

FAITH, DOUBT AND MYSTERY

1. MEANING OF FAITH
2. REDUCTIONS OF FAITH
3. TYPES OF DOUBT
4. PHILOSOPHICAL DOUBT AND MYSTERY

1. MEANING OF FAITH:

Two parts

First: the *cognitive* part of faith

- Faith means trust, which raises the question: what is one supposed to have trust *in*.
- Obviously, one only trusts things which one takes as true. Nobody knowingly trusts lies.
- The cognitive part of faith spells out the things which the Christian faith takes as true. Things like..
 - the existence of God.
 - the brokenness/sinfulness of humans due essentially to their alienation from God.
 - how intimacy with God can be restored (the role of Christ).
 - how the good life can be lived.
- Hence: faith involves a creed.

Second: the *heart* part of faith

- Agreement with a creed not sufficient for biblical faith.
- Biblical faith also requires a response from the heart.
 - Heart as metaphor for our deepest motives and drives – what ultimately makes us tick.
- What is the required heart response of biblical faith?
 - Radical commitment to trust in God’s provision and promises, as informed by the cognitive part.
 - Radical commitment to serve God’s purposes (God’s kingdom), as informed by the cognitive part.
- Essence of *heart faith*: emptying of self before God – surrender of self to God

“Dying to self”

- The bible likens this “emptying of the self before God” to death of the self (“dying to self”).
- The promise is that if we “die to self” in this way, God will subsequently fill the believer with “new life”.
 - God’s own life, through his Spirit.
- There has to be some kind of death before there can be resurrection to new life.
 - Literally with Christ, figuratively with us.
- *Heart faith* is what restores our relationship to God – *heart faith is* that new relationship:
 - Through faith, we live “in him” and he lives “in us”.
 - Partial fulfilment of heaven (Kingdom of God) already now.

As an aside

- *Heart faith* almost synonymous with Jesus' characterisation of the "heart" of the law:
 - "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind [that is, all your faculties] and love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 10:30-31)

Sum up:

Biblical faith needs both parts

- Rom 10: 9. "If you confess with your mouth [***cognitive part***] ... and believe in your heart [***heart part***] ..., you will be saved."
- 1 Thess. 1: 5. ".. our gospel came to you not only in word [***cognitive part***], but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction [***heart part***]."

2. REDUCTIONS OF FAITH

Reduction 1: faith as consent to doctrine

- Emphasises the cognitive part but downplays the heart part of faith.
- Faith gets reduced to
 - consent to a set of doctrines
 - the ability to recite a creed.
 - pure theological intellectualism.
- Such faith deteriorates to “dead orthodoxy”.
 - Little life, love and heart.

Reduction 2: faith without action

- Faith is, of course, in essence an inward matter;
 - It resides invisibly in the believer's heart.
 - It can only be subjectively experienced.
- Yet faith must also become outwardly manifest in the believer's behaviour – in **all** areas of his/her life.
 - “Works” are not faith, but the necessary result of faith and, therefore, the evidence of it.
 - “By its fruit you shall recognise the tree” (Matt 7:16).
- No necessary contradiction between Paul and James.

Reduction 3: faith as middle-class comfort and respectability

- Genuine faith is a radical stance.
 - To a degree always counter-cultural, non-mainstream, subversive to the status-quo, anti-establishment, and offensive to many.
- Believers should be “pilgrims in a foreign land” – not too comfortable in this world.
- When well told and well lived, the Christian message tends to produce either fierce hostility or radical embrace.
 - Precisely the reaction that Jesus got.
- When the offence of faith is lost, its edge is blunted.

Reduction 4: faith as only emotion or no emotion

- In essence, faith is an act of the will:
 - a commitment of the heart “to die to self and live for God”.
- A faith built too much on emotion is not deeply rooted: “like seed planted in shallow soil”.
 - Waxes and wanes with one’s emotional state of mind.
- It is possible to have lots of emotion but little heart faith.
- Still, faith should involve all the faculties, including the emotion:
 - “Love God with all your heart, soul and mind”
- So, a faith that has not touched the emotion is also not likely to be deeply rooted.

Reduction 5: cognitive part of faith downplayed or relativised

- If that happens, the heart part suffers.
 - tends to deteriorate to non-descript optimism, mere good feeling/good will, or pure mystical experience.
- Biblical faith must have specific content, which is held as true in an objective absolute sense.
 - As said, faith is trust *in* something, which by nature must be held as true.
- Without really trusting the absolute truth of a few things, faith tends not to survive the storms of life.

Reduction 6: faith as a static, “done deal” from the past

- Faith does know an initial “step of faith” in the past, but requires continual “steps of faith” in the present + future.
- So faith is almost like a living organism which *should* grow:
 - “I believe. Help me in my unbelief” (Mark 9: 23-24).
 - It takes time for faith to grow:
 - to really move from the head to the heart
 - to fully impregnate behaviour in all areas of life.
 - to correct consciously + sub-consciously held false notions.
- Just as faith can grow, it can also shrink, stagnate, be damaged and, if possible, die – if not handled well.

Reduction 7: faith insulated from challenge

- Faith either shrinks or grows under pressure from (a) adversity (1 Peter 1) and (b) intellectual challenge.
- Radical questioning and doubt may be necessary precursor to faith or growth in faith:
 - Christianity, if true, should be able to handle some stiff interrogation.
 - If handled well, the interrogation should strengthen faith.
- Many entertain deep doubt, but don’t do anything about it: no reading, wrestling, discussing, etcetera
 - Result: stagnation or even slow death of faith.
- Such people bought into the New Atheist caricature of faith as blind faith: belief in the truth of things for which there can be no evidence (because it is plainly false).
 - If that is faith, why seek evidence to support it?

3. TYPES OF DOUBT:

Type One Doubt: Potentially Productive

Type Two Doubt: Usually Unproductive

Type One Doubt (a)

- It is **not in denial**: it frankly admits to being confused and uncertain about the claims of Christianity.
- *But it still believes that the matter can be settled: either for or against Christianity.*
 - *It takes it for granted that truth (or untruth) exists and that it is, in principle, obtainable and recognisable.*
- That is why it is prepared to embark on a journey of discovery.

Type One Doubt (b)

- It is **not insisting on absolute certainty**: it realises that there is no absolute proof for things like:
 - The existence of God
 - The life, death and resurrection of Christ, etcetera.
- *But it is willing to be swayed if **sufficient reasonable evidence** were presented to it.*
 - *Not like the absolute proof of mathematics but more like judicial proof based on evidence presented in a court of law,*
 - *where the accumulation of circumstantial evidence can put a case “beyond reasonable doubt”.*
- That is why it believes that its journey of discovery can have some destination.

Type One Doubt (c)

- It is **well aware of the limits in the knowledge of God**: it realises that exhaustive knowledge of an invisible, transcendent God is not available.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that **sufficient knowledge of this God** may be available (through empirical evidence, experience or credible revelation) as needed for robust faith in this God.*
- That it why it still seeks after this God, in spite of the doubt.

Type One Doubt (d)

- It is **not unduly exacting in its demand for proofs of the reliability of the bible**: it realises that, as with any historical text, not everything in the bible can be externally confirmed by historical, archaeological or scientific evidence.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that a **sufficient** amount of biblical detail may be open to such confirmation,*
 - *sufficient to gain our trust in the truthfulness of the bible as a whole.*
 - *sufficient to give the parts that cannot be directly checked the benefit of the doubt – as we do with any historical text.*
- That is why it is willing to go to the bible as a possible source of reliable knowledge about God's involvement in history.

Type One Doubt (e)

- It is **not unaware of the nature of the bible**: it realises that the bible consists of a seemingly disjointed set of books by different authors, in different cultural contexts, in different times, in different literary styles.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that a coherent set of ideas (a golden thread, a systematic theology) can nonetheless be distilled from all these divergent texts.*
 - *through the use of an appropriate set of hermeneutical principles (rules of interpretation).*
- That is why it is willing to investigate the bible as a possible source for coherent truth about God and his plans with man, in spite of the doubt.

Type One Doubt (f)

- It is **not unduly impatient**: it realises that not everything in the bible will be immediately understandable and acceptable.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that a **sufficient** amount of the biblical message can become understandable and acceptable*
 - ***sufficient** to justify taking “a step of faith”.*
 - ***sufficient** to justify trust in a gradual retreat of what remains incomprehensible and doubtful.*
- That is why it is prepared to interrogate (and keep on interrogating) the bible, in spite of the doubts about it.

Type One Doubt (g)

- It is **not naïve**: it realises that all biblical interpretation is fallible human activity, which should remain open to continual re-evaluation and re-interpretation.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that human interpretation is at least capable in principle to unlock what the authors of the biblical texts intended to say.*
- That is why it is willing to investigate, and keep on investigating, both the bible and interpretative tradition.

Type One Doubt (h)

- It is **not insensitive**: it realises that parts of the bible may cause serious offence to a contemporary audience.
- *But it is willing to entertain the possibility that contemporary cultural norms may not be absolute – not in God's eyes (assuming he exists) and not in historical perspective.*
 - NB: throughout history different aspects of the biblical message were offensive to the prevailing culture.
- That is why it is prepared not to write off the bible too soon when it asserts things which inflame contemporary sensitivities.

Type One Doubt: Summary

- It is not in denial about its serious doubts about the claims of Christianity.
- But it still believes in truth and is willing to investigate it.
 - It accepts that only a consistent, coherent set of truth claims is worthy of our trust (faith).
- It is willing to entertain the possibility (however remote) that enough evidence for the coherence of the bible and the truth of Christianity is available.
 - It rejects the New Atheist notion of faith as belief, through sheer will power, in the truth of things for which there is no evidence.

Type One Doubt: Summary (cont'ed)

- In spite of its serious doubts, it still deep down **suspects** that Christianity may just be true or even deep down **would like** it to be true.
- That's what drives it along.

Type Two Doubt

- We can be very short about this type of doubt.
- It is the doubt which – deep down – does not really want Christianity to be true nor suspects that it may just be true.
- Hence it keeps on tripping over the many, many things that seem, at first inspection, offensive and unbelievable in Christianity.
- This doubt cannot maintain itself for very long and soon turns into certainty – the certainty of the untruth of Christianity.

4. PHILOSOPHICAL DOUBT AND MYSTERY

Type Three Doubt: Philosophical Doubt

- This type of doubt not only doubts the truth and reality of Christian ideas, but the existence of objective truth and reality in general.
- It is a generalised scepticism about all **grand narratives**, **systems of thought** and **totalising discourse**, which seek to make definitive sense of the world.
- It is a more or less permanently sceptical frame of mind, rooted in a particular philosophical stance (postmodernism).
- It is really **philosophical** doubt related to the object-subject barrier.

Object-subject barrier: some definitions

- Subjective knowledge = knowledge as experienced “in here”, by me in my mind.
 - Subjective knowledge can only be true for me, because situated in my mind.
- Objective knowledge = knowledge about what exists “out there”, outside of my mind.
 - Because objective knowledge is rooted in what is “out there”, it can, if true, be true not only for me but for everybody.
 - Hence objective truth = absolute truth.

Object-subject barrier

- Nobody has direct knowledge of the external world.
 - Objective knowledge can only be subjectively held by each of us in our minds.
- Poses a basic problem: we cannot be certain that the images and conceptualisations subjectively constructed by the mind correspond with the objective reality out there.
 - Impossible to prove that our logic/observation is reliable guide to objective knowledge.
 - The barrier cannot logically be bridged.
- Pervasive doubt and scepticism would then seem the only rational posture.

The apparent subtext of philosophical doubt

- Philosophical doubters appear ***perplexed*** by
 - the pervasive complexity and ambiguity in reality – a reality which seems shot through with paradox, contradiction and dilemma.
- Philosophical doubters appear ***exasperated*** by
 - the enormous amounts of humbug, exaggeration, arbitrariness, bias, delusion, and just plain nonsense in people’s confident truth claims – especially in the religious realm but also even in the scientific realm.

The apparent subtext of philosophical doubt

- Seemingly overwhelmed by all this, philosophical doubters give up on truth.
 - “Forget it, it is just not there. And it anyhow leads to strife, exclusion (‘we are in and they are out’) and discord.”
- “And, anyhow, claiming objective truth is just a smoke screen for power play.”
 - Objective truth claims are all “social constructions of reality” informed by the interests of our race, gender or class.
 - Let’s “deconstruct” it all.

“Make love, not war”

- And so: instead of fighting over truth, let's just accommodate it all, embrace all contradiction and ambiguity.
- Reality is just not open to coherent interpretation.
- So just play around with words.

Quick aside

- For those who believe in objective biblical truth, let's just say this:
 - The bible commands Christians to “speak the truth in love”.
 - The bible explicitly forbids Christians to use violence in the defence of their faith: be it verbal, attitudinal or physical.
 - Christians can use violence as representatives of the state in defence of **everybody's** freedom (including people's religious freedom), NEVER in defence of their own particular religion.

New understanding of blind faith

- Philosophical doubt (PD) suggests a new understanding of the New Atheist notion of **blind faith**: *belief in the existence of things for which there is no evidence.*
- According to PD, everyone, be they Christian, (New) Atheist or Muslim, have blind faith insofar they hold on to the existence of obtainable objective truth.
 - Ironically, New Atheists (who are not PD) would thus fall foul of the PD notion of blind faith too.

New understanding of genuine faith

- PD can also allow for a new understanding of genuine faith as inspired by love – call it PD faith.
- PD faith is defined in seemingly purely subjective terms as a mental attitude.
 - An attitude which looks at reality through the spectacles of love.
- This attitude can still be informed by cognitive issues too: creeds, doctrines and dogmas.
 - Seemingly not because they are held to be objectively true, but because they are somehow useful in directing the believer's attention towards love for others, like the dogma that God = love.
- In PD faith, creeds are aids to faith, not an intrinsic part of faith itself – as we took our cognitive faith to be.

New understanding of genuine faith (continued)

- PD faith's emphasis is not on objective truth but on mystery:
 - The mystery of an unobservable and inscrutable transcendent God.
 - The mystery of an impenetrable reality
 - full of contradiction
 - resistant to definite categorisation
 - abounding in moral dilemmas.
- And so, it reduces it all to love and defines faith as an attitude of love.
- After all, 'God is love' and so it is love that really matters. Everything else is at best irrelevant and at worst dangerous.

Overlap with heart faith

- Of course, large overlap of PD faith with our *heart faith*: the emptying of self in love to God and our fellowman.
- But, because of its rejection of objective truth, PD faith must remain vague and fluid about:
 - who precisely God is (beyond the fact that he is love) and what his plans are,
 - what it means in practice to love him and our fellowman.
- If true to its own beliefs, PD faith must accommodate Muslims, Hindi, Christians or even atheists, as long as their creeds emphasise love – as they all do, to some degree or other.
- According to PD faith, what matters most is mental attitude, not content.

Impoverished faith

- Emptying faith of content by giving up on all objective truth besides some undefined concept of love, must impoverish faith.
- **Heart faith** needs more definite information about who this God of love is, how he loves us, and what plans he has for us.
 - Otherwise our faith walk must be bewildering.
- **Faith action** needs more definite ideas about how to serve God and our neighbour.
 - It needs a well thought-through worldview which informs believers about:
 - how to love and respect others in all areas of life in a broken world.
 - what justice means in all areas of life in a broken world.

Hard, frustrating work

- Of course, finding one's way through the maze of ambiguity, arbitrariness, bias, delusion, and humbug in search of reliable objective truth is hard, often frustrating work.
- But if Christians (or everybody else for that matter) want to have solid faith + make a positive contribution to the world, that is what needs to be done.

And it is not hopeless: the basics are fairly straightforward

1. There is fairly good extra-biblical evidence for the existence of a God who is both the transcendent Creator and the immanent sustainer of the universe (who is both “out there” and “in here”).
2. There is fairly good extra-biblical evidence that Jesus actually existed and that he died and rose again.
 - That already directs us to the bible, which is unique in that regard.

And it is not hopeless: the basics are fairly straightforward

3. There is overwhelming evidence for the idea that man is “fallen”, broken and sinful.
4. It makes sense to suppose that a good God needs to be a God of both love and justice.
 - That already suggests something like the Christian mechanics of salvation by substitutory atonement.
5. There is fairly good evidence for the biblical view of man as God’s representative (created in the his image) with freedom and moral responsibility+accountability.
 - That can already inform a whole lot about what a just society in broad outline should look like.

Overlap with cognitive faith

- There is also an overlap of PD faith with what we called *cognitive faith*, which can indeed also embrace mystery.
- However, cognitive faith does not embrace mystery because the world is an enigma and coherent objective truth is unattainable.
- Rather, it embraces mystery because, among other things, we experience an inexplicable union between subject and object which makes objective truth possible.
- Let's explain.

Bridging the barrier

- The object-subject barrier poses a real problem if objective knowledge is to be attained.
- And yet it is practically bridged all the time:
 - We don't worry about it in daily life.
 - "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, does not go away".
- We know, and take for granted, that our subjective minds can obtain adequate objective knowledge of the external world.
 - That's what allows us to function in the world.

But what about all that false knowledge?

- Sure, people are prone to embrace a bewildering amount of arbitrariness, bias and error, both in their daily lives and in their scientific activity.
- The philosophical object-subject barrier indeed serves the useful function of reminding us of our own proneness to bias and error, into which all of us all too easily fall.
- But the philosophical object-subject barrier need not cause us to indiscriminately cast doubt on all knowledge; it need not lead us into a pervasive scepticism about all knowledge.

What about all that false knowledge? (2)

- It seems that the cause of false knowledge seems to lie in things such as:
 - Ignorance, selective admission of facts, admission of untrue facts, inadequate interpretative methods, hasty conclusions, lazy thinking, wild speculation, logical mistakes, fuzzy definitions, and such like.
- And these things CAN be overcome – even if often with effort and difficulty.

But what about all that false knowledge? (3)

- Proof: we have undeniably progressed in our understanding of the objective world, both in daily life and in scientific practice.
 - We sent a man to the moon!
 - Better education has pushed back ignorance and superstition.

The contribution of theism

- Theism can make sense of the fact that what seems logically impossible in philosophical terms (namely overcoming the o-s barrier) is practically and experientially solved all the time.
- A transcendent God created the object and the subject as two separate entities (they remain distinct).
- Yet object and subject are also linked because God created them both and immanently upholds them both (they can come together as one).
 - God has given humans a rationality which somehow “fits” the structure of the outside world.

Adequacy of human rationality

- Example: abstract mathematics thought up by the human brain happens to fit the structure of the physical world – Polkinghorne.
- Hence human rationality is adequate for making sense the world, but it is not absolute.
 - It remains derivative - derived from the divine rationality which represents absolute reason (“the God’s Eye View”).
 - Its logic is not capable of fully explaining metaphysical questions which do require “the God’s Eye View”.

Metaphysics

- Metaphysics: the philosophical endeavour to encode the ultimate structure of reality.
- It encounters dualities everywhere:
 - Subject versus object, matter versus spirit, transience versus permanence, etcetera.
- They all display reason-defying “unity-in-duality”: there is both separation (difference) and connection (sameness) between the opposing categories.
 - Metaphysics cannot strictly logically be done.
 - Any logical attempt to solve the mystery leads to reduction.
- Does that mean that science and life cannot strictly logically be done?
 - NO

Metaphysics in the particular sciences

- Metaphysics enters the particular sciences only when they seek to answer questions about the ultimate nature/structure of reality.
 - **Psychology**: Does chemical reaction in the brain shape thought or does thought shape chemical reaction in the brain? Answer: mysteriously both.
 - **Physics**: Is light ultimately a wave or a particle? Answer: mysteriously both.
 - **Social sciences**: Is human behaviour regular (subject to generalisable laws) or irregular? Answer: mysteriously both.
 - **Theology**: Is God transcendent or immanent? Is God sovereign or does man have freedom? Answer: mysteriously both.

Metaphysical in the particular sciences

- Answers to metaphysical questions can powerfully shape the methodology of the particular sciences:
 - The methods used to investigate things.
 - When wrong: highly distortive.
- Otherwise metaphysical issues, and the logic-defying paradoxes that they entail, need not enter scientific enquiry at all.
 - Science can be purely rational and logical: reason reigns (luckily).
 - Flat contradictions disallowed.

Summary and conclusions

1. Faith has a cognitive part and a heart part, both of which are essential.
2. Faith is a living thing: it entails a process of growth (or stagnation)
3. Doubt is not inimical to faith, but there must be some kind of desire or suspicion that Christianity may just be true. Otherwise the many “oddities” of Christianity are bound to trip up the doubter who will then never reach faith.
4. PD faith as a loving disposition towards reality can have large overlaps with heart faith and cognitive faith but, due to lack of objective content, must ultimately impoverish faith.

Summary and conclusions

5. The paradoxes of metaphysics should not be generalised and introduced into issues which are not metaphysical in nature. Not everything is metaphysics.
6. The paradoxes of metaphysics need not be a source of doubt about Christian truth claims. In fact, they can be a confirmation of such claims.