

**William Wainwright. *Reason, Revelation and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*.  
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When philosophers construct or assess arguments, they employ a standard of reason. A standard of reason, broadly speaking, decides for us whether we have good reason to believe something on the basis of the available evidence. Our standard of reason thus operates as a kind of window or lens, a transparent screen *through which* arguments and evidence are presented to us as persuasive or not. Most of the time, our attention is directed past this lens, squarely on the arguments and evidence that lie before it. But there are important insights to be gained by turning our attention back onto lens through which we view them. René Descartes famously argued that our perceptions of external objects are mediated through the lens of our own “ideas”; we never directly perceive a fire or chair itself, we only perceive the effect those things have on our mental world. In a similar way, it could be argued, we never directly see the force of the “arguments themselves”; our perception of an argument’s force is always mediated by the coloured lens of what we consider to be rational. If we want our assessments of arguments to be accurate, we must always keep this mediating influence in mind.

This redirecting of attention, back onto the lens through which we assess arguments, is the central concern of Wainwright’s provocative and insightful book. When it comes to the study and assessment of argument in religion, Wainwright contends that too often, the focus has been “exclusively on the validity of arguments ... and the truth of their premises” (1). These properties are obviously important, since “no invalid argument or argument with a false premise is a good argument” (1); but to focus exclusively on the logical mechanics of an argument is to ignore other factors which play just as crucial a role in determining whether or not we find that argument “probative” or “persuasive.” More specifically, Wainwright argues that our background knowledge, intuitions, desires, hopes, fears and “worldviews” all inevitably stain the lens of reason through which arguments appear to us as good or bad. An exclusive focus on an argument’s logical construction will tend to dim our awareness of the powerfully *subjective* particularities that are just as influential in determining whether an argument seems to us to “work” or not.

This seems obvious enough, once stated. But the real contribution of Wainwright’s book lies in the further thesis he advances about the epistemic *value* of these subjective factors. Far from being purely distortive, unwelcome influences on

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our quest for justified beliefs, Wainwright provocatively suggests that factors like these might actually be essential to discovering the truth in certain epistemic domains, particularly the religious and the moral. And he is far from the first to think so, as he eagerly demonstrates. Among Christians, Platonists and Confucians alike, for instance, it was once commonly held that truths about *value-laden* subject matter could only be properly assessed by those with the right *affective* dispositions (45). Without the right *desires* and *affections*, one was simply “incapable of reasoning correctly about moral matters,” meaning that “a properly cultivated emotional nature [was] thus essential to sound ethical reasoning” (45). Put more bluntly, the idea here is that our desires and affections might be less like *stains* or *cracks* in our rational lens, and more like cleansing agents that allow us to see arguments properly. The purpose of Wainwright’s book is to highlight and assess the importance of these subjective factors in religious argumentation.

The book’s seven chapters all hover around this central theme, but they are sometimes only loosely connected. It is best, perhaps, to think of the book as an edited collection of essays rather than a sustained argument for a particular thesis.

In chapter 1, Wainwright provides four examples of religious debates drawn from both Christian and Hindu history. The arguments touch on God’s existence, omnipotence, and personhood, and finally on the relation between grace and freewill, drawn from a variety of sources. Wainwright’s goal here is not to shed light on these debates themselves (although he does anyway), but rather to draw attention to the *kinds of reasoning* they involve, and so pave the way for his main theses about the nature and function of reason in religious thinking.

In chapter 2, Wainwright asks how religious arguments like those in chapter 1 should be assessed. Here, Wainwright begins his challenge to modern scholarship’s unhelpful focus on the merely logical aspects of argument, to the exclusion of other important factors which determine an argument’s “probativity” or force for particular responders. Wainwright contends that the background knowledge, worldview, intuitions and assumptions of responders inevitably affect their assessment of an argument’s force as much as the argument’s logical construction. For instance, if an argument involves an inference to the best explanation as justification for one of its premises, we still have to “decide which hypotheses should be taken seriously and which dismissed as nonstarters ... which comparative weights to place on various kinds of evidence,” and so on (44). As Wainwright points out, “there are no mechanical decision procedures” for making these kinds of assessments. Our personal histories, existential situations, and cultural biases will probably affect our judgements of these things as much as nakedly logical considerations.

The point is that in religious arguments, subjective factors are just as operative in our assessments of an argument’s force as that argument’s logical construction. We must also be conscious of these “person-relative” epistemic principles we bring to bear on an argument (and which the arguer brought to bear in its construction).

By way of illustration, chapter 3 explores the way in which a religious thinker’s immersion in the sacred texts of her tradition affects her notions of what is and is not “rational.” Wainwright draws on Islamic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist examples to illustrate that in these traditions, a believer’s idea of reason is “textually-inflected,”

that is, indelibly coloured by the values, metaphors, images and stories of their scriptural tradition. This deference to sacred texts cannot help but strike a modern reader as epistemically irresponsible; indeed, it seems “run directly counter to the insistence on neutrality enjoined by the Enlightenment project that continues to dominate most modern thought” (52). But Wainwright argues, as he does frequently in the book, that religious reasoning is not so different in this respect from the kind of reasoning that occurs in universities today as a matter of course. “[M]odern intellectuals, too,” he suggests, “ingest and are shaped by texts and by the standards and models of rationality that they explicitly or implicitly endorse” (52). Of course, modern thinkers do not believe these texts (say, of Plato or Foucault) to be divinely inspired, or their different models (continental vs. analytic for instance) to be divinely revealed (Wainwright addresses this in chapter 6), but they nonetheless “inflect and affect” their ideas of what is rational. And again, and there is no “neutral or non-question begging stance or point of view from which these competing standards of rationality could be impartially assessed” (52). Wainwright’s point is that religious thinkers are not alone in having a standard of rationality that is “inflected” by culturally contingent factors; this is just an inevitable consequence of the way each of us is formed by our intellectual communities, religious or otherwise.

Thus far then, Wainwright has shown that our reasoning, particularly about religious questions, is inevitably “coloured” or “inflected” by contingent cultural and personal factors. The real question now is whether factors like this *help* or *hinder* us in forming rational beliefs about the world. Chapter 4 lays some of the groundwork for answering this question by considering some theories of what Wainwright calls (following William James) “passional reason.”<sup>1</sup> A theory of passional reason is a view that our “passional nature” — that is, our desires, interests, and values — play an essential, non-detrimental function in forming rational beliefs in certain epistemic domains. A view like this was once “a Christian commonplace,” Wainwright argues. Aquinas, for instance, thought that the evidence for Christianity’s truth, powerful thought it may be, is “not sufficient to compel assent in the absence of an inward movement of a will grounded in a ‘supernatural principle’, and early modern Protestants were wont to argue that the Gospel can only penetrate our faculty of understanding “when it brings a passport from a rightly disposed will” (60).

After an insightful and lengthy analysis of four historical theories of passional reason (from the Puritan Jonathan Edwards, the Catholic John Henry Newman, the pragmatist William James and the neo-Confucian Wang Yangming), Wainwright considers some objections to giving passion a legitimate role in rational belief-formation. For one, does claiming that passions (of the right kind) *ought* to influence our beliefs commit us to a kind of subjectivism? Only if we assume that passions don’t track reality. But that is precisely Wainwright’s point; on the views he presents, “passions are reflections of reality, causal or quasi-causal products of the states of affairs represented by the beliefs they generate” (78). Is any reliance on passional reasoning likely to be circular? Not in any obvious way, Wainwright argues; at least,

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws heavily on William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1995).

appeals to passional reason are not any more circular (or less) than our implicit reliance on intuition in philosophical debates about, for instance, incompatibilism or physicalism.

In chapter 5, Wainwright explores the relationship of philosophy to rhetoric. Historically, as wide a range of philosophers as Plato, Augustine, Hume and Kant have viewed rhetoric as an attempt to deceptively bypass the audience's reasoning faculty and appeal straight to their irrational passions. But if what Wainwright suggested about "passional reason" in the previous chapter is true — that is, if in some domains, the right passions are legitimate and essential components of effective reasoning — then rhetorical appeals to the passions might have an important place in philosophical argument.

Chapter 6 deals with some of the epistemological criticisms to which religious thinkers' reliance on sacred texts as grounds of reason might expose them. Religious thinkers tend to rely on scripture because they believe it contains divine revelation. But what justifies this belief? Can "reason" independently verify the revealed authority of a sacred text, and thus justify our reliance on it? In brief, Wainwright suggests that scriptural traditions cannot be persuasively verified on the basis of "public evidence" — hence the presence of many equally intelligent, thoughtful and fair-minded adherents to the world's many textual traditions, and to no tradition at all. Rather, most adherents to a scriptural tradition do so on the basis of "passional" considerations of the sort discussed in chapter 4. Again, the question of circularity in passional reasoning emerges; why should we think that a particular affective disposition provides us with a truer apprehension of scripture's reliability than any other disposition? Do we have any reason to do so without relying on that scripture in the first place, or at least assuming that the worldview which justifies its appeal to particular passions is true? Here, Wainwright more or less falls back on his response to the circularity objection from chapter 4; I offer some comments on this below.

In the seventh and final chapter, Wainwright changes pace with an examination of the concept of God's "mysteriousness" in Christian tradition. After the idea of "mystery" in Pseudo-Dionysius and John Eriugena, Wainwright argues that if God exists at all, he is necessarily mysterious. While this realisation should temper our ambitions to describe God with anything like a perfect analytic precision, God's mysteriousness doesn't prevent us from affirming many well-justified truths about him, anymore than Locke's professed ignorance about the "substance" of physical matter prevented him from knowing many useful things about them.

As should be clear even from this brief summary, Wainwright's book covers a dizzying breadth of philosophical and historical ground. He presents his reader with perspectives on the questions he poses drawn from radically different thinkers within the same traditions, and also across traditions; arguments from Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish philosophical texts are brought to bear upon arguments from Kant, Locke, Hobbes, Plato, Plotinus and Augustine, and more recent thinkers, from William James and S. T. Coleridge, all the way up to contemporary philosophers and theologians.

This breadth of sources can be disorienting at times, particularly for readers not familiar with some of the traditions from which he draws, but it ultimately allows

for one of the book's greatest achievements. It is notoriously hard to *prove* anything in philosophy, particularly in domains as ethereal as epistemology, but because Wainwright's argument is constantly grounded in historical examples of religious reasoning, he succeeds in proving at least one thing beyond reasonable doubt: that whatever one may think about the plausibility of theories of passionate reasoning, a startling proportion of religious thinkers, spanning a huge range of historical and cultural space, *actually held* such theories, and deployed them to address a range of concerns. Wainwright uses his deep familiarity with the history of religious thought to demonstrate, often with direct quotations, that (for instance) ancient Hindus, 17<sup>th</sup> century Calvinists and modern pragmatists all explicitly argued that certain passions or affective dispositions were required for rational thinking about God and goodness. Obviously the mere fact that many people believed something is not, *prima facie*, evidence of its truth. But it is a good indication that we will seriously misunderstand a lot of religious reasoning if we do not keep this passionate dimension in mind. That said, one still wishes that the many interesting threads Wainwright explores in this book were weaved together more tightly into a coherent story; at many points, it is hard to see just how what Wainwright is saying fits into his overall picture.

Let me conclude by briefly raising a lingering worry about the circularity of theories of passionate reason. For the most part, Wainwright seems content to admit that *no one* operates on a standard of reason that is perfectly neutral, for person-relative factors are intrinsically and necessarily bound up in everyone's rational standard. What prevents this observation from plunging us into a kind of resigned relativism is the pivotal notion of "*passionate reason*," which aims to show that passions themselves can be *rational*. This is because theories of passionate reason do more than simply *explain* why different people arrive at different assessments of the same arguments; they also claim to show why some passions yield greater insight into particular domains of knowledge than others. If the passion of love for God is a requirement for proper reasoning about the divine, for example, then persons who love God have an epistemic authority with regard to truths about God, somewhat akin to the authority a sighted person has on truths about their visual surroundings; their passions serve almost as a kind of perceptual apparatus.

The worry about circularity arises when we try to explain or justify the authority of a rightly-passioned person. We can tell a reasonably convincing story about why it is that sighted people are epistemic authorities about their visual surroundings (referring to photons and ocular biology). But can we tell a similarly convincing story about why a God-loving person is better at discerning the truth about God?

One possible solution is suggested by Wainwright's account of Jonathan Edwards and William James theories of passionate reason. Both the Calvinist Edwards and the agnostic James think that an affective disposition is rational when it "resonates" with reality. For Edwards, the passion he calls benevolence "is appropriately related to objective reality because it resembles or is an image of it" (65). Edwards holds this view because of his wider, broadly Platonic view that created objects "image" or "resemble" God's ideal nature. As Wainwright summarises Edwards' view, "Reality's core is an infinite benevolence — the world's only true

substance and its only true cause. The benevolence of the saints is grounded in this and mirrors it" (78).

James too relies on the assumption that there is "some sort of congruence between the mind's structure and the structure of reality" (74). The right affective state "eliminates cognitive disturbance, because it leads to a successful adjustment to the cosmos ... the 'sentiment of rationality' (the feeling we have when thought flows smoothly) is an indication that our thought has engaged 'the nature of things'" (75).

Potentially, this kind of "resonance" of a passion with reality might explain why it is epistemically virtuous. The reason we should trust particular passions is that those passions have the capacity to *reflect* or *resemble* reality; we can identify such passions by experiencing their "resonance" with the world. But couldn't this "resonance," or at least the experience of it, also be produced in ways that would undermine the rationality of the beliefs it is being used to justify? What if the passion only "resonates" in this way, because, for example, nature selects for the behaviours and beliefs that passion produces?

One of Wainwright's responses to this concern is to argue that much of the reasoning that goes on in contemporary philosophy and history relies (implicitly) on a similar notion that certain dispositions or intuitions are better guides to truth than others. But true as this might be, it is also a possibility (though not an attractive one) that all our philosophical and historical reasoning is similarly suspect, because the intuitions we trust are not properly connected to the states of affairs we are aiming at. It would be interesting, then, to read Wainwright give a deeper account of precisely *how* reliance on certain passions can be justified, especially given recent attempts to "debunk" the possibility of knowledge about value-laden domains.<sup>2</sup>

None of this detracts from the engaging and compelling argument of Wainwright's book, which provides a lucid (if sometimes diffuse) introduction to some of the most important, and too often ignored questions of religious epistemology. Any theologian interested in the intersection between "mystical experience" and analytic thinking (or conversely, any analytic philosopher interested in mystical experience) will find much to whet his or her appetite here.

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<sup>2</sup> I am thinking mainly of Sharon Street's important article, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127:1 (2006): 109-66.