The Puzzle of Faith

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces ‘The Puzzle of Faith,’ which highlights an apparent tension between faith and belief. To resolve this tension, I will present a solution to The Puzzle of Faith by identifying the sort of cognitive attitude that is sufficient for faith. I will argue two theses. (1) That the cognitive attitude in religious faith need not be belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense, but it can be an attitude which I call creedal acceptance. (2) If there are cases in which faith entails belief, then these ‘beliefs’ are different from the evidentially vulnerable beliefs talked about in philosophical literature. My second thesis is a linguistic thesis, which seeks to argue that the way the word belief is used in everyday speech does not typically refer to belief in the philosopher’s sense, but refers to something closer to what I am calling creedal acceptance.

INDEX WORDS: Faith, Belief, Acceptance, Cognitive attitude
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1 INTRODUCTION

Faith and belief, whatever those may be, are essential to the lives of religious adherents around the world. Many religious traditions use “faith” and “belief” interchangeably or view one as a component or feature of the other. For instance, many Western traditions portray belief as a component of faith, where having faith entails or requires having certain beliefs. Interestingly however, beliefs are understood as being responsive to evidence by many prominent philosophers; there are many different ways to flesh out the notion of a belief being responsive to evidence, but the general idea is as follows. If we did not think of an agent’s beliefs as cohering with their evidence, it would be hard to understand what that agent’s beliefs even are. For example, if Ted believes that his grass is not cut after having mowed his own lawn, it would be hard to make sense of his belief. In contrast, faith is commonly portrayed as not being responsive to evidence or as something that need not require evidence in order to be had. In fact, in some traditions it even seems virtuous to have faith in that which is contrary to the evidence one has, or at least faith in that which is not evidentially supported either way. From these various perspectives, a serious but unappreciated puzzle arises about the nature of faith; I call it The Puzzle of Faith.¹ I outline it as follows:

(i) Faith is held regardless of evidence.

(ii) Beliefs are based on evidence.

(iii) Faith entails belief.²

¹ I use the phrase ‘The Puzzle of Faith’ to distinguish the puzzle from phrases like Kierkegaard’s ‘Paradox of Faith’. Henceforth, I’ll use ‘The Puzzle of Faith’ to refer to this specific intellectual problem and I don’t mean to confuse it with any other use of that phrase, which I do not see present in philosophy literature in any way.

² We can word this puzzle in other ways; we can put it more sharply, but less neutrally and yet this puzzle would still emerge. For instance, in (2) we could also say ‘beliefs are responsive to evidence’ and for (3) we can also say that ‘faith is not (or need not be) responsive to evidence’.
Taken individually, each of these three points reflect commonly held notions about faith and belief. Yet, despite the fact that each one of these points are compelling in its own right, it is obvious that there is a tension or apparent inconsistency in attempting to posit all three together. For instance, if we posit that faith requires belief and that belief is responsive to evidence, then it seems as though faith should also be responsive to evidence, which is inconsistent with (i). We can approach this puzzle from another angle; if faith involves belief and faith is not responsive to evidence, then belief would not be the sort of thing that is responsive to evidence, which is inconsistent with (ii). Further still, if we understand faith, which is held regardless of evidence, as entailing belief, which is based upon evidence, then it seems as though we are stipulating that that which is not based upon evidence entails another thing which does rely on evidence. For this reason, the conjunction of (i) and (ii) seem to be at odds with (iii). We can even extend our considerations further in noting that religious adherents are often exhorted to have faith, which makes it something that is responsive to volition as opposed to belief, which is held involuntarily. Though these illustrated tensions do not collapse the points of our puzzle into a strict logical contradiction, they do raise worries about how these three propositions can be understood and clarified. My goal is to resolve the tension in this puzzle by arguing that there is a particular cognitive attitude in religious faith that stands in an explanatory relation to the essential features of faith. This is the attitude most people refer to under the term “belief,” though it is not what philosophers mean by “belief.” But before discussing the particulars of my solution, I want to discuss the puzzle in more detail.

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3 Williams (1973). I see this point to be a heightening of the tension between (i), (ii), & (iii), which ties to a related puzzle. It could be construed as follows: Faith is voluntary. Belief is involuntary. Yet, Faith entails belief. This sort of puzzle is typically discussed at the intersection philosophy or religion and ethics. Here the question is raised, how can something like faith (voluntarily held) be required by God, if it entails holding certain beliefs (i.e. that which is involuntary or not subject to one’s volition). For example, see Kinghorn (2005).
To heighten the puzzle, I want to explain why points (i), (ii), or (iii) in the puzzle are difficult to give up. Moreover, I would like to supplement these reasons with what more there is to say about the various ways this puzzle is connected to and representative of various facets of Western religious and philosophical traditions. Let us first consider (i). Faith, at least at times, is something that is held or maintained regardless of evidence or despite our available evidence. In the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews encapsulates this notion, where faith is described as the “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” ⁴ In this way, faith is characterized as something held regardless of evidentiary input (or faith is something held without any need for specific evidentiary input). Consider to the story of doubting Thomas from the Gospel of John. There, Thomas tells his fellow disciples that he will not believe that Jesus has been resurrected unless he sees Jesus himself. Initially this may seem to cast faith as that which is responsive to evidence, but when the gospel narrative goes on to record Thomas’s encounter with the resurrected Jesus, Thomas is admonished by Jesus who says, “have you believed me because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” ⁵ In this way, the gospel is depicting the paragon disciple as one that does not require evidence in order to believe or have faith. Though it is conceivable to interpret that passage as conveying that sensory evidence can bolster faith or operate as a catalyst for coming to have faith, it is clear that such evidence is not required. In support of (i), we can also look to an example of faith that the sacred texts of Judeo-Christian traditions share—the story of Abraham and Isaac. ⁶ This story details Abraham as the ultimate exhibitor of faith, where Abraham, given the test of sacrificing his first born son Isaac, follows through with the preparations for the sacrificial act right up to the

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⁵ John 20:29 (Revised Standard Version).
⁶ Though the Quran also espouse a variation of this story, the details vary rather significantly where it is Satan that communicates the idea of sacrificing Abraham’s other son, Ishmael, in a dream—not Isaac (The Quran, Surah 37).
point at which Yahweh intervenes to provide a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac so as to reward Abraham
and his display of trust and confidence in God to fulfill God’s promises. This story best
encapsulates (i) in the way that Abraham, even in the absence of any signs or evidence that
anything good would come of the sacrifice, followed through in carrying out the preparations for
sacrificial rites in accordance with Yahweh’s commands. Traditional interpretations in the
Talmud render this story as the tenth and final trial that Abraham faces through which Yahweh
“established the worthiness of Abraham.”7 Thus, this story of Abraham highlights the way in
which models of faith in the divine exhibit faith irrespective of evidential considerations. Such
eamples motivate the strong tension felt from our Puzzle of Faith. Many more examples could
be employed, but these will suffice to demonstrate this puzzle in need of a resolution.

Further still, (ii) is also difficult to give up. Widespread philosophical opinion tells us that
beliefs are the sort of things that are responsive to evidence. In other words, beliefs are formed
and informed by evidence. There is an assumption of minimal rationality that includes a
connection between evidence and belief.8 To illustrate this idea, image if I told you that my car
has a flat tire and you look to find that all four wheels of my car are fully inflated (and there are
no signs of air leaking anywhere). Here, we could say that your sensory perception would
operate as a defeater to my claim that my car has a flat tire. Moreover, you would not need to
will yourself to change your belief that ‘a tire was flat’ to ‘no tires are flat’. You would simply
find your belief updating itself so that you believed the latter instead of the former. Thus, this
notion of factual belief is very much tied to understanding belief as being an involuntary sort of
thing—we find ourselves having certain beliefs (i.e. the sorts of beliefs that map to or correspond

8 Davidson (1963), Velleman (2000), Williams (1973), among others.
to the way in which the world is represented in our thoughts and senses). Similarly, if you were wondering whether or not you should wear a rain jacket on your way to run some errands, you might check a reliable source for the weather forecast or look outside (possibly examining the sky). In so doing, you would be acting in accordance with the standard way we come to form or have certain beliefs—we allow and orient ourselves to have our beliefs about our environment in a way that is formed by the sensory input we receive. However, in giving this characterization of belief, I do not mean to say that beliefs are never wrong or that beliefs are *never* contrary to evidence; I simply mean to highlight that part of the standard operation for beliefs (in the sense operative in (ii)) is that they respond to evidence.

Lastly, let us consider (iii). I see (iii) as difficult to give up because it is a platitude that we hold to; namely, I take it that this platitude may be founded upon the intuition that religious beliefs form and constitute a person’s faith, whereby faith is assumed to be a collection or cohesive whole of particular beliefs. For example, in Islam the Hadith describes faith as follows: “Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Last Day, and to believe in providence both its good and its bad.”9 This passage reflects the notion expressed in (iii), where various beliefs constitute or are required for religious faith. Similarly, major figures in Judaism, like Maimonides, the influential 12th century scholastic, wrote the still highly regarded *13 Principles of Jewish Faith*. There, each principle, which begins with the phrase “‘I believe with perfect faith…”, seems to exemplify this connection between faith and belief as a means of outlining the way proselytes and religious adherents are to regard and position themselves in relation to the most essential tenets of Judaism.

How might we go about resolving the tension of this puzzle? In section 2, I will

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9 The Hadith, (Sahih Muslim 8).
canvass the concept of faith that is focus of our inquiry. In so doing, I will employ an example-based strategy whereby I abstract certain features from what the Abrahamic religions consider to be a paradigm case of faith. In characterizing faith with these features, this section will give us some purchase on adjudicating between our theoretical options in solving *The Puzzle of Faith* without presupposing the solution I seek to give. Next in section 3, I will canvass the concept of belief in contemporary philosophical literature in a way that is also theoretically neutral for providing a solution to our impasse. In section 4, I will develop four general solutions or proposals to the puzzle as a means of systematically outlining the various ways we can go about resolving the tension and giving an account of the way that faith and belief relate to one another. The first three solutions that I explore are the three most obvious theoretical options for alleviating the tension in the puzzle; that is, I will first consider eliminating each individual part of the puzzle as a means of solving the tension. That is, I’ll first discuss eliminating (i), faith is not based on evidence, by considering what it would mean to regard faith as being that which *is* based upon evidence. Upon examination, I will show how this is problematic and move to our second option, eliminating (ii). This will entail regarding that beliefs are not based upon evidence; however, I’ll show that this option yields unacceptable consequences for how we understand human psychology and how the mind works. Last among our three most obvious theoretical options will be doing away with (iii). Namely, I will discuss the philosophical literature that seeks to argue that faith does not entail belief. As with the initial two proposals, I will show why arguing that faith does not entail belief is not the most viable solution to the puzzle.

After surveying each of these three theoretical options for solving the puzzle and showing why each is problematic, I will present my own solution to *The Puzzle of Faith* at the end of
section 4. My solution entails nuancing the way in which we understand (iii), by identifying the sort of cognitive attitude that I take to be sufficient for faith. I will argue two theses. (1) That the cognitive attitude in religious faith need not be belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense, but can be an attitude which I call creedal acceptance. (2) If there are cases in which faith entails belief (in some sense of the word), then these ‘beliefs’ are different from the evidentially vulnerable beliefs talked about in philosophical literature.10 My second thesis is a linguistic thesis, in which I argue that the way the word ‘belief’ is used in everyday speech does not typically refer to belief in the philosopher’s sense, but refers to something closer to what I am calling creedal acceptance. After proposing my solution, I conclude with section 5 by discussing how creedal acceptance stands in an explanatory relation to the features of faith that I lay out in my earlier section on faith. In so doing, I will show that creedal acceptance best reflects and complements those features of faith that I think the Abrahamic faith traditions take to be most essential.

2 WHAT IS FAITH?

In discussing the notion of faith, it is first important to clarify the sense of ‘faith’ that I have in mind. The sense of ‘faith’ that is the focus of this essay is religious faith and, more specifically, a religious adherent’s state of mind that relates to the core doctrines and practices of their particular religious tradition. The term ‘faith’ can also be talked about in the following way, ‘Sarah is a member of the Baha’i faith.’ This latter sense of ‘faith’ is used to identify the religion or religious sect to which a person belongs; this usage is synonymous with saying Sarah’s is an adherent to the Baha’i religion. My discussion of faith will be focused on the former notion, not the latter. For, I take it that being a member of a particular faith is explained by faith in the

10 N. Van Leeuwen (2014).
former sense—as a state of mind that relates to the cognitive and affective content of religious doctrines and practice.

Given that my focus is on faith as a state of mind, the notion of faith under consideration here has to involve mental states. Faith is not reducible to any singular mental state; rather, it is a disposition with certain features constituted by different sorts of mental states. As a result, I would like to explore several different examples of faith from the sacred texts of the Abrahamic traditions in order to get at what the core, widely agreed upon features of faith are. In so doing, my strategy will be as follows. I will examine three narratives that these traditions present as exemplifying paragons of faith. In my examination, I will identify the features of faith that are both essential and unlikely to be controversial. In turn, I will make note of what the accompanying mental states are in these examples that are both indicative of faith and its focal cognitive attitude (i.e. what the operative attitude is in my faith that can help account for and explains the features of faith).

2.1 [Story 1] Features: Risk, Trust, Reliance, & Action

The first figure under consideration is Abraham, an essential figure to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sacred texts of these traditions convey many different stories of Abraham as a paragon of faith. In particular though, the Hebrew Bible talks of the faith exhibited by Abraham when he was commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, his son. Building up to this story, the Hebrew Scriptures speak of God as having made a covenant with Abraham, promising Abraham will become “the father of a multitude of great nations”\(^{11}\) and that his lineage will continue on through Isaac, the son that Abraham and Sarah miraculously conceived in their old age. After the fulfillment of these promised events, Rabbinic commentators note that Abraham was directed to

\(^{11}\) Genesis 17:4-5 (Revised Standard Version).
sacrifice Isaac as a final test to exhibit his faith in God. Through this test, Abraham faces the dilemma of exhibiting his faith in God by obeying God’s directive to take the life of Isaac or to ignore the command and preserve the life of Isaac, the one whom God has promised to Abraham as the means through which Abraham’s lineage would continue and be preserved.

There are several components of this Abrahamic narrative that seem to contribute to the notion of faith. In this narrative, there is a lot at stake for Abraham in following through with God’s demand. First, there is the loss of that which seems to be of utmost value to Abraham; namely, his “favored” and “loved” son, Isaac. There is also the loss of the one who is to preserve Abraham’s lineage, something of particular socio-cultural importance for the narrative’s original audience. Interestingly enough though, the details of the story do not explicitly focus on Abraham’s loss or perceived risk. Instead, the story develops in a way so as to emphasize the details of Abraham’s obedience to God’s command in spite of any risk he faces. However, the magnitude of the faith displayed by Abraham can only be rightly conceptualized when juxtaposed with the degree of risk Abraham took in performing the sacrificial rites demanded of him. Any ancient near eastern audience would have readily understood that the costs of the sacrificial rites demanded of Abraham extended far beyond the loss of a son. The performance of these rights were labor and time intensive and they required the expenditure of vital resources. Complicating these demands was also the demand to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain “in the land of Moriah.” Such a command, required extensive preparation, three days of travel, and a company of Abraham’s servants and supplies. As a result, the sort of action required of Abraham made him not only vulnerable to loss, but it also made Abraham to susceptible to risk, the more obvious sorts of risk being those associated with the dangers of prolonged travel and the

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expenditure of vital resources. However, there is also a broader sense of risk here that is inherently tied to our notion of faith under consideration. This broader notion of risk seems comparable to accounts of faith in contemporary analytic philosophical literature where the idea of *risk* is said to be integral to the notion of faith.¹³ For instance, L. Buchack (2012) portrays risk as being part of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being able to say that a person has faith. On this account, “it is natural to understand risk in terms of evidence—an action is risky to the extent the evidence is consistent with it going badly. Thus, an action is risky when the available evidence does not fully support taking the action associated with the risk” (Ichikawa 2). This conception seems very consistent with our narrative of Abraham in the Hebrew Scriptures. There the details surrounding the build up to the sacrifice of Isaac do not seem to indicate that the act will go well for Abraham. After all, he is having to sacrifice his son (the line to his lineage is being cut off); he’s traveling great distances, spending vital resources, etc. The degree of risk here for Abraham seems particularly high given the evidence. After all, how can Abraham imagine this going well for him in the moment? Nonetheless, he is displaying a faith that God will keep those promises made to Abraham. This surely wouldn’t mean that a figure in such a situation would not experience the anxiety and uneasiness associated with being asked to perform such tasks. In the philosophical literature, this sort of mental state associated with the apprehension a perceived risk is referred to as *epistemic anxiety*. Despite the fact that Abraham might view God’s earlier promises as evidence that things will not turn out so badly, it does not therefore mean that Abraham is not experiencing some feelings of uncertainty with respect to what he’s been commanded to do; after all, having evidence does not always establish confidence—especially when the costs are high. Thus, *epistemic anxiety*, following J. Nagel

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(2010) is a feeling of uncertainty and it seems to be present in cases of perceived risk. This mirrors Buchak’s conception of faith, expressed in the following sort of condition.

“A person has faith that X, expressed by A, only if that person performs act A, and performing A constitutes taking a risk on X…”

This portrayal of faith seems to match up well with our narrative of Abraham. There Abraham can be said to have faith that God will fulfill his promises, expressed by the action of sacrificing Isaac, only if Abraham performs the act of sacrificing Isaac, and performing the act of sacrifice constitutes taking a risk on what God has commanded Abraham to do. We need not strictly limit the notion of faith that we consider here to this sort of necessary and sufficient condition as Buchak does, but it seems that this faith condition at least conveys a necessary condition for a person having faith (Ichikawa 2). Thus, there are strong parallels between this Abrahamic narrative and philosophical conceptions of faith with the conception of risk built in.

From here we can identify some other features of faith in our account of Abraham and Isaac. I’ll first briefly note these other features as they relate to our Abraham narrative and then I’ll develop them in full using other examples from various sacred texts in the Abrahamic faith tradition. They are as follows. In sacrificing Isaac, Abraham is put in a place where he must trust in God, with the hope and confidence that God will fulfill that which has been promised to Abraham. On this rendering of the narrative, Abraham might also be seen as acting on the assumption that God has Abraham’s good will in mind. Further still, there is also an element of reliance, whereby Abraham, despite the circumstance, is dependent upon God to come through for Abraham and make a way for Isaac to be spared, saved, or revived from the sacrifice (so that Isaac can become that which God has promised Abraham).

In this example, there are two senses of trust that merge. There is (1), trust in an information source, and (2), trust in an entity that some information is about. These two senses of trust are not mutually exclusive, but can sometimes run together. An example of (1) would be trust in someone like a news anchor—i.e. they have a trustworthy character and have my good will in mind, taking care to be accurate and vigilant in their reporting as they can. An example of (2) would be trust in a piece of information that you take to be true, regardless of who the information source is. For instance, let us say that I hear disparaging remarks about well-known world leader from this particular leader’s preferred news network. Given that this information is also being reported from other news outlets, I come to regard this information as true. Thus, trust in the sense (2) is not as concerned about the ‘messenger’ as it is the ‘message’. In my example, I take it that Abraham is both trusting God in the sense of (1) & (2). Namely, in (1) he is trusting of God’s character—i.e. that God has Abraham’s good will in mind and will not harm Abraham. In the case of (2), I take it that Abraham is trusting the information that God had earlier provided and that it is worth placing one’s confidence and trust in the likelihood that the information is true.

Before moving on to the last feature of faith, I have one final comment about trust and reliance to make. One might think that trust in a source requires beliefs about the source of that information. However, I see no reason to assert that trust requires this sort of belief. For example, suppose I have a transistor radio from which I am receiving information. I can trust that information source even though I might only have the vaguest idea about what might be sending me the information. As a result, I see no reason why beliefs about the information source are required in order to be said to have trust.
Fourth, there seems to be a requirement for voluntary action on the part of Abraham. To show or exhibit faith to God and faith in God, Abraham must act in accordance with God’s commands and he must act in the face of risk, trusting, and relying on God to come through for him. As the narrative goes, Abraham does just these things and God intervenes in the sacrificial rites to stop Abraham and provide an alternative sacrifice. In this way, we can take this story and other narratives like it, to be helpful in identifying those components integral to the concept of faith under consideration. These are but brief glosses of the features of faith that I take to be essential to the notion of faith under consideration. From here, I will develop these features in fuller detail.

2.2 [Story 2] Unique Features: Reliance & Action

Our next example will draw from Islam and the story of the prophet Muhammad’s first revelation. From both the Quran and Hadith, we find the prophetic biography of the life of Muhammad. The story of Muhammad’s first revelation speaks of a religious experience that the prophet had in a cave in Mount Hira near the city of Mecca. According to these sacred texts, Muhammad was holding vigil one night and while he was in contemplation, he heard a voice that commanded him “Proclaim!” The voice was that of the angel Gabriel. Upon hearing the voice, the startled Muhammad replied that he “was not a proclaimer”(H. Smith 226). The angel commanded him thrice more with Muhammad reiterating his initial response. After this third exchange, the Angel “whelmed [Muhammad] in his embrace… and said (ibid.):

“Proclaim in the name of your Lord who created! Created man from a clot of blood.

Proclaim: Your Lord is the Most Generous, Who teaches by the pen; Teaches man what

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15 H. Smith (1991, p.269). Smith notes that ‘Proclaim’ comes from *iqra*, which literally means recite. He opts to follow V. Danner’s (1988) translation of the term because he thinks more accurately conveys the meaning behind the command on Muhammad’s commission.
In this initial religious experience, it is recorded that Muhammad received the beginning parts of divine revelation that would come to form the Quran. In the roughly twenty-three year period to follow, Muhammad received the remaining revelations in a similar capacity. Each time he received these revelations through the voice of the angel Gabriel, Muhammad would in turn recite and proclaim each message to his followers, who would record and memorize each revelation. Muhammad came to be known by his followers as the final prophet of God and the paragon of faith for Islam. In the accounts of how the Quran came to be compiled, we see Muhammad as an example of faith in the way the act of reciting or proclaiming was requisite for him to be regarded as the messenger of Allah. In the accounts of Muhammad’s revelatory experiences, both reliance and action are essential aspects of these narratives. According to the Hadith, Muhammad would have religious experiences in which he would submit himself to a present angel or messenger and posture himself as a mouthpiece or tool to recite the new elements of divine revelation to his followers. In this way, Muhammad as a figure of faith is said to exhibit faith in his reliance upon the divine for receiving and reciting divine revelation. Here, there is a particularly epistemic dimension to the sort of reliance on display by the prophet Muhammad. This sort or reliance is epistemic or cognitive in the way that it is perceived to be a unique and revelatory message that Muhammad could only receive from Allah; he is reliant on Allah for the messages he is receiving. Apart from the divine messenger, Muhammad would not be able to share and impart this revelatory message from the divine. Thus, the conception of

16 As an aside, we can also note that Muhammad did not know what to make of his initial religious experiences in the cave. The Quran notes that he was not sure if he was going mad or if he was having real encounters with the divine. On account of this, it seems like there was at least perceived or felt risk for Muhammad in continuing to seek out and encounter the Divine in these religious experiences.
faith under consideration here sees a connection between faith and reliance where Muhammad’s action constitutes a receptive response of volitional commitment to Allah’s call, heard by a person; here, there is a willing reliance on Allah for this divine message. Given that Muhammad can be said to accept an act of communication, he can be said to be dependent or reliant upon the communicator for that divine message and act of communication. On this conception of faith, reliance seems to be coupled with action in this display of faith on the part of Muhammad. The act of yielding to the reception of divine revelation is also characteristically thematic in Islam in the way Muslims describe the religious practices as a form of submission to Allah and his divine revelation through the prophet Muhammad. Here, faith is portrayed as being reliant upon divine revelation and it cannot be separated from the act of submission to Allah and the divine will; faith is not faith without this sort of action.

In summary, the features of faith that we have abstracted from our paradigm examples are as follows:

a. faith requires risk
b. faith is voluntary
c. faith entails trust and reliance
d. faith requires action

One may worry that this way of characterizing reliance requires one to presuppose the existence of some deity in order for this to be an actual instance of reliance. I see no reason why though. I understand someone to be dependent or reliant on someone else insofar as they (i) perceive some sort of lack in themselves—in the case of faith it’s ‘epistemic lack’—and (ii) perceive something or someone else as being able to ‘make up for’ that lack. Suppose that I believed that I had an imaginary friend’—only I didn’t think of this friend as imaginary, but ‘real’. Furthermore, suppose that I said I relied upon this friend very much. Perhaps, I’d say something like I rely on my friend to be make me feel good by keeping me company when I’m lonely, or I rely on this friend to provide me encouragement when I need it. I do not see why I would need this ‘friend’ to actually exist if I am able to procure what it is that I perceive I lack. Perhaps this limits what we are actually able ‘to count on’ with respect to who or what we’re relying on, but I think that (i) and (ii) above are sufficient for characterizing reliance. I can obviously be wrong about what the actual source is (or even what its ontological status is) that I am procuring what I think I lack, but it still seems like I can rely on something/someone I do not fully understand or know.

I take a lot of this descriptive explanation about the connection between reliance and faith from McCraw (2014). Here, McCraw is also drawing heavily from Moser (2010).
Each of these features help conceptualize faith and give us purchase on adjudicating between our theoretical options in solving *The Puzzle of Faith* without presupposing the solution that I will ultimately give. In our next section we will canvas belief as it is conceptualized in contemporary analytic philosophy.

### 3 WHAT DO PHILOSOPHERS MEAN BY “BELIEF”?

The role of this section is to provide a sketch of the core properties of belief. These properties are theoretically neutral features of belief that are broadly agreed upon in philosophy. That is not to say that these features are entirely uncontroversial; however, there is broad consensus in the philosophical literature that supports characterizing belief as I will do in this section. Moreover, in pointing out these theoretically neutral features of belief, we also provide a means of adjudicating between the various theoretical options available to us in our search for a solution to the puzzle. Consensus thinking regards belief as a component of knowledge and a motivator of action. There are certain features of belief that make that possible; these are the features or the four core properties of belief that we will focus on in this section:

a. beliefs are representational

b. beliefs are involuntary

c. beliefs generally form a coherent set (in accordance with known logical entailment)

d. beliefs combine with desires to motivate action in a characteristic way.

Having mentioned these four features of belief, let’s consider an example to illustrate what these features are and how they relate to one another. Let’s say I have the belief that there is a bag of skittles on the coffee table in front of me. In having the belief, I simply regard it to be the case that a certain rainbow colored candy was situated on a particular piece of furniture in front of me (a. the belief simply represents and tracks the world as I experience it). In this sense, my belief
that a particular sweet is on the table in front of me does not require me to actively reflect about my present state of affairs (even though I could be doing so). There really is not anything that I actively do in my mind to ensure that the belief actually forms (b. the belief is involuntary). Instead, I simply find myself having the belief that the candy was present given a certain visual, sensory experience. Moreover, we might note that my belief that there was a particular type of candy on the table would also lead to the formation of other related beliefs. That is to say, if someone were to ask me if I believed that there was a piece of furniture underneath the sweet food item, then I would also assent to having that particular belief as well. In this way, beliefs also form other related beliefs in keeping with logical entailment—i.e. if \( a \) is on top of \( b \), then \( b \) is underneath \( a \) (c. these beliefs form in a coherent set). Further still, if I had the desire to eat the candy on the table, any action involving my consumption of the skittles would not be produced by my desire alone; the desire would also require certain beliefs (i.e. where the skittles are, etc.). In this way, beliefs are an important part of any model of action in that they combine with desires to motivate certain actions (d. the belief has motivational properties that are conditional on what desires I have). Given this illustration, I will now go on to discuss each of the four core properties in further detail.

### 3.1 Beliefs are representational

Beliefs are representational states in that they are about specific things; that is, beliefs are information bearing states of mind that have certain contents. For instance, if I learn that my friend resides at 123 Elm Street. I can be said to acquire a new belief (e.g. Marcus resides at 123 Elm Street) where my belief then comes to represent the state of affairs in question (or my belief is a representation of that particular fact about the world). In this way, we can thus distinguish
beliefs or thoughts, one type of mental state with a particular content, from non-representational mental states like headaches, which do not represent anything at all.

That said, there are some accounts of belief which understand belief(s) to be a disposition to behave in a certain way. As a result, some beliefs might be attributed to a person on the basis of a disposition. However, I am taking it as an assumption that there are beliefs that are in fact representational and not merely dispositional. In fact, I take the dispositional notion of belief to be parasitic on the representational notion. Moreover, this particular account of beliefs as a representational state is in keeping with representational theory of mind, which historically has its roots as far back as Descartes.

3.2 Beliefs are involuntary

In saying that beliefs are involuntary, I mean that beliefs form apart from any direct act of the will; for, I cannot will myself to believe contents that I would not believe in the absence of such willing. This involuntariness feature comes about in virtue of the fact that beliefs (i) tend to be responsive to evidence and that (ii) beliefs generally aim to represent the way things are (i.e. beliefs tend to represent the world as we perceive it). Regarding (i), to say that beliefs respond to evidence is to say that evidence relevant to the content of a belief can influence whether or not the belief persists in an agent’s mind (Van Leeuwen 2017:S53). This is more or less a rough characterization and a description of the way in which beliefs generally are—beliefs will not always respond properly to evidence; some of the time beliefs will respond to poor evidence.

Next regarding (ii), to say that beliefs tend to represent the world as we perceive it is to

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20 Fodor (ibid.), Dretske (1983 & 1989). This point is not crucial to my argument though; All that is needed for my arguments that there are in fact a large class of beliefs that are representational states. This assumption seems strongly supported by the philosophical literature.
highlight the way in which beliefs, as representations, function to catalogue, track, and map our perceptions of the world. As W.V. Quine (1979) says, “[our] repertoire of beliefs changes in nearly every waking moment. The merest chirp of a bird or chug of a passing motor, when recognized as such, adds a belief to our fluctuating store.”\textsuperscript{22} These host of “trivial” beliefs are acquired, but some are quickly forgotten while others endure. Our beliefs operate in this way regardless of whether or not we notice. Furthermore, our beliefs generally operate in this way without any willful effort on our part. Our beliefs, instead, are generally based on the evidence we encounter, whereby we have our beliefs “because we have our evidence.”\textsuperscript{23} Van Leeuwen (2017), following Davidson (1984), notes that beliefs do not always perfectly respond to evidence; though, “irrational processes do seem to stand out because they are exceptions to the overall pattern of rationality.”\textsuperscript{24} For instance, if I were to see and perceive muddy paw prints on my kitchen floor, then I would have evidence against the idea that my dog’s paws are clean. Further still, I could not will myself to believe that my dog’s paws are clean on account of what my evidence is and the way it sways my belief. Our beliefs about everyday topics like bus schedules, grocery store locations, commute times, etc. are all changing on account of the evidence we receive, which fixes them. We do not directly bring about these beliefs (at least in the same sense that we can directly will ourselves to lift our arm or shrug our shoulders). To give another example, if I had the belief that I had a $20 bill in my pocket and I reached into that same pocket to find no such bill, I would simply no longer have the belief. The sensory experience of not finding a bill there would simply lead me to change my belief. In a sense, my beliefs on this matter would ‘update’ to represent the given state of affairs, and this is something

\textsuperscript{22} W.V. Quine (1979), p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{23} B. Williams (1979), p. 141.  
that would happen regardless of any desire that I had to retain my initial belief. In this way, beliefs are involuntarily held representations.²⁵

3.3 Beliefs generally form a coherent set

Beliefs generally form to be logically consistent with other beliefs of the same set and, as such, involve the tendency to avoid incoherence. As such, this tendency away from incoherence and inconsistency is part of what distinguishes beliefs from other cognitive attitudes (e.g. like imagining) and mental states (like desires and fears). For example, my belief that there are birds chirping outside in the pear tree by my mailbox, will have tendency to form in a way that is consistent with other related beliefs that I have. This would include beliefs like, birds produce chirping sounds, there are presently birds outside of my home in a certain part of my yard, my mail box is adjacent to the pear tree in my yard, birds have the ability to access and inhabit trees, etc. Other mental states, like desires, are different from beliefs in that I can have conflicting or contrary desires. For example, I can have a desire to eat an entire pint of ice cream, but I can have the simultaneous desire to not want to engage in activities that may make me feel bad, like eating too much junk food (or the simultaneous desire to follow a healthy diet by avoiding excess sweets). On the other hand, my corresponding belief about the nutritional merits of eating ice cream, will tend not to consist of beliefs like ice cream is healthy and ice cream is high in

²⁵ As an aside to these considerations, there is a minority view with regards to beliefs called doxastic voluntarism, which regards that at least some beliefs can be willed about or that there are some instances in which a person can will himself or herself to believe something. Usually these accounts involve some circuitous route of explaining and accounting for how persons come to will themselves to come to hold a certain belief. For example, on this account, someone might be able to indoctrinate himself or herself into coming to hold a certain belief. In this way, the act of willing oneself to have a certain belief still is not an action that is as direct as the act of willfully raising one’s hand, but there is an attempt to make room for some sort of agency in belief formation. Nonetheless, these accounts do still acknowledge some degree of involuntariness to belief given that many (if not most of one’s beliefs) are beliefs that form involuntarily. N. Shah (2008) makes a case for qualified doxastic voluntarism. For other proponents see R. Vitz’s “Doxastic Voluntarism”, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ISSN 2161-0002, http://www.iep.utm.edu/
artificial trans fatty acids, which contributes to heart disease.

Consider yet another example, if I have the belief that I have $74 in my checking account and I see that I have a bill from the utility company for $124. I will also have the belief that there is not enough money in my checking account to pay for my utility bill (because, in combination with other beliefs, I have the belief that 74 is less than 124). I take this feature to be relatively straightforward, especially considering the fact that we regularly seem to assume this feature about other peoples beliefs when we are trying to make sense of what they are thinking in virtue of their behavior and self-reports about what they believe. In fact, there is a principle of action that we assume when we make sense of other people’s behavior—this principle is called the principle of charity.26 For example, if I learn that your favorite local coffee shop is south of where you work and I hear you say that you are going to go visit this shop after work because you were not able to earlier in the day, I do not infer that you have the beliefs that the coffee shop is also north of where you work and that you visited that place this morning. This is the general sort of coherence we attribute to people—regardless as to what we may perceive their level of intelligence to be. We use this principle of charity as a means of interpreting other people’s behavior, where other people’s beliefs are inferred to have some baseline level of rationality and coherence. Moreover, this principle of charity is something that is really so subconscious that we rarely realize that we are implementing it when making sense of a person’s actions and behavior. It is as if we have internalized the principle in virtue of the fact that it is the natural way that beliefs regularly form.27

27 This property of belief is being used to describe how beliefs are in general—not that beliefs never have false representational content. Moreover, the principle of charity never assumes that people cannot be mistaken about their beliefs; mistaken beliefs can and do form. As a result, problems like the preface paradox do not undermine the tendency of beliefs to form in way that is consistent and coherent with a person’s other beliefs. That people can be
3.4 Beliefs, desires, & action

Beliefs are representational states, and they do not produce action by themselves; rather, action is motivated as these representational states combine with desires. So beliefs have motivational properties that are conditional on what desires a person has. For example, if I find myself having the desire to eat chocolate cake at a particular moment and I have a belief that there is chocolate cake in my refrigerator, any ensuing action that I take can be understood to be a product of my desires and beliefs. On this account, any given belief can have indefinitely many actions associated with it because any one belief can be associated with many different desires and action types, depending on what a person’s other occurrent beliefs and desires are. In keeping with this, we can note that it’s also the case that beliefs can be sensitive to different strengths of desires. For instance, if I had the aforementioned beliefs and desires about cake and I also had a greater desire to lose weight and an accompanying belief that cake will not help me lose weight, then we could understand my former beliefs and desires to be sensitive to these latter beliefs and stronger desires. Thus, it is that flexibility of belief in relation to other mental states in terms of actions that are motivated that’s characteristic of belief. Mere beliefs, as representational states, do not produce action.

4 SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF FAITH

4.1 Prefatory remarks on the linguistic function of ‘belief’

Now that we have mapped out both the features of faith and the core properties of belief (i.e. ‘belief’ in the philosopher’s regimented sense), I would like to make a couple of linguistic points regarding the way in which the term ‘belief’ is used in everyday, common parlance. I take that found to be mistaken in their beliefs can actually bolster the claims about belief that I am trying to make. The mere fact that a belief can be wrong assumes that beliefs operate and form in accordance with some baseline level of rationality and that it is a natural feature of beliefs to update in accordance with logical coherence and entailment.
the meaning of the broad, everyday notion of ‘belief*, henceforth belief*, is not as clear as the philosophical sense of ‘belief’ outlined in section 3. As such, I think it remains an open question as to whether or not the philosophical disambiguated sense of ‘belief’ is similar to or identical with ‘belief*, especially when discussing matters that pertain to religion or personal ideology. Moreover, our everyday usage of ‘belief*’ seems to mirror the way religious texts translate and make use of the term. For instance, consider once more the story of doubting Thomas in the New Testament. Towards the end of John’s gospel (after Jesus had been crucified and buried), several disciples are said to have had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus. The disciple Thomas, who is absent during this initial encounter, tells his fellow disciples that he does not know what to make of the reports that Jesus has been resurrected; in reply to their account, he says he needs to see the resurrected Jesus himself to regard the stories as true. Following this exchange, the narrative goes on to record an encounter several days later where the resurrected Jesus visits Thomas. In this account, Thomas is admonished by Jesus who says, “Stop doubting and believe… have you believed me because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

In this particular passage of the New Testament, we have three different instances of the term belief* (or believe*). All of these instances are translated from various iterations of the Greek word ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ. In the first instance, ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ has the connotation of a command ‘to trust in someone’, ‘to have faith in someone’, or to ‘regard someone as faithful, credible, or true’. As such, ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ overlaps in meaning with our notion of faith in section 2. The other two instances of ‘believe’ in the passage (ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ) appear to have the connotation of ‘considering

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someone/something to be true and worthy of trust\textsuperscript{30} or the connotation of ‘giving credit to someone.’\textsuperscript{31} Here, there is a similar sense in which the meaning of \textit{pisteuō} overlaps with ‘trust’ in the sense as we have outlined it in section 2. In this way, the overlap in meaning raises, yet again, the open question as to whether or not something like ‘belief’ in the philosopher’s regimented sense should be equated with \textit{pisteuō}. The word studies of the term convey \textit{pisteuō} as being closer in meaning to trust and faith. Consequently, it is at least an open question as to whether or not we can interpret \textit{pisteuō} to mean anything like belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense. It will be the purpose of this section to provide an answer to that question and provide a solution to \textit{The Puzzle of Faith}.

\section*{4.2 Notation of belief and the focal cognitive attitude in faith}

Having identified our question to be answered, I would now like to set up some notation that I think will be pivotal for maintaining clarity and precision and that will be helpful for introducing a technical term into our discussion. Given that there are three parts \textit{The Puzzle of Faith} and that resolving the tension in the puzzle seems to require eliminating one of (i)-(iii), we need an impartial way to adjudicate between our theoretical options; as such, we would benefit from having theory neutral terminology. Thus, I would like to introduce ‘focal cognitive attitude’ as the term of art in reference to the primary mental state that is underlying religious faith/belief. In solving the puzzle, I will aim to identify what I take the focal cognitive attitude of religious persons, comparing and contrasting this attitude to the features of faith and the core properties of belief. Here, the focal cognitive attitude in faith refers to whatever the attitude represents or whatever the content of the religious person’s attitude is. Usually, having faith or having a belief

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\textsuperscript{31} Mounce (2006) p. 877.
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entails a particular sort of representation about something being the case. For example, in terms of a focal cognitive attitude we would say, ‘Thomas’s faith involves a focal cognitive attitude that represented Jesus as having risen’. This is simply just another way of saying, ‘Thomas had faith that Jesus had been resurrected’. However the former sentence employs the technical term ‘focal cognitive attitude’ as a means of tracking and picking out the specific phenomena on which we are focused.

At any rate, we will use the following notation to represent a given agent’s focal cognitive attitude.

Example 1. Agent, t, is in a state of faith where the cognitive attitude, F, has p as its content:

\[ F_t: \text{Thomas had faith that Jesus had been resurrected} \]

Example 2. Agent, t, is in a state of faith where the cognitive attitude, F, has p as its content:

\[ B_t: \text{Thomas believed that Jesus had been resurrected} \]
This notation will be helpful in outlining the specific ways in which I take belief and faith to be different—especially when we use the notation to examine and compare the notions of faith and belief outlined in our previous two sections.

4.3 Examining our theoretical options for solving The Puzzle of Faith

Now that we have (a) the features of faith and the core properties of beliefs outlined, (b) our notation introduced, and (c) prefatory remarks out of the way, we will now return to the puzzle of faith outlined in the introduction and review the various options available to us that would allay the tension created by the puzzle. After outlining the theoretical options for solving the puzzle, I’ll indicate the solution I take to be best and discuss how our outline of both faith and belief in the previous two sections helps us solve the puzzle. To review, the puzzle of faith is as follows:

(i) Faith is held regardless of evidence.

(ii) Beliefs are based on evidence.

(iii) Faith entails belief.

Each of these three parts of the puzzle reflect commonly held notions about faith and belief. Yet, despite the fact that each one of these points are compelling in its own right, it is obvious that there is a tension or apparent inconsistency in attempting to posit all three together. As such, we must eliminate one of our three theoretical options so as to preserve the remaining two. In favor of getting rid of (i) we could preserve (ii) and (iii), but we seem to find a lot of support for (i) in religious texts about faith. On to (ii), were we to eliminate our second theoretical option, we would be able to preserve (i) and (iii); however, eliminating (ii) would deprive us of this intuitive notion about a very important psychological state. After all, our beliefs do update when exposed
to new evidence. We could finally choose to eliminate (iii), which would enable us to preserve the notion that captures the phenomenon of (ii) and (i).

As noted though, (iii) seems axiomatic. However, I think that (iii) is not as self-evident as it may initially appear. When we recall our previous sections on faith and belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense, we find that the notion, ‘faith entails belief’, is fraught with ambiguity—what is the sense of ‘belief’ in (iii)? As a result, our solution to *The Puzzle of Faith* is to be found in either jettisoning (iii) or nuancing the way we understand it. The structure of my solution will build on the prefatory linguistic remarks where I make the concession that there are some linguistic uses of the word ‘believe’ (or ‘belief’) that are interchangeable with a certain sense of the term ‘faith.’ However, I contend that the specific philosophical sense of belief (section 3) is not included in this interchangeable use of the term and that the philosopher’s regimented sense of belief is ultimately a different mental state. As our translation of the doubting Thomas story highlights, there is a real lack of precision in many of the everyday uses of ‘belief*’, the solution I aim to provide does not fall prey to those issues.

4.4 Faith does not entail belief in the philosophical sense

Drawing upon the notation that we introduced earlier we can notate (iii) from our puzzle (i.e. ‘Faith entails belief*’) as follows:

(iii) F_r → B_r

Example of notation in sentential form: *Thomas had faith that Jesus had been resurrected entails that Thomas believed that Jesus had been resurrected.*

We can illustrate what is problematic with (iii), by providing a counterexample to show that the entailment relation does not hold. In other words, we simply need to give an example where an agent’s focal cognitive attitude exhibits the features of faith, but not the core properties of belief.
Consider again the example of Abraham and the command to sacrifice Isaac in Moriah (Introduction). Abraham receives the command from God to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham’s son through whom God has promised Abraham’s lineage will continue. This story is told in the Abrahamic faith traditions\textsuperscript{32} as one in which Abraham provides a near perfect model and example of what putting one’s faith in God looks like. Abraham’s story models each of the features of faith that we outlined in section 2. First, Abraham voluntarily and intentionally follows through with the preparations, sacrificial rites, and travels to Moriah where Isaac was to be sacrificed. Secondly, though the narrative lacks details about how Abraham must have felt or what he must have thought in following through with the command, there seems to be consensus among both biblical and rabbinic scholars that Abraham’s action involved a great degree of risk. Not just risk of losing his son and the line through which his lineage would continue, but also perceived epistemic risk, perhaps inclusive of a lack of confidence or belief that he had heard God correctly when commanded to sacrifice Isaac. Nevertheless, Abraham relies on his judgments and follows through with the travel and the preparation of the sacrifice. In so doing, Abraham follows through with the act until the very final moment before God commands Abraham to stop, providing an alternative sacrifice for Isaac in the end. In what is considered to be an ultimate exhibition of obedience and trust in God, Abraham is reliant upon God to uphold the covenant promises made and provide a way out of sacrificing Isaac. Lastly, the command to sacrifice Isaac required action and extensive planning on the part of Abraham. Emphasizing this point, some Midrashic commentators regard this story to be about the last and final test for Abraham to prove his faith and love in God. Had he not followed through on the command,

\textsuperscript{32} There are some notable differences between the Judeo-Christian rendering of this story and the Islamic telling of the story—the main difference being that it is Satan that commands Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael, not Isaac.
Abraham would not have passed the test of faith. In this way, the story of Abraham and Isaac seem to reflect all of the features of faith.

In contrast, however, it does not seem that this story reflects all of the core properties of belief. For starters, Abraham’s focal cognitive attitude is voluntary, not involuntary—he chooses to have faith in God. The narrative tells of the extensive planning required of him and the ways in which Abraham seemed to obey every last command from God. Moreover, given that there is great risk, particularly epistemic risk, involved in Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, it seems as though we would need to characterize Abraham as someone who probably experienced cognitive dissonance in both trying to protect and preserve his son’s life, making it difficult to also follow through with the command to carry out the sacrifice. After all, it seems he would have been holding on to contrary notions; namely, that God would require the death of someone that ultimately was supposed to be the continuation of Abraham. This sort of cognitive dissonance seems to violate the coherence condition of belief and seems to require another operative mental state. Moreover, it seems that Abraham’s action is required in order for him to be counted as having faith. As a result, it seems like we have action that would need to be motivated by something other than a mixture of belief and desire. After all, Abraham presumably does not desire to kill his son. Accordingly, it seems like Abraham’s faith produces an action that is not conditional on desire. On account of these considerations this narrative provides a counter-example to (iii); consequently, it actually seems as though:

(iii’) \textit{It is not the case that faith}_p \text{ entails belief}_p  \\
\sim(F_p \rightarrow B_p)  \\

However from these considerations, it seems plausible that an even stronger theoretical claim follows. That is, not only is it not the case that faith entails belief, but it seems as though it is theoretically possible for faith to entail something that is entirely contrary to belief. Faith has the
four characteristic features described above: (a) it is voluntary; (b) it requires epistemic risk; and (c) faith requires action. In contrast, belief is (a) involuntary; (b) it does not generally entail epistemic risk because beliefs in the philosophically regimented sense are not generally formed to consciously permit incoherence; and (c) beliefs do not require action. In accordance with our notation that stronger claim would be:

(iii’’) Faith that $p$ entails that one does not have the belief that $p$.

$$F_p \rightarrow \neg B_p$$

In comparing and contrasting our conceptions of faith and belief in this way, it seems at least theoretically plausible that one cannot possess both of these mental states with the same content, in the same sense, and at the same time. As a result, this latter, stronger claim could stand to be bolstered with more empirical research and may or may not be true; I only put forth this latter claim, (iii’’), as one that seems theoretically plausible. Nevertheless, I do intend to argue and maintain that the former claim, (iii’), is the more important claim for the purposes of this section and the solution that I am proposing in solving the puzzle of faith. After all, we have argued that faith does not require belief; however, there does seem to be some other mental state operating as our focal cognitive attitude. I call this attitude creedal acceptance and in our last section we will define it and go on to explain how it helps solve the Puzzle of Faith.

## 5 CREEDAL ACCEPTANCE

Now that we have identified and explained why (iii) in the Puzzle of Faith is problematic, we can transition to our solution. As has been said, we have the option of jettisoning (iii) in its entirety or we can nuance the meaning of the terms in (iii). If we jettison (iii), then we can replace it with

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33 Note though that there is not an explicit way of contrasting the last feature of faith (trust & reliance) and the last core property of belief (beliefs are representational).
something like (iii’), but I think I think that nuancing (iii) would be a better option because it enables us to preserve the basic and intuitive thrust that faith and belief are related in some way. The solution that I would like to propose is that faith entails a different mental state; faith entails creedal acceptance. Let us call this option:

$$(iii_c) Fp \rightarrow Cp$$

Where our notated components are:

- $C$: creedally accepts
- $F$: has faith
- $a/x$: the agent
- $p$: the proposition or content of the attitude.

Thus, a written example of the notation would be:

$C_{ap} : \text{Abraham creedally accepted that God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac.}$

(a) (C) (p)

Creedal acceptance is a term of art that I’d like to introduce that refers to the focal cognitive attitude in religious faith. Creedal acceptance essentially involves both cognitive and affective components that relate to an agent’s overall metaplan in life that influences, structures, and organizes activities and plans one might have in terms of some ideal. As such, creedal acceptance is a mental state that functions in such a way to keep us grounded and on track with these ideals even when agents are faced with what may seem to be counter-evidence to their ideal.\(^{34}\)

In this way, we can say the following about creedal acceptance.

If $A$ creedally accepts that $P$, then:

\(^{34}\text{Kvanvig (2013) conveys faith in a similar way—though I am saying something about a particular mental state here.}\)
(1) A voluntarily forms the representation that P;
(2) A has an emotional commitment to P;
(3) A regards maintaining a representation of P and expressing it as part of their personal (narrative) identity; and
(4) A will derive social identity with those who also creedally accept that P.

Each of these of these conditions help constitute the conception of creedal acceptance that I have in mind and each contributes something unique. In saying that creedal acceptance is voluntary, we are trying to highlight that it is an active, intentional mental state that a person brings about at their choosing. The agency involved in bringing about this state is similar to the agency involved in bringing about a mental state such as imagining. Were I were to ask someone to imagine that they were looking at an elephant outside the window, assuming one knew what I was talking about, then the person would presumably do everything that they could to induce the imagining (perhaps closing one’s eyes or staring in the direction of the window, etc.). Next, in talking about the emotional commitment to P that a person will have, what I mean to highlight is that what a person creedally accepts is often deeply entrenched and bolstered by affective states. Such a person might have particularly strong emotions about that which they creedally accept. This is, in turn, related to the ways in which the object of one’s creedal acceptance tends to be something that a person orients their life around and in keeping, their identity or perceptions about themselves and their life purpose(s). Moreover, there is a sense in which someone is able to make social connections and communities around these shared goals—as such, when someone creedally accepts that P and knows that other people do as well, there is often a social identity formed through the perception that the mental state as they experience it is not unique to themselves, but something that others participate in and derive ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ from as well.
Let us now go over an example of creedal acceptance. In particular, let us refer back to our earlier example about Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. In this narrative, it seems as though we can identify creedal acceptance as a focal cognitive attitude of the narrative’s main character. After all, Abraham’s obedience to God in the Abrahamic faith traditions corroborates that Abraham was acting in accordance with some higher ideal, some overall metaplan in life. Rabbinic scholars and anthropologists of religion often make note of the fact that human and large animal sacrifices were often made to establish or continue communion with a deity, so there is a sense in which communication and obedience to God for Abraham was the ideal or metaplan that Abraham was going to organize and structure his life activities around. Moreover, the story’s influence and prominence can be attributed to the fact that the sacrifice of one’s own child seems like an impossible task to perform. Nevertheless, Abraham seemed to operate voluntarily through some particular mental state that functions in such a way to keep an agent on track with their ideals—even in instances in which the very actions one has to take seem, at least at face value, to be in conflict with other ends. In Abraham’s case, he was acting in keeping with his ideal or telos, but he was faced with a competing ideal—preserving the life of his son Isaac, Abraham’s promised heir through which his lineage would continue. In this sort of example we see strong overlap between our definition of creedal acceptance and the features of faith that were previously identified in Abraham’s story. On this accord, I take it that the cognitive attitude of creedal acceptance can really help explain and unify the features of faith that we earlier saw we evident in the narrative.

Faith and creedal acceptance are each characterized as being voluntary and one way to explain this is to say that the voluntariness of faith just is the voluntariness feature in creedal

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acceptance. In other words, since we are saying that the focal cognitive attitude in faith is creedal acceptance, we can describe faith as being voluntary because that is precisely one of the features of creedal acceptance itself. In keeping with this, the voluntariness of creedal acceptance can also help explain the epistemic risk that one takes or feels in having faith. Reason being, a large component of having faith is taking action even if that would entail acting or doing something independently of the action’s evidential merits. Sometimes one is required to act without having all of the evidence; given that creedal acceptance is a voluntary mental state, it can explain how it is that someone willfully acts. Moreover, the emotional commitment and personal identity aspects of creedal acceptance can help explain how it is that someone can be committed to act the way they do (in keeping with a goal or ideal)—even in spite of competing considerations that seem to go against what a person’s ideals are. For instance, Abraham’s actions in preparing for his son’s sacrifice can be explained if we have a mental state like creedal acceptance. The mental state explains how he can act voluntarily, despite how conflicted he may have initially felt before a substitution sacrifice was made. Abraham’s actions could also be seen as pointing to a deep resolve and sense of self that could explain how someone could prepare to sacrifice their child. Perhaps there is a way to see a story like Abraham’s as one of someone who had a deep sense of self, entrenched with certain affective or emotional components in commitment to an ideal—like commitment to a deity. In addition, the trust/reliance components of Abraham’s faith could be explained by the emotional commitment that he had to God and how Abraham understood God’s character. Moreover, we can also account for this degree of emotional commitment when we view religious adherents corporately—or in their large gatherings. The emotional commitment in one who creedally accepts is not just a commitment to themselves and their own ideas, but it also takes form as a commitment to others in their same
faith communities that share in their creedal acceptance of some divinity. All in all, this is just a brief canvassing of the many ways in which the features of faith can be explained and bolstered by our notion of creedal acceptance.

Building upon our account of this relation between faith and creedal acceptance, saying that creedal acceptance stands in an explanatory relation essentially means that creedal acceptance is constitutive of faith and that there would be no faith without creedal acceptance. Creedal acceptance gives us an independently testable set of concepts where we can look to see if a person has a sense of narrative and social identity, whether this forms part of a metaplan for that person’s life, and whether it is directed towards some ideal (or idealized goal). Through these conditions we find phenomenal facts about what people are like when they’re said to have faith. In this way, we have not merely re-described the features of faith with creedal acceptance, but we have explained why these concepts lead us to these features of faith and why these features of faith tend to be bundled in the way that they are.

Referring back to our initial puzzle and our proposed solution, I am proposing the following changes from:

(i) Faith is held regardless of evidence.
(ii) Beliefs are based on evidence.
(iii) Faith entails belief.

to:
(i) Faith is held regardless of evidence.
(ii) Beliefs are based on evidence.
(iii_c) Faith entails creedal acceptance.

In summation, we have replaced, (iii) with (iii_c) in order to give a more precise articulation of what the mental state involved in faith actually is. We recall that (iii) was problematic in that the
term ‘belief’ is often used with many different meanings and that it is especially problematic when we understand (iii) to be employing belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense. That much is clear though, it is not the case that faith entails that sense of belief. With that said, I think there is a way to explain the intuition that (iii) belongs in our puzzle and recapitulate our linguistic point in section 4.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1977) has made the argument that our contemporary sense of the term belief--what he refers to as the propositional sense of ‘belief’, is a sense that is relatively new to religious discourse. In essence, his argument is that ‘belief’ in religious contexts originally had the meaning “to hold dear” or “to love”. In fact, the German term belieben, an etymological relative, still has that original meaning. To highlight this change, Smith notes an example in 13th century poetry where the original manuscript reads “to her he had loved” and the other, contemporary rendering reads “in her he believed.”36 There are several more examples in Shakespeare’s where the connotation of the words in question are “love”, not “believe”. From these and many other examples, Smith’s thesis is that much of our modern sense of ‘believe’ has become devoid of affective content and that our translations of texts should take this into consideration when translating from a pre-modern text to our contemporary understanding of the term. Given this historical shift in meaning, I think our linguistic point about (iii) is bolstered, and that there is a real need to at minimum nuance (iii) in solving the puzzle of faith. Our account of creedal acceptance helps us do just that.

6 CONCLUSION

In the beginning we raised ‘The Puzzle of Faith’ highlighting an apparent tension between faith and belief. To resolve this tension, we identified the sort of cognitive attitude that is sufficient for faith. In so doing we argued two theses. (1) That the cognitive attitude in religious faith need not be belief in the philosopher’s regimented sense, but can be an attitude which I call creedal acceptance. (2) If there are cases in which faith entails belief, then these ‘beliefs’ are different from the evidentially vulnerable beliefs talked about in philosophical literature. My second thesis was a linguistic thesis, arguing that the way the word belief is used in everyday speech does not typically refer to belief in the philosopher’s sense, but refers to what I am calling creedal acceptance. Regarding future areas of research, I take it that my first thesis may raise many normative questions. Reason being, if I am right about the psychology of an attitude like creedal acceptance, then it seems that there are normative questions that need to be addressed that won’t have been adequately addressed from contemporary epistemology. For instance, how does an attitude like creedal acceptance handle epistemic norms about known logical entailment? That is, if beliefs tend to operate so as to generate other beliefs in accordance with known logical entailment (where one has a belief \( p \) and a belief that \( p \) entails \( q \), then one also has a belief \( q \)), how might the attitude of creedal acceptance be said to operate in comparison?

REFERENCES


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