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Vanity Fea

José Ángel García Landa

Mind-forged 'carceri', in a nutshell

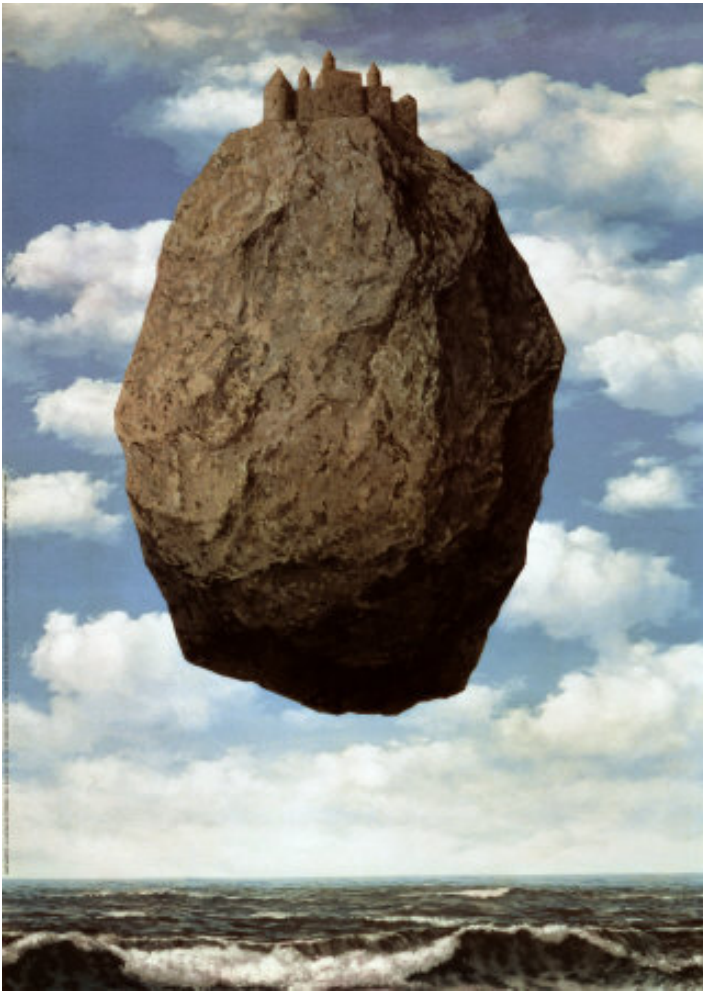
Prisons and Worlds of the Mind

GUILDENSTERN Prison, my lord? HAMLET Denmark's a prison. ROSENCRANTZ Then is the world one. HAMLET A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst. ROSENCRANTZ We think not so, my lord. HAMLET Why, then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

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In this passage of *Hamlet* (2.2) Shakespeare sketches a theory of reality as a subjective dimension, generated by the mind and its outlook rather than by the objective elements in the world. The world is a prison in which Hamlet feels himself to be trapped, and Denmark is one of the world's dungeons in it. They do not share this view, they reply—and Hamlet readily agrees that things are or are not what they seem to be, according to the color of the mind looking at them. Hamlet's color being, of course, black.

James Shapiro argues (in [1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare](#)) that Shakespeare's writing of Hamlet's soliloquies may have been influenced by the new essayistic genre being tried out at the time by William Cornwallis and others, after Montaigne. Shakespeare must have read some Montaigne, of course—for

instance, the essay on the cannibals which would provide some ideas for *The Tempest*. I think he must also have read another important essay, (I.XL), "[That the relish for good and evil depends in great measure upon the opinion we have of them](#)". The essay as a whole is an admiring meditation on the multiplicity of human realities, on the way the mind is a filter which transforms reality in such a way that it provides every person with a reality of their own, cut to suit their needs. We get the impression that minds create virtual realities to inhabit them—just like the poet's labour, as described by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, provides airy fantasies with "a local habitation and a name". Human reality—unlike that of animals, Montaigne specifies—is virtual reality:

"'Tis plain enough to be seen that 'tis the sharpness of our mind that gives the edge to our pains and pleasures: beasts that have no such thing, leave to their bodies their own free and natural sentiments, and consequently in every kind very near the same, as appears by the resembling application of their motions. If we would not disturb in our members the jurisdiction that appertains to them in this, 'tis to be believed it would be the better for us, and that nature has given them a just and moderate temper both to pleasure and pain; neither can it fail of being just, being equal and common. But seeing we have enfranchised ourselves from her rules to give ourselves up to the rambling liberty of our own fancies, let us at least help to incline them to the most agreeable side."

Montaigne's choice of terminology is significant. Man has been freed from the control of nature, he has "enfranchised" himself from Nature; these terms seem to suggest a previous state of nature, maybe the Garden of Eden, or the Golden Age, in which man was in harmony with nature, or domesticated by her. (A domestication which, paradoxically, gives free rein to the natural instincts). Montaigne's meditation points to a conception of man as the *mad ape*, the one who will not stick to the golden mean nor follow his own nature—as a matter of fact, the creature who has no longer got a nature, as he has freed himself from it, and no longer lives in a natural world but in a changing world generated by his own imagination. Man is not ruled by the reasonable demands of the animal body, but by "the rambling liberty of our own fancies".

Animals, we might retort, also inhabit their own virtual mental worlds, one for each species: the mole cannot imagine what it is like to be a bat, and in this sense every animal world is simultaneously a different ecological niche, and a "virtualized" mental reality. "The Emmet's inch & Eagle's mile /," Blake wryly

observed, "Cause lame philosophy to smile". The poet, on the other hand, knows reality to be multiple. What Montaigne seems to point at, though, is not that *all animals do the same and feel the same*, but rather that *all animals of the same species do the same and feel the same*. Members of the same animal species inhabit the same reality, have similar reactions and instincts, move in the same way, do not try out strange dances, do not speak mutually incomprehensible languages, nor invent outlandishly different artifacts, do not create different and isolated mental worlds, but inhabit together the world they naturally inhabit, the world of the senses, the instincts and the body. Whereas man, the mad ape...

Montaigne's reflection is interesting because of the way it articulates a protoevolutionist insight—after the fashion of many other *loci classici*, beginning with myths of origin, but taking the reflection one step further. It suggests the development of human evolution as a creation of mental worlds, emancipated from nature, for good or bad: some of them are absurd, some are marvellous, some of them are both at once. He makes us reflect on the fact that human cultures are like so many virtual realities inhabited by people(s), mental worlds, or perhaps *prisons of the mind*, the *mind-forg'd manacles* of another of Blake's poems. They are, too, imaginary palaces, without the like of which no actual palaces would ever come to exist. It follows, then, that actual palaces are also to a great extent *imaginary*, both the celebrated ones in art books and those private ones which float in the air and in which we are our own private *rois du monde*.

Montaigne's essay is also highly suggestive as regards the development of [a theory of attention](#). It must not be forgotten that attention is a cognitive and perceptual instrument of the first rank to articulate and manipulate these multiple or alternative mental realities... or mental fictions. Attention is in effect in itself a modification of reality. Where one sees the generality of women, I see only that woman. In a world structured by football and luxury vehicles, I see no structure at all and walk through the partitions without noticing anything—I focus my attention on this essay of Montaigne's which is invisible to practically everyone. And thus I create around myself a virtual environment, a cognitive niche, a bubble of mind whose transparent walls act as a lens blurring and refracting the rest of reality, or whatever sections of reality are visible from this standpoint, from the house across the street to Alpha Centauri and Alderaban. And thus we gradually become ever more alike to ourselves, creating these bubble-shapes sustained

by air, organizing reality after our own dreams and cultures and fictions. Almost like gods in a nutshell, according to Hamlet.

[Like a bubble](#)

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