

LOGOS QUESTIONS

Is Faith Reasonable?



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Introduction

Is it reasonable (or rational) to have faith? To answer this question, I think it will be helpful to first divide our discussion into two more basic questions. The first being, ‘what is faith?’; and the second, ‘what does it mean for something to be reasonable (or rational)?’ Answering each of the initial questions will put us in a better position to answer our larger inquiry. In what follows, we will briefly explore the nature of faith and discuss what it means for something to be rational. After, we will explore some examples of faith in scripture to show how faith is not just compatible with rationality, but even helps us to more seriously consider other sources of information like testimony.

What is faith?

Let’s first note the sense of faith that we have in mind here. I can think of at least two senses. In the first sense, we can say that a person is a member of the Christian faith. In this sense we at least mean that ‘faith’ is something synonymous with ‘religion’—i.e. ‘faith’ as in a particular religious tradition. To give an example, we use this instance of faith in the following sense, ‘Sara is a member of the Christian faith.’ However, there is a second sense that we see in scripture. Consider the book of Hebrews, “By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son...” (Hebrews 11:17).¹ Faith in this instance is not a reference to a particular religious tradition, but rather it is something Abraham is said to have, involving attitudes central to religious practice and devotion to God. This latter sense of faith is what we’re interested in—faith as it pertains to a person’s psychological attitudes or mental states.

Now at the beginning of this same chapter of Hebrews, the author speaks of faith as, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). While this is not an outright definition, it is a helpful characterization of faith that we find from scripture. Regarding faith being a ‘conviction,’ we can say that this seems consistent with the intuition to think of faith involving beliefs. Major thinkers in Christian tradition seem to share this intuition. For example, Augustine of Hippo took faith to involve believing something and he took belief to be one of the central components of faith (*On the Trinity*, xiv.11).² In fact, he had a very particular type of belief in mind. Augustine held that the belief that we have when we have faith is a belief that we come to adopt (or assent to) on the basis of some authority. That is to say, we come to form the beliefs that we have in faith from

¹ All Biblical references are from the *Revised Standard Version*

² Augustine of Hippo. *On the Trinity Books 8–15*, trans. Stephen McKenna. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

someone better positioned to know about a given matter than ourselves, especially when we ourselves have not witnessed or seen what someone else has. This is a pretty straightforward feature of religious beliefs in the Christian tradition. After all, we often refer to parts of the Christian scriptures (and rather explicitly so in the New Testament) as the written testimony of the disciples and followers of Jesus. As such, we can say that having faith includes having those beliefs that we come to form on the basis of some authority or someone's testimony. This is not to say that this is the *only* way we come to have the beliefs that we have in faith, but it is a major way that we come to have these beliefs.

While belief does seem to be a major feature of faith, it does not provide the full picture. For we learn in the book of James that beliefs about God are not enough on their own to count as faith, for “even the demons believe and shudder” (James 2:19). So, faith contains what we will call a ‘belief element’, but it is certainly much more than merely having beliefs.³ Let’s consider again, our example of Abraham and the command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22).

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Abraham needed more than the belief that God exists; he needed more than the belief that God would still come through on His promises in order to be said to have faith—Abraham needed to act and follow through with preparations for the sacrifice. Had Abraham merely believed that it were true that God would come through and spare Isaac, and not

actually travelled with Isaac to Moriah and set up the sacrificial alter (etc.), Abraham would not have been said to have faith. In this way, it seems Abraham also needed to risk both Isaac and what had been promised him through Isaac (the continuation of his lineage). Moreover, given that God had already promised Abraham that Isaac would be ‘the promise’ through which Abraham’s lineage would become ‘as numerous as the stars’ (Gen 26:4-5), Abraham had to trust God on this promise and rely on God to somehow either spare Isaac (Gen. 15:5; 22:11-14) or revive Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Further we can say that Abraham needed the resilience to follow through with something as difficult as sacrificing one’s child (despite whatever doubts he may have had about God, or desires to not follow through with the ritual preparations, etc.).

This is at least a partial list of features that can help us characterize what else is involved in having faith. There may be other features in such an example of faith (or there may be other ways that we can group these features together). Nevertheless, the main point of highlighting these sorts of features involved in faith is to show that belief alone cannot explain or account for what all factors into a person having faith. Even if belief were necessary, it would not be the only necessary component in faith.

³ There is some debate in Philosophy of Religion as to whether or not there are other mental states, besides belief, that can be the ‘active’ mental state in faith, but that debate takes us beyond our present focus. Suffice it to say that we will stick with ‘beliefs’ in our present discussion, for the mental state in faith is at least that.

What Does it Mean for Something to be Reasonable?

In asking what it means for something to be reasonable, I mean something synonymous to the question of what it means for something to be rational (I am using the terms 'reasonable' and 'rational' interchangeably here). At any rate, it may seem fairly straightforward what someone could mean in asking whether or not something is rational. That is, it seems like they are asking if you have good reasons for believing whatever it is that you are asserting to believe. This is at least one sense of what someone could be mean by 'rational.' Though that seems like a pretty standard way of characterizing the question of what it means for something to be rational, I see there actually being two senses of rationality that are important for our consideration. Respectively, these are (i) rationality with respect to what you believe and (ii) rationality with respect to what it is that you do. Philosophers refer to rationality in the first sense as *belief rationality* and they refer to the second sense as *practical rationality*. I think both of these senses of rationality are pertinent to our discussion about faith. Before we discuss how they are both pertinent, let's unpack these two different senses of rationality.

Belief Rationality

Rationality with respect to what you believe is in keeping with that earlier intuition that we mentioned, that is, having good reasons for a belief. However, that intuition needs to be unpacked a bit more. After all, what makes a reason a 'good reason'? Well, belief rationality is concerned with the question of how or what makes a given belief true and how or what we did to acquire the belief so as to avoid errors (false beliefs). There are several ways that we can look at a belief to see if it is sensitive to truth considerations and not formed out of error (or on the basis of falsehoods). Consider the following conditions.

A belief conforms to the standards of belief rationality if that belief,

- (1) coheres with our other beliefs.
- (2) fits with (or is sensitive to) the evidence we possess.

Let's develop each of these conditions a bit further with some examples. Consider the first condition, coherence. A belief coheres with our other beliefs if it does not contradict our other beliefs. For example, let's say that I come to discover on social media that my neighbour, Ken, has travelled to London for the weekend. Later that day, a different neighbour tells me that Ken is in Glasgow for the weekend. Now in order for my belief about where Ken is to be rational, it cannot contradict with other beliefs that I have, for I cannot believe that Ken is both in London and in Glasgow at the same period of time. If I come to hold both beliefs, then neither belief can be said to be coherent because each contradicts the other.

Let's consider our second condition, fitting with (or being sensitive to) the evidence that you possess. Building off of our earlier example, let's say that I come to learn that Ken is in London because he posts a picture on Facebook of himself on the London Eye. Moreover, the post is dated with today's date, and my wife tells me that she had a conversation with Ken in which he expressly told her that he was excited about going to London to visit his sister. Given all these considerations, we would say that my belief that Ken is in London would be rational, at least in so far as it fits the evidence that I possess. How do we make considerations about whether or not our beliefs are sensitive to our evidence? Well for one thing, we can look at the sources of my evidence. For instance, my wife's testimony that she spoke with Ken would carry considerable strength in so far as I trust her as a source and believe Ken would not be dishonest with her. As such, it seems she would be in a privileged place to weigh in on the matter (especially since she spoke with Ken directly). In fact, this sort of testimonial evidence carries as much weight as if I had heard it from Ken myself, especially if we consider the source to be trustworthy, credible, or even an authority with respect to the truth of the matter to which they are testifying. In fact, there are even some instances in which it would seem irrational for me to disbelieve instances of testimony. In summation, we can say that a belief is rational in so far as it meets these criteria for belief rationality. With that said, I do not mean for these conditions to be an exhaustive list of criteria for belief rationality, but they do at least give us a foothold for how we might go about deciding whether or not a given belief is rational (or reasonable). From here, let's move on to discuss the other sense of rationality pertinent to our inquiry.

Practical Rationality

Rationality with respect to what you do pertains to taking the courses of action that you think will help you to achieve your desired goals. For example, if I am worried about my high cholesterol levels and desire to be healthier, it would be practically rational for me to adopt certain lifestyle changes that I think will help me attain those desired cholesterol levels (like dietary constraints and regular exercise). As such, this sense of rationality is

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oriented towards pragmatic considerations where we determine the rationality of a certain course of action on the basis of whether or not it is in keeping with what we think will help us achieve our goals or aims. With that said, there is a sense in which this sense of rationality can overlap with

considerations that one makes in belief rationality. For instance, if I believe that diet and exercise are the means to lower high cholesterol (which also pertains to belief rationality), then I am only practically rational to the extent that adopt those practices deemed suitable for lowering cholesterol. However, let's say that I believe (falsely), that dietary changes will not impact my cholesterol levels. I can still be said to be practically rational if I am adopting those courses of action that I think are helpful in achieving my goals. One may worry why

we would consider practical rationality seriously at all, if this is the case. In response, it is important to note that while practical rationality is highly dependent upon our beliefs and values, belief rationality cannot sufficiently evaluate the extent to which our actions are 'rational'. In other words, having true beliefs about what does and does not lower cholesterol is not sufficient for adopting and enacting practices that will help us achieving goals like lowering cholesterol. Consequently, both practical rationality and belief rationality are important for evaluating the overall behaviours and attitudes that a person has. With that in mind, we can now come to see why practical rationality is an important part of our evaluation concerning whether or not faith is rational. As we have said, faith is not simply a matter of believing, it has other important elements or features like action, which cannot be evaluated on the basis of truth considerations alone. Now that we have identified the senses of faith and rationality that are pertinent to our discussion, let's move on to our bigger question: Is faith reasonable?

'Is Faith Reasonable?'

When evaluating whether or not faith is rational, we see from our previous discussion that we must evaluate the rationality of faith in light of these two different senses of what it means for something to be rational. We will make these two different evaluations in what follows.

Is faith reasonable with respect to practical rationality?

In answering this question, we can begin by noting that there is nothing about the nature of faith, (as we have discussed it) that makes faith incompatible with practical rationality.

Consider again our example of Abraham and the command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). In order to be said to be faithful, Abraham would have needed to act in accordance with God's request. Because faith involves action in keeping with one's desired goals (like exhibiting faith in God), we can see that faith is something that can be evaluated by practical rationality. Remember, an action is practically rational in so far as you do those things that will help you achieve a desired goal. So in the instance of Abraham and Isaac, we would say that Abraham's action is practically rational in so far as he chooses those courses of action that help him achieve whatever his ends are (in this instance to exhibit ultimate faith (trust/allegiance) in God, even at a great personal cost/risk). In this story, Abraham does the very things needed to exhibit faith in God. He travels to Moriah, performs the sacrificial rites in setting up an altar, up until the very point of God intervening to provide an alternative sacrifice. As such, we can consider this instance, despite the difficulty of the circumstance, as practically rational faith. Next, let's faith as it pertains to belief rationality.

Is faith reasonable in so far as it pertains to belief rationality?

In answering this second question, we can again note that there is nothing about the nature of faith (as we have discussed it), that makes faith incompatible with belief rationality. Rather, because faith has what we've referred to as a 'belief element' it is evaluable by the conditions of belief rationality. As such, we would say that faith is rational when the beliefs operative in one's faith (1) cohere with one's other beliefs and (2) are sensitive to one's available evidence.

“there is nothing about the nature of faith, (as we have discussed it) that makes faith incompatible with practical rationality”

With that said, there are often examples of a person having faith in scripture that may, at first glance, seem to run contrary to one or both of our conditions for rationality. Similarly, there are also examples of a person not having enough faith (or lacking faith entirely) that may seem like instances in which a given person is abiding by the conditions of

rationality. Note, I say 'seem' here because we do not always have information as to what particular beliefs the persons in these narratives have. As such, we must infer what a given persons beliefs are and that makes this sort of analysis tricky. Nevertheless, in order to show how faith can be compatible with what counts as rationality, let's consider an example for the sake of showing how an instance of faith *is* rational.

Consider the story of doubting Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, from the Gospel of John. There, after the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples, they informed Thomas, who wasn't present. In response to this, Thomas tells his fellow disciples that he will not believe that Jesus has been resurrected unless he sees Jesus and touches the crucifixion wounds himself. After making this statement, Jesus appears to Thomas several days later. In this encounter with the resurrected Jesus, Thomas is admonished by Jesus who says, "have you believed me because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

In this narrative, how are we to take Jesus' admonishment of Thomas? This seems like an instance in which Jesus is reprimanding a disciple for not having faith. Consequently, it seems like Jesus is saying that Thomas would have had been counted as having faith if Thomas had believed (among other things) the accounts of the other disciples. Assuming that this would have been an instance of faith, would Thomas' declaration to not believe that Jesus had been resurrected been rational? On the one hand, it looks as if Thomas is making a claim on the basis of the evidence available to him. That is, he seems to be acknowledging that he is lacking the sensory experience of the resurrected Jesus that the other disciples have had. Furthermore, it even seems within the realm of interpretive possibilities for us to read this passage as if Thomas is abiding by the conditions of

coherence in not believing that Jesus is alive, especially given the fact that he witnessed the crucifixion and death of Jesus (and perhaps Thomas' worry is that the belief that Jesus is alive would not be coherent with the belief that Jesus died by crucifixion).

Based on those considerations, aren't Thomas' beliefs (prior to his encountering the resurrected Jesus) rational? Even if it seems plausible that Thomas was acting rationally at first, we would still need to address the fact that Thomas is discounting seemingly credible

testimony in coming to the conclusion that he does prior to his own encounter with Jesus. In fact, discounting this testimony seems to be the very thing that prevents us from counting this as an instance of faith. As such, we can add to our earlier considerations on the nature of faith, that having faith involves valuing testimony as

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a credible information source. In light of this observation, we can read Jesus' admonishment of Thomas not as a prescription to form beliefs without evidence, but rather, to form beliefs on the basis of anything that might be a pertinent information source with respect to whom (or what) we place our faith. Given this further development, it seems that we have an added motivation to not only think that faith and rationality are compatible, but that faith invites us to look beyond our usual sources of evidence (like sense perception) in acquiring information about those in whom we ultimately place our faith. Valuing testimony in this way strengthens not only our resolve to have true beliefs, it also strengthens our resolve to be committed to potential sources of truth and to be more trusting of those whom would aid us in our truth related pursuits. In this way, there is an added benefit to having faith.

Conclusion

In this discussion, we sought to answer the question, ‘is faith reasonable?’ We began by briefly outlining the nature of faith and surveyed the two important accounts of rationality pertinent to our analysis of faith. We said that having faith involves believing as well as other essential components like trust, reliance, action, risk, and resilience. We also gave an overview of the two senses in which something can be said to be rational: belief rationality (considerations about how beliefs are true) and practical rationality (considerations about how our actions help us to achieve our goals). From these overviews on the nature of faith and rationality, we then turned to our main question, whether faith is reasonable. We analysed our respective accounts of faith and rationality in conjunction with several examples of faith to show that faith is not only compatible with rationality, but that, especially with respect to belief rationality, having faith is beneficial for having true beliefs because it involves seriously considering those sources of information that extend beyond our own immediate capacities.

Further Reading

1. Thiselton, Anthon, 2017, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Eerdmans Publishing)
2. Work from Lara Buchak www.larabuchak.net/faith
3. Work from Daniel Howard-Snyder <http://faculty.wvu.edu/~howardd/papersandbooks.html>

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The Logos Institute at the University of St Andrews is a centre for excellence in the study of analytic and exegetical theology. It is committed to scholarship that reflects a concern for: transparency; simplicity in expression; clear, logical argumentation; and rigorous analysis. It also reflects a radical commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, particularly between the fields of philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the sciences. Its faculty consists of world-leading scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

These booklets are supported by generous funding from the Templeton Religion Trust.

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