

Chapter 10: Belief in the Braino Machine

“There is no spoon.”

-- *“The Matrix”*

We’ve looked at what beliefs are, what they do, and how they’re justified. But that leaves some important questions unanswered:

- What makes beliefs meaningful?

Consider “the book is on the table” vs. “it’s a good book.” Both are meaningful but in different ways. If we don’t know how they’re meaningful, it’s easy for us to get confused about what they mean. For example, we might think that being good is like being on the table, and that it’s related somehow to the position or physical properties of the book. Believe it or not, people sometimes get confused about things like that.

- How can you know if beliefs are true?

This is more obviously important. If we don’t know how to determine if beliefs are true, then we can’t have confidence in any of our beliefs.

- What does it mean for beliefs to be true?

In a way, this asks what our world is like. Is it really true, as Hamlet wondered, that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so?” Or is there a reality beyond our beliefs that makes them true or false?

The answers are the subtext of the 1999 movie “The Matrix.” The movie got them from millennia of smart people thinking about those questions. The next few chapters will answer them in more detail. In this chapter, we’ll set the stage to make the answers easier to understand.

What if nothing you perceive is “real”?

The hero of “The Matrix” is Thomas Anderson, an employee at a software company who spends his nights online as a hacker named “Neo.” He discovers that the world he sees around him isn’t real. It’s only an illusion created by wires attached to his brain. Even his own body, as he perceives it, is an illusion. His real body sits in a pod that extracts energy from it, in a dark chamber that uses billions of human bodies as living batteries.

In one of the movie’s early scenes, Neo has to escape from agents of the Matrix. He climbs out his office window onto a ledge high above the city street. He believes that if he slips, he’ll fall to the pavement and die.

But he’s not really on a ledge. He’s not high above the street. The pavement isn’t even there, nor is his body. Even so, he has beliefs about all of those things. As long as the virtual world around him stays consistent with his previous experience -- as long as there’s no “glitch in the Matrix” -- his beliefs seem true. But are they? Do they mean what they seem to mean? And is he justified in believing them?

“The Matrix” is an entertaining movie, not a philosophy seminar. It raises serious questions but doesn’t try seriously to answer them. For millennia, some thinkers *have* tried to answer them.

Plato’s cave prisoners see shadows

The earliest known ancestor of “The Matrix” comes from ancient Athens. In his book *The Republic*, the philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) told “the allegory of the cave.” For their entire lives, prisoners have been chained in a cave where they face away from the entrance and can’t see each other or themselves. As people outside the cave walk past the entrance, they cast shadows on the wall faced by the prisoners. The shadows are the only reality that they have ever known. The prisoners can hear each other, so they discuss the activities of the shadows, theorize about them, and so forth.

One of the prisoners escapes from the cave and makes his way to the outside. Though at first blinded by the sunlight, he eventually realizes the truth: What he’s seen all of his life and took to be real were only the shadows of people in the real world. He makes his way back into the cave and tells the other prisoners what he discovered. He tells them haltingly and with great difficulty, because even though he’s *seen* the world outside the cave, he has no words to describe it.

The other prisoners don’t understand what he’s talking about. They don’t have any frame of reference for it. All of their ideas come from thinking about shadows on the wall. The ideas of open space with ground, sky, trees, and sunlight make no sense to them because they can’t be translated into shadow-speak. They think that the returned prisoner must be insane.

Plato wanted to know the nature of our world. Is the world real and substantial, or is it like a series of shadows on the wall of our cave?

Descartes thwarts his evil demon

Two millennia later, French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) told a similar story but with a different question. He wanted to discover if he could know anything for certain.

And he had a pretty high standard for what counted as certain. What he perceived with his senses seemed pretty certain – but was it really? In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he considered:

“... for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine?”

What if he was asleep and was only dreaming about sitting by the fire? The possibility meant that he couldn’t even be certain about what he perceived at the moment.

The situation was even worse: What if (like Neo) he didn’t have a body at all, and was only *dreaming* that he did? Sure, it was kind of a goofy idea, but it wasn’t impossible. If it wasn’t impossible, then it was *possible* that he was mistaken about having a body. The whole world might be an illusion. It was possible that a malicious demon:

“...has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not

having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things."

Was there anything at all that he could know for certain?

Just one thing, he thought: His mind existed, because if he could doubt that his mind existed, then he had to *have* a mind with which to doubt it. Whatever else might be doubted, he existed as a thinking being. He could know that for sure.

"Cogito, ergo sum!"

he cried, and leapt to his feet, startling the other patrons of the tavern in which he'd spent the evening.

"Cogito, ergo sum" means "I think, therefore I am." If he was thinking, he had to exist.

Tragedy almost struck a few hours later when the tavern was about to close. The bartender asked, "Would you like another drink, Mr. Descartes?" Descartes pondered for a moment and then replied, "I think not."

Poof! He disappeared in a puff of logic. Luckily for us, he reappeared a moment later, laughing. It was one of his favorite party tricks. We know that for certain.

Reid's common sense strikes back

The story of Descartes would be incomplete if I failed to mention his most perceptive critic, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796).

Descartes' argument "I think, therefore I am" is usually considered a pretty good one, but Reid would have none of it.

Reid argued that certain assumptions were necessary for any thought at all. As a result, you couldn't prove them without circular reasoning because in order to prove them, you first had to assume that they were true. Such assumptions included your own existence, the existence of the world, and the laws of logic.

According to Reid, it was crazy to reject such assumptions even if they could never be proven. His book *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* is where we get his juicy critique of Descartes.

"A man that disbelieves his own existence is surely as unfit to be reasoned with as a man who believes he is made of glass. There may be disorders in the human frame that may produce such extravagances, but they will never be cured by reasoning."

Reid himself couldn't quite believe that Descartes was serious:

"Descartes would make us believe that he got out of this delirium by his logical argument Cogito, ergo sum. But it is evident he was in his senses all the time, and never seriously doubted his existence. He takes it for granted in his argument, and proves nothing at all. I am thinking, says he, therefore I am: And is it not as good reasoning to say, I am sleeping, therefore I am? Or I am doing nothing, therefore I am?"

As we've seen in earlier chapters, these kinds of arguments are *philosophical stories*. Neither Descartes' view nor Reid's can be proven conclusively. One story probably makes more sense to you than the other. Or you might think that since neither story makes a practical difference, it just doesn't matter. For practical purposes, you'd be right. It doesn't make any difference in how you live your life, but if you're curious about the world, the dilemma might bother you a little. It's bothered a lot of people, and it still does.

Putnam puts brains in a vat

Plato's allegory of the cave gets its best contemporary retelling by the late Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam (1926-2016). Although "The Matrix" told a version of the story, its main focus was on entertainment rather than on the philosophical problems it raised.

Putnam's version is usually called "the Braino machine story." All people's brains have been removed from their bodies and plugged into the Braino machine. In Chapter 1 of *Reason, Truth, and History*, he explains:

"Suppose that the automatic machinery is programmed to give us all a collective hallucination, rather than separate unrelated hallucinations. Thus, when I seem to myself to be talking to you, you seem to yourself to be hearing my words. Of course, it is not the case that my words actually reach your ears – for you don't have (real) ears, nor do I have a real mouth and tongue."

All of us in the Braino machine seem to perceive the same world, but it's a virtual-reality copy of the physical world instead of shadows on the wall of a cave. We can communicate with each other, but we can't actually see each other or ourselves: we just *believe* that we do because the Braino machine creates the illusion.

The only world we know is the world portrayed to us by the Braino machine. When we see a tree, we're not seeing a real tree; we're just getting the result of electrical impulses sent to our brains by the machine. And when we believe that the tree is tall – *what*, exactly, is our belief about? Is it about a tree, because that's what we seem to perceive? Or is it about an illusion?

A lot depends on how we got into the Braino machine and how long we've been there. Based on Putnam's points, we can conclude that:

- If we previously lived in "the real world," then we have seen real trees, people, and so forth.
- If we have *always* lived in the Braino machine, then we have *never* seen real trees, people, and so forth.

If we previously lived in the real world, then our ideas about it were derived from real things. Our words and our beliefs refer to real things even if we're currently in the Braino machine looking at a series of illusions. When we were children living in the real world, our parents pointed to a real tree and said, "That's called a tree." Now that we're in the Braino world, we think that when we see a "tree," we're seeing at the same kind of thing as we learned about when we were children. But it's not. In that case, our beliefs about things in the Braino world are simply *mistaken*.

If we have *always* lived in the Braino machine – like Neo at the start of "The Matrix" – then our ideas about the world were derived from illusions. When we were children living in the Braino

world, we perceived our parents pointing to one of the Braino reality's virtual trees and saying, "That's called a tree." As adults in the Braino world, we think that when we see a "tree," we're seeing at the same kind of thing as we learned about when we were children. And we are. Our words and beliefs refer to the illusions. In that case, our beliefs about the world are (or can be) *correct*.

To put it in terms of the allegory of the cave, the cave prisoners' only experiences have been of shadows. They've formed their language and ideas based on the shadows they've seen. If they believe something about "a man," they can't mean a real man because they've never seen one. "A man," to them, means the shadow of a man, but they don't even know it's a shadow because they don't have the concept of a shadow. They think it's the real thing. So if they see a shadow of a man on the wall and believe, "that's a man," their belief is true. Their concept of "a man" is that of a shadow. Their belief refers to a shadow, and that's what it is.

As a result, neither the Matrix prisoners, the cave prisoners, nor the Braino machine prisoners can refer to the real world or anything in it. There might not even *be* a real world outside of the worlds created by the Braino machine. We only know that there is -- at least, we think we know - - because we're not prisoners in the Matrix, the cave, or the machine. We're outside of them.

And there's the problem, according to Putnam:

"... although the people in [the Braino] world can think and 'say' any words we can think and say, they cannot (I claim) refer to what we can refer to. In particular, they cannot think or say that they are brains in a vat (even by thinking 'we are brains in a vat')."

To believe that we are brains in a vat requires us to have some concept of a world *outside* the vat. But if we are lifelong Braino prisoners, then even our idea of "outside" refers to illusory spatial relationships that we've perceived inside the Braino machine. Those perceptions were generated by the machine, not by the real world. If we try to think about what's outside the reality created by the machine, we still end up thinking about the reality *inside* the machine. Just like the prisoner who escaped from Plato's cave and returned, we have no language or concepts with which to think about anything outside the reality created by the Braino machine.

For us even to think that our perceptions are illusory and our beliefs mistaken is impossible. When we seem to see a tree, the tree we see is the same kind of thing we've always seen when we saw a tree. Our beliefs about the tree are about the same things they've always been about. We aren't wrong.

What we see is *not an illusion*: It's exactly what we think it is. What we believe is *true*, in the sense relevant for someone who has always lived in the world of the Braino machine.

And we have no way to know if we're in the Braino machine or not.

That's our predicament. By definition, the Braino machine creates an illusion of reality so flawless that it contains no evidence of anything outside it. Since we can't know if we are in the Braino machine or not, all the conclusions about our beliefs that would apply *in* the Braino machine also apply to us:

- Our ideas are derived from our experienced reality, not from anything outside our experience.

- Our words and beliefs refer to the reality we've experienced, not to anything beyond it.
- To verify that a belief is true, we look at related experiences and beliefs based on those experiences. We check to see if the belief is consistent with them.
- For a belief to be true means that it accurately describes the experiences to which it refers. Those experiences are shaped by our thoughts and circumstances.

Meaning and truth cast their shadows

The next four chapters look at meaning, evidence, and truth in more detail. But what can we learn from Plato's cave, Descartes's demon, and Putnam's machine?

From Plato and Descartes, we learn that what reality *is* and how we perceive reality are not always the same thing. Our goal is to make our perception of reality more accurate, but our concepts and circumstances can make it more difficult.

From Putnam, we learn that we can't even talk about realities that transcend our experience because we have no language or concepts with which to do it. To test a belief for truth, we look at more experiences. For a belief to be true means that it's consistent with those experiences.

Let's look again at the quote from "The Matrix" that begins this chapter: "There is no spoon."

It turns out that there really *is* a spoon after all. It's just not the kind of spoon we expected.