



7-17-2023

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Recommended Citation

Dauphin, Madeline (2023) "Systems of Faith, Doubt, and Reason," *The Mall*: Vol. 7 , Article 7.
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol7/iss1/7>

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Systems of Faith, Doubt, and Reason

Madeline Dauphin

Humans have always looked for something to believe in. Whether it was the spirits of their ancestors or a pantheon of gods, they turned to a higher power that could guide them and explain why things occurred. However, as people grew more accustomed to natural sciences and reason, they began to doubt that which they could not see or rationally explain. Thus, the dynamic of faith, doubt, and reason was born. In the 12th century CE, an Islamic philosopher from Spain named Averroes developed his personal system of faith, doubt, and reason based on Islam and the teachings of Aristotle (Abdelfatah). Since then, many scholars and theologians have developed their own systems of how faith, doubt, and reason interact. Using these different systems, one determines that reason is used to resolve doubt and strengthen faith, which aligns with Averroes' emphasis on using logic to support faith but contradicts his rejection of doubt.

Understanding the interaction between faith, doubt, and reason in what will now be referred to as the Harmonic System requires several definitions. In this system, where reason is used to resolve doubt and strengthen faith, faith is defined by 20th century German-American philosopher Paul Tillich as being ultimately concerned with a singular infinite cause (Tillich 4, 12). One's life revolves around this one belief which is held above all else. However, one can believe in anything and put no effort into it. Consequently, 19th century mathematician William K. Clifford stresses that faith alone is not enough, for one "cannot escape the duty of investigating on the ground of the strength of his convictions" (Clifford). This is where doubt and reason play a pivotal role. Doubt, precisely existential doubt, is an awareness "of the element of insecurity in every existential truth" (Tillich 20). We know that our ultimate concern may be wrong, but we still dare to take that risk and devote ourselves to our concern. As Reverend Professor Enda McDonagh explains, these are "doubts [that] come from the need and desire to find a fuller truth" about one's faith (McDonagh 312). Reason, as described by 17th century philosopher René Descartes and 18th century philosopher David Hume, is knowledge obtained through

one's own intellect and personal experiences, not the testimony of others (Descartes 69; Hume 77). By thinking through an experience, one can find logical reasoning behind events. In summary, one enters a deeper level of faith by having doubts. One sees the potential flaws in one's belief and is encouraged to explore one's faith more to become more secure in it and better understand it. Reason helps one to take a step back and see one's faith confirmed. Even though this might be a personal experience or scientific phenomenon, it helps one to feel like one's ultimate concern has been proven.

The interactions of faith, doubt, and reason in the Harmonic System are like a scientist looking through a magnifying glass at a grain of sand. At first, the scientist might doubt that there is anything special about the sand, which represents faith. However, using the magnifying glass which represents reason, the scientist begins to see the particles that make up the grain of sand. By using the magnifying glass to investigate his doubt, the scientist can have a better understanding of the sand. Without the initial doubt and the subsequent reasoning to alleviate the questions, the faith would have been left unchecked. Ultimately, the Harmonic System argues that “[n]o simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe” (Clifford). One must always use reason to investigate doubt because it will strengthen faith. Averroes has a similar view of the interactions between faith and reason but disagrees with the role of doubt.

Similar to the aforementioned Harmonic System, Averroes believes that reason supports faith, but he removes doubt from the equation. He claims that “rational investigation is not contrary to [faith], for truth cannot contradict truth, but verifies it and bears testimony to it” (Averroes 26). However, since truth does not contradict truth, there are times when faith and reason must be interpreted to find the truth written in scripture, which he refers to as the Law. Averroes proposes the following model: “if the agreement [between the Law and reason] is positive there is no need to apply logic; but if it be conjectural there is” (Averroes 30). So, the Law should be taken literally if the truth aligns with it. If the truths do not align, then the infinite needs to be interpreted. However, Averroes states that the only trustworthy interpretations are those “which God has ascribed to the learned men,” and “these interpretations...should not be disclosed to all but only to those men who are ‘well grounded in knowledge’” (Averroes 33-35). If

common people were to make these interpretations or learn of them, it could cause doubt, which Averroes sees as a detriment to faith.

Averroes believes that doubt is detrimental because it signals that the reasoning used is incorrect. Professor of philosophy Deborah L. Black describes the method he devised for absolute certainty, which is the idea that what we believe to be true is also objectively true (Black 97). He describes first principles, which are basic beliefs that are the foundation for other things, and explains that they “must be acquired through sensation and imagination” (Black 98). By sensing and imagining—or “experiencing” and “scrutinizing”—a belief, one can determine whether or not it is certain (Black 98). According to Averroes, any other way of reasoning leads to doubt—especially testimony and intuition. Testimony is an opinion, which “unlike certitude, is defeasible, since it involves believing that ‘it is possible that the state in which something is found could be the opposite of what we believe about it’” (Black 104). One cannot confirm testimony to be true since one has not experienced and scrutinized it. Intuition is inadequate reasoning because it “bypasses the inferential process mean[ing] that whatever cognitive state it yields lacks the defining property of knowledge” (Black 113). Since there is no experience and scrutiny involved, the shortcut of intuition leaves too much room for doubt. Essentially, using testimony and intuition creates unstable reasoning which produces doubt that weakens faith. However, doubt can be constructive, which is proven in alternate systems of faith, doubt, and reason.

While Averroes’ system of faith, doubt, and reason align with the idea that reason strengthens faith, he rejects the idea of doubt’s role in the process. Reason, defined earlier as evidence and experience that leads to knowledge, allows one to better understand one’s ultimate concern. Reason usually does align with faith. It explains the finite beliefs associated with faith systems. That being said, it is also fair to state that not everything in sacred texts and sacred traditions needs to be interpreted. As Averroes states, some things are meant to be taken literally. If one gets stuck on whether or not a teaching or narrative is literal or figurative, one may conjure some false truth that satisfies their question. If one misunderstands an interpretation, one may conjure up another false truth. Belief in false truths tears one away from their faith. Another key aspect of reason is the methodology behind it. Averroes lays out a set of

criteria one needs to be certain that a premise is true. Using this method of reasoning can be particularly helpful when investigating faith. If one cannot experience and scrutinize a premise for oneself, then it should not be taken as a certain fact. This methodology helps weed out errors that serve as the foundation of faith. However, faith is infinite, and it is difficult for finite beings to grasp the truly infinite aspects of faith. This is where the relationship between doubt and reason becomes important.

Averroes assumes that all doubt is destructive rather than constructive. As educator Dr. Jamie McKenzie defines it, destructive doubt is “skepticism that dwells on issues and problems with the hope that the whole project will come tumbling down” (McKenzie). While some doubt will lead to the breakdown of faith, doubt can also lead to a better understanding of faith. Constructive doubt is “skepticism that wonders about risks and pitfalls out of a wish for the enterprise to succeed” (McKenzie). It leads to an inquiry into why a belief exists rather than seeking to disprove it, and “this questioning [is] essential to the honesty of [one’s] belief and to its growth” (McDonagh 309). Constructive doubt allows for there to be more reasoning behind faith. It enables one to connect the finite to the infinite through a careful investigation into one’s belief, which is necessary to gain a total understanding of faith.

Doubt is an essential part of faith because it shows that one is constantly thinking about one’s ultimate concern. Doubt “was always and will always be present in the act of faith” because “serious doubt is confirmation of faith” (Tillich 22). Through constructive doubt, one seeks out evidence that supports the ultimacy of one’s concern. It is the initial driving force behind reasoning within one’s faith. If questions are not asked, then answers will not be sought. Faith is empty belief without evidence, which “is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford). Even though doubts in faith can lead to uncomfortable questions, the “break-down or disruption of [humans] in different ways in the course of [their] lives is necessary for the growth and transformation of break-through” (McDonagh 313). When we are challenged, we have to find methods to overcome the obstacle, which forces us to grow. The method of reasoning that Averroes presents is somewhat compatible with constructive doubt. One can have a question and research it. One can scrutinize what one thinks one knows and compare it to what one experiences.

However, one should also be able to use outside evidence. Big questions in faith are often about that with which one has little experience.

In this case, using testimony from others or facts that were obtained through proper reasoning is suitable to scrutinize. For, if one has few experiences, one cannot truly reason through all questions of faith. It is unfair to say a premise is unsound solely because one does not have a direct experience with it to scrutinize. Although his ideas of faith and reason are sound, Averroes' concept of doubt does not account for the good that comes out of it nor does his concept of reason address broader premises of faith.

Overall, reason is used to resolve doubt and strengthen faith, aligning with Averroes' emphasis on using logic to support faith but contradicting his rejection of doubt. Faith is an infinite ultimate concern, and doubt naturally appears when a finite being is addressing the infinite. However, when used constructively, doubt can answer questions about faith through reason. By using one's experiences and intellect, one can reason through the doubt to stabilize one's faith. Averroes' disagrees with the role of doubt in faith. He views doubt as a destructive force that leads to the breakdown of belief. While there are forms of destructive doubt that do more harm than good, it is irrational to condemn all forms of skepticism. It is difficult to question something that one has put so much effort into. Humans desire to know the truth that lies just beyond human comprehension. As philosophers and theologians have addressed the relationship between faith, doubt, and reason for centuries, they have come up with different models to show the interaction between the three elements. One thing is for certain: you cannot have faith without considering doubt and reason.

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