

Love and Doubt: the Central Truth of Existence

I've been working for a long time to arrive at the central truth of my existence.

In search of answers I've read extensively the works of mystics, saints, sages and great teachers from a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. I've read New Age books and talked to psychics and healers. I've studied philosophy in an academic context, and theology in a private one.

I've read various texts from psychology and psychotherapy, undergone counselling and hypnosis, examined my quest from the point of view of mental illness and personality disorders. I've tried Yoga, Qigong, martial arts, reiki, and various forms of meditation and prayer.

And through all this I've spent more than eighteen years analysing, questioning, struggling and striving, tying myself in knots and trying to untie them again.

What have I learned?

Some parameters

I've learned that the pursuit of some truths is *unhelpful*.

It eventually became clear to me that my path was different from most other people I know. It took longer still for me to stop apologising for this.

Part of me – both for intellectual reasons and for personal ones – has sought to *universalise* my conclusions. If, for example, I had the thought that “all wealth comes from God”, I would immediately think of counter-examples: drug-dealers, pimps, exploitative corporations and businesses, where clearly people are making money from the exploitation and harm of

others.

Is their wealth "from God"?

Well, even asking the question is departing from my original intent. I want to get to the central truth of my existence, *not* come up with a universalisable moral theology of economics. The counter-examples my mind produces are not a part of my experience.

To even consider them in this context is to set up obstacles to what is clearly a more faithful and God-centred view: that all wealth comes from God.

In other words, you can always find excuses to shake your faith and trust in God and in love. You can always find reasons to doubt.

So I took from philosophy a parameter that we could call subjectivism, so long as we don't get distracted by the broader (and decreasingly relevant) context of that term in philosophy.

Subjectivism

Subjectivism in the context of my search for truth means that I am not going to accept at face value the things that are not a part of my experience.

Many bad things happen in the world, don't they? But in *my* experience, these global events are just news reports. I'm not looking to call God to account for earthquakes and wars on the other side of the world, I'm looking to call Him to account for my own *subjective* sense of something wrong in my life, and my experience.

Charity begins at home, or as John Wyclif apparently put it in the 14th Century: Charite schuld bigyne at hem-self.

What I'm looking for is the truth of *my* existence, and

searching for objections in *what I have heard* from others' experiences is an unnecessary constraint on finding answers.

Because there are answers I will find that defy the worldly view, and it would be ridiculous to turn to the world to confirm or repudiate answers I've sought from God, when the whole point of these answers is that the world could not provide them!

Nothing is impossible for God.

Over time I've become aware that my experience is profoundly shaped by my own beliefs, choices, and emotional states. I might be conscious of real, insurmountable limitations and obstacles in the world, and yet those limitations and obstacles have simply evaporated as my belief in them, or my underlying emotional state, has changed.

Like the previous parameter, this often emerges as a conflict between faith and doubt. Love may point in directions that the world or our own experience say is impossible, implausible, or even undesirable. It helps to remember that the limitations and obstacles presented by the world or our past or current experience are at least shaped by, and sometimes wholly constructed from our beliefs and emotions.

This can be as simple as a depressed or anxious person projecting their own negative thoughts onto others, and anticipating social rejection. Or it can be as profound as admitting that the whole of space and time is known to me only as a series of impressions, and that all existence and all consciousness emanates from, and participates in, the being we call God.

God could repair the world, or end it at any moment. Don't talk about what is and is not possible based on the limitations of your own experience, when our own existence is barely distinguishable from a dream.

Love makes room for itself.

The obstacles and limitations that present themselves in the face of love are not substantial. They subsist foremost in our own doubts and fears, and the corresponding beliefs. They are only as consequential as we allow them to be.

Hence we can choose love over doubt, trusting that the conditions that seem to validate doubt will disappear or be resolved or somehow overcome through love itself.

Otherwise we are caught in an absurd situation, with love or hope that can't be reconciled with "the world" or our own experience, precisely when what we yearn for, and what brings us true fulfillment, must necessarily repudiate the limitations and obstacles coming from the world.

So with all these parameters in mind, I've found that my experience of suffering arises because of complex sets of beliefs and emotions in my own mind, which both shape my experience and are reinforced by it.

If I want to know why my experience feels always *insufficient* for happiness, then I only need to look at the fears, doubts, and sense of insufficiency in myself.

How do I feel about life, about myself, and about the world?

It turns out that my whole psyche is packed full of conflicted and negative beliefs and emotions.

But by tracing those chains of cause-and-effect backwards, I've come at last to the fundamental choice from which all the subsequent flawed efforts stem.

The fundamental choice is a choice between love and doubt.

I describe it as doubt rather than fear, because doubt is much more insidious and plausible. Yet doubt originally meant fear or dread anyway. It comes from the same root as "two", and

implies duality, double-ness, and the uncertainty evoked by suddenly having two alternatives to consider.

Recapitulating the fall

Again without seeking a comprehensive theological framework: our original, fundamental choice between love and doubt reflects and recapitulates the fall of man in the garden of Eden.

In essence, human beings were at one with God and in paradise. Yet the serpent tempted them *to doubt*.

In Genesis 3, the serpent essentially casts doubt on God's command not to eat from the tree of knowledge, and defies God's justification of the command. He presents to Eve, and by proxy to Adam, an alternative option, an option in which God – who is Love itself – has ulterior motives.

And from that moment erupts human suffering with temptation, blame-shifting, and fear dominating the human experience.

This doubt arises in our own lives continually. We have continual opportunities to choose between doubt and love. Yet for most of us the original doubt has grown and developed into a convoluted web of subordinate doubts, fears, temptations, and other psychological maneuvers, all designed to help us avoid, overcome, or shift the suffering that arose from that original doubt.

The original doubt would have been reflected back to us as it shaped our experience. In a vicious circle, our experience would have seemed to vindicate the doubt, in much the same way that a self-conscious, anxious person may act in ways that elicit negative attention from others.

The experience of doubt is painful, since it would have seemed to nullify or render hollow the prior experience of love, just as the serpent cast doubt on the goodness of God's motives in

commanding the first humans not to touch the tree of knowledge.

To escape this pain, what can we do? Well, we can blame other people for our suffering. Or we can blame ourselves for our suffering. Either option gives us a sense that maybe we can regain the love we lost when we entertained doubt.

But both are false. And both elicit a chain of psychological “moves” that attempt to shift the pain around in the vain hope of eventually removing it.

If you blame yourself for your suffering, then yes you have the hope of changing and redeeming yourself, but you also experience an additional pain of self-blame and recrimination.

And now you must pursue self-improvement and redemption.

It is no coincidence that such a central theme of Christianity is the insufficiency of our efforts to redeem ourselves, and the depiction of Christ’s death on the cross as the one true and eternal sacrifice for our redemption.

I’ve never appreciated the idea that God *required* a sacrifice, rather it is we who needed to know that our attempts at redemption would never succeed.

We can’t go forward from doubt into love. We need to go back to the original choice, to our own choice and repudiate doubt at the most basic level. That’s why the centrality of God’s love is the *most* prominent theme in Christianity.

If you choose doubt, no amount of love can overcome it. If you choose love, no trace of doubt can shake you.

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