

Knowing Non-Human Persons

“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus whom You have sent.¹ Jesus of Nazareth spoke these words over two thousand years ago, and avails the hearer of an understanding Jesus has about the nature of reality – including knowledge. One may fairly say that in His statement, Jesus embraces an epistemology that transcends the limits endorsed by empiricists and other metaphysical naturalists. Neither would he acquiesce to the post modernist ideology that would limit the application of those words to Himself and that small community of followers to whom He was both Lord and Savior.²

In this paper I shall agree with Jesus that one may have justified true belief or knowledge of incorporeal beings; these beings may even be considered for purposes of the present discussion, non-human persons. The relationship between eternal life and knowledge of God then clearly necessitates the possibility of being able to know something or someone as “it” actually is. Or how could the specific effect bound to the specific cause otherwise obtain? Additionally, Christians and other monotheists maintain that the Supreme Being, God, knows all things and many of these things are propositions and concepts such as possible future events – not merely observations about physical things and conclusions thereby drawn. Therefore both those who believe these things and those who believe contrariwise are interested in whether they are

¹ John 17:3. NASB 1995, Lockman Foundation.

² I shall not argue here against those who insist upon the mythological or otherwise non historical Jesus. Others have covered that territory quite well, and I shall consider the historical reality of Jesus a foregone conclusion. I shall, out of reverence use the capital pronoun “He” or “Him” when referring to Jesus or God.

justified in that belief or unbelief as the case may be (which is to say belief in the falsity of the claim).

There is a considerable burden of proof bought to bear on the one that argues, as Christians do, that one may have justified true belief in an anything immaterial. It seems at first rational to demand some physical relata for verification. American jurisprudence relies heavily on physical evidence for example, something that can be seen, or heard or some other appeal to the sense organs for affirmation. But within that same system circumstantial evidence also carries weight, and the notion of motive is typically presented to determine whether or not it is more reasonable to believe that a defendant committed an offense. Here we recognize thought and intention,³ strong enough at times to acquit or convict. In order for this to be an effective means, we tacitly acknowledge that we know (as a mental state) what it means to be angry or passionate, etc.; it is how we detect that someone else is experiencing the same. Hence we are able to have “thoughts about” things outside of ourselves in a way which actually coheres to the thing we are thinking about. “Concepts are the intentional bridge between thought and its objects”.⁴ And these objects may obviously be thoughts that others are having, and so not limited to being strictly physical. It is therefore rational to admit the possibility of such intention regarding a Supreme Being, intention according to Dallas Willard that is a property, even in the case of Scott Smith’s imaginary “Pegasus”.⁵ For in that instance,

³ Intention here is not understood as mental content, as discussed below, rather as what the person desired to do.

⁴ Smith, Scott R., *Scientific Realism and Our Knowledge of the Objective, Physical World*. P. 12

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13

one has a thought "about" the object, even if it does not exist. Obviously then, one can have intention or propositional attitude about something that does exist.

Christian scripture also records that "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we (the redeemed) are children of God."⁶ Here it is offered that a non-physical noetic agreement takes place, something at the level of the soul. For our purposes, *can* such a transaction occur (not does it)? What might substantiate such a claim that would also relate to and evidence the main premise that we may have true knowledge of incorporeal beings?

Gregory Koukl offers some helpful insights into this deliberation and writes; "the way that we know most things is by reflection of the soul".⁷ His approach goes somewhat like this: One cannot know how you are feeling, or what sensation you are experiencing unless the one experiencing those feelings and sensations reveals those to you. There is a soul, he continues, that provides information that science, studying the physical, cannot access. More of his specific arguments are offered below. But, he continues, " we need a report from a conscious mind, a mind that can feel the difference."⁸ My immaterial self communicates to another immaterial self that my material body is in pain, and that other immaterial self understands.

Stuart Hackett contributes to this understanding of the soul when he reflects upon the perceived intrinsic worth of persons as a determining factor in decision making and exercising judgement. He writes, "...those goals are alone deserving of

⁶ Romans 8:16, ESV

⁷ Koukl, Gregory, Science Doesn't Tell Us Anything Important.
<http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/science/science.htm>

rational choice which implement or seem likely to implement his own personal well-being as a self and/or the analogous personal well being of other selves whose circumstances are likely to be affected by his choices".⁹ Admittedly, this explains that sense of obligation in us to "do good" for the sake of ourselves and for others, who it may be urged, contribute nothing to our survival. A man may be concerned about his wife's illness for no other reason than that he cares about her, and not what effect that illness may have on her ability to do the laundry, etc. So this seems to be a good example of that "transaction" between spirits noted in the scripture reference above, and we do not commit intellectual sacrilege by inferring from that, that the immaterial may communicate with the immaterial in a trustworthy manner.

Referring back to the initial proposition then, there is good reason to acknowledge a mechanism by which we may have justified belief-the immaterial self, or soul, with its reasoning faculties and powers of logic, deduction, etc.

Now at this point, objections from both the postmodern and metaphysical naturalist persuasion may be raised. Of the former, it is argued that "the biblical narratives create a world, and it is within this world that believers are to live their lives and understand reality".¹⁰ The words of Jesus quoted above then, have no particular meaning for all, but rather for all in a community espousing the same tradition, and using the same language, as "translation of a proposition into any other language simply

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hackett, Stuart C., *The Value Dimension of the Cosmos: A Moral Argument*. Philosophy of Religion, Gen Ed. William Lane Craig, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2002. 9. 150

¹⁰ Smith, Scott R., *Should We Talk as Nancey Murphy Talks; as taken from Murphey, Nancey, Anglo American*, p. 120

will not preserve its meaning, for meanings are not universal".¹¹ Whatever eternal life is then, it is to be understood as preserved in the traditions of a particular community and therefore will vary from one community to another. Also, since so much of what it means to know anything hinges on those same socially constructed, language dependent observations, the knowledge of God which leads to eternal life is equally universally unknowable. All of scripture at this point disintegrates into an exercise in futility, as Nancey Murphy and other postmodernists by their own understanding cannot hope to realize a God who maintains a particular identity over a period of time. Instead, according to her, "we live in our traditions and can only think and perceive by means of the categories, images, and stories they provide".¹²

There are two main problems with this postmodernist complaint. First, that objection decries any attempt at a universal, *meta-narrative* by which we may consider the important questions of existence, e.g. where did we come from, why are we here, etc. At the same time though, and very obviously, postmodernism is a *meta-narrative*; it is an attempt to explain the reality that we cannot get at the reality! Second, the supposed paradigm that prejudices a community towards a particular belief does not mean that reality depends on a community's belief for its existence. J.P Moreland writes, "If bias made rational objectivity impossible, then no teacher including the postmodernist herself – could responsibly teach any view the teacher believed on any subject! Nor

¹¹ Ibid. p. 6, paraphrasing Murphy.

¹² Murphey, Nancey, *Epistemological Holism and Theological Method*, p.105

could the teacher teach opposing viewpoints, because she would be biased against them!"¹³

Therefore the postmodernist objection fails to convince against our actual access to objective reality, and the reality Jesus speaks of may indeed be true. Other arguments may be offered, and of course Jesus may still be wrong, but postmodernism can never demonstrate that. And Jesus claims to be carrying on and bringing towards fulfillment a particular narrative that universally applies.

But what about my specific claim that Jesus was right in asserting that we may have justified true belief that incorporeal beings exist? Does postmodernism succeed in any way at refuting that? I do not see how it may be so given the self-imposed limits of that philosophy. If postmodernists are a community lacking epistemological access to "the real",¹⁴ and if I am not a member of that community who consequently agrees with that supposition, then their arguments are circular, and their objections have no force and should be denied. Furthermore, "postmodernists reject...laws of logic or principles of inductive inference, for determining whether a belief is true or false..."¹⁵ Rather, the evidence abounds on the side of objective reality. The claim throughout history that people have encountered a "spirit" realm bears additional weight in favor of my proposition, and such evidence cannot be overcome by the postmodernist refutation, or

¹³ Moreland, J.P., Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn, ETS, 11/18/2004

¹⁴ This term is employed in John Hick's arguments, which parallel much of postmodern thought regarding our inability to know the thing itself, i.e. we are limited to our *perception* of the thing.

¹⁵ Moreland & DeWeese, *The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise*. P. 81

attempts by the same to “judge rationally between competing paradigms”¹⁶, as explicated above.

Metaphysical Naturalists will complain against my conclusion (and supporting propositions) from a different perspective than the postmodernists, though at times it may be seen that the failure of naturalism to yield to the limits of empiricism will result in “constructivist” style theories. And the reality that they argue for will rule out by assumption the possibility of incorporeal beings and certainly of “souls” as they exist in a non-physical way – never mind the endurance of persons in an unembodied state even temporarily. How do their arguments succeed in denying my conclusion?

Metaphysical naturalism, of course, insists that all that is proceeds along a continuum of unintelligent causation, specifically such things as random genetic selection, accident etc. – ultimately that the natural world is all that there is and hence explains everything. Therefore, “all that is required for naturalism to be false is the discovery of one thing that cannot be explained in the naturalistic way”.¹⁷

Returning to the argument by Greg Koukl, “nothing that is ultimately valuable to you can be classified, studied, probed or analyzed empirically by the five senses using science...so rather than science being the beginning and end of all knowledge, science is dependent on the soul to give it its information”.¹⁸ The force of this is apparent; we may and do obtain and communicate “knowledge” outside the limits of scientific observation. Furthermore, naturalists cannot explain why I should reject that end.

¹⁶ Murphey, Nancey, *Epistemological Holism and Theological Method*, p.100

¹⁷ Nash, Ronald H., *Miracles and Conceptual Systems*, in “In Defense of Miracles”, Ed. by Doug Geivett and Gary H. Habermas, Intervarsity Press,, Downers Grover Ill., 1997, p. 125.

Appeals to evolutionary development of those chemical and other biological processes that are measurable are merely observations of what happens when one feels a certain way. It is observed then that there is knowledge out there that cannot be accessed by the five senses, even if it is allowed that sentient beings appeal to the testimony of sensory experience by way of affirmation or witness. "That the use of the scientific method is sufficient, roughly speaking, for getting truth about the world by no means shows that it is necessary for achieving that."¹⁹ Again, this is not necessary for justified true belief as may be established via the soul or various mental states. Since naturalists cannot employ science to discern these immaterial realities, naturalists are not justified in dismissing the proposition that God, whom Christians acknowledge to be spirit, may be known.

Ironically, it must at the same time be insisted that empirical observations lend assistance to assessing the possibility of reliable sources of knowledge not achieved through the naturalist's scientific inquiry. Or, how does the reliability of sense perception as a means of accessing knowledge direct us towards that transcendent source of eternal life that Jesus declares may be known?

Alvin Plantinga argues quite convincingly that evolutionary arguments themselves provide a sufficient defeater for naturalism.²⁰ Unguided, blind processes maintain over time with the "goal" of survival at the very heart of the process; "...it is

¹⁸ Koukl. He also notes, "You can't smell knowledge. Love doesn't have a shape. Happiness cannot be heard".

¹⁹ Alston, William, Ph.D, *What is Naturalism that We Should Be Mindful of It?*
<http://www.leaderu.com/aip/docs/alston-naturalism.html>

²⁰ Plantinga, Alvin, *An Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*,
<http://hisdefense.org/articles/ap001.html>.

unlikely that they have the production of true beliefs as a function".²¹ Of course if that is the case, then we have no reason to believe that is the case! Clearly, we depend on the use of our senses to give us information about things that have a reference outside of the senses. "We suppose, without even thinking about it, that they [our sense organs] reveal to us things that have nothing to do with themselves, their structures, or their origins"²². It is rationally inferred then that there is both purpose to our sensory faculties, and an intelligent agent to which those senses owe their reliability. We have them that we may discover things about other things.

What of my thesis, in light of the naturalist arguments above, that we can have justified true belief or knowledge of incorporeal beings, or as is the case with theism, non-human persons? That there is a belief and knowledge conferring causal agent is evident from consideration of those sense perceptions which cannot arise from a purely physical, undirected processes. A priori disqualification of the "supernatural" may be naturalist orthodoxy, but it is unreasonable. And the dependence of science on the soul to give science information further buttresses my assertion.

Other arguments maybe offered and reasoned concerning my main point – and that we reason at all is meaningful to the discussion. C. S. Lewis writes in his *Miracles*; "something beyond nature happens whenever we reason". Ronald Nash adds, "reasoning requires something that exceeds the bounds of Nature, namely, the laws of logical inference".²³ Leaving other arguments to that increasing horde of thinkers who

²¹ Ibid.

²² Taylor, Richards, *Metaphysics*, as quoted by Ronald Nash in *Miracles*, p. 129

²³ Nash, *Conceptual Systems...*, p. 127

reject metaphysical naturalism, I am content to simply point out the reasoning used in that process. Both naturalists and theists are engaged in this enterprise – to the theist it makes sense to pursue, and the naturalist continues seemingly conflicted about the supposed simplicity of naturalism, and his violation of its tenets to so engage.

In conclusion, “one can unreservedly acknowledge the stupendous achievements of the scientific method – theoretical and practical –and still wonder whether this is our *only* cognitive access to the world”.²⁴ I have agreed in this paper with Jesus of Nazareth that we may know that incorporeal beings exist, and that they may convey truth, or lies for that matter as the case may be. Knowing God and growing in that knowledge entails the senses as well as communication from immaterial mind to immaterial mind, or soul or spirit as those terms are commonly interspersed. The elements of knowledge, a knowledge conveyor and a knowledge receiver are all in place and continually at work in our human experience. Christians and naturalists concur that survival of the fittest is the paradigm in which all humans operate. What is disagreed on is who are fit, how one becomes fit, and the temporal or eternal status of survival! The postmodernist may fit into either category though they are so not in reality, but only perceptually. Jesus assures us that we can know God, and I have argued that the capacity to attain that knowledge is real.

²⁴ Alston, emphasis mine.