

Divine Presence and Epistemic Trust

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August 30, 2012

A few years ago, in spite of being a life-long agnostic, I had occasion to pray. A wonderful woman had come into my life, and I felt such a welling up of gratitude that I literally fell to my knees and said an earnest prayer of thanks to Whomever or Whatever. Later, as I pondered the challenges of making a life together – we lived and had careers in different cities -- without premeditation (for I was still an agnostic), I prayed for guidance. And, to my vast surprise, a voice answered. I asked, Who is this? The answer came: “I am God.” “The God of Israel?” “I am the God of All.”

I have never, from that moment on, been an agnostic. However strange, and uncomfortable for my naturalistic world-view, the voice was too real and benign and authoritative for genuine doubt. It might be an unnerving experience for anyone, but for an epistemologist, it was also conceptually puzzling. I have never believed in certainty, not even in mathematics. Yet here I was confronted with a divine presence that I could not genuinely doubt.

My experience of a divine voice may be unusual but it is far from unique. Not only people like Socrates, Joan of Arc, and George Fox, but ordinary individuals have reported such experiences. In *Quantum Change*, two psychologists discuss clients who experienced dramatic, instantaneous life changes. These were sometimes prompted by a voice telling them, “You don’t need to drink any more” or “You have to leave that man.” (1)

But hearing voices is not the only, or the most common, experience of divine presence. “For me, it wasn’t a voice,” a priest told me about his own call, extending a pointed finger at my chest, “it was more like a touch.” For some, it is an unseen presence in the background, what Duke English professor Reynolds Price calls a “patient listener,” a “reliable presence” who is always there. (2) Others sometimes sense the divine presence in their hearts or in nature or in

sacred rituals. In one way or another, the experience of divine presence is not rare, and yet some of us doubt. Particularly if we are intellectuals, we doubt. Why do we do that?

The great Columbia philosopher Frederick J. E. Woodbridge tells of asking his class how you would go about studying frogs. “A naïve student said he would collect a number of frogs,” Woodbridge writes, but a “clever student” interrupted: How do you know they’re *frogs*? (3)

. Intellectuals want to be clever, and so we ask about any knowledge-claim, how do you know it’s *knowledge*? The motive for being clever is that we don’t want to be fools. The effort to avoid being fools virtually defines modern philosophy. Since Descartes, philosophy has been dominated by what one might call the Epistemology of Doubt. Hume sharpened the doubt by arguing that all we can ever really know, or even have a valid idea of, are our own sensory impressions. We don’t even have a valid *concept* of material objects, or of our own minds, or of the past, or future. According to Michael Williams’ survey of contemporary epistemology, “[S]ceptical problems are the driving force behind philosophical theories of knowledge. ... Such theorizing responds to deep worries about whether knowledge is so much as possible.” (4)

Kant reflected this attitude when he declared the “lack of a satisfactory proof” of “the existence of things outside us” to be “the scandal of philosophy.” (5) Responding to the challenge have been a variety of rationalisms using a priori reason to override the infirmities of experience; of skepticisms, relativisms, existentialisms, and deconstructions relishing the problem; and of empiricisms, idealisms, pragmatisms, phenomenologies, and critical philosophies offering coping techniques within experience itself. The one position rejected decisively, and often derisively, is what textbooks routinely call “naïve realism.”

But there is something to be said for the so-called naïve approach. Woodbridge comments about his two students: “I can see how the naïve student might actually learn something about frogs; I do not see how the clever student ever would.” The Epistemology of Doubt wrestles with the question posed by the clever student; what one might call the Epistemics of Trust starts where the naïve student starts, with collecting instances of what is to be studied. If Aristotle, for example, wanted to learn about frogs, he would -- in fact did -- collect some. There were clever thinkers like Protagoras back then, so why does Aristotle not first ask the clever student’s question? It is because he is interested in investigating *frogs* – or some other subject-

matter such as motion or the soul or the good life -- not in exploring the logical possibilities of doubt. Like the naïve student, Aristotle put his trust in the world of experience more than in logical arguments, which, in his view, could be too clever by half. When Parmenides and Zeno offered a powerful proof that there is no such thing as motion, Aristotle found their position to, as he put it, border on lunacy. (6) In a similar spirit, the twentieth-century philosopher G. E. Moore said about his friend – I am paraphrasing -- “Russell has apparently proved that I am not sitting on a chair, but rather on a set of statistical probabilities. But I have to ask myself: Which am I more sure of? Russell’s proof or the fact that I am sitting on a chair?” (7)

As you can see, the Epistemics of Trust, while muted in the modern period, is not completely absent. It is not present as a self-conscious tradition. Sometimes it crops up in passing remarks. Awareness of the logical possibility of doubt, notes C. S. Peirce, is not the same as actually doubting. (8) Logical possibilities are often real impossibilities. Indeed, Roderick Chisholm defines skeptics as philosophers who engage in the *pretense* of doubt. (9) About the claim, “I am a human being,” Wittgenstein asks, “Can I doubt it? Grounds for doubt are lacking!” – reminding us that doubt, as much as belief, requires reasons. (10)

Sometimes the Epistemics of Trust has arrived in the form of a common sense philosophy, a term used by Moore and earlier by Thomas Reid. (11) Reid argued that Hume’s account of impressions, or what were later called sense-data, is a philosopher’s fiction, not an accurate description of what we experience. We don’t see and hear and touch and taste our own experiences; our experiences are experiences of the world around us. Here Reid anticipates Franz Brentano’s conception, itself derived from Aquinas, of the intentionality of consciousness: consciousness is consciousness-of. (12) As Aquinas had put it, one does not perceive the perception; it is *by* perception that one perceives the object. The senses are the instruments, not the objects, of perception. (13)

The Epistemology of Doubt takes consciousness to be self-contained, and so any criteria for reality must be found in the mind itself, either a priori by reason or a posteriori within sensory impressions themselves. The Epistemics of Trust takes our sensory and cognitive powers to be, not only open to, but naturally attuned to, or adapted to, the world and its features. Put the other way around, the world itself appears to us, presents itself. “Appearance” is not a phenomenon solely on the subjective side. *Things* are visible, and audible, and touchable.

The two approaches have different goals. The aim of the Epistemology of Doubt is to minimize error; the goal of the Epistemics of Trust is to maximize truth. Doubt is willing to miss some, or even all truths, so long as error does not creep in. Trust is willing to allow some error as the cost of discovering important truths; it accepts human fallibility. For Doubt, human fallibility is the enemy.

Doubt wants to object here: Surely critique must precede trust. Experience is notoriously deceptive. Put a stick in water and it looks bent. But doesn't that put things backward? Even in this case, we trust that there is a stick and that there is water, and that water does not have the power to bend a stick. Trusting all these things, we are able to develop an account of why the stick appears bent; we develop the science of optics. Of course, critique must occur -- trust need not be blind trust -- but the critique that advances inquiry, that advances the truth-seeking project, can only occur within the context of trust. Trust precedes critique.

Epistemology asks whether knowledge is possible; Epistemics asks how knowledge comes about. It explores knowledge the way Aristotle explored frogs and constitutions. It starts with the fact that there is knowledge -- or, more precisely, that there are many knowledges, each with its own subject-matter and methods -- and looks empirically at the processes, varieties, contexts, and purposes of various knowings. The list does not stop with the diversity of the sciences. Most of the knowledge we use as we navigate life does not depend on formal inquiry. We have empathy. We have insight into the character of people we know. We have the ability to do the right thing in delicate social situations. We gain an understanding of life from our personal experiences; we can even acquire life wisdom. We can understand poetry, even in foreign and ancient languages, and use language creatively ourselves. We can refine our moral and aesthetic judgments. And these are only the rudiments of an adequate survey of knowings.

What, then, about divine presence? The Epistemology of Doubt might throw it out altogether or, if sympathetic to religion, might follow one of the strategies mentioned above: deduce what the divine reality must be from a priori reason, or regard the divine not as a reality being experienced but only as a subjective phenomenon or as a belief useful pragmatically or as a required ethical postulate. Those approaches may yield insights, but the Epistemics of Trust would prefer to begin by collecting instances of divine presence and looking at those in a sensitive, open-hearted way, analogous to how one would explore a previously unfamiliar culture

and people, or a new style of art or music. In the beginning, one has to be willing to yield to the experience, to take in what presents itself, and to hold questions for later. Like collecting any samples for study, you don't start with the most ambiguous cases; you start with the clearest cases and you try to learn from them.

For example, according to Exodus 3, Moses encountered a burning bush and "turned to look." He was not looking for God; he was just tending Jethro's flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a humble and improbable place, a bush, but one designed to get Moses' attention, because it was burning but not consumed. Moses turned aside to "look at this great sight" (RSVP), perhaps merely out of curiosity, perhaps recognizing something miraculous, we don't know. What he did not do is ignore the appearance, or rush past too busy to investigate, or dismiss it as sunstroke or the act of an Evil Genius. He paid attention.

Then and only then, "when the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see," did God call to him, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses responded, in the language of a soldier reporting for duty, "Here I am." The voice was apparently authoritative.

The voice introduced itself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." He was afraid, but he did not run away.

Even on a cursory reading, we can see that (1) you don't have to be looking for the divine reality to find it, (2) it finds you, (3) it can find you in surprising places, (4) you have to pay attention, (5) you can't let doubt discount the experience, (6) the divine reality is authoritative, (7) it demands a response, (8) you have to yield to it, and (9) you can't give in to your fears.

The burning bush is just one case. An Epistemics of Trust would require a deeper examination of this and other exemplary cases and the further study of each in light of what is learned from the others. But, for me, it is instructive to apply even these preliminary guidelines to my own experience with the divine reality.

Like Moses, I was not looking for the divine reality; it found me. In fact, the experience contradicted – falsified, you might say – the naturalistic philosophy on which I had taken my stand. The place my experience took place was not particularly strange – a park bench facing the Potomac -- but there is no reason to think that is a requirement.

Like Moses, I certainly did pay attention. I suppose I would have had every motive to deflect, to block the challenge to my secular worldview, but I did not. I did not let doubt discount the experience. In fact, I say above that I never had “genuine” doubt. I certainly knew that such experiences can be erroneous or delusional. Whenever I stepped out of the experience and looked at it from a distance, as others would see it, I thought, “I would be a skeptic too.” But, as I say above, the divine presence was too real for genuine doubt. Thomas Reid makes the same comment about perception, memory, and other basic faculties; even Hume admitted that, as soon as he stepped into his garden, his skepticism dissolved. I never let the distant view prevail over the view from within the experience.

Like Moses, I experienced the divine reality as authoritative. When the Voice continued to speak to me and sometimes told me what to do, I always tried to obey. I had to reorient my life Godward, which involved major life changes. I was fearful, not of God, but of some of those changes. I thought I would lose my friends, my standing in Washington, my career, my income. But I balanced those fears against another one, the fear of failing to answer a divine call.

The choice between Doubt and Trust is not just a philosopher’s puzzle. It is, first, a question of cognitive strategy whether doubt or trust will yield the truer worldview. But, deeper than that, it is a question of how one wants to live one’s life. All our lives are, as Gandhi titles his own autobiography, “experiments with truth.” We can pursue that experiment in either of two ways. We can shrink from the terror of possible error, the fear of being fools or perhaps of being seen to be fools by our “clever” friends and colleagues; and hope to live a safe, parsimonious life. Or we can accept the risk, accept our fallibility, accept that as the price of maya or of our fallen condition, or perhaps accept them even as blessings. For there is another risk, which we may count greater, of closing ourselves off from that subliminal presence discerned however faintly. That may be a price too steep.

FOOTNOTES

(1) William R. Miller and Janet C’ de Baca, *Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives* (N.Y.: Guilford, 2001).

- (2) "I would lie alone in my bed in the dark and sense the presence, just to the right in my mind's eye, of a patient listener behind a screen," and a bit later, "a reliable presence."
Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and A Healing* (N.Y.: Scribner, 1982), p. 54.
- (3) F. J. E. Woodbridge, *Aristotle's Vision of Nature* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 113.
- (4) Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.
- (5) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xl, footnote a.
- (6) Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* 325a18, cited in Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 60.
- (7) Moore uses this style of argument frequently. See particularly "A Defense of Common Sense" and "Four Forms of Scepticism" in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (N.Y.: Collier, 1962).
- (8) See C. S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief, pp. 82-98, in Milton R. Konvitz and Gail Kennedy, eds., *The American Pragmatists: Selected Writings* (Cleveland and N.Y.: World, 1960).
- (9) See Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), chapter 5, "The Problem of the Criterion," pp. 61-75 and "The Problem of Skepticism," pp. 113-225.
- (10) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, tr. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (N.Y.: J. & J. Harper, 1969), p. 2e.
- (11) Reid's major works are his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, but he is probably best read in the hands of a good guide. The best treatment is Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid* (London and N.Y.: Routledge, 1989). The first two chapters and Epilogue are the most pertinent.

(12) See Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, tr. A. C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and L. McAlister (London: Routledge, 1973).

(13) “The sensible species is not what is sensed, but rather that by which a sense senses.” (S.T. Ia.85.2 s.c.) See the excellent discussion in Eleanor Stump, *Aquinas* (London and N.Y.: Routledge, 2003), pp. 248-256.

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