

# THE EMOTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE OF FAITH BY DR LAUREN WARE

As a philosopher, one of the chief aims I strive towards in considering any question is being clear about the nature of the specific terms I am considering. Everyone wants to be “good” and “fair”, to live in “well-governed” states with “just” laws and policies. We get into problems and arguments, however, when it comes to light that people have different -and, often, competing- understandings about what it means to be good, or for a law to be just. Coming to grips with these basic, foundational terms is therefore crucial if we want to get anything done in the direction of, say, justice. Accordingly, for me, thinking about “faith” begins with considering what exactly it is... is faith a belief, an expectation, a promise? In traditional Christian theology, faith is of course held to be one of the three primary virtues, alongside hope and love. In what follows, I would like to share some thoughts on the idea of faith as a virtue, and, specifically, as a jointly emotional and intellectual virtue.

In the branch of moral philosophy known as virtue ethics, virtues are taken to be those aspects of, for example, one’s character that help her achieve the goal of human flourishing. Just as a knife’s purpose is to cut, and sharpness is that feature that best enables the knife to fulfil that function, so sharpness is therefore a virtue of a knife. Is faith such a virtue of human beings? Can it help us to flourish as humans?

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Can it help us to flourish as humans?”*

Recent developments in virtue ethics -including work being done here at my home department in the University of Edinburgh- suggest a focus on the so-called “intellectual virtues”. As in virtues that are specifically valuable in intellectual and cognitive aims... virtues like honesty, carefulness, intellectual integrity, and open-mindedness.

Faith offers an intriguing challenge when considered as a possible intellectual virtue. It is historically associated with a belief or conviction of some sort, and so holds an association with reason. The problem with faith as a virtue, however, concerns two elements of this association: (1) virtues are linked to what is good for a person to do, and so have moral commitments; and (2) belief and disbelief are often held to be involuntary states, and involuntary states are not things for which one ought be blamed in a moral capacity. The problem is further compounded when one considers the possibility that if faith, as a belief, is in fact morally praiseworthy, there is some expectation that its praiseworthiness depends on the belief turning out to be true. What are we to make, for example, of Mark Twain’s schoolboy’s claim, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so”?

What I propose might offer a possible solution to these concerns is the potential of faith to harness the benefits of emotional engagement. Now, there exists a disparaging view in the history of philosophy that emotions must be opposed to reason. (It is a common view, but not an exclusive one: the interested reader may enjoy Plato’s delightful dialogue, *The Symposium*, and, this being Edinburgh, I should also credit David Hume for his work on sentiments, both of whom advance a positive role for emotion in deliberation.) The past 50 years, however, have seen a veritable Renaissance in academic research on the emotions -notably within cognitive science- emphasising their importance in directing action, lateral thinking, and problem-solving. Emotions are dynamic processes integral to linking actors with goals in their unparalleled ability to motivate human action: including the desire to know.

If we think of faith as a brand of belief beyond evidence, it becomes not simply belief, but belief plus trust of, or in something external (whether God, a scientific hypothesis, absolute truth, or a nation). The virtue of that trust is more related, I gather, to that external something actually being trustworthy than the trust being (or being able to be) rationally justified. Trust always brings with it a manner of vulnerability -as to a beloved- to be shaped and moved by time spent in such a commitment. This brings in a distinctly emotional facet to faith: a commitment to the object of faith, based on trust, which motivates the faithful person to act in certain ways which determine, at least a little, not only how her life turns out to the extent that she spent time in that commitment, but how she turns out as well. Whilst this commitment carries a risk, it can begin to be seen as a virtue. In the best cases, such commitments can allow one to be free to be herself in a uniquely self-determining way, a way that enables her to be shaped for the better.

Faith may then turn out to be a virtue when its object is actually trustworthy. Where I propose faith can be taken to be an intellectual virtue is when that commitment manifests itself in the constant sharpening of that faith, akin to a sharpening of the knife we considered earlier. The sharpening of faith can take the form of questioning: a commitment to finding out more about the object of faith. Faith is a recognition that there is something here worth pursuing, something worth considering further. Faith, thus understood, can be seen therefore to motivate not only a certain way of life, but a distinctive life of the mind and heart.

*Dr. Lauren Ware is a researcher in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. This piece arose out of a compelling discussion in the department’s 2014 seminar on Evaluating Intellectual Virtue.*

