

Graced Response: John Owen on Faith and Reason

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I. Introduction

The issue of faith and reason arises from the claim that there are two kinds of truths: some truths are discoverable or comprehensible to human understanding and some are not. This claim is found at least in the three Abrahamic religions. The Christian theologian John Owen expresses the view that there are truths of faith and truths of reason in the following words:

And there are many things revealed unto faith that are above and beyond the comprehension of reason in the best and utmost of its proper exercise: such are the principal mysteries of Christian religion. And it is the height of folly to reject them, as some do, because they are not discernible and comprehensible by reason, seeing they are not contradictory thereunto.¹

Among “the most proper subjects of divine revelation” are the triunity and incarnation of God as well as the resurrection of the dead. These are “*above our reason [...] because finite and limited*”.² Yet, these truths come “with an evidence and certainty of a higher nature and nobler kind than that of the *strictest demonstration* in things natural or the most forcible argument in things moral.”³

Now, this claim of two kinds of truths raises a number of questions. Granted that there are two kinds of truths, the question raises itself as to whether or not these kinds are related. More specifically, given that there are truths about God that are above and beyond the comprehension of reason, there is the question how (if at all) they are inferentially related to claims about God that are (arguably) within the comprehension of reason.

¹ John OWEN, *The Reason of Faith*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 4, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1677), 86. The full title may be noteworthy: *The Reason of Faith; Or, An Answer unto that Inquiry, “Wherefore We Believe the Scripture to Be the Word of God;” with the Causes and Nature of that Faith wherewith We Do So: wherein the Grounds whereon the Holy Scripture is Believed to Be the Word of God with Faith Divine and Supernatural Are Declared and Vindicated*.

² Ibid., 54. “a light superadded to the innate conceptions of men’s minds, and beyond what of themselves they can extend unto, because it is concerning such things as the heart of man could never of itself conceive, but the very knowledge of them is communicated by their revelation, 1 Cor. ii. 9, 11.” John OWEN, *Pneumatologia: A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 3, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1674), 232.

³ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 105.

For instance, do the truths about God that are comprehensible to reason provide the evidence that epistemically justify those truths that are not comprehensible to reason? In other words, how, if at all, are revelatory and non-revelatory truth claims related? Moreover, if reason cannot comprehend some claims, how can it be sure or certain that they are true because “they are not contradictory”? Not every non-contradictory claim is true, and claims are usually certain on account of evidence to the senses and/or reason, but how can a claim be certain without such evidence? Furthermore, what is the relation (if any) between theology and all other disciplines? If there are truths of faith, there may be a discipline devoted to those, but would it relate to other disciplines?

In this paper I will address two issues.⁴ First I will investigate Owen’s view of the role (if any) of rational or philosophical arguments concerning God in making faith intellectually good, and I will argue that according to Owen such argumentation has no role in an individual’s act of faith. In other words, philosophical reasoning is, according to Owen, neither necessary nor sufficient in coming to faith in God. That which concerns the act of faith is rationally incomprehensible and faith thus relies on divine revelation alone. Second, and following on from the first issue, I will examine how Owen can regard faith as an intellectual kind of act when it is the nature of faith to lack evidence comprehensible to reason. Thus I will deal with faith in its relation to other kinds of intellectual acts and with the distinctive characteristic of faith, namely the will to assent to the truths of faith. There is a closely aligned and third issue, namely the role of philoso-

⁴ Owen’s epistemology has been generally neglected. The only exception I know of is Paul Helm’s remark that on faith and reason Owen stands in continuity with the medieval period: Paul HELM, “Introduction,” in *Faith and Reason*, ed. Paul HELM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135. Helm also includes an extract from Owen (pp. 166–168). This paper aims to improve on my earlier discussion: Sebastian REHNMAN, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 109–154. In this paper I do not consider the sources and context of Owen’s doctrine. Apart from Owen’s appendix to *The Reason of Faith* that briefly attempts to show the catholicity of Owen’s conclusions from patristic, medieval and reformation sources, there are no explicit references to other accounts of the relation between faith and reason. However, his contemporary Gisbertus VOETIUS contends (in the disputation *De ratione humana in rebus fidei*) that Aquinas distinguishes rightly between faith and reason (Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum theologicarum*, 5 vols. (Utrecht: Johannes Waesberg, 1648–1669), I.3.) Voetius refers to AQUINAS *Summa theologiae* 1.1.8. It would be of interest to establish how closely Owen agrees with Aquinas on faith and reason, but space does not permit me to do so here. I simply refer the reader to Thomas AQUINAS, *Super Boëthium De Trinitate*, vol. 50, *Opera omnia* (Rome/Paris: Commissione Leonina/Editions Du Cerf, 1992, 1257–8) I–II, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 22 ed., 6 vols. (Taurini/Romae: Marietti, 1940, 1266–73), 1.1, Brian J. SHANLEY, *The Thomist Tradition*, ed. Eugene Thomas LONG, vol. 2, *Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 21–43, and M. F. SPARROW, “The Proofs of Natural Theology and the Unbeliever,” *American Catholic philosophical quarterly* 65 (1991), 129–141. The reader may also want to look up Thomas BARLOW, *Exercitationes aliquot metaphysicae de Deo*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Lichfield, 1658), 167–172.

phy in theology. This issue concerns the relation between theology and all other disciplines. However, there is not space here to argue that, according to Owen, although the faithful need not be philosophers, theologians must be philosophers, because philosophy is the presupposition of theology. I leave that for another occasion. Here I limit myself to analyse Owen's account of the traditional view that truths of faith are certainly true to the faithful, although they lack the evidence of the senses and of reason. So, this paper attempts to clarify an orthodox protestant view of faith and reason, and suggests its historical continuity and contemporary relevance.

II. Does Faith Require Reason for Epistemic Justification?

I will start with Owen's view of philosophical argumentation for claims about the existence and revelation of God, since this will pave the way for a deeper analysis both of the nature of faith and reason, and of the relation between philosophy and theology.

Let me start with two interpretations of Owen's view of philosophical arguments that cannot both be true.

On the one hand, there is William Cunningham's interpretation of Owen as a straightforward fideist; that is, someone who denies any relation between faith and reason or claims that nothing we know counts for or against the truth of, say, the triunity and incarnation of God or the resurrection of the dead.⁵ Owen, according to Cunningham, "exhibited to an erroneous extent" the "tendency" to "disregard or despise the rational or external evidences for the truth of Christianity" in favour of "the work of the Spirit".⁶ However, according to Owen, it would be "irrational" to claim that the Holy Spirit is the ground or reason of faith,⁷ and that faith

⁵ Alvin Plantinga defines 'fideism' as an "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth" Alvin PLANTINGA, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin PLANTINGA and Nicholas WOLTERSTORFF (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87. For an overview of fideism together with a bibliography see, Richard AMESBURY, "Fideism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2005 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/fideism/>.

⁶ William CUNNINGHAM, *Theological Lectures on Subjects Connected with Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, the Canon and Inspiration of Scripture*, ed. Thomas SMITH (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1878), 226. Cunningham also refers to Owen on pp. 324 and 330. Cunningham probably failed to grasp the distinction Owen infers between the function of rational evidence in an individual act of faith and the function of rational evidence in the discipline of theology; taking the denial of the former as a denial of the latter. It may be conjectured that Cunningham made this mistake for contextual reasons. In his context he aims to defend that faith is reasonable, and seems to understand natural theology as a response to the questioning of the reasonableness of Christian faith. Owen's context and understanding is different.

⁷ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 55–6.

would be “irrational” if philosophical arguments “were absolutely discarded”.⁸ Indeed, it would be “senseless”, according to Owen, to talk to unbelievers of the creed as the ground or reason of faith.⁹ He calls it

a mistake [...] to suppose [1] that we resolve all faith unto private suggestions of the Spirit or deluding pretences thereof; and [... 2] that we confound the efficient cause and the formal reason of faith or believing, rendering all rational arguments and external testimonies useless.¹⁰

So Owen himself already challenged the view that Cunningham is ascribing to him. Owen says positively that humans are given reason “to use it in those things which are of the greatest importance unto them”, namely God and ourselves.¹¹ For right reason teaches that “there is an eternal, infinitely wise and powerful Being, by whom” the world was “caused, produced, and made”.¹² So, according to Owen himself, he is not at all contending what Cunningham claims.

On the other hand, there is Alan Clifford’s interpretation of Owen as a “rationalist.”¹³ Clifford does not define this ambiguous term, but in this

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15. Further on in the same work Owen writes that what he pleads for “is liable to be mistaken” as a “retreat” to the Spirit of God and “a pretence to discard all rational arguments, and to introduce *enthusiasm* into their room.” However, such a “charge is grievous, yet, [...] groundless” (59). For “neither do we nor can we answer by it [the work of the Spirit] unto this question, *why do we believe*.” (60) Moreover, “the illuminaton of the Holy Ghost, [...] consisting solely in enabling the mind unto that kind of assent which is faith divine and supernatural, on supposition of an external formal reason of it duly proposed, is not the reason why any do believe, nor the ground whereinto their faith is resolved.” (61) “no internal work of the Spirit can be the formal reason of our faith, [...] yet without it we can never sincerely believe as we ought” (68).

¹¹ Ibid., 60. Cf. “a neglect of the improvement of” the intellectual powers to the end of knowing and living to God “is the highest aggravation of sin.” (83) The term ‘reason’ is here used broadly for “the due exercise or reason, or the natural faculties of our minds” (54). Cf. John OWEN, *A Vindication of the Animadversions on “Fiat Lux”*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 14, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1663), 357.

¹² OWEN (see above, n. 1), 89, cf. 9, 86–89, John OWEN, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded Declared and Practically Improved*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 7, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1681), 353, 355, 370, 409, 411. Contrary to Cunningham, Owen contends that human beings are undoubtedly obliged “to consider all things of” the nature of “reasons and motives as are proposed unto them, and not to receive it with *brutish, implicit faith*; for the receiving of it is to be an act of men’s minds or understandings, on the best grounds and evidences which the nature of the thing proposed is capable of.” OWEN (see above, n. 1), 81.

¹³ “It is paradoxical that Tillotson, rather than Owen, has been viewed as a the rationalist.” For Owen “was significantly influenced by the older *a priori*, scholastic rationalism.” Alan CLIFFORD, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640–1790 An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 43. Clifford’s use of ‘*a priori*’ and ‘scholastic’ is, of course, as historically inaccurate as his phrase “Owen’s Aristotelian methodology.” (8) The terms ‘metaphysics’, ‘scholastic methodology’ and ‘Aristotelian method’ would seem to be used synonymously by Clifford (96; cf. 129).

context ‘rationalism’ means the view that faith must be grounded on that which can be conceptually and experientially available to all people, at all times and at all places.¹⁴ So on this kind of rationalism faith must be inferentially based on the foundations of reason and sense in order to be epistemologically justified. The view that some intellectual acts depend on other intellectual acts and that some intellectual acts do not depend on any other intellectual act is called foundationalism, and the view that every act of faith must depend on evidence available to reason is called evidentialism.¹⁵ So Clifford is more precisely charging Owen with evidentialist foundationalism. However, Owen is explicitly opposed to the view “that all things may be reduced unto sense and reason.”¹⁶ He claims that to faith, divine revelation “evidenceth its own truth, not with the same kind, but with an evidence and certainty of a higher nature and nobler kind than that of the *strictest demonstration* in things natural or the most forcible argument in things moral.”¹⁷ He moreover maintains that the “spiritual experience, which believers obtain through the Holy Ghost, is such as cannot rationally be contended about, seeing those who receive it cannot fully express

¹⁴ Clifford is clearly not considering Owen a rationalist as opposed to an empiricist (namely, the view that (some) knowledge is ultimately independent of sense experience as opposed to the view that knowledge is ultimately dependent of sense experience), but a rationalist as opposed to a fideist (namely, that faith must be grounded in reason as opposed to grounded in itself). For an overview of rationalism generally together with a bibliography see, Peter MARKIE, “Rationalism vs. Empiricism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>; and Thomas M. LENNON and Shannon DEA, “Continental Rationalism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2007 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2007/entries/continental-rationalism/>. Merold Westphal defines the relevant sense of ‘rationalism’, namely as “an appeal made by rationalists and empiricists alike [in the context of the so-called Enlightenment] to limit religion to those grounds, whether *a priori* [conceptual] or experiential, which are available to all people, at all times, and in all places. The contrast is [...] between reason and faith, in so far as the latter is tied to special revelation and a particular ‘church.’” Merold WESTPHAL, “Modern Philosophy of Religion,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. QUINN and Charles TALIAFERRO (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 112. Paul Helm elaborates on this sense of rationalism: “Rationalism requires the elimination of mystery and paradox from theology as a condition of believing; or at least as a condition of continuing to believe. The propositions of faith have to meet some *a priori* criteria of intelligibility, either rational or empirical, before they are worthy of belief.” Paul HELM, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 107.

¹⁵ Strictly, this is evidentialism within religion. Here ‘evidence’ means rational, intellectual or propositional evidence to faith. But it is possible to maintain a broader evidentialism according to which every good intellectual act must be based on some evidence of whatever kind. Cf. Anthony BOOTH, “The Two Faces of Evidentialism,” *Erkenntnis* 67 (2007), 401–417, and John ZEIS, “Evidentialism and Faith: Believing in Order to Know,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 80 (2007), 185–200.

¹⁶ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 59. “in this case [...] the truth is not exposed to sense, nor capable of scientifical demonstration” (47).

¹⁷ Ibid., 105. Moral certainty or probability would seem to go back to the methodological principles of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

it, and those who have not cannot understand it, nor the efficacy which it hath to secure and establish the mind".¹⁸ So, Owen denies the reduction of faith to reason and claims that faith is ultimately incomprehensible and unspeakable.

Now, it is fairly easy to show that both Cunningham and Clifford has misunderstood Owen's view of philosophical arguments concerning the existence and revelation of God. But it is more difficult to make sense of what Owen really means. Can it be coherent to claim, as Owen does, both that philosophical arguments count in favour of faith and that philosophical arguments are not the ground of faith? Or, if he is not a fideist nor an evidentialist, what is he? We thus need to analyse what Owen really meant.

Let us first probe into philosophical arguments. Owen discusses explicitly and elaborately the use of philosophical arguments both for the existence and revelation of God.¹⁹ Mostly he calls such an argument "an external argument",²⁰ because it provides a proposition with "outward evidence of its truth".²¹ These arguments "arise from all the indubitable notions that we have of God or ourselves, in reference unto our present duty or future happiness."²² For instance, if humans "use and exercise the best of their rational abilities in the consideration and contemplation of" the world, they have evidence of the being and power of God.²³ Similarly, "There are sundry cogent arguments, which are taken from *external considerations* of the Scripture, that evince it on rational grounds to be from God."²⁴ Here Owen argues from the antiquity, preservation, aim and success of Scripture, as well as the testimony of the church to Scripture.²⁵ Likewise there are external arguments for the Trinity and Christ.²⁶

¹⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁹ Most of the material on philosophical arguments in *The Reason of Faith* relate to the revelation of God. But there and elsewhere he expresses the same view regarding philosophical arguments for the existence of God. For instance, OWEN (see above, n. 12), 352–357, 370.

²⁰ Other terms are "rational considerations", OWEN (see above, n. 1), 5., "rational motives of faith" (45), "rational arguments or motives" (82). "There are sundry cogent arguments, [...] motives of credibility, or effectual persuasives to account and esteem it [Scripture] to be the word of God." (20, cf. 55, 61, 68).

²¹ Ibid., 37. It would seem to be external or outward evidence in the sense of outward or external to revelation. Thus this usage would seem to suppose truths that can be known both naturally and supernaturally. In one instance Owen uses the phrase "external arguments" for "the first dictates of reason". Propositions that are true on the evidence of the meaning of their terms "are not capable of being confirmed by external arguments" (87).

²² Ibid., 68.

²³ Ibid., 9, OWEN (see above, n. 12), 352, 353, 355, 370, 409, 411.

²⁴ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 20.

²⁵ Ibid., 20–47.

²⁶ John OWEN, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity: As Also of the Person and Satisfaction of Christ*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 2, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–55, 1669). I have pursued this issue in Sebastian REHNMAN, "Does it matter if Christian doctrine is contradictory? Barth on logic and

The “use” and “proper place” of philosophical arguments is twofold.²⁷ “In the first way,” they are “considered as previous inducements unto believing”,²⁸ but this “use is not great, nor ever hath been in the church of God”.²⁹ “Hence they were not of old insisted on for the ingenerating of faith”.³⁰ So the first use of philosophical arguments is to dispose to rather than to produce faith. “But in the second way”,³¹ philosophical arguments are used as “concomitant means of strengthening faith in them that do believe.”³² In this way, rational arguments “may be pleaded with good use and purpose” “wherever there is occasion from objections, oppositions, or temptations”.³³ In addition Owen maintains that philosophical arguments should be used against attacks from atheism,³⁴ but it is not clear whether this is a third use or merely a defensive application of the two other uses.

Owen is clear on the probative force of philosophical arguments. He writes: “for we will allow the utmost assurance that can be claimed upon them.”³⁵ “*external arguments* [...] are effectual motives to persuade us to give an unfeigned assent”.³⁶ Where the “use and exercise of their best rational abilities [...] is neglected, [...] men degenerate into atheism.”³⁷ Yet, philosophical arguments are “not demonstrations”, but “produce an opinion only, though in the highest kind of probability, and firm against objections”.³⁸ The ultimate reason why people still reject such arguments is, according to Owen, lust and weakness of will. For “it is an unreasonable thing not to assent unto them”³⁹ and “nothing but *perverse prejudice* can detain men from giving a *firm assent* unto” them.⁴⁰

theology,” in *Encounters with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David GIBSON and Daniel STRANGE (New York/London: T & T Clark, 2008).

²⁷ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 71. Compare “proper place” here with “their property is to level the ground, and to remove the rubbish of objections out of the way, that we may build the safer on the sure foundation” (21), and “place” and “proper end” (50).

²⁸ Ibid., 71. Here the “place” and “proper end” of rational arguments are “to beget such an assent unto the truth as they are capable of effecting”; namely, “the mind is prepared and disposed by them unto the receiving the truth in its proper evidence.” (50)

²⁹ Ibid., 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 72.

³¹ Ibid., 72.

³² Ibid., 71. Rational arguments are “necessary unto the confirmation of our faith herein against temptations, oppositions, and objections.” (20, 21, 47, 49) “of singular use for the strengthening of the faith of them that do believe” (47). “corroborated” (21) “for the defence against gainsayers and their objections” (49). Assent is “fortified and confirmed, against exceptions and objections” by “rational considerations” (5).

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid., 71.

³⁵ Ibid., 50.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Ibid., 9.

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

³⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 46.

But the most rational arguments for the being of the Deity will never prove an effectual cure unto a predominant love of and habitual course in sin, in them who have resisted and rejected the means and motives unto that end declared in divine revelation; and unless the love of sin be cured in the heart, thoughts in the acknowledgement of God will not be fixed in the mind.⁴¹

So, although philosophical arguments may not be convincing subjectively, they are convincing objectively.⁴²

From this material we should therefore conclude that Owen is not a (straightforward) fideist, since he maintains that philosophical or rational arguments for the existence and revelation of God are significant or count in favour of the truths of faith.

We need then, second, to consider Owen's view of the ground or reason of faith. He denies emphatically and persistently that philosophical arguments are the ground of faith: "they neither are, nor is it possible they ever should be, the ground and reason whereon we believe".⁴³ Owen has two major reasons for this, since two things needs to be considered regarding true faith. "The first respects the *subject*, or the *mind of man*, how it is enabled thereunto; the other, the *object* to be believed, with the true reason why we do so believe".⁴⁴

First, faith is grounded in divine revelation or supernatural evidence. We have already noted that the things of "faith are", according to Owen, "above and beyond the comprehension of reason".⁴⁵ The object of faith is, more precisely, "invisible things, things capable of no demonstration from sense or reason, as respects divine revelation only, whereinto alone it is resolved".⁴⁶ Here Owen defines revelation strictly as that which only respects or contains things that cannot be demonstrated from sense and reason. So faith is "an assent of another kind",⁴⁷ since its evidence is "divine revelation".⁴⁸ And the "nature" of the evidence of revelation is "an evidence unto *faith*, and not to *sense*".

It is not like that which the sun gives of itself by its light, which there needs no exercise of reason to assure us of, for sense is irresistibly affected with it; but it is like the evidence which

⁴¹ OWEN (see above, n. 12), 355.

⁴² There are two things that hinder or disenable divine and supernatural faith. Rational arguments are directed only to one of them. "This [...] obstruction or hindrance [of prejudice] may be so far removed by external arguments and motives of credibility, as that men may upon them attain unto a moral persuasion [...]; but these arguments cannot remove or take away the native blindness of the mind, which is removed by their renovation and divine illumination alone." OWEN (see above, n. 1), 58.

⁴³ Ibid., 20. This is repeated throughout (e.g. 5, 47, 49).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 55. These are called "subjective" and "objective" on p. 59.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37. Cf. "the interposition of any other authority between the things to be believed and our souls and consciences, besides the authority of God, overthrows the nature of divine faith" (19).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

the heavens and the earth give of their being made and created of God, and [...] it is required hereunto that men use and exercise the best of their rational abilities.⁴⁹

Thus divine revelation “is sufficient of itself to secure their faith in this matter”.⁵⁰

Secondly, faith is not a mere exercise of reason, but a grace or free gift of God, since philosophical arguments result, according to Owen, in “a mere effect of reason. There is no more required unto it but that the reasons proposed for the assent required be such as the mind judgeth to be convincing and prevalent”. Faith would then be “a naked exercise of reason”, because “the act which is exerted on such motives [...] is purely natural”.⁵¹ Here Owen explicitly denies the implicit naturalism of evidentialism. According to evidentialism, faith can only be the natural outcome of arguments and each believer ought to be able to present his or her propositional evidence. However, if

the whole *work of believing* would be a *work of reason* [..., this] both overthrows the nature of faith, substituting as assent upon natural evidence in the room thereof, and is absolutely exclusive of the necessity or use of any work of the Holy Ghost in our believing, which sober Christians will scarcely comply withal.⁵²

Owen maintains on the contrary that faith is a God-given capacity. He argues by analogy of the power of seeing.⁵³ Any animal with a properly functioning faculty of sight is able to see the light of the sun, for the “sense” of sight is “irresistibly affected with” the evidence that “the sun gives of itself by its light”.⁵⁴ Now, “It is in this case [of supernatural things] as in things natural”; unless a human animal is endued with “a due visive faculty” the supernatural light or evidence of revelation will not be seen nor any argument in favour of it.⁵⁵ For “we must believe the revelation and the things revealed with the same kind of faith, or we bring confusion on the whole work of believing.”⁵⁶ Thus Owen defines faith as supernatural, infallible and divine: “our faith is *supernatural*, with respect unto the production of it in our minds by the Holy Ghost; and *infallible*, with respect unto [...] divine revelation; and is *divine*, in opposition unto what is merely human, on both accounts.”⁵⁷

It may, though, be wondered whether any use is left for philosophical arguments concerning the existence and revelation of God on Owen’s account. But he writes: “They are left unto us as consequential unto our be-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁵¹ Ibid., 49. Similarly 46.

⁵² Ibid., 54.

⁵³ Ibid., 56, 9, 82, 89. Cicero may be the source of this analogy (cf. 89–90).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

lieving, to plead with others in behalf of what we profess, and for the justification of it unto the world.”⁵⁸ This formulation is significant. Philosophical arguments for the existence and revelation of God are “consequential” or follow after faith, and faith is not a consequence or does not follow philosophical argumentation. External arguments are for the justification of the Christian religion to the world. This is contrary to evidentialism. First, in that evidentialism assumes that something can only be taken to be true on account of valid arguments, but Owen clearly contends that most things are assented to without any argument because of the reliability of the senses.⁵⁹ Second, this is contrary to evidentialism in that Owen does not conceive of natural theology as a response to atheism. It is not invented in order to justify faith. Rather, natural theology is just part of philosophy or science (broadly conceived).⁶⁰

Thus Owen is not a (straightforward) evidentialist, because he maintains that philosophical or external arguments for the existence and revelation of God are not the ground of the individual act of faith. Faith is the graced response to revelation.

So this section has established that Owen is neither fideist or evidentialist because, according to him, rational arguments count in favour of faith and yet they are not the ground of faith.

III. Cognitive Kinds of Acts

Now, while philosophical arguments count in favour of the existence, revelation, triunity and incarnation of God and the resurrection of the dead, faith is not, according to Owen, grounded on such arguments but by grace on revelation. Although not based on sense or reason, faith is “accompanied with more *assurance* than any assent which is the effect of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁹ No exercise or argument of reason is needed to assure an animal of the light of the sun. Ibid., 9, 56.

⁶⁰ Several historical studies have in different ways established that it was only during the so-called “Enlightenment” that natural theology began to be used in order to justify individual acts of faith. For instance, Guy DE BROGLIE, “La vraie notion thomiste des praemambula fidei,” *Gregorianum* 34 (1953), Nicholas WOLTERSTORFF, “The Migration of Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert AUDI and William J. WAINWRIGHT (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986), Nicholas WOLTERSTORFF, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118–133, John CLAYTON, *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anne M. BLACKBURN and Thomas D. CARROLL (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a development and defence of the traditional (as opposed to the Enlightenment) conception of natural theology, see Sebastian REHNMAN, “Natural Theology and Epistemic Justification,” *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2010).

science upon the most demonstrative principles.”⁶¹ Thus faith not only holds things to be true but, according to Owen, it holds things to be true in the most certain way. Yet, it may then be queried, how can there be assurance or certainty apart from such evidence that grounds other kinds of assent? Owen’s answer is in short, God; faith can be certain apart from rational evidence on account of God. His full answer is occupied with distinctions and divisions, and to understand what kind of act Owen considers faith to be, we need to see it in the context of his psychology and epistemology.

First, there is the general framework. What Owen attempts to do is to “show what it is, what power, what faculty in the minds of men, whereunto this revelation is proposed, and whereby we assent unto the truth of it”.⁶² He inquires into the nature of the intellect, and the “nature and essence” of its acts,⁶³ before he reflects on and attempts to validate the claims of the intellect in terms of certainty and probability. The starting point is “rational faculties” or “distinct faculties and powers of our souls”,⁶⁴ where the term “faculty” does not signify “organ” but “powers, abilities, qualifications, and endowments”.⁶⁵ This priority of faculties and their objects remind us of the traditional view of epistemology as part of philosophical anthropology, and its realist assumption that there is first knowledge of things and only later knowledge of knowledge. This is the opposite of one of Owen’s famous students, John Locke, who contends that “the mind, in all of its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas”.⁶⁶

Second, there is a major distinction. In Owen’s theory of knowledge the traditional distinction between sensation and intellection – “sense and reason” – is fundamental.⁶⁷ Sense knowledge is about what we perceive

⁶¹ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 100–101. From the context it appears that Owen uses “assurance” and “certainty” as synonymous translations of the Latin *certitudo*. In this context “the firmitude and constancy which we have in the assurance of faith” is also used. This certainty of faith is similarly expressed elsewhere: “Yea, our faith is capable of giving an assent, though of another kind, more firm, and accompanied with more assurance, than any given by reason in the best of its conclusions” (90).

⁶² Ibid., 82.

⁶³ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 12, 83. Cf. “facultas proprie est qualitas, qua idoneum quid dicitur, vt afficiatur. Facultas autem & potentia non sunt [illegible Greek probably meaning “equivalent”]. [...] At potentia [...] habet se ex parte materiae, quae magis proprie est mera potentia: sicut facultas ex parte formae, quia ab ipsa & facultatibus omnis actus prodit.” Rudolphus GOCLENIUS, *Lexicon philosophicum* (Frankfurt: Mathias Becker, 1613) 565.

⁶⁵ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 38. These may be of two kinds: “moral or natural endowments” (32–33).

⁶⁶ John LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. NIDITCH (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 1689), IV.i.

⁶⁷ Cf. OWEN (see above, n. 1), 59, 86, 90, GOCLENIUS (see above, n. 64), 383. This distinction goes back at least to ancient Greek philosophy and held sway until Descartes.

(see, hear, smell, taste, feel, etc.), and intellectual knowledge is about what we understand. These manners of knowledge are related in that “our senses [...] are] the means of” the intellectual powers.⁶⁸ Through the senses we directly know the concrete particulars and through the intellect we indirectly know general meanings or natures.

This difference between the knowledge of the senses and that of the intellect may become clearer when we turn to Owen’s distinction between various kinds of objects. Psychical powers only have meaning in reference to their acts, works or operations, and the acts of the soul only have meaning in reference to their objects: “the due respect of the faculty unto the object”.⁶⁹ For every consideration there is an object toward which the mind is directed. Owen distinguishes objects into two kinds: material objects and formal objects. The “material object” is “the things which we do believe”. The “formal object” is “the cause and reason why we do believe” or “that which it rests upon and is resolved into”,⁷⁰ “the evidence whereon we give this assent”,⁷¹ or, simply, “the ground”.⁷² Imagine that Fido is barking. Fido’s sound is not the object of your eyes, Fido’s colour is not the object of your nose, and Fido’s being a terrier is not the object of your ears, but Fido is still the object of your mind. The thing considered, namely Fido, is what Owen calls the material object. The aspects under which Fido is considered he calls the formal object, and so Fido’s noise is the formal object of the act of hearing, Fido’s colour is the formal object of the act of seeing, and Fido’s nature or dogness is the formal object of the act of understanding. It is moreover the formal object that makes acts into the kind of acts they are:

it is the formal object or reason of all our acts from whence they are denominated, or by which they are specified. And the formal reason [...], is that which prevails with us to believe, and on whose account we do so.⁷³

It is the formal object that makes acts auditive, visual, tactile and so forth. “That, therefore, which proposeth any thing unto us as true, with evidence of that truth, is the formal object”⁷⁴ For example, a given noise is evidence of and suggests that Fido is barking. Yet, the material object and the formal object cannot be distinguished in experience, but is an abstraction.⁷⁵ In short, the senses and the intellect have the same material object, but differ as to formal object.

⁶⁸ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

⁷² Ibid., 18.

⁷³ Ibid., 46. More on specification of acts: 17, 51, 53.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

Owen devotes further attention to the rational or intellectual powers, because he makes the traditional assumption that the reliability of the senses is unquestionable. The intellectual faculties are also called three ways, or “kinds of assent”,⁷⁶ namely (1) the “inbred principles of natural light, and the first rational actings of our minds”; (2) the “*rational consideration* of things externally proposed unto us”; and (3) faith.⁷⁷ The word “assent” means here, of course, to hold something to be true: “we *assent* unto any thing that is proposed unto us as true, and receive it as such”.⁷⁸ These three all belong to reason or the intellect as opposed to the senses, since in traditional logic, assent or affirmation belongs to the intellectual act called judgment, which is one of three operations or acts of the intellect (apprehension, judgment and reasoning).⁷⁹ It is Owen’s account of these kinds of assent that we need to investigate in order to understand his claim that faith can be certain apart from the evidence that grounds other kinds of assent.

The first faculty is “a power of apprehending”,⁸⁰ and the first operation of the intellect yields “first apprehension”⁸¹ (traditionally called “simple apprehension”). It is “apprehension” as opposed to “either express reasoning or farther consideration”.⁸² By this power humans “assent unto self-evident natural principles, as that the *part is less than the whole* or the like.”⁸³ Indeed, these “first dictates of reason [...] are nothing but its assent.”⁸⁴ From the very meaning of the terms they are taken

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17. It seems that they are called “kinds of assent” from the view-point of logic/epistemology, and are called “faculties and powers” from the view-point of psychology.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 82–3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 82. “Assensus est quies intellectus, qua adhaerescit conclusionibus, vt, acquiescentia est quies voluntatis in aliquo, quod habetur vel habitum est. Ille est firmus vel languidus.” GO-CLENIUS (see above, n. 64), 128.

⁷⁹ E.g. Thomas AQUINAS, *Expositio libri Posteriorum analyticorum*, vol. 1*/2, *Opera omnia* (Paris, 1989; Vrin, 1269–72), 1 l. 1 n. 4.: “Sunt autem rationis tres actus: quorum primi duo sunt rationis, secundum quod est intellectus quidam. Una enim actio intellectus est intelligentia indivisibilium sive incomplexorum, secundum quam concipit quid est res. Et haec operatio a quibusdam dicitur informatio intellectus sive imaginatio per intellectum. Et ad hanc operationem rationis ordinatur doctrina, quam tradit Aristoteles in libro praedicamentorum. Secunda vero operatio intellectus est compositio vel divisio intellectus, in qua est iam verum vel falsum. Et huic rationis actui deseruit doctrina, quam tradit Aristoteles in libro perihermeneias. Tertius vero actus rationis est secundum id quod est proprium rationis, scilicet discurrere ab uno in aliud, ut per id quod est notum deveniat in cognitionem ignoti. Et huic actui deserunt reliqui libri logicae.”

⁸⁰ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 84. In this context Owen uses “natural light” synonymously (82), and calls this power the “natural light and the common reason of mankind” (23). We may call this the intuitive faculty or simply intuition. For the second intellectual power is a power of reasoning that is by contrast called the “discursive faculty”, and Owen compares the first kind of assent with “instinct in *irrational* creatures.” (82). But “intuition” is nowadays associated with a very different epistemology.

⁸¹ Ibid., 82.

⁸² Ibid., 82.

⁸³ Ibid., 88. The same example is used on p. 83 and twice on p. 105.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 82.

to be true, and thus “the mind is necessarily determined to assent unto the proper objects of these principles; it cannot do otherwise.”⁸⁵ The “principles of natural light” are “inbred”⁸⁶ as opposed to “things externally proposed”,⁸⁷ so that “the mind embrace in itself the general notions of moral good and evil, with the difference between them”.⁸⁸ Acting contrary to “the light of nature” leads to “a maze of folly and wickedness.”⁸⁹

The second faculty or power is simply assent by “*rational consideration* of things externally proposed unto us. Herein the mind exerciseth its discursive faculty, gathering one thing out of another, and concluding one thing from another”,⁹⁰ either certainly or probably.⁹¹

The third (and to our query the most relevant) faculty is faith, “the power of our minds to assent unto truth upon testimony”.⁹² For all things assented to on faith have “some sort of inevidence or obscurity attending them”,⁹³ and acts of faith would be overthrown by the necessity or certainty of evidence.⁹⁴

It belongs unto the nature of faith, of what sort soever it be, that it be built on and resolved into *testimony*. This is that which distinguisheth it from any other conception, knowledge, or assent of our mind, on other reasons and causes.⁹⁵

This intellectual act is called or denominated ‘faith’ not “from the *object* of it” but “from the nature of the assent”. Thus the term ‘faith’ is used “equivocally”.⁹⁶

Assent is an act then of the intellect on account of evidence whereby something is affirmed of something else. In traditional epistemology, acts of assent are further denominated, specified or differentiated either on account of the degree of assent or on account the nature of the evi-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 82. Also here “the first principles of reason are evident in themselves without farther proof or testimony”.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 82, 85, 86, 87.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

⁹² Ibid., 105. “it is the nature of faith to be built on an external testimony.” (63) Similarly pp. 53, 83, 85, 90. “the understanding cannot assent unto any thing with any kind of [testimonial?] assent, natural or supernatural, but what is outwardly proposed unto it as true, and that with sufficient evidence that it is so.” (60) Faith is “the effect and product” of some testimony or argument (47).

⁹³ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 19, 51, 54.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁶ John OWEN, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith through the imputation of the Righteousness of Christ; Explained, Confirmed and Vindicated*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 5, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1677), 72.

dence.⁹⁷ Assents that differ on account of degree are either certain or probable. “Our assent can be of no other nature than the arguments and motives whereon it is built, or by which it is wrought in us, as in *degree* it cannot exceed their *evidence*.⁹⁸ In things natural there can be demonstration, necessity or certainty; in things moral there can be various degrees of probability. Assents differ also either on account of intrinsic evidence or on account of extrinsic evidence: “the nature of every assent is given unto it by the nature of the evidence which it proceedeth from or relieth on.”⁹⁹ The nature of the evidence comes either from the thing itself (intrinsic evidence) or from some witness or testimony (extrinsic evidence). For instance, the “sense” of sight is “irresistibly affected with” the evidence “which the sun gives of itself by its light”.¹⁰⁰ Intrinsic evidence “is sufficient of itself to secure” such assent.¹⁰¹ “If there be such a light and evidence in the things themselves, with respect unto our reason, in the right use and exercise of it, then is the mind thereby necessitated unto its assent”.¹⁰² But external evidence is needed when there is not sufficient evidence in the things themselves and the testimony of an authority is needed.

Lastly, these intellectual powers can, according to Owen, be strengthened or weakened, since there are dispositions (*habitus*) of the mind.¹⁰³ For “the faculties of men’s minds are naturally enlightened and enlarged” by arts, sciences and wisdom.¹⁰⁴ Arts and sciences are traditionally called intellectual virtues. Humans are, on the other hand, subject to “vicious habits of their minds,”¹⁰⁵ namely intellectual vices.

With this psychological and epistemological background, we may now better understand Owen’s view of acts of Christian faith. According to him, Christian faith belongs to one of the “*three ways* whereby we *assent* unto any thing that is proposed unto us as true, and receive it as such”.¹⁰⁶ Although faith “is not to be fully expressed by any *one single habit* or act of the mind or will distinctly whatever”,¹⁰⁷ it is above all a kind of assent or affirmation that something is the case: “That God is one in three persons, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the like proposi-

⁹⁷ For a brief statement, see R. P. PHILLIPS, *Metaphysics*, vol. 2, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy: An Explanation for Students* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1935).

⁹⁸ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 50. Once Owen uses “evident certainty” (33), which seems to mean the certainty which evidence yields.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰² Ibid., 54.

¹⁰³ OWEN (see above, n. 96), 100.

¹⁰⁴ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 22–23. Also “invention, and conjectures” (23).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰⁷ OWEN (see above, n. 96), 100.

tions".¹⁰⁸ However, the triunity of God cannot be sensed or experienced (at least not in this life), and the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ cannot be argued demonstratively.¹⁰⁹ In other words, there is not, according to Owen, intrinsic evidence of the triunity and incarnation of God. This lack of evidence makes faith in some external evidence necessary, since faith is the kind of intellectual act that relies on external evidence.

Christian faith has then two distinctive features according to Owen: it is assent on account of God's testimony and is desire on account of the goodness of God's acts.

First, Christian faith distinguishes itself by its reliance on God's testimony. "The material object of our faith," writes Owen, "are the articles of our creed",¹¹⁰ and "the formal reason" is "God's truth and authority."¹¹¹ As the material object of Christian faith is of a supernatural kind and nature, so must, according to Owen, its formal object be of a supernatural kind and nature: "we must believe the revelation and the things revealed with the same kind of faith, or we bring confusion on the whole work of believing."¹¹² Christian faith is then "an assent of another kind",¹¹³ since its evidence is "divine revelation".¹¹⁴ This evidence also "removes the moral certainty treated of out of our way."¹¹⁵ Only that is infallible evidence, which is "immediately from the first essential Verity."¹¹⁶ And this faith is the gift of God: "all which is properly called faith, with respect unto divine revelation, and is accepted with God as such, is the work of the Spirit of God in us, or is bestowed on us by him".¹¹⁷ So, Christian faith considered

¹⁰⁸ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 16. "It belongs to the nature of faith [...] that it be built on [...] reasons and causes." (53).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. "[T]he nature of faith in general [...] is, such an assent unto and confidence of invisible things, things capable of no demonstration from sense or reason, as respects divine revelation only, whereinto alone it is resolved", ibid., 37.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 49. Strictly the material object of faith is the articles of the creed and the formal object of the act of faith is revelation. Therefore the material object do not have "the nature of a testimony" (53) but the formal object has that nature.

¹¹² Ibid., 51.

¹¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 17. "Justifying faith is not a higher, or the highest degree of this faith, but is of another kind or nature." OWEN (see above, n. 96), 72.

¹¹⁵ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 51.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 51. "It is because God himself, the first truth, who cannot lie, hath revealed and declared these things so to be, and he who is our all requireth us so to believe." (70) "In his bearing witness he [God the Father] is an object of belief. [...] God, as the *prima Veritas*, upon whose authority is founded, and whereinto all divine faith is ultimately resolved, [...] is the prime object thereof." John OWEN, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, ed. William H. GOOLD, 24 vols., vol. 2, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–1855, 1657), 11–12.

¹¹⁷ OWEN (see above, n. 1), 56–57.

as assent refers to the veracity of God, and faith considered as duty refers to the authority of God.¹¹⁸

Second, Christian faith distinguishes itself by desire of God. We noticed earlier that it was the nature of faith to lack evidence. Owen argues that this absence of evidence to the intellect is solved by the will:

the evidence which we have in things scientifical is speculative, and affects the mind only; but the evidence which we have by faith effectually worketh on the will also, because of the goodness and excellency of the things that are believed.¹¹⁹

The excellency of the material object of faith he means here is its “goodness and suitableness unto the souls of men as to their present condition and eternal end.”¹²⁰ This condition is “our present depravation and apostasy from God”.¹²¹ For there are two closely associated ends of human nature. The “only two great concerns of our nature, of any rational being” is living and enjoying God.¹²²

These things are necessary to our nature, so that without them it were better not to be; for it is better to have no being in the world, than, whilst we have it, always to wander, and never to act towards its proper end, seeing all that is really good unto us consists in our tendency thereto and our attainment of it.¹²³

In faith the intellect is determined by the will, because God appears as the proper end of human nature and the will embraces God. Believing, or being faithful to God, is by grace to intend one’s ultimate good, “wherein the blessedness of our nature doth consist.”¹²⁴ However, the “due apprehension of such a goodness suitable unto our constitution and condition” is impossible without an “antecedent assent of the mind”.¹²⁵ We will only what we know, and we cannot will God unless we know some of God. So in coming to faith there is first a knowledge of God that triggers the will to desire God. The will does not then supply new or additional evidence to the mind, but yields firmness or certainty. In faith the mind still lacks evidence, but the will grasps the suitable goodness that results in certitude. Perhaps this is why Owen sometimes uses the word “faith” synonymously with “hope”¹²⁶ and “confidence”.¹²⁷ Hope and confidence are clearly psychic acts that have prominent voluntary aspects.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 54, 18, 70.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 101. In this context Owen follows a medieval distinction between “the certainty of adherence” and “the certainty of evidence” in explaining the difference between faith and science.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 53, cf. 54.

¹²¹ Ibid., 29.

¹²² Ibid., 26, 109, 110. Cf. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, q. 1.

¹²³ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 16, “faith or hope”.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 37. “faith, affiance, and confidence” OWEN (see above, n. 116), 13.

So this section has established Owen's account of the certainty of faith. Faith can be certain apart from the evidence of first principles and the evidence of further inferences, because it is a God-given ability to embrace the evidence of revelation.

IV. Conclusion

Owen's epistemology does not fit well with contemporary labels nor with stereotypical accounts of Protestant orthodoxy. He is neither a straightforward evidentialist nor a straightforward fideist, since faith is a grace or free gift of God and is based on revelation or supernatural evidence. Yet he is a fideist in the sense that faith is not based on rational evidence, and an evidentialist in the sense that Christian faith ought to have some rational or cognitive support. Owen does not maintain that faith must have evidence of a rational kind and denies that reason can provide necessary evidence that God is triune or was incarnated in Jesus Christ. No one can come to faith merely by rational evidence, but rational evidence contributes significantly to whether or not one has faith. Perhaps Owen could be said to be a fideist in relation to individual acts of faith, and an evidentialist in relation to revelation. Formally faith is assenting by or on account of God's testimony, and materially faith is desiring by or on account of the goodness and suitableness of God's acts. But faith is more ordered towards truth than towards good, and is therefore more an intellectual act than a voluntary act.¹²⁸

SUMMARY

The issue of faith and reason arises from the claim that there are two kinds of truths: some truths are discoverable to human understanding and some are not. This paper argues that the epistemology of the prominent orthodox protestant theologian John Owen (1616–1683) does not fit the labels of evidentialism and fideism. According to evidentialism, every cognitive act (including faith) must depend on evidence available to reason. According to fideism, there is no relation between faith and reason so that nothing of reason can be counted for or against faith. But Owen is a fideist in the sense that faith is not based on rational evidence, and an evidentialist in the sense that Christian faith ought to have some rational or cognitive support. Philosophical arguments count in favour of faith and are not the ground of faith. The paper suggests that this nuanced view is a viable alternative and option.

¹²⁸ I thank the participants of the conference John Owen Today, held at Westminster College, Cambridge University, 19–22 August 2008, for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Frage nach Glaube und Vernunft ergibt sich aus der Behauptung, dass es zwei Arten von Wahrheiten gibt: diejenigen, die dem menschlichen Verstehen zugänglich sind, und diejenigen, die es nicht sind. Dieses Papier argumentiert, dass die Erkenntnistheorie des prominenten orthodoxen evangelischen Theologen John Owen (1616–1683) nicht zu den Etiketten des Evidentialismus und Fideismus passt. Gemäß des Evidentialismus beruht jede kognitive Handlung (einschließlich des Glaubens) auf Beweisen, die der Vernunft zugänglich sind. Nach dem Fideismus gibt es keinerlei Beziehung zwischen Glaube und Vernunft, so dass es keine vernünftigen Gründe für oder gegen den Glauben gibt. Aber Owen ist in dem Sinne ein Fideist, dass für ihn der Glaube nicht auf rationalen Beweisen beruht, und ein Evidentialist in dem Sinne, dass seiner Ansicht nach der christliche Glaube rational oder kognitiv gestützt sein sollte. Philosophische Argumente gelten zu Gunsten des Glaubens, erweisen sich aber noch nicht als Fundierung des Glaubens. Das vorliegende Papier legt nahe, dass diese differenzierte Sicht eine sinnvolle Alternative und Option darstellt.