

## THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FAITH AS A RELIGIOUS MODE OF KNOWING

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In religious discussions, we often hear that "You have to have faith." This comment frequently follows a protracted exchange in which the parties seem to have arrived at a rational impasse. Reason has failed to adjudicate the issue. Reason having failed, faith must now take up the task. Where reason ends, faith begins. This notion, that where reason ends faith begins, begs some indication of the point of transition: *Where* does reason end and faith begin? Or, as philosophers have asked: What is the relationship between faith and reason?

Of course, to formulate the problem this way assumes that there is such a thing as faith, for only if there *is* faith can faith have a relationship to reason. I doubt that there is such a thing as faith. The thesis of this paper is that there is no faith in the sense of a distinctively religious mode of knowing.

The paper consists of three sections. First, I will indicate how I am using the word 'faith'; second, I will examine a presumably paradigmatic instance of knowing on the basis of faith and attempt to show that, in fact, it is not an instance of knowing on the basis of faith; and, third, I will conclude by considering several possible objections to my argument. It is not my goal to show that religious belief is irrational or unwarranted. Rather, my goal is to show that *if* religious belief is warranted, it can *only* be warranted by reason, not by faith. Maybe it can be warranted; maybe it can't. In either case, faith can play no role.

I

We begin with the meaning of 'faith.' I want to make three points. First, 'faith' can refer either to a *body* of belief or a *basis* of belief. The former, or *doctrinal*, sense is illustrated by the sentence, "She is a member of the

Presbyterian faith." The latter, or *epistemic*, sense is illustrated by the sentences, "He believes on the basis of faith" and "You have to have faith." Obviously, there are instances of faith in the doctrinal sense, since all persons subscribe to bodies of belief and many persons subscribe to bodies of religious belief. My thesis is that there are no instances of faith in the epistemic sense—faith in the sense of a mode of knowing.

Second, and to be more precise, I am saying that there are no instances of faith in the sense of a distinctively *religious* mode of knowing. Obviously, there are instances of faith in the sense of an *ordinary* mode of knowing. There is, for example, my belief that the Chicago Cubs this year will end the season by winning more than half their games. We can say that I hold this belief on faith, meaning that my grounds are inconclusive, although they may be pretty good grounds. Faith, in this sense, is just induction. In this paper I am not denying that there is religious induction. I am denying, rather, that there is anything *other than* religious induction; I am denying that there is a mode of knowing that begins where induction ends. Indeed, I am saying that if religion is warranted at all it is warranted inductively.

But what is the nature of faith, this presumed warrant that begins where reason ends? This brings us to the third point regarding 'faith.' Faith is the correlate of revelation; it is the human response to revelation; its legitimacy presupposes the legitimacy of revelation. As the correlate to revelation, faith is essentially passive so far as the believer is concerned. When we cannot know by identifying evidence and evaluating arguments—in other words, when we cannot know by our rational agency—we can know by the agency of another—or so the advocate of faith maintains. God makes himself known to us. He reveals himself. Our role is passive: We can open ourselves to what he shows us and affirm what he shows us—and we can do no more. When availing ourselves of faith as a distinctively religious mode of knowing, we are *revelatees*. The knowledge is ours, but the epistemic agency is essentially God's. Our knowledge of God is, essentially, something that God does to us.

It is knowledge that begins where our rational agency has ended.

The word 'passive' is often vague. In this context, however, it is precise: Passivity consists in the fact that the person who believes on the basis of faith performs no other operation than remaining open to revelation and affirming revelation; she does not, so far as her believing on the basis of faith is concerned, search for evidence or evaluate arguments. She may perform these rational actions, and she may perform them as a religious believer; but, when she does so, her epistemic functioning is not, at *that* juncture, based on faith.

Now it is sometimes said that faith is active, far from being passive. Here we must distinguish between an act of believing and a mode of knowing. If a prospective believer is unsure of his rational grounds for *p*, but decides to believe *p*, his believing that *p* is active: It is active, first, in that believing is an act and, second, in that his believing issued from a personal struggle regarding the credibility of the grounds. Therefore, activity does characterize an act of believing. But suppose that a prospective believer wonders whether *p*: he is not merely unsure of his rational grounds, he cannot decide on the basis of his rational grounds; and he experiences a putative revelation. Fideists maintain that his rational agency has at this point ended, that his appropriate response is not to seek further reasons but to accept the putative revelation as actual revelation. Therefore, passivity characterizes this mode of knowing.

In summary, faith is a distinctively religious, passive mode of knowing. The person who advocates this mode of knowing is a fideist. The fideist need not always eschew evidence and reasoning. She need do so only sometimes: She will, upon encountering the appearance of some rational impasses, adduce the principle, "You have to have faith."

## II

My criticism of fideism requires two assumptions: (1) that faith in the view of fideists is a mode of knowing, and (2)

that modes of knowing are subject to the principle that true belief should be sought and false belief avoided. I will examine a presumably paradigmatic instance of faith and show that it cannot be an instance of faith if true belief is being sought and false belief is being avoided. Certain decisions will be required of the believer if she is to reduce the possibility of error, and these decisions will require reason. Therefore, faith cannot begin where reason ends since reason cannot end.

Let us consider an instance of revelation in which God verbally informs a prospective believer that God exists. God says to our prospective believer, White, "I exist." White may remain open to this experience, or she may ignore it; she may affirm the experience as the experience of a true proposition that God does exist, or she may deny that she has experienced a true proposition. If she assents to this proposition, she presumably does so on faith, not reason. Now, the reader may note, this is a somewhat unusual example of revelation and faith. When we examine objections to my argument I will explain why I think that the unusualness strengthens rather than weakens my argument.

As we have seen, human agency is inconsistent with fideism; faith as a mode of knowing is essentially passive. The significance of the example is its unexpungible element of human agency: if true belief is being sought and false belief is being avoided, rational activity is indispensable when White concludes, having experienced the sounds "I exist," that in fact God exists. This element of agency consists of all the cognitive activities that are required for White to derive a belief in God's existence from her experience of "I exist." Specifically, these cognitive activities include:

- A. A decision by White that she has experienced the phonemes, "I exist."
- B. A decision by White that she herself is not the source of these phonemes.
- C. A decision by White that the phonemes constitute a proposition.
- D. A decision by White that the proposition asserts that God

exists.

- E. And a decision by White that the proposition is true.

Each of these decisions, and possibly others, is necessary if White is to decide on the basis of this putative revelation, and pursuant to the truth, that God exists. Consider decision A. White must make a reasoned decision regarding the sounds that she experiences, since sounds *similar* to those that we represent with the symbols, "I exist," need not constitute the phonemes that constitute the sentence, "I exist." A parrot making similar sounds is an example. If God should initiate those sounds, it is at least possible that the sounds will be somewhat unlike those sounds when uttered by a human being, since God is presumably transcendent and, hence, unlike human beings. So White's decision *may* be difficult. Difficult or not, if White is to reduce the possibility of error, she must decide: She must decide whether the sounds that she has experienced do constitute those phonemes. She will decide on the basis of her past experience. She will determine whether there is sufficient similarity between this experience and her previous experiences of "I exist" to conclude that she has experienced, in fact, the phonemes. In other words, she will reason by analogy. What is important for our purpose is simply to note that she will, indeed, reason.

Similar analyses apply *mutatis mutandis* to the remaining decisions. Consider decision B. Again, she must make a reasoned decision because if *she* is herself the source of the sounds, their relevance to a belief that *God* exists is extremely doubtful. Now, presumably, White did not activate her vocal organs; and, in the past, when she has not activated her vocal organs but experienced sounds that are like those that comprise sentences, she has not been the source of those sounds. Of course, again, we are here considering a putative experience of the transcendent God, so previous experiences may mislead and the decision may be difficult. But, difficult or not, if she is to reduce the possibility of error, she must decide whether something other than herself is the source of the present sounds. I think that she must decide by analogy. Again, the

important point is that she is reasoning. Reasoning is not obviated by an instance of putative revelation, nor could it be obviated even if the revelation were real.

One more example will suffice: decision C. Do the sounds constitute a proposition? Again, White will draw on past experience. Previous contexts for "I exist" have been truth-claim contexts. White may think of "Here I am" as being uttered by one person who wants to be seen by another person and as meaning "I exist here"; or, she may think of "The Loch Ness monster exists" as meaning that the Loch Ness monster is not a figment of our imaginations; or, she may think of "Elvis exists" as meaning that he did not die or that he has returned to life. In many contexts in which we say "X exists," we are uttering a sentence—and one that is either true or false. White also might think of some uses of "I exist" that are *not* propositional; but, she could decide that the possible revelatory use—which is the use under examination here—is not propositional and so not revelatory of God's existence only if she deemed it more analogous to any exceptional cases than to the regular cases. But whatever her decision, some rational decision is necessary if she is to determine on the basis of this experience whether or not there is a God and if she is to do so while minimizing the possibility that she might be wrong. Were we to examine decisions D and E, I think that we would find that they involve more reasoning, not less, than do A, B, and C.

My conclusion is that faith cannot begin where reason ends because reason cannot end. And since faith, by definition, is that which begins where reason ends, there is no believing on the basis of faith. We may believe on faith if by 'faith' we mean inductive reasoning; but, then our fideist is confused when, encountering a rational impasse, she advises that faith is our next, and a different, recourse.

### III

Three objections might be proposed at this point. First,

perhaps I have caricatured fideism. As mentioned earlier, this example *is* unusual. After all, fideists do not frequently say that they have heard the phonemes, "I exist." Usually they adduce more subtle experiences as revelatory. But, if I have thus caricatured fideism, I think that the caricature strengthens my argument rather than weakens it. More subtle experiences would require more, not less, reasoning. If the sounds, "I exist," do not obviate reasoning before the existence of God can be affirmed, *what does?* Surely there is a longer argument between the experience of a sunset and the affirmation that God exists than there is between the sounds, "I exist," and the affirmation that God exists.

Second, it might be said that, while I have shown that reasoning must be *present* in the acceptance of revelation, I have not shown that it *constitutes* revelation. I have shown that faith *by itself* does not begin where reason by itself ends, but I have not shown that faith *with* reason does not begin where reason by itself ends. Perhaps faith *and* reason begin where reason by itself ends. Faith, in other words, is always mixed with reason. However, if this tack is taken, I think that we are on the verge of losing the meaning of 'faith.' Faith is essentially passive. It consists in remaining open to revelation and affirming revelation; it excludes, I have asserted, identifying evidence and evaluating arguments. Suppose, nevertheless, that someone wants to define 'faith' so that it includes these rational activities, but also transcends them. Then a term is needed for *that aspect* of this new kind of faith that transcends rationality. And I think that everything that I have said about faith as I have defined it will now apply to this newly designated aspect of our newly defined faith.

Finally, perhaps I have begged the question. In a personal communication to me, Ralph Forsberg proposes that fideists could argue thus:

By positing a rational, decision-making process as necessary to faith, the argument is predestined to be correct. Can't faith operate without any decisions? It is overwhelming: It overwhelms

even the urge to judge, to question, to look at reasons for a decision. "It just takes over."

This criticism can be developed in several ways. For brevity, let us examine just one formulation. According to this formulation, I have assumed that certain decisions must be made. Moreover, decision-making is essentially rational. Since decision-making is essentially rational, if I have assumed that decisions must be made, I have assumed that reasons must be sought. Since whether reasons must be sought is precisely what is at issue, I have, on this view, assumed the conclusion.

The weakness of this criticism is that, contrary to one of its claims, I have *not* assumed that decisions must be made: I have argued that they must be made. Decisions must be made for one very good reason: They are necessary to reduce the possibility of the believer's error. Two assumptions that I *have* made are: (1) in the view of fideists, faith is a mode of knowing; and (2) modes of knowing are subject to the principle that true belief should be sought and false belief avoided. The decisions that I have cited must be made if believers are to reduce the possibility that their belief is false.