

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### PLATO'S NIGHTMARE: ANOREXIA PORTRAYED IN A VIRTUAL REALITY

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In “Rhetoric of Anorexia: Eating as a Metaphor for Living,” Amanda Marshall draws on Susan Sontag’s notion that depicting illness through metaphoric language can be dangerous, and she applies Sontag’s warnings to anorexia. Marshall explains how many people with anorexia are turning to different outlets of communication, such as pop culture books and online websites, “to express their anorexia metaphorically” (78). These forums of communication, Marshall suggests, are destructive; rather than unifying victims to rally against their disease, they reaffirm their unsafe lifestyle choices. I offer an additional perspective on the problem: through the unlikely comparison of the virtual digital world and the world of Platonic thought we can see that anorexic behavior is encouraged by a blurring of reality that is perpetuated through electronic media outlets like the Internet.

As Marshall suggests, the mass media contribute to the glorification and misrepresentation of anorexia, associating a potentially life-threatening disease with a luxurious lifestyle and failing to recognize the true implications of the disease. Marshall also reveals the way some people with anorexia use the Internet as an outlet for self-expression and have discussions on pro-anorexia websites to strengthen their convictions that being thin can be accomplished with the help of an eating disorder. While she acknowledges that these websites might promote anorexic behavior, Marshall attributes this danger only to the way they portray anorexia metaphorically. However, I suggest that pro-anorexia online journals and similar websites serve as stages for epideictic speaking; they are open forums for praising thinness and blaming the evils of eating, and these *stages* are proving to be the greatest danger. Internet users are transferred through the computer screen to an alternate reality, which might be partly responsible for contributing to the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of anorexia.

The confusion surrounding the virtual reality that exists in the digital world parallels Plato’s opinions on what is real and what makes good rhetoric. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates asks the young student Polus, “Do you think there’s a state which only appears to be healthy, but isn’t really?” Socrates adds, “It’s quite common for people to seem to be physically healthy, and for no one except a doctor or a trainer to see that they actually aren’t [. . .]. In my opinion, this is a mental phenomenon as well. I think the mind as well as the body can be in the kind of condition which makes it seem to be in a good state when it really isn’t at all” (33). Through the voice of Socrates, Plato argues that rhetoric is not an art but rather an “experiential knack” that looks like and pretends to be an art. He compares the knacks and arts of the human body with those of the body politic to illustrate the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Plato asserts that the arts of exercise and medicine maintain a healthy body and that the knacks of ornamentation and cookery give only the appearance of health. Just as “cookery is to the body, so rhetoric is to the mind” (33). Even though Plato’s theory was meant to prove that rhetoric functions in the realm of appearances, Socrates’ words also link the worst forms of rhetoric to the most dan-

gerous element of anorexia: anorexics do not perceive that they are living an unhealthy lifestyle or they choose to disregard the knowledge that they are damaging their bodies by not eating.

Plato distinguishes between a world of shadows and the real world of higher philosophical thought, complete understanding, and metaphysical being. In the same way, the world of electronic media represents a world of shadowy forms, where images of what appear to be real dance before our eyes. Electronic technology allows us to communicate instantly with people around the world, taking real interactions and placing them in an undefined electronic space, and having immediate contact conveys a sense of the real. Digital communication obscures the boundaries of space and time—and therefore can generate misconceptions of reality.

The *World's Largest Pro Anorexia Site*, a *LiveJournal* account, is an example of how the Internet can foster a sense of community among web users. Comments are posted on the forum around the clock by members with usernames such as “thinocence,” “thinspiration,” and “\_notperfectyet\_” (Marshall 79). By expressing themselves under such figurative names, web users reidentify themselves with their disease and base their personal routines on virtual reality as they begin to rely on affirmation and encouragement from other anorexics to maintain their dangerous habits. In online communities, anorexic users are further distanced from reality and the true dangers of their condition. On May 6, 2007, Narkoticthrust posted a warning about the dangers of anorexia from her own experience, apologized for speaking out against the disease on the website, and announced that she was leaving the forum. Pangsofbeat responded to her message: “i’m [*sic*] sorry you couldn’t get the support you wanted. i personally love this forum. i think the girls are supportive and helpful.” Pangsofbeat’s comment illustrates how the world of electronic media has blurred the distinction between what is virtually real and what is actually real. Rhetoric found on pro-anorexia websites is used to portray the unhealthy as healthy in order to emphasize appearance over reality. Pro-anorexia websites are damaging because they are mediums through which bad rhetoric only reemphasizes the distorted truth in which anorexics live.

Electronic media have synthesized the conception of reality and, consequently, affected social behaviors to an unforeseen degree. For those with a mistaken grasp on the truth, the virtual world of the Internet provides a haven in which they can find rhetoric to persuade them to continue their anorexic behavior, where ornamentation and cookery are the means to achieve a desired appearance. However, using the power of persuasion to a destructive and unrealistic end is exactly what Plato feared.

### **Works Cited**

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