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# THE EVIDENCE OF GOD HAVING SPOKEN

Steven G. Smith

God's revelation is not uncommonly represented as a past speaking—"God has spoken," "We have heard." In order to study how the possibilities of reasoning are affected when the crucial evidence to which reasoning may appeal is a remembered speaking, a parable is offered in which three young brothers dispute whether their mother has called them home. Their arguments necessarily take an *ad hominem* turn. It is found that the claims of the brother who remembers hearing are provisionally, partially, and prescriptively reasonable. This brother's position resembles that of St. Paul at *Romans 1:18-32* ("So they are without excuse").

"...I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

(*Exodus 33:22-23*)

\* \* \*

When preachers and theologians argue their claims, the decisive evidence to which they appeal is God's revelation. Did they not appeal to evidence (that is, to something experienceable that agrees with and confirms their proposals), their arguments would not be reasonable (that is, they would offer no basis on which their audience could and should agree with them). But God's revelation is a strange kind of evidence—accessible in different ways to different people and to some people, apparently, not at all. Thus the question continually arises whether claims based on such evidence are truly reasonable.

In making either a philosophical or a theological assessment of the rules of reason that have force in religious discourse, much depends on how revelation is conceived and, accordingly, on what kind of evidence it is thought to be. The kind of evidence revelation is will determine the kind of argument that can appeal to it. We should pay close attention to different ideas about what revelation is and how it occurs, therefore, since the often tacit competition between such ideas has a great influence on reasoning in theology and philosophy of religion. My present purpose is to examine one important but I think relatively unappreciated way in which revelation is thought to occur, and then to see in what



position this puts a person who wishes to make claims based on it.

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures characteristically represent the revelation of God as a self-disclosure in speaking. The correlated human response of faith is understood as a hearing or hearkening. Even when God (for Christians) becomes human, an object of touch and vision, God is still “heard” or not heard, hearkened to or not hearkened to, as a Word. “God speaking” is adopted as a metaphor for revelation because the evidences presented and received in speaking and hearing are more similar than any other ordinary evidences to the peculiar evidence of revelation. Speech is controlled by the speaker’s initiative; so is God’s self-disclosure. Speech is invisible; so is God invisible in the solicitation of the Holy Spirit which attests Jesus as Christ, the Bible as God’s Word, or the world as God’s creation. What has been spoken can be denied or ignored or misunderstood; so too is God’s revelation often ambiguous or “incognito.” A heard call is, on the other hand, commanding and summoning; so also does God’s revelation put one on the spot, creating a personal bond by which God pulls on one.

A difficulty associated with this conception is that it seems that the preachers and theologians can only talk reasonably to people who, like them, hear God speaking—and who, moreover, hear the speaking of God in timely fashion, so that claims based on it can be checked against it. This condition could rather drastically restrict the circle in which religious reasoning takes place. However, there exists a significantly different variation of the model “God is speaking/We hear.” It is “God *has* spoken/We *have* heard.” To think about how a past speaking differs as evidence from a present speaking or showing, and how it determines the situation of argument, I offer a parable.

\* \* \*

One summer afternoon three boys, brothers, set out from home to go play in an abandoned rock quarry about a mile away. Their mother is on a shopping trip and they believe she will not be back until dinner-time. The boys are Danny, 13, John, 10, and Alex, 8. While they are still within a few hundred yards of home, Alex stops short and tells Danny and John that he has just heard their mother calling them back. They turn to look, but by now the house is out of sight around a bend in the street. A few seconds pass and no second call is heard. Alex’s brothers pull him along, telling him he must be hearing things. Soon they are out of earshot of home.

At first Alex is sure he heard his mother calling, but when the others deny hearing it he begins to doubt. She wasn’t supposed to be home at all. Even if she had unexpectedly come back, why would she have wanted them? Possibly for no serious reason. And what right would he, the youngest, have to try to make his brothers turn back, or even to go home by himself, which would

initially shame them and maybe in the end disgrace them? On the other hand, what right does he have to disobey his mother?

Danny heard nothing. His mother might have called, for all he knows, but in his judgment the most important point is that he, John, and Alex had gotten far enough away from the house to be beyond any reasonable hope of recall. At that moment they were out of earshot *de jure*, if not *de facto*, and so were entitled to enjoy their freedom. But beyond this Danny knows something that Alex doesn't know: he gathers from a previous conversation with John that the quarry they are bound for is a dangerous place. There was some kind of accident in it not long ago. It follows that their mother would probably not approve of what they are going to do, if she knew what they know—but, he thinks, she doesn't.

John, the middle brother, knows for a fact that a boy was killed in the quarry just a week ago. The boy was a friend of his. He also knows that his mother knows about the accident, and he has no doubt that she would forbid her sons to play in the quarry if she were asked. In fact, she may have said something about it in general terms last week. But that was last week, and this afternoon—like most afternoons, it seems—she is away. Did John hear anything? He heard *someone* call out in the street. If he could be sure that it was his mother, he would be unwilling to disobey her, but who knows who it really was? It could have been the old busybody next door who has no right to tell them what to do. It could have been a different mother calling different children.

Now the boys arrive at the quarry. Alex's conscience is bothering him. He has not been able to convince himself that he did not hear his mother calling; he cannot stop wondering what their mother wanted, and he says something out loud to this effect. Danny sees that if Alex's conscience isn't put to rest then no one will have any fun, so he tries to reason the thing out with Alex. Unfortunately, he takes the wrong tack. He tries to show that their mother doesn't know enough to want to keep them out of the quarry, and thus lets slip the fact that the quarry is dangerous. John chimes in with what he knows about last week's fatal accident. His friend had tried to climb a vertical rock face in the pit and had lost his grip near the top, falling and breaking his neck. Danny is encouraged to hear this because he knows he would never do such a stupid thing. But Alex feels more on the spot than ever. He now knows why their mother would have wanted to call them back. Alex isn't afraid of the quarry; for him the problem is one of obedience, and thus the argument that ensues turns entirely on the issue of whether of the mother was heard to speak and what her will might be.

How can the brothers argue about such a thing? What evidence can they appeal to? One thing they could do, of course, would be to go home to ascertain whether their mother is there, whether she called, and if she called, what she meant. But

at the moment that is the entire issue, namely, whether they need to go home, so the sort of verification or falsification that could only be obtained at home is not available to solve their problem. There would not be enough of the afternoon left in which to do anything worth doing if they had to trudge the mile home at this point. So they must argue here and now, in their mother's absence. Let us see how this argument proceeds.

In the opening round, Danny and John counter Alex's claim that he heard their mother call with a series of *ad hominem* attacks. First they accuse him of being so afraid to play in the quarry that he is using a made-up story to get out of it. (But Alex protests his courage, and maybe even proves it by doing something dangerous.) Then they call him a "Mama's boy" and say he is apt to hear his mother's voice even when she is absent. (This charge has some truth in it, since Alex's active conscience does often speak to him with his mother's voice; but he hotly asserts that he knows the difference between imagination and reality. His brothers are skeptical, remembering how Alex used to confuse the two when he was a few years younger. It is true, they think, that Alex is no longer such a little kid and so unreliable in that respect, but who can tell whether he is completely over that phase now?) Finally, John argues that Alex did hear something or someone, but misinterpreted what he heard. How does Alex know that what he heard was what he says it was? (Alex answers that if he can recognize anyone's voice, it ought to be his own mother's.)

In the second round, Alex takes the offensive against his older brothers. To Danny, who claims to have heard nothing at all, he points out that anyone anxious to get away from home and intent on doing what he pleases might well fail to hear his mother calling when someone else does hear her. It is characteristic of Danny to become so absorbed in his pursuits that he fails to respond when someone tries to get his attention. (Danny answers that he has his wits about him as much as Alex, and besides, this line of argument would only prove that there might have been a call, not that there was one; and how could he be expected to hear a call from so far away?) To John, who admits that he heard something but professes himself unable to say what it was, Alex objects that his judgment is distorted by his partiality. Clearly John does not *want* to hear his mother calling him back, so he is likely to be giving an unreal weight to alternative explanations of the sound, even bending over backwards to admit or create these alternative explanations.

Oh for a Universal Tape Recorder, to play back the call/no-call in order to settle the question without all these personal insinuations! But would such a tape recorder have heard what Alex did? It might have, if it were sensitive enough. But then it might hear so much else—radios, automobiles, squawking and murmuring and scratching by all the bodies in the neighborhood—that it might not be able to discriminate one person's voice. If it were keyed to her frequency

and voice-print, then? But Alex himself is, as he says, the ideal instrument for recognizing his mother's voice, and certainly better than any other instrument available to the brothers. The trouble is that he "plays back" rather differently than a tape recorder.

The *ad hominem* arguments have so far produced a stalemate. Alex cannot be argued out of his certainty, nor John out of his doubt, nor Danny out of his agnosticism. But inner debate might go on in the soul of each. John, secretly stung by what Alex has said, might worry about the reliability of his thinking in this case and, by implication, in all others (he wants to be a judge when he grows up); perhaps he resents his mother for being away so much and is subconsciously taking revenge by closing his ears to her voice. Danny might worry whether he is just insensitive, whether important things in life are passing him by because of his egocentric isolation. Alex might worry whether he has become a prig and is making a scene here just for the satisfaction of spoiling his brothers' fun. Yet I think we can grant Alex a legitimate and unavoidable interest in trying to convince his brothers of what he has heard, for it is the mother of all three who has called, not Alex's alone.

Unless some weight of new evidence is added, it is hard to see how the balance of the disagreement can be tipped. Alex is put in a difficult position by his brothers' refusal to admit the only decisive evidence, the mother's call itself. He can defend his claim by appealing to secondary evidence that is admitted. For example, all three brothers know that their mother could have come back from shopping early, since she has done that in the past, though not often. This would at least rule out the objection that the call heard by Alex was impossible on account of their mother's known absence. The issue of the dangerousness of the quarry could be approached by making observations and tests—for example, by finding out how much traction a tennis shoe gets on a certain rocky incline. Unlikely as it seems, the boys could independently convince themselves that playing in the quarry is unwise, and proceed home *as if* they had been forbidden to do it. That way lies sanity and righteousness, they might all agree. Despite the practical importance such a decision might have, however, it would be in no way based on the evidence of the mother's call; at most, it would be provoked by the *idea* of that call.

Alex's argument is premised on a real call. If he assumes for the sake of his argument that John and Danny do have a memory of it that they deny having, he has to admit that this evidence is momentarily hidden; it discreetly refuses to determine perception in the way that evidence is supposed to. He realizes that even his own memory is not coercive evidence. Since he is not immediately faced with what he heard, he can take certain liberties with it. He can deal with it in the hypothetical manner of "All right, suppose I did hear her...what then? But if not, what then?" He is free to resist the suggestion, which would not be

absurd and might even be plausible, that his mother never called, by reminding himself that she did; it is as though the call trusts him to remember it. If he betrays the memory of the call by supposing it never happened, it will not speak up in public to contradict him. He is safe from this kind of embarrassment. Auditory evidence, invisible, seems more escapable; whatever is or has been visible seems more naturally repeatable, is liable to be seen again—the very word “evidence,” from *exvidere*, refers to vision. (Compare the kind and duration of unease you would feel if you once heard a strange noise in your house with what you would feel if you once saw a strange apparition in it.) Alex might not be able to get away with denying or forgetting the call if his brothers had heard it and insisted on reminding him of it. But the burden of remembering and reminding has fallen on him. No pressure will be applied except that which is generated within him.

For all its “modesty,” the memory of the heard call is imperious, too. Being a call, it pulls on Alex. The pressure generated within him is thus not all by him, although it is within his power to subdue it or dismiss it by interpreting it as random guiltiness or “voices in his head.” Because this evidence of a bygone sound is invisible, it exists in one sense inside his head, only in the re-enactment of remembering; yet because the sound was no mere noise but a *speaking*, it came from the absolutely outside, from another person. The memory is an intersubjective bridge, or at least the burning issue of an intersubjective bridge, at the same time that it is fully private. (This means, incidentally, that the call is something more than mere evidence to Alex, and threatens to be more than evidence to his brothers, even though it is positioned between Alex and his brothers as evidence pertinent to *their* argument; for a call is that initial demand for commonality which creates a context in which evidence can be evidence, an instrument of reasonableness.) Each of the brothers is on a tether, be it long and loose, to this call; each is on his own responsibility, which has a public dimension only because they are brothers, committed to acting together. It is this freedom-and-responsibility that makes the *ad hominem* reasoning necessary. One has to get at them to get at the matter.

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In the garden parable of John Wisdom’s essay, “Gods,” we see how people can differ about what is to be seen when the very same evidence seems to be before each one, and how arguing about what is to be seen may still not be unreasonable.<sup>1</sup> We are now used to saying in such cases that different *aspects* of the evidence occur to the disputants, who then employ various tactics to render aspects visible to each other. Of course the aspects are themselves the crucial evidences, and not something distinct from evidence. Suppose I try to get you

to admire a painting, Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, which you presently have no use for ("seedy Baroque pornography"). I direct your attention to the pinwheel composition, the color rhythms, and so forth, so that the painting's beautiful aspect will leap to your eye. At this point I am arguing from a premise that is not evident to you, and to do that is, in itself, unreasonable; but I suppose that you *will* see it—I hope—which gives my argument a certain kind of rationality—provisional, partial, and prescriptive. It is provisional, or hypothetical, in the sense that my argument only works if you do come to see the desired aspect and thus admit the shared evidence required by reason. It is partial in the sense that the sharing of the evidence is at first contemplated only by me. It is prescriptive in the sense that I impose the aspect in question upon you, I do not leave it to chance or even (at first) to your option whether the aspect appears to you and takes on due importance. I do not accept your experience as is. Rather, I try to shape it. All this presumption on my part is risky, but we might judge the risk a good one since Rubens is held in high esteem by painting cognoscenti.

Alex's situation is both like and unlike this. He too must argue on the assumption that at some future time the evidence that is crucial to his demonstration will be accessible to all. By appealing to their memories, he in some sense invites his brothers to discover that aspect of their past experience in which their mother's call becomes apparent and important. But the testing of this hypothesis, the search for this aspect, is mainly interior: the brothers must rummage in their own memories and imaginations and wrestle with their own motivations. In our argument about the Rubens, you and I have the third thing, or can have it, constantly before us. Our objectivity or what I have called "tethering" is firm, theirs is loose. The greatest dissimilarity between the cases is that only under very unusual circumstances would I suppose that you *already* knew about the beauty of the Rubens, and that my task was to get you to admit what you had already perceived. In that case I would have to wonder what was influencing you to suppress your appreciation. Like Alex, I would have to go beyond a simple review of the evidence to make my case; I would have to try to straighten you out.

In cases like this where the resolution of an issue depends on something more than review of available evidence, we commonly think not only of "aspects" but of the dimension of *decision* in rational belief. Believers array and invest themselves in their beliefs in ways which evidence is not sufficient to determine, and there are practical rules for doing this non-arbitrarily—for instance, to promote health, wealth, long-term learning, or virtue. Certainly there is an irreducible element of decision in each of the three boys' cases, and practical rules which apply thereto. But the locus of the present question, the point at which something crucial will or will not happen in the mind of each boy, is, so to speak, in the middle between "aspect" and "decision," between the mainly involuntary occur-

ence of a certain form of evidence and an essentially voluntary determination of the will. It is a question of what the boys can and will *realize* rather than what they see, on the one hand, or decide, on the other. (The power of realizing has, I take it, very much to do both with the aspects of things one is able to see and the decisions about things one is able to make.) We may specify “realizing X” as “knowing X explicitly because one knew X implicitly.” There is thus midwifery in any argument that aims to secure a realization.

In a famous piece of religious argumentation, Paul’s letter to the Romans (1:18-32), the arguer seems to practice this midwifery with respect to the evidence of God’s revelation. Paul asserts that the God he is proclaiming to his fellow human beings is no novelty but has been known to them beforehand. They are “without excuse,” subject to God’s wrath because they chose not to admit what they knew. At this moment Paul characterizes revelation not as something happening while he speaks and not as something promised to happen in the future, but as something that has already happened. He argues in this way on this occasion to emphasize the point that his audience will not know God unless they take the blame for their ignorance of God. God’s righteousness is the solution to the problem of human sinfulness; but who would step out of his or her own sinfulness to see the “aspect” of God’s righteousness now evident in the world or in the Christian gospel? The interests of sinners run counter to apprehending God’s will, the bane of their sin. Their blindness and deafness is prescribed by the ideology of sin. To combat this, Paul makes the presumption, intolerable to sinners and from their point of view unreasonable, that they already know God. If it is true that they already know God but will not admit it, then the problem lies with them rather than with God. They have to change in order to know what they know.

The presumption that an audience has already heard God speak is an aggressive proselytizing tactic, to be sure; it is also a basis of reasoning that accords with the self-understanding of many believers, who acknowledge an already-existing divine claim on them but rarely or never feel themselves in the presence of a divine speaking. Thus the experiential structure of *realizing one has heard*, rather than *hearing*, is already at hand to vindicate the presumption. However it happens—by having read certain texts, by having received a church education, by having implications of a past event in one’s life dawn on one—one can come to find oneself tethered to an evidence that cannot be repeated in the present or rendered entirely unambiguous in one’s own mind. And it is not nonsense to say that some are tethered without knowing it, because those who discover that they *are* tethered may discover at the same time that they *have been* tethered for some time or all along. That aspect of past experience emerges with the realization.

Extending the parable for illustration: suppose that John knows implicitly but

not explicitly that it was his mother who called him and meant him not to go to the quarry. Explicit acknowledgement is blocked by a problem of character. He cannot afford to know what he knows; he is too much steeped in resentment of his mother for being gone so often, or (like Danny) too proud of having escaped the house to be able to admit that he has not gotten away with it after all. A bystander cannot know what John knows without knowing John. (Alex does know John and has a shrewd idea of what John knows and will not admit, even to himself.) The corollary truth is that John needs to straighten himself out in order to know what he knows. The initiative must come from within John. It is uncoercible from without. Yet from Alex's point of view it can only be fair and desirable to propose John's truth to him from without, to put a kind of pressure on him. Such proposing may be the only occasion John gets on which to break through to acknowledgement of what he implicitly knows, which in this case would mean to obey his mother by going home.

Further, we can imagine Danny endorsing Alex's claim and heading homeward precisely as a result of realizing that he, an interested and self-absorbed party, could not have heard the call. He might agree that Alex could have heard whatever was to be heard and is therefore entitled to be official hearer for this occasion. He would probably reason at the same time that it is a far, far better thing to go home, repenting for past heedlessness, than to take advantage of not having heard the call. But he would not be acting purely *as if* there had been a call, independent of any evidence. He would be granting the existence of the evidence and allowing it to have effect. His presumably competent brother Alex would mediate the evidence to him, subject to checks from the secondary evidence and from his canons of experience.

Or we can suppose more realistically that the brothers go merrily about their games in the quarry.

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It seems that rational subjects possess not only certain responsibilities but certain rights with respect to already-heard evidence. Preachers and theologians in an Alex-like position would have arguing rights like Alex's. (Part of being in an Alex-like position is *brotherhood* with one's hearers, which is here a figure for full reasonableness, i.e. being in some respect essentially concerned with the beliefs and actions of all others; our problem vanishes if this "brotherhood" is denied.) All who realize they have "heard" something will naturally and rightly assume that others within "earshot" have heard the same thing, unless they have some reason to suspect that their ears or memories are playing tricks on them. Those who are not deaf in general and yet do not hear the evidence cannot reasonably believe in it; yet the claim of not-hearing is not secure. There may

be reason to suspect that the not-hearing is hypocritical or correctible, particularly when someone's interests run strongly counter to the implications of what might be heard, and therefore Alex pursues a legitimate aim by challenging his brothers. He begins with the same right his brothers have to be believed as an official (hence latently officious) hearer of any sound, simply because any presumptively normal subject perceives the same normally perceptible things that any other would, and if we do not at least begin by granting each other this standing we will be unable ever to talk about anything with each other. Still, in making his provisionally, partially, and prescriptively reasonable argument on the assumption that his mother called, Alex does run a risk of failing ever to bring about reasonable sharing of evidence. The longer he fails the worse this risk looks. It increases in proportion to the consistency and convincingness with which the brothers deny his claim, and also varies with the strength of contrary indications from the secondary evidence, such as known facts about the quarry or their mother's habits.

On the other hand, the brothers run a risk of their own, for Alex may be right. And besides, the quarry is a dangerous place.

#### NOTE

1. John Wisdom, "Gods," reprinted in *Logic and Language*, I (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1951).