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# The Illusion of Forms

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# The Illusion of Forms

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## i. Introductory Dialogue

Standing behind two strangers in a line for a street vendor between Tenth street and Third Avenue of Manhattan, I overheard a conversation between a man in a dark wool coat and long, scraggly hair and a young woman with her hair tied in a bun. Their conversation continued, even after they had their orders. He ordered a hotdog, or a dirty-water hotdog<sup>1</sup> as they're commonly called, and she had a bottle of water. I was curious about how their conversation started, so I asked the man working at the vendor, "Sir, how did those two begin speaking?"

"She not like what he wanted," he said in broken English.

"What did he order?"

"Hotdog," he said.

"What didn't she like about that?" I asked, as I mentally sounded out the name on his certification.

"Love?" replied Pollodorusa.

"Are they lovers? They don't act like it. Look how they quarrel like strangers! There isn't that fastidious zeal of lovers, only a slight warmth in the cold distance between two strangers when they happen to conflict. Look how she keeps her distance and turns from his glance! Those are not lovers."

"Rational mean to avoid irrational, but even most rational goal started by irrational. They come to here everyday, always same order, but today, for first time, they speak. The first time they meet, they argue! She usually quiet and keep to herself, but today, when she near him in line, she start asking many question, speaking many ideas. This first time they saw each other, though

always same line, maybe two, three customer apart...”

Pollodorusa said, though he trailed off when the two began again.

I discovered that the man in the dark coat was named Geros, a famous New York City artist. Dried acrylic paint caked his fingers. Fine wrinkles near his eyes and lips saturated each of his expressions with a peculiar caution. He always took large strides, but each careful and slow enough so that he didn't walk too quickly. He looked almost thirty, but he had a boyishness in his behavior that made me question that assumption.

The woman, whose name is Endia Feromenos, according to her student ID, had a youthful urgency in her eyes and regularly shifted the uncomfortable weight of the textbooks she held in her arms. She leaned on either one or the other leg, uncertain which was the most comfortable.

Geros stepped out of the line with a hotdog in his hand, content and ready to take a bite but he knew that he wouldn't be able to just yet.

“I still can't believe that you're going to eat that. Can you imagine what you're doing to your body? I certainly don't understand why you would eat something so unhealthy! Good health is something we ascend to and something we ascend from (Plato 310-311), so for us to become better is to become more of what better is detailed to be. You give many young people inspiration to work at becoming what you are, and this entails a responsibility, regardless of whether or not you thought you willed it to be so. It is a consequence of being a part of a society, because those who rise to be exceptional must lead lives to which the rest aspire.” Endia exclaimed.

“I eat this hotdog because I am hungry,” Geros stated flatly.

“Please, there must be more.”

“More to the reason why I want to eat this hotdog or more to what I will have to eat after this hotdog?”

“I should think that they are one in the same, if this is how you eat.”

“You are right, but allow me to explain.”

## ii. Geros Justifies his Decision

"First I will tell you that whether this was a hotdog or a fresh salad is not important when hunger is concerned, because one does not have a greater value in its diminishment of hunger than the other. Hunger, whether I eat this hotdog or a fresh salad, will die when I eat, but wakes, as if it were in a light slumber, when perturbed by simply the passing of time (Plato 203E-204A). In time, my stomach will require more food and it will not have mattered whether I ate this hotdog or if I ate a salad instead. How my hunger is aroused is just as insignificant, for it only matters whether I am hungry," Geros said.

"How could this be so? It would seem that the hunger aroused by starvation is separate from that hunger that is aroused by the sight of good food. I haven't had lunch today, but the unappetizing sight of that hotdog does seem to diminish my hunger. It would then seem that hunger is not only a consequence of time, but also the other senses and what effects they produce, appealing or not," Endia replied.

"You make the mistake of confusing hungering for something with being hungry, for they are separate. When hungering for a certain kind of food, you will only think of all the finest foods, according to the specific taste or tastes that are desired. When thinking this way, everything about what is hungered for will strike you as beautiful in every way (Plato 204C-204D), since what is not in accordance to the particular cuisine that you are seeking will be disregarded, as if it were not food at all, considering food as the primordial lover of hunger.

"How this is separate from hungering for a specific kind of food is that hunger, in and of itself, must be a lover of food, in and of itself, and not for its taste but for its ability to satisfy hunger. In other words, hunger desires food for all of that food is, not just a single attribute of food, such as taste. But I should be careful not to separate hunger from its person - me, in this case - for what hunger seeks is my satisfaction, which leads to happiness. My reasoning is that I cannot be happy if I am hungry because I am not satisfied when I am hungry. Therefore, if the hunger leaves me dissatisfied as having a lack of food, any food will satisfy my hunger. This is because hunger is devoted to just one kind of love, to all of food, and it is in this special relationship that we use

words that describe the whole of it: hunger and hungry" (Plato 205D).

Endia said, "But you would say that all hunger is the same? I would think that this is not the case, for there are religions that do not allow the consumption of certain meats and then there are those who allergic to other types of substances. If I were to believe that hunger is satisfied by the consumption of any food, it would mean that those who are of the sort of religion with diet restrictions find satisfaction regardless of their sacrilege and those who are biologically refrained from certain foods find satisfaction in spite of their great discomfort afterwards."

"Would you then consider religion and allergic reactions a part of what it is to be hungry?" asked Geros. "When one begins to feel hungry, is that hunger tapered by preferences? That would mean that some of the discomforts of being hungry could be alleviated by thought alone, and that would not be the same kind of hunger we have been discussing so far."

"Please elaborate."

"It may help to think of hunger as a gluttonous son of Dionysus, reclined on a couch and too heavy and large to move from that spot. Because he cannot move, he sits on that couch and sleeps. He only wakes when he is hungry, when he will eat until his hunger is satisfied, only to fall asleep again afterwards. Of course, this son of Dionysus does not exist and is just a metaphor, but hunger can be thought of in that way. He knows only one thing, that is satisfying his hunger, and that is the only reason that he lives. That avatar resembles hunger in that it has one purpose: the consumption of food. It may be predicted, but there is more to understand about hunger," Geros explained.

"Many of my friends who admire your work say that they do so because your paintings represent many of the pressing concerns of life, though all I see are blotches of paint. I don't understand how you can produce a form to represent all things within its genus of existence, when, for instance, a thing will change and no longer be the same as what it was in the past. An example that comes to mind is a tree with thirteen leaves: this particular tree has the form of trees with thirteen leaves, but when that tree sheds a leaf, it will no longer be of that form of trees with thirteen leaves. In that case, why even concern ourselves with forms when it would only cause more trouble to chart out each and every possibility to grant legitimacy to forms?"

"I can't help but think of the cave analogy from the Republic. I would think that amongst themselves, one would be the best at identifying the shadows of the objects that pass by the fire. If one of them identified a plant of one species that has many leaves then a plant of a different species, distinguished visibly, to them, only by a fewer number of leaves, as plants in general, is that individual correct in his evaluation? It would seem to me that a plant with  $x$  number of leaves would be called one thing and the other plant with  $x - y$  leaves would be called something completely different. This is all speaking within the world of the cave, of course."

Geros took a bite of his hotdog before he continued to speak. Endia showed disgust on her face, but waited eagerly for his response. Geros wiped his mouth then spoke.

"To understand the nature of whatever we are studying. In this case, to say that there is a single form of hunger would allow us to know what it is to be hungry. Without knowing what the form of hunger is, it would seem obscured by many other states that may be confused, at face value, as hunger. In such a case, a hunger for a specific taste may be confused with being hungry (Nehamas 308-309).

"This also applies to your questions regarding the cave parable. If there was a separate name for every plant and tree by the number of leaves they have, we would not know them by "plant" or "tree" but rather those specific names. What would we know about the world if we were to make these divisions? That there exist whatever objects but we would not know much more than that. Categorizing them by similarity allows us to understand the characteristics of that thing and all things like it, approaching a definitive nature of that object."

"So how does the form of hunger reveal the nature of hunger itself?"

### iii. The Form of Hunger

Endia Feromenos beseeched Geros to walk with her to Eighth Street, where her school is. She spoke of an obligation that Geros had to finish supplying the idea of a form of hunger. She could not go about her ways, she implored, as a diet-conscious individual without having understood what the very nature of

what it is she sought to restrict. Geros obliged and they began walking away from the stand. I paid Pollodorusa and began following them, thanking him for speaking with me, but he began following them as well! Pollodorusa and I walked behind the two, so that we could listen to the rest of their conversation. They walked slowly, so it was difficult for us to follow inconspicuously.

"The nature of hunger," Geros started as he swept his arms to signify something large, "is rooted in us, and what we desire. Being hungry, essentially, is the desire for something, but what it desires will also help to explain its nature. What is it that we hunger for?"

"Food," replied Endia Feromenos.

"Correct, but as we've concluded earlier, food is also happiness. Do you remember how we came to this conclusion?"

"Yes, we connected food with happiness as a cause for satisfaction of the state of hunger."

"You are right. But what, then, is the happiness that we seek when we are hungry? Or, in other words, what is the happiness that we feel when we satisfy our hunger?" asked Geros.

"Could it be by ending an aching for something?"

"Close, but let us examine the question more specifically.

Food is goodness because hunger is a state of dissatisfaction, which is unhappiness, and to satiate hunger is to consume food, so food would bring satisfaction, the relief of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Therefore, it can be said that hunger is really desire for the good. It is also in the nature of hunger, or its form, to always be in that state, for the moment that the desire stops, hunger itself stops and the form is no longer active, or, as I've put it, is dead. Hunger seeks food eternally, or, in other words, we are eternally hungry (Plato 206A).

"Now that we have introduced a new concept, we must take it upon ourselves to examine the nature of that as well. We have introduced eternity. Though we have an eternal hunger, we, ourselves, are not eternal. We are mortal, so whatever is eternal, or immortal, is beyond us humans. We can only come close to that eternity by eating to replenish ourselves, and this could be explained by why the lack of food and the state of hunger is also a state of unhappiness. When one is hungry and continues to deny him or herself food, discomfort and unhappiness will result because there is something necessary that is missing. Without food, one does not consume the proper nutrients to survive, so by

eating, we choose to live longer, for how much longer is an unspecified amount of time, so it hopes for immortality. I would consider it an affair that is beyond humans, or perhaps we may call it a godly affair (Plato 206C-206E). Look at the Greek gods, for example, and how often they feast and drink!”

Geros continued, “But without complicating this matter with involvement of gods, it seems that the form of hunger is much more than we originally expected! Our hunger is not actually for happiness, but for the enduring reproduction of that happiness. Alternatively, if we simplify that statement, it seems that hunger is the desire for immortality itself.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying,” Endia Feromenos huffed.

“Because hunger is eternal, the only way we may truly satisfy it is by seeking to gratify it eternally. Because we cannot do this, as mortals, we come as close as we can by eating food. If food is representative of that eternal gratification that we seek, it can be justified to say that hunger is the desire for immortality” (Plato 207A).

“In that sense, can’t we say this about drinking in the same logic and sleeping as trying to prolong ourselves? In fact, it even seems that many things can be in the name of the pursuit of goodness, as we’ve defined it, like eating sweets, stealing, and, why, even love!”

Pollodorusa lit up at the mention of love.

“Therefore, regardless of what form we state it as, though we will continue to use hunger, it is not the desire for good things but for the good itself. I feel that you understand why I chose the hotdog as my lunch. It doesn’t matter what I chose to eat, because I sought the whole form of satisfaction of my desire for immortality. Soon hunger will awaken again, that fat son of Dionysus, and I will eat again.”

Geros and Endia Feromenos reached a large building and stopped in front of it.

“Is this where your class is being held?” Geros asked.

“It is. I’m terribly late though; the class is almost finished,” Endia replied.

“Then you should hurry and go inside!”

“What does it matter? My class is for the replenishment of knowledge, which is also constantly fleeting (Plato 208a-208c). Whether I study in my class or I study with you, I seek to replenish



the knowledge that has left me with fresh knowledge. This is the same as eating, I would say. I seek the same thing, that same immortality or eternal gratification, so it should not matter how I specifically go about it.”

#### iv. The Concerned Citizen

Endia Feromenos and Geros walked into a diner next to the academic building. They sat and began speaking more casually, most likely on more lighthearted matters. A great pressure began to rise inside of me, from my gut to my throat. The conversation that the two had had spurred my soul, excited it with ideas and thoughts. I felt compelled to enter and sit with them to join in their conversation. The more I lingered on their words, the more that their conversation began to seem like a place, a vast place, full of majestic things, inventive in every lot and veiled in mystery, umbrageous by a virtuous shadow that left all people pregnant with tremendous ideas.

Pollodorusa walked past me, with a slight “humph” as he passed, wondering why I stood there like a helpless fool. He entered the diner and sat at a table adjacent to them. He retrieved a notepad from his pocket and began, what seemed like, recording what he had heard.

I entered the diner as well. I approached Pollodorusa but the closer that I got to Endia Feromenos and Geros, the more forceful the excitations of my soul became. By the time I reached Pollodorusa to sit beside him, I couldn’t contain myself. I instead sat at the table with the two. My abrupt act interrupted their conversation and they simply stared at me. I couldn’t withstand, in spite of my embarrassment, and words flowed from me, as if they were entirely separate beings, only momentarily carried by my body.

“Excuse me, the two of you. I couldn’t help myself from eavesdropping on your conversation. I was in line behind you at the street vendor and followed you here to listen to how your conversation would conclude. Though I enjoyed listening to your conversation very much, I feel that it is important that I spoke up. You may consider me a concerned citizen, one concerned about the society as a whole, which includes you as much as it does me. My concern in this position isn’t about the conversation that you had,

for its contents were lovely and accurate, but rather the way that it has seemed to have ended."

Endia Feromenos looked at me questionably but Geros spoke.

"By all means."

"Thank you. It would seem to me that your conclusion that it is more important to identify the nature of things, such as hunger, before identifying the various parts that belong to that larger thing, what may be called a genus, is true, as all your logic seems to pass without problem. Hunger in and of itself is, as you have said, the desire for food, or satisfaction. I followed, with you, the road that you paved in logic as you led food into symbolizing happiness itself, then goodness. But I would suggest that this is not the conclusion but a first step in forming principles, guidelines in which we form habits and conduct in life. To use the conclusion that you two have reached as a principle is premature, I believe, and would like to discuss further how one should apply that idea of understanding of the nature of a thing on a life composed of obligations, interaction, and other such social contracts and mores. I would like to urge the importance of why living by seeing all in this logic of forms would be devastating.

"To live the life considering only the ends and not the means, in this case, as all in the equal pursuit of good, it would collapse the hold of society as a stable entity. If we all knew hunger as the desire for immortality and did not discriminate on the means, this land would be full of the fat sons of Dionysus. I can accept that we all seek the form of the good, but what I cannot accept is that the form of the good is the same for all people. This may contradict the very notion of a form, but if it does, perhaps the forms are not as useful as we suspected."

Geros replied, "The good that we reached in satisfying hunger is only when hunger is present, so it is only when we are hungry when the consumption of food is good. To eat without the presence of hunger does not apply to the conclusion that we have come to. If one eats when he or she is not hungry, it will lead to discomfort, what we have reasoned to be unhappiness, and further, adverse to good."

"Allow me to explain in further detail: The reason why a form is detrimental to society is that it overlooks harmony. All men may harmoniously understand the form of good, otherwise it would not be a form, but the means by which one attains that form

are certainly not harmonious. In order for society to work, each individual must modify the means to their individual attainment of happiness, or the good, in a way that allows others to pursue equally their attainment of happiness. The laws placed onto society allow this to happen. There must be strife for harmony (Curd 37: Heraclitus 71-73). We know the best way to attain the good for ourselves, but this is in strife with being considerate for society. We are in strife with the laws that restrain us, for those who want but cannot have, or those who would benefit most without an observation of the law are limiting their freedoms in attaining happiness. This law is what I meant earlier when I spoke about principles. We must resign some of our wants without satisfaction, because they are harmful for the society. So this conflict is not between the individual and the society, but the individual against other individuals, and the necessity to live together to prosper.

“We may consider working tenaciously to live comfortably as another pursuit of the good, but if we are only to look at the end, the happiness, then we may seek that same happiness at the expense of another. Therefore, the form of good may explain the origin of our intent, but it should not dictate our actions. There is a time when one must fulfill some duty to society, or make some sacrifice, so that he may pursue the good in peace with other people.

“Considering my argument, I would say that the catalyst of your conversation should be reexamined. She was simply concerned with what you ate, for if you continued to eat whatever is most convenient or, at the time, tastiest to you, and if you neglect the means and see only the ends, your health will be at risk and you may not be able to produce the inspirational paintings that you do. Your art inspires others to work hard, and that position as a role model is your sacrifice to society that will restrict the way that you pursue your desires. For if you die, or if your art stops, you will not die alone but you will take with you a part of each person who found your work important to them.

“Though it may be comfortable to think otherwise, our lives contribute to a greater tapestry of society. To destroy ourselves would destroy some of this social tapestry, thereby damaging the whole. If you speak of the form of good, I suggest that you consider more carefully the means to that good because they are vastly important.”

Endia Feromenos and Geros sat in silence, pondering all that I had said. My throat was dry from my attempt to speak clearly and quickly, but I felt as if I gave birth to an idea, great or impecunious in value. Endia Feromenos gave a sort of hum while Geros raised his hand to beckon the waitress.

“A coffee for this young man, please. We will be here a while.”

### ENDNOTES

1. The water used to boil the hotdogs isn't changed throughout the day

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