

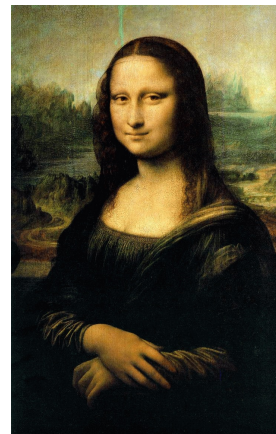
Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W
Spring 2011
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January 26
Plato's Cave and Descartes's Doubts

Two Ways to Be Wrong

- Some people believe that we can be wrong about a lot of things.
- Others believe that we can be wrong about very few things.
- There are two different kinds of reasons that one could be resistant to error.
 1. We could be resistant to error because we are almost always right about something.
 - ▶ simple arithmetic calculations
 - ▶ whether we are in pain, or are happy
 2. We could be resistant to error because the claim we are making are neither true nor false.
 - ▶ Whether the *Mona Lisa* is attractive
 - ▶ Whether lima beans are yummy

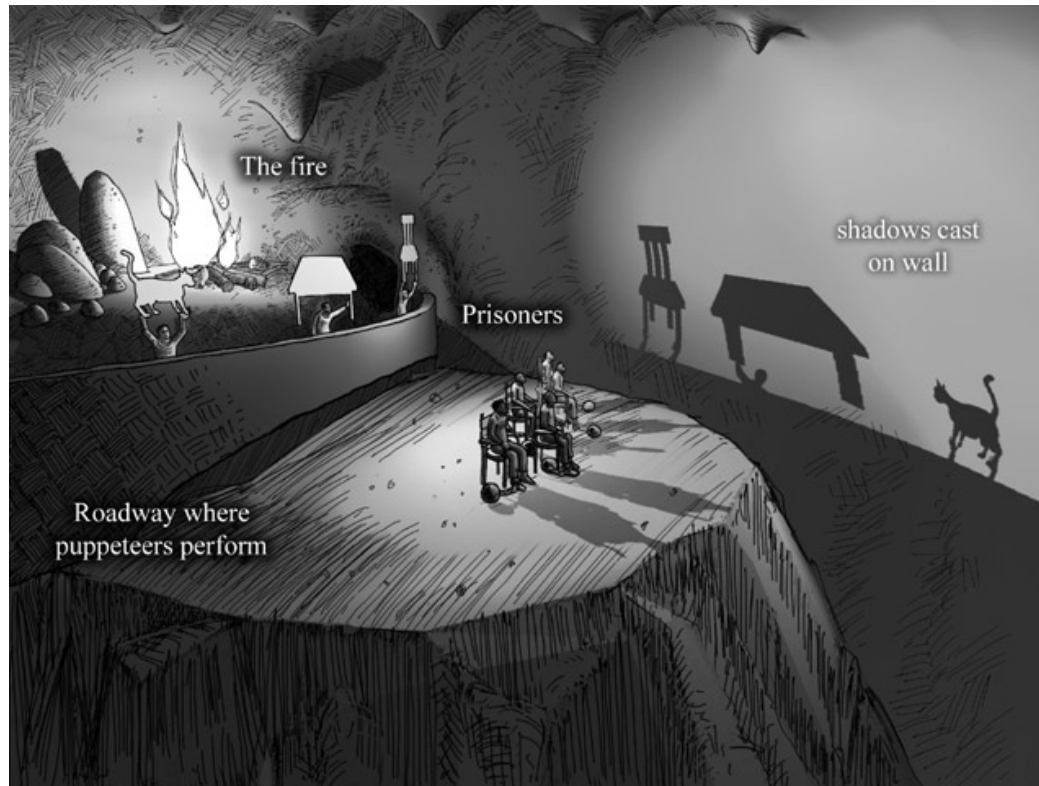


Truth Values



- Some of us think that many or even most claims are matters of opinion.
- If we want to know the nature of reality, we need to consider claims of the first sort.
- Mathematical claims are not matters of opinion.
- Neither are the claims of science.
 - the force of gravitational attraction
 - the genetic code of a chipmunk
 - the structure of the set-theoretic universe
- In “The Country of the Blind,” Wells depicts a community of people who are systematically in error.
- In what ways are we like those people?

Plato's Cave



The prisoners believe that the shadows are reality.

Setting Free a Prisoner

When one was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light, he would be pained by doing all these things and be unable to see the things whose shadows he had seen before, because of the flashing lights... If we pointed to each of the things passing by and compelled him to answer what each of them is, don't you think he would be puzzled and believe that the things he saw earlier were more truly real than the ones he was being shown? (515c-d).

Returning to the Cave

- If this man went back down into the cave and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes be filled with darkness, coming suddenly out of the sun like that?... Now, if he 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, and if the time required for readjustment was not short, wouldn't he provoke ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he had returned from his upward journey with his eyes ruined, and that it is not worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And as for anyone who tried to free the prisoners and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hand on him, wouldn't they kill him (516e-517a)?
- The people in the cave will not let go of their images.
- “The Country of the Blind”

Two Reasons for Hostility

Anyone with any sense...would remember that eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes: when they change from the light into the darkness, or from the darkness into the light. If he kept in mind that the same applies to the soul, then when he saw a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he would not laugh absurdly. Instead, he would see whether it had come from a brighter life and was dimmed through not having yet accustomed to the dark, or from greater ignorance into greater light and was dazzled by the increased brilliance (517e-518a).

Interpreting the Allegory of the Cave

- Who are the people in the cave?
- What are the images we are reluctant to give up?
- What are the images Plato wishes us to give up?
- How do we feel about those who refuse to listen to those who see the world differently?
- How do we feel about Medina-saroté's attitude, and those of the other villagers?

Plato's Challenge

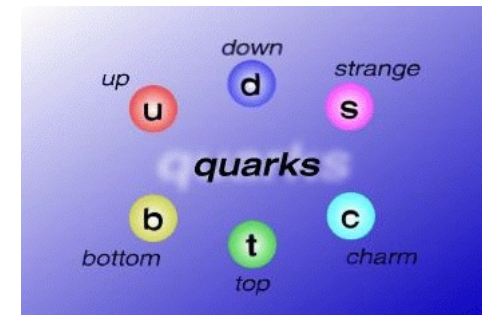
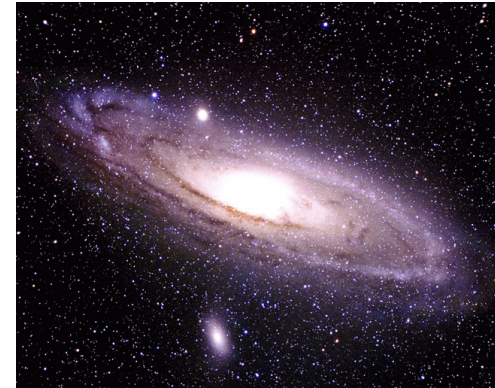
- Find the reality behind the images.
- Do not let our preconceptions lead us.

Descartes's Doubt

- Three reasons to doubt that the world is as we perceive it
- His larger project is to use these doubts to rid ourselves of preconceptions.
- Remove our false beliefs
- Replace them with true ones
- We will not pursue Descartes's larger project.

Illusion

- Sensory illusions undermine our sensory beliefs.
 - Distant or ill-perceived objects
 - Very small objects
- Our knowledge of close, medium-sized objects, like our own bodies, resists doubts deriving from illusions.



The Senses



- Among the most difficult beliefs to abandon are those which we grasp with our senses.
- What we see, and even more so what we touch, we take as most real.
- “What I have so far accepted as true *par excellence*, I have got either from the senses or by means of the senses” (61).
- What’s the difference?
- Are all of our beliefs derived from the sense?

Empiricism

- Some philosophers, called empiricists, claim that all knowledge is derived from sense experience.
- Empiricism is difficult to reconcile with our knowledge of mathematics.
 - We never sense mathematical objects like circles or numbers.
- Some sentences do not seem to depend on sense experience for their justification.
 - 'Bachelors are unmarried'
- Locke and Berkeley

Rationalism

- Rationalists believe that some knowledge comes from our ability to reason, independently of the senses.
- Knowledge based on reason is sometimes called *a priori* knowledge.
- Logical and mathematical beliefs are often taken to be acquired *a priori*.
- So are our beliefs in sentences like the one about the bachelors.
- Descartes is a rationalist.
- Does all knowledge come from experience?

Illusion, Redux

- Descartes first worried about illusions.
- Our senses sometimes deceive us.
- But we have other sensory ways of discovering the truth.
- While we might see a mirage, we can also approach it, and discover that it is not real.
 - The stick in water
- Illusion may allow us to doubt some specific properties of physical objects, but that's about all.

The Dream Argument

- Descartes wonders if there is a way to know whether he is dreaming.
- Three distinct questions:
 - A. Is there any way of distinguishing waking from dreaming experience?
 - B. What beliefs does the possibility of our dreaming eliminate?
 - C. Is there anything of which we can be sure, even if we are dreaming?

Distinguishing Waking from Dreaming Experience

- There is no obvious mark to distinguish waking from dreaming.
- We can dream of things that do not exist.
- We can dream that things which do exist have different properties than they actually do.
- Anything we can do when we are awake, we can dream we are doing.

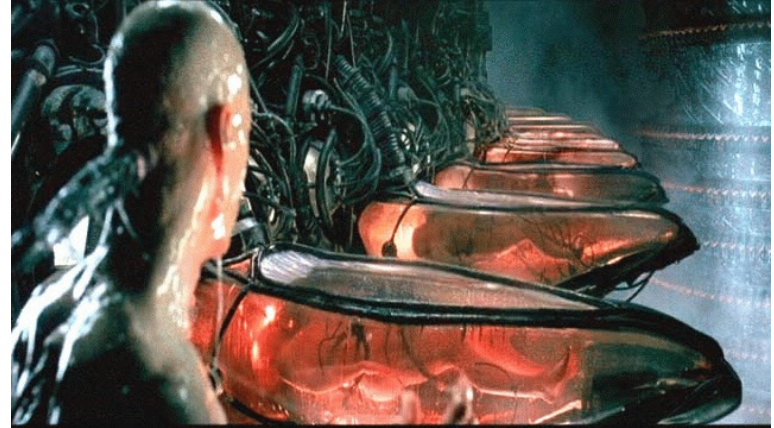
What Beliefs Does the Possibility of Our Dreaming Eliminate?

- The answer will be long and detailed.
- We can fantasize entirely novel objects, so we can not be sure that the objects in our dreams exist.
- There need not even be any Earth, or any people.
- We could be sentient machines, dreaming about people, in the way that we, supposing our ordinary views of the world, can dream of sentient machines.
- We can even doubt that any objects exist, since we could be just disembodied minds.
- If we can not be sure that we are not dreaming, then we can not be sure of anything our senses tell us.

What Remains?

- If we can not be sure that our sense experience is veridical, perhaps there is non-sensory knowledge that resists the dream doubt.
- Even if we are dreaming, our beliefs in mathematical claims, like '2+2=4' or 'the tangent to a circle intersects the radius of that circle at right angles' may survive.
- Descartes also claims that the universals from which objects are constructed, the properties of objects, remain, as well.
 - color, shape, quantity, place, time
- Even if no object has these properties, the properties remain, insofar as they are in our minds.
- "It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false" (AW42).

The Deceiver



- What if there were a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into our minds?
- Brains in Vats
 - According to such examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.
 - There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.
 - In contrast, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.
- We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.
- When we apply the deceiver hypothesis to our beliefs, we notice that just about all of them can be called into question.
- Nothing, it seems, is certain.

Descartes's Goal

- Descartes does not want to defend skepticism.
- His goal is to provide a new foundation for knowledge.
- He seeks a single, unassailable truth, one that resists all reason for doubt.
- “Archimedes asked only for one fixed and immovable point so as to move the whole earth from its place; so I may have great hopes if I find even the least thing that is unshakably certain” (66).



The Cogito

Whenever I am thinking, even if I am doubting, I must exist.

- ‘Cogito’ is Latin for ‘I think’.
- “I think; therefore I am”?
 - ▶ looks like a logical inference
- A logical deduction would require previous knowledge of premises, and that the conclusion follows from the premises.
- But Descartes eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.
- Thus, the Cogito must not be a logical deduction according to prescribed rules from prior premises.
- Descartes calls it a pure intuition.

What Does the Cogito Get Us?

- The cogito establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks.
- Our thoughts, though, may not tell us anything true about the world.
 - The doubts about the content of thought remain.
- Even if our thoughts misrepresent the world, they still appear to us.
 - We certainly seem to sense the table.
- Even a dream world consists of appearances, with certain characteristics.
- I have direct access to my thoughts in a way that I seem to lack access to thoughts of others.
 - privileged access
- Ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds.

A Solipsistic Muddle

- We will wallow in that muck for another class period, after watching *Inception*.
- Tomorrow Night, KJ Aud (KJ 125)
- Pizza?

