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What is Virtuous about Faith?

Erratum
article

WHAT IS VIRTUOUS ABOUT FAITH?

James Muyskens

When thinking uncritically, we often think of Christian faith as belief: accepting as true the doctrines of Christianity. But then it is difficult to see how faith can be a virtue or unbelief a sin. What is praiseworthy or blameworthy about believing or disbelieving a set of statements? If, despite conscientious efforts at evidence gathering, we are mistaken about the strength of the evidence and thus believe what is false or disbelieve what is true, does that mean we are bad or sinful or just that we may not be as clever as others who got it right?

True belief alone (getting it right) does not get us very far. We all know people who firmly believe (and let's assume correctly) that there is life after death; yet their actions, their aspirations, and their life-projects are seldom guided by this belief. Others, to draw a sharp contrast, like Søren Kierkegaard's Socrates profess ignorance about even so central a religious doctrine as life after death; yet in all they do they make the possibility of immortality guidance for their lives. As Kierkegaard says of Socrates: "On this 'if' he risks his entire life, he has the courage to meet death, and he has with the passion of the infinite so determined the pattern of his life that it must be found acceptable—if there is an immortality."¹ Surely there is greater virtue in Socrates' agnosticism than in these believers' belief. Indeed, as Kierkegaard maintains, those without belief have the greater faith.

Philosophers in the Socratic tradition—and especially Post-Enlightenment philosophers—aim to apportion belief, that is, assent to a proposition, to the strength of the epistemic grounds for it, taking care *in belief-formation* to minimize the influence of wants, wishes, needs, and desires. Not taking such care is recognized as an intellectual vice. Those whose considered judgment is that the support for a proposition is weak but who try to force themselves to believe in spite of it, are not (at least in this tradition) moral or intellectual heroes; they are more likely to be objects of pity or derision than praise. Yet is such an act of will (a "will to believe") the virtue of faith?

Beliefs are not the sort of thing we can simply decide here and now to have or not to have. Try as we may, we cannot make ourselves believe "seven impossible things before breakfast." Yet over a period of time we can come to hold particular beliefs in large part because we want or need very much to hold them. Is this the course of action being recommended by talk of the virtue of



faith? Frequently beliefs acquired in this manner while lacking epistemic support are rejected as “wishful thinking,” an all too common sort of irrationality. By calling faith a virtue are we putting wishful thinking on a pedestal?

Who among us has not been thoroughly exasperated by the person who resolves to retain his belief come hell or high water, refusing to consider other alternatives or to respond to any challenges? Yet, if the belief in question is one of core Christian doctrine or is one acquired *via* a (putative) revelation is such obstinacy a virtue? Despite our general disapproval of such believing and our willingness to condemn as fanatics the faithful of other religions (e.g., Shiite Moslems) when their belief is not based on thoughtful reflection, when it lacks broad epistemic support and countenances no challenges, is believing Christian doctrine, come what may, the virtue of faith?

Surely the answer to each of these questions must be no. Virtuous faith is not obstinately believing a set of statements. Indeed, its virtue may have nothing to do with firmly believing religious propositions: it appears to be present even among those in Socratic ignorance. What then is the virtue of faith? And is the virtue of faith an intellectual vice?

I. *What is the Virtue of Faith?*

The key element of virtuous faith in Robert Adams’ penetrating and helpful recent discussion of these issues² is *trust*—trust that expresses itself as confidence in God and the willingness to be entirely dependent upon His power, justice, and goodness. The faith that Adams wants to show is a virtue is a confident faith. Lack of trust in God, the failure to rely on His power, justice, and goodness, is the sin of unbelief.

I wish to argue, in opposition to Adams, that it is *fidelity* rather than trust that makes faith a virtue. While I agree that the trusting relationship with God that Adams portrays is the goal of all Christians, those who have attained the goal are not the sole possessors of the virtue of faith. Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* introduces the notion of *doubtful* faith, contrasted with *trusting* faith in his *Lectures on Ethics*.³ Doubtful faith as well as the trusting faith described by Adams is, I shall argue, a virtue. That is, what makes faith a virtue is to be found in doubting as well as in trusting faith.

Doubtful faith is a state of mind in which one is aware of the “objective insufficiency” of the grounds for believing that the object of faith obtains. The “objective insufficiency” can result in one’s having radical doubts, including doubts about whether the object of faith obtains. Yet the state of mind is one of faith since the person continues to pursue his goal, and *acts as if* he were certain that that toward which he aims obtains. Paul Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith* gives us an account of doubtful faith.

Where there is daring and courage there is the possibility of failure. And in every act of faith this possibility is present. The risk must be taken...Only certain is the ultimacy as ultimacy, the infinite passion as infinite passion. This is a reality given to the self with his own nature.... But there is not certainty of this kind about the content of our concern, be it nation, success, a god, or the God of the Bible: Their acceptance as matters of ultimate concern is a risk and therefore an act of courage....the risk to faith in one's ultimate concern is indeed the greatest risk a man can run. For if it proves to be a failure, the meaning of one's life breaks down; one surrenders oneself, including truth and justice, to something which is not worth it....If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith.⁴

To see whether doubtful faith is also a virtue, it is useful to consider what we mean when we speak of faith as a *gift* and as *fidelity*. Considerations emanating from these features of faith have a direct bearing on how we construe talk of the virtue of faith.

A. Faith is spoken of as a gift. For example, St. Paul in I. Corinthians 12 lists (among others) miracles, prophecy, healing, and a deep faith in God as gifts of the Spirit: "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit; who apportions to each one individually as he wills." If we are to construe talk of the gift of faith in a straightforward manner, having faith (more precisely possessing that part of faith that is a gift) would appear not to be a virtue and the failure to have it not to be a sin. If those who have faith are the recipients of a gift—an undeserved favor, an act of grace (freely conferred)—and all those without faith have not received the gift, it would seem quite inappropriate to consider those without faith to be culpable or to praise those who have it. The necessary conditions for praising another or for ascribing responsibility to another appear not to be present.

It is not clear whether Adams would disagree with this. He does challenge the grounds that seem to me most suitable for establishing the thesis that one cannot be held culpable for failing to possess a gift, namely, the following principle: We are justified in holding a person responsible for a shortcoming or deficiency only if we believe he could have acted otherwise or could be otherwise had he not (at earlier times) made certain decisions and performed certain voluntary actions including neglecting to attend to things he could have attended to. Adams says: "There are many cognitive failures that we regard as morally reprehensible.... These failures are not in general voluntary."⁵ Adams is not simply making the obvious point that, for example, ignorance that members of

other tribes or races are bearers of human rights has led to barbaric, reprehensible, sinful behavior and pernicious institutions. He is suggesting that such deficiencies—even when not attributable to negligence or choice—are culpable.

In particular, Adams finds fault with Alan Donagan's suggestion that an officer bred up from childhood in the Hitler *Jugend* might not be culpable for his ignorance about his duty to noncombatants.⁶ In disagreeing with Donagan, he appears to be saying that such officers are culpable despite the fact that their cognitive failure may be out of their control and not the result of previous choices. If this is Adams' position, we must closely examine the grounds he could have for holding the German officer culpable. To say he is culpable is to say he has no acceptable excuse for his ignorance. But if we are going to support this claim, we must offer some criteria for judging an excuse acceptable or unacceptable. Suppose the officer says: "I didn't know I had any duties to noncombatants. I was taught that all is fair in love and war." Suppose also that the following is true: But for his thoughtlessness and callousness, he could have known he had such duties. He came from a military family and as a small boy heard his uncle talk with pride about how they as soldiers in the Great War had even risked their lives to protect noncombatants. Now as a young man the lesson he learned at his uncle's knee is not applied as he responds to the presence of noncombatants in the field of battle. If, in these circumstances, we judge the excuse unacceptable we will support our judgment with the claim that he could have known he had a duty to noncombatants despite the years of contrary indoctrination in Hitler's *Jugend*. Suppose, modifying the example, we have an officer who has had no comparable childhood experiences. If we reject his excuse our rejection will take the same form but our appeal will be to such things as (putative) innate knowledge of moral principles that he could have known but for his carelessness or evil choices or to principles claimed to be so basic and self-evidently true that simply by living we can recognize them to be true but for carelessness or evil choices. These appeals may strike us as less compelling than those to an individual's experience. Yet they may have some force. Suppose, however, that we make no effort to demonstrate that the officer could have known better; yet we insist he is culpable. What basis do we have for our insistence?

Denials of the legitimacy of excuses from ignorance take the following form: "You could have known but for certain actions or failures of yours. Hence, your excuse is unacceptable." Wouldn't it be arbitrary and capricious, then, to say: "Your excuse is unacceptable despite the fact that you have met the normal requirements for acceptable excuses (you have shown that your ignorance is not voluntary)."

Adams follows Aristotle in holding that ignorance of moral principle is no excuse. Yet if I have understood him correctly, he wishes to reject Aristotle's background assumption that such ignorance is voluntary.⁷ I have argued that a

view such as Aristotle's may be plausible. But I find no support for the view that ignorance of moral principle is no excuse if such ignorance is not voluntary. Until such support is forthcoming, it is reasonable to hold that we can be held responsible only for those cognitive failures over which we have control or those that result from our earlier voluntary actions or negligence.

Applying this to the sin of unbelief or the virtue of faith, only those aspects of unbelief and faith that are voluntary can be, respectively, the sin of unbelief or the virtue of faith. Lacking the element of faith that is a gift cannot be a failure for which we are culpable. (The Spirit "apportions to each one individually as He wills." Over this apportionment we have no control.) Just as lack of this aspect of faith cannot be a sin, its possession cannot be a virtue.

What then is the element of faith that is a gift? I suggest that it is the confident trust that Adams has so attractively described, the trust that arises from a life of relationship with, and dependence upon, God. If this is correct, then (contrary to Adams) faith *as trust* is not a virtue; nor is its lack the sin of unbelief. We must look to other parts of faith to find the virtue of it, specifically, the element of fidelity.

B. Especially for those of us deeply influenced by the work of Søren Kierkegaard, when we think of the paradigm of faith, faithful Abraham, a crucial element (if not the key element) of his faith is fidelity, endurance, being firm in his commitment, having an unswerving allegiance. The guiding principle is "Be thou faithful unto death" (Rev. 2:10). The emphasis is as much if not more on being trustworthy as on being trusting, as much on resolve and commitment as on confidence, as much on endurance and perseverance as on serenity and security. The Knight of Faith wishes above all to be able to say with St. Paul: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). Being trustworthy and firm in one's commitment is a matter of choice. I can decide to persevere despite hardship and (as in Kierkegaard's account of Abraham's lonely journey up Mount Moriah) in the face of doubts and fears. Or, of course, I can decide it is too difficult and give up at the first call for sacrifice. The call to faith is to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). We can choose to run or not to run. Fidelity is the voluntary dimension of faith.

II. *Fidelity and Confident Faith*

One way of drawing the contrast between my understanding of the virtue of faith and Adams' is as follows: whereas I am inclined to see confident faith arising after a lifetime of fidelity, he maintains that for there to be faith at all, it must be trusting faith, confident faith. Trust is the core. Fidelity arises as the expression of that trust.

Adams finds an alternative conception of faith such as I have proposed to be unsatisfactory for, he maintains, it is not a powerful enough force against fear which can be a pervasive poison and a malignant power in our lives. Without trust, without full confidence in God we will be plagued by the “fear that God will let us down.”⁸ Certainly if this were the case, the view I am advocating should be rejected.

Such fear, however, is not inevitable; nor is the danger of succumbing to it inordinate. This can be seen to be so even in the most extreme cases of doubt. Thus it surely is so for the milder forms of doubt more common among the faithful. Consider then the most extreme case: suppose we wish to live the life of faith but are torn by doubts, including frequent doubts about God’s providential care, or the veracity of our experiences of God, or whether He exists at all. Not even such doubt can shake the truth that if God exists He is worthy of our trust, He can be counted on. This we can know and for this we can hope. Our problem is the one stated by Tillich in the passage cited above: if that toward which we direct our hope, our ultimate concern, proves false, the meaning of our lives breaks down. With greater confidence regarding the reality of the object of our ultimate concern, we could reduce the risk. Nevertheless, even as we are burdened with these extreme or radical doubts and are painfully aware of the risk, we can resolutely press on, continuing to interpret certain of our experiences as encounters with God. As with Kierkegaard’s Socrates, we can live a life that will be found *faithful* if that for which we deeply yearn, a relationship with God, turns out to be a reality for us.

Of course, such a life of faith would not be possible if we were certain God does *not* exist or if we believed that He does not. Such belief is incompatible with faith. But uncertainty and doubt about God’s existence are not. Suppose for any number of reasons (e.g., a recent personal tragedy, preoccupation with the likely consequences of “big power politics” of nuclear annihilation, or the challenge of a rigorous atheological argument) we cannot now say with confidence “I know that my redeemer lives.” The resultant uncertainty and tentativeness of our belief is compatible with perseverance and with fervently hoping that we will someday achieve the victory of faith. Tentative belief entails neither fearful nor tentative faith. Our questions and doubts need not cause us to suffer debilitating fear of failure. They do not entail inactivity or signal a flagging of commitment. They do, however, test faith. They compel endurance, for they force recognition that the race of faith is a marathon run over rugged terrain and is not a Sunday afternoon walk in the park.

Some who find themselves with doubting rather than trusting faith suffer, according to Adams, from a pernicious form of the sin of unbelief, namely, the “lust for control of one’s own life.”⁹ In these cases, the commitment to rationality that feeds the doubt is a ruse for saying no to God’s call to put our trust in Him.

...much of our emotional attachment to *rationality* has to do with our counting on it as a crucial part of our intellectual equipment for controlling our lives....In Christian faith we are invited to trust a person so much greater than ourselves that we cannot understand Him very fully. We have to trust His power and goodness in general, without having a blueprint of what He is going to do in detail. This is very disturbing because it entails a loss of our control of our own lives....the continued lust for control of one's own life, in preference to opening oneself to grace, is sin.¹⁰

Such a possibility is cause for concern, requiring careful introspection to determine the source of the doubts and to see that they are not undermining the resolve to be faithful. We must determine whether in our lives these doubts are strategems for shutting out the unexpected, the alien, the new, God's grace. Nevertheless, it would be surprising if all doubts vanished once those *motivated* by the lust for control were banished. *Reasons* to doubt (the lack of epistemic support), in contrast to these illicit motivations or incentives for doubt (the lust for control among them), will remain. Does faith require stifling these doubts?

III. *Is the Virtue of Faith an Intellectual Vice?*

Trust and fidelity both require a willingness to *act* ahead of the evidence, that is, to act without full epistemic support, to embark on a venture of uncertain outcome. Surely no one would deny that we have a right so to act. We are not duty-bound to remain in our home port until we have epistemic warrant for the proposition that the venture will be a success. If we were not free to *act* ahead of epistemic warrant our lives would be impoverished if not brought to a standstill. Life and faith are far more than forming and affirming beliefs. Judging their value calls for far more than an assessment of the epistemic warrant of beliefs.

The fundamental question of the "ethics of belief," however, is whether these other factors (our desires, our interests, our affections, our moral obligations, and so on) have a role to play when evaluating whether *beliefs* are warranted. Should we adopt a criterion of reasonable belief that requires that beliefs be assessed *exclusively* by reference to epistemic norms or one that *includes* as well considerations of practical (moral and prudential) reasoning? That is, are beliefs to be judged solely on their intrinsic epistemic worth (the exclusive standard) or on their instrumental value as well (the inclusive standard)? Adams favors a criterion of the latter sort, whereas I (for reasons developed elsewhere¹¹) favor the former. I happily recognize the richness and complexities of life and that most of the time the question of a belief's justification is simply beside the point. But when (for any number of reasons) the question of a belief's justification

arises, I recommend that our answer be restricted to consideration of epistemic merit. Our goal (despite its unattainability) should be to withhold belief (assent) from propositions that we discover lack epistemic warrant.

Determining what our criterion of justified belief ought to be is a complex undertaking. The position we adopt depends on considerations that are far broader than those of this essay. For our current purposes it will be sufficient to see the relationship between the standard of justified belief we adopt and our understanding of the virtue of faith.

In the following example (a frequently discussed analogue to religious faith), the trust that Adams sees as the virtue of faith can be justified only by means of an inclusive standard whereas fidelity is justifiable on an exclusive standard. A man's wife is confronted with substantial but inconclusive evidence of his infidelity. Given the strength and the length of their relationship and her desire to sustain it, she is not inclined to take steps to end it or to do anything that would jeopardize it. She hopes that in time the evidence will be amenable to a less damaging interpretation than current circumstances permit. She resolves to remain loyal, to persevere, and to act on the hope that what now appears to be the case may not be.

She confides in two friends, seeking their advice. One friend says that—despite the evidence for infidelity—she has a duty to trust her husband. She must continue to believe that he is faithful. To do less is to renege on her commitment and to risk destroying the relationship. She asks: suppose that, contrary to this evidence, he has not been unfaithful, wouldn't he be deeply disappointed and "feel offended against"¹² upon learning that she doubted him? The virtuous course requires trusting him and thus believing against this evidence.

Her other friend concurs that it is important to act in ways that sustain the relationship. But he feels that this can and should be done while she keeps her "eyes open" and weighs the untoward evidence. Given her love for her husband and her desire that he be faithful, he warns that she should resist giving in to her strong inclination to ignore the contrary evidence and her deep desire to believe he is faithful. Responsible believing, not avoidance behavior, is what is needed. He recommends facing the abyss, the doubts, the anxiety, the fear of loss, with the resolve that the relationship will not only survive the challenge but will be enhanced by it. In doing this, she knowingly takes Tillich's risk of faith: the object of her concern and loyalty may prove "not worth it." His counsel is that the virtuous course of action requires endurance and fidelity in the face of adversity and risk but not believing against the evidence. Trust (and the belief that her husband is faithful) will once again be appropriate if and when additional evidence and experience provide ground for defeating the current contrary evidence.

The advice of the second friend concerning trusting faith in God would be

similar: the trust must be grounded in a lifetime of experience. The trust that is the goal of faith is warranted only after living with fidelity and amassing the experiences of God that provide the experiential and epistemic ground for this trust. The “will to trust” that tries to circumvent the travail of doubt and uncertainty on the way is a short-cut to be avoided. As in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, we must enter at the right gate so as to complete the entire course with all of its trials and tribulations before reaching the Celestial City.

IV. *The Sin of Unbelief*

On Adams’ view of faith, the sin of unbelief is lack of trust in God. On the alternative I am suggesting, the sin of unbelief is lack of fidelity—that is, failure to stand firm in one’s commitment to live as a disciple. Construed this way, the sin of unbelief can only be committed by a believer. Those who have never made a commitment cannot fail to live up to it. People who make no religious commitment may be living in a fallen state and apart from God. Their lives may well be unfulfilled as a result. There may be much about their lives we can fault. We can say that they are in a state of sin. But only a believer could commit the sin of unbelief.

V. *Faith, Uncertainty, and Dependence*

Uncertainty cannot be avoided in the pilgrimage of faith. In this life we are aware of God’s presence only fleetingly. At best, even those blessed with confident faith only see God “through a glass darkly” and not “face to face.” What distinguishes even the confident faith Adams presents from knowledge and sight is uncertainty.

Adams’ account as to why a relationship with God involving uncertainty is superior to one of certainty is a gripping one. His argument that full knowledge of the other in any relationship would reduce the relationship to one of manipulation is convincing. Uncertainty and unpredictability in our relationship with God protect us from projecting our values and desires onto God and from confidently claiming that God is on our side. We just do not know where the life of faith will lead us.

In speaking of the uncertainty of faith, Adams acknowledges that often we cannot know whether what we are inclined to interpret as God’s will for us is a revelation from God or merely “a foolish impulse.”¹³ He insists, nevertheless, that we can be confident that God’s plan for us and for the world is good and that our highest good is achievable only through Him.

I have placed greater emphasis than Adams on the uncertainty of faith in order to include (in the discussion of faith’s virtue) doubting as well as trusting faith.

I have claimed that even among those with radical doubts and adherents of a stringent “ethics of belief” the virtue of faith can be found. If this is correct, then the *virtue* of faith cannot be trust.

What does not follow from this conclusion is that in the final analysis doubting faith is preferable to trusting faith. On the contrary, Adams makes a compelling case for the superiority of trusting faith. Trusting faith far more than doubting faith facilitates development of the sense of absolute or complete dependence upon God. Trusting faith makes it possible for us to sacrifice some of our control over our lives, to put our lives in the hands of God and no longer rely on ourselves. Biblical faith and the faith of the saints exemplify this (see, for example, Hebrews 11). Clearly one who has this trust has something religiously desirable—something she or he would prize above all else.

Precisely because of the way trust is related to being dependent, however, it is not the virtue of faith. As we have seen, virtue is appropriately ascribed to an individual only if that person is responsible for having acquired it. The trust of faith is best seen as arising from God’s gracious acts toward us and not from our effort, character, or good works. What better way to stress our dependency upon God and His initiative and action as the source than by seeing trust as a gift?

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NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p.180.
2. Robert Adams, “The Virtue of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1984), pp. 3-15.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), p.325 and *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. by Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p.95.
4. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 17-18.
5. Adams, p.4.
6. Adams, p.5.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b30-1110b35.
8. Adams, p.10.
9. Adams, pp. 11-12.
10. Adams, pp. 11-12.
11. James L. Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope: The Conceptual Foundations of Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1979), pp. 37-54. See also John Heil, “Believing What One Ought,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXX, no. 11 (November 1983).
12. Adams, p.7.
13. Adams, p.9.