

Immediate Certainty and the Morally Good

Luther, Kierkegaard and Cognitive Psychology

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In this article, I consider the relationship between the notion of certainty and the notion of a form of life. I am not going to deal with the epistemological question of the nature of certainty, but with the problem of its function for an individual's orientation in life. More precisely, there are circumstances in which a feeling of certainty may become the basis for adopting a certain form of life. The forms of life I have in mind are those with a formal orientation towards the realisation of the (morally) good for its own sake.

The article proceeds in three steps. First, I consider Luther's certainty of salvation as a kind of inaugural (theological) reflection on what will be called immediate certainty as the basis for a form of life aiming at the realisation of the morally good for its own sake. Second, with reference to Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*, I then try to show that such an immediate certainty can also be considered as the basis of an ethical form of life without religious implications. With the help of contemporary cognitive psychology, I will finally propose an explanation of such a certainty as one that we experience because of our universal cognitive and conative constitution.

The three steps amount to a universalisation and naturalisation of Luther's certainty of salvation. My procedure is not meant to bereave it of its supernatural character; my intention is to show that there are foundations for such a certainty on a very general anthropological level. In a way, my article is meant as a justification of Luther's certainty of salvation by providing an anthropological foundation for it.¹

¹ I hope it will not be a source of irritation that such a justification is presented by a philosopher who is also a Roman Catholic theologian. Otto-Hermann Pesch, *Frei sein aus Gnade: Theologische Anthropologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983) has long since shown that in important respects the controversy between Protestants and Catholics on certainty of salvation is obsolete. My own approach is somewhat in line with the "Catholic" *gratia perfecit naturam*.

1. Luther's Certainty of Salvation

Certainty of salvation was, for Luther, one of the cornerstones of his opposition to the official teaching of the catholic church of his time. It is part of his affirmation of the self-sufficiency of faith for salvation, which means that the individual act of believing in one's being saved by God is the only thing necessary to be assured of one's salvation – there is no need for the church and its sacraments. Luther often refers to Mk 16:16: “He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”² The Gospel is the message of God's promise that whoever believes in Jesus Christ, and in the forgiveness of sins through him, will be forgiven. Whoever believes is driven by the Spirit of God, and as Paul writes in Rom 8:16, “it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

This belief, Luther says, is accompanied by certainty, and excludes doubt. For Luther, the reason for the exclusion of doubt is that such a belief does not have its basis in the believing subject itself but has it *extra nos*, i. e. in the Word of God of the Gospel.³ This certainty is not the result of a cognitive process but of a feeling of being personally touched by God's promise as something coming from outside, from a perfect, wholly reliable God and therefore as a certainty beyond doubt.⁴

Philosophically speaking, I would like to call Luther's certainty of salvation an immediate certainty. Even if for him its source is not the believing subject itself but its experience of being related to God, I conceive it as an inner certainty that is immediate because it is not the result of a process of reflection, the result of a conclusion based on arguments, or the result of a choice between A, B and C, where the reasons 1, 2 and 3 make me certain that A, for example, is the right choice. Here, we may introduce Plato's distinction between noetic and dianoetic thought. One could say that an immediate certainty is not the result of a dianoetic thought process, which proceeds by combining concepts in the form of propositions, but of an immediate noetic insight.⁵

² Cf. among others Martin Luther, *On Baptism*, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. John W. Doberstein and Helmut T. Lehman, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 183.

³ Cf. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians 1535*, trans. Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1949), commentary of Gal 4:6: “No wonder that our doctrine is certified, because it does not rest in our own strength, our own conscience, our own feelings, our own person, our own works. It is built on a better foundation. It is built on the promises and truth of God.” See also Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Philip S. Watson and Helmut T. Lehman, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 289: “But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me.”

⁴ Cf. Reinhard Schwarz, *Martin Luther: Lehrer der christlichen Religion*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 355: “Der Glaube schöpft seine volle Gewißheit aus dem Evangelium, dem höchstverläßlichen Wort Gottes.”

⁵ Pol. 510 ff., 533.

In my view, Descartes's *cogito, sum* is also exemplary of such an immediate certainty. It is epistemic, it provides some knowledge: I know that I exist. But it is not a knowledge that is reached through reflection, through conclusions out of arguments. It is an intuitive knowledge. According to Descartes's definition of intuition in Rule 3.5 of the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*,⁶ the certainty of the *cogito* is to be called an understanding of the attentive spirit that cannot be doubted. And Descartes calls it evident in a way that Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy would not talk about evidence. By "evident," he refers to an understanding that has its source in the light of reason alone (*sola rationis luce nascitur*).⁷ It is an immediate understanding of reason on its own.

Luther's certainty is also epistemic: I know that I am saved, and this knowing is immediate. But contrary to Descartes, Luther's certainty of salvation – or certainty of faith, as one could also call it⁸ – is more than just a claim of knowledge; it inaugurates a whole way of life. It is a certainty that underlies a call to live in a particular way. Luther describes it very well in the second part of *The Freedom of a Christian*, when he is talking about the "outer man". The "inner man" (described in the first part) is "abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all that he needs," but "yet he remains in this mortal life on earth. In this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men."⁹ This is the "outer man". Driven by his faith, he will live in such a way as to well-please God.¹⁰ More precisely, the relationship to God that causes the knowledge of being saved by a loving God makes one act according to God's love, makes one choose a way of life focused on acting in such a way. In explaining what he means by love of God, Luther concentrates on the question of "dealings with men". Love of God means to become "the servant of all,"¹¹ to "help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him."¹² And when Luther further insists that the Christian ought not to act morally in order to secure his own salvation, but to "make your gifts freely and for no consideration, so that others may profit by them and fare well because of you and your goodness,"¹³ he lays down the principle of human action motivated by such a love: to do the good for its own sake. It is essential for my approach that Luther conceives certainty of faith as a motivation for doing the good for its own sake.

⁶ René Descartes, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii/Rules for the Direction of the Natural Intelligence*, ed. George Heffernan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), regula 3.5.

⁷ Descartes, *Regulae*, regula 3.5.

⁸ Sven Grosse, "Heilsgewissheit des Glaubens: Die Entwicklung der Auffassungen des jungen Luther von der Gewissheit und Ungewissheit des Heils," *Lutherjahrbuch* 77 (2010): 54.

⁹ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 358.

¹⁰ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 359.

¹¹ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 358.

¹² Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 366.

¹³ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 371.

If I may introduce Wittgensteinian terminology here, I would say: Luther's certainty is the basis of a particular *form of life*. Let me call it a form-of-life-certainty. A form of life, as I conceive it, consists of a number of beliefs and a given goal structure. For Luther, the central belief of the Christian form of life would be the belief in being saved by faith, whereas the goal structure culminates in the goal of pursuing goodness for its own sake. Luther's form-of-life-certainty is not a certainty in the way Wittgenstein understands the certainty of, for example, having two hands.¹⁴ The foundation of Luther's certainty is an inner experience: the experience of the ideal, redemptive love of God. It is this experience that triggers a feeling of certainty.

2. Kierkegaard's Ethical Stage

Luther's certainty of salvation is bound to a religious commitment. The experience triggering it is the experience of a transcendent Redeemer. I think it is possible to universalise Luther's certainty to one that does not (necessarily) imply any religious commitment. There is, one could say, a metaphysically more neutral certainty as a basis for a form of life orientated towards goodness for its own sake. In Søren Kierkegaard's theory of two stages, as developed in *Either-Or*, this becomes apparent.

In this work, Kierkegaard distinguishes between two stages of life. By stages of life he means forms of life that are hierarchically related one to another: an inferior esthetical and a superior ethical one. The two forms mainly differ in their goal structure, particularly in how they define what their respective highest goals are. For the estheticist, the highest purpose of life is to enjoy life. An individual has a number of possibilities of enjoyment and he will choose among them. Kierkegaard calls this an esthetical choice. He then distinguishes between different levels or sub-stages within the esthetical form of life. An estheticist may find the highest purpose of life by choosing an immediate goal, such as to become rich or to develop one's talent. On a higher level, he may pursue enjoyment wherever he can find it. On an even higher level, he may enjoy enjoyment or enjoy renunciation of enjoyment.

Still, I am not going to describe these sub-stages within the esthetical stage of life any further.¹⁵ My focus relies on the fact that the underlying feelings of the esthetical way of life are, for Kierkegaard, unrest and doubt because the individual has not yet become a self. Behind the esthetical form of life, there is no certainty whatsoever. On the contrary, it is characterised by an under-

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), entry no. 148.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either-Or. Part II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 180.

lying despair: “it is manifest that every esthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives esthetically is in despair.”¹⁶ There is despair because human beings desire more than just different kinds of enjoyment: “nothing that is finite, not even the whole world, can satisfy the soul of a person.”¹⁷ The soul remains in a state of unrest because there is a desire to become a self and the esthetical individual has not yet *chosen* his own self, as Kierkegaard would put it. For becoming a self, the esthetical individual lacks, as we will see, a certainty similar to that of Luther.

What does Kierkegaard mean by a choice of one’s own self? He often refers to the self as the point of absolute or eternal validity within us,¹⁸ and many other times, he refers to it as just the absolute.¹⁹ Leaving out the metaphysical implications of this concept, absolute for him means that which is above the individual’s and the world’s finitude. The absolute within us is something different from our concrete determinations: our capacities, our inclinations, our passions, “influenced by this specific social milieu, as this specific product of a specific environment.”²⁰ In short, the absolute is the capacity to reason and decide on our goals. It is the rational self (or “rational soul”²¹ as it is called once in *Either-Or*), the abstract I of reasoning and deciding, that allows the individual (at least relatively speaking) to be free from concrete determinations: “there is something within him that in relation to everything else is absolute, something whereby he is who he is.”²²

To choose such an absolute self does not just mean to become conscious of this self, but to choose it in the sense of making the reasoning and decision-making agent within us the highest rule of our life. In a way, by absolute choice we choose the choosing of this abstract or absolute self. Moreover, the choosing of such an absolute self is a particular kind of choosing other than the esthetical choice between objects of enjoyment. One chooses a choosing for which the criterion of choice is not enjoyment.

Without explaining any further, Kierkegaard identifies absolute choice with the choice of good and evil: “only when I have absolutely chosen myself have I posited an absolute difference: namely, the difference between good and evil.”²³ Generally speaking, choice is always directed toward the good. Yet ethical choice, as Kierkegaard understands it, is different, because it makes of the individual a universal human being, or, better, a being that “expresses the universal in his

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 192.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 203.

¹⁸ Cf. Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 210.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 213. In one place, he calls it the “soul” (Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 220).

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 251.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 222.

²² Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 192.

²³ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 224.

life.”²⁴ In other words, being moved by the absolute consists of pursuing goals that pretend to be universal goods. It is to choose according to general laws formed by our reason, laws that are considered valuable independently of what is enjoyable for a particular individual at a given time.²⁵ And as choosing the universal good also means choosing it over against choosing evil, Kierkegaard can say: “when I choose the good, I choose *eo ipso* the choice between good and evil.”²⁶ In that sense, choosing oneself posits the difference between good and evil.

At the same time, absolute choice is the choice of choosing the universal good *for its own sake*. Kierkegaard expresses this by introducing the notion of duty. The ethical person does not seek to realise the universal good for the reason of enjoyment, but “places the meaning of life in living for the performance of one’s duties.”²⁷ What does it mean to do something because it is one’s duty? It means acting according to a moral law because reason tells us that it is good to do so; it is seeking to realise a universal good because reason tells us to do so. In that sense, the highest goal of the ethical is not enjoyment but a universal good achieved for its own sake. Kierkegaard insists that of course the ethical person wishes to be happy in what it chooses to do.²⁸ Nevertheless, the basic motivation for the ethical choice is not enjoyment. The esthetical is not banned from the ethical form of life; it comes back after having made the absolute choice, but only within the limits of a new highest goal. One may seek to enjoy, but only inasmuch as one’s enjoyment is indifferent to acting according to the absolute difference between good and evil. In that sense, to do something because it is one’s duty means to realise the universal good for its own sake.

We can summarise by saying that absolute choice is a decision to realise universal good for its own sake as the highest rule of one’s life. Addressing now the topic of certainty, we have to consider that, for Kierkegaard, absolute choice precedes the ethical form of life. Absolute choice is a decision for endorsing the ethical form of life, the formal decision to live in such a way as to realise universal goodness for its own sake. In *Either-Or*, this choice is accompanied by a certainty which is very similar to Luther’s certainty of salvation. It is most clearly expressed in the following quotation: “When the individual has grasped himself in his eternal validity [...] at the first moment, this fills him with an indescribable bliss and gives him an absolute security.”²⁹ The feeling of security triggered by absolute choice is mentioned several times in the text.³⁰ It is a feeling of certainty

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 256.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 255.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 219.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 254.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 252.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 231.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 254 f.

of having made the right choice. Kierkegaard compares this feeling with the soul resting confidently in the conviction of there being a providence.³¹ The ethical individual is not certain about salvation, but “rests with confident security in the assurance that his life is ethically structured, and therefore he does not torment himself and others with quibbling anxiety about this or that.”³² He is certain that his life is “ethically structured”. I would paraphrase this by saying that absolute choice makes us certain that to be oneself is to be ethically structured in the sense of choosing universal good as the highest rule for life. Absolute choice triggers a feeling of being certain of having achieved the highest possible form of life in choosing that which is ethical.

This certainty is a universalisation of Luther’s certainty inasmuch as it can be endorsed by any individual independently of any religious commitment. I don’t want to say that Kierkegaard’s ethical certainty could not be, at the same time, a religious certainty – indeed, maybe for Kierkegaard himself it is, which depends on how we interpret him – but, systematically speaking, it doesn’t need to be. Instead of an act of faith, we just have an ethical choice. And according to *Either-Or*, we are free to choose the ethical. It is something “every person can will if he so will”³³ and the will “is within the person’s own power.”³⁴ As it is described here, absolute choice does not necessarily depend on divine grace.

3. Explanation by Cognitive Psychology

As a third step, I would like to suggest that, from a cognitive point of view, there is a general explanation for both feelings of certainty. From a universalisation of Luther’s certainty of faith, this leads me to its naturalisation. Why is the feeling of being saved or of grasping one’s self accompanied by a feeling of certainty? With reference to contemporary empirical psychology, I would like to argue that, in both cases, it may have to do with our general cognitive and conative constitution.³⁵

There seems to be a current consensus among empirical psychologists that the functioning of the brain/mind can be characterised by two different types of cognition. The Canadian psychologist Keith E. Stanovich calls them type 1 processing and type 2 processing. Most interesting for me is that, according to Stanovich, they implement two separable goal structures: type 1 processing

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 257.

³² Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 257.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 217.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either-Or II*, 206.

³⁵ For more on cognitive and conative constitution in relationship to Kierkegaard see Jörg Disse, “The Two Process Model of Cognition and Kierkegaard’s Stages of Life,” *e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie* 19 (2013).

serves the pursuit of goals that are in the interest of our genes and type 2 processing leads to goal satisfaction that is in the individual's interest.³⁶

Let me shortly characterise type 1 processing, even if it is not of much importance for us here. This kind of cognitive process is mainly automatic and unconscious, it is rapidly executed, it is mandatory when the triggering stimuli are encountered, and it is basically domain-specific: the different kinds of type 1 processing form independent mechanisms that respond to a limited array of domain-relevant stimuli in order to solve specific problems. Examples of type 1 processing are recognising faces, reading behavioural cues of others, recognising the presence of predators, or avoiding poisonous foods.³⁷ They are the product of a long-scale evolutionary adaptation, favouring the reproduction probability of the genes.³⁸ With Dawkins, Stanovich holds that, on this level of the functioning of organisms, the genes do not exist for the sake of the organisms but the organisms are mainly the means or vehicles for the survival of the genes.³⁹

Type 2 processing, on the other hand, relates to cognitive activity characterised by conscious awareness and executive control. Processing here is slow and domain-general: the processes can refer to all kinds of stimuli. It is our capacity of asserting and reasoning.⁴⁰ The key mechanisms are cognitive simulation and hypothetical thinking.⁴¹ Both depend on the operation of cognitive decoupling which allows us to distance ourselves from our primary representations triggered by real-world stimuli.⁴² They allow us to reason about alternative preferences,⁴³ to be critical about our own beliefs and desires,⁴⁴ and to manipulate the world.⁴⁵ Type 2 processing can override type 1 processing. In many cases, the interests of the genes and the vehicles coincide, but because of their capacity of type 2 processing, human beings can rebel against the selfish genes that drive them on the level of type 1 processing. We can, for example, choose not to procreate.

For Stanovich, the only conceivable highest goal of type 2 processing is the well-being or happiness of the individual or vehicle. And we ought to rebel against the interest of the genes because failing to do so would be harmful to the individual's well-being. We should use our type 2 processing to maximise our own happiness. Anything else would be a "thinking error," as Stanovich calls it.⁴⁶

³⁶ Keith E. Stanovich, *The Robot's Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 34.

³⁷ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 40.

³⁸ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 64.

³⁹ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 5.

⁴⁰ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 102.

⁴¹ Keith E. Stanovich, *Rationality and the Reflective Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47 f.

⁴² Stanovich, *Rationality*, 51.

⁴³ Stanovich, *Rationality*, 51.

⁴⁴ Stanovich, *Rationality*, 82.

⁴⁵ Stanovich, *Rationality*, 49.

⁴⁶ Stanovich, *Rationality*, 23.

In the last chapter of *The Robot's Rebellion*, his understanding of the human quest for maximising the individual's interest is rather elaborate.⁴⁷ Stanovich introduces Nozick's notion of symbolic utility – that we pursue values that are not directly connected to experienced utility. He also introduces Harry Frankfurt's notion of second-order desires, and he favours Nozick's idea of rational integration between first- and second-order desires, so that type 2 processing allows a reflective and critical evaluation of our desires. At one point, he even admits that ethical considerations could override vehicle well-being at times, particularly when the sacrifice to our well-being is minimal,⁴⁸ but he does not pursue this train of thought any further.

I basically adopt Stanovich's so called "two process theory," but I would like to modify it slightly with regards to the teleology of type 2 processing. In my view, reducing the goal structure of type 2 processing to the individual's interest underestimates the possibilities of the human mind. At the level of type 2 processing, I am therefore going to introduce a *mind's interest* alongside the individual's interest. Knowing and reasoning are based on the use of concepts, and concepts represent characteristics of objects which these objects have in common with other objects. In terms of our goal structure, this means that type 2 processing directs us to the general. There is, because of our cognitive constitution, a natural interest in the general. Furthermore, there is also a natural interest in proceeding from the less general to the more general – that is, to subsume statements under more general principles and finally to understand reality as such as a systematic whole. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant has called this the interest of reason.⁴⁹ I call it the mind's interest. It is not confined to theoretical knowledge but includes knowledge related to practical goal setting. We are interested in pursuing goods of the most universal kind. Feeding oneself is good, feeding one's family is better, but it would be best to feed every human being. This interest is an interest in the universal good for its own sake. The practical mind's interest in itself pursues the universal good for its own sake.

The existence of a mind's interest means that there is a natural desire or interest in knowing or reasoning and in relating this knowing or reasoning to our practical goal setting. Given its structure, the mind is interested in pursuing goods of the most universal kind. The desire for universal good for its own sake is a basic human desire because of the nature of type 2 processing, which feeds our desires with goals. Our brains have evolved in such a way that, for whatever evolutionary reason, there is a thinking mechanism within us that steers our desire towards realising the universal good for its own sake. We sacrifice our individual interest not only because there are inclinations within us which cause

⁴⁷ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 207–75.

⁴⁸ Stanovich, *Rebellion*, 231.

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 365.

us to be driven by our genes, but also because of our mind's interest. And the structure of our mind is such that we would find it difficult to completely resist the mind's interest. It is probably because of this cognitive constitution that so few people use their type 2 processing solely for maximising their own happiness or for living esthetically, to say it with Kierkegaard. Being resolutely esthetical would be an uphill battle against our biological and psychological constitution as human beings.

What does this have to do with certainty? My proposal is that this conformity with our biological and psychological constitution is the basis for the certainty we may feel when we consciously adopt a form of life driven by the mind's interest, whether it is religious or only ethical. Therefore, I would say that it is type 2 processing, guided by the practical mind's interest, that is the foundation of Luther's faith and Kierkegaard's ethical form of life. More precisely, a feeling of certainty occurs because we feel that to follow the mind's interest is to conform with the highest potential we are capable of achieving as human beings. Life-form-certainty is a feeling of being in line with our highest conative and cognitive possibilities. Following the mind's interest, we feel being a self or even saved because we are naturally inclined to act in line with our highest conative and cognitive possibilities.

Of course, this proposal is an extension of Stanovich's theory from a first-person perspective. I have no empirical evidence in support for it. Yet in my view, there is no reason to reject a first-person explanation as long as there is not a third-person one contradicting it.⁵⁰ As I am unaware of the existence of any contradicting explanation, I maintain it to be plausible that the feeling of certainty described by Luther and Kierkegaard is the expression of a feeling of conformity with our highest conative and cognitive possibilities.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed explanation of this methodological choice, see Jörg Disse, *Desiderium: Eine Philosophie des Verlangens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016), 23–42.