

## How Can Faith Go Beyond the Evidence and Still Be Rational?

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Blog Post for the Open Table

It is natural to think that faith goes beyond the evidence. At the same time, many don't want to say that faith is irrational – faith, both religious and non-religious, seems like an important part of a flourishing life. Here, I explore one way to make sense of this apparent tension.

Before thinking about faith, let's think about two other attitudes: belief and confidence. Believing something amounts to a commitment that the world is a particular way. When you believe something, you take a stand on its truth. In this sense, belief doesn't come in degrees – you either believe something or you do not.

Confidence, on the other hand, comes in degrees. You can be extremely confident, moderately confident, or have low confidence that something is true. Further, you can believe two things but be much more confident in one than the other – I believe that  $1+1=2$  and that it is going to rain tomorrow, but I'm much more confident in the first than the second. Confidence tightly tracks or mirrors your evidence.

Sometimes, evidence rationally moves our confidence levels around, but doesn't change our beliefs. There are two ways this can happen: (1) evidence can increase our confidence in something but not cause us to believe it, and (2) evidence can decrease our confidence in something without forcing us to give up a belief.

Here are examples of (1). Suppose you buy a lottery ticket. It seems like you should be confident your ticket will lose – the odds are very likely your ticket is a loser – but plausibly, you shouldn't believe you ticket will lose. After all, one ticket will win, and it might just be yours. Or consider a second example (from Lara Buchak 2014). Suppose someone steals your cell phone, and you know either Peter or Becca did it. Pretend you also know that men are 10x more likely to steal cell phones than women. You should be more confident that Peter did it than that Becca did it, but you shouldn't believe he did it just based on the statistic.

Here is an example of (2). Suppose you trust and love your brother very much, and you believe he would never commit a serious crime. However, he becomes a suspect for a murder, and the evidence is mounting against him. If the evidence is good but inconclusive, you should be less confident he is innocent, but you need not give up your belief that he is innocent.

It is natural to think that faith is more like rational belief than rational confidence. Faith seems like a steadfast attitude, like belief, rather than one that is sensitive to every minor evidential change, like confidence. If this is right, faith can go beyond the evidence but nonetheless be rational.

Examples of faith that have a similar structure to (1) would include cases where someone gets some evidence something is true, but that evidence isn't enough to give them faith. For instance, maybe someone does a study and finds out that 90% of Notre Dame students are good at keeping secrets. Someone who just met me should raise their confidence that I will keep their secret upon learning I am a Notre Dame student, but that is probably not be a good basis for having faith that I will keep their secret.

Examples that parallel the structure of (2) may be more interesting, since those are ones in which faith is steadfast in light of counterevidence. Suppose Billy is happily engaged and will be married soon, and based on the sincerity and commitment of him and his spouse, he rationally has faith that they will not get divorced. Then, he learns that half of all marriages end in divorce. Learning this should lower his confidence that they will remain committed, but it does not mean he should lose faith in their commitment.

There are similar examples of religious faith. Sarah has faith that a miracle occurred – maybe she thinks she witnessed it, or bases her faith of historical testimony (e.g. she has faith that Jesus rose from the dead). However, Sarah might learn of an argument against miracles: given the laws of nature we regularly observe, a miracle's occurring is very unlikely. This counterevidence might cause Sarah to be less confident a miracle occurred, but she doesn't have to stop having faith that the miracle happened, especially if she initially had a good experiential or testimonial basis for her faith.

Or suppose John has faith that God is good. However, John keeps experiencing evil in the world – in his own life, things happening to other people, and on the news. John nonetheless continues to have faith in God's goodness, even though these observations of evil lower his confidence in God's goodness.

The general idea is this: sometimes certain kinds of evidence, including (but not limited to) statistical evidence, chip away at our confidence. However, even though our confidence gets lower, sometimes even drastically lower, this evidence need not render our faith irrational. In this way, rational faith is consistent with relatively low confidence, and faith can rationally remain steadfast in light of counterevidence. In this, faith goes beyond the evidence.

We need not be blown about the winds of counterevidence, but faith can keep us rooted and established, enabling us to maintain long-term commitments.

This is a summary of a longer paper of mine, "Belief, Credence, and Faith" that is forthcoming in *Religious Studies*. For a further explanation and defense of the claims made here, you can download the longer version of this paper at this link: <https://philpapers.org/rec/JACBCA>.

Reference:

Buchak, Lara. (2014). "Belief, Credence, and Norms," in *Philosophical Studies* 169(2): 285-311.