Faith, Cognitive and Affective

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§1 Introduction

In usual portrayals, faith is a type of belief, with its relationship to reason a central issue about it. Christian apologists defend the idea of rational faith, though not every adherent of Christianity thinks the same:

Figure 1: Caution: Baptist Thinkers at Work

A fitting hyperbolic characterization of this perspective says that faith involves believing what you know isn’t true. More careful, and epistemically neutral, perspectives think of faith as a type of belief: to have faith that it will rain tomorrow is, at the very least, to believe that it will. The philosophical work needed for a full understanding of faith thus involves, from this perspective, saying what particular type of belief faith is.
There are three varieties of opposition to such doxastic conceptions of faith. The most conservative opposition to doxastic conceptions comes from those who think faith is a type of cognitive state, but that belief isn’t the right cognitive state to focus on. The most radical opposition comes from those who argue that every cognitive conception of faith is globally mistaken. Instead of being a subtype of belief or other cognitive state, such views argue that faith is a non-cognitive state, perhaps an instance of hope, or trust, or preference. A middle position of opposition allows that there is a variety of types of faith, but insists that some, perhaps the most important, are not best thought of in such doxastic or cognitive terms. One version of such a middle position is the one I have developed in a couple of places.\(^1\)

An important issue for every position that characterizes faith, or an important type of it, in non-cognitive terms is to make precise exactly what such a non-cognitivist position involves. For accounts of faith that give precise necessary and sufficient conditions for faith, this issue is addressed directly by the conditions in question. But one can oppose cognitive and doxastic pictures of faith in a way that isn’t quite so precise or general, as in the account of faith that I have defended, according to which an important kind of faith involves a disposition or orientation of a person toward an ideal.\(^2\) My goal here is to compare this limited account of one kind of faith with other, more fully general non-cognitivist accounts of faith, especially that of Lara Buchak (2012), which defines faith in terms of preferences. I will argue that more fully general accounts of faith that understand it in terms of mental states of a certain kind are not adequate for understanding the kind of important faith expressed by the slogan “a disposition to act in service of an ideal.” In order to get to this conclusion, we need some understanding of the varieties of non-cognitivism, which I will discuss in the next section. After achieving a better understanding of this variety, I will focus our attention on what I consider to be the best version of fully general non-cognitivism, arguing that, in the end, we have no way to determine exactly which mental states underlie a disposition to act in service of an ideal, even if we grant that there must be some such collection of states involved in that disposition.

\(^1\text{See Kvanvig (2013) and Kvanvig (2015).}\)
\(^2\text{This account takes its cue from Dewey (1934), which offers a functional account of faith.}\)
We begin with an account of the breadth and width of non-cognitivism. The early non-cognitivists, from the positivist era, thought of moral judgments in terms of expressions of emotions, but later non-cognitivists adopt a point of view on which moral claims involve expressions of attitudes, not just emotions. Other varieties are on offer as well, and we can distinguish two central common claims among non-cognitivists. The first is a semantic thesis, to the effect that moral judgments (or, more generally, normative judgments) are not suited for alethic evaluation, that such judgments are not the sort of thing that can be true or false, or have truth conditions. The second is a psychological thesis, to the effect that what is expressed by a moral or normative claim is not a belief or other mental state that falls within the cognitive aspect of a person.

These remarks can be made more specific by thinking of the meaning of normative sentences instead of talking about such sentences in use in the form of judgments. When talking of the meaning of a normative sentence, the non-cognitivist insists that part of the meaning of such sentences is that they are used to express non-cognitive attitudes. Perhaps part of the meaning is something else as well, and perhaps that additional part involves ordinary propositional content of the sort that characterizes non-normative language.

The connection between this use of the cognitive/non-cognitive distinction and the use to which I will put it is indirect. First, the above use of the distinction lands all such discussions squarely at the meta-level: it is a topic in metaethics whether cognitivism is true, not a topic in normative ethical theory. The distinction regarding various approaches to faith is, however, not one about the meaning of sentences involving a notion of faith, nor about the judgments people make that count as expressions of faith. The topic here is faith itself, and thus the discussion is in the material mode rather than the formal mode.

Even so, there is some connection, for the sense in which some approaches to faith are non-cognitivist is a sense much like the second sense above, which is a psychological thesis to the effect that the function of a particular item is one that can be understood in cognitive or non-cognitive terms. There is also a trivial sense in which the semantic claim plays a role in any account of faith, for locutions involving faith include both faith that something is the case and faith in an object of some sort. When one person has faith
in another person, the object of faith is not a suitable object for semantic appraisal, it is not the sort of thing that has truth conditions or which can be assessed as either true or false. The same is rarely claimed, however, for having faith that something is the case. Here, the object of faith is a proposition, and the default understanding of such that-clauses is that they can be semantically assessed. So, in what follows, we look for the specific variety of non-cognitivism in terms of the psychological condition alone.

Examples of non-cognitivist approaches to faith start with the cognitivist contrast. The standard cognitivist view is that faith is a type of belief (Locke 1698), but there are other possibilities. It may also be taken to involve a degree of belief, perhaps a maximal one, or that it involves a non-doaxastic 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, claiming that faith 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).

One example of a non-cognitive approach to faith is Lara Buchak’s, and her account of faith in terms of preferences raises a further complication in classifying approaches to faith in terms of the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive features of a person. Her account, while officially put in terms of a necessary and sufficient conditions for faith in terms of preferences,

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3 Some may want to express this idea by saying that faith is a feeling of confidence, and since feelings are clearly non-cognitive, one might be inclined to think that such an account is non-cognitive. I resist that move, thinking that talk of feelings of confidence is a misnomer, one arising from the common sloppiness in ordinary speech of confusing thoughts and feelings. We hear things like “I feel that we know a lot less than we think we know,” “I felt that Obama was going to have trouble getting legislation passed.” At some point, we’ll have to say that the meaning of ‘feeling’ has become ambiguous between referring to an emotional state or a cognitive one, but I think we aren’t there yet, and such uses involve either a nice metaphor or the mistake of confusing a thought with a feeling.

4 If knowledge is a mental state, as Williamson (2000) claims, then this view is clearly a cognitivist one. If knowledge isn’t a mental state, however, its only psychological constituent is a cognitive state, and so one might extend the reach of the cognitive classification to include such an account within it. There is some reason to do so, in that the view would still have more in common with the cognitive approaches already listed than the non-cognitive approaches to follow.
she also says things that sound quite cognitive: early on in Buchak (2012), she speaks of faith in a person as involving “acquiescing” to some propositional content or other about that person, and then says in a footnote

I speak of acquiescing to a proposition rather than believing it because I am not sure that if I have faith in something, I thereby believe it. While it sounds infelicitous to say ‘I believe that $\sim X$ but I have faith that $X$’, there may not be anything wrong with saying ‘I don’t know whether $X$—I have no idea whether I believe that $X$ or not—but I have faith that $X$’. So as not to prejudge that issue, I make a weaker claim: that having faith involves taking the proposition to be true, that is, ‘going along with it’, but not necessarily adopting an attitude we might describe as belief. (p. 2, ms)

Here, it appears that Buchak is endorsing a claim that there are cognitive elements to propositional faith, even if they are not doxastic elements. So, to what extent is her account a non-cognitivist one?

In discussing the details of her account an answer will emerge concerning the purity of her non-cognitivism, but for the present, all we need to note is that it is possible to give a non-cognitivist account of faith while at the same time holding that various cognitive elements are involved in any instance of faith. This possibility makes characterizing the difference between cognitivism and non-cognitivism more difficult, however, for presumably one could also be a cognitivist about faith while thinking that no example of faith ever occurs without some sort of affective features being present as well (for example, have a pro-attitude toward the claims that are the objects of faith). Given these possibilities, what makes the difference between a cognitive and a non-cognitive account?

The typical approach among many philosophers is to formulate an account of a phenomenon in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and this

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5I am confident that Buchak is onto something important here about the relationship between faith and belief (see also Howard-Snyder (2013)), but less confident about a further connection she claims between acts of faith and the cognitive state discussed in the quote above. She also maintains that acting on faith involves acquiescing to a proposition. She writes, “For example, if setting down one’s own weapons is an act of faith, then this is because setting down one’s own weapons involves acquiescing to the claim that the other person will then set down his.” (p. 3) To the extent that acquiescing is a cognitive state, this example is not compelling. One might, for example, set down one’s weapon, merely hoping that the other person will do so as well.
procedure makes a mess of trying to draw the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive in such terms. A better way to think here is to think in terms of the notion of fundamentality. If faith is fundamentally cognitive, then any affective features that are present arise in virtue of these cognitive features, for a pure version of cognitivism to be on offer; and if faith is fundamentally non-cognitive, then whatever cognitive features arise are to be explained in terms of what is fundamental, for a pure version of non-cognitivism.

Such an approach makes it more difficult to defend many of the accounts of faith in the literature, if only pure versions of either positions are allowed. For, whatever the approach, the question must be asked whether features of the other sort are also necessary for faith. Accounts in terms of preferences, hopes, trust, and the like, however, do not consider this issue; nor do accounts in terms of dispositions to act. In such a case, if these positions acknowledge the necessity of various cognitive features, they are either incomplete or impure. If impure, some other explanation must be offered as to why the non-cognitive features get priority over the cognitive ones in categorizing the approach in question. One answer might be temporal: faith arises out of the non-cognitive, even though the cognitive elements to follow aren’t explained fully by the non-cognitive features.

The problem with such an attempt is that it is hard to swallow the idea that what’s most important here is what comes first temporally. It looks like we should want a better story. I will return to this issue at the end of this essay, but for the present what we can say is that if an account is impure and the intention is to offer either a cognitive or non-cognitive account, then an explanation is needed for why the impurities in question are compatible with the approach being defended. My goal is to be able to do so in terms of the approach to faith I have already outlined, which is clearly intended to be a non-cognitive account.

Why might one favor non-cognitive approaches, whether pure or impure, over cognitive ones? Here, I will only record some possibilities, without attempting any full defense. A first reason comes from the slogan “Faith seeking Understanding.” Though there are readings of this slogan that are compatible with cognitivism, there is also a natural reading that is non-cognitive: faith arises first, and the attempt to make sense of this phenomenon leads to the development of systems of understanding, in much the same way as sensory experience is related to the web of belief it prompts. A second reason is the poor track record of trying to identify the precise cognitive content
involved in the great heroes of faith, even within one particular religious tradition such as Christianity. Identifying any common content between, say, the faith of the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible toward that to which the tetragrammaton refers and the faith of the twelve in following Jesus is a hard task, a point I will return to later in discussing the faith of Abraham. Third, faith is found in non-religious contexts, most importantly in relation to political and social causes, and even in humanity itself. Even if, e.g., faith in humanity requires believing that some humans exist, it betrays a kind of tone-deafness to turn that claim into the claim that faith in humanity is a kind of belief or other cognitive state. Finally, there is a common and pervasive aspect of religious life and experience that advert, not to creeds and doctrines and theological formulations, but rather to awe-inspiring encounters: burning bushes, the flash of light from heaven that unseats one from one’s horse, and even the more common experiences of natural beauty and sublimity. Such encounters both spawn and partially constitute the faith that is thereby produced, and to be told that the faith in question is really, at bottom, a cognitive state of some sort seems to miss the mark entirely: even if the faith that results involves cognitive states of some sort, the source that is partially constitutive of the faith is clearly non-cognitive, better addressed by discussing the affective and conative features of a person.

I make no pretense of claiming that these remarks are sufficient for undermining the dominant paradigm that treats faith, especially faith-that, as a fundamentally cognitive phenomenon. My goal is only to provide some motivation for taking seriously those approaches that look to the non-cognitive for a better understanding of faith. Among the fully general and non-cognitive accounts of faith, Buchak’s recent account of faith in terms of preferences is, in my opinion, the best, and I turn to it in the next section.

§3 Preference Non-Cognitivism and Dispositional Non-Cognitivism

Lara Buchak (2012) argues for the following account of faith in terms of preferences:

A person has faith that X, expressed by A, if and only if that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&∼X to
A\&\sim X, and the person prefers \{to commit to A before he examines additional evidence\} rather than \{to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence\}.\(^6\)

A simple example will help us see how the account is supposed to work. Suppose you are thinking of confiding in a friend. Given the risks of having your secret told, your action of telling a secret to your friend will involve faith of a certain sort. It will involve faith in your friend, and faith that your friend will keep your secret. So, we can let \(X=\text{your friend will keep your secret},\ A=\text{confiding in your friend},\ \text{and } B=\text{keeping your secret to yourself}.\)

You have faith that your friend will keep your secret just because (i) you prefer the conjunction of confiding and having your confiding honored to not confiding and having any confiding being honored, (ii) the preference for confiding switches when conjoined with having one’s confiding violated, and (iii) you prefer to act now rather than wait on additional evidence.

At first glance, this account is both non-cognitivist and quite different from an account of the kind of affective faith I’ve written about in terms of a disposition toward acting in service of an ideal. A close examination of the details of the account will reveal, however, how close the two accounts are, and help with the project of explaining how the cognitive elements involved in these accounts of faith are compatible with their fundamentally non-cognitive approach to the subject.

3.1 The Details

Let us first look at the specifics of this account. The crucial thing to note, in turning to the specifics of the account, is that it characterizes faith that something is true (as expressed by a given action) in terms of preferences,

\(^6\)To be formally precise, we’d need to re-formulate the use of the letters ‘A’ and ‘X’ in this account. With respect to ‘X’, we have it used as a schema letter, to be replaced by a grammatical sentence on the left side; and on the right side, we have a name for the proposition expressed by that grammatical sentence. Moreover, ‘A’ is here both the name of an action and something else proposition-like, since it can be conjoined with a proposition. The idea, I take it, is that the person prefers one conjunction to an incompatible one, where the first conjunct is the performing of an action and the second is a proposition (though one wonders whether the conjunctive formulation is the right one here, as compared with a construction such as “the person prefers performing A to performing B on the assumption of X”). Since such technical details do not affect the central points I want to focus on, I will not pursue these issues further.
(or to be more precise, in terms of *preferences* and *strict preferences*). Since preferences are clearly non-cognitive, affective states of a person, this account is designed to present a non-cognitive account of faith.\(^7\)

To carry out such a project, the account above must be supplemented, since it is, at most, an account of propositional faith, the kind expressed in sentences containing a ‘that’ clause: faith that a spouse will be faithful, faith that the economy won’t collapse, faith that my investment advisor isn’t stealing my retirement funds, etc. In addition to propositional faith, however, there is also objectual faith, typically signalled by sentences involving an ‘in’ complement. One can have faith in America, in the government, in God, in a spouse, and in one’s horse. We also speak of acts of faith, saying for example that putting money in the stock market in the 1930’s was a sheer act of faith. Finally, there is faith *simpliciter*, faith full stop. We speak of people of faith, of the faith of Abraham, and the honor roll of faith in Hebrews 11 repeats over and over that certain things were done by faith.

It is an interesting question which use is fundamental, if any are. To the extent that the first verse of Hebrews 11 is taken as a definition of faith, it is a use of the term that involves no sentential complement or qualifier of any sort—it simply says that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Seen in this way, one might think that the Hebrews position is that faith *simpliciter* is fundamental. But, as is usual, such a specific philosophical thesis is hardly warranted by such a passing characterization, and the verse is probably not best thought of as a definition in any case.\(^8\)

What is clearer, however, is that objectual faith will not be able to be

\(^7\)The variety of theoretical uses to which the notion of a preference has been put (the theory of risk, preference logic, moral theory, decision theory, rational choice theory, etc.) may give rise to special understandings of this notion that do not imply that preferences are intentional states at all. I have no objection to such special understandings, and if Buchak wishes to elaborate her approach in terms of such a special understanding, the expanded view may no longer involve a commitment to the claim that faith is a fundamentally an affective state. None of this should blind us to the obvious point that preferences are intentional, affective states of a person, and I will thus continue to investigate her view on this understanding.

\(^8\)A more literal translation makes this point more obvious: “And faith is of things hoped for a confidence, of matters not seen a conviction.” (Young’s Literal Translation) The prepositional constructions are central here, showing that there is no definition intended, but rather a description of what faith involves, relative to things hoped for and things not seen.
defined in terms of propositional faith alone. And the reasons here are the same as those in the literature on the relationship between *de re* and *de dicto* attitudes more generally. In that literature, objectual belief involves a kind of acquaintance or causal connection to an object, even if it also involves the attribution of some property to the object in question that might constitute a propositional attitude involving that object as well. Given this standard approach to the distinction, there will be no collection of *de dicto* attitudes that implies a *de re* one.

This point does not imply that we can’t think of propositional faith as fundamental. Even if there is no collection of instances of propositional faith that is identical to a given instance of objectual faith, it might still be that we should understand objectual faith as built out of propositional faith plus some other factors. The only prohibition would be that these other factors can’t be factors involving objectual faith itself.

Buchak’s account is helpful in this regard. On her approach, the fundamental locution is ‘A person has faith that X, expressed by action A’, and before offering an account of this locution, she uses it to define other uses of the language of faith—as she says, “I propose, then, to make *faith that X, expressed by A* the basic unit of analysis, where X is a proposition and A is an act, and define the other constructions in terms of this one.” (p. 5) She then defines faith in a person as follows:

A person P has faith in another person Q if and only if there is some act A and some proposition(s) X that express(es) a positive judgment about Q such that P has faith in X, expressed by A.

And she defines acts of faith in similar fashion:

A person performs an act of faith (or acts on faith) if and only if he performs some act A such that there is a proposition X in which he has faith, expressed by A.

Perhaps something along these lines can be successful, though I think some refinement will be necessary. First, a minor emendation of the account of acts of faith is needed, since a person can have faith in a proposition, expressed by an action, without acting. So the reference to an action here is to a *type* of action. And when a person performs an action which is an instance of that type, there is no guarantee what the causal or explanatory story is as to why that person performed that action. It could be because of their
propositional faith in question, or it could be something completely different. The minor issue here is that the two references to act A do not distinguish properly between the token action performed and the type of action involved in an attribution of propositional faith. Once we distinguish the two properly, we’ll have to add a basing requirement to the account, so that the token act is performed because of, or on the basis of, the propositional faith in question. Making these changes gives us:

A person performs an act of faith (or acts on faith) if and only if he performs an instance of some act type A, and performs it on the basis of the person’s faith in some proposition X, expressed by A.

Second, note that the adequacy of the second definition requires success in the first definition, for an act of faith can be an expression of faith in a person. So if faith in a person can’t be defined in terms of propositional faith, we won’t be able to define acts of faith in terms of propositional faith either. Moreover, the account given here attributes faith in a person too broadly, and the literature on the de re/de dicto distinction contains the relevant concerns. A proposition can be about a person in very indirect ways, and a person can have an attitude involving that proposition without any direct acquaintance or causal connection to the person at all. For example, one can believe that the tallest spy is a spy quite easily, but it is a much different thing to believe of the tallest spy that they are a spy. To make this point relevant to the definition above, let the proposition in question be the proposition that the most talented person is courageous, and let the person in question have faith in this proposition, expressed by averring publicly that the most talented person is courageous. We also stipulate, however, that this devout witnessing is not accompanied by any acquaintance with the most talented person, but only by the strong conviction that the most talented, whoever he or she is, must be courageous—the world could not be right without it! Suppose, then, that there is a most talented person, and her name is ‘Mary’. In such a case, our devout witness does not have faith in Mary. Mary is completely unknown to said person.

\footnote{Strictly speaking, none of Buchak’s proposals are given as definitions, but rather only as necessary and sufficient conditions. The difference is important in many philosophical contexts, but it is ancillary to present concerns, so I will continue to speak in a loose way about the precise nature of the accounts.}
This difficulty would be a deep one if the literature on the *de re/de dicto* distinction showed that such cases undermine the possibility of defining the former in terms of the latter, but the standard view is that such is not the case. The standard view is that such a definition merely requires the addition of some acquaintance or causal relation between the subject of the proposition and the person taking the attitude in question, and the same view could be endorsed here. In such a case, we would need to find a proposition that expresses a positive judgment about Q, where the required acquaintance or causal connection of the person in question to Q obtained, in order to define faith in a person in terms of propositional faith. Perhaps the following will work:

A person P has faith in another person Q if and only if there is some act A and some proposition(s) X that express(es) a positive judgment about Q such that P has faith in X, expressed by A, and P is in the right sort of acquaintance relation to Q.\(^\text{10}\)

Moreover, once we have a successful account of this sort, we can generalize the account to explain, not only faith in a person, but faith in an object more generally. One can have faith in Obama, and one can also have faith in the government (though it is sometimes hard to see why one would), and an adequate account of objectual faith should include all such objects and not just persons. But this presents no principled objection to Buchak’s strategy, since the required generality is easy to obtain, once we get an adequate account of faith in a person.

Even given success on these fronts, however, two problems remain. The first is that Buchak provides no definition of faith *simpliciter*, as is indicated when we say that Abraham was a man of faith, or that faith is, of things hoped for, a confidence. Some might think of such constructions as elliptical for other uses, uses which attribute either propositional or objectual faith, or some acts of faith (which I’ll call “praxical faith”). As a matter of syntax alone, there is no

\(^\text{10}\)A complication here is that *de te* awareness, awareness of persons, might be different from the more generic *de re* awareness of objects, and both of these are clearly different from *de se* awareness of self. For discussion of some of these issues regarding second-person awareness, see Stump (2010) and Darwall (2009). I assume that the differences between these types of awareness will be a function of different acquaintance relations to the object in question, so to bypass them in the text, I make the vague reference to “the right sort of” acquaintance relation.
basis for such a position. The clearest evidence for this claim is that, in ellipses, the full statement is easily recoverable in any context of assertion in which the elided sentence is used. Such a point is clearly seen in a wide variety of ellipses:

- Ben does epistemology and Chris metaphysics. (gapping)
- Gary does ethics, and Linda, too. (stripping)
- Anyone who wants to read Dewey can. (Verb Phrase Ellipsis)
- Who reads James? John and Gregory. (answer ellipsis)
- When I don’t know, but Michael will show up. (sluicing)
- The department chair, leader she is, served on three onerous University committees because everyone else in the department served on two. (nominal ellipsis)
- Do you know whether Elizabeth will take the job? No, I don’t. (null complement anaphora)

Compare, then, some of the claims of faith *simpliciter*, all from Hebrews 11:

- By faith, Abel brought a better offering than Cain.
- By faith, Enoch was taken from this life.
- By faith, Noah . . . built an ark.
- All these people were living by faith when they died.
- These were all commended for their faith.

It takes a dead ear to syntax to lump the latter together with the former. That is, none of the constructions in the second list are instances of anything in the first list; in short, faith *simpliciter* constructions are not syntactically elliptical.

So perhaps the claim is there is a semantic basis for thinking of such constructions as identical in meaning to some complex of propositional and objectual and praxical faith. That suggestion is not promising, even if it
is plausible to think of faith *simpliciter* as requiring some combination of propositional and objectual faith. For note that faith can go undisplayed: Abraham was a man of faith even when not acting on it. So, we can’t endorse that faith *simpliciter* requires praxical faith, and the idea that some combination of propositional and objectual faith implies faith *simpliciter* looks like the same mistake as trying to infer a character trait such as courage from some combination of actions and mental states of the person in question. A more promising view would try to give a unified account of faith in the absence of having to meet such a demanding standard.

Here a remark of Buchak’s is instructive. She writes,

> Along the same lines, having faith typically involves an action: a person’s having faith in something should make a difference to her behaviour. However, this needn’t be an actual action. It would be enough for faith that if a person were put in a particular situation, she would then manifest the relevant behaviour (assuming that there are no forces that would stop her). Faith is thus linked to a disposition to act. (p. 3)

Buchak notes that faith is linked to a disposition to act, and if we replace this claim with the somewhat stronger claim that faith *simpliciter* is a disposition toward acts of faith—toward praxical faith—we have the resources to develop a unified account of faith, even if we can’t define faith *simpliciter* solely in terms of propositional, objectual, and praxical faith. We begin by defining faith *simpliciter* in terms of a disposition toward acts of faith, and then define acts of faith in terms of objectual and propositional faith, as before. In this way, the first issue, the issue of incompleteness can be accommodated with Buchak’s framework.

There is a second concern as well, however, for Buchak doesn’t give an an account of propositional faith, but rather of propositional faith expressed by a certain action A. That is, as formulated, it isn’t quite an account of faith—that, since it includes a restriction involving the expression of such faith in an action. One might conclude, then, that it only informs us about propositional faith relative to a restriction, rather than propositional faith itself.

One might hope to be able to transform the account into one of propositional faith itself, putting the reference to actions on the other side of the central connective of the account. We might try, for example:

A person has faith that X, expressed by A, if and only if for any action A that the person in question performs that expresses the
state in question, that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&∼X to A&∼X, and the person prefers \{to commit to A before he examines additional evidence\} rather than \{to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence\}.

One might worry that the account is now circular, requiring a reference to propositional faith on both sides of the main connective, but that worry is misplaced. I’ll reformulate to make the following explicit, but the idea is to identify a mental state and connect that state to actions that express it. Once we get our collection of states and actions they express, we ask which of these states count as states of propositional faith, and we can do this without employing the concept of propositional faith in the definition. Here’s how to do so:

A given mental state S of a person is an instance of faith that X for that person if and only if for any action A that the person in question performs that expresses state S, that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&∼X to A&∼X, and the person prefers \{to commit to A before he examines additional evidence\} rather than \{to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence\}.

This formulation is clearly not circular, but it may be too general. Notice that it quantifies over every action that expresses the state in question, and that is too strong. For one thing, some actions that express a given state are never thought of by the person in question, and perhaps couldn’t be thought of. In such a case, it overreaches to imagine the person in question having preferences regarding that action.

On the point that the universal quantifier in the above is too general, Buchak agrees:

\ldots [O]ne can have faith in a particular proposition relative to one action but not to another. For example, I might have faith that my car will start when I only need to drive to work but lack that faith when I am relied upon to carry a life-saving organ to the hospital (as evidenced by the fact that I may double-check
my engine or arrange for a backup mode of transportation in the latter case but not the former). A person might have faith in God when it comes to giving weekly donations to the poor but lack faith in God when it comes to allowing himself to be martyred. (p. 3)

Perhaps, then, we should try the existential quantifier instead:

A given state S of a person is an instance of faith that X for that person if and only if for some action A that the person in question performs that expresses state S, that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&~X to A&~X, and the person prefers {to commit to A before he examines additional evidence} rather than {to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence}.

One might worry here that such an account is too weak. For on it, all it takes is having the preferences toward one action which can express propositional faith to yield the conclusion that such faith is present. But that seems too easy. For example, take a mental state of strong desire to eat a doughnut, and consider the question of whether a given person has faith that eating a doughnut is a health food. Clearly, the action of eating a doughnut is a way of expressing such faith. So we now have a state and an action, and we ask whether that action has the right features to show that the strong desire to eat a doughnut is a state of faith that the doughnut is a health food.

On the account just formulated, we need an alternative action as well. Let that action be throwing the doughnut in the trash. In my own case I prefer eating the doughnut and having it be a health food to throwing it away and having it be a health food. Moreover, we can imagine the case so that I also prefer throwing it away if it isn’t a health food to eating it if it isn’t a health food by supposing that I have a second strong desire: to eat only healthy foods. But finally, suppose that in this case, my desire for the doughnut is stronger than my desire to eat only healthy foods. Then it is plausible to describe the case as one in which I might also prefer to eat before seeking more information to postponing eating until I get more information.

Buchak seems to agree that the existential account above is insufficient. She writes,
There are two ways in which we might interpret the fact that one might have faith when it comes to the performance of some actions but not others: we might say that faith is context-dependent, or we might say that faith comes in degrees. There is something to be said in favour of each of these approaches. However, whether one has faith in X expressed by a particular act A will be determinate on either approach, and since this will be our basic unit of analysis in this paper, we needn’t choose between them. (p. 4)

Note two things endorsed in this quote. The first is a remark about two ways to accommodate the idea that faith can be sporadic. The second is a remark about why that issue can be bypassed. This second point is, however, the reason for concern at present, since it raises the possibility that we don’t get an account of propositional faith here, but rather only propositional faith relative to a given action. So, if we try to eliminate the relativity present in the account, it appears that Buchak thinks this can only be done by making faith context-dependent or by appealing to degrees of faith.

The appeal to context-sensitivity will raise the same concern about relativizing the account of faith, but if we think in terms of degrees of faith, we perhaps can accommodate these points by simply inserting that the existential quantifier account only involves some minimal degree of faith:

A given state S of a person is an instance of some degree of faith that X for that person if and only if for some action A that the person in question performs that expresses state S, that person performs act A when there is some alternative act B such that he strictly prefers A&X to B&X and he strictly prefers B&\sim X to A&\sim X, and the person prefers \{to commit to A before he examines additional evidence\} rather than \{to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence\}.

Such an account would then generate a further project, in order to complete the account of propositional faith. We would need to say how minimal faith aggregates with other bits of minimal faith, and whether all minimal bits of faith are of the same amount. Once we get an appropriate measure on specific bits of faith and some way to aggregate, we would also need a threshold that degrees of faith need to meet in order to count as faith that X, full stop. Perhaps I have some degree of faith that doughnuts are a health food, but I surely don’t have such faith, full stop. The issues here mirror
issues in relating the epistemology of belief with the epistemology of degrees of belief, for I may have some degree of confidence or belief that it will rain soon, when in the middle of a drought, but not a high enough degree for it to be true that I believe that it will rain. Perhaps, however, the threshold idea will be as defensible here as it is in the threshold case, where we define belief in terms of some threshold on degrees of belief.\footnote{For discussion and defense, see Foley (1993) and Sturgeon (2008). There is a worry that arises in the literature that I will merely note and not pursue, for the most promising approach here requires the threshold to be context-sensitive. If that is true also in the realm of faith, the worries about relativity come back full-force, and may make it impossible to have a fully satisfying account of faith \textit{simpliciter} along the lines of Buchak’s proposal.}

\section{3.2 The Account Itself}

Suppose, however, that we are able to generate an account of propositional faith from the account Buchak of gives of expressed faith in a proposition. There is still the question of the adequacy of the account itself.

Let us use a particular example to help with our assessment. Suppose Abraham hears (what he takes to be) the voice of God telling him to pack and go, and Abraham does so, performing an act of faith. In order for Buchak’s account to be successful, we must be able to identify some propositional faith of Abraham’s, where it is that propositional faith that is being acted on in leaving Haran. The official account interprets such propositional faith in terms of three preferences, two of which are contrastive (relative to an incompatible alternative act, such as staying in Haran or moving back to Ur) and the other evidential: For the action $A$ (leaving), there is a a proposition $X$ and an alternative act $B$ (not-leaving), where

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Abraham strictly prefers $(\text{leaving} \land X)$ to $(\text{not-leaving} \land X)$
  \item Abraham strictly prefers $(\text{not-leaving} \land \neg X)$ to $(\text{leaving} \land \neg X)$
  \item Abraham prefers (to commit to leaving before examining additional evidence) to (postponing a decision until he examines additional evidence).
\end{enumerate}

We’ll return to the third preference later, but for now, let’s stipulate that it is satisfied, since it isn’t relevant to the issue of whether we can explain Abraham’s act of faith in terms of propositional faith. Given this
stipulation, our question is “What could X be?” Note first that there are lots of possibilities here for attempting to secure the left-to-right inference: X might be “I will become the father of a great nation,” or “My hopes and dreams will be realized.” But to have the preferences in question, Abraham would have had to have these propositions in his head in some way: he would have to take an attitude toward them. It is clear from the example that Abraham takes an attitude toward some propositions: toward the claim that God is speaking to him, toward the claim that God is commanding him to go, etc. But nothing in the story requires that he takes an attitude toward the claim that he will be the father of a great nation or toward the claim that his hopes and dreams will be realized. We may call this issue the “problem of gappy preferences.” It is simply very difficult to find propositions that the agent in question must take any attitude toward, much less a preference of some sort.

One might try to find a proposition that it is impossible not to have taken an attitude toward, to alleviate this concern. Maybe, for example, everyone wants to be happy, and so must take an attitude toward the proposition that they are happy, at least the attitude of wanting that they are happy. Even so, the problem of gappy preferences won’t go away just because we can find some propositions that have to be the content of some mental state or other. For conative states, like mental states in general, are at least mildly modular: having a proposition as the content of one such conative or mental state doesn’t require having it as the content of others. So even if I want to be happy, it doesn’t follow that I have any beliefs about being happy.

In this respect, wanting or desiring might be more intimately connected with preferences than they are with belief, so even if it is possible to have no cognitive attitudes involving happiness even though it is impossible—we assume—to not want to be happy, the same might not be true of preferences. That is, preferences might be so intimately linked with wants and desires so that wanting to be happy makes it unavoidable that one prefers to be happy. So too for our Abraham example. Since he too wants to be happy, perhaps it is unavoidable for him to have preferences conjoining doing what God commands with his being happy.

There are two problems here, however. The first is the conjunction principle just used. We assume Abraham has preferences about whether to do what God commands, and preferences about being happy. Does it follow that he has preferences regarding the conjunction? Such a principle is, in general false, since some conjunctions are too complex for a finite mind to
contain. Without such a general conjunction principle, however, we are still in need of a solution to the problem of gappy preferences.

There is a second, and worse, problem as well. Notice now that we are identifying Abraham’s faith in responding to God’s command in terms of some degree of propositional faith in being happy (or, in the language of Buchak’s account, in terms of some propositional faith in being happy, expressed by obeying). Just saying it out loud makes it clear how wrongheaded this suggestion is. If anything, Abraham’s faith had better be directed toward something outside of himself, whether propositional or not. The faith of a navel-gazer is not the faith of Abraham.

A better approach, then, will try to find some other way of solving the problem of gappy preferences. In the case of Abraham, a better suggestion is to examine the source of his decision to leave, to look there for the conceptual elements necessary for attributing the preferences required on Buchak’s account. We have, in the story, an experience: hearing the voice of God, commanding leaving Haran. Such an experience requires various conceptual competencies on the part of Abraham, enough to make possible taking mental attitudes toward the claim that God exists, that God is saying something about where to live, etc.

But the possibility of such attitudes isn’t enough here. What is required is actual preferences, and the preferences have to involve the claims in question. So it isn’t enough that one believe or “acquiesce to” the claims in question: one must prefer conjunctions that involve the claims themselves. It is a vexed question what standard logical operations hold inside of intentional contexts, but if any such operations hold in such a context, conjunction-elimination does: from any attitude toward $p \& q$, it follows that one has that same attitude toward $p$ and toward $q$.\textsuperscript{12} So, if the experience in question leads Abraham to believe, or acquiesce to, these claims, we can’t attribute the conjunctive preferences to Abraham without also implausibly attributing to him a preference for each of the claims to which he acquiesces.

Here, a remark of Buchak’s quoted earlier is relevant for showing a way around this problem. She says, that faith in a person as involving “acquiescing” to some propositional content or other about that person, and then says in a footnote

\textsuperscript{12}The classic source of discussion of these issues is Dretske (1970), where it is argued that conjunction-elimination, unlike conjunction-introduction, for example, is one of the few logical operations that remains unscathed in intentional contexts.
I speak of acquiescing to a proposition rather than believing it because I am not sure that if I have faith in something, I thereby believe it. While it sounds infelicitous to say ‘I believe that ∼X but I have faith that X’, there may not be anything wrong with saying ‘I don’t know whether XI have no idea whether I believe that X or not—but I have faith that X’. So as not to prejudge that issue, I make a weaker claim: that having faith involves taking the proposition to be true, that is, ‘going along with it’, but not necessarily adopting an attitude we might describe as belief. (p. 2, ms)

The issue this quote raised earlier was about the possibility of impure forms of non-cognitivism, which involve a fundamental non-cognitive basis but do not exclude cognitive elements from being present as well. In the present context, this talk of acquiescing to certain propositional contents might be useful for the Abraham case, for even if Abraham doesn’t have the preferences needed, it is plausible to think that he believes or “goes along with” the aspects of his experience noted above. Moreover, if he does acquiesce cognitively to these features, we have the possibility of changing Buchak’s account slightly to avoid over-committing on the range of preferences Abraham has.

We can make some progress here, I think, by replacing conjunctive preferences with conditional ones, conditional on the claims to which Abraham acquiesces. So, what is needed are strict preferences for leaving over staying, conditional on God’s existence, for example. And the conditional preferences relevant here are those whose conditions are ones that the person in question takes the appropriate cognitive attitude toward, which, on Buchak’s approach, involves acquiescing to the claim in question, with the issue of whether such acquiescence involves belief is left open.\(^{13}\)

Making this change alters the list of preferences needed in the account of Abraham’s propositional faith. We replace the former list of conditions with the following:

For the action A (leaving), there is a a proposition X that is acquiesced to and an alternative act B (not-leaving), where

\(^{13}\)Are conditional preferences, like unconditional ones, intentional states? I think they are, in the same way that conditional degrees of belief are just as intentional as unconditional degrees of belief. For more on this issue, and the relation between conditional and unconditional degrees of belief, see Edgington (1995).
1. Abraham strictly prefers (leaving|X) to (not-leaving|X)
2. Abraham strictly prefers (not-leaving|¬X) to (leaving|¬X)
3. Abraham prefers (to commit to leaving before examining additional evidence) to (postponing a decision until he examines additional evidence).

We thus end up with a list of conditions involves two conditional preferences and one unconditional one. Moreover, the account is no longer an account of propositional faith purely in terms of non-cognitive states, since the conditions in question include ones toward which a cognitive attitude must exist. This fact raises the further question of how to categorize mixed views of this sort, a question we will return to later, but for the present, I want to continue evaluating the proposal itself.

I will assume, then, that the move from unconditional, conjunctive preferences to conditional ones requiring a cognitive attitude toward the condition is sufficient to solve the problems noted with the left-to-right direction of Buchak’s account. The other direction is not trouble-free either, for there are nearly always problems with conjunctive accounts, for whenever a conjunctive account is proposed, the individual conjuncts can be satisfied in quite independent ways, leading to counterexamples to the account. Gettier counterexamples directed at the justified true belief account of knowledge are the best-known examples of this more general phenomenon. Here, the satisfaction of the third condition is easy to imagine in ways that are independent of the first two conditions. Some close-minded folks never prefer to acquire additional evidence for anything—they have their minds made up. So, we can imagine two people, one close-minded and the other always wanting more information, where they both satisfy the first two preference conditions. Then, merely by being close-minded, the former gets classified as a person who has faith that X.

Here is another concern along the same lines. Let X be a claim that Abraham is so fully committed to some claim that his life can make no sense to him if it isn’t true. For many people, there are such central truths. The future makes no sense apart from that assumption. For example, for many after years of marriage, imagining how to carry on with one’s life apart from one’s spouse yields apoplexy: there is simply nothing beyond the pale. It is of the essence of such cataclysmic events that preparation for them can be unimaginable. There is no set of plans or attitudes or goals to drive reflection
on how to go on with one’s life in the face of them. In keeping with the etymology of the word, all is washed down to nothing by the contemplation of such events.

Let us say of such claims that in their absence life make no sense, has no meaning, at all. Their falsity would create crisis, and imagining what one would do or think, prefer or avoid, leads nowhere. In such a case, it is easy to imagine a person having no preferential differences between any possible actions conjoined to the cataclysmic representation. So it is easy how to see how the first condition above can be satisfied for such a proposition while the second condition is not: the first strict preference is a matter of life proceeding normally, but the second involves such cataclysm that all preferential differences disappear.

Yet, some such absolutely central claims to the life of a person are just the sorts of claims that are properly described as objects of propositional faith. For some, the existence of God or the reality of Jesus are just such cataclysmic claims, and the people for whom they are, are people who have faith that God exists or that Jesus is real. Here, the story of Jesus and Peter in John 6 is instructive. People abandon Jesus after his “hard sermon,” the sermon in which he requires the drinking of his blood and eating of his flesh. The claims leave the audience flabbergasted, and many leave. Jesus asks the twelve whether they too will leave, and Peter replies, “Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Peter’s response signals an attitude of cataclysmic proportions toward Jesus and the promise he brings for the future. To leave would be to abandon that attitude, and Peter’s response indicates that he finds doing that unimaginable. Some see in Peter’s response an affirmation of his deep confidence in who Jesus is, but I suspect otherwise. It could just as easily be, and I suspect it is, a cry of hope and despair—Peter is noting what his life has become and how unimaginable a future is apart from the promise Jesus embodies (however he understands that). So Peter has faith in Jesus, in spite of not being in a position to make sense of the hard sermon, and though he understands why others are leaving, he cannot fathom it for himself. By Buchak’s account, to have faith in Jesus requires propositional faith of some sort, perhaps faith that Jesus is the promised one. And the cataclysmic status of that claim in the life of Peter could easily involve no preferential difference between leaving and continuing to follow, under the assumption that Jesus isn’t the promised one.

The same could be true for Abraham and his faith in God and faith that
God exists. So there is no reason to suppose that Abraham strictly prefers not leaving under the assumption that there is no God to staying under that same assumption. His faith is, perhaps, too central, deep, and significant in his life for that condition to be satisfied.

What can we make of such possibilities within the structures of standard Bayesianism and decision theory? In both cases, there are principles about what changes to make in both attitude and behavior in light of new information. In standard Bayesian cases, we conditionalize: our new attitude is our old one conditional on the new information. If we think of rational action in terms of expected utility, the change in behavior that results from new information is a function of the new probability induced by learning and the utility ranking already present.

Notice that in both cases, there is something that changes, in light of something that doesn’t. In the case of conditionalization, what doesn’t change are the conditional probabilities relevant to the change of attitude. In the case of change in behavior, the utility ranking doesn’t change either. But it is of the essence of cataclysmic experience that such constancy is not reasonable to assume. In the face of such, human beings lose their moorings, cognitively, affectively, and conatively. When asked to contemplate such a future, one senses that one would have to start over, that one would have to figure it out from there, not here. It is an unimaginable future, in the sense that one’s current attitudes and opinions cannot be reasonably relied on to provide guidance for such a future, since one has no idea what will survive the catastrophe.

Put in this way, one can think of standard Bayesian and decision-theoretic calculations in terms of normal life. In normal circumstances the rational thing to do and think may be as these approaches recommend. But there is a caveat for when experience forces one to re-calibrate, either in terms of one’s theory of evidence (as embodied in one’s conditional attitudes) or in one’s theory of value (as embodied in some utility function).

One way to think of such cataclysmic possibilities is in terms of narratives and their structures. For Abraham, there is a narrative regarding his current situation that, at the crucial moment, includes being commanded to pack up and leave. Abraham has attitudes toward the components of this narrative, including propositional faith in some parts of it. But he doesn’t have propositional faith in everything in the narrative, since some parts of it are just background conditions for whatever faith is present. It is in light of this narrative structure, holistically conceived, that Abraham’s preferential
attitudes arise. He prefers to leave rather than stay, on the basis of this complex system of information.

Regarding some parts of the narrative, there is a “Ship of Theseus” phenomenon. You can change some parts a bit, and still get roughly the same preferences. But if you change too much too fast, the system in question doesn’t merely change preferences, it shuts down completely. And the person who is the system in question can recognize that such is the case, and adopt current preferences that take this fact into account. Such a person will simply say, regarding such cataclysmic alterations of the narrative, “I have no idea how to go on from there.”

There may be ways to model such stultification in terms of a Bayesian notion of resilience without having to limit the Bayesian apparatus to normal life only. We can understand resilience of attitude in terms of the range of conditions under which the attitude would remain untouched. Resilience is thus something like depth of entrenchment in the web of cognition. At the extreme are attitudes where every conditional attitude accords with current attitude, so that regardless of what is learned, updating by Conditionalization leaves the attitude unrevised. For present purposes, however, these details can be left to one side, since the moral of the story is clear: cataclysmic possibilities provide one important kind of counterexample to the conditions involved in Buchak’s account.

If we put aside the specific example of Abraham’s faith in leaving for the promised land, there are reasons for thinking that the three conditions in question include too many instances of faith as well. In particular, the account has problems with first-person attitudes such as are expressed by indexical assertions such as “I exist,” “I am capable of motion,” “I am conscious,” “I am a non-plant,” etc. It should be obvious that it is in general false that people have propositional faith regarding such claims, but it is easy to find a related action for each such claim that allows the three conditions in Buchak’s account to be satisfied. For the claim that I exist, there is the act of having a drink with friends; for the claim that I am capable of motion, there is the act of trying to move my arm; for the claim that I am conscious, there is the act of focusing attention on things that matter; and for the claim that I am a non-plant, there is the act of relaxing in the sun all day. In each case, related to the action and its denial, the three conditions are each satisfied. It would be tedious to run through them all, so let the following suffice: I prefer being conscious and focusing on things that matter to being conscious and not so focusing, but I also prefer not focusing on things that
matter and not being conscious to so focusing and not being conscious (since so focusing obviously entails being conscious, and I, quite admirably, arrange my preferences to honor obvious entailments of this sort). I don’t have faith that I am conscious, however, and the same is true of the other first-person claims noted above.

Some of the problems noted might seem to call for tinkering with the account (especially, technical counterexamples like the ones involving first-person attitudes), while others might suggest that the account is on the wrong track. I don’t want to draw that conclusion, however, and instead want to leave the issue open at this point. Instead, what I want to do is to use these problems to further discussion of the relationship between her precise account and the less precise account of (one kind of) faith in terms of a disposition to act in service of an ideal. Once we are uncertain of the prospects for a preference-based non-cognitivism about faith, one might think it promising to move to the more general level of dispositions toward behavior, leaving open what precise mental attitudes would be involved. As we will see, however, this difference between the two accounts is not the central difference, and to this issue I now turn.

3.3 The Central Difference

On the explanation of affective faith I have proposed, faith involves a disposition to behavior aimed at an ideal of some sort. This explanation resists the temptation to identify the precise attitudinal components that might be involved in having such a disposition, even though it is fairly clear that the disposition in question is one that involves some combination of affective, cognitive, and conative elements. Not all dispositions to behavior have such features, for some operate at the submental level. In this category are pain-response behaviors: we pull our hand away quickly from a hot stove.

\[14]\text{This issue of the central difference is complicated in a further way in light of footnote 7, noting the variety of uses to which the language of preference has been put. One area is with regard to risk, and we might think of Buchak’s use of the language of preference as a particular coding for a theory of faith in terms of risk, where risk is defined in terms of preference. (It is worth noting that Buchak seemed to be saying as much in conversation, at the Religion on the Raritan Conference at Rutgers, May 7-9, 2014.) If we think of faith in terms of something a person is risking, and are also realists about risk, refusing to reduce it to preferences, we get another, quite different form of non-cognitivism about faith, one that doesn’t identify it as a disposition but also doesn’t identifying it with non-cognitive attitudes.}\]
displaying a certain pain-avoidance disposition. But the response is so quick that the parts of the brain involved in mentation can’t be involved. Engaging them would take more time that would be advantageous from an evolutionary perspective, and thus mechanisms to allow a quicker process evolve to minimize the damage from the heat source.

Clearly, however, the disposition to behavior that is involved in the kind of affective faith I’ve written about isn’t that kind of disposition, for behavior that expresses such faith is clearly of the sort that involves mentation of some sort or other. That leaves open that it might be precisely the kind of mentation involved in Buchak’s account.

In conversation, Buchak has noted that this appeal to preferences is a derivative feature of her approach, which is fundamentally dispositional.\(^{15}\) After hearing this, I noticed signs of such in her piece. First, there is the emphasis on acquiescing to the claims she discusses involving propositional faith, and central to her initial remarks on faith is that it involves a disposition to act. One gets to an emphasis on preferences by standard decision-theoretic conclusions: decisions are driven by cognitions and affections, where the former are treated in terms of degrees of belief and the latter by preference rankings or weightings on desire. So, if we hold fixed whatever cognitive elements are involved,\(^{16}\) we can replace talk of dispositions to act with talk of preferences. And the advantage of doing so, in Buchak’s context, is that this approach allows variety of precise results on when it is rational, from a decision-theoretic standpoint, to have faith (which is the main goal of her paper).

If we are a bit more wary of reductive tendencies in philosophy, however, we will be cautious about replacing dispositional language with talk of preferences, even when we hold fixed all cognitive features. The links between mentation and behavior are subject to the vicissitudes of pre-emption,

\(^{15}\)At the BGND conference in 2013 (October 3–5), held at the University of Notre Dame. In light the prior footnote, perhaps the dispositions in question could be identified with those involved in risk aversion.

\(^{16}\)Or derive them from the preferences via a representation theorem. I am skeptical here, though: representation theorems don’t tell you the elements in question, but only show that a person whose preferences meet certain conditions can be represented as having them. There are questions both about the conditions preferences have to meet for such a theorem to be provable, but even if preferences meet these conditions, the theorem doesn’t show that someone with such preferences in fact has the cognitive elements in question, but only that such a person can be represented as having them. There is still the question of how to fill the gap between representation and reality.
overdetermination, masking, and finking. So, if we take any particular collection of preferences, it won’t follow that the person has any disposition to act in virtue of having this collection of preferences. Moreover, if we refuse to think of all affective states that motivate behavior in terms of a single factor such as a preference ranking, we will be suspicious of replacing dispositional talk with the standard decision-theoretic categories.

Even so, the attractions of decision theory are strong, for in its development we get our best understanding we have of how human behavior arises and the conditions under which it is rational. We should not be blinded to these virtues by niggling grousing about the possibility that not all cognitive states can be explained in terms of degrees of belief and that not all affective states can be captured by a preference ranking. To overthrow such a dominant paradigm we need something much stronger, and so it is worth seeing what to make of dispositional accounts with the standard decision-theoretic framework.

If we think of dispositions to act in such terms, we have two fruitful possibilities to pursue. The first is in terms of actual preferences and degrees of belief that in certain circumstances typically lead toward the kinds of actions in question, and the second is in terms of dispositions toward such states, even if the states themselves are absent. The latter, however, presents little by way of advance over simply identifying a disposition to act in the first place, so we can put it aside here. If we do so, we can understand a disposition to act in terms of two functions, one on degree of belief and the other on preferences. If the functions in question can generate a measure of some sort, then we can say that a disposition to act involves some threshold on the combination of the two functions, so that as the measure on one decreases, the measure on the other must rise in order for the disposition to be present.

One further complication arises here for the dispositional account I have offered, for on this account, the disposition in question is a disposition to act in service of an ideal. In order for the ideality in question to be incorporated into this decision-theoretic apparatus, two things must hold. First, there must be some degree of belief in the ideality, or goodness, of whatever teleological characterization of the act is appropriate. If the act is leaving Haran at the command of God, we expect some suitably high degree of belief that the commands of God are to be honored (or something in this neigh-
Moreover, we should expect an accompanying preference for something in the area to indicate the attraction the ideal in question holds for the person disposed to act.

These remarks, however, leave open such a wide variety of options regarding particular combinations of beliefs and preferences for the disposition in question that it is hard to see how a significant advance can be made, even when we give the decision-theoretic framework its due. This conclusion should not surprise, since it is so well-known that the connections between action and mentation are holistic enough that no simple and easy formula is likely to be possible, linking either actions or dispositions to act with mental states of particular type and intensity.

So, the first point to note is that it is better to go with the less precise account of faith in terms of dispositions to behave in certain ways, since attempting to use the resources of decision theory doesn’t really advance the discussion in significant ways. Once we do so, the central difference between the account I have given and Buchak’s account involves the dispositional variant of her third condition. She claims that the dispositional features of propositional faith involve a disposition to act on the claim in question without examining further evidence, and my account includes no such feature.

On this point, her account is initially more attractive, but here is a way of accommodating the feature of faith she is noticing without requiring a full-fledged disposition to act without seeking or examining further evidence. A person of faith who has a certain disposition, will act in a characteristic way in the triggering conditions for that disposition, unless the disposition is masked or finked. Once one notices the role played by masking and finking in the story of realized dispositions, we can easily see the role that masking and finking can play in the creation of a new disposition as well. The triggering conditions for a disposition might also be triggering conditions for the creation of a new disposition with precisely those triggering conditions. In such a case, the disposition wasn’t present prior to the occurrence of the triggering conditions. I suspect that faith is an instance of this phenomenon. If one thinks about the Little Leaguer example, there is no need to posit a disposition to act without seeking additional evidence, though once the issue of seeking additional evidence is raised, the Little Leaguer will display

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17 A complication arises for general non-cognitivist approaches in value theory, for on such views, this cognitive description should be replaced with an attitudinal or expressivist rendering. I will avoid discussing this issue here, however, since our topic is at a more programmatic level.
the characteristic behavior for that disposition (unless masked or finked in some way). The same is true of Abraham, I believe. The ordinary human experience is to trust and act on information gathered, and the moments of sophistication where character traits are developed regarding skeptical concerns, such as those that would counsel seeking additional information before acting, are the tip of the iceberg of human experience rather than a dominant part of it. In the usual case, no dispositions need to be present regarding what to do or think about the possibility of seeking additional information. But, of course, once the question is raised, the very question itself can trigger both the creation of a disposition and its characteristic display, and this fact makes it look as if the disposition were present all along. It is part of being a realist about dispositions, however, to recognize the possibility that such looks are misleading.

I thus conclude that the more generic description, in terms of a disposition to act in pursuit of an ideal, is to be preferred to a more specific description in terms of acting in pursuit of an ideal in a way that includes an aversion toward examining additional evidence. The more specific account is a more adequate description of sophisticated or reflective faith, but not faith itself in all its forms and varieties.

§4 Taxonomic Considerations

On both accounts, there are cognitive and non-cognitive features present in any case of faith, affective or otherwise. On the dispositional approach I favor, the non-cognitive features are fundamental, since a disposition to act need not involve any particular cognitive features at all, even if some or other are required. So whatever cognitive features are present in a given case of affective faith will not be essential to the more fundamental disposition to act in service of an ideal.

On the conditional preferences account, things are a bit more complicated. On that account, one must acquiesce to the conditions in question, and if we adopt the view that such acquiescence should be understood in terms of some threshold on degrees of belief, we have a clear cognitive condition in the account. Moreover, the account doesn’t make the non-cognitive preferences fundamental, since the preferences themselves are conditional ones, with the condition itself subject to a cognitive requirement. The theory is thus neither a purely non-cognitivist nor impurely non-cognitivist. Moreover, it is also not
a cognitivist one, either pure or impure. So a further category is needed, a mixed category. The conditional preference account is a mixture of cognitive and non-cognitive features, with it remaining an open question whether it includes doxastic features. It will, if the crucial notion of acquiescence to a proposition is a kind of belief in that proposition, but that issue is left open by Buchak in the footnote cited earlier.

§5 Conclusion

The culmination of our inquiry is disappointing in one way, for we have found no way to replace the vague description of affective faith in terms of a disposition to act in service of an ideal with some more precise formulation. Even so, there are many ways of clarifying a vague description, and only one of them leads to such disappointment. Other ways involve situating the view within a larger landscape and comparing its resources for understanding the topic in question with alternative views. The closest such view is Buchak’s, which is both quite precise and useful for the related topic of the rationality of faith. As we have seen, however, the more generic language in terms of dispositions is preferable to the more specific, decision-theoretic notion of preferences. The path to this result gives us a deeper understanding both of the preference-based approach and the dispositional approach, yielding enhanced understanding of both approaches.\textsuperscript{18}

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