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### **Leaps of Faith**

Humans, as a species, know more about the surface of the Moon—an object 238,900 miles away—than we know about the bottom of the ocean, somewhere considerably closer. Additionally, from most modern points of view, we know even less about something that is as close as possible to ourselves: our own minds. One could say that our senses are the sole connection between the reality of the outside world and the reality inside our skulls, but the eye receives what wavelengths it will and simply passes the information on to the mind. So, the mind itself has only a third-hand image of what is really happening on the outside of its skin and calcium living mech. In theory, this could create a fair number of discrepancies between what we call “true reality” and “perceived reality.” Only in theory though, because thus far in our existence, no one has been able to prove in any way—whether that be scientifically, theologically, or through any stretch of imagination—exactly how the mush inside our skull reacts with what we think is everything else outside. While this is a question to be addressed by neuroscientists with knowledge far beyond mine, room remains in the world for thinking of all kinds, and for this reason texts such as Plato’s *Republic* and *The Bhagavad Gita* remain relevant in many circles of discussion today, mostly for their interpretations and ideas of true reality.

Towards what exactly we proceed is almost as difficult to establish as true reality itself. An idea is a very broad thing and narrowing it by giving the idea something to form around—say, reality—does very little to help us approach anything productively. Plato and his various

acquaintances searched for many years for true reality, and were loud and lucky enough to come up with an idea that still remains studied to this day. Today, many people who still follow methods devised by Plato's contemporaries build their own ideas of reality and choose to present them through the religion we call science. In ancient India, many generations of people's lives were based upon the lessons found in texts such as *The Bhagavad Gita*. In fact, most people throughout human history have lived under the guidance of some meaning-filled narrative. Not all of these have sought to understand reality as deeply as others, but the vast majority provided at least some consolation concerning the parts of reality that its followers didn't quite understand. One thing that every guiding text, system of belief, and collection of suggestions (see Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*) shares is simple: an expectation of the reader to take some leap of faith to fully benefit from any certain view of reality.

This universal occurrence of what I will call 'the big jump' could be seen as a simple logical fallacy which appears in each and every system of belief—a place where the story starts to come apart and doubt starts to seep in through the cracks. In most religious belief systems, this point comes when one is asked to worship a specific deity, simply because they said so. In India's *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, this comes when Krishna instructs Arjuna to “Keep your mind on me, / be my devotee, sacrificing, bow to me— / you will come to me, I promise,” (Miller 144). Little to no reason is given as to why we or Arjuna should do what Krishna says, but this is because the text was written for a people who already believed strongly in the existence of their own Pantheon and needed little to no convincing. *Meditations* is capable of much the same method, but for opposite reasons. To learn from and trust stoic teachings requires much less of a significant leap of faith than other beliefs, as they are about as far from religion as one could get. And still, in taking Aurelius as a wise man and his fellow Stoics as being truly

selfish in their teachings, we still are letting our experience of reality hinge on a leap of faith. Many similarities have been drawn between the Stoics like Aurelius and platonic metaphysics, and for good reason (beyond their proximity to one another in time). While the Stoics offer guidance through the experience of life by giving specific examples and solutions, platonic metaphysics approaches the same problem of living by first establishing a basis of understanding upon which it builds its view of true reality. The key difference between the two teachings is in one word: stoic thinking concerns the *experience* of reality, while platonic thinking concerns more the *perception* of reality. Both systems require a leap of faith, but when platonic metaphysics makes its first statements on the relationship between “true reality” and “perceived reality,” the leap of faith to be made becomes much more treacherous.

Such statements as “If they [Plato’s imaginary prisoners] could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him” (Plato 231) are pivotal points in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. From a certain point of view, the prisoner’s choice to remain shackled is entirely reasonable, and they will only ever experience the depicted journey out of the cave if they blindly trust something they know nothing about—that being the outside world which is described to them only by a stranger. Aurelius never really tells his reader how to view the world, only how to act in response to it. He never once asks the question of what is real and what is a deceitful perception, and as a byproduct of this lightness of idea, much less trust in the idea’s perpetrator is required to believe in the validity of its claims. Meanwhile, Plato asks—at least for the sake of his cave allegory—for his reader to suspend disbelief momentarily and trust in his allegorical view of the world. Even in this fictional situation, rather extreme leaps of faith must be made by the prisoners for the story to play out at all.

Modern science is so broadly accepted as the most valid interpretation of true reality because it utilizes its Achilles heel to its own benefit. One tactic—often used by popular texts such as the Bible—asks its readers/believers to make their leap of faith as early on as possible. Basing everything on the existence of one singular, all-powerful being is a time-tested and proven way to subdue any doubts. Once one accepts the existence of a greater deity, the rest comes easily. Over the ages, science has grown apart from religion, albeit gradually. For a time, many scientific theories still relied upon the existence of a god or set of gods for their claims to be true, and for the unknown to rest within his or their control. Modern science as we know it simply removes the responsibility of the unknown from the basis of belief, by way of what we understand as the scientific method. This form of worship has developed to such a degree of detail and methodology that it very rarely lets any untruths slip through its sieve. And yet, there is still so much unknown in the world, the Mariana Trench being a prime example. While the scientific method means well, until it can explain everything in this experience down to the finest detail, it will remain a scapegoating system of belief like any other. This is because instead of attributing the unknown to something that is the basis of belief, science cleverly says “yet” and waves an index finger for articulation. When something is inexplicable by science, it asks a believer to take maybe the greatest leap of faith of all—to believe that the answer will come eventually, without any guarantee. From this point of view, believing in modern science is much like funding a product on Kickstarter. There is no guarantee that your investment will return anything at all, but for many the reward is more than worth the risk.

This idea of risk-versus-reward has been present in every aspect of humanity’s existence—from modern game shows to venturing outside tens of thousands of years ago. While it is a basic foundation of our everyday survival, it can be noted that weighing risk against reward is

not exactly a common practice in many schools of thought outside those concerned with straightforward morality. Even Krishna in *the Gita* encourages his readers and followers to avoid letting the threat of consequences influence their actions in favor of simply following one's pre-determined fate. This belief system leaves little room for a follower to make their own decisions surrounding their faith, and the same is true with Plato's Cave Allegory. Looking closely at risk-vs-reward when choosing whether to follow the suggested path out of the cave, it becomes clear that the presence of choice is a mirage when the leap of faith is considered. In these cases, as in many of the same texts previously referenced (as well as modern science), the sole risk lies entirely in making the leap and trusting a text to guide one's life, and the reward comes only as a byproduct of the resulting faith. The nature, validity, and true value of the reward awarded by faith is an entirely separate question. The answer to this question is more relevant to our existence than we can see, but one which will never be answered without first questioning why and how faith is achieved. This, in nearly all cases, is by leaps and bounds, and almost always in blindness. Such is the beauty of being human and not knowing.

### Works Cited

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