

Philosophy and Religion:
Faith – I

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November 29, 2020

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1 Introduction

In this series of entries I will try to explore what it means to have faith, in general, and in the context of religion.

In this entry in particular, I will try to set out a mechanism by which faith works, and so in later entries try to use it, change it, or move on to another topic regarding faith.

2 A Standard Definition of Faith

Firstly, it would be good if we could define faith. Thus, a standard definition would be that faith is a “Strong or unshakeable belief in something, especially without proof or evidence.” (Collins English Dictionary 2018). Another part such a standard definition might include, as Collins English Dictionary does, “A conviction of the truth of certain doctrines of religion, especially when this is not based on reason” (Collins English Dictionary 2018).

There are a few things about this definition that just do not fit into a situation where someone has faith. Firstly, from the perspective of a believer, I do not think that they see no evidence for their beliefs. On the contrary, I think a believer would see “evidence” that others would not see, and therefore that they believe. Secondly, I would not think for a second that anyone who believes in something, does so without any reasonable judgement, from their perspective. I think that faith is a result of reason, from the perspective of the believer, for if such faith was unreasonable, no one in their right mind would have such a faith. So the important thing missing is perspective.

Another key thing to note is that faith is usually only ever applied to things that are fundamentally unknown, or unknowable. In these areas, it is not scientific logic that drives faith, but human reason, since no experimentation can be done, and nothing can be observed. Hence, the only tool left to use is human reason, and creativity in the use of it. By human reason, I mean the processes which have been observed through human experience. For example, when the cause of thunder was unknown, people of the Norse belief system may have said such an event was Thor beating his hammer. I would advise caution, if one were to say that this is an absurd notion, since it does make basic, human sense. The sound could easily be akin to that of a strike, and so who else could strike with such power, and in the domain of the sky? Why of course, a god. And one who satisfies such a profile might have been Thor. It may have been the case that, in fact, Thor and his hammer were reasoned *from* the sound of thunder, not attributed to it. But I hope it can be seen, either case, that there is logic here, and that it is a basic human kind of logic that may have been used to explain thunder.

And so, because faith is applied that which cannot be known, or is unknowable, there naturally cannot be any external evidence, nor proof. There is also the case of reason, and I would say that there is reason within faith, but not a kind of reason that can be directly applied to the unknowable concept,

due to its unknowable nature. That reasoning is human reasoning, and it is extrapolated into the unknown, because there is little else that can be done at all. This human reason may lack elements of direct logic, but that does not mean it cannot make sense, and so what we have is in fact human reasoning, within a domain which cannot possibly be reasoned with. That might be why, usually, religious faith has much to do with human death. Of death, no one can empirically say anything about it. It is in its nature, unknowable. However, human reason can be applied, when no other kind of direct logical process can be applied. For example, seeing death, by human experience, is an emotional, soul moving event. Therefore, it makes human sense, to say that death has an emotional, soul moving quality within its process too, hence many religions leaning towards the idea of death as being the beginning of a kind of emotional, soul moving process. In another example, other religions may take the idea that, by human experience, things work cyclically, that all around us lie the remnants of a natural world, which is constantly producing new life, and housing death all the time, and that we sleep and awake repeatedly. Therefore, it would make sense that after death, we just come back to life. Within all this, I cannot see anything that is unreasonable, but in fact, as I hope you see too, there is inherent reason within all of these explorations of death.

I really would like to supply a new definition of faith, because I cannot help but feel very dissatisfied with the standard one I found in the dictionary, so here it is:

Faith is the extrapolation of human reasoning, which is developed often by personal experience, into domains and concepts that are fundamentally unknowable, or are not fully known of, or understood, at the time.

By this definition, there can be any number of conclusions made on the nature of unknowable concepts, but the defining element is the presence of human reasoning. I would also like to add that human reasoning may also include reason attached to emotion, such as taking thunder to be a sound of anger expressed by Thor, for example.

I would be cautious also, in saying that faith is only a means of explanation. I would think it is a bit bolder, since its contact is with concepts that are unknowable, and so is rather akin to exploration rather than explanation, which also gives rise to the possibility of many different views within the same unknowable concept.

3 A Framework of Faith

Now we can say that faith is the result of human reason, we can then say that an understanding of that human reason must be in place for anyone to be able to extrapolate it into an unknowable domain. We can also say that such faith could result in some form of action, simply by using that faith as a reason in itself. Thus we have a basic framework which involves faith:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} \text{Understanding} & & \rightarrow & \text{Faith} & \rightarrow & \text{Action} \\ \text{(of the human reasoning)} & & & & & \text{(due to faith)} \end{array}$$

And so, understanding, drives faith, drives action. Not all action of course, but if we can say that human reasoning is the foundation of all other kinds of reasoning and logic, then we can apply this to all kinds of actions, and so say that all actions are driven by a kind of faith. But that would be an entry for another day.

4 Conclusion

In this entry, my main goal was simply to show that faith and belief are not so unreasonable at all, and secondly, to hopefully show that their standard definitions are rather inadequate, and possibly do not take into account the whole picture. The definition I formulated might not even take into account the whole picture, and so I predict I may change it in a future entry.

At any rate, I hope this makes for an interesting exploration.

Thank you for reading.

END

References

Collins English Dictionary (2018), Thirteenth Edition, Glasgow, Harper-Collins.