

5. Touching the concrete

“Once upon a time, I, Zhuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.”

These are the words of the 4th century b.c.e., philosopher, Zhuang Zi, which beautifully capture the transporting power of the human mind. In our dreams, or in our imaginations, we can fly to higher forms of freedom. It is the simplicity of the idea that has made Zhuang's dream a staple of the romantic imagination and a popular expression of the uncertainty of being.

There is however one truth that the honest mind can't escape, which is this: no matter how vivid and enthralling dreams might be, they are qualitatively and unmistakably different to being awake.

Our languages (even the languages of cultures that attribute mystical significance to dreams) distinguish between the unpredictable, unsettling and sensorily limited nature of the dream world, and the solidity of concrete reality. Blurring the distinction is typically regarded as a medical concern. I have met several people who have suffered “delusions” and been treated. Not one of them disputed that what they had were delusions, and that the test of such things is reality perceived in its fully waken state. Can you imagine in a dream being prescribed medication for the delusion that your waking state was real?

I am not saying anything new. Aristotle (a slightly older contemporary of Zhuang Zi) used the word “nous” to refer to a sense he believed was integral to the human body, like vision, hearing, touch, taste, etc. It simply told us what was and wasn't real. During dreams, the nous, like the other senses, is suspended, and things going on in our minds seem real. Waking up switches on our senses, including the nous, which immediately (except perhaps in exceptional cases, like the one that afflicted poor Zhuang Zi) sorts out the real from the unreal.

The immediate sense of the real and unreal is precisely why the problem of scepticism is a “problem”. Honest sceptics like David Hume, were unsettled by it. Reflecting on his work from a distance, he once commented “I dine. I play a game of Backgammon. I converse with my friends and all of these sceptical worries just disappear.” In short, reason inclines us to doubt the existence of the material world, while being alive in the world seems to make that doubt untenable.

Hume concluded that belief in the external world is incoherent, but inescapable, and the only way to deal with it was a kind of thoughtless surrender. If nous puts us productively in the world, and reason leads us to futile uncertainty, the best option is to trust the former and pay the latter “careless inattention”. He settled for what strikes me as a fob, a temporary solution, that may last little longer than a game of Backgammon. Soon enough the need for certainty will bounce back.

Let's look at the problem as a kind of paradox. In *Commentary 4*, I shown how thinking of a paradox as a clash of metaphors can break it. Now let's use the same method to deal with the Gettier problem I discussed in the pedagogic essay.

The story begins by saying that Smith *believes* that Jones will get the job. The metaphoric bundle of *belief* includes both prediction and knowledge. “I believe the sun will rise tomorrow” is a prediction, while “I believe the sun is hot” is knowledge. When we say “Smith believes that Jones will get the job”, the metaphoric applies the sense of prediction and over-stretches the sense of knowledge. Let's try instead the metaphoric of *predict*. With that Smith is not left with a “true belief” but an accurate prediction. It feels comfortable to say that this is not knowledge.

There is also, by the way, an ambiguity in the little story that I will just mention in passing. Smith

forms the justified belief (makes the informed guess) that *the* man who gets the job will have 10 coins in his pocket. The metaphoric bundle of *the* includes a sense of a specifically referred to thing (it is verbal pointing), which is context-dependent. In the proposition it is Jones, while in the conclusion it is Smith. It seems to point to one thing, but actually points to two.

Nevertheless, Plato's definition still stands on shaky ground. As I mentioned in *Commentary 4*, Plato and the Academy's mistake was to seek essences in definitions. The metaphoric bundle of *justified* contains both the ideas of evidenced and of reasoned argument. The former fits, while the latter is over-stretched. I am justified, for example, in believing I have a hand. I can feel the evidence but I can't and have never felt the need to make an argument.

Before we come to an answer to the question of knowledge I just want to restate the context in summary. Descartes' meditations (before his divinely inspired escape) was a culmination. His pure logic left us no solid ground to stand on. Hume's guess that the answer would come from thinking about the mind turned out to be true, but not in the way that Kant and the Phenomenologists imagined. Wittgenstein brought us close with the idea that words denote resemblances.

The Pragmatist, John Dewey said that the mind is in the world the way that the hand is. It is functional, active and inseparable. It is part of, and shaped by nature. Dewey meant that this also applies to our "truths". It is only a short step from this to the "multiple-truths" consensus of Post-modernism, and only another short step to the sceptical morass of 21st century "post-truth". Yet the pearl in Pragmatism is that knowledge has nothing to do with justification, logical or otherwise, it is naturally and directly derived from being alive in the world through time.

So let's unpack and repack the metaphoric bundle of *knowledge*. When I say that I know something I am asserting that it is a true belief. The bundle contains both the idea of belief, and of truth, or let's say, "certainty". We can never have absolute certainty of beliefs because they are about the world and subject to sceptical doubt. Yet we can have absolute certainty of our raw concrete experience, like the presence of my hand, for example.

When I described my raw concrete experience of a horse (in *commentary 4*) I was trying to put it into words. My words were the evocation of a memory that reflects a real experience, they were not the experience itself. I can't give you this experience, for this you must find yourself a real horse. When I describe these atoms of knowledge I add the words "concrete" as a reminder of their physicality, and "raw" as a reminder of their inexpressibility.

Raw concrete experiences are not themselves knowledge, they are the atoms of knowledge. They are assembled into metaphoric bundles, at which point some uncertainty creeps in. Bundles however, can be unpacked. We can disqualify particulars, that is to say, identify over-stretched ideas and break them down until we have as much certainty as we want.

Raw concrete experience can't be doubted. It is a stronger feeling than any valid deduction. It is an immediate connection with being, as indisputable as Descartes' feeling that he is thinking. It feels like the sense of *nous* (although it is not), it is why we can only pretend to disbelieve it (as Reid's "common sense" asserts) and it is why the anomalies of dreams never fool us (except in Zhuang Zi's imagination).

Descartes set the standard of modern epistemology by demanding certain knowledge and seeking it through pure rational doubt. It took a long time, and many arguments, to realise that he could not possibly have found it this way. We have certainty because, and in so far as, we are in the world over time. To achieve his end by the method he chose, Descartes would have had to regress to infancy and start his life all over again.