

ETERNAL QUESTIONS

a Journal of Metaphysics written by

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The Stoic Monastery

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The Right to Believe

The dream. Another dream. A great choir of many voices. Men and women, vaguely formed, singing together in a glorious architecture of sound. Over and over they sing:

"Nature placed the love of God
in the heart of humankind.
All that there remains for us
is acceptance by the mind."

I am so shaken by the sound and feeling that I fall to my knees pounding the ground with my open palms, saying, "I want to believe. I want to believe. I want to believe." And that's what I was still saying when I awoke in Napa, California, at 5:30 AM, Thanksgiving Day, the 27th of November, 2014.

. . .

But I wasn't ready to believe. Two months later, in January of 2015, I walked away from the Great Choir Dream and left behind a full year of strenuous effort creating the Society of Epictetus, the Chrysippus School of Theology, a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit religious organization, and bringing together a group of Stoics who looked to my leadership to establish a Stoic religion. But after all the work was

done and everything was in place I detected a reluctance from the 7 or 8 members of our society to really be what we had become. So, I asked them: "Should we create a Stoic religion?" All but one said "No," and the one that didn't say no simply didn't answer the email. I said goodbye and walked away.

It wasn't until eight years later that I was able to even consider such a thing again. I won't mention how I was led to William James and one of the greatest essays I have read, but it was exactly what I needed in 2014 and didn't see until 2022. You already know the essay, "The Will To Believe,"¹ which was originally a lecture given to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities and later published in 1896 as an essay. You already know about it because it was the philosophical foundation of the first article in this journal of metaphysics, I entitled it, "The Right to Exist." Then, I was referring to our monastery.

In the circumference of a circle the beginning and end are common.
Heraclitus (frag. 70, Burnet)

William James was defending the legitimacy of religious faith to Brown and Yale students because he was disappointed in the agnosticism of his Harvard students and hoped that the Brown and Yale students would be more open to their religious beliefs.² As much as I value James's essay it is rather difficult for some of us to follow the formal rhetoric of a brilliant 19th century Harvard intellectual. For that reason, I recommend an updated outline of the James text by a Professor Bob Corbett written in 1980.³ I have benefited from his work to cut through the occasional language barrier I found in the original.

The essential points William James makes in his essay on the will to believe begins with three criteria in making a genuine choice. The choice must be:

1. **Live**, in that it has some internal, subjective emotive appeal, not necessarily rational. A "dead" choice would be a matter that has no internal, subjective appeal at all.
2. **Forced**, in that you are confronted by an either-or situation, not multiple choice. If you choose one you must necessarily go without the other. In a multiple choice situation you are not forced to make a decision, because you can choose other options or none at all.
3. **Momentous**, in that it isn't a trivial matter. It is momentous in that what you choose is a once in a lifetime opportunity or situation and that it matters a great deal to you.

¹ William James, "The Will to Believe," an Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.

² This is from the preface to James' work and is available free from Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>

³ <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbette/philosophy/misc/james.html>

Before we go any further it's important to remember that William James is the Father of American Psychology and one of the greatest philosophers of the 19th century. I don't mean to commit the logical fallacy of deferring to authority figures, but his insights into human nature are deeply learned. So, when he says that logic alone does not make our beliefs it should cause us to stop and reflect on exactly how and why we believe what we do. Class, culture, education, and family influence are the sources of momentous beliefs, and these are an internalized passionate nature that cannot be denied.

And now we come to the crux of the matter. James's thesis is that when we cannot make a decision on the basis of the intellect, the rational mind, then we not only may, but we necessarily *must* make the decision based on the internal feeling of what is right. Refusing to make a decision, according to James, doesn't solve the problem; it is in itself a "passional" decision.⁴ He goes on to point out that although we are born with absolutist tendencies, we must always search for the truth. We must search for truth even as we know there are no concrete tests for the truth, that truth constantly changes, and that there is really only *one truth*, "...the present phenomenon of consciousness exists."⁵ Nothing more.

James goes on to say that we have the right to believe any hypothesis that is "alive" to us (see the above criteria of choice). In making momentous choices, those who are afraid of looking foolish by making the "wrong" choice or waiting for scientific certainty will live with *nothing*. We are showing gratitude to our god, who or whatever it is, by earnestly believing, even if faith is required. *Faith creates facts*. It is with faith that we embark on any enterprise. This idea is important enough to quote James directly:

"Whenever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted."⁶

What I Believe

Reasonable minds can disagree on virtually all theological and metaphysical matters because, as James pointed out, the only truth is that "the present phenomenon of consciousness exists." When several options present themselves

⁴ William James, "The will to Believe," an Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

to the mind, and with diligent investigation we have found what appears to be the most reasonable answer to both our hearts *and* minds, then we have a belief.

Every religion *and* Stoic philosophy has one belief in common that unites them all. This bedrock foundational idea is as follows: Good people go to a good place; bad people go to a bad place. It is in the instructions on how to get to the good or bad places that the religions and Stoic philosophy differ. Religions use myths, visions, saints, and prophets. Stoics use the rational mind, reason. Our good place is not some heaven in the future; it is eudaimonia (a good daimon), the happiness that comes about by ethical behavior. The bad place we try to avoid is not some hellacious punishment in the future; it is the *sturm und drang*, the emotional unrest that resides in the absence of virtue.

With all of this in mind, I synthesized James's essay into a single sentence that helps me remember the importance of what he taught. It is especially important that the second part of this sentence is really a nod to both Stoicism and my own steady state of doubt. It also acknowledges the dream that began this final essay. With the essays written in this journal of metaphysics I have already shown you my beliefs. But it's likely that some of the concepts were obscured by so many stories, so many words. Let us begin with a kind of mantra of my belief:

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

One. I believe that beyond the cosmos there lies a reality that is normally invisible to the senses. I saw and felt this world in my first mystical insight, Empty Sky, and in conversations with teachers from this world when I journeyed to it. What I saw, heard, and felt in those experiences at the time that I had them were real, certain, and reasonable.

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

Two. I believe in the immortality of the soul based upon the studies of many carefully recorded Near-Death Experiences, hypnotic regressions, and numerous anecdotal references of good people—intelligent, educated, and/or professional.

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

Three. I believe that in the most *reasonable* evolution of humanity we would have numerous lives to learn the lessons we need to attain a eudaimonic state of wisdom and virtue. I respect the academic work done in this field, and I respect

the ancient and consistent insights regarding reincarnation that is pervasive throughout Asian religions and philosophies.

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

Four. I believe that human life is a school where lessons of wisdom and virtue are learned. Heavens and hells are only conceptual human constructs. I agree with Origen that even the worst students in this school of life are eventually united in harmony with the One.

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

Five. I believe that the origins and greatness of God are beyond rational analysis, and that only through contemplation, meditation, and other spiritual practices will we know the meaning of the divine.

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

Six. I believe the human soul evolves with virtue. And with wisdom from the practice of virtue the soul eventually evolves to become what the Stoics called "Heroes."⁷ And it is this hero who evolves to the spiritual level of the daimon, the one who is a guardian, et cetera.⁸

I have the right to believe my heart on all matters that are reasonable to my mind.

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For Those Who Doubt

I would like to tell you that what I have experienced of the paranormal is always certain and irrefutable, but I can't. Virtually within days, sometimes hours, I doubt everything; it is my nature. I live in a perpetual state of doubt. But that is as it should be. Logically, we can't prove that we are anything more than brains in a vat, chemically nourished by some evil genius.⁹

⁷ DL

⁸ DL and Plutarch

⁹ "The skeptical hypothesis that one is a brain in a vat with systematically delusory experience is modeled on the Cartesian Evil Genius hypothesis, according to which one is a victim of thoroughgoing error induced by a God-like deceiver. The skeptic argues that one does not know that the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is false, since if the hypothesis were true, one's experience would be just as it actually is." See "Brains in a Vat," Stanford Encyclopedia of

I accept my doubt, and I reject it. Our familiar world may only be Maya, an illusory dream, but I refuse to believe that, too. I have that right. And I reject Nihilism as a way of life because it is founded on a lost soul in deep depression. All these options, and more, I have examined and accepted or rejected as is my right and responsibility. Here is a story about two related journeys I took to Lower World that explain my views on doubt today.

Doubt and the Great Jinn

25 JUL 17: Tuesday: 0600-0620: Lower World:

Met [several Lower World contacts] and explained why I was there, my doubts and desire to know what I was doing with journeying. Was it real, or was my subconscious telling me stories? Was it a real Spirit World or the world inside my head? I asked the question of all of them, but X took charge, nodding his understanding, then leading us down to the desert floor.

We passed most of the places I had journeyed to previously. I could even see Black Eagle Aerie and Monastery Mountain in the distance. We passed Renovo Canyon and came to a great multitude of shamans, 50 or more, dancing and drumming at the base of a large butte. Y joined us as we stood and watched them.

"You are doing what shamans have been doing for millennia," X said. "Basically, telling stories about the unknown."

I immediately assumed that he was saying the Spirit World was inside my head and nothing more. I felt a sense of relief, actually, now that I knew the answer. I was just making this all up, and what we had in common, the shamans of human history and I, was a talent for storytelling. We were the storytellers in the human evolution of talents. And, of course, some are, were, great storytellers and some were of more modest talent, such as myself. But, then X spoke again.

"Are there experiences in your life that you can't explain, some events that can only be answered as Great Unknowns?"

"Yes, certainly."

"The same is true for them," he said, gesturing in the direction of the drumming shamans. "They, too, are storytellers, creators of mythology attempting to describe a reality where their experiences of the Great Unknown can be accounted for.

"There is one significant difference between you and them. They lived in an age and environment of belief; you live in an age of doubt. But the Great Unknown exists for both of you just the same. Your stories will represent your time and age just as their stories represented their time and age."

I said nothing. We listened to the shamans drumming for awhile, then I said my thank yous and returned to middle World.

27 JUL 17: Thursday: 0600-0619: LW:

Met X on Rockpile. I told him I was still consumed by a plague of doubt, and I wanted it to stop. I wanted to address all inhabitants of Lower World. X made no objection. [The other allies] appeared and stood with us as I spoke. I loudly spoke (in my mind, of course) to the Four Directions:

"Please show me some evidence or grant me some experience that I can know and remember whenever I am overwhelmed with doubt," I repeated four times.

After listening and listening and hearing only my own drumming, the five of us were joined by a great shaman drumming circle, and I realized that they, too, had known what I know of doubt—but maybe not all of them.

Suddenly, a giant jinn, a genie appeared. It was at least 20 feet tall and looked just like some pictures I've seen of them—the turban, beads, small vest on a rotund girth, pantaloons, and curly-toed slippers. But, he was diaphanous, only partially materialized. I was disappointed and thought it was a silly joke, but decided to go with it and see what would happen. I focused on him and restated my wish.

He stretched and smiled with the innocent grin of a baby, and I think he was trying to show me I had nothing to fear despite his enormous size.

"It's a matter of choice," he said. "If you feed your doubt it will grow; if you nurture your belief it will become stronger; if you search for reasons not to believe, you will find them; if you search for reasons to believe, then you will have all the evidence you need. Choose to believe and you will know."

I repeated what he told me just to make sure I understood. I paused. He said nothing further, then vanished.

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QUOTE OF THE DAY

Nature placed the love of God
in the heart of humankind.
All that there remains for us
is acceptance by the mind.
Glory halleluujah.
Glory halleluujah.

Afterword

I'm a Posidonian Stoic. I used to be a Pyrrhonian Stoic, but that was about 20 years ago when I was immersed for several years in the study of Pyrrhonism, the philosophy of the true and original skeptics. The outcome of that study was the *Book of Doubt*. I decided that if we cannot actually know the true nature of our familiar world, then I'm a Pyrrhonian; but if we can, then I'm a Stoic. Since then I've matured in my appreciation of the Stoa, and I find myself in agreement with Posidonius more than any other Stoic philosopher of Classical times. Here is an excerpt about him quoted from Oxford Bibliographies.¹⁰

"Posidonius of Apamea (135–c. 51 BCE), Stoic philosopher, scientist, and historian, was one of the foremost intellectuals of his day. Born in Apamea, a Greek city in northwestern Syria, he came to Athens as a young man to study with Panaetius of Rhodes, then head of the Stoa. After his studies Posidonius took up residence in Rhodes, where he taught philosophy, wrote a large number of treatises, and was visited by prominent Romans, notably Cicero and Pompey.... In the 90s [BCE] he traveled extensively in the Mediterranean world, studying the geography of its various regions and the habits and customs of its peoples.

"Today, there is a growing consensus that Posidonius by and large stayed within the philosophical framework he had inherited from his predecessors in the Stoic school: Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Panaetius. Even so, Panaetius and Posidonius are often referred to as the two main representatives of a phase in the history of Stoicism called Middle Stoicism, a term coined by the 19th-century German scholar Schmekel....He was one of the most important Stoics of antiquity.

"None of Posidonius's treatises have been preserved. We have to reconstruct his philosophy and scientific work from reports and quotations ("fragments") from a great variety of sources such as Cicero, Strabo, Seneca, Plutarch, Galen, Cleomedes, and others. Some of these sources had access to Posidonius's original expositions, while others drew upon intermediate sources....Posidonius could be portrayed as an empirically minded scientist or a religiously inspired mystic or a curious blend of the two."

Although my abilities in the empirical sciences are low, my appreciation for their perception of our world is high. That's why so many of the Eternal Questions issues included work done by the scientific community. But it is in my work with mystical experiences and daimon contact where Posidonius and I are most closely

¹⁰ Tieleman, Teun, "Posidonius," *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195389661/obo-9780195389661-0365.xml>

related. And, although my work with the Journal of Metaphysics is now ended it really heralds a new beginning. What I have explored in the EQ Journal became the inspiration and foundation for a new school. I am convinced that the world needs a new kind of online Stoic school, and it will be called the College of Posidonius.

College of Posidonius

The purpose of the College of Posidonius (CP) is to create an educational environment that inspires students to understand the intellectual power of their own theological beliefs. The CP student will realize that goal in two years of online study and practice in the fields of Comparative Religions, Ancient & Modern Physics, Divinations, and engagement with the Social Dimension.

All these subjects taught at the CP were born in and derived from the genius of Stoic philosophy. This is why the prerequisite for admission is that the applicant must be a graduate and Fellow of the College of Stoic Philosophers (FCSP).

Master of Stoic Theology. Successful completion of the CP program will qualify the graduate for a Master of Stoic Theology (MST) degree. This will be the standard certification for the Stoic clergy of the future.

The College of Posidonius (CP) will be open to take applications and on May 1, and begin instruction on June 1, 2024. All Fellows are welcome regardless of age, gender, race, or national origin. Students are not required to be monks, but may become members of the monachi if they apply and are selected after their novitiate probation period.

Due to the intensive nature of these studies, we will only be able to accommodate four (4) students in our first year. For these 4 very exceptional students there will be no actual tuition. In lieu of tuition, each student will agree to work together as a group to found a 501 (c)(3) religious nonprofit corporation in which they will become directors of the Board.

For more information about applying to the College of Posidonius, please email me at erik.wiegardt@gmail.com

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It has been an honor to served you 43 recipients of the Eternal Questions Journal of Metaphysics. Writing these issues each month for more than a year was a solitary effort that was inspired and guided by the single act of a wild animal. Whenever my attention or motivation flagged I remembered this contact and was inspired to carry on. Here is that story:

It was a dark and cloudy night, a warm summer night in the month of July, 2021. I was awakened by a coyote about 3 AM. The familiar bark and yip was so loud and so close I thought it must be outside my bedroom window. I expected it to go away soon, and I rolled over to wait until it stopped. But it didn't. And it still didn't, so I got out of bed and went through the kitchen to the back door, which is on the side of the house beside my bedroom window.

I opened the door just a crack and yelled, "Quiet!" I actually expected to see the coyote standing there in the concrete alley the goes by my bedroom window. But no. He wasn't. But he was still barking, and with the door now fully opened I couldn't believe how loud he was. I needed a flashlight, grabbed one, and walked out onto the back porch.

So there I was, standing in my nightshirt in the pitch dark shining a flashlight all around to see where this coyote is hiding and continuing to bark as if what he had to say was endlessly important. I keep saying, "Quiet! Stop barking. Stop it!" and he completely ignored me. After a minute of shining the light everywhere but in the sky I raised the beam into the sky and saw him standing on the top of my neighbor's house, not 50 meters away. He was straddling the very top of their steeply pitched composition-shingled roof...There! Barking and barking until my flashlight beam met the eyes of this very large and very male coyote. He really and truly was standing on the pitch of the neighbor's roof looking directly back at me.

I used my command voice to tell him matter-of-factly that he was too loud. "Stop barking. Right now." He looked at me awhile longer then lightly trotted over the pitch, down the far side of the roof, and disappeared.

And so do I.

Best,

Brother Erikos, Abbot
The Stoic Monastery

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