**An Evidentialist Model of Virtuous Faith**

Travis Dickinson

[www.travisdickinson.com](http://www.travisdickinson.com)

tdickinson@swbts.edu

The notion of faith has been variously understood—and misunderstood—throughout the course of Christian intellectual history. Recently, there has been renewed interest in thinking carefully about faith, which has produced a spate of philosophical and analytic theological work on its nature.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though these projects have produced very good work, faith continues to be variously understood. It is common for an account of faith, especially Christian faith, to see certain beliefs as necessary ingredients of faith or to see faith as, in some way, propositional. In this paper, I argue that faith, especially faith that’s had in the context of relationships, is nonpropositional. Instead, I argue that faith is, at bottom, an act of ventured trust. This is not to say that beliefs and the evidence for the truth of our beliefs are unimportant. Indeed, I argue that having evidence that counts in favor of faith is what makes faith a moral good.

There are those who think that Christian faith, especially saving Christian faith, is a *sui generis* state. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll be assuming this is not the case. The recent philosophical accounts tend to assume that faith, in the Christian sense, is broadly similar to faith we have in the contexts of other relationships, such as the faith had between spouses or the faith a child places in a parent. The approach I shall adopt here is that by understanding faith exemplified in ordinary cases this can shed light on Christian faith. So Christian faith may not be *sui generis* but it is certainly unique in terms of the object of Christian faith. If the Christian view is right, Christ is a uniquely qualified object of faith.

**Faith as belief?**

A lot of people tell us what religious faith amounts to. We can dispense rather quickly with what amount to mere caricatures. Richard Dawkins is one of the most famous who decry faith. He says “Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is not an uncommon way to dismiss faith whole cloth. It is reminiscent of the Mark Twain’s schoolboy who famously puts it as, “Faith is believing what you know ain't so."[[3]](#footnote-3) The most obnoxious dismissal of faith comes from Peter Boghossian who thinks faith is a virus that needs to be eradicated. He characterizes faith as “pretending to know things that you don’t know” and the slightly (but only slightly) more charitable “belief without evidence.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Now these do not warrant much response here simply because they themselves take no time to understand or engage what thoughtful Christians mean by the term ‘faith.’ However, they each illustrate what I think is an important mistake. They each assume faith in every instance is a doxastic attitude.

The mistake is one of taking faith too rigidly. There’s no doubt the term ‘faith’ is used in a variety of ways to express of variety of different things, including states of belief. In fact, there is a usage of the term ‘faith’ where we intend something like the core beliefs of Christianity in saying, “I hold to the tenets of the Christian faith.” It also seems possible to say something like “S has faith that p” as a way to simply express “S believes that p,” perhaps as an expression of especially strong belief in the face of counterevidence. My concession here is only that the term ‘faith,’ as it is actually used in everyday discourse, has a complex semantic range. There is of course no one way in which it is used. So the statements above are problematic given that they do not recognize this complexity. It seems plausible that people do sometimes intend the term to mean belief without evidence or intend some other sort of doxastic state. I don’t, however, think this is the common usage and it is not, to me, the more interesting usage of the term. I will be primarily focused instead on faith that happens in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Faith, in a wide range of cases and especially in the context of relationships, does not seem cleanly reducible to mere belief. An initial reason for thinking so is beliefs, by themselves, are far too thin and too easy to come by for an account of faith. Whatever faith is, as it functions in our relationships, it is a thick and very rich notion deeply intertwined with the human experience. To see this one only needs to consider the faith a child has in her parent or the faith between spouses in a healthy marriage. There would no doubt be a variety of beliefs in play relevant to the faith in these relationships, but faith, in itself, does not seem reducible to a set of mere intellectual commitments. This seems clear in the Christian sense, as well. When one comes to faith, it is not a set of mere intellectual commitments, such as the belief in God. Indeed, even the demons (and many Baptists) believe and yet the demons (and many Baptists) lack genuine faith!

A second problem with thinking that faith is merely a belief is specifying the special feature that makes the belief an instance of faith rather than some other kind of belief. It is very common for people to think faith always involves some sort of risk taking.[[5]](#footnote-5) If that’s right, it will be tempting, along with the new atheist among us, to say that the special feature that makes a belief an instance of faith is that the belief lacks sufficient evidence. But if this is all that faith is, then this makes faith a deficiency in all cases. But if faith is mere belief, then lacking sufficient evidence will, for many, constitute a necessarily deficient state. Lara Buchak makes the point that a plausible account of faith should specify both good and bad cases of faith.[[6]](#footnote-6) The thought is having faith is surely sometimes virtuous. Even if one thinks that Christian faith is a bad idea, there are relationships, such as in the context of a healthy marriage, where having faith in the other is appropriate and even crucial for the relationship.

**Faith as a propositional attitude?**

Perhaps faith is not a doxastic state but is another kind of propositional attitude.[[7]](#footnote-7) Again, we do say things like ‘S has faith that X’ and this seems to make a proposition the object of our faith. But what does this amount to? Lara Buchak defends the idea that faith is fundamentally propositional.[[8]](#footnote-8) She summarizes her view of faith as:

…to have faith in some proposition consists, roughly speaking, in stopping one’s search for evidence and committing to act on that proposition without further evidence.[[9]](#footnote-9)

For Buchak, faith is not a mere belief, but it is propositional. She construes faith as propositional since when it comes to statements and expressions of faith, there is typically some proposition involved in the instance of faith. It is easy to see this in statements in the form of ‘S has faith that p’ but not as easy in statements of the form ‘S has faith in A’ where A picks out a person. Buchak says some of these are easily translated into ‘faith that’ statements, as in “the statement *I have faith in your abilities* is equivalent to *I have faith that you will be able to do such-and-such*.” She goes on:

It is less obvious in the case of those statements claiming that an individual has faith in a person; however, upon further inspection, having faith in a person does typically require acquiescing to particular propositions about that person. For example, having faith in a person might involve acquiescing to the claim that the person will do the right thing or will succeed at a task, and having faith in God might involve acquiescing to (at least) the claims that God exists and that God is good. By the same token, performing an act of faith or acting on faith seems to involve acquiescing to a proposition, and which proposition one acquiesces to will be set by the context. For example, if setting down one’s own weapons is an act of faith, then this is because setting down one’s own weapons involves acquiescing to the claim that the other person will then set down his.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I think Buchak is right, as far as it goes, there is typically a proposition to which one acquiesces involved in, or at least in the background of, expressions of faith.[[11]](#footnote-11) But I’m not sure this should lead us to think that faith itself is fundamentally propositional. An attitude, such as a doxastic attitude, is clearly propositional since a proposition is the object of the attitude. One believes *that grass is green*. But is a proposition really the object of our faith in typical instances of faith? To think so seems confused. ‘Having faith in a proposition,’ as Buchak puts it, is a really awkward locution. One does not, it seems, have faith in a proposition. One has faith in persons or things. This is especially clear if we are thinking about faith in the context of relationships. I have faith in the other person (not some propositions) even if there are certain claims to which I have acquiesced about that person.

Furthermore, the fact that a propositional attitude (such as acquiescing to a claim) seems necessary for faith doesn’t mean that these attitudes are constitutive of faith. The question comes down to whether propositional attitudes are conceptually necessary or causally necessary. If a propositional attitude is only causally necessary for faith, then faith is not fundamentally propositional. My claim is that beliefs are, if anything, causally necessary since it seems possible to have faith without any specific beliefs informing the faith commitment. I can of course put my life in the hands of someone I believe is trustworthy. And, though it is not recommended, I can also put my life into the hands of someone who I believe is untrustworthy. The beliefs are opposites and yet these may be identical instances of faith.

What is at stake here? My concern is not merely terminological in getting the right label. My worry is that to think of faith as propositional in a conceptually necessary sense has the potential to get the relationship between faith and evidence substantively wrong. If faith is propositional, evidence could play far too large of a role in one coming to faith. Or one could go in the opposite direction and think of faith as a kind of deficient belief that necessarily lacks evidence. For me, what it really comes down to when I zero in on faith in the context of relationships and not the conditions leading to faith, the fundamental state is not a cognitive stance but one characterized by relational terms, such as trust, reliance and dependence. This puts faith in moral categories rather than epistemological categories.

Now you might be wondering if faith doesn’t fit in an epistemological category, how it is I’ll be giving an evidentialist model of faith. Well sit back and relax, we’ll get there soon enough. It will be the conditions leading to faith where the epistemology figures in. But first, we must say a bit more about the nature of faith.

**What then is faith?**

Rather than thinking of faith in propositional terms, I want to suggest that faith, especially in the context of relationships, fundamentally involves trust. Though trust is a very basic human experience and easy to ostensively point at, it is not so easy to define. Richard Swinburne characterizes trust along the lines of acting on certain assumptions.[[12]](#footnote-12) What is it to act on an assumption? Swinburne says it this way:

to act on the assumption that p is to do those actions which you would do if you believed that p. To act on the assumption that p is to use p as a premiss in your practical inferences, whether or not you believe p.[[13]](#footnote-13)

He goes on to offer an account of trust. He says:

To trust someone is to act on the assumption that she will do for you what she knows that you want or need, when the evidence gives some reason for supposing that she may not and where there will be bad consequences if the assumption is false.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Though it seems clear enough what Swinburne is getting at, his definition of trust here seems overly specified, which makes it a bit clunky. Paul Helm summarizes Swinburne’s view as, “Trust is a case of acting on the assumption that p when there is some reason to doubt that p.”[[15]](#footnote-15) What both of these seem to be attempting to capture is the risk involved in trusting someone. If there is no risk that one fails to do what you want or need and if there is no significant negative consequence risked, then it seems we are not genuinely trusting someone. For example, I may act on the assumption that my coworker will ride with me across town for a meeting. But if there’s nothing at stake in him riding with me (i.e., I’m driving there whether he comes or not, I know all the shortcuts, my coworker is not providing much needed snacks for the ride over, etc.), then this doesn’t seem to be an instance of trust. I’ve not ventured anything on my coworker. However, if my coworker committed to pay for the gas and I don’t otherwise have the gas money to get across town, then clearly I am trusting my coworker to come through for me. In this situation, I have ventured something on my coworker.

To capture the sense of risk involved in trust (in a less clunky way!), we’ll say that to trust someone is to act on the assumption that she will come through for you in some way that matters to your wellbeing.[[16]](#footnote-16) You may venture your wellbeing in small ways, such as trusting your coworker to provide snacks for the ride across town. Or you may venture your wellbeing in much larger ways, such as trusting a surgeon to competently perform a lifesaving surgery. In each case, there’s something at stake; there’s something ventured.

A primary benefit of understanding trust this way is it puts trust under one’s voluntary control. Doxastic attitudes, by contrast, are, for many philosophers, involuntary, at least in a direct sense. What we lack with beliefs is what William Alston called “basic voluntary control” which we have, according to him, when it comes to “actions we perform ‘at will,’ just by an intention, volition, choice, or decision to do so, things we ‘just do,’ not ‘by’ doing something else voluntarily.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Alston was clear that there are things we can do to influence and manipulate our beliefs indirectly, but we do not have basic voluntary control directly over beliefs.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, I can’t simply choose to believe that God exists, (or doesn’t exist) or that I am a billionaire, or that a certain friend of mine is reliable just in case I want to. Beliefs, on this view, arise on the basis of involuntary factors. In the good case, our beliefs arise on the basis of positive epistemic reasons for believing. In the bad case, our beliefs may arise for other factors, such as fears or wishful thoughts.

By contrast to doxastic states, when it comes to assumptions and acting on assumptions, these seem to be under my direct voluntary control. Though I can’t just believe that God exists, I can act on the assumption that God exists. That is, I can do those actions which I would do if I believed that God exists. I can’t simply believe that I’m a billionaire, but I could start making financial commitments to people and even writing checks for money that I didn’t have. Even more saliently, it seems perfectly possible to believe, with justification, that my friend is unreliable and yet still act on the assumption that he is reliable. Indeed, I can venture trust in a friend who I know will very likely break this trust.

The upshot of this feature of faith is that it makes faith morally evaluable. A person can, on this view, be praiseworthy or blameworthy for their faith. And this seems right. Faith can be ventured on those in whom we *should not* place our faith. And we do something wrong when we fail to trust those who are worthy of faith. Jesus, in fact, chides his disciples for being “of little faith” (Matt. 8:26). I take it the point here is that Jesus had demonstrated his worthiness and the disciples should have ventured their trusted in him. He also, at other times, specifically praises people for having great faith.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**Faith in the Contexts of Relationships**

Again, we are focused on faith in the contexts of relationships. Though we can have a kind of relational faith expressed towards objects, such as cars and chairs and bridges, these are importantly different from the faith in the context of relationships between people. I may love my chair, but I of course don’t have a relationship with it (let’s hope!) like I do with one of my children. This is because any (perhaps quasi) relational features goes only in one direction. However, in a relationship of persons, as I’m thinking about it, there is always the mutual give and take.[[20]](#footnote-20) In addition to this, the trust of objects seems to only involve the mere functioning or performance of the object. There seems to be nothing more to these sorts of acts of faith than trusting the object to the degree to which the object will perform a task. Whereas faith in the context of a genuine relationship may not involve a specific performance or a specific task. It makes sense to say “Tom has faith in his wife.” We don’t hear this and ask “for what task?” (at least, not without getting smacked by Tom’s wife). Faith, in the context of a marriage, should be a general and an abiding state directed at the wellbeing of one’s spouse expressed in an indefinite and in often unexpected ways.

As has been emphasized above, faith is this very active thing where we venture ourselves and our wellbeing on another. We do take something of a leap in any significant relationship. But it’s important to emphasize that we ought to leap in ways appropriate to the relationship. I venture on my wife in a host of ways. In fact, much of my wellbeing turns on the condition of our relationship. But this is appropriate in the context of a marriage. It would be wildly inappropriate to venture on my work colleagues in the same ways. I shouldn’t, for example, join my finances with one of my fellow philosophy department members and provide for all their needs as best I can. This is not the kind of relationship we have. But there are ways I do venture on them appropriate to the relationship as colleagues and friends. And of course one ventures on God in very different ways than these given what’s appropriate to that relationship. The kind of relationship it is determines what are the appropriate ways of entrusting ourselves to that person.

We are now in a position to offer a statement of the view:

In the context of a relationship between S1 and S2, S1 has faith in S2 if and only if S1 ventures her wellbeing on S2 where S1 acts on the assumption that S2 will come through for S1 in some way that matters to S1’s wellbeing, according to the kind of relationship it is.

To be clear, this is an account of faith and not an account of faith a virtue. When philosophers and theologians talk about Christian faith, they are typically talking about the virtue of faith. However, we have so far only been concerned with ordinary instances of faith where faith can be misapplied, unwise or even used for evil. The way the term ‘faith’ is often used, in ordinary instances, it doesn’t necessarily connote a virtue. Indeed, many don’t think it is any kind of virtue at all, moral or otherwise.

In what follows I will be using the terms ‘virtue’ and ‘virtuous’ in the more colloquial sense to mean a moral good. I won’t be using it in the more technical sense of the term. The reason is twofold. For one, the term ‘virtue’ has a long tradition and, for many, a rich and specific meaning. It will be beneficial to avoid some of the disputes at home in that discussion. Second, it is also common for people to think of faith as a specifically theological virtue where the discussion is centered on saving faith. I’m offering a more modest account of, what I’ll call, *virtuous faith* where faith is seen as a moral good. In light of this, we turn now to give an account of faith as a moral good.

**Virtuous Faith**

One thing to navigate at the outset is a worry Swinburne raises.[[21]](#footnote-21) The worry is that it should not be possible to satisfy a proposed account of faith and be a scoundrel. In outlining other views of faith, Swinburne says that the problem with these accounts is that:

…the perfect scoundrel may yet be a person of faith. For what you do when you act on an assumption depends on what your purposes are…A person may act on the assumption that God will do for him what he wants or needs, with purposes good or evil. Acting on that assumption, he may try to conquer the world, believing that God will help him in his task. Shall we call such a person a person of faith? Does he not trust God? Or the antinomian whom St Paul attacks for suggesting that people should ‘continue in sin in order that grace may abound’? Does he not trust God, to care for him abundantly well?[[22]](#footnote-22)

Swinburne does not say a lot about what he sees as problematic about a scoundrel being a person of faith. After all, on the Christian view, we are all scoundrels to some extent. Swinburne is, in this section, thinking of Christian faith as a virtue. So perhaps the objection is that a person should not be able to satisfy an account of faith, as a virtue, in a specifically unvirtuous way.

So the first thing to say, in light of Swinburne’s scoundrel objection, is that virtuous faith, as I’m conceiving of it, should happen in the context where there is a mutual goodwill. This is motivated by the fact that we are focused on faith in the context of relationships. So this must be the kind of relationship that provides a context for a morally praiseworthy faith. And the rather obvious fact is it is a really bad idea to entrust oneself to a scoundrel. We shouldn’t venture trust on people who do not have our wellbeing as their interest or aim. The idea here is reminiscent of Aristotle’s notion of a true friendship.[[23]](#footnote-23) In short, one should only place one’s faith in a genuine friend.

Second, it seems we need to know that someone is minimally competent to fulfill our, at least, basic relational expectations. We shouldn’t, it seems, trust an incompetent person even if the person is well intentioned. Take, for example, someone who has offered to babysit your child. Suppose the prospective babysitter loves you and your family and is sincerely interested in the good of your child. The problem is this prospective babysitter unintentionally makes terrible decisions on very regular basis, ones that often result in harming himself and the ones around him. Even though he acts for your good, you shouldn’t place your faith in him as your next babysitter.

The question is how do we know when someone is a genuine friend who is minimally competent? The problem is real. We’ve all had the experience of thinking that someone is a true friend only to find out he or she is only using us for something selfish or self-serving. We’ve also perhaps had the experience of a friend who seeks to bless us but seems only able to cause us trouble. We may even face the decision of whether to venture our trust on someone who we don’t yet know has our good in mind or is competent. Not knowing if someone is a competent friend is not nearly as bad as the previous possibilities, but it is still not the ideal condition for faith.

So here comes evidentialism.

It seems we need to have good reasons for venturing our trust on someone as a competent friend. When we do have good reasons to trust someone as a competent friend, it is good to place our faith in that person in ways appropriate to the relationship. The thought is, though faith is not itself doxastic, as I’ve argued above, the conditions which bring about faith may indeed be doxastic. And what makes faith a moral good, I suggest, is when we have good reasons to believe the person in whom we have placed our faith is both a genuine friend and minimally competent.

How shall we understand good reasons? In the next section, I will argue that evidentialism has the right sort of epistemology for making sense of a properly grounded and virtuous faith. I will then respond to objections that say there are some conditions where faith is a good even though one may lack the relevant evidence.

**The Evidentialist Intuition**

It is common for people (especially non-philosophers) to think someone has good reasons just in case they have evidence. If a person lacked all evidence for a claim, then the natural intuition is to think they lack all reasons. How shall we understand evidence? Kevin McCain characterizes evidence as “good reasons that are indicative of the truth concerning the proposition that is the object of the doxastic attitude.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Now it is important to note that these good reasons must be had by a subject to be considered evidence. It is, at least, a strained understanding of evidence to think of it as facts of which one is completely unaware. If a belief is produced by a cognitive process that tends to produce true belief, then this is a truth indicative reason concerning the belief. But it is not evidence, unless and until the believing subject becomes aware of its being produced in this way. This is to say that evidence necessarily involves truth indicative reasons or facts *of which one is aware*.

This evidentialist intuition actually makes sense of much of our inquiry. The plain fact is, when we reflect and evaluate things, our beliefs and what we should do, we look to the evidence. Unfortunately, we don’t always act according to this intuition. But it seems we should. Perhaps the most famous maxim related to evidence is W.K. Clifford’s. He said, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Trent Dougherty has made the point that it is very difficult to avoid the use of evidence even if one is not an evidentialist. He says:

Evidence, it seems, is a central concern of epistemology…If reliabilism were true and you wanted to know if the new health care bill was going to be good or bad, what would you do to find out? If contextualism were true, and you wanted to know if a prospective neighborhood was safe, what would you do? If some kind of virtue epistemology were true, and you wanted to know whether diet soda caused cancer, what would you do? In all cases, the answer is obvious: you’d seek out evidence.[[26]](#footnote-26)

We might add to this that if one wished to critique evidentialism, one would likely proffer evidence against the view. There’s at least something of a practical tension here, if not an outright contradiction.

This intuition has led a growing number of philosophers to see the epistemic status of one’s belief as entirely a matter of one’s evidence. This view has come to be known as *evidentialism* and is commonly associated with the work of Earl Conee and Richard Feldman. They characterize evidentialism with the following thesis they call EJ:

EJ: Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The idea is that the epistemic status of one’s belief (at a time) is entirely a matter of one’s belief fitting the evidence (at that time). Now almost everyone, including Conee and Feldman, immediately say that this thesis is only a framework and that there are many things that need to be worked out. Conee and Feldman admit, “There are difficult questions about the concept of fit, as well as about what it is for someone to *have* something as evidence, and of what kind of thing constitutes evidence.”[[28]](#footnote-28) We can’t, of course, get all of that done here.[[29]](#footnote-29) We are going to have to leave much of this as intuitively grasped. My primary claim is that evidentialism is the right view for the epistemology of virtuous faith since evidentialism provides subjective assurance that can be action guiding.[[30]](#footnote-30)

To see this, we should note that purely external factors do not seem to do us any good when we are deciding in whom we should place our faith. Having a belief formed by a reliable or proper functioning cognitive processes or having a belief that tracks the truth doesn’t seem to help us when we are making the decision to venture our wellbeing on someone. For all one knows, from the subject’s perspective, the beliefs came from one’s unconsciously wishing someone to be a good and competent friend. By contrast, evidence is action guiding because it comes to us, in a way, from within our subjective perspective. They are, by definition, facts of which we are aware and can be used in our practical decision making. We should be quick to add that there may be non-evidential ways a belief is good. A belief being formed by a reliable belief forming process is, it seems to me, a genuine good. But if one is unaware of this good, then it does very little from an evaluative standpoint on whom we should venture ourselves.

Laurence BonJour made this point many years ago in his famous case of Norman the Clairvoyant. He said:

Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.[[31]](#footnote-31)

BonJour goes on to make the point that we, as epistemologists, know that the belief has something going for it in the sense that it will non-accidently turn out true (or, at least, likely to be true). But, BonJour says, “how is this supposed to justify Norman's belief? From his subjective perspective, it *is* an accident that the belief is true.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Norman has no assurance at all to think his belief has anything at all going for it. Though BonJour’s argument was directed at process reliabilism, it seems easy enough to generalize the point to any externalist theory in epistemology. A view that posits external conditions as crucial for justification will fail, by definition, to provide assurance from the subject’s perspective. Thus, even if one is lucky enough to have properly functioning cognitive faculties and also satisfy a host of positive external conditions, it does little good when we make the choice in whom we place our faith. One needs the relevant evidence to have properly grounded faith.

But what constitutes evidence of competence and good intentions? Again, it’s painfully obvious that we can, at times, be wrong about these things in our relationships. However, it is also clear that we can often approach our relationships with due care and rationally place our faith in others. How do we do this? It seems we often recognize instances of self-sacrifice for our wellbeing and this strongly implies one is a genuine friend. We may not be able to know with certainty that one has our interest in mind, but we can see behavior that is best explained by a friend’s having a good will toward us in a competent way. We can also have testimonial affirmations of a good will towards us. Talk is of course cheap, as they say; but it is not worthless. Saying it is so along with the demonstration of self-sacrificial behavior stands as good evidence that one is a competent friend.

So putting this together, in the context of a relationship and coming from a good will, virtuous faith is ventured trust in someone we have evidence to believe is a competent friend, according to the kind of relationship it is. We ought to venture trust in someone when we have evidence of his or her good intentions towards us and his or her competence to come through for us in ways that matter to our wellbeing according to what’s appropriate to the relationship.

**Evidence for Christian Faith**

So now here comes Christian faith.

The ultimate evidence of a good will, it seems to me, is the willingness to give one’s life for the other. Again, talk is cheap. It is easy to say one will give one’s life, but doing so is another matter. There is an epistemic gap in knowing the other is willing to give his or her life. I’ve, so far, not to been called upon to literally give my life for my family, though I am indeed willing to do so. How does my wife and kids know (or justifiedly believe) that I would? As I’ve said, they would need some significant evidence of this and it would involve seeing me living self sacrificially for them.

We have in Christianity the claim that God, the omnipotently competent one, loves us and gave his son for us. If this is true, then this certainly calls for a response of venturing our entire lives on his good will in ways appropriate to the relationship. Here again, we need reasons to believe that this sort of God is there. Is there significant evidence for the Christian claim? I would suggest there is. There are at least three broad lines of evidence to justify the Christian’s belief that an omni-competent God has our good in mind. I of course do not have the space to fully develop these but must only indicate how the line of evidence may go.

First, there is evidence for the existence of God of a certain sort, namely, a God of maximal perfections. This would include the moral arguments for the existence of God along with the claims that follow from a perfect being theological approach. The belief is not just that God does the good, and not just that God always does the good, but that God, as the source of moral goodness, could do nothing other than the good. This means that we may not always be able to easily pick out or describe how God is acting in morally appropriate ways. So if God is there, then God is good.

Secondly, there is evidence of God’s work in history culminating with the person and work of Jesus, the divine Son of God. This would include the evidence for the reliability of the biblical texts, the evidence that the claims of Jesus are grounded in eyewitness testimony, and the historical evidence for Jesus’s resurrection. The good news of the Christian gospel is that Jesus came precisely for our wellbeing.

Third, there may be evidence of God’s work in our lives. We should take the advice of the Psalmist to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). There is perhaps no better way to know God loves us and has good intentions towards us than by personally experiencing God’s love for ourselves.

The typical objection here is that these are the evidences of philosophers. Paradigm instances of faith would involve “regular folks,” those without formal training in philosophy including my grandma and Jesus’s disciples. In response, there’s no doubt that each of these lines of evidence can get very complicated and technical in a hurry. But I think there is a level at which each can be grasped in an epistemically relevant way by regular folks. Regular folks may not have at their disposal a formal apparatus of modal logic to bring to bear on the question of God’s essential goodness. But they can grasp the idea that God can only ever be good and this can figure into the epistemic status of their beliefs about God’s goodwill.

An even better example is the everyday way people can have evidence for the resurrection. The primary evidence is, for many people, the testimony of the Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, etc.) and also evangelists (i.e., proclaimers of the gospel). Testimonial evidence has an important role to play here. As the Apostle Paul says “And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?...So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:14-17). Though it is not easy to work out an account of testimony as evidence, there’s no question that we often take ourselves to be justified on the basis of testimony.[[33]](#footnote-33) Indeed, it is often through the testimony of the Scriptures and the testimony of those who preach the Scriptures that God communicates his deep love for us.

It is important to mention that this is not necessarily to provide an account of *saving* faith. I think that an account of saving faith would be for the theologian to work out according to his or her soteriological commitments and it very likely will include further and stricter conditions. However, I see no reason why an account of saving faith couldn’t be entirely consistent with the evidentialist model I have provided.

**Objections**

The first objection claims that there are times practical considerations prompt faith in someone, in what seem to be morally praiseworthy ways, even though the evidence suggests the person is not a competent friend. I will give two stories that illustrate this sort of objection.

1. Let’s suppose my wife had a brother who is a complete deadbeat. Let’s imagine that he has never fully grown up or accepted adult responsibilities in life. However, suppose that he offers to pick my wife and I up from the airport after a long travel day. We have trusted him before for these sorts of tasks and he has failed to come through. But suppose he intimates that he is trying to turn his life around and he would very much appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate this by picking us up from the airport. Because we love him and we want to give him the opportunity to come through, we agree to depend on him to get home from the airport. This is an instance of faith without the relevant evidence. Is it praiseworthy?
2. Suppose there is an escaped prisoner of war in Nazi Germany whose only hope is to enlist the help of a German to get out of the country.[[34]](#footnote-34) All the evidence points to the fact that most every German will turn any escaped prisoner over to the police. However, with no other options, the prisoner ventures his wellbeing on a German person in hope that he will aid him. This is an instance of faith without the relevant evidence. Is it praiseworthy?

In response, it is not clear to me that these are in fact morally praiseworthy, at least as it relates to the faith exemplified. If either story ends badly, then our appraisal of their actions will likely not be too positive. In other words, if my wife and I are left at the airport once again, we might be led to say that we shouldn’t have trusted the brother. But clearly there is something morally praiseworthy about the actions in each story even if it is not the faith exemplified. In the first case, it is the kindness and self-sacrificial love that is being shown to the brother. And in the second, it is the great courage of the prisoner that is praiseworthy. These situations seem morally complex. They both seem relevantly similar to a case where one acts dishonestly out of kindness and love. The kindness and love may be commendable, but this fact doesn’t make the dishonesty itself morally praiseworthy.

The second objection claims that there are times when we ought to hang on in faith even though the evidence says someone is not a competent friend. Here are two cases of this sort:

1. Suppose that a man’s wife notices a distinct smell of perfume that is not hers on one his dress shirts and, upon closer inspection, also sees a small spot of lipstick on the collar. Suppose also he has been traveling more than normal and, now that she thinks about it, she has very little evidence that these trips are even business related. Let’s say they have children and the wife chooses to maintain faith in him despite the evidence. Is this an instance where she morally ought to maintain faith despite the evidence?
2. It is not uncommon for someone’s faith to be tried when they face tragedy in life. Suppose a young adult named Steve has been killed in a tragic accident. Steve’s mom tries to sort this out intellectually and his death seems, to her, utterly pointless and without any redeeming element. She begins to genuinely question God on the basis of what seems to be gratuitous suffering and yet she chooses to maintain faith. Is this an instance where she ought to maintain faith despite the evidence?

In these cases, the answer really depends on getting more details. In case 3, if he has cheated on his wife more than one time in the past and has, in various ways, intentionally sabotaged their marriage, then clearly she shouldn’t continue maintaining faith in him, especially in light of the new evidence. However, if he has heretofore displayed many instances of consistent love and faithfulness and this new evidence is completely out of step with all of what she knows, then she should maintain her trust (at least until she can get more evidence). At the moment, she doesn’t have overwhelming evidence of his infidelity. Perhaps there’s a good explanation. But she may also find more evidence that an affair has occurred. The intuition is that the praiseworthiness of her faith turns on her overall evidence.

In case 4, here again, it seems we need more details. Just because the mom is confronted with what seems like gratuitous evil doesn’t mean she is without all evidence whatsoever. Though she has an intellectual struggle on her hands and even if she can’t make sense of why God would allow her son to be killed, she may still have very good evidence that he’s there and he is good. Tragedy has a way of forcing us to get really honest about our faith. But scores of people have maintained faith in the face of horrific circumstances they don’t understand and this is precisely because they know too much of God for the circumstances to destroy their otherwise well-grounded faith.

So I think the model can handle these sorts of objections.

The upshot of this model of faith is that faith as ventured trust allows evidence to play a significant role for faith in the context of relationships. We see that evidence plays an important role, but it is not overvalued or overplayed. It also makes clear that faith is not a necessary deficiency of the evidence. Faith can be misplaced and inappropriate, to be sure. But it is the evidence that guides us to the proper objects of our faith. And the model can be applied to Christian faith. The heart of the Christian story is one in which God, who in his maximal goodness, loves us and gives his son in the ultimate sacrifice for us. I have found this to be true and reasonable and, as such, there is no worthier object of our faith.

1. For example, *The Nature and Value of Faith* project was a three project funded by the Templeton Religion Trust. See <http://www.thenatureandvalueoffaith.com/>. The project produced three conferences and numerous publications, including a special double issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 81 (2017): 1-227. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Dawkins, speech, Edinburgh International Science Festival, April 15, 1992, quoted in Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (New York: Dover, 1989), 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2013), 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Trent Dougherty, “Faith, Trust, and Testimony” in *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, eds. Laura Frances Callahan and Timothy O’Connor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105; Lara Buchak, “Faith and Steadfastness in the Face of Counter-evidence” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 81 (2017): 113-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lara Buchak, “Rational Faith and Justified Belief,” in *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, eds. Laura Frances Callahan and Timothy O’Connor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is a family of views Daniel McKaughan and Daniel Howard-Snyder call *belief plus* where faith is belief coupled with states, such as commitments or affections. See Daniel McKaughan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Faith,” in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion, eds. Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Buchak makes a distinction between interpersonal faith and propositional faith. She expresses hope “that the correct account of interpersonal faith will ultimately rest on an account of propositional faith: for example, to have faith in a person is to have faith that some facts about her obtain.” Buchak, “Rational Faith and Justified Belief,” 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Buchak (2014), 49. This view is further explained and defended in Lara Buchak, “Can It be Ratonal to Have Faith,” in *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Jake Chandler and Victoria S. Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 225-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Buchak, “Can It be Rational to Have Faith,” 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Acquiescing to a claim seems to be similar to what other philosophers call “acceptance.” See Jonathan L. Cohen, A*n Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)). William Alston also adopts a similar account of acceptance for his account of faith in William Alston “Belief, acceptance, and religious faith,” in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, eds. Jeff Jordan & Daniel Howard-Snyder (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996)), 3-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a different account of trust see Linda Zagzebski, “Trust,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, eds. Craig A. Boyd and Kevin Timpe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 269-284. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Richard Swinburne (2005), 143. There is an earlier discussion of what it is to act on an assumption. See 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Paul Helm, *Faith With Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One concern with invoking this idea of assumptions is that we have brought back in to the picture something propositional. An assumption looks to be a kind of propositional attitude since, again, it fits the form S assumes *that p* is the case. One should notice that Swinburne defines trust as an *action* on the basis of certain assumptions. But even here he defines acting on the assumption that p counterfactually as doing those actions which you would do if you believed that p. Though undoubtedly there are some propositional attitudes involved with these actions, they are not constitutive of the state. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. William P. Alston, Epistemic justification: essays in the theory of knowledge (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1989), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I can manipulate my beliefs by choosing to seek out a balanced set of evidence as I form my beliefs. Or I can choose to surround myself with an echo chamber of views I want to hold and keep myself from the views I would like to avoid. I am clearly making choices here and these choices will likely influence my beliefs even though I do not have direct voluntary control. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See for example the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:10) and the Syrophoenician woman (Matt. 15:28). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As we shall see shortly, this makes our intentions towards one another an important feature of our relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. To be clear, Swinburne is primarily focused on accounts of Christin faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Aristotle says, “Those who wish good things to their friends for the sake of the latter are friends most of all, because they do so because of their friends themselves, and not coincidentally” (1156b9-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Clifford’s claim seems to make believing without evidence a moral wrong. Not everyone agrees there’s a specific *moral* obligation to believe on the basis of evidence. But the general sentiment is that proper belief formation is based on good evidence. W.K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in L. Stephen and F. Pollock, eds., *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Trent Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and Its Discontents* (New York: Oxford University, 2011), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, Evidentialism (New York: Oxford University, 2004), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. CF (2004), 84, n. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Some recent works intended to address these things include Trent Dougherty (2011*) Evidentialism and Its Discontents* (New York: Oxford University Press); Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For a defense of the importance of a subject’s assurance see Richard Fumerton “Epistemic Internalism, Philosophical Assurance and the Skeptical Predicament.” in Knowledge and Reality: Essays in honor of Alvin Plantinga, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2010) 179-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1985), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge,* 43–44. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Dougherty, “Faith, Trust, and Testimony,” 97-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This is an example from Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)