"What is Faith?" -- Chapter 2 from Why Faith is a Virtue

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A Definition of Faith

The main argument of the book: faith helps us achieve the internal goods of research science, social/political reform, and parenting, and these practices are very important to good living; therefore faith is an important virtue for good living. Chapter 1 defined "virtue" as it functions in this argument; the next step is to define "faith."

Easier said than done. Asking, "What is faith?" is much like asking, "What is a game?"

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that questions such as "What is_____?" often lead us astray. We think that there must be some thing that corresponds to our word. The word may be meaning, or time, or faith, or something else entirely. But there may not be any one thing named by that particular word. Wittgenstein famously offered the example of games. If we pay attention, he wrote, we will see that there is no single common feature to games, but instead there are many "family resemblances" among games. We discover this, not by meditating on the word game, but by looking. That is, we pay attention to the way people actually use the word. I propose we do this with faith.

People use faith in a variety of ways. I will list eight different meanings people assign to faith. The list is not exhaustive; people undoubtedly use faith in more ways than these. But the list demonstrates, I think, that there is no single meaning of faith, and no single common feature to these usages. The eighth definition is my own proposal. I do not say it is the true or best understanding of the term; there is no single true or best understanding of the term. I offer my definition of faith because it serves the purposes of the argument of the book and because it captures an important way many people use the word.

Because people use faith to mean different things, they often talk past each other when they discuss faith. I say faith is a virtue, but someone else says it is a vice. If we recognize that we may mean different things by faith, we're much more likely to understand each other.

It's possible that at some point readers of this chapter will think, "Well, that's not what I mean by 'faith,'" as we go along. That's all right. I am going to offer a definition of faith, not the definition of faith. Perhaps when you use the word you are talking about something other than what I call faith, and perhaps the thing you mean by "faith" is something worthy of a separate discussion. The argument of this book only asks that you consider my contention that the human characteristic that I will call "faith" is a vital part of good living.

Having acknowledged that people mean different things by "faith," I do think that the understanding of faith developed in this chapter (which I will call faith1) tracks important features of the way both religious and non-religious people speak of faith. I hope that the definition of faith I propose will be neutral in this sense: both those philosophers who think faith is a virtue and those who think it is a vice will agree that the definition describes an important concept that can rightfully be called "faith."

After I survey eight versions of faith, I will refine faith1 by using some features of the earlier versions to enrich the concept in faith2. In section 2.2 I will discuss the affective and volitional component of faith, and in section 2.3 I will defend my contention that faith must have a cognitive component.

2.1 VARIETIES OF "FAITH"

On to the list!

Faith (MR): "Faith is believing what you know ain't so." Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) put this memorable phrase in the mouth of one of his characters, Pudd'nhead Wilson. It’s a joke, of course, but the joke has a certain bite because we recognize some truth in it. That is, some people seem to affirm, by "faith," things that they know, or ought to know, are false. Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) offered a similar joke, in Through the Looking Glass. Alice says to the White Queen: "There's no use in trying. One can't believe impossible things." The White Queen answers: "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a

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day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.\textsuperscript{2}

I imagine that Mark Twain and Lewis Carroll aimed their ridicule at real targets. That is, they knew people who used “faith” like Pudd'nhead Wilson. Some people really have thought that faith means believing impossible things or believing something one knows to be false.

Having admitted that some people speak this way, we need to see that they shouldn't. People who think faith involves believing things known to be false are wrong, first of all, about belief. If I believe a thing, I must think that it is true. This is what philosophers call an “analytic truth.” One need not interview bachelors to confirm that they are unmarried men; we know this simply by knowing what “bachelor” means. In a similar way, the concept of belief includes the concept of regarding as true. To say, “I believe this, but it’s not true,” is as unintelligible as saying, “I am a bachelor, and that woman is my wife.”

If faith\textsubscript{1} were the only version of faith in our language, I would be the first to agree that faith is an intellectual vice. My contention that faith is a virtue clearly does not extend to all uses of “faith.”

Faith\textsubscript{2}: faith is believing without doubts. The notion here is that faith and doubt are inversely proportional to each other. On this view, the degree that a person has doubt about something is the degree of her disbelief in it. Some Christians interpret certain biblical passages as supporting this view; for instance, Jesus chastised Peter when the disciple failed to walk on water: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31). Whether or not this passage really means that doubt and faith are antithetical, it is certain that some people read it that way.

If people have imbied the notion that faith is opposed to doubt, and if they think that faith is a good thing, it is easy for them to develop an unwillingness to consider evidence against their faith. Such reluctance to consider counter-evidence comes in degrees. Some people may be merely hesitant to consider counter-evidence, while others may energetically avoid it. In extreme cases, some people deny that there is any possible counter-evidence to their beliefs. Peter Boghossian, a philosopher at Portland State University, identifies such unfalsifiable beliefs as “cognitive sickness.”\textsuperscript{3}

Since the reluctance to consider counter-evidence comes in degrees, we should be slow to make a blanket judgment about all cases of faith\textsubscript{3}. A completely unfalsifiable belief—that is, a belief against which the believer will allow no possible evidence of any kind—is a bad belief. Boghossian is right about that. But a person may be slow to consider counter-evidence for a belief for good, practical reasons. It might be true that the extreme case is a “cognitive sickness” while the mild case is a cognitive virtue. For example, teammates in basketball generally believe that each member of the team is striving for team goals (primarily, winning). Suppose it occurs to player L (for loyal) that one of her teammates, S (for selfish) might be pursuing individual glory rather than team success. In most cases, good teammates simply dismiss this worry out-of-hand. Loyal player L doesn't bother to weigh evidence for or against the belief, because wasting mental effort on such questions distracts from the immediate task of playing well together as a team. In this case, player L's mild reluctance to consider counter-evidence is actually a good thing. But suppose overwhelming evidence comes to light that player S is not only pursuing her own interests over the team's goals, she has been deliberately "throwing" games to pay off debts to a bookmaker. Player S is both self-serving and a cheater. Now suppose loyal L's faith in selfish S remains unshaken; player L will not allow anything to weaken her belief. When the mild reluctance has become a complete refusal to consider counter-evidence it has become a bad thing, a "cognitive sickness."

Faith\textsubscript{4}: faith is a special way of acquiring and maintaining beliefs. Sometimes one can meet people who say, “I choose to believe . . . .” This understanding of faith brings will onto the scene. Faith\textsubscript{1} does not go to the extreme of faith\textsubscript{4}, since faith\textsubscript{1} does not mean belief in things known to be false or logically impossible. Faith\textsubscript{4} restricts the operation of the will to a certain class of beliefs.

Philosophers have long debated the propriety of allowing will any role in belief formation. W.K. Clifford said that it is wrong for anyone, anywhere, at any time to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Since only evidence counts, there is no room in the belief business for wishful thinking, hoping, or faith. William James replied that there are some forced choice situations in which we must either believe something or else not believe it, that in some of these situations purely “intellectual grounds” will not decide the issue, and that sometimes these forced choices are important enough that it is morally acceptable to choose to believe. That is, James implied, there are some situations in which beliefs might be rightly based on something other than evidence. Lest we think this debate is a mere artifact of the 1890s, when Clifford and James wrote, in 2005 Simon Blackburn began his book, Truth: A Guide, by rehearsing the Clifford and James arguments (and siding

2. Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass, 174.

3. Boghossian, “Faith, Belief and Hope.” It is possible that professor Boghossian would include other “faiths” from my list as cognitive sicknesses, but he would certainly include unfalsifiable beliefs.
emphatically with Clifford). Faith is clearly a bad thing, says Blackburn. “Intellectual grounds” will decide most issues, Blackburn says, and when they won’t, we can simply refrain from believing. “Refusing to believe is not a kind of faith.” For Blackburn, there are no forced choice situations such as James imagined.

The debate between Clifford and James focused mostly on religious faith, with Clifford arguing that religious beliefs, if not founded on good evidence, are evil and James claiming that persons may properly believe in God by choice. Blackburn sides with Clifford, but says that the debate about religious beliefs is only an illustration. Faith cannot be admitted as a shortcut around evidence in any case. What we want to be true is simply irrelevant to what is true, Blackburn insists.

Notice that faith, and faith, are not co-extensive. A person may hold both positions, that faith is inversely proportional to doubt and that faith is a special route to achieving beliefs. But nothing about faith requires faith, or vice versa. Analogous to what Wittgenstein said about games, we see family resemblances, not essential features.

Faith is not a special way of acquiring beliefs, but is a commitment of one’s life toward one’s beliefs. Faith, is well expressed by Arthur Holmes:

(*Faith is neither a way of knowing nor a source of knowledge. Faith is rather an openness and wholehearted response to God’s self-revelation. It does not preclude thinking either about what we believe or about what we are unsure of, nor does it make it unnecessary to search for truth or to examine evidence and arguments.*

C.S. Lewis’s view paralleled Holmes’s:

(*Now Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reason takes. I know that by experience. Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable; but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable.*

Faith, is clearly incompatible with faith. Holmes explicitly and Lewis implicitly deny that faith is a special way of acquiring beliefs. Now, some Christians think of faith along the lines of faith, and in these excerpts Holmes and Lewis are writing explicitly as Christians. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that Christians disagree about what “faith” is; at the least, they do not completely agree about it. I’m confident the same is true for Muslims and Jews. This realization underscores the importance of paying attention to various uses of “faith.” It’s not just that believers and unbelievers speak past each other when they debate faith; coreligionists sometimes speak past each other as well.

For Holmes and Lewis, faith concerns what one does about one’s beliefs. Here we can benefit from a distinction made by medieval theologians. There are two parts to faith: fides (the thing believed) and fiducia (the attitude taken toward the thing believed). For example, Christianity requires that one believe (fides) that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, but the Christian also commits herself (fiducia) to this belief. The fiducia aspect of faith includes affect and volition, feelings and actions. Holmes and Lewis insist on the fiducia element of faith; for them, it is the defining aspect of faith. For both of them, acquiring beliefs is a matter of reason and evidence; faith is what you do with beliefs once you’ve got them.

(*Faith, is a gift of God to believe things necessary for salvation. Here, faith is explicitly understood as religious faith, as faith in God and in whatever truths are necessary for salvation. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga is a representative of this view, which he finds in Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Plantinga seems to think of the gift of faith as a natural capacity “built in” to human nature; he uses Calvin’s phrase *sensus divinitatis* for this semi-perceptual cognitive power. The idea is that in many ordinary circumstances of life, human beings “sense” God. They then believe in God, not on the basis of an argument, but basically.* Consider an analogy. Suppose someone asks you what you had for breakfast, and you answer, “The quiche looked runny, so I had the omelet.” Your belief that you chose the omelet is not based on evidence or reasoning; you simply remember what you had for breakfast. This is a “basic” belief. In appropriate circumstances you just find yourself believing something. In a similar way, Plantinga argued, persons may, in certain circumstances, simply find themselves believing things like “God made all this beauty,” or “God is displeased with my shabby behavior.” In such circumstances, the *sensus divinitatis* simply informs us.

Another version of faith, would see the gift of faith as an event in a person’s life. On this version, God directly gives a person belief in things

5. Ibid., 13.
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crucial to salvation.\(^9\) Robert T. Herbert quotes a character in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair:* "I've caught belief like a disease," and, "I fell into belief like I fell into love." Herbert's position is that coming to believe is, in at least some cases, neither reasonable nor unreasonable. It is simply something that happens to a person. The occasion of the gift might be any sort of event in the person's life: a vision of beauty, a rational argument, experience of suffering, and so on.

Aquinas famously affirmed that some items of dogma could be demonstrated by argument; for instance, that God exists can be shown by right reason. However, some people may not be able to understand the arguments that demonstrate these truths. Such simple folk believe by faith—a gift of God—things that learned people can know through demonstration. But Aquinas did not think that all truths of Christianity could be demonstrated by reason. For these items of dogma (e.g. that God exists as a trinity), all the faithful are dependent on revelation. In any case, we need the gift of faith (as *fiducia*) to properly align our lives with the teachings of the church.

**Faith,** two kinds of faith should be distinguished; **thin** faith is not the same thing as **thick** faith. Jay Wood, a philosopher at Wheaton College, defines "thin faith" as trust in our basic epistemic faculties.\(^10\) "Thick faith," on the other hand, is belief in some comprehensive doctrine, such as some particular religion or ideology.

It's important to take notice of the difference between thin faith and thick faith, not least because it shows the fallacy of a certain argument often used against agnosticism.

Let me illustrate the notion of thin faith. 1) I must trust my senses to navigate through a day. 2) I have to believe that the words and phrases I use in thinking today are part of the same language I used yesterday. 3) I may doubt this or that memory belief, but the only way to correct memory beliefs is to check them against other beliefs, including memory beliefs, that I am not doubting. 4) If I don't depend on fundamental logical moves such as *modus ponens,* I can't reason at all. Sensory beliefs, memory beliefs, and dependence on logical inferences are examples of thin faith, and Wood is certainly right that we must have thin faith if we are to engage in intellectual work.

Sometimes religious people will argue this way: "Everyone needs to have some kind of faith, so really it is only a question of which faith one will adopt. Disbelief in God is just as much a matter of faith as belief in God." Stated just that baldly, the argument is ambiguous and fallacious. Professor

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9. Herbert, "Is Coming to Believe in God Reasonable or Unreasonable?"
10. Wood, "Faith's Intellectual Rewards."
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Rene Descartes and David Hume together undermined our confidence in truths evident to the senses. First, Descartes set the standard for knowledge at undoubtability. He worried about the possibility that he might be dreaming rather than perceiving the real world. In the most extreme case, Descartes thought, if it is possible that an evil demon is deceiving me, I can’t rely on my perceptions to deliver real knowledge. So the mark of true knowledge is that it is impossible to be wrong: undoubtability. Philosophers like John Locke cheerfully accepted the undoubtability standard, thinking that they could prove the reliability of the senses (and the existence of God and lots of other things). But David Hume came along and pointed out that all of our perceptual beliefs rely on our prior belief that a real world causes our perceptions—and our belief in causation is itself not a self-evident belief, nor a perceptual belief, nor derivable from either self-evident beliefs or perceptual beliefs. Hume concluded that belief in causation is akin to superstition. And if we don’t have good reason to believe in causation, we have no good reason to trust our senses. Hume recognized that we are overwhelmingly predisposed to believe in causation and the deliverances of our senses, but that only means that we should admit that we live in a world beyond our capacity to really know.15

Hume’s skeptical conclusion was something of a scandal in its own time (Kant certainly thought so), and it has motivated much epistemology in the last three centuries. It is embarrassing that in the era of modern science some of the best epistemologists say we don’t really know anything. Don’t we live in the era of the knowledge explosion? And yet epistemology in the last century has not escaped the shadow of Hume. It seems crazy to say we don’t know things; we’re learning all the time. But epistemological theories seem to multiply like tribbles, mostly in the vain attempt to find a watertight definition of knowledge.

Now we can appreciate the radical nature of Michael Polanyi’s epistemology. Polanyi was a Hungarian medical doctor and physical chemist, but his interests extended to economics, politics, and philosophy. Polanyi thought that the epistemology of the mid-20th century made no sense of the way scientists actually work. He started, not with the question, “What is knowledge?” but with, “How do we know?” Scientists do gain knowledge—how do they do it? Polanyi’s epistemology rests on an insightful exploration of the process of knowledge acquisition. He steadfastly resists getting sidetracked by the desire for a definition of knowledge.

What happens when we come to know? Think of knowing as a process of discovery. How does the process work? Polanyi thought that his greatest discovery was the “structure of tacit knowing.” We move from “tacit” knowledge or awareness to “focal” knowledge/awareness. Consider learning to read.16 When we were children we learned the shapes of letters and the sounds they represent. We learned to blend the sounds together to make words, and we spoke the words in order to grasp their sense. In Polanyi’s terms, we directed our focal awareness to letters, sounds, and words. But later, after having learned to read, our attention shifts. Suppose you are reading a loan contract for a house. Now, your focal awareness is on the contract—an abstract entity, not the paper and ink. You are thinking of the responsibilities and obligations you will take on if you sign the contract. Notice: while you are reading the contract, you rely on—Polanyi would say you indwell—the words and sentences on the paper. You have subsidiary awareness of the letters and words; you are probably not conscious of them. Your conscious attention is on the matter of focal awareness, the contract.

Esther Meek says the process of coming to know displays faith in two ways. First, we trust subsidiary things while we strive to understand the focal things. Second, the whole process is motivated and sustained by belief that truth is there to be found; the focal understanding we desire can be achieved.17

Polanyi pointed out that our subsidiary awareness is tacit rather than explicit. A well-trained doctor, when using a probe to explore some organ inside a patient relies not on sight (since the organ is inside the patient’s body) but on the feel of the probe in her hand. She gains insight into the state of the organ by relying on a kind of knowledge that she probably could not express verbally. Another illustration: think of keeping your balance while riding a bicycle. Many parts of your body may be involved in this complex behavior—your arms, legs, inner ear (sense of balance), eyes, your butt on the seat, a feeling in your gut. All are included in subsidiary awareness, but rarely are you consciously aware of any of them. In fact, says, Polanyi, our subsidiary knowledge is indeterminate; it is impossible to say precisely all that goes into it. We are embodied knowers. We also exhibit faith, says Meek, in our pursuit of focal knowledge. We trust that there is something “out there,” something to be known, and we can gain some measure of understanding of it. A measure of understanding—but not complete comprehension! Polanyi and Meek say the mark of the real is that the new insight opens

but not a classical foundationalist; he would include belief in God among basic beliefs.


16. Meek, Loving to Know, 70.

17. Ibid., 94, 170.
up new questions. The process of coming to know moves from one kind of indeterminacy (not-completely-specifiable subsidiary awareness) to a different kind of indeterminacy (a focal insight that opens up unpredicted further avenues of exploration).

Faith, has affiliations with "thin" faith when it is our reliance on subsidiary awareness we have in mind. But faith\(_{(f)}\) also coheres with other versions of faith in this list, at least in the sense that it does not contradict them. Once again, we find overlaps and family resemblances among our concepts, not a clean taxonomy.

Meek claims: "All knowing has as its structure and dynamic the subsidiary-focal integrative feat as identified by Polanyi." If she is right, faith\(_{(f)}\) is as ubiquitous as "thin" faith. We need it in order to know anything. Does a very wide eld of applicability for faith\(_{(f)}\) go beyond "thin" faith? Does our reliance on subsidiary awareness go beyond basic epistemic faculties? It seems the answer is yes. Only a trained physician can use the probe to extend her knowledge in the right way. For the untrained person, the probe is just an awkward piece of machinery.

On Meek's view, faith\(_{(f)}\) since it is crucial to the whole process of coming to know, would seem to be worthy of my focus in this book. Nevertheless, my focus is somewhere else. Faith\(_{(f)}\) is bound up with Polanyian epistemology. This book doesn't focus on epistemology, but on morality. I am writing about a virtue the possession of which helps one to achieve the goods of important human practices: scientific research, social and political reform, and parenting. I will return to faith\(_{(f)}\) in chapter five, when I discuss the case of Henrietta Leavitt, but for most of this book, our attention will be on faith\(_{(f)}\).

Faith\(_{(f)}\): faith is believing and being for things that are not known and are not believed by people who are epistemologically close to us. Two parts of this definition need immediate comment. First, faith\(_{(f)}\) involves believing things not known. A few paragraphs back, I noted that modern epistemologists have worked very hard in the futile (so far) effort to find a definition of knowledge they can all affirm. My definition of faith\(_{(f)}\) does not depend on settling this debate. It doesn't matter which theory of knowledge you adopt; faith\(_{(f)}\) only applies to things you do not know—given your theory. We all admit that there are many things we believe that we do not know, so there is a very wide field of applicability for faith\(_{(f)}\).

Second, faith\(_{(f)}\) involves believing things that other people—people who are epistemologically close to us—do not believe.

Many people—both in the past and some living today—live at what might be called great epistemic distance from us. Such people live or lived in cultures with significantly different plausibility structures than ours. For example, a medieval European might have believed that the blood of noble persons is purer than the blood of commoners. This belief is so distant from a modern, scientific, liberal mindset that we can understand it only with effort. (What did "blood" or "purity" mean in the medieval context? At a minimum, "blood" meant more than the fluid in one's veins and "purity" meant more than something chemical.) The belief is so implausible to us that we do not consider evidence for or against it. So far as we consider the matter at all, we reject the medieval belief as a matter of course. Our unthinking rejection of the medieval belief is a kind of faith. (But not faith\(_{(f)}\).) It is somewhat like faith\(_{(m)}\) It is a faith that lies in our shared life. We live this way—a form of life that combines beliefs about the physiology of blood, the role of DNA in human reproduction, and the equal political worth of every person. Of course, we could stop to think carefully about the medieval belief, and we would discover that we have strong evidence for our contrary beliefs about blood and DNA; to that extent our rejection of the medieval belief in noble blood is based on evidence. But what is the evidence for our belief in the equal political worth of every person? Thomas Jefferson thought it was self-evident—which is an admission that he knew of no evidence for it. And yet it is clear that many people in many times and places have not thought the equal political worth of all persons is self-evident; in fact, the Nazis thought it obviously false. Belief in the equal political worth of all persons is a kind of faith. (It is somewhat like Jay Wood's "thin" faith, in that it is unuestioned bedrock of the way we (some of us, anyway) live. But belief in the equal political worth of persons doesn't really fit the thin faith category, since the Nazis proved one can do intellectual work while denying it. As I said earlier, this list—faiths 1–8—is not complete.

The point of the illustration is that some people live or lived at great epistemic distance from us. The distance between such widely divergent belief systems serves to insulate us from them. For instance, I believe that airliners fly because the air passing over their specially designed curved wings creates lift. This is a rational belief for me, not because I am an expert in aircraft design, but because I remember learning about this in school. A great many of our rational beliefs are like that; we learn them from relevant authorities who, if called upon, can explain the evidence for the beliefs. Now, I think it is safe to say that no medieval Europeans (except da Vinci?) had any beliefs about the shape of airplane wings and lift. Perhaps it is not quite right to say they didn't believe what I believe, since the idea never occurred to them. It would seem strange to say the medieval Europeans had a

18. Ibid., 75.
19. Ibid., 67.
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“faith” concerning the shape of airplane wings if they had no beliefs about the matter. Therefore, when I suggest that faith involves believing things other people don’t believe, in the usual case I mean people whose epistemic world is relatively close to mine.

Experientially, it is not the beliefs of “distant” persons that trouble us. I can read a book and learn that Samurai culture included certain beliefs. It is an intellectual exercise only; I am not tempted to adopt Samurai beliefs. In contrast, suppose I read an editorial in a newspaper or on a website that supports capital punishment, while I myself oppose capital punishment. The writer gives reasons for the policy he supports, and in the process he expresses a number of beliefs. Now I am challenged. Here is someone who inhabits an epistemic world very close to mine and yet we do not agree. Why does the writer believe the things he does? Should I, perhaps, adopt his beliefs?

I suggest that faith—faith as a virtue, a component of good living—most often occurs in such settings. Faith involves believing things that are not believed by people who are epistemologically close to me. In fact, they are people for whom I have intellectual respect: I regard them as well informed and rational.20 Yet they believe differently than I do. My knowledge that a well-informed and rational person does not believe as I do almost always gives me grounds for doubting whether what I believe is true. If nothing else, I can think of that person as giving well-informed and rational testimony against my belief. If I nevertheless believe that it is true, my believing is usually faith.21 In chapter three I will argue that such believing is part of good living.

If a philosopher I respect says there is no God, I have reason to doubt there is a God. If I continue to believe in God, it will be because I think that if all the relevant evidence were on the table it would demonstrate the existence of God. But of course, in regard to belief in God—and in regard to many important other questions in life—we live our lives without all the relevant evidence.

This is where faith matters. We are fully aware of people whom we respect—intelligent, well-informed, and well-intentioned people—who do not believe some of the things we believe. Nevertheless we continue to believe those things. I contend that faith occurs commonly. It is a faith that coexists with doubt in the typical case. Note the explicit contrast with faith, which pictures faith and doubt as inversely proportional.

Faith includes both fides and fiducia. It is not enough to believe something is true; one must also be “for” it. This is such an important point that I will devote section 2.2 to it.

I claim—and this is the most important assertion of this section—that faith describes the attitude many people hold toward many beliefs; faith has many instances in real life. In chapter three I will argue that faith is a virtue.

2.2 BEING FOR: THE AFFECTIVE AND VOLITIONAL COMPONENTS OF FAITH

In this section, I adopt, nearly wholesale, Robert Adams’ position that faith includes affective and volitional components. In chapter 16, “Moral Faith,” from Finite and Infinite Goods (1999), Adams says that merely believing a thing is not sufficient for faith: “To have faith is always to be for what one has faith in.”22 In 2006 he published A Theory of Virtue, in which Adams explained his broad notion of being for something, in a passage I cited in chapter one.

There are many ways of being for something. They include: loving it, liking it, respecting it, wanting it, wishing for it, appreciating it, thinking highly of it, speaking in favor of it and otherwise intentionally standing for it symbolically, acting to promote or protect it, and being disposed to do such things.23

Suppose some person, Elaine, believes that a hurricane will strike her coastal county within 48 hours. Elaine’s belief is not irrational; after all, hurricanes do occur, her county does border the ocean, and it is hurricane season. Let us assume that her belief is not shared by all Elaine’s neighbors. Perhaps the weather service has predicted the hurricane might come ashore somewhere else or not strike land at all. The mere fact that reasonable people

20. Someone might object that if a well-informed and rational person believes a thing then all well-informed and rational people ought to believe it. This mistakes “well-informed and rational” for “omniscient and perfectly wise.” I will return to the question of what we ought to believe in chapter 3.

21. Something like the following could happen. I could recognize that someone else, for whom I have intellectual respect, believes p while I believe ~p. This causes me to reexamine my position. Upon reexamination, I find that my belief seems very well supported by evidence; I am convinced it is a rational belief. It doesn’t seem right to me to call my belief faith, since it is in accord with reason. And yet, the other person, whom I respect, does not agree. I am at a loss as to what to think about the other person’s belief. And he may be just as dismayed by my belief. Neither of us regards his position as “faith,” since he thinks it is in accord with reason.
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about her do not believe the hurricane will strike their county ought to give Elaine some cause to doubt her belief. Nevertheless, Elaine does believe that the hurricane will strike and will devastate the county.

We are not now focusing on whether Elaine’s belief is well-grounded, rational, or right. As we will see in the next chapter, some philosophers have said that Elaine ought to strictly regulate her degree of belief to the amount of evidence she has for the belief. We will leave that question for chapter three. The point I am focusing on now is this: Elaine’s belief about the hurricane is not faith, because she is not for it. In fact, Elaine feels a mixture of despair and dread whenever she thinks about the hurricane. She is against the hurricane, though she finds it very hard to express her opposition to it. Taking precautions before the hurricane strikes and cooperating in reconstruction efforts afterward seem terribly inadequate as means of expressing her opposition to the hurricane. Such practical actions may help limit or alleviate the bad effects of the storm, but in regard to the storm itself they are symbolic actions.24 We might say that Elaine’s attitude toward the hurricane is that it ought not to be.25

This feature of faith, that it includes our affections and volitions, is a long-standing part of religious tradition. “You believe that there is one God? Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19, New International Version). The demons, according to this text, are against God in much the same way as Elaine is against the hurricane. The apostle takes it for granted that the demons do not have real faith. If faith is to be a virtue, it must include more than intellectual assent, says James: “faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:17, 26)

Adams’ notion of being for something includes feelings, attitudes, desires, and hopes in regard to it, as well as symbolic actions favoring it and actions that promote or protect it. Thus he includes both our affections and our volitions in the notion of being for. That sounds right to me, and it steers us away from unnecessary complications.

We might be tempted to ask precisely which affections or volitions are required to transform belief into faith. Suppose a college soccer player believes his team will win the conference championship. He rejoices at the thought; he is excited by the prospect of a championship; and he confidently predicts to his friends that the team will win the conference. Nevertheless, he exhibits poor practice habits: he arrives late, doesn’t work hard, and

24. See Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods, 214–249, for a discussion of symbols and the ways we use them to express ourselves as being for the good (or against the bad).

25. See Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 5. Neiman identifies as basic to our judgment that something is evil the thought: this ought not to have happened; it ought not to be.


distracts his teammates with irrelevant conversation. My goal is to imagine a case in which the player’s affections seem right but his volitions are wrong. Should we say he has faith that his team will win the championship? “Faith without deeds is dead,” says the apostle, and we can imagine the player’s coach would agree. In this case it seems that belief plus affect is not enough; real faith should show itself in the player’s behavior. But not all examples are like the soccer player. Imagine a fan of the same college soccer team who believes, not that the team will win the conference, but that the coach is an excellent coach: knowledgeable, hard working, dedicated, and so on. His belief gives the fan confidence that the coach is doing the right thing when, for example, he hears other people criticize the coach’s strategy or substitutions during a game. He rejoices at successes by the team, and he thinks the coach deserves partial credit for those successes. It is completely possible that the fan’s belief and confidence in the coach produce no observable actions on the part of the fan. Perhaps he doesn’t even verbally defend the coach when he hears others criticize him. The fan simply attends games and feels a sense of satisfaction and approval in watching good coaching. I think we should say that the fan has faith in the coach; in this case belief plus affect seems enough.

I may not have imagined or described these examples just right. Someone might say that the soccer player does have faith that his team will win the conference, but that he lacks other virtues, such as self-control and the determination to work hard. I think the point of the examples still stands, however: the proper affect/volition that combines with belief to constitute faith may vary in different cases.

What about the person whose religious faith is combined with anger at God? Suppose a long time religious believer experiences great evil in the world—his family is destroyed in ethnic cleansing, or he is betrayed by a trusted friend, or he is diagnosed with a terminal and painful disease. Understandably, many persons of faith have reported feeling great anger at God in these sorts of situations. Should we say that these people are against God? Surely being angry at something can be one way of being against it. Should we therefore say that these people do not have faith in God, at least while their anger lasts?

In most cases, I think such a person is an example of what Adams calls “clinging to faith.”26 The believer believes that God exists and is kind and just; yet in his suffering he does not experience God’s kindness or justice. The anger the believer feels toward God arises from this contradiction. We might say the believer is for the God he believes in but against the God he
experiences. Eventually believers resolve this tension, either by rationalizing their experience in a way that allows them to incorporate it into their beliefs about God, by abandoning belief in God, or by gradually losing their anger. (Theoretically, one could retain one’s belief in God and settle into a determined opposition to God, a la James’s devils. But I don’t know of any such accounts.) The faithful are sometimes angry at God, but such anger does not last forever; if it did, they would cease to be faithful.

I agree with Adams that faith involves being for the thing believed, but that leaves open the way that one is for the thing believed. Most of the time, we might guess, faith will involve both affect (feelings, desires, etc.) and volition (decisions and actions). But we don’t need to try to make a rule that tells us how much of either is required—cases will differ.

A more important question is not how much affect or volition is required for faith, but whether affect and volition together simply are faith. Does faith really need belief? We turn to that question next.

2.3 WHY FAITH MUST INCLUDE BELIEF

As we will see in chapter 3, some philosophers have thought that all our believing ought to be strictly governed by evidence. They would say that faith, if it involves believing something more strongly than the evidence indicates, is a bad thing. At the same time, such thinkers might agree that a good life sometimes includes feelings and decisions that involve us in risk. So they might say that “faith” could be a good thing (in some circumstances), but only as a combination of affect and volition. We don’t need to believe beyond the evidence, they would say, in order to feel and act beyond the evidence.

Such objectors might offer an example along these lines. Suppose there is discord in a marriage over money. Husband and wife argue over money and each occasionally undermines the family budget by making large unilateral spending decisions. The situation builds to a crisis. The couple sees a counselor, who tries to help them understand why they use purchases to “one-up” each other. Both husband and wife seem to understand the situation better, and they promise to each other to change their financial practices.

Now, our objecting philosophers will say, the husband and wife may well act on “faith”—understood as each being for the healing of the marriage. That is, they each want the marriage to succeed; they each love the other; each one decides to change his or her behavior. The husband and wife make a commitment to a common project. But in none of this do they believe anything to any degree beyond what the evidence supports. They both know that the other has promised to change, and they both can estimate how likely it is that the other will change. At first they might struggle with a lot of doubt, but as time goes on and each one sticks to the new financial discipline, both wife and husband come to believe more firmly in the other’s repentance.

If “faith” is to be a virtue, the objectors could argue, isn’t that the way we should understand it? Conceived this way, faith is a combination of affect and volition, but it doesn’t require belief.27 Consistent with what we said in chapter one, the objectors could point out that this “faith” interweaves with other virtues, such as love and tenacity. But beliefs should always be governed by evidence.

I would counter that faith does require belief, even in the marriage case just described. Notice, though, that I don’t need to show that faith includes belief in every case. The burden of proof goes the other way. The objector wants to define faith as only affect and/or volition, not belief that goes beyond the evidence. If faith, conceived as something that contributes to good living, requires belief in some cases but not others, that is still enough to show that good living sometimes requires a faith with a cognitive component.

I will say two things to support the idea that faith requires belief in at least some cases. First, I will relate an example to illustrate a comment by Adams. Suppose that “John” and “Henry” correspond frequently by email. They live on different continents and have never seen one another. Henry has a position of mid-level authority in the government of a small developing country. Henry has steadfastly refused to participate in bribery and other corruptions that infest the ministry where he works, and this has drawn him into increasing conflict with ambitious coworkers. Some of these people threaten Henry. They demand that he collaborate with some of their dishonest schemes, or else they will destroy his career with false accusations.

Henry asks John for his advice. John quickly learns that Henry has good reason to believe Henry’s enemies have the power to carry through on their threats. The ministry and the local courts are fairly rife with corruption. The whole episode causes John to feel thankful for the comparatively honest courts and civil service in his own country, but he realizes that he cannot apply his expectations of government in his country to government in Henry’s country. Now, how should John advise Henry? Should he encourage him to persist in his rejection of bribery and his pursuit of efficient,
honest public service? Or should he tell Henry to act in ways Henry has already described as corrupt?

Adams says:

Morality requires that we encourage each other to live morally. But how could we do that in good conscience if we thought living morally would be bad for the other person? Are we to encourage others to act morally so that we, or the less scrupulous, may take advantage of them, or so that we may all lose out together? Those are not morally attractive propositions; but if, on the other hand, we cease to encourage each other to act morally, we have abandoned morality as a social enterprise. So it seems that if we do not believe that living morally is at least normally good for a person, there will be a conflict in the very soul of our morality that threatens to tear it apart.28

Does John believe that moral living is good for Henry? Perhaps it would be a good thing for Henry if he were to succeed in leading an anti-corruption campaign. But John has no expectation that such a campaign would succeed. If Henry persists in his honesty, John expects it will cost Henry his career and possibly much more.

We can easily imagine, or find in history books, cases which parallel the John and Henry case. Should the “Johns” in these stories advise the “Henrys” to risk great loss (martyrdom, in many actual cases) for what is morally right? Adams’ point is this: morality requires that we do so, and yet morality requires that we do not do so, unless we believe that acting morally is at least normally good for the moral person. It is not enough that we wish or desire that moral living be good for our friends; we need to actually think that it is good for them. And yet it seems easy to find rational and well-informed people who deny that such moral living really is good for the moral person. Friedrich Nietzsche comes to mind. Nietzsche famously scorned the “slave morality” of inferior people that threatened the full living of better people. He emphatically denied that “noble” people should curb their lives according to slave morality.29

The objector may try to argue this way. “We only need to believe that acting morally is good for the person to the extent that evidence seems to suggest that it really will be good for the person. Our beliefs can be regulated by evidence, while our moral faith consists in our emotions and decisions.” But this will not work. Adams is right that morality requires us (at least sometimes) to encourage our friends to act morally even when the cost to them is high, and we cannot in good conscience do so if we think that it would be bad for them, all things considered.

Let’s move away now from the example. The second thing I want to say to defend the cognitive component of faith is simply an observation about human psychology. To wit: for human beings, believing, desiring, and willing are interrelated. For more than one hundred years, since Freud at least, psychologists have been saying that our believings, desirings, and willings are interrelated subconsciously; we are never fully aware of how they influence each other.

Now if this picture of the human mind is at all accurate—that there is a subconscious mind and that our beliefs, desires, and decisions interact with each other—it seems highly unlikely that the virtue of faith could exist purely as a combination of desire and decision. The cognitive component of faith will get dragged in because of its influence on affect and volition. To illustrate the point, let us imagine another player on the college soccer team, this time one who has excellent practice habits. This player wants his team to win the conference championship and he behaves in ways that help make him a better player and his team a better team. But since he believes that several other teams in the conference are superior to his, he rejects out of hand the notion that his team will win the conference. He simply doesn’t believe it. And for that reason, it’s wrong to say he has faith that the team will win the conference. He has the right affect and volition, but without the appropriate belief, he doesn’t have that faith.

It will be instructive to pursue the example a bit further. If the player doesn’t believe the team will win the conference, why does he persist in his excellent practice habits? What sustains him in the face of difficulty, discomfort, disappointment, and laziness? Most likely, the player believes in something—not that the team will win the conference, but that something valuable can be gained by striving for excellence in soccer. The player does have a faith of some sort, and it involves belief, even if the player could not clearly express that belief.

2.4 SUMMARY DEFINITION

Faith, as believing and being for something that is doubtful (in the normal case, something not believed by persons for whom one has intellectual respect). Believing something involves thinking that it is true. “Being for” something involves affect and volition.

2.5 ADDENDUM: REGARDING “PROPOSITIONS”

Some readers of the book to this point, particularly those trained in philosophy, will have noticed that I have avoided using the word “proposition,” except when quoting someone else. I have employed “thing” or “something,” as in “Faith is believing something.” Some may think I have perversely used a vague word when a more precise word is available. So I should explain.

First of all, there is a difference between the words we use to describe something and the thing itself. A Christian has faith in God. She uses many words (e.g. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, etc.”) to describe God. Her faith is not in those words, but in the reality to which they point. It is quite proper, even necessary, for Christians to use propositions to describe God. How else could they do many of the things essential to their religion, such as public worship, religious instruction of children, and so on? Nevertheless, the Christian may come to be dissatisfied with some proposition or group of propositions she has previously employed. (Maybe for the first time in her life she has encountered horrific evil; her previous attempts at theodicy now sound empty and weak to her.) The Christian may well come to deny some of the propositions she formerly used to describe her belief in God, and yet rightly insist that she still believes in God. In fact, she may say that her belief in God—the real God, not just the object of her creed—is stronger than ever.

It should be clear that nothing hangs on the religious nature of the previous example. A scientist may have faith in a research program and yet be willing to modify many of the auxiliary hypotheses that compose the program. A parent may have faith in something for which she finds no adequate proposition at all. Much like the second soccer player, she believes that there is something good, something worthwhile, to be achieved by means of the struggle in which she is engaged, but she may not be able tell you what that good is.

Second, I have been wary of saying that faith means believing a proposition because the phrase sounded, at least to my ear, exclusively cognitive. I very much want to guard against the idea that faith is entirely or mostly belief that. Faith must include being for the thing believed. The cognitive component is necessary, as I argued in section 2.3, but so are the affective and volitional components.

These two worries compound each other. “The hurricane will strike our county” is simply a proposition. Elaine believes it. But when we say that Elaine is against the hurricane, it is the reality we describe with those words that she detests, not a mere statement.

Having offered these words of explanation, I will now abandon my resistance to using “proposition.” I only beg the reader to remember that if I speak of faith in a proposition, I mean faith in the thing the proposition is used to express, and being for that thing.