

Keen Reasoning Based on the Evidence of the Senses

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2022 at 2:57 PM

Knowledge is usually defined as “justified, true belief.” That is, you 1) believe something (think it is so); 2) have good reason to think it is so (otherwise you're just guessing); and 3) it turns out to be true (factually confirmed).

Now, suppose I point and say: “That’s a maple tree.”

You ask: “Are you sure?”

Well, am I? Objectively? I’d say it depends on how close we are and how well we examine it.

[This is akin to the oft-cited “square tower / round tower” example.]

At some evidentiary point, I think it’s reasonable to claim certainty in such a case. My point about anxiety comes in when someone has some fear of being wrong – or even uncertain. I’ve encountered that, for example, among some Christians. [And I should add that there is some controversy among epistemologists about fallibilism versus infallibilism. I think the ancient Greeks thought of actual knowledge as being infallible. I tend to as well. But the question becomes, not is knowledge possible, per se, but is infallibility possible -- to know something infallibly (and a perhaps a stronger version?) do I infallibly know that my knowledge of some proposition is infallible? That is, am I infallibly certain about my own capacity for having infallibly certain knowledge? (That would border on a claim of omniscience, it seems to me.)]



But that means that if (contrary to all expectation) it was somehow shown that there are gods that intervene in some way in our world, I would not be anxious about it (partly because I see most claims about supernatural gods to be logically absurd – so any such gods would have to be part of the nature of the cosmos, etc.). Just as I have no anxiety about idealism versus realism for the Epicurean view of the gods.

But we need to be careful about thinking the sheer number of observations can confirm to a probability of 1.0 the truth of a hypothesis – it only takes one (as yet unobserved) counter-observation to disconfirm it. (The “Black Swan” event.)

So, I guess my general viewpoint is to rest easy about such things – and don’t cling to a need for certainty: that does not always relieve anxiety. (I think sometimes we can cling to a need for too much precision as well.)