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“What You Don’t Know, You Can Feel It Somehow”: Knowledge, Feeling, and Revelation in U2

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We know many things. At least it is natural to say we do. We know that George Washington was the first President of the United States, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that bachelors are unmarried. We know how to sing, how to play tennis, or how to ski. We know the Mona Lisa by sight, the sound of Bono and Bob Dylan as soon as we hear them sing, the smell of biscuits baking when we wake up in the morning. If we tried to list off the cuff all the things we would claim to know, we would soon give up. Feelings are equally ubiquitous. We feel anxious, depressed, angry, and elated. We feel love and hatred, *Angst* and *ennui*. We feel sorry for some people and attracted to others. We feel the wind in our hair and the sun on our face. We feel sleepy and feverish. We can feel certain our team will win or sure things are beyond repair. Feelings seem as common as consciousness.

Contrasting knowledge and feeling is cliché. It’s easy to hear the songs of U2 as simply reiterating this commonplace. In “A Beautiful Day,” the contrast is obvious: “What you don’t know, you can feel it somehow.” A similar distinction between thought and feeling is clear in “Vertigo,” “Your head / can’t rule your heart/ A feeling is so much stronger than / a thought,” and the refrain connects this contrast to knowledge and feeling: “It’s everything I wish I didn’t know/ Except you give me something I can feel / Feel.” The last capitalized and repeated “Feel” is sung as a command. U2 comes across as championing feeling but disparaging knowledge and thought. This message seems no better than the banal distinction between knowing and feeling. The substance of these U2 lyrics, however, may reflect more

subtle insight into knowledge and feeling. The feeling that U2 champions may actually be akin to a kind of knowledge. U2's songs make frequent references to God and moral matters. Understanding how feeling is distinct from some kinds of knowledge may also be crucial to understanding the nature of revelation and moral motivation. A careful listen to U2's corpus raises the following questions: What is knowledge? How is knowledge distinct from feeling? What kinds of knowledge are there? How many ways can one feel? What is the relationship between knowledge and thought? Is feeling ever a kind of knowledge? When is feeling more important than knowing or thinking? One word the Greeks used for knowledge is *episteme*. Philosophers call the theory of knowledge *epistemology*. Behind Bono's lyrics and the music of U2 lurks a distinctive epistemology that may bring us "one step closer to knowing" the answers to some of these questions.

The Varieties of Knowing

The verb "to know" is incredibly versatile. The direct objects of this verb can be many different things. We know *that U2 is a band, that Bono is the singer, that Edge is the lead guitarist, that Larry plays the drums, and that Adam plays the bass*. We can also say things such as, "I know *Bono whenever I hear his voice*" and his friends can say simply "I know *Bono*." Quite a different way to use the verb 'to know' is to say "I know *how to play U2 songs on the guitar*." If we are careful to distinguish these objects, then we see there are different ways to know, varieties of knowledge.

In the first examples above, the italicized direct objects of "know" are clauses beginning with the word *that*. We could say that what these clauses stand for are *facts*. That Bono is the singer is a fact. So in these examples what we know are facts. Here is another way to think of this use of the verb 'to know'. The sentence "Bono is the singer" says something that is either true or false. In this case it is true. The sentence "Bono is an Englishman" is false. Sentences that are true or false express propositions. The sentence "Bono is the singer" expresses the proposition *that Bono is the singer*. Knowledge *that* is called *propositional* knowledge. In ordinary talk we sometimes don't

include the 'that' when we claim to know something. For example, the song "Beautiful Day" contains the line "I know I'm not a hopeless case." This line is an example of propositional knowledge even though it does not include the word 'that'. The first-person speaker is claiming to know a proposition—*that I am not a hopeless case*. Most of the examples of the propositional use of 'to know' in U2 songs are similar. In "Ultraviolet (Light My Way)," the verb 'to know' is used in the propositional sense without the word 'that': "you know I need you to be strong ..." *That I need you to be strong* is a proposition. In "I Still Haven't Found What I Am Looking For," there is the example "You know I believe it [in Kingdom Come]." *That I believe it* is a fact that is known. Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts or truths expressed by true sentences. Often when we speak of knowledge we mean propositional knowledge.¹

Contrast this propositional use of the verb 'to know' with the one in the second set of examples: I know *Bono whenever I hear his voice* and I know *Bono* (said by his friends). In these cases the object of the verb is not a proposition but a person, Bono. I don't know *that* something is the case. I know an object, in this case a person, Bono. The direct object of the verb 'to know' in this case is an object. Notice that this use of the word 'to know' is very close to the verbs 'to recognize' or 'to be acquainted with.' I recognize Bono simply by his voice. His friends are acquainted with him. Of course, they may know many facts about him (propositional knowledge) but they also know him directly. They have been in direct contact with him. This kind of knowledge is sometimes referred to as knowledge by *acquaintance*.

Propositions are expressed in sentences. So whatever propositional knowledge I have about Bono can be stated in true sentences about him—truths. Propositional knowledge is knowledge of truths. However it is possible that I know no truths about Bono but I can nonetheless recognize Bono by the sound of his voice or by seeing him. I could be directly aware of Bono without knowing any truths or facts about him. This kind of direct awareness is knowledge by *acquaintance*.

¹ Some philosophers argue that all knowledge is propositional knowledge. More on that to come.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) first noted the distinction between knowledge of truths and knowledge by acquaintance in his book *The Problems of Philosophy*: “We shall say we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths,” and “Knowledge of things, when it is of the kind we call knowledge by *acquaintance*, is essentially simpler than any knowledge of truths, and is logically independent of knowledge of truths . . .”² This kind of knowledge is closely tied to direct perception of things. I know Bono by the sound of his voice or how he appears to me. Such knowledge is common and crucial, though we often think of knowledge as knowledge of truths or facts. An example of this use of the verb ‘to know’ occurs in the song “Daddy’s Gonna Pay for Your Crash Car”: “You know everyone in the world, but you feel alone.” The claim is hyperbole. No one can know everyone in the world. But the type of knowledge here is acquaintance. She is not said to know truths about everyone in the world but to be acquainted with everyone. Note also that in this song her knowledge is contrasted with a kind of feeling.

The last use of the verb ‘to know’ I mentioned was illustrated by “I know *how to play U2 songs on the guitar*.” Here the object of the verb is neither a thing nor a proposition. It is a capacity or skill. This kind of knowledge is often referred to as knowing *how*. As in the case of knowledge by acquaintance, one may have knowledge *how* without any knowledge of truths. I may know how to play the guitar without knowing any truths about the techniques of guitar playing that allow me to play so well. This is a perfectly good and common use of the verb. Philosophers are prone to focus attention on propositional knowledge because it is closely connected with issues of truth and rationality. The epistemology implicit in U2’s songs is a call to reconsider the importance of propositional knowledge. To appreciate this message we must first be careful to distinguish the ways one can be said to feel.

² Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 46. He adds in the passage above, “it would be rash to assume that human beings ever, in fact, have acquaintance with things without at the same time knowing some truth about them.”

Ways to Feel

The verb 'to feel' is even more flexible than the verb 'to know'. This flexibility is likewise found in the different direct objects that verb takes. These different uses of the verb are illustrated in many U2 songs. In "Where the Streets Have No Name," the lyric is "I want to feel sunlight on my face . . ." In "If God Will Send His Angels," Bono sings, "I want to feel my soul," and finally, "And I want to feel." Many times the verb is followed by a simile, "The sky falls / and you feel like it's a beautiful day," and in "Ultraviolet (Light My Way)": "Sometimes I feel like checking out." The line I already quoted from "Daddy's Gonna Pay for Your Crash Car" simply says, "You feel alone." The title of the song "Numb" is the feeling: "I feel numb." To lump all these different uses of the verb 'to feel' together into a simple category called 'feelings' is to court confusion. The common verb obscures important differences.

Consider the first example, "I want to feel sunlight on my face." Here we could say that there is some *thing* desired to be felt—the sunlight on my face. What the person wants to feel is a certain sensation that sunlight on one's face produces. In this case, 'feeling' is synonymous with 'sensation'. "I want to feel sunlight on my face" means "I want to sense sunlight on my face." Another example is found in Bono's song "The Wanderer": "I went out there / in search of experience/ To taste and to touch / and to feel . . ." Here feeling is a kind of experience or sensation like tasting or touching. We often think of feelings as sensations. We might call this *perceptual* feeling. Note that our sensations are things we are directly aware of. We know them by acquaintance. So perceptual feelings should be considered a kind of knowledge.

Feelings are frequently thought of as emotional states. The lines "you feel alone" and "I feel numb" do not refer to sensations. They refer to emotional conditions. Feeling alone is the condition of alienation. Though one can feel a sensation of numbness, say when a limb is anesthetized, in the song "Numb" it refers to a kind of emotional listlessness, *ennui*. U2 songs often mention the emotion love. "I feel love" is the use of 'feel' in the sense of an emotion. Call this use of the verb 'to feel' *emotional* feeling. Russell believed we have knowledge by acquaintance of our emotional feelings.

In the song "Acrobat," Bono sings "Don't believe what you hear / Don't believe what you see/ If you just close your eyes / You can feel the enemy." Here feeling is contrasted with perceptual states that make one aware of the world around them. The 'enemy' that one can feel is oneself. 'To feel' in this case refers to a kind of awareness one has of oneself independent of the sensations of the outside world. Feeling in this case could be called *introspection*. Like perceptual feeling it is a kind of direct awareness and so a kind of knowledge by acquaintance. Again feeling is a state of knowledge, not contrary to it.

Consider cases where 'feel' is followed by a simile. "Sometimes I feel like checking out" and "you feel like it's a beautiful day." The first example may seem to be a case of emotional feeling, expressing a state of depression. But I think this case actually illustrates another kind of feeling. 'Checking out' is a euphemism for committing suicide. That is why it is natural to think of this as emotional feeling. One usually has to be depressed to commit suicide. However, 'to feel' here is used very much like 'to believe': "I believe that I should commit suicide" or "I believe that suicide is a good idea." Now feeling like checking out is not the same as a belief but a kind of inclination to believe. Notice that the object of 'to believe' in this example is a proposition, *that I should commit suicide*. So feeling like checking out is having a positive attitude toward a proposition. The same is true of the example "You feel like / It's is a beautiful day." The feeling here is a positive attitude toward the proposition *that it's a beautiful day*.

'To feel' in these cases expresses a state of mind that is an inclination toward accepting a particular truth. If I feel like checking out, then I am inclined to accept as a truth the sentence "I should commit suicide." If you feel like it's a beautiful day, then you are inclined to accept as truth the sentence "It is a beautiful day." These examples illustrate what could be called *attitudinal* feeling. Attitudinal feeling is like propositional knowledge in that its object is a proposition. But usually we use the verb 'to feel' in this context to contrast this attitude with propositional knowledge. 'To feel' in these cases implies that one is not sure or does not have justification for one's inclination. This contrast is natural and obvious in the claims, "I don't know that I should kill myself, but I feel that I should" and "You aren't certain it's a beautiful day but you feel that it

is." Attitudinal feeling is a state of mind that falls short of knowledge.

Sometimes the verb is intransitive—it lacks any object. For example, the lyric "I want to feel." This might mean "I want to be open to experiences and sensations" or it could mean "I don't want to be emotionally numb." Only the context can determine whether perceptual feeling or emotional feeling is intended. There are other uses of the verb 'to feel' besides perceptual, emotional, introspective, and attitudinal. These however should suffice to understand how feeling might provide an alternative to knowing.

Knowledge and Thought

Philosophers usually think of knowledge as a kind of belief. In order to know that Bono was born in Dublin one must believe that he was. But people believe all kinds of false things. For belief to count as knowledge the belief must be true. If Bono was born in Dublin, then one cannot know he was born in Belfast. Yet one could just happen to believe that Bono was born in Dublin. Let's say one simply guesses so based on the fact that he is Irish. In that case, one has a true belief but one does not know that he was born in Dublin. One happens to have a true belief but one has no good *reasons* to believe he was born in Dublin. One cannot just happen to know something by having a true belief. One must have good reasons or justification for the belief. Philosophers debate what justification is and how much is needed for knowledge, but it is clear in this case that there is plenty of evidence available. One could confirm Bono was born in Dublin via hospital documents for instance. There is a long tradition in philosophy of defining knowledge as justified, true belief. Science is the paradigm of knowledge in this sense.

If knowledge is justified true belief, then it seems all knowledge will be propositional knowledge, knowledge of truths. Knowledge then will have to involve thought. To believe that the lead singer of U2 is Irish one must have that thought. And to think that thought one must understand the concepts of *being Irish*, *being a lead singer*, and *being a member of U2*. Concepts can apply to many different objects. For example, *being Irish* applies to many different objects, all the distinct individuals that

are Irish. Put simply, thinking is the ability to relate objects with concepts. Relating the concepts of *being Irish*, *being a lead singer*, and *being a member of U2* in the appropriate way produces the thought that the lead singer of U2 is Irish, that is, a proposition. Belief occurs when one accepts the proposition as a fact, the way the world is. Knowledge occurs when the proposition is a fact and one has good reasons, evidence, or justification for accepting it. All such knowledge depends on thought, our ability to cut the world into categories with concepts.

This point can be put more clearly in terms of language and sentences instead of concepts and propositions. To believe that the lead singer of U2 is Irish is to believe the sentence "The lead singer of U2 is Irish" is true. To believe is to assent to the truth of a sentence. Sentences are made up of words related appropriately. The subject of the sentence is the description "The lead singer of U2" and the predicate is the phrase "is Irish." The thought is that the predicate applies to the object so described. The sentence is true if this is so, false if it is not. True sentences reflect the way the world is, false ones do not. A belief is true when the sentence one assents to is true. Propositional knowledge occurs when one has a justified true belief. One can think of knowledge in terms of propositions or in terms of sentences. Either way knowledge depends upon thought or language.

Feeling as Knowledge: Revelation

When U2 songs favor feeling over knowledge, feeling seems to be contrasted with propositional knowledge, knowledge that depends on thought. But feeling can be thought of as perceptual, emotional, or introspective. All these kinds of feelings involve a different kind of knowledge however. They were all cases of knowledge by acquaintance. Knowledge by acquaintance is unlike propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge of reality is mediated by thought or language. Knowledge by acquaintance is direct awareness of things. The feeling mentioned in the lyric "I want to feel sunlight on my face" is a direct awareness of the bodily sensation of sunlight unmediated by any concepts or language. It is pure feeling, we might say.

The song "Staring at the Sun" says, "Don't try too hard to think / Don't think at all." This seems to emphasize the importance of feeling over thinking in the same ways as the lines in "Vertigo":

"Your head / can't rule your heart / A feeling is so much stronger than / a thought." The importance of feeling here may be that, unlike propositional knowledge, it provides us with a direct access to reality, a reality that one will miss if one tries to think of it in terms of concepts or describe it in language. Feeling as knowledge by acquaintance is what has traditionally been described as 'intuition', and, in the religious case, 'revelation'. It is no wonder that U2, a band known for its religious sentiments and commitments, should plead the case for feeling as a way not only to have direct awareness of oneself and immediate connection to other people but as a way to relate directly to God. The song "When I Look at the World" seems to be sung in the voice of one who cannot experience such a feeling but recognizes the lack from seeing another who can: "So I try to be like you / Try to feel it like you do," but "I can't see what you see . . ."

The person longs to feel what the other person feels that allows him or her to see the world in a way that "bring[s] them [him/her] to their [his/her] knees." It is a religious revelation, a feeling that has transformed the person into someone with "an expression / So clear and so true / That it changes the atmosphere / When you [he/she] walk[s] into the room." The songs of U2 seem to champion feeling as the possibility of a kind of knowledge by acquaintance, a direct awareness, of God or divine reality. The feeling that the music of U2 is heavy with philosophical weight is not an illusion. They, in fact, find themselves in the company of a philosopher such as William James, who wrote in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue. . . . When I call theological formulas secondary products, I mean that in a world in which no religious feeling had ever existed, I doubt whether any philosophic theology could ever have been framed. I doubt if dispassionate intellectual contemplation of the universe, apart from inner unhappiness and the need for deliverance on the one hand and mystical emotion on the other, would ever have resulted in religious philosophies such as we now possess.³

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green, 1905), p. 431.

U2 seems to express James's philosophical thesis in the emotions of their music—the agony of 'inner unhappiness,' the desire for 'deliverance,' and the ecstasy of religious revelation. Like James, the songs of U2 call for a kind of mysticism over a kind of religious understanding restricted by thought or concepts. Feeling is more important than knowledge when it comes to the matter of ultimate importance. That is, feeling as a kind of knowledge by acquaintance trumps propositional knowledge when it comes to what matters most.

This preference for feeling as knowledge by acquaintance over propositional knowledge also explains why Bono's Christianity seems controversial to more traditional believers. Traditionally, revelation has been thought of in propositional terms. Revelation is thought to occur when God communicates some truths to humans by extraordinary means. These truths are the propositions expressed by the sentences of the Scriptures. Faith, on this understanding of revelation, is believing this set of truths. Call this view *propositional* revelation. The view suggested in James and the songs of U2 is *mystical* revelation, revelation as an immediate experience or feeling. That this is how Bono understands the Scriptures is evident in an interview from his new book. He explains the importance of feeling in relating himself to God when he recounts this story about his father:

'He said: "You do seem to have a relationship with God." And I said: "Didn't you ever have one?" He said: "No." And I said: "But you have been a Catholic for most of your life."—"Yeah, lots of people are Catholic. It was a one-way conversation . . . You seem to hear something back from the silence!" I said: "That's true, I do." And he said: "How do you feel it?" I said: "I hear it in some sort of instinctive way, I feel a response to prayer, or I feel led in a direction. Or if I am studying the Scriptures, they become alive in an odd way, and they make sense to the moment I'm in, they're no longer a historical document." He was mind-blown by this.⁴

Mystical revelation is a direct relationship with God found in a momentary feeling. This knowledge of God does not result in a set of truths or propositional knowledge. In fact, this mystical

⁴ Bono and Michka Assayas, *Bono in Conversation* (New York: Riverhead, 2005), p. 25.

revelation is *ineffable*—it cannot be expressed in truths of language. To try to articulate it is, as James says, "like translations of a text into another tongue."⁵

A serious philosophical problem arises for a defender of this kind of revelation as feeling, as knowledge by acquaintance. Simply put, one person's feeling is another person's pathology. James admits the epistemological limitations to this type of revelation: Religious feelings or experiences ". . . have the right to be absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come . . . [but] no authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations . . ." (*Varieties*, p. 422). There is no standard, beside the experiences themselves, for judging the veracity of these feelings or experiences. Do they come from direct relation with God or are they products of one's own mind? James calls this the problem of *origins*. He admits it has no answer. Does that refute the importance of feeling over thought and propositional knowledge? James thinks not. James articulated a view called *pragmatism*. The truth of an idea was determined solely by its results. This pragmatism also applies to religious passions. The test of a religious experience or feeling is its results. How does it affect the person's life? Don't try to confirm the origin of the feeling, but instead look to its consequences. Alluding to a Biblical passage, James writes, "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots . . . The *roots* of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence . . ." (*Varieties*, p. 20). The feeling Bono describes is only significant of a relationship with God if it is reflected in moral transformation.

Philosophers have long argued over whether feeling is necessary for moral motivation. Suppose one has propositional knowledge of what one should do. That is, one has a true moral

⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Neither James nor Bono think that propositional knowledge and reason are bogus or unimportant in religion. James says he does not wish "to defend feeling at the expense of reason" (p. 431) and "Conceptions and constructions are thus a necessary part of our religion" (p. 432). That Bono thinks that religious feeling and propositional knowledge and reason are compatible is evident in the song "Miracle Drug": "Of science and the human heart / There is no limit . . . Love makes nonsense of space / And time will disappear / Love and logic keep us clear / Reason is on our side, love." Both Bono and James think feeling has primacy over propositional knowledge.

belief based on impeccable reasons. Does that knowledge make one act? The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) famously said that it could not. Reason without feeling never leads to action. As he put it, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”⁶ The importance of revelation as feeling manifests itself as the impetus of moral transformation. The feeling that most inspires the Christian vision expressed in the songs of U2 is love. Bono says, “Well, I think I know what God is. God is love, and as much as I respond [*sighs*] in allowing myself to be transformed by that love and acting in that love, that’s my religion” (*Bono in Conversation*, p. 200). The relationship with God that he finds in feeling manifest itself in his concern for social justice and equality for the poor and the oppressed. One can always remain skeptical of feeling as a kind of knowledge or revelation. But if feeling can transform the world, then one may want to reconsider the importance of feeling over knowledge and wish to embrace U2’s message: “What you don’t know, you can feel it somehow.”

⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951 [1736]), p. 415.