

Class #2: Reality
H.G. Wells, "The Country of the Blind"

I. Business

After class, send me an email with three preferences for presentations.

I will try to give each person her/his first choice.

Beware the ethics ones, which are popular but at the end of the course.

Inception screening: Wednesday, January 25, SC Auditorium

For next class: Two readings, one précis.

II. Reading Philosophy

[Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.](#)

III. Error: A Group Exercise

Philosophy is, on one apt description, a search for truth.

To get at the truth, we have to avoid falsity.

In particular, we would like to be correct about the nature of reality.

The residents of the Country of the Blind systematically get something wrong.

Let's look at the kinds of things we can get wrong to see what we can learn from that question.

In groups of three:

What kinds of things can we be wrong about?

Think of some things you once thought you knew, but found out were wrong.

What kinds of things can we not be wrong about?

So, why do we get things wrong?

Optical illusions: [here](#), [spinner](#), [silencing](#)

Math facts

Beliefs of others

Newtonian mechanics, Euclidean geometry

The very notion of a false belief is a little odd.

Parmenides, as described in Plato's [*Sophist*](#), argues that one can not lie.

NL NL1. Lying is saying what is not.

NL2. That which is not has no sort of being.

NL3. When I say something, it has at least some sort of being.

NLC. So, lying is impossible.

The suspect argument NL depends on Parmenides' claim, NL2.

The argument for NL2 seems to be that 'that' attributes singularity, which is some sort of being.

If NL were sound, the sophist could deny that he is a liar, a maker only of semblances, rather than likenesses.

Young children don't even have the concept of false beliefs.

Until the age of four, children routinely fail the [false belief test](#).

[Piaget clip on conservation](#)

Theory of Mind clip

One might look at such entrenched inabilities to have false beliefs and wonder about ourselves.

Numbers estimating

Framing:

In "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," Kahneman and Tversky presented participants the follow scenario asking them to pick either Program A or Program B.

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimate of the consequences of the programs are as follows:

Program A: 200 people will be saved 14

Program B: A 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved

Kahneman and Tversky found that 72% chose program A and 28% chose program B. Curious as to how the "framing" of a question affected how it was preferred, they repeated the study with a slight variation. The second time they presented participants with the same scenario but different program options.

Program C: 400 people will die

Program D: A 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and a 2/3 probability that 600 people will die.

In the second scenario 22% chose program C while 78% chose program D. Rationally speaking, however, people should not prefer one over the other given that Program C is statistically identical to Program A. What explains the drastic difference in preference?

The preference in problems 1 and 2 illustrate a common pattern: choice involving gains are often risk averse and choice involving losses are often risk taking. However, it is easy to see that the two problems are effectively identical. The only difference between them is that the outcomes are describes in problem 1 by the number of lives saved and in problem 2 by the number of lives lost (1974, p. 3, my emphasis).

Kahneman and Tversky realized that different contexts or "frames" could strongly change people's decisions and behaviors. (McNerney, "Shifting Paradigms")

[Ariely](#) ~12:00

Is there a difference between the false beliefs of children and the false beliefs of adults?

With children, we can't just correct the false beliefs.

But, adults don't like to be corrected, either.

IV. The Country of the Blind.

In “The Country of the Blind”, H.G. Wells describes a man named Nunez, who discovers an isolated village of blind people.

The blind people believe that the valley in which they live is like the inside of a hollow ball, with a smooth roof above them, and that the birds are angels singing.

Nunez imagines that he can become king by telling the blind people about the real world.

But they refuse to listen.

The blind people think that Nunez is delusional.

Nunez falls in love with Medina-saroté, who wants him to have his eyes removed so that he can be normal.

Some questions:

Is Nunez really at a disadvantage?

Why doesn't he become king?

Central question: How do the people respond to Nunez's discussions of sight? - See pp 5, 6, 6-7

Are the blind people's reactions to Nunez, and his description of sight rational?

It is impossible to make a man blind by nature understand that he does not see, impossible to make him want sight and regret his lack (Montaigne, *Apology*, §7)

At the end of the long version of the story, there is an earthquake.

The mountain around the blind village crumbles, and only Nunez and Medina-saroté escape.

Even then, when Medina-saroté is convinced of the power of sight, she resists it.

Read p 29 to end.

What is it that we actually see?

Blind people given sight don't see chairs and trees.

What is the connection between the taste and color of the apple?

Among the different sense modalities?

Space aliens with a sixth sense (of bludge?)

Our beliefs about the world are mediated by our sensory apparatus.

They are also mediated by our minds themselves.