

The Nature and Rationality of Faith

For *The New Theists* (Joshua Rasmussen and Kevin Vallier, eds.), Routledge.

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Abstract: A popular objection to theistic commitment involves the idea that faith is irrational. Specifically, some seem to put forth something like the following argument: (P1) Everyone (or almost everyone) who has faith is epistemically irrational, (P2) All theistic believers have faith, thus (C) All (or most) theistic believers are epistemically irrational. In this chapter, I argue that this line of reasoning fails. I do so by considering a number of candidates for what faith might be. I argue that, for each candidate, either (P1) is false or (P2) is false. Then, I make two positive suggestions for how faith can be epistemically rational but nonetheless have a unique relationship to evidence: one, that Jamesian self-justifying attitudes describe a distinctive kind of faith in oneself and others, and two, that faith is not solely based on empirical evidence.

Keywords: Faith; Rationality; Evidence; Inquiry; Evidentialism; Self-Fulfilling Beliefs; Empirical Evidence

I. Introduction

Can faith be rational? On this question, the New Atheists speak in one voice: no. Sam Harris says that “religious faith is simply *unjustified* belief in matters of ultimate concern” (emphasis his).¹ Richard Dawkins agrees: “The whole point of religious faith, its strength and chief glory, is that it does not depend on rational justification.”² Hitchens, Dennett, and others make similar remarks.³ The consensus among the New Atheists seems to be that faith can never be rational.

In this chapter, I examine the rationality of faith in light of this complaint.⁴ The main New Atheist contention seems to be that faith, especially faith in God, is irrational. But what is faith? Why think that it makes most theists irrational? These are the questions I will explore. In the first part of this chapter, I examine what the New Atheists say about faith. I argue that, on a number of specifications of the nature of faith, either faith is not irrational, or most theistic believers do not have faith. In the second part of the chapter, I suggest my own account of the nature of faith, that can be used to further constructive dialogue between atheists and theists.

II. Preliminary Remarks

Before I get to my main argument, a few preliminaries. First: what kind of rationality do the New Atheists have in mind when they claim that faith is irrational? Philosophers have distinguished many kinds of rationality,⁵ but their writings suggest to me that the New Atheists think faith lacks *epistemic* rationality. Epistemic rationality is a kind of rationality associated with justified belief and knowledge. A belief that is epistemically rational has characteristics like being based on evidence, being reliably formed, being a candidate for knowledge, and being the result of a dependable process of inquiry. Paradigm examples of beliefs that are *not* epistemically rational are beliefs that are based on wishful thinking or hasty generalizations, or ones formed as the result of emotional attachment.⁶

¹ Harris 2004: 65.

² Dawkins 2006: 23.

³ See Hitchens 2007: 137; Dennett 2008; Harris 2006: 22.

⁴ For another response to the New Atheists on faith, see Kvanvig 2013.

⁵ See Cohen 2010: 663; Plantinga 1993b: 132-7.

⁶ In this chapter, I will use ‘rational’ and ‘justified’ interchangeably.

I will argue that, in many cases, faith is not epistemically irrational. Note that even if one's faith failed to rise to the level of being *epistemically* rational, it would not follow that faith is not rational in any sense. For even if one's faith is epistemically defective, it may nonetheless be *practically* rational. Practical rationality, unlike epistemic rationality, is associated with an agent's goals and what is at stake for that agent, and is more commonly applied to actions than to mental states. In this, acts of faith are evaluated for rationality from a practical point of view. It might be rational for me to perform some act of faith because I have a lot to gain if it is true and little to lose if it is false. This can be rational even if believing the associated proposition is irrational, because of, e.g. a lack of evidence.⁷

Generally, it can be rational to act as if something is true, even if you don't have much evidence for its being true. For example, suppose you are a judge in a court case, and the evidence is enough to legally establish that a particular suspect did it "beyond reasonable doubt." However, suppose you have other evidence that they are innocent, but it is personal in nature, such that it cannot legally be used in a court of law. You might not be justified in *believing* they are guilty, but for legal reasons, you must *act as if* they are guilty and issue the "guilty" verdict.⁸ Consider a second example. Suppose you are visiting a frozen lake with your young children, and they want to go play on the ice. You may rationally believe the ice is thick and totally safe, but nonetheless refuse to let your children play, acting as if it will break, because of how bad it would be if they fell in.

In the same way that acting on some proposition might be rational even if believing it is not rational, taking an act of faith might be rational even if one has little evidence for the proposition they are acting on. For example, one might be rational in practicing a religion, participating in prayer and liturgy, and joining a spiritual community, even if faith is *epistemically* irrational. Rational action is a practical matter, and sometimes it can be rational to act as if something is true even if our evidence points the other way. Denying this is to deny the traditional and orthodox way of thinking about rational decision making, but this point is frequently overlooked by the New Atheists.⁹ The general lesson is that, *even if* faith is epistemically irrational, acts by faith may still be practically rational.

Now, I turn to faith's epistemic rationality.

III. The Rationality of Faith

The New Atheists maintain that faith is epistemically irrational. I want to first note a point of agreement with the New Atheists: it is important to avoid epistemically unjustified attitudes. If faith is really an epistemically irrational attitude, they are right to point this out. Using reason, following evidence, being open-minded, and having courage to face the truth are all valuable, and I am in agreement with the New Atheists on this point. I applaud their desire to follow the evidence and avoid irrationality.

However, when it comes to the epistemic rationality of faith, I depart from New Atheist thinking.¹⁰ To see why, I first want to make the New Atheist objection to faith as clear as possible. What exactly is their complaint? I think we can outline their complaint as follows:

⁷ Robert Audi 2011: Part II distinguishes between *propositional faith*, or faith that some proposition is true, and *volitional faith*, which is much more action-like. Even if a lack of evidence makes propositional faith irrational, one may nonetheless be rational in having volitional faith and performing particular acts of faith.

⁸ See Cohen 2000.

⁹ See Harris 2004: 51-55.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, I will not assume faith that p entails belief that p (see Alston 1996, Howard-Synder 2013, 2016, 2017, McKaughan 2016, 2017). Nonetheless, I don't think much hangs on this; most of the New Atheists use 'faith' and 'belief' interchangeably.

- (P1) Everyone (or almost everyone) who has faith is epistemically irrational.
- (P2) All theistic believers have faith.
- (C) All (or most) theistic believers are epistemically irrational.

In this chapter, my goal is to argue that, for every definition of faith the New Atheists provide, either (P1) is false or (P2) is false. This method allows us to consider a large variety of (potentially inconsistent) definitions of faith. However, on every definition, the conclusion does not follow. Or so I will argue.

3.1 Faith as an Epistemically Unjustified Attitude

The New Atheists consistently associate faith with an epistemically unjustified or irrational attitude. Given this, they may just want to simply stipulate that ‘faith’ is just the set of (or a subset of) the epistemically irrational attitudes. This would make sense of the many their comments that directly associate faith with irrationality. For example, Harris says that religious faith just is unjustified belief,¹¹ or belief for which there is no rational justification,¹² and an excuse to keep believing when reasons fail.¹³ Dawkins says faith lacks objective justification, and that “the whole point of religious faith” is that it doesn’t depend on rational justification.¹⁴ This suggests the following about faith:

- (1) Faith is an epistemically unjustified attitude.

Given this definition, (P1) is trivially true. If faith just is, by definition, an irrational attitude, then those with faith will be irrational.

An initial worry is that simply stipulating that faith is irrational undermines other New Atheist goals. One of their main projects seems to be an anti-apologetic one: giving reasons why theistic beliefs are irrational or false. For example, Dawkins devotes two chapters of *The God Delusion* to giving arguments against God’s existence.¹⁵ Hitchens has at least six anti-apologetic chapters in *God is Not Great*.¹⁶ One can find similar arguments by opening virtually any New Atheist book and turning to the table of contents. If faith just is *by definition* an unjustified attitude, why devote so much time and space to arguing against faith in God? That faith is irrational seems to be something they want to argue for, rather than stipulate.

Second, it is unclear that (P2) is true on this understanding of faith. If faith just is an irrational attitude, then (P2) amounts to the claim that (most) theistic beliefs are irrational. There are several points to be made here. First, the apologetic project of justifying theistic beliefs has a rich history, with authors like Aquinas, Anselm, and Augustine arguing in favor of theistic belief. Additionally, Christian philosophy and apologetics has not died out with the enlightenment; rather, it has produced a stream of new and increasingly precise challenges to non-theistic frameworks.¹⁷ Dawkins’ doesn’t address the majority of these arguments, and thus it is far from clear—from anything Dawkins’s says—that none of the arguments supply all fail to supply evidence to support theism, or that theistic beliefs simply lack “objective justification,” as Dawkins claims. Additionally, many philosophers acknowledge that, with respect to the debate about God’s existence, there is good evidence on both sides of the debate,

¹¹ Harris 2004: 65.

¹² Ibid: 72.

¹³ Harris 2006: 22.

¹⁴ Dawkins 2006: 23, 306.

¹⁵ Dawkins 2006: 75-105, 111-151.

¹⁶ Hitchens 2007: 63-73, 73-97, 109-139.

¹⁷ See e.g. Plantinga 1993a: 216ff, Beilby 2002, Rea 2002, Walls and Dougherty 2018.

and both theists and atheists can be rational.¹⁸ It is far from clear, then, that the evidence points obviously and directly to atheism, making all theists irrational.

One might point out that not all regular churchgoers are aware of this evidence. The average person in the pew likely knows very few of the arguments for and against God's existence. Thus, the New Atheists might concede that the average case of faith in God is not justified. This objection brings me to my second point: recently, many prominent philosophers have argued that theistic beliefs can be justified without rigorous argument, similar to how a child's belief in the external world can be justified without rigorous argument. Alvin Plantinga argues that Christian belief can be rational, even if it isn't based on other beliefs or arguments,¹⁹ and William Alston argues that experiences of God can justify theistic belief.²⁰ While of course these arguments are not the final word on the matter, to my knowledge, the New Atheists have not given these arguments any kind of extended treatment.

Further, it is possible to know something but not know how one knows. Consider a child and his father; presumably, the child knows that *he is my father*, but if asked how he knows this, the child could not give a satisfactory answer. This does not mean the child does not know or does not have good evidence that he is his father. In the same way, many of the average people in the pews might know that God exists, but not be able to satisfactorily explain how they know this. This does not mean that their faith is irrational or that they lack knowledge or evidence of God's existence. The fact that many people of faith are unaware of theistic arguments doesn't entail that their faith is irrational.²¹ Therefore, (P2) has not been established, given (1).

3.2 Faith as Self-justifying

A second potential suggestion is that faith is an attitude that justifies itself. Consider the following quote from Harris: "Faith entirely self-justifying: perhaps the very fact that one believes in something which has not yet come to pass ('things hoped for') or for which one has no evidence ('things not seen') constitutes evidence for its actuality ('assurance')." ²² The idea here is that there is something circular about faith: it justifies or rationalizes itself. This suggests the following:

(2) Faith epistemically justifies itself.

Self-justifying attitudes are philosophically interesting, but they are not automatically epistemically irrational. A couple examples will illustrate this point. William James discusses a mountain climber who stands at a snowy mountain pass.²³ Suppose that, in order to survive, this climber must jump over a deep crevice, and it isn't obvious she can definitely make the jump. However, she knows that if she becomes more confident she will successfully make the jump, she will develop more energy and zeal, which will make it more likely she will jump further and successfully land on the other side of the crevice. The presence of her belief "I will make this jump successfully" makes the belief more likely to be true. Or consider someone about to give a speech: as they become more assured they are a talented public speaker, this will give them confidence and poise, making it likely they will give a great speech. Similarly, believing I will survive a serious surgery can make it more likely I will survive; believing I will play well at my basketball game will instill self-assurance that makes it more likely I will play well.

¹⁸ Some have even suggested that theism is a permissive case, where our evidence permits more than one rational doxastic attitude. See Schoenfield 2014 and Kopec and Titelbaum 2016.

¹⁹ Plantinga 2000.

²⁰ Alston 1991.

²¹ Thanks to Josh Rasmussen.

²² Harris 2004: 64. See also Hitchens 2007: 202.

²³ James 1897.

The fact that these beliefs provide evidence for themselves is admittedly peculiar. Yet it is unclear that, just on account of being self-justifying, they are epistemically defective. In fact, forming the relevant belief makes the belief more likely to be true. Attitudes that justify themselves are just that: justified! It is far from clear that (2) renders (P1) true—in fact, (2) seems to be at odds with (P1), which says that faith is not justified.

It is also unclear that (P2)—that all theistic believers have faith—is true, given (2)’s account of ‘faith,’ especially if we are talking about faith in God. I don’t see how someone’s faith that God exists would *justify* itself. However, as I discuss in section IV, (2) might describe certain kinds of faith.

3.3 Faith and Inquiry

In some places, the New Atheists connect faith to insufficient or irresponsible inquiry (i.e. evidence gathering). Dennett expresses this concern: “So here is the only prescription I will make categorically and without reservation: Do more research. There is an alternative...just take it on faith...”²⁴ Dennett’s idea seems to be that doing research and gathering evidence are in opposition to faith. Similarly, Hitchens notes that faith “choke[s] free inquiry”²⁵ and Harris says that the biggest thing standing in the way of critical thinking and intellectual honesty is faith.²⁶ These remarks suggest the following:

(3) If someone has faith, then that person does not inquire into their faith commitments.

Whether (3) explains why faith is irrational, rendering (P1) true, hangs on two things. First, recall that we are concerned with *epistemic* rationality. There is disagreement among philosophers as to whether obligations to inquire are epistemic. Some philosophers have suggested that whether and how much we should gather evidence depends on practical, rather than epistemic, considerations.²⁷ This suggestion would explain why it seems that we should spend time gathering evidence about important matters, and should not merely memorize the phone book, even though this would give us lots of knowledge. Useless knowledge just isn’t that significant. Some conclude that inquiry is a practical, rather than an epistemic, matter. However, this move is controversial, and so for the sake of argument, we can suppose that there are epistemic duties of inquiry and failure to fulfill these can make an attitude epistemically irrational.

This brings up a second question that bears on whether (P1) is true: if we have epistemic duties to inquire, what are they? We surely don’t have to inquire into all of our attitudes in order for them to be justified. Some statements, like $1+1=2$ or *torturing babies for fun is wrong*, are self-evident, so no inquiry is required for us to rationally believe or know them. But a statement doesn’t have to be self-evident to fall into this category. If my mom casually mentions she had eggs for breakfast, I don’t need to interview my dad or check the trash for eggshells in order to be justified in believing her. Thus, not inquiring into some matter doesn’t automatically make one’s attitudes irrational.

Hence, there are reasons to worry that (3) doesn’t render faith irrational. But what about (P2)? Do most theists have faith, if (3) accurately describes what it means to have faith? If we understand ‘inquiry’ as merely evidence gathering, then almost all of those who believe in God inquire. They look for *some sort* of evidence their theistic beliefs are true, even if it is merely, say, testimonial evidence. A more plausible version of the complaint would be that theists don’t inquire enough into their faith. This suggests an amendment to (3):

²⁴ Dennett 2006: 312.

²⁵ Hitchens 2007: 137.

²⁶ Harris 2006: 28.

²⁷ See Conee and Feldman 1985, Feldman 2000, Berker Forthcoming.

(3*) If someone has faith, then that person does not sufficiently inquire into their faith commitments.

Perhaps biggest problem with (3*), however, is that it does not specify what is required for sufficient inquiry. It will be difficult to set the bar for sufficient inquiry at a place where both (P1) and (P2) come out to be true. The bar cannot be too high, because our duties to inquire only go so far; as discussed above, there seem to be many propositions we can rationally believe, and even know, with little to no inquiry. Even for sufficiently important propositions, it is psychologically and practically unrealistic to require lots of inquiry for rationality. Also, a very high bar will probably mean that most of our attitudes (not just those about God) are irrational, which seems counterintuitive. The higher the bar, the less likely it is that (P1) is true.

For this reason, one might try to lower the bar, and say that we need some inquiry—but not too much—for the resulting attitudes to be rational. However, as the bar is lowered, more of those who believe in God will meet it. As mentioned above, most theistic believers engage in some sort of evidence collection and examination. Therefore, the challenge for the New Atheists is to set the bar for inquiry at such a place that it is not implausibly demanding, but is also one that most theistic believers do not meet. This challenge has not been met, and I am skeptical that it could be.

3.4 Faith and Evidence

One of the most common things the New Atheists say about faith is that it is not based on evidence. Harris remarks that faith is “an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence.”²⁸ Dawkins suggests that if we have faith in something, we won’t change our mind no matter what evidence we get;²⁹ faith is simply “belief without evidence.”³⁰ Elsewhere, he drives the point home: “But what, after all, is faith? It is a state of mind that leads people to believe something...in the total absence of supporting evidence.”³¹ Hitchens notes that the “leap of faith” is an imposture, because we are required to perform it, in spite of “mounting evidence to the contrary.”³² These remarks suggest the following:

(4) Faith is not based on (adequate) evidence.

Given (4), is faith irrational? Faith is irrational if *evidentialism* is true. Evidentialism is the view that for an attitude to be rational, it must be based on evidence. Evidentialism is debated among philosophers, but it is a plausible enough thesis (at least on a sufficiently broad account of evidence) that I will assume it for the sake of argument.

But what about (P2)? Do most theistic believers base their faith on evidence? Most at least base their beliefs on testimony or experience. Theists rely on the evidence of historical testimony (e.g. authors of their scriptures), the testimony of their families, spiritual leaders, or others in their communities. They also rely on their experiences, whether it be experiences of God through nature, in prayer, in liturgy/tradition/ceremony, etc. It seems that most theistic faith is based on *some kind* of evidence.

²⁸ Harris 2004: 65.

²⁹ Dawkins 2006: 283.

³⁰ Ibid: 199.

³¹ Dawkins 1976: 330.

³² Hitchens 2007: 71.

A New Atheist would likely respond that this doesn't rationalize faith in God. Why? An initial suggestion is that testimony and experience don't count as evidence at all. However, going this route would render most of our everyday beliefs irrational (on reflection, we believe quite a bit on the basis of testimony). This also seems to rule out things the New Atheists want to count as evidence—e.g. belief in some scientific claim on the basis of the testimony of a reliable scientist.³³ They might even want to allow for someone to disbelieve in God because of their experiences of evil in the world. Thus, I don't think they want to rule out testimony and experience altogether.

Alternatively, they might want to say that testimony and experience can justify, but not always. Then they could distinguish between different types of testimony to exclude testimony that rationalizes faith, but allow for other sources of testimony. They might distinguish between reliable and misleading testimony, and maintain that we only ought to trust the former. However, in cases where we have misleading evidence, it is possible to have rational false beliefs. When there is a huge upset in sports, before the game, almost everyone believes the better team will win. This belief is rational even though it turns out to be false, because of the overwhelming (but misleading) evidence in its favor. It is almost universally accepted that rationality and truth can come apart, and it is rational to follow our evidence even though it doesn't always lead us to the truth. Thus, the suggestion that faith is irrational because it is based on misleading evidence isn't promising.

Another suggestion is that the problem with trusting religious testimony is that its claims are not scientifically demonstrable. This route seems to be one that is advocated by Harris, who suggests that, if testimony is to be trusted, its claims must be verifiable.³⁴ Similarly, Jeremy Stenger (author of *The New Atheism*) maintains that testimony needs to be checked with independent observations.³⁵ Maybe the problem with faith isn't lack of evidence, but being based on the wrong kind of evidence. This leads to a slightly different focus: the problem with faith is that faith is not based on empirical evidence.

3.5 Faith and Empirical Evidence

Empirical evidence is evidence we get by experiencing or studying the world around us. A paradigm example of empirical evidence is scientific evidence. In many places, the New Atheists suggest that the problem with theistic faith is that it isn't adequately based on empirical evidence. Dennett states, "Religious avowals concern matters that are beyond observation, beyond meaningful test..."³⁶ and, "it has been noted by many commentators that typical, canonical religious beliefs cannot be tested for truth...this is...a defining characteristic of religious creeds. They have to be 'taken on faith' and are not subject to [scientific or historical] confirmation."³⁷ Hitchens says that his principles are not faith because he distrusts anything that contradicts science.³⁸ Harris associates faith with "untestable propositions"³⁹ and also maintains that we can trust engineers and doctors, but not priests or rabbis, because the former make defeasible, falsifiable claims about the world, whereas nothing can demonstrate the falsity of the core beliefs of spiritual leaders.⁴⁰

On the face of it, one might think that these remarks suggest that empirical evidence is the only source of epistemic rationality. This suggests that the problem with faith is as follows:

³³ See Harris 2004: 66.

³⁴ Harris 2004: 74-77.

³⁵ Stenger 2009: 72.

³⁶ Dennett 2006: 238.

³⁷ Ibid: 239.

³⁸ Hitchens 2007: 5.

³⁹ Harris 2006: 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid: 66.

(5) Faith is not based solely on empirical evidence.

For (5) to render (P1) true, something like the following principle must hold: for an attitude to be rational, it must be based *only* on empirical evidence. However, this principle is implausible. This first problem with it is that, if it is true, it cannot be rationally believed, since it cannot be justified by empirical evidence alone. This is because principles about rationality are not ones we learn by studying the empirical world; they involve ought-claims which science cannot establish. Thus, there are self-referential problems with the principle. Second, the principle also assumes that empirical evidence is the only kind of evidence that can make a belief rational. This assumption is doubtful, as it overlooks sources of evidence such as a priori evidence (the source of evidence for math/logic/moral truths/etc.), evidence from memory, and many other kinds of non-empirical evidence.⁴¹ If empirical evidence were the only kind of evidence we could rationally rely on, a large majority of our beliefs would be irrational. So, given (5), it is unclear that (P1) is true.

Generally, the principle from the previous paragraph closely resembles what some call *scientism*, the view that empirical science is our only source of evidence and/or the only justification for belief.⁴² This is a view that is often attributed to the New Atheists, but it is unclear that all of them hold this view, and some have even explicitly denied strong versions of scientism.⁴³ However, given the central emphasis they put on scientific knowledge and scientific practice, they likely still endorse something like what Taylor (2016) calls “weak scientism,” or that empirical science is our *best* method for forming beliefs about the world.

If weak scientism is true, this suggests the problem with faith is not that it isn’t based only on empirical evidence, but that it isn’t based on empirical evidence *at all*. This seems like a more charitable interpretation of the New Atheist complaint:

(5*) Faith is not based on any empirical evidence.

For (P1) to be true, given (5*), this requires a weaker principle than before: for an attitude to be rational, it must be based *at least partially* on empirical evidence. This principle allows for more of our everyday beliefs to be rational.

Whether (5*) renders (P1) and (P2) true depends on what exactly one counts as “empirical evidence.” However, we can show that (5*) won’t do the job without a precise answer. Consider beliefs about the past, beliefs about math/logic/morality, belief in *induction*, that the future will be like the past (an assumption indispensable to scientific practice) or even the belief that empirical evidence is sometimes reliable (e.g. that I am not a brain in a tank with electrodes stimulating my senses). Are these beliefs based partially on empirical evidence? If not, as long as these beliefs are sometimes rational, then the principle underlying (5*)—that rational belief requires being partially based on empirical evidence—will be false. Thus, (P1) will also be false. Suppose instead that these beliefs are partially based on empirical evidence. Then, why can’t faith that God exists be similarly based on empirical evidence? Of course, none of these matters—truths about math, logic, morality, induction—are ones that science can fully settle (although science may bear on them). However, it is unclear why faith that God exists fails to be based on empirical evidence, while other philosophical beliefs are based on empirical evidence.

The basic problem, then, is that there is parity between faith in God and these other philosophical beliefs when it comes to empirical evidence. It is unclear that (5*) can render beliefs

⁴¹ See Kelly 2014.

⁴² See Taylor 2016.

⁴³ See Stenger 2009: 285.

about the past, logic, morality, math, induction, and anti-skepticism potentially rational, but not theistic faith. If we admit these former beliefs are often based on empirical evidence and therefore potentially rational, then there is no reason to think that faith or belief that God exists cannot also be potentially rational.

A third potential principle worth considering is the following:

(5**) Faith is not testable/falsifiable.

This principle is slightly different than (5*), because something could be falsifiable but not based on empirical evidence. Take a random scientific hypothesis I just thought of, and suppose I don't use any empirical evidence in generating the hypothesis. Suppose I decide to believe the hypothesis. My belief is not based on empirical evidence, but my belief is testable or falsifiable.

This route is still problematic. First, we can run a dilemma similar to the one we ran in response to (5*). Are my philosophical beliefs and beliefs about the past testable? If so (maybe 'testable' means that we can get scientific evidence that bears on it), then there is no reason to think that whether God exists is similarly testable. If philosophical beliefs and beliefs about the past are not testable, then, for (5**) to render (P1) true, it seems like we are going to have to give up on the rationality of these beliefs, too. This is surely not a route the New Atheists would want to go—induction and our beliefs about the external world are indispensable for scientific methods, and for the New Atheists, scientific beliefs are paradigm instances of rational beliefs.

Consider, finally, that certain sacred creeds might even be more like scientific hypotheses than wholly non-empirical philosophical propositions. For example, Christianity teaches that Jesus was an actual historical figure who rose from the dead. Paul himself says that if Jesus was not raised, Christian faith is in vain.⁴⁴ If historians or scientists discovered the bones of Jesus, this would call the truth of Christianity into question, potentially falsifying the whole system.⁴⁵ Other religions make similar historical claims; a central Islamic claim that Muhammad received the Koran via revelation from Allah. Thus, some religious claims are falsifiable.

In conclusion, it is not clear what faith is, such that it is both epistemically irrational and something all or most theistic believers have. We have yet to see any good reason to think that most theists are irrational, although now we might have a good idea of what faith is *not*. Now, I turn to the question of what faith *is*.

IV. The Nature of Faith

In this section, I outline two suggestions for what faith might be. First, recall the mountain climber whose belief that she will make the jump is self-justifying; having the belief makes it more likely that she will be successful. We discussed other similar examples: an athlete, a public speaker, and someone about to have surgery. In these cases, the belief made itself more likely to be true. My first proposal is that these self-fulfilling attitudes might describe a certain type of faith in ourselves and others.

In many of these examples, those with self-fulfilling attitudes can be naturally described as having faith in themselves. The athlete has faith that she will play well; the public speaker has faith that he will give this talk capably. Here, the faith in oneself creates evidence for itself. Similarly, when I believe that someone else will do something aptly and I communicate this to them, my confidence

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:14.

⁴⁵ Harris 2004: 68 even acknowledges this.

in their abilities can make it more likely that they will do well. For example, consider two people who are about to marry, but realize that statistically, divorce is likely. They might have faith in each other than their marriage will last, and this faith might make it more likely that their marriage will last. This might enable them to sincerely commit to marriage based on their faith in themselves and each other, because the fact that they have this faith makes their commitment more likely to stick.⁴⁶

Not only do I think that this is a natural way to think about faith in oneself and faith of communities, but I think this explains why the relationship between faith and evidence might seem, on the face of it, odd or puzzling. Many of our beliefs don't create evidence for themselves in this way, and without an explanation for how this works, it is not surprising that, at first glance, people might think faith of this sort is irrational. However, once the model is understood, it becomes clear that this kind of faith is not epistemically defective—it justifies itself.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, I do not think that self-fulfilling faith describes faith in God. Someone's faith that God is loving, for example, doesn't make God more loving.⁴⁸ However, I want to suggest a second characteristic of faith, which I think can describe faith in God: faith is not solely based on empirical evidence. The idea here is that, when we have faith, we go beyond what can be definitively proved by science. If someone's belief in something is based solely on empirical evidence—e.g. they saw an experiment done right in front of their eyes – then they don't have faith in that thing. Why would they need faith? It was proved in front of their eyes.

However, in many of our decisions about what to believe and what to do, we do not (and cannot) have indubitable empirical proof. When I have faith that my friend is trustworthy and trust her with my secret, I am “going beyond” the empirical evidence (even if I have some empirical evidence that she is trustworthy). This understanding of faith explains why faith is an important part of flourishing communities—empirical evidence won't give us all we need, especially in personal relationships.

Advocates of this view needn't insist that, when we have faith, we fail to proportion our beliefs to the evidence—instead, we rely on non-empirical sources of evidence. Testimony is one important example. Testimony is an indispensable source of evidence, and many philosophers have recently argued that testimonial evidence and faith are closely connected.⁴⁹ When we acknowledge evidence goes beyond the empirical, we can see why faith doesn't ignore or oppose evidence; rather, scientific evidence alone is not sufficient for a flourishing life and meaningful relationships.

On this account, faith in God requires more than empirical evidence. While empirical/scientific evidence can bear on the question of whether God exists, I doubt that it will ever settle the matter. The question of whether God exists requires us to look beyond the empirical, just as the question of whether the external world exists, or whether any empirical evidence is even reliable, requires that we look beyond the empirical. The faith of most theists, therefore, goes beyond the empirical—whether that means relying on a priori arguments for God's existence, relying on the testimony of those in your spiritual community, historical figures or spiritual leaders, or even experiences of God's voice in their lives.

⁴⁶ Thanks to Jonathan Nebel.

⁴⁷ Of course, I do not want to claim that this kind of faith is always rational, or that we cannot ever be overly confident in our abilities.

⁴⁸ It has been suggested to me that, on some readings of James, Jamesian faith does not *create* evidence for itself; rather, it *reveals* evidence for itself. On this reading, faith enables us to access evidence that was there all along but would otherwise be unavailable to us. For example, there might be evidence for God's existence that is never accessible if one doesn't first 'meet the hypothesis halfway' and put faith in God. However, the evidence exists whether or not one embraces the hypothesis. In this, Jamesian faith might be applicable to faith in God. Thanks to Ian Huyett.

⁴⁹ See Locke 1698: book IV, chapter 18, paragraph 2; Alston 1996.

If faith is not fully based on empirical evidence, this also explains why faith is often contrasted with tangible proof, and why I don't have to have faith in things like a well-established scientific hypothesis, or that there is a cup on the table in front of me. This account also explains why we "live by faith, not by sight"⁵⁰ and why faith is "evidence of things unseen."⁵¹

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for two things. First, I have argued that there is no single notion of faith that is both irrational and had by most theists. The New Atheists have not given us a successful argument that most theists have a faith that is irrational. Second, I have suggested two characteristics of faith: first, that Jamesian self-justifying beliefs might describe a unique kind of faith in oneself and others. Second, I have suggested that faith is not solely based on empirical evidence. One of the important lessons we learn from this is that looking beyond the empirical evidence is an essential part of the flourishing life. While I cannot fully defend this here, this suggests that faith is not only rational, but an essential part of human flourishing.⁵²

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⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:7.

⁵¹ Hebrews 11:1.

⁵² Thanks to Josh Rasmussen, Kevin Vallier, and Ian Huyett for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Thanks to Andy Rogers, Jonathan Nebel, Andrew Moon, Rebekah Jackson, and those who attended the New Theists conference for invaluable feedback that improved this chapter in many ways.

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