

How Do We Know What We Know?

Pernik, Bulgaria, November 2003

Ivan¹ glanced up, a mix of affection and annoyance in his eyes. “*Az znam che nishto ne znam,*” he said. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

I nodded. *The only thing I know is that I don’t know anything.*

There was an uncomfortable silence. My companion and I sat in a small, dimly lit living room that smelled of musty carpet. We’d been visiting Ivan and his family for several weeks now, and the scene had become familiar. Ivan was perched on a worn brown armchair, leaning forward, while Sister Rodgers and I sank into the decades-old couch opposite him. Half-eaten drugstore cookies lay crumbling on the card table between us, emblems of his humble hospitality: he didn’t have much, but what he had he shared with us. I fiddled with the black nametag on the jacket in my lap, tracing the grooves that spelled “SESTRA ACKERMAN” phonetically in Cyrillic characters.

Rodgers, a lean and stylish ballet dancer from Utah County, raised her voice. “But we *know* the Book of Mormon is true,” she said in broken Bulgarian.

Ivan scoffed, his stocky frame rumbling. “You can’t know anything of the kind!” he said. Beneath his brusque exterior, I could tell he relished our debates.

“Yes we can!” Rodgers said. “By the power of the Holy Ghost we can know the truth of all things!”

She looked to me for backup, so I dutifully agreed. “The scriptures promise that,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

¹ In this and future instances in my personal narrative, most names have been changed and some identifying details obscured. Occasionally, I have compressed or otherwise altered specific details for narrative purposes, but the substance of the experiences and their impact remain true.

But Ivan's words, *az znam che nishto ne znam*, hung heavy in my chest. Over the years, I'd play them back. After I returned from my mission and dared to face all the questions I'd pushed out of my mind for years, I'd hear them in Bulgarian and English, in Ivan's voice and mine. *Az znam che nishto ne znam. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything.*

And the thought that would inevitably follow: *How does anyone know what they know?*

It became a matter of urgent importance, the difference between hope and despair, belonging and oblivion. *What is true, and how can I know it?* The irony that *this* was the question that plagued me, the same question that drove Joseph Smith into the woods to pray on that early spring morning in 1820, was not lost on me. I half hoped for a vision like Joseph's just for good measure, for God to unfurl the heavens and appear in a white-hot blaze of glory, but I was sensible enough to know I didn't have the stomach for anything so dramatic. And so Ivan's words played on repeat, a track skipping. *Az znam che nishto ne znam. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything.*

Mormon epistemology is premised upon the notion that truth is discerned by *feeling*. It works like this: you bring God a yes/no question and God will answer through spiritual witness, like a Magic 8 Ball. If the answer is yes, you'll experience a burning in the bosom--a warm, calming glow that spreads from your heart to your fingers and toes. If the answer is *no*, you'll experience a stupor of thought--confusion, darkness, fear.

The practice comes from a passage toward the end of the Book of Mormon that promises clarity to all who read it: "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:3-4). As missionaries we were taught to encourage investigators to pray and report their experiences back to us. If they felt warm or peaceful, we'd

interpret the meaning for them. “That’s the Holy Ghost testifying that the Book of Mormon is true,” we’d say. Then we’d drive them toward conversion: if the Book of Mormon is true, that means it’s an ancient document depicting real events, which means Joseph Smith was a real prophet, which means the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true and living church upon the face of the earth with which the Lord is well-pleased. Will you be baptized this Saturday?

And it worked for more than just deciding whether to join the Mormon church. Using this formula, you could gain insight into whatever troubled you. Should you major in English? Ask God, and wait for the burning in the bosom. Was your boyfriend *the one*? Ask God, and wait for the burning in the bosom. Were you worthy to enter the temple? Ask God, and wait for the burning in the bosom. Any question could be whittled down to a yes/no proposition and brought before the Lord for an answer, for human beings are children of God, entitled to personal revelation.

Most of my family and friends extolled the simplicity of the process, but I experienced it as agonizingly vague. How did I know what my feelings were really telling me? Was that a burning in the bosom, or was it heartburn? Was it joy, or was it self-deception? Did my constant confusion, the doubt that pounded like a drum between my ears, mean that nothing whatsoever was true, or that I was hopelessly and irredeemably flawed?

And what of conflicting answers? From its inception, Mormonism has struggled to reconcile its inventive theological impulses with a notion of divinely inspired leaders who have authority over everything, even scripture. With the aid of Sidney Rigdon, a fiery Campbellite preacher who played a significant role in shaping early Mormon thought, Joseph Smith threw convention aside in his ambitious project to “restore” the kingdom of God. Together Smith and Rigdon revised the Bible, published new revelations, even invented their own monetary currency. Smith, the more magnetic of the two, experimented with polyamory. There was a

wildness about early Mormonism, a radical edge that cut against the boundaries of 19th century American society--and frequently ruptured them.

It should come as no surprise that early Mormon spirituality was deeply charismatic. While this was not unusual in the birthplace of Mormonism, a pocket of 19th century New England known as the "burned-over district" for its zealous revivalism, converts to the new movement saw visions, spoke in tongues, and prophesied. They dabbled in folk magic, blending the occultic arts with emerging Mormon theology. But the intensity came at a cost: many burned out as quickly as they blew in. Within just a few years even some of the founding members had become disenfranchised with Smith's reckless leadership and left to find or form new religious communities.

Thus, the paradox of Mormonism is that it is precisely its radicality that tempered it. Mormon experimentation created chaos, so a streak of authoritarianism evolved to contain it. Over the years, Smith's stories of heavenly manifestations grew more grandiose in a bid to maintain control. In 1832 he claimed to have received a theophany of Jesus, forgiving him his sins; a decade later he claimed it was a vision of both God the Father and Jesus Christ, commanding him to form a new church. At its founding in 1830 the polity of the church was horizontal; by the 1840s a complex priesthood structure had emerged and the hierarchy was imbued with total authority.

Ecclesial control was only the beginning. By the time he was assassinated in an Illinois jail in 1844, Smith had been elected mayor of Nauvoo, IL; served as general of the militia; formed a secret police force; launched a presidential campaign; and crowned himself king of the world. Brigham Young, Smith's successor, built upon these authoritarian strains to establish a theocratic government in the isolation of the Great Basin, a move that would forever shape the landscape of the American west. The wild, charismatic impulses of Mormon spirituality became hedged by the authority of Mormon leadership.

While the overt political power² of Mormon leaders has faded over the past century or so, a formidable hierarchy survives. The tension between the promise of personal revelation and the claims of institutional authority remains a defining feature of the Mormon experience. One's spiritual promptings are valid only within the bounds of Mormon orthodoxy, which is wholly defined by the men in charge. Thus, the burning in the bosom can confirm the truthfulness of the leaders' words, but if you receive a different answer from what they're saying, *you* are the problem, not the church. This teaching is exemplified in the words of Henry Eyring, a member of the quorum of the twelve apostles (the church's highest governing body) in a recent address to students at Brigham Young University - Idaho:

"Whenever I am tempted to doubt the Church or any of its leaders, past or present, I need only to reevaluate my own spiritual state. I ask myself the question, 'Am I true?' ... There is always some weakness I can identify, some failure requiring repentance. ... Assume that the Church is true, notwithstanding the human frailties of its members and leaders. Then look for at least one way in which you are not being true to the teachings of the Church. ... [As this happens] you can once again prove the truthfulness of the Church."³

For years I'd accepted this notion without question, that the place to turn with doubts is inward rather than outward, that a spiritual prompting that leads to disagreement with the Brethren⁴ is a personal failing or even a manifestation of Satan. Evidence isn't evidence, but a trick: as my aunt explained to me once, the burning in the bosom confirms the truthfulness of

² Mormons remain a formidable voting bloc in the United States and the Mormon church maintains significant informal influence over the Utah State legislature. However, Mormon leaders no longer occupy ecclesial and civil positions of power simultaneously.

³ See here: <https://www.lds.org/church/news/overcome-your-doubts-with-study-and-repentance-byu-idaho-president-says?lang=eng>

⁴ "The Brethren" is a common term for the Mormon leadership in Mormon culture.

the scriptures, which report a 6,000-year-old earth, therefore Heavenly Father planted dinosaur bones deep in the layers of rock as a trial of faith and devotion. Will we believe men, or will we believe God? Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

But now I didn't know what to believe. As agonizing as it was to assume that *I* was the problem, at least I knew where to place the blame. But what if my doubt wasn't the result of personal unworthiness? What if the church was as flawed as I was? The thought terrified me, yet beyond the terror lay hope, a barely discernible edge, glinting sharp. I knew what the thought might cost me: my faith, my family, the community to which I'd always belonged. Yet somehow I knew that a discovery might be waiting there, too: myself, my freedom, and most importantly, God.

It was almost unthinkable. To lose everything for something I could barely imagine. Could the exchange possibly be worth it?

Salt Lake City, Utah, June 2012

I picked at my rice and chicken kabob, beads of sweat forming around my temples in the summer heat. The air was unusually sticky for the desert. About fifteen of us crowded around a long table in the private dining room of a rundown Greek restaurant off State Street, chosen no doubt for its low profile and drawn curtains. Not everyone could afford to be seen here. Habitually, I took stock of the beverage selections around the table: some had Sprite, some Coke, and some more daring, more far-gone, stirred cream and sugar into steaming mugs of coffee.⁵ I sipped my water self-consciously. Why did what I drank with my lunch have to be so laden with meaning?

We went around the table and introduced ourselves, first names only. Craig. Gary. Rachel. Sarah. Joe. When it was my turn, I felt like I was blinking into a spotlight. "Katie," I said,

⁵ Coffee and black tea are forbidden by the Word of Wisdom, the Mormon health code. Inexplicably, other caffeinated beverages are okay.

“just hoping to meet people who understand what it’s like not to know anymore.” A few of the others nodded with recognition. I turned to the man next to me and made small-talk. He was from Sandy, a BYU grad, stay-at-home father, struggling with the church’s gender roles. Me? From Logan, married in the temple, one kid, this is my tribe but I’m not sure what to do because I don’t believe it anymore. It was strange, the sudden intimacy between us. I wondered if our conversation was appropriate. I couldn’t remember his name, yet I shared more candidly with him than I did with almost anyone in my life. The realization jolted me, and I raised my guard. I wasn’t attracted to him, but you could never be too careful.

Across the table two men engaged in an animated discussion. They were charismatic, forceful, and soon everyone stopped to listen. I noted with jealousy their effortless confidence, characteristic of many Mormon men who have climbed the ranks of leadership--what I’ve since come to see as an unchallenged certainty that the world exists for them, that they can bend it to their whims. They are meant to be gods, after all. You can lose the substance of your belief system, but the way it’s formed you remains embedded in your body, like muscle memory. The same was true for me. As soon as they spoke, I knew my role. This was a support group for questioning Mormons, but the rules were the same. I was only there to listen.

One of the men in his 30’s, handsome and impeccably groomed, raised his voice in anger. He described an encounter he’d had with his stake president,⁶ who had expressed dismay over the man’s apostasy. “I told him it was all bullshit,” he said. Others around the table murmured their approval. “I told him I could *prove* to him that the Book of Mormon came out of the drugged-up mind of Joseph Smith and has the credibility of a fucking fantasy novel.”

Perhaps it wasn’t fair, but in an instant I knew him. I saw scenes from his life like a film montage. There he was on his mission, serving as Assistant to the President,⁷ chiding the

⁶ A stake president is the leader of a large geographical area comprised of several local congregations; it is roughly the equivalent of a Roman Catholic or Lutheran bishop.

⁷ The top leadership position for full-time missionaries.

missionaries who disobeyed the rules and bearing witness to the reality of the gold plates. Next he was an elders quorum president,⁸ pushing his men to a perfect home teaching score.⁹ Then a counselor in the bishopric,¹⁰ reviewing the records of members who were no longer temple worthy, and using their thinly veiled identities as warning illustrations in talks and lessons. There was no difference between the man he'd been and the man he was now, except the content of his beliefs. He went from certainty to certainty, from righteous rage to righteous rage. He had questioned everything, yet nothing had changed. I couldn't even fathom what that might feel like.

After lunch, I stepped into the afternoon sun. I knew I wouldn't be back. I wasn't interested in moving from one rigid dogma to another. It felt to me that something much more elemental was at stake, as if the ground on which I stood wasn't actually ground at all, but layers of compacted sand that had begun to soften and give way. There was something beneath it, something solid, at least I hoped so, but I understood instinctively that this wasn't the way to find it.

I unlocked the car and turned the key in the ignition, the familiar refrain humming as the engine whirred to life.

Az znam che nishto ne znam. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything.

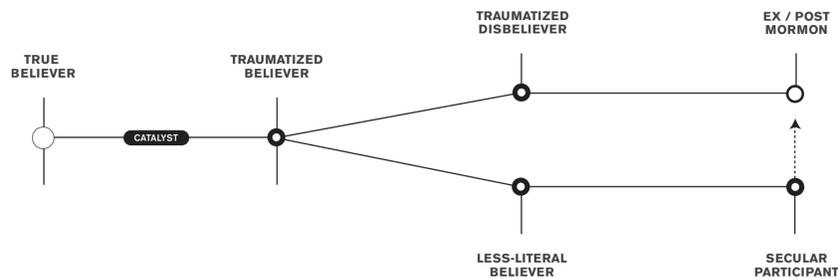
If Mormon epistemology is premised upon the notion that truth is discerned by feeling, ex-Mormon epistemology is premised upon the opposite extreme. Researchers who have

⁸ The elders quorum is the organization for men over the age of 18 in the Mormon church. Each congregation has an elders quorum and one man from the quorum is assigned to serve as its president.

⁹ Home teaching is a now-defunct program in Mormonism where men in the congregation were assigned families to visit and share a short spiritual lesson. Every family was supposed to receive a visit once a month, and statistics were tracked to ensure compliance.

¹⁰ In the Mormon church, the volunteer pastor of each congregation is called the bishop. The bishop selects two men from the congregation to serve as his "counselors." The three of them together comprise the bishopric.

studied the rising prevalence of disaffection in Mormonism,¹¹ commonly referred to as a “faith crisis” or “faith transition” in marginalized Mormon communities, have noted a typical pattern among Mormons who question their faith. A catalyst, such as encountering information that doesn’t align with the church’s official narrative or talking with a loved one who is experiencing a faith crisis, leads a believing Mormon to scrutinize Mormon teaching and history more critically. As they uncover additional challenging information, they enter what researchers have called the “traumatized believer” stage.



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From there, they might become either a “traumatized disbeliever” on their way out of the church, or a “less literal believer” on their way to ongoing activity as a “secular participant” in the church. The latter is a largely uncomfortable stage that tends to be chosen as a strategy to reduce strain in family relationships, and still leads many to end their participation eventually. A devastating sense of betrayal characterizes the transition from true believer to traumatized believer,¹³ which lingers throughout the subsequent stages regardless of the person’s trajectory. For a majority, this leads to a loss of faith entirely: fifty-three percent of Mormons who have experienced a faith

¹¹ One of the challenges of the disaffected/post-Mormon space is that work is sometimes produced anonymously due to the possibility of social and political fallout. My understanding is that the report referenced in this section was created by Greg Prince, a Mormon historian and scholar, and Travis Stratford, a marketing executive on the board of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and based on the research of John Dehlin, an excommunicated Mormon with a PhD in psychology (see here: https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/9sgh3k/release_of_report_chronicles_and_presentation_on/). However, the report itself does not name any authors.

¹² This graph is taken from the anonymous report.

¹³ Anonymous report, 31

crisis describe themselves as agnostic, atheist, or humanist; only eleven percent identify as Christians.¹⁴

One survey respondent, a woman in her thirties, described her experience this way: “After researching Book of Abraham¹⁵ issues in an attempt to resolve some concerns of a family member, I quickly realized from reviewing the topical index at fairlds.org¹⁶ that there was much in the history that I did not know. As a result, I decided for the first time in my life to examine the church objectively through the lens of logic and critical thinking. None of my supernatural beliefs survived that examination.”¹⁷

Such a response is typical of traumatized Mormons who become atheists. Mormon rhetoric routinely creates an extreme dualism: either it’s all true, as confirmed by the burning of the bosom, or it’s all false.¹⁸ Thus, when the accumulation of competing evidence outweighs the emotional experiences that have served as the bedrock of faith, everything collapses. The former believer no longer trusts spiritual experience as a valid means of discerning truth; only what can be scientifically verified remains within the realm of possibility.¹⁹

This trend is not exclusive to Mormons. Many contemporary non-theists espouse an exclusive reliance on empiricism. A prominent example of this perspective is New Atheism, an intellectual movement more popular than academic in nature, based on the writings of Sam

¹⁴ John Dehlin, “Understanding Mormon Disbelief: Why do some Mormons lose their testimony, and what happens to them when they do?” <http://www.whymormonsquestion.org/survey-results/>, 7

¹⁵ The Book of Abraham is a text by Joseph Smith that Smith claimed was written by the hand of Abraham himself and that Smith translated from an Egyptian papyrus. The papyrus was lost for several decades, but when it resurfaced in the 1970’s, it was found to be a common funerary document that had nothing whatsoever to do with Abraham.

¹⁶ A website for Mormon apologetics.

¹⁷ Anonymous report, 57

¹⁸ For example, Mormon president Gordon Hinckley famously said in an interview with PBS: “Well, it’s either true or false. If it’s false, we’re engaged in a great fraud. If it’s true, it’s the most important thing in the world. Now, that’s the whole picture. It is either right or wrong, true or false, fraudulent or true.” <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/hinckley.html>

¹⁹ For example, this comment from a respondent: “The Bible and Book of Mormon cannot be ‘correlated’ with logic and science. The flood never happened. Adam was not the first man. Evolution is a near-certain fact. The tower of babel never happened (and therefore, the Jaredites are fictional as well). Abraham and Moses are mythical figures (possibly real people, but made into myths through folktales.” Dehlin 14

Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. The New Atheists argue that “a belief can be epistemically justified only if it is based on adequate evidence”--and that no such evidence exists to support faith in God.²⁰ Beyond merely critiquing belief in supernatural forces, they propose a secular morality grounded in the “transcendent value of justice” or human consensus around right and wrong, as part of their efforts to create a viable alternative to religion.²¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many post-Mormons are drawn to New Atheism as a replacement for their faith. It provides an epistemology that feels more reliable, more resonant with their own experiences, as it is through the critical examination of evidence that they’ve come to see Mormonism’s truth claims as untenable. Likewise, its approach to secular morality provides important structure for ethical reasoning, as it is not uncommon for a traumatized Mormon’s moral framework to collapse along with their belief. Though I’m not aware of specific research indicating as much, my anecdotal observation is that post-Mormons who adopt atheism do so as a kind of protection against future deception. It’s as if they’re saying, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.”

As a post-Mormon and a minister, I have tremendous empathy for this impulse. I would be lying if I didn’t confess that I have stared into the possibility of atheism and wondered if it isn’t a more reasonable and less potentially harmful way to approach the world. At the same time, I am compelled by critiques of an epistemology that relies on verifiability and repeatability as the only tools for defining reality, such as this one from Moltmann:

“The methods for acquiring verifiable and repeatable knowledge must always and everywhere be the same. Experiences that are fortuitous, unique, unrepeatable, and for which there is no warranty are no longer perceived at all; they are filtered out. ... The abundant wealth of life and experience is stifled through the eternal return of the same

²⁰ See <https://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>

²¹ Ibid.

thing in the mechanism of rational demonstrability. The controllable verifiability of experiences is a gain bought at the price of a desolate erosion of life. The construction of the world according to the ideas of geometry means its complete loss of sensuousness.”²²

Moltmann goes on to argue that “scientific and technological domination of nature has destroyed as much of nature as it has made accessible,” citing human-caused environmental crises that have devastated the planet, and concludes that humanity’s tendencies toward destruction mean that we must not uncritically adopt the ideology of the modern world.²³

The problem, of course, with both Mormon and ex-Mormon epistemology is that both seek certainty where none is possible--the Mormon through subjective experience and the ex-Mormon through empirical scientism.²⁴ But if both are inadequate as epistemic frames, what might be a more fruitful way to understand truth and make sense of the world? It’s a huge question, seemingly impossible, but I began to find some resources in a surprising place: Christian orthodoxy.

Raleigh, North Carolina, April 2017

I retreated to a stone bench beneath the cover of aspen trees, shaking. Across the park, a dirt trail wide enough for two traced the perimeter of a small, placid lake that reflected the overcast sky. My mother and three-year-old daughter, Miriam, stayed near the pier, slurping vitamin shakes Mom had insisted on buying from a health food place she called her Cheers-- “because everyone knows me there,” she’d explained. I put my own shake on the ground at my feet, the cup perspiring, its contents untouched. Panicking, I attempted to slow my breathing, *in*

²² Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 30

²³ *Ibid.*, 31

²⁴ See <http://www.hormonesmatter.com/science-versus-sciencism/>

and out, in and out, while I fought back tears that spilled out from the corners of my eyes in defiance of my efforts.

I wasn't sure why all this was coming up now, when it was hardly convenient; Miriam and I had traveled from Saint Paul to Raleigh to visit my family over spring break, and I didn't need another existential crisis. I especially didn't need one here, in plain sight of my parents, where Dad would attribute it to my rejection of Mormonism and Mom would fret dutifully over my wellbeing. But here I was, trying to catch my thoughts before they outran me, searching for something to slow the trickle of dread seeping into my gut.

As I wept I caught flashes of clarity, like sunlight reflecting off distant glass. It wasn't difficult to identify the source of my distress: I felt unworthy--of everything. My family, my friendships, my calling to ministry, they hung as if suspended in mid-air. Nothing kept them tethered to me, at least that I could see, and I feared that one day I'd look up to discover that they'd floated on to someone else, someone more deserving. On their own, these thoughts weren't new; I'd struggled with obsessive doubts for as long as I could remember, even had the diagnosis to prove it. But before, I'd known how to keep my arms tight around everything I couldn't bear to lose: Think the right thoughts. Follow the rules. Now, suddenly, that wasn't working.

It had been three years since I'd considered myself Mormon in any meaningful way, but Mormonism, as my friend Joanna says, doesn't wash off easily. Over the past decade, I had deconstructed and reconstructed my worldview several times over--except for this last piece, the most deeply embedded one--the one that said I could never be safe without external assurance. To be sure, the thoughts I was to think and the rules I was to follow had changed along with my perspectives, but I never questioned that I needed them. Of course I needed them, like water, like air; the molecules of my body ached for them. I was conditioned to search for them through years of training. *Whenever I am tempted to doubt, I must ask myself if I am true, if I am worthy. There is always some weakness, some failing I can identify. Am I true? Am I*

worthy? How can I know? Az znam che nishto ne znam. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything.

I'm not sure what drove me to pray that afternoon. Since leaving Mormonism, I'd kept God at arm's length. God, the ultimate arbiter of worthiness, the one who could never be satisfied, who made these demands on my thoughts and my life that I craved like a drug and hated for their burden. Yes, I needed them and I hated them and I hated God for making them, and still I prayed that afternoon--without words, without thoughts, as if praying were the only possibility, as if I couldn't have stopped if I'd tried. I prayed through my grief and my rage--for the community I'd lost, the family I'd disappointed, the mistakes I'd made, the betrayal I'd endured. I prayed for vengeance and for mercy. Most of all, I prayed for my people, who will always be my home no matter the distance between us, who raised me and rejected me, held me and hurt me. My prayer was a paradox, like them: *God, never make me go back there and God, make them a place where I'd love to go back.*

I looked up and saw my mother and daughter watching me from several yards away. "Are you okay?" Mom asked.

"No," I said.

Theologian Sarah Coakley says that God is found in *lack*²⁵--in the tugging, gnawing emptiness of human experience and the propulsion towards union that accompanies it. For it is in emptiness that we feel desire, and in desire that we come to understand that to be human is to be related.²⁶ Love, justice, self-giving: everything we regard as the highest expressions of human virtue are manifestations of our fundamental relatedness. By the same token, our worst

²⁵ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and The Self: An Essay On the Trinity*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59

impulses of control, unfairness, and abuse are evil precisely because they neglect the reality of our interconnection.

For Coakley, this is a clue not just of what it means to be human, but of humanity's ultimate source. She argues that desire is "an ontological category belonging primarily to God."²⁷ In other words, desire is inherent to God's nature; God is a being who desires. While God's desire is perfectly fulfilled in the love God has for all creation and within God's own self, as humans created in God's image, we catch only fragmented glimpses. Unlike God, who is characterized by fullness, our experiences of desire are characterized by absence. Still, however dim and distorted these glimpses may be, they are reminders of the One who created us.

C.S. Lewis observed something similar. In the autobiography of his conversion, Lewis, who was an atheist for many years, describes a lifelong search for what he calls "Joy"--a fleeting sense of longing he could neither capture nor control, but that he had experienced, quite unexpectedly, at various times: in the flash of a childhood memory, while reading *Squirrel Nutkin*, in Longfellow's poetry.²⁸ He pursued Joy his entire life, only to discover that the moment he tried to pin it down was the moment it dissipated. Joy could not be held or even contemplated, for as soon as it came all it left was shadow, "not the wave but the wave's imprint on the sand."²⁹ Lewis described Joy as "that sharp, wonderful Stab of Longing. ... It dashes in with the agility of a hummingbird claiming its nectar from the flower, and then zips away. It pricks, then vanishes, leaving a wake of mystery and longing behind it."³⁰

Like Coakley, Lewis discovered that longing itself is a clue--not a certainty, by definition neither observable nor repeatable--but a tantalizing impression of what lies beyond ourselves.

²⁷ Ibid., 10

²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 16

²⁹ Lewis, *Joy*, 219

³⁰ Lewis, *Shadowlands and Songs of Light*, quote found here: <https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/3253-c-s-lewis-joy/day/1>

For “desire is turned not to itself but to its object.”³¹ That is to say, when we desire, we desire *something* or *someone*, and the quality of the object determines the quality of the desire. It is the object that makes the desire “harsh or sweet, coarse or choice, ‘high’ or ‘low.’”³² And so Lewis, who pursued Joy relentlessly only to discover that Joy itself is desire for something *beyond* Joy, was forced to ask what that might be. The answer shocked him:

“Inexorably Joy proclaimed, ‘You want--I myself am your want of something other, outside, not you nor any state of you’. ... We yearn...for that unity which we can never reach except by ceasing to be the separate phenomenal beings called ‘we.’ ...[We ache] for that impossible reunion which would annihilate us.”³³

It is important to note that this is not mere theory. It is lived out in the complexities of daily life. Our entire economy functions on the stoking, and soothing, of desire: for wealth, for status, for distraction, for meaning, for belonging, for food, for sex. But because these objects are ephemeral, our desire remains unsatiated. Our landfills overflow with the remnants of our excess; our browsers hold incalculable stores of sexual fantasies on demand. But the quality of Joy--of desire rightly directed--can only be satisfied in what is ultimately real: the One Who Is and Who Will Be. Only such a Being could stir such desire in the first place.

Thus, when we consider the question of epistemology--how we know what we know--we must not begin with a goal of certainty, but with acceptance of its opposite: emptiness, longing, not-knowing. Here, and only here, can we begin to wonder at reality. Here, and only here, can the prick of desire draw us into the mystery of all that is. The beginning of knowledge is admitting that we can never know, not fully, and allowing that truth to bring us ever more deeply into relationship with God. Knowledge is not an end-point but a beginning; not a container but a clue, an adventure, a dance.

³¹ Lewis, *Joy*, 220

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 221-222

There is one more thing to mention. Prayer is at the heart of all this, the action of knowledge-as-not-knowing, the fruit of this hypothesis lived out. I never understood this until that day in the park when the prayer poured out of me almost against my will. In that moment I began to sense that there is more to reality than I had realized, something deeper than my own imagination, something beyond me that yearned to be connected to me despite the barriers I'd constructed.

I grew up with a formulaic notion of prayer. Step one, address Heavenly Father; step two, thank him; step three, ask him for blessings; step four, close in Jesus' name. But prayer, I've come to learn, is as much a mystery as God is. To pray is to acknowledge that there are depths of experience inaccessible through the senses, yet altogether real; to offer up what we think we know on the altar of what truly is, even when the disparity might shatter us. It is willingness to be shattered. Prayer is surrender in the face of the sublime: I am weak. I am stardust. There is more than I can comprehend.

In Romans 8 there's a haunting line. *We do not know how to pray as we ought*. It's why our prayers, if we bother to say them, so often resemble a checklist of wants. We think we can be satisfied with burning bosoms, scientific proof, possessions, and power, but that's impossible. True prayer is not ours; it can't be. Since it connects us to the object of our ultimate desire--God--it belongs to God alone, for God is not ours to control or possess. God simply *is*, desiring us and drawing us into desire, and the result of that reciprocal longing is prayer. In a very profound sense, we are not the ones who pray, but God prays in us, interceding for us, forging the union we've craved but are powerless to capture. As Paul puts it, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, *for we do not know how to pray as we ought*, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26, emphasis added).

Paul goes on to compare all this to labor pains, to inward groaning while we wait. For what exactly are we waiting? We'll explore that in subsequent sections, but for now it's enough

to say that everything we've been discussing--the not-knowing, the longing, and the prayer that emerges out of it--brings us to the precipice of mystery but does not leave us in utter darkness. It culminates, unexpectedly, in hope. Just as a laboring mother hopes for new life amidst the pressure of its coming, so we are brought to hope for something we can neither know nor see, even as we travail in shadows.

Does it seem absurd? It is. It's a fool's bargain, to exchange what is known for what is unknowable. But though not sensible, I expect it's all we can do, all we are ultimately capable of--to rest in eager longing for that which is startling, mysterious, and real. It sounds tantalizing, perhaps, but is it true? Who can know for sure? And if we knew, would it even be hope? *Az znam che nishto ne znam. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything.*