

Conflict and Persuasion after Foundationalism: Toward a Philosophy of Witness

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“. . . and you will be my witnesses.”

—Acts 1:8

The concept of witness is central to law courts, where persons called witnesses speak words to one side or the other of a dispute. Although a courtroom witness, like any human being, describes reality from a particular (and limited) point of view, the court pays careful attention. Here the question of truth matters—sheer skepticism and sheer relativism would alike destroy legal institutions—and here human testimony makes a difference.

In the Bible “witness” and terms related to it, like “testimony,” appear, generally speaking, either in juridical settings or as living metaphors taken from the juridical setting. In this latter usage, those loyal to God face opposition, either implied or direct, to their religious convictions, and the response proper to this opposition is witness.¹ Witness is communication, believed to draw upon strength from God, in which you confront either indifference or explicit opposition by appealing to evidence and attempting to persuade others to your point of view, or at least to consideration of it. The point of view from which religious witness springs is distinctive, of course, for being deeply self-involving. Some beliefs (such as your belief that Babe Ruth hit sixty homeruns in 1927) are more or less trivial. The beliefs you *witness*

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¹ For the biblical perspective, see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For the settling of disputes, consult, for example, Trites’s discussion of “justice in the gate” (21); for key metaphorical uses see, for example, his discussions of Isaiah 40–55 (35–47), the Fourth Gospel (78–127), the book of Acts (128–153), and the book of Revelation (154–176). In the Septuagint, the word for witness is *martus*, familiar from its similar meaning in the New Testament (16).

about are life-changing: they concern the person you may become and ought to become, and because of that they shape the person you actually are. Here what you narrate or declare is no ordinary assertion that certain propositions are true; you state claims you consider crucial to your own welfare and, indeed, to all of human welfare. In religious witness you uphold a practical identity² that shapes the whole of attitude and outlook. Directly or by implication, you ask others to consider for themselves a calling, a way of life—or at least one or more convictions (about justice, say, or human dignity) entailed by that way of life. And at least as scripture sees it, success requires effective testimony by a minimum of two: it takes a community, as one might say, to make the case.³

Contemporary epistemology complicates our understanding of what it is to make a case for something. Non-foundationalism has eclipsed the Enlightenment idea that knowledge rests upon some base, or “foundation,” that is indubitable for being self-evident. The belief that knowledge is built up from immediate experience available and equivalent across cultural divides now seems implausible. No longer are there any “unproblematic foundations”—no longer any foundations “needing no further justification”—and the effect of this change is our heightened sense, today, of human limitation, partiality, and untrustworthiness.⁴ The concept of witness is now caught up, of course, in this tangle of complexity.

In his 1951 essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” Willard Quine proposed a non-foundationalist model of human knowledge. Questioning received opinion concerning both analyticity and reductionism, he argued that each of our claims about reality—each of our attempted descriptions of it—reflects “the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs.” This totality is a “man-made fabric.” At the

² Christine M. Korsgaard characterizes “practical identity” as “a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking,” in her *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

³ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 16, 134. For this point, key Old Testament passages include Numbers 35:30 (“no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness”); Deuteronomy 17:6 (“On the evidence of two or three witnesses shall the death sentences be executed”); and Deuteronomy 19:15 (“A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime. . . . Only on the evidence of two or three witness shall a charge be sustained”).

⁴ The phrases are Nancy Murphy’s, and appear in her *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 5, 6.

center of that fabric—the center of that web, that net—lie beliefs, or assumptions, that both color our entire outlook and stand at a distance from, and thus relatively impervious to, direct experience. Such beliefs would include, for example, those concerning religious conviction and the theory of quantum mechanics. At the edges, or “sensory periphery,” of the fabric lie beliefs of another sort, those reflecting our direct experience of the external world. These latter beliefs take shape, however, under the influence of the former: I might see God in a mother’s kiss, you might see nature and nothing more. The whole fabric, or body, of the knowledge we claim to have comes into play when we interpret what our senses present to us directly. In turn, our sensory experiences—especially when they are somehow at odds with our total outlook—affect the whole fabric; due to “logical interconnections” among our beliefs, reevaluation of one occasions reevaluation of others, including those beliefs closer to the fabric’s center. Still, the totality of what we claim to know is so “underdetermined” by direct experience that there is “much latitude of choice” as to what beliefs need to be adjusted “in the light of any single contrary experience.” A deadly tsunami may or may not, for example, alter a person’s beliefs concerning, say, the resurrection of Christ.

In Quine’s picture, then, there is no indubitable support on which to construct human knowledge; knowledge is a web or fabric, vulnerable at the edges due to the force of experience, yet obstinate at the center due to the persistence, and relative invulnerability, of our core convictions. Knowledge on this account undergoes constant reconstruction, but the process is immensely complicated, not least due to what Quine calls “our natural tendency to disturb the total system as little as possible.”⁵

So in pursuit of knowledge we lack a fixed foundation. Cultural pluralism entails also that we lack a common vantage point. As with the work of Quine, hermeneutical reflections from Martin Heidegger’s 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time*, bear upon these matters and sharpen our sense of epistemic difficulty. Heidegger focused in the book on the interpretation of human being itself, or what he called *Dasein*. To this end, he examined the conditions that underpin the

⁵ Willard Van Orman Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” was published first in *Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20–43. It appears also in Willard Van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays*, second edition revised (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 20–46. Quotations are from pages 42–44.

very possibility of understanding. One of these is an inherited vocabulary, or conceptual scheme. Another is the background of inherited skills and social practices we grow up with. The conceptual scheme and social practices embody in themselves an interpretation of what is real, of what truly matters in human life. Thus our whole way of regarding the world is shaped by a cultural lineage that constitutes—an inescapable presupposition. “An interpretation which is to contribute understanding,” as Heidegger wrote, “must already have understood what is to be interpreted.”⁶ Thus the hermeneutical circle: there can be *no neutral standpoint, no neutral starting place*.

In a monocultural world all this could be true, of course, and yet go unremarked. But the world we actually inhabit is multicultural. Numerous inherited conceptual schemes and social practices come into play as human beings attempt to communicate with one another. So the deep difficulty, the thing we grasp now more than ever, is that there neither is nor can be a neutral standpoint *between competing points of view*.

Again, this seems complicating with respect to the challenge of making a case for something. If knowledge has no sure base, and if we live within a plurality of (inescapable) perspectives, what sense does it make to bear a religious witness? Does the collapse of foundationalism entail relativism’s dark abyss? Is it now pointless to address convictional difference in the hope of changing minds? What can it mean, these days, to attempt persuasion through appeal to evidence? In particular, what can it mean to do so with respect to the sort of beliefs that lie near the center of the fabric of knowledge?

The pertinent conversational possibilities seem truly formidable. If you were a religious witness facing adherents of an entirely different world religion, how would you approach the case you are called to make? If someone from a different sect of your own religion objected to your perspective, what might you say or do? If partisans of secular science opposed you concerning the reality of God, or even concerning the reality of human freedom, how might you respond?

For purposes of illustration, consider this latter possibility. Sam Harris and Wendell Berry are figures representative of the current debate about God, science, and morality. How might each of them undertake to persuade the other?

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 194.

In 2010 Harris, already well-known for his “New Atheism,” offered an argument for fully secular morality in *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Here, without repeating his earlier arguments at length, he identifies religion with simple-mindedness (reasons for believing are “risible or nonexistent”), moral failure (support of “practices like slavery”), dogmatism (refusal to face “new evidence and new arguments”), and irrelevance (focus on “supernatural reward” instead of “well-being in *this* world”).⁷ Taking as his fundamental premise the idea that “human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain,” he attempts to demonstrate that evolutionary science is compatible with the kind of “human cooperation” morality attempts to undergird. Science can discover “facts” about how our “thoughts and behaviors” affect well-being. It can simply show, for example, that forcing women to wear burqas, or demonizing homosexuals, or celebrating suicide bombers cannot make a “net contribution” to human satisfaction. What is more, the sort of arguments science utilizes do, as a matter of fact, change minds: witchcraft, once a “cultural universal,” is now widely out of fashion.⁸

Harris acknowledges that from his strictly scientific perspective, free will, long thought to be crucial for moral society, is problematic. Owing to the sway of physical law, determinism, by his lights, is true. No account of “causality leaves room for free will”; brain states over which we have no control cause our thoughts and intentions, and our choices have only “apparent” reality. But if this perspective from (his understanding of) science seems to doom morality, actually it does not. The notion of moral responsibility still makes sense. Our choices are merely “apparent,” but they still matter; absence of free will does not, he declares, entail “fatalism.”⁹

Wendell Berry’s short book *Life is a Miracle* came out in 2000 and chiefly addresses the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, whose outlook resembles Harris’s in several respects, including that of unfettered confidence in science. Within limits, what Berry contends for in this book would thus apply in an argument with Harris.

⁷ Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 78, 22–24, 63.

⁸ Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 2, 56, 62, 65, 74, 129.

⁹ Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 102–105. On this matter see also Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

Berry, a religious man and a writer of poetry and fiction as well as essays, sees life as “a miracle and mystery.” Science (at least as writers like Wilson and Harris conceive of it) has “crowned and mitred itself” the equivalent of the church in the Middle Ages. In doing so, however, it has also abdicated its “responsibility to be . . . self-critical.” Science’s intolerance for mystery is “doctrinaire”; its sense of “the ultimate empirical explainability of everything,” accompanied by the claim to be the one rightful instrument of such explanation, resembles “political tyranny.” In its tendency, moreover, to abstraction, science devalues the individual and undermines “the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected.” Our religious and cultural traditions have bequeathed to us “the idea of the preciousness of individual lives.” Science, in its preoccupation with the general, can neither come up with this idea nor shield it from harm.¹⁰

Nothing alarms Berry more than the alliance of science and determinism. Wilson (and Harris, too) think of determinism as compatible with morality, but how, Berry wonders, can a future “already determined” be in the least hospitable to moral (or any other) projects that are truly *ours*? If the causal system necessitates the precise course of things, how can *I* take moral action? If all is determined, *my* effort to change the course of things makes little sense, and passivity itself seems harmless. If freedom is only fancied, and our thoughts and intentions mere epiphenomena, “qualitative standards,” he goes on, “are irrelevant, and critical judgment. . . an illusion.” In a “naturally determined system,” nothing can be unnatural, however obscene. Nor can concepts like beauty and justice remain “conceptually” what our culture has thought them to be: they are effectively explained away.¹¹ And all this, he believes, is a sheer “reduction” of the human. The “miraculousness” of our lives cannot, of course, be “proved”; it can only be “pictured or told or sung or danced”—or, as Berry puts it two pages later, “shown.” But what can be thus “shown” matters. We have, in fact, no compelling reason to accept this deterministic reduction of humanity; we need not abandon our long sense of who we are

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D. C.: Counterpoint, 2001), 10, 18, 19, 27, 31, 41, 42.

¹¹ Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 90, 108, 101.

just because a science so lacking in “recorded moments of conscience or professional self-doubt” tells us to abandon it.¹²

The contrast between Harris and Berry is more than substantial; it is prodigious. What is more, the conflict between them involves assumptions that lie very near the *center* of the fabric of knowledge, where conviction remains relatively obstinate. When a society’s citizens share a way of life, disputes of a certain kind may resolve themselves fairly easily through testimony by two or more witnesses. But when differences are deep, as in (some forms of) the religion–science controversy, how can the partisans of one side hope to persuade the partisans of the other? And when knowledge has no indubitable base, doesn’t the difficulty of persuasion become simply overwhelming?

From the non-foundationalist perspective, Sam Harris is certainly far too sure of himself; Wendell Berry, for all his colorful assertiveness, is humbler. But both writers hope to change minds. One of them is a religious witness hoping to change minds. After foundationalism, what can it really mean to take up that role? Does the relativism we associate with the loss of a sure epistemic base make such witness a fool’s errand? If it does not, why not? Under what conditions might religiously authentic witness make the impact it hopes to make?

Three points drawn from the discussion so far shed at least some light on these matters.

It does seem clear, first, that religious witness is making a case that you really do believe in. The person or people you encounter may be indifferent to your case or openly oppose it. You yourself will know that you lack proof for what you want to say; you will know that defending convictions located near the center of the fabric of belief is highly complicated, and that competing cultural frameworks only add to that complexity. But even if you testify under the sense of doubt as well as conviction, and even if your interlocutors have a heightened awareness of human limitation, partiality, and untrustworthiness, you nevertheless attempt to make your case. Giving up on this kind of persuasion is giving up on religious point of view.

Second, religious witness involves life lived—conviction displayed or “shown”—as well as words spoken. In religion, words truly are self-involving; they either are, or they imply, premises for a way of life. And when you offer others the prospect of that better way, your own life is part of the evidence for or against it. Not just a vocabulary

¹² Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 115, 113, 20.

but a set of attitudes and practices go into the making of the case. You say, "Here is a life worth living; here is a frame of mind worth cultivating; here are actions worth pursuing." But unless you substantially exemplify your vision, your words are empty. And because life lived is life shared with others, you will fail in religious witness if you make your case alone. To be at all plausible, you and others of like mind must constitute a *community* that exemplifies the vision. Just as words alone will fall short, so the witness of one will fall short.

Third, religious witness may, despite the difficulty, actually succeed. Even with respect to convictions that lie near the center of the fabric of knowledge, minds do change over time. Here Sam Harris's point about witchcraft is instructive: belief in witchcraft was once widespread, now much less so. Think, too, of human attitudes toward slavery or repression of women. It turns out that under the pressure of evidence, human understanding does, over the long run, shift. Even though the difficulties of communication always remain, we are not, it seems, imprisoned inside our cultural boxes. Sheer relativism, the kind that sees no hope of better understanding or wider agreement, is false. Willard Quine himself backs this up. In describing the epistemic complexity that follows foundational collapse, he remarks that the Homeric gods are now less credible than the objects and forces of science.¹³ At least some of the time, beliefs that expedite our dealings with experience come into favor. It may take a long, long while, but it happens.

One further point, suggested by the discussion so far if not implicit in it: religious witness is conversation. When you see that there is neither a solid base nor a common vantage point for pursuing deeper knowledge, you abandon monologue. Smugness seems inappropriate. Conviction still matters, of course, and so does persuasion; if truth is whatever people declare it to be, there can be no hope for human betterment. But the challenge now is to bear witness without arrogance; it is to assume that if others can do well by listening to you, you can do well by listening to them. The point is not, of course, that you open your mind to anything; it's that you are prepared to make adjustments. Anyone not so prepared is less a witness than a propagandist.

¹³ Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 44, 45.