

Leaps of faith

Leaps of faith are an amazing part of human nature.

We may have evolved to act on faith, or some would say, intuition, and this has enabled our species to survive. As a mere primate, we are limited in our capacity to assess experiences or think logically; yet we are obliged to act, for the alternative may mean extinction. Faith has driven many mass movements of people in history, back to the early humans getting out of Africa. You and I, dear reader, may owe our existence and ability to read this article, to some cave-man or woman who took a leap of faith and talked the last human tribe into getting out of Africa, millennia ago.

A leap of faith is involved whenever evidence or logic is unable to resolve a difficult question, which however, must be resolved. Kierkegaard, in the 19th century, evaluated the various arguments for the existence of God and concluded they all fell far short of the mark. Yet he thought a belief in God was important for humanity. The only option was a leap of faith – an ungrounded belief in God. Even in science and technology, we have had leaps, such as the space program or the search for intelligent life elsewhere in the universe; no cost-benefit analysis could possibly justify these expensive programs, yet they went ahead. Pioneer aviators were unable to refute the logic and science of experts who argued that machine flight was impossible. But they went ahead and flew anyway.

Humans do not always use logic or evidence. Lack of time or will hold us back; ‘life is a gamble’ attitudes; these are some reasons. Maybe the evidence is too difficult to collate and use. Most of us have a second order faith – that those in science, medicine, engineering or some such field have done their duty and we will be safe. Because we cannot know everything or be competent in all fields, we have faith. Most of the time we are right, but occasionally things go wrong (witness the nuclear reactor incidents in Japan), yet we still have faith or confidence in others to put things aright. If not, there are always lawyers happy to litigate for us.

Some of the most important human questions have no clear answers. All theories, as you drill down through the reasoning, end in some assumptions. Even belief systems which seem to be so full of certainties are laid over shifting sands of doubt and uncertainty. For instance, the foundations of mathematics or say a belief in a material (or immaterial) reality, involve leaps of faith because it is not possible to argue for fundamental principles without slipping into circular arguments which assume the conclusion they are supposed to be proving.

So thinkers exhausted by the effort to find ultimate truths, simply say there exist such things as Sets (set theory – patched up – has been used to lay the groundwork of mathematics) or material substances, or if you are a dualist, mind-stuff. All are assumed; all based on faith. That’s philosophy 101. Some philosophers refer to these beliefs grounded in faith as ‘brute facts’ or ‘given’. Who is doing the giving? The universe or reality? How generous.

At a personal level, human relationships often involve leaps of faith; maybe that's why some marriages fail, because such leaps are not always proven right. Yet there is no science of relationships which can ensure success. So start leaping.

Somehow these leaps seem to succeed often enough to remain part of our human survival kit; maybe because we descended from early ancestors who had this faith.

I don't know, but you'll have to take it on faith.