The question of faith revolves around whether we have a personal relationship with divinity. This seemingly divides into two further sequential questions: first, does divinity exist, and second, what kind of relation can we have with divinity if it exists. But really, as far as relationships are concerned, it is just one question. For I do not in any other case of a relationship with a person withhold my consent to interact until I have proven the existence of that person. Rather, I begin relating to that person in faith that the person really exists. That faith, of course, is not blind, but is supported by evidence.

In all cases, it is my interactions with persons itself that is my main source of evidence – personal evidence - of their existence. What could be called non-personal evidence of persons is meager and pales in comparison to personal evidence. Were I ever to withhold from relating to persons until I had amassed enough non-personal evidence about them from which to infer personal existence, even if such an inference could be made, which I doubt, I would never know much about them at all, and would be much more prone to being largely deluded about their existence, about who and what they are.

As far as living human persons are concerned, all this goes without saying. We even typically continue relating to deceased persons in our hearts, so much so that our relationships with them continue to develop after their death – not according to sheer fictional projection, but according to the ordinary course of friendship. Except in the most extreme and dysfunctional of cases, no one lurks in the shadows studying persons based on impersonal evidence alone, with an aim to deciding whether one day to engage in personal interactions with them.

So why do some of us insist on doing just that when it comes to God? The only way to know persons, including God, is to have personal interactions with them. Moreover, it is not irrational to have personal interaction with a being of whose existence or personhood one is unsure, since the evidence you will need to ever be sure of personhood is personal evidence. Probable cause suffices to initiate the process, and that much has already been established by longstanding anthropological tradition, in which the awareness of the possibility of providence has demonstrated itself to be ubiquitous. Now the awareness of the possibility of providence implies the awareness of the possibility of the providential being, i.e., the unlimited being, commonly referred to as God.

Even in the toughest of cases, if the person exists, it will become evident over time, and usually only a very short amount of time. If I accidentally address a mannequin for a shirt size at the department store, I will quickly come to realize it is not a person and be done with it. Suppose, being unsure of whether the figure in the corner of my eye was a mannequin or a person, I felt I should not inquire further, nor linger to peer and perhaps even poke, but simply slink away with my head bowed, I might then be shocked to hear a voice saying “sir, may I help you?”, turning back to find it was indeed a person all along! This happened to me once!

It is eerie to think that this may well be what we are doing to the divine personhood.

I raise this issue not based on theological considerations, but on personal ones. I mourn for how sloppy we are with our personal interactions, so often taking for granted the preciousness of one another and attempting to justify it by slinking into a matter-of-fact world of things: commodities, ambitions, achievements, and empirical measures of success or failure in our

endeavors. Persons fit into this mentality not taken as what and who we really are, but as conveniences: “friends”, or inconveniences: rivals or foes; embracing the latter in competition to defeat them or keep them at bay; arranging the former around ourselves as flattering or utile accessories of our identity. Immanuel Kant built his moral philosophy around avoiding this pitfall.

This all makes sense if our bottom-line assessment of reality is impersonal, an assessment that seems suggested to many by the imagination that the personal ultimately reduces to or is but a phenomenon emergent from the impersonal, or brute-organismic awareness. After all, much of current political and economic thought still is formed around the organizing principle of psychological egoism, the notion that our moral awareness ultimately breaks down to motives of brute animal self-interested survival. If such is the case, then of course I should beat down my opponents while manipulating my friends to my optimal benefit. Ultimately, though, psychological egoism fails to make sense even for other organisms, who typically are not just “looking out for number one” but are in so many ways routinely engaging in self-sacrificial behaviors for one another’s benefit. Why then, should we rely on it for understanding who we are, which is personal organisms?

To be sure, there is a dogged, blind-faith commitment to empiricism behind all of this, one that insists that nothing can be known nor even made good sense of except that which is based in sensory experience. If this is true, then any sense to be made of the personhood of, say my mother must come not from direct notice of her moral character, friendliness, generosity, lovingness, niceness, etc., but from what colors she typically wore, the smell of her perfume, the texture and color of her hair, the sound of her voice, her height and weight, etc. Her physical behaviors would count too, but only after having been carefully parsed to exclude supposedly subjective moral projections. The claim that her smile conveyed moral warmth and generosity needs to be “unpacked” before counting as empirical evidence, as would even my claim that it made me feel loved.

In short, we have gotten in the habit of thinking that in order even to count as sensible, evidence of the personal must first be unpacked and restated in impersonal terms. This is fine for empirical science, which by its own proper definition is an endeavor limited to reasoning from empirical evidence. But to suggest that nothing else makes sense, or at best that nothing else can be known is a death knell for the genuine understanding of personhood.

The fact that modern science is empirical by its own definitive stipulation is no reason to infer that we have no other ways of gathering evidence and of knowing. In fact, most of what we know does not comes through science, but through relationships. If someone senses more than a little Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel in these words, then *touché!* These were two great existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century who homed in on and derided modern culture’s lack of attention on what can be called relationship evidence: non-physical things we experience not through our senses, but directly through intimate personal contact: moral qualities and personal presence. It is not that this direct person-to-person line of communication exists entirely apart from empirical awareness; our attention is initially prompted by it, giving us the opportunity to notice the non-empirical behind the empirical, after which our attention to it stands on its own even without further empirical prompting. When we observe organisms, we

can readily notice upon closer inspection whether there is something more than organismic awareness present, i.e., something more than brute survival awareness: to wit, truth-oriented awareness, a.k.a. rational awareness, a.k.a. morally responsible awareness capable of true love: personhood.

Our awareness of personhood is not, as some past philosophers have attempted, a product of analogous inference, or of any inference at all, but is something directly noticed. Direct notice is the only way to be aware of persons. Dogs can’t notice we are persons because they are not persons. They notice us by the lights they share with us, those of organismic awareness; more particularly, mammalian; or better: boreoeutherian (pertaining to our last common taxon, the magnorder *boreoeutheria*).

To whomever complains that it is disrespectful of other organisms not to consider them persons as well, I bring to mind that a criterion of personhood is moral responsibility, the capability of bearing moral blame. Clearly this is not something we sanely attribute to other organisms within our experience. Anyone who verges in this direction is guilty anthropomorphism.

Those who insist on the notion that we are only aware of the personhood of others by analogous inference consider that this occurs in the following manner: I attribute internal features I notice in myself to other humans not by direct notice, but because they look and act so much like me. There are several flaws in this argument, the main one being that it requires of me first that I have direct non-empirical notice of my own personhood. But if I am capable of this, why wouldn’t I be capable of direct notice of the personhood of others?

Let’s be clear about this: the notice of my own personhood would have to be non-empirical, since to insist it to be empirical would require it to be indirect, by some sort of inference from empirical things. But empirical, organismic things don’t add up to personal things; perhaps they might, stretching logistic credibility, add up to the outward appearance of personhood, as when a well-trained parrot launches an apparently heartfelt Shakespearean soliloquy. Still, what makes personhood actual is not its outward appearance but its inner state.

The inward experience of personhood is not an empirical perception, but rather, an *apperception*: something we notice not as object of perception but as its *subject,* the perceiver; anawareness, moreover, distinct from the organismic awareness subsumed in us by our personhood. Therefore, we cannot become aware of the personhood of others by empirical analogy to ourselves if we ourselves can only be aware of our own personhood non-empirically.

If we insist that my entire inner mental experience count as empirical, then that would not just cover thinking about myself, but of others as well. In fact, most of what is excluded from well-phrased empirical statements are precisely my inner thoughts: about who is loveable, despicable, of good character or depraved, nice or mean, cruel or generous. When it comes to personhood, these are the things that really count, and these exactly are the things excluded from empirical description.

But even prescinding from all these considerations, how would I be able to make an analogous empirical inference from myself to others if I don’t even get to observe myself the way I observe others: as smiling, laughing, sneering, crying, in action or sleeping. All my self-observation is stunted by the stilted artifice of the mirror image: I don’t really know what I look like, so how can I analogize from the looks of others to the looks of myself?

It must, then, really be that we do have direct notice of persons. If so, then it follows that awareness of personhood is an inner awareness, some of it vaguer, some of it more defined. For the most part, empirical prompts allow me to refresh and home in more particularly examples of human persons, which are persons associated with empirical moorings.

As to the possibility of our awareness of non-physical persons, or persons not empirically moored, we may be left with little more than a vague sense of possibility; for example, the possibility of angels protecting me, or demons seeking my harm. Not that these are ridiculous thoughts; they are not. But philosophically we can do little more than speak inceptively about them, perhaps establishing grounds for more reasonable theological conversations later on. Although, we can recognize the possibility or even likelihood of angelic persons, this is too generic on its own as the basis for a relationship. Even though I’ve been told there is an archangel named Michael, this tidbit of religious lore does not give me an identity claim, that is, something in my experience calling me to address it as a unique individual. Sure, I might go out in the dark behind my house and shout out: “Michael are you there?”, but short of a miraculous answer from above, this would not exactly be a conversation starter. It’s kind of like looking for someone in New York whose identity you would not be able to establish, short of a miracle, even if you found him.

Some would take what was just said here about angels as applying to God as well. But in fact, it does not. God does have an identity claim, one that is unmistakable: the unlimited being, of which there can only be one, since imagining *per impossibilia* there to be two, the one would be the limit of the other. This being has a definite calling card; we can’t innocently think we are talking to God and be mistaken. If this divinity exists, it knows all our thoughts and is inside of all our heads. There is nothing possibly greater than it, and it is impossible for us to mistake it for anything less.

This should make it easier for us to relate personally to God, yet we encounter many, even among the religious, to lack the easy ability to talk to God as a person, the way we routinely talk to other persons in our lives. I think there are several reasons for this. Keep in mind that our relating to a person is not predicated on the premise of having first established the existence of the person. The only way we can obtain knowledge of persons is by relating to them or seeking to relate to them.

In the first place, we may not relate easily to God as a person because we have bad habits of relating to persons generally. We don’t have to agree with Immanuel Kant on all things, but the one thing by which we all should abide is that persons are sovereigns of sorts, to be treated as ends in themselves, never to be manipulated as mere means. In short, we should all be in awe of one another, loving one another, adoring one another, mourning one another’s moral shortcoming not to condemn them, but to help them be built back up to wholeness. Persons are sacred, and all too often we treat them and think about them profanely. If such is the case, no wonder we can’t talk to God: we can’t even have proper personal relationships with one another!

Conversely, regardless of our identity as atheist, agnostic, or theist, we may be so much in awe of the very notion of God that we are daunted by the mere thought of personal interaction with the Most High. Our everyday conversations are so full of empty formalities that when we remove them all, we may not have much substance in our conversations, which is okay as long as we can convey deeper things by our physical presence, tone of voice, etc. But how does one go about communing with a purely spiritual being. We tend to think we should speak more formally, as with political or religious dignitaries; but that leaves even more bereft of substance. The very uniqueness of God makes us unprepared for an encounter since we have no appropriate precedent or analogous situation by which to abide.

To all who ask me how one should address God in conversation, I give the same answer: romantically. After all, if God is God – and here for reasons above presented I am attempting no proof – then God is love. If God is love, then as Augustine (*De Trinitate* VIII), Judah Leon Abravanel (*Dialoghi d/Amore 1535*), and the Sufis (“The greatest principle of Sufism”: *'Ishk Allah Mabood Allah'*) all taught, God is the primordial lover, the primordial beloved, and primordial love. This being the case, the best way to open dialog must be with words of love. Ask of God: “Do you love me?” and see where it leads. Pray to God: “Oh God, if you exist, talk to me! Teach me to talk to you!”

In the process, detach yourself utterly from all previously acquired negative or confused connotations of divinity that have encumbered you so far. Don’t let them ruin the conversation. The dialog to be experienced is between you and divinity, unchoreographed and unmediated by anyone else. This is not to reduce all religion to privacy; much religion, necessarily is public. But without the private dimension, the public dimension is all but useless.

Why should persons live out their lives without ever saying or asking such things? Say and ask such things! And when you do, please hang around to experience what ensues! What ensues is faith.