

Class #2: Reality
Plato, from *Republic*

0. [Plato's Cave in 8-bits](#)

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.
Prepare the Descartes selections: everyone presents a paragraph (or so).

II. Reading Philosophy

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

III. Error

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.

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](#)

One might look at such entrenched inabilities to have false beliefs and wonder about ourselves.
But adults are pretty good at making mistakes too.
One such common error is due to what is called 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

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")

[Here is Dan Ariely](#) describing other errors that people often make.

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.

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.

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. Such folks retreat to, "It's just my opinion, and I'm entitled to that." Problematic appeals to entitlement aside, one is not entitled to one's own facts. One can only be entitled to one's opinion, in the relevant sense, if the claim in question is not a factual one.

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?

Our next two readings are 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.

IV. 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.