

**On Certainty**  
**By**  
**Daniel E. White April 21, 2025**

In the movie *Conclave*, Cardinal Lawrence gives an opening address at the Mass opening the conclave to select the next Pope. The speech encourages the Cardinals to embrace doubt and uncertainty. The speech includes the following lines:

“There is only one sin which I have come to fear above all else...certainty.”  
“Certainty is the great enemy of unity...the deadly enemy of tolerance.”  
“Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks in hand with doubt.”  
“If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith.”

In the context of the movie, some of the Cardinals believe that, with those lines, Lawrence was opening his bid to be elected Pope. The words would mark him as a reformer. Others regard the lines as counter to the prevailing belief in the Church that there **is** certainty, and that the Church discerns it.

Might Cardinal Lawrence be pointing out that doubt is not the absence of belief but the presence of humility?

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes;” a fatalistic attempt at humor attributed to Benjamin Franklin. The remark might be the most-heard reference to certainty, at least by people in this country. Its relative might be the oft-repeated observation that “only change is constant.”

Both points of view would be disconcerting to anyone who is uncomfortable with uncertainty. It seems like there are many people like that. Count among them those whose political beliefs do not allow for alternative points of view, a position all-too-frequently seen these days. Include, too, those who live in perennial fear and crave some authority as a protector of their lives and property. One might also include those who believe that somehow the past, which is over with and done and therefore relatively “certain,” can be re-created and predictability restored.

The movie viewers see Cardinal Lawrence as one who doubts but welcomes the doubt as a partner to faith. As he observes, “if there were no doubt...there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith.” And he correctly notes that “certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance.”

The Cardinal’s comments channels Socrates in an important way. In *The Week* (1/31/25) Review of Reviews: Books, Tim Clare, reviews *Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life* by Agnes Callard. Clare contends that “Collard succeeds in explaining why Socrates’ insistence that he knew nothing was a profound form of wisdom, and why it’s nevertheless true that the best way to live life is to make it a journey toward knowledge gained by honest dialogue and questioning. Crucially, it’s a journey we embark on together.”

Clearly, Socrates knew a thing or two, but he did argue that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” It is his mindset about the need to make life “a journey toward knowledge gained by honest dialogue and questioning” that connects his thinking to the Cardinal’s.

Plenty of people living in the centuries between Socrates and the fictional Cardinal Lawrence wrote about the need to believe but not use that belief as a block to understanding that other people hold their beliefs just as completely.

In his preface to his book, *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand noted that highly-regarded thinkers/philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century held that “ideas should never become ideologies — either justifying the status quo or dictating some transcendent imperative renouncing it.” Why? Because ideologies discouraged people to think for themselves.”

Certainty discourages people from thinking for themselves once they get to the point that they are certain. The form of certainty about which the Cardinal spoke closes off further thinking. Doesn’t that effectively shut down one of the essential features of human existence, thinking?

If you have been involved in education during the past thirty years or so, you recognize that good teachers and their administrative colleagues committed themselves in countless statements about curricula to the development in students of critical thinking skills. Undoubtedly, that movement was in response to what was characterized as the traditional approach to the acquisition of information: memorization and recitation.

Why? What animated educators to work to develop teaching methods that encouraged students to discover, to follow their own curiosity, to test out ideas as teaching methods? Guiding students through processes designed to have them acquire information from their own research, reading, trial and error gave them tools to think critically.

The approach was not without its challenges: we often joked about teaching students to think independently and then sufering the consequences when they did. They thought for themselves.

I think we as teachers thought that graduating critical thinkers was the most promising way to send out into the world young people who would advance human history by challenging accepted ways, keeping those that stood the test of critical analysis and improving upon those ways that did not. They would unlock mysteries our generation had not.

The Cardinal refers to mystery when he rejects certainty. People of a Certain Age, isn’t mystery an alluring form of uncertainty? Don’t most advances in human history result from wondering about the unknown, solving mysteries, examining one’s own life?

If you are certain, there is no point in further thinking. Of that, I feel certain.

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