

**Not to Know Knowing**  
**The Three Stages of Doubt**  
**By**  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
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Psychologist Theodor Reik once wrote that “The capacity to doubt, and in particular the ability to endure doubt for a long time, is one of the rarest things on this planet.”<sup>1</sup> It is as tragic a statement as I believe it is true; and has been so since the dawn of humanity. We prefer the illusion of certainty to the reality of the overwhelming uncertainties of our existence. This is why we so often live routine lives and cling to habitual ways of thinking with ferocity. It’s tragic on a personal level because pretending we can be certain in such an uncertain world causes us to deceive ourselves and prevents us from achieving our full potential. The root of *routine* is “rut.” Paradigmatic ways of living and thinking indicate we are stuck in a rut. “Fixation” is the psychological term for this condition, referring to those who cannot move beyond an immature stage of development.

It’s also tragic on a social level because most of the conflicts and injustices in the world and in our societies are caused by underdeveloped people who would rather see others suffer and the world burn than to abandon their false feelings of certainty. The certainty of being right makes us feel righteous, which justifies us doing whatever we want to any and all who might question us or cause us to question ourselves.

In his book, *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton says the “*feeling of knowing* and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger<sup>2</sup> ... Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason.”<sup>3</sup> This is a stunning statement, that what we consider to be a mental state—knowing something—is really an emotional state, a feeling that we know. If true, the more certain we are of our beliefs the surer we can be that we are in the grip of an emotional response. This explains why so many of us feel threatened, angry, or offended when our ideas are challenged.

The emotion of knowing—the feeling of certainty—it turns out, is accompanied by a rush of dopamine into our system, a neurotransmitter that makes us feel good. Hence, certainty is a desirable physical state. Feeling certain feels great! This may have something to do with human evolution. It likely benefited our ancestors to feel certain of what they were doing, which kept them from wandering too far into unfamiliar territory and risking unknown dangers. Maintaining habits and habitats kept them safe.

Then again, it may just be the nature of ideas themselves to reproduce by hijacking our neurology so that we are eager to protect them and pass them on, the way desirable fruits and pretty flowers entice our nervous systems to help them propagate and spread to new territories. As I said in one of last year’s sermons, “there may be something innate about the information stored in beliefs and ideas, as is so of all information, that drives it to propagate and become dominant. *Memes*, as Richard Dawkins named them, behave the same way as genes in this sense. Today, many experts have begun to think the underlying structure beneath everything—memes, genes, molecules, and atoms included—are bits and qubits of information, that everything in the Universe and the Universe itself is comprised of

information, and information, again, has the propensity to spread and become dominant.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, ideas may be parasitic, causing us to want to help them propagate, all the while believing that defending and spreading them is entirely our own idea.

So, there are lots of reasons people go about their lives feeling certain they are right about most things. This is so even though both logic and the nature of reality should convince us that we can't be certain of anything most of the time. Yet, rather than learning to face reality on its own terms, too many, if not most, of us go about our lives preferring to delude ourselves about the value of our beliefs. As Erich Fromm put it, “*The compulsive quest for certainty is not the expression of genuine faith but is rooted in the need to conquer the unbearable doubt.*”<sup>5</sup>

All of this would indicate that living in a state of doubt is contrary to human nature, inconsistent with our neurology. Yet, throughout human history, there are those in almost every culture who come to cherish and prefer the state of doubt to certainty and the false feeling of knowing. We usually refer to them as mystics, but we shouldn't discount philosophers and scientists who also depend upon ways of thinking that cause them to question everything, especially their own beliefs.

Just yesterday, while reading *The New Puritans* (2022) by Andrew Doyle, I was reminded of an anecdote first shared by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2006), from when he was a student at Oxford:

A visiting academic from America gave a talk on the Golgi apparatus, a microscopic organelle found in plant and animal cells, and in doing so provided incontrovertible evidence of its existence. An elderly member of the Zoology Department, who had asserted for many years that the Golgi apparatus was a myth, was present at the lecture. Dawkins relates how, as the speaker drew to a close, “The old man strode to the front of the hall, shook the American by the hand and said – with passion – “My dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years.” We clapped our hands red.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the nature of science. Once a scientist comes up with a hypothesis, he or she must then work to disprove it. If it can't be disproven, the hypothesis becomes a scientific theory. Hence, it is the work of scientists to prove they are wrong. Being wrong is the goal, which is why the old zoologist was overjoyed to find out he'd been wrong for such a long time. He had been set free from his wrong idea about the world. By letting go of his belief, he came to better understand reality, he came closer to the truth.

Philosophy is also rooted in doubt—doubting the status quo and doubting our own presuppositions—in order to go deeper into the truth. From Socrates' dialectic method of incessantly asking questions, to the poet John Keat's “Negative Capability,” referring to those, “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” In short, Negative Capability is being comfortable with not knowing. This is why 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bertrand Russell said, “Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.”<sup>7</sup> And contemporary philosopher James Carse says, “...not knowing *is* the path. Knowing that we don't know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis of all our hope.”<sup>8</sup>

But the real champions of doubt are the mystics who are littered through time and many traditions. The root of mysticism, like mystery, is “mist.” Mystics are those who prefer living in the mist, within what one fittingly unknown 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic called, “the cloud of unknowing.” In his or her book by the same title, this mystery writer further explains, “When I speak of darkness, I mean the absence of knowledge<sup>9</sup>... [you must] learn to be at home in this darkness.”<sup>10</sup> This is precisely the sentiment one feels in reading the poetry of the beloved 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic St. John of the Cross. “O night! O guide! O night more loving than the dawn!”<sup>11</sup>

Mysticism is largely apophatic, a term that refers to their attempt to understand truth by continuously letting go of what mystics already think they know. Instead of building upon their base of knowledge, the mystics approach truth more like stone carvers, constantly chipping away at the beliefs and truths we’ve all been taught to take for granted. In mysticism this process is formally known as *purgation*—purging ourselves of all that we think we know. Instead of clinging to the truths we consider absolute, letting them go and stepping into the mystery, the cloud of unknowing, the uncertainty that is our true reality, the true nature of the world in which we live.

Even when it comes to what many consider their most sacred beliefs about God, the mystics, who are devoutly religious, say let them go. The Jewish Kabbalah says, “With every increase in the negations regarding God you come nearer to the apprehension of God.”<sup>6</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian martyr, St. Denis said, “The most divine knowledge of God is that which is known by not-knowing.”<sup>7</sup> And St. John of the Cross, (San Juan de la Cruz) said, “The soul travels to God not knowing, rather than knowing.”<sup>8</sup> He referred to this state of bliss as “*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*” – “not to know knowing.”

The higher he climbs,  
The less he understands,  
For this is the dark cloud  
That brings light to the night;  
And whoever has this light  
Always remains not knowing  
*Toda ciencia trascendiendo*

All of this is why, as a student of developmental psychology, I have used my understanding of these traditions—science, philosophy, and mysticism—to come up with my own schemata of cognitive development as a compliment to those described by developmental psychologists, most of which are akin to Lawrence Kohlberg’s three stages of moral development, the pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, all of which are based on the presumption that at some point we will adopt, and hopefully grow beyond, the conventional thinking imposed upon us by our society. “At this level,” he said, “there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual’s own identification with these groups.”<sup>12</sup>

So, without further explanation, what I am calling the three stages of doubt, or, more precisely, the three stages of living with doubt, are the miraculous, the magical, and the mystical. At the first stage, the miraculous, which is the state of mind we hold for the first years of our lives, usually until we are around age seven, the concept of doubt is meaningless. During our first years we lack much understanding of how the world works

and, thus, anything seems possible, so much so that nothing astonishes us. This is why I call this the “miraculous stage,” because we don’t yet understand physics or phenomenological rules.

We love and believe in colorful cartoon characters—be they talking animals, or purple dinosaurs, or sponges wearing square pants. We don’t deceive our young children by teaching them to believe in the Eastern Bunny and Santa Claus because trying to explain that such beings can’t exist would be meaningless to them since they are too young and inexperienced to understand what existence even means. We have to wait until they are old enough and experienced enough to *realize* for themselves such things can’t be real.

This is why when you try to pull a coin from behind the ear of young children, they aren’t impressed at all and immediately try to do the same trick themselves, befuddled as to why they can’t. It’s why they might even cry if you pretend to take their nose then show them your thumb tucked between your fingers. Better put it back before the tears really start to flow! At this stage everything is a miracle and, therefore, nothing is a miracle, nothing is impossible. Of course sponges wear pants, bunnies lay eggs, reindeer fly, money appears out of thin air, and some jerk who thinks he’s being funny can snatch those nose right of your face. Because that’s how the world works.

The next stage is the magical stage, which emerges organically around age seven and should last until we are in our teens, but more often is where we get fixated—stuck—for the rest of our lives. Contrary to its name, it is not the stage in which we believe in real magic, as we did during the miraculous stage. Children at this stage are the worst audience for magicians precisely because, having gained an intuitive understanding of physics, of how the world works, they have realized quite on their own that Santa Claus isn’t real, that magic is some sort of trick, and they are determined not to be fooled. So, they often heckle magicians, almost incensed by their deceptions, seeking to explain their tricks. And here’s the important part, *they will try to explain them even to the point of making up incorrect explanations*. They are satisfied to have an answer even if it isn’t the right answer. This is why anthropologist E.B. Tylor very succinctly defined magical thinking as, “mistaking an ideal connection for a real one.”<sup>13</sup>

This isn’t a bad thing, so long as they eventually grow past this desire to explain everything, even at the cost of truth. For it’s the beginning of a rational and scientific approach to truth. Learning to look beyond illusions and trying to figure out and understand how things really work is vital to becoming a rational being. Bertrand Russell once explained that “Magic is based on recognition of the principle of causality, that given the same antecedent conditions, the same results will follow. Magic is proto-science.”<sup>14</sup> Just as the first magicians were named such, not because they fooled people, but because they showed others how the world really works by demonstrating rudimentary physics, magical thinking is essential to each individual’s journey toward sound thinking.

But this is also a stage where we begin to mistake our ideas about the world for reality itself. If we don’t move beyond it, we can grow into dogmatists and idealists. Classical psychology refers to this belief that we can control and create the world with our minds as the *omnipotence of thought*. Today we simply call it magical thinking—the idea that we can make good things happen simply by imagining them and envisioning them, and prevent bad things from happening by ignoring them. “Perish the thought,” we say.

I once performed a magic trick for the kids at my church in Louisville, during which I appeared to make a lit match disappear into the center of a handkerchief without the slightest evidence the two objects ever came into contact. I then asked a nine-year-old boy, "Henry, how did you like my trick?"

"Bad!" He snapped back, disgusted that I tried to pull the wool over his eyes.

His father was immediately embarrassed. "Henry," he said. But it was precisely the response I wanted and expected in order to make this very point. Henry had no idea how I had performed this slight of hand, but he was not about to be fooled. No matter how I did it, he knew I was trying to trick him and that was "Bad!" Good for Henry! It was a mark of his intellectual development.

It's okay," I said to his father. "I'm glad he's being honest. It's just the kind of answer I was hoping for. What did you think of my trick?"

After a moment of searching for just the right words, he politely responded, "I thought it was a very good illusion!"

This was also the kind of answer I was expecting. In contrast to young Henry, all the adults in the room applauded my trick, even though they, more than anyone else, knew it wasn't really magic, and certainly not the miracle it appeared to be, because there is no such thing. Yet, even in knowing it was but a trick, they appreciated it and enjoyed wondering how I had done it, without any "irritable reaching after fact and reason;" without, that is, trying to figure out the trick. They were content to dwell in the mystery, the mist, the cloud of unknowing. They were comfortable with uncertainty, with not having all the answers, and, above all, without making answers up.

This is why I call the highest stage of coping with doubt the mystical stage, because, like the mystics throughout time, at this stage we become comfortable with not having all the answers. We don't make things up just to make ourselves feel good by falsely believing we can control the world with our ideas. We understand the world doesn't conform to our ideas about it, that our ideas and beliefs don't have magical powers. We grasp, rather, that our ideas and beliefs ought to conform to the reality around us, which is always revealing itself to us. This requires us, like the mystics, to cherish our doubts, not drive them underground, as Erich Fromm put it, "by some formula which promises absolute certainty."<sup>15</sup> As the *Tao te Ching* reminds us:

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.  
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations  
arise from the same source.  
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.  
The gateway to all understanding.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reik, Theodor, *Dogma as Compulsion*, (Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, CT, 1951, 1975) p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface.

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<sup>4</sup> Eklof, Todd F., "Bringing Up Our Brainchild: Real Life and the Omnipotence of Thought," UUCS, March 19, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Doyle, Andrew. *The New Puritans: How the Religion of Social Justice Captured the Western World* (p. 290). Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Problem of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1912, 1959) p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> deNicolas, Antonio T., *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, Paragon House, New York, NY, 1989, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Kohlberg, Lawrence, *Stages of Development as a Basis for Education*, (see Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, *ibid.*) p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> See Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, (Crescent Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1960) p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Tao te Ching #1.*