

The Dream of Purity

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What kind of contamination poses the greatest hindrance to our experience of the world? Do the most important cognitive faculties in epistemology – reason and the senses – truly cooperate with one another? What might be getting in the way, polluting and contaminating our image of the world, effectively keeping us unable to ever directly access the truth that we assume exists somewhere out there? The answer is suspiciously simple: we ourselves, the structure of our cognitive faculties, are the greatest contaminant distorting our own processes of cognition. Because, on the one hand, we have a cognitive apparatus that enables us to explore the surrounding reality, but on the other hand, this apparatus itself is not transparent and always imprints its own mark on our flowing experience, deforming reality in a way that we are not able to perceive because it lies within us. A great many questions arise in connection with this perspective-dependent deformation. First, can it be overcome? If so, how would we go about this, and what hampers us the most? And third, is it possible to come to terms with such contamination of the river of experience by simply accepting the fact, described perhaps best by Edmund Husserl, that an object is incommensurate with its representation?

The relationship between the senses and reason is one of the great, perennial topics discussed in the theory of cognition. One could roughly divide all philosophers into empiricists, i.e. those who value experience through the senses (although very few have given it primacy) vs. rationalists, according to whom the only trustworthy cognitive faculty is reason, which should be cut off from the senses to some less radical or more radical extent. In the history of philosophy, this opposition is most often illustrated using the example of the difference between the epistemological positions of Plato and Aristotle. The former believed that only the mind mattered; that it should train itself to disconnect from what pollutes thinking: the flow of experience and its associated affects. The only true knowledge must be purely rational, since our world is but a miserable copy of the reality of ideas, to which nothing but thinking gives us access. Plato's most eminent disciple, Aristotle, on the other hand, expanded the spectrum of our cognitive faculties to include experience, which enables us to function in the

world, becoming – very importantly – an ineradicable starting point for reason, which constructs its general concepts on the basis of particularistic perceptions. Plato had excommunicated experience, considering it a source of error and distraction, since cognition deserves its very name only on condition that it proceeds on the level of general concepts, without getting entangled in unnecessary illusions, without diving into the sea of experience. Aristotle, on the other hand, reinstated experience as part of how a person functions in the world. One can only suspect that the history of philosophy and the world would have turned out quite differently – the view of the empirical Aristotle is, after all, simply much more in line with the intuitions of common sense – had it not been for the fact that through a string of incredible coincidences, his writings disappeared for more than a thousand years. Plato's successors did not remain idle during that time and came to dominate Western thinking, in two guises: first as Neoplatonism, a highly radicalized interpretation of Plato posited by Plotinus and Por-



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Riachuelo (Brook), 2017, by Alejandro Durán, from the "Washed Up" photo series, in which pieces of trash found on the beaches of Mexico are arranged into thought-provoking artworks, meant to raise public awareness of the problem of pollution. The garbage is not painted, but rather collected and organized by color.
(<https://alejandroduran.com/washedupphotoseries>)



Bombillas (Bulbs), 2013,
Alejandro Durán, from the
photo series "Washed Up"

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phyry, tending toward mathematical mysticism, and then as the official dogmatics of the Catholic Church according to St. Augustine. Although the Stagirite's works made a comeback in Europe in the thirteenth century and touched off a great revolution in thinking, the assumption that the senses are essentially a factor that pollutes cognitive processes persists in many accounts to this day – even though if it were to be maintained, the very advancement of science would be impossible in the first place.

Scientific thinking is based on experience, from which conclusions are then drawn. Moreover, being rooted in experience is a necessary condition for reliable conclusions – every time pure speculation becomes detached from the ground, it ceases to be verifiable via the mechanism of reference. This observation allows one to come to conclusions radically different from those propounded by rationalists, to claim, like Francis Bacon for example, that it is actually *reason* that pollutes cognition, contaminating it by introducing disorder. Why? The answer is simple: because it has a great capacity to detach itself from anything concrete and to succumb to illusions. Bacon defines four types of the latter, calling them the false "idols," or illusions, of the intellect. In his main work *Novum Organum* (the title of which, by the way, is a direct allusion to Aristotle's *Organon*) he lists: the idols of the cave, of the tribe, of the market, and of the theater. The first of these arise from what each and every one

of us has internalized, what we silently believe – our convictions, attitudes, fears. The idols of the tribe, in turn, are illusions that arise from life among people – they include cultural patterns, defining the boundaries of proper behavior, but also "urban legends," circulating opinions, commonly known facts. Idols of the market emerge out of gossip, the distortions of language, out of the unspoken, unexplained, and often even unconscious misunderstandings to which we succumb in our day-to-day communication, so akin to the miscommunication in the children's game of "telephone." The last of Bacon's types of illusions – the idols of the theater – stem from the fact that we listen to pseudo-experts, that we give someone credence just because they wrote a book or said something in the media, and so we treat them as an authority. How can we break free of all these idols? It can only be done by checking things experimentally, by verifying them, by trusting our senses.

Immanuel Kant eventually posited a kind of mutual interdependency between reason and the senses (as I have written about before in *Academia* magazine). This may seem like a truly Solomonic solution, but the devil, as usual, is in the details – in the answer to the question of how much we glorify the purity of thought, or instead, how much we accept the fact that it is the degree to which the flow of such thought is contaminated that tells us the most about the thinking subject. ■