Contradicting Theories of Art by Nietzsche and Plato

Michele Gibney
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Plato proposes that there are ultimate, pure forms created by God behind every object in the world. Nietzsche, in response to this, argues that not only is there a multitude of differences between each object that have been disregarded to keep the illusion of the ideal, but that man himself creates the ideals and not an omnipotent deity. For Plato, art imitates the imitations of the pure form: thus confusing mankind, hindering their path to finding the pure, and tying them to a reality that is an appearance only. But for Nietzsche, art can save man from reality by producing new metaphors and reconciling one to life. In applying Nietzsche and Plato to Hamlet two different conclusions are reached. With Platonic theory it becomes apparent that literature is detrimental to man’s search for truth because it is misleading on those subjects of which the author knows little. Lastly, in regards to Nietzschean theory Hamlet is shown as a work of art wherein Hamlet suffers from knowing the truths of things.

In the Republic Book X, Plato espouses a view of the world as one of appearances constructed by man. For each object in this world there is one ideal of it, created by God in nature. The first example given is of beds and tables: “there are beds and tables in the world—many of each. . .But there are only two ideas or forms of such furniture—one the idea of a bed, the other of a table” (21). Even though there are many kinds of tables and beds, some with more excessive decoration, some with varying colors—there is only one idea of a bed ultimately. Behind each object in this world there looms a pure form of it, and it is these forms that all workmen base their designs on. Because all objects are constructed from vague impressions of
the pure ideal, the world created is merely an imitation of the original. In fact Plato states that man “cannot make what is, but only some semblance of existence” (22). Since man is not God he cannot make what “is,” the pure form of a bed, but only an inexact replica of it.

There is a second level to this theory, in that since workmen imitate the originals, artists imitate the imitators. In a painting, for example, the painter can depict a bed, but this bed is not a semblance of the pure form, it is only a well-drawn likeness to a bed made by a man. Painters imitate appearances only, and as they do so they deceive those who view their work into thinking they are looking at reality. Poetry does the same thing, only they are even more of a menace to society according to Plato. For poets, who know next to nothing about a subject, write about it as if they were experts. The worst of this comes about when the poets “copy images of virtue and the other themes of their poetry, but have no contact with the truth” (24). Plato believes that poets have no true concept of virtue, they merely “copy” it. In consequence of their poor copying, the minds of their readers will be damaged by contact with such prose that offers nothing of moral value. More specifically, poetry appeals to the inferior part of the human soul that houses the irrational nature of man (27). Plato fears this irrationality because it compromises man’s reasoning capabilities and makes it harder for him to judge the truth. By damaging man’s capability to comprehend truth, there is no hope of ever realizing the pure world of forms, and an eternity in the world of appearances is what Plato is trying to circumvent at all costs. Therefore, banishment from the state is Plato’s solution to the threat that poets pose to the people: “For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed Muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State” (28). “Law” and “reason” are Plato’s truths in a world of appearances. He needs these forms of virtue in order to regulate the State,
and so the imitative art of poetry must be cast aside in favor of justice, virtue, and truth. Also he feels that it is only through a high notion of virtue that one can come to the world of pure forms. The art of poetry brings the nation’s ability to discern truth down, which is why it must be banned.

In both *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense*, Nietzsche claims that a world of pure forms does not exist. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes, “From this mere appearance arises, like ambrosial vapor, a new visionary world of mere appearances, invisible to those wrapped in the first appearance—a radiant floating in purest bliss, a serene contemplation beaming from wide-open eyes” (45). This passage refers to a painting of suffering and the Apollinian counter-image of “bliss” that arises out from it. This passage symbolizes Plato’s argument that there is a world of appearances that is lower down than a world of “purest” forms. In the “radiant” world one can look at everything with their eyes “wide-open” to the truths therein contained. The contradiction that Nietzsche poses to this “visionary world” of Plato’s is that in fact it too is a “world of mere appearances,” thereby also making the claim that there is no world of pure forms whatsoever.

In *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense*, Nietzsche becomes even more specific on why Plato’s world of forms is impossible. First he claims that there are individual differences between objects which are forgotten when they are classified under one title. This however, does not manage to truly negate Plato’s theory because Plato admits there are many *types* of beds even though there is only one pure form of a bed. The section where Nietzsche’s view of truth differs from Plato’s is in who manufactures these ideals. For Plato it is God who is the maker of the original bed, but for Nietzsche it is man who “first manufacture(s) within himself” all ideas (637). The consequences of this theory mean that there is no absolute truth. If man
manufactures all the ideas by which he exists then truth itself is a meaningless concept imbued with importance only because we granted it significance when we created it. Nietzsche writes, “truths are illusions of which one has forgotten they are illusions” (636). It is because of man’s ability to forget what he himself has created that he can accept illusions as truth, and it is only through this ability that he can live “with some repose” (637). Without his own constructs man would be adrift in an inhospitable sea of nothingness. Without the meaning that he applies to his surroundings, there can be no order in the world or any way of communicating with others. Because of man’s desire to feel safe in life, the world of “appearances” that Plato wishes to move beyond is actually a comfort zone in Nietzsche’s ideology.

Art is one of man’s constructs to protect himself from outside “truths” destroying the “truths” he has built up. Just as for Plato, art enforces Nietzsche’s world of appearances/man’s creation by merely imitating its existing themes. By endlessly creative imitation though, man’s fear of reality is further calmed by new metaphors that add to the lexicon of “truths” man is always creating. In *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense*, Nietzsche discusses the role of art thus: “it constantly shows its passionate longing for shaping the existing world of waking man as motley, irregular, inconsequentially incoherent, attractive, and eternally new” (638). Art portrays reality in all its many guises, while at the same time trying to recreate it, or “shape” it. In allowing art to have a “shaping” influence on life, Nietzsche’s attitude is in marked contrast to Plato’s, who didn’t want to grant poetry even an opportunity to corrupt individuals. Nietzsche takes it a step further even when he writes that man desires to have art influence his life:

Man himself, however, has an invincible tendency to let himself be deceived, and he is like one enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist narrates to him epic romances in such a way that they appear real or when the actor on the stage makes the king appear more kingly than reality shows him. (638)
Man *likes* to be deceived. He likes to experience a seeming truth through a medium that is not purporting itself to be true. Also, it seems as if man enjoys this kind of illusion because it is much like a dream that allows him to pretend for a while that another way of existence is conceivable. Art has the potential to take man out of himself for a while and sometimes that is the only cure a person can ask for. As a final point for Nietzsche, one reason he gives for why man would want to experience this kind of escapism through art is because of a nausea associated with gaining knowledge of the “essence of things. . .Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence. . .Here when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress. . .She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts. . .into notions with which one can live” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 60).

As explained above, it is a fear of what the world would be like without truths that man has made up a system of metaphors to designate everything in his environment. By looking into the “essence of things” man is looking beyond his made up values and seeing the truth of the world as a construction. This real truth has a nauseating effect on him, and it is through the healing powers of art that he can regain an equilibrium with the new and old truths.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that Hamlet is one of those who has discovered the “horror or absurdity of existence.” Hamlet himself confirms this when he says, “O that this too too sallied flesh would melt, / . . . How [weary], stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on’t, ah fie! ‘tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (I.ii.133-137). In the first line, Hamlet comments that his own “existence” (“flesh”) has become “sallied,” or polluted, by the actions of his kin, flesh of his flesh. In the next two lines he bemoans the state of the “uses of this world” or the “customs” (footnote p. 38). This can be read in two ways: Hamlet is horrified by the disregard his relatives
show to custom and he’s become painfully aware of the triteness of customs that are meaningless anyway because they were created by man and not God. It is in fact because of his kin’s callous treatment of custom that he would be able to come to the realization that nothing is sacred or sanctified by God. In the final three lines, Hamlet’s “horror” of the “rank and gross” aspects of human nature comes to the forefront. Also his sense of the “absurdity” of this existence can be pinpointed in the use of the gardening metaphor.

Nietzsche continues his critique of Hamlet in The Birth of Tragedy with the following, “Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion” (60). Because Hamlet has gained this knowledge of the world as a rank and sordid place, he cannot act, or so Nietzsche interprets it to be. The “veils of illusion” would be the metaphors which humanity constructed for itself to distinguish between truth and falsity. Without these illusions, one cannot distinguish between truth and falsity and therefore one cannot act; which is exactly what happened to Hamlet. His indecisiveness was not a character fault, but a natural consequence of stripping away his illusions. It was only after the use of art, the play, that Hamlet gained a positive verdict on his uncle’s guilt and could then act because he has discovered a truth.

Plato would not even agree that Hamlet’s illusions have been removed since at no point in the play does he proclaim his understanding of pure forms. Instead, Plato would critique Hamlet for writing on topics on which Shakespeare would not be an expert. The politics of Denmark would be a case in point for Plato to point out. How would an Englishman, and one who is not a true member of the courtly elite, understand the intrigues of a foreign political system? How would he even be able to write truthfully about the state of being royalty, not being royalty himself? Another line of questioning Plato would probably contest is that Shakespeare is not a doctor, and thus would have a minimum amount of knowledge on poisons.
like that used to murder the old king. Even in the *Hamlet* passage quoted above, Plato would inquire after Shakespeare’s gardening ability.

Another point that Plato would focus on in *Hamlet* is the use of appearances in the play and how everything is not always as it seems. Hamlet says of himself, “But I have that within me which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe” (I.ii.85-86). In this passage it is evident that behind the world of appearances in the play there is a more meaningful level on which the characters hide their true selves. For Hamlet that level is full of the pure emotions of rage and sorrow, which he only expresses outwardly in a manner (at this point in the play) that will not shock the other characters with its virulence. The play within the play is another instance in which there is a world of appearances being made to stand in for the reality of what occurred in Denmark. Plato would see these points as the world of pure ideals trying to trickle into the imitative world.

In conclusion, by comparing these two theorists, an attempt has been made to show how and where they contrast one another and how they can each be applied to a specific literary text. In determining different methods of reading a text, one can increase their own knowledge of literature, the world, and themselves. The most fascinating by far, in this author’s opinion, is extending theories to the world. If one interprets Plato’s vision of pure forms to the whole world it becomes questionable as to whether humanity isn’t itself merely an imitation of a higher form. If this is true then we don’t exist any more then the bed the bed-maker constructs does. If everything has a pure form that we can’t even begin to comprehend without the help of philosophers, then we can never exit Plato’s theoretical cave, because philosophy as a written language is a construct of man. As for Nietzsche, if truth was invented by man to provide distinctions between things, then nothing is true and everything we hold to be true is a lie. The
implications of philosophy are astounding to a fixed world-view: at the same time, appealing and deeply frightening.
List of Works Cited


