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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Religious Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Mar., 1996), pp. 27-36

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20019791>

Accessed: 02/03/2012 05:57

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TIM CHAPPELL

WHY IS FAITH A VIRTUE?

(1) *The meaning of 'faith'*

By faith I mostly mean *religious* faith, i.e. that (whatever it is) which distinguishes the religious believer, as such, from the unbeliever, as such. Although an important qualification to this remark will appear in due course (see Section 8), I am not primarily concerned with faith as in 'Have you no faith in me?', or 'I doubted his good faith'. I am concerned with faith as in 'I wish I had your faith', or 'I'm afraid I've lost my faith', or 'other faiths'. Talking of which, I am also thinking primarily within the confines of the Christian religion.

(2) *The importance of not failing to notice the importance of the word 'virtue'*

Kantians and consequentialists are likely to think, though not of course bound to think, that 'virtue' just means 'good thing about a person'. (Perhaps not even necessarily about a person; spades and plans of attack may have virtues too, may they not?¹.) These sorts of moralist will (usually) say that talk about virtues should be, and unproblematically can be, ironed out into more straightforward theoretical talk about states of affairs or acts of the will. So much the worse for Kantians and consequentialists. And so much the better for Aristotelians, who will rather focus directly on the notion of a virtue, will have a rich and non-reducible account of what a virtue is, and will consequently meet, or so we hope, with much fairer success in their thinking about ethics.

If then we take the Aristotelian route, as I do here, our next question is bound to be:

(3) *What is a virtue?*

Some Aristotelians² say that a virtue is a disposition of character which we humans need to have to have a flourishing human life. Others (such as myself) would say it is a disposition of character which instantiates or promotes responsiveness to one or more basic good. These two sorts of definition are not, of course, necessarily in conflict. The reason why we need the virtues to have 'a flourishing human life' can be because the virtues instantiate or promote responsiveness to one or more basic goods, and because a flourishing human life essentially involves responsiveness to basic

¹ In any non-metaphorical sense of 'virtue', no, they may not.

² Such as Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991), p. 224.

goods. If so, our question ‘Why is faith a virtue?’ can be paraphrased as ‘Why is faith needed for a flourishing human life?’, and that question in turn can be paraphrased as ‘To what basic good(s) is faith a responsiveness, or source of responsiveness?’. I think the third paraphrase is the most revealing, and the most useful. It does however prompt a further question, which I must spend some time answering:

(4) *What is a basic good?*

A basic good, as some³ say, is ‘an *intrinsic* good, i.e. [one] that is considered good for its own sake and not merely as something sought under some such description as “what will enable me to impress my audience” or “what will confirm my instinctive beliefs” or “what will contribute to my survival” ... to say that [something] is a [basic] value is simply to say that reference to the pursuit of [it] makes intelligible (though not necessarily reasonable-all-things-considered) any particular instance of the human activity and commitment involved in such a pursuit’.

As others say, a basic good is a good, generally recognized as such by humans, of a sort which can appropriately provide an end to chains of subsumptive explanation (CSEs). What then is a CSE? Compare these two dialogues:

- 1A. I am running for the train because I want to get to Oxford on time.
 1B. Why do you want to get to Oxford on time?
 1C. Well, because...
- 2A. I am going to the National Gallery because I think it will be fun.
 2B. Why do you want fun?
 2C. ?!?!?

1B is a question which calls for a further explanation of a kind which, in general, we can see how to supply. (Perhaps I am going to Oxford to meet my beloved, or for a job interview, or for a party, or....)

By contrast, if someone asks 2B as if *this* were another question of the same sort as the question before it, then they display a misunderstanding – or they have read too much modern moral philosophy. In normal circumstances, the most natural response to 2B is a puzzled stare. Why so? Because 2B refers us immediately to a recognized basic good or goods (to fun, which by the way is not the same thing as pleasure); whereas 1B does not.

Quite generally, asking the question ‘Why do you want X?’, about anyone’s voluntary pursuit of any X, can meet with only two kinds of legitimate response: (a) those responses which refer us immediately to some basic good which our respondent sees as instantiated or promoted by the pursuit of X; and (b) those responses which refer us ultimately to some basic

³ J. M. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 62ff.

good which our respondent sees as instantiated or promoted by the pursuit of X, i.e. those responses which prompt further questions, which prompt further responses, which (eventually) will refer us immediately to some basic good which our respondent sees as instantiated or promoted by the pursuit of X.

In other words, any complete CSE must, sooner or later, terminate. A CSE that went on for ever, or indefinitely, would not yield any intelligible justification. Moreover, any such complete CSE must terminate in a reference to a basic good. If a CSE does not, or cannot, refer back at some stage to some basic good, then it is not a chain of explanation – not an intelligible account of the action's motivation – at all. Why is (e.g.) the thought that 'I must get there on time', in certain circumstances, a motivating thought? This question is to be answered by referring the inquirer to some good which 'getting there on time' is seen by the agent as a way of achieving in those circumstances. There can be no question of the same sort about the good to which the inquirer is, ultimately or immediately, so referred. This latter kind of good – the basic good – is foundational to practical rationality of the subsumptive kind I am talking about. If there are no basic goods of this sort there will be no subsumptive practical reasoning, because there will not be anything for it to aim at.

Such basic goods, then, are foundational to, the first principles of, subsumptive practical rationality. This in two senses: (a) subsumptive practical rationality could have no point or terminus without these basic goods, and (b) subsumptive rationality shows us what sort of things the basic goods are when we identify its termini. However we need a different kind of practical rationality, not subsumptive, but narrative, for an account of why the basic goods are the particular goods they are. Their nature and number is to be established by reflection on what kind of ingredients we would need for a good life; on what kind of story would be a good story to be the subject of, what elements it would contain, how combined, and why.

Another point about basic goods is (c) that they are either evident or self-evident goods, or both. By 'an evident good' I mean 'a good such that no one would normally dream of denying its goodness'; by 'a self-evident good' I mean 'a good such that it is self-defeating to deny its goodness'. Pleasure, for example, is an evident good, so much so that the utilitarians base a whole moral system on its goodness. No one except a philosopher could deny that the prospect of pleasure is, in the absence of special circumstances, something that gives us a *prima facie* reason to act.⁴ By contrast rationality – the ability to reason, to do logic, to see a contradiction, to frame an argument – is a self-evident good (and no doubt an evident good as well). For consider any argument that shows that rationality is not a good, not worth having. Any such argument, whether successful or not, is itself guaranteed to be not worth

⁴ Cp. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1153b27.

having. For its success would show that no argument is worth having (and so neither is this one); but its failure would show that this argument is not worth having.

Note also (*d*) that basic goods are mutually irreducible. Nothing is a basic good if it is not or cannot intelligibly be sought in itself, or its own sake. Now there is more than one basic good. Therefore more than one thing is sought for its own sake, and those who say, as Aristotle apparently did⁵ and as many utilitarians certainly have,⁶ that everything we do is for the sake of one end only – whatever end that may be – are simply wrong. Even if their position is not in itself unsustainably contorted or incoherent, the best they can hope to do with the phenomenology of our actual experience of choice is distort it.

(5) *Faith as a virtue*

With this much in place, I can now suggest that faith is a virtue because it instantiates a responsiveness to two basic goods: truth, and what I shall call ‘practical hope’. Not just truth, and not just practical hope, but both. So first I need to show that truth and practical hope are basic goods, and then I need to show that faith is a responsiveness to them.

If truth and practical hope are basic goods, then they will be (*a*) the kinds of goods that give subsumptive practical reasoning its point, (*b*) considerations typically, or at least often, found at the termini of CSEs, (*c*) either evident or self-evident goods, and (*d*) mutually irreducible goods. (*d*) The irreducibility of truth and practical hope is shown by the possibility that they could be in tension with each other. To put it crudely, the truth could be such as to make it irrational to have practical hope. What of (*a*)–(*c*)?

(6) *Truth as a basic good*

Truth is a basic good of the same sort as rationality, as just discussed, because (*a*) it is an intelligibly complete explanation of what John is doing, to say that he is seeking the truth; and (*b*) one will typically need no further explanation, than that seeking the truth is what John is doing, to understand what John is doing. (*c*) Truth is, like rationality, a self-evident good, and presumably an evident good as well. For consider the claim that truth is not a good, not worth having. Any such claim is itself guaranteed to be not worth having. For if it is true, then *no* true claim is worth having (and so neither is this one). But if it is false, then this claim is not worth having.

(7) *Practical hope as a basic good*

What is ‘practical hope’? The condition of practical hope is the condition of believing that I am not, either continually or typically, confronted with

⁵ In the opening lines of *Nicomachean Ethics*; but the evidence is ambiguous.

⁶ Bentham and James Mill are obvious examples; J. S. Mill’s distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures, in Chapter 2 of his *Utilitarianism* (ed. Warnock; London: Fontana, 1962) begins to complicate the picture.

situations in which my endeavours, both practical and intellectual, are either doomed to disaster from the start, or else can make no possible difference. It is the attitude that practical choice and action, or theoretical inquiry, is not inevitably going to be vain or fruitless in the situation(s) with which I am confronted. Something like this may be what Aristotle has in mind when he writes that

There is no deliberate choice of impossibilities... We deliberate about what comes about through us and not always in the same way. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1111b21, 1112b3-4)

and again when he remarks that, if logical fatalism were true, then ‘there would be no point in deliberating or taking pains’ (*de Interpretatione* 18b30). One good reason for thinking that logical fatalism is not true is that we do find, or seem to find, it worthwhile to deliberate and take trouble over our projects.

‘There can be no deliberate choice of impossibilities’; the belief that one is confronted (*a*) by possibilities, (*b*) by more than one of them, and (*c*) by some possibilities to bring about which will be a good and worthwhile outcome – these beliefs are a necessary precondition of deliberate choice. Deliberate choice is about our projects; so that to have these beliefs and not their opposites, and to act and inquire accordingly, is a precondition of any intellectual or practical project’s even getting started. The possibility of holding the beliefs in question is what I mean by the basic good of practical hope. The connections of this good with the goods realized in practical activity in general, and with the rather special good of free will, may already be plain. Practical hope, I suspect, is going to be a good in rather the same way that free will is.

But have I yet shown that practical hope is any more than an instrumental good? I have said something about how practical hope might be an irreducible form of good, and an evident, maybe even a self-evident, good. But it may be that instrumental goods too can be evident goods. Moreover, on my own principles, practical hope cannot be seen as an irreducibly basic form of good unless we already have other reasons for thinking that it is more than a merely instrumental good. And in any case, what I have said so far is not enough to show that practical hope is a basic good unless it is also the kind of good that can give subsumptive practical reasoning its point, and the kind of consideration typically or often found at the termini of CSEs. So: is practical reasoning ever about achieving no other objective than practical hope? To put it another way: is practical hope ever itself the terminus of a CSE?

I think the answer to this is Yes, although, of course, that doesn’t mean that any non-philosopher would ever put it quite as I have just put it. People do act in ways designed to make it true that they are confronted (*a*) by

possibilities, (*b*) by more than one of them, and (*c*) by some possibilities to bring about which will be a good and worthwhile outcome. We do seek to be in positions where we have a variety of options, and where as many of those options as possible are good options. For example we seek political freedom; we seek breadth of choice; we seek so to be habituated that we will not be the slaves of habit or addiction or laziness. We seek these goods for ourselves, and also for others (e.g. our children); and, this being the crucial point, we seek them for their own sake. Likewise we do prize the fact that it is possible to be in such situations, and to act so as to put ourselves in such situations, in and of itself. I can take delight in my health, in (say) a feeling of physical well-being and energy, as well as, and quite apart from, prizing what I can do with that energy and well-being, like sprinting or wrestling or climbing mountains. Similarly I can take delight in the very fact that I am confronted by different possibilities for good (or evil), as well as in any of the good possibilities themselves; just as I can take delight not only in particular truths but in the possibility of any truth; not only in particular pieces of logical argument, but in the possibility of any logic at all; not only in particular experiences but in the possibility of any experience; not only in the kind of life I actually have here and now, but in being alive itself.

I am arguing then that practical hope is a possible objective of action, a basic good lying at the end of possible CSEs, in and of itself. But recall that acting to attain any basic good (in fact any good at all) is itself an exercise of practical hope. So then is this one: acting to attain the basic good of practical hope is itself an exercise of practical hope. Contrariwise: acting in any way which directly denies or rejects the basic good of practical hope is itself going to be an exercise of practical hope, albeit an exercise in which practical hope is strangely at odds with itself. From here we can perhaps see our way to the claim that practical hope is, in fact, not merely an evident good, but a self-evident good: a good such that it is self-defeating to act so as to reject or deny it. In this respect, I suggest, practical hope is like free will, truth, reason, knowledge, experience, perception, health, and life itself; to act so as to reject or deny any of these forms of good is to act, in one way or another, self-defeatingly. For self-refutation, global scepticism in the sense of a denial of the possibility of knowledge or truth, determinism, solipsism, suicide are all, in different but related ways, cases of the sort of self-defeatingness I mean.

(8) *Truth, practical hope, and faith*

If all this is right, then I seem to have established my case for thinking that practical hope is indeed a form of basic good, in a sense surprisingly close to the sense in which truth is a form of basic good. A critic might now ask, indeed probably several critics are already asking: 'What has all this got to do with (religious) faith, which is supposed to be a responsiveness to truth

and to practical hope? Religious faith just doesn't seem to be in the picture yet. For, apparently, someone could be fully responsive to truth and to practical hope, and thereby (according to you) have the virtue of faith, without their having any positive religious beliefs at all!'

Indeed so. *If* someone could be fully responsive to truth and to practical hope without having any positive religious beliefs at all, then – we may provisionally suggest – they *would* have the virtue of faith. For faith (as I would define it) is the virtue about religious truth, and if religion (all religion) is false, then the person who has the virtue about religious truth is the atheist, the person who does not in any positive sense go in for religion at all. Faith *would* have little or nothing to do with religion if religion were false. Here then is my first shot at an answer to the question of my title: 'Faith is a virtue because it is a proper responsiveness to the basic goods of practical hope and truth; but religious faith, i.e. faith in the usual sense of the word as outlined in Section 1, is only a virtue if religion is true'.

But this, I think, is not quite right, because there is more to the virtue of faith than proper responsivenesses to the basic goods of practical hope and truth. If religious beliefs were all false, it might be that our responsivenesses to these goods were widely separate, i.e. that there was no single disposition of character which instantiated and/or promoted *both* sorts of responsiveness at once. The atheist, then, if he is right, will have a proper responsiveness to truth, and a proper responsiveness to practical hope. But he will not have them together in the same disposition of character; and no such disposition of character will be a virtue. In short, if God does not exist, there will be no one disposition which is the virtue of faith.

More than this: if God does not exist, then there will come a point at which proper responsivenesses to truth and practical hope will be not only separate, but in tension. For my being properly responsive to practical hope means my believing that I am confronted (*a*) by possibilities, (*b*) by more than one of them, and (*c*) by some possibilities to bring about which will be a good and worthwhile outcome. But if (the Christian's) God does not exist, and if accordingly there is, e.g., no eternal life, there will be situations where these beliefs are no longer true; and not just accidentally or possibly temporarily no longer true, but inevitably and irrevocably no longer true. Such a situation – for example, the situation of an atheist on his death bed – will be one where to be responsive to practical hope is to believe what responsiveness to truth forbids me to believe. The atheist on his death bed (and, perhaps more importantly, the atheist who is thinking ahead to his death) must, in short, either surrender responsiveness to truth, or else responsiveness to practical hope; he cannot keep both.

Of course, it is still true of the dying atheist that he can choose good or bad ways of dying, and also that he can make good or bad arrangements, e.g. in a will, for the world which will still be there after his death. So even at the

moment of his death, and beyond it, he can still be confronted by some possibilities – albeit ones of a sort which must be peripheral to the living of life. But not by any that the theist is not also confronted by; whereas the theist sees, however dimly and uncertainly, a great and central possibility that the atheist does not.

If, then, (Christian) religious belief is right, our interdependent responsivenesses to practical hope and to truth need never be in finally irresolvable tension with one another. My responsiveness to practical hope will be expressed in my belief in the doctrine of providence: in my belief that, if there is a God, then he will never put me in a situation where it is irrevocably or inevitably false that I am confronted by possibilities, by more than one of them, and by some possibilities to bring about which will be good and worthwhile. My responsiveness to truth will be expressed by a corresponding belief that there *is* such a God. Now without the belief that there is such a God, the attitude of practical hope will be, ultimately, simply wrong. But without the belief that the God who truly exists is a good and providential God, a God who makes practical hope an appropriate and justified attitude, the responsiveness to truth which is expressed by my belief that God exists will be, ultimately, futile. Thus in faith responsiveness to truth and to practical hope will be intimately linked – provided God exists; and if God does exist, then the answer to the question of my title will be that faith is a virtue, a responsiveness to basic goods which we need to have if we are to live well, because, in the words of *Hebrews* 11.6, God both is, and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

(9) *Some other positions reviewed*

I have presented no argument, nor anything like an argument, that God exists. But I have pointed out how intimately the very possibility of there being a virtue of faith at all is related to the question whether God exists or not. What kinds of people we ought to be does depend, in a crucial way, on whether there is a God. If God does not exist, then we have no reason to try to have the disposition of character of (religious) faith: that is, faith is not a virtue. Moral reasons and factual reasons are very closely interrelated here, and there is (I am arguing) no question of separating them, of arguing (say) what Pascal argues in the *Pensees*, that we have compelling reason to want to have the disposition of faith whether or not God exists.

On the other hand, I have argued that we do have *some* reason, though not compelling reason, to want to have the disposition of religious faith. For Kant was quite right to hold that the ultimate reconcilability of various sorts of basic good which (as a matter of empirical fact) people do seek depends upon whether religious faith is justified, i.e. upon whether God exists. However, this premiss cannot possibly license the Kantian ‘moral argument’, i.e. transcendental practical argument, for God’s existence, that

... the postulate of the possibility of a highest derivative good (the best world) is at the same time the postulate of the reality of a highest original good, namely, the postulate of the existence of God. Now it was our duty to promote the highest good; and it is not merely our privilege but a necessity connected with duty as a requisite to presuppose the possibility of this highest good. This presupposition is made only under the condition of the existence of God, and this condition inseparably connects this supposition with duty. Therefore, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God.⁷

Kant – to put it crudely – is saying that ‘Morality would be undermined if God did not exist; therefore God exists’. But if my argument here has been correct, then any such attitude as that expressed here by Kant is mistaken; for it embodies an offence against the basic good of truth in the name of the basic good of practical hope.

In any case, Kant’s argument, at least in my crude paraphrase, is a *non sequitur*: the ‘therefore’ is simply unwarranted. Nonetheless, it is a *non sequitur* with a true antecedent. Morality, or in my non-Kantian terms the unity or reconcilability of the virtues, is indeed imperilled if God does not exist. It would be an immense disaster for humanity if he did not exist; for then the kinds of goods we seek would be irreconcilable. Recognizing the threat of this disaster does not entitle us to infer that God does exist. But it may help us to see more clearly why the question whether he exists is of crucial importance, and why a negative answer to that question is something we have reason to want to be false.

(10) *Faith and knowledge*

In conclusion, a few words on the question which may seem to some to be the most obvious question about faith of all, namely how faith is to be contrasted with knowledge. I have been emphasizing the way in which, if someone’s faith is to be a virtue in them, it must be a proper responsiveness both to practical hope and to truth. Now faith is (*Hebrews* 11.1) ‘the substance (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for, the evidence (*elenchos*) of things not seen’; and in this life (*2 Cor.* 5.7) ‘we walk by faith and not by sight’. It is evident, when we consider the difficulties of this world, that my responsivenesses to practical hope and to truth are often going to be, to some extent, in tension or at least only precariously in balance.

How, to take an obvious example, is one to deal with the problem of suffering without either falling into a self-deceiving optimism which flouts the good of truth, or into a clear-eyed pessimism which flouts the good of practical hope? Another example: the adoption of faith is partly a matter of responsiveness to evidence taken to be true, and partly a matter of a decision that ‘this is the way to live’, which often means ‘the most practically-hopeful way to live’. But adopting the Christian faith could not be merely accepting

⁷ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (trans. Lewis White Beck: Oxford, Maxwell Macmillan, 3rd. edn. 1993), p. 132: Part 1, Bk. 2, Ch. 2, S. V, ‘The existence of God as a postulate of pure practical reason’.

the facts at issue. Firstly, the facts *are* at issue, they have not been simply accepted by all parties; anyway, secondly, one could (and many do) accept all the facts at issue without being in any sense a Christian. ('The devils too believe in God, and tremble': *James* 2.19.) Yet neither could adopting the Christian faith be merely an assertion of practical hope. If that is all there is to faith, one might as well believe in fairy-land. Faith would then simply be a matter of deliberate self-deception: moreover, faith adopted on this sort of grounds would still be self-deception even if the claims of faith are true. But I have taken it as obvious that the self-deceived way is not a good way to live.

Faith, then, for us imperfect and in-process creatures, is a matter of finding a balance between responsiveness to these two goods of practical hope and truth; a balance which rejects neither good and does honour to both. (Notice incidentally that if this sort of balancing is typically only going to be possible if God exists, then the very attempt to perform this balancing, in the exercise of faith, may well involve the presupposition that success in such attempts is possible, i.e. that God exists.) I do not here propose to attempt the difficult and detailed and situation-specific question of exactly how that balance is to be found by each or any one of us. I only want to say that this is the right question to pose, and that seeing faith as *this* sort of balancing act between responsiveness to truth and responsiveness to practical hope – a balance attained perhaps in what Iris Murdoch has called 'loving, truthful attention'⁸ to what is around us – is seeing faith in the right way.

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⁸ Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"', pp. 59ff., in her *The Sovereignty of Good* (reprinted by Routledge Kegan Paul, 1991).