

Enthusiasm*

GEORGE I. MAVRODES

*Department of Philosophy, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 and
Center for Philosophy of Religion, University of Notre Dame, P.O. Box 1068,
Notre Dame, IN 46556*

As many of you know, John Locke seemed to be much troubled by something which he called *enthusiasm*. He devotes chapter XIX of book 4 of the *Essay* to his animadversions against it. And in this paper I hope to consider some of his views. But this is not primarily a historical study. We can take Locke and his troubles as a convenient starting point for our own reflections on the topic which so interested him.

Who are the enthusiasts? Locke, I suppose, may have sometimes gotten enthusiastic himself about something, in the modern sense of “enthusiasm.” But of course it is enthusiasm in a somewhat different, though not unrelated, sense which roused the ire in his soul. Philologists tell us that the *thus* in *enthusiast* is derived from the Greek word for God, *theos*. And the *en* means *in*. It looks as though, etymologically, an enthusiast is either a person who is in God, or else one in whom God is.

Locke himself characterizes the enthusiasts in various ways. Early on in the relevant chapter he says that some people “persuade themselves that they are under the peculiar guidance of heaven in their actions and opinions, especially in those of them which they cannot account for by the ordinary methods of knowledge and principles of reason.”¹ And, he continues, they “have often flattered themselves with a persuasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity and frequent commu-

* This paper, here slightly revised, was delivered as the Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion, in Charleston, South Carolina, on 4 March 1988. It was written during my tenure of a fellowship in the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame.

nications from the Divine Spirit.”(¶ 5) And, apparently referring to this description, he says, “this I take to be properly enthusiasm.”(¶ 7)

This characterization is not in ideal form for a definition, and it invites several distinctions. But it gives us a pretty good idea of the sort of people whom Locke had in mind. This type is by no means restricted to Locke’s time. It is common enough in our own, and we have our own familiarity with such people. If Locke were to come to America now in the 1980s he would no doubt quickly recognize Oral Roberts and Jimmy Bakker as enthusiasts of the sort he castigated in 17th century England. A lot of us, therefore, will have some “feel” for the sort of thing which troubled Locke, and some of us will probably be inclined to go a long way with him in his attack upon enthusiasm.

It would, however, be misleading to think of contemporary enthusiasm entirely in terms of television preachers. It seems to me, for example, to be fairly common among the ordinary members of the churches with which I am best acquainted, i.e., those which are sometimes called “evangelical” and those in the reformed tradition. It is perhaps less common among the ministers and theologians of those groups than in the laity, but it seems especially noticeable in the missionary contingent.

For this occasion however, when we meet in a philosophical ambience, let me cite a 20th century Christian philosopher. This is an autobiographical passage taken from John Baillie’s *Our Knowledge of God*:³

What I must do is to ask myself how the knowledge of God first came to me. ...

It was, then, through the media of my boyhood’s home, the Christian community of which I formed a part, and the ‘old, old story’ from which that community drew its life, that God first revealed Himself to me. This is simple matter of fact. But what I take to be matter of fact in it is not only that God used these media but that in using them He actually did reveal Himself to *my* soul. ...

That God should have revealed Himself to certain men of long ago could not in itself be of concern to me now; first, because, not being myself privy to this revelation, I could never know for sure whether it were a real or only an imagined one; second, because mere hearsay could never be a sufficient foundation for such a thing as religion, though it might be well enough as a foundation for certain other kinds of knowledge; and third, because the revelation would necessarily lack the particular authorization and relevance to my case which alone could give it power over my recalcitrant will.

What is it to me that God should have commanded David to do this or that, or called Paul to such and such a task? It is nothing at all, unless it should happen that, as I read of His calling and commanding them, I at the same time found Him calling and commanding me. If the word of God is to concern me, it must be a word addressed to me individually and to the particular concrete situation in which I am standing now.

So far the testimony of John Baillie. It too is a version of enthusiasm, as I understand it.

Now, the fact that enthusiasm was endemic in his own time raised Locke's hackles, but the fact that it was not idiosyncratic to his time gave him a different sort of problem. And this is a problem which some of us, though only some, will share with him. For enthusiasm not only long outlived Locke, it also long antedated him. It is deeply embedded – I would say irremediably embedded – in several religious traditions, *including the one to which Locke himself gave allegiance, i.e., Christianity*. For almost all of the principal figures associated with the beginnings of Christianity, and many of the major figures in the long history of Judaism which preceded Christianity, are plainly represented in the canonical literature as being enthusiasts. Christianity may wear the cloak of reasonable respectability, but at home that cloak must hang beside a skeleton in the closet.

Who, for example, is more clearly an enthusiast than the biblical Joseph, a man who all his life interpreted dreams – his own and those of other people – as divine communications? Locke speaks, as we have just heard, of people who “persuade themselves that they are under the peculiar guidance of heaven in their actions and opinions, especially in those of them which they cannot account for by the ordinary methods of knowledge and principles of reason.” Could he cite a more dramatic illustration than the case of Abraham, going to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac? And what of Moses, who heard the divine voice emanating from a burning bush, and who climbed Mount Sinai to receive the divine law from the hand of God? Or think of the great prophets of Israel, such as Isaiah, seeing visions of the divine majesty in the smoke filled sanctuary of the temple, or Ezekiel, who apparently converted a thunderstorm into a vision of God's throne and chariot?

We can come down to New Testament times. There is Paul, missionary to a fourth of the Mediterranean world and writer of half of the New Testament. He is converted, so we are told, by a divine

voice speaking from the heavens, while he lies on the ground, stricken temporarily blind by a celestial light. He is commissioned for his evangelistic endeavors by a divine inspiration that falls upon the church of which he is a member. He receives God's own guidance for his journey in the form of a night vision. And he does not hesitate to construe his own preaching as the Word of God.

But of course it is not Paul only. Before the birth of Jesus, Mary speaks with an archangel. The father of John the Baptist sees a vision in the temple, and is left speechless until the birth of his son. And, after Jesus is born, Joseph and Mary are divinely warned to escape into Egypt with their baby.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter and the other disciples are filled with a divine inspiration which enabled them to preach in foreign languages, the celebrated "speaking in tongues." Peter is rescued from prison by an angel, and rebuked for his excessive ethno-centrism by a vision which he saw while meditating (or sleeping?) on a rooftop. Stephen shouts that he sees heaven opened, and Jesus at the right hand of God. And John the apocalypticist reports the bizarre and complex series of visions which now form the bulk of the book of Revelation.

And then, of course, there is Jesus himself. His baptism is acknowledged by a divine approbation, sounding from the sky. On the Mount of the Transfiguration he converses, in the first century A.D., with Moses and Elijah, who appear there in visible form. He declares himself to have a special divine commission in the world, and claims the authority of God for his actions. And he is represented as repeatedly performing miracles – walking on the water, feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. Sometimes a television evangelist may seem bent on rivalling Jesus in such exploits. But it would not be all that easy to surpass, in this respect, the picture given of him in the New Testament.³

Now, there is in all this a certain cause of embarrassment, though, as I say, not everyone would be embarrassed by it. A thoroughgoing atheist or secularist need not be disturbed by these similarities at all. He would be more likely to welcome them. He would say, I suppose, that all of these people – Jimmy Bakker, John of the Apocalypse, Peter, Moses, Abraham, Oral Roberts, and all the rest of them – belong in essentially the same bag. They are either cynical charlatans, preying on the religious sensibilities and credulities of simple people,

or else they are themselves superstitious fools. In either case they traffic in religious delusion, imposing it either on themselves or on others by ignoring the claims of sober reason. That we can find such a constancy of enthusiastic phenomena across more than four thousand years, from ancient Canaan and Egypt to contemporary America and Korea, shows how deeply rooted in human nature is the weakness to which religious delusion appeals. And across that whole spectrum the thoroughgoing atheist will no doubt be willing to apply Locke's critical strictures.

Atheists, therefore, can have a fairly easy way with enthusiasm. That way, however, is not readily available to Locke – nor to those who, like him, profess some allegiance to Christianity. Such people might perhaps reject one or another of the enthusiasts who belong to the history of Christianity, but I suppose that it would be hard for them to turn their backs on *all* of them and still to keep a straight face in church. Anyway, I could not do it. So Locke has a problem, and to some extent I share it with him.

Now, some medievals are supposed to have advised having recourse to a distinction as the strategy of choice in dealing with philosophical problems. No doubt some distinctions would be helpful here, and one of them, at least, is suggested by Locke himself. I think that there is not a single instance in which Locke specifically identifies something as *enthusiasm* and then says something good about it. Instead he says that enthusiasm substitutes for both faith and reason “the *ungrounded fancies* of a man's own brain.”(¶ 3) Enthusiasts “*pretend* to revelation, and ... *persuade themselves* that they are under the peculiar guidance of heaven.”(¶ 5) They “have often *flattered themselves* with a persuasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity”(¶ 5), and “whatever *groundless opinion* comes to settle itself strongly upon their fancies is an illumination from the Spirit of God.”(¶ 6) “This I take to be properly enthusiasm,” he says, “which ... *founded neither on reason nor divine revelation* [rises] from the conceits of a *warmed or overweening brain*.”(¶ 7)⁴

Locke also recognizes, however, that there is such a thing as a genuine divine revelation (¶ 11), and even claims that there are proofs that there have been such revelations. He cites Moses and Gideon specifically as men who really did have a special commission from God to perform great works.(¶ 15) And he assures us that he is “far from denying that God can or doth sometimes enlighten men's minds in the apprehending of certain truths, or excite them to good actions ...”(¶ 16)⁵

Perhaps, therefore, I was not being entirely faithful to Locke's own terminology in my early characterization of enthusiasm. For it looks as though he uses this word to apply only to the counterfeit or deceptive copy of something which has genuine and reputable instances, while using other terms, such as "revelation," to refer to the genuine article. He must acknowledge that the people whom he castigates are similar to Moses and Gideon, but he must also distinguish them. And, as I said earlier, any Christian thinker who is at all sensitive to the history of her religion must do something similar.

Here I adopt a convention somewhat different from Locke's, a convention which represents both the similarity and the intended difference. I will say that someone is a *genuine enthusiast*, and practices *genuine enthusiasm*, if she is in actual fact the recipient of a divine guidance or communication, or is someone who experiences a special manifestation of the divine presence. And someone is a *spurious enthusiast* if he is either convinced that he has such a divine grace, or he pretends to have it, when in fact he does not have it.

This distinction does not rest on a difference in the claims made by such people, for they may make very similar claims. Nor need it reflect any phenomenological or psychological difference. The distinction is not, for example, a matter of depth of conviction, or of sincerity. It appeals instead to a difference in what is going on in some sense *outside* the apparent enthusiast. Is it, or is it not, really God who thus inspires her? That is the question on which this distinction depends.

No doubt this distinction raises the problem of how one might answer this question in some particular case. That is, of course, an important problem, one of the most important ones. This distinction provides one way of formulating it. But the distinction does not itself tell us how to go about solving it. Whatever I can say about that must come a little later.

The distinction itself is, of course, not a new one. It is made in the biblical texts themselves in the contrast between the true prophets and the false or lying prophets. And many later Christian writers — some of the mystics, for example — are much concerned with distinguishing genuine divine visitations from demonic counterfeits and other misapprehensions. One can think here of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, both of whom I will soon mention again.⁶ And since these people are concerned with this distinction, they are also concerned with the question to which it naturally gives rise.

There is another distinction which will be useful. I will distinguish between *theoretical* enthusiasm and *practical* enthusiasm. A theoretical enthusiast is someone who undertakes to defend the practice of (genuine) enthusiasm. And the practical enthusiast is one who, either genuinely or spuriously, is involved in instances of enthusiasm. There is nothing, of course, to prevent a person from being both a theoretical and a practical enthusiast. No doubt there are many such people, and I would take John Baillie to be one of them. But a theoretical enthusiast need not be a practical enthusiast. I think, for example, of C.D. Broad, who introduced his defense of the validity of mystical experience with the observation that he was himself entirely devoid of such experience.⁷ And, on the other side, the biblical texts — both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures — seem to be full of accounts of people who were practical enthusiasts but who made no attempt to defend that practice.

Locke, I think, does not discuss theoretical enthusiasm. He is himself, of course, a sort of limited theoretical enthusiast in my sense, since he defends the validity and propriety of the biblical examples. That he also castigates enthusiasm is, of course, another version of the problem which this phenomenon generates for him.

Well, let us not postpone the interesting and controversial questions any longer. What shall we do about enthusiasm, and on what basis shall we do it? What response shall we make to Oral Roberts — or, for that matter, to Paul the apostle? There is a simple and easy answer to these questions. We should accept and act on genuine enthusiasm and reject spurious enthusiasm. It would seem, after all, that God is very likely to be telling the truth and commanding what is good. But of course this sort of answer is likely to seem unsatisfying, because it does not tell us just how to determine which enthusiasm to accept and which to reject.

There is, however, an interesting alternative to this easy answer. And that is that we should do nothing at all about enthusiasm, not even about genuine enthusiasm. This suggestion seems to me to be made, at least in certain moods, by one of the great Spanish mystical writers of the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross. He says, for example, “when it is a question of imaginary visions, or other supernatural apprehensions, which can enter the senses without the cooperation of man’s free will, I say that at no time and season must it receive them, whether the soul be in a state of perfection, or whether

in a state less perfect — not even though they come from God.”⁸ In the next chapter he says, “Let us speak of the confessor who, whether or no he be inclined toward these things, has not the prudence that he ought to have in disencumbering the soul and detaching the desire of his disciple from them, but begins to speak to him about these visions and devotes the greater part of his spiritual conversation to them, as we have said, giving him signs by which he may distinguish good visions from evil. Now, although it is well to know this, there is no reason to cause the soul this labour, anxiety and peril. By paying no heed to visions, and refusing to receive them, all this is prevented, and the soul acts as it should.”⁹ And later on he repeats this advice at greater length.¹⁰

Now, I say that John puts forward this view “in some moods.” That is because there are some other passages in which he seems to take not so hard a line. Maybe he is somewhat ambivalent, or maybe I have not worked out fully his doctrine.¹¹ But at any rate, there is this theme in John of the Cross, and we can use it regardless of whether it is his full account of the matter. As I understand the general thrust of his reasoning about this, he holds that while there is a real distinction between genuine and spurious experiences it is hard to distinguish them in actual practice, and a person who tries to do that is almost sure to make mistakes. Furthermore, even the genuine experiences are often obscure and are likely to be misinterpreted. On the other hand, the genuine experiences will produce their good effects in our souls even if we pay no attention to them, and the counterfeits will do us no harm if we ignore them. And so it is much wiser that a person act on none of them at all.

A person who followed this theme in John’s instruction might be called a *non-responsive enthusiast*. Such a person would simply ignore his own enthusiastic experiences. He would not preach his apparent revelations, he would not undertake to obey the apparently divine commands, and so on. The enthusiasm might be in him, but there would be no response to it.

Are there any non-responsive enthusiasts? I don’t know. The enthusiasts we know about — Abraham and John of the Apocalypse and Oral Roberts, for example — are not of this variety. But that is, in large part, just why we know about them. If there are any non-responsive enthusiasts we would be unlikely to identify them as enthusiasts at all, since they would presumably give no sign of it. And so there may be

such people, unknown to anyone except themselves and perhaps to some spiritual advisor.

There is something attractive in the suggestion that non-responsiveness is the right way to deal with enthusiasm, and I hope to make some use of it shortly. But is it not also incredible that it should represent the *whole* story about this problem? For one thing, if we apply it to the biblical period, it requires us to believe that almost all of the major figures in the beginnings of Christianity (and many of those in Judaism) regularly chose an unwise path. Even worse, I find it hard to believe that it could be spiritually preferable for a person to ignore what he deeply believes to be a divine command. Would it really have been better for Isaiah to ignore the divine commission as a prophet, or for Paul to remain at home despite his calling to be a missionary to the gentiles? Of course I don't really know what I would have done if I had been in Isaiah's shoes, but I can hardly imagine keeping a straight face while saying that I *ought* just to ignore the divine command. So I must look for something else.

Something else — but what? How should I decide, for example, about Oral Roberts' recent claims in connection with his fund raising project? If I don't take up Locke's position, attributing Roberts' statements to a "warmed or overweening brain," must I acknowledge Roberts as a genuine prophet with a divine inspiration? No. So far as I can see, I need neither side with Locke nor with Roberts. I said that I would look for something beyond John's advice. But this is not the situation in which I need it. For in the case of Oral Roberts and his claims the strategy of non-responsiveness seems plausible, at least to me.

As I recall the Roberts case, he announced that God had told him to raise several million dollars for some religious project, and that if he did not succeed then God would "call him home." Roberts then undertook to raise this money. I guess he succeeded in that, and he is still with us. That seems a pretty straightforward example of enthusiasm, presumably either genuine or spurious. And Roberts, of course, acted on it. But why must I have an opinion about it? Why should I make any judgment here at all?

Of course, I *might* have an opinion about it, and I might have that opinion on any one of several bases. I might, for example, have some previous opinion about Roberts' reliability, spirituality, honesty, or whatever, and then I might judge this case largely in terms of that

earlier judgment. Or I might have some theological view about whether God is likely to make such a demand as Roberts reported. And so on. If I do make a judgment about Roberts' claim on such a basis then I suppose that my judgment will have a reliability commensurate with that of the basis. But also I might find myself without any such basis, or at least without any in which I had much confidence. And if so, then why should I have any opinion at all?

Suppose that Oral Roberts had made a more prosaic and less theological claim, saying that his wife had told him to bring home two quarts of milk today, and that she would bang him with a skillet if he did not. Did his wife really tell him that? Maybe, maybe not. Must I have an opinion about that, too? Must I be able to determine whether he is telling the truth? How could I do that? I wasn't there myself at the alleged event, and maybe there were no other witnesses. I could ask Mrs. Roberts herself. She might confirm her husband's account. Or she might deny it. But she might say it was none of my business, and neither confirm nor deny it. And couldn't she be justified in that? The Roberts' domestic life is not obviously a proper concern of mine, and Mrs. Roberts is not bound to assist me in my curiosity. So I might in fact have no good way of deciding about the truth of this claim.

Now, my relation to Roberts' actual claim seems, to me at least, to be very much like my relation to this hypothetical situation. I may not have to *do* anything about the Roberts claim, and (perhaps largely for that reason) it may not be any of my business. My interest in it, if I have an interest at all, is likely to be mostly a matter of curiosity. So it doesn't seem at all surprising that I might be at a loss as to how to get any further on it.

Of course, if I happen to be on Oral Roberts' mailing list I may have to decide whether to send him twenty dollars. But a decision about that may well be largely independent of a decision about the genuineness of his enthusiasm. A genuine divine command to Roberts to raise several million dollars does not by itself impose any obligation on me to contribute to that project — it is a divine instruction *to Roberts*, not to me. On the other hand, the project for which Roberts is collecting the money may strike me as a good one, perhaps indeed just the sort of project which I ought to support. In that case it seems that I should write out the check regardless of whether I can come up with a definitive judgment on the character of Roberts' enthusiasm.¹²

The crucial point here, it seems to me, is something like this. Many

cases of enthusiasm will have the following feature. If they really are what they purport to be – that is, genuine communications from God – then it is unlikely that I will have any reliable way of determining that they really are what they purport to be. And so the fact, if it is a fact, that I cannot make that determination is not a strong reason for supposing that they are not what they purport to be. Of course, it isn't a reason for thinking that they *are* genuine either. And so it is plausible for me simply to decline to have any opinion at all about such cases.

There isn't anything special about me in this respect. I should suppose that for most cases of enthusiasm, and for most observers, if the enthusiasm is genuine then it is very unlikely that those observers will be in any good position to determine that it is genuine.

There is a corollary of this observation. It is quite possible for an enthusiast herself to wonder whether her own enthusiasm is genuine. (In fact, this is not an uncommon concern among the classical mystics.) And an enthusiast may even have some *reason*, perhaps a strong reason, for thinking that her experience is not genuine. But the fact that she cannot convince *me* that it is genuine is not, in general, a strong reason of that sort. For it will not usually not be the case that if it were genuine then she would probably be able to convince me of that fact.

But, someone may say, if I can't determine whether a certain enthusiasm is genuine, then what good is it? Well, John of the Cross is a useful reminder that divine actions may have effects which are independent of any determination I may make about them. Perhaps the spiritual life is more than epistemology. But nevertheless it may be suggested that epistemology is something, even if it is not everything, and a piece of enthusiasm whose genuineness I cannot determine is unlikely to be of any *direct epistemic* benefit to me. That is, I will not learn from it an important truth, nor will I receive from it a divine command for my life. And so there is at least one important sort of benefit which it will not confer on me.

That suggestion seems plausible. I think that it (or perhaps some careful emendation of it) is true. But I should also remember that I am not the only person in the world. I need not suppose that every divine communication must be intended to benefit *me*. Not every divine revelation need be a revelation *to me*, and not every divine command is addressed to me. So a divine revelation may very well be an epistemic benefit to someone even if I can make nothing of it at all.

This may suggest that if a genuine enthusiasm is to confer a direct epistemic benefit then there must be *someone* – though of course it doesn't have to be me – who is in a position to recognize it. That is probably not correct, at least in its full generality. But even so, I think that there are cases (and they are not so very uncommon) in which someone does recognize a genuine enthusiasm. And I suppose that the person who is most likely to be in a position to do that is the enthusiast herself. For if the experience is genuine then it seems plausible to suppose that the person who has the experience is probably the person to whom that revelation is most directly addressed. She is the one of whom it is most likely to be true that deciding about the genuineness of the enthusiasm really is *her* legitimate business. And how might that business be done?

Locke is stuck with this question. He repeats over and over, though without substantial argument, I think, that the enthusiasts of his own time ignore reason, and thus have no way of differentiating the genuine from the spurious. And he repeatedly seems to infer from this that therefore their enthusiasm must be spurious. But he wants to affirm that the revelatory experiences of the biblical prophets were genuine, and that they recognized them as such. So how did *they* do it?

Well, Locke says that in such cases God “convinces us that it [i.e., revelation] is from him by some marks which reason cannot be mistaken in.”¹³ And he goes on to explain that “holy men of old ... had outward signs to convince them of the author of those revelations.”¹⁴ What outward signs? Locke here cites Moses, who (Locke says) saw a burning bush which was not consumed by the flames, and whose rod was turned into a serpent. And he also cites Gideon, who, according to the biblical story, put out the famous fleece to get a miraculous confirmation of his divine commission. And Locke also suggests that “the prophets of old” must *all* have had similar miraculous evidence.¹⁵

Now a modern reader is likely to be struck by the apparent ease with which Locke became convinced that Moses, Gideon, and other prophets of old saw miraculous signs. His argument requires that these really were, and did not merely appear to be, events of such an extraordinary character that reason could not be mistaken about their significance. Not so very long after Locke, David Hume would be arguing that it was pretty hard, to say the least, to have sufficient testimonial evidence that a miracle had occurred.¹⁶ We need not swallow Hume's argument hook, line, and sinker to have some sympathy for doubts

about the ease with which the occurrence of ancient miracles might now be established by appeals to reason. One might indeed have the impression that Locke did not inquire very deeply into the genesis and maintenance of his own belief that these miraculous events had really occurred.¹⁷

However that may be, there is another problem here. Think of the Gideon story, one which seems strikingly, even humorously, true to life, at least in its psychological aspects.¹⁸ An angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and commissions him to raise an army and drive out the rampaging Midianite invaders. The angel also produces a miraculous sign at Gideon's request, fire springing up from a rock. So Gideon undertook some preliminary step to carry out his divine commission. But later on, before any decisive encounter with the Midianites, it looks as though Gideon began to have doubts. And so Gideon prayed and asked God to give him a miraculous sign, a sheepskin wet with dew in the morning while the ground around it was dry. And in the morning the sign was there, just as Gideon asked. Okay. But before the day was out Gideon has doubts again. (Did he think of the possibility that it was just natural that dew collected more readily on a sheepskin than on the ground? I don't know.) So he asked God for the opposite sign the next morning. And the next morning that sign was there. Finally Gideon has enough to sustain his confidence, and he began his march.

I can take the story of Gideon seriously. And I think that it provides one answer — but not the only possible answer — to the question we have been considering. A person could recognize an enthusiasm as genuine because it was confirmed by a divine sign, perhaps even a miracle. And indeed a person could iterate this confirmation, as Gideon did, seeking another sign to confirm the first. I know, of course, that some people don't put much stock in the miraculous. But the question I am here considering does not arise with any real force unless we take a genuine revelation to be a live possibility. And if it is a live possibility, as it seems to me to be, then a miracle is also a live possibility. The Gideon story thus strikes me as true to life throughout, and not merely in its psychological aspects.

But while this is one way in which a person might recognize a genuine enthusiasm, it need not be the only way. Consider, for example, the following passage from the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, another Spanish mystic of the 16th century. It is part of her reply to a confessor who raised some critical questions about her visions.¹⁹

My confessor then asked me who told me it was Jesus Christ. "He often tells me so Himself", I replied; "but, before ever He told me so, the fact was impressed upon my understanding, and before that He used to tell me He was there when I could not see Him." If I were blind, or in pitch darkness, and a person whom I had never seen, but only heard of, came and spoke to me and told me who he was, I should believe him, but I could not affirm that it was he as confidently as if I had seen him. But in this case I could certainly affirm it, for, though He remains unseen, so clear a knowledge is impressed upon the soul that to doubt it seems quite impossible. The Lord is pleased that this knowledge should be so deeply engraven upon the understanding that one can no more doubt it than one can doubt the evidence of one's eyes — indeed, the latter is easier, for we sometimes suspect that we have imagined what we see, whereas here, though that suspicion may arise for a moment, there remains such complete certainty that the doubt has no force.

Here Teresa makes no appeal at all to additional signs as a means of confirmation. Instead she talks of something impressed upon the understanding in the vision itself, and of a clear knowledge deeply engraven on her soul, so that doubt seems quite impossible. And then she makes a comparison, especially interesting in connection with Locke's demand. She says that "one can no more doubt it than one can doubt the evidence of one's eyes — indeed the latter is easier, for we sometimes suspect that we have imagined what we see ..."

Now, Locke demanded signs which were such that reason could not be mistaken in them. But both Gideon and Teresa knew that sense perception does not provide signs of that kind. One can, of course, strengthen such an appeal by an iteration of signs, as Gideon did. But a human life cannot encompass an infinite series of such iterations. If there is to be a human intellectual life at all, whether on the basis of divine revelations or in terms of some more "natural" knowledge, that iteration must somewhere come to an end. Where does it end?

Teresa, it seems to me, is pretty clear in answering that question for herself. Some of her enthusiastic experiences seemed to her to be the most solid elements in her intellectual life, more deeply engraven on her understanding and less open to doubt than any sense perception. We might say that Teresa represents the recognition of a genuine enthusiasm, in some instances at least, as a *basic* intellectual act, an act which is done not by means of doing some other act. It is a recognition

which does not stem from the application of a criterion or rule. The necessity of there being such basic intellectual acts seems to be parallel to that of basic physical acts – it is essentially due, in both cases, to the impossibility of an infinite iteration. Do we have some *a priori* reason for supposing that Teresa cannot be right in thinking that, *in her own case*, the recognition of the divine presence and communication is basic in that way? I do not have such a reason.

Let me reiterate that here we are dealing with the possibility of a genuine divine communication. Of course, if there is no God at all, or if God is either unable or unwilling to communicate with human beings, then there is no such thing as a genuine enthusiasm. But if there is a God after all, and if He is able and willing to reveal Himself, then it seems (to me, at least) not at all incredible that He should give Teresa a power of recognizing His presence. Is that more incredible than that He should have given Gideon a power of telling the difference between a wet sheepskin and a dry one? Or, should we say, between the feel of wet and the feel of dry?

William James says somewhere, if I remember correctly, that the religious form of every question is the most profound form. Perhaps that is true. If it is true, that is probably because those questions which really do have a religious form are not merely matters of curiosity, not merely “theoretical.” They are the questions which touch our own deepest roots, and the bases on which our lives are built. Do we choose the answers to such questions? Sometimes it seems so. But perhaps more often (as, I think, with Teresa) we seem to be gripped by something which is stronger than anything else in our experience. We may feel like saying, not that we have chosen an answer, but rather that an answer has chosen us. The enthusiasts, or some of them at any rate, are often in that situation. But perhaps they are not so much unlike the person who finds himself gripped by the power of sense perception, or by the lucidity of some principle of logic. Argument cannot do everything, because it must begin with something. Perhaps no one can do better than to cast in his own lot, and his own life, with whatever he has found to be most compelling in his own experience.

Notes

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, Ch. 19, ¶5.
2. John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, pp. 181–184.
3. See, e.g., Gen. 22:1–14, 37:1–11, 40:1–41:36; Ex. 3:1–4:17, 19:16–25; Is. 6:1–13; Ezek. 1:4–28; Mt. 2:13–25, 14:25–27; Mk. 9:2–8; Lk. 1:5–38, 3:21–22, 18:35–43; Jn. 6:1–14, 7:28–29, 11:1–44; Acts 2:1–13, 7:54–60, 9:1–9, 10:9–16, 12:1–11, 13:1–3, 16:6–10; I Thess. 2:13; Rev. 1–22. I cite these Biblical texts principally to indicate how these persons are represented in the canonical writings of Christianity. These citations are, of course, only a small sample.
4. John Locke, *ibid.* I have supplied the emphasis in these quotations.
5. *Ibid.*
6. For a fuller discussion of Teresa's comments on this topic, see my "Real vs. Deceptive Mystical Experiences," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz.
7. C.D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research*.
8. *The Ascent of Mr. Carmel*, Book II, Chapter 17, ¶7.
9. *Ibid.*, Chapter 18, ¶7.
10. *Ibid.*, Chapter 28, ¶6.
11. Maybe John intends this advice to apply only to certain sorts of enthusiastic phenomena – visions, for example.
12. Another situation which might generate a necessity for me to make some judgment about Roberts' claim would be that of my having some responsibility for a spiritual oversight of Roberts' work – if I were, perhaps, an elder in Roberts' church, or a denominational officer. But in fact I do not have any such relation to Roberts.
13. Locke, *ibid.*, ¶14.
14. *Ibid.*, ¶15.
15. *Ibid.*
16. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, Section X ("Of Miracles").
17. I suppose that most modern Christians who believe that the ancient miracles really did happen do so *because that information is revealed*, or at least they believe it to have been revealed, and not *vice versa*.
18. Judges 6:11–40.
19. St. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers, Chap. XXVII.