



Caswell **CORPORATE COACHING** Company

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Evidence and Proof

Every month, I have a Jehovah Witness man knock at my door to 'spread the good word' and I always listen to him, even though I am an atheist¹. Although I have long ago given up my futile efforts to argue with him, I take his monthly publications, (the widest-read monthly magazine in the world) because often the pages are full of good statistics and ideas that we embrace at CCCC – cooperation, listening, defusing emotions, patience, and so on. My point is that this Witness often attempts to make his case with me that God is real because of so much 'evidence' that he and the Bible bring forth.

I find in business that people often act on the evidence too. Evidence, however, is just that, evidence. It is not proof. We get into trouble if we accept evidence over proof. In a jury trial, usually evidence pieces are the only information bits one can assess; the situation cannot be proven conclusively; the jury does the best it can with the evidence at hand. For this reason, sometimes years later the jury decision is shown to be incorrect. (Fortunately for society, erroneous jury judgements are the exception rather than the rule.)

Science is based on proof and nowhere is this more conclusive than in the branch of science of mathematics. Proof is a logical set of procedures, rules and actions that lead to a result. That hypothesis is provable if that same procedure can be carried out by any person to get the same result. For example, Galileo verified that from a visual perspective, the planet Jupiter had several moons. Anybody with a telescope back in the 1630's could verify that indeed Jupiter did appear to have several moons. (The church however, refused to accept the proof, giving greater weight to the evidence of the Bible which was interpreted to say such things could not be so.)

An extreme example of evidence vs. proof in the mathematical field is taken around the hypothesis (called Fermat's Last Theorem) formed in 1637 by the French mathematician, Pierre de Fermat. It remained a hypothesis because no one could prove it until, nearly 400 years later, in 1994 a British mathematician, Andrew Wiles, was able to clarify it with a mathematical proof that spanned hundreds of pages. Anyone could follow his proof and get the same result. Mathematicians had struggled with this challenge for centuries – not accepting the tons of available evidence for the hypothesis until it could be rigorously proven.

Religion thrives on evidence, not proof. There is no doubt that people need religion and its immense advantages – social gatherings, encouraging good vs. not-good practices, promoting the hope that someone is always looking over us – someone we can actually talk to, creating a set of practical rules for a society to function by, and offering a final and perpetual reward (Heaven) after enduring life on this earth. There is lots of evidence for God – the words of the Bible or the Koran, nature's wonders if they are attributed to God, writings and beliefs of the religious leaders and their flocks, and so on. But there is not a single grain of verifiable proof that any experimenter can recreate to prove the existence of God.

Mathematics and religion mix, for example, when the great French mathematician Pascal analyzed why people should believe in God. Those of you who have followed these CCCC newsletters will recall that gambling is addictive because of the surprise element that bombards our brain with 4 times the amount of dopamine that good, non-surprises provide. Well, Pascal, the statistician, picks up on that theme (which is detailed in the box below) to hypothesize about God.

¹ *This missionary learned long ago that if he took no more than 3 or 4 minutes of my time, I would listen to him, so he has been very polite and fast; thus our monthly reunions endure.*

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However, this paper is not intended to argue pro or con about religion, but rather, it is my feeble attempt to clarify the difference between two words: evidence and proof.

In the business world, we use evidence of others' apparent success as 'proof' that these others are doing the right thing, and all we have to do is follow them. A good piece of evidence is profits. "That is proof", you say, "of who are doing the right things." Balderdash! I have coached highly profitable companies that were doing everything wrong. Living in the right set of circumstances led to their profits and once those circumstances changed, that company's road (and the many business awards they had garnered) went downhill rapidly (until they brought in outside help.)

So as you move forward you have to identify whether you are taking a certain action or direction based on conjecture, speculation, evidence or proof. Conjecture and speculation are the easy admission that you are beginning with a loose start. Evidence needs to be clearly stated as just evidence. Proof should be accompanied by the reference that provides established repeatability of the action (or experiment, if new).

I point these out so that you have clarity in your arguments as you build your ambitions, your company, and your life.

Pascal's gaming theory logic on religion

Pascal stated that the excitement that a gambler feels when making a bet is equal to the amount he might win, multiplied by the probability of winning it. He then argued that the possible prize of eternal happiness has an infinite value and that the probability of entering Heaven by leading a virtuous life, no matter how small, is finite. Therefore, according to this definition, religion is a game of infinite excitement and one worth playing, because multiplying an infinite prize by a finite probability (no matter how small) results in infinity. Ergo, betting on Heaven offers the best odds.

Good luck,

Bill

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