


Will there be skeptics in heaven?

Led Poston*

December 27, 2023

All I know now is partial and incomplete, but
then I will know everything completely, just as
God now knows me completely.

1 Corinthians 13:12

 begin with a puzzle that arises from reflection on two things that are not normally put together: the nature of Christian hope and global skepticism. Christian hope is focused on a renewed and redeemed creation in which persons will live as God intended: perfectly free, virtuous, and together focused on adoration of God's goodness. The puzzle relates to the fact that if arguments for global skepticism work now on earth then they work equally as well in heaven. On the orthodox Christian view of heaven we will not gain any special power in virtue of which skeptical possibilities are meaningless or incoherent. There will always be the logical possibility that one's experience of resurrection and divine presence is delusive.¹ And yet Christian hope is entirely incompatible with radical skepticism. My goal is to present the puzzle and then propose a resolution. I begin by discussing the nature of the Christian conception of heaven and then I develop an argument for global skepticism. I continue to fill out the puzzle before finally turning to examine a resolution of the puzzle.

*Thanks to Day Bennington, Aaron Cobb, Kevin McCain, Kevin Meeker and participants at the 2015 Midwest Society of Christian Philosophers meeting at Spring Hill College for helpful comments on an earlier draft. I am especially grateful for excellent comments by Rico Kirk-Giannini at the Paradise Conference.

¹See, for example, a remark by John Hick. He writes, „It must . . . remain a logical possibility that one's continuous sense of the divine presence, and of joyful interaction with God, is delusory. For in any situation, earthly or heavenly, however unambiguous its character, it remains theoretically possible that we are being deluded.“ (Hick 2005, 179)

1 The Puzzle

Christianity is not a skeptical religion. In addition to affirming that we have ordinary knowledge, the Christian tradition attests that creatures like us can know there is a God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says „The pure in heart will see God“ (Matthew 5:8). The apostle Paul claims „Even though our knowledge is now partial and incomplete, there will be a time in which ‘I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.’“ (1 Corinthians 13:12) Jesus tell us that if we hold fast to his teaching then we will know the truth and it will set us free (John 8:31-2). It is a prayer of the early church that the Lord would ‘fulfill the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be best for us, granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.’ (Prayer of St. Chrysostom)

There is little within Christianity to support the thought found in Buddhism and Hinduism that the world is an illusion and that the human predicament is one of radically failed knowledge. Rather, at the heart of Christianity is the claim that we suffer from broken relationships. We are alienated from God, from other people, and from creation. This estrangement affects every aspect of human existence. Christians proclaim that Jesus saves us by restoring us to meaningful relationships with God, others, and creation. But restoration will always be a work in progress and will only be fully realized in the final chapter of history. Christians look forward to this day when our partial knowledge will be made complete in the presence of God in a redeemed creation. It is a crucial element of the Christian story that this complete knowledge is embodied knowledge. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a bodily resurrection. Heaven, the place of God’s rule, is the redeemed physical creation.² We are not Platonic souls to be separated from decaying material bodies and then stare eternally at the forms. Rather, we are fallen human creatures that will be redeemed human creatures living in renewed communities on a restored earth. We now live under a veil of tears, but the veil will be removed and we will see things as God intends them to be. The first part of the puzzle arises from the Christian commitment that complete embodied knowledge is possible, indeed it is part of the Christian hope.

The second part of the puzzle arises from global skepticism. There are many kinds of skeptical positions, but I want to focus on a form of global skepticism which denies that embodied knowledge is possible. The first thing to note about global skepticism is that it is not a contingent thesis. Skepticism claims that the limitations imposed upon creatures like us are such that the truth-makers of our beliefs can’t be present to consciousness in a way that satisfies the demands for knowledge. Global skepticism isn’t a local predicament that can be effectively remedied by a change in location. Our epistemic predicament is, as the global skeptic sees it, unlike our inability to see distant billboards which can be alleviated by moving closer. Skepticism, in its most powerful form, claims that we cannot achieve embodied knowledge. As the skeptic sees it, our beliefs are based on signs, and signs, by their nature, can be misleading; hence the kind of assurance knowledge requires cannot be achieved by creatures like us.

To sharpen the puzzle let us put on the table a particular global skeptical argument. One of my favorite skeptical hypotheses is known as ‘a Boltzmann Brain’. Given what we know about the nature of the universe, it is a priori quite unlikely that we would have a state of low entropy like this, a state in which there are galaxies, stars, planets, persons, animals, and so on. A much more likely scenario is that a chance fluctuation of matter

²(Bright 2008)

results in an isolated state of low entropy in which there is an isolated brain floating in space. This brain realizes conscious states and, we may suppose, formed with language and memories in place. The conscious subject of the Boltzmann brain—Brainy—is in a state phenomenologically indistinguishable from a normal embodied state of subjects like us. Brainy appears to be listening to a philosophy talk, thinking about the implications of Christianity and skepticism. The Boltzmann Brain is a evil demon hypothesis for those who like physics rather than theology.

The Boltzmann brain hypothesis generates the following skeptical argument.

1. Necessarily, if S knows that (e.g.) S has hands then S knows that S is not a Boltzmann brain.

2. Necessarily, S does not know that S is not a Boltzmann brain.

So,

3. Necessarily, S does not know that (e.g.,) S has hands.

The proposition that S has hands is a paradigm proposition about embodied knowledge. If the argument succeeds for that paradigm then it undermines any embodied knowledge. We would not know that we live on earth, that we interact with other people, that we care for orphans and widows in distress, and so on. Moreover, the state of low entropy that results in a Boltzmann brain could make it seem as if one has entered heaven. That is, it is logically possible that Brainy is in a series of mental states that are phenomenologically indistinguishable from the states of redeemed persons in heaven.

So the second element of our puzzle arises from global skepticism which gives us some reason to think that embodied knowledge is not possible. The global skeptic correctly highlights that the epistemic difference between a redeemed person's phenomenal states in heaven and Brainy's phenomenal states is not a matter that is distinguishable purely on the basis of those states. The global skeptic takes this correct observation further by arguing that knowledge requires the ability to distinguish a good case from a bad case purely on the basis of one's phenomenological states.

We don't yet have a proper puzzle unless we have reason to think that both parts of the puzzle are true. This is especially pressing in the case of global skepticism. Immanuel Kant famously wrote,

It remains a scandal to philosophy, and to human reason in general, that we should have to accept the existence of things outside us (from which after all we derive the whole material for our knowledge, even for that of our inner sense) merely on trust, and have no satisfactory proof with which to counter any opponent who chooses to doubt it.

Kant here contrasts proof, which delivers knowledge, from trust, which evidently doesn't deliver knowledge. Yet we might reply to Kant with G.E. Moore that 'I can know things that I cannot prove.' And so in Moorean fashion we may well deny that there's any genuine puzzle because embodied knowledge is possible. We know that we are not a Boltzmann brain because we know that we have hands and it follows from that knowledge that we are not like Brainy.

I am sympathetic to the Moorean response. Our knowledge is not restricted to self-evident propositions and what can be deduced from such propositions. Knowledge is fallible. I know that I have hands even though the

basis for this knowledge is compatible with my not having hands. If Brainy were actual then the basis for my knowledge would be much the same as the basis Brainy has. But Brainy isn't actual and I'm not in a low state of entropy like Brainy is.

Yet even granting fallibilism, our puzzle does not completely dissipate. First, consider people who are actually skeptics. These folks think that knowledge requires strict standards that can't be met. The predicament of skeptics will not be remedied by a change in location. Heaven will do nothing for actual skeptics in terms of improving their epistemic position. Imagine a redeemed David Hume teaching epistemology in the new Jerusalem. Even God can't reason Hume out of his skepticism. That's odd. Suppose God miraculously changes Hume's disposition so that he now rejoices in the presence of God. That's a significant change for Hume, but is it an improvement in Hume's epistemic position? Does he now know something that would answer his former skeptical doubts?

Second, fallibilism is often linked to views on which it is easy to lose knowledge. David Lewis thinks that knowledge is elusive. As soon as we start thinking about skeptical hypotheses we lose knowledge.³ It'd be odd to do epistemology in heaven and quickly lose knowledge that there's a God, that there are other people, that you have hands, etc. Contextualists conjoin fallibilism with the claim that 'knowledge' is a contextual term and that it can be used to express many different knowledge relations. Some knowledge relations are such that we stand in that relation to the target proposition but other knowledge relations are such that we don't stand in that relation. Epistemology seminars in heaven would have the result that we can no longer truly say that we know that there is a God, that there are other people, or that we have hands. Subject sensitive invariantism has its own story to tell about fallible knowledge. But it too generates the result that if a subject's interests change in various ways knowledge can be lost in heaven.

Finally, moderate invariantists are prone to distinguish ordinary fallible knowledge from Cartesian knowledge and deny that we can have the latter even though we have the former. C.S. Peirce introduces fallibilism as the claim that „We can never be absolutely sure of anything. . . . Fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy.“ A nice feature of Peirce's view is that embodied knowledge is possible even if our epistemic position is not completely pure. On moderate invariantism, a heavenly subject would speak the truth to say things like 'I know there's a God and that there are other people but I'm not certain of these things.' Even on moderate invariantism, the logical possibility of a Boltzmann brain shows us that complete assurance that we are in heaven is not possible.

Given the Christian hope that we shall one day know completely as we are known completely, I find it puzzling that heavenly subjects may either lose knowledge or yet not have perfect knowledge. Paul, in 1 Cor 13 writes,

We know, in part; . . . but, with perfection, the partial is abolished . . . For at the moment all that we see are puzzling reflections in a mirror; then [with perfection, we see], face to face. I know in part, for now; but then I'll know completely, through and through, even as I'm completely known.

³ (Lewis 1996)

Paul speaks of epistemic improvement. Our knowledge is now incomplete, partial, like a puzzling reflection; but our knowledge will be made complete, full, like seeing a person face to face. How should we understand this epistemic improvement that not only improves our knowledge but makes it complete? It cannot be a matter of achieving Cartesian certainty. That isn't possible. And it would be inaccurate to say that we shouldn't take this as a literal epistemic improvement, but rather just achieving psychological certainty. I contend that we need to recover the thought that the epistemic improvement Paul speaks of is an epistemic ideal. The challenge therefore has three parts: first, this perfect knowledge is not Cartesian knowledge; second, we do not now have this knowledge; and third, we shall have perfect knowledge in heaven. The view I offer meets these three conditions.

The view I offer takes a kind of non-propositional knowledge as an exemplar of perfect knowledge. To anticipate this view let us consider the following analogy. Suppose shortly after returning to Shire from their adventures, Frodo and Samwise enroll in an epistemology seminar. They read about the Bolzmann Brain hypothesis, and over a pint of the Old Gaffer's best ale and some Southfarthing pipe-weed Frodo turns to Samwise and says that 'I can't be assured of your friendship because for all I know I might be a Bolzmann Brain.' The thought Frodo expresses strikes me as completely wrongheaded, and not entirely for the fact that there are false implicatures at play. Frodo ought to be assured of Samwise's friendship. It's not as if his epistemic position with respect to Samwise is less than perfect. While Frodo lacks Cartesian knowledge, Frodo is in a perfect epistemic position regarding Sam's friendship. To think that Frodo ought to be anything less than completely assured of Sam's friendship is to think something false and immoral. I contend that Frodo's perfect knowledge of Sam's friendship is similar to the complete assurance the redeemed have in heaven. They have perfect assurance that there is a God, that there are other people, and that they have hands. Anything less than perfect assurance seems to not properly take into consideration the strength of the redeemed person's epistemic position. And yet global skepticism gives us reason to think that perfect assurance is impossible.

Following Chisholm's work on comparative and non-comparative appearances, we can distinguish between two senses of perfect knowledge: the comparative and non-comparative sense. The comparative sense holds that perfect knowledge is knowledge we have such that we don't have better knowledge; the uncomparative sense holds that perfect knowledge meets some standard, S , that is independently taken to characterize perfect knowledge. Global skepticism gives us Cartesian standards for perfect knowledge. I think we should instead hold up second-person experience, particularly the experience of perfect friendship, as a model for perfect knowledge. It's compatible with my view that there may be multiple exemplars for perfect knowledge; in mathematics, Cartesian standards are apt and yet in relationships a different exemplar is appropriate.

2 The epistemology of love

In this section I develop the idea that an exemplar for perfect knowledge is found in the epistemology of love. N.T. Wright, the eminent New Testament scholar, claims that 'Jesus calls his followers to a new mode of knowing'.⁴ He speculates that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are ways of knowing. In his

⁴(Wright 2008, 239)

magisterial two volume work on Paul, he reads Paul as inaugurating an ‘epistemological revolution’ which he describes as the epistemology of love.⁵ Paul writes in 1 Cor 8:1-3

We know that ‘We all have knowledge.’ [But] knowledge puff you up, [while] love builds you up. If anybody thinks they know something, they don’t yet know in the way they ought to know. But if anybody loves God, they are known by him.

In Gal 4:8 Paul explains what it is to know God. He writes,

However, at that stage you didn’t know God, and so you were enslaved to beings that, in their proper nature, are not gods. But now that you’ve come to know God – or, better, to be known by God—how can you turn back again to that weak and poverty stricken line-up of elements that you want to serve all over again?

Wright thinks that these passages, along with 1 Cor 13, are at the heart of Paul’s „revision of the epistemological order.“⁶ Wright explains that we ordinarily think of human knowledge as detached from the things known. Humans acquire knowledge of things—the desk, the computer, the tree over there. Knowledge of God, however, is not knowledge of a detached thing. Knowledge of God is knowledge of a person. Moreover, knowledge of God is based on God’s initiative. In contrast to knowledge of other persons, God must first reveal himself to be known. Wright says,

Instead of humans acquiring knowledge of a variety of things within the whole cosmos, gods included, there is one God who takes the initiative. God’s knowing creates the context for human knowing; and the result is not a knowledge such as one might have of a detached object (a tree, say, or a distant star). The result, to say it again, is love.⁷

Wright contends that we see this transformation in Paul’s famous love passage.

Love never fails. But prophecies will be abolished; tongues will stop; and knowledge, too, be done away with. We know, you see, in part; we prophesy in part; but, with perfection, the partial is abolished . . . For at the moment all that we see are puzzling reflections in a mirror; then [with perfection, we see], face to face. I know in part, for now; but then I’ll know completely, through and through, even as I’m completely known. So, now, faith, hope, and love remain, . . . and, of them, love is the greatest. (1 Cor 13:8-13)

⁵(Wright 2013, 1354-1407)

⁶(Wright 2013, 1361)

⁷(Wright 2013, 1361)

N.L. Wright's remarks on the epistemology of love are suggestive but lack the sophistication of a trained epistemologist. In the following I develop the epistemology of love through Eleonore Stump's recent work on second-person experience. Stump has given us much valuable work on the nature and importance of second-person experience.⁸ I want to use her ideas to develop the Pauline idea that in heaven we have perfect assurance. Stump's model of second-person knowledge (knowledge *de te*) illustrates N.L. Wright's intriguing but undeveloped remarks about an epistemology of love.

Stump picks up on the virtue of love through Aquinas. She explains that „For Aquinas, the best things and the worst things for human beings are a function of relations of love among persons, so that for Aquinas love is at the heart of what we care about.“⁹ In love, specifically the relation between beloved friends, there is a disclosure of another person. Love, therefore, is a way of knowing. This disclosure, made possible by love, is second-person experience. It is a revelation of personal presence. It is the kind of presence that is absent when we say 'He was at the table with us but never present since he had his face glued to his iPhone.' Or, 'I worked with him for years and he was always in the office but never really there. We finally connected with each other one day over lunch.' It is suggestive that second-person experience requires love.

On Stump's view our knowledge of persons does not completely fit into the model of propositional knowledge. In the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers' journey to Egypt (Gen 42), when Joseph sees his brothers in a crowd he knows them at once. Stump contends that Joseph's knowledge of his brothers is not reducible to propositional knowledge. To be sure, there are elements of propositional knowledge; for when Joseph sees his brothers and knows them at once, he knows that his brothers are in the market. But Joseph's knowledge of persons is a special kind of irreducible knowledge.¹⁰

One test for propositional knowledge is transference by testimony.¹¹ If S knows that p then S can transmit this knowledge by testimony. But knowledge of persons can't be transferred by testimony. Frodo knows Samwise. But Frodo may tell Elrond about Samwise it doesn't follow that Elrond knows Samwise. Knowledge of persons, therefore, fails a standard test for propositional knowledge.

Stump refers to this kind of second-person knowledge as Franciscan knowledge, contrasting it with what she calls 'Dominican knowledge.' The former takes the paradigm of knowledge as the kind of knowledge disclosed in second-person experience (and which is found in narrative knowledge). The latter takes as the paradigm the kind of knowledge gained by reasoned argument. Dominican knowledge is, in her view, short-sighted because „there are things we can know that are philosophically significant but that are difficult or impossible to know and express apart from stories.“¹² By stories we can come to know intimate details of real and fictional people. We can know what it is like to face grave evil without ourselves having faced it. As Stump sees it, stories are a means to second-person experience. Even so, it may be that the narrative knowledge is not exhausted by second-person knowledge together with propositional knowledge.

⁸See (Stump 2010, 2012, 2013)

⁹(Stump 2010, 21)

¹⁰(Stump 2010, 53-56)

¹¹See (Voson 2016)

¹²(Stump 2010, 40)

Stump defends the non-propositional nature of knowledge de te by a thought experiment inspired by Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment about Mary.¹³ In Jackson's story Mary is a renowned neuroscientist who specializes in color perception. Yet she is raised and confined to a black and white room. Mary knows every fact there is to know about color perception that can be gleaned from reading a book. Yet when Mary steps outside her monochromatic room and sees a bright red London bus for the first time she learns something new, she learns what it's like to see red.

Stump tells the story of Mary who is deprived of any interaction with another person.¹⁴ Yet she reads all the books about inter-personal interaction on the assumption that the material contains only third person accounts. This rules out Mary acquiring second-person experience through literature. She knows all the science of inter-personal interaction. She knows about mirror neurons and dyadic shared attention, but only in this third person way. Mary knows every fact about second-person experience that can be expressed in third person propositional terms. Then, for the first time, Mary meets her mother who deeply cares for her. Stump writes,

When Mary is first united with her mother, it seems indisputable that Mary will know things she did not know before, even if she knew everything about her mother that could be made available to her in non-narrative propositional form, including her mother's psychological states. Although Mary knew that her mother loved her before she met her, when she is united with her mother, Mary will learn what it is like to be loved. And this will be new for her, even if in her isolated state she had as complete a scientific description as possible of what a human being feels like when she senses that she is loved by someone else. Furthermore, it is clear that this is only the beginning. Mary will also come to know what it is like to be touched by someone else, to be surprised by someone else, to ascertain someone else's mood, to detect affect in the melody of someone else's voice, to match thought for thought in conversation, and so on. These will be things she learns, even if before she had access to excellent books on human psychology and communication.¹⁵

Stump here points to the phenomenon of personal connection. As the character Amy explains in *One Girl* personal connection is the goal of every relationship. She says, „I go on dates with men who are nice and good-looking and smart-perfect-on-paper men who make me feel like I'm in a foreign land, trying to explain myself, trying to make myself known. Because isn't that the point of every relationship: to be known by someone else, to be understood? He gets me. She gets me. Isn't that the simple magic phrase?“¹⁶ We might take this lead and change Stump's revised Mary case to a case of missed connection between mother and child that is made well when they each get the other. In this new found love, they both know each other and are known by each other.

In Stump's Mary case we see the special nature of knowledge de te. This knowledge cannot be fully expressed by propositional knowledge even though it involves propositional knowledge. It would be ridiculous to suggest that

¹³See (Jackson 1982)

¹⁴(Stump 2010, 52)

¹⁵(Stump 2010, 52)

¹⁶p. 29

while Mary learns for the first time that she is loved by her mother, she does not know that her mother is real. And yet it would be equally absurd to say that Mary's knowledge of her mother's love is fully captured by a string of propositions she might read in an encyclopedia.

Knowledge of persons provides a new model of perfect assurance. In the analogy involving Sam and Frodo, the assurance that Frodo has of Sam's friendship is perfect assurance. Frodo has perfect knowledge of Sam's friendship. Their friendship—in particular the awareness of mutual love—discloses personal presence. This experience of personal presence can provide perfect assurance of another. Now, it may be that there are epistemic hinderances to second-person experience which are not simply a matter of distance. We all suffer from lack of true virtue and this infirmity creates epistemic obstacles to perfect love. Any perception of greed or pride in another provides a genuine epistemic obstacle to the kind of personal revelation in knowledge *de te*. But note well that this skeptical problem to knowledge of persons is a local problem. We can have second person knowledge in part, indeed in some special case we can have this knowledge in full. Heaven is the community of the redeemed and so there will not be evidence of human vice. Rather in the community of the virtuous we will experience for the first time true fellowship.

There may also exist epistemic hinderances to knowledge of God. In addition to concerns about God's moral character—concerns that are entirely misplaced if one is an Anselmian about the nature of God—the explanatory tradition of naturalism stemming from Darwin, Freud, and Marx poses intellectual obstacles to any second-person experience of God. This is salient for Stump's account since she allows for the possibility of second-person experience through literature. We can have second-person experience with a fictional person. Thus, if one has doubts that there is a God then one may think that second-person experience of God is an experience with a fictional character. The Scriptures are great literature and if one is so moved by the arguments against theism one may well think that experience of the divine is like second-person experience of Tom Wingo in the southern novel *The Prince of Tides*.

Stump thinks that second-person experience of God—particularly through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—is epistemically perfect. She writes,

In the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God is present to a person of faith with maximal second-personal presence, surpassing even the presence possible between two human persons united in mutual love. It is a union that makes the two of them one without merging one into the other or in any other way depriving the human person of his own mind and self.¹⁷

Stump's stress on the epistemic perfection of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, though, conflicts with Paul's thought in 1 Cor 13 that we now know in part. My view is that we have glimpses of maximal second-personal presence with God, but that complete second-personal presence awaits future consummation. Furthermore, in the here and now we need Dominican knowledge to properly situate second-person experience in the context that includes both reason and argument and the kind personal presence that is a key element to the Christian community. In my view these are both mutually supporting but that is a story for another occasion.

¹⁷(Stump 2013)

3 Conclusion

I've argued that we can recover the thought that in heaven we shall have perfect assurance, assurance that there is a God, that there are other people, that we have hands, and that we are not a Boltzmann brain. But the nature of this assurance arises from love. Only if we develop the virtue of love will we be in a position to have full, complete assurance.

References

- Hick, J. (2005). *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd edn, Yale.
- Jackson, F. (1982). Epiphenomenal qualia, *Philosophical Quarterly* 32(127-136).
- Lewis, D. (1996). Elusive knowledge, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74(4): 549–567.
- Poston, T. (2016). Know how to transmit knowledge?, *Noûs* 50(4): 865–878.
- Stump, E. (2010). *Wandering in Darkness*, Oxford University Press.
- Stump, E. (2012). Atonement and the cry of dereliction from the cross, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4(1): 1–17.
- Stump, E. (2013). Omnipresence, indwelling, and the second-personal, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5(4): 63–87.
- Bright, R. L. (2008). *Surprised by Hope*, HarperOne.
- Bright, R. L. (2013). *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Fortress Press.