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## How Do We Know What We Know?

### Epistemology in Homer, de France, and Borges

Throughout the course of history, people have enjoyed stories with magical elements. Magic, a key feature of modern fantasy, fairy tales, and ancient mythology, is any supernatural event or phenomenon that is unexplainable through logic or reason. Often, stories of magic ask the reader to suspend their disbelief enough to accept a contradiction between sensory information (seeing a man turn into a pig) and reason (men can't turn into pigs). Taken at face value, these stories are useful tools for examining the reliability of the senses, a field of philosophy known as epistemology. In essence, when characters accept the breach of logic inherent in magical events, they are telling the reader that sensory information is more reliable for conveying truth than reason is. When characters question magical events, they are relying on reason over senses. Academic philosophers, of course, do not tend to deal with magic, but they very much deal with epistemology. And while the epistemological conclusions of philosophers change over time, the literary tradition of the West remains faithful to the senses. Through examining magical literary and philosophical works of three time periods, we can trace the developments of popular and academic epistemology from Classical Greece to the present day.

Homer's *Odyssey* seems at first glance to be a work of pure fantasy, rife with princesses, gods, and monsters. And while this evaluation may be useful in the world of entertainment, *The Odyssey* serves as a useful cultural and intellectual artifact, just as full of philosophy as it is of

the supernatural. In one episode, the titular sea captain Odysseus and his men find themselves on the island Aeaëa, which is inhabited by the mysterious Circe. Unfortunately for the crew, Circe is a skilled witch, and some of the crew "... were turned to pigs in body / and voice and hair; their minds remained the same" (10.240-241). When their physical forms seem to change before Odysseus' eyes, it is because their bodies have literally become those of pigs-- just two lines later, they eat "mast and cornel cherries" (10.243), typical pig food. The men "[look]<sup>1</sup> like fat boars" (10.390), they are penned like boars, and they seem to act like boars, despite the caveat that "their minds remained the same" (10.241) In other words, there is a one-to-one correlation between appearance and reality. If Homer were a philosopher, he would say that when the object of the senses (Odysseus' men) undergo an apparent change (becoming pigs), the perceiver can be sure that they have undergone an actual change.

Plato's philosophical work, despite being from approximately the same time period, contrasts that of Homer. In his *Republic*, Plato directly addresses the same questions that Homer answers in the episode with the pigs-- can we trust that the information from our senses represents what is true? Plato uses the famous allegory of the cave to say, no, none of what we perceive as true is true. He asks the reader to "imagine human beings living in an underground, cave-like dwelling" (*Republic*, VII, 14a), seeing only the shadows of reality projected on the wall in front of them. "What the prisoners would take for true reality is nothing other than the shadows of [the true reality]" (*Republic*, VII, 15c). However, there is hope for the hypothetical prisoners. If one of the prisoners is dragged out of the cave into the sunlight, "[The man dragged from the cave] would need time to get adjusted, I suppose, if he is going to see the things in the world above... Finally, I suppose, he would be able to see the sun" (*Republic*, VII, 16a-b). The

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<sup>1</sup>Changed from "looking" to preserve grammatical continuity.

implication here is that we are all prisoners in our societal cave, unable to even see that our whole world is an imitation of reality.

Plato's allegory suggests that nothing we sense is ever "true reality," which would seem to directly contradict Homer's assumption that when Odysseus sees his men turn into pigs, his men are now pigs. In fact, Plato would seem to question whether Odysseus' men were ever really men in the first place. Upon further consideration, however, it becomes apparent that the two works are compatible. In *The Odyssey*, nobody's beliefs about the functioning of the world are challenged. Since Odysseus lives in a world where cyclops and fairies exist, it makes sense for him to take magical transformations at face value-- watching his men turn into pigs is not equivalent to being dragged into the sun. Therefore, his system is internally consistent. Because the pigs are treated as pigs, they are, for all intents and purposes, pigs, cave or no. Whether Plato would say that the pigs are real or not does not matter within *The Odyssey*, because humans are capable of living whole and complete lives within the cave.

The intellectuals of the Medieval era were evidently concerned with the same questions as the ancients. The writer Marie de France used magical elements in her *Lais*, a collection of literary fairy tales written for a French court. In the Arthurian story "Lanval," a lonely knight, Lanval, falls in love with the Fairy Queen, who makes him infinitely rich. Queen Guinevere and King Arthur refuse to believe in the Fairy Queen's existence, so they charge him with treason, and his only possible defense is for the Fairy Queen to appear before the court. In this story, the court is skeptical of truth, and the only proof that they are willing to accept comes in the form of sensory information-- they have to see the Fairy Queen to believe in her. Already, it is clear that this story contains no epistemological skepticism; it follows more in the vein of *The Odyssey* than *The Republic*. But even the accusation of treason that drives the central conflict of the plot stems from reliance on a bizarre truth, the objectivity of which speaks to the extent to which the

characters trust their senses. When Guinevere propositions Lanval, he tells her, "I love and am loved by a lady who should be prized above all others... you can be sure that one of her servants, even the very poorest girl, is worth more than you, my lady the Queen, in body, face and beauty..." (77). Here, an objective hierarchy of beauty is established, with the Fairy Queen above Guinevere, as much as Arthur and his court would like to believe otherwise. Lanval's trial itself upholds this hierarchy, and one of the barons who serves on Lanval's jury goes so far as to require that Lanval "provide proof" to demonstrate that "what he said to incur the queen's displeasure is true" (79). This objective beauty hierarchy shows the extent to which the Medievals trusted their senses, as they failed to consider the possibility of various individuals sensing different things when presented with the same sense object.

But like Plato, Medieval philosophers interpreted the world differently from their pop-culture literary contemporaries. Al-Ghazali, a Medieval Islamic philosopher, details his personal period of skepticism in his "Rescuer from Error." In examining and questioning his "conformist beliefs" (61), Ghazali first dismisses all of his beliefs except for those which could be proven through sensory information or logic. He soon dismisses all of his beliefs except for logic however, saying, "After a lengthy process of doubt, my mind did not allow me to maintain my trust in sensory beliefs" (62). Eventually, he dismisses logic too, until "God cured me of this disease and my mind was restored to health and balance" (63). He eventually decides to believe his senses again, but the fact of his skepticism is a sharp contrast to the almost humorous certainty of "Lanval."

Whether the difference between the belief system presented in "Lanval" and that in "Rescuer from Error" is due to variation in religious belief (many of Marie de France's other works are quite Christian), intellectual discipline, geographical region, or other factors, it is impossible to square the two. This represents a shift in cultural unity from Ancient times-- even

though it appears as though Homer and Plato disagree epistemologically, their arguments are compatible. In the Medieval era, writers and philosophers have split even more drastically.

In the Modern world, however, storytellers and philosophers have become blended within the work of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges, the pioneer of the literary genre of magical realism, throws out all the epistemological assumptions from the previous eras in his short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The story is based on the discovery of a fabricated planet, Tlön, which, through widespread promulgation of the bogus fact of its existence, gradually becomes real. The last section discusses schools teaching the languages of Tlön, and the final paragraph reads, in part, "English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön" (18). The implication that an entire world could come into being simply through the imagination of a people is astounding and confuses the projects of earlier philosophers-- in Platonic terms, by dint of the people believing that the shadows on the cave wall are real, the shadows become real. Borges hammers this point home with the concept of "hrönir," objects that appear simply because a person looks for them-- he gives the example of two people looking for a pencil. "The first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations" (13). Borges also discusses the various languages of Tlön. In one, neither verbs nor nouns exist. Instead, ideas are conveyed through the layering of adjectives, causing the very concept of nouns to be simultaneously a non-entity and as plentiful as the possible combination of adjectives that exist. In the narrator's words, "The fact that no one believes in the reality of nouns paradoxically causes their number to be unending" (9).

Borges' work essentially turns traditional epistemology on its head. Instead of the central question being "Can we trust our senses to represent the absolute truth of what is?," Borges asks, "How does what we sense *determine* the absolute truth of what is?" Through expecting to find a pencil, a person creates a reality where they find a pencil. Through not acknowledging the

existence of nouns, a society creates a reality where nouns are infinite. Through a fictional planet becoming widely popular, the planet itself is created.

Despite his re-writing of the question of epistemology, Borges is not incompatible with earlier philosophers. In fact, all three systems of philosophy-- Plato, Al-Ghazali, and Borges-- fit within each other. Plato's allegory of the cave, in essence, supposes that there is a higher plane of understanding above what we think of as true, which fails to contradict Ghazali's conception of reality. Like Odysseus' pigs, Ghazali's skepticism functions just as well within the cave as it does outside. In fact, one could argue that Ghazali's period of questioning represents him being dragged from the cave, and God allowing him to believe once again in logic is his final escape. He then embarks on a journey of discovery analogous to the former cave-dweller blinking in the sunlight. Borges challenges these epistemological systems, but through "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius's" fictional format, he does not up-end Plato or Ghazali by stating a truth-- he merely raises questions about their work.

Although philosophers have tended to disagree with each other and raise alternate explanations for the world, authors of fiction from varied times and cultures generally seem to agree-- we as humans should trust our senses to tell us the truth. The enduring nature of magic as a plausible phenomenon throughout literature speaks to the twin human desires of residing comfortably in a world where we can trust that what we know to be true is true and of residing in a world where fairy queens appear out of nowhere to make the poor and forgotten knights wealthy and popular.

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