ON LOSING BELIEF IN FAITH

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Abstract:

Faith entails belief is the thesis that S’s having faith that \( p \) requires, or consists at least partly in, S’s believing that \( p \). Philosophical interest in whether faith entails belief is at its highest. Some philosophers allege that if faith entails belief, then faith is epistemically defective whenever its associated belief is. Others allege that if faith does not entail belief, then faith is easily reconciled with reason. I argue in this paper that these allegations are either mistaken or of less consequence than they appear. I propose several other likely reasons for worrying about whether faith entails belief: the truth-value of the thesis is crucial to the value of faith, to settling religious membership, and to settling religious benefits (e.g., salvation). I argue that these proposals too are either mistaken or of less consequence than they appear. I conclude that whether faith entails belief has none of the striking outcomes it might seem to have. This conclusion is happy: debate about belief’s relation to faith may proceed at reassuringly low stakes.

1. Introduction

More than a few philosophers have recently tried to figure out what faith is. Some have focused on the kind of faith that has propositional content, a kind often called propositional faith. One has this kind of faith when one has faith that God exists, or faith that one’s friend will do what is right. These philosophers aim to disclose the nature of faith, to state precisely what faith consists in. One potential constituent of faith has been of special interest: propositional belief. A traditional view is that S’s having faith that \( p \) consists partly in, or at least requires, S’s believing that \( p \). Tradition has recently fallen out of favor, but some still keep it.\(^1\)

It is philosophically noteworthy when we have cause to pen or erase connections between types of mental states. So it is of general philosophical interest to chart the relation between

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propositional faith and propositional belief. But some folks think much more is at stake here, that faith’s relation to belief has some important consequences. I will argue that this view is mistaken. Whether faith requires belief is of much less significance than recent debates suggest. I will consider (in Section 2) the only two reasons in the literature, and then (in Section 3) three other promising candidate reasons, for thinking it matters whether faith requires belief. Each of these reasons either is false, or fails to render belief’s relation to faith very significant. For simplicity, and for the sake of keeping with the literature, I will let faith entails belief stand for the traditional and allegedly noteworthy thesis. But I observe that this name is infelicitous, since mental states like faith and belief do not stand in entailment relations.

2. Literary Reasons

Two reasons for worrying about whether faith entails belief have surfaced in the recent literature. Daniel Howard-Snyder (2016, 142) has recently hinted at the first. He lists the definitions that Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Alex Rosenberg, and Mark Twain each give to ‘faith’, definitions that make the faithful blush. These thinkers simply define ‘faith’ as a kind of belief that has a major epistemic shortcoming. Howard-Snyder notes that “These cultured despisers of religion share the idiosyncratic view that faith is, as a matter of necessity, epistemically defective. But they share another view, too, the view that faith is propositional belief.” These thinkers share not only these two views, but also a third view connecting them. For these thinkers, faith is necessarily epistemically defective because faith is the kind of belief it is.

Howard-Snyder (2016; 2013) goes on to attack the thesis that faith entails belief, and one might conclude that his success would spare the faithful of all embarrassment. Reading the definitions of ‘faith’ that the “cultured despisers” offer might have induced worries about whether faith entails belief because one might think:
Worry 1. If faith entails belief, then faith is epistemically defective.

But Worry 1 is false, so Worry 1 does not render important the truth-value of faith entails belief. From faith’s entailing belief, it does not follow that faith is epistemically defective. To guarantee an epistemic defect we need a weaker antecedent, something we find in:

Worry 1*. If (a) faith entails belief and (b) every proximate belief is epistemically defective, then faith is epistemically defective.

A proximate belief is a belief that shares faith’s content. For faith that \( p \), belief that \( p \) is proximate. If faith entails belief, faith always has a proximate belief. If faith does not entail belief, faith may sometimes lack a proximate belief, although it may as matter of contingent fact usually have one. According to (b), any such belief is epistemically flawed.

Worry 1*, unlike Worry 1, seems true. If faith that \( p \) requires or consists partly in an epistemically defective belief that \( p \), then faith that \( p \) seems epistemically defective. And it might indeed be worrisome to learn that faith is epistemically defective. But Worry 1* itself gives no reason to worry about whether faith entails belief. Worry 1*’s antecedent is importantly weaker than that of Worry 1. Even if faith entails belief, faith could be free of epistemic defects if (b) is false. And (b), put mildly, is controversial. No serious inquiry into the nature of faith has produced evidence that all beliefs sharing propositional content with faith are epistemically defective. In other words, saving faith does not require one to join Howard-Snyder in challenging (a), and shaming faith requires more than a defense of (a).

I will defend an even bolder claim: whether faith entails belief is irrelevant to the worries about faith that we might associate with Worry 1*. Even if Worry 1* is correct, and even if (b) holds,
it does not matter whether (a) is true. My argument for this bolder claim begins with a step back. It is worth reflecting on why, in the first place, we would find it notable if faith were *epistemically* defective. If Worry 1* is to motivate concern about whether faith entails belief, faith’s being epistemically defective must be of some consequence. So, why suppose it would matter if faith were epistemically defective? I will consider two apparent reasons, and argue that on neither does it matter whether faith entails belief.

The first reason is this: it matters whether faith has *any* important defect. If faith has an important defect, then there is some reason not to have faith, and that’s a notable outcome. And all epistemic defects are important. So, it matters whether faith is epistemically defective.

I will grant all these claims, though some seem improbable. Even if this first reason and its support are correct, it does not matter whether faith entails belief. Here is why. Suppose it is false that faith entails belief, and yet the proximate belief is nonetheless epistemically defective. That is, suppose faith that \( p \) does not require belief that \( p \), but whenever faith is accompanied by belief with the same content, the belief is epistemically lacking. It looks like faith is defective in some important way, even if it itself isn’t *epistemically* defective. After all, whenever we pair faith with belief, the belief falls short epistemically. Something about faith, it seems, precludes reasonable belief. Even if we suppose that it is false that faith entails belief, faith is importantly defective so long as (b) holds. Worry 1* is correct, but (a) ultimately does none of the work. Regardless of whether faith entails belief, faith would be importantly defective simply given (b). On the first reason for caring about whether faith is epistemically defective, it is trivial whether faith entails belief.

The second reason for caring about whether faith is epistemically defective is this: if faith is epistemically defective, then the corresponding doctrines of faith are epistemically defective. This is especially notable when we think of religious doctrine and faith. There is insufficient reason to
believe that God exists, and perhaps even reason to deny his existence, if faith that God exists is unreasonable. That is why faith’s epistemic standing is significant.

These claims too can be granted. Still, it does not matter whether faith entails belief. Faith’s epistemic status is significant here because it is connected with the epistemic status of doxastic attitudes toward doctrines of faith. Consider what affects the epistemic status of faith. Suppose it’s evidence. A lack of evidence for \( p \) makes faith that \( p \) epistemically defective. But by itself a lack of evidence for \( p \) makes believing \( p \) epistemically defective. The status of \( faith \) isn’t ultimately settling the status of doxastic attitudes toward doctrines of faith. Rather, \( evidence \) settles the status of both one’s faith and one’s doxastic attitudes. Now suppose that it is false that faith entails belief. The types of things that ultimately determine the standing of one’s doxastic attitudes haven’t changed. Evidence still settles the epistemic status of one’s doxastic attitudes, including those attitudes toward doctrines of faith. So it does not matter whether faith entails belief. The doctrines of faith are good, bad, or ugly, independent of whether faith entails belief.

I conclude that Worry 1*, though correct, gives no reason for concern about belief’s relation to faith.

Lara Buchak (forthcoming) points toward a second reason for worrying about whether faith entails belief. Buchak looks at the prospects, on the main types of theories of faith, for solving the problem of faith and reason. She (forthcoming, 1) describes this as the problem of “reconciling religious faith” with “ordinary epistemic standards”. Given a theory on which it is false that faith entails belief, she (forthcoming, 10) says, “it is easy to see how faith is epistemically permissible”. Since faith does not demand belief, it does not demand belief in violation of ordinary epistemic standards. Faith, on such a theory, appears always epistemically permitted. Maybe a complete solution to the problem further reconciles faith and reason, but we appear to have at least a partial solution. That is:

\(^2\) Cf. McKaughan (2013, 115).
Worry 2. If it is false that faith entails belief, the problem of faith and reason is at least partially solved.

More generally, a theory on which faith does not require belief helps solve a notable problem. So, it matters whether faith entails belief.

I grant that Worry 2 is correct. I claim, nonetheless, that Worry 2 is not itself cause for concern over whether faith entails belief. Two reasons support my claim.

First, it remains to be seen that the problem of faith and reason needs a solution. It is not a given that religious faith should be reconciled with ordinary epistemic standards. Perhaps the two are irreconcilable. It would be inconsequential that some theory of faith could partly explain how they fit, if they don’t fit.

Second, some partial solutions to the problem of faith and reason underwhelm—it is more important how the problem is solved, than that it is solved. If the problem of faith and reason is partially solved simply because faith does not require belief, then the partial solution for two reasons appears trivial. First, if it is false that faith entails belief then, trivially, faith is epistemically permissible. What is epistemically permissible is simply what is not epistemically prohibited. And any type of thing that altogether fails to be governed by epistemic prohibitions is, of course, not prohibited by them. If faith entails belief is false, faith is not governed by epistemic prohibitions. Here is why. If faith does not entail belief, faith is not even partly constituted by belief. And faith is not partly constituted by disbelief, nor by suspended judgment. So, if faith entails belief is false, faith is not partly constituted by any doxastic attitude. What’s more, if faith does not entail belief, then faith seems compatible with nearly any degree of belief. So it is doubtful that faith is constituted in part by some degree of belief. Faith is a wholly non-doxastic mental relation between a subject and a proposition. But epistemic prohibitions do not apply to wholly non-doxastic mental relations, just as
they do not apply to relations like *imagining*. It would be a category mistake to suppose faith is a candidate for an epistemic prohibition. So, trivially, faith is epistemically permissible—not epistemically prohibited—just as *imagining*, and *feeling pain*, and *taking long walks* are epistemically permissible. The problem of faith and reason might be partly solved, but to no one’s satisfaction. A more consequential solution to the problem would, instead, show not only that faith is epistemically permissible, but also that faith *is* the kind of thing governed by epistemic prohibitions.

The second reason that the solution is trivial is that it does not imply that there is any epistemically permissible *proximate belief*. The solution reconciles religious faith with reason, while allowing every belief that shares religious faith’s content to violate ordinary epistemic standards. But I think we are interested in whether religious faith and reason can be reconciled in large part because we interested in whether the proximate beliefs of religious faith can be reconciled with reason. If we wonder whether faith that God exists fits with ordinary epistemic standards, it is in part because we wonder whether belief that God exists fits these standards. So, supposing Worry 2 is true, there is not yet reason for concern over whether faith entails belief. If it is false that faith entails belief, little of note is thereby reconciled with reason.

3. Other Reasons

The literature suggests some reasons for concern over whether faith entails belief, but I have shown they raise only false alarms. But perhaps there are other reasons for concern, reasons that were thought too obvious or widely shared to require explicit mention. I will briefly consider three additional tempting reasons for thinking it matters whether faith entails belief. The literature has not offered any support for them, and I will show that they are effective only given some contestable assumptions. So, we should not yet conclude that the truth-value of faith entails belief matters. You
might understand the remainder of this section as a thrifty guide to avoiding any remarkable consequences of whether faith entails belief.

The first of these worries might arise in connection with a certain criticism of faith, or of the faithful, intended by a statement like “You only have faith that…”. The criticism may be that faith falls short of knowledge and the person of faith doesn’t know the content of her faith. If faith falls short of knowledge, it may lack some important good that knowledge has. The thesis that faith entails belief is relevant to this criticism given:

Worry 3. (a) The greatest intellectual and epistemic goods are highly cognitive, requiring belief. And (b) if faith entails belief is false, faith is not such a good.

Knowledge is such a good, and it requires belief. So, one might think, debate about whether faith entails belief helps establish or undermine the criticism of the faithful.

I take no stance on whether the faithful merit criticism. But (a) is false, so Worry 3 is false, and so it should be excluded from any case against faith. In Frise (forthcoming) I argue that knowledge shares its value with some things falling short of it. Knowledge even shares its value with something that doesn’t involve belief, namely, being in a position to know. Trivial details about one’s past, about the correct theory of belief, and about the contingent workings of human memory can affect whether one counts as believing that \( p \), and therefore as knowing that \( p \), yet these details do not affect whether one’s relation to \( p \) is valuable. So, there is reason to doubt that the greatest intellectual and epistemic goods are highly cognitive.

What’s more, even if these great goods are highly cognitive, it is not obvious that they require belief. Some of these goods may just require a positive cognitive stance, like acceptance, assent, acquiescence, and so on. And many who deny that faith entails belief propose that faith
nonetheless has one of these cognitive components. So, faith may still be sufficiently cognitive to be one of the great goods. It would be a mistake for the appraisal of faith to focus on whether faith requires belief.

A second tempting reason for concern over whether faith entails belief is this. Faith seems necessary for being involved in certain groups, and some of this involvement is notable. Christianity, for example, is often thought to require faith, and it is significant whether one counts as a Christian. If faith without belief is possible, then the Christian world expands. In short, it is significant whether faith entails belief because:

Worry 4. If it is false that faith entails belief, then faithful non-believers attain notable memberships.

It is plausible that some important memberships require faith. But that is an imprecise claim. There is more than one kind of faith. Which kind do the memberships require? Let’s grant that Christianity requires faith of some sort. It is not obvious that the required faith must be propositional (nor even exactly which propositions one must have faith in). Perhaps objectual faith, faith in a thing or person or activity, will do the job. And it is not obvious that objectual faith requires belief in some or any closely related proposition. Perhaps faith in God does not require belief that God exists, and perhaps faith in God fulfills the faith requirement for Christianity. I am undoubtedly not the first to note these possibilities, but note their relevance. It seems it is already possible for a kind of faithful non-believer to be a Christian, to have that notable membership. But then even though Worry 4 is true, it is innocuous. If propositional faith requires propositional belief, the Christian world shrinks

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little. If propositional faith does not require propositional belief, then Christianity adds few members.

The line of thought leading up to Worry 4 proposes that it is significant whether one counts as a Christian. Reflecting on whether this proposal really is true brings us to the third reason that one might be in suspense over whether faith entails belief. Here are potential grounds in favor of the proposal: only people with certain memberships receive certain desirable benefits; Christianity is among those memberships, and faith is key to Christianity. Analogously: only the Hollywood elite receive invitations to the swankiest of parties. Since notoriety in celebrity-circles helps make one a Hollywood elite, notoriety is instrumental to the good night-life. Or, perhaps something that helps guarantee membership is really what matters for receiving the benefits exclusive to those members. It is notoriety that is vital to being on the invite-list.

Likewise: only Christians receive certain desirable benefits, like salvation, and faith is instrumental to salvation because it helps make one a Christian. Or, although faith is critical to whether one counts as a Christian, it is ultimately one’s faith that saves, not one’s Christianity. We are saved by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

This lends perspective on the significance of whether faith entails belief. As long as faith does not require belief, faith will allow salvation even for some who do not believe that, say, God exists (perhaps by allowing these non-believers to count as Christians). However, if faith entails belief, then no non-believers are saved. Non-believers lack faith, which salvation demands. The third tempting reason for interest in whether faith entails belief, then, is:

*Worry 5.* If it is false that faith entails belief, then faithful non-believers thereby attain notable benefits.
Let’s set aside concerns for Worry 5 that parallel those for Worry 4, concerns about whether it is *propositional* faith that is essential to attaining the notable benefits. Worry 5 is doubtful for other reasons. Some clubs share their benefits with the uninitiated, and Christianity appears to be such a club. Since the God of Christianity is perfectly good and just, it is plausible that some who faultlessly have had no genuine opportunity to acquire faith can know salvation. For the same reason, some who faultlessly have had no genuine opportunity to become Christians, and yet who have faith, can know salvation. That is, some faithful non-believers are already eligible for the cream of Christianity.

If it’s false that faith entails belief, faithful non-believers aren’t given new goods.

Bracketing these doubts, I claim Worry 5 is dialectically inert. A sociological observation helps reveal this. It is the details of a religious worldview that primarily shape our intuitions about who, on that worldview, receives salvation. These details are insulated from stances on whether faith entails belief. Here is reason for the insularity. It seems that what very generally matters for salvation on, for example, the Christian worldview, is how the person is oriented toward or disposed to be oriented toward God. The subject’s relation or potential relation to God is paramount. It seems trivial to the subject’s salvation how her types of mental states turn out to be related to each other. To discover how states internal to her mind are related is not to discover much about the relation the subject bears to God. In other words, it doesn’t matter whether Worry 5 is true. Our antecedent evidence about who on some worldview receives salvation, and what the recipients are generally like, will make it reasonable to accept or deny Worry 5. As a matter of contingent fact, we learn nothing for or against Worry 5 that is independent of this antecedent evidence. More generally, Worry 5 is not poised to change reasonable attitudes about who gets what.
4. Conclusion

The volume of the recent philosophical debate about faith’s relation to belief would suggest the relation specially matters. I have suggested otherwise. The stakes of the debate are low, the central apparent worries about the debate’s outcome are either false or harmless. I do not offer this conclusion in order to demotivate the debate, but rather to encourage further reflection on what, besides general philosophical curiosity, keeps it up.

References


