

Resurrecting Faith:  
Facts, Feelings, and Finding our Religious Way<sup>1</sup>

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0. *Luke 24: 13-18*

Now that same day, two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast.

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” he asked them.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ...[T]hey crucified him, but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

0.1. *Going backwards forwards*

They are headed toward Emmaus. It’s a small village: why there? We aren’t told. But in walking there, the two disciples—one is Cleopas; the other, some scholars suggest, may be his wife Mary<sup>2</sup>—are walking away from

<sup>1</sup> The talk given at Notre Dame on 9 October 2013, as the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Plantinga Fellow Lecture, was a shorter version of this written version. I want to express thanks to Notre Dame’s Center for Philosophy of Religion—that is, to all those persons who comprise the life-blood of the Center in its four-dimensional existence. I especially thank Alvin Plantinga, both for his founding role in the Center, and for his continuing inspiration and support to all of us trying to—his definition of philosophy of religion— “think hard about religious belief.” Finally, I thank Robin Dembroff: for her keen editorial eye on various drafts, I owe a special “draft” of thanks.

<sup>2</sup> John 19:25 mentions a “Mary of Clopas” as one of the women women present at the crucifixion of Jesus: “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, his mother’s sister, Mary [the wife] of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.” “Of Clopas” in Greek can refer to either the wife or daughter of Clopas. Thanks to Carolyn Charnin who called

Jerusalem and their community. They are disillusioned. They are perhaps also in fear. Might not the authorities come after Jesus’s followers next? (A few verses later, we’re told that the Eleven—still in Jerusalem—are huddling behind locked doors.)

The two are in animated discussion, but also downcast. They still see Jesus as a prophet (“powerful in word and deed before God and all the people”), but they no longer hope that he’s Israel’s redeemer, the promised Messiah. In moving toward Emmaus, they are walking away from Jerusalem, away from the community that hoped in all that.

Then a stranger somehow overtakes them. And soon after—even as night descends—they are on the same road, but hurrying *back* to Jerusalem, back to that community.

What changed them? And what is the nature of that change?

The standard answer is: “God’s resurrecting *Jesus*—that’s what changed them. They’d met the risen Lord!” I think that’s true. But Luke also tells, in curious detail, both human and divine sides of the process. He tells, for example, how Jesus joins them, walks with them—but they don’t recognize him. And this isn’t due to some defect in them. Luke’s phrasing is clear—they *are kept* from recognizing him. (Why?) Luke tells of Jesus interrupting them—but by asking to be brought *into* their conversation. Jesus does not belittle: his questions *elicit* their feelings and their thoughts.

Are there, in the details of Luke’s story, things that can also help us? A first answer might be that we need listen to our doubt and look closely at its nature. Today I’ll talk about a book that might help us do this.

0.2. *Rediscovering Venn*

I found the book around ten years ago. I was at an APA Meeting in San Francisco, and had wandered into a small bookstore. On a shelf was a slender book; the gold letters on the black spine just said:

*Venn Some Characteristics of Belief*

my attention to N.T. Wright on the identity of the “other disciple.” See ([http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Resurrection\\_Postmodern.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Resurrection_Postmodern.htm)) For a quick entrance to more leads, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_of\\_Clopas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_of_Clopas)

You may have heard the name “Venn” in connection with “Venn diagrams”—those overlapping circles representing syllogisms and sets. I knew him more for his fat 500-page book *The Logic of Chance*.

I’d studied Venn’s fat book in the late 1970’s and really liked it. At that time I had been writing my Ph.D. thesis on scientific rationality. I’d also been struggling in a big way with doubt—finding myself, for the *second* time in my life it seemed, on a road moving *away* from Jerusalem.

And now, some twenty-five years older, I chanced on this second more slender book by John Venn. Paging through it, I was surprised. First there was the inside cover, bearing the *full* title:

*On Some Characteristics of Belief, Scientific and Religious  
Being the Hulsean Lectures for 1869*

So, Venn was interested in the science-religion relation! Paging further, I saw that the book contained four lectures—and that each one started with a Bible verse. So...John Venn was also a Christian—and even, it seemed, some sort of minister or preacher or priest!

A little probing has confirmed this. Venn graduated from Cambridge University in 1857. In 1859—a historic year, we’ll see—he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. Soon after, he returned to Cambridge as a professor. And in 1869 Venn would, under an endowment for an annual series of “Hulsean lectures on topic of “the Evidence of Revealed Religion,”<sup>3</sup> give the four lectures republished in this slim little book I’d discovered.

#### 0. 1869

Ten years before the lectures—in 1859—two books sent seismic shock waves throughout England and well beyond. One was Darwin’s famous *Origin of Species*. The other bore the unrevealing title *Essays and Reviews*—a now forgotten book that introduced the rather buttoned-up world of British theological learning to the radical New Testament scholarship coming out of Tubingen.

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia has a useful entry on the Hulsean lectures, with on-line links to published accounts.

While Venn’s four lectures don’t directly address these books, he was not impervious to either of them. He’d been raised in a religiously devoted Evangelical family, with a long history of men who were famous ministers. He was firmly expected to follow family tradition, becoming a minister himself. But he very nearly didn’t, for he had spiritual and intellectual struggles that led him to feel personally inadequate to minister to the struggles of others.<sup>4</sup> There is a remarkable letter in which Venn, writing to his father, pours out these doubts. (He does so, he writes, only with hesitation—and only because his father had encouraged him to confide in him not so much as a father as a friend.) And in a remarkable reply, his father tenderly but firmly counsels his son on using Scriptural truth to, so to speak, ‘talk back’ to this doubts.

Venn knew about Emmaus roads.

And now, ten years later, Venn is speaking to his students as a professor, but also as a person of faith. Cambridge then—like Notre Dame today—still claimed a Christian identity. Cambridge students still identified strongly as Christian. But Venn felt something moving among them, and among his colleagues. It was, as I will call it, a “new wave” of religious doubt. But its shape was not so much a swelling of doubt as an undulating but conspicuous *receding* of conviction.

This receding movement, Venn says, will have been have been noticed “by anyone familiar with the current tone of thought and feeling upon religious matters.” It was new, Venn said, but also old, for what it exposed to view had been there all along. Venn’s four lectures seek to examine the nature of this receding of conviction, and what it exposes.

Venn’s eyes are also, however, seeking to discern something on the horizon. For something, he senses, is *coming*.

<sup>4</sup> John Venn (4 August 1834 – 4 April 1923) was raised strictly in a Christian home; he traces the religious history of his family in his book *Annals of a clerical family* (1904). His great-grandfather Henry Venn (1725-1797) was an evangelical minister who helped found the highly-influential “Clapham Sect” within the Anglican Church. his father—also Henry Venn (1796- 1873), also an Anglican clergyman, was a foremost Protestant missions who, as was characteristic of Clapham Sect, frequently lobbied the British Parliament on social issues, most notably—with William Wilberforce—to ensure the eradication of the Atlantic slave trade.

Venn graduated from Cambridge in 1857; he became a priest in 1859; and in 1862 he returned to Cambridge as a lecturer in moral sciences. His own journey led him to struggle with some of teachings in the 39 Articles of the Church of England, and in 1889, rather than serve in bad conscience, he gave up his orders. He remained a Christian, and later remarked he needn’t and perhaps shouldn’t have done this: given the Church’s evolving interpretation of the 39 Articles, he could have remained an Anglican priest.

## 1. *New-Wave Doubt*

Venn begins his lectures by trying to characterize the new wave doubt. It has, he thinks, three main distinctive features.

### 1.1. *New Doubt's First Feature*

The first feature is a peculiar *vagueness*. Until recently, Venn says, doubters—those willing to express doubt about the truth of Christianity—could be expected to state some specific reason for doubt, some specific objections to specific Christian truth-claims. But, says Venn (p. 2), “at the present day this state of things is nearly reversed”:

It is not a doctrine here and there that is exposed to attack; it is not that a conflict between religion and science is apprehended just at one or another point.

If we are New Wave Doubters, we may of course tentatively voice a specific difficulty. But if it is removed, Venn says, “the crop [of difficulties] that follows is only thicker.” If we are honest, our doubt is really

...a kind of feeling of dissatisfaction, perhaps almost an instinct of aversion, which [one] might find it very hard to draw out into articulate objections.

The new type of doubt thus has a de-localized character. I hereby dub it *Fuzzy Doubt*. It can involve, Venn says, “an instinct of aversion.” So the fuzz can be *prickly* fuzz, with something getting under our skin. This is the first feature of New Wave Doubt.

### 1.2. *New Wave Doubt's 2<sup>nd</sup> Feature: The Inner-Fluctuation Source*

The next two features concern the *sources* of the new doubt. Venn sees two main sources. Perhaps we can call them the *Twin Pillars of Fuzzy Doubt*.<sup>5</sup>

The first source is this: many religious believers find their convictions subject to a good deal of inner fluctuation. And this fluctuation seems to have a random character. Venn says:

Everyone must be acquainted with the way in which his practical hold of his faith is subject to variation without any apparently sufficient cause. It is influenced by his outward circumstances, his health, his age... Sometimes his faith appears extinct; often it

burns in a way that only just gives evidence of its existence; occasionally it shows a lurid flare at the approach of danger or death.

So, one day the creed seems real and true to you. The next day you wonder if it's all a big social construct. And—crucially—there doesn't appear to be any “sufficient cause”: your evidence for the creed, good or bad, hasn't changed. You are, Venn says, like a hiker in deep fog, who finds the light around her growing sometimes dimmer, sometimes brighter—and she cannot tell why. Venn writes (p. 6):

...the sun has remained the same throughout, your eyes have not varied in their power, you cannot point to any particular cloud as having caused the change, and yet there is a change.

### 1.3. *New Wave Doubt's 3<sup>rd</sup> Feature: The Outer-Disagreement Source*

To get at the second source of fuzzy doubt, Venn sets a context. In 1869, when Venn was writing, science had only recently crossed an important threshold—the threshold where the smartest people could understand only a small fraction of what, if I can so put it, “science knows.” “We are all of us,” writes Venn:

...now in a position in which we can know but little even of the facts in most sciences, and next to nothing about the evidences of these facts.

Venn doesn't mean we've become know-nothings. We do know more now than before. You and I are not chemists, yet we know many things like this: when common table salt dissolves in water, it breaks apart into charged ions—positively charged sodium ions and negatively charged chlorine ions. A hundred and twenty years ago, no one had any idea about such ions or ionic dissociation. But—here's Venn's point—you and I know only a *bit* about such things, and even less about the evidence for such things. Our fragmentary knowledge is “second hand”; we know such things by depending on other people who have the specialized skills and knowledge to have “first hand” knowledge about ions and the like.

Here's another way to put Venn's point: in many areas, you and I can know (or rationally believe) many things only by virtue of belonging to a *community* of knowers with various specialized functions. For dissociation of salt into charged ions, that community includes the ingenious theorists who came up with the theoretical hypothesis, experimentalists who did diverse and specialized experiments to help refine and test it, critics who pushed them hard on possible flaws in their reasoning, debates that wrestled through both sides to

<sup>5</sup> From Mike Rea's introduction: “Two minutes before we started, Steve asked me to mention Plantinga's essay “The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship. Consider it as now mentioned.”

discern where the evidence really points. It also includes textbook writers and publishers and high schools and high school teachers who allowed this to be transmitted to you and me when we were sixteen years old. In many areas of knowledge, then, we know things only as members of these broader *knowledge communities*—or *epistemic communities*, as philosophers would say.

With this point in hand, Venn continues:

This being the case, what is our security against being misled or deceived when we accept a result on the authority of those who are enquiring at first hand. . . . [O]ur main reliance must surely be found in the fact that the genuine students are in substantial agreement. If they coincide in their conclusions, we do not doubt that they have arrived at least at some substratum of truth; if they are still in dispute, we mostly withhold our full assent from any one of them.

And here lies the rub for religious matters. For what we now face is, as Venn puts it, awareness of a huge contrast. We have

... increasing awareness of the prolonged, in fact incurable, differences of opinion which exist in the province of religion—**as compared** with that of science.

Consider science first. Here, Venn says, we are struck by

the compact unanimity which exists, . . . at least upon many topics. Even where scientific points are still in dispute, it is asserted that such points are but few in number, and of small importance, compared with the bulk of those which are universally accepted by the competently informed; and, what is more, each successive age sees this proportion still further diminished.

Now compare religion. Here we are struck by “the endless discords which prevail.” Some of these discords are *between* major religions, of course. Within a given religion, like Christianity, some discords are in scholarly study of the theology and Christian scripture and history. Others are the level of the church itself. At this level, Venn writes

...hardly a generation passes without some Church being shattered into sects, or some sect undergoing still further subdivisions, whilst centuries elapse without showing any sign of reunion.

#### 1.4. *The Source of the Force*

So Venn diagnoses these things—Inner Fluctuations, Outer Disagreements—as at the root of the new wave of Fuzzy Doubt. But *how* do they lead to doubt? Is it by a *reasonable* process? Is it, that is, sensible to see these two things as justifications—or even, indeed, as explanations—of fuzzy doubt? Venn realizes this may look thin. It may seem odd, he says, “to be assigning as a *cause* of doubt, the doubt that already *exists*.” But Venn thinks there is more than mere causation: the doubt is arising from a process of inference, of reasoning. To see this and address them, Venn says, “we do well to begin by putting them in as precise a form as possible.” The above considerations, he says might, with their implied inferences, be thus summarily stated:

- I) The fact that most persons do not retain their religious convictions with unaltered tenacity, but find them vary exceedingly in practical efficacy according to circumstances,—in other words find them somewhat vague and vacillating,—suggests the conclusion that **these convictions are less the product of objective facts than of our own morbid fancies;**
- II) The fact of there being such an endless conflict of opinions in religion, (even if we supposed each person to retain his own opinion with unwavering steadfastness) is pretty clear proof that **the subject-matter in question is one upon which truth cannot be reached.**

To understand Venn’s responses to these arguments, it will be useful to spell out the nature and implicit premises in each one. Since the first argument appeals especially to the weird *fluctuations* in our religious convictions, let’s call it the Fluctuation Argument, or FLUCT for short. As Venn phrases it, the considerations in the premise are said only to “suggests the conclusion.” Construed in this modest way—leaving a blank premise for any intended but unstated tacit premise(s), we thus have:

FLUCT 1: Most persons find their religious convictions vague and vacillating (“varying exceedingly in practical efficacy according to circumstances”).

FLUCT 2: Tacit premise(s).

FLUCT 3: So, it is somewhat probable that these convictions are more a product of something subjective (e.g., “our own morbid fancies” than of objective facts.

Since the second argument is from the endless conflict of religious opinions, let's call it "The Conflict Argument"—or CON, for short. Here, on Venn's phrasing, the considerations in the premise are said to be "pretty clear proof" of the conclusion—a more ambitious inferential claim. So we can lay it out like this:

CON 1: In religious opinions, there is (so far) endless conflict of opinion.

CON 2: Tacit premise(s).

CON 3: So, it is very probable that on religious subject matter, the truth cannot be reached.

To fill in the tacit premises, we have to ask what *sort* of inference is going in in both cases. The conclusions clearly are not meant to be deductively entailed by the premises, so the inferences are, broadly speaking, inductive in character. But what sort of inductive reasoning?

My sense is that it's best to construe the arguments as cases of "inference to the best explanation" or (as it sometimes called) *abductive* reasoning. In each, the first premise articulates certain putative *data*, and the conclusion contains some specific *hypothesis of interest*, which is (also in the conclusion) said to be made to some degree probable by the data in the first premise. The principle underlying such abductive reasoning is roughly this: if some hypothesis of interest H explains the data D to better, to some degree, than does any other available hypothesis we know of, then, H is, to that same degree, confirmed—made more probable—by D.

Construed in this way, one key tacit premise in each argument is that the hypothesis of interest does *explain the specified data better* than does any other available rival hypothesis.

FLUCT 1: DATA: Most persons find their religious convictions fluctuating a lot ("varying exceedingly in practical efficacy according to circumstances").

FLUCT 2: The hypothesis that our religious convictions are the product of something subjective (or morbid fancies, wishful thinking, or the like) explains this vacillation data somewhat better than any rival hypothesis.

FLUCT 3: So, it is somewhat probable that (HYPf) religious convictions are more a product of something subjective (e.g., "our own morbid fancies" than of objective facts.

And:

CON 1: On religious questions, there is (so far) endless conflict of opinion.

CON 2: The hypothesis that our minds are not equipped to reach the truth explains this data very much better than any rival hypothesis.

.CON 3: So, it is very probable that (HYPc) on religious questions, our mind's are not equipped to reach the truth.

Venn does not find these arguments silly. Each rests on some perplexing facts, and each involves a hypothesis that gets some support from those facts. Venn writes:

Everyone who feels a rational interest in any subject must find a real cause of perplexity. ... He will at least demand to have some account of the fact, and if possible to know the grounds of it.

## 2. *Standard Evidentialism, Revelation, and Faith*

If the Inferences from Fluctuation and Conflict are a "real cause of perplexity," as Venn puts it, this is especially because they are on a collision course with a position widely held in Venn's time—a position that we nowadays called "evidentialism," and more specifically *Christian* evidentialism.

So Venn thinks about these twin pillars really hard. What he comes up with are *alternate* decent explanations for the facts of fluctuation and disagreement. If he can do this, he will have shown that the second premise of each argument is false. He will, like Samson, have pulled down the two main pillars of fuzzy doubt.

Venn doesn't put it quite this way, because putting it this way makes it sound like he is just negative, like playing defense—trying to stop Fuzzy Doubt from scoring two touchdowns. That's how it starts, but Venn finds himself discovering something that the twin pillars of doubt are, really, telling us something positive. They are telling us something that can help us release Christian evidentialism from an epistemological straitjacket. The result will still be an evidentialism, but a renewed evidentialism—one that is stronger, more supple, and—my hope—more helpful to us on our Emmaus Roads. To understand his renewal, let's start with some points about plain evidentialism.

### 2.0. *Evidentialism and the Bottom Lines:*

To be an *evidentialist*—whether theist or agnostic or atheist—is to hold something like the following:

EVID: *In order for* it to be epistemically proper<sup>6</sup> or reasonable for a person to believe a set of world-view claims (like those of Christianity), there must be good evidence for those claims, and the person, in believing, must be rightly related<sup>7</sup> to this evidence.

The *Christian* evidentialist believes, in addition, that:

PROP It is in an epistemically proper way that many persons to believe the core truth-claims of Christianity

and, naturally enough, thus also believes

CHEVY For the core Christian truth-claims: 1) there is good evidence for these truth-claims; and (2) many Christians are epistemically proper in believing them because they are rightly related to this evidence.<sup>8</sup>

But if the two main arguments troubling Venn—FLUCT and CONFLICT—are right, then something is seriously wrong with Christian evidentialism. It is worth noting, though, that the two arguments identify two distinct things as wrong. The bottom line of FLUCT is that the notion that that normal Christian belief rests on evidence is a pretense, an illusion. It is a veneer, covering over some subjective and far less creditable source of conviction—one that, so far as we know, nothing to do with giving us access to reality. This, in particular, is the bottom line of the Fluctuation Argument.

The bottom-line of CONFLICT goes further by suggesting that, in all likelihood, there is no remedy for this sorry state of affairs. It's not just that on religious questions, we need to work harder at basing our beliefs on the evidence, or on getting ourselves into right relationship with the evidence. It is much worse: in the domain of religious questions, "working harder" won't help. Our brains just aren't equipped so as to be able to make progress toward

<sup>6</sup> A more detailed treatment would need to distinguish here the various senses in which a belief can be said to be (or fail to be) justified, reasonable, warranted, and the like. For our purposes here, the reader can fill in a sense of "reasonable" that he/she finds most natural, when considering a statement like "For most educated persons today, it is reasonable to believe that the sun is much further away than the moon, and it is not reasonable to believe that the sun and moon are about the same size.

<sup>7</sup> In keeping with Venn's point about the communitarian nature of evidence, we should note that an individual's being "rightly related" to the evidence for the claim need not entail that the individual knows this evidence—any more than you or I, in properly believing that salt dissolved in water dissociates into charged ions, need to know the specific evidence for this doctrine of physical chemistry.

<sup>8</sup> This is an improved version of the paragraph as read aloud on October 9.

the truth on such things—no matter how hard we work at it. You might as well try to teach your dog to write Shakespearean sonnets.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1. Standard Evidentialism

In a preface to his four lectures, Venn puts his evidentialist cards on the table. He will throughout, he says,

...treat belief [including Christian belief] as being *founded solely upon evidence*—with the implication that in the thoughtful and sound-minded, it is *rightfully* so founded.

So Venn thinks that all belief—including Christian belief, "is to be founded *solely* upon evidence."

### 2.2. Evidentialism and Revelation

One might, as a Christian, worry that Venn's evidentialism conflicts with Christian belief in our need to rely on divine revelation. If we base our beliefs "solely upon the evidence," doesn't it follow that we aren't going to base them on God's Word, as revealed in Scripture and Jesus Christ?

As a committed Christian, Venn knows that we must depend on divine revelation. He affirms (p. vii) that "The testimony of our Creator," he says (p. vii), "is to be accepted without hesitation." The question is how we are to determine what is God's testimony, so that we may rightfully accept what it tells us. Venn's view is that our judgments of what *is* God's testimony (and what is counterfeit) must be founded solely on evidence.

### 2.3. Evidentialism and Faith

Another worry: Christians tend to think that that Christian faith is a matter of—well, *faith*. The view that Christian belief is "to be founded solely on evidence," Venn says,

...will probably prompt the enquiry, What then do you make of *faith*?"

Doesn't Venn's view somehow horribly diminish *faith*? Venn respects this worry. It is, he says,

<sup>9</sup> The above paragraphs, and related paragraphs elsewhere in this lecture, have been improved thanks in part to conversations, after the lecture, with colleagues at the Center for Philosophy of Religion. A lunch conversation with Natalja Deng was especially helpful here.

...hardly in accordance with ... the teaching of Scripture to make faith little more than an intellectual state, as it must be if it is founded solely upon evidence.

Again, the worry here can be put as an argument:

(FAITH 1) If evidentialism is right, then all our Christian beliefs are to be founded solely evidence.

(FAITH 2) If all Christian's belief are to be founded solely on evidence, then Christians have no need of faith.

(FAITH 3) Therefore, if evidentialism is right, then Christians have no need of faith. (1 & 2, Hypothetical Syllogism)

(FAITH 4) But Christians clearly do need faith

(FAITH 5) Therefore, evidentialism is not right. (3&4, Modus Tollens.

Venn thinks there is just one false premise here: FAITH 2. What we need to see clearly, he thinks, is that *belief* (in the sense he means the term) is an intellectual (or mental) state, and that faith is much more than this. He writes:

Faith then, as I understand it, is belief and something more; the something more being a moral element, namely, confidence or love towards God and our Saviour.

Today we often get at this by distinguishing between “believing that” and “believing in.” By “belief” Venn means a mental state of “believing *that*” some proposition is true.<sup>10</sup> By “faith” he means a heart-state of “believing in”: Christian faith is believing in God. This may require having beliefs *about* God, but it also goes way beyond them, because it involves trust, love, obedience, and so on. So even if all your Christian beliefs *about* God were founded on evidence, you’d still need to take those heart-steps of having faith in God—of resting in God in that trusting loving obeying way that is—or so a standard evidentialist will say—the essence of faith.

So that’s how Venn as a Christian addresses these two worries about standard evidentialism. Since his real concern is with other things, he moves quickly over these worries. So shall I.

### 3. Liberating Evidentialism: What Inferential Evidence Really Is

<sup>10</sup> Venn calls “belief” an intellectual state, but tilts toward what we now call a “dispositional” account of the state: “Without attempting to offer a full definition, we may give a valid description by saying that belief is that state of mind in which we are prepared to *act upon the truth* of any proposition in question.”

To treat Fuzzy Doubt, Venn thinks, we must *reform*—or better, *liberate*—evidentialism. Christian evidentialists have put the concept of inferential evidence in an epistemological straitjacket. Venn asks us to reconsider how we actually form opinions—opinions not on simply and detached subjects (like whether one’s checking account is overdrawn), but on those “of large inquiry and especially of human interest.” Venn carefully goes over three considerations. He does this kind of slowly, making them seem so obvious, that he has to tell students to not fall asleep, because they will have important and unexpected consequences for religious belief.

I will try not to go so slowly, but they are important, so please try not to fall asleep.

#### 3.1. Point One: Evidence as Dutch

Venn’s first point is that for hypothesis of large scope, our evidence draws on many areas. Here Venn sees our logic books and our “Systems of Logic” as leading us astray. They have, he says (p. 12), encouraged that idea

... that when we track a truth backwards and examine its sources, we shall find that many derivative conclusions follow from one more general proposition, that this again is one of many that follow from some more comprehensive proposition, and so on. On such a view this process of justifying our beliefs would lead us (as one may say) along a converging cone, till we reach at its centre a few fundamental truths which either stand self-supported, or rest upon an immutable basis of experience.

This, Venn says, is the picture of inferential evidence we get from our Systems of Logic text-books. Granted, *some* conclusions can be *exhibited* in this form. And we may, “here and there,” find a comprehensive thinker who has so “tabulated taken his beliefs on almost every subject,” reducing them to a few with which he is irrevocably satisfied.” But, says Venn—call this Venn’s Big But—:

But it is to me quite clear that for most the process is practically precisely the reverse. The moment you question any proposition, you find it linked by a strictly logical connection (inductive or analogical) with many others. Each of these again, when examined in turn, brings you into contact with many more. You thus seem led along a cone which is continually diverging.

Venn hear finds, in a work by one Abraham Tucker, an illustration which (p. 13) “quaint and familiar as it may seem, is so much to the point that I cannot

forbear from quoting it.” And I in turn—for reasons you will see—cannot forbear quoting Venn:

Speaking of the grounds of our religious belief, the author [Tucker] rejects the common illustration of a building and the foundation on which it rests, as inappropriate to describe the real facts of the case. A more apt comparison would be found, he thinks, in one of those Dutch [ ! ] buildings which rest, not on well-laid courses of brick or stone, but on an assemblage of many piles driven deep into a soft and yielding bank of sand.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. *Point Two: Data as “Filled in” Evidence*

Not only does evidence for wide and deep hypotheses come from a broadening cone of data: each “datum”, each discrete fact or chunk of evidence, though it may seem simply “given” by the experience, is in fact far from simple.

What we call a simple fact is in great part the product of our judgment, and therefore often of our fancy, working upon very fragmentary data. What we do in observing a fact is to *fill in* any outline of which only a point here and there has been actually assigned, an outline therefore which may be no more obligatory than the shapes of the constellations on a celestial globe.

Venn gives several telling examples to illustrate how our minds, by a process of “filling in,” synthesizes those things we often think of as perceived “facts.” The well-known McGurk Effect is a wonderful example of this: what we actually *hear* when we carefully listen to a speaker is in part a creation of what we see, as we watch the embouchure of the speaker’s lip. Change this *visual* input, and what you “hear” changes, as your mind—willy nilly—uses the visual signals to “fill in” and create the perceived sound. Subjecting yourself to McGurk Effect on YouTube shows this effect (if you like most people are subject to it) to be incredibly robust. Even when you know your eyes are tricking you, what you hear *still* fluctuates, depending on whether you watch the speaker’s lips or cover them up. This can be incredibly disorienting for those who pride themselves on being objective observers—one of my students, after having his auditory perception flip-flop around depending on whether his

<sup>11</sup> Venn continues (still p. 13): “It may better please the fancy to picture to ourselves a regular building towering in tier above tier of solid masonry, whose foundations we can assign, and can prove they rest on firm rock. But such a structure is quite unsuitable to describe the circumstances in which we are actually placed.”

eyes were open or shut, looked at me helplessly and said, “It makes me think maybe I *am* in the Matrix.”

### 3.3. *Move Three: Evidence as Emotion-Laden*

Finally—and most importantly—Venn asks us to consider closely the roles of our emotions when we form conclusions on the basis of evidence. Emotions shape our belief formation, Venn says, in two ways.

#### 3.3.1. *The Subjective Role of Emotions*

On one hand, in forming conclusions, emotions can have a subjective influence directly on the mind of the observer. This influence is generally, and on the whole justly, regarded as of a decidedly *disturbing* character.

We must read Venn closely here. The influence of emotions on our conclusions is, he is saying, is generally *regarded* as of a decidedly disturbing character—that is, I think he means, that it makes our conclusions less reliable. He agrees that regarding them this way is pretty much right. But this opens the door a crack: maybe it’s not always right. Maybe, instead, the subjective role of emotions sometimes *helps* us get at the truth.

Like when? Well, here I will tell an Evan Fales story. (Evan is one of my colleagues at the Center this year. (Evan, stand up, would you?<sup>12</sup>)

Now Evan likes climbing. Climbing as in, like, scaling up hundreds of feet of sheer rock in incredibly dangerous places (sometimes with Al Plantinga, Bas van Fraassen, Rick Otte, and other rock-climbing philosophers). Evan was climbing alone a few years ago, in the Canadian Rockies. Bad weather set in, and he had to hole up overnight in a shallow cave a bit up a cliff face. Night fell; it got pitch black; and it was getting cold out there. But his body heat kept it cozy inside. It was nice, except for a few mosquitos whining nearby. He rubbed on some Cutters, He curled up in his parka, dozed a bit, and starting thinking about a problem regarding the causation and counterfactuals.

His eyes suddenly jerked open. He’d heard something: a faint *slithering* sound somewhere near the mouth of his cozy little cave. His heart pretty much stopped beating. His mind reviewed, in a flash, everything he knew about

<sup>12</sup> This tale about Evan begins in fact but rapidly devolved into fiction. In the discussion period, however, Evan challenged only one point. He remarked that in fact that he began studying, collecting, and handling snakes as a young boy, and insisted that he has no fear of snakes, poisonous or otherwise.



Canadian rattlesnakes, and his ears began taking in every whisper of a slither along that wall.

Now, Evan hates fear. He sometimes gets irrational fear attacks, panic attacks, and so on. Also, like Bas and Ric, he lives in California, so he always has at hand plenty of...well, various and sundry consciousness-altering substances, let just say. One of them would quiet his fear totally, mellow him out nicely. Should he be thinking about this as a solution to his current problem?

What we're talking about here is the emotion of fear. Fear was telling him: there's a potential problem here. It pretty much focused him 100% on input relevant to that problem, filtering out pretty much everything else. It was tuning his senses, his thoughts, filtering out everything except what is relevant to the problem. Is his fear, acting as a focuser and filter—an *aid* to getting at truth here, or is it a disturbing factor? And if an aid, is that generally the case? Or not?

These questions aren't trivial to answer. Perhaps we think of our emotions as mostly detriments to truth because we *notice* those times our emotions make us do stupid things that get us in trouble with the Campus Police. But what if we did a fair sample, or kept track of *all* the times our emotions kick in, day in and day out. Are they more often helpers to truth, or hinderers? This is a real question, and Venn helps us put it on the table.

### 3.3.2. *The Objective Role of Emotions*

Emotions, Venn says, also have

an objective aspect, as being themselves some of the facts which have to be taken into account in framing or choosing our theories about the world. Under this aspect they have a most important *logical bearing*.

What Venn means here is that, if you are considering some hypothesis with real breadth and depth and human importance, then emotions are going to be part of the *data*. Your conclusions are then going to be affected directly by your emotions—by the emotional range of your own life. And this will have an indirect snowballing effect, he says, because it is going to very hard—maybe impossible—for you to grasp emotions of others, if they fall outside your own emotional range. This will be just as true if you are one of those sensitive neurotic types whose emotions are a total roller coaster, because it will be hard for you to grasp the emotions and thoughts of a calm, disciplined person.

### 3.4. *Bringing it Together*

We now need an illustration that brings together Venn's three points about evidence.

Venn is asking us, remember, about how evidence works, not on narrow boring topics like whether salt dissolves into tiny charged ions, but on areas of broad inquiry and vital human interest.

So here's such a question: is human nature basically good, or basically evil, or what? There's something incredibly valuable about humans. But humans sometimes do really crappy things to each other. There's some sort of flaw there. So how deep and bad is it. Are we just prone to making mistakes about what is good, or to forget what, in our better moments, we know is good? Can we fix ourselves just by *trying* harder? Or is there something, rooted deep in our selves, that is really twisted?

Now these days, we philosophers don't much deal with this question. But that doesn't mean it's a bad question. I think most thoughtful humans *sort of try* to answer it, drawing on ideas from religion, humanistic psychology, literature, and the history of ideas. Most humans come to some conclusions, too, though these aren't easy to verbalize, and are more like "a sense of how things are" regarding human nature. Suppose this is true for you—you've got some beliefs, by way of a broadly based "sense of things," about human nature. Now, are these beliefs of yours based on "evidence"?

Venn would say: of course they are! But if you think about the *nature* of this evidence, his three points hold.

First, your evidence is drawn from a huge *variety* of data-sources, ranging from their own inner life, to the lives that have affected them most, to their exposure to racism or abuse, to their reading of newspapers and autobiographies, to their knowledge of history, whether of genocides or Christian missions or whatever. You see the point: the *range* of data-sources is huge. And none of it is rock-solid: it is like those Dutch houses built on many poles sunk into the mud.

Second, each small "chunk" of your information is not simple: it is a complex, jiggly thing partly due to this input, and partly due to what your mind fills in.

Third, your evidence will be shaped by your emotions. Your emotions will play a role in helping you focus and filter as you do (and if your emotions are screwed up, this may affect your filter). And second, emotions will be part of your data, because what you see as people's emotions will be relevant to how you think of the goodness and messed-up-ness of human nature.

### 4. *Fuzzy Doubt and Emmaus*

And now, in the short time left, I need to bring it back home...back home to the two arguments—FLUCT and CONFLICT—and also back to where we live.

Let's suppose Venn is on the right track. As an evidentialist, he wants to say that, in the religious domain (as well as in other domains of vital human interest), it is possible for us, to find answers that are soundly based on real evidence. But real evidence, he is saying, doesn't fit the narrow ideal that so many philosophers—the "strong foundationalists," shall we call them?—have tried to foist on us. We need a *name* for the sort of evidence Venn thinks is more realistic. With those Dutch houses on poles in mind, let's call it *Squishy Evidence*.

Venn thinks squishy evidence is still evidence. In saying it's still evidence, I think he's saying two things.

First, that it comes in different degree of quality or strength, and our judgments about this can thus be on or off target. And that we can improve our judgments by thinking about it—thinking about what the evidence is, and how it's related to what it's evidence for.

Second, that when it's at its cognitive best (and when we are at ours), squishy evidence can bring us closer to knowing the truth about things.

Let's include these two things in the concept of squishy evidence, to see where he wants to take it.

#### 4.1. Addressing the First Argument

Venn, we've seen, is tackling two main arguments—FLUCT and CONFLICT—seeking to stop them from scoring touchdowns and defeating us with Fuzzy Doubt. When we laid out those arguments, I said he would be tackling the second premise of each. Let's see how his concept of Squishy Evidence might bring each second premise down.

For FLUCT, the second premise was this:

\*FLUCT 2. The hypothesis that our religious convictions are the product of something subjective (our morbid fancies, or wishful thinking, etc.) explains the above data somewhat better than any rival hypothesis.

The data here, in the first premise, was that "most persons find their religious convictions Vague and vacillating ('varying exceedingly in practical efficacy according to circumstances')."

Now, using his more realistic model of squishy evidence, Venn wants to say FLUCT 2 is false, because there is in fact a rival hypothesis that explains this data equally well, or better. It is, simply, that our religious convictions are based on our judgments about a big field of squishy evidence. A key relevant aspect of squishy evidence is that it is a big field, with lots of squishy chunks of

data. And what Venn wants to say here is that a change in our circumstances can—partly by acting on our emotions—change how we are filtering and selecting and gestalting the chunks in this squishy field. If you are attacked by a dog, the emotional trauma can easily lead you to select out, from all your experience with dogs, those episodes which suggest that dogs are by their nature vicious. It may also introduce instability into your belief about dogs: even some small circumstance may—by changing the way you filter your total evidence—trigger a shift in the content and confidence of your belief about dogs. It is not that your belief about dogs is a basic belief unrelated to inferential evidence: it is rather that the evidence, being of the squishy sort, can be filtered in various ways, and that small circumstances can alter the "filter" you use on that evidence, leading to instability and fluctuation in your level of confidence.

I leave for your consideration the question of whether Venn's hypothesis does explain religious vacillation as well as the more extreme hypothesis. If it does, the first Pillar of Fuzzy Doubt pretty much collapses.

#### 4.2. Addressing the Second Argument

Venn's approach to the second pillar is similar. Here, the data was that (CON 1) On religious questions, there is (so far) endless conflict of opinion,

and the second premise was

(\*CON 2) The hypothesis that on religious questions, our minds are not equipped to reach the truth explains this data very much better than any rival hypothesis.

Again, using his model of squishy evidence, Venn wants to offer a hypothesis that, he thinks, explains the data of endless conflict equally well. The core idea here will need to be that on the hypothesis that religious questions rest on human judgments about squishy data, it is to be expected that people will, over long periods of time, hold different answers to them.

Now, some things are hard to see here. It is harder to see how Venn's core idea will bring down CON2. It is also a little hard to see the relation of CON2 and FLUCT2. Both are meant as Pillars for Fuzzy Doubt, but they seem to involve different Fuzzy Doubt ideas. On FLUCT2, the Fuzzy Doubt hypothesis is that our religious convictions do not rest on any sort of evidential judgment. On CON2, the Fuzzy Doubt hypothesis is that, whatever religious convictions rest on, our minds are not going to make progress toward truth on them.

(H) On religious questions, our minds are not capable of getting at the truth.

So it could, one might think, beef up H this way

(H') On religious questions, we rely on squishy evidence (just as Venn says), but in this area the questions are too big and the data too squishy, so our judgments can never get at the truth.

And now it is hard to see how Venn can use his hypothesis is going to bring down H'. How can he say that his hypothesis—that on religion questions we are relying on squishy evidence—explains the data of protracted conflict better than H' does?

So there are some questions to sort out and get clear about here. I'll need some to keep working on them.

#### 5. *On the Outskirts of Emmaus: Addressing Where We Live*

Two months ago, on the phone, I was catching up with an old friend—I'll call her Judy. She'd been reading the new bestseller *Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, by Reza Aslan. Judy is about my age, was raised in the same small town of Martin Michigan, and in the same Calvinist church—the Martin Reformed Church. She and I both, in our teens, drifted away—or, hell, just walked away—from much of what that little church in Martin taught and stood for. Her journey, like mine and like so many of our generation, has at times explored other spiritualities, and has at other times seemed adrift in a void.

Talking about Christianity with Judy is sometimes a challenge. Two months ago, then, she told me she'd been reading this book about Jesus by Reza Aslan. She'd never heard Jesus presented in his historical context before. And she'd gone to two big meetings in New York where Reza talked about things. What Judy shared with me—or what I with my flawed ears at any rate heard—was very approximately along the following lines:

Steve, this is the first time I've found Jesus interesting (she said). The book by Reza explains how the church and Paul and all the church councils distorted Jesus. In the beginning there was lots of diversity among followers of Jesus, and lots of different written gospels about him. But when Christianity became the state religion, Constantine appointed bishops and stuff to squash the diversity, and the other gospels got labeled as heresy and destroyed, and left us with the repressive religion that isn't what Jesus stood for at all. Which is also the narrow Midwestern Christianity you and I grew up with in Martin.

Steve, I'm going to try to read Elaine Pagels' books again. She's a Princeton professor and she says the same thing, and also gives us the Gospel of Thomas, which was written the same time as the gospel of John, but gives us a whole different picture and a Thomas Christianity. In fact Jesus was just one of many healers in that time, but as Reza explains he was different because he didn't charge money for healing people. Oh, Pagels also gives us the Gospel of Judas and Gospel of Mary—I think that's the Mary Magdalene who married Jesus—and all these were just recovered from caves in Egypt recently. And they now give us a gnostic way to follow Jesus that is so much different from what Paul Christianity, with its emphasis on sin and on God killing his own son so he could stop being angry at our sin, and so on.

Have you read the Gospel of Thomas, Steve?

Now, Judy knows I'm a Christian, and I think she's sometimes seen me as rather dogmatic and narrow, or uncompassionate, in my faith. Maybe I am. At any rate, I did wonder for a moment if she was testing me now—testing to see whether, as she told me about this book *Zealot*, I'd go all dogmatic and critical. But I don't think she intended any such test. She was, I think, just excited to be reading this book by Reza Aslan. and to be hearing these new things about the life and times of Jesus, and to be connecting it to things she remembered from Elaine Pagels. And she was trustingly sharing her excitement with me.

But though she didn't *mean* to be testing me, I *was* nevertheless being tested. I didn't trust Reza Aslan or Elaine Pagels one single bit. I was inclined to see them as doing nothing but leading people astray. And so I was starting to feel upset and angry.

Not at Judy. More, I guess, at Reza or Elaine Pagels. But even more, I think, at myself.

Here's why: I really wanted to have some facts to *refute* what Judy was reporting from these books. I wanted to defend ordinary Christianity against them. But, on the phone, I couldn't think of a single argument, a single solid fact that would do the job. I started to just make some facts up, about scholars having shown the Gospel of Thomas being written way later than the real Gospels—but I didn't know that: I was just grabbing at straws (and the dating of the Gospel of Thomas in fact seems to be a bit more up in the air than I wanted to think).

I'm glad to report I didn't just make something up, or say something belittling. I think I managed to shift into holding my tongue, to just listening and praying. And after listening I said something like this:

That’s really interesting, Judy. I think I did read some Gospel of Thomas a long time ago. These are important things to think about. I think you and I both have, inside us, strong gnostic tendencies.<sup>13</sup>

\*                    \*                    \*

Judy may not have realized it, but in my high school years and after, I really *did* have strong gnostic tendencies. I graduated from high school in 1967, having dismissed standard Christianity several years before. I hitchhiked to New York to look for Nirvana with powerful chemical aids. The gnostic self within me didn’t want to be saved from *sin*. It wanted to experience some mystical enlightenment, some special knowledge that would allow me to be kind of god-like, in touch with some flow of all being, enabling me to float above this changing illusory world, looking down, with Buddha compassion, on ordinary people still caught up in the illusions of the materialist American society. In the summer of ‘67, seeking a gnostic Jesus, I think I drank pretty deeply at the gnostic well.

Judy knows *some* of that. She also knows this: hitchhiking back to Michigan, that gnostic summer, my Eastern trip was crashing. I was hitchhiking back from the East Village—got let off on Interstate 80-90, about 40 miles east of here, so as to head north toward Martin on US-131. A guy picked me up, gave me a ride for twenty minutes, taking me through the first small town; and as he drove, he witnessed to me.

He let me off, and by the side of that dark road I knelt and prayed to God for the first time in years. Not to the impersonal Atman-and-Brahman-are-One that I’d been chasing, but to—I hoped—a Personal God, able to hear personal prayers. I prayed something like this: “if you do exist, I guess I’ve made up a false Jesus, and gone and messed up my brain with LSD.” And “if you are real, please come into my life and show me who Jesus really is.”

Some will see these as silly variants on the famous “agnostic’s prayer: “Oh God, if you exist, save me sound, if I have one.” But is the agnostic’s prayer

<sup>13</sup> I don’t mean to suggest this response is ideal in the long or even medium-short run: see below. The “Thomas and Mary Challenge,” voiced in different ways by Reza Aslan and Elaine Pagels, deserves the best squishy-evidence conversation we can give it. My sense of the need for this was heightened yet more after reading Joe Nocera’s Christmas Eve 2013 column in the New York Times: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/24/opinion/nocera-the-gospel-according-to-mary.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/24/opinion/nocera-the-gospel-according-to-mary.html?_r=0).

really so silly? If you’re lost in the fog on a mountain side, is it silly to yell out for help in the hope that someone *might* be there.

That was July 1967; I was about to turn 18; looking back, I see my life there turning from BC to AD. It was not an instant makeover. I made a confession of faith in our small-town church; I entered Hope College, dropped out of Hope College, spent time in a psychiatric hospital where some good people cared for me, went back to Hope. Thus began a slow path of growth to a healthier saner self... though one that, on the most charitable view, can even now barely qualify as a “work in progress.” Let me try to relate that path to Venn’s idea of squishy evidence.

\*                    \*                    \*

On my own path back to Jerusalem, evidence seemed and still seems important. The evidence was, every step of the way, mediated by community. In college, conversations and books—here I think of F.F. Bruce’s vintage *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?*—helped me see the gospels (the four gospels) as reliable historical accounts of Jesus—written believers with an agenda, yes, but by believers who cared about real history. Other teachers and books—I think here of a text by Bruce Metzger, used in the New Testament class I took in college—helped me see Paul’s letters in historical context, and also to see that later selection of these into the New Testament canon was not an arbitrary decision, but a recognition of what that community already endorsed as apostolic. These and other Christian scholars helped me, in my college days, to see St. Paul’s framework as illuminating (rather than distorting) who Jesus is—and to see all this as fitting my life too. And it seems to fit more and more: it fits my experience of life to confess that I am a sinner; to recognize myself as bearing God’s image but desperately fallen; to find in God’s grace through Jesus an atonement that covers over all that, and gives me the fresh start I need every day.

So if I ask what my beliefs are based on, there’s some scholarly-type stuff mediated by community and mixed in closely with this “fit with experience.” This mix may not sound much like “evidence.” But here I think Venn’s book helps us. Evidence can really be evidence, and yet also be very squishy, in just the ways that Venn says. Your beliefs, and mine, are like those Dutch houses resting on poles stuck in mud and sand and marsh, with the mind filling in fragments now barely remembered, fragments filtered and focused through emotional longings and fears that pick out the slithering sounds and escape routes that we happen to face at particular times of our lives. And, for me, with so much help over the years from our epistemic communities—from, in my

case, so many brothers and sisters in Christ that I cannot *imagine* how the evidence would look without them. Our perception of squishy evidence gets much nurture by getting grafted into a good epistemic community. (And if a good Christian epistemic communities can be faith-making, bad ones can be faith-shaking, or even faith-breaking.)

Our beliefs are based on evidence. And yet ... on the phone with Judy, I could not think of a single good *argument*. The next day, I went to the public library in Holland and checked out four books by Elaine Pagels. (Reza Aslan's book was on hold for about 84 people, so I had to go buy a copy.)

On dipping into these books, I got—well, something between really nervous and somewhat *scared*. *One* voice in me said (and I could imagine Judy saying this to me):

*They* knew far more facts about these things than me, *they'd* read so much more than I ever could; and *they* thought my Jesus and my Gospel was just—well—simplistic narrow-minded *bunk*.

But *another* voice in me said (and I could imagine myself saying this back to Judy):

“Well. My Bruce Metzger and F.F. Bruce know more about the New Testament than your Reza and Elaine ever will, and *they* think your gnostic Jesus is just bunk.”<sup>14</sup>

And I could hear *me* saying to me:

If my heart sinks and confidence recedes as I read these things, how can I suppose my beliefs rest on anything worth calling ‘evidence.’

And if these experts disagree so much, how can I suppose any investigation I do of ‘the evidence’—even if for the next twenty years of my life—will give anything worth calling ‘high probability’.

\* \* \*

It was about then that I found Venn's book in a dusty box and started to study it. Venn's reflections helped me, and I hope they may also help you. As I think about how Venn's analysis applies to the challenging conversation with Judy, the words forming in my mind go kind of like this:

<sup>14</sup> Sort of like kids going “My dad can beat up your dad.” Not, clearly, a very *edifying* dialectic.

Steve, when you were in college and grad school, your study of Metzger and F.F. Bruce on this stuff mattered, and it still matters. Your self-chosen gurus—Timothy Leary and Alan Watts and Edgar Cayce—had set you on a gnostic path away from Jerusalem; and these Christian teachers gave you the evidence you needed then, to begin growing into the truth.

And, though what you learned from these teachers became part of you, you shouldn't—now—expect or even want to be able to marshal what you learned into rapid-fire arguments with numbered premises. That's not the way squishy evidence becomes effective. It becomes real, and its weight discernible, by being invited in, and lived with.

And even though this evidence is good evidence, it is *squishy* good evidence: so you should *expect* many smart people—people like Reza Aslan and Elaine Pagels—to passionately disagree with it, regardless of what smart people like Bruce Metzger and F.F. Bruce think. *Both* sides are passionate—if they weren't they wouldn't work on this so hard. Both sides are themselves facing that huge hill-side of squishy spring-fed evidence, filtering out mud and panning for gold.

But, Steve, you can't just live on the capital of *old* gold. You need to study Reza and Pagels, study vintage Metzger and Bruce again, and then go on to add new scholarly resources, to meet new challenges in a new way. As a second-hand scholar, your advantage is that you don't have to trample the hillside looking for fresh evidence. You just have to digest and weigh the nuggets they've dug up. That's a lot easier.<sup>15</sup> Which is not to say that it's easy.

<sup>15</sup> My metaphor is too obscure. In the lecture I noted that I was here helped Peter van Inwagen's essay on the relation of ordinary Christians to Biblical criticism: “In general, it is much harder to find reasonable grounds for deciding whether a certain proposition is *true*, than it is to find reasonable grounds for deciding whether *so-and-so's arguments* for the truth (or for the falsity) of that proposition are cogent [*arguments*].” (Italics mine.) Finding the truth is often hard—like being prospector panning for gold in a stream. Evaluating someone's argument for a claim is often easier—like being an assayer, testing a lump of gold the prospector has brought into town set on your counter. That's the thought, anyway.

The essay by van Inwagen, as originally published and reprinted in his *God, Knowledge, and Mystery*, is entitled “Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament.” But the essay more recently appears with a helpful new

\* \* \*

And, adding to Venn something I read by Rich Mouw,<sup>16</sup> I am hearing, in the Emmaus Road story, one last thing. Mouw says that when we listen to people talk about what they believe and don't believe, we need to listen for their *journey*—for how their beliefs are *changing*, and for the direction of that change. With this in mind, I am hearing a new note in the Emmaus story. If the writer didn't mean the story to sound the note, it may yet be a note to be heard the story.

When the stranger and two disciples reached the turn-off to Emmaus, remember how the stranger started to say goodbye, telling them that he was going further down the road? Was this a trick? Before revealing his presence, did he want to be wanted? Or, perhaps better, want them to know what they desired? And maybe: wanted them to verbalize this too each other, as well as him?

In telling them he was going further, it makes sense to suppose that Jesus wanted something along these lines. Cleopas' heart *had* been “burning within him” as Jesus explained things along the road; so too had the heart of his friend. Together, they did *implore* him to stay longer with them, to come into the village, to eat with them, to stay overnight. And, in response, he *did* come in, *did* break bread with them. And then, the story says, the scales fell from their eyes, and they saw: It's *You!*

But no sooner do they see this than—squish squish—he disappears. And no sooner do Cleopas and his partner compare notes—how *each* of their hearts did burn within them as he explained how Scriptures were fulfilled—than they slam on their sandals, grab their backpacks, and hit the road heading back to Jerusalem, back to the recovering brothers and sisters they'd left behind. In a few hours, they would share their story with that no-longer- huddling community in Jerusalem, adding, to amazed testimonies there, their own patch of squishy recognition of Jesus on that road to Emmaus. And for whatever its worth, their patch of evidence has come—and come in some detail, some twenty centuries later—to us too.

And those details: so squishy, so curious ...yet also so rich. And with Rich Mouw's point in mind, I find in one such detail a possible little “parabolic” twist. Those two disciples, Cleopas and (let's suppose) his wife Mary—they were walking to Emmaus, and the stranger joined them. Approaching the village, the Stranger said he was going further. Perhaps it served to elicit their invitation. But the road *did* go further—*way* further, I imagine. Maybe Jesus really *had been* headed further out. Perhaps he was going after someone else, someone further—maybe *way* further—down that Emmaus road.

If so, you can bet he slipped out the door to catch up with them—and it's a safe bet that he succeeded.

So if you're like me, and you meet someone who seems to be standing still on the road just outside the turnoff to Emmaus, be gentle. When *you* were last at that place in the road, you may have been headed away from Jerusalem. But this person standing at the same place—well, don't be surprised if the Stranger has caught up with her. If so, she's standing still just to take a rest. She's on her way back.

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introductory section and a new title (“Do You Want Us to Listen to You”) in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. C. Bartholomew, C. S. Evans, M. Healy, and M. Rae (Zondervan: 2003). Pp. 101-129.

<sup>16</sup> I think it was by Mouw—perhaps somewhere in Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (IVP Books; Revised and Expanded edition, 2010)