

The Faith of Unbelief

Dallas Willard

I.

Some preliminary observations:¹

This is not to be a *tu quoque* session. That is: I shall not reproach the unbeliever for having faith as a way of trying to justify religious belief.

Faith here is understood, not as a *profession* of something you do not believe, but as belief, trust, reliance upon something. You believe in *A*, or that *P*, if and to the degree that you are ready to act with reliance upon *A* or as if *P* were the case. We *always* “live up to” (or “down to”; really, *right at*) our beliefs.

Unbelief in the context of the present discussion is not simply a *lack* of belief, in the sense that I now have no beliefs at all about most individual things that exist, for example. Rather “unbelief” here will refer to what is more properly called *disbelief*: a readiness to act as if certain facts were not so. Thus unbelief is a species of belief involving negation.

More precisely still, by unbelief in the present context we are referring to belief that a certain set of claims made by traditional Christianity—roughly, what C. S. Lewis referred to as “Mere Christianity”—are false. We are thinking of the person who is set to act as if they were false, and this personality set is what we mean here in speaking of the faith of unbelief.

II.

The idea that there is an *ethics* of belief and unbelief is founded on the assumptions that:

1. We ought to do what is beneficial for human life.

2. Our beliefs can cause great good or harm, especially with regard to their truth or falsity; and truth may be regarded as good in itself, regardless of consequences.
3. We have, indirectly, some degree of control over the beliefs that we have, and hence some responsibility to see to it that they are true or at least rational.

III.

W. K. Clifford claimed that it is always wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence (in his essay, "The Ethics of Belief"). William James effectively replied (in his "The Will to Believe") that this claim is too stringent. There are many issues that cannot be decided on the basis of 'sufficient' evidence, where much of value is at stake, where we must decide (to take the plane or not, for example, or to believe in God or not), and where we have a preference. Here James says, "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide, . . . for to say, under such circumstances, 'do not decide, but leave the question open', is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risks of losing truth."² James saw that you could "lose the truth" by not believing as well as by believing, and that it is irrational to think it is better not to believe than to believe, given only that you lack sufficient evidence on the positive side.

Clifford actually expresses the contemporary prejudice that the one who doubts is automatically smarter. James saw that *one has to earn the right to disbelieve as much as the right to believe*. Basically, disbelief is a form of belief. Blaise Pascal made essentially the same point much earlier with his famous "Wager."³

IV.

Let us give this much to Clifford: that we should make a sincere effort to ensure that our beliefs are true, that we are *morally obliged to do so*, and that to do anything less, to be careless about the truth of significant beliefs, is to be legitimately subject to *moral* censure. The

believer or disbeliever who is careless about truth and evidence is less than they should be, for they are careless of human good.

V.

Since truth is not *always* manifestly attainable, we do not have an obligation to have true beliefs. *But we always have a moral obligation to do what is possible to ensure that our beliefs are true.* That is, to be irrational is to be morally irresponsible, and to be morally admirable we must be rational—because of the fundamental importance of true beliefs to human welfare.

VI.

But who is the rational person? Persons are *reasonable* to the degree in which they conform their thinking, talk and action to the order of truth and understanding *or* are effectively committed to doing that so far as is possible. They will characteristically endeavor to *reason soundly* (validly, from true premises), and be *open-minded* and *inquiring* about the issues which require a response from them. They will *seek the best concepts, classifications and theories*, testing those concepts, classifications and theories by relating them to each other and to the world given by their experience and the experience of others. They will respect facts more than theories, and take pains to determine the facts relevant to their beliefs.⁴

By contrast, the *unreasonable* person characteristically does not thoroughly inquire into the basis for his beliefs, contradicts himself, rejects known means to his chosen goals or ends, demands the impossible, refuses to test or consider criticisms of his beliefs, and fails to seek better means of ascertaining the truth.

Now, to turn back to the 'Faith of Unbelief' as explained above.

VII.

Currently, ‘unbelief’ rarely holds itself responsible to be rational as described above:

A. *About the nature of ultimate reality or about which reality is ultimate.* Specifically, the Christian view that reality is ultimately personal and subject to personal will that is intelligent and loving. By contrast, a rather typical statement: “Christianity lost its credibility by and large in the course of the eighteenth century. . . . Such Christianity as did survive was no longer secure even within the Christian churches. . . . The leading thinkers and artists of Christendom were virtually all de-Christianized even before Darwin in 1859 provided a credible alternative to Creation.”⁵ Darwin provided *what?*

B. *About the historical claims of the ‘biblical’ tradition.* For example, that there was a person whom we call Jesus Christ; that he was human and more; that he was killed and continued to exist, resuming personal contacts—though admittedly of a rather unusual character—with those who knew him before his death.

C. *About the current experience of human beings in the life of belief.* For example, ‘miracles’ of various kinds, as acts of God in response to prayer or action. You rarely ever find anyone who rejects such ‘miracles’ who has made a point of examining a single one that thoughtful Christian reflection has marked as such. As the bishop said to Galileo, “I don’t need to look. I already know.”

D. *About the ethical superiority of Christ’s teachings and of life conforming thereto.* Generally speaking it is assumed that you can safely omit serious thought about this matter and stick to John Stuart Mill or John Rawls. Jesus is at best an irrelevant idealist—at worst the sponsor of the ethical disaster that is Western Civilization.

VIII.

There really is no reason in the general nature of reality why “Mere Christianity” or any other view should or should not be true.

This constitutes what older thinkers used to refer to as the “antecedent credibility” of Christianity (or other views).

IX.

Thesis: Most of ‘the faith of unbelief’ that exists today in the concrete form of individual personalities is morally irresponsible—because *not* rationally sustained—and would be recognized as the superstition it most often is, but for the fact that it is vaguely endorsed by the socially prevailing intellectual system. One *might* be rational, as above defined, and not believe, in my opinion. But I think this is highly unlikely, and I am sure it rarely ever actually occurs. (This opens up another set of issues about belief in relation to evidence.)

X.

If, now, one says that current belief is just as morally irresponsible as current unbelief, or even more so, we can only ask: “And how does that help?” Do we not, whoever we are, owe it to ourselves and those around us to be serious about questions of major importance to human well-being?

Notes

1. This philosophical note was originally prepared as observations for a lecture on the ‘faith of unbelief’ by Professor Willard and were re-crafted by him for this journal.
2. James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (New York: Dover, 1956), 11.
3. See his *Pensees*, subsections 233-241.
4. This is only an attempt to characterize the rational person, not to give necessary and sufficient conditions of being a rational person.
5. Rudolph Binion, *After Christianity* (Durango, CO: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1986), 9-10.