

Is Faith a Path to Knowledge?

An Invited Position Paper By

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Editor's Note: *The “Invited Position Paper” segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper’s line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author’s training and experience as a scholar in their field of study.*

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

“Can or should faith (specifically, religious faith) be considered an epistemology? If yes, what makes faith an epistemological method? If no, what epistemological methods preclude faith from being considered?”

Abstract: *In this paper, I consider whether (religious) faith has any role to play in conferring positive epistemic status to (especially religious) beliefs. I outline several conceptions of faith that have been historically important within Western religious traditions. I then consider what role faith might be supposed to play, so understood, within the framework of internalist and externalist accounts of knowledge. My general conclusion is that, insofar as faith itself is a justified epistemic attitude, it requires justification and acquires that justification only through the regular faculties for contingent truths: sense perception and reason. I also argue, however, that the operations of our cognitive faculties in arriving at epistemic judgments on matters of substance are sufficiently complex, subtle, and often temporally prolonged, to make it exceptionally difficult to reconstruct the cognitive process and to judge whether it meets standards of rationality.*

Keywords: Religious Faith, Epistemology, Knowledge, Justified Belief, Testimony, Prophecy, Mysticism, Miracles, Cognitive Faculties

What is Faith, Anyway? Two Views

LET ME BEGIN BY clarifying—and further specifying—the question here as I understand it. First, even if faith is an epistemology—or, better, an epistemological method—it is presumably beyond dispute that faith is not *only* such a method. It has other roles, and purposes to serve, in the lives of religious persons. But what is meant by the claim that faith is, or provides, an epistemological method? Epistemology is the discipline that asks questions about what it is to know, or have justified belief, or evidence for, something.



Further, it asks how, if at all, we can come by such things, and whether we have in fact done so with respect to various matters of interest to us. To ask, then, whether faith is, or provides, an epistemological method is, I shall take it, to ask whether it offers a distinctive path to knowledge, or provides a means for justifying beliefs, or puts us somehow in touch with evidence for or against certain sorts of propositions.

Two further questions promptly arise: 1) What *sorts* of propositions might the exercise of faith claim to put us into a cognitive relation with? 2) What is it, indeed, to have faith? As to the first question, it is (presumably) not just *any* sort of proposition for which faith can deliver evidence or justified belief or knowledge. What, therefore, is the target range of propositions? And, with respect to these, is the exercise of faith distinctive in that it provides a kind or degree of evidence that is not to obtainable solely by way of the exercise of other cognitive operations—for example, sense perception, introspection, memory, deductive and inductive reasoning, and so forth? If it does so, how and why is it able to deliver this special knowledge? How does it aid and abet the operation of other cognitive faculties?

As to the second question, we begin by observing that, even if we confine ourselves to the main religious traditions of the West, we are confronted by a considerable variety of conceptions of what it is to have “faith.” The medieval Christian theologians, for example, regularly understood faith that *p* as a matter of accepting the truth of *p* on someone else’s say-so—in particular, on the say-so of God. Faith, for them, consisted in accepting divine revelation, perhaps received through the instrumentality of God’s prophets, because it comes from God. Modern Christian conceptions of faith are commonly quite different, in significant measure (at least among Protestants) because of the influence of Søren Kierkegaard.¹

Kierkegaard’s view of faith was certainly complex, but at its heart, famously, is the claim that faith is an inner attitude, involving confidence and a kind of commitment that is exercised in tension with whatever negative evidence one has for proposition *p* through “regular channels” (that is, sense experience, reasoning, and so on). In short, to perform an act of faith in *p* is a challenge, one whose exercise is afforded opportunity precisely in inverse

¹ John Locke accepted but further articulated the medieval conception of faith in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1975; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), book IV, chap. XVIII (Originally published in 1689). For an accessible work on Kierkegaard’s reflections on faith, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*, rev. ed., trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

This is not, except in certain special contexts (like scientific research labs) how knowledge-acquisition works. In particular, it is not regularly the case that we retain in memory a systematic record of all the relevant observations we could in principle muster. (And this is a good thing: it would severely over-tax all but the most capacious and encyclopedic of human memories.) We all know, in the ordinary sense, that dandelions are aggressive invaders of lawns and gardens in their natural range. But we do not form or maintain that belief by retaining a growing record of particular dandelions we have observed to grow in such locations. Rather, we recall that we have seen “lots of them,” that they are hard to eradicate, and that they are quite promiscuous in finding locations to propagate. Such beliefs are strengthened, especially during early encounters with the plant, by continued observation, not by way of a retained record. Indeed, much of the time our beliefs are generated or modified by “noticings” of our environment that involve no focused attention at all to the features that might come later to be of interest to us. We typically know, for instance, whether the lights are on or not in a room we are occupying, without so much as giving the matter any thought.

These observations about our ordinary cognitive processes are relevant to assessing the account of religious belief-formation in fairly straightforward ways. The history of the accumulating cognitive processes that lies behind a (perhaps rather sudden) “coming to see” that the words of Jesus in the Bible must be true will almost always span a considerable period of time and involve countless experiences and inferences that serve to support the conviction about the veracity of the words of the canonical Jesus. And these can bear upon the conclusion concerning Jesus in countless ways, both direct and very indirect, both conscious at some point or never properly so.

Conclusions

My conclusions, then, can be stated in short order:

- 1) That there is a multitude of conceptions of what faith is and what role it plays in the religious life of an individual;
- 2) That the claim that religious faith constitutes or provides an avenue to knowledge or justification for particular religious doctrines or to the will of a divine being, or anything of that sort, falls short for each of the conceptions of faith I have surveyed;
- 3) And last, that precisely because the cognitive background and reconstruction (rational, psychological, social, and otherwise) of

purported religious insights is so complex and difficult to excavate, we must all remain circumspect in our accounts of what such processes entail in any given case, and to what extent they yield beliefs that have good epistemic credentials. If so much lies behind a glass, seen darkly by the subject, then how much more so for other observers?

Even one's coming to believe that dandelions are aggressive derives, in significant part, from long-forgotten inferences to such general bits of acquired wisdom as that members of the same biological species will rather strongly resemble one another, and that the success of a species depends upon its adaptability to a range of environments. How much more complex will be the cognitive inputs that provoke, for example, a major shift of paradigms in a scientific field—and, *mutatis mutandis*, in theological convictions? Because so much of the cognitive development that leads to such an event lies behind the veil of complexity and forgotten inferences in a nearly unrecoverable cognitive history, the present cognitive leap may seem to arrive almost “out of the blue,” without a robust evidential rationale. But that may be an illusion that results from an inability to reconstruct the long chain of reasonings that led to the new belief. For this reason, I do not find Plantinga's account in terms of actions of a *sensus* and a Spirit to be at all convincing. If not, then what remains of Reformed Epistemology?²³

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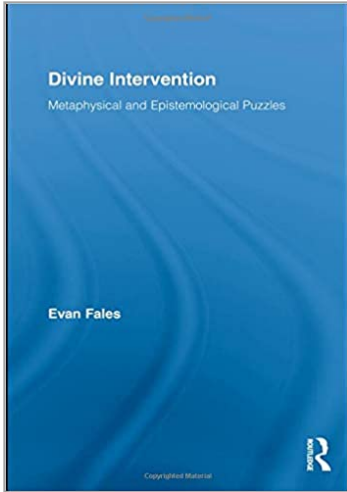
²³ For a different position on the subject, see Julius Gurney III, “Faith and Epistemology: Religious Truth Claims and Epistemic Warrant,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 207–16, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.09>.

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