

What is Sacred?

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

Introduction

I had a conversation with a friend today that inspired me to record a few thoughts. She is a very bright lady - not lds - with a masters in divinity from Harvard, and a law degree. She teaches religion and women's issue at the U of Toronto, Canada's best university by most measures.

We were talking about David Sloan Wilson's "Darwin's Cathedral", my book du jour, and how some of the ideas in it relate to the way in which religion has affected issues related to how the sexes relate to each other. As we discussed/debated some of these issues, the following idea occurred to me.

The Uncertainty of Knowledge

Except within formal logic systems like mathematics, nothing can be known with certainty. For example, we "know" that $2+2=4$ because we have constructed a system (mathematics), know its rules, and this is a result of that system. The same cannot be said respecting our perceptions of physical reality because it is not a construct of our creation. We use science to an extent, and other theories of various types, to try to understand reality. However, $2+2=4$ every time. The same cannot be said about our ability to use scientific theories to understand the physical reality by which we are surrounded, or to predict what happens in life. We know a lot about weather systems and can only guess what will come from the sky tomorrow. Rockets that cost many millions to build and are intended to reach some distant destination sometimes misfire, or blow up during flight. And while some of the "laws" of science (such as gravity, for example) seem utterly reliable, we do not understand them in the same way we do math. So, it is possible (though very unlikely) that a theory based on such laws could fail us in particular circumstances.

The easiest way to show that any piece of "knowledge" is not certain is to simply ask "How do you know that?" in response to each statement of fact (this is called "questioning the premises") until either circularity is established or an admission is made that the matter is uncertain. Epistemic circularity is also sometimes called an "infinite regress".

Circularity is established when one statement of fact can be shown, through a chain of questions, to rely on itself. It is easy to do this with some assertions, such as: God exists.

Question: How do you know?

A: Because it says so in the Bible.

Q: How do you know that what the Bible says is true?

A: Because God says it is.

Q: Where does he say that?

A: In the Bible.

I have had the dialogue just outlined on a number of occasions with faithful Mormons and other religiously inclined friends, and they see nothing wrong with it. Until questioned closely on this point, and sometimes even after such questioning, their position is the idea that no proof is required that God exists. He just does, and to question his existence is worse than pointless. Such questions disclose the questioners suspect, or even evil, nature. This attitude exemplifies the "true belief" or "blind faith" paradigm. Most believers, however, will acknowledge the uncertainty of their belief, while still harbouring concern with respect to the moral fibre of anyone who does not share their view.

The assertion "God exists" is easy to deal with in the fashion just described because it is based on a non-testable theory – there is no way to prove, or disprove, God's existence – and so the chain of logic back to the source of authority for this statement – God – is relatively short. Any theory respecting the existence of God is not scientific because it is not testable. Hence, science has nothing definitive to say with respect to this debate despite how desperately many try to enlist it.

It is possible to establish circularity with respect to an assertion of fact such as that the earth is not flat (or is round), but only when dealing with someone who treats science like God – a source of unquestionable authority. In this case, the series of assertions and questions is likely to play out something like this:

A: The earth is round.

Q: How do you know that?

A: Everyone knows that, and I can find it in my science text book.

Q: How do you that "everyone", or your science textbook, is right?

A: Because the best scientists in the world say that the textbook is right?

Q: And how do you know that they are right.

A: This is stupid! They are the best scientists in the world! How could they possibly be wrong!?

And so circularity is established – the scientists are right because they say they are right. This kind of discussion can be wonderfully entertaining when it occurs between two people with different opinions with respect to a complex issue such as global warming, and who predictably have a different opinion as to who “the best scientists in the world” are. Such a discussion can quickly devolve into name calling, hair pulling and face scratching, and differs only in the terminology used from similar skirmishes between religionists of different stripes.

In discussions related to philosophy, or politics, or anything else, one will find surprisingly often even among the well-educated this kind of reasoning. They use various sources of indisputable authority behind which one simply does not look. Only the most enlightened will be prepared to make an admission of uncertainty respecting ideological matters. The source of indisputable authority might be scientists or great philosophers (Socrates said ..., or Einstein said ... and that settles the matter), or political leaders (the Chairman said, or Marx said) etc. But more people resort to "God said", through his prophet or otherwise, than anything else.

When dealing with someone who understands how science works, circularity will not usually be established. Rather, there will be an admission of uncertainty. For example:

A: The earth is not flat.

Q: How do you know that?

A: Satellite pictures taken from space show it to be round.

Q: How do you know that those pictures are real, and not made up?

A: I am not certain of that. But, I trust the National Geographic, various government space agencies and the many independent scientists who have been involved with the taking of these photographs. There is only the tiniest of chances that they are all wrong. And, the laws of physics indicate on the basis of various measurements that the earth is round.

Q: How do you know that these measurements are accurate and that the theory on which they predict the Earth to be round is accurate?

A: I am not 100% certain of that, but ...(a summary of evidence follows). And so again, it is so unlikely that these measurements or the theories on which they are based are incorrect that I am not prepared to worry about it.

This process could go on for a long time in the case of a statement respecting the shape of the earth, and in each case the conclusion would be the same – a summary would be provided to show that on the basis of a theory that cannot be proven true, evidence that cannot be proven to have been accurately observed supports the theory that the earth is not flat. And, there would be no way to prove that no other contradictory evidence would ever be produced, or a theory that produced a contrary conclusion would ever be formulated. However, the more thoroughly and successfully test a theory is, the more confidence we are justified in having with respect to it, and as shown below, some theories that cannot be proven to be 100% certain have shown themselves to be so reliable in various circumstances that we are justified in treating them as true for practical purposes.

Authority

The purpose of the above summary is to illustrate that humans dislike uncertainty. So, we find "certain" authorities to which we turn to cut off the infinite regresses into which we otherwise would continually fall. Religion is the most popular of all such authorities, of all time. If god says it, or the person we consider to be god's agent says it for god, it IS true and hence can't be questioned. Hence, no infinite regress. Hence, we feel secure.

Some people rely upon science as their ultimate authority. Oddly, these people are almost never scientists. Often, religious people use scientific authority to buttress their religious authority in cases where they feel that is required to remain secure. Mormons have long done this.

Some people use the great philosophers as their unquestionable authorities. Some people even use political leaders in this role. Hitler, for a while, was such an authority figure. Marx, Mao and others have held such authority for much longer periods, over broader areas.

The Sacred

In light of the foregoing, let me suggest two things. First, as humanity becomes more aware - or as Buddha would say, more awake - the bounds of authority are pushed back. That is, more choice is left to individual human beings, and less to leaders. This, in my view, is the fundamental measure of a civilization - how much choice can the individual humans within a society handle without running amok. This ties into Daniel Dennett's ideas set out in his book "Freedom Evolves".

Second, no matter how far out the circle of authority is pushed, we still eventually in almost all cases find things that people are not prepared to question - sources of absolute authority. These are the "sacred" of a society or an individual. Much can be learned by asking "How do you know that?" until circularity is established or uncertainty is admitted. Often this process brings an unquestionable source of authority into view.

I suggest that by going through this exercise with ourselves, we can learn things that will help us to understand those around us as well as ourselves.