

Kenny Johnston

Faith, Knowledge, and Virtue: John Wesley's Concept of Faith as a Conscious State

Abstract:

It is well established that John Wesley's understanding of faith shifted radically between 1735 and 1740. The nature of that shift is variously understood, but most agree that Wesley shifted from defining faith as assent only to faith as a heartfelt trust; from faith as a bottom-up effort to faith as a top-down gift. What is often overlooked is that Wesley's new version of faith was influenced by his previous epistemological commitments. Faith, accordingly, is defined in terms of a *conscious state*, something not deducible by inference but directly available to its subject, and located epistemologically at the forefront of the mind's tripartite operations.

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Kenny Johnston received his MDiv at Wesley Biblical Seminary, is an ordained pastor in the Wesleyan Church, and is a MPhil/PhD student at London School of Theology. He has been involved in ministry for over twenty years as a pastor, school headmaster, church planter, and independent scholar. He has a passion for church renewal in both theology and practice. His publications are particularly focused on Wesleyan epistemology.

Introduction

In *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Maddox 1990), Wesleyan scholars attempted to better understand the nature and importance of John Wesley's 1738 Aldersgate experience.¹ In *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Collins and Tyson 2001), Wesleyan scholars addressed the broader theme of conversion itself, but in doing so, Aldersgate was never too far out of view.² One issue surrounding the debate about Aldersgate is whether or not it represents Wesley's conversion experience or even if such a thing exists. If it does, what is the extent and significance of that conversion? If it doesn't, then what does Aldersgate represent exactly?³ One thing that is inarguable, however, is that Wesley *did* undoubtedly have a conversion of how he defined faith in and around this period. If nothing else can be established for certain, it is nevertheless true that Wesley's notion of faith from his early years underwent a radical change. From approximately 1735 to 1740, Wesley's understanding of faith as a bottom-up assent was converted to a top-down, supernatural gift, understood epistemically as a conscious state. As a conscious state, faith is a non-inferential and incorrigible.

I will begin first by summarizing Wesley's understanding of faith between 1725 and 1730 as an assent to the objects of faith, grounded upon the authority of divine testimony, the virtue of which is located in an allegiance to divine authority. Second, I will then develop what I take to be the salient features of his motivation for rethinking his understanding of faith. I will demonstrate that his notion of faith was not first found to be deficient definitionally or even theologically, but *experimentally*. Third, I will argue that because being a rational Christian was important to him, he therefore needed a framework upon which to build his new understanding of faith, which he found in his commitment to Aristotelian empiricism. The result is that faith was moved from the second operation of the mind (judgment) into the first (simple apprehension).

Wesley's Concept of Faith from 1725–1730⁴

Wesley's earliest attempt at defining faith took place during the latter half of 1725 in correspondence with Susanna, his mother, while reading Richard Fiddes' account of faith and Jeremy Taylor's account of holy living.⁵ At that time, Wesley attempted to define faith as "an assent to a proposition upon rational grounds," his understanding being almost completely dependent on Fiddes.⁶ Objects of faith were understood to be

proportioned to the evidence or reasonableness of the object. His argument can be summarized by the following passage from his July 29th letter.

I call faith an assent upon rational grounds, because I hold divine testimony to be the most reasonable of all evidence whatever. Faith must necessarily at length be resolved into reason. *God* is true; therefore what *He* says is true. He hath said this; therefore this is true. When anyone can bring me more reasonable propositions than these, I am ready to assent to them; till then, it will be highly unreasonable to change my mind.⁷

Wesley was not simply arguing that trust in the divine testimony is rational, but that the divine testimony testifies to nothing that is *not* rational, and therefore that our epistemic duty is to put faith in no object that is not *supported* rationally. The distinction is subtle. If every object of faith is resolvable into reason, then, he argued, the virtuous act of faith is to establish a rational account of every object of faith, proportioning faith to the evidence of reason. The virtue of faith is directly related to the fulfillment of one's epistemic duty.⁸

Susanna, however, suggested to Wesley that his definition of faith was definitionally flawed and that there is a better account for faith than that found in his study of Fiddes.⁹ Her argument was that "an assent to a proposition upon rational grounds" describes not faith but science.¹⁰ Instead, argued Susanna, faith is a species of assent defined as an assent grounded upon the authority of divine testimony. Although all objects of assent are "at length resolved into reason," yet faith need not wait on that resolution, nor should it.¹¹ She wrote, "For though the same thing may be an object of faith as revealed, and an object of reason as deducible from rational principles, yet I insist upon it that the virtue of faith, by which through the merits of our Redeemer we must be saved, is an assent to the truth of whatever God hath been pleased to reveal, *because* he hath revealed it, and not because we understand it."¹² The virtue of faith in *this* case, is found in an allegiance to the divine authority as a grounds as opposed to the evidences of reason.¹³

Not only did Wesley come over to the opinion of Susanna, but he went even farther in 1730 than she did in 1725. In 1730 he held that faith is an assent to the objects of faith upon the grounds of God's authority. Moreover, all objects of faith can ultimately be resolved into reason. New, however, was that God sets "proper bounds" to what can be rationally accessed this side of human malfunction so as to encourage faith. "And

this intention of our Creator [to limit the bounds of attainable knowledge] is excellently served by the measure of understanding we now enjoy. *It suffices for faith, but not for knowledge.* We can believe in God—we cannot see him.”¹⁴ In 1730, not only is it more virtuous to ground one’s faith in divine testimony as opposed to the evidence of reason, but also God has deliberately limited the boundaries of reason so as to encourage faith as a choice, rather than as a dictate of knowledge.

Epistemological Framework

Two things are important to know at this point. First, Wesley was working within an epistemological framework in which the mind has a tripartite division of operations: simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse.¹⁵ Second, within this framework, faith was understood to function under the second operation, judgment. This combination produces a bottom-up faith, where faith is both a choice and a responsibility of the subject.

Evidence of the Early Influence of the Tripartite Division

As far as I can tell, Wesley did not make any direct references to the tripartite division before the 1740s, after which it became more numerous throughout the remainder of his life.¹⁶ However, there are two reasons besides his later use of the tripartite division for thinking that they shaped his thinking in the early stages.¹⁷

First, Wesley was educated at Christ Church, Oxford where he would have been directly exposed to this unique epistemological framework prior to 1725. Henry Rack writes that the “latest study of Oxford logic shows that much of the instruction depended on compendia of Aristotelian and later scholastic logic: Wesley studied Aldrich’s version [the tripartite division version].”¹⁸ Furthermore, Rex Matthews writes, “This tripartite division of the operations of the human mind and of the corresponding functions of logic is unique to the Aristotelian tradition in eighteenth-century England.”¹⁹ By education alone, the framework would have been familiar to him.

The second reason for thinking that Wesley used this tripartite framework is because two of the most influential authors that informed his early years on faith also used it for framing *their* arguments. Wesley only discussed faith in 1725 and 1730. In 1725 he was reading Richard Fiddes’ *Theologica Speculativa*, specifically parroting Fiddes’ argument on faith. In

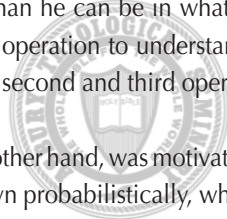
1730 Wesley was reading and abridging Peter Browne's *The Procedure*, at which time he used certain elements of Browne's book to inform his sermon "The Promise of Understanding," which elucidates Wesley's developing understanding of faith. Both Fiddes and Browne explicitly used the tripartite division to build their arguments.

Faith in the Tripartite Division

As noted above, the tripartite division of the operations of the mind consists of simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse. Wesley defined simple apprehension as "the bare conceiving a thing in the mind," which occurs when something is either self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible.²⁰ These first conceptions were known as "ideas." He defined judgment as "the mind's determining in itself, that the things it conceives agree or disagree," which is when the mind first exercises its will on the ideas of apprehension or perception, accepting them, rejecting them, and attending to them. Finally, he defined discourse as "the progress of the mind from one judgment to another" using inference. The first operation, simple apprehension, is non-inferential, direct, and immediate; it commands assent. The second two operations, judgment and inference, are inferential, indirect, and mediate. The second and third can only admit of probabilistic assent and can only work upon the ideas provided by the first operation.²¹

For both Fiddes and Browne, faith was a species of judgment, meaning that faith is indirect and mediate. Fiddes was motivated by a desire to establish human liberty in faith. If faith is located within simple apprehension, then, according to Fiddes' epistemology, the liberty of faith is impossible. He wrote, "Perception is always true, and necessarily what it is; and consequently infallible. For a man cannot be deceiv'd in what he perceives; any more than he can be in what he sees, hears, or feels."²² Fiddes attributed the first operation to understanding, since understanding is purely passive, and the second and third operations to the will, since the will must act.

Browne, on the other hand, was motivated to establish that revealed religion can only be known probabilistically, which meant that faith *cannot* be located within the first operation. Browne explored three possible ways that direct religious knowledge might be possible, all of which he rejected. The first option is the immediate presence of the objects of faith presented to a "faculty in the mind which is disposed to receive that impression, and



retain it."²³ But, according to Browne, no such faculty is known. Secondly, it could simply be by the power of God who might "impregnate the mind with true and *direct* ideas of spiritual things, which were never present to any of our faculties..."²⁴ The final option was that a person might have some internal ability to "intuit" such things (like heavenly beings), circumventing the faculties of material sensation.²⁵ Browne appears to have thought that the second and third options would be extraneous since the rational faculties God has provided are adequate to the task.

Although Wesley was not as explicit as Fiddes and Browne, he appears to have accepted their application of the tripartite operations in relation to faith. For instance, in "The Promise of Understanding," he stated that faith can be chosen because God deliberately places some aspects of knowledge beyond the proper bounds of human capacity. "It suffices for faith, but not for knowledge. We can believe in God—we cannot see him."²⁶ The implication is that if we could see God, then faith would be overwhelmed by knowledge. Seeing God would fit into the category of simple apprehension, where objects are directly perceived (evident to the senses). "Another reason why he now hides himself from us is to fulfill his eternal purpose, that man, as long as he continued upon earth, should walk by faith, *not by sight*."²⁷ Direct contact and perception are by definition out of view in Wesley's 1730 understanding of faith.

Wesley's Experimental Discontent

Exercising faith was not, for Wesley, a one-time decision such that if exercised, one *will* be saved. Rather, faith was a chosen assent to the propositions and attitudes suggested by divine revelation. It was necessary, therefore, to continuously exercise faith under the hope of salvation. He had established in 1730 that hope, as a species of assent like faith, occurs when a person takes a proposition of faith (grounded in divine testimony) and infers from that proposition to the conclusion that "I am to hope for salvation."²⁸ He writes, "Everyone therefore who inquires into the grounds of his own hope reasons in this manner:

If God be true, and I am sincere, then I am to hope;
But God is true, and I am sincere, (There is the pinch);
Therefore, I am to hope."²⁹

The variable in the syllogism is the sincerity of the subject (the "pinch"). By faith a person affirms the hypothetical, but by inference he or she arrives at

hope. Key to that hope is being able to *perceive* one's own sincerity: "Am I really doing all I can with the best I have?"³⁰

What would be the case if a person could not *presently* hope? Wesley had written in 1725 the following to answer this question in one of his objections to Jeremy Taylor:

...I imagined [in opposition to Taylor] that when I communicated worthily, i.e. with faith, humility, and thankfulness, my preceding sins were *ipso facto* forgiven me—I mean, so forgiven that unless I fell into them again I might be secure of their ever rising in judgment against me, at least in the other world. But if we can never have any certainty of our being in a state of salvation, good reason it is that every moment should be spent, not in joy, but fear and trembling, and then undoubtedly in this life WE ARE of all men most miserable!³¹

If one cannot have certainty in their present state of salvation, no wonder but that they should be in a state of constant fear and misery.

It was not until 1730 that Wesley developed his understanding of the relationship of hope to faith, which by that time came to mean a certainty arrived at through faith in the proposition, "If God be true, and I am sincere, then I am to hope" conjoined with an inference to the conclusion of hope grounded in the perception of one's sincerity.³² The difficulty for Wesley, then, was the constant maintenance of his faith in order to maintain a continuous hope of salvation. And this leads us to Wesley's trip to America in 1735.

*Wesley Goes to America to Save his Soul in 1735*³³

Because Wesley must always be working to exercise faith, since this is the only means towards hope, he set out in 1735 to go to Georgia as a missionary. He explained to Dr. John Burton, a scholar of Corpus Christi College, "My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul."³⁴ Further on in the letter, he anticipated Burton's response. "But you will perhaps ask, Can't you save your own soul in England as well as in Georgia?"³⁵ Wesley responded:

I answer, No, neither can I hope to attain the same degree of holiness here which I may there; neither, if I stay here knowing this, can I reasonably hope to attain any degree of holiness at all. For whoever, when two ways of life are proposed, prefers that which he is convinced in his own

mind is less pleasing to God, and less conducive to the perfection of his soul, *has no reason from the Gospel of Christ to hope that he shall ever please God at all, or receive from him that grace whereby alone he can attain any degree of Christian perfection.*³⁶

It must be kept in mind that for Wesley, where there is not hope, which can easily be shattered by self-doubt in one's own sincerity, there is only the expectation of a state of fear and misery.

Wesley then boarded a ship and began to learn German in order to converse with the Moravians. On January 17th, he experienced his first storm on the ship, and it did not go well. He expressed shame at his "unwillingness to die."³⁷ On January 23rd, just a few days later, a second storm came, and Wesley was perplexed by his response. He recorded, "I could not but say to myself, 'How is it that thou hast no faith?' being still unwilling to die."³⁸ The problem that was occurring in Wesley's mind was that his system was failing in some way. According to his notion of faith and hope, he should be at peace and at ease. What makes it worse, he recognized a different response from the Moravians. According to his system, it followed that he did not have faith, he thought.³⁹

On January 25, 1736, Wesley journaled that he had noticed the character of the Moravians, and with another coming storm, he put them to the test. "There was now an *opportunity of trying* whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that pride, anger, and revenge."⁴⁰ Wesley observed them, using the coming storm as an opportunity for a live experiment.⁴¹ The result, as is well known, was that the English began to scream while the Moravians "calmly sung on."⁴² On February 24th, once in Georgia, Wesley wrote in his diary that he had once again "opportunity, day by day, of *observing their whole behavior.*"⁴³ Thus the experiment continued. What was the variable that differentiated Wesley and the Germans?

Upon reaching Georgia, Wesley sought the audience of August Spangenberg, a Moravian pastor, and asked him for advice. Wesley had not yet entertained the idea that his model of faith was wrong, only that he must not have it, or at least have it fully, and that the Moravians *did* have it. The conversation between Wesley and Spangenberg, though well known, is worth noting at length because it reveals some important epistemological distinctions. The interchange got awkward because Spangenberg used the language of *knowing* Jesus as opposed to *believing* a proposition about

Jesus. Though Spangenberg was no philosopher, his terminology implied that faith can exist in the first operation of the mind, simple apprehension. Meanwhile Wesley uncomfortably shifted the terminology back to the propositional language of the second operation of the mind.

[Spangenberg] said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know he has saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.⁴⁴

Wesley was "surprised." He had only understood the witness of the Spirit according to his understanding of hope, based upon inference from the promises of scripture.⁴⁵ This is why he answered, "I *hope* he has died to save me." Wesley wasn't being trite; he was being precise. Additionally, for Spangenberg to ask, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" was to move an object of faith, Jesus Christ and his salvation, from the second operation of the mind (judgment) to the first (simple apprehension). It is not clear that Wesley deliberately analyzed it this way at the time, but it certainly seems clear that this is why it caught him off guard and why he answered the way he did. Wesley's response removed the language that indicated a direct, experiential relation, something that only occurs with material objects of sensation or incorrigible states, and replaced it with indirect, propositional language.

On December 22nd, 1737, almost two years later, Wesley began his journey back to England, and made a journal entry on December 28th that is important. While at sea, he experienced what Ken Collins has identified as possibly a panic attack though "the wind being small, and the sea smooth...."⁴⁶ Wesley cried out for help from God, and God granted momentary relief. Out of that relief came a reinforcement of his former understanding about faith and the facing of death at sea as an experimental test.

Let me observe hereon, (1) that not one of these hours ought to pass out of my remembrance, till I attain another manner of spirit, a spirit equally willing to glorify God by life or by death; (2) that whoever is uneasy on any account (bodily pain alone excepted) carries in himself

his own conviction that he is so far an unbeliever. Is he uneasy at the apprehension of death? Then he believeth not that 'to die is gain.' At any of the events of life? Then he hath not a firm belief that 'all things work together for his good.' And if he bring the matter more close, he will always find, beside the general want of faith, every particular uneasiness is evidently owing to the want of some particular Christian temper.⁴⁷

Faith, here, is about "attaining" a spirit that is "willing." If a person experiences uneasiness, it is because he or she does not assent to the proposition, "to die is gain." His working principle about faith was that "every particular uneasiness" is proportioned to "want of some particular Christian temper," the temper itself understood as an object of faith.

On that day, December 28th, 1737, Wesley thought that he had finally attained the faith he had witnessed among the Moravians. Nevertheless, by January 8th, he reached the very opposite of that conclusion

By the most infallible of proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced: 1. Of unbelief, having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled; which it could not be if I believed in God, and rightly believed also in him [i.e., Christ].⁴⁸

Finally, Wesley had failed the test, and how is it that he knows? By the most "infallible of proofs, inward feeling." By now we can recognize the following formula of faith and hope:

If God be true, and I am sincere, then I am to hope;
But God is true, and I am sincere, (There is the pinch);
Therefore, I am to hope.⁴⁹

But Wesley does *not* perceive his own sincerity, and this is what he means by "inward feelings."

Inward Feelings and Incurable Conscious States

Key to Wesley's formula, but as of yet not discussed, is that in Wesley's empiricism, inward feelings are the sorts of things that have evidential value.⁵⁰ In fact, they are among the most important for evidential value. Earlier I mentioned that the first operation of the mind, simple apprehension, is an operation that is direct, immediate, and non-inferential. Simple apprehension was understood to occur in one of several

ways: through what is self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Something is self-evident if the truth of it is relatively perceivable and necessary such as “all unmarried men are bachelors.” The smell of a rose is something evident to the senses, as is anything presented to the faculties of material sensation. Something is incorrigible when its existence implies and entails that it is perceived. The most notable use of incorrigibility is when applied to one’s own *conscious states*. Scott Crothers and Joseph Cunningham give the example that “the belief that I am tired now is an incorrigible belief.”⁵¹ An example of the incorrigibility of conscious states is found in John Locke’s famous *Essay*: “For to be happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible.”⁵²

Later in Wesley’s life, he uses the perception of conscious states regularly to establish his arguments.⁵³ It is visible, however, from the beginning, being the key to peace in 1725, the “pinch” of any inference of hope, and the most significant variable in his experiment of fear in 1737 and 1738. It is an epistemic principle that he *never* gave up. One’s conscious states are immediately accessible and incorrigible.

Wesley Develops His Concept of Faith

On January 24th, two weeks following the conclusion of his failed experiment, he famously wrote, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! Who shall convert me? ... I have a fair summer religion.”⁵⁴ On January 28th, he wrote, “I have no hope, but that if I seek I shall find....”⁵⁵ It is at this time that he made the following statement about faith.

If it be said that I have faith (for many such things have I heard, from many miserable comforters), I answer, So have the devils—a *sort* of faith.... The faith I want is, ‘a sure trust and confidence in God, that through the merits of Christ my sins are forgiven, and I reconciled to the favour of God’. ... *I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it.*⁵⁶

Wesley wanted a faith *which none can have without knowing that he has it*. This was the first explicit step away from his prior understanding. It was a step toward faith as an inward *conscious state* that is incorrigible.

Wesley and Peter Böhler 1738

On February 7th, Wesley met Peter Böhler, following which, it became clear that Wesley engaged in many conversations with him on the nature of faith. On February 18th, Wesley mentioned that Böhler had

confronted him. "*Mi frater, mi frater, excoquenda est ista tua philosophia—* My brother, my brother, that philosophy of yours must be purged away."⁵⁷ It is not clear what Wesley's takeaway was from this, especially since he expressed his ignorance of Böhler's comments in his journal that night. Presumably, though, Wesley shared his understanding of faith with Böhler, which likely included a portrayal of faith that was objectified rather than experiential. On March 4th, in company with Böhler and his brother Charles, Wesley wrote that being "clearly convinced of unbelief," he began in spite of his lack of faith to preach "this new doctrine" of "*salvation by faith alone*."⁵⁸

What did Wesley mean by a "new doctrine"? He recorded a shift in his thinking and doctrine, but he also recorded much confusion. I suggest that Wesley's confusion is found in his unconscious inability to reconcile the language of faith as an incorrigible conscious state with his broader epistemological commitment that faith and hope belong in the second and third operations of the mind. Böhler and Spangenberg discussed faith in a manner of "knowing Jesus" and having a "confidence" that, if one has it, cannot escape perception, placing faith in the first operation of the mind. Of course, Böhler and Spangenberg did not have an epistemological framework, only crude and experiential descriptions. They were not philosophers but pastors. We can surmise, though, that this new doctrine was theologically associated with Luther's *sola fide*.

On April 22nd, with Böhler, Wesley emphasized that he was confused as to "how a man could *at once* be thus turned from darkness to light, from sin and misery to righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost."⁵⁹ After a careful study of scripture and an interview of testimonies on the following day, Wesley declared: "Here ended my disputing. I could now only cry out, 'Lord, help thou my unbelief.'"⁶⁰ The initial confusion regarded the possibility of an *instantaneous* faith. This highlights my suggestion that Wesley wanted to define faith in a way that positions it within the first operation of the mind, but which he could not epistemologically justify or comprehend.

By April 23rd, Wesley confessed that instantaneous faith is presently possible and being experienced by some, but he did not work out the epistemological implications of how it works. He did, however, understand its theological implications, that faith was no longer to be understood as a *bottom-up* but as a *top-down* relation to God. Faith is *God's* working. On May 14th, Wesley wrote to his brother that this new doctrine

of faith is “intolerable to *religious* men” because it “makes Christ a Saviour to the utmost....”⁶¹ He explained that “this is not to be wondered at. For all *religious* people have such a quantity of righteousness, acquired by much painful exercise....”⁶² The obvious implication was that religious people will be offended that their virtuous efforts account for nothing before God.

Wesley and Aldersgate 1738

At five in the morning on May 24th, Wesley read the Greek text of 2 Peter 1:4, “Τὰ μέγιστα ἡμῖν καὶ τίμια ἐπαγγέλματα δεδότηται, ἥνα γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως—‘There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.’”⁶³ This passage is choice because it communicates something of a spiritual ontology, a contact between subject and subject, elucidating the shift that was taking place in Wesley and highlighting his earliest conversation with Spangenberg. By that evening, Wesley related,

I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.⁶⁴

Wesley’s language here has important epistemological qualities. Whether or not we can call this Wesley’s conversion, is, for my purposes, irrelevant. What is relevant is that Wesley’s perceived *confidence* in Jesus is such that he not only understands himself to have it, but it is incorrigible for him. This represents his *conscious state*, which, be reminded, cannot err.

It is no argument against Wesley’s conscious state on the evening of May 24th that his perceived state is different on following dates noted by scholars.⁶⁵ I am not arguing that a certain theological and philosophical finesse is unnecessary, but, rather, that following the month of May, 1738, Wesley forever shifted his concept of faith. It remains true that certain issues need to be sorted. For instance, this new definition, which was not worked out by Wesley yet and what, for the moment I will call the faith-as-a-conscious-state principle (CSP_f), has problems.

(CSP_F) For any person p , and for some conscious state x , if p has faith, then p has x where x is incorrigible for p and the instantiation of x in p is veridical.

Now suppose we define a conscious state where $\sim x$ is instantiated in p and define it as (CSP _{$\sim F$}).

(CSP _{$\sim F$}) For any person p , and for some conscious state $\sim x$, if p does not have faith, then p has $\sim x$ where $\sim x$ is incorrigible for p and the instantiation of $\sim x$ in p is veridical.

In this case we might say that a person has and does not have faith upon the evidence or instantiation of their conscious states. So, we can add a time quantifier t and imagine both instantiations for a person at different times, at one time genuinely having faith but at another time afterwards genuinely not having faith.

(CSP_{F $\sim F$}) For any person p , and for some conscious state x , and for some conscious state $\sim x$, and for some time t^1 , and for some time t^2 , possibly, p has x at t^1 and $\sim x$ at t^2 where x at t^1 and $\sim x$ at t^2 is incorrigible and veridical for p .

The problem is that if conscious states have the properties of incorrigibility as well as veridicality then at any time Wesley perceives his conscious state of unbelief, he at that time genuinely escapes salvation. These are the sorts of problems that need to be discussed, and they *are* resolvable. Nevertheless, my point is simply to demonstrate that this is the sort of shift that Wesley was making and the problems it involves.

Developments Following Aldersgate 1739

On January 4th, 1739, Wesley, it appears, makes a fuller connection to his implicit epistemology. In his journal, he writes the following:

My friends affirm I am mad, because I said I was not a Christian a year ago [at the Hutton's]. I affirm I am not a Christian now. Indeed, what I might have been I know not, had I been faithful to the grace then given, when, expecting nothing less, I received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins as till then I never knew. But that I am not a Christian at this day I as assuredly know as that Jesus is the Christ.

For a Christian is one who has the fruits of the Spirit of Christ, which (to mention no more) are love, peace, joy. But these I have not. I have not any love of God. I do not love either the Father or the Son. Do you ask how do I know whether I love God? I answer by another question, 'How do you know whether you love me?' Why, as you know whether you are hot or cold. You *feel* this moment that you do or do not love me. And I *feel* this moment I do not love God; which therefore I *know* because I *feel* it. There is no word more proper, more clear, or more strong.⁶⁶

We can see the problem, discussed above, of viewing faith as an incorrigible conscious state that reflects ultimate relations. Regardless, consider how Wesley thereafter discussed his understanding of that experience and his new concept of faith. The epistemological language is throughout. "Do you ask how do I know...?" Wesley's appeal as to the knowledge of his own inward, conscious states was based on examples of other incorrigible conscious states. His example, "Why, as you know whether you are hot or cold." He knows it in the same way that one "cannot be happy and miserable without be conscious of it," (Locke 1690);⁶⁷ in the same way that one "who perceives not *joy* has not *joy*," ('John Smith' 1746);⁶⁸ and in the same way that "you cannot but perceive if you love, rejoice, and delight in God," (Wesley 1738);⁶⁹ in the same way a person may inwardly and directly perceive "a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, my sins are forgiven, and I reconciled to the favour of God," (Wesley 1738).⁷⁰

If I am correct that Wesley was working from Aldrich's tripartite division of the operations of the mind, then it is unlikely that Wesley was still, in 1739, thinking of faith as something that is a species of judgment, or even of assent at all.⁷¹ This is evidenced by the fact that faith was defined primarily in terms of conscious states that are incorrigible and veridical, which means that the act of the will is uninvolved and the subject passive. And because incorrigible conscious states were not understood as associated with the second and third operations of the mind, Wesley likely began to understand them at that time according to the first operation, simple apprehension. (Of course, we know that in the 1740s, he did, in fact, develop his concept of faith along these lines, as a faculty of perception, and he specifically used the tripartite division to present his argument.)⁷²

Conclusion

I have argued that Wesley's development of faith in and surrounding Aldersgate might better be understood against his Oxford, Aristotelian education and early readings where the operations of the mind are divided by simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse. I have also argued that in Wesley's earliest musings on faith, he located faith in the second and third operations of the mind, associating it with a bottom-up tendency in which a person would virtuously assent to objects of faith on the grounds of divine authority. Finally, I have argued that in the time surrounding Aldersgate, Wesley shifted his understanding of faith in a way that relocated faith in the first operation of the mind (simple apprehension) where it became associated with incorrigible, conscious states.

Rex Matthews most helpfully suggested in 1986 that we understand Wesley's 1738 transition according to the notion of "convictional knowing," a theory of knowledge articulated in 1981 by James Loder.⁷³ The value of my interpretation of that time period is that it utilizes a context closer to home for Wesley for understanding how Wesley himself might have been processing it, as opposed to how we might make sense of it.

My broader purpose for this study is to better understand Wesley so that we can more properly situate him within current discussions about faith. For instance, how does faith fit within the certainty of faith tradition argued for by Brandon Dahm?⁷⁴ Or how does it square with faith as a mechanism of cognitive input, like that formulated by Alvin Plantinga?⁷⁵ Or what about John Piper's life-long development of faith as an affection?⁷⁶ What about Matthew W. Bates' argument that faith is defined as an allegiance?⁷⁷ Furthermore, where do we locate the virtue of faith now that it is not located in the liberty of faith? If Wesleyan scholars are to join the discussions looming large today, then having a proper understanding of Wesley's epistemological outlook regarding faith is necessary. My hope is to have pushed our understanding of Wesley one step further, and to some degree, I *hope* the reader *perceives* that I have accomplished it.

End notes

¹ *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, edited by Randy L. Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

² *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, edited by Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001).

³ See the compelling argument of Mark K. Olson in *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives*, Routledge Methodist Studies Series (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2019). Olson argues that Wesley understood his own narrative about Aldersgate specifically as a *conversion narrative*.

⁴ For a detailed analysis see my “Analytical Theology Applied: John Wesley’s Early Logic of Faith (1725 and 1730),” forthcoming in *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, vol. 16 (2024).

⁵ Wesley was incredibly disciplined in his width and breadth of reading. In 1726, Wesley’s reading plan was revised as follows: “Mondays and Tuesdays were to be given to classics, Wednesdays to logic and ethics, Thursdays to Hebrew and Arabic, Fridays to metaphysics and natural philosophy, Saturdays to oratory and poetry, and Sundays to divinity.” Onva K. Boshears, “John Wesley, the Bookman” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1972), 101–2.

⁶ John Wesley, Letter to Susanna Wesley (July 29, 1725), *Letters I*, ed. Frank Baker and Ted A. Campbell, 7 vols., vols. 25–31 in *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1980–82; and Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015–), 25:174–5. Hereafter *Letters*. Richard Fiddes, *Theologica Speculativa: or The First Part of a Body of Divinity, Under That Title Wherein are Explained the Principles of Natural and Reveal’d Religion* (London, UK: Printed by W. Bowyer for Bernard Lintot, 1718), 330–56.

⁷ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:175.

⁸ I tease out the details of this more fully in “Analytic Theology Applied,” (forthcoming). For a discussion of noetic and epistemic duty see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:179, 183 respectively.

¹⁰ Susanna lists three species of assent: what is self-evident, what is deduced from what is self-evident (science), and what is believed by testimony (faith). Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:179.

¹¹ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:179, 183.

¹² Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:183 (italics added).

¹³ I use the term allegiance because I think it represents what was being argued for, but the term is inspired in part by its recent use in Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

¹⁴ Wesley, “The Promise of Understanding,” in *Sermons IV*, vols. 1–4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984–1987), 4:288 [italics added]. Hereafter *Sermons*.

¹⁵ This tripartite division is attributed to Henry Aldrich, *Artis Logicae Compendium* (Oxford, UK: At the Sheldonian Theater, 1691).

¹⁶ Rex D. Matthews covers Wesley's use and understanding of these operations in Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined": A Study in the Theology of John Wesley" (Th.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1986), 78–119.

¹⁷ In 1734 Wesley read Isaac Watts' *Logic*, where a fourth operation is added to Aldrich's tripartite division. Apparently, Wesley did not like it (Matthews, "Religion and Reason," 101). Isaac Watts, *Logic: Or, the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth* (1724), in *The Works of Isaac Watts, D.D.*, 9 vols. (London, UK: Printed for Longman, et al., by Edward Baines, 1813).

¹⁸ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1989), 65."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ These definitions are from Wesley's translation of Henry Aldrich's Latin version in 1756. John Wesley, *A Compendium of Logic*, in *The Works of John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vol. ([1872] Reprint. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 14:161. Quoted in Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined," 98. The use of the term incorrigible is more modern, but the idea of it was used in Wesley's day to describe inward states that one could not experience without knowing that they are experiencing them. I will discuss this more below.

²¹ This is commonly understood as classical foundationalism. Alvin Plantinga defines classical foundationalism as "believing one proposition on the evidential basis of others," *Warranted Christian Belief*, 82 (italics in the original). Scott Crothers and Joseph Cunningham define classical foundationalism as "the foundationalist epistemology which permits only two types of beliefs to be believed without the rational support of other beliefs as evidence. These two sorts of beliefs are those that are either self-evident (the belief that 1+1=2 for example) or incorrigible, that is beliefs about one's own states of consciousness that cannot be believed mistakenly (for example, the belief that I am tired now is an incorrigible belief)." "Wesley's Epistemology in Contemporary Perspective," in *Via Media Philosophy: Holiness Unto Truth; Intersections between Wesleyan and Roman Catholic Voices*, ed. Bryan Williams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 171 n1.

²² Fiddes, *Theologica Speculativa*, 332.

²³ Browne, *The Procedure*, 92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 93 (italics in the original).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁶ Wesley, *Sermons IV*, 4:288.

²⁷ Ibid. (italics added).

²⁸ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:245. See my explication of this in “Analytical Theology Applied,” forthcoming in *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, vol. 16 (2024).

²⁹ Ibid. This deductive account of hope becomes the foundation of Wesley’s more developed doctrine of the witness of the Spirit.

³⁰ I address Wesley’s understanding of perception as an epistemological issue in “Perceiving Wesley: An Analytical Study of Epistemological Uses of Perception in John Wesley’s Theology,” *The Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 14 (2022): 78–117.

³¹ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:170.

³² The correspondence between Wesley and Susanna demonstrate that attitudes were as much an object of faith as propositions.

³³ The following section contains passages that have been all but worn out in discussion, but they contain important hints regarding Wesley precise epistemological understanding that have not been explored.

³⁴ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:439. His journal entry from October 14th, 1735 relates the same sentiment (*Journals and Diaries I*, vols. 18–24, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988], 18:136–7). Hereafter, *Journals*.

³⁵ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:441.

³⁶ Ibid. (italics added).

³⁷ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:141.

³⁸ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:142.

³⁹ Kenneth Collins has drawn attention to the fact that the fear of death was a “standard of conversion” throughout Wesley’s life, being used for his societies as a point of accountability. Kenneth J. Collins, “John Wesley and the Fear of Death as a Standard of Conversion,” in *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition*, edited by Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 56–68.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:143.

⁴¹ For the impact of Wesley’s empiricist epistemology on his understanding of these experiences, see the interesting essay by Theodore H. Runyon, “The Important of Experience for Faith,” in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, edited by Randy L. Maddox (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 93–107. It is not clear to me that Runyon is correct on his assessment

of Locke, whom he attributes with having shifted the perceived value of experiences. However, he draws attention to the fact that experience is an epistemological concept, not an emotional one.

⁴² Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:143.

⁴³ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:151.

⁴⁴ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:146.

⁴⁵ The same inferential, deductive formula that Wesley used for arriving at hope in 1730, is used for his understanding of the *indirect* witness, which in 1733 he relates to hope in his sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart," (Wesley, "The Circumcision of the Heart," in *Sermons I*, 398–414).

⁴⁶ Collins, "John Wesley and the Fear of Death," 60. Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:207.

⁴⁷ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:207.

⁴⁸ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:208.

⁴⁹ Wesley, *Letters I*, 25:245. This deductive account of hope becomes the foundation of Wesley's more developed doctrine of the witness of the Spirit later.

⁵⁰Noted by Runyon, but somewhat misunderstood it seems. "Although the subjective element was by no means absent for Wesley, it is important to realize that for the 18th century 'experience' was first and foremost 'evidence,' i.e., impressions made on the physical senses by the external world, giving the mind which receives those sense impressions access to reality and knowledge of the way things 'really are,'" (Runyon, "Importance of Experience," 95). Runyon is not wrong, but his analysis is certainly incomplete as far as it appears to only address material sensation with regard to "feelings."

⁵¹Cunningham and Crothers, "Wesley's Epistemology," 171n.

⁵² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1975] II.1.11, 110.

⁵³ I discuss this in more detail in "Knowing God: The Non-Inferential Foundation of Spiritual Knowledge in John Wesley's Theology," *The Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies* 13 (2021): 1–29 and "For the Love of God: Knowing, Certainty, and John Wesley's Vision for Holy Love," in *WTJ*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2022):108–31.

⁵⁴ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:211. COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

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⁵⁵ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:215.

⁵⁶ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:215–16 (italics added).

⁵⁷ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:226.

⁵⁸ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:228 (italics in the original).

⁵⁹ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:234 (italics in the original).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:240 (italics in the original).

⁶² Ibid. (italics in the original).

⁶³ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:248.

⁶⁴ Wesley, *Journals I*, 18:249–50 (italics in the original).

⁶⁵ See for instance the summary of scholars who challenge the significance of Aldersgate for this reason in Randy Maddox's "Introduction," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 13–14.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined," 140.

⁶⁷ Locke, *An Essay*, II.1.11, 110.

⁶⁸ Letter from 'John Smith' (Feb. 26, 1746), *Letters*, 2:188 (italics in the original).

⁶⁹ Wesley, *Sermons I*, 1:273.

⁷⁰ "January 24, 1738," *Journals*, 1:75.

⁷¹ Possibly the conscious state is a fruit of something preceding faith or a result from it rather than faith itself. Wesley isn't clear.

⁷² I discuss this in my "The Witness of the Spirit," in *Reclaiming the Order of Salvation: Evangelical Wesleyan Perspectives*, ed. Jerome VanKuiken (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Press, forthcoming).

⁷³ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 29–34, 92–124. Quoted in Matthews, "Religion and Reason Joined," 149. See also the summary in Natalya Cherry, "Wesley's Doctrinal Distinctions in Developing the Faith that Marks the New Birth," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol. 52, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 100–12.

⁷⁴ Brandon Dahm's "The Certainty of Faith: A Problem for Christian Fallibilists?" in *Journal of Analytic Theology*, Vol. 3 (May 2015): 130–46. Dahm argues for a certainty of faith that is probabilistic. For my analysis of probabilistic knowledge in relation to Wesley, see my "For the Love of God," *WTJ*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2022):108–31.

⁷⁵ Alvin Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic,' *Nous* XV (1981); 'Reason and Belief in God,' in *Faith and Rationality*, Alvin Plantinga

and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame 1983), 16-93; *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷⁶ John Piper, *What is Saving Faith? Reflections on Receiving Christ as a Treasure* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

⁷⁷ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).



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