

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Fall 2019

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From the Editor

The photo on the front cover, taken by provost Eliot Grasso, captures administrative assistant Audrey Barton preparing boxes of books to distribute to Gutenberg students. This is a common scene each quarter—except for Audrey balancing on chairs. Books are at the heart of a Gutenberg education, as students grapple with the ideas of those who have come before them.

This fall, Gutenberg begins its twenty-sixth year, and nine freshmen start their four-year journey. (See their incoming class photo below and their adventure at the University of Oregon library on page 8.) They bring with them energy and enthusiasm for learning, which is encouraging to all of us at Gutenberg.

This fall, *Colloquy* celebrates its first birthday. All of us at Gutenberg hope you have enjoyed and benefited from its articles and information. Remember, “Colloquy” [kol-uh-kwee] means a “conversation.” We welcome your responses to articles, your questions, and your topic suggestions. Please send them to office@gutenberg.edu. Thanks for reading!

Robby

2019 Freshmen. Back (L to R): Will Dowdy, Donovan Snider, Dane Miller, Isaiah Hall, Connor Clark. Front (L to R): Ryanna Eyre, Aria Jones, Zoë Watts, Abby Margrave



Trust, Belief, and Knowledge

Eliot Grasso

Every human being believes something to be true that his senses have never confirmed. Christians do when they accept the existence of an immaterial, transcendent reality. Scientists do when they assume that laws can be universal without being tested universally. How we think we know things matters because how we know plays a significant role in what we believe to be true. Our culture’s theory of knowledge is at odds with biblical frameworks for knowing. To clarify the difference between these two approaches to knowledge, I will examine three methods of knowing: empiricism; rationalism; and one understood by Augustine that relies on the relationship between trust, belief, and knowledge.

Empiricism and Rationalism

Our culture’s theory of knowledge is based on a blend of two philosophical approaches: empiricism and rationalism.

The empiricist thinks that seeing is believing; that in order to accept something as true, a person must see, taste, touch, smell, or hear it. The empiricist remains skeptical about anything his senses have not “proven.” The disciple Thomas acts like an empiricist when he says, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

By contrast, the rationalist thinks that human beings grasp truth by the mind alone and not by the senses. The rationalist remains skeptical about anything his mind has not “proven.” Euclidean geometry is an example of truth arrived at from a rationalist perspective. Euclid states that parallel lines go on infinitely in both directions and never cross. He says this not because he has seen lines go on infinitely without crossing but because his mind imagines, grasps, and then “proves” this to be true.

Empiricism and rationalism—in their radical forms—are mutually exclusive theories of knowledge. The empiricist would say to the rationalist: “You’ve never seen two lines go on infinitely and never cross, and neither have I. In fact, no one has seen this. I therefore reject your claim that parallel lines go on infinitely but never cross.” The rationalist would say to the



empiricist, “Your senses have been mistaken on many occasions—your ears misidentify someone’s voice, your eyes misidentify someone at a distance. If your senses have been wrong only once, then you can’t rely on them. You can see and touch and hear all you like, but you must realize that your senses don’t get you any closer to the truth.”

These are extremes in the centuries-long historical debate about how human beings know things. What the empiricist and rationalist have in common, however, is (1) their conviction that their method of knowing gives them certainty about what is true and (2) their skepticism toward anything about which their method of knowing does not give them certainty.

Blending rationalism and empiricism, then, modern culture’s concept of knowledge is the conviction that “knowledge” brings indubitable certainty to the knower. Knowledge, therefore, is a special category—perhaps the only category—in which certainty is possible. Given this method of knowing, it is easy to understand why modern culture looks askance at something like “belief” in general and at Christianity in particular. Modern culture believes that those who “believe” (i.e., religious people) embrace a sub-par standard for deciding what is true and what isn’t—an inferior method of “knowing” that Christians call “belief” and which is bereft of certainty. “Belief,” modern culture would say, “is defined by a tenuous and insensible probability; it doesn’t count as knowing because there is no certainty. Outside of certainty, there are simply multitudes of opinions, all equally questionable. Those people who are willing to do the work, however, can have certain knowledge and don’t have to settle for spongy belief. Believing is for the lazy and naïve.”

Furthermore, modern culture conjoins its view of knowledge-as-certainty to a concept of progress passed down from the Enlightenment when rationalism and empiricism flourished—namely, that over time knowledge replaces belief. Physicist Stephen Hawking’s (1942-2018) commentary epitomizes this view: “The one remaining area that religion can now lay claim to is the origin of the universe, but even here science is making progress and should soon provide a definitive answer to how the universe began” (Hawking, 28). To Hawking, a rationalist who “spent [his] life traveling across the universe, inside [his] mind” (Hawking, 3), religious belief is a mere placeholder that provides temporary answers until scientific knowledge arrives with the facts. In Hawking’s way of thinking, science and religion (or knowledge and belief) are mutually exclusive categories, a view widely held today.

I would argue, however, that modern culture’s concepts of knowledge and belief, exemplified in Hawking’s work, are flawed. The modern formulations of these concepts are based in unrealistic methods of knowing that are not consistent with how humans behave and overlook the real and indispensable relationship between belief and knowledge. For every human being, from the physicist to the priest, knowledge is grounded neither in indubitable certainty nor in insensible probability. Rather, human knowledge is grounded in trust, which I will define here as a likelihood undergirded by reasonable criteria developed through personal experience that is too complex and nuanced to fully articulate. It is trust, then, that leads to belief and, ultimately, to knowledge.

In the late fourth century, Augustine of Hippo raised this very issue. Let us consider his analysis of the relationship between trust, belief, and knowledge.

Augustine’s Way of Knowing

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a North African theologian, citizen of Rome, Church Father, rhetorician, exegete, and bishop in the Roman Catholic Church. He became a Christian at age thirty-one and by age forty-three had written thirteen books reflecting on his journey through skepticism to faith. He titled these books *Confessions*, a work considered by many to be the first autobiography of Western civilization.

In Book VI of *Confessions*, Augustine, disillusioned with polytheism and other religions, finds himself drawing closer to Christianity. Reflecting on the many things that he believes and why he believes them, he writes,

Then, O Lord, you [...] set my thoughts in order, for I began to realize that I believed countless things which I had never seen or which had taken place when I

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Trust, Belief, and Knowledge

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was not there to see—so many events in the history of the world, so many facts about places and towns which I had never seen, and so much that I believed on the word of friends or doctors or various other people. Unless we took these things on trust, we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life.

Here, Augustine is realizing that much of what he thinks to be true is based on trust, not on first-hand experience. In order to comprehend the sort of common human experience that Augustine is describing, I propose the following working definitions of trust, belief, and knowledge derived from his thinking:

Trust is a state in which someone is willing to accept (and potentially act on) information as true because of the relationship between the information's source/cause and the one who trusts. The concept of relationship here is essential because relationships establish expectations, commitments, and obligations that when mutually fulfilled build "trust." If expectations, commitments, and obligations are not mutually fulfilled, then trust erodes. While we tend to think of relationships as primarily between people, I would argue that we also have relationships with our senses—we expect them to give us accurate information. When we correctly predict outcomes based on the information our senses give us, then we trust our senses more.

Belief is the conviction that something the believer cannot exhaustively confirm is likely to be true. Our senses give us information that our reason can process. It is reason, according to Augustine, "to which the facts communicated to the bodily senses are submitted for judgment" (*Confessions*, Book VII, 151). The essence of belief is that we may interact with what is true even though our understanding may be incomplete.

Knowledge is information, perspective, perception, or experience that affects the knower's outlook and options in decision-making.

To transfer Augustine's thinking to a common situation, consider the follow-

ing. My eyes have given me decades of information about the world that when tested have proven reliable. For example, when I am about to cross the street, my eyes may perceive an oncoming car. My reason confirms that I am seeing a moving car and predicts that the car will eventually reach and then pass my location. Over many years, I have built a relationship with my eyes—my track record of seeing—and therefore, I trust my eyes that a car is approaching. I not only trust my eyes, but I believe my eyes even though they do not give me exhaustive information about the car, its speed, its makeup, or the mental state of the driver. My reason, then, processes the sensations of light and color presented to my eyes, and I conclude that **I know** a car is approaching.

In this scenario, I might also observe a distracted person walking toward the curb where I am standing. He does not see the oncoming car and thus does not engage in the actions of trust, belief, and knowledge with respect to the oncoming car, and so I grab his arm before he walks into its path. When I explain to him what I saw and why I grabbed his arm, however, he trusts me because he concludes it is reasonable to believe that I have acted in his best interest. He knows he has avoided a collision.

Augustine realized that his knowledge of just about everything was based on trust, not certainty. The significance of Augustine's realization is this: if most of what humans know is based on trust, then believing is a very common action for *all* humans, not just the religious ones.

If this is true, then all of us should ask ourselves what our criteria are for trusting one thing and not another. I propose four criteria that most all humans employ, even if subconsciously: (1) The source of information about a scenario/claim has been consistently reliable over time, thus allowing us to make reliable predictions. (2) The scenario/claim itself is consistent with other things we know. (3) We have inarticulable knowledge (for example, feelings, emotions, complex rational judgments) that the scenario/claim corresponds to reality. (4) We are

willing—or not willing—to pay the cost of believing in the scenario/claim.

Trusting, believing, and knowing are not neutral activities. The knower must make decisions about what he trusts and why, and he also must weigh the costs involved in admitting to himself or to others that he knows something. Augustine recognized the costs associated with believing Christianity when he wrote the following:

I had prayed to you [God] for chastity, and said "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet." For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled. I had wandered on along the road of vice in the sacrilegious superstition of the Manichees, not because I thought that it was right, but because I preferred it to the Christian belief, which I did not explore as I ought but opposed out of malice. (*Confessions*, Book VIII, 169)

When we think that a belief will cost us (for example, our wealth, comfort, social status, or even the indulgence of baser instincts), we may suddenly become devoutly skeptical, telling ourselves that no one can "prove" the claim that will cost us more than we care to pay. Whereas when trusting only necessitates that we believe some obscure claim that costs us nothing, our objections are much less severe, as were Augustine's when, before his conversion, he disbelieved biblical testimony while embracing claims from "friends or doctors or various other people."

This rationale for skepticism is nothing new. Augustine writes in *Confessions*, "I began to think that the philosophers known as Academics were wiser than the rest, because they held that everything was a matter of doubt and asserted that man can know nothing for certain" (*Confessions*, Book V, 104). To someone committed to the wrong sorts of behaviors, skepticism is wonderfully convenient. And, our culture's concept of knowledge-as-certainty that developed from rationalism and empiricism breeds skepticism about anything that is "uncertain." If certainty is the essence of knowledge, and the skeptic claims axiomatically that nothing can be known

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Parable of the Householder's Treasure

Ron Julian

“Have you understood all these things?” [The disciples] said to Him, “Yes.” And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.” (Matthew 13:51-52)

The last of Jesus' Kingdom parables in Mathew 13 is so short that some don't even think of it as a parable. But it is. Jesus is talking privately to his disciples, and he asks them, “Have you understood all these things (that is, the parables in Matthew 13)?” And they answer, “Yes.” The disciples' level of understanding is of interest to us for two reasons. First, as our fellow believers, they are in the same situation we are: trying to understand what Jesus, our teacher, is saying. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, those disciples are going to go on to be apostles. Jesus is going to send them out to teach the world, including us, what he taught and what it meant. So whether they understand what Jesus is saying is doubly important. Matthew 13 has a sub-theme concerning the understanding of the disciples. They don't understand why Jesus is speaking in parables or what he means by them. Jesus explains things to them and congratulates them for having eyes to see and ears to hear. This is going to be hugely important in their role as apostles. And because they are future apostles, Jesus addresses this tiny parable of Matthew 13:52 to them.

Jesus says to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like...” A scribe, like a rabbi, was a student and teacher of the law, the Scriptures. The scribes studied and sought to understand the law and then explain it to the people. In one sense, every scribe was a “disciple of the kingdom of heaven.” They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of God. But clearly Jesus is

not referring to every scribe. For Jesus, becoming a disciple of the kingdom of heaven means becoming *his* disciple.

This is a great example of how Jesus uses the concept of the “kingdom” throughout Matthew 13. For him, the kingdom is the kingdom that he, the king, has come to inaugurate in his own way and in his own time. To become a disciple of the kingdom means to become a student of the way King Jesus is implementing his kingdom—which is very different from what the scribes at the time would have understood.

I would paraphrase what Jesus means like this: “A scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven studies and teaches the Scriptures from the perspective on the kingdom that I, Jesus, have presented in my parables and in the rest of my teaching.” The disciples are going to be called to this role. Have they understood what Jesus is saying in these parables? Okay, then in their future calling as teachers, they are going to be like “a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”

At first glance, it doesn't seem like Jesus is saying much. The householder has old stuff and new stuff. Big deal. But we must first think about the dynamic of the situation. Every head of a household has his treasure—that is, the collection of things that are valuable, that bring him and his household security, joy, comfort, and so forth. We all want to make our lives better. The “treasure” of the household are those things which help to do that. As time goes on, however, changes

happen to the householder's treasure, to his collection. Some things lose their value. Maybe they wear out. Maybe they are no longer needed. Maybe something that does the job better has come along. And so those things get thrown away and replaced with new things. But other “treasures” do not lose their value. They continue to be valuable and desirable. They don't wear out. Nothing better can replace them. And so the householder keeps them even as they grow old. That is the way of things: as time goes by, some old things never lose their value, but others need to be replaced by new things. It all depends on the changes that time brings.

So then, how are the scribes of the kingdom like this householder? First, let's make clear what Jesus is *not* saying. He is not saying that some parts of the Old Testament have lost their value and need to be replaced. He made that clear in the Sermon on the Mount. Some people believe that Jesus was criticizing the Old Testament and replacing parts of it with his new, superior teaching. But that is not what he was doing. He was saying that the religious leaders had drawn the wrong *implications* from those Scriptures. Their *understanding* needed to change. The Scriptures were always right, but some of the teaching based on those Scriptures needed to change. And that is what Jesus means by “old and new” in the parable.

The things that need to be replaced by new things are the teachings, the understanding of the Scriptures, not the Scriptures themselves. A lot of what was being taught at Jesus' time was either wrong or lacking in perspective. That “old” teaching was very different from the kingdom parables Jesus had just taught. His kingdom parables clarified the understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus' kingdom is the same kingdom that God had been promising in the Scriptures, but the scribes at the time had misunderstood what the Scriptures were really talking about. If Jesus' disciples have really understood his parables, then they have understood that the true kingdom is partly just like everyone was expecting, but it is also partly different from what everyone was expecting.

The old understanding was right in several ways. The kingdom will one day

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for certain except those claims that are provable by an approved method of knowing, then all “unproved” claims are equally dubious.

Augustine’s realization about how humans “know” is significant because while he was exceptional in many ways, his humanity and approach to trust, knowledge, and belief exemplify experience common to every human being.

By contrast, the radical empiricist and radical rationalist advocate a method of knowing that does not align with common human experience, and, as such, is neither realistic nor reasonable. No matter what he says, the radical empiricist always believes that when he blinks, the world around him remains and that when he walks out of a room, the objects in the room continue to exist. The radical rationalist trusts the testimony of his senses as he looks both ways before crossing the street, even though he lacks a rational proof that his senses tell him the truth about reality.


Those who intend to be devoutly skeptical—that is, those who accept as true only what they can prove as certain—set an unlivable standard for themselves. The devout skeptic ought to consider that consistency demands he doubt uniformly and with equal intensity all unexperienced events, objects, and occurrences.

Conclusion

Augustine draws together an important relationship between trust, belief, and knowledge. Knowledge rests on belief and belief on trust. If Augustine is right, then we must acknowledge that we know things because of how and whom we trust. We do not know because we are certain. We know because we trust.

Both empiricists and rationalists think that they have formulated and embraced a higher standard for knowing, one in which certainty plays a key role. What they have actually formulated, however, are unrealistic models for knowing which neither they nor any other human can use and in which certainty plays no real part. Neither position addresses the complexity of human experience because both positions demand an oversimplification of human experience. Consequently, these positions are not particularly helpful, at least in their radical forms. If the ultimate function of knowledge is to help a human being navigate life, then radical empiricism and rationalism fail because they do not meet this end. They both fail to address how human beings live according to what they think they believe and know.

At this point, empiricists and rationalists might protest, “at least we aspire to know with certainty.” Whether their aspirational goal is merely pursued or actually attained, however, it doesn’t generate the kind of progress they think it does because the standard they champion is misaligned with how human beings actually operate.

Despite what our culture says, all human beings know things in the same way—in the way Augustine describes—whether Christian or not. Each person, at some point, must confront the question of who and what he will trust and why. For the Christian, a common set of questions must be reviewed daily: Will I trust the words of Jesus Christ? Will I trust his analysis of the human condition? Will I trust his solution? Will I trust him enough to follow despite what it may cost me? 

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Eliot Grasso is the provost and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He holds a M.A. in ethnomusicology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Oregon.


Parable

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provide protection and shelter to God’s people, like a tree giving shelter to the birds (Matthew 13:31-32). When the Messiah comes (again), he will send forth his angels to bless the sons of the kingdom and condemn the sons of the devil (Matthew 13:40-41). On that day, as Daniel had said, the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father (Matthew 13:43).

But the old understanding of the kingdom was also wrong in important ways and needed to be renewed. The people expected the Messiah to come and immediately bring about the end of the age. Well, the Messiah had come but not to end this age and establish the eternal kingdom of God. Rather, he came to *start* something. He came to teach and clarify exactly what God’s purposes were. He came to call his people to live out challenging lives of faith while they wait for his return. He came to urge us to persevere under hardship and the temptations of the world.

As we learn from other places in Jesus’ teaching, there was much more that he came to do that was not well understood before he came. He came to put the focus of the Scriptures back where it belonged: on love and mercy and repentance. He came to rebuke the religious leadership for its worldliness. He came to give his life as a ransom for many, so that God’s mercy might be poured out on his people. All of that was new, a change from what people had come to expect, and particularly, it was a change from the teachings of the religious leadership at the time. The coming of Jesus was a change of seasons. When he came, it became clear which things were old, but abiding, treasures and which things had worn out and needed to be replaced with something new.

So then, when Jesus’ disciples go on to become apostles, their teaching would in some ways be like what the scribes had been saying all along. But in other ways, it would be new, replacing an inadequate understanding of the kingdom with a new and better one. 

Ron Julian is a Gutenberg tutor and the author of *Righteous Sinners*.

Alumni Spotlight: James Simas, Class of 2008

James Simas' post-Gutenberg journey does not fit the mold. Coming from the small town of Yreka, California, in 2004, James did not opt for the "big university" experience but went for a "really small college" that focused on the liberal arts. Then to further flip expectations, he took his liberal arts degree and entered the information technology field.

It all started while he was still in college. "I have had an interest in computers and technology since my family purchased their first PC in 1997," James says. "I continued pursuing this interest while attending Gutenberg and quickly became the go-to IT person for the entire school." James and his classmates recognized a need at Gutenberg for improved internet accessibility. Looking around at the staff (historians and philosophers and Bible scholars, oh my!), he decided to take on the project himself. After some research and several trials, James installed an outstanding WIFI network throughout the entire building. He set up the necessary computer infrastructure and continues to maintain and update the system to this day. James also has provided computer support for the office, working out critical security and backup systems for the college. He has spent countless volunteer hours building, maintaining, and troubleshooting IT at Gutenberg, providing students and staff the critical infrastructure to simplify and enhance their work.

But his interest in computers took him beyond his time in school. James graduated from Gutenberg College in 2008 during what was probably the worst economic time since the Great Depression. Nevertheless, he was able to find a job at a local Symantec service center, which launched his career in IT.

"In the past ten years, I have worked exclusively in the information technolo-



gy industry. I have been promoted nine times in those ten years and have held six different positions and have worked for two different IT companies: Symantec and F5 Networks." James is currently employed by F5 Networks in Seattle, where he lives with his wife, Sinah, a physical therapist and also a Gutenberg graduate, class of 2010.

Despite the strong technical aspect to his work, James feels that his Gutenberg education has contributed in many ways to his career.

"Many people are surprised to hear that I have a BA in Liberal Arts and ask how it has possibly contributed to my working life," James says. He lists three specific benefits of his education.

First, improved communication: "It's simply astounding how many problems are caused by people misunderstanding each other or not being heard by the other person. Gutenberg gave me many opportunities to sharpen my written and oral communication skills, and this

has translated nicely to clearer and more concise emails as well as more productive verbal interactions with others."

Second, when faced with a problem or situation, he gained an ability to understand it quickly. "By repeatedly grappling with tough concepts and large systems, Gutenberg helped me learn how to quickly understand how all the pieces of a complex system fit together. This has allowed me to repeatedly be thrown into new technologies which I have not worked with before and to quickly learn to thrive. This skill is absolutely vital to doing well in my industry due to the high rate of change it has been experiencing for the past twenty-five years."

Third, James feels that Gutenberg College stimulated in him a desire for lifelong learning and personal growth. "I came out of Gutenberg with a commitment to lifelong learning and personal growth as well as a willingness to change. I credit Gutenberg for helping foster these attributes and have found them to be wonderful assets while navigating the complexity of modern life. I am almost always reading one or more books and have discovered that personal development books can be both fascinating and extremely helpful. I took two years of course work from Landmark Worldwide. Their classes significantly increased my emotional and relational IQ. I spent two years reading about investing and finance in order to get our financial house in order. Unlike most people my age, my wife and I have a plan and direction which help guide the daily financial decisions we make."

James concludes, "If I were to summarize Gutenberg's impact on me, I would do it like so: Gutenberg gave me the tools and ability to quickly and effectively learn whatever I choose to direct my energies to. This has proved to be a profoundly beneficial skillset to have. I believe this skillset has proved invaluable in allowing me to build a rich and rewarding life, full of friends, growth, and adventure."

Thanks for keeping Gutenberg's computers connected, James!



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