The Role of Faith in Epistemology

Is Faith epistemological? There is a startling lack of consensus among Christian philosophers as to what, exactly, faith is. And the problem is even less settled among Christians in general. It may be that, as William James suggested, talk of faith has been intentionally sequestered from the discipline of philosophy. Whatever the cause, epistemologist Peter Boghossian seems attuned to this vulnerability, and uses it to undermine epistemic justification for religious faith in general. The disunity of response among Christian philosophers unfortunately only lends credibility to Boghossian’s thesis. I suggest with some urgency that Christian philosophers take up Boghossian’s gauntlet and work toward a unified concept of faith.

To that end, I offer here a biblical model of faith that seeks unity among both my predecessors and my contemporaries. I offer this model to two camps: non-Christians that argue for faith as a failed epistemology, and Christians that argue for faith as non-epistemological. What we will see is that a biblically-accurate model of faith is incredibly robust, and illumines misconceptions among non-Christians and Christians alike. I will argue 1) Faith is epistemic in nature, 2) Faith is active, 3) Faith is trust, 4) Faith can be virtuous, and finally, 5) Faith is an adjunct avenue in acquiring knowledge. I will deal with Boghossian’s claim first, and then examine the structure of faith.

Boghossian and Scripture

Boghossian offers two definitions of faith: (1) Belief without evidence, and (2) Pretending to know things we don’t know. Trivially, few Christians (if any) will subscribe to (2) as their working definition of faith. The biblical Hebrew for “faith” – אמונה (‘emuna) – has been translated variously into English as truth, stability, and honesty. Clearly, “pretending to know things you don’t know” is a strange translation for אמונה – truth (or stability, or honesty).
But the aim here is not whether faith has been poorly defined (it certainly has – even by Christians). The aim here is to discern a **biblically-accurate** definition of faith, and whether that model is epistemically justified. So let us begin by admitting that those who subscribe to (2) lack both scriptural support and, in agreement with Boghossian, epistemic justification. Let us then leave (2) behind in search of something more biblically accurate.

**Faith as Epistemological**

Boghossian suggests that faith claims are *knowledge* claims. But this assumes only one of many models of faith. And models of faith run the epistemic gamut from non-applicable, to a belief-producing process, to belief itself, to an action *based on* belief, and finally, to the entire package of knowledge itself. So epistemologically speaking, where exactly is faith located? This appears to be the most contested feature in the topography of faith.

One might exclude faith from epistemology altogether, with faith *based upon* knowledge previously acquired. Or one might near epistemology and locate faith within the intellect. One might cautiously enter epistemology and place faith somewhere between opinion and knowledge. One might enter epistemology and place faith as a species of belief. One might swim in epistemology and suggest that faith is a doxastic (belief-forming) process. Or one might dive head-first into epistemology and equate the entire package of knowledge with faith. Boghossian obtusely assumes all (or the majority) of religious adherents adopt this latter form of faith-as-knowledge. Yet this may be the single redeeming element in Boghossian’s thesis: there do seem to be good reasons suggesting faith *is* epistemological. And, as we shall see, perhaps more properly epistemological than either camp realizes.

**Faith as JTB**

Accepting the traditional tripartite theory of knowledge (JTB), a venture which consistently incorporates elements of JTB, such as *belief, truth, or justification*, is epistemological. And faith not only
incorporates each of these elements, but in some cases, is isomorphic to them.19 Regarding belief, “I [have faith] that \( p \)” is isomorphic to “I [believe] that \( p \)”\( .\) This is propositional faith: the doxastic (and therefore, epistemological) component of faith.\( 20 \) This is not to say that faith is reducible to belief. But faith parallels belief in several ways.\( 21 \)

Next, if epistemic justification is that which indicates or points toward truth,\( 22 \) we are inching closer to one of the several expressions of biblical faith (אמונה). As we saw, part of what the Christian professes is a belief (propositional faith). But another part of what the Christian professes is sufficient reason that their belief is true. St. Peter thus urges the Christian to always be prepared to offer an ἀπολογίαν (apologist) – a justification, or reason – for his faith.\( 23 \) So St. Paul felt he was imprisoned for the sole purpose of giving good reasons (epistemic justification) for his faith.\( 24 \) This component of faith (henceforth apologetic faith) is virtually identical with Boghossian's understanding of justification – sufficient reason to believe.\( 25 \) The proposition “I have [faith] in Jesus’s Resurrection” is therefore isomorphic to “I have [sufficient reason to believe] in Jesus’s resurrection.”\( 26 \) When the Christian enumerates his faith in the Resurrection, he is thus providing reasons for which he feels justified in such a belief.\( 27 \) When such a set of reasons comprise a person’s justification for religious belief, such reasons are properly epistemological.

Of special interest here is not just that faith is an epistemic venture, but that faith, when biblically conceived, parallels each of the necessary conditions for knowledge: belief, justification (ἀπολογία), and truth (אמונה). Thus when Boghossian suggests faith claims are knowledge claims, we ought, in a sense, to agree with him.\( 28 \) Faith is a unique cognitive venture which captures the three necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge (JTB).

**Faith as Active**

So far we have examined faith as a propositional attitude\( 29 \) or state of affairs.\( 30 \) This feature of faith might be described as “Belief in \( [X] \)” or “Good reason for believing in \( [X] \),” where \( X \) is
some fact or state of affairs. But this doesn’t exhaustively describe the phenomenon of faith. Faith clearly has an active component. 31 Timothy McGrew (as well as Craig) rightly suggests faith is, among other things, acting on what one believes to be true. 32 While faith as a psychological state may be described as “Belief in [X],” faith as active may be described as “Belief that [x],” where X is some active venture beyond mere attitude. But what sort of active venture?

**Faith as Trust**

Essentially unanimous among the aforementioned thinkers, and least contested, is faith as trust. Yet Boghossian contends that “this is not how the faithful use the word ‘faith’ in religious contexts.” 33 Boghossian does not provide support for this claim (or perhaps his support is anecdotal). As a test case then, let us see whether his contention holds against scripture.

First notice that the root meaning of the Biblical (Koine) Greek πίστις (pistis), ‘faith’, is ‘trust’. 34 Second, recall that the Biblical Hebrew for faith (אמונה) also denotes trust. 35 But third, faith-as-trust is clearly inherent in scripture. As St. James explains, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe—and shudder.” 36 But if faith is only belief, as Boghossian suggests, then the Christian is willingly equating his faith with demonic faith, which is absurd. Clearly faith is more than belief, as St. James further clarifies. 37 “[Abraham’s] faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” 38 According to St. James then, faith is made complete (suggesting faith as a composite) with action. “Faith by itself,” he concludes, “if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” 39 Note that when St. James differentiates between dead faith and active faith, he is implicitly differentiating between the epistemic component of faith (faith-as-belief), and the active (or dead) component of faith.

Of course, even the demons act in scripture. What kind of action then differentiates Christian faith from demonic faith? St. James quotes Genesis, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 40 Note that for St. James, Abraham did not believe “in” God (a
belief state): he *believed* God (an action). Faith here equates with trust. And for St. James, this is part of the proper model of faith: trust. This feature, termed the *fiducial* component of faith, is supported by the most famous of Christians, past and present. Now Boghossian may be right: some Christians may not equate faith with trust. But this only illumines a conceptual defect in such a Christian’s faith. And this serves to highlight precisely why, on a biblical model, faith – as trust – is a virtue.

*Faith as a Virtue*

In Aristotelian ethics, virtue is the median point between deficiency and excess of some trait. And for Aristotle, virtues come in two kinds: moral and intellectual. Now, Boghossian believes that faith as a virtue is entirely mistaken: faith ought to be understood as an unreliable way of reasoning. “Having a firm belief is not a virtue,” he suggests. And he is right. But “firmness” of belief has not been marketed as virtuous among the thinkers (or scripture) in our discussion. How, then, is faith virtuous?

I suggest faith can be virtuous on at least three levels: morally, intellectually, and epistemically. In agreement with Craig and McGrew, this component is based on previously established knowledge (or beliefs). First, if one has good reason to trust in some person or proposition, one is virtuous in trusting in, or having faith in such a person or proposition’s offer.

Second, following the Aquinian model, faith is only virtuous when it expresses truth, never when it expresses falsehood. Further faith ought to perfect the intellect. In other words, an epistemology which profits its holder in new, bona fide knowledge, is virtuous. It is a spurious claim to dismiss all religious faiths (both in the form of beliefs and actions) as failing to produce knowledge.

And finally, employing epistemic tests in evaluating beliefs prior to acting upon them is virtuous. We shall touch on this in the final section. Now if, as I have argued, faith is a composite of
at least (1) action and (2) belief, it becomes easy to see how faith carries virtue inherently. (1) Acting upon (2) a belief for which one does not have good reasons, is not virtuous (it is reckless – a vice). However, acting on a belief for which one does have good reasons, is virtuous. And failing to act on such a belief is a vice (cowardice). This model is summarized in Figure 1 below.

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Figure 1

Boghossian complains that faith is commonly conceived as virtuous when one has “resolute belief in something – anything,” or in the purportedly common sentiments that “faith makes us better people,” or that “a man of faith is a good man.” Again, no support is given that these are biblical, or even traditional concepts of faith-as-virtue. But for those who conceive faith-as-virtue thus, we ought to side with Boghossian and agree, resolute belief alone is not virtuous. As we have seen however, this is not the model of faith-as-virtue advocated in scripture or in the sample of highly influential religious thinkers (ancient and contemporary) under discussion. Rather, faith properly construed is virtuous. Two questions therefore remain from the current section: 1) can faith-trust in a faith-belief render new knowledge in a consistent manner, and 2) are there epistemic tests for such a process?

Faith as a Knowledge-Producing Process

Granting that we have several belief-producing processes (“cognitive faculties” – hereafter “CF”) such as sense perception, reason, memory, intuition, imagination, sympathy, and so on, we see that knowledge comes from a variety of cognitive processes. Now if some sort of religious experience, causally related to faith, is shown to bring veridical knowledge, its faculty must be up for consideration as a valid knowledge-producing faculty, and therefore, properly epistemological.
Let us examine a single case from the biblical prophet Isaiah, who professed both *propositional* and *fiducial faith* in God. His faith brought new knowledge that, for example, Babylon would be destroyed, its land not to be inhabited again throughout all generations. This seems to be bona fide knowledge which remains testable today. And presumably, if Isaiah lacked any of the necessary conditions for Biblical faith – *propositional, active, or fiducial* – he would have lacked such knowledge. Again, this is not to say that faith is reducible to knowledge, but rather, that knowledge does factor into Biblical faith. And such cases of new knowledge abound through the corpus of the prophets, wisdom literature, the disciples of Jesus, etc.

Now Boghossian suggests that faith is abandonment of reason. But reason is only one of many knowledge-producing processes. For example, when I use the CF of memory to recall what I ate for dinner a week ago; or I use the CF of introspective perception to know that I have a headache, I am using processes other than, or in addition to, reason. Reason is one faculty among many, and CF such as memory or perception may be used in conjunction with, or exclusively apart from, reason. But this is not abandonment of the CF of reason, any more than one abandons perception when one relies on memory.

William Alston places the faculty of faith among the perception-based faculties: participants are passive, and experiences are simply presented to the participant, such as an object entering the field of one’s vision. William James defines the faculty as, in part, perceiving new truths, which consistently render the most *real* experiences of life: experiences which unify and explain all our past experiences. This is not a trivial phenomenon, nor a marginal one. It factors into the lives of all walks of humanity, across all cultures, across all eras of history. This of course does not confirm them, but rather, commends them to our attention.

One objection may be that not everyone has shared such an experience. But as James points out, it makes little sense to exclude phenomena from our consideration merely because some of us
have not participated in it. A more serious objection is that subjects of religious experience come
to hold conflicting religious beliefs. But our CF regularly present us with conflicting beliefs. And
yet we do not discard such CF as unreliable. Memories, for example, are notorious for conflicting
with each other, yet we don’t discount memory as a valid knowledge-producing faculty. Why? We
generally filter our memory-produced beliefs through internal epistemic tests. And we generally filter
all of our CF-beliefs through epistemic tests. This is why we see the Biblical mandate to test faith-
beliefs in 1 John 4:1, 2 Corinthians 13:5, etc.

Now, Boghossian rightly complains that faith, as a cognitive tool, cannot adjudicate between
competing faith claims. And it doesn’t take an epistemologist to see that using faith to establish
faith is tautological. Boghossian proposes that only reason and evidence can aid in discerning the
truth of a faith claim. Boghossian is on the right track: I only propose we use our full set of CF in
discerning the truth of a faith claim. This will include far more than just reason and evidence.

I suggest that if religious experiences are the result of CF, they be subjected to internal
episemic tests, just as with our other CF. For example, if an incredulous memory is presented to
me, I would do well to employ other cognitive tools, such as reason or testimony, in evaluating
whether such a memorial presentation is veridical. William Alston terms this the epistemic test of
“internal consistency.” If two perceptual beliefs contradict each other, at least one is false. Likewise, if I have some sort of religious experience-produced belief which has no testimonial
support (or contradicts it), or fails a test of reason, or of memory (say, of another set of beliefs), I
would be virtuous in treating it with skepticism, and favoring my other CF. But if I am presented
with a belief which unifies and explains all my past experiences, brings with it a wealth of new
knowledge, and passes internal epistemic tests, I am clearly virtuous in accepting it.

Further, as William James explained, if we are unable to truly experience the noumenal
(objective), but rather have only the phenomenal (subjective), then the most important kind of
knowledge is that which is most phenomenally profound. The arguments in this section are exceedingly brief. But there ought to be sufficient support at least showing, again, if some sort of religious experience, with causal dependence on faith, is shown to bring veridical knowledge, its faculty is properly epistemological. In this way, faith, considered as a cognitive, belief-producing faculty, is properly epistemological, in divergence from Craig and McGrew, and in agreement with Boghossian.

**Conclusion**

Talk of faith is strangely absent in epistemology: we have Boghossian to thank for re-introducing it as a proper subject of epistemic investigation. But my intention here is not merely to correct the remaining misconceptions in Boghossian's critique of faith. We can go much further. To give an explicit voice to what has historically been implicit: faith, properly formed and exercised virtuously, merits a place alongside the established epistemic tools of perception, reason, testimony, memory, intuition, and so forth.

Faith straddles belief, justification, truth, action, trust, virtue, and knowledge. It stands unique among all human characteristics. Faith, a belief-producing process, carries virtue in morality and intellect, and when run through epistemic filters, is made complete when paired with an active trust. But perhaps most importantly, whether considered non-epistemological by one school of thought or a failed epistemology by another, both camps eliminate a perfectly valid cognitive tool from the art of knowledge-acquisition. And for many, this would exclude a tool for acquiring the most valuable kind of knowledge. A biblical model of faith is not a failed epistemology: it is not pretending to know what we don’t know, nor is it belief without evidence. Faith is spiritual seeing, not spiritual blindness. To prohibit it from epistemology is to willingly prohibit one of our most unique and important of human gifts.

2 Supported by Boghossian, et al.

3 Supported by Timothy McGrew, William Lane Craig, et al.


6 The root of which is יאמ, “amen”.

7 Proverbs 12:17, “Whoever speaks truth (אמן) gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.” ESV. See also Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 33:4; Psalm 40:10; 89:49; 96:13; 98:3; 100:5; 119:30; Proverbs 12:17; Isaiah 25:1; Isaiah 59:4; Jeremiah 5:1, 3; 7:28; 9:3; passim.

8 Isaiah 33:6, “[The Lord] will be the stability (אמם) of your times”, ESV.

9 2 Kings 12:15, “they did not ask for an accounting from the men into whose hand they delivered the money to pay out to the workmen, for they dealt honestly (אמם).” ESV.

10 For reasons such as this, William James dismissed precisely (2) as the “schoolboy” definition of faith over a century ago. “The faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said, ‘Faith is when you believe something that you know ain’t true.’” William James, *The Will to Believe*, 29.


12 “Faith is not an epistemological category. It is not a way of knowing something. Faith is a way of trusting something,” William Lane Craig continues in response to Boghossian. “Faith is trusting in that which you have reason to believe is true.” http://www.reasonablefaith.org/a-manual-for-creating-atheists#ixzz3HjpT4lGT, accessed 10/31/2014.

13 “Faith, which is the proper principle of [belief], must needs reside in the intellect.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. II-II, Q. 4, Art. 2.

“Faith believes ... [in] things not seen.” St. Augustine, *Enchridion*, Ch. 2, 7. Or as William James suggested, faith is a belief in something for which doubt is still possible. William James, *The Will to Believe*, 90.


“Faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us.” John Calvin, *Institutes* III, ii, 7. Or Alvin Plantinga’s *Sensus Divinitatis*, in which “Faith is a really special case of knowledge... Faith is not to be contrasted with knowledge: faith ... is knowledge.” Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, ibid. Emphasis Plantinga’s. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.


In the Carnapian sense, where two sentences are isomorphic when they exhibit logical equivalence. Rudolph Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1947), 56-59.


For example, 1) both involve assent of something taken to be true, 2) both come in degrees of certainty, and 3) both are voluntary (or, depending on one’s school, involuntary). In other words, what is true of faith in (1)-(3), is true of belief in (1)-(3).


1 Peter 3:15. See also Acts 22:1; Philippians 1:7, 16; 1 Corinthians 9:3; 2 Corinthians 7:11, 2 Timothy 4:16; passim. Recall that while all Christians may not necessarily be able to enumerate such reasons (see note 39 below), nor even that all Christians think they ought to be able to do so, scripture exhorts the Christian to cultivate such an ability. Again, the aim here is not the current state of Christian faith, but what a biblically accurate faith looks like.
Note that epistemic justification, properly defined, is not necessarily showing that one is justified. One may potentially be justified but not be able to show how, as in epistemic internalism. See William Alston in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 83.

27 Extra-biblical attestation, the empty tomb, the post-resurrection appearances, etc.

28 Bohossian cites the miracle of Jesus walking on water in Matthew 14:22-27. This citation is a bit confused, as not much hinges on the historicity of this event, save for perhaps biblical inerrancy. But to make his point, we may consider in his stead the Resurrection, which is of utter importance to Christianity.

29 David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Jackson in *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 82.


31 “The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action.” James, *The Will to Believe*, 29.

32 “Faith is acting on what one has good reason to believe is true.”


35 Psalm 37:3; Proverbs 28:20; Deuteronomy 32:4, passim. Also Security or Stability (Isaiah 33:6); Steadiness (Exodus 17:12); Faithfulness in fulfilling promises (Psalm 37:3; Habakkuk 2:4).

36 James 2:19, NIV. Emphasis mine. All scripture hereafter is quoted in the NIV.

37 See also Joshua 22:16, in which “faith” equates to obeying God, and breaking faith equates to disobeying God. Both presume prior belief in God’s existence.


39 James 2:17.


42 Ranging from St. Augustine (*Enchridion*, Ch. 2, 7) in antiquity to the Reformers (See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Ch. 8, 16; Phillip Melancthon, *Loci Communes*, § 8 (CR 21:743); Martin Luther, “A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer”, *Werke*, vol. 7, 25, etc.) in the middle ages to William James (See his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*) and Alvin Plantinga (See his *Warranted Christian Belief*) in modernity.


44 More precisely, the “virtues of thought” and the “virtues of character”. Aristotle, Ibid., Book II, Ch. 1.

45 Boghossian, Ibid, 80.

46 Boghossian, Ibid, 209.

47 Let us assume for sake of simplicity that “good reason” inherently carries the avoidance of morally wrong behavior. Trusting in a person or proposition whose offer is morally wrong is clearly not virtuous (nor presumably “good reason”).


49 Thomas Aquinas, Ibid., Pt. II-II, Q. 1, Art. 4.

50 Boghossian, Ibid, 209.

51 The so-called “faculty approach” seen in Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Rene Descartes’ *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, etc.

52 Isaiah 43:10.


54 Isaiah 13:20.
Ie, Isaiah believed the proposition, the proposition not only came to pass but continues to come to pass today, and, for the Judeo-Christian, Isaiah had good reasons for his faith-belief.

One may counter that not every one of us is expected to receive knowledge in the manner of the prophets. But again, a Biblical (Christian) model will suggest something otherwise. The Christian, practicing virtuous faith, is guaranteed guidance “into all truth” (John 14:26, 16:13). This accepted, it is difficult to see how one could be guided into truth yet lack new knowledge. In one manner or another, new knowledge (among many other traits) ought to characterize the transformed Christian life. See also Isaiah 11:2-3.

Boghossian, Ibid., 15, 17, 18, 23, 31, 32, passim.

Plantinga, Where the Conflict Really Lies, 46.

Plantinga, Where the Conflict Really Lies, 46. Thomas Reid goes so far as to ask, “Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception – they came both out of the same shop.” An Inquiry into the Human Mind, ed. T. Duggan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 207.

“No effort of will is needed; no powers of attention or reasoning, no activities of formulating propositions are involved.” Alston, The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 16.

James, Varieties, 248.

Ibid, 397.

James, Varieties, 109.

Boghossian, Ibid., 31.

Alston, The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 170.

Boghossian, Ibid., 31.

The coherentist, of course (such as the presuppositionalist), may find this circularity perfectly acceptable. But let us ignore this in virtue of showing that justification exists for virtually all epistemologies.

Boghossian, Ibid.

Alston, Ibid, 170.

Alston, Ibid.

James, Varieties, 498-499, 502.
Ie, the phenomenologist. But also the innumerable score of humanity that has shared in this common experience, knowledge of which unites a person’s life experiences into a cohesive whole, somehow seems more “real” than other knowledge, heals broken lives, gives deep insight into matters otherwise unexamined, etc.