

A Return to Plato's Cave

On Perception, Uncertainty, The Depths of Possible Discovery and Wonder

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Today I was looking for something else and stumbled across a lighted edited version of a note I sent to my faithful Mormon father during an email exchange a little over a year ago. He had told me that he thought he understood my current experience and excitement about the world as I now see it and was glad I had discovered things he thought I had understood all along about the "real" world. I, on the other hand, was trying to explain what this discovery felt like to me.

It goes as follows:

Dad,

You may have forgotten how aesthetically inclined I was before my mission, or perhaps we did not spend enough time together for you to have understood that. I have long been the type to get excited about things like sunsets. This is a bit of joke with our kids.

The neurologists and psychologists tell us that people like me have a more active than usual "god spot" in the brain. That is the portion of the cerebral cortex that lights up when a person is experiencing "spiritual" things. In some people (many of whom are seriously religious or aesthetically inclined) this spot is much easier to excite, and much more active in general, than in the average person. There is a strong correlation between how emotional in certain ways people are, and how active their "god spot" is. This feature of human anatomy or neurology explains much of the variation that I see in how people react to religious or spiritual phenomena, even within a relatively homogenous culture such as Mormonism or the Robert D. McCue family as it was until two years ago.

So, I don't think that the intensity of the emotional response I described in my little essay (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.changing%20seasons.pdf>) was any stronger or different from the many other similar experiences I had while a faithful Mormon. Our emotional circuits, it seems, are pretty easy to max out.

Speaking of the water you admired at Lake O'Hara, Lake Moraine and Lake Louise (in Canada's Banff National Park) are two of my favourite places. We (Juli, me, another couple from Houston and our little kids) went canoeing at Moraine a few years ago on a day when the water in the lake literally looked like blueberry Kool-Aid. It was transfixing. The colour is due to microscopic rock chips that are suspended in glacial melt that in August and September, particularly, fills the rivers and lakes in certain parts of the northern Rockies. That fine, milky sediment causes light to refract oddly (when compared to what happens when light passes through "normal" river and lake water), hence causing the unusual colours we both enjoy.

I trust that my “unweaving the rainbow” (see Richard Dawkins great book by that title) with respect to this water will not diminish the quality of your aesthetic experience with it. Such information enhances my experience with nature in much the same way as the knowledge I now have about how spiritual experiences work makes that spectrum of life more useful and enjoyable, and less dangerous, than it used to be for me.

It is late at night, and the time zone change means that I am still awake. So, since your indication that you understand my current experience raises some issues I have been thinking about lately, I will take the time to record thoughts in that regard that I think will be useful for me, and perhaps will be of interest to you.

The best analogy I can think of to explain the difference between how I experience aesthetically moving and other important things now as compared to when I was a "faithful" Mormon makes use of Plato's cave analogy, of which you are fond. As you will recall, Plato taught that our perception of life is like that of prisoners sitting at the back of a cave facing the wall who are not able to see anything in the “real” world. All they can do is watch the shadows cast on the cave's walls by the light of a fire (which the prisoners cannot see) by people who are waking back and forth in front of the fire (whom the prisoners cannot see) carrying statues that represent “real” things in the “real” world, of which the prisoners have no direct knowledge. While the prisoners believe there is a real world, their only information related to it comes to them by the indirect and hence unreliable means just indicated. And they form their opinions as to what is going on based on these vague, shifting images while generally under the mistaken impression that what they are seeing is “real”. And Plato thought that was the best any of us can do in terms of approaching reality. Without debating Plato’s epistemic philosophy with you, let me use the situation in which Plato puts his prisoners to see if I can make a different point.

So, assume I am one of Plato’s slaves but there is more to reality than Plato thought there was. Having only seen shadows in black and white, but in infinite variety of entertaining patterns for the first 45 years of my life, they comprised my entire universe. And, I was fully moved by them in an emotional sense, even though I was ironically as certain as I could be that I understood what those shadows meant. They were symbols used by God to communicate his "one and only true" message to me. There was some uncertainty about which symbols signified which part of the message, and how the message applied to me and my loved ones in many specifics, but since I knew the message the task of fitting the symbols to the message was first, not that difficult, and second, largely of academic interest since I already understood the most important part of the message – “obey the leaders of the Mormon Church and so do whatever they tell you to do”.

As I let go of my Mormon induced certainty as to God's one and only true message to me and the rest of mankind, the shadows on the wall became much more important to me. Whatever meaning life had was to be found in those shadows, and so I started to pay attention to them as never before. To my amazement, they came to life. I was stunned to realize that I had not ever more than glanced at them. I was aware of them in the passive

way a passenger in a car is aware of the landscape that flows by while he day dreams of other things. As a passenger you can travel a route many times without learning it. But, if you have to drive the route yourself, and figure it out as you go, once is usually enough to remember the route. That is because you are forced by your responsibility as driver to pay a different kind of attention than the passengers usually pay to the information that flows by you as you drive.

So, as I began to really stare hard at those images on the wall, it was as if a Sony flat screen TV was wheeled into my cave and switched on, having first been connected to a series of cameras located all over the physical world outside the cave. Images – clear, sharp, clean in some cases and complex and shifting in others – simply emerged from the shadows with a full Dolby soundtrack that I realized had been playing in the background all along. I had simply not been paying attention. This stuff had been there the entire time.

There had always been many people in the cave, most of whom I had ignored because they were not Mormon and hence I had assumed that they did not have much that was relevant to the "reality" God agents had already fully explained to me. Since I no longer trusted what God's agents had to say, at the same time as I noticed these new images springing to life in the shadows, I started to watch and listen closely to what the other in the cave had to say. And was I surprised in what I learned there. These people had been watching the same images I was for ages, and knew an amazing amount about them. In fact, as I listened to them, new layers of information in both sight and sound came tumbling into my consciousness. It was dizzying; layer upon layer of meaning opened up to me. At times I wondered if the process would ever stop and wished it would.

This stage of my rebirth but did not last long. The pace at which I perceived new things slowed down (or maybe my mind quickened) so that my perceptions began to make sense and were not as frightening as they were at the beginning. Imagine a Hutterite boy leaving the colony, or the East Germans coming into West Germany when the Berlin Wall came down. It was the same kind of experience.

In any event, I was stunned by the new-to-me array of colours and sounds, as well as the clarity of some of the images I could see as a result of my new perspective. However, my emotional machinery had already been fully employed by the shadows that still danced on the wall providing context for the colourful images I now saw, and as the initial sensory overload and the fear it induced faded, I recognized the familiar range of emotions that I had enjoyed before. The same emotional machinery was digesting different material.

But the sight of the new images and noticing the commonality of my experience with the many of the other people in the cave did not deliver the largest shock to my system. I noticed that a few people were walking in and out of the cave! How had I missed that! So, I followed them nonchalantly, as if this was as routine for me as for them. Despite my attempt to appear under control, I stumbled out into a world orders of magnitudes more interesting than anything I had seen in the images on the cave wall. And I noticed that

most of the people who had left the cave seemed to be checking what was "out there" against what appeared in the shadows and images inside, and were comparing notes with each other both as to what they had attempted to verify had produced, as well as what they thought they had seen on the walls.

This was by far the most interesting group of people I had ever met. They had a tremendous amount of knowledge about what at least some of those images on the wall likely meant. They told me that while all the checking in the world could not make me 100% certain of the reality of anything I saw dancing in the shadows, that it was possible to feel very comfortable with the reality of many things and more or less comfortable with many others, but that we had to admit to being baffled by the vast majority of what we saw both in the cave and outside of it. I also quickly noticed that as I sought to understand the relatively few things I could, that the mysteries I saw in fascinating glimpses multiplied far more quickly than my knowledge of the likely reality of anything.

The people outside the cave could explain all kinds of things that had puzzled me in a way that made the best sense I had ever heard. And most importantly, they used their ideas to predict the behaviour of other people as well as physical things, and used the predictive capacity of their ideas to decide which to hold onto, and which to discard. That is, even though they stated clearly that they could not be sure of anything, they had devised a way to decide which of the various interpretations of the shadows and images on the walls was the most useful, and how it likely could best be used. And as time passed, it was clear that they were able to predict, and hence control, more and more of what went on outside the cave. This expanded the agency of all humankind – the more we can control, the more power we have, and the freer we are.

While this advancing tide of freedom has frightened mankind ever since the dawn of recorded history, we continue to become accustomed to the exercise of new powers. Perhaps the greatest task of mankind now, as it has always been, is to find ways to facilitate the wise exercise of power, and to restrain its abuse. Democratic systems, loaded with checks and balances, may be our greatest invention because of the way it both tends to empower those who would exercise power wisely, and restrains those who would not. These people, as it turned out, were the ones who had come up with that system.

The discovery of these people and their way of finding and testing ideas excited me as nothing else ever has. I marvelled over and over again as to how I had been right in the middle of these people for many years – and even had been personally acquainted with some of them – and somehow had not noticed the supremely important things they were doing. I was struck by how the certainty I felt while Mormon that I knew all I needed to know controlled what I could see. That idea literally determined the what I saw in the shadows on my wall and what I could and could not observe concerning the people around me.

From that day to this, I moved in and out of the cave. The shadows and the shaper images fire my imagination, and I do as much checking as possible to see if my impressions of

what I have seen are accurate. The more I do this, the greater my appreciation for the wonderful order of which we are a miniscule part, and the length and breadth of life's mystery.

So, I still recognize that what I see on the wall inside my own head are images rather than an assuredly accurate depiction of reality. I am as certain as I can be that there is much more worthwhile information to be had as I continue to plumb reality's depths – to "go above and beneath all things" (or something like that) – as someone once said. And it seems highly probable (almost certain) that the experience I now have is qualitatively different than what I used to have as a Mormon. But it is not that I am any more emotionally moved than I was. The difference relates more to the amount and reliability of the information that the images I now watch and the verification I perform respecting them conveys, the range of experience with which this approach to life brings me into contact, and most importantly, what all of this makes me want to do with my time.

Many of the images that emerged from the shadows are brighter and more clearly defined than anything I have ever seen. The images related to the "God spot" I mentioned above are among these. They thrill me, and can be verified with a high degree of certainty through the kind of repeatable scientific experiments of which Plato had no idea. Others shapes shift in complex patterns, first evoking one range of ideas and then others. These are the mirrors (or windows, I am not sure which is the better metaphor) through which I now see my soul, life's mysteries and meanings, etc. They transport me in different ways and are not susceptible to verification of any kind. What Plato had to say about caves and shadows is still pretty accurate as far as they are concerned.

But most of all, I am now acutely aware that I don't understand what these images, in the aggregate, mean. This is a massive paradox. I understand far more now than I did before about reality as a result of the images I now see and how they can be tested, used to predict future events (including human behaviour) etc. They have taught me far more than I thought it was possible to know about the cause and effect relationships that govern reality – the "hows" of life. And yet, they do not even attempt to explain life's great "whys". The people outside the cave tell me that they cannot teach me about the whys – that I must find my whys within my own heart, and then if I wish, use them to bring into being what I value – what I have decided is important – using my new found and forever to continue growing understanding of life's "hows". In this endeavour, I metaphorically become God – I literally create by my word – by my choice – the things I value. The more adept I become at doing, the more God-like I become.

This approach to certainty and understanding turned my Mormon shadow world upside down. I thought before that while the images were unclear, that I knew both the hows and the whys in any event. Hence, the images were not all that important and not surprisingly, I paid so little attention to them that I was not ever aware of how little attention I paid them. Now, I believe that my entire existence depends on what those images can tell me, and I pay much more attention to them than ever before and hence see a far wider range of images than I thought possible. It is that simple. We must look to see, and listen to hear. Or, as Christ said, let those who have ears hear (or something like that).

I have already learned more from these images than I could imagine, and yet recognize that there is no certainty in the most important things I thought I "knew" before. In this I see another of the broad patterns for which I thank the scholars who have done so much helpful work in the field of human perception and epistemology. Humans tend to express their greatest certainty about the things that are both fear inducing and the most uncertain from a scientific point of view (that is, unverifiable). For example, what will happen after death? Is there anything more untestable than that? And yet more people express certainty on that topic than any other. The origins of religious traditions are likewise fraught with uncertainty. Things like virgin births, resurrections from the dead and the miraculous appearance of sacred texts are all stock themes. And from one religion to another, events of this nature are generally believed with a breathtaking degree of certainty. If the sources of meaning are not certain, the foundations of society may crumble, chaos overcome us all, and a psychological if not physical death ensue. Hence we tend to express certainty regarding these things, and many people even do so when they feel uncertain because to express this kind of uncertainty is to shake the very foundations of the world. From this human font springs ignorance spreading social mechanisms like Mormonism's "faithful history" policy.

I now find the uncertainty just described to be one of my greatest blessings. This fundamentally changes the way I look at all that appears before me. The acknowledgement that I don't know – that I am not certain – has ignited in me a curiosity and thirst for understanding that gets me up early most days excited to see what I will experience and learn. Perhaps most importantly, this new-to-me approach to life makes me more interested in the human beings with whom I am privileged to have contact each day than I have ever been. Never have I so regularly asked searching questions about their life experiences, what they have read and found enlightening, what they value and why, etc. than I do now. This is as true in the most intimate of my family relationships as with people I meet in the business community, in airports etc. As a result, I feel more alive than I can ever remember feeling.

Regrettably, however, there are some people who refuse to leave the cave because they are still certain of one interpretation or another of the shadows to which they don't really even pay attention, and do not want to see any evidence that questions their point of view. These people are threatened to one degree or another by those who insists that there is more than one legitimate way to interpret much of what shows up in the cave, and that there are legitimate ways to test at least some theories in that regard. I find that it is both irritating, and unproductive to deal with these people. And so while life is in general much broader, some of those with whom I used to huddle in a particular part of the cave are no longer amenable as companions. This saddens me, but after having done what I feel I can to change it, I have simply accepted it and moved on.

Another analogy that might be helpful in this regard relates to the changes I have made to my diet. Tonight Juli and I had dinner at a nice restaurant in Montreal. For me, the meal started with a lovely glass of French Merlot red wine that I drank slowly throughout the course of dinner. Its taste is way off at the tangy, acidic end of the spectrum, and if drank

in small sips acts like a condiment to the rest of the meal. I enjoyed it in this way while eating a cream of potato soup prepared in a way I had not seen before, and a main course of salmon. And at the end of the meal, I enjoyed an apple strudel desert with a cup of Viennese coffee. The desert you know about – sweet – and the coffee is way off at the bitter end of the spectrum. The contrast between the coffee and the strudel was particularly nice because they are both vastly different and complimentary – kind of like the crescendo at the end of the piece of classical music of the type we listened during dinner.

The wine and coffee additions to my diet establish outside parameters to the taste palate that are far wider than those I used to experience. This spreads the spectrum so that the tastes within the relatively narrow range I used to experience now seem different – more sharply defined and interesting. Kind of like notes on the piano. Once you hear really high and low notes, those in the middle range sound differently because of you enhanced ability to appreciate them in contract to a wider range of different things. That is, if the context within which you experience those sounds changes, your perception of those sounds does too. The same thing can be done by looking at pieces of famous art (like Edvard Munch's "Scream" while listening to different kinds of classical music. The kind of music you are listening to while viewing the picture actually changes how the picture looks. There is a fascinating website that allows you to experiment with this kind of thing (see – see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/multimedia/multimedia.html>; then click on “Keeping Score: MTT on Music” and then “Primal Moves”).

I recognize that I just tried to describe what salt does to someone who has not tasted it, but at least I tried. My point is that I am now having an experience that while no more emotionally moving than what I experienced before, is qualitatively completely different. And while you continue to watch the same old shadows, you can no more comprehend what I am seeing now than you can understand any other physical experience you have not had. What is it like to do a triple flip from the top of the Olympic diving platform, to give birth, or watch one of your own children die in your arms as people in the Middle East continue to do on a regular as a result largely of their certainty with respect to their religious beliefs? The best either you or I can do is guess.

Best,

bob