

# THE SPIRIT'S FIFTH GIFT: KNOWLEDGE

Is 11:3; Jn 17:3; Ro 1:18-20, 2:14-16; I Cor 1:16; 2 Cor 12:3; Heb 11:1

## I. DEFINING IT: “Justified True Belief”

- A. Classical languages enhance meaning:
  - 1. Heb: *yada*—apprehend, experience, mastery of skill; euphemism re sex
  - 2. Gk: *oida* & *ginosko*—acquainted with, knowing facts, remembering events
  - 3. L: *scientia*—acquaintance, theoretical/philosophical insight
- B. Important Facets—various aspects of knowing
  - 1. Acquaintance with—empirical encounters (e.g. Moses at burning bush)
  - 2. Definition of—discerning essence, crafting propositions (e.g. Adam: animals)
  - 3. Explanation for—reason re purpose (Esther: “for this reason”)
  - 4. Proficiency in—skill to act (tabernacle craftsmen)

## II. NOTING ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND PARAMETERS: Knower (subject) & Known (object) & Knowledge (mental content)

- A. Significance: Greek Maxim embraced by ancients, including: Socrates: “Know Thyself;” Aristotle: “Man, by nature, desires to know”—thus imperative deeply rooted in our being; Augustine: “‘I desire to know God and the soul.’ ‘Nothing more? Absolutely nothing.’” J.I. Packer: “What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God”
- B. Mandate: “What should matter in matters of faith is knowledge, not merely sincere belief; good reasons for faith, not mere hunches; truth, not feelings. We can rightly say that Christianity is a knowledge tradition, meaning it is more than ritual or emotions. Christianity claims certain things can be known” (Garrett DeWeese & J.P. Moreland, *Philosophy Made Slightly Less Difficult*, p. 54)
- C. Parameters:
  - 1. Neither systematic skepticism nor rigid dogmatism feasible—though often skepticism is justified (i.e. politicians) and in many ways certitude defensible—c.f. “Faith and Certitude”
    - a. “The man who tells you truth does not exist is asking you not to believe him. So don’t”—Roger Scruton re skeptics who discount metaphysical, historical, moral & theological truths
    - b. Dogmatists discount evidence, assume godlike infallibility—impossible for man
  - 2. Either/Or Epistemological Choice re primary approach to knowing
    - a. Realism: correspondence between mental image and objective item (fact)
    - b. Idealism: coherence of inner notions (perhaps assuming external somewhat identical)
    - c. Pragmatism: taking as true whatever works (thus postmodern “constructivism”)

## III. SIGNIFICANT SPHERES WHEREIN KNOWLEDGE POTENTIALLY CERTAIN

- A. Physical: acquaintance with objects via senses—*perceptions* (see a llama)
- B. Metaphysical: reasoning re non-material reality—*conceptions* re essences (llama-ness)
- C. Historical: taking evidence seriously—*testimony* re events (Nicolay & Hay re Lincoln or Gospels re Jesus—Acts 14:14-16, 17:24-28)
- D. Moral: *conscience* discerning good & evil (Rom 2:14-16)—Natural Law tradition
- E. Theological: revelation (prophets’ messages) & tradition/experiences (mystics’ insights)

## IV. KNOWING GOD

- A. Promises Encourage knowing His Presence (Amos 5:14; Ps 23:4); His Power (Ro 1:20); His Nearness (James 4:8); His Love (I Jn 4:9, 16); His Goodness (Nahum 1:7); His Sovereignty (Ro 8:28)
- B. Jesus Reveals Him: His Life (Heb 12:2-3; His Forgiveness (2 Cor 7:10)
- B. Practices conducive to knowing God:
  - 1. Seeking Him: “seek and ye shall find” (Mt 7:7-8)
  - 2. *Lectio divina*: meditative reading, listening to eternal Word in written Word
  - 3. Prayer: praising, adoring, wondering, listening
  - 4. Worship
    - a. Music: including Bach & Gaither & Black Gospel
    - b. Art: cathedrals & sanctuaries; icons & crosses
  - 5. Obedience

# FAITH and CERTITUDE

Thomas Dubay's *Faith and Certitude* is a work of apologetics that begins by noting that lots of people are "bored with life." Folks in love, however, are never bored. So we face a world wherein far too many persons lack any love for life. They've lost their spiritual sensitivity, their openness to the beauty and truth of reality. Though unsuspected by most of them, at the heart of their boredom lies the loss of certainty, the conviction (or even hope) that they can know anything about anything for sure. It's clear, I think, that: "No man can worship love or trust in a probable God" (John Henry Newman). To the extent we forfeit the certainty of God's existence and presence, we lose the capacity to love Him. It's hard to love nothingness! Skepticism and disbelief may be fashionable in university classrooms, but they poison any love for life. Nietzsche's atheistic aphorisms may be clever and quotable, but his "hermeneutic of suspicion," his criticisms, wilt like tulips when exposed to the fires of existence.

So "the Church's centuries-old conviction that she abides in a secure certitude was expressed recently by Pope John Paul II when he wrote that our teaching of religion should 'continually separate itself from the surrounding atmosphere of hesitation, uncertainty and insipidity. . . .' We are to affirm calmly our identity and adhere 'firmly to the absoluteness of God'" (p. 34). One of the obstacles to ascertaining absolutes is simply "the prevailing atmosphere" surrounding us. Modernity, like an osteoporosis-ravaged bone, stands riddled with widespread subjectivism, a disbelief in objective truth, goodness and beauty. Imprisoned within our own consciousness, many of us can say only that we "feel" or "believe" certain things, providing commentary on what's going on in our own heads.

Such subjectivism easily slides into moral relativism, so what's right for me may not necessarily be right for you. It's pretty much every man for himself. Thus John Mackie, and Oxford professor, can title his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. You invent your right and I'll invent my wrong—and we'll hope we don't collide on the freeway of life. Another obstacle is simply "ourselves." As Hans Urs von Balthasar noted, "Sin obscures sight." The thinking which leads to certitude requires hard work, which eliminates those who want simple answers or personal opinions. Refusing to reason, we easily entertain contradictory opinions, demand little evidence for our opinions, and continually resort to repeating jargon rather than constructing arguments. As Newman said, "Men go by their sympathies, not by argument." Still more: our sinfulness nourishes such things as a disposition to doubt, an attitude of "chronological snobbery," unfair selectivity, and bigotry.

Following his analysis of the reasons for our lack of certitude, Dubay turns his attention to critical issues such as naturalistic evolutionism and biblical criticism. While open to truths in such scholarly fields, he rightly diagnoses the general disarray, the lack of genuine consensus, which leave most folks groping for answers. Every "expert" trumpets forth his own set of answers! Dubay's answer, especially in biblical studies (as you would expect from a Roman Catholic), lies in the teaching authority of the Church. With her assistance, Dubay argues, we may find certitude. Such certitude "is not a bolt out of the blue, a result of a high intelligence quotient or a sheer stroke of illumination. It happens in a context and with previous preparation" (p. 177). It takes careful study and reasoned deliberation, the path of philosophical realism, plus an authentic love for the truth. "They attain truth who love it. One of the chief immoralities is an indifference to truth" (p. 189). Thus sanctity includes a commitment to truth which is manifestly evident in men such as Augustine and Aquinas and Newman.

There's lots to chew on in this treatise. Dubay's learning roots him in the ancient fathers as well as keeps him in touch with modernity. He provides striking illustrations and quotations while developing his own presentation. Like his earlier discussion of religious experience, *The Fire Within*, it rewards careful reading and rumination.

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## PROOF OF HEAVEN

Eben Alexander's *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* is a fascinating, persuasive personal "life-after-life" account given credibility by the author's medical training and persuasive presentation. After receiving his M.D. from Duke University Medical School, he pursued post-doctoral study and taught for 15 years at Harvard Medical School, operating on "countless patients" and becoming quite expert in dealing with brain injuries. Though nominally religious (attending an Episcopal church at Christmas and Easter), he'd struggled with some personal issues and doubted the basics of the Christian faith, including the reality of "God and Heaven and an afterlife" (p. 34). Believing, with Albert Einstein, that "a man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be," he takes a scientific stance, determined to deal with the realities he encountered as a result of a "near-death" experience which forever "changed his mind" regarding heaven.

In 2008, at the age of 54, Alexander fell ill with bacterial meningitis—"arguably the best disease one could find if one were seeking to mimic human death without actually bringing it about" (p. 133)—and lapsed into a deep coma for seven days. While his brain shut down completely—"it wasn't working *at all*" (p. 8)—he encountered "the reality of a world of consciousness that existed *completely free of the limitations of my physical brain*" (p. 9). Consequently, he concluded: "My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us and about where the universe itself and all the beings within it are ultimately going." He now knows: "The place I went was real. Real in a way that makes the life we're living here and now completely dreamlike by comparison" (p. 9). Having encountered Ultimate Reality, he asserts: "What I have to tell you is as important as anything anyone will ever tell you, and it's true" (p. 10).

While Alexander was in the coma, doctors ran all the sophisticated tests modern science prescribes, preserving graphs and images of his damaged brain. As his brain showed no activity, he journeyed first into a dark "underworld filled with repulsive creatures and foul smells. Then a light descended into the darkness and he heard "a *living* sound, like the richest, most complex, most beautiful piece of music you've ever heard" (p. 38). Suddenly he was ushered into a beautiful new world—"The strangest, most beautiful world I'd ever seen" (p. 38). "Below me was countryside. It was green, lush, and earthlike. It *was* earth . . . but at the same time it wasn't" (p. 38). He'd entered a really Real world! A beautiful young "Girl on the butterfly Wing" joined him, giving him a "look that, if you saw it for a few moments, would make your whole life up to that point worth living, no matter what had happened in it so far" (p. 40). (After he recovered, he received a picture of one of his deceased biological sisters—whom he'd never seen even in a picture—and realized the "Girl" looked exactly like her!) Without speaking she gave him a wonderful message: "'You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.' 'You have nothing to fear.' 'There is nothing you can do wrong'" (p. 40). At that moment, Alexander felt "a vast and crazy sensation of relief. It was like being handed the rules to a game I'd been playing all my life without fully understanding it" (p. 40). He found his deepest questions answered, but not with words. "Thoughts entered me directly" (p. 46). He also felt himself immersed in the Reality of God. Indeed, "there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself. Yet at the same time I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely minuscule I was by comparison" (p. 47).

Still more, he understood: "The world of time and space in which we move in this terrestrial realm is tightly and intricately meshed within these higher worlds. In other words, these worlds aren't totally apart from us, because all worlds are part of the same overarching divine Reality" (p. 48). Because of his illness, he'd taken a remarkable out-of-body "tour—some kind of grand overview of the invisible spiritual side of existence" (p. 69). And, above all, he'd learned a priceless truth: he—and we—are loved. Every one of us! "Love is, without a doubt, the basis of everything" (p. 71). This truth is as certain to Alexander as any of the scientific truths

## Alexander: Proof of Heaven

necessary for his vocation as a surgeon. “The unconditional love and acceptance that I experienced on my journey is the single most important discovery I have ever made, or will ever make, and as hard as I know it’s going to be to unpack the other lessons I learned while there, I also know in my heart that sharing this very basic message—one so simple that most children readily accept it—is the most important task I have” (p. 73).

Applying his scientific understanding of the human brain—and the mind/brain/consciousness questions that have forever fascinated philosophers—Alexander tries to explain how the physical brain serves as a “kind of reducing valve or filter, shifting the larger, nonphysical consciousness that we possess in the nonphysical worlds down into a more limited capacity for the duration of our mortal lives” (p. 80). We are, spiritually, in touch with an Ultimate Reality that we rarely sense because our brains too easily restrict our consciousness to material realities. But there is a vast, mysterious universe that is purposeful and spiritual. Indeed: “The physical side of the universe is as a speck of dust compared to the invisible and spiritual part” (p. 82). We are primarily spiritual beings, designed and destined for eternal life with God. “This other, vastly grander universe isn’t ‘far away’ at all. In fact, it’s right here . . . . It’s not far away physically, but simply exists on a different frequency. It’s right here, right now, but we’re unaware of it because we are for the most part closed to those frequencies on which it manifests” (p. 156).

When, after seven days, Alexander emerged from his coma, his family observed him smiling. “‘All is well,’ I said, radiating that blissful message as much as speaking the words. I looked at each of them, deeply, acknowledging the divine miracle of our very existence” (p. 113). He was, miraculously, well! “In fact—though at this point only I knew this—I was completely and truly ‘well’ for the first time in my entire life” (p. 123). With each passing day his neuroscientist’s knowledge returned. And so did his “memories of what had happened during that week out of my body . . . with astonishing boldness and clarity. What had happened outside the earthly realm had everything to do with the wild happiness I’d awakened with, and the bliss that continued to stick with me” (p. 124). Still more: he was “also happy because—to state the matter as plainly as I can—I understood for the first time who I really was, and what kind of a world we inhabit” (p. 124).

Above all, he’d encountered what’s really Real! “What I’d experienced was more real than the house I sat in, more real than the logs burning in the fireplace. Yet there was no room for that reality in the medically trained scientific worldview that I’d spent years acquiring” (p. 130). His own experience led him to plunge “into the ocean of NDE [Near Death Experience] literature” (p. 131). He found his experience amply confirmed by others! Years earlier he’d heard about Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life*, but he’d neither read it nor considered its evidence. Now he read it carefully and affirmed its contents. But Alexander also realized that (compared with many other NDEs) his “was a technically near-impeccable near-death experience, perhaps one of the most convincing such cases in modern history. What really mattered about my case was not what happened to me personally, but the sheer, flat-out impossibility of arguing, from a medical standpoint, that it was all fantasy” (p. 135).

After a lengthy convalescence, Alexander made his way to church. To his amazement, the music and architecture which had left him unmoved before his NDE now touched him deeply. “At last, I understood what religion was really all about. I didn’t just believe in God; I knew God. As I hobbled to the altar to take Communion, tears streamed down my cheeks” (p. 149). That heavenly realm he’d visited while in a coma was, in fact, the same realm celebrated in Christian worship. Opening our minds to God in meditation and prayer ushers us into that eternal realm wherein we can directly communicate with God, knowing Him as He Is.