

**\*\*This is an unpublished early draft of the following book chapter:**

**Elliott, James. 2019. "On the Incompatibility of Faith and Intellectual Humility." In Gregory Trickett & JR Gilhooly (Eds.), *Open-mindedness in Philosophy of Religion*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. 121-139.**

**Please refer to the published version in any published correspondence.**

## On the Incompatibility of Faith and Intellectual Humility

**Author:** James Elliott

**Affiliation:** Purdue University

**Abstract:** Although the relationship between faith and intellectual humility has yet to be specifically addressed in the philosophical literature, there are reasons to believe that they are at least in some sense incompatible, especially when judging from pre-theoretical intuitions. In this paper I attempt to specify and explicate this incompatibility, which is found in specific conflicting epistemic attitudes they each respectively invite. I first suggest general definitions of both faith and intellectual humility (understood as intellectual virtues), building off current proposals in the literature, in an attempt to portray both in as broad and uncontroversial a manner as feasible. I then move to arguing how this *prima facie* incompatibility aligns with these understandings of faith and intellectual humility, and illustrate how this incompatibility is even clearer on one recent theory. I close by considering one avenue of response for those who want to maintain that, while conflicting in these ways, intellectual humility and faith can be simultaneously virtuous.

## ***Introduction***

In the last several years, a burgeoning literature concerning the epistemic role and status of both intellectual humility (hereafter “IH”) and faith has begun to uncover some exciting uncharted ground.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, many popular-level ‘Science vs. Religion’ tractates, most notably those of the so-called “New Atheists”, have had a parallel resurgence.<sup>2</sup> This pop-level milieu is characterized by questions such as the following: “What is faith, and how does it differ from scientific inquiry and skepticism?”, “Is faith rational?”, and “What role does faith have in the modern world?”<sup>3</sup> Recent work on these topics in the academic literature is generally more nuanced and less rhetorically driven (thank goodness!). Bracketing the fact that the “faith & reason” debate is perennial, however, no work has yet been done regarding the specific relationship between faith and IH. This paper thus makes the case for a sort of incompatibility, or at least a particular tension, that exists between faith and IH, and attempts to delineate where (at least some of) the conflicts lie.

We can first get an appreciation for the *prima facie* incompatibility between faith and IH if we take ‘IH’ to mean something like “a general inclination toward skepticism and fact-checking”, and ‘faith’ to mean something like “a general resistance to skepticism and fact-checking”. Thusly worded, IH and faith are strictly incompatible (by definition). Although these understandings of faith and IH are indeed simplistic (and thus, as stated, implausible), I think they get something right about the

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Callahan and O’Connor (2014). See also Spiegel (2012, 2013). Great work coming out of research groups and projects (such as the recent “Nature and Value of Faith” project at Baylor University, “The Philosophy and Theology of Intellectual Humility” initiative at St. Louis University, and the “Humility: Moral, Religious, Intellectual” research theme at the Biola University Center for Christian Thought) also attest to this trend.

<sup>2</sup> Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006, OUP) famously epitomizes this trend. The stellar sales of a recent (and most-unfortunately titled) book by Jerry Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (2016, Penguin), attests to the ensuing popularity of this sort of literature.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion of IH has been far more marginal in the popular ‘science vs. religion’ literature, but IH does play an important role in how many writers characterize the virtue of a skeptical, anti-faith-based epistemic paradigm.

alleged incompatibility of faith and IH. IH suggests attitudes of *epistemic caution*—being careful, you might say—to not over-estimate your epistemic capacities; IH carries with it, so to speak, a healthy dose of pragmatic skepticism. Faith, alternatively, might (not unreasonably) be understood as that which gives us confidence in our beliefs or positions *in spite* of our doubts and skepticism. The oft-quoted Hebrews 11:1, e.g., states that “Now faith is the *assurance* of things *hoped* for, the *conviction* of things *not seen*.”<sup>4</sup> If faith is something that *assures us* of p when we might otherwise lack the evidence to justify such assurance, it is certainly, in at least some sense, incompatible with IH (if, again, IH demands that we *not be assured* when lacking such evidence).

In this short paper I attempt to (i) suggest general definitions of both faith and IH, building off current proposals in the literature (in an attempt to portray both in as broad and uncontroversial a manner as feasible<sup>5</sup>), and (ii) argue that the *prima facie* incompatibility or tension stated above aligns with the *ultima facie* incompatibility or tension between the understandings of faith and IH outlined in (i). I close by considering one avenue of response for those who want to maintain that, while conflicting in these ways, IH and faith can be simultaneously virtuous.

## ***Defining Faith and IH***

When facing the question, “Are faith and IH incompatible?” a variety of responses might come to mind. One reason you might expect such a variety is because many tend to think of *religious* faith as

---

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this is a famously difficult verse to translate into English, particularly the terms “assurance” (ὑπόστασις, “confidence, conviction, realization” or “nature, being”) and “conviction” (ἐλεγχος, “proof, verification, certainty” or “evidence”). This translation is from the NRSV, and the italics were added by myself.

<sup>5</sup> Some might scoff at this suggestion as a fool’s errand. I understand, but want to focus back to the central thesis of the paper: namely, that I’m interested in exploring a specific *way* in which IH and faith are often (at least pre-theoretically) assumed to be (at worst) incompatible or (at best) in tension. I thus aim to define IH and faith in ways that are broadly and fairly representative of the way each is discussed in the literature, and to show that this tension therefore aligns *in at least a general sense* writ large.

a distinct kind of faith separate from normal faith (that is, faith *simpliciter*).<sup>6</sup> One might suppose that having religious faith that some sort of supernatural deity exists, for example, is a *different kind* of faith than having faith that your co-worker won't hijack your social-media account, or having faith that your shoes will not tear amid your evening walk. Although I do not personally find this distinction particularly pressing or convincing, this matter is inconsequential for the purposes of this paper.<sup>7</sup> This paper is interested in the relationship between IH and faith *simpliciter*.

These sorts of philosophical projects are only as good as the definitions under examination themselves, so what follows next is a brief delineation of how, in as broad, brief, and uncontroversial a manner possible, we can understand the concepts of faith and IH. For the means of this paper, I take 'faith' to be the following, where p represents some proposition.

**Faith:** A positively-valenced, para-doxastic, affective mental state of trusting-that p.<sup>8</sup>

That's, no doubt, many adjectives, and the meaning of the noun itself isn't crystal clear. Let's address each in turn.

Faith is a particular, multi-faceted *affective mental state*. It's a certain way in which one can have his or her thought processes, which includes inclinations, attitudes, emotions, etc. By "para-doxastic affective mental state", then, I mean a mental state that is chiefly characterized by inclinations

---

<sup>6</sup> See Audi (2008), Howard-Snyder (2013), and Schellenberg (2014) for discussions on this issue.

<sup>7</sup> Another distinction that one might raise here is the difference between propositional faith (faith that-p) and interpersonal faith (faith in-p). I also do not find this distinction to be particularly substantive, especially for the purposes of the current paper. You could amend my definition (which is a definition of propositional faith) into a definition of interpersonal faith by changing "trusting-that p" with "trusting-in x", where x represents some alternative (non-propositional) object of faith such as a person (or abstract object like "the government").

<sup>8</sup> It cannot be stressed enough that I aim to work with *generally representative* definitions of faith and IH in this discussion. No doubt, the project of simply defining these terms has resulted in entire literatures. Indeed, there are scholars in the field that have specifically argued that faith isn't a mental state, or isn't positively-valenced, or isn't trust-based (for example). But in the context of this paper, this is secondary to my thesis. My thesis is that there is some philosophical meat behind a *prima-facie* intuition that faith and IH are incompatible in particular ways. Excellent places to begin on understanding the different definitions of these terms are Audi (2008) and Eklund (2016) (for faith) and Church (2016) and Snow (2018) (for IH).

and attitudes that do not *in themselves* pertain to belief, but only indirectly indicate belief states. Examples of such inclinations and attitudes are how *optimistic* you are that p, your *confidence* in p, how *wary* you are that p, and how *excited* you are that p. “Having faith that p”, therefore, indicates that you are in a particular affective mental state with respect to p, but it doesn’t indicate that you necessarily *believe* p. “Having faith that p” might *suggest* belief that p, but it doesn’t *entail* belief that p.<sup>9</sup> Since faith is a para-doxastic mental state, you can have faith that p while simultaneously having a wide range of credences in p. Faith is a *way of feeling about* p, not a *way of knowing or believing* that p.

Faith isn’t necessarily luminous (you can be in a state of faith and also be unaware of it), it can become absent or regained, and its strength comes in degrees—faith can be strong, weak, or anything in between. The strength of Y’s faith that p is going to depend on a number of para-doxastic qualities. First and foremost among these are Y’s evidence and confidence in p; they will also include other qualities such as how desirable p is for Y, how motivated Y is for thinking that something like p is true, and how strongly Y is predisposed to having a trusting attitude. While faith that p doesn’t entail belief that p, its strength increases drastically if p is believed. It is rational to have a stronger faith in something believed than in something that isn’t believed. The lower the credence one has in p, the closer faith gets to something like hope.

Keep in mind that hope and faith are very distinct mental states, though. Hope and faith are similar in that they are positively-valenced (it is necessary to *want p* to be true in order *to have hope*

---

<sup>9</sup> The idea that faith that p doesn’t entail belief that p is, I think, the most controversial of my assumptions. That being said, I agree with Frise (unpublished) that this distinction isn’t as significant as it has recently been made out to be. However, *pace* Frise, I think that the alleged incompatibility between faith and IH *is* a good reason to prefer the non-doxastic account of faith over the doxastic account. For representative works arguing for the doxastic account (*viz.*, that faith entails belief that p), see Plantinga (2000), Alston (2007), Dougherty (2014), and Pittard (unpublished). For representative works arguing for the non-doxastic account, see Audi (2008), Howard-Snyder (2013, 2016), Schellenberg (2014), and Buchak (2012, 2014).

*that-p*, or *have faith that-p*<sup>10</sup>), but they are distinct in that hope that-p does not entail *trust* that-p, whereas faith that-p does. So faith is quite distinct from hope, chiefly because hope isn't a positively-valenced state of "trusting-that p", but rather something more like a positively-valenced state of "wishing that p were the case". So hope and faith are similar in that they are positively-valenced, but they are distinct in that faith that-p entails throwing your trust on *p*. As your confidence and/or credence in *p* diminishes, your faith that-p will get closer to *something like hope*, but that doesn't mean that hope is the same thing as weak faith.

*Throwing your trust on p* is an essential aspect of faith.<sup>11</sup> Faith isn't exactly synonymous with trust *simpliciter*, of course—a fact that has been well appreciated in the literature; this is why you need *positively-valenced* trust for faith. I can *trust*, say, that my friend will give me an oversized, itchy sweater for Christmas this year; after all, she has had a remarkably consistent penchant for doing so in the past. But seeing as I personally have no desire or see no substantial value in receiving such a sweater, it doesn't make sense to say that I have *faith* that she will give such an unfortunate gift.

I also hold that faith is an intellectual virtue: that is, I think that the rational, virtuous thinker will have faith in some propositions at times where it is virtuous to have such faith. In short, I think that faith can procure many epistemic goods, such as lightening one's emotional and epistemic load (faith can, for example, be a form of "epistemic inoculation", and allow for us to set aside troublesome

---

<sup>10</sup> See Page (2017) for a fascinating account of faith that gives a more nuanced look of exactly what sort of positive posture faith represents: she argues, for example, that faith isn't always positively *valenced* in the general way I am suggesting here. E.g., when one "has faith that the damned will go to hell", cashing this out in terms of simplistic valence just won't do. However, note two things: (1) it isn't clear that Page's more nuanced view of a "positive posture" is particularly damning for my account of the sorts of tensions that exist between IH and faith; (2) it is generally accepted by most who write on faith that positive valence (at least *generally*) is an important component to faith, and I'm primarily interested in a general definition (a horse that has been thoroughly beaten up to this point).

<sup>11</sup> As much as I'd like to get on an etymological tangent with respect to the way 'faith' is related to 'trust'—especially the way it is used in religious texts such as the New Testament—this short paper is clearly not the place for it. One excellent article on this topic is Callahan & O'Connor (2014). For a recent account of faith that tries to shift away from this focus on trust, see Kvanvig (2016).

worries for a given time), gaining friendship, and making one's affect more overall positive.<sup>12</sup> I should also state that, as with most epistemic virtues, you can be *too* faithful (such as when doing so would be pragmatically inadvisable, like trusting a friend to borrow a firearm when you have very good reason to suspect she'll commit suicide). Virtuous faith is a rational mean between overzealousness and disparaged, cynical depression.<sup>13</sup>

To make this definition of faith more vivid, consider the following scenarios.

**CAR:** My cosmetically unsightly Toyota Camry, endearingly named Ole' Bessie, although historically a good, trusty automobile, had begun to show clear signs of having a cracked head gasket in the engine. The car exhibited all the telltale signs: hot, leaking coolant, thick smoke in the exhaust, the distinct smell, etc. Today, however, the rest of my afternoon hinges on my being able to drive home in Ole' Bessie (so calling a tow truck now rather than later isn't any more convenient), and I've got to get her out of the parking garage regardless (so I could either call a tow truck or try to drive her home, but I can't leave her in the garage). I only have around a .20 credence that she will make the whole 30-mile trip (mostly through open country roads), and therefore certainly don't *believe* that she will make it. Nonetheless, I *take it on faith* that she will do so.<sup>14</sup>

**KINDERGARTEN:** Today is my daughter's first day of kindergarten. The fact that she's "in big girl school now" (to use her words) leaves me with a cache of worries that she might experience some difficulties and anxiety on her first day. I thus have around a .55 credence that she will be 'just fine' handling her new day. So while I don't quite *believe* that she will be 'just fine', I have *faith* that she will.

**GOD:** Say I believe in a tri-omni, Trinitarian God. I'm also well aware of the contentiousness of that sort of belief however, being well trained in the philosophy of religion, and would never claim, e.g., that I am *absolutely certain* that God exists. Say I have a .95 credence in the

---

<sup>12</sup> Callahan & O'Connor (2014) and Fricker (2014) are excellent on this point as well.

<sup>13</sup> Howard-Snyder (2015) elegantly states this differently: "Indifference, hostility, and faintheartedness are the enemies of faith, not doubt."

<sup>14</sup> If this scenario seems crazy to you, look ahead to the last footnote, which might clarify why taking on a faith disposition is rational here. One worry might harken back to the distinction between faith and hope: but I think the distinction can be made clearly considering **CAR**. A disposition of faith in **CAR** means that I am *trusting that* Ole' Bessie will make the drive home—even if I believe she won't. A disposition of hope in **CAR** does not mean that I trust she will make the drive home.

existence of this God, and I rationally and accurately take my evidence to support this credence. I affirm *belief* in this God. Nonetheless, I also have *faith* that God exists.

I think that these examples make it clearer as to why faith is a para-doxastic, trusting-that, positively-valenced mental state, and one that doesn't entail belief. I am motivated and excited regarding the truth of p in each scenario, by taking p on faith in each scenario I am trusting-that p will obtain, and I only *believe* p in **GOD**. Notice that faith comes in degrees here, proportional to the various doxastic and para-doxastic elements at play in each scenario. My faith is going to be weak in **CAR**, middling in **KINDERGARTEN**, and strong in **GOD**. Faith is an affective, para-doxastic virtue (assuming it doesn't entail belief); its primary goods are pragmatic and attitudinal.

The literature on the nature of IH is substantially smaller than that of faith, but in recent years there has been quite an upsurge on the subject in philosophical writing. In order to be widely representative of that literature, the concept of IH we'll consider in this paper is something like a combination of Hazlett's (2012), Whitcomb *et al.*'s (2014), and Church's (2016) views.<sup>15</sup>

**Intellectual Humility:** A proclivity to accurately and rationally  
(A) track the epistemic status of one's credences and beliefs,  
(B) own one's cognitive limitations and strengths, and  
(C) update one's credences or beliefs in light of A & B

To appropriate a locution from Christian Reformed circles, IH is the virtue that motivates us to epistemically "*semper reformanda*" (to "always [keep] reforming"). It's the rational mean between

---

<sup>15</sup> A is adapted (mostly word-for-word) from Church (2016), B is from Whitcomb *et al.* (2014) and Church (2017), and C is inspired by Hazlett (2012). None of these papers focus on IH being a proclivity, however. (It should be mentioned that, perhaps not surprisingly, I prefer my definition to the aforementioned definitions).



intellectual arrogance (holding beliefs to an irrationally tenacious extent, under-emphasizing disconfirming evidence for *p*, over-emphasizing confirming evidence for *p*, not accurately appreciating your likelihood of being mistaken, etc.) and intellectual diffidence (giving up beliefs or lowering credences capriciously, over-emphasizing disconfirming evidence for *p*, under-emphasizing confirming evidence for *p*, not accurately appreciating your likelihood of being correct, etc.). Just as with faith, you can be *too* intellectually humble (e.g., to commit yourself to constantly checking the statuses of your credences—and therefore have no time left to commit to anything else).

The most important thing to note at first is that IH is a *proclivity* (an inclination, predisposition, or a state of readily manifesting a disposition) rather than a mental state. To have IH means that you have a readiness and willingness to accurately and rationally do A-C. Someone might be *able* to rationally and accurately do A-C (and even be quite adept at doing so), but they aren't intellectually humble unless they're readily willing to manifest that disposition. The second thing to note is that, unlike faith, IH is primarily a doxastic virtue; its primary goods are found in appropriately tracking the epistemic statuses of beliefs and credences and appropriately updating credences and beliefs in light of those statuses (and having a healthy proclivity to track such statuses).

To say that IH is a proclivity to *accurately and rationally* do A-C is to say that A-C need to be done virtuously to constitute IH. Someone who doesn't accurately track the epistemic status of her beliefs or credences (or update on those statuses), even if she is well-intending, isn't being properly intellectually humble. This might seem misleading, because it seems that if a person is *trying* to track (or has a proclivity to track) their epistemic statuses, whether or not they do it accurately, they have IH. Even if you mean well when inaccurately tracking the epistemic statuses of your credences, though, this is still clearly an intellectual vice, and we want to maintain that IH is a virtue. Likewise,

someone who doesn't *rationaly* do A-C, even if they do so accurately, isn't acting in an epistemically virtuous way. Having a proclivity to do A-C but doing so irrationally or inaccurately might *appear* to be IH, but it isn't virtuous IH. We're interested in IH as a virtue.

The proclivity to (A), to “track the epistemic status of one’s credences and beliefs”, is, stated simply, to regularly evaluate the epistemic quality of your credence and/or belief in p (e.g., by evaluating the relevant reasons and evidence you have for (and against) your credence and/or belief in p).<sup>16</sup> A person with IH, who has a proclivity to accurately and rationally track her epistemic status for p, is going to be *sensitive* in checking the status of her credence or belief in p in light of her current (and ever-changing) body of evidence. If I am to act out of IH in the case of **GOD**, for example, I need to regularly check the epistemic status of my belief in God, perhaps by mulling over my reasons and evidence that confirm (and disconfirm) my belief, and engaging in critical reflection of my supposed justification for my belief. Someone who exhibits all the components of IH except for the proclivity to (A) isn't properly intellectually humble because they're not invested in examining the justification, evidence, or reasons for their credences or beliefs, which is perhaps *the* central component of IH (to “*semper reformanda*”).

The proclivity to (B)—to “own one’s cognitive limitations and strengths”—is a bit different from the proclivity to (A).<sup>17</sup> (B) is primarily affective, though it does involve a cognitive component. Whitcomb *et al.* ask us “to imagine a department chair who’s been promoted to Associate Dean, and recognizes that he’s terrible at calculating budgets.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than attributing his mistakes to his limitations, though, he offloads his guilt and blames the staff. The newly-appointed Associate Dean

---

<sup>16</sup> For a full exposition on the importance of the proclivity to (A), see Church (2016).

<sup>17</sup> For a full defense of IH requiring the proclivity to (B), see Whitcomb *et al.* (2014).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

indeed *recognizes* his limitations, but he isn't appropriately attentive to (or open, or explicit about) them. As such, he hasn't *owned* his limitations. Affectively, "owning" your limitations and strengths means that you aren't emotionally invested in resisting acceptance of the truth about your strengths and limitations. It means that you appropriately *act in accordance with* a full awareness of what you are and are not epistemically entitled to assert or believe. Properly doing (B) requires properly doing (A); you can't virtuously own your limitations and strengths without virtuously tracking the statuses for your credences and beliefs. (B) is therefore the primarily *affective* component of a generally *doxastic* virtue. If someone exhibits all the components of IH except for (B), she (like our Associate Dean) isn't exhibiting IH.

(C) likewise is a key component of virtuous IH, however, because someone can have a proclivity to accurately and rationally track their epistemic statuses (A), own their limitations and strengths (B), and still not properly update their credences or beliefs in light of (A) & (B). Consider the case of **CAR**. Assume that on my drive home, I discover that my son has played a cruel trick on me by putting a special type of fuel in Ole'Bessie that makes the car act as if it has a cracked head gasket. If I thereby still (even if I appropriately track my epistemic status for p and own my cognitive limitations and strengths with respect to p) fail to update my credence in light of this new evidence (say, from a .2 to a .9), I am no longer being epistemically virtuous. If we are to maintain that IH is an epistemic virtue then, (C) is a necessary component. The IH person will not only have a predisposition to accurately and rationally track their epistemic statuses for p, she will also own her cognitive limitations and strengths with respect to p and update her credence or belief that p according to her tracking.

## *On the Incompatibility of Faith and IH*

One key point to remember is that faith and IH are not poles on the same continuum. Faith is an affective, para-doxastic virtue (assuming it doesn't entail belief); its primary goods are pragmatic and attitudinal. IH is primarily a dispositional, doxastic virtue; its primary goods are found in appropriately tracking the epistemic statuses of beliefs and credences, appropriately updating credences and beliefs in light of those statuses, and having a healthy proclivity *to* track such statuses.<sup>19</sup> They're incompatible in the attitudes and states of mind they welcome. What follows, then, is an assessment of these conflicts. After discussing each case for the incompatibility of faith and IH, I will consider a possible response on behalf those who wish to maintain that faith and IH are compatibly virtuous.

With regards to (A), faith conflicts with IH by weakening our sensitivity, proclivity, and accuracy for tracking our epistemic statuses. With regards to (B), faith might cause us to not appropriately own our epistemic limitations or strengths. With regards to (C), faith hinders our ability to actually conditionalize on our evidence. (A) and (C) are the main concerns here, so let's address (B) first.

I do not think that faith conflicts with (B) in any obvious or clear-cut fashion. It *might* be the case that faith weakens or confuses our ability to own our intellectual limitations or strengths. Consider **KINDERGARTEN**—by taking it on faith that my daughter will be “just fine”, I have no doubt eased my worries and concerns (one might say that taking on faith in this situation is a form of

---

<sup>19</sup> IH no doubt does garner virtuous pragmatic and attitudinal goods (sometimes, e.g., it is quite refreshing to hear someone assert, “I don't know”, or give an un-biased, non-rhetorical, nuanced answer to a complex question).

“epistemic inoculation”). Does this mean that I am now less able to properly recognize and accept my intellectual limitations and strengths with respect to p? It might be the case that, after taking p on faith, I am now less able to recognize and own my cognitive limitations, but this seems unconvincing. In fact, it might seem more convincing that taking on a disposition of faith would *help* you recognize and own your cognitive limitations. If faith entails an awareness of how limited our ken is in any particular situation (which it seems to—for reasons I will explain in a moment), then faith doesn’t cut against (B) at all.

One aspect of faith worth noting is that it seems counter-intuitive that one can be *absolutely certain* that p (or not-p) and still “have faith” that p.<sup>20</sup> In other words, faith that p seems to entail an awareness that you are possibly mistaken with respect to p.<sup>21</sup> And if this is so, then (B) seems to be the (perhaps primary) way in which faith might be compatible with IH.<sup>22</sup> If the key aspect of both faith and IH is *a state of openness to being mistaken*, then faith and IH might not just be compatible, they might be synergistic. I, however, believe that this is a rather superficial understanding of both faith and IH; I agree, along with many others (e.g., Robert Audi, Alvin Plantinga, W. Jay Wood, Joshua Mugg, and Ian Church<sup>23</sup>), that faith and IH are more complicated virtues than that. So, as I mentioned

---

<sup>20</sup> This might be offered as a criticism of the non-doxastic account of faith, because on the non-doxastic account, you can still have faith with certainty. I do not believe this is a particularly strong objection, though, because I am skeptical that there is such thing as *absolute* certainty (for embodied, non-divine human persons). That is to say, in any sense in which one might colloquially claim that she is “certain that p”, this is still compatible with acknowledging that she could (*ceteris paribus*) be mistaken. If you are “99.99% certain” that p, having faith in p is still compatible with this because faith requires that you aren’t *absolutely certain* that p.

<sup>21</sup> Buchak (2014) notes this explicitly: “in order for a proposition *X* to be an appropriate object of faith... her evidence must leave open the possibility for *not-X*.” (53)

<sup>22</sup> One might suppose that a hardline doxastic account of faith, such as that of Thomas Aquinas (see *ST II-II*, Q2, A9) which holds that faith is a firm *knowledge* that p, might be a counter-example to the claim that faith entails an awareness of the possibility of being mistaken. Even on this account, though, Aquinas holds that this knowledge can only come in full awareness that one couldn’t have gotten that knowledge by mere human effort alone, so it is still a compatible account with “owning our limitations.”

Michael Bergmann has raised an interesting point that, even if faith is incompatible with absolute certainty (and even if faith *makes* us aware that we are uncertain), faith might keep us from “seeing the true depth of our ignorance.” If this is the case, then this is a way in which faith might still conflict with (B).

<sup>23</sup> Audi (2008), Plantinga (2000), Wood (2014), Mugg (2016), and Church (2016).

above, even if faith and IH might possibly invite *some* attitudes which do seem compatible, this doesn't mean that *most*, or *the most important* attitudes they invite are compatible. If most (or the most important) attitudes that faith and IH invite are incompatible, then that is sufficient for claiming that they are (at least broadly-speaking) incompatible virtues.

(C) is more problematic for faith, especially if faith entails belief. For example, consider **KINDERGARTEN** again. Suppose that I learn that the school has been trying to call me several times over the past hour. I thus have evidence that suggests I should lower my credence from .55 to, say, .3. If we maintain that belief that *p* means having a credence greater than .5,<sup>24</sup> then IH would thereby force me to cease in my faith that she's "just fine". That's about as incompatible as you can get!<sup>25</sup>

But what about our non-doxastic definition of faith? There is in fact a similar problem.<sup>26</sup> On the non-doxastic account, while faith that *p* does not entail belief that *p*, it might seem like it requires a commitment to the proposition that *it is epistemically reasonable that p might be true*. In other words, it seems like faith entails that one cannot be *certain* that *p* is false. Consider now **CAR**. Imagine, upon my drive home, that the engine finally gives out and Ole' Bessie is no longer able to run. (C) requires that my .2 credence in Ole' Bessie's functioning be lowered to a point so low, say .01, that it is no longer reasonable to entertain the proposition that she will run. Since faith isn't doxastic, it isn't *strictly speaking* "incompatible" with my .01 credence in *p*—i.e., you *can* have faith that *p* while

---

<sup>24</sup> The specifics here—how credence relates to belief—are quite controversial, but they aren't pertinent to the topic at hand. All you need to do here is imagine a scenario in which rationally updating on new evidence for a proposition (in which we previously both believed and had faith) requires that you now withhold your previously held belief in that proposition.

<sup>25</sup> If my argument here holds any water, then this is a reason, *pace* Frise (unpublished), to prefer the non-doxastic account of faith over the doxastic account.

<sup>26</sup> I want to thank Alexander Pruss for raising this concern (well, for raising a slightly different concern that inspired this particular concern).

holding a credence of .01 in  $p$ . But, more importantly, in this scenario, (C) significantly *weakened* your faith that  $p$ . In this sense, then, (C) makes faith and IH incompatible virtues as IH can significantly weaken your faith disposition.

Now let's look at (A). This seems to be where faith and IH's incompatibility is the most straightforward. The fact is, faith that  $p$  *can* weaken our sensitivity, proclivity, and accuracy for tracking our epistemic statuses. In fact, it seems like that is one of faith's *primary functions*. Recall that among faith's pragmatic goods are its ability to lighten your emotional and epistemic load—faith can, again, act as a sort of *epistemic inoculation* (to make us *feel more positively* about some proposition, and allow us to set aside troublesome worries for a given time). Faith is about *trusting that- $p$*  or making us *feel more confident that- $p$* , even when our evidence or credence might suggest that such trust or confidence isn't clearly warranted. In other words, the *pragmatic* goods that come from faith seem to have a potentially *epistemically vicious* cost.

Faith can also make us more prone to certain confirmation biases: faith can hinder us from correctly tracking our epistemic status with respect to disconfirming evidence for  $p$  (and thus make us more likely to dig in our heels, or under-evaluate the power of said disconfirming evidence). It might also make us too quick or cavalier in tracking the epistemic status with respect to *confirming* evidence, leading us to mistake the power or significance of such evidence. It also seems like part of what makes faith virtuous is that it protects us from micromanaging our status-checking in such a way as the perfectly intellectually humble person might. So in these aspects faith dispositions are clearly incompatible with IH.

Another reason to suppose that IH and faith are incompatible is that these cognitive-bias concerns are directly proportional to the *strength* of faith. In short, “the more faith” you have, the

more you are likely to err in IH with respect to (A). In **CAR**, for example, my faith in  $p$  is not very strong. Because of this, I am going to be *less* optimistic about  $p$ , even though I do deeply desire  $p$  to be the case. Since my faith isn't particularly strong in **CAR**, then, I am less likely to be weakened in my sensitivity, proclivity, and accuracy for status-tracking. In **GOD**, however, it is going to be more difficult to keep my cognitive biases in check. Since  $p$ , in **GOD**, is such an incredibly important proposition, has a lot riding on it, and is one that I am very hopeful, optimistic, and excited about, the strong faith in **GOD** is more likely to weaken my sensitivity, proclivity, and accuracy for status-tracking than my weak faith in **CAR** is.<sup>27</sup>

This incompatibility is even more explicit on Lara Buchak's view of faith. Buchak's account of faith states that, for some mental state to be one of faith, one must be consciously *taking a risk* on  $p$  (meaning that one's evidence leaves open the possibility that not- $p$ <sup>28</sup>), and be willing to *commit* to  $p$  without further examining additional evidence.<sup>29</sup> This last bit—that faith entails a willingness to *commit* to the truth of a proposition without gathering any further evidence, runs squarely against (A). Buchak is adamant that, on her definition, faith doesn't mean you *should stop looking* for evidence, it just simply means you are willing to act on or commit yourself to the truth of a proposition *without feeling the need* to seek out more evidence—you're willing to *act as if  $p$  were the case*, even if you don't have especially strong evidence to believe that it is. Nevertheless, it still seems evident to me that,

---

<sup>27</sup> Notice that, even if my evidence strongly supports my .95 credence in **GOD** (and thus I may very well be acting out of IH when asserting my belief), my faith disposition here will yet weaken this proclivity and sensitivity to accurately perform A due to these cognitive bias concerns.

<sup>28</sup> Buchak (2014), p. 53

<sup>29</sup> Here is her technical definition (*Ibid.*)

**Faith-Buchak:** For an individual  $I$ ,  $A$  is an act of faith that  $X$  iff  $X$  is a candidate proposition for faith ( $I$  needs to want  $X$  to be true,  $I$  needs to have a positive attitude toward the truth of  $X$ , and  $I$ 's evidence needs to leave open the possibility of not- $X$ ) and:

- (1)  $A$  constitutes  $I$  taking a risk on  $X$
- (2)  $I$  chooses to commit to  $A$  before examining additional evidence rather than postpone her decision about  $A$  until she examines additional evidence.



when you're in a mental state such that you're willing to act as if p were true without further considering more evidence, this is going to weaken your *proclivity* for epistemic status-tracking. It may very well be rational for one to act on faith in this way; for instance, in the **GOD** example, my evidence supports p. But that doesn't thereby mean that I'm not "epistemically inoculating myself" by taking on a faith disposition in a way an ideally intellectually humble person wouldn't. By committing to the truth of p without deferring to the important need for continual status-checking, one is still "backing off" of the proclivity aspect (the "*semper reformanda*" attitude) of IH. If IH is a proclivity to track your epistemic status that p, and faith entails (as it does on Buchak's view) that you're no longer *as* interested in tracking the epistemic status of p, then faith and IH are, at least in this way, clearly incompatible.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, there is reason to think that there is a *prima facie* incompatibility between faith and IH. There is also reason to think that faith and IH are incompatible on a deeper level. "But certainly," I can imagine many saying, "there *must be* a way to reconcile faith and IH." Perhaps this is so. I can see two ways to vindicate the relationship between faith and IH: one way is to argue against the points I have set forth in this paper, and to thereby either claim that faith and IH *haven't successfully been shown* to be incompatible, or to go further and argue that faith and IH are in fact compatible. One way to do this would be to simply reject my definitions.<sup>30</sup> Another way is to grant my arguments in the paper (to grant that, in many instances, faith and IH are indeed incompatible), but give an account of how

---

<sup>30</sup> This would be a noble challenge in itself, though, as the definitions in this paper are based on a coherent combination of well-defended proposals in the literature (one that "takes the strongest part" of each proposal, you might say), and the doxastic account of faith has an even tougher incompatibility problem with IH than the non-doxastic account I offered.

the virtuous thinker can employ each virtue in such a way that they do not conflict in rational epistemic tracking and belief deliberation. Although giving an account like this would be difficult, this seems to be the most promising route.

It might seem intuitive, e.g., that faith and IH can play a role in ‘balancing each other out’. We need faith dispositions often times because *if we don’t have faith*, then the pragmatic effects will be disastrous—for example, having faith that your spouse is faithful to you. *Even if you have good evidence that this is false*, it might very likely be in your best interest to have faith in your spouse at some particular point in time, or in some context—perhaps, say, while you are both dropping your daughter off at the airport. Conversely, if we threw our trust on virtually any proposition out of our impassioned faith alone, without checking our evidence and credences, then this would be no doubt disastrous as well. So one promising route to respond to the incompatibility between faith and IH is to claim that it is simply a question of context and instances: the rational, virtuous thinker will need to play an “epistemic balancing game.”<sup>31</sup> Giving a tight, analytic account of how exactly this game

---

<sup>31</sup> Here is an account of how such “balancing games” might appear.

In **CAR**, for example, it is reasonable to have (at least a weak) faith that Ole’ Bessie will make it home, because even though I think it is *unlikely* that she will, it would be mighty wonderful if *she did*—especially seeing as I don’t have roadside assistance. Since there are not too many significant repercussions if my car does, in fact, die on the way home (my wife, when having to corral the children into the car for an unexpected 40-minute drive, might have a different opinion), it moreover seems relatively harmless to have faith that it will make it home. “So what if I’m wrong?” It had to get towed if I left it in the garage anyway, and since the drive is mostly through the country, the likelihood of backing up traffic or being in danger is small. Since the good of taking p on faith here (my not being cranky and agitated) outweighs the bad (I won’t be too existentially tormented if my faith was misplaced), it seems perfectly rational to have faith that Ole’ Bessie will make it home, even though IH tells me this is very unlikely to be the case.

**GOD** is a completely different situation: I have a much higher credence in p here, and the existential levity of p is about as big as it can get. IH thus has a much bigger role to play here, as my inclination toward confirmation biases is going to be running full-throttle. I thus, in order to be virtuously intellectually humble, need to pay much more attention to the role of IH, and give it prominence. To act virtuously, then, I would need to not allow faith to ‘lighten the epistemic load’ as much in **GOD** as it did in **CAR**, and remain steadfast in focusing on epistemic tracking.

should be done (complete with a delineation of what weights we should apply to particular features in particular contexts), however, will undoubtedly prove to be difficult.<sup>32</sup>

## References

- Alston, William P. (2007). "Audi on Nondoxastic Faith," in *Rationality and the Good: Critical Essays on the Ethics and Epistemology of Robert Audi*, eds. John Greco, Alfred Mele, and Mark Timmons. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 123-138.
- Audi, Robert (2008). "Belief, Faith, and Acceptance." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 63: 87-102.
- Aquinas, Thomas (1964-1981). *Summa Theologiae*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Buchak, Lara. (2012). "Can it Be Rational to Have Faith?" In Jake Chandler & Victoria Harrison (eds.), *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: OUP.
- (2014). "Rational Faith and Justified Belief." In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*. New York: OUP. 49-74.
- (forthcoming). "Reason and Faith." In William J. Abraham & Frederick D. Aquina (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byerly, Ryan T. (2014). "The Values and Varieties of Humility." *Philosophia*, 42(4): 889-910.
- Callahan, Laura Frances, and O'Connor, Timothy. (2014). (Eds.). *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*. New York: OUP.
- (2014). "Well-Tuned Trust as an Intellectual Virtue." In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, New York: OUP. 246-279.
- Coyne, Jerry. (2015). *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*. New York: Viking.
- Church, Ian M. (2017). "The Limitations of the Limitations-Owning Account of Intellectual Humility." *Philosophia*: 1-8.
- (2016). "The Doxastic Account of Intellectual Humility." *Logos & Episteme*, 7(4):413-433.
- Church, Ian and Semuelsen, Peter (2017). *Intellectual Humility: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dawkins, Richard. (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Dougherty, Trent (2014). "Faith, Trust, and Testimony." In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, New York: OUP. 97-123.
- Eklund, Dan-Johan (2016). "The Nature of Faith in Analytic Theistic Philosophy of Religion." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 80:85-99.
- Fricker, Elizabeth. (2014). "Epistemic Trust in Oneself and Others—An Argument from Analogy?" In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, New York: OUP. 174-204.

---

<sup>32</sup> I want to thank an especially inquisitive audience at the 2018 Central APA, the 2018 Annual meeting of the EPS/ETS, Alexander Pruss, Chris Gadsen, and (especially) Michael Bergmann for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

- Frise, Matthew (unpublished). "On Losing Belief in Faith."
- Hazlett, Alan. (2012). "Higher-Order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility." *Episteme*, 9(3): 205-223.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel (2016). "Does Faith Entail Belief?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 33(1): 142-162.
- (2015). "Faith." In Robert Audi (Ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) New York: Cambridge University Press.
- (2013). "Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 50(4): 357-372.
- Kvanvig, John. (2016). "The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in Noncognitivist Approaches to Faith." In Bergmann, M. & Brower, J. (Eds.), *Reason and Faith: Themes from Swinburne*. Oxford: OUP.
- Mugg, Joshua. (2016). "In Defence of the Belief-plus Model of Faith." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 8(2):201-219.
- Page, Meghan (2017). "The Posture of Faith." In J. Kvanvig (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion (Volume 8)*. Oxford: OUP.
- Pittard, John (unpublished). "Credal Voluntarism and Christian Faith".
- Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Roberts, R. and Wood, J. (2003). "Humility and Epistemic Goods." In M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (Eds.), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives*
- (2007). *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. New York: OUP.
- Spiegel, James. (2013). "Open-mindedness and Religious Devotion." *Sophia*, 52(1): 143-158.
- (2012). "Open-mindedness and Intellectual Humility." *Theory and Research in Education*, 10(1): 27-38.
- Schellenberg, J.L. (2014). "How to Make Faith a Virtue." In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*. New York: OUP. 75-93.
- Whitcomb, Dennis, Battaly, Heather, Baehr, Jason, and Howard-Snyder, Daniel. (2015). "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(1).
- Wood, W. Jay (2014). "Faith's Intellectual Virtues." In Callahan and O'Connor (Eds.), *Religious Faith and Intellectual Virtue*, New York: OUP. 29-49.