The Passions and Religious Belief

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'*Whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things*.' Arthur Conan Doyle[1]

Abstract

Much contemporary philosophy of religion suffers from an overly abstract and intellectualized methodology. A more 'humane' approach would acknowledge the vital contribution of the emotions and passions to a proper cognitive grasp of the nature of the cosmos and our place within it. The point is illustrated by reference to a number of writers, including Descartes, whose path to knowledge of God, often thought to depend on dispassionate argument alone, in fact relies on a synergy between intellect and emotions.

1. Introduction: the limits of philosophical reason

The prejudice against the emotions goes a long way back in philosophy, in fact right back to a significant strand in Plato's thought, where we are warned that the emotions need to be held in check by controlling reason. The famous image in the *Phaedrus* is of the soul as a chariot, with reason as the driver, and two horses, the dark one representing appetites and the lighter one representing the spirited element.[2] The image has been variously interpreted: some see it as looking forward to the Stoic idea of the complete governance of reason and the suppression of the passions; others see it as a more harmonious vision in which the various parts of the soul work together, the unruly desires needing to be curbed, while the nobler and more spirited desires are natural allies of reason, although still requiring a restraining hand. The interpretation of Plato is a complex business, and Plato's thought is itself complex and nuanced enough to resist easy pigeonholing. But I think it is fair to say that the prevailing

[1] The creed of Sherlock Holmes, in Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* [1890], Ch. 12.

[2] Plato, *Phaedrus* [*c*. 370 BCE], 246a–254e.

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impression many readers have taken away from a number of central Platonic texts – the *Republic* is a notable example – is that the best life, the life of philosophical reason, operates on pure rational plane that is as far as possible free from the distortions arising from the murky world of the senses and the emotions.[3]

From Plato onwards we can find many examples of a 'ratiocentric' tendency in philosophy – a tendency to give primacy to the role of a certain kind of abstract and detached reasoning in our understanding of the world. So Bertrand Russell speaks with enthusiasm of the philosophical ideal of the 'free intellect':

> The free intellect will see as God might see, without hopes and fears, … calmly, dispassionately […and] will value more the abstract and universal knowledge into which the accidents of private history do not enter.[4]

This kind of stance is increasingly common in our contemporary philosophical scene, particularly in much of the Anglophone academy. If you look at a typical article in one of today's mainstream philosophy journals, you cannot fail to be struck by its dry, austere tone, suggesting that the author is trying to take an emotionally detached stance, judiciously evaluating the arguments and assessing the evidence, and treating philosophical inquiry as very much an impersonal and impartial enterprise. The style in philosophy journals is becoming more and more like that in science journals. And here it is no accident that a great many analytic philosophers are strongly influenced by what Brian Leiter has (admiringly) called the 'naturalistic revolution' in philosophy, where philosophy sees it as its role to 'adopt and emulate the methods of the natural sciences, or work in tandem with them as its abstract and reflective branch.'[5]

[3] For a defence of the traditional view of Plato as having a negative attitude to the emotions, see Stephen Leighton, 'The Value of Passion in Plato and Aristotle', *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 1995. More recent work has challenged the cognition/emotion distinction itself, and stressed the 'compositional intricacy' of the emotions in Plato (involving both desire and cognition); see A. W. Price, 'Emotions in Plato and Aristotle', in Peter Goldie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121–142.

[4] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* [1912] (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), Ch. 15, 93. For an interesting discussion of the opposite position, see Katherine Dormandy, 'Argument from Personal Narrative', *Res Philosophica* 93 (2016), 601–620.

[5] Brian Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Editor's Introduction, 2–3.

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And yet despite the influence of the scientific model, and despite the exacting methodology of contemporary philosophy, the minute dissection of arguments, the rigorous treadmill of objections and counter-objections, it is striking that we are not one step nearer to agreement on any of the key issues on which philosophers are so divided, as they have been for hundreds of years. It's extremely rare to find a philosopher who walks out of a seminar saying something like 'that argument convinced me: I used to be a materialist, but now I'm a dualist', or 'I used to believe in free will, but now I'm a determinist.' Alasdair MacIntyre puts the point with remarkable honesty in his recent book *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity* when he says about his own philosophical stance: 'I have worked my way slowly and painfully – the pain is sometimes … the pain of boredom – through the literature [in philosophy of mind and ethics] and … nothing in it has given me reason to abandon or to modify the views here expressed and the arguments here advanced.' He goes on to put his finger on why this should be, when he admits that his own aim in writing is 'not to secure [the] agreement [of my readers], since whether I do so or not depends in key part on the convictions and assumptions that they bring with them to their reading.'[6]

I think there is something important here that philosophers need to be much more aware of. Of course arguments vary in quality, they can often be flawed, can be invalid, and careful analysis of their structure can often be useful in detecting the flaws. But once the flaws have been ironed out, whether a given argument resonates with you, whether it makes a difference to your outlook, is going to hinge on where it starts from: it depends on underlying assumptions and presuppositions that typically operate below the level of detached rational analysis. That is one reason why *examples* are often so telling in philosophy: often a lecturer can plough through whole sequences of PowerPoint slides with numbered premises and sub-premises, and the response from the audience will be furrowed brows or sceptical yawns. But a vivid example or anecdote can suddenly create a breakthrough in sympathy: *now* I can see where this position is coming from, or what is motivating it. As Wittgenstein saw, what often underlies a given philosophical stance is a certain 'picture' of reality – a picture, as he put it, that 'holds us captive'.[7] And whether a picture

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), ix–x.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 1953], transl. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §115.

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captures your imagination is not just a matter of knowledge, or rational analysis – it is something far more complex. When we are dealing with the big traditional philosophical questions, about the nature of reality, our human place in the world, and how we should live our lives, the picture has to be one that *comes alive* for you, one you can with integrity live with and accept as making sense of who you are and how you relate to the world.

In my recent work I have argued for a more 'humane' turn in philosophy – one that does not in any way reject the valuable tools of the analytic method, or its commitment to clarity and rigour, but which recognizes the need for additional resources – the need for deploying all the powers of the human mind, including our emotional and imaginative and empathetic modes of awareness.[8] This seems to me a point we ignore at our peril if we want to achieve true philosophical understanding – and this is especially relevant to branches of the subject like moral philosophy and the philosophy of religion. In an interview over twenty years ago Bernard Williams suggested that there might be something about ethical understanding that makes it inherently unsuited to be explored through the methods and techniques of analytic philosophy alone.[9] The point seems to me to apply with even greater force to religious understanding; for the adoption or rejection of a theistic worldview is not nearly as dependent on purely intellectual assessments and arguments as is often implicitly supposed by philosophers of religion.

Advocating a 'humane' turn in philosophy is not necessarily a matter of wanting philosophy of religion to be more 'continental': the old 'analytic/continental' dichotomy in philosophy has long been exposed as a very blunt instrument that ignores many important connections and cross currents. And in any case, in advocating a 'humane turn' in philosophy of religion I speak as someone who is trained in the analytic tradition and firmly committed to its guiding values of precision in language and tightness in argument. It is certainly not these values that are the problem; the problem is more about what Eleonore Stump has called the 'cognitive hemianopia' of many analytic philosophers of religion – the way their philosophical thinking about religion involves only 'left brain' skills (to use a problematic term, but a useful shorthand), meaning that their thinking has become curiously detached from the involved imaginative and

[8] See John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[9] In an interview on the philosophy of Nietzsche broadcast on the BBC World Service, 25th November 1993.

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emotional modes of awareness that are manifest in religious texts and religious life generally.[10]

Taking account of these dimensions might help to rescue the subject from the dead end where much of it has got stuck. A lot of the current debate over religion has degenerated into a rather dreary standoff where militant atheists on the one side trade arguments with heavy duty theologians and philosophers of religion on the other: the sparks may fly, but there is very little meeting of minds, very little shifting of ground, and above all very little which could even begin to engage the unconvinced opponent. The only effect of the intellectual fireworks is to make the respondent devise ever more ingenious counter-arguments (a familiar phenomenon in many areas of philosophy). But philosophy is not, or should not be, just a clever intellectual game. The object should be to deepen our understanding of the reality we inhabit; and to do that, we need to engage our imagination and our emotions, for true philosophical understanding cannot be achieved in intellectual abstraction from the phenomena we are supposed to be studying – any more than we would expect a true understanding of music to be achieved simply by scrutinizing and evaluating the theories of musicologists and music theorists in isolation from any contact with the musical sounds themselves.

2. The role of the emotions in understanding

So what is the role of the emotions in our grasp of the world we inhabit? There has been a fair amount of work on this topic in recent years. Michael Stocker has argued that emotional states such as anger and pity can have a vital role in directing and focusing our attention, thus radically affecting the way we perceive things: 'they seek out and collect, even create, sustaining or concordant facts … which they then use to justify and sustain that emotion, which then leads to further seeking, collecting, creating and coloring.'[11] Similarly, Mark Wynn has argued that emotions have a role in 'guiding enquiry by constituting patterns of salience'.[12] But the

[10] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24–25. See also note 22, below.

[11] Michael Stocker with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94.

[12] Mark Wynn, 'The relationship of religion and ethics', *Heythrop Journal*, 2005. See also M. Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious*

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role is not merely a heuristic one – it is not just that emotions are helpful in directing our attention in certain suggestive ways. As Peter Goldie has argued, 'coming to think of [the world] in [a] new way is not to be understood as consisting of thinking of it in the old way, plus some added-on phenomenal ingredient – feeling perhaps; rather, the whole way of experiencing, or being conscious of, the world is new… The difference between thinking of X as Y without feeling and thinking of X as Y with feeling will not just comprise a different attitude towards the *same* content – a thinking which earlier was without feeling and now is with feeling. The difference also lies *in* the content, although it might be that this difference cannot be captured in words.'[13]

The idea here is that emotion doesn't merely function as a kind of extraneous add-on, like the salt added to the popcorn, which leaves the structure of the popcorn exactly the same. It's more like the yeast added to the flour which radically changes the properties of the resulting bread. No doubt there are questions that could be raised about this model, but it is useful I think in helping us to question, or deconstruct, the sharp dichotomy between the cognitive and the affective or emotional domains – as if the former were a matter of pure objective content, while the latter is merely our own subjective reaction. For there may be whole areas of life where we are *cognitively blind*, blind to the relevant content, if our emotions are not operating as they should.

In short, there may be certain aspects of reality that simply cannot be discerned via the cold, unemotional tools of rational analysis. To go back to the example of music, the beauty and power of a given composition simply cannot be captured or discerned via the methods and techniques of musicological analysis. What that theoretical analysis does is to map out certain abstract or formal structures, which are of course important and essential to the identity of the composition in question, but which do not disclose its power and beauty. To see why, we simply have to imagine the case of someone who is a musicological expert, who has passed all the relevant examinations, and can identify the relevant formal patterns with supreme skill,

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Understanding: Integrating Perception Conception, and Feeling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[13] Peter Goldie, *The Emotions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 59f. For a more extended development of this theme see John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 5.

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yet who is tone deaf, for example, and so entirely lacking in the kind of sensibility we have in mind when we call someone 'musical'. To be musical in this latter sense, to be capable of responding to the properties in question, you have to have the right kind of feeling and emotional responsiveness.

Consider another example: the ability to perceive the beauties of nature, the vivid colour and variety of an alpine meadow in springtime, for instance, or the grandeur and splendour of the fells in the Lake District. As the poetry of William Wordsworth makes brilliantly clear, the kind of awareness involved in our perception of such natural wonders is in large part an *emotional* awareness. Those who look on the scene with a cold or clinical eye will see other aspects perhaps, but some of the beauties will simply pass them by. This I think is what Wordsworth means by the enigmatic lines:

> Nature never did betray
> The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege
> Through all the years of this our life, to lead
> From joy to joy: for she can so inform
> The mind that is within us …
> [that nothing has the power to shake]
> Our cheerful faith that all that we behold
> Is full of blessings.[14]

The 'informing', the delivery of the right kind of awareness that enables us to see the truth of what is there, requires a certain kind of emotional sensibility, a *loving openness* to the reality spread out before us. (Hence 'never did betray the heart that *loved* her').

As a final example, consider the dynamics of a loving personal relationship, where the qualities that draw a couple together in mutual involvement are often not such as to be fully grasped and appreciated by the detached spectator or coldly impartial observer. As Gregory the Great observed in the sixth century, *amor ipse notitia est* – love is itself a form of knowledge.[15] Part of what this entails, I take it, is that love is not simply a non-cognitive impulse or feeling which happens to arise in one person when they make contact with another. Perhaps there are certain kinds of attraction or arousal that are like that. But when there is genuine love and commitment,

[14] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' [1798].

[15] Gregory the Great, *Homelia in Evangelium* 27.4, in *Patrologia Latina* (ed.) J, Migne, 76, 1207; cited in Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222.

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those involved have a certain kind of intimate *knowledge* of each other – they are aware of more dimensions, and deeper dimensions, of the other person's nature than could be accessed if no loving emotion were present. The couple's understanding of each other, to borrow a phrase from the twelfth-century Benedictine, William of Saint-Thierry, becomes 'an understanding of enlightened love'.[16]

3. The case of Descartes

From these general observations on the rich cognitive role of certain emotions in our understanding of reality (in the domains of music, of the natural world, and of personal relationship), let me turn more specifically to religious understanding. Some people may object that if the phrase 'religious understanding' is supposed to refer to our understanding of God, then there can be no such understanding, since there is no such reality. This calls to mind a letter to press by Richard Dawkins in 1991 calling for the resignation of the then Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford on the grounds that there was no such subject as theology (the implication being that theology is supposed to be the study of God, but in fact no such being exists).[17] So to avoid begging any questions here, let us agree for present purposes to put the issue of God's existence or otherwise on one side. What is undisputed is that many of the great canonical philosophers of the Western tradition have been religious believers, and so it is of some interest to know what role they considered the emotions as having in their awareness of God.

René Descartes placed God at the centre of his philosophical system (though this is an aspect of his philosophy that is often glossed over nowadays). But his approach to God is normally considered to be a purely intellectual one – indeed Descartes is typically classified as a 'rationalist' philosopher, a leading figure in the 'Age of Reason', to quote the title of a widely used short survey of seventeenth-century philosophy by Stuart Hampshire.[18] And the label

[16] 'intellectus amoris illuminati' *Expositio super Cantica Canticorum* [*c*. 1138], XIX, 90; cited in the encyclical letter of Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* [2013], §22.

[17] The episode is discussed in Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2008), 7.

[18] For the use of this term to characterize the era of the seventeenth-century 'rationalists', see Stuart Hampshire, *The Age of Reason* (New York: Mentor, 1956).

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'rationalist' tends to suggest the aspiration to build a philosophical system *a priori*, using the pure light of reason, without reliance on the fluctuating and unreliable data from the senses, let alone the murky and confused influence of the emotions.

It is quite true that Descartes does start his philosophical masterpiece, the *Meditations*, with arguments designed to lead the mind away from the senses (here he very much follows in the tradition of Plato, and of Augustine). But to those brought up on an exclusively rationalistic view of Descartes, it maybe surprising to find that the text of the *Meditations* uses quite dramatic and emotionally involved language at key points in the argument. The 'hyperbolical' doubts of the First Meditation, where Descartes conjures up nightmare scenarios of 'demons, dreamers and madmen',[19] questioning even his own ability to reason coherently from moment to moment, end up at the close of the Meditation with an expression of *fear* – the fear of being cut off from the light and having to struggle amid 'inextricable darkness'.[20] The term Descartes uses for 'darkness' in the original Latin text of the *Meditations* is *tenebrae* – a term that resonated with religious significance in the culture in which Descartes was raised. The ancient *Tenebrae* liturgy for Holy Week commemorates the 'darkness' that fell over the land at the death of Christ – a darkness eventually to be dispersed as the day breaks on Easter morning. It does not need any explicit allusion in Descartes's text for these connotations to have been subliminally operative for his contemporary readers: the darkness of ignorance and confusion will be dispelled by the 'immense light' that appears at the end of the Third Meditation.

And when the meditator finally finds his way out of the darkness by establishing the existence of God – the source of light and truth – he expresses himself in decidedly emotive language: 'Here I should like to pause and spend some time in the contemplation of God … and

[19] The phrase is from Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1970). For 'hyperbolical' doubt, see Descartes, Sixth Meditation, AT VII 89: CSM II 61. In this paper, 'AT' refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and 'CSMK' to vol. III, The Correspondence, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[20] AT VII 23: CSM II 15.

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gaze at, wonder at and adore the beauty of this immense light.'[21] In the original, the Latin verbs piled one upon another, *intueri, admirari, adorare,* ring out almost like a litany, or prayer, and the faculties involved are not just intellectual. Notice that *wonder* is involved – and wonder is one of the passions that was later to be discussed by Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul,* the last work published in his lifetime. God, the source of the 'light of reason' emerges at the end of the Third Meditation not as epistemic guarantor of the axioms for science (that will come later), but as the fountain of truth and goodness, the 'immense light' towards which finite creatures must reach out, not just in a spirit of cold rational inquiry, but in awe and wonder. The light is not fully perceived, but glimpsed only, as Descartes puts it, 'in so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it'; and he immediately goes on in the closing sentence of the Third Meditation to speak of how it arouses *joy* (in Latin, *voluptas*). So we find yet another passion explicitly making an appearance.[22]

It would, I think, be a great mistake to dismiss these references to the emotions and the passions as simply rhetorical flourishes, irrelevant to the 'real philosophy', or to the content of the argument. For what the Third Meditation is ultimately describing is an encounter of the finite mind with the infinite – something that Hilary Putnam (following the interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas) has described as not so much a step in a deductive reasoning, as 'a profound religious experience'. He goes on to call it 'an experience which might be described as the experience of a *fissure*, of a confrontation with something that disrupted all his categories. On this reading, Descartes is not so much proving something as *acknowledging* something, acknowledging a Reality that he could not have constructed…'[23]

In Descartes's own comments on his strategy in the *Meditations*, we find something that seems to me further evidence that his quest for God is not confined to the 'left-brain' mode of detached reasoning and abstract intellectual analysis alone.[24] He observes that when we

[21] AT VII 52: CSM II 36.

[22] The former, says Descartes, is apprehended through faith, the latter known by experience. Third Meditation, AT VII 52; CSM II 36.

[23] Hilary Putnam, 'Levinas and Judaism', in S, Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge, 1986), 33–70, at 42. The relevant Levinas text is *Ethique et infini* [1982], transl. as *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, 1985), 91ff.

[24] For more on the distinction between left and right brain modes of awareness, the former detached, analytical, impersonal, the latter more intuitive, imaginative and holistic, see Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven, 2009). It should be added that associating

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attend to the perfections of God, we should not so much try to understand them as to *surrender* to them, or, in the graphic Latin phrase, *non tam capere quam capi* – not so much to grasp them as to be grasped by them.[25] Surrender, humility, submission, awe, wonder – these notions speak not simply of not dry detached modes of analysis and inference, but of modes of awareness in which the emotions are inextricably involved.

4. Emotions and intellect in synergy

In drawing attention to these perhaps under-appreciated aspects of Descartes's way of philosophizing, I am not trying to downplay the importance of careful intellectual analysis in his thought. Indeed, in the same passage as Descartes talks of surrendering to or being 'grasped by' the perfections of God, he also speaks of 'using all the strength of the intellect' to contemplate them. It is not a case of 'either/or', of 'either the intellect or the passions', but rather of a philosophical journey in which both play an important role. This 'synergy' of the intellect and the emotions can I think also be seen in Descartes's near contemporary, Blaise Pascal, whose approach to religion is typically interpreted as a highly emotional one – at the other end of the spectrum from the supposedly ultra-rationalistic Descartes. Pascal's description of his conversion experience, his 'night of fire' in November 1654 is well known: he speaks of 'tears of joy', at having found God – the God not of the philosophers but of a living tradition of faith. One of the best known dicta of Pascal is '*C'est le coeur qui sent Dieu, et non la raison*' ('it is our heart that senses God, not our reason').[26] But Pascal went on to allow that rational and emotional awareness can cooperate in bringing us to the truth: '*nous connaissons la vérité non seulement par la raison, mais encore par le cœur*' ('we know the truth not only by reason, but also

these two modes of awareness with the right and left hemispheres, respectively, is something of a schematic approximation, as McGilchrist himself stresses. There is evidence to suggest that in most people the respective functions do broadly correlate with neural activity in the relevant halves of the brain, but in normal subjects there is constant interaction between the halves.

[25] AT VII 114; CSM II 82.

[26] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], (ed.) L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 424.

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by the heart').[27] So Pascal does not rule out the possibility that the perceptions of the heart can *complement* the deliverances of reason.

This connects up with a thesis that I have argued for elsewhere, namely that we need a new epistemology for thinking about religious belief and its basis. Many modern critics of religion, including most of the so-called 'new atheists', seem to operate with an *epistemology of control* – and this is also true of many theologians and philosophical defenders of religion. The idea is that we should scrutinize the evidence from a detached standpoint, in a 'left-brain' kind of way, and decide on the existence or otherwise of God. But there are several reasons to doubt the validity of such a strategy. To be sure, it may be reasonable enough to assume that if the theistic world view is correct, there should be evidence for its truth; and certainly, from a theological perspective a loving God would presumably want his creatures to have some awareness of him.[28] But it does not follow that such awareness should be achievable via intellectual analysis of formal arguments or observational data. On the contrary, classical theism, both in Judaism and Christianity, posits a *Deus absconditus*, a God who is at least partly hidden, and who is less interested in proving his existence or demonstrating his power than in the moral and spiritual development of his creatures and in deepening the understanding of those who 'seek him with all their heart', in Pascal's phrase.[29]

Given this, we should not expect the evidence for God's existence to be 'spectator evidence', to use Paul Moser's label – the kind of evidence that can be scrutinized and assessed irrespective of the moral stance of the inquirer.[30] In short, we may need to relinquish the epistemology of control, and substitute an *epistemology of receptivity* – one that posits truths that are accessible only to those who are suitably receptive. After all, there are many other areas of life, including those mentioned earlier – appreciation of poetry, or of music, for instance, or entering into any kind of personal relationship – where in order to achieve proper knowledge and awareness we need to be 'porous', to use Martha Nussbaum's term: not hard, detached, critical evaluators, but open, yielding, receptive listeners.[31] By always priding ourselves

[27] Pascal, *Pensées*, (ed.) Lafuma, no. 110.

[28] Compare John Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[29] Pascal, *Pensées*, (ed.) Lafuma, no. 427.

[30] Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 47.

[31] Martha Nussbaum, 'Love's Knowledge' [1988], reprinted in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 81–2.

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on being in control and insisting on 'spectator evidence' that we can inspect from a distance, we may be hardening ourselves against the very possibility of our being able to perceive the truth.[32]

So perhaps philosophers should be, if I may put it this way, more 'holistic' in their approach: when investigating a given set of claims, or a given class of phenomena, they should take more account of the way the emotions and the intellect need to work in synergy. This does not mean that our philosophizing about religion should be wild and woolly, or that we should downplay the importance of evidence in the formation and retention of religious belief. The point rather, as William Wainwright has put it, is that 'mature religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence, but … the evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications'.[33] To this we could add that acquiring such qualifications cannot be a purely cerebral matter, but must involve a deepening of our sensibilities and emotions. Wittgenstein is famous for pointing out that understanding the meaning of a given sentence cannot operate atomistically or in isolation, but it requires entering into the form of life of which it is a part. So rather than assuming, as much philosophy of religion has tended to do, that we can analyse and dissect the 'cognitive content' of religious claims, and evaluate their truth in isolation from the religious practices that give them life and meaning, there may be good reason to start at the other end, as it were, and look at what religious people *do*, in their liturgy, in their religious practices and rituals and activities, before we presume to extract the supposed doxastic ingredients and pronounce on their tenability or otherwise.

Once we start looking at religious praxis, as opposed to abstract doctrine, the role of the emotions will become strikingly apparent. Thus William Wainwright, whom I mentioned a moment ago, has recently drawn attention to the role played by the 'ingestion' of sacred texts. Here he follows up a point made earlier by Paul Griffiths that in many traditions, especially before the invention of printing, repeated reciting, chanting, memorizing and reflecting on the scriptures had the effect of making the text enter 'into the fabric of [one's] intellectual and emotional life in a way that makes deep claims upon

[32] For more on these themes, see John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[33] William Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 60.

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that life'.[34] The result of such spiritual formation is not just a subjective matter of private 'feelings' but a profound shift in emotional outlook that can make a crucial difference to the way we see the world.

5. Caveats and conclusions

It is time to draw the threads together, to make some qualifications and to consider some possible objections. The standard terms I have been using, 'reason' and 'emotion' are rather crude labels, suggesting discrete compartments in the mind – a picture that probably bears little relation to how our minds actually work. The modes of awareness that are grouped under the rubric of 'the emotional' are in some cases better described as *imaginative* modes of awareness, ways in which we reach out and come to terms with the complexity and wonder of the world we inhabit. Wordsworth called imagination 'Reason in her most exalted mood',[35] and clearly it plays as crucial role in human culture as scientific reasoning does.

One of the chief vehicles for the imagination is myth, which is an inescapable part of human culture. One thinks here not just of archetypal stories of our origins (such as the Genesis narrative), but a whole range of symbolic human activity – what Graham Ward has called the 'symbolic realms we hominids have been cultivating for 2.2 million years'. In ways we cannot fully explain, these interlocking modes of human culture, including art, poetry, rite and dance, tap the powers of what (for a want of a better term) we call the imagination, which operates at many more levels than are accessed by our conscious reflective awareness. Such work, as Ward puts it, 'intimate that our experience … of being in the world is freighted with a significance that only an appeal to the mythic can index.'[36] However much philosophers may implicitly assume the contrary, the maps drawn by the analytic intellect are very far from capturing the whole truth of the world around us. Poetry, myth, symbol, and story can express truths and insights that can't adequately be captured in other ways, and they do so by tapping into our emotional and imaginative modes of awareness.[37]

[34] Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45-7 (cited in Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation and Devotion*, 50.

[35] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* [1850 version), Book 14, line 237.

[36] Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: Tauris, 2014), 186.

[37] See Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation and Devotion*, 148.

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But clearly the emotion and the imagination can lead us astray. Martin Heidegger's imagination and emotion was so captivated by myths of ancient German purity and courage as to lead him straight into the arms of the Nazis. And even on a more mundane and everyday level, we all know how the passions can cloud our judgement. As Descartes warned, 'Often passion makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, possession of them brings home to us their defects; and thence arise dissatisfaction, regret and remorse'.[38]

Descartes goes on to say that the true function of reason is to examine 'without passion' the true value of the goods before us, so that we can rank them in proper order. But as I hope has emerged by now, this is a forlorn hope, if it is supposed to envisage a pure rational hotline to the truth and value of things. Philosophers who claim to speak with the pure voice of reason are certainly not immune to the influence of what lies beneath the surface of their supposedly dispassionate deliberations. Bertrand Russell, a philosopher of undeniable intellectual brilliance, notoriously once argued for embarking on a preventive nuclear war against the Soviet Union if it continued its aggressive policies: his calm rational assessment of the facts and the probabilities had led him to this conclusion – hardly the best endorsement for philosophical rationality.[39] As I observed at the start of this paper, whether a given argument carries conviction for you depends in large part on the assumptions and presuppositions you bring to it, and you do not have to go along with everything Freud said about the unconscious to agree that the mind is very far from being a transparent goldfish bowl whose contents are all clearly visible and accessible. When reason is linked to arrogance and lack of self-awareness, it can lead to dangerous conclusions.

Just as the emotions and passions are not raw feelings, unable to contribute anything to our cognitive grasp of the world, so reason does not operate in some timeless noumenal realm, but is always to a greater or lesser extent a product of the complex contingencies that shape an individual's outlook. We can try to achieve a balanced

[38] Descartes, letter of 1 September 1645 (AT IV 284–5: CSMK 264).

[39] In a BBC interview with John Freeman in March 1959 Russell was asked if it was true that he had advocated that a preventive war might be made against Soviet Russia; he replied 'it's entirely true, and I don't repent of it.' Full details are cited in Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell*, Ch. 19.

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view, to engage all our faculties as we try to shape the best picture of the world we can manage, but nothing in philosophy is self-certifying – there is no guaranteed hot line to the truth. But what can be said is that if we truncate the imaginative and passional part of ourselves, all we achieve is a colourless picture of reality that may lead us astray just as much as the wilder flights of imaginative fancy.

So where all does this leave religion? Philosophers have had very contrasting views of the respective roles of reason and passion in religious belief. For Kierkegaard, faith arises out of the 'infinite passion of the individual's inwardness' which 'holds fast to objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water'.[40] For others, from Thomas Aquinas in many of his writings, down to so many of our contemporary philosophers of religion, it arises from a dispassionate rational assessment of arguments and evidence that are supposed to be valid and to carry conviction in the eyes of any impartial judge. I hope I have said enough to raise serious concerns about this latter picture, though that does not mean I am advocating a rebound to the Kierkegaardian approach, which also seems to me problematic in important respects. We need a middle way between the two extremes just mentioned, one that allows for a fruitful co-operation between intellect and emotions. Let me close by illustrating this with reference to the phenomenon of religious conversion.

I know of few if any people who have changed from atheist to believer, or vice versa, as a result of detached rational argument and assessment of evidence alone. And conversely, I know few believers who would be happy about the Kierkegaardian option of passionate commitment in the teeth of reason and evidence. What I think characteristically happens involves a synergy of reason and emotion of the kind outlined in the previous section.

In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, there is a striking example of this, not in the life of the doomed eponymous heroine, but in the life of another main character, Konstantin Levin, who undergoes a religious conversion in the closing stages of the novel. What happens is a radical shift in Levin's hitherto sceptical and detached outlook about religion – a shift that comes about when he faces a crisis in his life (the risk of his wife Kitty's dying in childbirth at the term of her first pregnancy). Tolstoy describes how Levin feels as his wife goes into labour and he is confronted with the very real danger

[40] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [*Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, 1846], trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 182.

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that process poses to her life. His perceptions shift – he sees for the first time her true beauty and integrity, and simultaneously his heart is opened to the mystery and fragility and wonder and terror of life and of love, and he begins to pray. His decision could never have been arrived at by cold scrutiny of the evidence. But only a religious framework is now adequate for interpreting the momentous truths to which his heart has now been opened. He prays to God, and repeats the words 'not just with his lips'. He believes.

The crucial point being made here is that conversion is not simply accepting that God exists – indeed it is hard to see how mere assent to this proposition could in itself carry any moral or spiritual significance whatever. Rather, it involves a moral transformation – a transformation from the relatively self-sufficient and confident individual that Levin had been to someone who acknowledges his vulnerability and dependency. And this of course is consistent with the assumptions of classical theism, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that what God requires is not intellectual assent, but *metanoia,* repentance, change of heart, deepening of moral sensibility, in all of which the emotions are inextricably involved. The process is not, however, a blind or irrational one – Tolstoy describes how Levin continues to examine his position intellectually, wrestles with certain doubts, and by the end of the novel finds that his new found faith has been consolidated, for *he cannot with integrity accept that the insights he arrived at during the crisis were mistaken.* A complex amalgam of new perceptions and feelings has, says Tolstoy, 'entered into him through suffering' and 'firmly lodged itself in his soul'.[41]

What happens, in short, is that my character, as I confront the world, starts to undergo a radical shift, and simultaneously my perception of the world changes, and new realities are disclosed. Wittgenstein once observed that 'life can educate you to belief in God'.[42] And perhaps it is not at all surprising that an emotional, moral and spiritual shift can accomplish what merely intellectual theorizing alone is powerless to do. So many of the significant changes in

[41] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* [1878], Part VIII Ch. 19, transl. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonski (London: Penguin, 2001), 817. My discussion in this and the previous paragraph draws on material from Ch. 6 of John Cottingham, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009).

[42] Ludwig Wittgenstein, from a MS of 1950, in *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 97. See further John Cottingham, 'The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy' in H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman and (eds), *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 203–227.

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our lives are like that: reason or intellect may be a crucial part of who we are, but in such cases it often lags behind. Before we can see, before we can believe, the interior response has to occur. In a way that is in some ways analogous to what happens in the psychotherapeutic context, it is the lowering of the hard defences of the controlling intellect that allows growth and healing.[43] Wittgenstein, who never himself managed to make the shift to becoming a believer, nevertheless gave articulate voice to this idea in a manuscript of 1937: 'The *edifice of your pride has* to be dismantled. And that means frightful work'.[44] Dismantling the edifice of pride is a task in which both reason and the emotions are involved; or perhaps we should simply say that the old opposition between reason and the passions no longer applies, for the whole person is reshaped and renewed.

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[43] See John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.

[44] '*Das Gebäude Deines Stolzes ist abzutragen. Und das gibt furchtbare Arbeit*.' From a MS of 1937, in Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* 30.

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