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DOUBT AS VIRTUE: HOW TO DOUBT AND HAVE FAITH WITHOUT EXPLODING

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SYNOPSIS

An experience of intellectual doubt is often taken by Christians to be a sign of weak faith. I argue, however, that an encounter with doubt, when treated properly, is extremely valuable, since it can lead to knowledge and an even greater faith. To see this, it's important to understand the nature of doubt. Intellectual doubt should be defined as finding plausible what we take to be a potentially defeating claim. This definition provides insights for how to evaluate one's doubts. My claim is that it is completely rational to maintain our Christian faith while experiencing doubt. This allows us to in turn evaluate the reasonableness of our doubt. Evidence matters with intellectual doubt, since a doubt requires outweighing evidence to defeat a belief effectively. Merely to find an objection plausible is not for there to be a preponderance of evidence in its favor. The upshot of all this is that, by addressing our doubts, we are forced to think more carefully about our faith (i.e., we have greater knowledge) and, in the case that a doubt is diffused, we have more reason to trust (i.e., we have an even greater faith).

It is not uncommon for Christians to doubt their Christian faith. Unfortunately, we often treat our doubts as if we have contracted an illness. Indeed, the prescription for doubt and the prescription for a common cold are often virtually identical. When one doubts, one is told to wait it out, treat symptoms as best as one can, and hope it goes

away. This approach *might* work for some. But for many others, the doubts creep back in, and they often return with friends. Sadly, many abandon their Christian faith because they cannot find a safe place to admit and address their doubts. Doubt, when handled properly, is incredibly valuable because it leads to knowledge and an even greater faith.

KINDS OF DOUBTS

As it is the case with many notions, the term *doubt* has different senses, and it is important to zoom in on the specific sense in view here. The sense in which I am interested is what we will call *intellectual doubt*. This is when we have an internal conflict between competing ideas, beliefs, and reasons.

I don't have in mind the emotional struggle of doubt. When one is in the grips of *emotional doubt*, intellectual reasons are often ineffective. Now, don't get me wrong; there are almost always emotional aspects of our intellectual doubts. But emotions are funny things. They don't abide by the rules of logic and rationality. One can have all the reasons in the world to believe that *p* is true and yet emotionally doubt that *p* is true. An extreme example of this would be those who experience various kinds of phobias. When one has a phobic fear of flying, one may know every statistic related to flight safety and yet still doubt one's safety in getting on board.

Emotional doubt is certainly important and worth addressing.¹ However, I'm not focused on emotional doubt because, as a philosopher, exactly none of my training is geared to address the emotional issue head on (I wouldn't suggest me for marriage counseling either!). There's also this very common experience of intellectual struggle that so often is disparaged and discouraged by Christians such that there is a terrific need to set intellectual doubt in a proper framework to see its great value. To this we now turn.

DOUBTS, ZEBRAS, AND POTENTIAL DEFEATERS

Let's take a minute to think carefully about the nature of intellectual doubt (henceforth *doubt*).

As a first stab, a state of doubt involves the consideration of what we take to be a *defeater* for one of our beliefs.² What is a defeater? It is probably easiest to get at the notion of a defeater by way of illustration. Let's imagine I'm at the zoo, and I am viewing the zebra exhibit. I see what appears to be a zebra, and on the basis of this experience, I believe that "there's a zebra before me." Suppose, while still looking at what I take to be a zebra, I hear from a reliable source that, given a shortage of zebras, the zoo keepers have hired Hollywood makeup artists to disguise some mules to look just like zebras. As a result of hearing this report, I'm no longer sure that I'm looking at a zebra and not a cleverly disguised mule. I've now got a defeater for my belief that there is a zebra before me. I've now got reason to think that there are mules in the zebra

exhibit that are indistinguishable from the zebras. So long as this comes from a reliable source, my original reasoning is no longer any good. My belief has been defeated.

A defeater then is a contrary claim that either directly or indirectly lessens, degrades, or even destroys one's reasons for holding a particular belief.

Now this might seem obvious, but a claim is only a defeater when it in fact defeats. We very often entertain a would-be defeater as a mere possibility, but it doesn't defeat any of our beliefs. A defeater of this sort is called a *potential defeater*.

Evidence matters for defeaters. Were there to be no evidence for a potential defeater, then the claim would likely be dismissed. Suppose the report about the cleverly disguised mules was completely unreliable (perhaps given by a friend known for spinning tall tales). In this case, we likely would dismiss the report since it seems so farfetched. But notice how the situation changes when we have strong evidence for thinking it is true. A potential defeater becomes an actual defeater when there are good reasons to believe the defeating claim.

There is much more that could be said about defeaters. Hopefully I've sufficiently set the idea before our minds to now turn and apply the notions to thinking about doubt.

THE NATURE OF DOUBT

As I mentioned, doubt has to do with considering what we take to be a defeater for one of our beliefs. When we doubt, we are, in a way, being pulled by the force of a potentially defeating claim. Our belief is not yet defeated in a state of doubt, but it is threatened as we feel or sense the potential for defeat.

Let's flesh this out a bit more. There are two specific things that happen when one doubts a belief.

First, though one does not yet *believe* the contrary claim, it seems right to say that she is genuinely finding it *plausible*. It seems that if the potential defeater was utterly implausible, it wouldn't cause her to doubt. When she is finding a contrary claim plausible, however, she begins to doubt.

Second, one *believes* that the claim is a potential defeater for her belief. We of course do not use these terms in our minds, but we believe that a contrary claim, if true, is problematic for our current beliefs.

Let's put these thoughts together into a succinct account. S doubts that p is true when (1) S believes that p is true. (2) S does not yet believe that q is true, but finds q plausible to some degree. (3) S believes that q is a potential defeater.

To illustrate how this is supposed to go, let's imagine a Christian person named Steve. Steve believes that Scripture is without error. One day, his coworker asserts the idea that there are lots of errors and points out the following passages that all differ in the details. Each of these passages reference the same event, namely, the empty tomb of Jesus and identify the women who witnessed it empty.

Matthew says, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave” (Matt. 28:1; all Scripture references NASB).

Mark says, “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome...came to the tomb when the sun had risen” (Mark 16:1–2).

Luke says, “Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them” (Luke 24:10).

John says, “Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb” (John 20:1).

This catches Steve off guard, since he has never noticed how very different these passages are and begins to find plausible the idea that these passages contradict. He doesn't yet believe they contradict, but just feels the pull of that idea. But he does believe that if these passages contradict, then his belief that Scripture is inerrant is defeated.

Let's plug this into our account of doubt. (1) Steve believes that Scripture is without error. (2) Steve does not yet believe that these passages contradict, but he's finding the idea that they do, to some degree, plausible. (3) Steve believes that if these passages contradict, then his belief is defeated. Thus, Steve is doubting.

HOW TO ADDRESS OUR DOUBTS

With the account in hand, we can now talk about what to do about it.

The first thing to say about how to address a doubt is that we shouldn't run from it. It may not be an enjoyable experience, but we should see a challenge to our beliefs as an opportunity for greater depth. Rather than avoid our doubt and hope it goes away, I want to suggest that we *investigate* our doubts. In order to do this well, I suggest two things.

Hang On!

The first thing is to hang on. Don't let doubts have their way with you. I believe that Christianity is true. I believe this on the basis of a wide and varied case. I've given my life to its truth, and I train others in how to defend it. But here's the thing. I myself think there are a few plausible objections to Christianity. Some days, I find certain objections more plausible than others.

Wait, what? How is this possible for a professor of apologetics?

This sounds strange only because we are not used to engaging ideas deeply, in general, and thinking carefully about objections to Christianity, specifically. Taking ideas seriously requires us to consider ideas truly and honestly. It is very normal to find some ideas, even ideas that we do not ultimately believe, plausible. This is especially the case when we first encounter an idea and it is presented in a compelling way. But a merely plausible claim is not necessarily a reasonable claim and, thus, not one that defeats. Just think of the last time a really good salesperson made an inferior product

seem amazing. You might have found the sales pitch plausible but, let's be honest, it wasn't reasonable.

The most important point you'll read in this article is that it is perfectly rational to maintain one's Christian beliefs while one considers a doubt. We can be rationally committed to something about which we have a doubt or two. The myth is that Christian faith requires 100 percent certainty about every aspect of the faith, and anything less means you should give it up.

Let me offer an analogy. I fly on airplanes regularly. If I'm honest, I don't really know how a craft made of mostly metal and weighing about a million pounds (if it is a 747) can lift off the ground and literally cruise through the sky six miles above the Earth. It's almost absurd, if you really stop to think what happens when we fly. You and I could be sitting in the airport struggling to know how this phenomenon is possible. But here's the thing. When my seat section is called, I'm getting on the airplane. Wouldn't you? I think we would because we know enough about airplanes and air travel to know that it is a very safe and reliable form of transportation despite the fact that we have some doubts. We could even be cruising at 30,000 feet, entrusting our very lives to the airplane, and continue to struggle with these questions. Our faith (despite the doubts) in the airplane is completely rational.

Likewise, if I have good reasons for taking Christianity as true, it is completely appropriate to ask deep and difficult questions about the truth of Christianity while entrusting my life to its truth.

I'm convinced that most Christians have good reasons for faith. I bet when you are not backed into a corner, you could rattle off a number of excellent reasons for believing that Christianity is true. It may be because the world has clear and obvious design and order that's best explained by the existence of God as first cause and designer. Perhaps you can talk through some of the historical reasons for the reliability of Scripture and believing that Jesus rose from the dead. If you have reflected on the gospel, then you know that it addresses our deepest longings and makes sense of our fallenness. I'm guessing that you've seen your life changed by Christ, have seen God answer prayer, and heard incredible testimonies of these things along the way. If so, all of these constitute reasons for thinking that Christianity is true.

I'll be the first to say that all of us should improve our rational standing. Nonetheless, a typical Christian seems to have plenty of evidence to maintain rational belief in Christianity in the face of doubts.

So hang on! Don't jump ship just because you find an objection to Christianity plausible. But we don't want to stay in this place, either.

DOUBT YOUR DOUBTS

Second, evaluate your doubts. Remember, doubts don't win by default. They only become effective if they are well justified. Thus, my suggestion is that we should

attempt to raise objections to the doubts — here we are doubting our doubts — to see whether there is good reason to think that the doubts are sufficiently reasonable to defeat our beliefs.

There are two ways to doubt a doubt.

Ask, “So What?”

First, determine whether the claim we are finding plausible is genuinely a problem. This is where we ask, “So what?” It’s vitally important to determine whether there is a problem, if the claim is true, and to what degree it is a problem. Many ideas seem problematic at first glance, but turn out, on further reflection, to be completely harmless. Remember that, in our account of doubt, (3) said, “S believes that q is a potential defeater.” But this is a belief, and we can be wrong about beliefs. And so, in evaluating our doubt, we need to determine whether q is in fact a potential defeater.

This is going to help Steve, in our hypothetical case above. Remember, Steve was concerned that the differences of detail in the empty tomb accounts are a problem for believing that Scripture is without error. How can we have four accounts that differ and Scripture be without error? The response is that differences of detail are not necessarily contradictions.

When describing a group of people, we too will very often mention a representative subset, depending on whom we are talking to and what our purposes are. If the president and three of his aides showed up to my office, I very likely may only mention the president when telling someone about this event. Or I may report a more complete list, if the situation calls for it.

Look carefully at the accounts above. They have differences but no contradictions. To say that Mary was there is perfectly consistent with saying that Mary and Salome were there and makes sense if, for example, Salome is unknown to, say, John’s audience.

In fact, independent testimonies *always* have differences in detail. A witness describes the situation from his or her vantage point, and no two vantage points are exactly the same. Differences of detail are only a problem when the differences are unable to be reconciled, especially in the crucial details.

When we ask, “So what?” we see that the mere fact that there are differences can be accounted for rationally. It can be true, and the belief that Scripture is without error still stands. This, it seems to me, should address Steve’s doubt.

Ask, “Why Think This Claim Is True?”

The second way to evaluate a doubt is to determine whether the doubt is reasonable. Here we ask, “Why think this claim is true?” We are, in effect, evaluating (2) from our account of doubt above. S is finding a potential defeater plausible, but is it reasonable?

For example, say that we hear a news report of the discovery of an ancient Palestinian ossuary that bears the name “Jesus, son of Joseph.” The claim is made that they have discovered the bodily remains of Jesus Christ. Is this a problem if it is true? You bet it is! It has been Christian orthodoxy from the beginning that Jesus rose *bodily* from the dead. If His bodily remains are found, then clearly this central claim is defeated.

But now we need evidence, because this tune has played before (usually around Easter time on public television), and let’s just say it has not always been a hit. If the ossuary dates early and looks to be authentic, then it would of course be a genuine problem for Christian faith. If it turns out that there are compelling reasons to think the inscription is a modern forgery, then the problem is dissolved. But notice it is the evidence that matters here.

What’s the Risk?

You might think that this all sounds a bit risky — and you’re right. Investigating and attempting to address a doubt does indeed require openness to the possibility that the belief in question is false.

But ignoring doubts is no less risky. Many folks walk away from the faith not so much because their doubts were rational but because they don’t find people authentically open to think about and address their deep questions. What’s more is that, as Christians, we stand in a rich tradition of taking the hardest objections to Christianity and offering thoughtful and honest responses.³ I find it tragic that folks walk away when they haven’t even considered the great heritage of answers to their questions from church history as well as in contemporary sources.

So there is risk on both sides, and my thesis is that there is great value in exploring our doubts.

THE VIRTUE OF DOUBT

I’ll admit I have, along the way, doubted the truth of Christianity. As I mentioned, there are some objections to Christianity that I still find, to some degree, plausible. I can, for example, see the plausibility of the “problem of evil,” especially when some event is before me that seems incredibly senseless. I can put myself in the shoes of someone who sees the tragedy as a godless event. Given the fact that these sorts of events seem to occur with unforgiving regularity, I can also see how someone extrapolates to seeing the world itself as godless.

Am I thereby on the precipice of losing my faith? No way! The reason is that there are really reasonable responses to the problem of evil. Moreover, there are many other lines of evidence that count in favor of Christianity. In fact, rather than wavering in my faith, I have come to see that evil makes the most sense within a Christian worldview and, thus, counts in its favor.

I've investigated these issues. I haven't run from them and hoped that they would go and stay away. If I had, I think I could have ignored them for a time, but they would have plagued me. Eventually, I think I would have given in to these doubts.

As it turns out, the doubts, for me, had answers. Through this, I have found that Christianity has the resources to respond to this very deep and difficult objection. Thus, I come out the other side of this experience with a greater knowledge and a deeper and more abiding faith.

In our case above, Steve comes to realize that differences of parallel accounts, when seen to be consistent, are not a problem. He might still wonder about and explore why there are differences and how to understand these. But the point is that the doubt is diffused, and hopefully his faith in the text is now greater.

Doubt, when we embrace and explore it, is an extremely valuable experience. Rather than being treated as an illness or a vice to be avoided, it is something of an intellectual virtue, since it can lead us to greater knowledge and greater faith.

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NOTES

- 1 Gary Habermas has very insightful resources on doubt that often deal with emotional doubt. See *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990) and *The Thomas Factor* (Nashville: B and H, 1999). For an article-length treatment, see Gary R. Habermas, "When Religious Doubt Grows Agonizing," *Christian Research Journal* 36, 2 (2013): <http://www.equip.org/article/religious-doubt-grows-agonizing/>.
- 2 There's a large amount of literature on the notion of a defeater, including plenty of technical jargon, which we will be avoiding in this article.
- 3 See, e.g., Augustine's *Confessions*.