The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in NonCognitivist Approaches to Faith

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§1 Introduction

A, perhaps the, standard approach to faith treats it as a type of belief. In recent times, however, various noncognitivist approaches to faith have been developed, treating faith, for example, in terms of hope or some other affective state. One such approach identifies faith with trust:

Here [when discussing faith in a person] the crucial feature would seem to be trust, reliance on the person to carry out commitments, obligations, promises, or, more generally, to act in a way favorable to oneself. I have faith in my wife; I can rely on her doing what she says she will do, on her remaining true to her commitments, on her remaining attached to me by a bond of love. (Alston 1996, p. 13)

This quotation identifies a certain kind of faith with trust, and thus, without endorsing such a position, opens the possibility of thinking of faith in noncognitive terms. It is this approach to faith that I will focus on here, using it as a platform for talking some about faith and some about philosophical methodology in thinking about faith (among other things). I'll point out the controversies involved in current thinking about trust, controversies which should make us wonder what to make of identifying faith and trust. I'll then show that, for at least one important kind of faith, identifying it with trust of any kind is mistaken.

I’ll begin by motivating the move away from cognitivist portrayals of faith, and then turn to the trust view and the wide variety of opinion about what trust involves. One suggestion, in the face of such variety, is to conclude that the search for the nature of the thing in question may have a false presupposition: that there is such a nature. I consider this possibility and the change in philosophical methodology it counsels, arguing for a focus on what I take to be the most important and central examples of faith when theorizing. Such faith I term ‘affective faith’, and use it in the sections that follow to assess the prospects for the view that faith involves trust. I conclude that what is fundamental to affective faith is not trust, but something much more active and sustained.
What kind of thing is faith? We find the claims of the Cognitivists that it is a type of belief (Locke 1698), that it is a type of some related non-doxastic cognitive state such as acceptance (Alston 1996, Howard-Snyder 2013), or that it is a kind of knowledge (Plantinga 2000). In the last few decades, however, new approaches have been championed, claim that it is a feeling, that it is an attitude or affective state of a certain sort (Clegg 1979), that it is a special kind of trust (Audi 2011, Schellenberg 2009), that it involves hope (Pojman 1986, Sessions 1994), that it is a preference of a certain sort (Buchak 2012), or that it is a kind of practical commitment or disposition toward certain patterns of action (Tennant 1943).

Are there good reasons to abandon the standard cognitive approach? That is a difficult and complicated question, one which I will not attempt to answer here. But some quotes might help see why one might find attractive an alternative picture of faith:

“Unbelief,” like “theology” is a product of the Greek mind . . . . Where the word “belief” is used to translate the biblical Hebrew and Greek it means not the “belief that” of Plato, but “belief in,” a matter not of cognitive assent but of faith, trust, and obedience . . . . Plato’s “theology” is not in fact an accurate apprehension of traditional religion. It is the self-conscious intellectual’s translation of that religion into terms that he can understand. (Bellah 1991, p. 216)

To those inclined toward cognitive construals of faith, these remarks don’t help much. If belief-in is a matter of faith, among other things, then it looks like we are in a tight circle if we are objecting to accounts of faith in terms of belief. But if we drop the word ‘faith’ from the list, the idea is that belief-in is more a matter of trust and obedience, and it is belief-in that is playing surrogate here for the idea of faith. In that light, consider another passage:

While belief now refers to a state of mind, a disposition to assent to a set of propositions, even within the early Christian intellectual tradition historically it had as much or more to do with love, loyalty, and commitments akin to pledging one’s allegiance to a person as Lord or to a cause or to entering into a covenant such as marriage. The Latin word credo (apparently a compound of cor, cordis ‘heart’ and -do, -dere, ‘to put’ derived from the proto Indo-European root for placing one’s heart upon something, *kred-dhē) means ‘I set my heart’ upon the entity or doctrines in question. Even for scholastics such as Aquinas . . . credo meant to pledge allegiance to, to give
one’s self and one’s loyalty. The Latin terms most closely expressing today’s meaning of belief and opinion, *opinio* (‘opinion, belief, supposition’) and *opinor* (*opinari*, to be of the opinion, to believe) played an almost negligible role in Christian thought. (McKaughan 2013, pp. 107-8)

Though one might quibble with some of the details here, the general point is clear enough. When we ask about the nature of faith, we are not asking about necessary and sufficient conditions for it, though of course that is a topic that will arise in the inquiry. We are asking more about its essence (if it has one), about species and genera, that of which it is a particular instance and what makes it be the particular instance it is. When we want to know what it is to be a person or a human being, we will find it frustrating to be told that it’s a featherless biped or a thing inclined to don attire. Even if these claims are true, they don’t give us what we want. Just so with accounts of faith. We want to know what faith is, not what it co-varies with, even if necessarily. Thus, the standard cognitivist approach tells us that faith is an instance of belief, and then goes on to describe which particular instance it is. So if faith is an instance of a cognitive state of believing, we should expect an account of faith in terms of a mental state of one sort or another. Both quotes signal dissatisfaction with such an approach. Whatever faith is, to these authors, it may not be primarily or fundamentally a cognitive mental state. That leaves open the possibility that various mental states, including cognitive ones, are involved in having faith, but the project is one of understanding the nature of faith, and for that we must look first at what is fundamental and primary: what is it that faith is an instance of, and what makes it the particular instance of that phenomenon?

Attention to the history of Christian doctrine reinforces such disaffection. Very early in this history, doctrinal disputes arose, and the language of anathema was quickly adopted for those with non-standard views. See for example, the seemingly hyperbolic language of the Athanasian Creed: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. . . . This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.” The lesson is clear here. The faith is defined in terms of propositional content, and salvation requires believing truly and firmly the members of the set of propositions in question.

Disaffection with such doxastic requirements for faith and salvation results immediately when we consider heroes of faith: Abraham, Moses, Job, and even the Apostles. It is mind-boggling to think of them as satisfying the cognitive standard embraced. Thus arises the idea of searching for a less cognitively loaded account of faith.
When we look at the array of proposals given above, proposals that recommend thinking of faith in fundamentally non-doxastic or non-cognitive terms, one might be forgiven for concluding that philosophers have, at best, weak theoretical eyesight! The variety of options given are so wide and varied that it may raise suspicions as to whether they are all attempts to get at the same question of what is fundamental to the nature of faith. I don’t know how to explain the variety, though it is clear that part of the story is that faith—that is a different phenomenon from faith-in (not to mention the uses of the term ‘faith’ that are not followed by anything, as we see in Hebrews 11 and in some of Jesus’s remarks, such as Mark 5:34, “Daughter, your faith has healed you.”) Given such linguistic variety, one might worry that doxastic accounts of faith can’t be the right story about it, since that would, at a minimum, require that faith—that is fundamental, and second, perhaps there is also the kind of flailing about one finds when looking for an alternative to a dominant paradigm.

In any case, if one begins from a doxastic perspective on faith, initially testing the idea that faith is a species of belief, it is natural to turn to the trust view of faith when one becomes dissatisfied with an account of faith on which it involves, e.g., believing that God exists and is good.1 Whereas the cognitive view seems to identify faith with belief-that, one can get to the trust view as Alston does, by noting that the more natural locution at least in Scripture for the kind of belief that expresses faith is belief-in, not belief-that. And so one might go from the doxastic picture of faith to the trust view by claiming that belief-in is more a matter of trust than it is a matter of propositional belief. Our question, then, is how promising an approach to faith is this trust view?

§3 The Trust View and the Controversies

When we ask what trust itself is, we get a stupefying variety of opinion. Russell Hardin identifies trust with belief: “The declarations “I believe you are trustworthy” and “I trust you” are equivalent” (Hardin 2002, p. 10). Annette Baier (1986) thinks of trust as involving dependence on the goodwill of another, while Karen Jones (1996) claims that trust is constituted by an attitude of optimism about the goodwill of another. James Coleman (1990) characterizes trust as a kind of action that one places or not, depending on decision-theoretic calculations of the ordinary variety, and Richard Holton (1994) thinks it is crucial that an account of trust include normative, reactive attitudes involving dispositions to feel betrayed and grateful, depending on whether one’s trust is violated.

Once again, the thought of theories of personhood in terms of things inclined to don attire comes to mind. How could such disparate approaches

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1Such a doxastic account is myopic in addition to being too cognitive: just think of mundane faith, such as faith in one’s spouse, or faith in democracy, or faith in humanity.
occur if people are actually looking at the same phenomenon? One answer to that question is given by Thomas W. Simpson (2012):

The ways that the word is used are simply too various to be regimented into one definition. Sometimes ‘trust’ is naturally understood as referring to a sort of affective attitude (‘I will trust my husband, I will not be jealous’); at other times to a conative one (‘Come what may, I will trust you to the end’); and at yet others to cognitive ones (‘I know you are an honourable woman, so I trust you’). Sometimes it is not a mental state but action which is described as trust (‘The patrol followed the scout, trusting him to spot any ambush’). Similarly, it is used in situations where the motivation to trustworthiness is dramatically varied: love, or mutual gain, or moral considerations may all count as reasons not to betray someone’s trust. These all support the inductive argument against the plausibility of analysing of trust. Counter-examples can be given so easily because there are so many ways the word may permissibly be used, and so it would be foolish to seek a single definition. (Simpson 2012, pp. 553–554)

And what of Simpson’s solution? He recommends abandoning the project of analysis and substituting the methodology of genealogy in its place:

An alternative way of thinking takes the value of trust as of first importance. A genealogical approach addresses the concept obliquely, by asking why we might have the concept that we have, given some broad facts about how we live and the projects we pursue.

The claim is that if we can give a ‘role description’ for an important concept that looks and feels very similar to a notion that we actually operate, explaining what is needed of a concept in order to do a particular job, then that sheds light on the content of our actual one. Rather than trial by thought-experiment, it instead accommodates the vagueness and conflicting intuitions that surround difficult and abstract notions. No doubt all the advocates of the ‘trust is this’ claims I critiqued above have replies to my counter-examples. But the sorts of replies on offer will tend to consist in argument over the cases, and ultimately a discovery that we use the word ‘trust’ to describe different things on different occasions . . . . What would be genuinely revealing is an explanation of why the term permits this variability. As well as yielding a clearer grasp on the content of the concept, such an approach also makes it
entirely perspicuous where its value comes from. Two results for the price of one enquiry is no bad thing in these straitened times. (Simpson 2012, p. 555)

Simpson is well-aware that his case for an alternative methodology is not exactly compelling. But I think he is onto something important here. We can engage philosophically in an analysis of anything in the dictionary, but we don’t, and the reason we don’t, when justifying of our practice, is because we presuppose the value or importance or significance of what we focus on in our philosophical explorations of them. It is also true that much of what passes for linguistic analysis is simply bad faith: we aren’t attempting lexicographical improvement over what the dictionary says, but are instead attending to the phenomenon that our language indicates, however much it happens to cloud our view. We then say things like, “I don’t care what the ordinary concept of knowledge is, I don’t care what ‘knows’ means; I’m interested in knowledge, not ‘knowledge’, in much the same way we have come to expect scientist to disavow any interest in the ordinary meaning of terms like ‘mass’ and ‘motion’ when they attempt to give theories about the physical world. In each such case, the process of inquiry presupposes the importance of the topic in question, and one way to get past the remaining vestiges of the disease of ordinary language philosophy is to argue explicitly concerning what is valuable and worth theorizing about prior to offering a theory of it. In the process, we may find ordinary language to have a distorting effect and we may be in a position to do what philosophy has always claimed some promise of doing: to improve our lives by improving our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

But even if Simpson is onto something important, the intrusion of genealogy into the story is unfortunate. Genealogical accounts, by the use of the term, ought to be relying on some history or supposed history, and this is their flaw. Looking again at Simpson’s description above, there are two things to note here—one good, one bad. The good is the value-driven heart of the approach, and the bad is the bad metaphysics. The bad part is a direct result of including the historical part of what is claimed for the genealogical approach, hoping perhaps for something like what Bernard Williams is looking for in his discussion of truth when he claims that the genealogical method is broadly naturalistic in that it “helps to explain a concept or value or institution by showing ways in which it could have come about in a simplified environment containing certain kinds of human interests or capacities.” (Williams 2002, p. 21)

That is, the historical aspect of the genealogical account is supposed to point us to the fundamental reality the importance of which motivates our theorizing, and do so in a way (perhaps) that lets us see how to defend our favorite metaphysical picture in the process. But no historical or

\[\text{2Compare here Keith Lehrer (1974).}\]
historically-tinged mythology will accomplish either of these tasks, at least when considered purely abstractly. That is the stuff of which the genetic fallacy is made. Perhaps in particular cases, genealogy might be useful to add to our value-driven approach, but the general idea that the value-driven approach is itself part and parcel of genealogy is certainly wrongheaded. And it is wrongheaded in a way that favors value-driven approaches over genealogical ones, since the latter requires immense backfilling in order to justify the relevance of the historical dimension it touts.

§4 Value-Driven Inquiry and Affective Faith

So, to repeat, the methodology I favor here focuses on what is important in a given domain. In this domain, I thus focus on what I take to be an important, and perhaps fundamental, kind of faith—‘fundamental’, in the sense of being common ground between religious and mundane examples of the phenomenon that is central to a flourishing life.

This kind of faith emerges when we examine different possible approaches to life.ḍ We can begin with the idea that there can be both unified approaches to life and approaches that involve disunity or disconnectedness. In the latter category are lives that instance the Humean view of causation: just one damn thing after another, with no attempt on the part of the individual in question to be doing anything beyond coping with whatever comes one’s way. Such patterns of life are difficult to sustain, but it is not uncommon to see lives that display it in significant temporal chunks. In contrast to such patterns of behavior are approaches that pursue unity, that aim at connecting the multiplicities in experience into some sort of plan or purpose or understanding of things, and the boundary of such a search involves plans, purposes, and goals that are all-encompassing. The development of plans and purposes typically arise out of conative or affective aspects of human life,4 such as negative emotional experiences and positive emotional experiences. Among the negative emotional experiences are fear, horror, regret, guilt, worry, sorrow, shame, anger, misery, meaninglessness, and despair; among positive affective states are joy, compassion, awe, wonder, and experiences of beauty and the sublime.5

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3In the next few paragraphs, I draw on material from Kvanvig (2013), where I first began investigating the kind of faith in question.

4I will here use the terms ‘conative’ and ‘affective’ interchangeably, thinking of the mental life of a person as divided into two parts. Conation is sometimes defined as one of three parts of mental function, distinguished from both cognition and affection, but I am perplexed by attempts to sort the conative from the affective, so won’t abide by the strictures of this definition here.

5Some might think that the experiences of beauty and the sublime should be classified with the cognitive rather than the affective. Since nothing I say here turns on the issue, I’ll bypass extended discussion of the issue here by simply noting the attraction of views that treat normative and evaluative experiences and judgments as essentially involving a pro-attitude or con-attitude. So by classifying these experiences with on the conative
Such aspects of human life can provoke an interest in finding meaning or in developing a plan or purpose or goal that reaches beyond merely coping with each particular episode in life as it comes. In some cases, the call of the goal is merely attractive, in other cases it takes on the guise of the mandatory. In either case, these features of human life need not prompt the kind of unification that interests me, but the possibility exists, and is often realized, of responding to such by adopting a pattern of life that involves longer-term projects, goals, and plans.

Such responses involve decisions, whether in the most self-conscious, deliberative sense, or in the hardly discernible way in which, for example, one chooses to follow one’s standard route from home to work. The point is that the response counts as human behavior, motivated by the affective states and experiences in question.

It is on these affective origins of the pursuit of ideals of one sort or another that I want to focus initially, for these unifying responses, I want to suggest, are responses that involve faith of one sort or another. To adopt a longer-term project or goal or plan involves a kind of hope that success may be possible, or at least a decision not to give in to feelings of hopelessness, and a kind of self-trust and reliance on the structure of the universe and the society in which one hopes to flourish, regarding the accomplishment of some plan. None of these underlying attitudes or dispositions need to be ones brought to consciousness in deliberate reflection on the experiences that prompt them, nor need they be part of any fully deliberate approach taken to the motivations for them. Ordinary human experience in response to the kinds of motivations I want to focus on range from the spontaneous to the fully deliberative. But what is important about the responses in question is that they involve a setting of a direction for the individual, one which a person may faithfully pursue.

Faith, in this sense, is an orientation of a person toward a longer-term goal, an orientation or disposition toward the retaining of the goal or plan or project in the face of difficulties in its realization, one prompted by affections of various sorts and involving complex mental states that are fundamentally affective even if they involve cognitive dimensions as well. Such faith is a disposition to act in service of an ideal, whether that ideal is a political one such as equality and liberty for all people, or a sacred one, such as being part of the Kingdom of God. A plan, purpose, or goal is developed, and the culmination of this process involves a commitment by the individual to such a plan, and in following through on such a commitment the person displays the kind of faith that I am describing. People can be faithful to their commitments, or not, and when faithful, their actions express the disposition to act in service of an ideal. Though there is much to be said on the issue of what is fundamental to such a

and affective, my intention is to signal the way in these attitudes can function in the story of faith in much the same way as the emotions cited.
disposition, so let me merely register my view without arguing for it here. Central to such a disposition is that it involves an ideal, and central to the notion of an ideal for a person is, not a certain cognitive stance toward it, but rather a felt attraction toward it. Thus, even if the disposition in question involves both affective and cognitive features, I will here talk of the disposition as being fundamentally affective rather than cognitive.

A mundane example will allow better focus on such affective faith. Suppose a young Little League pitcher gives up a game-winning home run and experiences the typical despondency for having done so. One reaction is to adopt a goal of becoming a better pitcher and never having to feel that way again. Such a reaction can generate an orientation or disposition toward various efforts at becoming better, in hopes of doing so (or at least some aversion to the idea that any efforts of any sort are hopeless), and display a kind of self-trust or self-reliance and perhaps some trust of others who may be recruited to help in the project. Our youngster makes a commitment to a certain kind of future. It might be an intense commitment or more casual in its firmness, but when he carries through on this commitment, he will be properly characterized as being faithful to it, or pursuing his goal faithfully. In a short motto, we grasp the noun form of what (this kind of) faith is from the adjectival and adverbial form involving being full of faith: faith is what faithful people have and faith is whatever it is that underlies and explains patterns of behavior and activity that are engaged in faithfully.

Such an identification of affective faith with faithfulness is also well-suited to explaining important and central examples of religious faith, such as the faith displayed by Abraham in leaving Mesopotamia for Canaan. The narrative in Genesis 12 is sparse—we are told only that the Lord said, “Go,” and “So Abraham went.” Later accounts of the matter attribute his behavior to faith: “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” (Heb. 11:8) The explanation here is quite natural: Abraham is faithful to the divine command to leave for Canaan; his doing so is “by faith.” It is also a fundamentally non-cognitive feature of Abraham that undergirds his behavior. We do not know the details, but some possibilities come to mind easily: perhaps he experiences a felt obligation to a divine command, or perhaps a deep attraction to a life guided by a divine being and being the recipient of divine favor and blessings; perhaps these were mixed with fear of divine displeasure with disobedience. What we can be confident of, however, is that the source of his behavior and the attitude that underlies it are just as fundamentally

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6There is some uncertainty about the details here as to when the first call came to Abraham. Genesis 12 has the initial response involving leaving Harran, not Ur, whereas Stephen, in Acts 7, has the call coming to Abraham to leave Mesopotamia before he was in Charran (Harran). These uncertainties are irrelevant to our discussion, so I will ignore them here.
affective as they are in the case of the Little League pitcher. In both cases, affective faith involves faithfulness to an ideal.

What we should resist are interpretations of Abraham’s faith that are overtly cognitive. As Abraham’s life with God progresses, he receives specific promises about what his future will be like, and (we are told) believes God regarding these promises. But his initial acts of faith are not described in terms of belief but instead in terms of following the command of God. It is the following that is essential here, not the believing, since we can easily make sense of his behavior as a display of faith even without any belief in the promise of God (for example, it might have been only a deep hope). How things develop is one thing, where things start is quite another.

So it is a mistake to identify Abraham’s faith with the expression of it in the story of the offering of the sacrifice of Isaac. On this matter, Eleonore Stump writes,

And so this is indeed a test of Abraham, as the narrative says. God’s command to sacrifice Isaac tries the measure of Abraham’s commitment to the goodness of God. The way in which Abraham dealt with Ishmael makes the form of this test the right one for him, too. For Abraham to treat Isaac in the same way as he treated Ishmael is for Abraham to commit himself whole-heartedly to the belief that God is good.

. . . [T]t is precisely Abraham’s willingness to believing in God’s goodness, even against strong temptations to the contrary, that makes him the father of faith. When Abraham passes the test, he passes it just because he believes that God is good and will not betray his promises . . . . (Stump 2010, pp. 298–300)

There is much to say here about how different a perspective I have on the life and times of Abraham, but the following will have to suffice. First, even if the story of offering to sacrifice Isaac is the primary jewel in the crown that is Abraham’s faith, it is not the substance of it. Whatever is central to Abraham’s faith was already present in his leaving Mesopotamia at the command of God, and so if faith requires believing that God is good and keeps his promises, we’d have to find some sign of that in the early relationship between God and Abraham. As pointed out already, there is none.

Moreover, any account of the story of Abraham that leaves certain options open can’t be complete. One such option left open by Stump’s account is that nothing in her account explains why God’s command to sacrifice Isaac is essential to the situation. As far as I can tell, her account leaves open Abraham’s deciding on his own, or vowing to sacrifice Isaac (on the model of Jephthah) and then have the same degree of belief in
God’s goodness as she attributes to Abraham in the actual story. Stump makes much of the contrast between Jephthah and Abraham, arguing that the usual reasons for taking Abraham to be the father of faith (having to do with his willingness to kill his only son) are reasons for giving the title to Jephthah instead, since (according to one traditional interpretation) he carried through in his vow to sacrifice his child. There are several reasons this argument is less than compelling. For one thing, the father of faith needs to be earlier in the chronology rather than later, and Abraham wins on that score. Second, it is crucial to the story that this episode is instigated by God, and thus that the moral of the story is something about God himself and what he is like. As I see it, the story is a central component in the development of the ethical monotheism distinctive of the Abrahamic traditions, and culminating in the explicit denunciation of child sacrifice in the prophetic literature. Such an emphasis on authorial intent doesn’t help us understand the experience of Abraham in responding to God’s command, but when the question is one of who deserves the title “father of faith,” it is the perspective of the author or final redactors that are central, not the experience of the characters in the stories themselves.

I should also point out what I regard as excessive optimism in Stump’s account of the sacrifice event. Stump notes the duplicity and double-mindedness that has characterized Abraham’s relationship to God and his promises prior to the command to sacrifice Isaac, and she emphasizes as well his continued double-mindedness towards God’s promise in the taking of Keturah as his wife (or concubine) after Sarah’s death and fathering six children with her (as insurance of progeny should Isaac and Rebecca continue to be childless). But somehow, Abraham manages, in the Akedah, to achieve purity of motive and full clarity of belief regarding what God is like and how sure his promises are. I find such an explanation overly optimistic and going beyond what we have textual evidence for, and if we pay attention to the point made earlier that a primary moral of the story is about God’s self-revelation of his character to the father of the nation he has chosen, we can see why there is no need to posit such an astonishing change of character in Abraham. What has characterized Abraham from the beginning in his relationship with God is constant here: when God says go, Abraham goes; when God says do, Abraham, does. It is the very externalized following that is the heart of the faith of Abraham, not some imputed story about motives and beliefs that are somehow both ideal and out-of-character in the most difficult following of all. It is, in a word, a rendering of Abraham’s faith in terms of his faithfulness that is crucial to the story, which is the fundamental point made about the affective faith characterized above.

So characterizing the view leads directly to an objection due to Robert Audi. The objection claims that one can have faith without displaying faithfulness:
It should also be stressed that even if a person’s attitudinal faith (faith in) is highly comprehensive, as is faith in democratic institutions, the person might not have the character trait of faithfulness. This may not be widely realized because we so often speak of faith in the context of considering faith in God, and that kind of attitudinal faith is commonly presupposed to imply some degree of commitment to being faithful to what God, at least in the eyes of the person in question, commands or requires. Nonetheless, someone could have faith in God or great faith in other people, yet not be able to keep faith with them and thus lack faithfulness toward them. Having faith in others is mainly a matter of how we view them, and how we are disposed to respond to them, in terms of what we value. Being faithful to others is more a matter of how we act toward them in terms of what they value (though it is not wholly a matter of what they value, since people can be clearly mistaken about their own good).

One way to see this difference is by considering the relation of each kind of faith to trust. If I have faith in you, then I trust you, at least within a certain domain of conduct. If I am faithful to you, you may properly trust me; and if I am faithful to an ideal, I may, in the main, be trusted to live up to it. Neither case of trust implies the other. We can have faith in people, such as foreign heads of state, with whom we have either no relationship or one that does not call on us to keep faith. One way to put the contrast is this: faith is fulfilled when its object meets certain expectations—roughly, fulfills the trust—of the subject; faithfulness is fulfilled when the subject—the faithful person—meets certain expectations, or certain hypothetical expectations, of the object. (Audi 2011, pp. 296–297)

Audi makes two central points against the idea that faith is always tied to faithfulness. One idea relies on thinking of faith as connected with trust, relying on the idea that if one has faith in something, one trusts. In the next section, I will argue that there is no such connection, so we can focus here on the other point, which is that faith is an attitude of a certain kind while faithfulness is a disposition of character. As Audi says, “Having faith in others is mainly a matter of how we view them, and how we are disposed to respond to them, in terms of what we value. Being faithful to others is more a matter of how we act toward them in terms of what they value.”
Consider first the claim that having faith (in others) is "mainly a matter of how we view them." While this may be true of special kinds of faith, it is not true of faith in general. For one thing, it is primarily cognitive, and hence unable to explain the kind of affective faith displayed by our Little League pitcher and Abraham. Abraham has faith, according to the author of Hebrews. In what does this faith consist? Is it mainly a matter of how he views God? There is no textual evidence for such a claim, and it has a bizarre ring to it. Perhaps if we thought Abraham’s faith was a kind of trust, and agreed with cognitive positions on trust, such as Hardin’s view that trusting someone just is believing that they are trustworthy, one might come to conclusion that Abraham’s faith was a matter of viewing God as trustworthy. The central problem is that such an account of Abraham’s faith is—how shall I put it?—unfaithful to the text. Abraham hears God’s command and leaves. He does so by faith. So what involves in the faith in question? The only textual evidence of what such faith involves is that it provides the explanation of his behavior. It involves a displayed disposition to follow through and the disposition has an affective source, of the sort that provides impetus to the agency of the individual in question. So whatever we might wish to say about some other possible kinds of faith, the distinction Audi is drawing between faith and faithfulness does not apply, or at least does not obviously apply, to the affective faith involved in our examples of Abraham and the Little League pitcher.

What of the second point, however, the one relying on the link between faith and trust? I turn to this issue in the next section.

§5 The Inadequacy of Trust-based Accounts of Affec-
tive Faith

Consider, first, the insight of Simpson above, arising out of Baier’s important early work on trust: whatever trust is, it involves, or is built on top of reliance. Simpson claims that reliance is Ur-trust, and that a genealogical investigation of trust shows how various human interests will build various uses of the term ‘trust’ on top of Ur-trust. Baier holds a similar view, claiming that we distinguish between reliance and trust, but that the latter is a special case of the former.

Examples of reliance without trust are easy to find. Spies often find themselves in the position of having to rely on informants, even though they do not trust them. The simple reason such examples can be found is that, while trust can be betrayed, reliance cannot: when we rely and things go badly, feeling of disappointment and regret are normal and appropriate, but feelings of betrayal are not. It is for this reason that no account of faith can rest comfortably with only the remarks about trust contained in the Alston quote from the introduction, where trust is glossed in terms of
“reliance on a person . . . to act in a way favorable to oneself.” Bernie Madoff relied on his victims to act in ways that would be favorable to him—that is what con-artists are good at. But they don’t trust their victims, and feelings of betrayal, while appropriate in the case of violations of trust, are not appropriate when scams are uncovered and victims don’t play along.

This same difficulty arises in another prominent account of trust deployed in service of understanding faith. Richard Swinburne claims that

To trust someone is to act on the assumption that she will do for you what she knows that you want or need, when the evidence gives some reason for supposing that she may not and where there will be bad consequences if the assumption is false, . . . [where to act on an assumption is] to do those actions which you would do if you believed the stated assumption strongly. (Swinburne 2005, p. 144)

Once again, shysters and con-artists do not trust their victims, but they rely on them for exploitative purposes. In Swinburne’s terminology, they act on the assumption that their victims will do for them what they know is wanted or needed.

Even though their accounts don’t fully characterize the distinction between trust and reliance, both Swinburne and Alston agree that trust is a form of reliance, and with this assumption there is nearly universal agreement. Of course, the plausibility of such approaches requires adopting a suitable account of reliance. Accounts of reliance can go wrong by demanding too much in the way of vulnerability: reliance doesn’t require likelihood of harm, nor does it require some objective chance of harm. One can be unknowingly immune to the flu, for example, and still rely on one’s flu shot to protect one from the disease. Neither does reliance require the possibility of harm, for one can rely on God’s good will even if it is impossible for God not to have good will towards one. Moreover, accounts of reliance can err in another direction, by taking a significant chance of harm to be sufficient for reliance. I do not rely on the venomous snake in the grass (not to bite me) of which I am unaware just by walking across the yard. So reliance-based accounts of trust need to be careful not to undermine this approach to trust simply by adopting a ham-fisted account of reliance. I think this issue can be finessed easily enough, but won’t take the time here to do so, instead urging that we treat it as a platitude that trust involves reliance when the latter is properly finessed.

If we think of trust as a species of reliance, I think we know enough about trust to understand why such accounts of faith are bound to be inadequate. I have two complaints to make about trust-based accounts of faith, where trust is a species of reliance. First is simply a matter of philosophical unease, to the effect that no such account is metaphysically satisfying. A metaphysically satisfying account of faith will show where it metaphysically “bottoms out.” One of the attractions of the idea that faith
is a kind of belief is that belief itself is a psychologically basic state (it is, for example, part of the bottom-like story of folk psychology regarding human behavior). So if you tell me that faith is a kind of belief, I might disagree, but not because I find the account metaphysically unsatisfying. But when you tell me that faith is (a kind of) trust, I am metaphysically unsatisfied. I have none of the “aha” experience that accompanies understanding, but instead have the feeling of substituting a mystery for an enigma. Both faith and trust are confusing enough, and perhaps polysemous enough, that I long for a better approach.

My second complaint is more straightforward: at least when it comes to the affective faith I am focusing on here, trust-based accounts are thoroughly wrongheaded. What is distinctive about affective faith is that it is active rather than passive. Abraham is faithful to the command of God to leave, the Little Leaguer is faithful to his resolution to never let that happen again. And, time and again in Scripture, the model of commitment to the Kingdom of God is described in terms of being a follower. These examples of faith are not properly characterized in terms of passivity. And yet pure passivity, of the sort displayed by the successful achievement of Stoic apatheia, can be an expression of trust. Such an attitude toward the universe as a whole can display one’s trust in the created order and in whomever or whatever is responsible for that order. But it is simply too passive to characterize the kind of affective faith involved in the examples of our Little Leaguer, Abraham, or followers in general. So the first point to note about the view that faith involves trust is that the view will have to be modified to accommodate the fact that some instances of trust do not help us understand certain types of faith. In short, we can’t identify faith with trust; at most, we can only take faith to be a special kind of trust.

Even that much can’t be sustained, however. Consider people who have trust issues, people who fail to develop basic trust in early childhood. Such people will have difficulty trusting, and some will never be able to trust much at all. They will, nonetheless, have to rely on others and the world around them, and they will typically come to realize that even though trust is optional, reliance isn’t. Could Abraham have been such a person, consistent with the remarks made about him? I don’t see why not. He would still have been relying on God in the process of leaving, and his leaving would have been by faith. But it would have been questionable whether his leaving would have involved trust. It is also noteworthy, as documented in Stump (2012), the degree of double-mindedness in Abraham’s following of God. It is not really clear to what degree he

7Well, qualifications are surely needed, for it is also plausible to think that degrees of belief are more psychologically basic than belief. I won’t pursue this tangent here, though it is worth noting that that the idea of a credence or level of confidence arises out of the commonplace platitude that we believe some things more strongly than others.
believed the divine promises, as opposing to holding a cherished hope that the path he was following would get him what he wanted—children or heirs if progeny were not in the cards. He brings Lot, a member of his family, with him as a potentiial heir, even though told to leave his family; he makes Eliezer his heir even after being given the promise of his own offspring; and even after Sarah’s death, he fathers more children with Keturah, apparently as an insurance policy against the barrenness of Isaac and Rebecca. Perhaps the preponderance of the evidence here suggests that our question about Abraham’s level of trust is that it isn’t a hypothetical possibility that he didn’t really trust much, but rather the actual situation as described in the story. Such a failure of trust is fully compatible with an exemplary faith. What makes Abraham the father of faith, on this understanding, is the stunningly broad and deep array of circumstances in which his disposition to act in service of an ideal is realized. A disposition can be present and yet fragile, realized only in the best of circumstances. The divine demands on Abraham are extensive and significant. His faith is deep and secure, expressed even under the most trying circumstances, and the exemplary character of that faith isn’t threatened at all by the supposition that it involves a significant degree of failure of trust.

Or, again, could people with trust issues have been among the followers of Jesus, either during his life on earth or during the life of the Church? Again, the answer would seem to have to be “yes.” Consider, for example, the response of Peter after Jesus’s “hard teaching” in John 6. Many disciples abandon Jesus because they can’t accept the teaching, and Jesus asks the closest whether they will leave as well. Peter’s response is not to endorse the teaching or to claim that he understands and believes the message Jesus is communicating. His response is merely to follow, for, as he says, “where else can we go?” Silence on the issue of the hard teaching is telling: it is reasonable to conclude that Peter believes that Jesus has the words of eternal life (he sincerely asserts this), but that he doesn’t know what to make of the claims about eating Jesus’s flesh and drinking his blood. His expression of faith, in spite of whatever misgivings are present, is similar to Abraham’s: it involves being a follower in terms of an activity faithfully engaged in over time, one which may involve, for those with trust issues, varying levels of success in trusting the one followed. But the faithful following will nonetheless involve the kind of affective...
faith characterized above, and if so, identifying faith with any particular kind of trust is mistaken as well.

We can see the distance between faith and trust more easily in the case of mundane faith. Consider those who followed Cæsar across the Rubicon. What did they see in him that led to them crossing the Rubicon with him? Never mind those who followed blindly, or as mercenaries, or as conscripts. No emperor survives without a loyal band of devoted aids. And what did they see in him? What they “saw” wasn’t something they cognitively perceived at all: it was their affections at work, an admiration, or hope, or wish, or affection for the man or the ideal he represents, that motivates. And what is it that their commitment to, their embracing of, an ideal, which in this case is a person and the prospects and hopes he embodies, involves? Their commitment is expressed in the crossing of the Rubicon. To have hesitated or wavered, to have retreated or abandoned at that point, would have been to be unfaithful to the ideal in question; it would have been a display of lack of faith. So the question to ask of such followers is not what cognitive states they were in at this crucial moment of, perhaps, January 10 in 49 B.C.E. if we want to know whether his followers had faith in him then; it is, rather, whether they crossed the Rubicon with him. And that they could have done, with the same affective features that led to their initial commitment to the vision for Rome embodied in this Julian band while finding trust difficult and any specific beliefs beside the point.

§6 Metaphysics and Epistemology

Is this line of thought one gigantic failure that confuses metaphysics and epistemology? The confusion charge can be generated as follows: you talk of knowing who has faith and who doesn’t and you answer that question by looking to see whether the person in question is faithful. But that’s just an epistemological matter of trying to discover who has faith and who doesn’t, not the metaphysical issue of what faith itself is. So you can have your inference to faith from faithfulness if you like, but we should still retain the cognitive picture of faith we know and love.

To see why this line of concern is misplaced, begin with a more telling Christian example. Consider the Johannine perspective here on the attraction of Christ: “and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” It is clear that what is fundamental to the Johannine perspective here isn’t cognitive at all. It is seated in the affections, involving a complex aesthetic and emotional experience of a sort that resonates with many of us. To try to paint it as fundamentally a cognitive experience involving belief that God exists and is good is simply too cognitive for understanding the experience of beheld glory. As I prefer to characterize this, the experience and the attachment
to an ideal which results, are fundamentally affective (which I continue to acknowledge, needs clarification and defense).

So the source of Johannine faith is clearly affective. But the source isn’t the faith, for if John had beheld the glory in question, and then decided to return to his ordinary life, he would have been in the same faithless category as the rich young ruler, who with sadness went back to his wealth when hearing the call to a different life. For faith to be present is for something else to be found here. And notice, what more is needed is not a better understanding of God and his goodness, but rather the orientation of a person in service of one ideal rather than some other. What is needed is a disposition to follow and for that disposition to be displayed in action. The disposition alone, undisplayed, perhaps may be counted as the weakest of faith, and the general defeasibility of dispositions may require us to categorize some persons as people of faith in spite of lack of faithfulness. But such are the extremes, at best, and I’m suspicious here. Perhaps it is the lingering and deep-seated attraction for not allowing distinctions that don’t make a difference, even though we should reject such a philosophy. So I hold my nose and leave open the barest possibility of faith without faithfulness, where the disposition to the relevant behavior is present but always and everywhere masked or finked. But when we find faithfulness to an ideal, displaying behavior that is an expression of a disposition whose source and identity advert to the affective origins of the attraction of the ideal, we can not only infer the presence of faith, but have located its nature as well.

§7 Conclusion

We may sum up our discussion this way: some kinds of faith might involve trust, just as some kinds might involve belief or some closely-related cognitive feature. In fact, it might be typical or normal or expected that even the affective faith I’m considering involves trust as well as belief or some closely-related cognitive feature. But its core lies elsewhere, and the central explanatory role that affective faith can play both in understanding various religious and secular examples of faith, not to mention the obvious way in which it allows for an explanation of how and why faith is a virtue, should lead us to conclude that at least one central kind of faith shouldn’t be understood in terms of trust.\textsuperscript{10}

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