Oh Ye of Little Faith: On Measuring and Evaluating the Strength of Faith and Trust

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In the Christian scriptures, Jesus chides people for exhibiting little faith or weak faith, commands people for having strong faith, and encourages people to have more faith. Christian faith, as conceived in the Gospels, admits of degrees, and one can be appropriately praised or faulted for one’s degree of faith.

It doesn’t take a Sunday School lesson to see these points, nor do they apply only to religious faith. The strength or amount of the faith we have in others or in ourselves also can vary in degree. My focus will be on paradigm cases of faith describable as “faith in X to φ”—faith in a person or thing to do something. Thus, a Christian might have faith in God to bless and save, I have faith in my wife to keep her marriage vows, faith in a stranger to give me accurate directions, etc. (Having faith in X to φ is equivalent to trusting X to φ, so the discussion below is also relevant to a growing recent literature on the nature of trust.) These admit of degrees and are normatively assessable in various ways, including morally. I can properly complain if my wife has less faith in me to do something than is appropriate. And I deserve moral criticism if, other things being equal, I am disposed to have stronger faith in a white stranger to give me accurate directions than a black stranger.

Though I’m interested in various ways faith is normatively assessable, the aim of this paper is to get clear on ways faith can be psychologically strong or weak. I will argue that there is not one but several distinct ways that faith (religious or secular) can be psychologically strong or weak.

Let’s begin with some examples that will frame the discussion. Consider three scenes from The Fellowship of the Ring:

Scene 1 (Movie Version): Chased by the Nazgul (powerful, undead, really-bad men who are intent on killing them), Frodo and his friends encounter Strider, a mysterious man who seems to know about the ring Frodo carries and offers to help lead them into the wild to escape. It is later revealed that Strider is Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor and one of the most heroic and trustworthy characters in the story. But Frodo and company don’t know this at the start, and must decide whether to trust him to lead them into the wild. They have little evidence to go on. Strider seems
mysterious and secretive; he is rough-looking from years of living in the wild, and the townsfolk of Bree distrust him. In favor of Strider’s trustworthiness, Frodo says “I think one of [the Enemy’s] spies would—well, seem fairer and feel fouler, if you understand.” (168) The consideration leaves plenty of room for doubt. In the end, though, Frodo suggests that they don’t have much choice, since entrusting their lives to Strider offers them their only significant chance at escaping death. ¹ They follow Strider into the wild.

**Scene 1 (Book Version):** Same as above, but while considering whether to follow Strider, they receive a letter from Gandalf, their trusted advisor and friend, who vouches for Strider’s trustworthiness. They follow him into the wild.

**Scene 3 (Movie Version):** After weeks of seeing Strider risk his life for them and resist the temptation of the Ring of Power, Frodo decides to part ways with Strider, though not because of any lack of trust. Strider tells him, “I would have gone with you to the end, even to the very fires of Mordor,” and it’s clear that Frodo believes him. (This, despite the fact that Frodo has just seen another man, Boromir, corrupted by the power of the ring.)

I hope that these scenarios elicit some initial intuitions about strength of faith. In the movie version of Scene 1, the deliberations of Frodo and company increase their faith in Strider to lead them competently and with good will. Their faith at this point is pretty weak, but sufficient for the task at hand. In the book variation, their faith strengthens when they get the letter from Gandalf, and their experiences of seeing Strider’s trustworthiness tested strengthen Frodo’s faith even more by the time of the last scene.

Also consider this real-life story...

**Skywalk:** On the top floor of the Tower of London, my 8-year-old daughter, my mother, and I have the chance to walk on a skywalk looking down on cars many feet below. As I get ready to step on it, I find myself in the grip of a pretty strong fear that it won’t hold, a fear that at first psychologically prevents me from able to walk out on it.² My daughter feels excitement, but no fear. She walks (even jumps!) on the skywalk. Mustering my courage, I join her (walking, not jumping). My mom, however, is so afraid she cannot move forward.

Intuitions elicited: First, my daughter clearly has more faith that the skywalk will hold than my mom. Second, my faith increases in the story, allowing me to overcome my fears.

¹In the book, Strider gives the practical argument that wins the day: “[C]autious is one thing and wavering another. You will never get to Rivendell now on your own, and to trust me is your only chance. You must make up your mind.” (Tolkien, 163)

²Gendler (2008) uses this example to motivate a distinction between belief and what she calls “alief,” which is a state that is more automatic and less responsive to reasons than is belief. On her view, I believe but don’t alieve the proposition that the skywalk will hold.
What is it to have stronger or weaker faith in someone or something to \( \phi \)? I will approach the question by considering two recent accounts of faith. Both are accounts of propositional faith—faith that \( p \) rather than faith in \( X \). Having faith in \( X \) to \( \phi \) arguably implies faith that \( X \) will \( \phi \) (or has \( \phi \)-ed), and it is plausible to suppose that the strength of faith measures, in some respect, the strength of this propositional attitude. Here is Daniel Howard-Snyder’s account of propositional faith:

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[F]aith that \( p \) is a complex propositional attitude consisting of (i) a positive evaluation of \( p \), (ii) a positive conative orientation toward \( p \), (iii) a positive cognitive stance toward \( p \), and (iv) resilience to new counter-evidence to \( p \). \text{(370)}
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Consider how Howard-Snyder’s account applies to a paradigm case of faith, such as Frodo’s faith in Strider lead competently and with good will in Scene 3. On Howard-Snyder’s account, Frodo’s faith is constituted by his desiring, regarding it as good, and believing (in a way that is resilient to counter-evidence) that Strider will lead competently and with good will.

Howard-Snyder argues that a number of weaker attitudes can stand in for the positive evaluative, conative, and cognitive attitudes toward \( p \). Perhaps most notably, he argues that the cognitive component can consist of something far less than full confidence and can even fail to be an outright belief. At least three other cognitive attitudes besides belief can serve as the cognitive backbone of faith: (1) a belief that \( p \) is highly probable (as opposed to an outright belief that \( p \)); (2) accepting \( p \), conceived as a cognitive attitude that does not require as much confidence as belief; and (3) assuming \( p \) for the purposes of action, conceived as a cognitive attitude that requires even less by way of confidence.\(^3\) [In Howard-Snyder’s sense, Frodo and company act on the assumption that Strider will lead competently and with good will.]

Howard-Snyder does not suggest an account of strength of faith, preferring to think of it in an on-off sense, so I’ll consider resources his account gives for developing such an account. Each of the four conditions Howard-Snyder describes admit of degrees, but not all are plausible candidates for describing what we naturally describe as the strength of one’s faith. The positive evaluative and conative attitudes Howard-Snyder describes, in particular, are not directly relevant to strength of faith. These have to do with whether one regards the truth of \( p \) as better or worse, and how strongly one desires or prefers for it to be true. But note: my mom desired and regarded it as good that the skywalk should hold. When she saw her granddaughter jumping on the skywalk, I am fairly certain that her conative and evaluative pro-attitudes—her desire that the bridge should hold and estimation of how good it would be if it did—increased fairly dramatically, but this did not strengthen her faith that it would hold. Quite the opposite. Conative and evaluative pro-attitudes strengthen faith only

\(^3\)Philosophers who have denied that faith entails belief include (Audi 2008; Audi 1991; Alston 1996; Schellenberg 2005; Pfojman 2001; Swinburne 2005; McKaughan 2013; Howard-Snyder 2013a)
if they strengthen other attitudes, such as some aspect of the strength of one's cognitive stance.

More plausible candidates for explaining strength of faith are given by Howard-Snyder’s conditions (iii) and (iv), the positive cognitive stance and resilience to counterevidence. In fact, I’ll distinguish three ways that one’s cognitive stance can be stronger or weaker that can contribute to different ways faith can be strong or weak. [a) the degree of confidence; b) the extent to which one’s confidence supports risky behavior; and c) the resilience in the face of counterevidence of either of these ways of being strong.]

The first is one’s degree of confidence that X will φ, i.e., the likelihood from the subject’s perspective that X will φ. This is one natural way Howard-Snyder’s positive cognitive stance admits of degrees. The question “How much faith do you have in X to φ?” naturally elicits a response in terms of how confident one is that X will φ. Also, Frodo’s increased confidence that Strider is trustworthy through the three scenes nicely explains the increase in his faith that Strider will lead competently and with good intent. Thus, a conjecture worth considering is that faith is stronger or weaker to the extent that one’s strength of confidence that X will φ is stronger or weaker.

Before considering this conjecture further, I want to note one inconsistency in our way of talking about faith. While it is perfectly natural, I think, to say that the strength of Frodo’s faith increases with increases in the strength of his evidence that Strider is trustworthy, I should note that there are other ways of speaking of faith such that this is not the case. This way of speaking occurs in pithy but implausible definitions of faith that make it out to be essentially a matter of belief in the absence of or in spite of evidence (e.g., Mark Twain’s well-known quip that “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”) I concede that there is a way of talking about strength of faith that suggests something like this idea. We might say it “took more faith or trust” for Frodo to follow Strider when they first met than it does after he has lots of evidence of Strider’s trustworthiness. In saying this, we seem to have in mind a measure of the difference between one’s the strength of one’s evidence and one’s confidence. We might call this a measure of the strength of “blind faith.” I will not be concerned with this sense of strength of faith in what follows, preferring the other perfectly natural and important sense in which Frodo’s faith increases as he comes to know Strider. [Is this related to resilience?]

Though strength of confidence is relevant to strength of faith, there are problems with the that conjecture that strength of faith is fully explained by degree of confidence. The conjecture does not explain some of the intuitions about strength of evidence in the original examples. My mom, my daughter, and I each believed with a high degree of confidence that the skywalk will hold. Our folk concepts of belief and degree of confidence allow for cases of weakness of will that do not count against our believing or having a high degree of confidence.4 My mom’s lack of faith in the skywalk to hold is not plausibly

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4(Gendler 2008). There are arguably cases in which one believes a proposition that one does not accept. Bratman (1999, 24) uses similar examples to show that acceptance has a
explained in terms of belief or degree of confidence.

Also, the increase in my faith after mustering courage is not explained by my coming to think it more likely that the skywalk would hold. Nor does any increase in confidence account for the increase in faith that occurs when Frodo and company consider the practical argument that they should entrust their lives to Strider because he is their last, best hope for survival. By that time, they have considered and weighed all of the available evidence bearing on Strider’s confidence, and this practical consideration (I will assume) does not increase their confidence that he will safely lead them. It does, however, increase their faith in him to lead with competence and good will. \( [[\text{This needs more defense in light of Hieronymi’s claims}]] \) They come to see that the likelihood that Strider will prove trustworthy is \textit{enough}, given the circumstances, for them to entrust their lives to him.

In a series of recent papers, Lara Buchak gives an account of propositional faith that has the resources to capture this dimension of the strength of one’s faith. Buchak begins by defining an act of faith:

\textbf{For an Individual} \( I \), \( A \) is an act of faith that \( X \) if and only if \( X \) is a candidate proposition for faith and:

1. \( A \) constitutes \( I \) taking a risk on \( X \) \([I \text{ prefers to } A \text{ if } X \text{ is true, but not otherwise}^6]\).

2. \( I \) chooses to commit to \( A \) before examining additional evidence rather than to postpone her decision about \( A \) until she examines additional evidence.\(^7\)

My walking on the skywalk and Frodo’s following Strider are acts of faith, on this view, because both are actions we prefer if the relevant thing is trustworthy, but not otherwise, and in each case we choose to commit to performing the actions rather than inquiring further about the trustworthiness of the thing.

Buchak suggests that we can think of the degree of one’s faith that \( X \) (full stop) in terms of the acts of faith one is disposed to perform.

\(^5\)Footnote to note that I’m rejecting the Bayesian construal of degree of confidence in favor of a folk notion.

\(^6\)Buchak gives a moral formal definition: “[A]n act constitutes an individual’s taking a risk on \( X \) just in case for some alternative act \( B \), \( A \) is preferred to \( B \) under the supposition that \( X \), and \( B \) is preferred to \( A \) under the supposition that \( \neg X \).” Buchak (2014, 54)

\(^7\)(Buchak 2014). In an earlier exposition of her view (Buchak 2012), Buchak gives a variation of this definition, which she takes to be an analysis of a person’s having “faith that \( X \), expressed by an action.” There she analyzes this notion in the language of preferences: “A person has faith that \( X \), expressed by [action] \( A \), 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 \( B \& \neg X \) to \( A \& \neg X \), and the person prefers [to commit to \( A \) before he examines the additional evidence] rather than [to postpone his decision about \( A \) until he examines additional evidence].” (Buchak 2012, 254)
Just as belief comes in degrees, so too does faith. And one's degree of faith will be a matter of which risks one is willing to take on $X$ without looking for further evidence. I might have enough faith that God exists to attend a house of worship (a low-stakes risk) without gathering further evidence, but I might not have enough faith that God exists to donate all my money to charity and take up a life of poverty (a high-stakes risk) without gathering further evidence. Faith simpliciter, then, is a matter of one's dispositional profile. Buchak (2014, 55)

On Buchak's view, then, a person has a greater degree of faith if they are willing to perform acts of faith that involve taking bigger risks on $X$, and "of little faith" when they are willing to perform only actions that involve taking smaller risks on $X$.

Buchak's account suggests an important dimension of strength of faith, but it needs an amendment. Even though she advertises her view as an account of "the relationship between faith and degrees of belief" (Buchak 2014, 49), her view makes no mention of a degree of confidence, belief, or any other cognitive attitude as even partially constituting faith. Faith, on her view, involves only various dispositions to act, and (unless one adopts a dispositionalist account of mental states) it will not necessarily involve any particular cognitive state. This seems to me a mistake, since there are strong reasons to think that faith at least partly consists of a cognitive attitude. If we ask why I walked on the skywalk, an appropriate answer is, "because I came to have faith that the skywalk would hold," an explanation that seems to attribute a positive assessment of the truth of the proposition on par with other cognitive assessments such as, "because I believed the skywalk would hold," or "because I was confident the skywalk would hold".

There is a relatively easy fix for Buchak's account, though: Think of propositional faith as the degree of confidence that (when combined with other aspects of the subject's psychology) motivates or grounds the dispositions to perform risky actions that Buchak describes. The resulting account gives an additional way that one's confidence can be stronger or weaker that is independent of de-

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8[[If degrees of confidence just are preferences over bets one might be offered, then the dispositions or pattern of preferences Buchak mentions might be taken to imply a degree of confidence. However, I don't think Buchak accepts this view (nor does it seem that a theory of faith should be saddled with so controversial a view). In other places [reference] she seems to endorse the view of (Eriksson and Hájek 2007) that even a Buddhist monk with no preferences at all might still have degrees of belief. Decision theorists may need to treat degrees of confidence as a primitive concept.]

9[Here is another objection: It makes perfect sense to question whether a particular case of propositional faith is epistemically justified or counts as knowledge. (Indeed, whether religious faith is ever epistemically justified or counts as knowledge has been a central topic in philosophy of religion.) But this question involves a category error if faith is not at least partially constituted by a cognitive attitude that can be epistemically evaluated. Given Buchak's account of faith in terms of dispositions to act and preferences, we can ask whether these states are pragmatically rational, or whether the cognitive states that motivate them are epistemically justified or based on knowledge; however, it seems that faith itself can't be directly epistemically evaluated.]

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gree of confidence (which, recall, we are thinking of as the likelihood from the subject's perspective that a proposition is true). For example, the consideration that Strider is their last, best hope for survival can increase their faith in Strider, not by increasing their confidence that Strider is trustworthy, but rather by suggesting that the likelihood that he will prove trustworthy is enough to commit to performing the risky act of entrusting themselves to his care. Considerations for or against being risk-averse affect the strength of one's faith in this sense. Similarly, my faith that the skywalk will hold increases in virtue of changes in my overall psychology that make my degree of confidence sufficient to motivate me to step out on faith.10

However, although having a degree of confidence sufficient to support risks is one important measure of faith, it is again not the whole story. It is sometimes helpful to understand strength of faith in such a way that two people who are equally willing to take risks differ in the strength of their faith. Suppose that after I have mustered my courage to get on the skywalk, my daughter and I have the same dispositions to commit to risky actions on the skywalk even though I still experience the strong fear. We can still ask whose faith is stronger, my daughter's or mine? There are two plausible but competing ways of answering the question, suggesting separate ways to think about the degree of one's faith. On one way of thinking, faith is stronger to the extent that one lacks negative emotions like fear that undermine risk-taking and has positive emotions like hopeful feelings) that support it. By this measure, my daughter’s faith is stronger. This way of thinking of faith comes out in what Martin Luther King reports to be a common trope in sermons: “Fear came to the door. Faith answered. There was no one there.”11 [Faith (like perfect love) casts out fear.] Another way of thinking of strength of faith, though, credits people with more faith if they have psychological resources to act even in situations in which they would experience strong negative emotions. (On this way of thinking, I’m the hero of the story.) It gives you the psychological umph to overcome irrational emotions. The two ways of thinking parallel different ways of thinking of the character trait of courage—as a disposition not to feel fear in the face of things that should be done or a disposition to overcome such fear.

Treating a willingness to risk as the only relevant measure of strength of faith also underplays the importance of belief and strength of confidence to strength of faith. This is especially true in cases involving trusting testimony or in the special case of trusting people to do what they have promised.12 To see this, consider a different scenario than what is described in Scene 3, in which Frodo has a very low confidence that Strider will be trustworthy (and a strong confidence, perhaps even amounting to belief, that Strider will be untrustworthy). Perhaps he thinks it is very likely that the Ring of Power will corrupt Strider. However, suppose this low confidence is compensated by some

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10[Hieronym footnotes?]
11King (1990). On this way of thinking, faith, like perfect love, casts out fear.
12[One way to think of this that keeps the risk idea: If what is in question is whether one trusts someone else to tell the truth or to keep a promise, one's confidence or whether one has an outright belief seems to be one relevant "risky action." Cf. Hieronymi.]
other aspect of Frodo’s psychology that makes him just as willing as in the real story to commit, without seeking further evidence, to risky actions that depend on Strider’s leading well. Perhaps Frodo develops an increasing love for taking big risks when it comes to trusting men (a side-effect of the Ring of Power). Or perhaps he sees it as a moral duty or an obligation of friendship to be willing to entrust himself to Strider, even though he thinks it’s overwhelmingly likely that Strider is untrustworthy. There is a clear sense, it seems to me, in which Frodo’s faith in Strider is considerably weaker in this case, in virtue of his not believing or being confident in Strider’s claim that he would go with him to the end. If Strider found out that Frodo does not believe that he will prove trustworthy, he can rightly complain that Frodo lacks faith in him, even though he is willing to take the same risks. [Likewise, I can rightly complain that my wife has too little faith in me if I find out that she actually believes I’m untrustworthy in some respect but has been acting otherwise because she regards it as a good bet.] Or, again, suppose I try to overcome an implicit bias by making sure that I act as if black people are as trustworthy in giving directions as white people, even though my confidence that they are trustworthy stays the same. Though this might be better than not adjusting my behavior, it still involves a lamentable lack of faith as compared to someone who is equally confident. Sometimes in relationships with others, being trusted amounts to being believed to be trustworthy; a mere willingness to bet is not enough.

The final sense of strength of faith that I will consider is Howard-Snyder’s “resilience in the face of counter-evidence.” There are lots of questions that are pertinent to understanding what resilience amounts to. (Is it a resilience of confidence or one’s willingness to risk that is relevant? What sort of counterevidence are we to imagine? Undermining or rebutting defeaters? Must the subject consider and acknowledge the evidential weight of the counter-evidence in order to count as being resilient in the face of it, or is it enough for the subject to be disposed to refuse to acknowledge it as evidence or to be disposed not even to consider it?) I set aside these questions, which I think are important but do not diminish the importance of the category. The main point I want to argue is that resilience is a dimension of strength of faith that is distinct from what we have considered so far.

Notice first that neither Frodo’s first meeting with Strider nor the case of my having faith that the skywalk will hold seems to be significantly resilient to counter-evidence. The least hint that the skywalk will not hold will hold would keep me from having faith. Likewise for Frodo when he first meets Strider. More generally, faith might embody a high confidence or willingness to risk while being extremely fragile with respect to possible evidence. This poses a challenge for Howard-Snyder’s idea that resilience is an essential aspect of faith.

13Resilience also perhaps comes into play in two aspects of Bachak’s account. The first is her idea that faith involves being willing to commit to risks without seeking further evidence. We could test the strength of this aspect of faith by putting subjects in situations where further evidence is easily available. A second is her idea that faith involves a commitment to perform risky actions. Once such a commitment is in place, it may motivate performing risky actions even in the face of counter-evidence.
My faith that the skywalk will hold is strong in one dimension, even if it is not resilient.

However, it is also possible to have faith that is relatively weak in confidence or willingness to risk but whose strength lies in being highly resilient in the face of counter-evidence. Nicholas Wolterstorff distinguishes between resilience and confidence and suggests that it may have been resilience rather than confidence that made the faith of Job especially strong. “Job endured in the faith—with what level of confidence, we are not told. By doing so, he ‘pleased God’ (Hebrews 11:5).” (Wolterstorff, 1990, 414)

In conclusion, I have suggested several distinguishable dimensions in which faith can be strong or weak. They correspond to the following questions about one’s confidence that $X$ will $\phi$:

1. What risky actions dependent on $X$’s is the subject confident enough to commit to without seeking further evidence?
   (a) Is the subject’s confidence sufficient to motivate risky actions despite negative emotions that would undermine taking risks?
   (b) Is the subject disposed not to feel fear or other negative emotions that would undermine taking risky actions?
   (c) What is the subject’s degree of confidence that $X$ will $\phi$?

2. How resilient is the subject’s degree of confidence or willingness to risk in the face of changes to her evidential situation.14

References


Schwitzgebel, E. (2010). Acting contrary to our professed beliefs or the gulf between occurrent judgment and dispositional belief. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91(4), 531–553.


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