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10/13/16

Plato’s The Apology

When Plato, arguably one of the best philosophers known to man, writes something intellectual it is human nature to automatically agree to what he wrote, even if the person does not fully understand the material before them. They have a good reason to though; Plato knew exactly how to word his ideas so that they would sound as convincing as possible. And even if someone disagreed with Plato’s theories, they would have to admit that they are well-formed at the very least. This is because Plato would use techniques like intuition pumps, induction, false dichotomy, and a priori/a posteriori in order to get his points across.

Death is not something most people say they look forward to, and Plato is fully aware of this. So in order to paint the picture that it could in fact be a positive occurrence, he uses an intuition pump. How do you make your audience see death in a different light? The average person would struggle with the answer but Plato knew exactly what he had to do; create an image about death that would make his audience feel good about it. In Plato’s argument death is one of two things; either a “dreamless sleep” where “all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night” or “a change from here to another place” where one can meet demi-gods “who have been upright in their own life” like Hades, Aeacus, and Palamedes to name just a few. Basically Plato is saying death is something that lets you sleep for an eternity or meet those that are amazing and legendary. Since there is (probably) no human on earth who dislikes sleep and since the thought of being able to converse with someone that is highly intellectual is seen as a one in a lifetime experience, Plato perfectly evokes a sense of desire and pleasantry from his audience. This is exactly what an intuition pump is supposed to do, a tool for “aiding the understanding” (2.6). By creating images in scenarios that sound pleasing to the average person, Plato made the idea of death seem like a good thing.

In order to make his intuition pump work, Plato had to use the philosophical tool induction to help spur his image for his second scenario of death. Based on Plato’s passage, in this “other world” that the Greeks believed in, the great demi-gods and legends of their myths existed there. Plato’s intuition pump takes advantage of that belief. If a person believes that the demi-gods live there, and they believe that death is in fact a transportation to their world, then it is likely they would also listen to Plato’s induction that they can meet and converse with all of them there. Looking at it differently however, one can argue that even if death does take people to this alternate world of the demi-gods, there is only a chance that one would even get to meet them, let alone talk with them. It is the same idea as going to another country. What are the chances of meeting a government worker there? Some may say 10% perhaps, maybe 50%, or maybe even 99.9%. The point is, there is no absolute certainty there will be an encounter in the first place, just a probability. Plato is aware of this however, and uses that to his advantage. It gets the hopes up of the audience, and makes them more inclined to believe the scenario from his intuition pump.

Like mentioned above, Plato’s concept of death consists of two alternatives, either an eternal slumber or a transportation to a different world. What he does not mention, is the possibility that there can be many other alternatives. For instance, what if people reincarnate instead, or their souls get left behind and they prowl the earth as ghosts? However, unlike Plato’s scenarios, these two possibilities may lead to unwanted circumstances. Take reincarnation for example. If a person reincarnates into another human with a rich family background, most would find that situation desirable. What if though, instead of another human, the person reincarnates into a worm? The same applies with becoming a ghost. The idea of having to wander this earth eternally without having the power to make any impact on the world around one’s self is not something most yearn for. If Plato included those two options as well in his passage it would obviously make his argument a lot less persuasive. This is why he uses the tool false dichotomy to his advantage. By making it seem like there are only two possible options in death, and both of which lead to pleasing outcomes, Plato’s argument convinces the audience that death can only be good. Arguably once someone points out the possible scenarios Plato failed to mention, his argument seems considerably weaker. However at the time the Greeks widely seemed to believe in only the two options in Plato’s passage so his argument is fitting for his time.

There is no one in this world that knows what happens to a person when they die because, quite frankly, no one has ever survived to tell the tale (which is quite impossible). This is how Plato takes advantage of a priori and a posteriori. Since no living human can ever know what it is like to die, there is no one in this world that has an a posteriori experience with death. In other words, everyone living has an a priori idea of death, including Plato himself. That means no one could have ever confronted Plato and told him his idea of death was incorrect by countering “Because I experienced it before!” It doesn’t deny people from disagreeing with Plato’s ideas, but at the very least it denies people from having solid evidence as to why they disagree. Plato also uses a priori to his advantage by using the already speculated scenarios regarding death. He wasn’t the one that decided death was probably one of two things, people themselves as a whole came up with the idea together. By using society’s a priori idea about death, Plato’s argument seems a whole lot more plausible because he used concepts already familiar to his audience.

Sometimes getting people to accept theories is not about finding every possible refutation and explaining how the theory still works, but is about using techniques to make the theory more plausible. Plato must have understood this, which is why he is as well known as he is today, even though he lived way before modern times. Even in this day and age people still speculate about the world after death, and Plato’s ideas of it are still strong contenders. Though technology has exponentially improved since those times, the fact that people still wonder about the same ideas as back then shows that the human mind will always stay the same no matter how much time passes.