

Class #3 - Illusion  
Plato, from *Republic*  
Descartes, from *Meditations on First Philosophy*

## I. Two Ways to Be Wrong

In our last class, we discussed a variety of ways that one can 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. Notice that there are two different kinds of reasons that one could be resistant to error. First, we could be resistant to error because we are almost always right about something. For example, we are nearly always correct about simple arithmetic calculations and about whether we are in pain or are happy. Second, we could be resistant to error because the claim we are making are neither true nor false. Our opinions about whether the *Mona Lisa* is attractive, or whether lima beans are yummy are not the kinds of claims that are ordinarily open to refutation.

Some of us think that many or even most claims are of the latter sort. But, 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. We can be right or wrong about the force of gravitational attraction, or about the genetic code of a chipmunk, or about the structure of the set-theoretic universe.

Our concern, in this class, is whether we are correct about the ways in which we think about the world. In "The Country of the Blind," Wells depicts a community of people who are systematically in error about the nature of the world, and about the belief-forming abilities of people. In what ways are we like those people?

For today's class, we read two short excerpts from larger philosophical treatises. Both Plato, in the *Republic*, and Descartes, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, are concerned that the world may be radically unlike our beliefs about the world. Let's start with Plato.

## II. Plato's Cave

In Plato's cave, people are so entranced with images that they do not realize that there is a reality independent of those images. The people in the cave are chained so that they only look at shadows on the wall of the cave, bare representations of the world behind them. They believe that the shadows are reality. Trouble starts when one of the people who are chained is set free.

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).

Conversely, the person who returns to the cave has seen the real world, and is no longer entranced by the images he sees.

When he returns, the others will not believe him.

The people in the cave will not let go of their images.

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)?

Is it any wonder that the people in the cave wish to kill the person who returns?

What are the similarities to Plato's story of the cave and "The Country of the Blind"?

Notice that there are two distinct reasons for hostility in Plato's story.

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).

When people make claims with which we disagree, we have to ask whether they are correct and we are wrong or whether we are correct and they are wrong.

Arrogance naturally leads us to the latter view, and it is sometimes correct.

But, we would do well to maintain some humility.

One problem with maintain humility is that it seems difficult, perhaps impossible, to control our beliefs. We can not choose what we believe and what we do not believe.

Try, for example, to believe (and not merely pretend to believe) that there is, say, an elephant sitting next to you.

This aspect of our cognitive architecture is called doxastic involuntarism.

We might have some small control over some of our beliefs.

We can indirectly influence our beliefs by choosing to spend time with people whose beliefs are different from our own.

But it seems, for many beliefs, that they are out of our control.

Plato clearly intends the story of the cave to be an analogy.

In analogies, some objects or concepts stand for others.

Who are the people in the cave?

Maybe the people are those who watch too many movies or too much TV or play too much World of Warcraft.

Such people are entranced by images.

But, most of those people understand that the images they see are not reality.

The people in the cave do not know that they are seeing only images, and not reality.

Plato's implication is that we are the people in the cave.

We are the people who have fundamentally false beliefs.

We are the people who mock, or react in a hostile fashion, to those who wish to show us the true way.

How do we think about the people who try to get us to redirect our gaze away from what they say are only images to reality?

We call them conspiracy theorists, religious nuts, propagandists, philosophers.

What are the false images that Plato wishes us to give up?

The short answer is just that they are the physical world around us.

The world in which we seek satisfactions of our bodily desires, material goods, and the money to buy them.

The real world is the world of ideas, the world that the philosopher studies.

It would be easy to dismiss Plato's desire to redirect our attention to philosophy, and away from money and our physical desires.

After all, he is a philosopher.

But, how do we really 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?

They are wrong, no matter how much we sympathize with them.

There is a world of sight.

Plato has issued a challenge to us, to find the reality behind the images.

And, not to let our pre-conceptions lead us.

### III. Descartes

Descartes provides 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.

He wants to remove our false beliefs, and replace them with only true ones.

We will not pursue Descartes's larger project in detail here.

But, we will look at several aspects of it through the term.

Descartes's first reason for doubt is called the illusion argument.

Consider [optical](#), or other sensory, [illusions](#), or hallucinations.

Such experiences undermine our sensory beliefs.

They are particularly effective in impugning beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects, and perhaps very small ones.

The square building may look round from afar.

We may have difficulty discerning the properties of very small objects, like quarks, and very large ones, like our galaxy.

But our knowledge of close, medium-sized objects, like our own bodies, resists doubts deriving from

illusions.

Indeed, 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.

In the third paragraph of Meditation One, Descartes says that everything he has taken as most true has come either from the senses or through the senses.

What could he mean?

Are all of our beliefs derived from the sense?

Some philosophers, called empiricists, claim that all knowledge is derived from sense experience.

Empiricism is difficult to reconcile with our knowledge of mathematics, since we never sense mathematical objects like circles or numbers.

Also, some sentences, like 'Bachelors are unmarried', do not seem to depend on sense experience for their justification.

We need only to know the meanings of the words to know that it is true; we need not see any bachelors.

Locke and Berkeley, whose work we will read next week, both held varieties of empiricism.

In contrast, 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.

The question which divides the empiricist from the rationalist is whether all knowledge comes from experience.

For now, we are interested in whether our sense experience ever gives us knowledge.

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.

Illusion may allow us to doubt some specific properties of physical objects, but that's about all.

In the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the First Meditation, Descartes develops the stronger argument, called the dream argument, against the veracity of the senses.

In the dream argument, Descartes wonders if there is a way to know whether he is dreaming.

The dream argument elicits 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?

Regarding A, there is no obvious mark to distinguish waking from dreaming.

We can dream of things that do not exist, or 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.

So, the answer to B 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.

Machines need designers and constructors, of course, but these need not be people.

We can even doubt that any objects exist, since we could be just disembodied minds.

We might be able to know that some state was a dream.

But we can not be sure that our current state, if it has no obvious dream-like qualities, is a waking state.

If we can not be sure that we are not dreaming, then we can not be sure of anything our senses tell us.

The answer to B leads to a way to approach C.

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.

Properties are what he calls simple and universal.

For example, consider color, shape, quantity, place, time.

Even if no object has these properties, the properties remain, insofar as they are in our minds.

Descartes calls these the 'building blocks' of the empirical world.

"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 idea is not that the objects are made of their properties, in the way that water is made of hydrogen and oxygen.

Rather, our ideas are made of general images, and those general images can remain impervious to doubt even when we are doubting that they are properties of objects outside of us.

So, some beliefs resist doubt on the basis of illusion and dreams.

Even if I am dreaming, colors, as perceptions, exist, bachelors, if there are any, are unmarried, and  $2+2=4$ .

So, we needed a stronger doubt to finish the job of providing reasons to doubt all of our beliefs.

For the third doubt, Descartes wonders about the status of his beliefs if there is a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into Descartes's mind.

We need not worry about whether this deceiver is God, or a demigod, or a demon.

Neither need we assert the existence of a deceiver or a God.

All we need is to imagine the possibility of a deceiver, which is easy enough to do.

Compare the deceiver hypothesis to a brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

The brain-in-the-vat hypothesis is to imagine that we have been kidnaped, and our brain removed from our body.

Our bodies discarded, our brains have been hooked to computers which simulate the continuation of our lives.

According to the thought experiment, we don't notice the difference.

According to such examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.

But the brains are being fed misleading information.

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. The certainty which convinces us not to doubt those claims that remain under the dream doubt could itself be implanted by a demon deceiver.

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.

The world may be very different than it appears.

Descartes's goal is not to defend skepticism.

His goal is to provide a new foundation for knowledge.

To that end, 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 one belief which resists doubt is called the cogito.

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

'Cogito' is Latin for 'I think'.

In a section of the *Discourse on the Method*, another of Descartes's writings, Descartes formulates the first piece of knowledge as "I think; therefore I am."

This formulation is misleading, and the version in the *Meditations* is more careful.

'I think; therefore I am' looks like a logical inference.

A logical deduction, though, 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.

The cogito establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks.

But, it does not give us a whole lot more.

Our thoughts, may not tell us anything true about the world; the doubts about the content of thought remain.

But even if our thoughts are false, even if they misrepresent the world, they still appear to us.

Even if there is no table, we still seem to sense the table.

The doubts lead us to wonder if we are living in a dream-like world.

But that 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, if there are any others; my access to my thoughts is privileged.

Also, the doubts infect only my claims about what those thoughts represent.

They are indefeasible, as long as we take them to be just thoughts.

Ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds.

We can get certainty about our beliefs, as they exist inside our minds.

Beyond that, the doubts seem to have some force.

We seem to be stuck in a solipsistic muddle.

We will wallow in that muck for a little longer, after watching *Inception*, and then we will proceed into the details of a few different attempts to solve the problem of knowledge of the external world.