

§ 1

“As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left a stone upon a stone which will not be thrown down.” (Luke 21:6, *RV*)

As a philosopher heavily influenced by the Pittsburgh School (which is inspired by the Kantian tradition), I tend to think that our epistemic realm (in which we formulate beliefs in search of knowledge) is mediated by concepts (or language). Another philosophical tradition that has an influence on me is (my own interpretation of) the Strawsonian-Wolfian meta-ethical view which regards attribution of rationality as a constituent of moral agency *and* construes rationality as the capacity to engage in epistemic activities. Thus, in my view, moral activities (i.e., actions) are consequences of epistemic activities, which are in turn conceptual or linguistic all the way down; right actions are rooted in right thoughts which are anchored by their right relation with reality.

The traditional philosophical picture of the structure of our epistemic realm is foundationalism, which presents each of our beliefs as resting on (or drawing its truth-value from) another belief. The question then naturally comes down to what could possibly be the ground level belief (the first principle) on which all of our higher-order beliefs are sitting. Within this picture, for this ground level belief to provide the *foundation*, it must be able to justify itself as true.

On the one hand, there were rationalists. In the rationalist tradition, what they call ‘axioms’ (or ‘analytic statements’) were supposed to be able to serve the foundational function. In search of *axioms*, mathematicians and logicians sought to come up with a complete *and* consistent logical system. On the other hand, there were empiricists. In the empiricist tradition, what they call ‘sense data’ (or experiences) were supposed to be able to serve that function. In search of *sense data*, logical positivists sought to come up with the syntax of a purely observational language (based on which natural science was to be justified once and for all). However, in the 20th century, various thinkers from Gödel (incompleteness theorem) to Quine (rejection of analytic-synthetic distinction, indeterminacy of translation) and Sellars (the Myth of the Given) showed that *both* philosophical projects of foundationalism were impossible in principle.

To replace foundationalism, two alternative pictures were suggested: coherentism (Davidson, Brandom) and infinitism (Later Wittgenstein). However, these two alternatives are not yet able to completely overthrow our strong intuition that, to be justified as true, our beliefs must be ultimately based on some self-justifying set of contents (whether they be logical axioms or sense data); at best, these alternatives are still under philosophical development. To put it differently, we have a strong feeling that our conceptual or linguistic framework (through which we interact with reality) must be based on some foundational principle all the while none of us still have any idea what this principle might be. Facing this theoretical stalemate, one may continue to pursue the epistemological project of identifying the possibility of knowledge or just give it up. There

are two ways to give up this project. The first one is to take certain doctrines as brutally given—dogmatism. The second one is to entirely give up the entire notion of truth—post-modernism.

Enough of the philosophical background. If we posit that our concept of God (or the word ‘God’) is meaningful *in the foundationalist sense*, we are committed to the view that this concept (or word) must be referring to something (or someone) in the world. (As of what this world may be, we can settle the semantical issue by working out the model theory—the question is whether we would restrict the *range* of world to physical or expand it to so-called spiritual.) Here, the issue is then who has the authority to determine that our concept of God is right (i.e., that it corresponds with reality however one may model semantics). Unless we adopt coherentism or infinitism, we must concede that the authority should come from the world itself. Specifically, in regard to our use of the word ‘God,’ the authority is of God (whatever our word ‘God’ turns out to be referring to). Here, the perennial question is under what condition we can finally assure that our concept or word is correctly referring to its referent (as intended by the authority). I believe there is no way of knowing this. Philosophically speaking, we have come to a dead end.

Coherentism, infinitism, and post-modernism were not conceptually available to Judaism. (And, even in present days, we tend to resist these alternatives at all costs—think of our frustration with the new idea of alternative facts and relative truth.) Thus, in the absence of any viable principle by which one could identify the infallible ground of his beliefs, Judaism (as well as we) must have conceded to dogmatism. That is, Pharisees just endorsed whatever conceptual framework they happen to possess at the time, refusing to assess its truth—the stubbornness of which was symbolized by the Jerusalem Temple, built on the *fallible* foundation of human doctrines about the concept of God.

If God exists, and *if* Jesus is God’s manifestation in the physical world (in which we as biological entities dwell), he must do something about our dogmatic stance towards what we believe. For there is something perverse about our concept of God (or the linguistic framework in which we employ the word ‘God’). We are missing the mark (*hamartia*) not merely in the sense that we are misidentifying the first principle, but in that we are taking a delusional stance towards the very framework we adopt. *We are too confident of ourselves*. And, due to this groundless confidence, there is no way we can absorb the right concepts even if they are presented. If so, the first thing God must do is to destroy the conceptual temple we have been building (and are proud of). It is in this sense I understand the need for there to be no “stone upon a stone.” Otherwise, it is quite counterintuitive why God should bring destruction rather than peace among us.

Even after the supposed destruction, the foundationalist puzzle remains: How do we know that the very new ground on which the rest of our beliefs stand on—the very linguistic framework we have adopted—is finally the right one? As Davidson pointed out, we cannot get out of our skins to find out whether our concepts correspond with reality, for everything we consciously experience (feel and think) are through concepts—at least according to the Kantian tradition of epistemology. I think that one way to address this issue is by appealing to some version of virtue ethics. But this topic is beyond the scope of our current discussion.

§ 2

“If You are the Christ, tell us. But He said to them, If I tell you, you shall by no means believe;”
(Luke 22:67, *RV*)

Would I be able to tell that someone is Christ if I see one? What should serve as the evidence, and how should the evidence be acquired? To step back a little bit, how do I tell whether someone is my friend David M.? I do usually recognize David based on various evidential factors: my memory of how David looks like (or how the person before me resembles the person I have been calling ‘David’), the testimony of others claiming to know David, the person’s answers to the questions only David could know the answers for which, etc. The evidence is not (and can never be) conclusive, but it is more or less *good enough* for me.

Is “good enough” sufficient for the belief in God (or Christ)? How much evidence is (rationally) *enough* for one to form a belief? What makes it particularly difficult in the case of God is that God is no ordinary object or person (i.e., the word ‘God’ does not function in the way other referring words do). The word ‘God’ is Janus-faced in the sense that, on the one hand, it is meant to refer to an entity via definite descriptions, but on the other hand, its sense is also meant to transcend human understanding. Can we use linguistic items as informative that are by definition beyond our understanding (i.e., not graspable by their own users)?

The priests and scribes in Luke 22 did not just fail to recognize Christ when they saw one. They were also not *willing* to consider the possibility that the person before them might be Christ. This complicates the picture even worse. What kind of role does will play in belief-formation? Is will subject to the same epistemic rules as beliefs are? Or does will operate on different rules (e.g., moral rules)? How do different rules interact with epistemic rules in belief-formation?

As much as these questions cannot be answered right now, it cannot be denied that our belief-formations are influenced by various non-epistemic factors such as will and emotion. In intaking data, one employs a specific conceptual or inferential framework to interpret the data. In turn, the conceptual framework has its own biases and prejudices. And there is no vantage point of view from which one can revise the framework—whatever the framework one employs, *that* is all he has got. Likewise, no datum is unbiased. In fact, what makes something a datum rather than a meaningless noise is the very interpretative (and prejudiced) intaking of that thing *as such and so*. It is quite mysterious how we are to use such a fallible tool to attain truth. Nevertheless, this tool (conceptual framework) is all we have, and we are to somehow work truth out of it.

From 2015 to 2019, I was a committed atheist. During that period, my objective was to prove why Christianity was wrong (and harmful). I still admired Jesus as a literary figure for his gospel of love. But I refused to believe that he was divine as well. For me, Jesus was a historical figure who lived about two thousand years ago, telling people to love one another. Any doctrine that elevated him to a divine status sounded like a harmful lie for me to deconstruct and disprove.

A small turning point happened in early 2019. At that time, I was working on my Master's in philosophy at SFSU. One day, there was a discussion on the intellectual design argument in a graduate seminar. The intellectual design argument as it is, is logically flawed—there is no doubt about this. However, what caught my attention was my classmates' (and my) attitude towards the argument. Here is a brief reconstruction of the discussion to the best of my memory.

- Professor: So, why would you not believe that the designs in nature are good evidence for the existence of God?
- Students: Because there are alternative ways to interpret the “designs,” and these ways are just as good as, if not better than, the so-called intellectual design argument.
- Professor: Okay, then what if right now you hear a voice from the heaven saying that this is from God? Would you take that as the evidence for God?
- Students: No, because even that phenomenon has an alternative explanation.
- Professor: What could then possibly convince you that God exists?

No student was able to answer the last question. And it made me reflect on myself. If I think that something can serve as counter-evidence, I must also think that something can serve as evidence. Otherwise, there is no fact of a matter by which I can determine whether something is the case (whether God exists or not). If I cannot conceive the condition under which I can conclude that God exists, I cannot conceive the condition under which I can conclude otherwise. If there is no criterion for rationally judging that God exists, there is no criterion for judging the opposite, either. Otherwise, it would not be a fair trial. Rather, it was as if my classmates and I *wanted* there to be no God. In other words, there was no good evidence for me to believe that God does not exist. At best, things were to be further investigated. (That is, there is no good reason for me yet to make a conclusion about the existence of God.)

This realization was telling me that my atheism was not rationally motivated, that it was rather based on emotion (hatred towards Christianity). There was a bias in the conceptual framework I was employing in regard to God which was undetected hitherto. I still do not think that there can be a conceptual framework free of any bias or prejudice. Yet, some frameworks may be less biased than the others. The trick is to continue inspecting oneself and eliminating internal biases, knowing that one can never fully exterminate biases in his life-time.

One can never conclusively determine whether God exists or not. This inability to draw a final conclusion is built into the fallible tool (conceptual framework) we use in forming beliefs. There is no other tool available for us to use. This is human limit. But my hope is this. While we cannot conclusively reach truth, we can work and prepare ourselves (eliminating internal biases to the best of our ability) through a series of self-reflections. So, if it happens to be true that God exists, we are not emotionally motivated by our biases to blaspheme God when we see him.

§ 3

“And the chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him.” (Luke 23:10)

“In bread there was offered Thee an invincible banner; give bread, and man will worship Thee, for nothing is more certain than bread.” (from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky)

“I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.” (a quote attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein)

What were the priests and scribes fearing in regard to the figure that Jesus was? What did Jesus signify to them? What did lead them to accuse and eliminate Jesus? According to Yuval Harari, the primary function of religion is to sustain human cooperation, which ensures the survival and flourishing of our species. Harari writes, “Any large-scale cooperation ... is rooted in common myths that exist only in people’s collective imagination.”¹ It is not coincidental that what Hobbes conjectured as that which maintains peace and cooperation among people is a sort of *contract* that is *implicitly* agreed by its participants—wherein the contract is effective only to the extent that its participants *believe* in it. Initially, people might have consented to the contract (or myth) for its purely instrumental value. But, as Queloz points out, certain concepts become *regarded as* intrinsically valuable as they serve the purpose better if their instrumental origins are forgotten.²

Judaism as a national religion for Israeli has been serving this function (sustaining of human cooperation) at least since the time of Exodus. By institutionalizing the origin story of Israeli, theological explanation of that origin story, worship service of that theological ideology, etc., Judaism more or less successfully gave its participants the meaning of life as well as the sense of belonging and identity. The majority of its participants (both the ruling and the ruled classes) benefited from the coalition made possible by its mythical doctrines. What Jesus signified was a challenge to this enshrined system of cooperation and security, i.e., the kind of peace Israeli have worked for centuries in response to external threats and dangers.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879, 1880), Dostoevsky presents the story of the Grand Inquisitor, which is a fictional narrative about a cardinal who captured and persecuted Jesus. In the story, Jesus revisits the Earth during the Inquisition, healing people. Immediately, a cardinal notices and imprisons Jesus, telling him that he should not have come back on the Earth. The cardinal argues that what people need are peace, security, and certainty, not freedom, or freewill. In facing the three temptations by the Devil in the wilderness, Jesus chose the freedom to choose one’s faith over bread (security), testing God (certainty, or confirmation of faith), and the world (authority, or power to bring peace). However, the cardinal insists, Jesus should have given in to at least one of these temptations. Freedom gave people uncertainty. What the people wanted,

¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015), p. 27.

² Matthieu Queloz, *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering* (2021).

according to the cardinal, was an authority figure who can ensure their well-being. People would choose miracles (myths) over the need to figure out things themselves, for being told what to do is easier and sounds more assuring than making one's own choice. The cardinal claims that the Roman Catholic *corrected* the work of Jesus by subsuming people's freedom (irresponsibly given by Jesus) and providing them with the system of religion (myths) again.

Jesus came as *Logos*, not *Mythos*.³ In Greek philosophy, these two notions are contrasted with each other. The latter constitutes the mythological worldview that ancient Greeks believed in whereas the former was a resistance to this worldview, giving birth to mathematics, philosophy, and eventually modern science. It may be somewhat counter-intuitive to position Jesus with science (although Dostoevsky did put them together). Regardless of all the atheistic aspects of modern science, the point here is that the kind of faith Christianity requires seems to be that which questions the old, traditional dogmatic tenets stemming from our desire for security and peace—particularly, the kind of security and peace we seek. There is something atheistic about the kind of security and peace we seek—i.e., the thought that there is no God who will take care of us, but we have to labor with whatever we have for now. We will choose an earthly bread in front of our eyes right now over the promise of the heavenly bread (manna) tomorrow. And we have built institutions and systems ensuring the coalition (specialization) through which we can effectively produce breads (resources and services)—religion, law, industry, etc. All these institutions and systems are rooted in the contract, which is mythically upheld by our dogmatic loyalty to its *promise* to satisfy our hunger. The force of *Logos* was to break this wheel.

Can *we* bear the uncertainty and fear when Jesus comes to break *our* sense of security, peace, and happiness—the institutionalized concepts we have come to adopt and dogmatically value? This is a hard question. For we cannot escape our own concepts (our own skins!) insofar as we stay human. Our fallible nature as biological entities will force our hands to device systems and sign their contracts. In this space of causes, we have no free choice—we are no moral agents, but animals of instinct, or beasts. In what sense would the truth set us free? What kind of truth are we talking about? The last modernistic attempt by philosophers to guard the faith in truth (viz., logical positivism) has historically failed, and the post-modern notion of relativity (Nietzschean death of God) has been encroaching ever since. In the face of the unrestrained post-modern spirit of uncertainty, people seem to have hardened their dogmatic hearts even more (turning back from liberalism to religious doctrines, political partisanship, scientism, etc.). How should we conduct ourselves in such a “destitute time”?⁴ Unbeknownst to myself, am I already in my subconscious attempt to save myself from uncertainty, denying my faith as Peter did or joining the priests in accusing Jesus? That question bothers me, and—I urge—it should bother us all.

³ John 1:1

⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Bread and Wine.”

§ 4

a) The disciples had a wrong concept of Messiah.

In Luke 24:14-24, two of the disciples were walking out of Jerusalem on the third day after the crucifixion of Jesus and were met by resurrected Jesus whom they did not recognize. To the man (whom they did not know it was Jesus), the two disciples expressed their disappointment about Jesus. They described Jesus as “a Prophet powerful in work and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19) and said that they were “hoping that [Jesus] was the One who was about to redeem Israel [from the Roman Empire]” (Luke 24:21). Here, we can observe how the disciples were perceiving the figure of Jesus and, accordingly, what expectations they had of him. There was a mismatch between the people’s concept of Messiah (and expectation of what Jesus *as a messiah* was to do for them) and the fact about Messiah (and what Jesus *as a messiah* was to do).

There are at least two more instances in the Bible that record the mismatch. In John 11, Martha expresses disappointment to Jesus for not having come earlier to heal her brother Lazarus before his death. When Jesus tells her he is the resurrection and the life and asks her whether she believes that he is such a being, Martha answers to him that she believes him as the Son of God (Luke 11:25-27). Whereas the way Jesus works is through resurrection, Martha expected him to be a mighty deity that saves the day in the way *she* expected it. In Matthew 16, Jesus began telling his disciples about his future suffering, death, and resurrection. To this, Peter responded by expressing his wish (probably out of his love and good will for Jesus) that these things would not happen to Jesus. However, Jesus condemned Peter as Satan and a stumbling block. Here, the next lines are important. Jesus continues his condemnation by urging the disciples *not* to set their mind on the things of men, but of God, and deny themselves if they are to follow him. That is, there is a mismatch between Peter’s expectation and the fact about Jesus because his mind is set on the wrong set of things (i.e., his mind consists in wrong concepts). To follow Jesus, one must deny himself, i.e., the concepts that constitute his core beliefs.

In § 1, I emphasized the importance of concepts in cognition. Specifically, I followed the Kantian tradition in insisting that conceptual framework is, so to say, the channel through which we interact with facts. Conceptual framework functions as Fregean sense. That is, it is by the inferential patterns of concepts we recognize and identify objects and states of affairs in the world. If this is how our interaction with the world works, then wrong concepts lead us to wrong identifications (and therefore wrong expectations). The two disciples, Martha, and Peter all had wrong concepts about Messiah or what kind of figure Jesus was supposed to be. Consequently, they were misidentifying Jesus and developed misleading expectations. When their *beliefs* (about Jesus) were disproven, they became disappointed or frustrated.

One may attempt to avoid the mismatch by seeking to correct his concepts *from without*—as if there is some vantage point of view (sideways-on view) at which one can detach from his own conceptual framework and observe it *from outside*. However, it has been constantly pointed out by various philosophers that such a *view from nowhere* is an intellectualist myth. As Davidson

remarks, one cannot get out of his own skins to see whether his beliefs correspond with facts. All we have are our own concepts through which we perceive matters. One cannot see whether his eyes are functioning well by stepping out of his own vision. He always has to see through his own eyes (even when he is making inferences about his vision through various medical theories and equipment), and these eyes (perceptions, or conscious experiences) consist in concepts.

b) Knowing that Jesus is the Messiah is *not* enough.

In Luke 24:28, Jesus teaches theology to the two disciples by explaining to them how the Scriptures are about him. But it was not until later when Jesus sat with them at a table and gave them a piece of bread the two disciples recognized him as Jesus, *as whom the Scriptures were about*. Perhaps, Jesus' teaching of the Scriptures was his way of laying out the better conceptual framework for the disciples. So long as the disciples maintained their old framework, the new way of looking at the matters at hand was inaccessible. There was a need for Jesus to destroy the temple (Luke 21:5; John 2:19) and to split down the veil of the temple (Luke 23:45) that our outdated conceptual framework (or linguistic scheme) has become. Instead of leading us to facts (about God), old and dogmatic frameworks function as a barrier between us and the reality, as a stumbling block (Matt. 16:23). Clearing up the way was the prerequisite, but it was not enough. That is, having the right concepts or knowing the Scriptures—denying oneself—was not sufficient to complete the initiation of following Jesus.

Note: It is interesting how the two disciples described acquiring new concepts about the Messiah as the *burning of their heart*. Perhaps, there is a relationship among this sensation of concept acquisition, baptism in the Holy Spirit and Fire (Luke 3:16), and the annihilation of the temple. Also, the act of burning has to do with the Mosaic law of sacrifice. In Romans 7 and 8, Apostle Paul describes the law of *flesh*, i.e., of sin and death, as that which prevents us from conforming to the law of the Spirit of life, i.e., of God. In Kantian philosophy, concepts function as *rules* for cognition, as normative principles. There must be some underlying relationship among these ideas.

When Simon (before he was renamed as Peter) first met Jesus through Andrew (who heard about Jesus from John the Baptist), Jesus was introduced to Simon as the Messiah, or Christ (John 1:41). However, notice that merely hearing something about Jesus (or knowing that he is the Messiah) did not motivate Peter (Simon) to follow him. It was not until when Jesus visited the Sea of Galilee and Peter (chronologically) reencountered Jesus did Peter decide to follow him (Matt. 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11). The Bible does not describe the psychological changes that enabled the disciples to recognize Jesus or motivated Peter to follow Jesus. Respectively, in each incident, Jesus was breaking the bread to the disciples or telling Peter to put a fishing net into the ocean deeper. Was it due to a miracle (of catching a lot of fishes) Peter was convinced? I am not sure. Perhaps, the *point of a paradigm shift* is different for each individual—as each disciple (including Apostle Paul) has his own story of initiation. But the overarching theme is that the first phase had to do with some sort of cleansing of the conceptual framework and acquisition of

new concepts and the second phase had to do with some sort of paradigm shift that motivated each of them enough to recognize and follow Jesus.

Am I still in the process of destruction (infirmation of a misguided, old view), of reconstruction (acquisition of a new framework), or of paradigm shift (recognition of God)? Do I have faith or am I still atheistic? Am I currently believing in God? Or, is it still a wrong belief arising from a wrong conceptual framework (which dictates the content of experience)? I am not sure. But this is not for me to judge. Certainty is not part of the journey. I want certainty or assurance of faith only because I want security, peace, and authority. Every step in this wilderness towards the Land of Promise (not *of Certainty!*)—ever since I left Egypt (comfort in institutionalized myth) and crossed Red Sea (skepticism towards that myth)—has been full of uncertainty. And this uncertainty is what makes faith, neither knowledge nor experience, valuable. There is no way for me to assure my belief while in the Wilderness, and it was never meant to be assured.