

Faith vs. Reason

In discussing the existence of God, students always at some point fall back to “justifying” their belief by appeals to “faith”. Faith has various definitions both within the scriptures and within the academic writings. Here, we will examine these definitions and determine which could count as justification and which cannot and why not.

Faith within academia

The most prevalent definition of faith is “belief without evidence”. To disambiguate, we should stipulate this usage as “blind faith”. Blind faith is not justification for belief. Appealing to blind faith means one has given up the rational pursuit; one refuses to supply reasons for one’s belief. This practice is unacceptable within Philosophy as it is contrary to its core values. Furthermore, some argue that such appeals are immoral, for example Clifford’s [“The Ethics of Belief”](#).

C.S. Lewis defines “faith” as “trust in a person greater than you which can assist you in times of need” (see “On Obstinacy in Belief” published in his posthumous work *The World’s Last Night*). Again to disambiguate, we should refer to this type of faith as trust. This type of faith does potentially count as justification for belief in God.

William James says “faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is theoretically possible.” He went to say that faith was an activity not a propositional assertion. “Doubt” is not understood within this context as propositional or conceptual doubt but pragmatic doubt—“can X be done or achieved”. For example, if you saw the movie “Day After Tomorrow” I refer you to the opening scene. When the ice shelf is breaking off, Jack Hall needs to jump across while holding the ice cores. Jack does not stop to rationalize whether he can or not make the jump successfully—he does not reason from premises (his strength, the weight of the cores, the increasing expanse) to a conclusion (I can or not succeed). Rather, he realizes that he must make a choice; he must either jump or stay. James says, religious belief is a choice one must make because it is “forced, momentous, and live”. Jack’s choice is forced (he must make the choice), momentous (life changing—die or survive in this case), and live (a real option that can be decided upon). A non-live option is one where between the options available a person, for some reason, cannot actually make a choice, some factor precludes the ability to choose one over the other. For example, suppose someone says (as many did), “Why didn’t those people flee Katrina?” Well, for the poor and sick, they lacked the capacities to do so; hence, stay or leave was not a live choice for them (although it was momentous).

Faith defined by scripture

We will now analyze scriptural definitions of faith. I should note that they are consistent with the academic analyses.

Hebrews chapter eleven offers a nice synopsis of faith as found throughout the scriptures. The first verse is a little complex: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope¹ for and certain of what we do not [yet]² see. This is what the ancients were commended for."³ Hebrews then goes on to summarize the lives of "the ancients". Why were "the ancients" commended? Faith is a complex concept. It is hope, trust, and pragmatic belief. Note that Abraham, et. al. (the "ancients") held a personal relationship with Yhwh characterized by trust *and* hope.

Paul (the author of Hebrews) is clear that faith is also a pragmatic affair as discussed by William James. For "the ancients", faith was a choice that was forced, momentous, and live. Moses, as Paul notes, could have chosen "to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time." Abraham could have chosen not to murder Isaac (whether or not Abraham's choice was forced is debatable). Rahab could have chosen not to spy for the Israelites which would have resulted in her and her family's death (Joshua 6). (I will not discuss whether or not it was a moral choice to turn traitor aiding an invading army set on marauding and genocide. However, her choice was definitively forced, momentous, and live.)

The Abraham story is oft cited as an example of blind faith. This interpretation is dead wrong. First, it ignores the overall story and history of Abraham. Second, Abraham was not being asked to assent to the truth of a proposition either with or without evidence. Third, Abraham was given a test of trust—specifically, degree of trust—with the hope of promises to be fulfilled.

There is only one passage that seems to *prima facie* support the notion of blind faith, the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to Thomas (John 20). Thomas says to the disciples, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.... A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and

¹ "Hope" is also a complex concept with many different types and definitions—see below.

² I add the word "yet" here for clarity purposes. Paul would not mind given what he says in verses 13-19.

³ Hebrews 11 defines faith by offering examples. In Logic we call this method defining by extension via exemplification. This method is limited as it only informs us as to what it is applied. We must extract the term's intensional meaning, i.e., the necessary and sufficient conditions or genus and difference, by comparing the examples. This is what I am doing in the following analysis.

believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed⁴ are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

It does seem here that Thomas is asking for evidence to support a proposition; that being, "Jesus has arisen". This verse contains an implicit chastisement of Thomas. Thomas stood in a relationship with Jesus. Thomas doubted the fulfillment of a promise. In this way, Thomas lacked faith as hope.

Faith as Hope

Louis Pojman, for example, defines faith as hope. Hope is a complex concept and the term is used in a variety of ways. Types of hope are:

1. the object of desire may not obtain; i.e., the matter having an epistemic probability strictly less than one
2. hope entails desire for a state of affairs
3. hope disposes one to bring about a state of affairs

Examples of each

1. I hope Michael Jackson is innocent of child molestation. (Where this is about innocence or guilt not acquitted or convicted; the latter would be of type 3).
 2. I hope Boston wins the World Series.
 3. I hope I lose 20 pounds by summer vacation.
- (Notice these can overlap.)

Hope precludes certainty. For example, "I hope my cable TV will be connected when I get home from work." One would not say "hope" if one were certain that p is true or that a state of affairs will obtain. Hope motivates one to run risks for its sake. Type 3 hoping is under our direct voluntary control (types 1 and 2 are not) and is subject to direct moral evaluation: it is possible to have morally unacceptable hopes (for example, possibly Rahab).

Note that the scriptural analysis of faith given by Paul in Hebrews is consistent with hope as analyzed here; specifically with types 2 & 3. However, trust combined with hope eliminates uncertainty in the scriptural usage. Faith as defined in Hebrews 11:1-2 means "trust and hope affords certainty that p is true, or a state of affairs will obtain, or motivates me to act towards an end with confidence that I will succeed." Note this is consistent with Lewis and James. Hope then potentially counts as justification.

Note further that adherence to blind faith *alone* seems to be unscriptural and unphilosophical.

⁴ The meaning of "blessed" is key to understanding the exact meaning of this verse. "Blessed" is analyzed below.

*Being Blessed*⁵

The major Hebrew word for “blessed” is “ashere”, meaning “happy” (“fortunate” or “very happy”). The other word, “barak”, means “to declare blessed”. In Greek, the most common word and its derivatives is “eulogeo” which means “to speak well of” as clearly shown by the familiar roots. The second most common word is “makarios”, or “happy”, which is used to agree with the Hebrew text. Nowhere does “makarios” carry the meaning, “to cause to be happy”. Prosperity or good health or other things implied by “count your blessings” do not come into it at all, unless one takes a purely material understanding of happiness.

The root meaning in Greek of “to be praised” or “to speak well of” seems to better relate to Thomas. The verse no longer seems to imply a chastisement of Thomas’ demand for evidence thereby endorsing “blind faith”. It seems to make a comparison between those that believe without empirical evidence and those that believe with empirical evidence. Those that believe without empirical evidence are to be praised but this does not mean that 1. those that demand evidence are not to be praised nor 2. that those that believe without *empirical* evidence should not have evidence of some kind—trust for example.

C.S. Lewis says that a person must have evidence and it must be good evidence. For him, trust established via some form of religious experience is the best evidence one could have. We may justifiably ask “Why do you believe a deity exists?” as it is somewhat psychotic to place trust in nonexistent entities. So, in order to have “live” (to borrow from William James) trust one must be able to prove that a deity exists which means one must not default to blind faith. As Lewis notes, a con-artist demands the same trust or confidence from you (for example the Nigerian scam) as a true friend, but one will screw you in the end. Blind faith does not allow one to distinguish between a con-artist and a friend.

We may also ask whether or not evil constitutes a violation of trust:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails**” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

The point with which we are presently concerned with is that blind faith is not the basis for any meaningful religious/spiritual belief and practice.

⁵ This section is provided in part by Robert S. Pendell.