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## ***The Logic of Love***

### **Chapter 8: The Knowledge-versus-Belief Dilemma**

Things are known in the knower after the manner of the knower,  
not after their own manner of existence.

**-Thomas Aquinas**

We go on quests for knowledge, not for belief. Knowledge is worthy of a quest because we value taking actions that are in harmony with this thing called "reality." Knowledge reflects a clear perception of reality; belief implies the possibility of error. When something passes for knowledge, this means that people share a common view of reality on that issue. But the line between knowledge and belief is hard to define because our experience and our thoughts about life are subjective and individual in nature. This prevents the claim of knowledge from being absolute. At best, we believe that we possess knowledge.

"How do you know that San Francisco really exists," asks the Eternal Skeptic?

"Well, I've commuted there each day for the past ten years. Why? What's your point?" responds the bewildered Realist.

"How do you know you didn't dream it? How do you know you are not dreaming right now? Maybe you're just a brain in a jar with electrodes that stimulate you into thinking these experiences are real," muses the Eternal Skeptic. "You can't prove otherwise! You can't really know anything."

"I know God exists from my experience with chen," chimes in the Faithful One. "But you don't really know," barks back the Eternal Skeptic. "No one can really know anything!"

Then, employing the Eternal Skeptic's own premise, the Faithful One retorts, "Then you cannot know that I do not know because your own experience and reasoning discredits any claim of knowledge. Therefore, the possibility of knowing God through faith is still an open question. Besides, at least the knowledge I claim is based on experience with God. If the validation of knowledge is possible, there can be no better validation than experience with God."

"I'm grateful for how the Faithful One seems to have saved me from the Eternal Skeptic's existential, epistemological entrapments," interrupts the Realist. "But I have a real job and mouths to feed at home. I presume none of these cosmic insights will keep me from dinner tonight or work tomorrow. That being the case, I'm out of here. You two can banter back and forth 'til the break of day, for all I care."

"I will not be adding anything that would keep you from work and family," responds the Faithful One. "However, I do hope to offer some thoughts that might greatly enhance your experience of work and your love for your family."

The Eternal Skeptic has a lot more to offer the discussion than the suggestion that we might be nothing more than brains in jars. The absurdity of that scenario is evidence of just how obtuse the topic of spirituality can become. Speculating about the nature of spiritual life opens the door on a metaphysical three-ring circus, complete with clowns and wild animals, as well as death-defying

acts of love, loyalty, and courage. It's a psychological thrill ride where we free-fall down the Tower of Gloom, soil ourselves in the Haunted Mansion From Hell, and get turned every which way but loose on life's little roller-coaster ride of cosmological chaos. Turn your back for one minute, and the next thing you know, Aunt Betty just spent all her money getting financial advice from some psychic hotline.

So why believe in anything at all? Just because enough people agree on a set of spiritual beliefs that it's called a religion, does this make it any more probable than the "Brain-In-A-Jar" theory of existence? The discussion between the Realist, the Faithful One, and the Eternal Skeptic helps keep us on track in two ways. First, by exposing the elusive nature of knowledge (when it comes to discussions about reality), these predisposed pundits focus us on the fuzzy boundary between belief and knowledge. Second, they remind us that regardless of what we believe, we still have to make choices about how to deal with life; we still need to get to work and procreate for the privilege of pondering these seemingly impenetrable possibilities.

Let's enter this quagmire by generating a working definition of knowledge. We do not need to get worked up into existential dilemmas over defining knowledge. We just need to get enough of a handle on this concept to get us to the grocery store and back. Philosophic discussions about *knowledge* may get obtuse, but practical use of the term enjoys a narrower range of opinion. The standard for what *passes for knowledge* is not so elusive, though it does vary between things spiritual and things material.

Identifying the differing standards for knowledge allows us to work with the concept on a day to day basis. With material things, whether something is accepted as fact or not has a lot to do with how many people believe it. The existence of San Francisco passes for knowledge because no one cares to call it into question. On the other hand, who was involved in killing President Kennedy is still an open question. Positions taken on this subject are, therefore, relegated to the status of belief.

In the spiritual realm we do not enjoy the benefit of commonly held standards or measuring devices that yield replicable results. Consequently, the reality of anything spiritual can only be a subjective interpretation of an inner, or what might be called a *supermaterial*, reality. Because no one can hand us a prepackaged experience of God, the process whereby spiritual belief develops into knowledge does not follow the same pattern of acceptance as with material reality beliefs. Coming to a common belief in the reality of God is not like promulgating the discovery that the world is round. With things spiritual, the *quality* of personal experience is more significant than the *quantity* of people who claim to have a similar experience. Therefore, the first practical appreciation of this distinction between material knowledge and spiritual knowledge is that the source for material knowledge comes from outside ourselves, while the source for spiritual knowledge must be validated from our inner experience of life.

The second lesson arrives with the departure of the Realist. It is that no matter where we fall on this issue of knowledge and belief, ultimately we must act. Our lives are not "on hold" while we try to figure these things out. As much as we might like to act with knowledge (or something approximating knowledge), on the material level we cannot always afford to wait for that degree of certainty. And on the spiritual level, whatever degree of certainty that we enjoy is one that cannot readily be offered to others. Even if the Faithful One makes a good point about appealing to the best possible source for knowledge of reality (God), chens ability to form the sentence does not make the content real for anyone else.

Actions based upon knowledge are preferable to those based on belief because of the value of taking actions that are in harmony with reality. Actions based on belief fail to provide the sense of security that actions based on knowledge provide. For this reason when it comes to issues of spirituality, people without faith in God sometimes believe themselves to be in a superior position in refusing to believe what cannot be proven. But, as the dialogue between The Eternal Skeptic and The Faithful One demonstrates, when it comes to things spiritual, neither side is in a superior position.

Faith is what brings life to beliefs. Beliefs may be shared, facts may pass for knowledge, but faith is a purely personal experience that is evidenced through actions. Faith, whether it relates to secular or spiritual beliefs, is where the rubber meets the road. In a secular context, the distinction between belief and knowledge is predicated on consensus because this is how we arrive at secular knowledge. In a spiritual context, the distinction between belief and knowledge is a personal matter because the source for knowledge comes from within. These distinctions are foundational for appreciating the need for two different understandings of faith, one for the secular context and one for the spiritual context.

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