What is Fundamental to Faith?

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§1 Introduction

We talk about faith and use the language of faith in a multitude of ways: faith in humanity, being a person of faith, having faith that the economy won’t collapse, the catholic faith, etc. Faith is sometimes used as a synonym of trust, sometimes of belief. Such diversity prompts methodological reflection: is systematic treatment even possible here, except in taxonomic terms? Pessimism isn’t much a methodology, though, and the more optimistic will want to follow familiar paths. Those familiar with the linguistic turn in philosophy may seek semantic or conceptual systematization, and those of a different methodological persuasion may prefer conceptual genealogy, attempting a historical or perhaps mythical account of where our current concept comes from or might have come from (hoping to some elucidate the phenomenon in question in the process). One might also proceed more metaphysically, looking for something metaphysically fundamental, arguing that one can have equally true but different descriptions of the world, one of which “cuts nature at its joints” and one which does not.

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1 The best defense of the needs for such is Jackson (1998) and Jackson (2005).
2 Examples of such include Craig (1990) on knowledge and Williams (2002) on truth.
3 A standard example is the white-black/whack-blite figure, due to Sider (2011). The figure is a rectangle composed of two squares, one black and one white. A diagonal line is then drawn from the upper left corner to lower right, with everything above the line counting as whack and everything below blite:

Regarding this figure, it is both truth that it is half white and half black as well as half whack and half blite. But the first purportedly “carves nature at its joints,” while the second does not. (It probably goes without saying, but I will anyway: this issue of fundamentality is a metaphysical twist on a long-standing problem in confirmation theory,
Here I articulate and adopt a different strategy, one focused on faith worth having. One might think of such an approach as one that mixes metaphysics and value theory, thinking of the idea of fundamentality here in terms of axiological fundamentality. For a basic tenet regarding faith is that it is not like being snub-nosed, which is true of some and not of others but nothing of deep interest turns on the difference, but rather something which is supposed to be a virtue and somehow central to a well-lived life. While one might prefer to bracket axiological questions in the interest of first giving a systematic treatment of the ways we use the language of faith (or of the variety of conceptualizations of this phenomenon), my approach will be to put axiology first, leaving open the possibility that a substantial portion of the logical space of the language of faith and the conceptualizations involved can be written off as uninteresting or unimportant. For example, perhaps there is an appropriate usage or conceptualization of faith on which Mark Twain was right: faith is believing what you know ain’t so. Others who want to give an account of faith on which this claim comes out true are welcome to it. I have no interest in such a thing, any more than I care to make a big issue about who is snub-nosed and who isn’t. My interest is in a quite general human phenomenon, one that is purportedly central to human flourishing, and seeing to what extent we can regiment the language of faith and conceptualizations of it in terms of this axiologically fundamental sort.

I will pursue this line through two sources, one secular and mundane and the other in the history of Christianity. I begin, though, by characterizing the difference between more standard approaches to the issue of fundamentality with the one I will rely on here. I then turn to the issue of what is fundamental in the Christian tradition, showing that, contrary to standard assumptions, it meshes nicely with the focus on axiological fundamentality, as does a more secular approach to faith. These conclusions will require some backfilling regarding the language of faith in Scripture, since these conclusions are at odds with standard interpretations of sacred texts. As we will see, however, there is good reason in favor of, and no reason from the data in question to oppose, the view that what is axiologically fundamental here is a kind of the new riddle of induction from Nelson Goodman (1955), replacing grue and bleen with whack and blite.)

4My use of the term ‘axiology’ is not meant to restrict the focus to moral goodness alone. Instead, I use the term for value-theoretic inquiry more generally, and in the present context, for any value-theoretic inquiry into what the good life involves. Presumably, such inquiry will include moral goodness but not be limited to it.
faith that involves dispositions toward responses in service of an ideal.

§2 Fundamentality and Axiological Fundamentality

Standard philosophical practice in seeking what is fundamental about a given phenomenon is illustrated well in the history of epistemology. A central aspect of philosophy has always been the question of the varieties and scope of human knowledge. In order to address this question, epistemologists have an interest in understanding the nature of knowledge in hopes that such understanding will aid reflection on its scope. When we turn to the question of the nature of knowledge, we find various proposed necessary conditions for it: some maintain that you can’t know what isn’t true, others that knowledge requires belief or some other similar cognitive commitment to the claim in question, and still others that you can’t know anything without satisfying some normative constraint, voiced variously as a requirement for, e.g., justification or warrant or rationality.

This multiplicity of necessary conditions leads directly to a concern about what is fundamental to knowledge, and whether any of the proposed necessary conditions can take the lead in answering the question of fundamentality. The typical approach in western philosophy has been to contrast knowledge with belief (or opinion) and with true belief, with the former being much more difficult to attain than the latter two. Though this starting point might be simply a matter of convenience, this starting point might also involve a philosophical commitment. The thought might be (and often is) that the legitimacy of the contrast arises because knowledge is an enhancement of belief and true belief, that what is fundamental about knowledge is that it is a form of true belief (or opinion).

There are two issues one might raise with such an assumption. The first is that the contrastive source of the view (that knowledge can be rightly contrasted with, and is harder to achieve, than true opinion) isn’t sufficient for the conclusion drawn (that knowledge is a form of true opinion), as is shown by the source of the contrast in Plato’s dialogues. The approach taken there contrasts knowledge with true opinion, taking them to be different things with different objects involved in each, thereby denying that knowledge is a form of true belief. This strongest evidence for this view is found in the dis-
discussion of the divided line in *The Republic* 509d-510a and the cave analogy that follows it. The four parts of the line—the shadows and reflections of visible things, the visible things themselves which are the objects of natural science, the intelligible realm investigated via mathematical reasoning, and the intelligible world via philosophical dialectic, with the cognitive attitudes for each of the four parts being, respectively, εἰκασία, πίστις, δύνοια, and νόησις. The realm of opinion is thus contrasted with the realm of knowledge, where the first two areas involve imagination (εἰκασία) and conjecture and the second involves belief (πίστις) about ordinary objects, while the realm of knowledge involves different objects and is investigated via proof and mathematical reasoning yielding understanding (δύνοια) or philosophical reasoning yielding insight or theoretical wisdom (νόησις). We might classify the first two as falling with the realm of the phenomenal (δοξά) and the latter two as falling with the domain of the epistemic (ἐπιστήμη). This theme is carried through to the latest dialogue, the *Timaeus*, where at 37b, Plato contrasts the insight and knowledge or understanding (νοῦς, ἐπιστήμη) with respect to the intelligible realm (logistikon) to the lesser, non-epistemic achievements of belief (δοξά) and opinion (πίστις) of the perceptual realm (aistheton). At the very least, then, one needs more than a contrast between knowledge and true belief to draw the conclusion that knowledge is a form of true belief.

This point meshes nicely with a second concern, one concerning the pervasiveness of necessary conditions. It maybe be necessary to believe in order to know, but neither can one know without everything being identical to itself. Yet, no one is tempted to think that what is fundamental to knowledge is self-identity. In general, trying to determine what is fundamental to X by focusing on something they have in common is not a sound practice. The result might say more about the psychology of the theorist than about the thing itself. Moreover, even where the necessary conditions in question are not trivial in the way self-identity is trivially necessary for knowledge, the fact that something has non-trivial necessary conditions shouldn’t be taken to show that what is fundamental to the thing should be located among these necessary conditions. For, as the example of Timothy Williamson (2000) reveals, one theoretical option to consider is that knowledge itself is fundamental and unanalyzable even if it requires belief and truth.

Even if we agree with the current assumption that Plato is mistaken to think that knowledge and opinion never coincide, there is a tendency to false consciousnessness in epistemological theorizing about knowledge, for it is well-known that the language of ‘knows’ is wider than always implying true
belief. Witness the attributions of knowledge to students who hesitantly voice a correct answer (“See, you did know!”), where the behavior is more akin to what we do when we guess rather than sincerely assert. Notice as well the non-factive uses: “I just knew Kerry was going to win!”, distraughtly uttered the morning after the election by someone who retired contentedly for the night, having concluded Kerry would win. Such non-factive uses are widespread and involve no misuse of language at all.

Some will say that such uses involve non-literal uses of the term in question, and thus should play no role in the theory of knowledge. But it is a vexed question how to distinguish literal from non-literal meaning, though there are clear examples of figurative uses of language where a non-literal meaning is obvious (e.g., “Juliet is the sun.”), and it is also a vexed question which uses of a term, if any, count as literal. One finds several strands in the literature when attempting to characterize the distinction in question. Sometimes accounts advert to the concept of what is conventional: literal meaning is conventional, non-literal non-conventional. It is worth noting on this score that non-factive uses of ‘knows’ are clearly conventional. Others focus on context-independence for literal meaning, but such a criterion for literalness would make all uses of ‘knows’ non-literal if contextualism is true! Moreover, it gives no ground for thinking that non-factive uses are to be treated differently from factive uses. Still others focus on the semantics/pragmatics distinction: semantics is the domain of the literal and pragmatics the non-literal. That viewpoint has the undesirable consequence of ruling out a priori the Lakoff thesis that many terms in natural language have a semantic value.

5David Lewis (1996) takes these examples to be decisive: knowledge doesn’t require belief.

6I ignore in the text the complicating factor that one has to regiment the use of ‘literal’ to make this move. Witness the following passage from Frances Brooke’s 1769 novel The History of Emily Montague: “He is a fortunate man to be introduced to such a party of fine women at his arrival; it is literally to feed among the lilies.” If we prefer to think of such uses as non-literal uses of ‘literal’, we should say that such non-literal uses are not new. We should also note that such uses introduce an important circularity worry in trying to articulate the thesis that certain uses are literal while others are non-literal.

7See, e.g., Lakoff (1993).

8See, for example, the explosion of interdisciplinary work on metaphor that resists the traditional view that metaphor is a special rhetorical tool that allows language users to rise, at least momentarily, out of the mundane world of literal meaning, represented well in Gibbs (2008).

9If evidence be needed, note that one lexical entry in the OED is: “Be absolutely certain or sure about something.”
that involves metaphor (see Lakoff (1993)). Perhaps some would relish that thought, but that result strikes me as excessive.

Careful attention to these issues should lead one to look for a better explanation of why epistemologists ignore, and why it is appropriate to ignore, certain quite common uses of the language of knowledge. I think there is one, and its existence provides support for the charge of false consciousness above.

That explanation supplements or replaces standard analytic assumptions (whether couched in terms of linguistic meaning or conceptual content) with axiological considerations. Instead of looking for what is fundamental to certain pieces of language or intentional correlates of such, an axiological approach to fundamentality attends from the outset to issues about what is worth theorizing about. In the context of epistemology, the driving concern is the question of whether there are connections between mind and world that count as successful connections, in a purely theoretical (as opposed to practical) sense. This issue becomes embodied in the challenges of the skeptic, who insists that we are fooling ourselves into thinking that any of our intellectual efforts count as successful in the intended sense. We thus have an axiological source, and an embodied one at that, for focusing on factive uses of the language of knowledge, for no skepticism worth its salt cares one wit whether attributions of non-factive knowledge turn out to be true: if they do, that still won’t count as a successful connection of the intended sort between mind and world.

My suggestion, then, is that the attempt to rule out non-factive uses of ‘knows’ from epistemology by appeal to a distinction between literal and non-literal uses of language arises from a false assumption. That assumption is that what we are doing when we do philosophy, and especially when we are giving a theory of knowledge, involves nothing more than conceptual or linguistic analysis. Some are attempting to do such analysis, and even those who are actually being guided by axiological considerations tend to conceptualize their theorizing in terms of the dominant social milieu of philosophy in the English-speaking world since Frege, in terms of linguistic or conceptual analysis. As a result, they suffer false consciousness, actually doing one thing and telling themselves and others that they are doing something else. Regardless of the merits of this charge of false consciousness, however, a better understanding is achieved by characterizing what we epistemologists are doing in terms of an looking for important connections between mind and world. In a context in which one encounters living, breathing skeptics, it is natural
to adopt as a working hypothesis the idea that knowledge has pre-eminent position here.\textsuperscript{10} The focus on knowledge here, however, is a focus driven by the axiological concerns arising in the disputes between skeptics and non-skeptics, not a linguistic or conceptual investigation of ordinary meaning or its associated cognitive content. We rule out non-factive uses of the language of knowledge because we are inquiring about connections between mind and world that \textit{matter} from a purely theoretical point of view, and knowledge fits that bill. In the process, we search for something fundamental to theorizing about what matters here, and thus arrive at a standard view, according to which what is axiologically fundamental here is true belief is a special sort.

What goes for epistemology goes as well for pisteology, the study of the nature and value of faith. There are the usual linguistic and conceptual analysis approaches to the subject, and they always leave me wondering, “Why bother?” Why not, instead, look at the phenomenon in question and ask what, in the neighborhood of things pointed to by the language in question, is worth having and thinking about? If we start from this axiological point of view, we should notice, first, that faith has behavioral, affective, and cognitive features to it, and we can ask which of these features is fundamental. Is faith fundamentally a disposition to behavior, is it fundamentally an affective state (such as a certain kind of preference or hope or desire), or is it fundamentally a cognitive state (such as a belief, perhaps as Mark Twain claimed, belief that one knows ain’t so)? But the issue of fundamentality is intertwined with axiology, so we will focus on proposals regarding fundamentality only to the extent that they offer some hope of providing a positive answer to the question of whether the kind of faith in question is good for anything, either theoretically or practically, just as we begin epistemology, appropriately done, by considering only those kinds of knowledge that are factive.

Starting in this way doesn’t change a natural starting point, one which endorses the standard view according to which faith is a type of belief or other cognitive state.\textsuperscript{11} In slogan form, the standard view is that faith is fundamentally doctrinal: its primary form is in terms of faith that something is the case, and such faith-that is a form of belief-that.

This standard approach should be resisted, however, for a number of reasons. First, if we consider faith that matters, our attention will turn first

\textsuperscript{10}A working hypothesis that is, in my opinion, false, as I argue in Kvanvig (2003).

\textsuperscript{11}For documentation that the standard view is as described, see Howard-Snyder (2013).
to thoughts of the virtue of faith, since that is the primary way in which the significance of faith is discussed. Once our focus is on faith as a virtue, we should notice that we are thinking about a dispositional character trait, and thus would seem to be considering something that is fundamentally a disposition to behavior or responses of a certain sort rather than a cognitive state of some kind. I’m not suggesting that faith can’t be both, since many if not all cognitive states are or involve dispositions toward behavior. I’m only pointing out that if we are looking for a virtue, we will look first look for the disposition and only locate it within cognition when given an argument that the disposition in question cannot help but be located within a cognitive state of a certain sort. Second, a proper understanding of the language of faith in the Biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek shows a predominant usage elsewhere than in any language of faith that takes a proposition as object, so the usual approach according to which faith is fundamentally doctrinal suffers a failure of fit with at least the typical Biblical language concerning faith. Third, a proper understanding of the development of Judaism places loyalty and commitment to Yahweh as the central feature to note concerning the use of the term emunah and its variants, translated as “faith” when in noun form and “believe” when in verb form. An excellent example of this centrality appears in Deuteronomy 9:23, where Moses berates the Israelites: “And when the Lord sent you from Kadesh-Barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you’; then ye rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God, and ye believed Him [he’emantem] not, nor hearkened to His voice.” Using a standard Hebrew device of repetition for emphasis, the believing not and the hearkening not are to be understood in terms of failure to follow through on the command given, not in terms of some underlying cognitive commitment to the truth or falsity of certain propositions. Moreover, it is this same feature that is present in the first description of Abraham as the father of faith, for it is his emunah that is credited to him as righteousness in Genesis 15:6, a credit that makes perfect sense when understood in terms of loyalty, commitment, and reliance (and would be perplexing if understood in terms of cognitive commitment to certain propositional truths). This understanding of emunah fits perfectly with the underlying narrative concerning the rise of Judaism, which emerges in a struggle with the temptations of idolatry generated by surrounding cultures, with the accompanying demand of loyalty, commitment, and obedience to the one true God. If in this development there are cognitive commitments to propositional claims, they are ancillary to the central feature of faith.
My suggestion, then, is that when we inquire about the phenomenon of faith, we should begin by asking what kind of thing faith is that could be something truly worth having, and for such an inquiry, we need to think first about the function of faith in human life. What is faith for, not only in religious contexts, but elsewhere? And in particular, what is it for, that could possibly sustain a theology built around it, or uphold the idea that it is a major virtue of a well-lived life? In short, we look at the variety of ways in which we talk about faith and variety of things that get labeled using that word, and we sort through the jumble, looking for something of value. We should look for, not what is analytically, conceptually, or metaphysically fundamental to faith, but rather what is axiologically fundamental.

The first step in such a process has already been noted: if we are looking for something of value here, it will be a trait that some people have and others don’t, and in order to be a trait that is capable of being considered to be a virtue, it will have to be a trait of character. Traits of character can be characterized functionally, in terms of their input and output conditions. So, when we look at faith in this way, we may begin by asking how it functions, what dispositional difference it makes in the lives of those who have it, and whether this function is one that counts as a good thing for a person who has it.

When approached in this way, the first thing one might notice is that faith has a kind of directedness to it. Some faith is directed at humanity itself, some at the future, some at God and his kingdom, some at one’s prospects or the prospects of one’s children. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but only illustrative. The lesson it teaches, however, is that faith is a special kind of character trait, one involving an attachment or commitment to something as an ideal, a telos, something worth achieving or pursuing. So, we can begin by describing faith worth having in terms of a disposition to behave or respond to the circumstances of life in service of an ideal. It is the kind of disposition that provides structural unity or integrity to a personality over a wide variety of circumstances, with the depth or degree of faith a measure of how wide the variety.

Here, I won’t spend time articulating and defending this fundamentally Deweyan approach to faith, since I have done so elsewhere. Such an approach allows a straightforward explanation of the significance of faith in

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As articulated in Dewey (1934).
See Kvanvig (2013, 2015b,a, 2016).
terms of its functional role in persons who have it: for ideals worth striving for, a person of faith is motivated to pursue the ideal and disposed to respond in ways directed at realizing that ideal. Of course, there is no guarantee that a person of faith will be focused on ideals worth striving for, but a similar caveat is present for other paradigmatic virtues such as courage: there is no guarantee that a person of courage will not put that character trait to use in pursuing bad ends. The proper conclusion is that these character traits are good ones to have, while noting that at the same time that much more is required for the goodness of a person than just a smattering of positive character traits.

Once we agree on this general characterization of faith worth having, one might wonder whether it offers hope for explaining the value only of secular, mundane faith, and whether the kind of faith that is fundamental in religious contexts, especially Christianity, is of a different and less defensible variety. On this issue, I will press several points. First, I will press the point that there needs to be a defense of any faith-based enterprise, including faith-based religions such as Christianity. Second, I will show how the received view of faith in the Christian tradition, on which faith is fundamentally doctrinal, makes it susceptible to the charge of being defenseless. We have already seen above some reason to question the credentials of the received view, and I will press this concern further by considering and rejecting the two strongest arguments on behalf of the received view. That will leave us with the option of adopting the received view (on indefensible faith alone!) or showing how to extend the above account of faith to religious contexts. I will turn to that issue after examining the received view of religious faith.

§3 Axiological Fundamental Faith and the Christian Tradition

In the Christian tradition faith is supposed to be central to salvation, and thus of utmost significance. That makes it important no matter what kind of faith is involved, but not in the right way. If we wish to think about fundamental faith from an axiological perspective, we want an answer that is more internal to the faith in question, for notice that things that are completely uninteresting and nearly useless in themselves can come to be deeply significant at the whims of a powerful despot who demands that they
be collected and treasured. So the centrality of faith to salvation doesn’t by itself yield the right kind of defense of it, but rather only shows that the religion in question is faith-based. In order to assess the significance of the kind of faith in question, we begin examining this perspective by asking “Why?” Why would it be that this particular phenomenon is so central to eternal salvation? One might resist the question, insisting that we are not in a position to question the standards God adopts or suggesting that there doesn’t need to be any explanation here. Regarding the former concern, I note that questions can be asked for purposes of resisting a viewpoint or challenging it, but they can also be asked in hope of achieving understanding; and there should be no objection to seeking understanding even if there is a theological objection to demanding one.

Once we ask the question (with the right attitude), we face the possibility that there is no answer to it—that the focus on faith is just a matter of divine fiat, with no underlying rationale of any sort. Such a result would be deeply disappointing, and would present a challenge to every theology that falls short of the strongest universalism (the view that in the end all must be saved). For if one’s eternal destiny turns on the issue of satisfying some arbitrary matter of divine fiat, it is hard to see how eternal destruction could be an appropriate response to failure on this score. Consider, for example, other possible arbitrary standards. Perhaps the standard is you have to cut off your little toe on your right foot or have a tattoo on your right forearm, on pain of eternal destruction. A first problem with “lose the toe” theology and “tattoo” theology is the unfairness to those who never hear the demand until it is too late. A very clear demand of justice is that just laws have to be publicized to the point that if you don’t know about the law, it’s your own fault. But standards of justice go further: a just law typically involves some point to it, some goal or consideration that counts in favor of that law in comparison with other laws. This point doesn’t imply that there typically exists a full justification for, e.g., why the speed limit is exactly 70 miles per hour rather any other number among the infinity of possible alternatives to a 70 mile-per-hour speed limit—an explanation need not be a contrastive explanation to be a good one. This point lies at the heart of an adequate understanding of the Buridan’s Ass Paradox, where we can get an explanation for the ass’s eating from the left bale even if we can’t get an explanation of the ass’s eating from the left rather than from the right.

14 For detailed discussion of this problem, see Kvanvig (1993).
When there is such a contrastive justification available, we might say that there is a complete defense available for it, but even laws lacking a complete defense typically have a rationale of some sort or other. Beyond a minimal requirement of consistency with other laws, we should expect some point to a law. For example, in the case of speed limit laws, the point of the law is a concern for public safety, yielding a range of possibilities for such laws within which the actual law falls, and the same principle holds more generally. In the particular case of faith, perhaps there is some purpose or interest or concern that is worthy of attention, and having faith is the, or a, fitting vehicle for such. If there simply is no rationale of any sort for a given theology, it has no capacity for explaining why “lose the toe” theology should be rejected.

Philosophers often live to fray the fringes of a generalization, and the same is to be expected here. “Why can’t there be arbitrary foundations for a life well-lived?” one might ask. If the question is intended to indicate resistance to any need for full, contrastive justification of the foundations, we can agree. If the question, however, is intended to signal the possibility of foundations for which there is no rationale at all, we should resist. Such a stance certainly doesn’t fit well with any major religion, and certainly not with Christianity, which grounds the life of faith in an account of the problems of sin and misery plaguing the created order. Moreover, the Christian story about how a life of faith is a suitable response to these problems is certainly not presented in Scripture in terms of an arbitrarily selected mark to identify the redeemed, but rather is part and parcel of a story about God’s redemptive purposes for all of creation in being reconciled with the Creator. From this perspective, an account of faith in terms of dispositions to respond in service of an ideal is easily seen as being internally related to a process of reconciliation, and we should want to see something similar from any alternative proposal about why faith is required for salvation. A response to the effect that that’s just the way it is should strike us as too absurd to take seriously, a response that shows the inadequacy of the theology in question and a serious misrepresentation of a religion that has played such a central role in a wide variety of flourishing lives and civilizations.

So, at least as a methodological stance, we should begin by assuming that there is a point to the requirement of faith beyond mere divine fiat, and we should investigate the nature of faith (worth having) in terms of

\footnote{For discussion and defense, see Kvanvig (2009).}
this assumption. Once we do so, however, the received view concerning the 
nature of faith, an approach that treats faith as a special kind of belief, must 
be rejected out of hand. For the idea that the difference-maker regarding 
one’s eternal destiny is simply a matter of being in the right cognitive state 
is no better than the idea that the difference-maker regarding one’s eternal 
destiny is a tattoo on the right forearm or a missing little toe on the right 
foot.

This point deserves clarification and commentary, since the language of 
belief is so common in English translations of Christian Scripture. Situated 
where we are in human history, when we think of belief we do so primarily 
in terms of claims that are true or false. We thus notice the false beliefs 
of the past: that the earth is flat, that the sun revolves around the earth, 
etc. And we focus in the present on beliefs that we wish no one held: beliefs 
that vaccinating children causes harm, beliefs that human behavior isn’t 
responsible for (some of) global warming, etc. So when we hear the call of 
the television evangelist to “just BELIEVE!” we wonder “believe WHAT?” 
The injunction and the question form such a natural pair that the answer is 
going to have to be in terms of a truth-claim of some sort, and that is just 
what we get: “believe that God loves you, believe that Jesus died for your 
sins,” etc.

Yet, if we take all of these quite common steps—beginning from the cen-
trality of faith to the Christian story, to a connection between faith and 
belief, and to an understanding of belief that involves a complement clause 
that makes a claim which is either true or not—we end up portraying a the-
ofogy of faith that is not better off than “lose your toe” theology. If this 
theological picture weren’t so common, it would immediately strike us as 
absurd and nonsensical, in the same way we respond when reading in The 
Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy that the number 42 is the answer to the ul-
timate question of life, the universe, and everything. Of all the concerns God 
might have about human beings and the lives that they live, how could it 
come down to something like a true/false checklist that you fill out honestly, 
and the answers determine your destiny? Why not whether you have a mole 
on your right cheek? Why not whether you want to eat M&M’s for break-
fast? My point is not that there will be no place for doxastic commitments 
of some sort when the theology of faith is properly developed, but only that 
the picture that goes straight from faith to propositional beliefs is one that 
turns the theology of faith into a hopeless disaster.

Defenders of the received view, the view on which faith is fundamentally
doctrinal, will not go away so easily, however. There are two central ways to try to resist the arguments just given, both appealing to the authority of Scripture. The first involves the obvious point that Scripture is full of claims that link faith and belief, and the second is that faith and doubt are contrastive states in Scripture.

§4 The Received View and the Scriptural Language of Belief

In order to assess the defense of the received view by appeal to the language of belief in Scripture, we need to begin with a methodological account of the commitments involved in the received view. Philosophical accounts of various phenomena are given often in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions of varying strengths, corresponding with what kind of conditional is being used in the account. In the typical case, nothing short of metaphysical necessity would seem to be adequate for a philosophical account of this sort, so we can assume that those who give accounts of faith in terms of propositional belief take propositional belief to be metaphysically necessary for faith.\textsuperscript{16} Such an approach provides little hope of telling us what is fundamental to the thing in question, what is its basic nature. To answer that question, something more is needed, and one way to do so is to use the symbol ‘\(\equiv_{df}\)’ in place of ‘iff’, where the former is interpreted to involve identity by definition, i.e., an account of the meaning of the term used to pick out the phenomenon in question. Such accounts carry a heavy burden, however, since any interesting analysis of this sort will do more than provide obvious synonyms for the term to be analyzed. Once we move beyond obvious synonyms, one wonders how to defend the claim of meaning identity anymore, a worry that crystallizes in the difficult paradox of analysis and is threatened by Quinean concerns about the presupposed analytic/synthetic distinction.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16}I am mildly uncomfortable with the qualifier ‘metaphysically’ here, since it smacks of “philoso-speak.” I would rather speak of necessity, full stop, contrasting it with relative necessities: logical (one for each system of such), scientific, physical, chemical, biological, anthropological, sociological, psychological, etc.). But explaining this picture of modality will take us too far afield for present purposes, so I’ll stick with the more standard language of metaphysical necessity in the text.

\textsuperscript{17}The paradox of analysis has roots in Plato, particularly in the \textit{Meno} paradox concerning how learning anything not already known is possible, and can be found in both
As a result, philosophers may still use the connective ‘\(=_{df}\)’ without really intending to provide an analysis of the term in question, but when they do use it in this weakened way, one wonders exactly what import they attach to it. One kind of response is to distinguish real from nominal definitions, noting that only the latter rely on some requirement of analyticity for the result. A real definition is not really anything linguistically defining at all: it is a decomposing of the phenomenon in question into its constituent parts, where the latter are more basic metaphysically, rather than semantically or conceptually.

A related, though slightly different, approach replaces the language of definition with that of explanation. Instead of using ‘\(=_{df}\)’ or ‘iff’, this approach supplements the language with necessary and sufficient conditions with a ‘because’ clause: “\(X\) if and only if, and because \(Y\)”.

The slippage between ‘iff’, ‘\(=_{df}\)’, and ‘if and only if, and because’ is fodder for philosophical abuse, however. Necessary conditions are easy to find, but constituents and explanatory bases much harder. So one can make the beginning of one’s account much more palatable by using the language of necessary and sufficient conditions, even when the demands of one’s project require something stronger. Suppose, for example, that one’s project is to give a philosophical account of the property of being human. If one thinks in terms of constituents of this property, or explanatory bases of such, the project is daunting: where to start? Thinking in terms of necessary conditions, however, yields a harvest of possibilities: being a physical object, being an animal, being located in space-time, normally having hair in the actual world, not being born on Mars in the actual world, even being such that time exists or that \(2+2=4\).

Consider the latter disjunctive possibility. It is a plausible suggestion as a necessary condition for being human, but it is not a plausible suggestion about the constituents or explanatory bases of being human. If our goal is to understand what it is to be human, what is fundamental to that property of a thing, we will want something more by way of a beginning than a defense of the claim that a certain feature is necessary for being human. Claims of necessity are logically pristine, however, in comparison with claims about what is fundamental or explanatorily basic. As a result, a starting point in

Frege’s *Philosophie der Arithmetik* as well as G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* in the origins of analytic philosophy, though the phrase ‘the paradox of analysis’ is only first used in Langford (1942). The classic Quinean location for worries about the analytic/synthetic distinction is Quine (1953).
terms of a necessary condition is attractive because tractable: the defense of it need only stave off counterexamples. The discerning, however, will detect the sleight of hand needed to get the account off the ground and insist that one begin more transparently.

We can see this pattern in the received view about faith. We can see how by contrasting some resistance to the received view, articulated in different ways by Robert Bellah and Daniel McKaughan, with a response by Alvin Plantinga, conceived as a defense of the received view. To set up the debate, we imagine a theorist begins by considering the relationship between faith and propositional belief, taking the latter to be necessary for the former. If such a theorist is methodologically unreflective, this might be thought of as the first principle for a full account of the nature of faith. To such a first principle, however, resistance comes: whatever one makes of the language of belief in various translations of Scripture into English, the kind of belief in question is hardly ever that of propositional belief. It is the language of *de re* belief (e.g., Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness) or “belief in” rather than “belief that” (e.g., “You believe in God, believe also in me.”).

This worry that the language of belief in Scripture is not the language of propositional belief is articulated by both Robert Bellah and Daniel McKaughan. Bellah writes,

“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)

McKaughan is similarly concerned that the received view distorts:

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, *kr̥d-dhe) 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)

The background for these complaints about the received view is that the language of belief in Scripture is linguistically related to the language of faith in a way that is absent in English. In English, there is no verb form of the noun ‘faith,’ whereas in Scripture, the noun πίστις (in English, “faith”) has verb forms which are translated in terms of believing, and when Scripture ties believing to faith and salvation, it uses these verb forms. So, the basic point that Bellah and McKaughan share is that the verb forms of πίστις conveyed a more affective emphasis as opposed to the more purely cognitive tone involved in the current meaning of ‘believe’. If we divide the life of the mind into cognitive, affective, and conative elements, paradigm examples of the three are, respectively, beliefs, emotions, and intentions or strivings. When we speak of matters of loyalty and what one sets one’s heart on, it is clear that we are in the domain of the affective and conative, even if the affection and conation in question also require the presence of various cognitive elements. McKaughan’s point is that a paradigmatically cognitive term such as ‘believe’ is ill-suited to convey the paradigmatically affective and conative sense involved in the verb forms of πίστις.

It might seem that these points are easy to resist, however, even if one grants that the language of belief in Scripture is more typically a matter of “belief in” rather than “belief that”:

“So believing in God is indeed more than accepting the proposition that God exists. But if it is more than that, it is also at least that. One cannot sensibly believe in God and thank him for the mountains without believing that there is such a person to be thanked and that he is in some way responsible for the mountains. Nor can one trust in God and commit oneself to him without believing that he exists; as the author of Hebrews says,
“He who would come to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarde of those who seek him.” (Heb. 11:6)” (Plantinga 1983, p. 18)

The idea is clear: even if faith is a matter of belief-in rather than belief-that, the latter is necessary for the former, and so the latter can easily be defended as necessary for faith.

By way of foreshadowing, we will come back to the Hebrews passage that Plantinga relies on, but it is also worth noting the way in which Plantinga identifies accepting a proposition with believing it. On the latter score, many philosophers think there is a distinction between believing and accepting, and the received view about faith is undermined if belief-in only requires acceptance-that rather than belief-that, if these philosophers are correct.18 A defender of the received view can use the Plantinga quote to respond to Bellah and McKaughan, however, by treating Plantinga’s appeal to acceptance as a slip of the tongue, replacing it with the language of belief. The possibility of distinguishing the two nonetheless creates additional problems for the received view which I will only note here and not pursue, for several philosophers have recently defended that the received view is mistaken precisely because faith requires only some cognitive state weaker than belief.19

Returning to the main point, I want to insist that it takes a bit of methodological carelessness to view this dialectic as a suitable defense of the received view. The received view is supposed to tell us what faith is, not just what co-varies with it of necessity. In pursuit of this goal, the received view begins from the plausible idea that propositional belief is necessary for Biblical faith. In response to the complaints of Bellah and McKaughan that the place of the language of belief in Scripture isn’t that of propositional belief, the defender of the received view agrees, but insists that propositional belief is similarly necessary for the kind of belief-in that is central to the Scriptural language of belief. Such a dialectic would be suitable if all we wanted was a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for faith, but if we are explicit about looking for constituents or explanatory bases of faith, the remarks about the priority of trust and obedience over against propositional belief (or cognitive assent)


are not so easily dismissed. For those remarks don’t need to challenge the necessity of propositional belief for faith in order to undermine the received view, and the received view, conceived of as an account of the fundamental nature of faith, can’t be defended against this objection by appeal to a purportedly necessary connection between faith and propositional belief.

So the first point to note is that the received view has to take more seriously the methodological requirements on giving an account of the fundamental nature of faith. It is not enough to defend the necessity of propositional belief for faith; if a defense of this starting point is going to be adequate, it must begin by taking the complaints voiced by Bellah and McKaughan much more seriously than can be done by relying only on the Plantinga point above.

Moreover, there is some theoretical discomfort in relying on the Plantinga point at all, for the claim that belief-that is necessary for belief-in is a bit strained in other contexts: does faith in democracy imply belief that democracy exists? That’s a strange belief to have, if one thinks that there aren’t any democracies to be found. Or consider a different case, the case of faith in or belief in equality of opportunity. Here the import of the language is readily understood: one is committed to such equality, one’s life is arranged in service of this ideal. To suggest that such involves belief that equality of opportunity exists is certainly not involved.

One might try to resist this concern in the following way: faith in democracy involves an awareness of what democracy is, and such awareness requires a belief that there is such a thing as democracy, even if it is only an abstract entity or possibility of some sort. This response is, however, strained: a believer in democracy or equality of opportunity doesn’t seem to need to expend any mental energy making ontological commitments to abstract entities. Such a believer must know or be aware of what democracy or equality of opportunity is, and this knowledge or awareness will presumably involve some sorts of propositional doxastic commitments. But the point remains that there is no necessary connection between belief in X and believing that X exists.

A defender of Plantinga’s remarks might note, however, that Plantinga doesn’t claim that belief in X requires believing that X exists. Instead, he only says that belief in God requires believing that God exists. That claim can be true even if the more general principle is not. We should expect, however, that Plantinga’s claim here derives from some sort of generalization, for it would be amazing to find him admitting that the requirement holds nowhere else except in the case of God. Perhaps it doesn’t hold for any and
every value of X, but even so, we should be able to ascertain some general
category for which it does hold if it holds in the case of God. The Hebrews
passage says it is true of God, and the most plausible reason for it holding
in that case would see to be because God is a person: where X is a person,
having faith in X requires believing that X exists.

We can often find evidence of a translation gone amiss by registering dis-
agreements with what the translation says, and such is the case here with
Hebrews 11:6. Upon reading the claim in question, one ought to be sus-
picious. One should wonder why such doxastic confidence in the existence
of God and in his character as a rewarder are required in order to (try to)
draw near to him. An extremely strong preference for nearness to God could
prompt efforts to draw near to him in spite of significant uncertainty about
whether he rewards those who seek him, for example. If the preference is
strong enough, a mere hope that God would reward the search would seem
to be strong enough.

Consider the following analogy. A young man from a remote village in
colonial America can’t decide whether to sign on to a seven-year appren-
ticeship to learn blacksmithing. He must make a decision soon, but doesn’t
know what to do. A traveling minstrel stops to chat and upon learning of
the dilemma, reports that there are rumors of a very wise hermit living up
in the hills who has provided sage advice to many young men about career
choices. It is said that if he is willing to give advice, he’ll spend a few days
coming to understand the seeker, after which he’ll make a recommendation.
The rumor is that his advice never goes wrong. The young man reflects,
deciding to try to find the hermit and try to get his advice.

The question to ask is, in pursuing this plan, what our young man must
believe. The answer is fairly obvious about what beliefs aren’t required. He
doesn’t have to believe that the hermit will be a useful source of informa-
tion, though he must take some positive attitude toward this possibility. He
doesn’t even have to believe that the hermit exists; it would be enough for
him to have a strong hope that there is such a hermit.

Returning then to the Hebrews passage, the doxastic commitments indi-
cated seem excessive. If you want to draw near to God, why would one need
to believe that God will reward such an attempt? Just as in the case of the
young man and the hermit, a strong hope would seem to be sufficient.

If one wants to preserve the full authority of Scripture in the face of such
questioning, the obvious move to make is to consider whether the translation
overreaches. Moreover, if we attend to the points in the McKaughan passage
quoted earlier, noting the way in which a more ancient conception of belief had “more to do with love, loyalty, and commitments akin to pledging one’s allegiance,” one might gloss the verse in question as follows: if you want to draw near to God, you must be committed to, be loyal to, have your heart set on him and his interest in a relationship with you. Put in this way, the concerns about the requirement being too strong are no longer pressing. For, put in this way, the verse is counseling against half-hearted, casual efforts on the part of seekers. Failure to be fully committed in this way is an indication that one isn’t really trying to draw near to God.

The proper conclusion to draw, then, is that the Hebrews passage provides no support for the view that belief in X requires belief that X exists, even when X is restricted to persons. In light of the vignette of the young villager and the hermit, we should be suspicious of the requirement as well. For the villager sets out on a quest, showing faith in the hermit (at least, provided there is such a hermit to be found), but not needing to believe that the hermit exists in order to engage in behavior explained by the faith in question.

In addition, we can readily see why one might be tempted toward the requirement Plantinga endorses, in spite of its falsity. First, human history is the story of near unanimity on the question of the existence of God, and certainly in the Abrahamic traditions, the question wasn’t one of the truth or falsity of theism, but rather one of allegiance toward the one true God. In such a context, where belief-in signals the kind of allegiance in question, such allegiance is built on top of a prior theism, and so it is appropriate to describe such allegiance in terms of going beyond mere theism (or mere Christian theism). Once we try to generalize beyond this context, however, faith in (belief in) a person or cause need not be built on top of a prior doxastic commitment and need not involve such, even if the fulfillment of that faith will result in such commitments in the future and even if those with such doxastic commitments will display greater psychological integration among conative, affective, and cognitive aspects of personhood.

Returning to a more general level of discussion, here is where we are. I have been emphasizing that we cannot make philosophical progress in thinking clearly about faith without being adequately reflective about what a good theory must answer to, and in particular without abandoning the idea that a good starting point is simply to latch onto some necessary condition or other and add qualifiers until one achieves a grand conjunction of conditions that are jointly sufficient for faith. Such an approach is methodologically unsound in the present context, in which we are attempting to determine
whether faith-based religions such as Christianity appeal to faith of a sort than is axiologically fundamental.

A full defense of the received view thus requires more than what is contained in the Plantinga quote above. It is equally true, though, that the quotes from Bellah and McKaughan work better as a demand for further explanation by defenders of the received view than as conclusive objections to that view. It is thus incumbent on us in the current context to examine carefully what to make of the Scriptural language concerning the relationship between faith and belief to determine whether it is best explained by the received view.

§5 Faith and Belief in the Context of Scripture

We can begin such a discussion by first noting that the language of faith in the Bible has a complexity not found in English. This complexity arises from the fact that there is no verb form in English that is linguistically related to the noun ‘faith’, whereas the language of the New Testament translated using variants of the English verb ‘believe’ are verb forms of πίστις (the noun translated as the English noun “faith”).20 This relationship is present the Hebrews passage to which Plantinga appeals. The pleasing of God is identified in the second part of the version with coming to him or drawing near to him, and language of πίστις is used in both parts of the verse, the noun form first and verb form later. It would not be misleading, then, to translate as follows: “without faith it is impossible to please God, indeed anyone who comes to him must have faith that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” So why do translations uniformly use the language of belief here and elsewhere rather than the language of having faith? One

20Some details: the language of faith in the Bible derives derives from the Greek term πίστις (–εως, –ή). The root form of this noun is πείτω, with a primary meaning of “to persuade” but translated variously in the KJV, for example, as ‘persuade’ (22x), ‘trust’ (8x), ‘obey’ (7x), ‘have confidence’ (6x), ‘believe’ (3x), ‘be confident’ (2x). (See entry 4102 in Strong (2007[1890]).) The verb πείτω, has as root a term meaning “to bind”, helping to explain the variation in translations of the term from ‘believe’ to ‘obey’, from something that seems to connote something purely mental to something that is most clearly behavioral. (It may also be worth noting the emotional and affective overtones of ‘be confident’, which is sometimes taken to be a purely cognitive notion, as in Bayesian epistemology and standard decision theory, but has a more primary connotation in ordinary language of a feeling of a certain sort).
reason might be that the latter is more cumbersome, but that would still leave the question of why the language of belief rather than something else.

One disturbing possible explanation is this: translating verb forms of πίστις using the language of belief might simply show how impoverished our folk psychology is about cognition. Folk psychological explanations treat what we do as explicable in terms of the various combinations of beliefs and desires. For example, those who have a headache take an analgesic, and we might wonder why they do so. Their behavior is easily explicable by standard folk-psychological categories: they want (desire) to be rid of the headache, and they believe that taking an analgesic will be effective in satisfying that desire. The same explanatory template may also be at work in the standard translations of this verse: if we find a person drawing near to God (or trying to), the folk psychological explanation will include wanting to draw near and believing that there is someone to draw near to who would reward attempts to do so. Anyone assuming such a folk psychology, then, would have no trouble replacing occurrences of the verb forms of πίστις with the language of belief. This possibility of translation influenced by background theoretical assumptions cannot be ignored, and since we have no verb form in English to correspond to the noun ‘faith’, the search for an appropriate verb for the verb forms that correspond to πίστις is especially susceptible to the influence of folk psychology.

What if one were convinced the connections between the life of the mind and human behavior were more complex, however? What if one were convinced that not everything non-cognitive that motivates action can be reduced to (some degree of) desire, and what if one were convinced that not everything that guides action can be explained with reference to what is believed? Then, it would seem, the verb forms of πίστις must be translated more cautiously, reflecting that they are verb forms of a noun translated as “faith”, and not relying on some background theory that all the cognitive work to be done in explaining behavior must involve propositional belief. The best way to do so is to still use the language of faith in both cases, reflecting the obvious feature of the text which draws attention to the connection between the noun and the verb. We might even exploit the rhetorical device

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}It is worth noting in this context that our best understanding of human decision-making, encoded in standard decision theory, treats human behavior in terms of ranked preferences and degrees of belief. There is some plausibility to the suggestion, then, that we have already arrived at the conclusion that the folk psychology that treats human behavior as explicable in terms of belief/desire complexes has already been abandoned.}\]
of turning a noun into a verb here (the device of antimeria), noting that the language of Scripture ties the faith of a person linguistically to what that person “faiths”. We could begin to speak this way as well. We could say, for example, that we faith our positions in philosophy and politics, that Jesus faithed Peter in spite of predicting that Peter would deny him, that Caesar and his followers faithed each other in crossing the Rubicon, or that no matter how many times humanity lets us down, continuing to faith humanity is still to be recommended. Adopting this strategy, we could translate Hebrews 11: 6, for example, as “And without faith it is impossible to please God, indeed anyone who comes to him must faith that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The problem with such a translation, however, is that such rhetorical devices are unusual enough that they would be likely to perplex rather than enlighten.

So a central point to note here is that translations can go wrong not only by erring about the internal features of the language to be translated, but also by relying on a mistaken background theory. We must note that there is no possibility of translation without such dependence, but it is one thing to take one’s assumptions into account and acknowledge them and quite another thing to act on them unreflectively. This point, together with the noted relationship between the noun and verb forms of πίστις in the Bible converge to show that the language of belief employed in English translations doesn’t provide the evidence needed to endorse the received view.

Yet, even if the language of belief used in English translations of the Bible does not show that the received view is correct, defenders of the received view have another resource to use in defense of their view. We often learn something important about the nature of a thing by noting what contrasts with it. We learn something about humility by contrasting it with pride, something about modesty by contrasting it with vanity. So, in Scripture, what is the relevant contrast with faith? The answer, it would seem, is that faith contrasts with doubt. Once we endorse this claim, we have fodder for the received view: lack of doubt requires full belief, and so if faith contrasts with doubt, it has a nature involving full belief. We turn, then, in the next section, to this formidable defense of the received view.
§6 Scriptural Contrasts to Faith

The language of doubt in English conveys the idea of a mental state involving uncertainty, and if we put this together with the idea that doubt is a contrast to faith, we end up with the view that faith requires, not merely belief, but (psychological, subjective) certainty. Such a conception of faith, though quite common in conservative Christianity, is certain to result in self-deception among those who wish to be people of faith, for uncertainty is simply unavoidable. Defenders of the requirement can take refuge in the thought that what is impossible for us is possible for God, with the presence of faith being as impossible as a rope fitting through the eye of a needle but miraculously happening nonetheless.\(^{22}\)

We need not tread this path of defense, however. One of the hallmarks of Biblical studies of the twentieth century is the uncovering of differences between Hebrew and Greek frames of mind, and seeing the effects of the latter on interpretations of a document that is better understood in terms of the former than the latter. Caution is in order, of course, since by the time of New Testament writings, the influence of Greek culture on Jewish culture had been occurring for at least four centuries. Even so, the writings in question are clearly best understood as products of the Abrahamic tradition, so when differences between Hebrew and Greek frames of mind are detected, it is worthy of note. In this regard, consider the remarks about doubt and certainty by Rabbi Akiva Tatz:

A fascinating insight into the subject of doubt can be gained from examining the root words themselves, as always in Torah. The Hebrew word for doubt is "safek," and for certainty, "vadai." Amazingly, these commonly-used words are not to be found in the entire biblical writings! Nowhere does the Torah mention the Hebrew forms for doubt or certainty. Both these words are of Rabbinic origin. (Tatz 1993, Ch. 5)

Given this fact and the consistent emphasis of the synoptic Gospels that Jesus was not a fan of oral traditions that added to the Torah, one can

\(^{22}\)For those preferring the actual Biblical metaphor, trade in the rope for a camel. I use the other metaphor because of an attraction for the plausible speculation that it is the metaphor Jesus used, having been misheard because of the auditory similarity in the Aramaic terms for “rope” and “camel”.

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begin to wonder what Jesus might have been saying that would justify any Greek language that involves the current conception of doubt that contrasts with certainty. Or, more plausibly, one might begin to wonder whether the terms that are translated in this way might not be best understood in this way. The language of doubt in the New Testament typically involves one of two words translated as “doubt” (διακρίνω, διστάζω), so one might wonder whether these terms as used really do convey the current conception of doubt and uncertainty.

The most common of the two terms in the New Testament is διακρίνω, and it is used, for example, in James 1:6, where it is translated in the King James Version in terms of wavering: “But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” Regarding the possibility that we misunderstand this term when we see in it terms of doubt and uncertainty, note that a meaning for διακρίνω involving the notion of uncertainty is simply unknown prior to or contemporaneous with the New Testament. This fact provides evidence that the language of uncertainty is not a proper way to understood the use of this term:

Similarly, in contrasting διακρίνω with words in the πίστις group, it was not the NT authors’ intention to invest διακρίνω with a previously unknown meaning, but rather to ensure that their readers understood πίστις and πιστεύω as meaning “faithfulness” and “loyalty” rather than “certainty about a given proposition.” (De Graaf 2005, p. 739)

Notice that this conclusion about how to understand διακρίνω makes sense of it as a contrast to πίστις as understood earlier. If we understand πίστις as a disposition to respond in service of an ideal, and we understand διακρίνω as a contrast to loyalty and commitment to a cause or person, the two form a natural contrastive pair, in much that same way as pride and humility do.

Much the same can be said regarding the translation of διστάζω, the other term translated as “doubt”, used, for example, in Jesus’s remonstrance to Peter for failing to walk on the water during the storm: “Oh ye of little faith, why did you doubt (διστάζω)?” A similar conclusion to that above has been defended regarding this term as well, in connection with Matthew 28:17 (the only other place in which this term is used in the New Testament), where it is said of the disciplines, “Some worshiped and some doubted.”

23As documented in Kittel et al. (1964).
A further preliminary is the famous difficulty of ‘doubting’ (*distazo*, v. 17b), which has brought forth numerous suggestions as to its possible significance here and is generally considered a puzzle. Much of the problem lies in a likely misconstrual of the Greek. The almost universal assumption is that ‘doubting’ is an alternative to reverent prostration, that is, that some reverently prostrated themselves while others doubted. But there is nothing either in the Greek or in the context to warrant this.

... All these problems are caused by the assumption that *hoi de edistasan* is meant to introduce a subgroup within the disciples, which then becomes puzzling precisely because of the lack of further reference to it. The problems are resolved by dispensing with the assumption. That is, the sense of the text is that *distazo* characterizes the response of all the disciples. ...

Thus, one should translate: ‘and when they saw him the reverently prostrated themselves. But they were hesitant, and Jesus came up and said to them ...’

Why then the depiction of the disciples by *distazo*?24 The only other use of *distazo* in the New Testament is Matthew 14:31, where it is part of Jesus’ rebuke to Peter for his failure to respond consistently in his walking on the water to Jesus. The rendering ‘doubt’ is probably due to its juxtaposition in 14:31 with ‘little faith’ (*oligopistos*) and the traditional Christian polarity of ‘faith’ and ‘doubt’; but it is unhelpful in either 14:31 or 28:17 because it is likely to imply too much. (Moberly 2000, p. 192)

The central point here is that the term, used in the two places in which it occurs in the New Testament, can generate better understanding of what is being communicated by the text by translating in terms of the language of hesitancy rather than doubt. While it is true that, unlike *διακρίνω*, there are well-attested uses prior to and outside the New Testament where *διστάω* means “doubt,” it is also true that this term can also refer to hesitating. Notice that the latter is overtly behavioral, while the former meaning refers to a cognitive state. Given our penchant for explaining overt behavior by attributing enduring character traits, it is natural to infer the presence of

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24 In the story in Matthew 28:16–20, where the disciples see Jesus on the shore of the sea of Galilee, and which culminates with remark that “some worshiped but some doubted.”
doubt when observing hesitancy, but the inference should be resisted. Hesitancy can have many causes, one of which is uncertainty, but not always and not uniformly enough to make such an assumption when translating.

The evidence here concerns the puzzle Moberly notices as well as a similar puzzle about Matthew 14. Part of the puzzle in Matthew 28 is that a contrast between worshipping and doubting is not a natural contrast, whereas a contrast between worship and hesitancy is a quite natural contrast. (Of course, if Moberly is right that no groups are being contrasted, we get a natural contrast being used to communicate a informative and perhaps surprising conjunction about the disciples: they both worshiped and displayed hesitancy, a remarkable combination.) It is worth noting that there is something similarly puzzling about the Matthew 14 narrative. The author of the gospel writes,

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

Jesus’s response here is mysterious. Our folk psychological categories would have us interpret behavior in terms of belief/desire complexes, and here the explanation offered by the author focuses on Peter’s fear. The explanation is affective in nature: he doesn’t want to drown! But then, the author attributes to Jesus a different explanation: you stopped and needed to call out because of uncertainty! The discord between Jesus’s perspective and the author’s is mysterious, leading one to wonder whether the translation miscommunicates.

Let me be quick to point out that the two explanations can both be true, so it is not as if there is any inconsistency between the two explanations. But, given the well-entrenched character of folk psychology, it would be natural for an author to indicate some awareness of competition between the two explanations. For they can’t both be sufficient explanations of the behavior without being overdetermining as well, and such possibilities are remarkable. One can try to explain away the puzzling difference between Jesus’s remark and the author’s claim by pointing out that no matter how natural it would

25I note that the very next sentence in the passage from which the Moberly quote above is taken confuses the two: “The sense of distazo in each text is that of hesitancy and uncertainty.” My point is that even if the two naturally go together, they need not. And that fact makes the Moberly translation in terms of hesitancy the right one in these two verses.
be to notice the puzzle and remark on it, at least indirectly, there is no requirement here, and so we don’t need to question the translation simply in order to solve the puzzle. With that point I agree, but if we have independent reason to question the translation, and doing so makes the puzzle disappear, so much the better. And such is the case here.

If we adopt Moberly’s conclusion about how to translate διστάζω in Matthew 28:17, we can dissolve this puzzle, for we should then understand the passage in such a way that the contrast Jesus calls attention to is one between faith and hesitating. Peter hesitates, and that results in his need for help. This interpretation resolves any tension between Jesus’s explanation of Peter’s behavior and the authorial perspective. Jesus’s explanation of Peter’s call for help is overtly behavioral: “you sank because you hesitated, you wavered in your response to my invitation to walk to me on the water!” We can then consistently note both that Peter needed help because he hesitated, and that he hesitated because he was afraid. The tension disappears.

This interpretation of the language of doubt in the New Testament also fits naturally with the picture of fundamental faith involving a disposition to respond to the circumstances of life in service of an ideal. Where the ideal in question involves God and his kingdom, the appropriate contrast to faithful pursuit of this ideal is wavering, hesitating, and shrinking from the task when things become difficult. In such circumstances, the remark “Oh ye of little πίστις, why did you διστάσετε?” is poignant indeed, whereas anything like “Oh ye of little faith, why were you uncertain?” sounds like a category mistake.

§7 Dispositions to Respond

There is a slightly different way to make this same point that also help us appreciate what is involved in the kind of dispositional faith I am claiming is axiologically fundamental. Being disposed to respond in service of an ideal involves the integration of a wide variety of one’s concerns and interests, and so a person of faith, in this sense, is a person with a mental, emotional, and psycho-social life that is integrated in terms of the ideal in question—integrated in a way that generates the disposition noted. But the organizational unity of a life is one thing, and the manifestations of it in thought, action, emotion, and will is another. This point is a straightforward implication from the general nature of disposition and underlying structure.
of ordinary objects: a fragile glass is disposed to break when being struck hard with a hammer, but circumstances can be described coherently in which the glass is fragile but when struck hard by a hammer, it does not shatter. Possibilities of this sort arise out of the phenomena of masking and finking of dispositions. Masking occurs when there is conflict between dispositions: a match can be disposed to light upon striking, but it can also be disposed not to light when struck while wet. Finking occurs when the triggering circumstances for a given disposition are also triggering conditions for the loss of that disposition. The examples of finking tend to be rather artificial—one might say they are the kinds of cases only a philosopher can love—but here’s one: a very fragile vase is so special to the king that he finds a wizard with special hexing abilities to watch over the vase, charging him with leaving the vase precisely as it is unless threatened by breakage; the wizard is so diligent in his duties (the king is known for rewarding the inept with beheading) that the vase remains undisturbed and thus fragile but any triggering condition for breakage will result in hexing by the wizard thus rendering the vase unbreakable. The vase is thus disposed to break upon being struck hard by a hammer, but this disposition would be lost upon that very triggering condition.

Cases of this sort, those involving masking or finking, cause surprise in those who know of the dispositional character of the object in question. The same is true when the disposition involves persons: when someone known for being prompt is late for an appointment, we are surprised. When faced with such a set of circumstances, one is naturally puzzled: this isn’t what we expected! This general phenomenon can occur as well with a disposition to respond in service of an ideal. The internal organization can be fully present, the integration of heart, soul, mind, and strength can be realized in such a way that the disposition is strong, and yet the expected outcomes fail to be realized in circumstances in which faith is tested.

In light of the possibility of the internal organization of a person becoming dissociated from expected, characteristic behavior, we should expect admonitions in favor of the preferred internal organization and cautions against failures of this preferred structure to be displayed. If faith is a disposition to respond in service of an ideal, hesitancy and wavering in particular cir-

\[\text{26} \] The language of finkish dispositions is due to Martin (1994), though the date is misleading—the possibility of such was noted by Martin in the 1970’s (on that issue, see Lewis (1997)).
cumstances will be the unexpected failure for the disposition in question to be realized on a given occasion. Because of such a possibility, the encouragement against wavering or hesitating is a non-redundant complement of encouragements to have faith.

At the most general level, how unusual it is for these two to come apart is simply a good measure of the degree of one’s faith, so the admonition to have faith can be buttressed by a caution against having a faith that is weak. The strength of one’s faith, on this approach, is a measure of how resistant that faith is to being finked and masked by the circumstances of life. It is in precisely this sense that the test of Abraham’s faith in the Akedah passage is to be understood. The circumstances involved are at the extreme of the kinds of circumstances likely to generate finking and masking of his disposition to respond in service of God, and yet he does so. On more cognitive pictures of faith, such as that of the received view, one searches the Scriptural record in vain for signs of some strength of conviction or belief that God exists, that God is good, that God is to be trusted.27 To the contrary, a proper understanding of axiologically fundamental faith allows the story to contain all the details necessary for seeing it as a supreme test of faith: his behavior is an expression of a disposition, and the strength of the disposition is a function of its manifestation in the most dire of circumstances. So understand, it confirms the strength of Abraham’s faith in the most direct way possible.

The dispositional character of fundamental faith helps us see why it is a mistake to try to identify particular beliefs and other attitudes that are needed.

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27Defenders of this perspective on faith will turn to Hebrews for comfort: “He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead...” (11:19). A few points are in order here. The first is that the passage doesn’t say that Abraham’s faith consisted in having this attitude, so the passage offers some hope for cognitive portrayals of faith but falls far short of confirming them. Second, even if Abraham agreed that God’s power extends to raising the dead, that belief doesn’t really help with the moral horror of the experience of receiving a divine command to sacrifice Isaac. One still has to plunge the knife and take a life, and the horror of that remains even if the son is brought back from the dead afterwards. Finally, the belief about the power of God doesn’t actually get us to the cognitivists’ favored cognitive attitude, to the claim that God is good and to be trusted. A belief about God’s power is not yet a belief about God’s goodness. (I hasten to add that I don’t wish to deny that Abraham had the beliefs in question; I’m only arguing that attempts to defend a cognitive picture of faith have to read more into the Scriptural record than is actually there, unlike the approach I am taking in terms of axiologically fundamental faith.)
required for such faith. A responsive disposition is a disposition to behave in certain ways but is also a disposition toward a certain pattern of cognitive, affective, and conative states. For Abraham’s faithfulness in action to count as a realization of his disposition to respond in service of an ideal, the pattern of behavior, thought, feeling, and willing has to be an instance of a certain pattern. It is important to note, though, that the pattern is multiply realizable by a wide variety of underlying intentional states and attitudes. We are familiar with this phenomenon from our understanding of human behavior. The underlying cognitive, affective, and conative states that can generate the same overt behavior are quite indeterminate. The taking of an analgesic when experiencing a headache can occur whether or not a person believes that taking an analgesic will get rid of the headache; it can also occur whether or not one wants to get rid of a headache. We might expect the behavior to result from believing or desiring in this way, but if we adjust the other intentional components sufficiently, we can still see why a person might take the pill in spite of not believing it will be effective (or even believing it to be ineffective). For example, consider a young army recruit so indoctrinated by basic training that he’ll do whatever he’s told. He might believe the pill won’t help and still take it. Or think of someone who likes headaches of a mild sort, but doesn’t want other people to know of this weirdness. The variety of ways that a given action might result from a given prompting condition is open-ended and wide indeed.

Just so with the disposition to respond in service of an ideal. This disposition is multiply realizable in terms various possible combinations of actions, thoughts, feelings, and intentions. What matters is that the combination falls into a pattern of the sort that counts as an instance of that disposition. Once we begin to see faith in this way, we no longer need to pretend that only those experiencing no cognitive uncertainty can be people of faith, any more than we need to pretend that only very specific kinds of intentions and feelings are compatible with faith. Even in the most impressive displays of faith in God, as in the Akedah passage, we don’t need to go beyond the text and impute to Abraham some conclusive conviction that God exists and can be trusted, nor do we need to attribute to Abraham some total trust in God. What matters is that whatever level of trust he had and whatever he was thinking, his behavior constitutes a display of a disposition to respond in service of an ideal, a specific combination of features of action, mind, and will that falls with a range of possible combinations, all of which are specific realizations of the general disposition.
§8 Conclusion

We thus can see that there is little cause to think of religious faith and Christian faith in particular as requiring a kind of faith that cannot be defended as axiologically fundamental. Just as with more mundane faith, one can embrace an account of axiologically fundamental faith that meshes nicely with a defense of faith as a virtue.

Once we see the attraction of such a functionalist account, we can anticipate counterexamples to every attempt to cite particular features of a person—cognitive, affective, or conative—that must be present in order for a person to count as a person of faith, even axiologically fundamental faith of the sort a religion might say is saving faith. Once we adopt such a frame of mind, we can see where to look for such counterexamples, but perhaps more importantly, we have a theoretical stance from which to correct the practice of listing pieces of doctrine that one must affirm in order to count as a person of (Christian) faith. It remains possible, of course, that particular kinds of faith—faith that something is the case—are best approached by searching for necessary and sufficient conditions, but if we are interested in the nature and value of faith itself as a general phenomenon, we should think in other, more functional, terms.
References


