



Photo: Still from the film "The Sixth Sense"

The 64 Gazillion Dollar Question: *How do you know?*

How do you know?

I can remember when I thought the question was a waste of time, a tedious and boring exercise in hair-splitting. Worse still, some people considered it rude, so you didn't even ask.

"Because I said so" once counted as a good-enough answer for me. "Because God said so" was even better! How could you argue with that? It slammed the door on any further discussion.

My thinking slowly changed, though, in university. In the Faculty of Engineering we were allowed one elective in our first year. I chose philosophy. The course, called 'Problems of Philosophy,' was a buffet of ideas and topics: free will, skepticism, the mind-body problem, artificial intelligence, ethics, the existence of God, and epistemology. Those eight months did me a world of good, but the *epistemology* part really stuck with me. Here I am, 25+ years later, and I can't listen

to the news (or have a conversation, or read an article, or write an editorial...) without a little voice in my head asking, "How do they *know* that?" and "Can they really be *that* certain?"

With every passing year, I see more clearly the importance of this question, and I can better appreciate the hard, honest work that goes into answering it properly.

Answering it properly can literally save lives. You could say that vaccinations, helicopters and roofs that don't collapse are all products of systematically acquired answers to "How do you know?", an endeavour sometimes called the scientific method.

Conversely, answering it poorly can kill. In the USA, about a dozen kids die every year simply because they had the misfortune of being born to parents with low epistemological standards, who believed that *faith* trumps chemotherapy and an-

tibiotics. Why believe this? ‘Because God said so.’ How do you know? ‘Because my minister (or priest, or imam, or rabbi) said so.’ How do *they* know? ‘Stop. You’re being rude.’

Low epistemological standards affect us all. For example, it is likely that all of us have known (or will know, or will *be*) a person who has endured a long, drawn-out, horrible death. When such hopeless suffering befalls a beloved pet – a cat, a dog, even a hamster – our sense of compassion demands that it be put out of its misery. But when it comes to human beings, forget it; they must suffer until their last pained wheeze (p 8). Why? ‘Because it’s God’s will.’

When members of ISIS throw homosexuals from the tops of apartment buildings, when they behead aid workers, when they blow up ancient cultural treasures, when they buy and sell Yazidi girls as sex slaves, they tell us they do it because their god commands it. How can we argue with that if we allow the invocation of a god’s will in other contexts? If we *ever* accept the ‘god clause’ then we must also accept that we can’t tell the difference between piousness and thugery, i.e., between good and evil. Our moral compass goes out the window, carried aloft by angels – or by demons, who knows?

How can you tell a Mormon there’s no such thing as a talking stone when you yourself believe in a talking bush? How can you laugh at a UFO cult waiting to be lifted off to a better place when you believe in the bodily Assumption of Mary? Does it become, then, just a matter of who has the best weapons, or who reproduces or proselytizes faster? Is it back to a jungle (of genes and memes) with nature still red in tooth and claw? We simply must do better than that.

I’m reminded of Alexander Pope’s lines:

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is Man.*

To be fair, it’s not just the religious folks among us who would benefit from an epistemological booster shot; all of us could probably do with one now and then. (Check out Linus Pauling’s claims about vitamin C when you have a moment!)

A great many of the articles in this issue wrestle with the question ‘How do you know?’ in one form or another. Then again, I see the question everywhere, so don’t take my word for it!•

– Richard Young

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