

The Epistemology of Faith and Hope

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, epistemologists focus on attitudes like belief and knowledge. This isn't surprising, given that epistemology is the study of knowledge and rational belief. However, epistemological questions aren't limited to belief and knowledge, but apply to other attitudes as well. For example, in what's known as formal epistemology, there's been a recent interest in what makes a level of confidence rational. This entry surveys the epistemology of two other attitudes: faith and hope.

We'll focus on two sets of questions. The first is descriptive (§2): what is faith, and what is hope? The second is normative (§3): when are faith and hope epistemically rational, and epistemically irrational? What's the relationship between faith, hope, and knowledge?

2. The Nature of Faith and Hope

Faith and hope come in many stripes, so we'll begin by clarifying the specific kind of faith and hope we are focused on. First, we'll focus on faith and hope as *attitudes*, as opposed to faith and hope as *actions*. A lost hiker might take an act of faith by attempting to jump a wide crevice to try to get back to civilization (see James 1896/1956). In the hope literature, *hopefulness* normally picks out an action-focused strand of hope (Martin 2013: 69). There are significant questions about what justifies action-focused faith and hope, but since we are interested here in epistemic rationality, we'll restrict our focus to attitudes.

Second, we'll focus on *propositional* versions of faith and hope, that is, faith/hope that a statement is true or false. In other words, we'll be focusing on faith *that* God exists or faith *that* a chair will hold you, rather than faith *in* God or faith *in* a chair. Finally, this paper is about both religious and secular faith and hope. While faith and hope are theological virtues, they are also part of our everyday lives and personal relationships.

What are faith and hope, then? The best way to understand faith and hope begins with a distinction between two types of attitudes. Some attitudes are belief-like, or what is known as *cognitive* attitudes. Cognitive attitudes normally represent the world in some way. They have what is known as a *mind-to-world* direction of fit: the attitudes conform to the way the world is. For example, when you believe it is raining outside, this belief is caused by the world: either seeing the rain itself or by an indicator of rain, such as the forecast. Beliefs, confidence levels, and beliefs about what's probable are all cognitive attitudes.

Other attitudes are desire-like, or what's known as *conative* attitudes. Conative attitudes reflect what is desirable or valuable. In contrast to cognitive attitudes, they have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit: when satisfied, the world conforms to your mind. For example, when you want

food, you go to the fridge; when you want the lights to be on, you flip the switch. Examples of conative attitudes include desires, pro-attitudes, and beliefs about what is good.

As noted, belief is the paradigm cognitive attitude. Beliefs represent the world and are sensitive to factors like truth and evidence. However, most contemporary philosophers maintain that beliefs don't have any essential conative component; we believe things all the time that we don't want to be true. This is one of the key ways that faith and hope differ from belief; faith and hope involve desire. Suppose you believe that you're running late for an important meeting. You wouldn't have faith you're running late for the meeting or hope you're running late. Similarly, you wouldn't have faith that your best friend has cancer or hope that your picnic is rained out. This is because faith and hope have a conative component—the objects of faith and hope are seen as desirable or valuable. This is the first feature of faith and hope.

Second, note that the cognitive component of belief is strong: when you believe something, you take it to be true. Faith and hope, in contrast, have a cognitive component, but it is weaker. For faith, while it's possible to have faith and believe at the same time, many philosophers have argued that faith is compatible with more doubt than belief (Pojman 1986; Alston 1996; Audi 2011). For example, if you have very good evidence that God exists, then you might both believe and have faith that God exists. But if you get counterevidence, you might give up your belief, but maintain faith that God exists. In this case, the cognitive component of faith isn't belief, but might be replaced by a moderately high confidence God exists or the belief that God probably exists. That said, it also doesn't seem like faith is compatible with *any* amount of doubt. Being only 10% sure is probably not enough confidence to have faith that God exists.

Here's where hope comes in. Hope's cognitive component is even weaker than faith's, as hope merely requires thinking the object of hope is *possible* or having a confidence level greater than 0%. So if you're only 10% (or even 1%) confident that God exists, you can still hope that God exists. The only thing that would rule out hope is a confidence level of 0% or thinking God's existence is impossible. Note also that hope is inconsistent with certainty, or 100% confidence; hence, you wouldn't *hope* that $1+1=2$ (Martin 2013: 69).

Finally, both faith and hope aid in overcoming obstacles. It's commonly said that faith "goes beyond the evidence" or is "resilient in light of counterevidence" (Buchak 2012; Jackson 2019, 2021). Faith that your spouse was a good person to marry can help you overcome doubts characterized by difficult periods in marriage. While it is less natural to say that hope "goes beyond the evidence," it's widely acknowledged that hope has a unique motivating force in difficult circumstances (Martin 2013; Calhoun 2018). Hope for a political or ethical ideal helps you continue to fight for that ideal, even when it looks unlikely that you'll succeed. Thus, faith and hope are both *resilient*.

In sum, like belief, faith and hope both have cognitive components. Faith's cognitive component is weaker than belief's, and hope's is the weakest of all. Unlike belief, faith and hope both have a conative component. Faith and hope are also resilient attitudes. While this summarizes the main features of faith and hope, note that some authors add other components to faith and hope. For example, some argue that faith involves emotions (West 2013) or taking certain risks (Buchak 2012); others argue that hope involves an extra focus or attitude to distinguish it from despair (Martin 2013; Chignell 2023). While we don't have space to survey all the views here, this discussion will suffice to anchor the next about the epistemology of faith and hope. (For more: see Jackson (2022: 202–207) for a similar but slightly more detailed and technical exploration of the nature of faith and hope. See Rettler (2018) and Jackson (2023)

for an overview of the main views of faith, and Rioux (2021) for an overview of the main views of hope.)

3. The Epistemology of Faith and Hope

In the next two sub-sections, we'll discuss faith and hope's epistemic (ir)rationality. *Epistemic rationality* aims at getting at the truth and avoiding error. An epistemically rational attitude has characteristics like being based on evidence, being reliably formed, and being likely to be true. We'll also examine the relationship between faith, hope, and knowledge.

3.1. Faith's Epistemic Rationality

We've seen that faith is *resilient* in light of counterevidence and even goes *beyond* the evidence. But if faith is insensitive to and goes beyond evidence, how can it be epistemically rational? Many writing on faith offer solutions to this puzzle, often known as *the problem of faith and reason*.

Before examining solutions, first, note that faith is not always rational. In the same way that beliefs can be rational (my belief that $1+1=2$) and irrational (my belief that my child will probably play in the NBA), faith can be rational or irrational. Furthermore, rational faith isn't resilient in light of any amount of counterevidence. If you have small suspicions your spouse is cheating on you, you shouldn't lose faith, but if you walk in on them cheating, it's irrational to continue to have faith that your spouse did not cheat.

Second, this puzzle is a special problem for faith as a mental state. Acts of faith—e.g., jumping a crevice when there's only a 50/50 chance you can make it—don't generate the problem in the same way, since acts of faith are normally evaluated for their *practical* rationality—i.e., their effectiveness at helping us meet our goals and promoting our flourishing (see Buchak 2012). Since practical rationality isn't as closely tied to evidence as epistemic rationality, it's less puzzling how acts of faith can go beyond the evidence.

How might rational attitude-faith go beyond the evidence? For the sake of space, we'll explore two answers to this question. First, note something about rational *belief*: sometimes evidence changes your confidence levels without changing what you should believe. If there's only a 5% chance of rain tomorrow, you should believe it will be sunny tomorrow and be 95% confident. If the forecast changes and now there's a 10% chance of rain, you can still believe it will be sunny tomorrow—you should just lower your confidence to 90%.

Something similar can happen with faith, but to an even greater degree. Suppose you have faith that Bob is an excellent business partner, and decide to start a business together. However, you get some signs he isn't as good as you thought—he's late to a meeting and makes an accounting error in the same week. You might slightly lower your confidence that Bob is a good business partner, but continue to have rational faith in Bob and his abilities. Furthermore, recall that many argue that faith's cognitive component is even *weaker* than belief's. Then, rational faith is consistent with less confidence—and more counterevidence—than belief (see Jackson 2019).

A second view on which rational faith goes beyond the evidence is defended by William James (1896/1956) and Bishop (2007). James argues that believing beyond the evidence can be epistemically rational in cases where "reason does not decide." Similarly, Bishop argues that

faith is a “doxastic venture,” and we can rationally take this venture when the propositions of faith are “undecided” by the evidence.

These remarks resemble a view known as *epistemic permissivism*: sometimes, there’s an “epistemic tie” between multiple attitudes, in which 2+ attitudes are permitted, and no single attitude is rationally required by the evidence. For example, suppose you are trying to decide whether God exists; the evidence for and against theism is complex and difficult to assess. You might be in a position where it’s rational for you to believe, remain agnostic, or disbelieve that God exists. If you demonstrate religious faith by being a theist, you aren’t irrational, but you are going beyond what’s required by the evidence. Bishop argues that in similar cases, attitudes can have non-evidential, “passional” cases, but can nonetheless be epistemically rational.

3.2. *Hope’s Epistemic Rationality*

When it comes to hope, more attention has been given to hope’s practical rationality than to hope’s epistemic rationality. Milona and Stockdale (2018: 209) discuss the case of hoping to get back together with your abusive ex-partner. This hope isn’t obviously *epistemically* irrational, but it is practically irrational, as this is not conducive to your flourishing.

When is hope epistemically irrational, then? Hope’s epistemic (ir)rationality involves hope’s cognitive component: the possibility-belief or the confidence above 0%. Rioux (2021: 4) notes, “a hope-constituting belief in the hoped-for outcome’s possibility is [epistemically] irrational if one possesses good evidence that such an outcome is in fact not possible, or good evidence that it is instead certain.” In other words, if your evidence implies that *p* is either impossible or certain, hoping that *p* is epistemically irrational.

Beyond that, the epistemic norms on hope are quite flexible, because, as we’ve seen, hoping for an outcome is consistent with that outcome’s being quite unlikely. One’s evidence, and thus one’s confidence level, can fluctuate anywhere between (but excluding) 0% and 100%, and hope can still be epistemically rational. This helps explain hope’s resilience; rational hope allows for tremendous fluctuations in one’s evidence. That being said, the cognitive component of hope should fit the evidence. If you hope that it will be sunny tomorrow with a 40% confidence level, this is irrational if you know there’s a 90% chance of rain.

3.3. *Faith, Hope, and Knowledge*

We’ve seen ways that faith and hope can be epistemically (ir)rational, but epistemology also concerns *knowledge*. This raises the question: what is the relationship between faith, hope, and knowledge? Knowledge is widely taken to involve justified (or rational) beliefs that are also true, and most think knowledge is more than justified true belief. Possessing knowledge, then, is an epistemic ideal; knowledge is a high bar, more difficult to achieve than epistemic rationality.

There are three main views about how faith relates to knowledge. The first view, often attributed to Aquinas, Calvin, and more recently Alvin Plantinga, is the view that faith is a kind of knowledge. This view puts a strong epistemic requirement on faith: if one’s epistemic position isn’t strong enough for one to *know*, then one couldn’t have faith, and since knowledge is had only to truths, false claims cannot be objects of faith. While this view is noteworthy, it is in tension with the contemporary, popular view of faith suggested above, on which faith is epistemically resilient and consistent with moderate levels of counterevidence.

There are two remaining views on the relationship between faith and knowledge. The second is that faith can, but does not always, amount to knowledge. For example, one person might both know and have faith that their spouse is a good person. Another person might have too much doubt to *know* their spouse is a good person, but nonetheless still have faith. On a final view, faith is inconsistent with knowledge. Someone might hold this view because, for instance, if you know, there's no need for faith (Kant suggests this view of faith in the *Critique*). More recently, some (Alston 1996: 12) have suggested that faith involves a weaker epistemic position than knowledge (e.g., less evidence); this might also lend itself to a view on which faith is inconsistent with knowledge.

What about hope and knowledge? Benton (2021: 1675) explains that hope is incompatible with knowledge: if you know whether *p*, you normally won't, and should not, hope that *p*. For example, it sounds very odd to say "I hope that it will be sunny tomorrow, but I know it will rain." In most cases, if you hope for something, and then come to know it's either true or false, you stop hoping (especially if you are rational). So hope is neither a kind of knowledge nor is hope compatible with knowledge.

Nonetheless, lingering questions remain. For example, it's unclear *why* hope and knowledge are incompatible. We saw earlier that hope is consistent with any confidence level besides 0% and 100%. Most epistemologists don't think that knowledge requires 100% confidence; I can know my car is parked outside even if I'm only 95% sure. So why can't I both know and hope for the same thing? This puzzle merits further exploration (see Benton 2021).

4. Conclusion

We've surveyed answers to three questions: What are faith and hope? When are faith and hope epistemically (ir)rational? What's the relationship between faith, hope, and knowledge? As we've seen, faith and hope are resilient attitudes with unique cognitive and conative components; while related, they are also distinct, notably in that hope's cognitive component is weaker than faith's. We then saw ways that faith and hope can be epistemically rational and irrational. Finally, we discussed that, while it's controversial whether faith is compatible with knowledge, hope is not compatible with knowledge. Since faith and hope keep us resilient and underlie our commitments, I suggest that epistemologists continue to pursue these questions.

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