

Faith and Reality

1 Introduction

We hear regularly about the conflict between science and faith, and about the conflict between faith and reason. We also hear people referred to as “people of faith” - both by others and by themselves - with the implication that such people live with a certain disconnect with the real universe, as though faith and reality are mutually exclusive concepts.

What does all this mean? Does it make any sense? Is faith reasonable? If so, why? Or is it foolish? What exactly is “faith”?

Is faith believing something despite the evidence, or because of the evidence?
And *if* faith is reasonable, which faith is reasonable?

An interesting article on gizmodo about a group set up to promote North Korea to the world shows that atheists can be 'people of faith' too. See:

<http://gizmodo.com/meet-north-koreas-bizarre-english-language-social-media-649373106>

- note the quote part way down: *“He loves North Korea, he explains, because it reflects his faith.”*

Some views of faith:

- Mark Twain: *“Faith is believing something you know ain't true.”*
- Richard Dawkins: *“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”*
- Christopher Hitchens: *“Faith is the surrender of the mind; it's the surrender of reason, it's the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals.”*

There actually are some people who do believe this definition of faith, and consider it a virtue to cling to and uphold this 'faith'. BUT if that is what faith is, then no amount of dressing it up will make it reasonable and it should be denounced and renounced by all.

2 Conflict between Science and Mathematics

When I was at university I would go to a maths lecture and would be told of a great mathematician of the past who had been instrumental in developing what we were then studying. The lecturer would go on to say *“X was a great mathematician. It's a pity he wasted so much time with science.”*

Later in a physics lecture the same person would come up in reference to a major contribution to science. The physics lecturer concluded with: *“X was a great scientist. It's a pity he wasted so much of his life on mathematics.”*

This happened 3 or 4 times, referring to different mathematician-scientists, quite amusing me.

It is my contention that science and mathematics are compatible. There is no conflict between science and maths. They simply answer different questions, have different purposes. Science and maths work together to provide a bigger and more accurate picture of what is.

In fact, without mathematics science would be very limited in what it could tell us. Mathematics provides the framework in which science exists and works. Science alone is far from being the be-all and end-all.

Similarly faith is essential for/to science. "I" must have faith :

- a) in the teachers who taught/teach 'me' science; & in the reliability & trustworthiness of other 'scientists'
- b) in my ability to understand what I am taught

- c) the validity of 'my' observations (& that of others)
- d) in the veracity of my senses and my reasoning to correctly interpret my observations
- e) in the veracity of the senses and reasoning ability of others
- f) in the consistency of the universe
- g) and much more...

The Conflict of **Faith vs Reason or Science** - cannot be resolved because no such conflict exists. The conflict is manufactured, not real. As with many other issues the enemies of truth and reason attempt to bolster their position and create conflict by redefining words, and too often we fall for it. We then end up fighting on their turf in their terms in an indefensible position with indefensible arguments.

We must first expose this subterfuge and reclaim the words and restore their true meanings. (A problem here is that there is often an element of truth in the redefinitions, but it is half-truth. Half-truths are usually more deceptive than outright lies.)

So what is this thing we call faith? What is the relationship between faith and the real world we see, hear and touch? Does faith still have a role in our modern scientific world, and if so what?

Faith is a bridge. It is a bridge over uncertainties, over what we can't see. But it must be anchored on both ends onto certainties, solid evidence.

Consider the concept of a 'ring of truth'. Some things just sound/feel right, and some wrong. (Of course we can be mistaken.) Some things just seem to have that ring of truth inherent in them - as if there is an inner witness in us confirming them, even in the absence of sufficient evidence. Some things similarly just sound wrong. When we reject this inner witness, often for ideological reasons, it leaves us with an inner conflict or tension.

Similarly, scientists and mathematicians often choose or promote one theory over another because of its 'elegance' or 'beauty'. (No criticism is implied or meant.)

All this goes well beyond the mechanical. It is a characteristic of human nature enabling us to go far beyond what a computer or 'robot' could. It enables us to come to valid conclusions from insufficient data. It is how we invent things, create music, science, movies, ideas. Faith is what enables us to live, to move.

3 Quotes

- CS Lewis: *"Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods"*
- Martin Luther King Jr: *"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."*
- Victor Hugo: *"Faith is a necessity to a man. Woe to him who believes in nothing."*

There are some people who argue that science (\equiv objective truth) and faith (\equiv subjective nonsense) have no connection at all. Consider the "non-overlapping magisteria" of Stephen Jay Gould (eg. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-overlapping_magisteria).

The general belief is that faith is unreasonable, that it is contrary to reason. There is much ridicule based on this notion with references to, for example, sky fairies, invisible friends, etc.

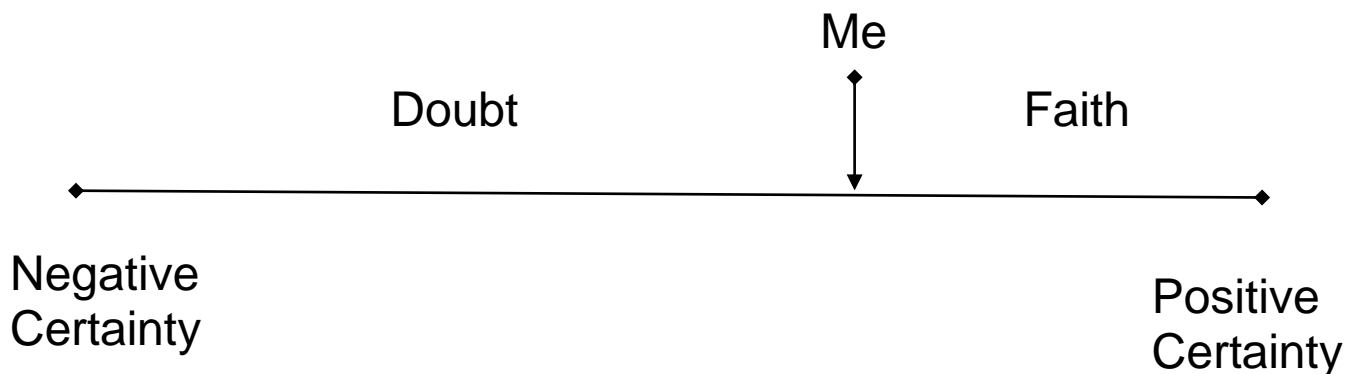
Others do their best to show that science and faith are compatible, that it is possible to "be a person of faith" and a scientist at the same time. Very often, however, they tend to go along with Gould and have distinct "faith" and "science" compartments in their minds – and "never the twain shall meet".

It seems to me that the biggest problem in this whole 'debate' is our understanding of what exactly "faith" is, especially given some of the quotes we had earlier from Twain, Dawkins & Hitchens.

One of the aims of a group like this is to demonstrate that faith is reasonable. True faith, real faith is, and must be, based on reason, on evidence (irrespective of whether or not it is rightly placed), past experience, faith in a trustworthy teacher/witness/etc.

4 Faith and Doubt

This diagram provides another way to look at faith :



'My' position on any given proposition will fall somewhere along the continuum between negative and positive certainty. "Faith" will then be that gap between my position and positive certainty, and "doubt" the gap to negative certainty.

In ALL things we all fall somewhere along this line. No matter how sure something is there is always this gap which can only be crossed with faith. The nearest we get to certainty is "*I think therefore I am*".

Depending on your world view, you will pick different positions along this line for different questions.

Note also – certainty is not the same as truth. They may or may not correspond.

Information, data, and 'facts' don't compete with faith (or doubt), rather they serve to move the pointer along the faith/doubt continuum (it should probably be asymptotic). They do not provide certainty, merely probability.

5 Faith and Faithful

When I was married I promised my wife to be faithful to her. She likewise promised to be faithful to me. I have faith in her. The longer I live with her, the better I know her, the stronger my faith - the more faith I have in her.

For some relationships, the better you know the other person the less faith you have in him/her.

The marriage vow includes a vow of faithfulness "until death".

Faithful – If someone is faithful then I can reliably put my faith in him/her.

"You can never really know someone completely. That's why it's the most terrifying thing in the world, really—taking someone on faith, hoping they'll take you on faith too. It's such a precarious balance, It's a wonder we do it at all. And yet.." — **Libba Bray**

Science and Faith – As any scientist will tell you (anyone at all, in fact) : we don't know everything. In science there is much that is unknown, in fact the more we know the more this reveals that we don't know.

Stuart Firestein (chair of the Department of Biological Sciences at Columbia University) — "*Being a scientist requires having faith in uncertainty, finding pleasure in mystery, and learning to cultivate doubt. There is no surer way to screw up an experiment than to be certain of its outcome.*"

“Science, then, is not like the onion in the often used analogy of stripping away layer after layer to get at some core, central, fundamental truth. Rather it’s like the magic well: no matter how many buckets of water you remove, there’s always another one to be had. Or even better, it’s like the widening ripples on the surface of a pond, the ever larger circumference in touch with more and more of what’s outside the circle, the unknown. This growing forefront is where science occurs... It is a mistake to bob around in the circle of facts instead of riding the wave to the great expanse lying outside the circle.”

“Perhaps the most important application of ignorance is in the sphere of education, particularly of scientists... We must ask ourselves how we should educate scientists in the age of Google and whatever will supersede it... The business model of our Universities, in place now for nearly a thousand years, will need to be revised.

[...]

Instead of a system where the collection of facts is an end, where knowledge is equated with accumulation, where ignorance is rarely discussed, we will have to provide the Wiki-raised student with a taste of and for boundaries, the edge of the widening circle of ignorance, how the data, which are not unimportant, frames the unknown. We must teach students how to think in questions, how to manage ignorance. W. B. Yeats admonished that ‘education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.’”

It is a standard belief of science that those things we don't know we can know, we can work out. (Eg. 'We don't know how life formed from non-life, but some day we will'.) This is simply believed by faith – based on the evidence of what we have discovered and determined in the past. It is a (giant) leap of faith that the unknown is knowable and can be known, and will be known.

Once upon a time, man believed in 'spontaneous generation' – ie. that life could and did spontaneously form from non-living matter. Eg. Rotting meat naturally produced maggots. This has since been *proven* to be false, and **all** the evidence we have tells us that life *only* comes from life, that non-living matter *never* comes to life (though the opposite direction is common).

There is no known mechanism whereby life could form from non-life, and the best efforts of scientists have been unable to even come close to making it happen under the best conditions they can engineer.

So, those who believe that the universe created itself from nothing, who believe in the non-existence (or at least total non-involvement) of God, have to take a giant leap of faith to believe that:

- something all scientific evidence says is impossible actually happened
- someday science will work it out
- eventually our best minds and scientific approaches will be able to replicate it, so proving that no intelligence was required in the first place. (*sarcasm intended*)

Where there is **complete knowledge and absolute control**, faith vanishes. Where knowledge and/or control are incomplete faith must be exercised to bridge the gap.

Faith in 'my' senses, faith in my reasoning ability, faith in my 'teachers', faith in other people faith in 'my' memory, ...

Faith in wikipedia, faith in horoscopes, faith in God, ...

We are ALL people of faith. Without complete knowledge and absolute control it is impossible to live without faith.

What basis do we have for faith in our reasoning? In the reasoning (and veracity) of others? In our senses? In a universe that somehow created itself from nothing, if everything that is is the result of unplanned, undirected, undesigned, purposeless random actions, reactions & interactions, then that applies also to the human brain. There is thus no basis whatsoever for believing that any of its thoughts, deliberations, conclusions have any meaning at all, or any connection to reality.

Therefore if you believe that, then you have no basis to believe it. No basis for reason, for rationality. No basis even to believe that you actually believe what you think you believe.

To believe that chemical reactions and the movements of electrons can provide us with rational, coherent, valid, conscious understanding of reality requires a great leap of unjustified faith.

Computers cannot do this – they are merely machines, only able to do what we tell them to. Their output is only as good as our input. AND – they did not randomly evolve as we are believed to have done, but are the result of countless hours of intelligent design and construction.

If, however, everything that is came into being at the behest of an intelligent, relational, purposeful creator, directed according to 'his' design, then that applies also to the human mind. There is thus an absolute basis for believing that our thoughts, observations, reasonings do have a genuine meaning and validity.

Therefore - if you believe that then you have a genuine basis for reasoning, for rationality, for believing that this belief is rational and meaningful.

Thus, *irrespective of the actual nature of reality*, it is only belief in a creator God that can be considered a rational belief. No other belief can be maintained on any reasonable basis whatsoever.

In fact it is because of things like this that modern science could only develop in Christian Europe – because only there was the necessary faith in human reason.

God is often derided as “God of the gaps” - where we don't have an explanation for something we say “God did it”. But as science takes us further and further those gaps get smaller and fewer. It is now possible to see that, down the track, these gaps will disappear leaving no room for God, and God will then cease to exist.

Christians don't see things that way. To them science isn't removing God but revealing him.

Faith can be viewed in a similar way. Faith covers the gaps in our knowledge (see above). As knowledge increases it leaves less room for faith. BUT a universe, an existence, with no room for faith is one not worth having, for that would require absolute knowledge and absolute control. This would then totally rule out any possibility of genuine meaningful relationship (ie. A unitary God – incapable of creation or of anything). It is relationships that provide worth, meaning, purpose; that provide life. And in any relationship worth having each party is free to give/take as they choose. It is not love, it is not real, if one has absolute control and the other is a robot. Hence there will always be the requirement of faith – faith in the faithfulness of the other(s).

Faith is thus, also, vulnerability. Placing trust in one who 'may' let you down, trusting that they won't, though being aware that it is always a possibility.

Though in the same way that science *reveals* God, the more, the better we know someone the easier it is to have faith in his/her faithfulness.

6 Conclusion

Faith is an inescapable essential.

Faith is as much, if not more so, faith in a person(s) than belief in propositions.

Ultimately the big question when it comes to 'faith' is: Which faith is reasonable?

We could also consider which faith is the *most* reasonable. And an important consideration in deciding this is to determine which is (the most) consistent, and which is actually coherent.

It is my thesis, which I have alluded to here, that the Christian faith best fits these criteria, and is by far the most reasonable.