

The Camel **A Discussion of the Value** **of "Interior Certainty"**

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Then Hassan bin Brahim, the camel-driver, lifted up his voice and said: "The sun is hot."

This statement gave me considerable food for reflection.

In the first place, Hassan is a number one liar. Had he not said that he was afraid to cross the desert with only one camel, and having thus induced me to pay for two, brought one of them so antique and infirm that he had to send it back to Bou Saada?

In the second place, Hassan was a fool. Had he not started on a long desert journey without money, food, or water? Had he not shivered all one cloudy night in fear that the flood would carry us away?

Clearly, no reliance could be placed upon Hassan!

So, before assenting to his proposition, I looked about for corroboration of some kind.

"By 'the sun' you mean, I take it (said I to Hassan), that glorious and beneficent luminary which is apparently a small disk in the heavens above us, but in reality a vast globe, the centre and father of our system, in diameter so many miles, in distance so many miles"—I gave him the exact figures—"around which this planet revolves in 365 days, 4 hours, 37 minutes and 28.0387541 seconds."

"No!" said the churl; "I mean that." And he pointed to the orb in question.

One could not reason with the clod! But his appeal to the evidence of my sight was far from convincing me of his integrity or of the accuracy of his observation; for he had said (in his haste), "The sun is hot," and heat, as

such (I reflected at leisure), is not truly appreciable by the eye.

And then it dawned upon me! This camel-driver was a mystic! He was asserting a relation between two senses. A relation in what? In something that was certainly not either of those two senses; in something that must be a reconciler between them, a court of appeal, a . . . yes! a soul.

This was absurd: Haeckel has shown it to be absurd. So I halted the camel and got out my sweater, and buttoned my jacket over it, and continued the journey.

Why did I feel uncomfortable? Why did I perspire? My friends, I cannot tell!

The night brought counsel. In the morning I attacked Hassan's position with horse, foot, and artillery.

"How dare you?" I said. "We have an instrument for registering degrees, the thermometer. Produce your thermometer!"

Hassan seemed abashed; he only wiped his brow.

"No!" I continued, "you are an impudent fellow, a pretender to knowledge, a sophist, a scholiast, and several other things ending in 'ast,' I dare say, if the truth were known!"

The victim hummed some rubbish about "the eyes of Arabi," which he thought superior to a gazelle's; but I did not take his point.

"Hassan!" said I, "you know absolutely nothing. You do not know that heat is a vibration of molecules, that heat is molecular motion! And is this perceptible even to feeling? Perish the thought! By feeling, who would ever have found out about molecules? Understand then, once and for all, that heat as such cannot be felt!"

The poor man was by now, metaphorically speaking, a mere pulp. The volcanic grey matter of his Arab brain sizzled under the cold spray of my intellectual acumen.

He hit the camel repeatedly and gave his wheezy whistle.

I had won; the rest of the day's march was for me a smiling silence.

Yet night found me disturbed. On what profound metaphysical conceptions (I mused) rest our simplest certainties! Think of Huxley, and the smashing blows that he delivered at "commonsense" metaphysics; how they crumbled to powder before him!

If I contemplate "the sun," how rapidly it becomes a mere subjective phenomenon, a puppet of the ego, or at least a strange, mystical, unknown, perhaps unknowable being. Subjective or objective, certainly my idea of it is dependent upon me; it is the objective school (surely!) that insists that things exist without my cooperation. Yet is not that the very proof that the object must be conjoined with my sense before it exists for me? Then "the sun" means "the relation of some unknown thing with my organs of sight."

And this relation is neither "it" nor "I." Nor is it in time or space, this relation. What is a relation? In what does it take place?

Fortunately, I stopped there. Another step and I should have had to postulate a soul, and the Rationalist Press Association might have got to hear of it—and then?

The boot, and my last link with respectability snapped for ever!

The dawn broke at last, and we resumed the trudge across the sands. "Hassan!" I said earnestly, "you are concealing something! You are keeping back from me the fact that your opinion that the sun is hot (by which of course you only mean that the exposure to the rays of the sun produces effects similar to those caused by those bodies which we have agreed to describe as hot) is founded upon the fact that your experience teaches you to associate the visible appearance of yon glorious orb with sensations of heat. You are wrong! I, for example, can testify that one may be exceeding cold in bright sunshine. And, besides, your experience may be very limited."

"Forty-four years, man and boy," he grunted, "ave I druv this 'ere ruddy oont." (I translate freely from his classical Arabic.)

I took no notice. "For instance," I remarked, "suppose you went to London for forty-four years more. You—who know nothing of electricity—would return to Algeria and say that in London bright stars appeared in the streets at nightfall. It would never strike you that those stars would not appear unless men kindled them, and I am just as presumptuous in supposing that the appearance of the sun would take place if (say) the sea dried up!

"You see no connecting links between the arc lamps in Picadilly and the generating station tucked away somewhere; I see no connection between the sunrise and the existence of the sea—and we both try and trade off our ignorance as knowledge!

"There was (and is) no answer to the problem of the Chinese philosopher, who dreamt that he was a butterfly, and, awaking, called his disciple and said: `I, Chuang, dreamt that I was a butterfly. Now, is it so, or I a butterfly that has gone to sleep and is dreaming that it is Chuang?

"It is the experience of man that the appearance of the evening star heralds the darkness; but the truth is that the darkness causes the appearance of the stars. It is only in the great shadow of the earth that we may behold them, save from the darkness of a well. What a whirl of sophistry and confusion is all this babble of cause and effect! How all experience may deceive us! Hurrah!" (I broke off), "there is our oasis! How the palms wave and the minarets glitter and the waters gleam!"

"No!" said Hassan; "it is a mirage."

"Scoundrel," I retorted, now thoroughly incensed with his stupidity and falsehood, "how do you know?"

"I have been here before (says he as cool as custard), and I know there is no oasis within many days' journey. By my eyes I could not tell."

"Then you judge an optical phenomenon by treacherous memory, slave, beast, reptile, socialist that you are?"

"And yet I (even I) cannot get beyond William the First ten sixty-six, William the Second ten eighty-seven, Henry the First . . . and I knew them all, once!

"Why, Hassan, you are a bundle of uncertainties. Come now, confess! That remark of yours about the sun was interrogative? Or at most a feeler? You wanted to know what I thought about it? You had an intuition and wanted to test it?"

"No," said the Sahara of obstinacy; "I just passed the remark." "Yes, I see, a mere idle frivolous bit of small-talk. A sort of joke?" "No joke in the summer," he growled.

"Don't answer me back!" I snapped. (Something had made me irritable—not the heat of the sun, of course.) "I don't want you to speak; I'm trying to argue with you (I was on the right side of the Rationalist Press Association, that time!). But—you didn't mean that you were *sure*, did you? You sort of threw out the suggestion?"

"Dead sure," says he, and hits the camel again.

Disgusted with his brutality and Boeotian bathos, I fell back, and walked alone, meditating.

He was *sure*, thought I. And Perdurabo is sure that he will endure unto The End, that his *khu* will be a mighty *khu* for ever and ever, and that he hath indeed talked with his Holy Guardian Angel and seen God face to face. And Charles Watts is sure that Perdurabo is an ass, and suspends his opinion about Hassan bin Brahim until he has submitted the question to Haeckel and got a *firman* or an *ukase* about it. And Aleister Crowley is sure that nobody can distinguish between Perdurabo and Hassan and Charles Watts, saying—

On life's curtain

Is written this one certainty—that naught is certain.

What is the test? Is it the common experience of men? Then sure the sun moves round the earth, and there are no such things as molecules, and there are such things as spirits.

Is it the common experience of the instructed and competent among mankind?

The men who designed and built Luxor and Anuradhapura bore witness to gods visible and tangible. Lombroso assented to Eusapia Palladino, A. R. Wallace believes in spirits, Newton thought Euclid proved the existence of God, and Kelvin relied for the same proof upon biology. (Worse, Newman "worshipped idols and a piece of bread," and I (who am hardly likely to allow that anyone is more instructed and competent than I am) believe in the Great Brotherhood, and the certain heritage of man in the Holy Kingdom. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church (not Christianity), the communion of saints; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen!

This conviction is not to be shaken, for it is based upon the same rock as Hassan's conviction about the sun. It is my experience. Like any other experience, it comes through the senses; but it takes place in some unknown fortress within the five outlying towers of sense, in some secret cave of the heart and brain that even Ernst Haeckel has not dissected out.

Let him say that "as your mind decays (though I don't see how it can decay any more) you will lose this assured knowledge of your immortality."

"Yes, and I lose the sun, and the heat of the sun."

"But your Holy Guardian Angel is only a phantom of your diseased brain."

"But in that same brain is the sun."

"But other men testify to the sun."

"But other men testify to the Angel."

"But the majority of men accept the sun and deny the Angel."

"I am not a democrat. All the men whom I respect testify to the Angel, and don't care twopence about the sun"

"But I can show the sun to any man who had never seen it, and he would add his testimony to its truth."

"For 'sun' read 'Angel' and you have my exact position."

"Show Him to me! This instant!"

"Patience a moment; it requires a little trouble, even a little work." "Ah! I have you at last. I can show the sun to any man at any moment!"

"Not if he is in England, and if it is night, and if he has cataract."

"I should remove him from England and wait for the morning and perform an operation."

"Exactly; I will arrange your moral climate, and ask you to have patience for an hour or two until the dawn, and remove the scales from your sight."

"Bah! I can't waste my time arguing with a fool."

"I have not disagreed—so far—with anything that you have said. Why should I begin now?"

Nay, this interior certainty of Truth; this Faith in the Validity of Essential Relations; this Knowledge that stands behind and apart from Evidence; this Understanding which makes the darkness light, this Wisdom which directs the Will; are not these Children of One Ineffable Brilliance, one Selfhood beyond all Self?

And a Voice came unto me, saying—

"This Interior Certainty is the Camel that goeth ten days in the desert bearing water in his belly, as thou goest ten times seven years in the desert of life, where the Water of pure Truth is not found. And this Camel was furnished with sufficient water from the Well, yet at the end of the journey, if he be athirst, he shall drink deeply at his will from the unfailing fountains, and rest under the shadow of the never-withering palms.

"Rise up, therefore, and proceed upon thy way, for thy water is inexhaustible, and thereof shalt thou give to drink unto many men that be athirst."