

## Faith and Reason: The Foundations of Belief

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The relationship between faith and reason is a subject of debate in philosophy. While faith and reason are both facilitators of firm belief in a particular proposition, they seem to be unrelated to one another. Some philosophers believe that faith is opposed to reason, and is therefore irrational. Others claim that faith and reason are so different that there can be no comparison between the two. A few even claim that faith is higher than reason, and therefore provides us with truths that reason alone cannot. I believe that faith and reason form a necessary relationship with one another, and that faith complements reason in a way that allows us to live our lives in an expeditious manner. Faith without reason, however, is not only illogical but misleading at best and sometimes even dangerous.

This paper will use the following definitions of faith and reason from the Oxford American Dictionary:

**Reason:** 1. Motive, cause, or justification.  
3. Intellectual faculty by which conclusions are drawn from premises.

**Faith:** 1. Complete trust or confidence.  
2. Firm belief, especially without logical proof.

In order to understand the relationship between faith and reason, we need to understand how they function in our everyday lives. Every act of will conducted by a knowledgeable person is a consequence of thought. We would not, for example, attempt to jump over the moon like a cow in a nursery rhyme. Empirical knowledge and reason tell us that it is impossible. On the other hand, if asked the sum of two plus two,

we would immediately answer four. In this case, reason alone provides an absolute justification for our answer, but what about cases where reason is not enough? If I get in my car and turn the key, how do I know that I am justified in believing that my car will start? Even the most thorough mechanical inspection cannot guarantee that my car will start. I know that it started the last time I drove it, and there were no apparent problems. Therefore I have a reason to believe that my car will start, but not absolute knowledge. Here I must complement reason with just a little faith. Assuming that my car starts, the next thing to do is drive. Here again I must believe that my car will not only start, but also stop. How can I be certain that my brakes will stop my car? This time it is not only a matter of convenience, but also my personal safety. My brakes worked fine the last time I drove my car. I also understand that automotive braking systems are engineered with redundant safety measures. Still, I cannot be absolutely certain my car will stop, and thus must use just a little faith in order to go about my daily life. These examples may seem silly, but they demonstrate a necessary connection between faith and reason. In our everyday lives, we use just a little faith to complement reason. Although some faith is required to be justified in such beliefs, it is obvious that the strength of our justifications are directly proportional to the strength of our reasons. Conversely, the strength of our justifications are inversely proportional to the amount of faith required to believe in a given proposition.

Now that we have seen how faith can complement reason, what about faith without reason? Where reason fails completely, are we justified in relying on faith alone? Perhaps the best example of this is religious faith. While some have tried to give logical proofs for the existence of god(s), their efforts have been in vain. While it is

beyond the scope of this paper, all logical arguments for the existence of god(s) can be shown to be fallacious. It can even be shown that the teleological argument actually provides a good reason *not* to believe in the existence of god(s). If this is the case, then where do religious beliefs come from? Some philosophers, like Descartes, think that the idea of “God” is innate. That is, that “God” has given human beings a built-in knowledge of his existence. But is this the case? If so, there would be no need for logical proof. Perhaps an examination of the history and motivation of religion will provide us with the answer.

Is the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omni benevolent ( $O^3$ ) deity really an innate idea? If so, we would expect that this idea would be reflected in religions throughout history. A quick review of the religious beliefs of ancient Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and other civilizations reveals something different. They had many gods, each of whom was in charge of a particular aspect of the physical universe or human life and emotions. They also had one leader god who ruled over the rest. These gods were invented by mankind to answer the simple question; “Why?” In the absence of modern science, these religions provided primitive answers to the most fundamental questions. This pantheistic view does not, however, coincide with the idea of an all-powerful god. Furthermore, these gods were endowed with human failings, such as jealousy, hate, lust, etc. None of these qualities describe an  $O^3$  deity. These pantheistic religions could not stand up to the scrutiny of reason.

With the emergence of Judaism, we begin to see the first hint of an  $O^3$  deity. Reading the Torah, we learn that this new god is indeed all-powerful, but still retains many human qualities. He is still characterized by physical sex, is jealous, vengeful, and

changes his mind often. This is still not quite the God that Descartes envisioned. Eventually, Judaism gave way to Christianity, the meme spread to Europe and the Catholic Church was born. Across Europe this new God came under the scrutiny of some of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. Many of the teachings of the early Catholic Church did not seem adequate, and the Reformation began. During this turbulent time, various theologians began to make minor changes in the Christian Doctrine. This new God received a facelift, so to speak, and the “one true God” finally became an O<sup>3</sup> deity. This evolution of religion is still seen today within the Christian churches. Social issues have been a tremendous source of change in the churches. Whereas just a few decades ago homosexuality was seen as evil, it is now becoming more acceptable to society. This has led many churches to change their doctrine, lest they fall behind the times. Another driving force behind this religious evolution is science. Every time science takes one step forward, religion must take two steps back. This battle has raged for centuries. The current political fight over religion is the result of theists desperately clinging to the tattered remains of their beliefs. Religion must change in order to keep pace with philosophy and science, but there is nowhere left to go. The last refuge of theism rests in the idea of an O<sup>3</sup> deity. This idea is not innate. Rather, family and friends implant it into a person’s mind during childhood.

Having examined history, and finding no evidence of this innate idea of God, there still seems to be something appealing about the idea. Could it be that the idea itself is self-justifying? Anselm certainly thought so. What exactly are the reasons for believing in this God? According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, once a person’s

essential needs are fulfilled, they seek higher sources of satisfaction. Listed in order, they are:

1. Physiological Needs
2. Safety
3. Love
4. Esteem
5. Self-actualization

According to Maslow, the greatest sense of happiness can only come when all five of these needs are fulfilled. Belief in an O<sup>3</sup> deity meets these needs all too conveniently. However, even if God does not exist, wouldn't it still be beneficial to believe anyway? Perhaps there is a reason behind belief in God after all. Or would we be unjustified in holding onto such an empty belief system? It seems that this question can only be answered by oneself. If a person, being unable to otherwise achieve a high level of satisfaction, can find peace and happiness by believing in God, then perhaps they should believe. There is, however, one major problem with this sort of belief.

All religions that are based upon an O<sup>3</sup> deity have certain things in common. One of these is a system of morals. This provides detailed instructions regarding right and wrong, and how a person should live their life. It also describes how society at large should behave. This does not necessarily pose a problem if individuals base their own life upon such principles. The problem arises with the idea of Divine Authority. Belief in an O<sup>3</sup> deity entails believing that everything comes from God. Therefore, this God is the supreme authority over everything that exists. As such, a believer acting on the "word" of their God exercises a higher level of authority than exists in the world of mankind. For example, a state Supreme Court justice may deliberately disobey a ruling from a higher court if he believes that he is acting in accordance with the will of God. This idea of

Divine Authority has no place in a just and fair government. Another example involves parental autonomy. If a parent wishes to raise their children in an environment free from religion, then that is their decision. It is often the case, however, that a family member, acting on the word of their God, will attempt to indoctrinate the child. They feel perfectly justified in overriding the parents' wishes as they are acting with Divine Authority. This authority also retards the progress of science today as it has all throughout history. From Copernicus's heliocentric theory to stem cell research, religion stands in the way of scientific progress. Deism avoids these problems altogether, but is it a viable alternative? It seems rather inadequate as it only provides one thing for the believer: it answers the question "Why does the universe exist?" It is otherwise an empty and baseless belief.

One final consideration is that of non-belief (Atheism). If a person comes to the conclusion that belief in god(s) is not justified, what are they left with? There are several difficult matters that the Atheist must consider. Having given up on belief in a deity, a person finds their self on the bottom rung of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. There is no longer a loving, caring deity to look out for them. They no longer have the self-esteem that comes from being one of the "faithful". The question of "Why?" becomes open once more. Finally, one is left wondering what their purpose in life is, and is faced with the inevitability of their own mortality. The atheist is left in the precarious position of having to fulfill each of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs through his or her own devices. This is no simple matter, and requires a tremendous amount of introspection. Furthermore, as to the question of "Why?", the atheist must accept that we simply do not have all the answers. Perhaps not everyone has the strength of will required to not believe in god(s).

We have seen that there is always a reason behind faith, even if it is just simple convenience. What a person must consider in deciding whether or not to believe in a particular proposition is the strength of those reasons. If the reasons are found to be inadequate and the amount of faith required is too great, then the proposition should be discarded. Should an individual decide that it is in their best interest to believe anyway, then they should take care that their beliefs do not impact upon anyone else's life. It may be the case, however, that such beliefs cannot be contained. These sorts of beliefs are called memes. They are like viruses, contagious and malignant. Perhaps it is in the interest of all mankind to discard such ideas. Or perhaps mankind is still too primitive.