

Not Without a Doubt

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Abstract:

In this paper, I share my story about some of my experiences with doubt. Along the way, I also share some philosophical reflections. I know this does not tell you very much, but like I said, I am telling a story, and I do not want to spoil the ending.

Richard Dawkins is the reason I am a philosopher today. Well, Dawkins and Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was a name that I wanted resting on my bookshelf so that my friends would think I was smart and stop thinking of me as the clumsy, impulsive idiot in the group. How idiotic of me to think that this would do anything to change my standing in a group which cares nothing for philosophy and theology. How impulsive of me to buy *City of God* before coming to this realization. How clumsy of me to actually read the *City of God* in the way that I did, without any real understanding of what was being claimed. It took me a whole summer to read that tome, but for what little it is worth, I did earn the right to rest Augustine's name on my shelf that fall.

It was Dawkins who first lit within me that fire of deep existential doubt which would eventually lift me aloft and propel me towards a career in philosophy. For it was he who made me seriously doubt whether the God whom I had spent my entire life trying to obey, or at least just trying to placate, well and truly exists. Until I read *The God Delusion*, I had been given very little reason to question my evangelical Christian worldview.

In fact, not only had I not previously been exposed to the kinds of questions which Dawkins raised, but I had been trained to resist even asking such questions. As Biblical scholar and theologian Peter Enns puts it,

“Like a lot of [Protestant] Christians, I was taught – from a young age all the way through seminary, and in most every church I've ever been to, book I've read, or sermon I've heard – that having strong faith depends on “knowing what you believe.” And people of true faith will be able to articulate what they know to a lost and blind world that just doesn't get it. It was all very logical and

clear. Having that kind of sure knowledge of the mysteries of life is promoted as one of the major perks of being an insider to God.

“Conversely, if you don’t know what you believe, something is clearly wrong with you that needs to be addressed with a sense of some urgency. At least that is the message I picked up over the years – which really stinks if you happen to have questions and you don’t always feel like you know what you believe.”¹

I picked up this same exact message growing up. If salvation involves *believing* in Jesus – that he was and is the Son of God, who came to pay the price for our sins – then to *doubt* that God even exists was tantamount to admitting that one might not actually believe in Jesus in the way that is required for salvation. To even ask questions was akin to playing with a lake of fire.

It may well be that some of those reading this are not familiar with the notions of hell and, what is emphatically not the same thing in certain circles, the lake of fire. In order to drive home how serious a matter it was for me to doubt my salvation, I shall now describe to you what I was taught would happen to those who do not put their faith in Jesus.

To be damned is to be forced against one’s will to spend eternity in a lake of fire. The lake of fire is described as a place of cannot-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face darkness, where one is somehow supposed to be hideously alone, yet always able to hear the ear-shattering cacophony of screams, cries, and gnashing of teeth of countless other terrified, anguished souls. There is screaming because everyone in the lake of fire is continually

¹ Enns (2016): 29. Another great book on this topic is Greg Boyd’s *Benefit of the Doubt*.

experiencing the excruciating pain of being burned alive by flames so hot they must apparently not give off any light. And as if this were not enough, each person is also supposed to be experiencing the excruciating pain of being endlessly eaten alive from the inside out by an undying worm. There is also unquenchable thirst in the lake of fire, which is a powerful torment in its own right. But the worst of all is supposed to be that incomprehensible psychological terror which accompanies being cut off from having any relationship with God. There is *no one* who can help you in this lake. There is *no one* who loves you there. There is no help, no escape, no end.

I have since learned that even in the early Church there were many who did not believe that a truly loving God would, or even could, force His own children to suffer for all of eternity in this way. Consequently, I now regard the beliefs described above, and all of the terror they cause, as insidious, a traumatizing result of weaponizing the Bible even if only inadvertently.² Nevertheless, I was not aware of all this back when Richard Dawkins was causing me to question my faith. It should surprise no one, then, that I spent many sleepless nights deeply worried about eternity.

What is further, in my community, spiritual strength was measured in terms of the staunchness of one's beliefs, in the right doctrines, of course. So not only was doubt a threat to one's salvation, but it was also a threat to one's status in the community. As Enns pointed out above, to be thought of as someone who questions the unquestionable was to be thought of as a person in need of help, and perhaps even as someone who poses a

² See, for instance, N. T. Wright's *The Day the Revolution Began*. And see also Preston Sprinkle's edited collection *Four Views on Hell*.

danger to the community. For it would never do to have such a person broadcast widely their questions to the whole church community. There could be other “weak-minded” Christians who might themselves be led astray in this way. No, better to help the doubter quietly, and if not answer their questions directly, at least help them to see those questions for what they really were – attacks from the devil himself. The upshot of these social pressures was to make it seem dangerous for me to even seek help from other Christians. Who could I turn to who would understand without judgment?

I believe that in his own sneering way, Dawkins was honestly just trying to help people break free from genuinely harmful religious beliefs. However, the way in which he went about doing so was itself so incredibly harmful. For he did not seek to meet people where they were, in an attempt to lovingly and gently persuade them to think in a different way, and this for their own sake. Instead, he implicitly ridiculed them, me, for being stupid enough to believe such obvious nonsense in the first place. I read Dawkins’ book and trembled, not because his arguments are all that compelling upon further analysis – they are not, turns out that he is not a great philosopher – but because he made me realize that my faith, and therefore my salvation, was not nearly as secure as I had previously thought.

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I can now look back on *The God Delusion* with thankfulness. Reading it, and then reading Harris and Hitchens immediately afterwards, forced me to go in a different direction with my life. It is a direction which has proven to be exponentially better than the one in which I was headed. Nevertheless, at the time, I experienced extreme psychological pain. This is the first observation that I want to make about my experience with doubt – it

can be incredibly painful. The second observation that I want to make is that doubt can also be incredibly helpful, insofar as it can spur us on to do and/or achieve that which we consider valuable. As Charles Peirce once opined,

“However the doubt may originate, it stimulates the mind to an activity which may be slight or energetic, calm or turbulent. Images pass rapidly through consciousness, one incessantly melting into another, until at last, when all is over – it may be in a fraction of a second, in an hour, or after long years – we find ourselves decided as to how we should act under such circumstances as those which occasioned our hesitation. In other words, we have attained belief.”³

While Dawkins may have played an important role in causing me to doubt, it was my late uncle, Lawrence Burkholder, who directed my now-stimulated mind towards a profitable end. Lawrence had graduate degrees in theology and history, and a reputation in our family for being a somewhat progressive intellectual, so it was he whom I eventually turned to after reading Dawkins’ book. I wanted to know what he thought about it. Was he impressed? He was not. Was he aware of how one might answer the questions that I was now wrestling with? Yes, but there was a caveat – while we can certainly put our faith in God, just as Dawkins apparently has put his faith in scientism, it is not clear that we can ever really know anything with absolute certainty. If I wanted to know whether God exists, I first had to determine whether we can know anything at all, and if we can, I had to further

³ Peirce (1878): p. 290.

determine how we can know that we know something. In short, I needed to study epistemology.

Having realized that this project was now far bigger than what a student of architecture technology could suss out in their spare time, I enrolled to study philosophy part-time at McMaster University. It was there that I was first began to seriously explore the work of Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Russell and Wittgenstein.⁴ It was there that I read Gettier, Goldman, Chisholm, Alston, Plantinga, Lehrer, Putnam, and about things like Coherentism, Foundationalism, Infitism, and Chisholm's Problem of the Criterion. My goal was to learn everything I could about the theory of knowledge and especially about epistemic justification. For if I could just parse out a working theory of warrant, then I could start discerning which beliefs about God were most warranted.

Interestingly enough, what started out as very painful was now becoming quite exciting and transformative. Doubt had spurred me on towards learning and exploration. In his brilliant book *The Quest for Certainty*, John Dewey claims that,

“The quest for certainty is a quest for a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear which action casts. For it is not uncertainty *per se* which men dislike, but the fact that uncertainty involves us in peril of evils. Uncertainty that affected only the detail of consequences to be experienced provided they had a warrant of being

⁴ I wish I could have listed women here, but I was not really exposed to their work in epistemology as an undergraduate student. This is not the fault of the philosophy department at McMaster, but rather a long-standing fault in our society. Apart from one of the courses I took at McMaster under Sandra Lapointe, I did not start seriously reading women philosophers and scientists until I began graduate studies.

enjoyable would have no sting. It would bring the zest of adventure and the spice of variety. Quest for complete certainty can be fulfilled in pure knowing alone. Such is the verdict of our most enduring philosophic tradition.”⁵

As I understand Dewey, he is here criticizing this “enduring philosophic tradition” for the disdain it has had for those practical arts involved in everyday living. The type of knowledge, the certainty sought by those working in this tradition, has to do with abstract theories about the timeless and the immutable. Think Plato’s forms and Russell’s universals. It cares little for the practical and ever-uncertain knowledge required for navigating life’s demands. If all that we were in doubt about were things which could not have any real-world effect on us, should we turn out to be wrong in our beliefs, then our doubt might even be experienced as enjoyable.

I am very sympathetic to Dewey’s way of thinking. However, I would like to nuance what he has said in the passage above. For in my case, in those early years of my undergraduate education as a novice philosopher, I did not fall neatly onto either side of the line which Dewey draws. On the one hand, my doubt had to do with the most perilous of all possible issues for a person raised as I had been raised. I writhed in response to that lasting and pungent sting of existential doubt. And yet, at the same time, as I began my investigation, I came to enjoy such a thrill in learning about all of these fascinating thinkers and the vast world their ideas described that the initial sting of doubt soon subsided to a kind of dull ache; ever-present, but not acute. The anesthetic turned out to be that zest for adventure and spice of variety which Dewey describes so beautifully. No small part of my

⁵ Dewey (1929/1960) p. 8.

ability to savour these things was due to my realization that whatever cut one way with respect to what we could know, equally cut the other way also. If I could not know with certainty that God exists, because of my limitations as an epistemic agent, then I also could not know with certainty that God does not exist. Nor could Dawkins or any other atheists. I found that shared finitude and fallibility very comforting.

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Follow my logic here. We are clearly capable of doubting. Therefore, we must have evolved in a such a way that we are now capable of doubting. This suggests that doubting, or at least doubting well, likely serves a useful purpose for helping us to engage in those sorts of organism-environment interactions which are beneficial for ensuring our continued survival as a species. Now, if epistemic attitudes have a role in helping to guide action, it follows that insofar as the capacity to doubt appears to be generally beneficial, what makes it beneficial is the role it plays in helping to guide action. In my case, doubting the existence of God, coupled with sage advice from my mentor, functioned as profitable catalysts for my intellectual development.

It should not be too hard to grasp how doubt might prove useful, even in the wild. Imagine a field mouse, hidden safely in some long grass. That mouse may doubt that it is safe to emerge out into the open, and as a result, it may hesitate. This hesitation might last just long enough for the bird of prey which was indeed just now scanning that part of the field where the mouse was hidden to shift its attention elsewhere. Thus, the hesitation born from doubt may just have saved that mouse's life.

I wish that what we have just now imagined was a case study I could have cited from the empirical literature on doubt. Unfortunately, as far as I can tell, no such literature exists. To be sure, there is an ample scientific literature on uncertainty, and insofar as uncertainty may take the form of doubt, it is possibly the case that there is some data which might be of relevance to anyone developing a scientific theory of doubt.

Yet it seems to me that doubt and uncertainty are not quite the same physical phenomena. I can be generally uncertain about when my wife will arrive home after work, but without more information, perhaps a positive claim of some kind, I do not doubt *when* my wife will arrive home after work. Doubt only comes into play if, say, my wife has promised to be home by a certain time. Once either a positive/negative proposition or assertion or description or even impulse or thought has been provided, then there is that specified target which can be doubted. Uncertainty, by contrast, seems to be something I can experience even in the absence of any target. Thus, I suspect that the organism-environment system dynamics involved in doubt will be measurably different from, even if still closely related to the organism-environment system dynamics involved in uncertainty.

This is an empirical hypothesis, that doubt always has a target which it is a doubt with respect to, whereas uncertainty need not have any target. As an empirical hypothesis, I am unwilling to say that my distinction between doubt and uncertainty is a useful distinction to make until it has robustly been put to the test. In fact, until we have begun with a close examination of the various mechanisms, processes, relations and/or enabling constraints involved in the physical enactment of doubt, I am even unwilling to say what I think doubt actually is as a phenomenon.

Even further, I do not think that anyone else has really grasped what doubt actually is either, at least in terms of the full range of role(s) it might play in guiding organism-environment interactions. I acknowledge that Paul Thagard (2004), at least, begins with the cognitive science when theorizing about doubt. And I think that Charles Peirce, John Dewey, and Bertrand Russell each made valuable contributions to the discussion, in their own ways.⁶ However, with respect to what Flusser (1966/2014), Salmon (1995), Howard-Snyder (2013), Lee (2018), Moon (2018), Machuca Conicet (2021) have to say about doubt, I see relatively little of empirically tested substance to either agree or disagree with. For each of these thinkers stays largely within the realm of how we think and speak about doubt.

Please do not misunderstand me. I think there is tremendous value in what these researchers are doing. The part of the picture of doubt that they are painting is worth painting. My point is just that there is so much more to this picture than what the brushes of conceptual and grammatical analysis can fill in. To focus only on how doubt affects the ways in which we think and talk about it is to miss the way in which it might variously affect all of the other actions that we human organisms are capable of. Does a doubting jumper jump less far? Does a doubting heart beat differently, or doubting lungs breathe differently, or a doubting olfactory bulb oscillate differently? The questions multiply.

⁶ One might even say that Russell's entire epistemology was actually a study in doubt, given his focus on degrees of credibility. See Russell (1948). And see Russell (1958) for an example of how the Pragmatists tended to be radically misunderstood by their contemporaries.

Suffice to say, I shall not be specifying my preferred definition for doubt. However, this does not prevent me from describing how I have been variously affected by doubt, whatever this might amount to.

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We are at last in a position to understand why I have chosen to share my story of how doubt has impacted my life. As I see it, I am just cutting straight to the chase by making explicit that which remains implicit in each person's theorizing about doubt. I take it we can all agree that our experience of the world is subjective, through and through. How we perceive doubt, how we think and talk about it, will all vary according to our perspective, and our developmental history, and our values, and our aims. Some of these might overlap with the perspectives, histories, values, and aims of others, but the exact intersection of all of these subjective factors will be unique to each person, not to mention each Principle Investigator. It is because we are all subjectively enabled in these ways that each one of us must try to discern what it is about each of our experiences of doubt which is reliably unique, a recurring artefact of our own relation to doubt, so as to contrast these things with that which we might all experience in common, namely, whatever objective properties doubt might have.

Traditionally, we have mistakenly thought of what is objective as true, immutable, universal, a reliable standard. And we have tended to denigrate what is subjective as false, or at least distorted, limited, unreliable. But this does not make sense to me. Subjective and objective properties are both equally real. When perceived, thought about and

discussed, they both play a crucial part in helping to guide our actions. Therefore, both subjective and objective properties play a role in human evolution.

If doubt has even just one objective property, then it would necessarily have to be the case that for all possible subjective observers of that property, the relation between each subjective observer and that property of doubt would have to be the same. To use an illustration, suppose that the speed of light remains the same regardless of who one is, or where one is in the universe, or how quickly one is travelling. If the speed of light remains the same for all observers, regardless of whichever intersection of subjective factors might play a role in a given observer's observation, then, and only then, might it be said that the speed of light is an objective property. For the observation of this property would be in no way contingent upon the unique subjectivity of each observer. So too with doubt. If it should be the case that regardless of which unique set of subjective factors play a role in our perception of doubt, or in our thinking and talking about doubt, we all experience doubt as having the property X, then it would follow that X was indeed an objective property of doubt.

What would *not* follow, however, is that X is the *only* property of doubt. To use another illustration, suppose that I myself have some objective property X, such that regardless of who perceives me, every perceiver would perceive me as having the property X. Does it follow from this that my only property is X? Not at all! I might also have property Y, even though only a subset of those with whom I interact might ever observe this. Maybe I am funny, but only around certain people and in certain contexts. My funniness would not be an objective property, because not every subjective observer would experience me as

being funny. Yet just because my funniness might not be an objective property does not make it the case that it is no property at all. So too with doubt. Even if we all discover that doubt has a given objective property X, it would not follow from this that all of the other subjective properties we variously experience doubt as having, with respect to ourselves and in our own contexts, are somehow then not real. Doubt might very well have a given property for me which it does not have for you. For each person is unique, and therefore will be likely to have experienced doubt in their lives in a somewhat different way than others do.

This bleeds through in the way that people think and talk about doubt. When Vorms & Hahn (2019) begin their analysis of doubt by adopting a decision-theoretic framework, this reveals something about their own experience with doubt. They could have started with a linguistic analysis of the word 'doubt', like Moon (2018) does. They could have started instead with a focus on doubt's affective dimension, and with social psychology, like Thagard (2004) does. The decisions each of us make about how to even begin thinking and talking about doubt reveals quite a lot about what drives us, what we value, and what we have ourselves experienced. This is profoundly beautiful, I think. For it means that when we pay attention to what others do and do not say about doubt, as well as to how they say what they say, when we pay attention to where we agree and disagree with that person, we will begin to get a sense of who that person is, and what kind of life they have had. Try as we might to fight against it in academia, our subjectivity always bleeds through into our work. Thank God it does! Otherwise, we would really be alone.

Say that you and I disagree about some aspect of doubt. I think it has property X, but you deny this passionately. Say that I then demonstrate genuine curiosity. I ask you why you might think as you do about doubt. As you explain to me your reasoning, and as I reciprocate, we begin to get to know one another. Perhaps we might even become frenemies, if not good friends. Over time, I might learn about how the way in which you were treated as a child has had an impact on how you now think about doubt. I begin to understand how it would be quite reasonable for someone who had been treated as you have been treated to deny that doubt has property X. Conversely, I also might see how my own thinking about doubt is itself influenced by my past, such that it is equally reasonable for someone in my position to think that doubt does have property X. In such a situation, not only will I have been given enough evidence for thinking that property X is a subjective property of X, though no less real for being so, but I will have gained a much deeper insight into how you think. In addition to helping me to better care for you, our interactions will also serve to expand my understanding of doubt. For through you, I will have learned that doubt may have one or more other subjective properties which I myself may never have even imagined it to have.

Like I said, by sharing my story I am cutting straight to the chase. I am skipping the part where you have to come to the realization that there is more to me than just what I have written. I am fast-forwarding through your understandable hesitance to reach out to me or introduce yourself to me at a conference. I am using my capacity to be incredibly vulnerable to demonstrate to you how each of our stories impacts what we think and say. I shall not always write in this way, for there is tremendous value in that gradual process

which I am skipping here. Real friendships take time to develop. My desire is that by being upfront about how my experiences have impacted my own thinking about doubt, I can foster an atmosphere of curiosity and perhaps even intimate connection in our all-too-competitive and pugilistic academic fields. For I am confident that in the absence of such an atmosphere, even our best science will never yield the sort of understanding we seek.

Consider how close you might feel to me, should you discover that we have both had almost exactly the same experience with doubt. Suppose we both have doubted in a particular way, and felt the same feelings, and drawn the same conclusions, would it not feel as though there is some part of you which must be the same as some part of me? Would we not find it easier to empathize with one another? I know that I feel a very special kind of unity with my wife when she knows exactly what kind of scandalous joke I am about to say quietly to her, just out of earshot of someone nearby. She knows what I am thinking. And in this knowledge, she reveals to me that there is some part of each of us which is truly shared.

Conversely, consider how alienating, and even devastating it can be to think that no one else has had the same experience with doubt as you have.

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Like it or not, there is still a live debate in our society over whether we ought to believe someone who claims to have been the survivor of sexual assault. Or more particularly, there is a live debate over whether we ought to believe a woman and/or a queer person's claim to have been sexually assaulted. What is not really a live debate in our society is whether we should believe that men can actually be victimized in these ways as

well. How many of us have secretly thought the man claiming to be the victim could have stopped it if they didn't really want it to happen deep down? I know that I have personally had that thought about other men. And this, even though I myself am a textbook male survivor of sexual assault.

A few years ago, at the beginning of the fall semester, there was an outcry against sexual assault and harassment on campus. This culminated in a large rally followed by a march. As a survivor, I encouraged my colleagues to attend this rally, for I was looking forward to seeing change. Of the multiple speeches given at that rally, only one person mentioned that men could be victimized sexually. Actually, what they did was list the types of demographics of people who could be victimized sexually, and in this list, they briefly included men. That was all that this person said about my kind of story. Though it was still more than what anyone else said that day. Every other person exclusively railed at length against the injustices faced by women and those who are queer. They were not wrong to rail against such things. For the way in which women and queer folk are often treated in our society is beyond reprehensible. The problem was not what these speakers at the rally were saying, it was what they were not saying – they were not saying that many men are survivors too. And for what it is worth, many of these men were victimized by women and/or those who are queer, whether as boys or as adults. I left before the march started. I did not want any of my colleagues to see my tears of frustration, for I completely lacked the ability in that moment to explain them. How could a rally about not being silenced any longer be itself an instrument of such devastating silencing?

Perhaps you, dear reader, have been feeling silenced as well? Why did I mention that women and/or queer people struggle to have people believe that they have been sexually assaulted, only to then immediately turn the attention to the plight of men in our society, a plight which is surely overblown? If this is what you may have been thinking, I want you to know that I recognize that there are likely fears and wounds in your past which are motivating you to think and act with respect to the issues of sexism and believing survivors in the way that you are. I feel that pain. Literally, I feel it, because I too am speaking out of a place of pain and fear which is informing my own subjective experience with these issues. I too have been doubted. I too have had my very intelligence called into question because of my sex. For what else could it mean to have someone genuinely question whether I actually understand what happened to me?

Here is the trope. I am a man, and all men want sex all the time, and all real men are assertive and strong. Therefore, because I did not physically prevent what happened, and because I must always want sex, that entails that I chose to let what happened happen. This then further entails that I must have really wanted it, at least deep down.

What can I say to this? I can tell you that I didn't want what happened to happen. But if you think I am just lying, or that I am just in denial, or perhaps that I am just totally, out-to-lunch-stupid, then hey, maybe you are right, maybe I really did want it after all. Apparently, I am entirely incapable of saying what happened to me because I am subjective in all of the wrong kinds of ways with respect to a situation which you never witnessed. Apparently, I was not sexually assaulted because otherwise, someone might have to wrestle with their own insecurities about what it means to be a man in our society.

I am telling you right now that I did not want happened to me to happen to me. I repeatedly said no, even though he had tricked me into getting more drunk than I had ever been before, and this, in a context where I was especially vulnerable. I repeatedly pushed him away as I lay there in a profoundly uncomfortable, uncertain, exhausted delirium. Then when he persisted, and when it started to feel good in a gross way, because all of those neurotransmitters which make sexual stimulation feel good had started to make me lose that last shred of inhibition which I was desperately clinging on to, I began to doubt.

I doubted that I did not really want it, even though I was incapable of giving informed consent, and even though I had said no repeatedly, and even though I had pushed him away. Otherwise, how could I find it so physically pleasurable at the same time that it felt so emotionally revolting?

I have never been attracted to men in any way. Did this mean that I am gay, or wait, maybe just bi-sexual? Now I was doubting my sexuality.

I would never be able to tell my parents or my church community that I was possibly bi-sexual. And I could certainly never tell them how I first came to question whether this might be a possibility. It was all too incredibly shameful, and dangerous. Now I was doubting my standing in my community.

And what about the woman I was dating, did this count as cheating on her? Was I a cheater, like one of those heartless, self-centered people who does not actually give a shit about the person they are supposed to be committed to? Now I was doubting my character.

When it was over, I turned to my side and vomited. I blamed it on the alcohol. But really, what was making me feel sick was what just happened. Nothing about it felt good or

right. I had made a huge mistake coming here, drinking all these free drinks. How could I have been so foolish and naïve? Now I was doubting my discernment and intelligence.

Because I eventually stopped resisting, that must have meant that I bear some responsibility in what happened, I later reasoned, as I tried to process what had happened. Sure, that makes me a shitty person, because I cheated on my girlfriend, but at least I did not have my agency stripped from me. At least I was not so weak as that. Better to be a cheater, who is apparently bi-sexual, and stupid to boot, than to be a no one, a person with absolutely no worth, no autonomy, no identity, during that disgusting, shameful chunk of time that happened.

Over time these doubts became dispositional and very rarely occurrent.⁷ I repressed any questions or thoughts about bi-sexuality, and I leaned into my attraction to women. I eventually concluded that yes, I had been naïve, but I was just a kid, and kids sometimes make mistakes. We just have to pick ourselves back up and learn from them. In my case, I learned to accept that I am not a perfect person. I have flaws in my character, flaws which I must strive hard to either fix or at least mitigate, flaws which make me no better than every other flawed person I come across. I extracted some humility out of my humiliation and tried to forget about the rest.

What I did not think to question, however, was whether I was actually responsible for anything that happened to me. That was just not really even an option afforded to me by

⁷ I find Matthew Lee's application of the dispositional v. occurrent distinction to doubt to be quite useful. A doubt can be dispositional when it "...isn't a constant irritation or a constant impetus to inquiry..." and "Only when the content [of one's doubt] comes to mind [occurently] does the subject experience discomfort and a desire to make up his [or her] mind." Lee (2018).

my community. Everyone knew that adult men never actually get sexually assaulted, or if they do, it does not really constitute all that big a harm suffered. Or at least that was the impression I got from the snickers I heard, concerning those high school boys who have affairs with their hot teachers, only to later claim that they were forced into these relationships against their will. That was the impression I got from all of the countless cues in our society telling us that real men are tough, assertive, virile, violent, emotionless, angry, logical. That was the impression I got from all of the many stories from adult male survivors of sexual assault that it seemed to me like no one was saying anywhere.

When I stood in that crowd numbering in the tens of thousands, and listened to speaker after speaker fail to remember to mention that many males are sexually assaulted also, it made me doubt that I was a real person with inherent value. You see, a few months prior, I had been forced to finally question whether I was in fact responsible for anything that had happened to me. And in questioning that, I was forced to doubt whether I had really had any agency, identity, worth during that shameful episode. I was attending a seminar on sexual harassment and abuse, and as the counsellor began to describe male sexual assault, as she explained that many men share certain doubts – doubts that I had carried then buried – it finally occurred to me that I was a textbook male victim of sexual assault.

As she spoke, the answer enveloped me like the stunning loss felt when the bottom suddenly drops out from one's world. It hit me even before I even thought to ask the question. I *had* had my agency stripped from me. My value as an end-in-itself had been taken from me for the duration of the gap in that sequence of moments which I identify as

mine. During that gap, someone else effectively made my moment theirs. It was communicated to me in no uncertain terms that during that episode, my story did not matter in any way whatsoever. And they must have been right, because even now I do not have a moment of my own to put in that gap. I was not really there when my body started to be controlled by someone else's mind.

Grappling with this realization was both relieving and devastating. I was relieved to learn that I was not responsible in any way for that horrible, shameful moment, because it was never my moment anyways. If someone takes a moment away from you, they bear all of the blame for absolutely everything that happens in that moment. I was devastated because there was a naïve, well-meaning kid who had been profoundly hurt and who had never healed properly. That kid had carried doubts well into adulthood that were never his to carry – doubts about his character and his discernment and his intelligence. Those were doubts that the person who victimized him ought to have carried all of these years. Even now I can still only weep in the third person for that poor kid. To weep in the first person would require my being able to identify myself as myself in that moment that was taken from me, but I cannot. There is no one there.

I cried in the first person at that rally though. When my story was not recognized as important, it made me re-experience that loss of agency that that kid, that I, had experienced those many years prior. All of the doubt in our society, about the validity of the stories of male survivors of sexual assault, had reared its ugly head in the most unlikely of places – a rally to raise awareness in an effort to stop people from being sexually assaulted. It is not that my story was explicitly questioned, mind you. No one has ever said to me that

they do not believe me about what I experienced, though I have had someone inappropriately try to explain to me where the person who victimized me may have been coming from. But in even just forgetting about stories like mine, the speakers at that rally clearly communicated to me that my kind of story was forgettable. Only stories that are not very important, or valuable, are ever forgotten. But that is exactly how I felt when I was being assaulted – unimportant, totally without value. This was why I left before the march, with tears of frustration running down my face. I had just been caused to doubt my own identity as a person, again, in a context that ought to have been a place of healing. If I was not safe even there, where else could I feel safe? I knew I was deeply wounded, to the point of actually being in serious trouble. I knew I needed professional help, so I made a beeline to the campus mental health services.

I know that there remain many people who continue to doubt the stories of male survivors of sexual assault. I know that most of these people doubt out of ignorance – they simply do not know just how negatively one’s doubt can be experienced by other people. If they did, then they would surely take steps to excise this particular dispositional doubt from their way of thinking. Hopefully, this part of my experience with doubt can help to raise the awareness needed to begin this process. Otherwise, I will just have shared one of the most vulnerable parts of my story for nothing.

* * *

You might imagine just how disappointed I was in the fourth year of my undergraduate degree to have to finally acknowledge that there is no non-arbitrary, non-question-begging, non-contradictory way to provide a meta-theory of epistemic

justification for one's theory of epistemic justification. Like Chisholm's Problem of the Criterion, this problem seemed to me to be unsolvable.⁸ Either one's meta-theory will be the same as one's primary theory of epistemic justification, in which case, it will beg the question, or it will be different from one's primary theory, in which case, the meta-theory will undermine the primary theory. Even if one could resolve this issue, there would still remain the problem avoiding an infinite regress of meta-theories. Finally, we cannot just arbitrarily assert that our theory of justification is warranted, for that would open the door for anyone to do likewise with their own rival theories.

Without a defensible theory of epistemic justification, we can never ensure that any of our beliefs are fully justified, and this means that even if we did have a defensible criterion for what counts as knowledge, we could still never confidently identify any bona fide tokens of knowledge. And with that, I kissed knowing goodbye. I had originally gone to school to dispel my doubts. What I graduated with, seven years later, was a diploma I was proud of and an even greater sense of disillusionment than ever before. My only solace was my conviction that everyone else, should there even be anyone else, was in more or less the same position that as I was.⁹ Apart from what we had access to in our own minds, such as the bald fact *that* we seemed to have experiences, none of us really knew what we were talking about. There was no way to be certain about how things really are in the world outside of ourselves.

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⁸ While I remain unconvinced by Lawrence Sanger's positive proposal, he does a fairly good job of laying out the problem which ended my career as an analytic epistemologist. See Sanger (2000).

⁹ Perhaps this was something more than a conviction. Maybe it was something I, um, knew?

Ever wonder if you are brain in a vat? No, I mean, have you ever *seriously* considered whether everything you perceive is really just the result of a computer program and a bunch of evil scientists piping data into your brain? As in, have you ever been to the point that if you saw a car bearing down towards you at 100 mph you would honestly take that extra moment to consider whether there was really any point to jumping out of the way? Me neither. I will jump out of the way every time. Because some doubts are just not worth the risk.

I find that interesting – that just like believing, and as we already saw Dewey point out above, there can be a real risk involved in doubting.¹⁰ This risk, I think, is what keeps nearly everyone from living as though they actually doubted that how the world appears is how it really is, at least for the most part. Some of us philosophers might sincerely believe that we could very well be just brains in a vat, for all we know, but that sincere belief does not tend to help guide the vast majority of our actions. Instead, the only influence it seems to have is upon those actions involved in our thinking abstractly about philosophical issues. I suspect that the reason for this limited sphere of influence is because it is not worth risking the consequences of allowing that belief to play a role in guiding the rest of our actions. Precisely because it matters whether we might be wrong, we still harbour doubt about such sceptical beliefs, even when we take ourselves to actually believe them. (Perhaps there is some cognitive dissonance going on here?) Give us all the bullet-proof,

¹⁰ Awareness of this risk can cause anxiety, which may also play an important part in doubting. See Vazard (2022) as well as Hookway (2008).

iron-clad philosophical arguments in the world for global scepticism, most of us are still going to regard it with suspicion, given the risk we would be taking to live accordingly.

Though many philosophers, including Hume, had already recognized that even the most sceptical amongst us still tend to live as though they are not sceptics, it was Thomas Reid who did the most to really put this problem on the map. Broadly understood, and radically oversimplified, as I see it, Reid's complaint boiled down to a burden of proof argument. The burden of proof was not upon those who believe that the world is (largely) how it appears to be to have to defend this belief against those who have their doubts. Rather, it was upon those who doubted this common belief to have to defend why they were warranted in doubting it in the first place, especially since most of these doubters did not actually seem to believe their own sceptical claims strongly enough to risk living by them. Hume may have introduced us to the most radical of scepticisms in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, according to Reid, but

“He believed, against his principles, that he should be read, and that he should retain his personal identity, till he reaped the honour and reputation justly due to his metaphysical *acumen*.”¹¹

I am not a common-sense philosopher, so I shall not go so far as Reid in stipulating who has what burden of proof. Besides, even if there is some core set of beliefs which all humans tend to share, a “common-sense”, as I think cognitive linguists have now given us good reason to believe that there is,¹² I have already explained why I think that that which is

¹¹ Reid (1983): p. 8.

¹² Sanders (2016).

subjective is just as important and true and real as that which is objective – for *both* play a role in guiding action. Perhaps that makes me a proponent of *uncommon* sense?

No, the reason I mention Reid is because he was the first to raise the possibility, at least for me, that doubt is not actually any more of a default position than is belief. One cannot just call a given claim into question and then assume that one is automatically warranted in doubting that claim until such a time as good reason can be given for believing it. Why? Because this assumption can itself be doubted. I can doubt that X, where X is the claim that, “One is in fact automatically warranted in doubting a claim until such a time as good reason can be given for believing that claim.” According to X itself, I would be warranted in doubting that X until such a time as good reason can be given for believing that X. But then, if I am warranted in doubting that X, then I am warranted in doubting that I am warranted in doubting that X. This is not a paradox, strictly speaking, for we are not dealing with propositions that have endlessly vacillating truth values. Nevertheless, it is self-defeating in the sense that it leads to a kind of doubt which can never be resolved.

Once I realized that the doubter has just as much of an obligation to explain how their own past experiences and subjectivity informs their doubting that X as does the believer for explaining the same thing with respect to their belief that X, a whole new world of philosophical possibilities opened up for me.

This brings my story to the present day. I had graduated from McMaster feeling jaded about epistemology. Not knowing what I ought to do next, but having developed a strong interest in the philosophy of science, and especially in cognitive science, I went to the University of Western Ontario to do my Masters. During that time, I attended a seminar on

the philosophy of neuroscience run by now PhD supervisor. I will always remember listening to one of my peers, a Quinean as I recall, debating the professor about the web of beliefs. Having listened to my peer say his piece, the professor calmly placed a grenade in my mind, and with a knowing smile, pulled the pin – what if there are no such things as beliefs? he asked. What if there is nothing in the central nervous system which we can point to and say, see, that there is a belief, about four years along I reckon, and quite lively for its age? The subtext was this. We can debate about epistemology and the philosophy of mind all we want, but the physical processes, mechanisms and relations involved in cognition are going to continue to be what they are, regardless of whether our folk psychological kinds carve it at its synapses. (Funny how the CNS can be mind-independent in this way, right?) So perhaps, before we get too settled into thinking this or that thing is true about these so-called webs of beliefs, we ought to naturalize our epistemology by actually studying the relevant sciences, but like, for real though. To be clear, I am not saying that my supervisor denies the existence of beliefs. He is a fan of Daniel Dennett, and I know he appreciates what Dennett had to say about adopting different stances with respect to folk psychological kinds.¹³ Nevertheless, the question of whether beliefs might not be real launched me along an entirely new trajectory in my intellectual development. Instead of trying to wrap my head around what knowledge was, I now wanted to know everything I could about what wraps around my head. How do organisms relate to their environments?

In search of an answer, I plumbed the fields of Ecological Psychology and the Eco-Evo-Devo approach to studying evolution, development and behavior. After familiarizing

¹³ Dennett (1989). See also Anderson (2015).

myself with the broad contours of this framework for thinking about cognition, I grew interested in the Radical Empiricism which even now seems to me to infuse so much of this way of thinking. Naturally, studying James and Dewey led me into Pragmatism, and thus, almost accidentally, back to epistemology. Yet, epistemology had by now lost some of its savor for me. Sure, pragmatism could explain what warrants one's adoption of pragmatism in a way that was not self-defeating, since it specified its own fallibility condition – one should stop being a pragmatist if one's adoption of pragmatism turns out to be unproductive for guiding action in one's context(s). And that was great, because it meant that the pragmatic account of epistemic warrant does not fall prey to the issues attending those who would otherwise purport to provide a theory of epistemic justification. Yet that problem had stopped seeming quite so important to me. Not only did I now have doubts about the entire philosophy of mind which seemed to me to undergird the vast majority of Western philosophy, but I had also now abandoned many of the beliefs I had once held about God, in favour of an open and relational theology which still seems to me to make much better sense of the evidence. Ironically, like Dawkins, my journey has led me to also disbelieve in the cruel and capricious god of classical theism whom we both find repulsive.

What was much more interesting to me now, and remains so to this day, is olfactory perception. I will not get into it here, but suffice to say, everyone should read Ann-Sophie Barwich's *Smellosophy: What the Nose Tells the Mind* and then (re)consider what the science of olfaction implies for mainstream theories of perception and action. The field is rife with possibility, and just begging for an account that is grounded in Ecological

Psychology and the Extended Synthesis. This is the broader project that I am still working on, and I look forward to focusing again on it in earnest, once I have got this thesis written and out of the way.

* * *

In the meantime, however, I still have these doubts about scepticism, and in particular, about those sceptical arguments which rely upon the belief that there is an epistemic gap, or veil of perception, separating that which is putatively “internal” to the subjective mind, from that which is “external” in the world as it actually is, objectively speaking. In an earlier work, I showed how it was impossible for me, at least, to defend the assertion that this epistemic gap exists.¹⁴ Following this, I wrote a short paper in which I suggested that Hume’s argument for the Problem of Induction may undercut itself.¹⁵ In both of these cases, I took a sceptical argument, assumed that it was true for the sake of argument, and then showed how by its own lights, it fails to go through.

Here I would like to address those sceptical arguments which presume first, that there are only two kinds of perception – veridical and non-veridical – second, that these are indistinguishable from one another, and third that it is possible that we live in a world where at least some of our perceptual experiences might be non-veridical. This is how the kind of argument I have in mind generally goes:

P1: There are two kinds of perceptual experiences – veridical and non-veridical.

P2: The two kinds of perceptual experiences are indistinguishable from one another.

¹⁴ Bakker (2024a)

¹⁵ Bakker (2024b)

P3: It is possible that we might be experiencing non-veridical perception at any time.

P4: By P2 and P3 we would not have any way of knowing whether what we are currently experiencing perceptually is veridical or non-veridical.

C: By P4 we cannot trust that the way that the world appears to us to be in our perceptual experience will accurately correspond to the way that the world actually is. Which is to say, we cannot gain any knowledge about the world through our senses.

Speaking only for myself, I find the first premise misleading, the second premise dubious, and the third premise unwarranted. Let's start with the first premise. For perception to either be veridical or non-veridical, it must be the case that there are at least two relata involved in perception – that which is perceived, usually referred to as the object of perception, and that which represents or stands for this object of perception. This already presumes that perception is representational, which is somewhat contentious. However, I do not take issue with this aspect of the claim. As soon as we allow that there might be some kind of tracking relation of any kind, even if it is homomorphic and functions only as an enabling constraint upon various organism-environment interactions, as I think there is good evidence for thinking, then the debate over representation quickly devolves into one of semantics. Call it resonance, call it deflationary neural representation, I do not have a strong preference. Tracking can either be accurate or inaccurate, so I am fine with allowing that perception can either be veridical or non-veridical. It is veridical when the perceptual systems are functioning smoothly, and non-veridical when one or more of the perceptual systems is not functioning as expected.

Having said all of this, and in line with my sympathy for Ecological Psychology, I think that *what* gets tracked in perception is not the *world-as-it-actually-is*, but rather, the *world-as-one-relates-to-it*. If I am standing below a hot air balloon, looking up at it, and if what I perceive tracks with my relation to the world around me, then I should expect the balloon to appear as that which is above would appear to that which is below. Indeed, something would have gone terribly wrong if I were to simultaneously perceive the balloon from every possible perspective, and every possible light condition, and against every possible backdrop, as would need to be the case if I were to have veridical perception of the balloon-as-it-actually-is. Therefore, while I agree that perception can either be veridical or non-veridical, I take issue with the tacit assumption that the standard against which we must judge veridicality is the world-as-it-actually-is. Even just from an evolutionary perspective, I see little reason to think that perception would ever have this function. For what use would it possibly be to have to sift through all of that extraneous information gained from having perceived something from every possible perspective in order to find just that small subset of perspectives which might have some relevance to the task at hand? In any case, yes, perception can either be veridical or non-veridical, but this will mean different things depending on whether one thinks that perception is relational. Thus, the first premise risks being misleading, since it admits of multiple interpretations.

While I am not sure what is supposed to warrant the second premise, I am content to let it be in this paper. For it is the third premise that I find most problematic. To see this, let us suppose that there are two types of worlds. In the first world, all perception is always veridical. In this world, let us call it “Truth”, there is not even the possibility that perception

might sometimes be non-veridical. In the second world, which we shall call “Falth”, both veridical and non-veridical perception are possible. Were it to be the case that we were living on Trurth, then the premise claiming that it must be possible that we might be experiencing non-veridical perception at any time would just be false. We might not *know* that P3 is false. For we might not know that we are in fact living on Trurth, and not on Falth, as we believe ourselves to be. But it would still be the case that P3 would be categorically false, were we to be living on Trurth and not Falth. In fact, our first premise would also be categorically false on Trurth. For once again, all non-veridical perception, and thereby any and all sceptical scenarios, would be impossible on Trurth.

All of this entails that for the argument above to go through, we cannot be living on Trurth. Or another way of putting this, this kind of argument for global scepticism *presupposes* that we are living in a world where both veridical and non-veridical perception are possible, such that we could be experiencing either at any given time and not know it.

I ask you – how do we *know* that we are not living on Trurth? Afterall, by P2 above, veridical and non-veridical perceptual experiences are supposed to be indistinguishable from one another. Therefore, we cannot very well just appeal to our perceptual experiences to determine whether we are living on Trurth or Falth, as our perceptual experiences in both worlds would be indistinguishable from one another. Without any way of determining which world we are inhabiting, then we have no more reason for assuming that we live on Falth than we do for assuming that we live on Trurth. At best, all we can say is that it is *possible* that we might be living on Falth, such that *if* this is the case, *then* we might have good reason to suppose that we can gain no knowledge of the world through our senses. Then

again, this exact same reasoning could be used to suppose that it is equally possible that we *can* gain knowledge of Truth through our senses. Thus, in the light of this uncertainty, which is premised on the putative truth of P2, a premise which the sceptic also endorses, it seems to me that I am warranted in doubting that the argument for global scepticism goes through. Of course, were P2 to be false, well then absolutely, I should be just as forced to give up my argument as the sceptic would be for giving up theirs.

Perhaps you will not be satisfied with this argument. You may be chafing at the way in which I have blatantly ignored all of the evidence we have for thinking that not only is non-veridical perception possible, but it also happens all the time. I welcome your chafing in this way. For I take that evidence very seriously myself.

However, before we take a look at it, it is worth pointing out that if you are a global sceptic, you cannot have access to that evidence. I am hardly the first to remind you of this. For by your own lights, you would have no knowledge of the external world save but what you can arrive at purely by way of reason. In turn, since I have used reason to demonstrate that we have as much chance of inhabiting Truth as we do of inhabiting Falth, it follows that reason can deliver no more to us than the doubt I have raised against this argument for global scepticism.

Supposing you are not a global sceptic, in which case I should have no need to further convince you to doubt the argument for global scepticism which we are considering here, you might still want to point out that how we visually experience color,¹⁶ and how we

¹⁶ Viger (2006).

experience temperature¹⁷ and smells, are all demonstrably subjective.¹⁸ What we experience does not align with the world-as-it-actually-is. (See where I am going with this?). In addition, there are the well-known perceptual illusions, such as the Ames Room and straight sticks appearing bent in water, and so on, which clearly show us that how things appear is not always the same as how things really are. We might also add to these well-documented phenomena the fact that people can sometimes hallucinate by experiencing things as being real which do not actually exist. All this and more should suffice to serve as strong evidence for thinking that we do not inhabit a world in which all perceptual experiences are veridical. And from this it would follow that even if global scepticism is not a live possibility, the argument for it which we have been discussing must still be addressed.

In response, I would emphasize once more that I take this evidence for the subjectivity of perception quite seriously. I just think that it is better explained by a relational account of perception, where what we evolved in such a way as to perceive is not the world-as-it-actually-is, but rather, the world-as-one-relates-to-it. So yes, please, show me all of the ways in which perception is subjective. For in each case, you will only have served to make my point for me – perception is subjective because it takes a subject to perceive. When we humans experience color, temperature, smells, etc. in the various subjective ways that we do, this subjectivity seems to me to be exactly what is required for determining how each of us stands in our own unique relations to the world with respect to

¹⁷ Akins (1996).

¹⁸ Barwich (2020).

such variables. How else could we have evolved to perceive so subjectively if perceiving subjectively did not prove to be repeatedly advantageous for our reproduction and survival? Evolution is generally anomic, except in those cases where we humans intentionally modify its processes. It is not an agent in its own right. It does not have a goal of trying to help us get better at perceiving the objective world without distortion.

While I ought to go on and on in support of this relational approach to thinking about function of perception, citing the latest developments in both the Ecological Psychology and Eco-Evo-Devo literatures, I trust that I have at least said enough to show that there may at least be different ways of interpreting the evidence of our subjective perception. In turn, this implies that the inference that perception is at least sometimes non-veridical with respect to the world-as-it-actually-is is not a deductive inference which follows necessarily from our perceiving subjectively. Rather, it is an inference to the best explanation. Moreover, it is an inference which presupposes that the function of perception is to help us perceive the world-as-it-actually-is. And sure, one might be able to provide evidence for this presupposition – I would love to hear it – but whatever *that* evidence is, it must be different from the evidence we have for thinking that perception is subjective. For this latter evidence is precisely the explicandum which we are supposed to be explaining.

Finally, if perception is relational, as I am suggesting it is, then it can simultaneously be *both* subjective and veridical (assuming there is still some kind of tracking involved between the organism and its relation(s) to its environment). This means that it remains an open question as to whether non-veridical perception, apart from malfunctioning perceptual systems, really is possible in the world which we inhabit. And this is the second

reason why I doubt that the argument for global scepticism which we have been discussing goes through.

Let me beat you to the punch. Everything I have just said about my second reason for doubting this argument for global scepticism hinges upon the plausibility of my own presuppositions. If I am wrong about the function of perception, which I might very well be, then my second reason for doubting the argument above is not warranted. And even that first reason, you know, the silly one having to do with Truth and Falth, it doesn't show that the argument fails. At best, it shows that the argument for global scepticism is inconclusive. And that falls far short of showing that we can in fact have knowledge of the external world. I accept all of this, but I already noted that I was not trying to show that the argument in question actually fails. All I was trying to do was explain why I have my doubts about that argument.

At the very least, hopefully I have dislodged from their imaginary armchairs those who assume that sceptical doubt enjoys some kind of automatic warrant unless or until some good reason can be given for not being sceptical. Hopefully I have illustrated how even sceptical doubts need to be warranted.

* * *

At the beginning of this past semester, I had the opportunity to meet with a student after class. I was a teaching assistant for a theory of knowledge course, and this student was almost at the point of tears. How was she supposed to reconcile the beliefs that she had grown up with, that she still cherished, with the weighty philosophical doubts which she was now being exposed to in our class? This was not just an academic exercise for her.

This had profound implications for what she understood her place to be in the world. It had implications for her sense of purpose and identity.

Having once stood in her place, my heart went out to this earnest young woman. And having now myself recovered from what can only be described as a kind of trauma, I gently reassured her that it was possible to reconcile faith with science and philosophy. Granted, some beliefs will likely have to be abandoned along the way, and others changed, but there is no deep-running animosity between religion, philosophy and science regardless of what some biologist-turned-amateur philosopher might vigorously assert. Doubt is not antithetical to faith. After letting this student know that the resolution she sought may indeed be possible, I then noted that, with all this being said, in a philosophy class everything is fair ground for questioning. If you want to make a claim, you'll need to be prepared to defend it. Philosophy, like doubt, is tough, but at their best, both are fair. *Everything* can be questioned, including questions themselves. I could see the worry melting away. Not completely, mind you, but where it did fade, there was in its place a look of determination, a spark, a rising to challenge I know not what. I am pretty sure that helping this student to focus her doubt may be one of the most important contributions I shall ever make to philosophy. I can say this, but not without a doubt.

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