Gi **Faith Without Theology**

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Contents

1. Belief, faith, truth, knowledge 1
2. The cosmological answer 15
3. Forced, living, and momentous options 21
4. Passional and intellectual grounds 23
5. The leap of faith 26
6. Faith and Reason 32

1. Belief, faith, truth, knowledge

Elderly mother loses her only child, longtime businessman is forced to file for bankruptcy, ambitious politician suffers first electoral defeat, paraplegic endures constant pain, once-famous musician ponders the fickleness of fame, passionate teenager is abandoned by lover -- they ask “What is the meaning of life? Is life worth living? What is the point of living?” This, not uncommon, question often leads to commitment to religion, or if already committed to strengthening it.

The most familiar answer to the question is indeed theological: certain beings, gods or God, guarantee that life has a meaning, but mostly *after death*, consisting of (vaguely) the contemplation of God in heaven together with angels and saints, or (crudely) enjoying the company of virgins, eating the sweet fruit of bountiful orchards, and savoring rivers of milk and honey. Such meaning of life involves existence *after death*, but this is desirable since the question becomes especially stringent when combined with the thought that life here and now is ephemeral. What is the point of seeking happiness, pleasure, well-being, love, fame, power, whether for oneself, or for others, even for the human species, if they all will turn out to be mere specks in space and flickers in time? It is not surprising that the question about the meaning of life has led to the question about life after death. Yearning for the hereafter is hardly separable from yearning for meaning of one’s life, though not vice versa.

But it would be fatuous to claim that we *know* the theological answer to be true. The standard view has been that we only *believe* it, or more precisely have *faith* in it. “Faith,” William James wrote, “means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance. It is in fact the same moral quality which we call courage in practical affairs.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Merriam-Webster offers “strong belief or trust in someone or something” as its first definition of “faith,” and “belief in the existence of God: strong religious feelings or beliefs” as the second definition.

We are faced with the distinct, but often used interchangeably, notions of belief (including the deontic notion of justified belief) and faith. Faith is not mere belief. The usage of the word “belief” is loose, indeed chaotic. The chaos was made evident by H. H. Price in his classic book on the subject.[[2]](#footnote-3) He considered a plethora of senses: belief as an occurrence, as a disposition, as assenting-to-a-proposition, as taking a stand, thinking-that, being-sure, believing with conviction, thinking that, surmising, suspecting, believing mildly, believing-in, believing-that, believing with thinking, believing without thinking, believing with understanding, believing without understanding, conscious believing, unconscious believing, believing a proposition, believing a person, half- believing, and so on.

In contrast, “faith” expresses the notion of serious commitment to something important. Whether I believe that Tirana is the capital of Albania would ordinarily be of little importance even to me, it would not matter, but whether I believe that I will be alive tomorrow is obviously different. To think of the latter as casual belief would fail to acknowledge the unquestioning commitment, perhaps even courage, it usually involves, comparable to that of a genuinely religious person’s belief in God, which indeed is usually called faith.

Although the notions of faith and religion are also often used interchangeably, they too are distinct; neither word in the phrase “religious faith” is redundant. In serious discussion the word “religion” might be preferable to “faith.” The latter, though not chaotic, remains vague, excessively broad, because of its inevitable tie to “belief.” In contrast, “religion” has the merit of expressing the narrower and important notion of a regimented*,* disciplined,commitment*.* We will be concerned here chiefly with the nature of faith and its role in human thought, though our conclusions also will have surprising implications for the question of the meaning of life.

Faith is essential to religion, but it is essential also to what is usually contrasted with religion. First, there are cases of faith that appear utterly capricious, unrelated to religion, evidence, or argument. Second, we make confident judgments about other people’s thoughts and feelings solely on the basis of what they say, often what they don’t say, or just on their facial expressions. Our moral statements usually concern observable facts, but we may find inferring them from nonmoral statements about these facts quite questionable (“is” does not entail “ought.”) They are all cases judgments and statements “concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible.” Even if we describe them as based on evidence, we would not regard them as proved by that evidence. They are not made solely on the basis of faith, but obviously faith plays a role in our decision to make them. And, there do seem to be cases concerning which doubt is *not* theoretically possible, for which we would employ the word “knowledge.” Appeals to faith are essential even to such cases. Familiar examples are our reliance on memory in making statements about the past, on sense perception in making statements about material objects, on the principle of induction, stated by David Hume as “instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same*.*”[[3]](#footnote-4) Fourth, there is our acceptance of the principle (“law”) of noncontradiction (contradictory propositions cannot both be true) and of propositions the denial of which would violate it. The acceptance of propositions such as “2 + 2 = 4,” and “If x + y = z, then y + x = z.” There are also, fifth, propositions such as “It is true that this apple looks green to me,” when it does look green to me. With the possible exception of induction, they all may be accepted as *self-evident.*  But that they are also *true* is not a matter of further knowledge, it can only be a matter of faith. They all are also examples of faith.

Of course, the faith need not be blind, unreasoning, insensitive to cognitive context and circumstances. Its cognitive context, i.e., what one feels, perceives, thinks, remembers, attends to at the time, may range from being utterly irrelevant to almost decisive. Accordingly, faith may be subject to evaluation as natural, reasonable, normal, irrelevant, surprising, peculiar, unfounded, perhaps crazy. It may be appropriate to its context or totally unrelated to it. It would remain faith, however, as long its propositional content is not entailed by that context. The self-evidence of a proposition is especially appropriate for faith that the proposition is true. So is also the conclusion of a valid argument with premises already taken to be true. In all other cases, the gap between cognitive context and truth is obvious. It is the reason for skepticism in epistemology and finding a bridge between them has been the central task of its opponents. Not so in the case of allegedly self-evident propositions. There the gap is almost hidden, and the role of faith generally ignored.

“Self-evident” means evident in virtue of itself, not in virtue of inference from something else. Merriam-Webster defines “evident” as “clear to the vision or understanding,” and “self-evident” as “evident without proof or reasoning.” The Oxford Dictionary defines “evident” as “clear; easily seen,” adding “ORIGIN late Middle English: from Old French, or from Latin evidens, evident- ‘obvious to the eye or mind’, from e- (variant of ex-) ‘out’ + videre ‘to see’,” and defines “self-evident” as “obvious and needing no further proof or explanation.” (Merriam-Webster defines “obvious” as “easily discovered, seen, or understood.”) Neither dictionary mentions truth. To say of a proposition that it is self-evident is indeed often taken to mean that it can be readily *seen* to be true, but usually only metaphorically. I may wonder whether the cat is in the house and try to find out by engaging in some sort of uncertain inference, perhaps appealing to memory. But seeing the cat in the house ends my wonder instantly.

While we may agree with the saying that seeing is believing, it does not say that seeing is *knowing*. Yet it is natural to take seeing as the best ground for knowing. Hence the traditional account of knowledge as apprehension, intuition, awareness, acquaintance, and the existence of the so-called strong sense of “know,” roughly that of certainty, as contrasted with its weak sense of some sort of true belief.[[4]](#footnote-5)

In the pursuit of knowledge, we sooner or later make an appeal to faith, not to replace knowledge but as a necessary step to it. To answer the question “How do you know that the proposition you claim to know is true” we are limited to two choices. One is to offer an argument, to infer the proposition from other propositions, the premises of the argument. The other choice, applicable also to the ultimate premises of an argument, is to say that the proposition is self-evident and then that *we just accept* it. But to say “wejustaccept it” amounts to little more than appealing to faith. Finding that the proposition is self-evident is not the same as finding that it is true, even if it is the best reason for the latter. As Frege remarked, “What is given is not a reason for something’s *being true*, but for our *taking it to be true*.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

Of course, “self-evident” does not mean accepted on faith. What is accepted on faith is that what is found to be self-evident is *true*. “This apple looks green to me,” when it does look green to me, may be self-evident to me, but I need faith to add that it is true. “Self-evident” and “true” are not synonyms: there are truths that are not self-evident. Nor is self-evidence a kind of truth. Neither of the two words in the phrase “self-evident truth” is redundant. If this distinction between self-evidence and truth seems stretched, notice that judgments of truth have implications that those of self-evidence do not. They provide premises for arguments, construction of explanations and theories, support for plans, and much else that calls for truth, not for self-evidence.

Self-evidence is usually appealed to in cases involving feeling, sense perception, or deductive reasoning. That an apple *looks* green to me may be self-evident to me, but not only does it not follow that the apple *is* green, it also does not follow that it is *true* that the apple looks green to me. That there is a gap between the self-evidence and the truth of a proposition becomes clear when we refuse to jump from the former to the latter. As physicians often find, some of their patients are afraid to admit even to themselves that they feel a certain ominous pain, while others refuse to admit even to themselves that they feel a certain pleasure they find embarrassing and perhaps sinful. Self-deception and Sartrean bad faith are hardly uncommon. Ordinarily, of course, the gap between the self-evidence and truth remains chiefly logical, and we may avoid acknowledging it by saying that the proposition in question is “self-evidently true.”

To say that a self-evident proposition is true is to take the substantive and all-important step from self-evidence to truth. We do not take that step by argument, reasoning, or providing additional evidence. We take it by faith, and faith is borne without appeal to knowledge. While knowledge may change belief by employing argument or providing evidence, it is usually powerless in the case of faith. You can, by argument or rhetoric, talk someone into believing, i.e., agreeing, that God exists, but not into faith that he does. It may be self-evident to me that I have a headache, but this by itself calls for no medication, only the judgment that it is true that I have a headache does so. My doctor cares for the latter, not the former.

If tempted to deny the distinction between self-evidence and truth, we should note that “I sure saw it but couldn’t believe it” is not unheard of and certainly not self-contradictory, even if it is a case of self-deception or bad faith. Its similarity to “OK, he (she) is a crook (liar, unfaithful, cruel, etc.) but I still love him (her)” is superficial. The latter need not be a case of self-deception or bad faith, it may be just a case of misplaced affection.

Self-evidence is unavoidably subjective, while truth is the epitome of objectivity. Indeed, this difference may account for the familiar disdain among some philosophers for “mere appearance.” Surely, they say, that this apple *looks* green to me is mere appearance, deserving no cognitive respect, while cognition demands objectivity, reality. That this apple *is* green does deserve cognitive respect. It enters in logical relations with numerous other propositions and may serve as evidence for scientific theories. That the apple *looks* green to me may also enter in logical relations to some other propositions, but they are fewer and unlikely to constitute a theory though they may be cited in support of some theories, presumably in ophthalmology and psychoanalysis. Contrast this with the proposition that it is *true* that the apple looks green to me. Surely, all truth, even about mere appearance, deserves cognitive respect, though perhaps not to the same degree. Hence the attraction of the sense-datum and adverbial theories in epistemology. Even if we find a proposition self-evident, we need faith to find it also true and claim it expresses knowledge.

Indeed, faith is needed throughout human thought, not just in appeals to self-evidence. Consider a valid argument of the form “All S are P, x is S, therefore x is P,” and let us assume that its two premises are true. Reason will tell us that “All S are P, x is S, but x is not P” is a contradiction. However, we cannot infer by deduction from this that “x is P” is true. There is no logical room left for such deduction. All that we could do in this case by employing the mechanism of formal logic has already been done with the declaration that “All S are P, x is S, but x is not P” is a contradiction. What the argument did was to set the cognitive context of the move by faith to “‘x is P’ is true.” Only faith could make that move. Since its context here, unlike that of faith that “This apple looks green to me” is true, is a deductive argument, it may involve also faith in the truth of the law of noncontradiction, one of our examples of self-evident propositions the truth of which we accept on faith. But can’t we *prove* that the law of noncontradiction is true by constructing the truth-table of “̴ (p⸳ ̴p,” rather than appealing to faith that it is true? No, because it is presupposed in the very construction of that truth-table: “p” is not allowed to have both T and F in the same row of the table.

Neither “true” nor “truth” occurs in the argument; indeed, neither is a term of formal logic. This is why logic is indifferent to what theory of truth is accepted and thus to the question “What is truth?” “Self-evident” is even more plainly not a term of logic. At least this is so in *formal* logic, which, as P. F. Strawson wrote, is concerned with “sets of schemata or logical skeletons…made up of logical constants (or logical particles) on the one hand and sentence-letters, predicate-letters and variables on the other…[Unlike formal logic, *philosophical* logic asks] What, exactly, is a *proposition*? What is meant by saying that a proposition is *true*? What, in general, is the nature of that relation between propositions when one *follows from*, or is *deducible from*, another?”[[6]](#footnote-7)

In *Principia Mathematica* we are told: “The process of inference is as follows: a proposition ‘p’ is asserted, and a proposition ‘p implies q’ is asserted, and then as a sequel the proposition ‘q’ is asserted. The trust in inference is the belief that if the two former assertions are not in error, the final assertion is not in error…The process of the inference cannot be reduced to symbols”[[7]](#footnote-8) But we also read there the following: “When we say that truth or falsehood is, for logic, the essential characteristic of propositions, we must not be misunderstood. It does not matter, for mathematical logic, what constitutes truth or falsehood; all that matters is that they divide propositions into two classes according to certain rules…It does not matter what propositions are, so long as we are content to regard our primitive propositions as defining hypotheses, not as truths.”[[8]](#footnote-9) The Ts and Fs in a truth-table do serve to divide propositions into two classes, and thus they are useful in the internal work of contemporary logic. But the interpretation of them as standing for “true” and “false” is external to that work, and so is the application of these words to propositions. The three primitive (undefined) ideas in *Principia* are those symbolized by “⸞p,” “p v q,” and “Ƒ” (the symbol for assertion).[[9]](#footnote-10)

Syntax and semantics are concerned with the content of the individual sentence, not with its truth, logic is concerned also with the relations between sentences, and it too cannot go beyond this in order to render verdicts about truth. That is the task of faith, even when it is achieved in the cognitive context provided by logic, just as it is in the context of self-evident propositions. Regarding the argument of the form “All S are P, x is S, therefore x is P,” logic does its job by making clear that “All S are P, x is S, but x is not P” would be a contradiction. But only faith can tell us that the contradictory statement is false and that “x is P” is true. For whatever our theory of truth may be, it holds truth to be a certain value (not “truth-value”!), whether for knowledge of the world, or greater coherence of the propositions we accept, or greater success in our dealing with the world. None of these can be expected from logic, just as they are not expected from syntax or semantics. Value-judgments have no place in any of them. This becomes especially clear in the case of logical truths or tautologies, which are declared true solely on the basis of their form, not content. Yet logic, syntax, and semantics do bear special relevance to faith, because all three are essentially concerned with propositions.

By “faith” I mean faith-that, not faith-in. Faith *in* x (God, some human, a book) would also be concerned with propositions if understood as faith *that* what x says is true. But if faith in x is understood as reliance on some other kind of help rendered by x, then faith-in would lack the intimate relation of faith-that to logic, syntax, and semantics.

In general, we resort to faith at three points when we rely on a valid argument: (1) in declaring its ultimate premises to be true, e.g., in the move from “This apple looks green to me” to “That this apple looks green to me is true,” (2) in declaring the argument that seems to be valid to be really valid, e.g., in the example of “All S are P, x is S, therefore x is P,” that “All S are P, x is S, but x is not P” would be a contradiction, and (3) in declaring its conclusion, e.g., “x is P,” to be true. It may be unlikely that self-deception or Sartrean bad faith would be present at any of these points, just as it is unlikely that they would be present in the move from “This apple looks green to me” to “That this apple looks green to me is true,” or from “I have a headache” to “That I have a headache is true.” In all of these cases, the move to truth by faith is likely to remain tacit and the logical distinctions not made.

The case of an inductive argument such as “All S observed in the past were P, therefore the next S will be P” is different in this respect. It almost begs for an explicit move to truth by faith, as the not uncommon rejoinder “But the next S might be an exception” would make obvious. This is why it is induction, not deduction, that has seemed questionable and in need of justification.

The distinction between a proposition and its truth becomes clearer when we note, without endorsing any one of them, how it would be understood by some conceptions of the nature of a proposition. According to the metaphysical conception, a proposition is a possible state of affairs, and it would distinguish between the state of affairs and its actuality. According to the linguistic conception, a proposition is a declarative sentence, and it would distinguish between the sentence and the assertion of the sentence (for example, p and q in “if p then q” are not asserted when the latter is asserted). According to the mentalist account, a proposition is a mental state or act, a judgment, and it would distinguish between the judgment and the “making” of it; one may contemplate making the judgment but not make it. All three accounts acknowledge that the truth of a proposition is not an internal feature of it and that it involves going beyond the proposition. The linguistic conception is especially clear in this respect. There is an obvious leap from awareness of the grammar and meaning of a sentence to asserting the sentence.

Wittgenstein wrote that “‘*p’* is true’ says nothing but *p*.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Following Tarski, Quine held that “‘Snow is while’ is true if and only if snow is white…such is the correspondence, in this example. Ascription of truth just cancels the quotation marks. Truth is disquotation.”[[11]](#footnote-12) But while disquotation may be ontologically frugal, it is hardly illuminating. Surely, also snow is white if and only if “Snow is white” is true. We have interest in the former only insofar as we have interest in the latter. And “says p” is ambiguous. Merely writing or uttering p could be part of a lesson in English or an example in a paper in linguistics entirely unrelated to its truth-value. The relevant meaning of “says p” is that of “asserts p,” but the latter surely means asserts that p is true.

This is why the nature of truth, not the color of snow, has been one of the most fundamental questions in human thought, and the search for it central even in the lives of nonprofessional truth-seekers. It’s tempting for philosophers to assign that search to science, but scientists are often equally perplexed, as seen from the puzzles in physics, astronomy, and psychology to the endless controversies in economics, political science, and sociology, and scientists’ depressing thought that they might have to settle for probability, not truth.

Unlike many others who have made remarks similar to Quine’s, Wittgenstein went deeper. He took seriously the primacy of truth as correspondence, offered the most detailed ontological account of it, but also acknowledged its special character with his striking distinction between “saying” and “showing.” He immediately explained what was just quoted as follows: “ “ ‘p’ is true”… is only a pseudo-proposition like all those connexions of signs which apparently say something that can only be shewn.”[[12]](#footnote-13) On Wittgenstein’s theory of saying and showing, if “‘p’ is true” cannot be *said*, it might nonetheless *show* something. If ‘p’ is a logical picture of a state of affairs (*Sachverhalt*), i.e., if it shares its logical form with the state of affairs (to be a logical picture, a sentence must share its logical form with what is pictured), then we cannot *say* that the state of affairs is *actual* or a *fact*, that it *exists* (all terms Wittgenstein uses), which is what we would mean by saying that ‘p’ is true. In general, we cannot *say* anything about logical form and about formal properties such as being an object, a complex, a *fact*, function, or number, all of which can only be *shown*.[[13]](#footnote-14) A sentence does not contain a word or feature for its being a logical picture of the state affairs it pictures, but it *shows* this, just as a portrait of a person does not represent its being a portrait of that person, or the person’s existence, but shows it. This does not mean that what the sentence and the portrait show is nothing. That the state of affairs shares the logical form of the sentence and that it exists, i. e., is actual, a fact,[[14]](#footnote-15) may show themselves. None of these can be said; none appears in logical notation (think of the arguments whether existence is a predicate). They may show themselves in our attitudes toward them: (1) in the case of logical form, our identifying the state of affairs in question, and (2) in the case of actuality or existence, our living and dealing with that state of affairs. It is hardly surprising that the move to truth is a matter of faith, not argument or inference. But in case (2) we are going beyond what Wittgenstein wrote, though he did not hesitate to speak of “the mystical.” He did observe, however, that “we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that,’” which would imply that logic cannot tell us what elementary propositions are true.[[15]](#footnote-16)

The central doctrine in the *Tractatus* was that what logic is about is inexpressible. This motivates the antirealist reading of the book, for example, Cora Diamond’s[[16]](#footnote-17) and Warren Goldfarb’s,[[17]](#footnote-18)since one might reasonably conclude that what cannot be said lacks reality. But the *Tractatus* also tells us that what cannot be said nonetheless can be shown or, as Wittgenstein sometimes writes, e.g., in 5.5561 and 6.522, that it can show itself (*zeigt sich*). One might then no less reasonably conclude that what cannot be said but can be shown is part of reality. After all, it is not like Pegasus or phlogiston. It *does* show itself. This motivates the realist reading, for example David Pears’[[18]](#footnote-19) and P. M. S. Hacker’s.[[19]](#footnote-20) Wittgenstein, however, avoided both antirealism and realism. He did write “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest* [*Es gibt allerding Unaussprechliches*],” but his next sentence was “They are what is mystical [*Dies 'zeigt' sich, es ist das Mystische*]” (6.522). These “things” are not of concern just to “soft” disciplines like ethics and theology. They include logical form and formal properties, the subject matter of logic. We cannot say of an item that it is an object, a complex, fact, function, number, or the totality of objects or of facts. Therefore, we cannot even say of the world, which is “the totality of facts,” that it is a world. But what we cannot say shows itself in what we can say. It is not nothing. Surely, the world is “something.” Surely, so is what Wittgenstein called “the higher,” in ethics or in logic. Yet, neither is it straightforwardly a part of reality. If it were, it would not be inexpressible.

Cora Diamond calls such a reading of the *Tractatus* a “chickening-out,”[[20]](#footnote-21) and Warren Goldfarb calls it “irresolute.”[[21]](#footnote-22) But I doubt they would say that logical form is like Pegasus or phlogiston. Wittgenstein is explicit that in some sense it is in “reality” [*Wirklichkeit*]: “Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it--logical form” (4.12), “Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it” (4.121). Logical form can only be shown, not because it is nothing but because its presence in *both* language and reality is what makes any saying possible. Saying presupposes showing. Something is said only if something else is shown.

In describing the step to truth as faith, we might be tempted to use the word “religion” instead of “faith.” We would then be moving from the chaos of the usage of “belief” to the sternness implied by “faith,” and from the latter to the regimentation and discipline associated with “religion” – all without presupposing theology. Such a use of “religion” may alarm the reader, but there is no standard name for the unquestioning yet serious and orderly stance that is characteristic of religion. This stance is not limited to religion. The word “religion” is often used also in nonreligious contexts, e.g., in describing political commitments, aesthetic preferences, personal likes or dislikes, and much else. Merriam-Webster defines “religion” first as “the belief in a god or in a group of gods” but promptly adds “a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith” as well as “*informal*: an interest, a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group,” suggests “[credo](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/credo), [creed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/creed), [cult](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult), [faith](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/faith), [persuasion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persuasion)*”* as synonymsand offers as examples “Hockey is a religion in Canada,” “Politics are a religion to him,” “Where I live, high school football is religion,” and “Food is religion in this house.” The Oxford Dictionary defines “religion” as “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the [worship](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/worship_1#worship_sng_1) of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader,” but also as “a particular interest or influence that is very important in your life” and offers as examples “For him, football is an absolute religion” and “Football has become an alternative religion for many people.”

But, despite its excessive breadth, I shall continue to use the word “faith,” rather than “religion,” in order to avoid the traditional but here unwanted specificity of the latter, which is commonly used in connection with the teachings and activities of churches, mosques, temples, even polytheistic rituals. I shall not mean, however, blind faith, insensitive to reason, cognitive context, or circumstances. I shall mean faith that is disciplined and meticulously sensitive. Such faith is indeed characteristic of religion, but it is also essential elsewhere, including appeals to self-evidence.

2. The cosmological answer

If we find the theological answer unsatisfactory, what other answers are there to the question about the meaning of life?

There is the egoist’s answer: the meaning of life consists in one’s own good (happiness, pleasure, well-being, love, fame, power) here and now. But, unless combined with the theological answer, the egoist’s answer is irrelevant. The question is not limited to the few decades one can expect to live here and now. The mother, businessman, politician, musician, paraplegic, and teenager mentioned earlier ask it because of unhappiness with life here and now.

There is the altruist’s answer: the meaning of life consists in promoting the good of others, whether one’s friends and relatives or all humanity. But it, too, is irrelevant to the question. Unless we take seriously the imagination of some science fiction writers, the eventual extinction of our friends and relatives as well of all humanity, indeed of our planet and even solar system, is as certain as one’s own eventual death. This is why the altruist’s answer is also often combined with the theological answer. What is the point of seeking happiness, pleasure, well-being, fame, power, whether one’s own, or that of others, even of humanity as a whole, if from a larger perspective they too will turn out to be mere specks in space and flickers in time?

Perhaps the only answer that does not face obvious difficulties is cosmological: the meaning of one’s life is its integral place and function, however minor, in the organic unity, the order, of the cosmos. It is often held that even the slightest change here and now occasions changes, perhaps virtually infinitesimal, throughout the universe, that everything affects everything else, however indirectly or slightly, perhaps also that “the flutter of a butterfly’s wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world.” Indeed, according to Newton’s law of universal gravitation, each body in the universe is attracted, even if very slightly, by every other body. One’s life, though brief, is not ephemeral and trivial because it is a necessary part of the cosmos, which is not ephemeral and trivial.

This answer may remind us of Spinoza, who insisted that “In Nature there is nothing contingent, but all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and act in a certain manner,”[[22]](#footnote-23)that “the reason why a circle or a triangle exists or does not exist is not drawn from their nature, but from the order of corporeal nature generally,”[[23]](#footnote-24) that ”Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God,”[[24]](#footnote-25) that “all things which are, are in God, and so depend upon Him that without Him they can neither be nor be conceived,”[[25]](#footnote-26) and that “Individual things are nothing but modifications or modes of God’s attributes, expressing those attributes in a certain and determinate manner.”[[26]](#footnote-27) Spinoza’s notion of God was not Judeo-Christian. Here are his three crucial definitions: “By *God*, I mean a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality,”[[27]](#footnote-28) “By ‘attribute’ I understand that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence,”[[28]](#footnote-29)and “By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.”[[29]](#footnote-30) Spinoza introduced the phrase “intellectual love of God” for one’s grasp of God as the immanent causal power of the universe. Whoever enjoys that love also enjoys “the highest possible peace of mind,”[[30]](#footnote-31) and “our salvation, blessedness, or freedom consists in a constant and eternal love toward God, or in the love of God toward men,” since “God, insofar as He loves Himself, loves men.”[[31]](#footnote-32)

Spinoza’s metaphysics is complex but suffice it here to note that one of the “infinite attributes” of the substance he called “God” was what he called “extension” and we call “the cosmos.” Since God is absolutely infinite, there is no limit to the number of his attributes, though humans can know only two, namely extension and thought, since humans are “modes” only of the attributes of extension (as possessors of bodies) and thought (as possessors of minds). It should be noted that most of Spinoza’s definitions were intended as “real” rather than “nominal,” i.e., as describing the nature of what is defined, not as reporting or proposing a use or meaning of a word. He would have regarded these definitions as self-evident, as he regarded his axioms and the validity of his proofs.

The cosmological answer may also remind us of F. H. Bradley, who held that “my duties” are determined by “my station.”[[32]](#footnote-33) He wrote, “In the realized idea which, superior to me, and yet here and now in and by me, affirms itself in a continuous process, we have found the end, we have found self-realization, duty, and happiness in one -- yes, we have found ourselves, when we have found our station and its duties, our function as an organ in the social organism.”[[33]](#footnote-34) The view is essentially Hegel’s, who held that a person's "supreme duty is to be a member of the state,"[[34]](#footnote-35) and that “To fulfill one's station in social life is doing one's duty, by which virtue or excellence is acquired.”[[35]](#footnote-36) Hegel also wrote that “to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all philosophy.”[[36]](#footnote-37)

Hegel’s views are even more complex than Spinoza’s. Here we may only recall that, according to him, the Absolute, which is "the sum of all being, actual and potential" and often called God by him, develops, “unfolds,” logically (“dialectically”) from the logical Idea to Nature and then to Spirit (mind, *Geist*). (Nature, of course, is the necessary condition for the existence of Spirit.) Spirit itself develops from subjective spirit (individual mental states) to objective spirit (society as exemplified by the family, customs and traditions, the state, and institutions such as corporations and guilds), and finally to absolute spirit (art, religion, and philosophy). In philosophy the Absolute achieves self-consciousness, and thus completes the circle of its logical development.

In the Absolute the ideal is also the real, and the real is the ideal: “The rational is the real and the real is the rational.” The rational, of course, is what accords with reason (*Vernuft*), which is the highest level of consciousness. “[S]elf-consciousness is Reason...it is certain that it is itself reality, or that everything actual is none other than itself; its thinking is itself directly actuality, and thus its relationship to the latter is that of idealism.”[[37]](#footnote-38) “Reason is the Sovereign of the world…underlying all the natural and spiritual life which it originates…it is *the infinite complex of things*, their entire Essence and Truth”[[38]](#footnote-39) But it is not any individual person’s reason. Hegel insisted on the necessity of a move from “the I (*das* *Ich*)” of “thecolourful show of the sensuous here-and-now” to the “’I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (*Ich, das* *Wir, und* *Wir*, *das* *Ich ist*).[[39]](#footnote-40) It was a move from individual cognition to collective cognition. As Terry Pinkard has put it, Hegel reconceptualized “the unity of thought and being” as an “intersubjective unity.”[[40]](#footnote-41)

Bradley’s “station” would belong in objective spirit, an integral stage in the development of the Absolute. Despite the superficial similarity, Hegel’s and Bradley’s views on one’s station and its duties must not be confused with later collectivist theories. Their views are inseparable from the absolute idealism they espoused, which must be distinguished from both Berkeley’s subjective idealism and Kant’s transcendental idealism. Reality, Hegel and Bradley held, is not independent of cognition (mind, Spirit), it is in fact shaped by it, but cognition is neither subjective Berkeleyan consciousness, nor compatible with the reality of Kant’s unknowable things-in-themselves. Hegel wrote, “The thought…. must be an Idea; and when it is viewed in the whole of its universality, it is the Idea, or the Absolute.”[[41]](#footnote-42)

Imitations of the cosmological answer are commonplace. There is patriotism (commitment to one’s country), partisanship (commitment to a party, often a political ideology), humanitarianism (commitment to the human species, to “our fellow-humans”), and a multitude of perhaps less commendable imitations such as commitment to one’s immediate family, one’s business or institution, city, state, even football team. Of course, from a cosmic perspective one’s country, party, the human species, etc., are only slightly less ephemeral than one’s individual life. A somewhat juvenile but useful summary of the cosmological answer and its imitations is that the meaning of one’s life is to be found in one’s “submerging” in, “identifying” with, something greater and more enduring, if not the cosmos, then a country, a political movement, the human species, or any one of the many other choices. This view is familiar, attractive, and popular.

Earlier I said that it would be fatuous to claim that we know the theological answer to be true. But it would be fatuous also to suppose that we know that the cosmos is an organic whole, that it is orderly, and that our lives are integral parts of it. Is it obvious that, as Spinoza asserted, “the reason for the existence of a triangle or a circle does not follow from the nature of those figures, but from the order of universal nature”? Nor can we assume that Bradley’s and Hegel’s assertions also cited above are expressions of knowledge. And there is the doubt that recent work in physics and astronomy (especially the Big Bang theory and the hypothesis of a plurality of universes) has cast regarding the uniqueness and eternity of the universe.[[42]](#footnote-43) We can only have *faith* that the premises of the arguments for the cosmological answer are true and the arguments are valid. Thus, we find ourselves again appealing to faith, a faith without theology. If the cosmological answer is preferable, the reason is that of the four answers mentioned here it alone is based on serious arguments and thus does not seem crude. But this is not the place for detailed account and evaluation of those arguments.

Of course, Spinoza’s, Hegel’s, and Bradley’s versions of the cosmological answer are not themselves appeals to faith; they are appeals, successful or unsuccessful, to knowledge. But, as we saw, appeals to knowledge ultimately rest on faith, like my faith in the *truth* of “This apple looks green to me” when it does look green to me, or of “If x + y = z then y + x = z” when I do find it self-evident. Since Spinoza’s and Bradley’s versions of the cosmological answer are intended as conclusions of *arguments*, the faith on which they rest would be faith,not in those conclusions but in the truth at least of the ultimate premises of the arguments and the validity of those arguments. Indeed, as we saw earlier, faith is needed three times when we rely on a valid argument: in declaring its ultimate premises to be true, declaring the argument that seems to be valid to be really valid, and declaring its conclusion to be true*.* This qualification may not satisfy the acolyte of unadulterated knowledge, but it is not trivial. Sun-worshipping and astronomy both rest on faith, but the sunworshipper does so almost directly, the astronomer very indirectly.

3.Forced, living, and momentous options

Why seek an answer to the question about the meaning of life at all? The belief that life has a meaning, that there is a point to living, is like my belief *today* that I will be alive *tomorrow*. In normal circumstances (e.g., reasonable health, no dangerous activities) both beliefs are constitutive of my being alive *today*. The truth of the belief that I will be alive tomorrowis presupposed by almost everything I do and plan today, including postponing payment of my life insurance premium until tomorrow. It is not that I might suffer disastrous consequences today if I did not believe that I will be alive tomorrow, that in some circumstances I might not even remain alive. Rather, my life today would be radically different if I did not have stern *faith*, not just casual belief or even hope, that it will continue for at least one more day.

William James wrote, “(L)et us call the decision between two hypotheses an option. Options may be of several kinds. They may be—1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.”[[43]](#footnote-44)

My belief that I will be alive *tomorrow* is indeed a genuine option: it is living (not dead), forced (not avoidable), and momentous (not trivial). In normal circumstances the belief is a vital part of my being alive *today.* In this sense, acceptance of the sentence “I will be alive tomorrow” is practically necessary in normal circumstances. Elsewhere I have argued that sentences like “I will be alive tomorrow” are ordinarily accepted by the speaker as true for practical reasons, and that their case thus lends support to the “pragmatic” theories of truth.[[44]](#footnote-45) In normal circumstances, I take that sentence to be unquestionably true, I believe in it neither because of inference from experience nor because of a priori argument or its coherence with other sentences. The belief is certainly not casual. It is faith.

The point of believing that I will be alive tomorrow is not that it will help me live until tomorrow, which may or may not be true, but that in normal circumstances I have no genuine choice in the matter. The belief is not only living, but forced and momentous. Now, the same is true of the belief that life has a meaning. Both beliefs entail the decision to stay alive, and especially to avoid suicide.

What is wrong with suicide is not its implication that those beliefs are false but rather its spectacular irrationality, indeed intellectual malfeasance, perhaps plain stupidity. For committing suicide is absolutely, irreversibly final. It renders forever impossible a change of mind and precludes any new information, decision, or desire. After all, the grieving mother may adopt a child, the businessman may engage in fulfilling social work, the politician may write a useful memoir, the musician may achieve fame again, the paraplegic may be helped by advances in medicine, the teenager may soon meet someone even more lovable, but for any of these to happen the person must remain alive. To be sure, one seriously contemplating suicide is not likely to decide against it because of such considerations. Spectacular irrationality is impervious to reason.

4. Passional and Intellectual Grounds

I have suggested that of the four answers to the question about the meaning of life the cosmological answer alone does not seem crude. But, perhaps for this reason, it is also the least common answer. All four depend on faith, either almost directly and immediately, or quite indirectly, mediately. I have suggested that this is true of all claims to knowledge. But the cosmological answer does so by resting on an argument, whether Spinoza’s, Hegel’s, Bradley’s, or a scientific argument, that the universe is an organic unity. Spinoza was explicit in this respect, saying that in his *Ethics* he was following the “geometrical” method, appealing to definitions, axioms, proofs, and corollaries. The conclusions of these arguments, i.e., their versions of the cosmological answer, are not themselves accepted on faith, but ultimately they rest on premises and assumptions of validity that are. In contrast, the theological, the egoist’s, and the altruist’s answers are usually accepted on faith almost directly, even though there have been attempts to defend them by argument and the faith has been sensitive to a cognitive context, perhaps memory of a sermon. This explains their wider acceptance than the cosmological argument enjoys.

Our conclusion, therefore, is not that we have found the right answer to the question about the meaning of life. We have not. But this should not surprise us if all four answers involve, however directly or indirectly, appeals to faith. While after carefully examining them for mistakes we may not allow that scientific or philosophical theories can be true even though incompatible, we comfortably recognize and perhaps welcome the existence of incompatible faiths. After all, they are *faiths*, not claims to *knowledge*! Kant famously wrote, “I have … found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith.”*[[45]](#footnote-46) And William James held that the ground of the belief in life after death is “passional,” not intellectual.

James did not explain what he meant by “passional,” though it suffices for his point to say that the ground of the belief in life after death is not intellectual. Religious faith may be accompanied by certain passions or emotions, but surely this is not the case with most other manifestations of faith. The commitment to intellectual grounds, moreover, is itself not intellectual. After all, it is a *commitment*, not an *argument*! It is no argument for rationality to say that it is rational to be rational. In any case, James held that the belief in life after death is as legitimate as the commitment to intellectual grounds for the contrary belief: “We want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if a *pyrrhonistic sceptic* asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another,--we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make.”[[46]](#footnote-47) The belief in life after death is just one volition against another. We have a right to it just as we have a right to the other. Both are ultimately “passional.” We have a right to both. The *will* to believe is thus rendered legitimate by the *right* to believe.[[47]](#footnote-48)

Now, a similar defense can be made of a right to accept any one of the four answers to our question about the meaning of life. Such acceptance is ultimately not intellectual, but so is also the faith on which any argument for a scientific or philosophical theory ultimately rests. Neither can be decided on purely intellectual grounds. Indeed, the history of philosophy has amply shown that this is so.[[48]](#footnote-49)

If we are still tempted to ask which answer to our question is true, we should first ask what the word “true” would mean in this context. For we ought to free ourselves from the confines imposed by the usual theories of truth and acknowledge the wide range, complexity, and subtlety of the use of this word. We may call pragmatic the sense of the word “true” in which it is true that I will be alive tomorrow, without denying that it also has other senses, like that in saying that “this apple looks green” and “I am typing now” are true as well as that in saying that “Two plus two equals four” is true. “True” is versatile enough to allow, without equivocation, for great diversity in what “makes” statements true. In this respect, it resembles “good” (as medieval philosophers acknowledged in the doctrine of the *transcendentalia*). Gustatory pleasure, knowledge, compassion, and justice are all standard examples of good things, but they seem to have little else in common. Yet there is no equivocation in calling them all good. The moral of the doctrine of the *transcendentalia* applies even to lower levels of abstraction. Red is a color, green is a color, and blue is a color, even though they are very different colors. But there is no equivocation in calling all of them colors.[[49]](#footnote-50)

“Immanuel Kant,” James wrote, “held a curious doctrine about such objects of belief as God, the design of creation, the soul, its freedom, and the life hereafter. These things, he said, are properly not objects of knowledge at all…. theoretically speaking they are words devoid of any significance. Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning *for our practice*. We can act *as if* there were a God; feel *as if* we were free; consider Nature *as if* she were full of special designs; lay plans *as if* we were to be immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life. Our faith *that* these unintelligible objects actually exist proves thus to be a full equivalent in *praktischer Hinsicht*, as Kant calls it, or from the point of view of our action, for a knowledge of *what* they might be, in case we were permitted positively to conceive them. So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever.”[[50]](#footnote-51) Even if James’s exegesis of Kant is questionable, his own view is reasonably clear.

For example, if we really believe in immortality then we live *now* as if we are immortal, as *practically* immortal. (“Immortality” of course is an unnecessarily strong word. What is at issue is life after death, not eternal, endless life, which is what the word means.) James’s point is especially obvious when the belief makes a genuine difference in our moral life. The same can be said about faith, direct or indirect, in the truth of any one of the answers to our question about the meaning of life. If it is genuine faith, a real commitment, the person lives now as if the answer is true. We may call James’s view epistemic liberalism.

5. The leap of faith

Philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians, as well as those familiar with their work, are especially likely to be committed to “reason,” in effect, I have suggested, to indirect appeals to faith. Those ignorant of that work are more likely to appeal to faith quite directly, often under the influence of preachers and politicians. They may even use phrases like “known by faith” and “in the light of faith,” which make sense only if an appeal, however tacit, is made to the testimony of books (e.g., the Bible, the Koran) or persons (e.g., parents, teachers). Then some argument for the reliability of that book or person may be provided.[[51]](#footnote-52)

The argument is likely to be lengthy, complex, questionable, and seldom actually stated, e.g., “the priest seems to say so, the priest does say so, the bishop said so to the priest, the Pope said so to the bishop, the Pope read it in the Bible, God revealed it in the Bible.” It is really a chain of arguments, many calling for ordinary argumentation (e.g., that the priest is not a liar, that the Bible does contain the sentence(s) in question), and like all arguments they appeal to faith at least in their ultimate premises (e. g. that I really did hear the priest say so). It is difficult to see in that chain a need for misleading phrases like “*known* by faith” and “in the *light* of faith.”

The classic defense of faith was John Henry Newman’s, though he called it “unconditional real assent” and was chiefly concerned with religious faith. Newman gave as a nonreligious example a mother telling her child that “lucern is medicago sativa, and is food for cattle,” and wrote that there are “three directions, which among others [the child’s] assent may take, viz. assent immediately to a proposition itself, assent to its truth, and assent both to its truth and to the ground of its being true,—'Lucern is food for cattle,’—'That lucern is medicago sativa is true,"—and ‘My mother's word, that lucern is medicago sativa, and is food for cattle, is the truth.’[[52]](#footnote-53)  The third “direction” clearly is the direction of testimony. Newman’s distinction between assenting to a proposition and assenting to its truth resembles the distinction between “This apple looks green to me” and “That this apple looks green to me is true.” It’s unclear what Newman means by assent to a proposition, but certainly one could attend to the grammar and meaning of a sentence without saying that it is true (or false). “Assent” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “to agree to or approve of something,” not as “belief.” Clearly, one sometimes agrees to or approves of a proposition without believing it, e.g., if required by law, religion, or tradition to do so, or in order to fulfil a duty as officeholder, or in order to be grateful, polite, friendly, cooperative, and so on.

Newman also used “apprehension,” by which he meant “our imposition of a sense on the terms of which they are composed.”[[53]](#footnote-54) It is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the act or power of perceiving or comprehending something,” which clearly is necessary for believing that a proposition is true. In any case, it is important to stress that although belief has a natural tie to a proposition and thus to truth, one’s concern with a proposition may have nothing to do with its truth-value. It may focus on our understanding or grasp of it, on the syntax and semantics of the sentence expressing it, on its logical relations to other propositions, even on its relevance to a certain interest, discussion, or plan. One can spend years on the propositions of the Big Band theory without saying or even being tempted to say that they are true (partly because there are incompatible versions of it).

Newman distinguished between doubting a proposition, inferring and thus assenting to it conditionally (the condition being acceptance of the premises), and assenting to it unconditionally. He pointed out that these three ‘acts’ are all natural to the human mind, though also admitted that it is possible to err in their exercise “without forfeiting the natural right, under proper circumstances, to doubt, or to infer, or to assent.”[[54]](#footnote-55)

By “unconditional real assent” Newman clearly meant faith in the broad sense suggested here, and like William James he held that one has a right to it just as one has a right to doubt or inference. But assent can be notional (conceptual) or real (directed upon a thing, *res*). “That there is a God, that he has certain attributes…As far as these particular subjects can be viewed in the concrete and represent experiences, they can be received by real assent also; but as expressed in general propositions they belong to notional apprehension and assent.”[[55]](#footnote-56) Faith as real assent requires a proper context and sensitivity to it: if not the self-evidence of its object, then related circumstances such as vivid imagination, sincere prayer, or ties to special books or people. Newman suggested that “acts of Notional Assent and of inference do not affect our conduct, and acts of Belief, that is, of Real Assent, do (not necessarily, but do) affect it,”[[56]](#footnote-57)

Newman admitted that faith is not infallible, but he also wrote, “Resolve to believe nothing, and you must prove your proofs and analyze your elements, sinking farther and farther, and finding ‘in the lowest depth a lower deep,’”[[57]](#footnote-58)and that “To give a real assent to [a dogma of faith] is an act of religion, to give a notional [assent], is a theological [assent].”[[58]](#footnote-59) Hence the common willingness to speak of faith as trust, to prefer the phrase “faith in” rather than “faith that,” and to call the adoption of religious faith a leap of faith.

It would be an exaggeration to describe as a leap the rather mundane move from self-evidence to truth. Indeed, as we have already seen, that there is a difference between self-evidence and truth becomes noticeable chiefly when a person refuses to admit that something found to be self-evident is true, as in cases of self-deception or bad faith. The leap is not at all “the great leap whereby I pass into infinity” that Kierkegaard wrote about in *Fear and Trembling.* Yet the move from self-evidence to truth can be called a leap because it is neither notional nor inferential, and therefore can also be properly said to be nonrational (though not irrational). But even when spontaneous, it is not blind, irresponsible, capricious, insensitive to cognitive context and circumstances. For, in Newman's words if not meaning, it certainly “can be viewed in the concrete and represent experiences.” Finding a proposition self-evident is a concrete experience. It is quite unlike what Newman appealed to in his defense of religious dogmas (which he did not claim to find self-evident). But between the two extremes of the color of an apple and religious dogmas there are examples of a leap of faith that are more common. The most obvious one is the leap from perceptual appearance to physical reality, e.g., from “The apple *look*s green to me,” not only to “That the apple looks green is true,” but to “The apple *is* green.” This leap is the central feature of common sense and the chief claim of direct realism in philosophy.

There are other leaps of faith. We usually regard them as inferences, but as such they would be often implausible and quite questionable. I mentioned earlier that we usually make judgments about other people’s thoughts and feelings solely on the basis of what they say, often what they don’t say, or just on their facial expressions, but we seldom hold that basis to be sufficient. Also mentioned earlier is that our moral statements usually concern observable facts, but we may find inferring them from nonmoral statements about these facts quite questionable. We take for granted that most of what we seem to remember did occur. In deductive reasoning, we usually take simple arguments that seem valid to be really valid.

To acknowledge the ubiquitous role of faith in human thought is not to accept a virulent skepticism. Those who have faith in God are hardly agnostics. Rather, to acknowledge the role of faith is to note that we seldom (if ever) rely solely on reasons and arguments. This does not mean that reasons and arguments are usually unnecessary. A leap of faith need not be blind, unreasoning, or insensitive to cognitive context and circumstances, even when it is spontaneous.

Nor is acknowledgement of the ubiquitous role of faith acceptance of universal fideism. Merriam-Webster defines fideism as “reliance on faith rather reason in pursuit of religious truth.” But the faith at issue here need not be religious. And it is not blind to reason. The leap to “That the apple seems green to me is true” is a leap from “The apple seems green to me,” which surely is a report of a relevant experience. Being a leap, it involves no inference, and thus indeed is nonrational. But it is not irrational, baseless, or capricious. It is certainly sensitive to context. This is the case also in other leaps of faith. One does not make moral judgments haphazardly, nor does one make judgments about the thoughts and feelings of people never met or seen.

Initially we face the world indiscriminately. There is neither belief nor disbelief, certainly no faith. There is no distinction between appearance and reality. There is no distinction between truth and falsehood because there is no propositional thinking. The notions of belief and truth have application only when these distinctions are made.

This is not amateur psychology of the neonate. It is a matter of logic. (1) The notion of *proposition* is needed for marking what is true or false, even if it is not needed by a metaphysics of states of affairs, or a linguistic theory about declarative sentences, or a psychological theory of judgments. As Newman put it, “without a proposition, there cannot be a question, conclusion, or assertion, so without a proposition there is nothing to doubt about, nothing to infer, nothing to assent to. Mental acts of whatever kind presuppose their objects.”[[59]](#footnote-60) (2) The notion of *belief* is needed for one’s primary and certainly initial attitude to a proposition, and (3) the notion of truth is needed for the propriety of that attitude. The various philosophical theories of truth provide criteria for such propriety. The leap of faith is a leap to faith, trust, that at least one of these criteria is satisfied, presumably “correspondence” in the case of “That this apple looks green to me,” “pragmatic” for “I will be alive tomorrow,” “coherence” for purely mathematical and many scientific statements.

If I have headache, then there is the proposition that I have a headache, my initial attitude to it is believing that I have a headache, and by applying the usual criterion for the propriety of that attitude, namely the self-evidence of the proposition, I leap to the faith, the trust, that it is true that I have a headache. Of course, one seldom makes these logical distinctions in trusting self-evidence, though as noted earlier they are occasionally made in cases of self-deception or bad faith. In other cases, such as religious faith, we have also noted that the distinctions are often made explicitly.

Our thought, not just our reasoning, is throughout dependent on faith. And, as William James would have said, the ground of faith is passional, not intellectual. David Hume famously remarked that “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions,”[[60]](#footnote-61) but the word “slave” is too strong, and “passions,” like James’ “passional,” can be misleading. It would be more accurate to say that reason is impotent without faith. In most cases, including answers to the question about the meaning of life, faith is not irrational --- blind or insensitive to cognitive context, even if the latter is just a preacher’s sermon. But it does remain nonrational --- non-inferential, non-intellectual.

1. Faith and Reason

Discussions of faith usually contrast it with reason. We have had much to say about the former but little about the latter. Philosophers’ use of the term (from Plato’s *nous* to Kant’s and Hegel’s *Vernunft*) has been too closely tied to their metaphysical views, and its everyday use is even more chaotic than that of “belief.” I shall use it to refer to cognition, i.e., not knowledge but the *capacity* for knowledge, and thus include in reason sensation, perception, thinking, appeals to self-evidence, as well as the mechanisms of formal logic and mathematics. Then choosing between reason and faith in the broad senses suggested here would be a false choice. Faith is the effective member of the pair. Reason, however, is its most valuable auxiliary. Faith without reason is likely to be blind. Reason without faith is certain to be impotent. Cognition aims at knowledge, but it succeeds only if faith supplies the necessary element of truth.

Trivially, it also supplies a second necessary element of knowledge, namely belief. And by being sensitive to the relevant cognitive context it supplies the third element: usually called evidential basis, rationality, or justification. Epistemic liberalism renders much less vexing the distinction between a strong and a weak sense of “know,” the former so exacting as to be seldom employable and the latter resisting credible definition; the distinction does not apply to faith, though other distinctions do, e.g., in firmness, sincerity, and duration. This is why we were able to allow that one has the right to accept any one of the four answers to the question about the meaning of life.

Kierkegaard rejected “the absoluteness of reason,” but he did not advocate insanity. What I called epistemic liberalism is not indiscriminate or uncritical. It does distinguish between blind faith and informed faith. It may not sanction the prohibition of any faith, but it does reserve the right to view some with contempt. For example, like most adults, it would not take seriously the thought that the meaning of life consists in enjoying the company of virgins in heaven. It does shift philosophical focus from knowledge to faith, but only because it recognizes the crucial role of faith in the pursuit of truth and thus of knowledge. It is, of course, faith without theology, because theology presupposes it, for example in its much-maligned arguments for the existence of God, no less than physics and logic do. And though epistemic liberalism rejects “the absoluteness of reason,” the rejection protects knowledge from the onslaught of both skepticism and fideism.

1. “The Sentiment of Rationality,” included in William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part III, Section VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The distinction between a weak and a strong sense of “know” was made by Norman Malcolm in “Knowledge and Belief,” included in *Knowledge and Certainty* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 58-7. See also my "Epistemology Dehumanized: Three Varieties," in Quentin Smith, ed., *Epistemology: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 301-327. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Gottlob Frege, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, trans. M. Furth (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. P. F. Strawson, ed., *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University y Press, 1967), pp. 1, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica to \*56* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1962), pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Principia*, pp. 402-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Principia*, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914-1916,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 6.10.14, p. 9e. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. W. V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Notebooks*, 6.10.14, p. 9e. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. ‘“Object,” “complex,” “fact,” “function,” “number” signify formal concepts, represented in logical notation by variables’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1272). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. “The world is the totality of facts, not of things…What is the case—a fact---is the existence of states of affairs” (*Tractatus* 1.1, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Tractatus, 5.61.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Warren Goldfarb, “Metaphysics and Nonsense,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* XXII (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. David Pears, *The False Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 20-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *The Realistic Spirit*, e.g., pp. 181, 194ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Warren Goldfarb, “Metaphysics and Nonsense,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* XXII (1997), p. 66. See also, in the same issue, Cora Diamond, “Realism and Resolution: Reply to Warren Goldfarb and Sabina Lovibond,” pp. 75-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (New York: Hafner, 1949), Part One, Proposition XXIX. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *Ethics*, Part One, Proposition XI. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. *Ethics,* Part One, Proposition XV. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *Ethics,* Part One, Proposition XXVIII, Note. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. *Ethics*, Part One, Proposition XXV, Corollary. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *Ethics*, Part One, Definition VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. *Ethics*, Part One, Definition IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *Ethics*, Part One, Definition III. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. *Ethics*, Part Five, Proposition XXVII. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *Ethics*, Part Five, Proposition XXXVI, Corollary. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. F. H. Bradley, “My Station and Its Duties,” in *Ethical Studies*, Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. *Ethical Studies*, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox, 1942; tr. [H. B. Nisbet](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Barr_Nisbet), ed. [Allen W. Wood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_W._Wood), 1991, section 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. ## *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 246-47.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosoph*y, Volume 3 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1956), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Terry Pinkard, “Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and *Logic*: an overview,” in Karl Ameriks, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 164. See also Pinkard’s *Hegel’s* *Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, #14. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Yet see Paul Halpern, *Flashes of Creation* (New York: Basic, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. *The Will to Believe*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy: Realism, Antirealism, Semirealism* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, Eide Series, 2015), pp. 183-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edition, Norman Kemp Smith (trans.) (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. *The Will to Believe*, pp. 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. *The Will to Believe*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. For more on this large topic, see *Anthropocentrism in Philosophy: Realism, Antirealism, Semirealism*, pp. 180ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 55. L Jonathan Cohen has claimed that while “belief is a disposition, not an occurrent feeling…it is a disposition to feel that p, not to say, or act as if it is the case, that p….” (*An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. For a useful discussion of the general topic see Robert Audi, "The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification," in *Rational Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 217–236. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T Ker (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1985), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. *op*. *cit*., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. *op*. *cit*., p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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59. *op*. *cit*., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)