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“*Sola Fide*, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Involuntariness of Belief”

By Peter Zuk

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the doctrine of *sola fide* is deeply problematic on the basis of two widely accepted philosophic principles, and then attempts to treat the problem exegetically. The article begins by showing that the “ought implies can” principle, which states that agents can only be held morally responsible for performing or not performing acts within their power, presents apparent problems for *sola fide* when examined alongside doxastic involuntarism, which holds that agents are incapable of choosing their beliefs. *Sola fide*, however, has been essential to the traditional interpretation of core Pauline texts. The author attempts to resolve the issue by reexamining Paul’s use of phrases that have in English been translated ‘faith in Christ’ and ‘works of the law’ respectively and, on that basis, offering a reinterpretation of the traditional dichotomy between faith and works.

Since the very inception of Protestantism, the doctrine of *sola fide* has been widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the tradition. It asserts that Christian faith is the only way one can attain salvation, with “Christian faith” defined at the very least as a belief in the resurrection, divinity, and redeeming power of Jesus Christ. I will argue, however, that this notion is shown to be untenable by a two key philosophical principles. In other words, I will use rational argument to highlight a potential problem for such a reading and then attempt to treat the problem exegetically. The first principle is the idea that “ought implies can” with regard to moral obligations, and the second is the psychological impossibility of choosing what one believes. Together these principles entail that a strong deontological ethic of belief – a view which posits moral obligations pertaining to belief holding – is untenable. It follows from this that *sola fide*, which is such an ethic of belief, must be false as well. I will then argue that while the committed Protestant (as well as Christians of other stripes) might understandably view this as reason for great dismay, there is no cause for alarm because *sola fide* is not nearly so biblically supported as many have supposed. The so-called New Perspective on Paul opens the door for an account that both avoids the problems of *sola fide* and turns out to be better grounded in the biblical text itself. This second part of the argument is achieved primarily through (A) a reexamination of

Paul's use of phrases that have in English been translated 'faith in Christ' and 'works of the law' respectively and (B) an analysis of the implications of this examination for textually based conceptions of faith and works. A rejection of *sola fide* for the reasons stated provides the opportunity to reimagine Pauline justification in a richer and far less problematic manner.

A philosophical, rational critique of *sola fide* begins with the aforementioned philosophical claims, which go something like this:

- (1) "Ought implies can" – there can only be a moral obligation to perform some action if it is in our power to perform that action.
- (2) Doxastic involuntarism is true – beliefs cannot be chosen but are instead formed involuntarily.

If these propositions are true, it seems clear that *sola fide* cannot stand. The first is rather uncontroversial. It is difficult to see how there could be any sort of binding obligation in the face of an impossibility to fulfill that obligation, especially given an omnibenevolent God. I cannot, in any sense of the word, be *accountable* for a failure when it was never in my power to succeed.¹ The primary tension, then, is between *sola fide* and (2). If doxastic involuntarism is true, the idea that belief in Christianity is a necessary condition for salvation must be false. If beliefs cannot be chosen, there can be no requirement to choose such a belief (or any belief at all, for that matter). And unfortunately for the proponent of *sola fide*, doxastic involuntarism has become by far the dominant position of contemporary philosophical thinkers. William Alston, perhaps the foremost authority on the issue, provides the following justification for his position that beliefs cannot be chosen voluntarily:

My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such power. Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the Roman Empire is still in control of Western Europe, just by deciding to do so? If you find it incredible that you should be sufficiently motivated to even try to believe this, suppose that someone offers you \$500 million to believe it, and that you are much more interested in the money than in believing the truth. Could you do what it takes to get that reward? Remember that we are speaking of believing *at will*. No doubt, there are things you could do that would increase the probability of your believing this, but we will get to that later.

Can you switch propositional attitudes toward that proposition just by deciding to do so? It seems clear to me that I have no such power. (Alston 62-63)

Alston begins by demonstrating that some beliefs surely are not voluntary: those in which the strength of the evidence is so great that it, for lack of a better term, *forces* belief on the subject. In cases like the one he has described, knowledge of the relevant facts simply makes it psychologically impossible to believe in a way inconsistent with them no matter how badly one might wish to. There is also the difficult question of how one would go about voluntarily believing *that p*, where *p* is some proposition, even supposing that such a thing were possible. We might “assert that *p* with what sounds like conviction” or “dwell favorably on the idea that *p*” (63), but this is not the same as consciously causing ourselves to hold the belief. So in addition to the apparent psychological impossibility of believing against extremely strong evidence, we are also confronted with the practical problem of *how* to go about consciously changing a propositional attitude.

The voluntarist might instead point to situations in which the evidence does not favor one side or the other, but rather is such that both sides are in some respect intellectually appealing. In these cases, is it not plausible to assume that we may decide to believe one side or the other? The answer still seems to be a resounding “No”:

Begin with the philosopher who really does come to believe the libertarian account of free will or the epiphenomenalist position on the mind-body question. Where that happens it is presumably because at least for the moment the considerations in favor of the position seem to be conclusive, even though previously they did not. And at that time the belief follows automatically from that momentary seeming of conclusiveness, just as it does in cases where it always seems obvious what the truth of the matter is whenever one turns one’s attention to it. (65)

Voluntarism fares no better in these sorts of cases, for the evidence being in equilibrium rather than tilting heavily to one side does not appear to increase our ability to choose one propositional attitude over another. If two views are truly equally appealing, on what basis could we choose to hold one over the other? There does not seem to be an answer, because the notion of “equally appealing” precludes, by definition, any potential criteria that we might use to decide. And of

course, the additional problem of how one actually goes about willingly forming the relevant belief rears its head once again.

It must be readily admitted that “one certainly has voluntary control over whether to keep looking for evidence or reasons, and voluntary control over where to look, what steps to take to find relevant considerations, and so on” (69). We certainly have the ability to choose whether to inquire into a matter and how to proceed if we do, but this is not the same thing as having control over what conclusions the investigation will cause us to draw. Alston recognizes this as a crucial distinction:

In order that the phenomenon of looking for more evidence would show that we have voluntary control over propositional attitudes, it would have to be the case that the search for evidence was undertaken with the intention of taking up a *certain* attitude toward a *specific* proposition. For only in that case would it have any tendency to show that we have exercised voluntary control over *what* propositional attitude we come to have. Suppose that I can't remember Al Kaline's lifetime batting average, and I look it up in the baseball almanac. I read there the figure .320, and I thereby accept it. Does that show that I have voluntary control (of any sort) over my belief that Kaline's lifetime batting average was .320? Not at all. At most it shows that I have long-range voluntary control over whether I take up *some* propositional attitude toward *some* proposition ascribing a lifetime batting average to Kaline. (70)

It is clear that a person can, and arguably the case can be made that they ought to, sincerely investigate questions such as whether or not God exists and whether or not the biblical accounts of Jesus' life are accurate. But the outcome of such an investigation is not up to them. One can certainly read the relevant literature, attend church services, and consult clergy on spiritual questions. Whether or not these things convince an individual of the truth of Christianity, though, is entirely out of their hands. It follows, therefore, that they cannot be held responsible for failing to believe in God or the biblical accounts of Jesus' life. It is a matter over which they simply lack conscious control.

If the doxastic involuntarism objection to “faith” as mental assent holds, what sort of interpretative options are available in biblical studies to combat this difficulty? It seems that any viable response will need to include an alternative understanding of faith, or more properly, of *pistis*, the word translated faith in the New Testament. It might be replied that most Protestant traditions have already done this: *pistis* may be taken to have a fuller meaning, such as a robust form of “trust in” or “obedience to” God. And indeed, this may turn out to be precisely the answer sought, for it could be argued that trust and obedience are voluntary. However, simply equating *pistis* with more than just mental assent does not solve the problem. Faith may indeed be a robust sort of trust or obedience, but if these things in turn require belief as one of their initial conditions, the involuntarism objection remains. Saving faith might turn out to be, in the strict sense, voluntary after all. But if it requires something involuntary to get off the ground, such as belief in the existence of God and the truth of Christianity, we are still confronted with the problem of “ought” implying “can.” Trust and obedience might be voluntary, but if belief is a necessary condition of these things and belief is involuntary, we are right back where we started. Lacking the requisite beliefs, the nonbeliever would not have the opportunity to trust or obey God. Thus, the problem extends not only to faith itself being voluntary, but the initial conditions that make faith possible being voluntary as well. It follows that salvation cannot be based nor even depend upon belief because belief is involuntary.

What the involuntarism objection necessitates is an interpretation of Paul that does not take him to be making belief a necessary condition for salvation. This is not to say that the philosophical considerations should influence our reading of the New Testament, of course. On the contrary, any alternate interpretation will need to stand on its own two feet. What the objection does imply, though, is that we should search for (and hope to find) such an interpretation if we are to be rationally consistent. To both admit the force of the involuntarism objection and maintain a view of salvation as requiring belief would be contradictory. For many Protestants and other Christians, the project will sound initially implausible. The notion of salvation without belief is, on their view, quite antithetical to the biblical text. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has opened the door for such a view to be tenable. I do not purport to be providing an exhaustive defense of this scholarship, but seek simply to show that if its claims are valid, they allow us to take a significant step in the right direction with regard to this problem.

The Greek *pistis* is normally translated ‘belief’ in English. If the term does not mean belief in this context, why is it so often rendered that way? E.P. Sanders, often credited with setting “the New Perspective on Paul” in motion, begins his discussion of justification by faith with an explanation of how this came to be:

‘Faith’ best translates Paul’s *pistis*, since ‘belief’ often connotes ‘opinion’, which is far from what Paul meant. But English has no verb which corresponds to ‘faith’, and so for Paul’s verb *pisteuein* English translators have to use ‘believe’.

In this case the Anglo-Saxon has driven out the French. (Sanders 73)

Part of the problem, then, is this limitation on the part of the English language. Paul uses faith as a verb, but translators lack the proper term with which to express this. We would think it quite odd if a friend were to tell us that he “faiths” something, yet this is the way in which the original text uses the word. So ‘belief’ only enters the picture as an English *substitute* for the verb form of faith, not as a proper translation. Sanders provides us with a negative definition of faith: it is not reducible to belief. However, this is clearly insufficient; a positive conception is required as well.

This may be found in recent scholarship that has taken a new view of Paul’s *pistis Christou* (‘Christ-faith’). Recently, the scholar Richard Hays has issued a challenge to the notion that the phrase should be read as the objective genitive ‘faith in Christ.’ What is meant by objective genitive? It denotes the way in which ‘Christ’ modifies ‘faith,’ the relationship in which they stand with regard to one another. Thus in the objective genitive, Christ is the object of faith. This implies that the faith being discussed is on the part of believers, who direct it toward Christ. However, there are strong reasons to dispute this reading. The passages in which *pistis Christou* appear make a great deal more sense if we take them to be in the subjective genitive, which has Christ as the subject of faith. According to Hays, “it is more reasonable to suppose that Paul’s primary intention is not at all to juxtapose one type of human activity...to another...but rather to juxtapose human activity with God’s activity” (Hays 147) for a number of interpretive reasons. Paul is therefore not contrasting human ‘works of the law’ with human *pistis*, but rather human ‘works of the law’ with divine *pistis*. Thus, the phrase *pistis Christou* understood as ‘the faith of Christ’ may suggest that Paul views faith as an action on Christ’s part that has a justifying power

for us. If so, it provides considerable room to think about faith in an entirely fresh way. Christ's own faithfulness to God certainly was (and is) more than mental assent, rather, a vibrant, radical way of living. It would seem to follow that a Christian's own faith ought to correspond to Christ's faith in a significant way. Such a view of faith aligns well with a core principle of Christ's ministry: a call to selfless action and a life like his. A conception of human faith that ignores these considerations by making it synonymous with belief would be in tension with Christ's own *pistis*.

But isn't this in conflict with Paul's teaching about works? Doesn't he say that human action is irrelevant to salvation? Many have traditionally taken this to be the case, but there is now evidence that suggests a very different reading of Paul's phrase *ergōn nomou* ('works of the law') and thus his teaching on the matter. While his emphatic denial that salvation does not come by these 'works of the law' has traditionally taken been to be a criticism of works righteousness, it is now held by many to instead be a caution against Jewish exclusivism with regard to covenantal or soteriological status. James Dunn, another prominent New Perspective scholar, writes:

'Works of the law' is now recognizable as a phrase in use at the time of Paul. We have several examples of it in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is refers explicitly to the particular understanding and practice of the law which characterized the Qumran community. The Qumran people, it should be recalled, were Jews who had set up a monastery in the Judean desert, in order to separate themselves from the sin which they believed had corrupted the rest of Judaism. 'Works of the law' signified that practice of the law which distinguished them from other Jews.

(Dunn, *JoG* 27)

In other words, the Qumran community used 'works of the law' not to refer to the whole Torah, but only those unique practices that set them apart from other groups. Paul's use of the term, therefore, can be taken as a denunciation of these sorts of practices on the part of his readers. If Dunn is correct, Paul is not dismissing works. Rather, he is dismissing only a certain class of works: those that separate Jewish Christians from Gentile ones. Such works were circumcision, dietary laws and the keeping of certain festivals and holy days (Dunn, *CL* 73). The strongest argument against the significance of works, therefore, is diffused if we adopt Dunn's position.

Dunn follows Sanders in challenging Luther's view of Judaism as legalistic. He cites Jewish scholars who, upon learning of Christianity's characterization of their beliefs, were utterly baffled (Dunn, *JoG* 14-15). Obedience to the law was never a way of earning God's favor and grace. Rather, the Judaism of Paul's time turned this conception on its head. God's acceptance of human imperfection was assumed and became "the starting point of obedience" (20). Under this schema salvation came by grace and yet also had works as a vital component. God granted salvation by virtue of one's membership in the covenant, which came at birth. But that was only the beginning; covenantal status had to be maintained, and this occurred through adherence to God's law. In Dunn's words, "One obeyed because one was already in the covenant, part of the covenant people" (20). Paul could not have been reacting to Jewish legalism because such a perspective was rare. This historical reality asserted by Dunn lends considerable support to his interpretation of 'works of the law.' Grace and works were not viewed as opposed to one another, but rather as complementary.

We are now in a position to put the pieces together and form at least a preliminary sketch of what this view of justification will look like. This paper has suggested that faith need not refer to mental assent to Christianity, but might have a different meaning entirely. A very good candidate seems to be 'faithfulness' in imitation of Christ's own dedication. We further see that Paul's use of *ergōn nomou* may not be an indictment of all works, but an argument against using identity markers such as circumcision and dietary laws to define early Christian communities. Sanders, Dunn, and other scholars have demonstrated that human effort to live according to the divine will was never antithetical to grace in Jewish thought but a crucial component of the human response to it. Because of this, faith may well be best conceived of as 'faithfulness to Christ.' This makes it possible to maintain that free human action plays a role in justification without downplaying the importance of grace.

What exactly is meant by 'faithfulness to Christ,' and how does it correspond to Christ's own faithfulness? These remain open questions. It would seem on its face, though, to answer the objection posed by doxastic involuntarism. There is nothing about free action in accord with Christ's example that implies any particular mental state at all. If faith is best construed as an

active way of living and, at some level, an imitation of Christ's own faithfulness, it suggests that faith might be attainable even for those who do not mentally assent to Christianity. This suggestion points toward further research, including a systematic treatment of the sort of faith that has been outlined. But my hope is that this examination has proved fruitful in identifying a potential problem, surveying pertinent recent scholarship, and offering a possible step in a promising direction. It admittedly does admittedly depart from a core Protestant teaching, but does so in an earnest manner consistent with Anselm's notion of "faith seeking understanding." It entertains open-mindedly yet critically the idea that we may need to, as the scholars examined have done, take a new perspective on Paul. Christian truth deserves nothing less.

Endnotes

¹ The 'ought implies can' principle enjoys broad philosophical support, as well as intuitive appeal. William Alston explains the line of thought nicely when he states, "It seems clear that the terms of the deontological triad, permitted, required, and forbidden, apply to something only if it is under effective voluntary control. By the time-honored principle, 'Ought implies can', one can be obliged to do A only if one has an effective choice as to whether to do A. It is equally obvious that it makes no sense to speak of S's being permitted or forbidden to do A if S lacks an effective choice as to whether to do so" (Alston 60).

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