

# Faith and Logic;

*A Critical Examination.*

An essay by

Joshua Michail

28 December, 2011

Critical thinking appears to be a rather uncommon skill. Or, at least, one that most people selectively employ. People generally have many beliefs. Some beliefs are good, some acceptable and still others are bad. But whether a belief is good or bad, or virtually inconsequential, is a matter of context and circumstance. Faith is very often a bad belief. So what makes a good belief then? And what about logic? It seems there is a common, but erroneous, notion that faith and logic are somehow opposite. They are different, for sure. But to better understand about faith and logic a critical examination of both is necessary.

The definition of “faith” is having a belief for which there is insufficient or no evidence to support the proposition form of the belief. There is one body, a single set called “belief”. A belief is simply defined as a conviction about some issue, or an acceptance of a proposition, or claim. A belief can be based on evidence or on no evidence. But, there is a special subset of “belief”, that subset is called “faith”. Faith is a belief, but a belief is not necessarily faith. Unlike other beliefs, it is specifically based on little or no evidence. For analogy's sake, faith is to beliefs as a truck is to automobiles. Trucks and automobiles are not exactly synonymous, and neither are faith and belief. Just as a truck is a type of automobile, likewise faith is a type of belief.

In fact, in the main set “beliefs”, there are other beliefs that don't necessarily require evidence, or sound reasoning, but are still not “faith”. Those are “tastes”, unlike faith, they are generally inconsequential. For example, if I like mint chocolate chip icecream it may just be my personal preference, but the claim that it is good has virtually no impact on anything else. This is what differentiates two types of belief, when both have insufficient supporting evidence. A “faith” not only is a belief for which one lacks supporting evidence, but it is also a claim which has some considerable consequence. To revisit the icecream example, the vast majority of people do not live their lives on the premise that a particular flavor is good. With “faith”, however, people do take action, live their lives, and view the world through the perspective of the “faith”. People actually base their entire lives on the major premise that, and act as though, there was some being who sacrificed himself long ago specifically for the purpose of granting people forgiveness. One does not have legitimate evidence to support either the claim that mint chocolate chip icecream is the best flavor, nor the claim that some man died in order to forgive people in the future. Yet we can clearly see why the icecream preference is not “faith”, certainly not in same class as the other belief about some unbelievable story.

Now let's turn our attention to the concept of “logic”. Logic, which derives from the ancient Greek word *Logos*, is not anything like a belief. Logic is a tool. It is a way of thinking that either induces or deduces from premises an inference, and from the inferences and premises to a conclusion. Logic is a way of reasoning, in as much as faith is a type of belief, logic is a type of reasoning. While one could “reason” in any manner one wishes, we would rightfully consider illogical reasoning to be flawed.

There are valid forms of logic, usually most commonly dealt with in a field called “formal logic”. The “formal” part meaning that the form of the argument is scrutinized. The idea of the form of the argument can be illustrated as, say, “A is true, B depends on A being true, therefore B is true”. But, then there is the commonplace “informal logic”, which does not stress the importance of the form of the argument so much. We are all a little more familiar with the informal type. It is in the informal structure in which fallacies are dealt with. This is the type of logic that is applicable to everyday life, arguments that ordinary people encounter in advertisements, in politics, in debate and in ordinary discussions. With this kind of logic we talk about how conclusions are deduced, or induced, from valid premises. The issue is more to do with many fallacies, among which are “non sequiturs” (a conclusion that doesn't follow from the premises), or “ad hominem” (attacks at the arguer rather than the argument), or “appeals to emotion” (where the arguer attempts to convince the audience by arousing their emotion), for example. Though we still call a fallacious argument “invalid”.

It's certainly true that logic is not the only way to decide upon something. One doesn't apply logic to deciding what flavor of icecream one likes most, for example. But, it is absolutely fair to demand logical reasoning for a belief which impacts on the way one lives life and deals with the world. It is impossible for a “faith” to be logically derived since to accept a claim as true logic dictates the necessity for supporting evidence. The nature of faith necessarily makes it illogical.

There are good beliefs. Those, are beliefs for which one both has a good motivation to believe, and also good reason. We can say that all beliefs have two applicable axes. On one axis is motivation, that is a scale from wanting a belief to be true, to wanting a belief to be untrue. In the middle is indifference to the belief. Many beliefs, which is usually faith, are held because a person is motivated to believe. Some faith is a belief that some undesired truth is not true, and some faith is a belief that

some desired concept is true. There can be “good” motivation for a faith. The most obvious being a belief in an afterlife, particularly an “eternal paradise” or “heaven”. The motivation being, of course, a desire to not have death be the end, but to be a transition to “something better”. But, there are also beliefs for which there is no desire, or motivation, or want, for the belief to be either true or false. Also some beliefs are held despite a desire for the beliefs to untrue. When a belief is held despite a desire that the belief is untrue, usually it is because the evidence is so convincing that the intellectually honest person can't make him/her self deny it. Desire becomes irrelevant in the light of the facts.

The second axis is the evidence. This evidence axis ranges from evidence against the belief, to evidence for the belief. In the middle of this axis is no evidence either way. Considering this axis we may say that someone has “good reason” to believe something, meaning that there is plenty of valid evidence to support the belief. In this way, motivation is distinctly separate from reason, or evidence. This is part of the power that religious faith has. Because of strong motivation to believe some people are willing to overlook, and even excuse, the lack of supporting evidence. Sometimes the attraction of the proposition is so powerful that people willfully choose to believe despite plenty of evidence against the proposition. But, this is the nature of faith.

The wise are weary of those who claim faith to be a virtue. This is the sort of claim made very often by those who wish to exploit the gullible. The credulous are all too eager, too ready and willing, to believe what they want to believe. The conman thrives and encourages all people to accept on faith that which he/she claims. In fact, faith is not a virtue but a shame. One ought to be ashamed to have “faith”. It is quite shameful for one to say that one believes in some claim for which one knows he/she cannot provide the requisite evidence. It is especially shameful because one admits that one's worldview, the way one lives his/her life, the way one acts are based upon unsupported beliefs about very consequential claims.

This deserving shame is due to the nature of “faith”, as a belief about an important claim, unlike a preference in musical taste, or liking blue more than orange. We cannot think of any readily known examples in which a preference in foods has launched a campaign of terror, causing the murder and torture of thousands of people. Yet, a brief review of history clearly shows that faith, beliefs without supporting evidence in very consequential claims, has, in fact, lead to the murders and suffering of so

many people. Only the credulous have “faith”, indeed faith is foolish. It was rightful in Star Wars for the villain, as opposed to the hero, to say “*I find your lack of faith disturbing*”.

Copyright © 2011 by Joshua Michail

*All Rights Reserved.*