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PHIL 206 Essay 1: Comparing and contrasting Hume and Plato (double-sided)

This paper will contrast Plato's divided line with Hume's empiricism, exploring the role of sense impressions in relation to Plato's Forms. Then, it will argue that both Hume and Plato advocate processes of examination, and that that the student of philosophy must study and apply said processes before concerning himself with the conclusions to which they lead.

In the Cave Allegory, Plato famously calls sense impressions "shadows" on the walls of the cave. The prisoners in the cave believe these shadows to be the fundamental elements of reality, because their frames of reference are limited to experience in the cave. However, the freed prisoner is afforded the opportunity to expand his frame of reference, so that he sees the sun that creates the shadows.

As far as Plato is concerned, Hume is a prisoner in the cave. In positing sense impressions as the only reality, Hume denies that there is any world outside the cave. Plato's allegory is flipped, so that the shadows become the real entities and the "sun," the Form from which those shadows proceed, the eternal Truth those shadows reflect, becomes the illusion. While Plato asserts that sense impressions are perverted reflections of a higher reality, Hume contends that Plato's "higher reality" (i.e. his forms) is a superfluous abstraction that detracts from one's ability to face, accept, and operate properly in the world right in front of one's eyes.

Plato would presumably grant that, insofar as human beings begin in the world of sense impressions (as prisoners in the cave), sense impressions hold some utility in terms of pointing one toward Ultimate Reality. Otherwise, there can be no path out of the cave. If one is in the

ignorance of the shadows, he must understand his ignorance before he can escape from it. It is just as much a fallacy to sit in the cave pretending one is in the sunlight as it is to deny the sunlight entirely. Therefore, human life becomes a process of studying the shadows and gradually coming to understand their relationship to the sun. Plato contends that an honest examination of the shadows, the reflections, will lead one toward the realization that said shadows are not ultimately real, that there exist entities (namely Forms) that are more real.

Socrates' process of inquiry, in which he seeks wisdom from various groups and admonishes those groups for giving *examples* of things rather than essences of things, functions as the prototype for the aforementioned process of studying the shadows. And Socrates' is a kind of *via negativa* approach: he does not affirm the existence of Plato's sun directly, but exposes the limits of sense experience's ability to represent the Truth in full. In this way, Socrates deals with sense impressions (methodically refuting their Ultimate Reality) before concerning himself directly with Forms

Hume, of course, firmly denies the notion that sense impressions reflect or represent an a priori Truth, as well as the assertion that sense experience limits Ultimate Reality. For Hume, sense impressions *are* "Ultimate Reality," and whatever Socrates and Plato claim sense impressions limit (specifically, Forms) is mere fantasy. In this way, Hume argues that studying sense impressions (Plato's "shadows") will not lead one out of the cave, but rather reinforce the cave's realness; indeed, as far as Hume is concerned, there is no world beyond the cave at all. Still, Hume asks the student to study sense impressions.

Herein lies the point of reconciliation in this gulf between Plato's Forms and Hume's sense impressions, and the saving grace for confused philosophy students like the present writer:

both Hume and Plato advocate a close examination of sense impressions. Plato instructs his students to take up Socrates' process of inquiry with a view toward exposing the shadows as illusions and emerging into the sunlight from the shadows of the cave. Hume instructs students to adopt a similar process of examination as a means toward recognizing sense impressions as the fundamental reality, indeed the only reality. Hume and Plato have conducted similar examinations and arrived at utterly divergent conclusions.

From a student's standpoint, however, the process itself might be far more important than the conclusion to which it leads. For no respectable conclusion can be reached without an arduous process of inquiry; should one accept a conclusion without examining and performing for himself the process that leads to that conclusion, one will entrap himself in dogma and rob himself of true intellectual satisfaction. Therefore, a student must study a great thinker's *process* before concerning himself with that thinker's conclusion.

As mentioned, Hume's and Plato's processes are remarkably similar: both thinkers advise students to examine that which lies directly in front of them, that which they have the ability to examine. Everybody can examine his own experience of sense impressions, for we have all been experiencing sense impressions since birth. For Plato, the examination of sense impressions (i.e. the shadows on the cave's walls) will lead to the realization that sense impressions are incomplete reflections of a greater reality, the world of Forms. If a student's own investigation leads to a similar conclusion, then the student's next step would be to study the forms, because the name of the game is to study what lies in front of you. If, on the other hand, a student's inquiry leads him to accept sense impressions as fundamental realities, then he must devote himself to dismantling abstractions such as Forms, thereby bringing himself as close as possible

to an experience of pure sense impressions. In a broad sense, the process is examination. Both Hume and Plato have shown us how to examine: where the examination leads is up neither to Hume nor to Plato, nor perhaps to the student himself. The examination takes on an identity of its own and leads the student by way of the things it reveals to him.

Certainly, it is worth mentioning that there are differences between the particular processes of examination recommended by Plato and Hume respectively. Where Plato, via Socrates, advocates dialectic (that is, the process of asking questions in such a way as to reveal the flaws in another's answers), Hume appeals to a process of logic, of recognizing abstractions as abstractions. The student owes it to each philosophical forefather to employ both methods. But, insofar as each process is at its core a process of examination with a view toward understanding things as they are, the processes are not mutually exclusive. That is to say, Hume's logic might lead a student toward Plato's forms, just as Socrates' dialectic might lead a student toward Hume's empiricism. It is up to the student to identify where his own sincerity lies, and any genuine process of philosophical inquiry will help the student to discover and understand that sincerity.

This paper provided a cursory overview of Plato's Forms and Hume's empiricism, explaining the obvious differences between the two while arguing that both Hume's and Plato's processes begin from examination of sense objects or, more broadly, of the world in front of us. In this way, the piece suggests, a philosophical student can avail himself of Hume's as well as Plato's method without prematurely committing to a particular conclusion. The essay emphasizes the importance of the process of inquiry over the conclusion to which that process leads, and

contends that any process of inquiry, if conducted sincerely, will lead a student toward a more thorough understanding of himself.