

Geoff Bagley was intending to give an outline on the philosophy of Rene Girard but is unfortunately indisposed. As a substitute he has given a quote "from a TV program called Robots". I don't know of the program, but here is the quote:-

*"It's one thing to question your mind. It's another to question your eyes and ears. But then again, isn't it all the same? [Are] Our senses just mediocre inputs for our brain? Sure, we rely on them, trust they accurately portray the real world around us. But what if the haunting truth is they can't? That what we perceive isn't the real world at all, but just our mind's best guess? That all we really have is a garbled reality, a fuzzy picture we will never truly make out?"*

One thing is I think clear, that this quote takes the existence of an external world as an axiom – there is a reality with which we interact and that our senses “portray”: so the immaterialism of Berkeley is refuted or ignored. However that leaves in the frame virtually every other major thinker in the history of philosophy.

Where to begin? – *in medias res* of course, with Descartes and his wax candle: the wax has shape, colour, size and smell, qualities perceived through the senses but lost or changed when approached to the fire while the wax itself remains. Sensible qualities he concludes are therefore not in the nature of things; material substance is essentially extended, and that extension can be modified in various ways - but extension and its modes are the sum of physical reality. This both harks back to the Aristotelian concept of substance and pre-empt's Locke's concept of primary and secondary qualities, but critically it also leads to the arch-rationalist position that the reality of the world can only truly be known by reason through arguments that resolve the vagueness and inconsistency of sensory perception. Here we have another Cartesian divide: appearance and reality.

Which, as it happens, is the title of the British philosopher F.H. Bradley's (1846 – 1924) metaphysical tome "*Appearance and Reality*" published in 1893. Although born in Clapham, his philosophy does seem rather difficult and he certainly wasn't your average man on the Clapham omnibus. He is for example criticised in A. J. Ayer's "*Language, Logic and Truth*" for such statements as "*the Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress*", which Ayer says is "*an utterance which has no literal significance even for himself*". Bradley takes the rationalist project to yet further extremes. Like Berkeley he argues that not only Locke's secondary qualities but also his primary qualities are mere appearance with no reality independent of the perceiver; but then proceeds to deny the reality of such concepts as space, time and causality. So far Descartes might not have been too dismayed, but not content with dismissing the whole universe as mere appearance Bradley then proceeds to undermine the ideas of self and consciousness as being any more than mere appearance. You might well ask what survives this onslaught but for this you will have to go off and read his text - as far as I can tell he is of the view that Reality is an unknowable unity which he calls the ABSOLUTE and all individual objects that we call real are mere appearance. As he says, "*the Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals*". Good luck!

Talking of “unity”, or perhaps “the One”, maybe it would help to go back to basics. I mean of course the G(r)eeks. Plato famously was similarly of the view that the sensible world is unreal, but rather in the sense of imperfect. He does not deny that the objects of sense exist, but asserts that they are in a fundamental sense impure. This leads him to his theory of Forms (although self-criticised in for example the *Protagoras* as well as being dismissed by Aristotle). Here we have a different concept – the real world is a spiritual realm where the pure forms of sensible objects subsist and we are able to perceive and recognise their imperfect clones via a species of recollection that can be improved by philosophical contemplation and rigour. The sort of thing which found its way via the likes of Plotinus and Augustine into Christianity. Christians of course make no assertions concerning the reality of the sensible world, but they do have plenty to say about what Plato called the intelligible world, the realm overseen by his concept of the Good and their concept of the God.

Well, so much for rationalist philosophers, and I'm sure you have other examples of your own. But rationalists have a major difficulty in how to account for contingent truths: most of the things we see in the world are not necessary facts, they could have been different. This is perhaps the reason so many retreat into denial of the observable world as being chock full of messy and inconvenient data. But there is an alternative school of thought – empiricism takes that messy data as the bedrock of knowledge itself, a view particularly espoused by our modern concept of science and even more recent concept of “big data”.

Britain has a good smattering of empirical philosophers ready to refute those airy-fairy continental system builders and its very own heretical Bradley. I give you, like sacred images from medieval times, Thomas Hobbes with his Leviathan, John Locke and his *tabula rasa*, David Hume holding his fork, and Thomas Reid using his common sense, not to mention Samuel Johnson, who “refuted it thus” (that is, Berkeley’s immaterialism). And here we have the very opposite of scepticism: appearances received through the medium of our senses are the very grist to the mill of our understanding without which it would not be possible to know anything of the world or indeed anything at all – even the premises of deductive reasoning must result from empirical knowledge of the world. The problem of illusion and delusion of the senses is dismissed as fallacious – for example, Gilbert Ryle in his “counterfeit coin” argument points out that the reason we know that some coins are counterfeit is our ability to tell a real coin: in other words, the reason we know that our senses sometimes deceive us is because most of the time they do not. The conclusion must be that on the whole our senses are reliable, not unreliable.

It has to be said though that modern research in neuroscience and other related studies have thrown some fascinating light on the ways in which we perceive and interpret the world. Take for example the vanishing ball trick - magician throws ball up several times and the last time it disappears, but in reality the last time he just doesn’t throw it: your brain substitutes what it has been led to expect to have been seen. Another example is “colour consistency” where the colour you perceive can depend on the amount and quality of light and even surrounding colours – different people can perceive radically differing colours for the same object at the same time as their brains make differing adjustments. It is clear that our brains will often anticipate the interpretation of sense data and can be quite cavalier in overriding data which does not fit an expected pattern. It is a moot point the extent to which the undoubted occasional fallibility of this process is sufficient to make it unreliable, which brings us back to Gilbert Ryle’s argument. It has to be said that “our mind’s best guess” (referring to Geoff’s quote) is usually very good and the conclusion that “all we really have is a garbled reality” may be a little hysterical.

Of course, the empiricists also have their extreme wing. Logical positivists dismiss all metaphysical and other speculation not founded in the possibility of empirical verification. In other words all synthetic conclusions derive from inductive logic. In this view appearances do in fact fairly represent the real world and our interpretations of sense data are reliable. It may be that my view of the world is not the same as yours, and certainly not the same as a bat, but, as Schopenhauer wrote, “the world is my idea”. Since this is my world then my interpretation is indeed my reality. What does it signify that your reality may be different?

Which brings us to Kant. It is remiss to have got this far without mentioning Kant who has plenty to say on this topic. But I want to focus on his concept of the thing-in-itself. Kant says this kind of reality is unknowable – in which case, even if it is in some meaningful sense real reality, what difference does that make to me since I can never know it? What is meaningful to me is the reality that I perceive, potential warts and all, through the medium of my senses and cognition. Furthermore, in what way could there be a reality for the thing-in-itself since that thing either has no perception or if it does then that perception would itself be subjective rather than objective? I think it likely that the whole concept of the possibility of objective reality has no meaning, in the same way as physicists assert that the concept of time has no meaning before the Big Bang.

If rationalists have the difficulty of accounting for any but necessary truths, empiricists have the embarrassment of the problem of induction – as Hume pointed out, the validity of inductive logic suffers from the informal fallacy of begging the question: the proof of induction would seem to rely on the process of induction. So, if we cannot rely on induction to reach reality by way of appearances, and we cannot rely on rationalism to account for contingency in the world, then where does that leave us? A conclusion of solipsism would seem to be itself absurd – but which of the alternative premises in determining appearance and reality is the false one? Coming back full circle to those G(r)eeks, and the great Parmenides, which is the “way of truth” and which the “way of seeming”?

Is Reality populated by substances hidden in a fog of accidental properties and subjective perception? Can we never pierce the intervening veil of appearance and interpretation? Or is the hysteria of sceptical worries and the endless search for abstract meaning a very large red herring?

Discuss!