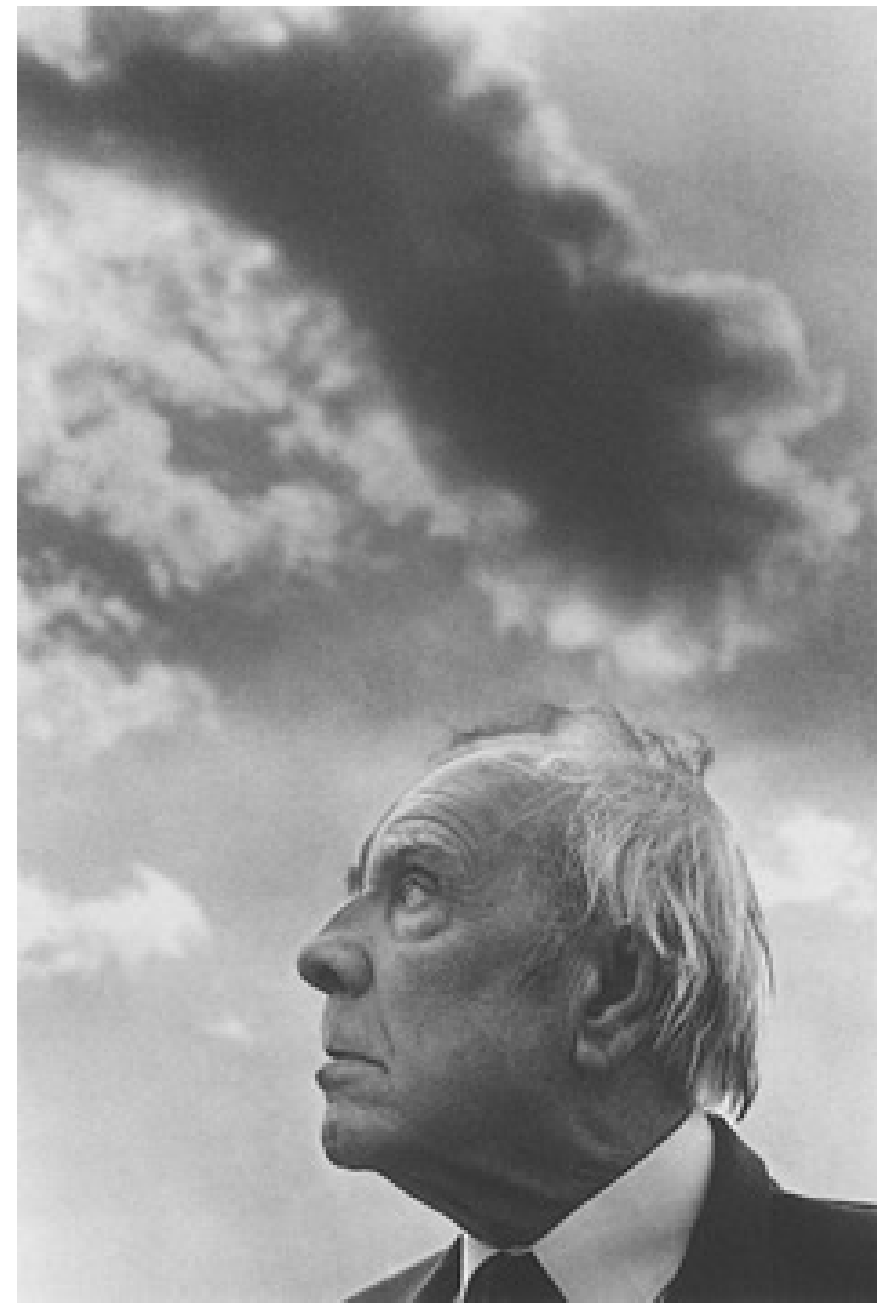


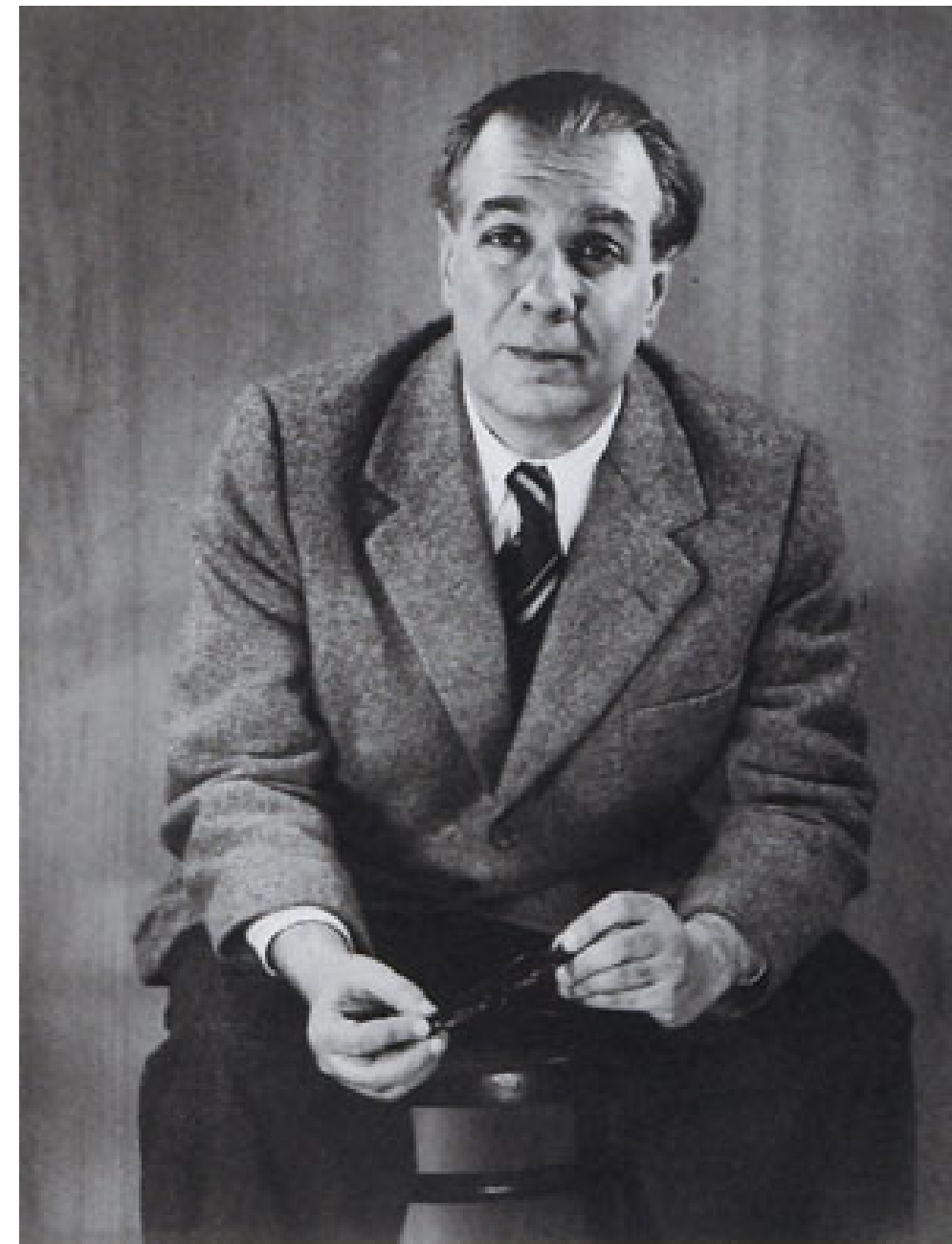
Jorge Luis Borges

Realism vs. Idealism

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)



Magical Realism





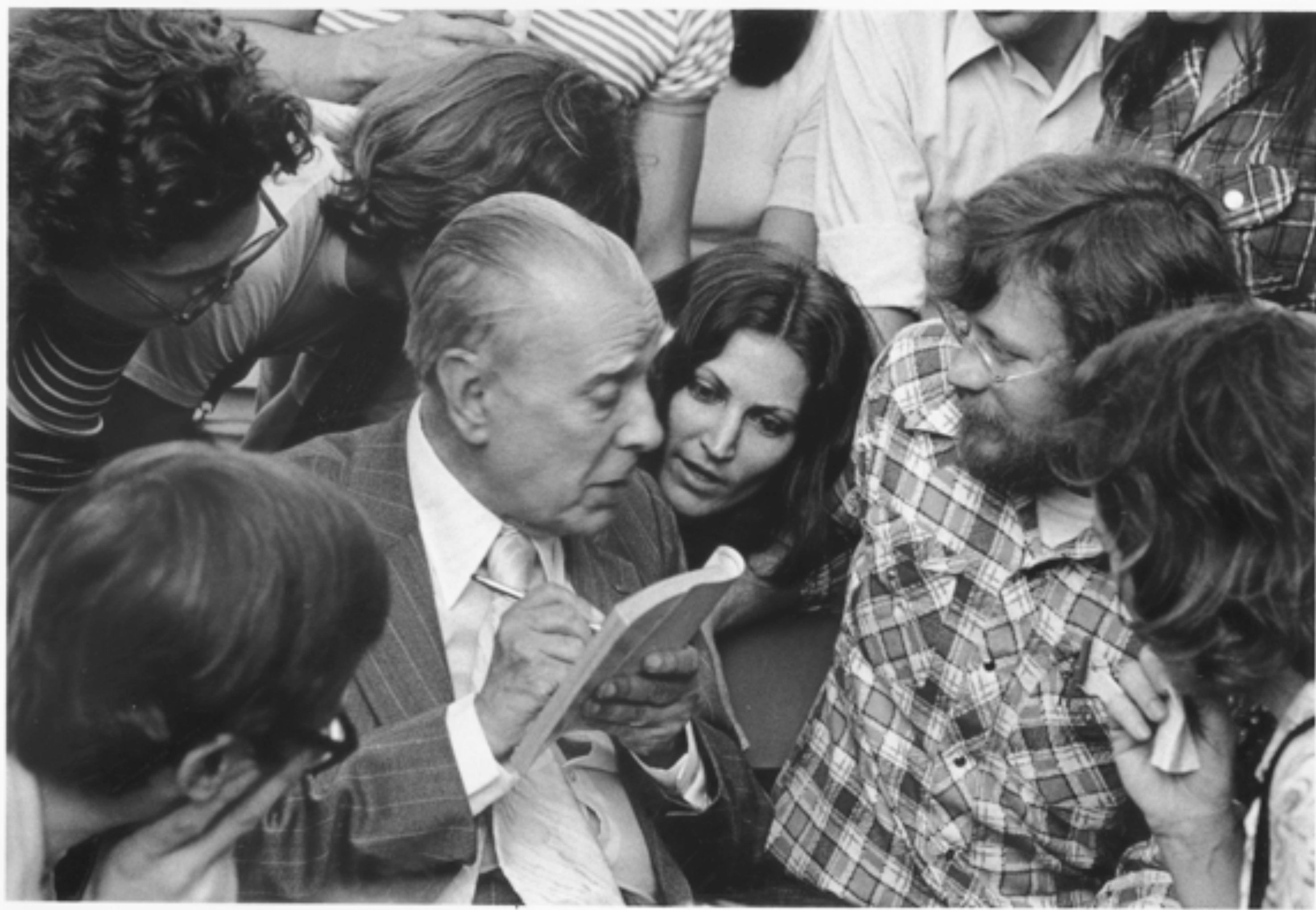












Realism and Idealism

- **Realism:** some things are independent of the mind
- **Idealism:** everything is mind-dependent









Idealist Tradition

- Bishop George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*
- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*
- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-too-Human; The Cheerful Science*

“I refute Bishop Berkeley
thus!”



Argument for Idealism

- Suppose that the world is at least in some respects independent of the mind.
- How could we know anything about it?
- The world might be different, even though all our perceptions and thoughts of it might be the same.
- We would have no way of knowing which way the world truly is.









Skepticism —> Idealism

- If the world is independent of the mind, we can't have knowledge of it
- The only way to have knowledge of the world is to treat the world as a mental construction
- Berkeley: "To be is to be perceived."



Realism

Some things are independent of mind

- “Bioy Casares had had dinner with me that evening and we became lengthily engaged in a vast polemic concerning the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers - very few readers - to perceive an atrocious or banal reality.”

- “He had recalled: *Copulation and mirrors are abominable*. The text of the encyclopedia said: *For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe.*”

- “The book was written in English and contained 1001 pages. On the yellow leather back I read these curious words which were repeated on the title page: A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr. There was no indication of date or place. On the first page and on a leaf of silk paper that covered one of the color plates there was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: Orbis Tertius.”

Jorge Luis Borges



- Tlön: “Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction. This dictum is entirely correct in its application to the earth, but entirely false in Tlön. The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts.”

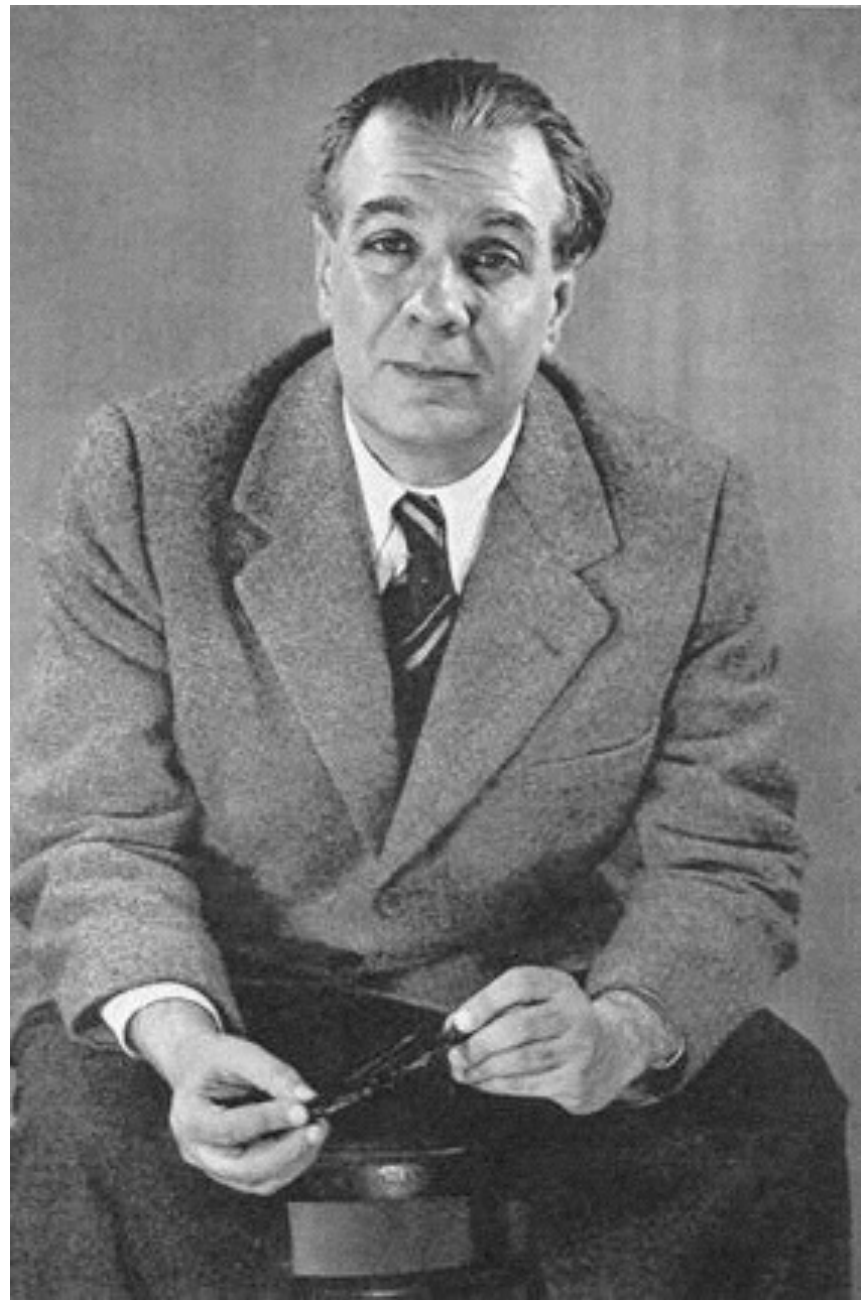
- “There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the "present" languages and the dialects are derived: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word "moon,", but there is a verb which in English would be "to moon" or "to moonate." "The moon rose above the river" is *hlor u fang axaxaxas mlo*, or literally: "upward behind the onstreaming it mooned."”

- “The noun is formed by an accumulation of adjectives. They do not say "moon," but rather "round airy-light on dark" or "pale-orange-of-the-sky" or any other such combination. In the example selected the mass of adjectives refers to a real object, but this is purely fortuitous. The literature of this hemisphere (like Meinong's subsistent world) abounds in ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs.”

- “It is no exaggeration to state that the classic culture of Tlön comprises only one discipline: psychology. All others are subordinated to it. I have said that the men of this planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes which do not develop in space but successively in time.”

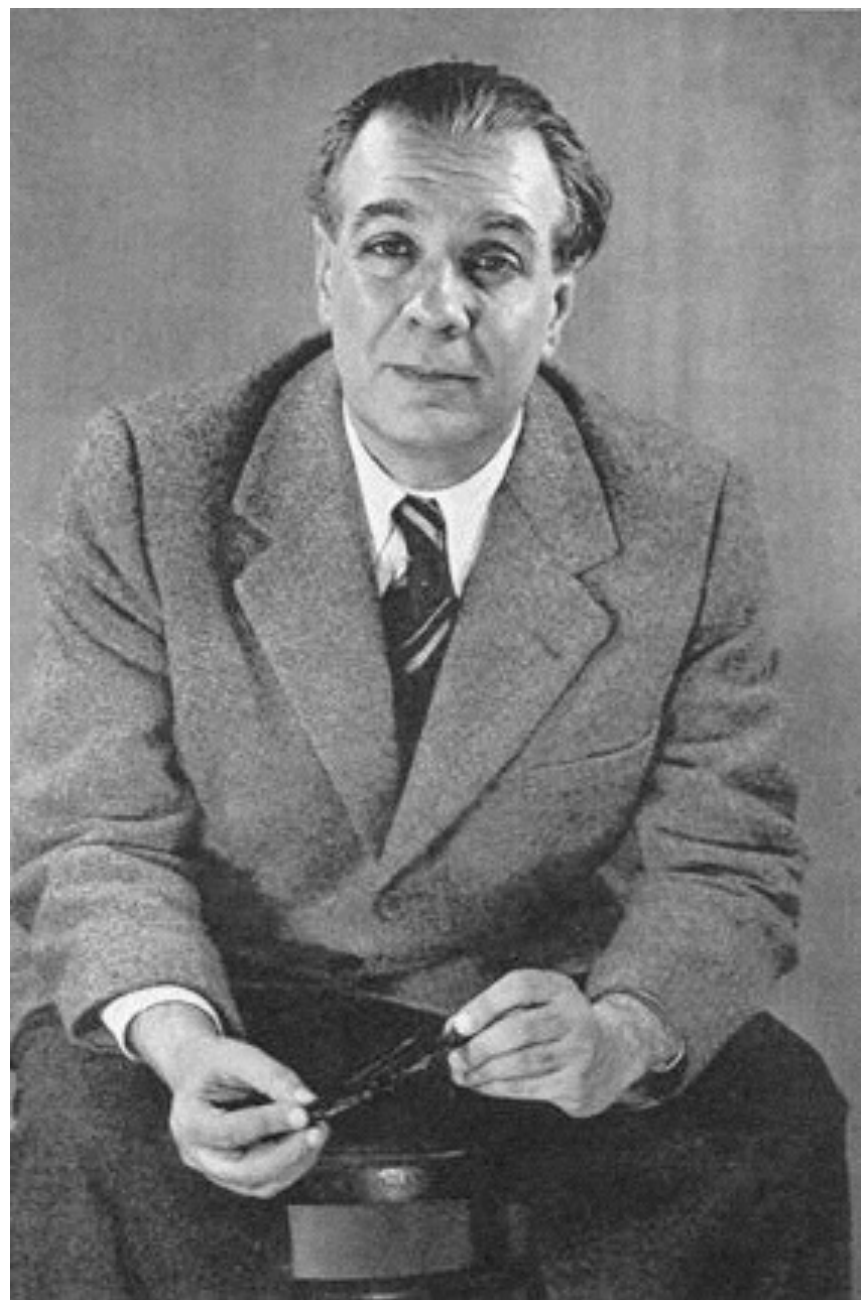
- “The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has caused them to multiply. There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type. The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature.”

The Heresy of Materialism



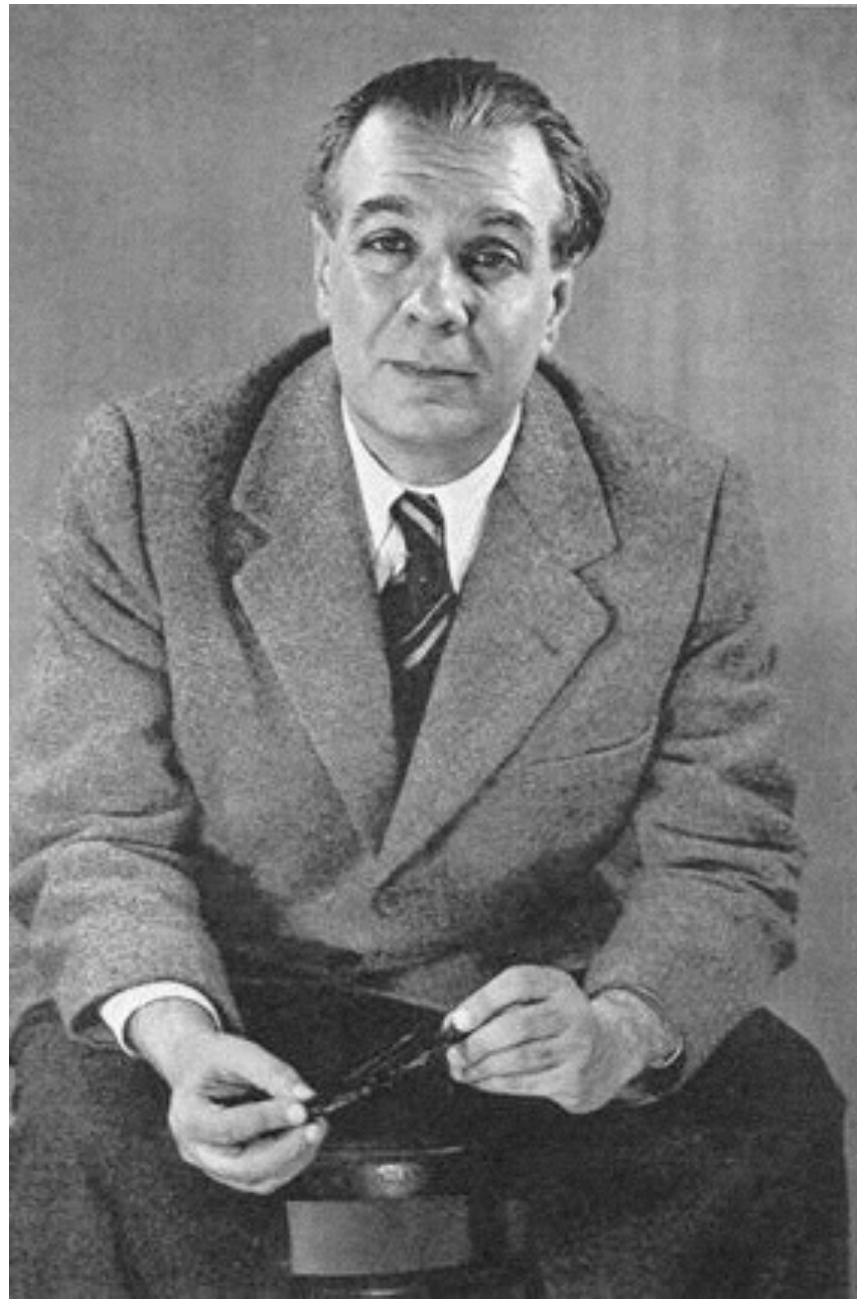
- “On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins on the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house.”

The Heresy of Materialism



Tuesday	Thursday	Friday
X loses 9 coins		X finds 2 coins
	Y finds 4 coins	
		Z finds 3 coins

The Heresy of Materialism



- “The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality— i.e., the continuity— of the nine coins which were recovered. It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think they have existed-- at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men-- at every moment of those three periods.”

- “The language of Tlön resists the formulation of this paradox; most people did not even understand it. The defenders of common sense at first did no more than negate the veracity of the anecdote. They repeated that it was a verbal fallacy, based on the rash application of two neologisms not authorized by usage and alien to all rigorous thought: the verbs "find" and "lose," which beg the question, because they presuppose the identity of the first and of the last nine coins.”

- “ They recalled that all nouns (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) have only a metaphorical value. They denounced the treacherous circumstance "somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain," which presupposes what is trying to be demonstrated: the persistence of the four coins from Tuesday to Thursday.”

- “They explained that equality is one thing and identity another, and formulated a kind of reductio ad absurdum: the hypothetical case of nine men who on nine nights suffer a severe pain. Would it not be ridiculous - they questioned - to pretend that this pain is one and the same?”

Missing Explanation Argument



- Realism explains our experiences
- Suppose everything were mind-dependent
- Why are there regularities in my experiences? Why does your experience align with mine?
- Realism explains this
- Idealism has no explanation

Missing Explanation Argument



- Regularities?
- This screen
- Hand claps
- My movements

Missing Explanation Argument



- Realism is the *simplest* explanation of our experiences
- Suppose the idealist is right
- Suppose things don't exist, or obey natural laws when we aren't looking
- But it's simpler to suppose they do

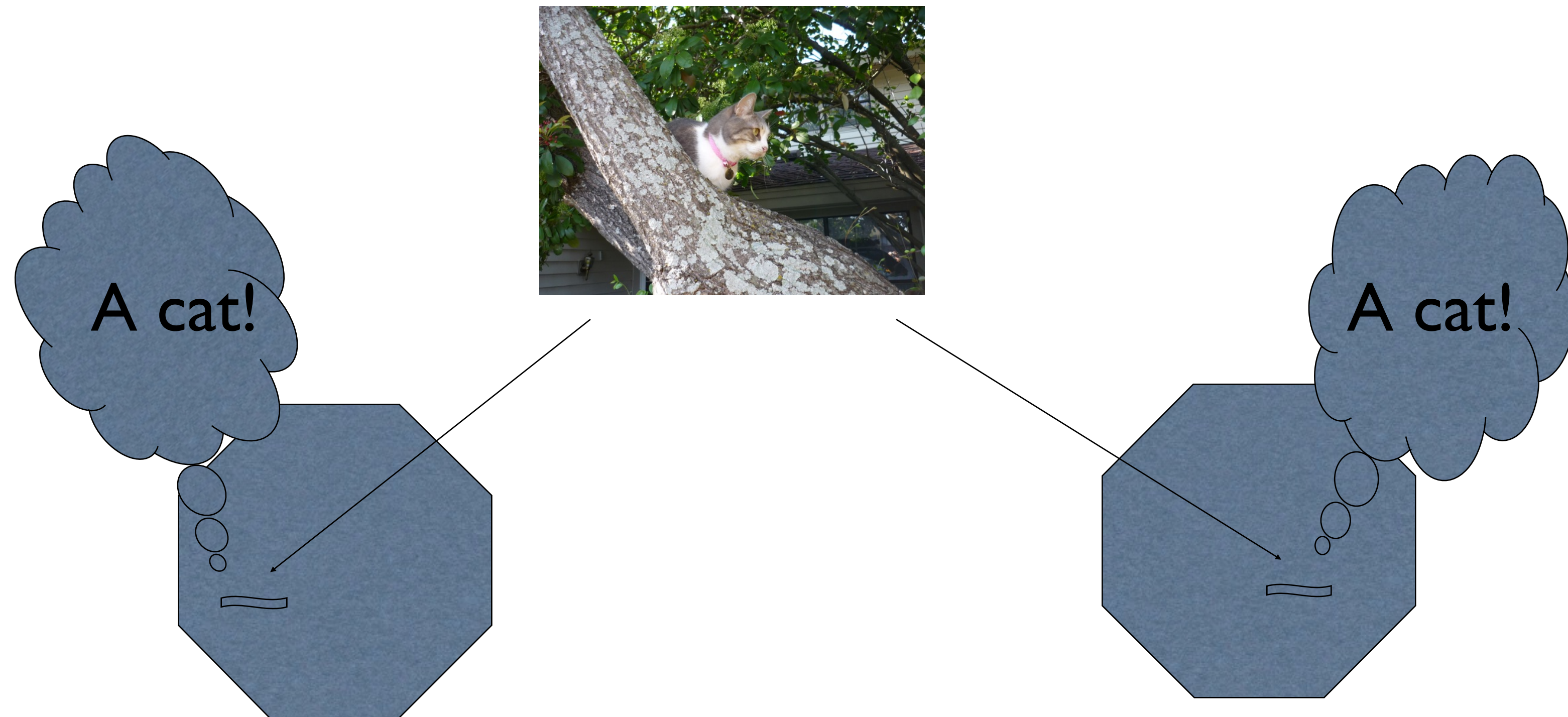
Missing Explanation Argument

- Pragmatism: the truth is what we all eventually agree on
- But *why* do we all eventually agree on, say, p ?
- The realist can say, *because p is true*
- What can the idealist or pragmatist say?

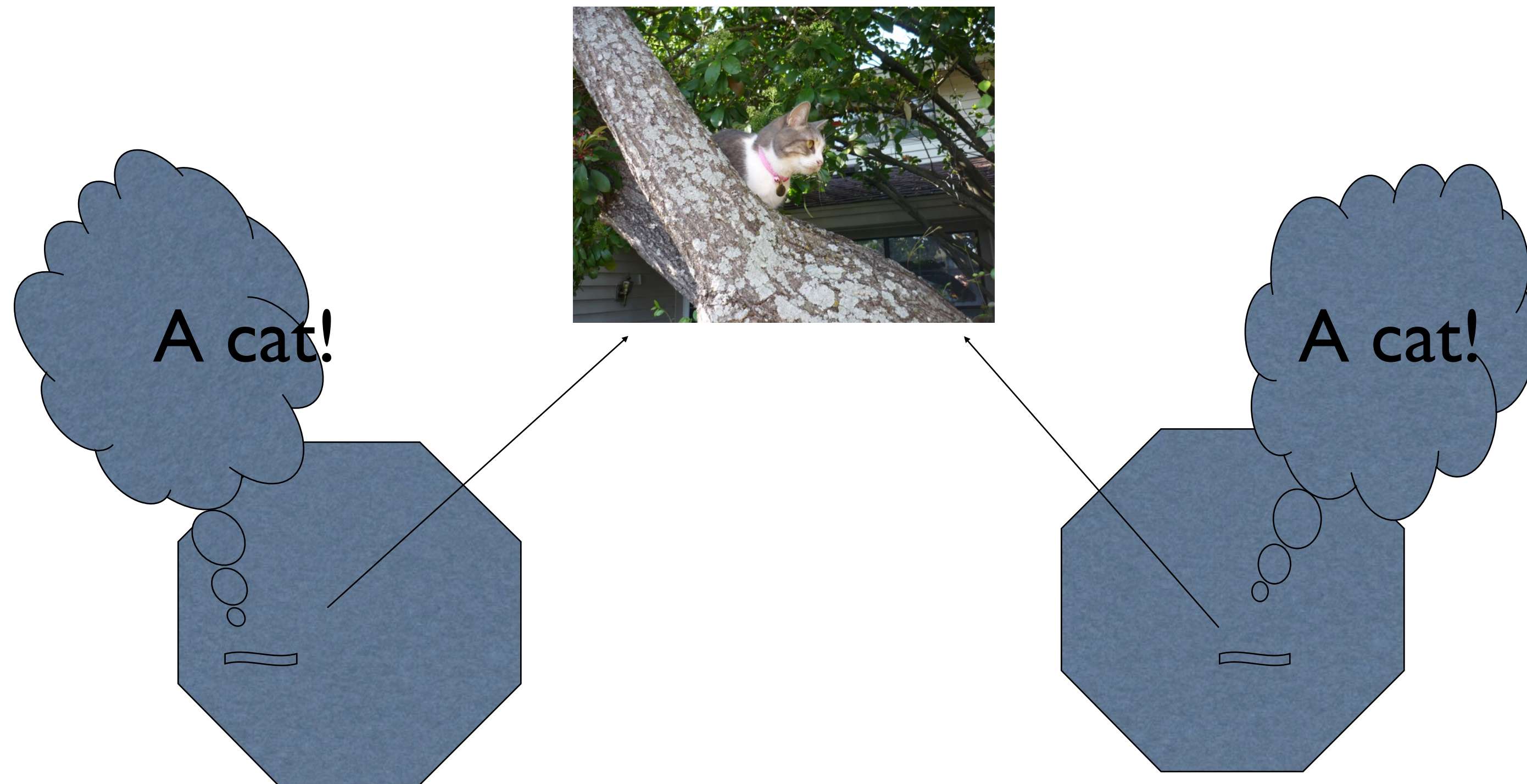
The Realist's Explanation



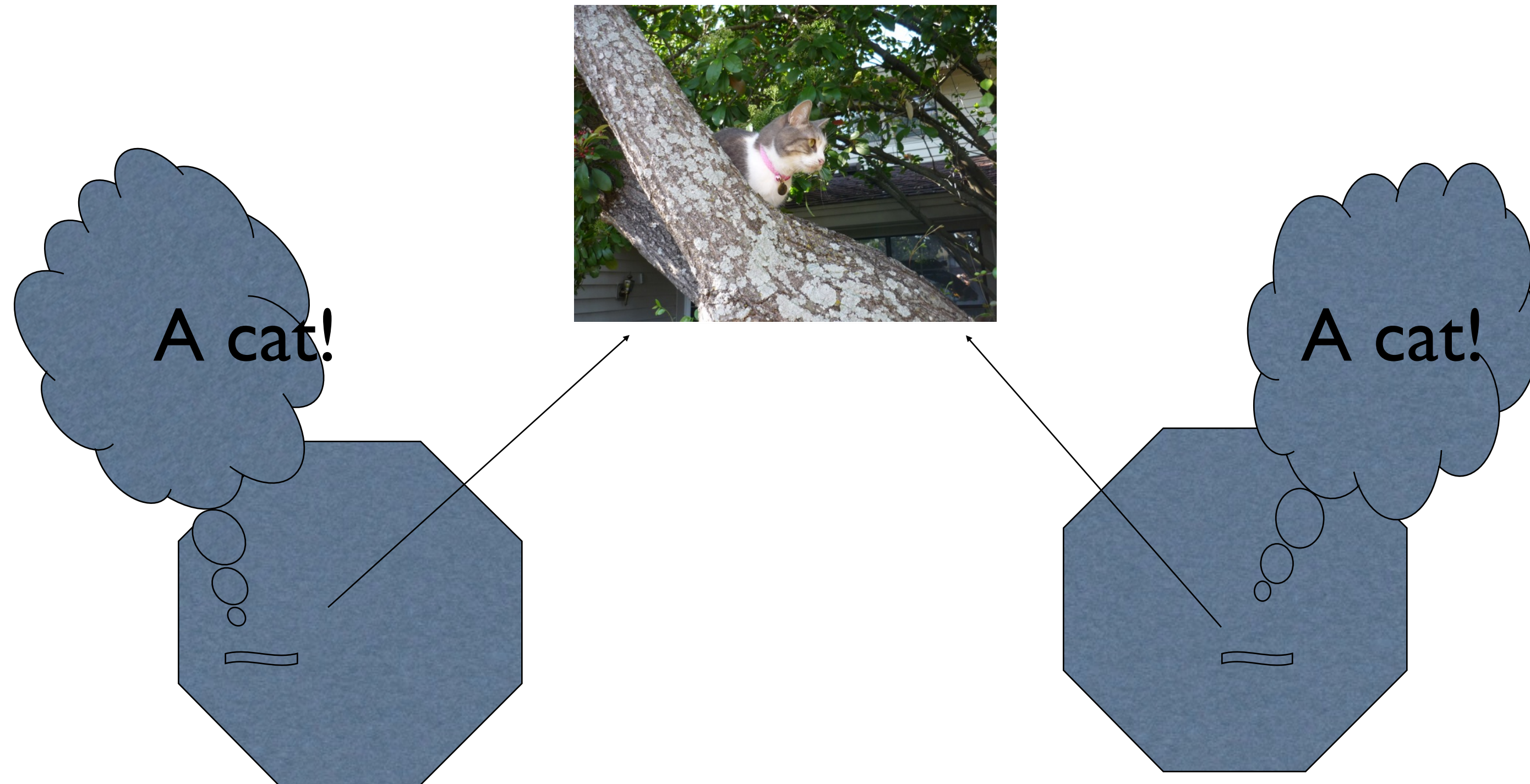
The Realist's Explanation



The Idealist's Explanation



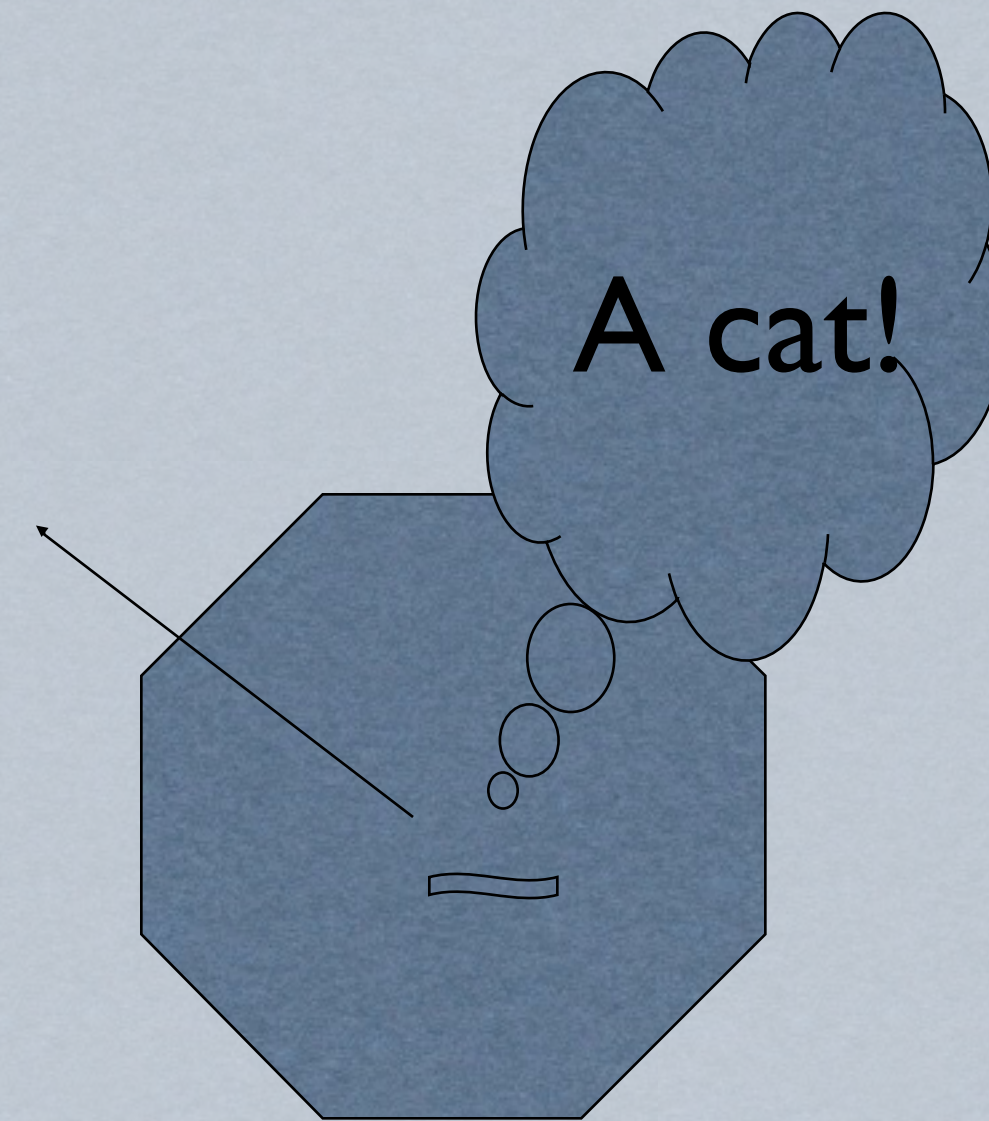
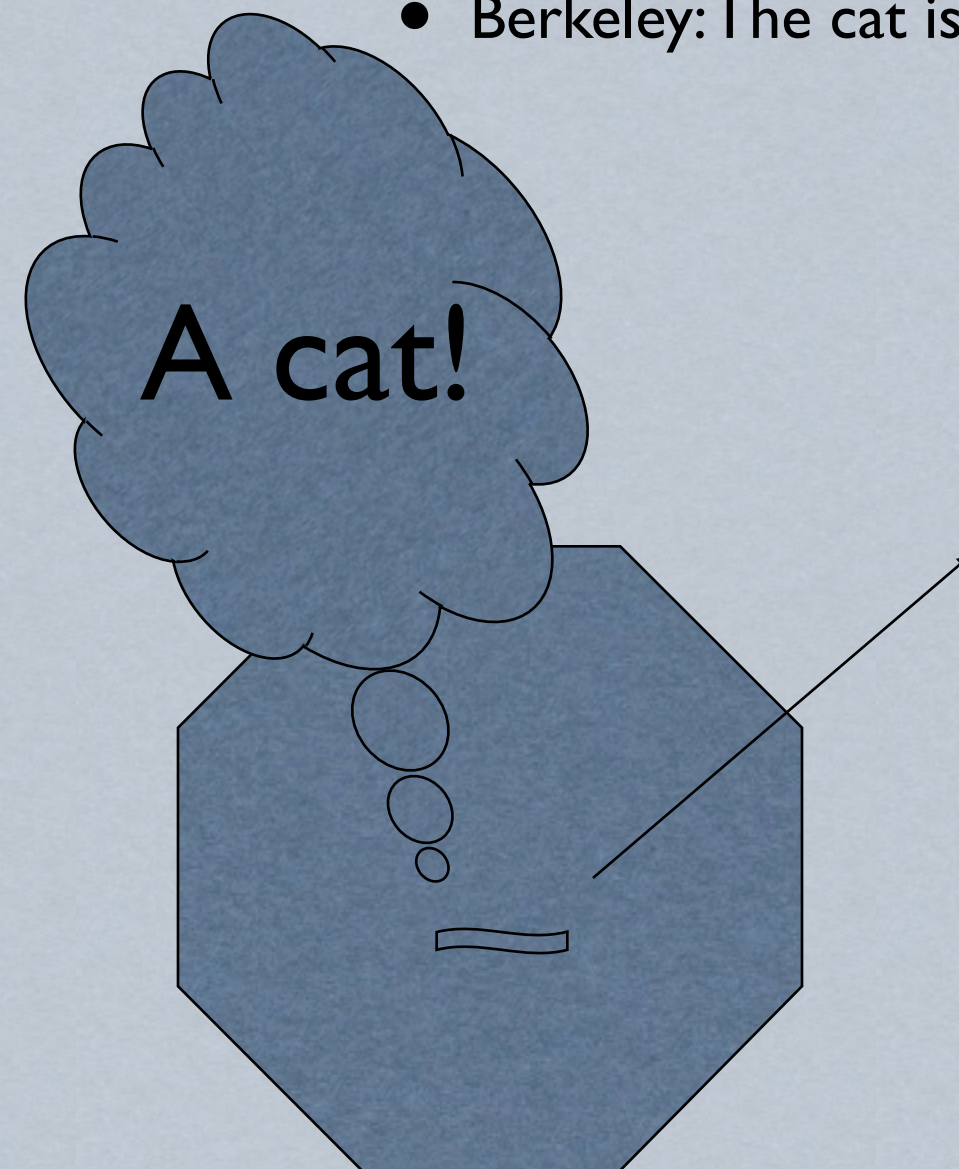
The Idealist's Explanation



But why?

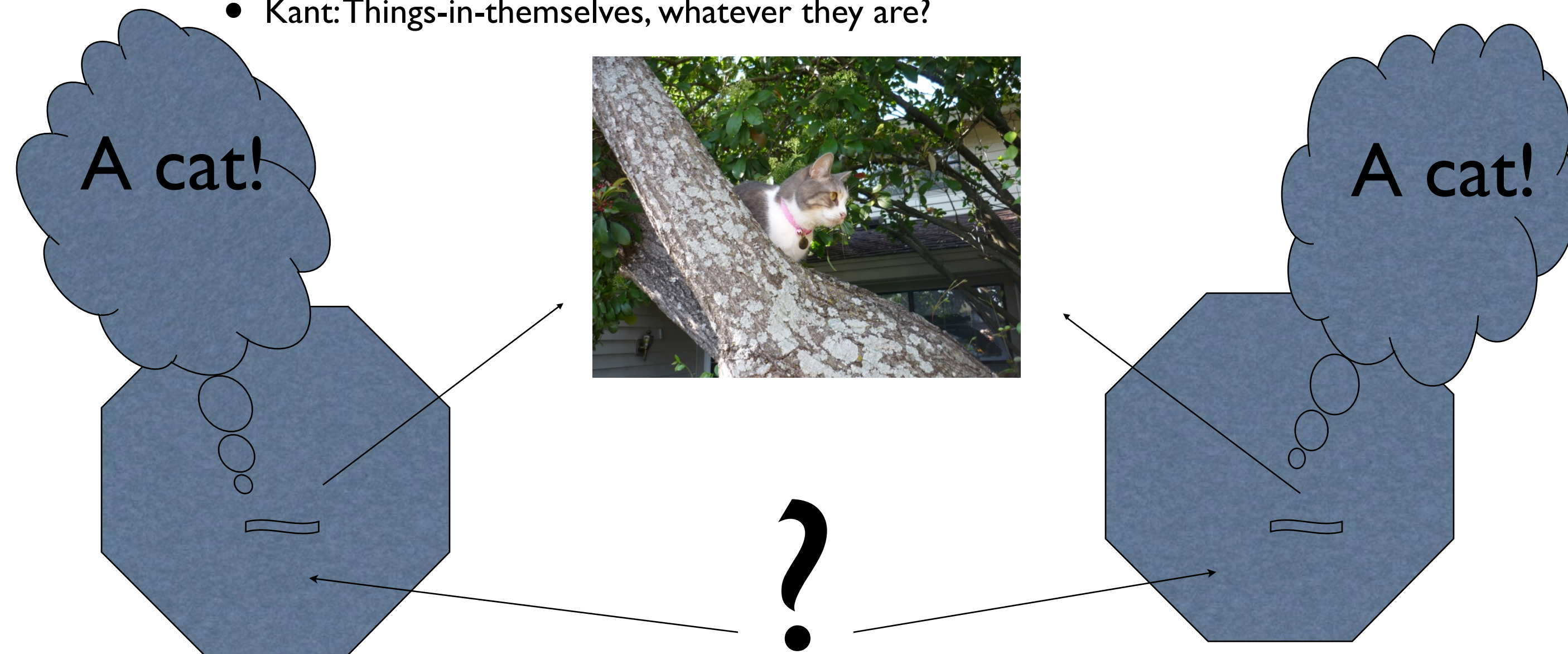
The Idealist's Explanation

- Berkeley: The cat is an idea in the mind of God?



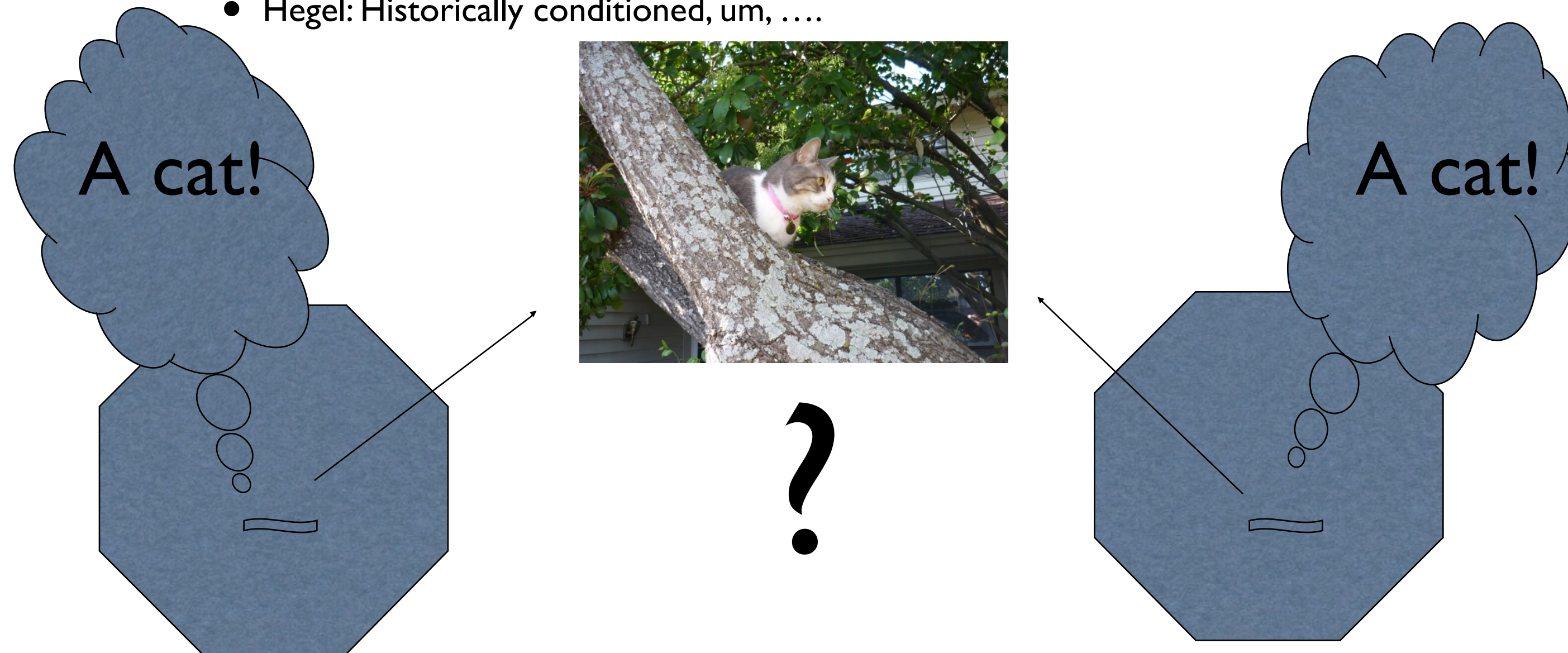
The Idealist's Explanation

- Kant: Things-in-themselves, whatever they are?



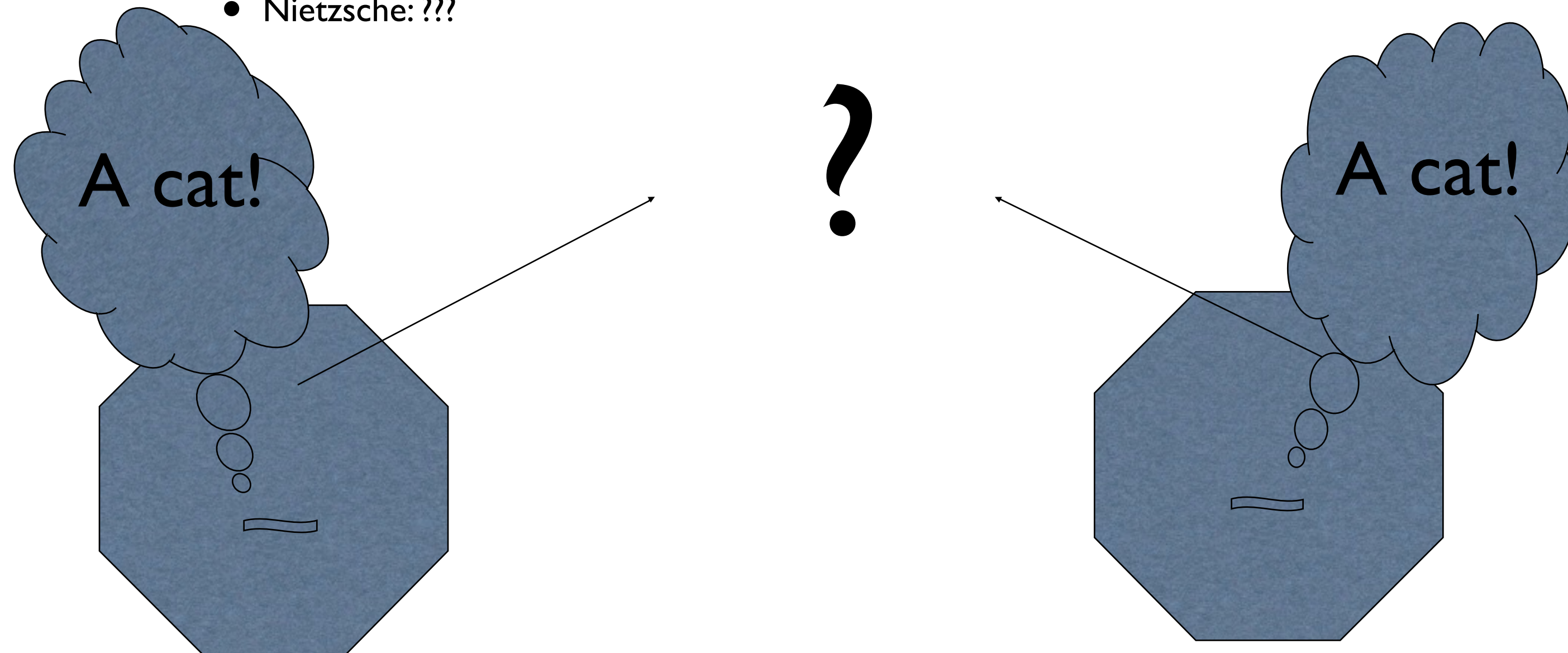
The Idealist's Explanation

- Hegel: Historically conditioned, um,



The Idealist's Explanation

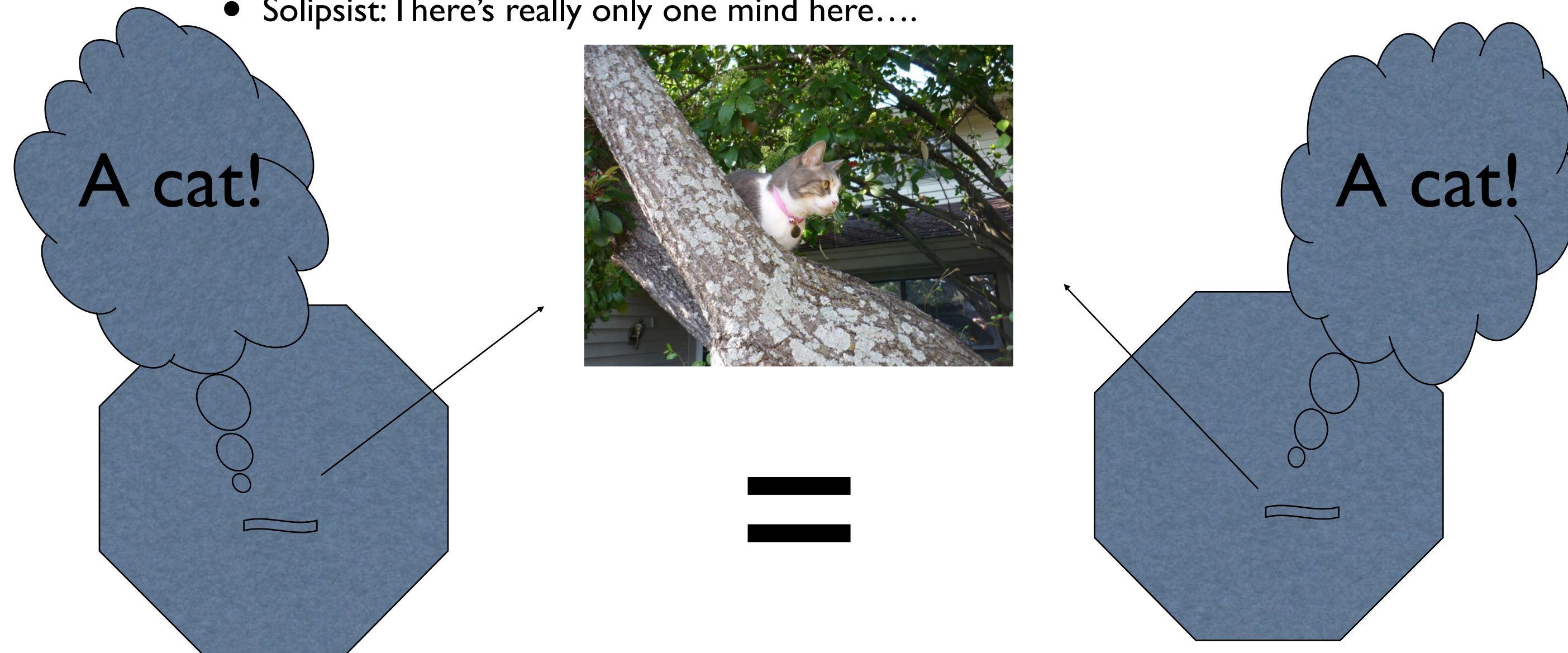
- Nietzsche: ???



- “Unbelievably, these refutations were not definitive. A hundred years after the problem was stated, a thinker no less brilliant than the heresiarch but of orthodox tradition formulated a very daring hypothesis. This happy conjecture affirmed that there is only one subject, that this indivisible subject is every being in the universe and that these beings are the organs and masks of the divinity. X is Y and is Z.”

The Idealist's Explanation

- Solipsist: There's really only one mind here....



Movie Analogy

- Two theaters are playing the same movie!



- “Things became duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten. A classic example is the doorway which survived so long it was visited by a beggar and disappeared at his death. At times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater.”



The Perfection and Episteme of Tlön

Creeping Idealism

- The fantasy world of Tlön begins invading reality.
- Orbis Tertius publishes a version of the encyclopedia of Tlön that catches the public imagination.
- Reality begins to yield.
- "The truth is that it longed to yield."

0 40 80
Distance: ka'mu (km)

*I know of a world with three rainbow suns, suns that shine unmoving 'neath a clouded sky.
I know of a world set upon the back of a giant bird, journeying to an unknown destination.
I know of a world at peace, a world that has forgotten the terrors of war.
I know of a world where Time is ending.
This world is Ontolosna, and we are part of its weaving.*



- “Ten years ago any symmetry with a resemblance of order - dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism - was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly plant? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accord with divine laws - I translate: inhuman laws - which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.”

- “The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and over again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already the schools have been invaded by the (conjectural) "primitive language" of Tlön; already the teaching of its harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has wiped out the one which governed in my childhood; already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty - not even a that it is false.”