*The Ancient Art of Living*

Exercises on the Power of Appearance

“The power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small.” (*Protagoras*, 356d)

“What the prisoners would take for true reality is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.” (*Republic*, Allegory of the Cave, 515c)

“Now if [the person who had ascended out of the cave] had to compete once again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, while his sight was still dim and before his eyes had recovered, wouldn’t he provoke ridicule? Wouldn’t it be said of him that he had returned from his upwards journey with his eyes ruined, and that it is not worthwhile even to try to travel upward?” (*Republic* , Allegory of the Cave, 516e-517a)

Socrates and Plato are very concerned about the way in which appearances can warp our judgments. They worry that the force of appearances—the attraction, disgust, anger etc. that they immediately inspire in us—and the broader ways in which our social and cultural environment shape how things appear to us lead to distortions in our understanding of what’s good. To understand why they’re worried, complete the following exercises.

**Exercise: The Difference Image and Sound Make**

Pick a controversial issue that you have an interest in (whether or not your view on it are entirely formed or firm) and which has recently been discussed in the media. It should not be too abstract or theoretical but should be focused around a particular event or proposal, preferably one that directly affects your life (e.g. if an artist has acted badly, should we avoid their art? What are the effects of social media? What makes for a fulfilling career? etc.). Then complete the following four phases and the accompanying questions. **Submit an overall reflection which incorporates your answers to all the bulleted questions in bold. (300-800 words)**

*Phase 1: Preparation*

* What are your initial thoughts about this topic and how do they connect to your overall values and your personal identity?
* Which emotions do you anticipate feeling as you consider this issue more closely? Who will these emotions be directed towards?
* Do you feel certain about your position on this issue? Do you think learning more will qualify or develop your view?

*Phase 2: Engagement with the written word.*

Find an article (at least 500 words long, articles from the Internet are fine) about this subject, preferably one that takes a definite position on the issue, and read it carefully.

* Which emotions did you feel in connection with this article? Did it intensify or change any of the emotions you feel or direct them differently (i.e. to different people or groups)?
* Did reading this article make you more or less certain about your position on this issue? Did it qualify or develop your view in any way?

*Phase 3: Engagement with video.*

Find a video about this subject, at least 2 minutes in length and preferably one with striking images (as opposed to talking heads) and one that takes a definite position on the issue. Watch the entire video with your full attention (avoiding any multitasking).

* Which emotions did you feel while watching this video? Did it intensify or change any of the emotions you feel or direct them differently (i.e. to different people or groups)?
* Did watching this video make you more or less certain about your position on this issue? Did it qualify or develop your view in any way?

*Phase 4: Final reflection*

* In what way (if at all) did reading the article affect your emotions, change your sense of what’s at stake and/or make the issue seem more or less important?
* In what way (if at all) did watching the video affect your emotions, change your sense of what’s at stake and/or make the issue seem more or less important?
* Were there any aspects of the article or video that seemed misleading or unhelpful to you? How confident were you in their presentation of the issue?

**Extra Credit Exercises**

*You may complete one or both of these for extra credit, but they are not required.*

***Exercise A: The Power of High Resolution Color***

Turn your smartphone to grayscale, so that it only displays in black and white. For instructions on doing this, see here: <https://lifehacker.com/change-your-screen-to-grayscale-to-combat-phone-addicti-1795821843> or search for your appropriate phone and operating system.

Spend 24 hours with your phone on grayscale. Then answer the following questions:

* Did switching to grayscale make your phone significantly less useful or did it just make the experience of using it less enjoyable? Explain.
* Did you end up using your phone less?
* How tempted were you to switch back during this period? What are the chances that you would continue putting your phone in this mode for part of the time?

***Exercise B: The Power of Consistent Messaging***

For one day, keep a log (to the best of your ability) of all the advertising messages you see (on computers and mobile devices, on tv and radio, on billboards, etc.)

You can use something like the following chart.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Product/Company* | *Medium (social media, websites, tv, billboard etc.)* | *Category (food, clothing etc.)* | *Need, desire, or aspiration appealed to (beauty, social connection, status etc.)* |
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At the end of the day, answer the following questions:

* Which needs, desire, or aspirations were most commonly appealed to? How many of these did you feel a connection to? Which kind of messages seemed most and least attractive?
* How many of the messages seemed to be personalized, based on your shopping or browsing history?
* Is there any way you could avoid being influenced by these advertisements or is their force an inescapable part of contemporary life?