The Turning: Conversion, Choice, or Chance?
By Amanda Bartley

Someone once told me that you do not find philosophy, it finds you. When presented with a piece of philosophy, a person generally has one of two reactions: interest or disinterest. The person who expresses interest in the philosophy also falls into one of two groups. One group has a detached, academic interest in which they find the argument interesting or the words beautifully written but ultimately unimportant. The second group reads the piece and has a distinct reaction. Two devoted physics students read Hume's attack on causality. Physics student A reads it and notes how eloquently it is written and notes how well he uses examples in his arguments, then puts the book down and returns to his lab. Physics student B reads the argument, does not put the book down, does not return to his lab, and goes on to pursue a career in philosophy. Both students read the same text. Why do they have radically different reactions? To better explore this question, I refer to one of my favorite pieces of philosophy, Plato's simile of the cave.

In the Cave, Plato describes the two levels of reality and the process by which one moves between the two. He asks us to imagine a great cave with a sloping entrance leading to the outside world. The outside world represents the realm of enlightenment and the forms. The cave and its contents represent the constantly changing and shadowy world of the physical realm. He then asks us to imagine that inside the cave there are groups of people who are bound by their legs and neck and forced to face a wall where they are unable to look around the cave or at their fellow prisoners. Then one of the prisoners is released from his bonds and is suddenly compelled to stand and turn around to look inside the cave. The prisoner then starts his journey upward out of the cave of ignorance and blind belief into the world of knowledge and enlightenment.

The liberator of the prisoner in the cave is mysteriously absent. If everyone is bound and unable to move, then how can one be there to release the first prisoner? A common interpretation is that only divine intervention can release the prisoner. Or it may be, as I.M. Crombie suggests, that true philosophers arise unpredictably by divine chance. Even more mysterious, however, is the event that happens after the prisoner is released. The prisoner is compelled to stand and turn around. Plato seems to suggest that these are two separate events, first the prisoner is released then he is compelled to turn around. While it must be remembered that the Cave is meant to be a metaphor used to illustrate the ideas set forth in The Divided Line and should not be interpreted too literally, this event is similar to another event that is written about much more in depth. That is the event of conversion.

If it is the divine that both releases us and compels us to turn, then we can describe Plato's turning as such. But one cannot escape the deterministic implications that conversion has. It is not up to us if we ascend the slope or not. Is the man who is not chosen doomed to live in the shadows forever? Another way to view conversion is to take it out of a strictly religious context.

In James’ system of philosophy, conversion is treated as more of a mental than a religious process. James describes the mind as being composed of a field. In the center of the field lies our consciousness and immediately accessible memories. As one travels further away from the center of the field to the outskirts, one dives further and further in to what could be called our subconscious. For James, the mental event of conversion can be explained as a sudden collapse of our field and the reorienting of the objects in the field as it reestablishes itself. It is analogous to a building that has had the support beams taken out. When the building collapses, the roof is where the supports used to be.

This view does not seem to have the deterministic implications that the purely religious view does. This view has two assumptions. The first is that the objects have to be in the subconscious to begin with. Secondly, there must be some catalyst for the process to begin. James leaves the possibility open that the divine is what sets the
process into motion. We appear to be right back to where we started from. It may indeed be that only the divine can release the prisoners. But there are two parts to the puzzle. The prisoner is released and then he is compelled to stand and turn. We are still left questioning the exact difference between physics student A and physics student B.

Both students are dedicated to their work. Why does Hume’s philosophy affect one but not the other? At first glance the answer would appear to be that he was simply dissatisfied with his particular line of study. Perhaps the math became too hard or he simply got bored. In this case the switch to philosophy was completely arbitrary and could easily have been to chemistry or biology. But physics student B does not feel that his switch was arbitrary. On the contrary he feels that his switch was necessary. This is not the act of simply switching majors. The turning is a completely subjective event. To compare it to switching jelly or switching cars is to trivialize the force of emotion that accompanies this turning point. When the prisoner moves from the dark cave to the light outside, it is a painful and difficult process. What is this thing that compels him despite his discomfort?

There are various differences between the two physics students (e.g. backgrounds, personalities, political persuasion, neurological constitutions), but the important difference is something that the student brings with him. If I were to say something to you and you were not in the position to receive it, you would not care. If I were to tell you that the fire extinguisher is located beside the door to your right, you would have a distinctly different reaction than if I told you this while the building was on fire. In both cases the same words were said, but the position in which the receiver was in is radically different. It is the same with our two physics students. The subjective situation that they bring into the classroom is what determines how they will respond to the philosophy.

For something to have an effect on you, you must be in the position to receive it. A person reading Kafka will not be able to identify with Joseph K. unless they feel that something is not quite right. Camus’ words will be lost on the person who is not plagued with the question of the meaning of life or the possibility of existing in an absurd world. This emotional and personal questioning is called anguish. It is the person who is in anguish about the plight of the proletarian that will be moved to start a revolution. It is the person who is in anguish about the status and fate of their soul who will be moved to accept or decline religion. Every real scientist, philosopher, and theologian has at some point experienced this feeling. It is the catalyst that compels Plato’s prisoner to turn around, and our physics student to respond to Hume.

But is it not determinism as to who has this feeling of anguish and who doesn’t? According to Sartre, this answer is an absolute no. Everyone has this anguish at some point in their life, and it is up to each person to either affirm it and be an authentic person or deny it and become someone who is living inauthentically. The pain of anguish is to Sartre a sure sign that at least they are striving to be an authentic self. If it is this anguish that compels a person to travel from the shadows to the light, then the accusations against the existentialists that they are trying to bring man down with their talk of suffering and pain are completely unfounded. Like the sting of peroxide that signifies the healing effects on a nasty cut, anguish should be accepted as not only an inescapable part of human life, but a positive one as well. While divine intervention can not be ruled out as the explanation for Plato’s turning, I believe it is more coherent to ascribe the turning to an outward manifestation of anguish felt either consciously or subconsciously by the person in question.

Please join the PDG for our discussion of Plato’s Turning and the deterministic implications it has as well as the role of anguish in the life of the prisoner. We will meet in the Gamble Hall room 213 at 5:00pm on Thursday, August 28th.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Amanda Bartley or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for The Philosopher’s Stone, please contact either of us.

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Nietzsche Reading Group Starts September 4th at 5:00pm in G 213

All are welcome to join in our discussion of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra every other Thursday at 5:00pm starting September 4th in Gamble Hall 213. For the first meeting, we will focus on the First Part of Zarathustra from the Prologue to Section 8.