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IS FAITH COMPATIBLE WITH REASON?

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *In this article I argue that faith is not only rationally justifiable but also inescapable simply because our decisions regarding ultimate questions must necessarily be made under conditions of objective uncertainty. I review remarks by several prominent thinkers on the subject — both avowed atheists and several writers who have addressed the challenge implicit in issues related to faith and reason. I end my discussion by citing William James, who articulated clearly the choices we must make in addressing these “ultimate questions.”*

That title, our severely limited time, and the diverse character of this FreedomFest¹ audience suggest at least two things: First, my task here isn't to prove faith, as such, *true* but to argue that faith is or can be, “compatible with reason.”

Second, my obligation isn't to demonstrate that any *particular* tenet of any *particular* faith is true. That's not my job.

Now, this is somewhat unsatisfying. After all, few if any people have faith *generically*, without a specific *object* of faith. By analogy, nobody speaks “language.” People speak English, say, or German, or Arabic, or Chinese. Thus too, religious believers assert specific propositions — for

1. This article, exclusive of one clearly marked addendum at the conclusion, is the affirmative statement with which I opened a debate with the atheist Michael Shermer on the topic “Is Faith Compatible with Reason?” at FreedomFest 2018 in Las Vegas, Nevada, on 12 July 2018. Dr. Shermer, trained as an historian of science, is a prolific author as well as the founder of The Skeptics Society and the editor-in-chief of its magazine, *Skeptical*. Dr. Shermer also writes a monthly column for *Scientific American* under the title “Skeptic: Viewing the World with a Rational Eye.” He did not appear to have a written text with him during the debate. See Daniel Peterson and Michael Shermer, “Is Faith Compatible with Reason?” C-Span video, 55:20. July 12, 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?448000-3/is-faith-comptabile-reason>.

example, that Moses received the law on Sinai, that Jesus rose from the dead, that Muhammad encountered Gabriel on Mt. Hira', or that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon "by the gift and power of God."

Thus, my task here today is not only modest but also artificially abstract. Still, we proceed.

As a very blunt statement of unfaith, I choose a passage from the 1903 essay, "A Free Man's Worship," by the great philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell, the most vocal and famous atheist of the twentieth century:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.²

Summarizing the views he once held as an atheist, Leo Tolstoy sounds like Lord Russell: "You are a temporary, incidental accumulation of particles."³ "The meaninglessness of life" is "the only indisputable piece of knowledge available to man."⁴ The bottom line, as one American atheist philosopher put it, is that the things that matter most will ultimately be at the mercy of the things that matter least.⁵

In contrast to that, I offer a statement from the great Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James:

2. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," chap. 3 in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (1910; repr., London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1959), 47-48.

3. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. and ed. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 39.

4. Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, 34.

5. William Pepperell Montague, *Belief Unbound* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930).

Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things. First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. ... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.⁶

That second affirmation — “that we are better off even now if we believe” — is, I think, demonstrably true. Scores of studies show that religious faith or religious involvement correlates, on the whole, with superior physical, mental, and emotional health. That isn’t my topic for today, however, even though such considerations might be enough, in themselves, to demonstrate that faith is reasonable.

For my remarks today, I will draw heavily upon William James. In his classic 1896 lecture “The Will to Believe,” James responded to the English mathematician and philosopher W. K. Clifford, who had asserted that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁷ James was, he said, offering an “essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.”⁸

I will argue that faith is rationally justifiable and also, as a subordinate and perhaps dispensable point, that faith is inescapable — for the simple and sufficient reason that decisions regarding ultimate questions must be made, and must necessarily be made under conditions of objective uncertainty.

Let me stipulate that there are large issues — the ultimate questions — for which publicly accessible, objective proof is unavailable.⁹

By “publicly accessible, objective proof,” I mean not only the kind of proof we find in mathematics and, par excellence, in geometry — where, if the proof is valid, anybody who understands it *must* logically accept its conclusion — but also the rather looser kinds of proof we sometimes see

6. William James, *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 25–26.

7. James, *The Will to Believe*, 8.

8. *Ibid.*, 1.

9. In an article I saw only when sorting through my mail after returning from Las Vegas, Dr. Shermer effectively grants this stipulation with regard to theism and atheism (and, for that matter, with regard to subjective personal experience). See Michael Shermer, “The Final Mysterians: Are consciousness, free will and God insoluble mysteries?” *Scientific American* 319, no. 1 (July 2018): 73.

in laboratories and elsewhere. And I specifically mean to exclude personal spiritual experiences, which may convince those who have them to the point of certainty but which, by their very nature, are subjective — meaning not “false” but uniquely accessible to their “subject,” to the person who experiences them — and nontransferable. They may be more or less described, but they cannot be fully conveyed to another, any more than another who hears me describe my headache or my Alpine hike in Switzerland’s Berner Oberland experiences my pain or thereby sees the Lauterbrunnen Valley in the way I saw it. Reading about headaches or the Swiss Alps is simply not the same thing as having a headache or traveling to Switzerland.

“Let us,” proposes William James, “give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed.”¹⁰

Of course, people will differ on what is possible or not, what is plausible or implausible. As James puts it, “deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker.”¹¹

Responding directly to W. K. Clifford, James observes that

When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such “insufficient evidence,” insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start.¹²

“Next,” he says, “let us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be — 1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*.”¹³

We’ve already discussed “living” and “dead” hypotheses. The distinction between “forced” and “avoidable” hypotheses should be fairly obvious: Whether life arose in a warm tidal pool or near a hot deep-ocean vent, for example, has no practical impact on my life. Nor does the question of whether Napoleon ate eggs for breakfast on the morning of the Battle of Waterloo. In such cases — science and the study of history offer many of them — I can avoid deciding.

10. James, *The Will to Believe*, 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

12. *Ibid.*, 14.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.

“Wherever there is no forced option,” says James, “the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal.”¹⁴

Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of *gaining truth* away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all. Law courts, indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge’s duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me) few cases are worth spending much time over: the great thing is to have them decided on *any* acceptable principle, and got out of the way. But in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced. The questions here are always trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of sceptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Röntgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand.¹⁵

But the ultimate questions with which religion and irreligion deal are not of that nature. Back to William James:

We see ... that religion offers itself as a *momentous* option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose

14. Ibid., 21-22.

15. Ibid., 19-20.

by our non-belief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a *forced* option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve.¹⁶

At this point, his argument is very similar to Pascal’s famous “wager”:

A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will bring out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on heads, or God’s existence: if you win in such case, you gain eternal beatitude; if you lose, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain.¹⁷

I’ve already stipulated above that there are large issues — the ultimate questions — for which publicly accessible, objective proof is unavailable. So I will proceed on the assumption that, on these fundamental questions, the questions with which religion (and its negation) concern themselves, the answers are, so far as publicly demonstrable arguments go, neither 100% certain nor 100% impossible but somewhere in between and, let us say, in the rough vicinity of 50/50. Perhaps — judgments will vary — they’re 30/70 or even 5/95.

But “live options” remain, and, on these issues, a decision is inescapable. Theists decide. Atheists decide. Not to decide is also, itself, effectively and unavoidably to decide. To behave agnostically is, practically speaking, to behave atheistically. The choice is forced upon us.

How, though, are we to decide when the objective facts are inadequate to compel our judgment? Decision-making under uncertainty should be very familiar to the risk-takers and investors who flock to this conference. In the end, we have little alternative but to go with what feels right to us.

“Our passional nature,” says William James,

16. Ibid., 26.

17. Ibid., 5-6.

not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision, — just like deciding yes or no, — and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.¹⁸

Here’s an expressly Jamesian analogy from the contemporary Claremont philosopher Stephen Davis:

Imagine the following situation: while entering a steep downgrade, a truck driver suddenly discovers that her brakes have failed. The truck is starting to pick up speed, and the driver sees that soon she will be in danger. The driver is faced with a choice: she can either immediately jump from the truck, risking bruises and broken bones while escaping the greater danger of a possible crash farther down the hill. Or she can remain in the truck, risking a crash but hoping eventually to guide it down the hill to a level spot. But the driver does not know how long the downgrade is; she cannot see where it ends and this stretch of road is new to her.

It surely seems that this is a genuine option for the driver. It is live, because both possibilities appeal to her as distinct possibilities. It is forced, because there is no third option beside jumping now or staying with the truck (jumping later is a logical possibility, but is clearly too unsafe to be seriously considered). It is momentous, because her life is at stake. And the evidence is ambiguous because, let’s say, neither possibility seems to her any safer or more dangerous than the other. ... James would claim that she now has the intellectual right to choose whichever option she wants to choose, to let her passional nature decide.¹⁹

Still, wouldn’t it be preferable to follow rigorous logic and irrefutable data here, rather than to take a leap of faith? Yes, it would. But we’ve already stipulated that rigorous logic and irrefutable data are not, in fact, available to fully ground a choice.

18. Ibid., 11.

19. Stephan T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 173-74.

Moreover, James points out, “pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.”²⁰ We don’t arrive at our moral beliefs or even our political views or economic ideas purely on the basis of indisputable data and irresistible chains of logic. And anyway, James asks rhetorically, “Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on his moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?”²¹

In this life, said the apostle Paul, we “see through a glass, darkly.”²² That’s our situation, and we must do the best that we can. When the facts are uncertain but a decision absolutely must be made, it’s scarcely irrational to make a decision — as both theists and atheists in fact *do*.²³

I close with the final paragraph from William James’s “The Will to Believe,” in which he himself is citing Fitz James Stephen:

These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them. ... In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. ... If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? “Be strong and of a good courage.” Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. ... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.²⁴

20. James, *The Will to Believe*, 11.

21. *Ibid.*, 14.

22. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

23. At this point in the Las Vegas debate, constrained by time, I chose to sit down. So the remainder of these prepared remarks was not presented there.

24. James, *The Will to Believe*, 31.

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