



Wise as serpents and harmless as doves

(Matthew 10:16)

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Seeing things or seeing the light: the argument from personal experience

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Is it a man, is it a plane no it's a ...

We were teens at a scouting camp on the banks of a dam. In the middle was an island. The boys were telling stories about a very old man on the island that ate children. It seemed to me that as afternoon wore on, the stories became increasingly embellished with the macabre then the ghoulish. I pooh-poohed it all of course.

"Oh, yeah?" was the chorus." If I was so sure, they challenged, I should stay on the island for the night.

"No problem," I asserted. "Pay me and I'll do it." A collection was taken. Soon, a little pile of coins was waiting for my return.

I got my sleeping bag and torch, placed it in a kayak. The shadows were starting to get long as I set off. The excited chatter and laughter of the scouts faded into the background. All I could hear was the soft dipping of the paddle and the lapping of the waves against the kayak. The island was getting closer. In the distance, I could just make out a beach. This is where I would sleep tonight I decided. No need to venture into the surrounding vegetation. To resist my nerves I tucked in my head and pushed on and on.

I looked up to check my bearing and there, standing on the beach in a dark suit, was a man looking intently at me! In the place of his face was ... a skull!! I know what you are thinking. "That is impossible." But I know what I saw. For a moment the kayak continued towards him as I froze in shock. Then I quickly turned the boat. Something made me look back, just in time to see the man take off. The "man" was actually a bird with a pale head. But I was too shaken to complete my adventure, preferring the jibes of the scouts to a night on the island.

The incident illustrates that there is something amiss with the "seeing is believing" argument. If I had returned without seeing the bird, I would not have had a knock-out argument for the paranormal. True, I had a personal experience, but that only leaves me with an anecdote. God alone sees things as they are. For the rest of us, what we see is modulated by our limitations, foibles and circumstances. The bogeyman stories, the twilight, my state of mind and less than perfect vision had all primed me to "see" the worst. "There is more to seeing than meets the eyeball," as philosopher Norwood Hanson famously expressed it.¹ What we see is partly influenced by what the brain expects to see or hopes not to see! So, while superficially, "Seeing is believing" may seem empirically-minded, it is a fallacy.

And researchers have found that personal experience is the most important reason many individuals give for their belief in the paranormal.² It is small wonder, then, that so many Americans (three out of four according to a 2005 Gallup Poll) believe in some form of the paranormal.³

One of my favourite examples of the fallacy comes from Charles Johnson, president of the "Flat Earth Society. He said that his Australian had "sworn out an affidavit that she never hung by her feet in Australia ... We consider that a very important proof that the world is flat." It did not seem to occur to them that they were too small to properly take in the shape of the earth.⁴

Seeing God?

It is easy to spot the fallacy when committed by flat-earthers and believers in ghosts. But what about having visions of God or hearing the voice of Jesus? Does the principle not apply here too? Is atheist Richard Dawkins right when he says that the "argument from personal experience is the one that is most convincing to those who claim to have had one. But it is the least convincing to anyone else, and anyone knowledgeable about psychology. You say you have experienced God directly? Well, some people have experienced a pink elephant, but that probably doesn't impress you. Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, distinctly heard the voice of Jesus telling him to kill women, and he was locked up for life. George W. Bush says that God told him to invade Iraq (a pity God didn't vouchsafe him a revelation that there were no weapons of mass destruction)." ⁵

As an aside, Dawkins fails to mention the possibility that the two, well, lied - Peter Sutcliffe to feign insanity, George W. Bush to garner public support for war. A little biblical history would have helped him here. When King David pretended to be mad before King Achish, the latter responded with, "Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me?"⁶

Nevertheless, God has given Dawkins an insight. The argument from personal spiritual experience as an attempt to close discussion is also a fallacy. Is it not especially a fallacy? If I do not see material things as they are, how can I expect to see spiritual things as they are? Does God not forever remain infinitely bigger than my experience of him? Would it not take a God to really see God? I cannot expect to suddenly develop God-like powers of perception in a prayer or revival meeting. He may or may not have met with me, but is it an argument I can foist on others?

What did Jesus see?

The argument from personal spiritual experience might have greater merit if the person so arguing was prophesied about, died and rose again. Yet even Jesus said, "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid."⁷ Even God incarnate abided by the biblical principle that more than one witness is needed to establish the truth of something.⁸ Even, Jesus recognised his human limitations, and deferred to Another. Jesus's faith was based less on what he saw and more on what the Father said. God has said much. For instance, there is the familiar line in Isaiah, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities."⁹ And there is "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."¹⁰

Jesus is the central figure of the Old Testament and the point of a big story that began with God in eternity. The argument from big history is so much greater than the argument from personal experience. If this is true for Jesus, how much more true is it for us? No single human experience could ever capture God, nor even a lifetime of experiences.

It is hard to be cautionary about positive personal spiritual experiences when we are revelling in it. But what happens when the experiences turn sour? Consider Jesus when he felt his Father had abandoned him on the cross.¹¹ If Jesus was looking to positive spiritual experience, would he not be set up to abandon his faith?

What did the Apostle see?

The Apostle Paul had a personal spiritual experience of note - he went up to the third heaven. Yet he was forbidden to blab about it. What he does tell us is the curse that came with it. He was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him from boasting. Perhaps this is why Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹² Paul had a personal encounter with the risen Christ, yet chose to mention it last, after the appearing to Peter, the Twelve, the five hundred, James and all the apostles.¹³

The Apostle Peter also had a personal spiritual experience of note - the transfiguration. After mentioning in it his letter, he says, "And we have something more sure, the prophetic word."¹⁴ And he chose not to even mention the transfiguration while seeking to persuade the crowd at Jerusalem. Instead, he appealed to public knowledge and quoted the Old Testament.

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, *as you yourselves know*. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,* put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken."¹⁵ As powerful as the experience of the transfiguration must have been, Peter put it in perspective as a small part of a very big story.

If Jesus, Paul and Peter put personal experiences into perspective, how much more should I do so with my paltry ones whether they are real or imagined, good or bad? They are only part of one story. The danger is that little old me could try to make my story into *the* story. My personal experiences hang on God; he certainly does not hang on my personal experiences.

Seeing the big story

The big story is that God has taken our smallness seriously - that we are too small to take in his shape. And so he became small. In his definitive encounter with humanity, he came shaped as a Nazarene. A lot of people saw Jesus risen from the dead; even more saw him die on the cross and anyone can see that all this was written about in the Old Testament. God said it would happen and it happened. God speaking through Scripture and acting in history is big. The big story is certainly vastly bigger than my personal experience. Here is the place to look to be sure we are seeing the light and not seeing things. God surely wants us to have a personal encounter with him. However, our faith needs to hang on something much bigger than the vicissitudes of personal experience. Oswald Chambers said it well, "My goal is God Himself, not joy nor peace, Nor even blessings, but Himself, my God."

If you found this article helpful please give it to someone else.

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Notes

¹ Hanson, N. R. (1958) *Patterns of Discovery*. Cambridge University Press, p. 7.

² French, C.C. and K. Wilson (2007) Cognitive Factors Underlying Paranormal Beliefs and experiences In "*Tall Tales about the mind and brain: Separating Fact from Fiction*." Edited by Sergio Della Sala, Oxford University, Press, Oxford. p.3.

³ Moore, D.W. (2005) Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/Three-Four-Americans-Believe-Paranormal.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/flat/flart.htm>

⁵ Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. Transworld Publishers, London, p. 88.

⁶ Samuel 21:14.

⁷ John 5:31-32.

⁸ Hebrews 10:28.

⁹ Isaiah 53:5.

¹⁰ Psalm 16-9-10.

¹¹ Matthew 27:46.

¹² John 20:29.

¹³ I Corinthians 15:3.

¹⁴ 2 Peter 1:19 English Standard Version.

¹⁵ Acts 2:22-25, Italics mine.