



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Faith – Not Fact

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My life is based on a faith. All the facts of it rise out of that faith.

It occurs to me that all of life is based on a faith. All the facts of life are facts in the light of that faith.

One of my college professors was a professed atheist. Even though the school was considered to be a Christian school, he made not attempt to hide his atheism. “I do not believe in God”, he said, “I do not believe in anything I cannot prove, and I cannot prove the existence of God. Therefore, I do not believe in God.”

I was a pre-ministerial student at the college, and was prone to argue with just about anyone who would encounter with me to prove the existence of God. How young and inexperienced and unknowing I was.

Nevertheless, I took on even his professor. He was very patient with me even though he could “shoot down” any argument I advanced. And, in the end, he would repeat his refrain, “I do not believe in God because I cannot prove that God exists. I will believe only what I can prove.”

The professor taught chemistry, and, in due season, I was in his class, which included chemistry lab. Our over-all purpose in lab was to do experiments that would prove the accuracy of what we were taught in the class lectures – provided, of course, that we did the experiments correctly.

In one lab period I was trying to do an experiment, and I needed some information from the professor. He gave me the information for which I asked. However, I had no proof that what he told me was true, so I said to him, “How do I know that the information you have given me is true?”

The professor explained, and, in the process, gave me the information that proved what he had already told me.

Again I asked him for proof of the new information he has given me. Quite patiently, he gave me the proof for this next layer of information – of course, giving me yet other information to prove what he had already told me.

Again I asked him for proof.

This time the professor said to me, “You don’t know enough chemistry to understand the proof. You’ll just have to take my word for it.”

And I replied, “You are asking me to believe what you have told me even though I cannot prove it, and you won’t believe in God because he could not prove God’s existence.

It appears to me his error was that he did not realize that, ultimately, the proof of all we regard as fact is based on something we believe to be true but cannot prove.

I do not set aside the fact of fact – all the provables – in the light of what is assumed to be fact. I am well aware that we need a sense of certainty in our life. I need to know what I can count on, and what I can depend on.

And yet, when I peel back the layers, I find that, in the last analysis, I have to accept something on faith, and build my certainties and assurances from there. For instance, I am told that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is a fact – a demonstrable fact. But how do I know it is a fact? Of course I can demonstrate over and over again. The weight of the many demonstrations gives credence to the assumed fact. They do not provide ultimate proof.

The first thing I had to learn when I took geometry in High School was a series of axioms – 10 of them I think. An axiom in geometry is described as a self-evident truth. Or, in other words, something that is assumed and believed to be true, but cannot be proved to be true. One of those axioms was, “A straight line is the shortest distance between two points.” I don’t remember the others and I am told that the one I do remember is no longer assumed to be true.

As I understand it, the scientific way to go about establishing fact is, first, to observe and gather the data of that observation. Then you speculate on the possibilities and decide on how it may be. You postulate. You work out a theory that seems to fit and explain the observed data. Then you do experiment after experiment to see if the outcome will support the theory. If a single one does not, then it is considered to have been disproved. It is not a fact. However, as long as all the experiments support the theory, it is considered to be proven – a fact. If it works, it must be true. It must be a fact. It must be something we can count on to be as we believe it to be.

There it is again. The scientific method itself is, ultimately, based on faith – not fact. You develop a theory, based on observations and speculations (not proof nor fact). You observe many experiments. If none disprove the theory, it is considered to be fact.

Of course there are facts in another sense of the word. The sun will rise tomorrow. At least that is what I have experienced and what I believe. I own a house and a car. I have scheduled times to go to work. We know each other. I need food, exercise, and rest. We have four children and fourteen grandchildren. So it goes. Fact after fact after fact.

The life of facts that we accept as fact and depend upon is virtually endless.

With good reason, you may say to me, “What is the point of this paper? You establish that all fact is, in the last analysis, based on faith. So, what?”

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

My dictionary defines “faith” as, among other things, “That which is believed.” and gives the word “belief” as a synonym. And “belief” is defined as, “A conviction or persuasion of truth.” And “faith” as I am using it in this Paper does have to do with that which I believe to be true. However, that does not mean “proved to be true”. Demonstrated, yes. Experienced, yes. But, in the last analysis, all that is demonstrated and experienced to be true comes from something unprovable that is assumed to be true.

“So”, you say to me, “What’s the point of this Paper?”

Good question.

Over and over, I am in contact with people who are anxious and fearful and insecure. Often they say to me, “I want to know that what I believe is true. How can I be sure? Where is the proof?”

It seems that people want objective, external certainty – something “out there” that establishes truth – something incontrovertible – something to count on absolutely – something proved. Then they can feel secure. Or so they – we – seem to believe.

It seems to me that truth is subjective. It is perceived. I am aware that I cannot know anything except through my sense – my mind, what that is – my capacity to conceptualize and formulate into ideas and understandings. It all comes down to the faith-reality – the perceived faith-reality – that it is as I see it to be, whatever it is.

I can see. I can hear. I can smell. I can feel. I can taste. I can think. I can figure out. I can organize and put together. I can discount and eliminate. I can recognize what fits, and what doesn’t. I can experience my world, interpret meanings, and draw conclusions. I do all that through my systems – from my experience and conditioning – with my genes. I can’t do it through yours.

I strongly suspect that there isn’t any objective, provable, truth.

Maybe there is. If there is, I have no way available to me to know what it is. I can suppose there is such truth. I can assume there is. I can demonstrate and experience things that support my assumptions. Or not be able to and have to change them. What I can’t do is prove them.

If I believe that I must have proof before I can believe anything, then I am really in trouble. For I end up unable to believe anything.

Only it is not possible to not believe anything.

You might ask, “Is that statement a fact? You make it as if it is.”

I don't know if it is a fact. I have no way of knowing. It is what I believe. Experientially, I assume it to be fact. No that isn't quite correct. I assume it is demonstratable belief. It is born out in what I observe and what I experience. It "makes sense". It "goes together". It "fits". It works out so consistently that I can be convinced that it is true.

So what is the point of this paper?

I carefully observe my world and my experience in it. The more I observe – the more I study – the more I "sort out" – the more obvious it becomes to me that all we know and depend on is built on faith – not fact. I can't prove that statement. If I were able to prove it, the proof would disprove it. Isn't that an interesting little paradox?

However, I believe that all of life is based on faith – not fact. And that believing gives me an abiding sense of security. Things do go together. Things do make sense. There are explanations that fit the observations. I am able to perceive the order of my life and depend upon it.

My faith has not always been what it is now. Experiences and my reasoning power brought some beliefs into question, and, when it was indicated, I abandoned those parts of my faith, and put something else in its place. Paradoxically, if things actually could be proved, I would have no flexibility to adjust what I believe. I would have to go with the proven things no matter how they fit.

Many years ago, I believed in the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Clause. I no longer believe in them – not as I did then.

I remember about Santa Clause. He visited all the children of the world in one night and left them toys. He came down the chimney. He watched us all year long, and knew who was "naughty and nice". I had no difficulty believing any of that when I was a little child. What didn't fit just got dismissed. When I was old enough to being to question, I did some interesting mental gymnastics so that I could hold my belief.

For instance, the house in which I lived had a very small chimney. Santa couldn't come down it with his bag of toys. He and it were just too big. That was no problem to me. I figured out that he could adjust the size of everything so as to be able to come down the chimney. That adjustment let me keep my faith intact yet a while longer. Eventually, all the things I believed about Santa were disproved. Disproved? Not disproved. Rather, they were not supported by the evidence of which I became aware.

Besides that, who can prove today that Santa Clause does not exist? Oh yes, I can prove (demonstrate, or supply evidence) that what I once believed I cannot believe any longer. But would you say that there is not a giving spirit in the world? Would you say that Santa Clause does not exist?

In a like manner, a lot of what I once believed about God, I no longer believe. But I can't prove anything. My experience and my observations, from my point of view, often tell me that things are different from what I once believed them to be. So I often say, "That's how I believe it is." Further observation, further experience, further speculation may lead me to a different point of view.

So, I believe what I believe. What happens in my life, together with what I observe and figure out, may or may not bear out what I believe. If it does not, then I examine and rework the belief. There is no fact that I can put in the place of faith. Even so, my faith sustains me.

My faith tells me that I, and you, and the whole creation is in the care and keeping of the creator. My faith tells me that the Creator is loving in every sense of the word. My faith tells me that I am of the substance of my Creator's attributes to my own life. In like manner, my faith tells me many things. I regard them as truth. I regard them as fact. I can't prove any of them. I stake my life on my faith.

So the point of this paper is to underscore that the search for proof does not provide a very stable foundation of fact on which to build and to live. Using our God-given ability to observe, experience, reason, and figure out does enable us to have a very stable foundation of faith on which to build and to live.

That's the point of this paper.