

Certainty and Heresy | BY HOLLIBERT PHILLIPS

I was motivated to write this piece because of my very deep concern over the public proscribing and targeting of certain ones in the Seventh-day Adventist community by some among us who think they've, so to say, "got it" doctrinally right, whereas the targeted individuals and, *a fortiori*, those among us who see things as they do, have "got it" doctrinally wrong. This is a matter of enormous moment to all thinking and thoughtful members of the faith we not only now hold, but have long held, dear.

To assist in showing what really is at stake, I am approaching this awful situation via a number of crucial distinctions. I begin by framing the central issue in terms of the notion of certainty and some of what that term entails. I justify this approach on the grounds that on a matter of this magnitude, things can't or shouldn't be rushed; a little studied patience and systematic scrutiny are essential.

I, therefore, regretfully issue the following caveat: those who delight in quick and comforting answers, those who are content with unexamined pious platitudes, and convenient, knock-you-flat quotations, need not read any farther.

Certainty can take many forms, and those forms must not be confused. Indeed, we can and do wreak unspeakable havoc if, whether through sheer ignorance or inattention, we fail to observe the distinctions in our everyday lives. In religion, as in politics—arguably more so in religion—this failure can be devastating. As much as possible, therefore, we need to know what undergirds the ideas and claims we regard as worthy of our assent. This is part of what it means to live sensibly and wisely.

Briefly in what follows, I distinguish between three types of certainty: logical certainty, psychological certainty, and epistemic certainty—fairly standard distinctions. As with many other distinctions, some degree of overlap is to be expected.

I begin with logical certainty. That which is logically

certain leaves no room whatever for rational doubt. Because of its nature, that which is logically certain holds universally true. It knows neither national nor ideological boundaries of any sort. That a triangle has three sides leaves no room for rational doubt anywhere in the world; that a proposition and its contradictory cannot be true of anything, at the very same time, and in the very same relation, is another example.

This principle, put another way, says that a logical contradiction affirms or asserts nothing whatsoever. More generally, we may say that that which is logically certain is either *a priori* true—in in which case no state of affairs in the world can count against it, or add to its truth—or intuitively, i.e., self-evidently true, calling only for attentive rational reflection, as we do, for example, in pure mathematics and with numerous everyday truisms. No one goes checking everywhere in the world to be assured that all triangles have three sides, or goes about with clipboard or calculator in hand to check on the marital status of bachelors in their neighborhood. No one needs to be assured, however the world may change, that a blue thing is a blue thing, and so on, *ad nauseam*.

It is this kind of certainty that we scrupulously rely on to do our mathematics. At one time it was the practice in some academic communities to write at the end of a proof in geometry the letters Q.E.D.—*Quod Erat Demonstrandum*—by translation: "which was to be demonstrated." Across all ideological boundaries such proofs held, and still hold, good.

Such is the nature of logical certainty, and with it logical proof and demonstration. Logical certainty is a peculiarity of a logically closed system, unaffected by the way things happen to be in the world. What we have then is a logically privileged world that guarantees all its conclusions. It is a unique world where certainty is privileged. Axioms, postulates, and rules of correspondence guarantee this kind of certainty.

When we move out of this privileged world to take



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account of the other forms of certainty—psychological and epistemic—things can and do get extremely messy. We no longer have the convenience or protection of doing our mental work in anything like the safety of a closed system where axioms, postulates and rules of correspondence strictly apply, and where things are guaranteed to come out right. The real world we must make sense of, one way or other, is nothing like a closed system. We are now in the realm of the *a posteriori*, the realm of

the everyday world we all inhabit, the empirical world, a perplexingly open system, where trial and error, experimentation and conjecture, insight and foresight, inform our claims. Here, we must make even our best judgments with a salutary degree of, so to say, fear and trembling. For the claims we make in this situation, however useful at the time, are in principle defeasible. We must do this because we are limited in our capacities, so that even our best and most cherished judgments are not immune to

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improvement, or correction, or falsification. Since we strive to learn, we embrace our fallibility and acknowledge our claims to know as representing work in progress.

Let us now briefly consider psychological certainty. Psychological certainty, treated as a distinct type, is best considered as that kind of assurance that rests primarily on some feeling or state of mind, where claims are affirmed on the basis that one just has, or is in the grip of, a particular *feeling* in their support. It is the *feeling*, or state of mind, that grounds matters. No evidence need be adduced, for the feeling is, as it were, self-authenticating. Certainty claims of this sort can range from the obviously naïve, on the one hand, to the fairly sophisticated, on the other.

In some delusional cases, the notion of evidentiary warrant carries, or can carry, no weight. We are all familiar with a range of cases of this sort. True, certainty of whatever kind does involve some form of mental assent, some degree of feeling, but that does not suffice to reduce the one form to the other, or to suppose that they are all simply the same. That kind of muddled reduction would be unfortunate; indeed, it serves no useful purpose.

I turn now to epistemic certainty. This is the kind of certainty involved in some of our everyday or technical claims to know, in affirmations such as, “I know for a fact that the world is spherical”; “I know that some diets are better than others”; and so on.

The term epistemic derives from the Greek verb that means *to know*. (Incidentally, and of significance, the term science derives from the Latin verb that means *to know*.) Tersely put, epistemology is the study of a family of related concepts among which knowledge and belief are central. Other logically relevant concepts in this family are truth, evidence, faith, revelation, justification, and certainty itself.

We all strive to know; that’s why we establish and invest in institutions of learning. We strive to keep ignorance at bay, so we develop sophisticated tools and strategies, establish stringent principles and standards of confirma-

tion and disconfirmation, test hypotheses, theories, and conjectures of various sorts, all in an attempt to “get it right.” By and large, we want, progressively, to know better and better and in so doing develop warranted beliefs.

To accomplish this, we have to ask the two-fold question: what is it to know, and what, if possible, is it to know with certainty? (The technical literature that addresses these and related questions is vast, and sometimes daunting, but for the purposes of this short paper, that fact is not of crucial concern here.)

Minimally, for one to know that the earth is spherical, logically requires that three conditions be met. (1) It must be the case—true, that is—that the earth is indeed spherical. If it is not, then one cannot *know* that it is. One cannot *know* that my name is George if my name is not George. So let’s call this first condition the truth condition. (2) One must also *believe* that the earth is spherical. One cannot, without obvious contradiction, claim that one knows that the earth is spherical, but believe no such thing. Call this condition the belief condition. (3) One must have and understand relevant supporting evidence, i.e., warrant for the claim. Call this the justification condition. (This knowledge schema, with some subtle modification, is fairly standard. It rules out lucky guesses, serendipity, and mere parroting.) While one cannot *know* what is false, one can *believe* what is false, for with belief there is no truth condition that must be met. One can believe anything one pleases.

Where does all this take us? On the face of it, the earth illustration above was an easy one. George was easily identifiable. He was the guy sitting in a Swedish chair typing this paper. Very serious problems can arise when that which we want to know is not George-identifiably accessible. It is not easily or neatly identifiable. What then becomes of the truth condition that we noted above as a requisite for knowing in the propositional sense? Integrity demands that we do not rush to judgment. In such cases the only viable option is to qualify our “know-

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edge” claims. We do this in science all the time. We would all be dead by now if medical knowledge, and with it the practice of good medicine, were to wait until the truth condition were assuredly, i.e. incorrigibly, met.

Some crucial implications seem clear. In the absence of George-like confirmation of our knowledge claims, we must learn to express our knowledge claims in the modest terms of levels of confidence. At times humility requires that we say in all truthfulness, we simply do not now know. And in all such circumstances, the door should be genuinely open for open, serious, and charitable conversation. The truth condition, much to the dismay of some, cannot in the real world be met without qualification. That’s the way things are and will be for a long time! Certainty with qualification is an instructive and humbling result. In this regard, no one can with any credibility claim any sort of privileged immunity. We are all in the quest to know with essentially the same epistemic handicaps.

Germane to the project identified in the opening paragraphs of this piece, we are now in a position to recall and confront the following two observations. First, certainty of the logical kind discussed above is not attainable in open systems. In all open systems our claims can be rationally doubted—not so with a closed system such as logic or pure mathematics. Certainty of this kind is unassailable. Second, *all* other candidates for certainty are open in principle to rational doubt. So, without loss of integrity, we can acknowledge the inevitable and adjust the discourse from talk of certainty to talk of degrees of confidence.

With that said, we encounter an extremely serious problem. The notion of certainty is so appealing, so beguiling, so reassuring, that it becomes the ground for many a deadly social conflict. The notion must be retained, unattenuated, at all costs. The result is certainties in conflict and with that state of affairs, attendant violence. Heretics become identified.

Certainty, like truth, is *prima facie* a commend-

ing term. It takes very little reflection to see that that is so. A peculiar feature of commending terms is that they can be abused to do the work that only carefully developed arguments should do. Call an opinion a finding and all is more or less well; call it a guess and a lot of trouble can ensue. A lot of argument space is taken over by conveniently employing commending terms designed to elicit concurring and favorable responses and, *a fortiori*, by crafting terms of disapproval for whatever is in conflict with a given certainty. No painstaking or rigorous justification is invoked. Anyone can wield a club; it takes skill to build strong bench. We are all familiar with this, I think.

Unfortunately, the discreditors I made reference to in my opening paragraph, treat their brand of ideological certainty—akin to logical certainty discussed above—with militant self-assuredness. The Triumvirate of Tape, Talk, and Text, armed with axioms, postulates, and question-begging rules of correspondence or coherence, take over with virtual epistemic certainty. (Begging the question is the logical fallacy committed when one uses as a premise, precisely what is to be established as a conclusion to one’s argument.) QEDs sprout up, it seems, everywhere. Every question gets a definitive answer. Textual cherry-picking guarantees an inerrant ideological hermeneutic. One unsustainable result is a destructive, because divisive, intolerance.

For the good of the faith we all cherish, and our unyielding commitment to *the only sure and certain Word*, who called and dined with sinners, that sorry state of affairs must go. In the serious business of “getting it doctrinally right,” studied charitable caution is essential. Now, we are destined to know in part. Let’s give more than lip service to this truth. ■

Dr. Hollibert E. Phillips is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus,



Whitman College, WA, where he taught for 28 years, the first ten overlapping his last ten at Walla Walla College from which he moved as Dean of the Graduate School. He is the author of the textbook *Vicissitudes of the I: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*.