

RELI 4015 Mysticism and Religious Experience

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARE	Argument from Religious Experience
BSJ	Basic Source of Justification
CTA	Critical Trust Approach
PC	Principle of Credulity
PCT	Principle of Critical Trust
PFJ	Prima Facie Justification
SE	Sense Experience

Tutorial reading (4.1): Kwan, Kai-man. 2011. *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism*. New York: Continuum. Selections from Ch.4: "The Critical Trust Approach"

4.2 The Spirit of the Critical Trust Approach

The general rationales for the CTA can be characterised by several themes:

- 1) The Priority of Trust over Doubt
- 2) The Superiority of Pluralistic Empiricism over Exclusivist Empiricism
- 3) Impartiality Towards Our Experiences
- 4) Unity in Diversity

4.2.1 The Priority of Trust over Doubt

We have seen that the atheists' main worry about belief in God (like Parsons') is the opening of the floodgates of superstition and irrationality. This certainly reflects a spirit of criticism and doubt which are central themes in modern epistemology. However, doubt is neither necessary nor natural. For example, in the Chinese intellectual traditions, skeptical doubt has never been prominent. (It may even be unintelligible to many Chinese.) In contrast, emphasis is placed on *Xin* (trust) as a virtue of the Gentleman, the morally mature person. Excessive doubt towards claims of others will probably be regarded as inappropriate, or even impolite. So we need to understand the specific historical background of the primacy of doubt in the West. Of course, the story usually begins with Descartes' quest for certainty. In a time of drastic changes and upheaval, Descartes resolved to doubt everything that could be doubted, including common sense beliefs, traditions and religion. He adopted this method of doubt in order to find an indubitable foundation upon which the human cognitive edifice could be securely built.

He accepted a principle of doubt. As explained by Polanyi, "[i]t has been taken for granted... that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt... It trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence. Critical thought trusted this method unconditionally for avoiding error and establishing truth" (Polanyi 1958, p. 269).

Another related development is the hermeneutics of suspicion developed by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. "What unites them ... is ... *the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively*" (Westphal, p. 13; italics in original). The scope for the hermeneutics of suspicion is very wide: it can be applied in spheres of political economy, bourgeois morality, psycho-sexual development, religion, etc. In fact, suspicion is contagious and it has a tendency to spread from one field to another. Once the image of the rational autonomous individual is gone and the dark unconscious with its seething libido is seen to be calling the shot, what is there to stop the

suspicion to spread to other kinds of belief, political or scientific or whatever? The image of human being as portrayed by the masters of suspicion cannot but create doubts about human beliefs. In the long run, it also leads to Nietzsche's genealogy, Foucault's understanding of power/truth, the Derridean project of deconstruction, and so on. So the intensification of the hermeneutics of suspicion finally results in the demise of meaning and truth, and it is now fashionable for scholars to write obituaries for epistemology. The roots of many postmodern claims are still epistemological: the demise of foundationalism or the impossibility of metaphysics is the unarticulated common assumption of many postmodern thinkers.

Since doubts are so powerful, perhaps doubt can't be defeated except by itself. We may hope that the acid of doubt will be applied to itself in such a way that we begin to be suspicious of suspicion, doubting doubt, relativizing relativism, and skeptical of skepticism. As Polanyi suggests, we should turn the critical attitude to the principle of doubt itself (Polanyi 1958, p. 272). The first thing to do is to note with William James that a failure in knowing can be manifested in two ways. Believing a false or unjustified belief is only *one* form. Advocates of the principle of doubt regards 'gullibilism' as a mortal epistemological sin. Doubt and critical acumen are regarded as epistemological or even moral virtues. The idea seems to be that we should try our best to avoid having false beliefs. However, it seems to ignore another kind of epistemic failure, namely, failure to believe the truth. Being over-critical is also a defect. Gullibilism is not the only devil to be exorcised. We should also beware of the dangers of dogmatic skepticism, and Polanyi offers a good example. "We may regard this sceptical movement as altogether reasonable and be unaware of its fiduciary character until we are confronted with its blunders... scientific scepticism ... brushed aside all the instances of hypnotic phenomena ... even in the face of systematic demonstrations of hypnosis by Mesmer and his successors" (Polanyi 1958, p. 274). No doubt the critical spirit can also lead us to errors.

We can even argue for the priority of trust over doubt. Firstly, a failure to trust when we should is not only foolish but also detrimental to oneself or others or to the interpersonal relationship. Without trust, we could hardly survive and doubt is out of the question. If a child adopts a habitual critical attitude, he may have never grown up! He can never answer all the critical questions he can ask if he embarks on this project. Secondly, doubt and criticism seem to presuppose a certain existing framework. We need the relevant concepts and knowledge to ask the right questions and to give criticisms. Doubt never occurs in a complete vacuum. The artificiality of the Cartesian method of doubt is often noted: "someone who really believed that he knew nothing would not even know how to begin on a course of radical doubt; for he would have no conception of what his task might be, of what it would be to settle his doubts and to acquire well-founded beliefs" (MacIntyre 1980, pp. 59-60).

Popper is famous for his critical rationalism, and some critical rationalists like Hans Albert are very critical of religion. Interestingly, Popper also upholds our *prima facie* trust in traditions. After all, rationalism itself is a tradition. Moreover, the critical attitude has to work on something: "we cannot start afresh... we must stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. We must carry on a certain tradition... you need something with which to start. If you have nothing to alter and to change, you can never get anywhere" (Popper 1969, pp. 129-30). Popper points to a fallibilist conception of epistemology. Though we can only start with fallible beliefs or theories (or for Popper, even myths), we can *criticise and falsify* them and then invent better theories. In this way we may still gain knowledge.

All in all, these criticisms converge towards the idea that the dependence of doubt on trust is inescapable. A completely presupposition-less doubt seems unrealistic.¹ As Wittgenstein says, "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (Wittgenstein 1969a, paragraph 18e). It is possible to adopt a wide-ranging principle of trust as

¹ In itself, this point is not an adequate reply to the skeptical questions. Of course, the skeptics need to assume some knowledge of language and various basic facts about our experience. However, if their presuppositions are also undeniable to us, and their reasoning on the basis of those presuppositions are cogent, then we are still faced with a problem.

the basis of epistemology and it is worthwhile to explore this kind of approach, especially in view of the inadequacies of approaches which are built on the principle of doubt. However, the Critical Trust Approach needs to give a due place to criticism and doubt.

The PCT is a general, first order principle. By applying it, we usually get some second order *critical* principles. For example, the Principle of Testimony tells us to give initial trust to others' words. However, it does not forbid us to formulate a second order principle to the effect that a certain type of person and a certain sort of statements are not to be trusted. Indeed the only grounds for this kind of principle may only be derivable when we adopt the first order principle. I have no intention to say trust should be unlimited. An attitude of initial trust may be defeated. CTA can be regarded as a kind of post-critical philosophy (Polanyi) but *post-critical* philosophy is not *un-critical*. It just insists that the principles of criticism and suspicion are *second level* principles which are derived from *first principles* of trust. In this way, it reconciles two indispensable poles of epistemology: trust and criticism.

So we have to start somewhere, but where exactly? The metaphor of Neurath's ship is helpful. He likens our body of knowledge to a boat at sea. Repairs must be made afloat, and though no part is untouchable, we must stand on some in order to replace or repair others. Not every part can go at once. Experience is the only channel for us to get in touch with reality. If we do not trust the deliverances of our experiences, it would be impossible for us to gain knowledge of reality. So the CTA suggests that an attitude of *prima facie* trust towards our experience is wise and inescapable.

4.2.2 The Superiority of Pluralistic (Holistic) Empiricism over Exclusivist Empiricism

I will be contented with staking out my claims clearly in this section, and provide the more detailed arguments in the next few chapters. The CTA is also empirical in spirit. However, it objects to the kind of narrow empiricism prevalent in modern Western philosophy, and advises us to attend to the richness of our experience.² It believes that to posit a *qualitative* difference between SE and other kinds of noetic experiences is not sustainable after the downfall of foundationalism. It objects to the narrow empiricists' reductionist project which is *prima facie* implausible, and the eliminative project which is impracticable. So narrow empiricism is a kind of intellectual imperialism.

For the pluralistic empiricism (or holistic empiricism), the "complaint against many modern empiricists is that they are not empirical enough. So often they set arbitrary limits to human experience and thus themselves exclude mystery *a priori*. It is only when experience is taken into account in its full dimensions that we can have an adequate basis for philosophizing; and it will be my contention ... that the most rigorous analysis of our experience confronts us with mystery as its depth: mystery that is illuminated ...by the distinctive mystery of the Christian revelation" (Clifford 1971, p. 33). Clifford's talk of mystery may sound alarming because the exclusivist empiricists often have an aversion to mystery, and they tend to classify everything which cannot fit into their naturalistic worldview as mystery. The emphasis on mystery here should not be equated with obscurantism. Instead the contention is that exactly as we pursue the *greatest degree of intelligibility* in the context of the rainbow of experiences, we are confronted with a depth dimension which seems to call for belief in transcendence. (There is even a mysterious dimension of our experience of the natural world- see chapter 9.) There will be an extended argument for this contention in Part B.

4.2.3 Impartiality Towards Our Experiences

The pluralistic empiricist tries to be impartial towards our diverse experiences. So often only knowledge by sensory experience is thought to be unproblematic while all other modes of cognition are suspected, e.g., a

² For similar complaints of this narrow concept of experience, see John Smith (1968, chapter 1) and Baillie (1962, chapter III).

priori intuition, moral intuition. However knowledge by senses is not as unproblematic as we used to think and also in some sense mysterious. In the end skepticism about SE can only be replied by a basic, *prima facie* trust. We have to ask why the same attitude of trust cannot be adopted with regard to other experiences? Why can't we accept pluralistic sources of justification? In fact, there is already internal plurality within sense experience (five senses together with kinesthetic sensation and gustatory sensations, etc.). There is also plurality among sense experience, memory, introspection, and reason- the four basic sources of justification most commonly recognized, and these four sources are very different.

The chauvinistic attitude of traditional empiricism towards other kinds of experience is unwarranted. The CTA contends that we have to shake off the shackles of a narrow empiricism and recover a more realistic notion of "experience" which is actually part of our *Lebenswelt*. Some analytical philosophers have come to see that. For example, Bonjour says, "the relevant notion of experience should not be restricted to sense experience in a narrow sense, but should rather be understood to include any sort of cognitive factor or element which... provides ... information, *input*, concerning the specific character of the actual world as opposed to other possible worlds. Thus ... introspection, memory, and nonsensory forms of input like clairvoyance and telepathy (if these should exist) count as varieties of experience and the knowledge derived therefrom as *a posteriori*" (Bonjour 1985, p. 192).³

Of course, equality in starting point does not guarantee equal outcome; different types of experience do differ in epistemic strengths. I agree that in the end sensory experience does possess some properties to a unique degree which make it more trustworthy. However, it does not follow that SE is qualitatively different from all other kinds of experience. It is illegitimate for narrow empiricism to make this assumption as our *epistemological starting point*. In the end, the pluralistic empiricist also wants to fit the deliverances of our experiences into a unitary worldview, and acknowledges the need to unite different kinds of experience. This will lead to intellectual integration. So the pluralistic empiricist is at the same time the holistic empiricist. Moreover, the acceptance of other types of experience (e.g., moral, religious and spiritual experiences) provides us more resources in the quest for personal wholeness.

7.2.3 Applicability Thesis

Some critics contend that we can justify claims of experience without appealing to the PCT. We'll consider the cases of ...memory.

<2) Application of the Type PCT to Memory>

It is clear that our memory is fallible. How can we safeguard from mistakes and distinguish real memory from false ones or even imagination? Some philosophers have suggested the reliable memory claims have intrinsic characteristics which are accessible to us, e.g., vividness of the images associated or degree of conviction. However, after a long exploration in his book on memory, Von Leyden concludes, "since a false memory claim is as a rule qualitatively indistinguishable from a correct one, no memory experience alone can make it certain that what is alleged to be remembered really occurred" (Von Leyden 1961, pp. 115-116).

Since reliance on memory is almost *ubiquitous* in formation of our beliefs *at every moment*, it is extremely difficult to see how there can be non-circular justification of memory. Consider the suggestion that the general reliability of one's memory is to be established by our perceptual experiences. However, unless we take the reliability of memory for granted, it is well-nigh impossible to gather sufficient empirical evidence

³ Bonjour further suggests the idea of observation has also to be extended: "the line between the observable and the unobservable is *not* fixed ... observation is not essentially tied to sense experience in the way it is for more traditional views, and thus any sort of reliable, cognitively spontaneous belief, no matter what sort of causal process it may result from, can in principle count as observational" (Bonjour 1985, p. 175). According to Bonjour, a spontaneous belief which has no accompanying experiential content at all can still be an observation.

for memory. It is because our experiences almost all happened in the past. Without our basic trust in memory, what we can get from an even infallible SE is only and always a vanishing point.

Suppose we attempt to justify memory by some a priori argument. Further suppose we have a valid proof which needs several pages to write it out. When you come to the end and believe that the conclusion is proved, what justifies this? Not directly by the steps because we can't hold all of them together in our minds and see all at once their connections; but by the *memory* that you have checked all the connections and found them convincing. So memory would also be vital in this piece of reasoning (and any other reasoning). So either way (empirical or a priori), it is extremely difficult to see how there can be non-circular justification of memory.

Some philosophers suggested we can check our memories with documents and archaeological evidence, e.g., Hamlyn (1970). Gutting has also written: "it is not clear that memory claims admit of no justification apart from an appeal to the PC. A memory claim might ... be supported by its coherence with an immense body of other memory claims and present experiences" (Gutting 1982, p. 187). However, if we do not already trust our memory of the meaning of the words, how can we be sure that we have interpreted the documents (which we use to check our memory) correctly? Moreover, what is the basis of my belief that the documents are reliable? Their reliability cannot be read off directly. Here we again need some inductive evidence from the past, *which we can remember*, to support it. So this kind of check is also in the end circular. Gutting is correct that a memory claim is supported by coherence considerations but the problem is twofold. Firstly how can we be sure that we remember correctly the past coherence? Secondly, coherence alone cannot generate justification but coherence between presumptive data can provide an enhancer. So Gutting's observation does not repudiate the CTA, but is presupposing it.

In the case of our memory beliefs, the appeal to the PCT as a fundamental principle seems inescapable. I have surveyed quite a few authors, and found that all of them reach similar conclusions. For example, Russell claims that "the past occurrence is itself a premiss for my knowledge " (Russell 1948, p. 205). Other authors concur: "in the last analysis ... we cannot ... validate our memories further than by ... assuming that the sufficient conditions of remembering are in fact very often fulfilled" (Von Leyden 1961, p. 119). Ginet also thinks we "should trust ... the direct perceptual deliverance of one's memory" (Ginet 1975, p. 202). Most critics of PCT who want to deny the Applicability Thesis have tried to do so in the case of SE. Their case will never be complete if they cannot show how we can justify our memory claims non-circularly.

<3) Explanatory Foundationalism>

Explanatory foundationalism wants to deny that the PCT is a fundamental principle by suggesting that the hypothesis of the external world can be justified as the best explanation of our SEs (interpreted as appearance beliefs like "it appears to me that a table is there"). Alston (1993) has already criticized many versions of explanatory foundationalism, e.g., Alan Goldman, Slote. I want to discuss the attempt by Jonathan Vogel here.

Vogel considers the isomorphic skeptical hypothesis (ISH) which is in a way parasitic upon the *real world hypothesis* (RWH). "The relationships among causes and effects according to the ISH match those of the RWH. To that extent, it seems, the explanations provided by the one are no better or worse than the explanations provided by the other" (Vogel 2005, p. 75). For example, if our experiences are produced by the computer of a mad neuroscientist, then different portions of the computer disk can be supposed to occupy the explanatory roles we normally assign to familiar objects. This is called the *computer skeptical hypothesis* (CSH). This kind of improved skeptical hypothesis apparently can do as well or as bad a job as the RWH does. However, he contends that necessary truths like "two distinct objects can't be in the same place at the same time" in the RWH has some explanatory power, but ISH has to guarantee that by invoking

“an extra empirical regularity,” say, one written down in the computer program of the superscientist. So the ISH is shown to be inferior by its “lack of simplicity” (Vogel 2005, p. 77).

I doubt whether this really works. We can argue that the ISH just needs a computer and a brain, whereas RWH needs myriad of separate objects. Hence the former scheme is much more economical. Vogel is aware of this point but then he goes on to assert that “it is far from clear that, all by itself, positing fewer entities is a theoretical virtue” (Vogel 1998, p. 355). Well, it seems to me quite clear that when we consider our practice of IBE, a theory which posit fewer entities is indeed simpler than another theory which posits more. A detective will not posit ten murderers to explain a dead body when one can do. Astronomers will not posit ten more planets to explain the deviation of Uranus’ orbit from Newton’s theory if just one (Neptune) can do, and so on.⁴

So in terms of simplicity, it is by no means clear that the RWH will win over skeptical competitors. To make a successful epistemic *ascent* possible, the Principle of Simplicity alone is not enough because its basic inclination is to trim things *down*. In the Simplicity Contest, the theory that nothing exists will surely become the champion, and the theory that nothing but a mind or brain exist will likely be the runner-up. In our ordinary application of IBE, we have already used the PCT side by side with the Principle of Simplicity.

In any case, there are some general problems with explanatory foundationalism which even Vogel’s version cannot overcome. First, the basic trust in memory seems quite inescapable. The common data for the competing hypotheses like RWH or CSH are the *continued coherence* of our experiences. But this datum we can only know through our memory. Indeed the presupposition of memory in almost all attempts to vindicate SE’s reliability is quite obvious. Or perhaps we can try to provide a coherentist justification for memory, or even an IBE for the reliability of memory? Bonjour clearly points out the problems:

“the issue arises of how... the memory beliefs upon which any access to the fact of *continued coherence* must rely are themselves to be justified. Many philosophers have offered coherence theories of the justification of memory beliefs, but such an account seems clearly to be involved in vicious circularity if the only reason for thinking that coherentist justification is conducive to truth, and so that the memory beliefs in particular are true, relies on the existence of coherence over time and so on those very memory beliefs themselves... there is no noncircular way for a coherentist to appeal to sustained or long-run coherence” (Bonjour, 1999, p. 130).

Second, we have argued that memory is also vital in reasoning. So *the explanatory argument for RWH* also needs to depend on the memory belief that the argument has proceeded correctly. I will also argue that the alleged superiority of explanatory power of the Real World Hypothesis is in fact *irrelevant* to the applicability of PCT to SEs (see the next chapter).

⁴ Moreover, “we can compare our commonsense hypotheses about physical objects to, let us say, a Berkeleyan hypothesis about a very complex mind orchestrating the comings and goings of sensations. Which theory is simpler? Well Berkeley had just minds, mental states, and causation. The commonsense hypothesis has minds, mental states, causation, and physical objects. On any criteria of simplicity, Berkeley seems to win” (Fumerton 1992, p. 165).