Faith, Rationality and the Passions

Edited by Sarah Coakley

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Faith, Rationality, and the Passions

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Sarah Coakley
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INTRODUCTION: FAITH, RATIONALITY, AND THE PASSIONS

SARAH COAKLEY

The question of the relation of passion to reason in the life of faith is a pressing one for contemporary theology and philosophy of religion, and that for a number of reasons. This volume is devoted to a selective exploration of that relation and those reasons—understood historically, systematically, and in interdisciplinary exchange with relevant recent scientific research. The chapters in this book were first presented as papers at the “Faith, Rationality and the Passions” conference, which I convened at the University of Cambridge, January 11–13, 2010. The offerings were then judiciously divided between two relevant journals with rather different readerships, in order to maximize the immediate impact of the conference in the philosophy as well as the theology guild. The result was a happy collaboration which enabled a remarkably quick and efficient publishing process. Such was the positive response to the two journal issues, however, that the decision was made that the papers should now be reunited here in book form, allowing for a more effective integration of their shared contribution to the topic.

In order to situate the chapters in a wider context of discussion, it is perhaps worth spelling out at the outset some of the reasons for the current intensified scholarly interest in the relation of faith, rationality and the affective realm. Let me highlight four “clusters” of such interest.

First, there are of course the jibes from exponents of the “new atheism,” for whom religious commitment is precisely a manifestation of a loss of reason. To be reasonable would be to be “scientific,” and to override misdirected affective nostalgia for an outmoded “God,” as well as violent discharges of religiously motivated hatred. This atheistical charge requires an answer, both philosophical and theological, in terms of the very notion of scientific “rationality” at stake; but it also requires a historical diagnosis
which can explain how and why “reason” and “religion” became rhetorically unhitched in the first place, and when this might have happened. There is a seeming oddity about such a disjunction appearing so forcefully in the modern period. Admittedly the very term “religion” took on significant new meanings at this juncture, and “fanaticism” was a topic of serious concern in the light of what had earlier come to be dubbed religious “enthusiasm”; but this was just at the same juncture as some other leading Enlightenment philosophers were simultaneously doing their best to defend the notion of a reasonable “faith.” In other words, a genealogy that reaches back at least to the Enlightenment is required that will help explain why current hostilities about “religion,” reason and emotion are taking the form that they now are.

Secondly, there are increasingly pressing new doubts today (amongst at least some in the guild of philosophical theologians) about the hostile reception of “Enlightenment” philosophy which has characterized recent post-foundationalist Anglophone theology. Not long ago it became fashionable for theology to blame the Enlightenment (or more generically, “modernity”) for all manner of distorting philosophical moves which effectively “secularized” reason and so fatally side-lined the intellectual status of theology. Whilst that large-scale story obviously still has some real historical point, it is beginning to be clear that the assessment of the Enlightenment heritage it promoted needs much more careful discernment, and perhaps especially in relation to its accounts of affectivity, will and feeling in the philosophers concerned. A stereotype had here been created of “secular Enlightenment reason” which obscured the manifold differences and riches of thinking in a period in which “passions” and “affections” were still counted as significant and often positive forces with which reason had to do, and “emotions” were yet to be invented. Part of the move beyond a false scapegoating of “Enlightenment” or “modernity,” then, is the recovery of a nuanced sense of how modern philosophers differently construed the affective realm, and also what happened when their notion of “passion” became replaced, considerably later, by the very different concept of “emotion.” As Thomas Dixon spells out, it is surprising how recent is the evolution of a concept of “emotion” divorced from rational moorings.

Thirdly, the feminist critique of “The Man of Reason” (which to some extent piggy-backed on the malestream scholarship which homogenized the “Enlightenment,” and in other ways already corrected that homogenization) has drawn attention in recent decades to the place that feeling, passion, maternal nurture, and domestic pursuits play in the thought of the leading male philosophers of the modern period and their female interlocutors, and has sought to excavate the often-covert associations with stereotypical pictures of “femininity” thereby promoted. This feminist discourse has not been taken up as much as it deserves into the fields of theology and philosophy of religion. On the other hand, as Western philosophy of religion in recent years has tended to withdraw from foundationalist and universalistic
claims to rationality, and to embrace a stronger interest in religious affections and desires, one might argue that it has unwittingly “feminized” itself to some extent in terms of these inherited cultural stereotypes. This leaves a paradoxical situation, and calls for deeper analysis of the relation of belief, rationality, affectivity and gender.

Lastly, but by no means least in terms of intellectual significance, recent deliverances from the fields of neuroscience and experimental psychology have yielded remarkably interesting challenges to the idea that reason and emotion can be regarded as an oppositional binary in their disciplines. The old picture of the brain’s clear division into more ancient, animal-based centers of primitive emotion, and more-recently evolved centers of rational decision-making, has been questioned or refined in various ways, not least by the discovery that the brain-processes involved in rational thought are inexorably interconnected with affective function, and indeed operate quite weirdly and dysfunctionally in terms of human behaviors if artificially cut off from them. Even to put the matter this way of course begs profound (and highly technical) questions in the philosophy of mind about the relation of brain and “mind” which theology also has to face; but the neuroscience debate about the relation of rational and affective function has, in principle, great intrinsic significance for theology in itself—for its own choices about how to expound the nature of the human person and her integrity before God, and for its potential response to the “scientific” scoffers about reasonable faith. If reasoning in its neurological manifestations is in some sense essentially also affective, in other words, it cannot be that belief in God is irrational simply because it too has affective dimensions. Of course, to draw that conclusion simultaneously requires some moves in the philosophy of mind which may prove contentious: a stark mind/body dualism would have to be ruled out to sustain it, and the intrinsic relevance to the “mind” of brain states and functions would also have to be defended, without any actual “eliminative” reduction.

Such, then, are the clusters of thematic concern which intersect in this collection of revisionary essays on *Faith, Rationality, and the Passions*. As will be clear, the overall effect of this collaborative research has been to underscore the significance, however it be parsed, of the affective dimensions of religious rationality. It remains for me now briefly to sketch each chapter, and to indicate how the themes enunciated here fit into a rather more focused cumulative thesis. Since the latter dimension may not be so obvious at first blush, I shall allow more attention to it than simply giving a précis of the chapters themselves.

The chapters in the book unfold in the following way. First, Charles Taylor’s broad-ranging introductory reflection on the very meaning of “rationality” presents a systematic assault on what he regards as the modern “myth” of “disengaged” scientific reason. He urges the reconsideration of affective “meaning-making” (including religious such meaning-making) as
endemic to the pursuit of “rationality,” tout court; and—a fortiori—he likewise trenchantly resists the idea that religious faith is necessarily set at odds with reason. These connected “illusions” (reason vs. commitment, reason vs. faith) are now in need of urgent countering, Taylor urges; and though he does not here attempt any sustained genealogy of the triumph of disengaged or instrumental reason in the late modern period, it is noteworthy that he (unlike Milbank, who later gives a positive rendition of Hume’s reliance on “sentiment” to ground his ethics) reads Hume’s disjunction of reason and sentiment as precisely “opening the door” to the false modern instrumental reason which has “held us captive.”

William Cavanaugh’s chapter, which follows, comes at some of the same issues as Taylor but with the focus now on what “religion” came to mean in the modern period, and why it progressively became associated with irrationality and violence. His first concern is the way that “religion” and “public reason” became progressively divorced in this period in various contexts; and there is a particularly American, and contemporary, message which Cavanaugh wishes to purvey: when “religion” becomes suspected of irrational affectivity and violence, this can ironically cloak and condone the continuing uses of violence in the name of secular rationalities and nation-states. Cavanaugh draws attention to those voices in the modern period (particularly Locke and Voltaire) who, as he reads them, significantly contributed to a new notion of religious “fanaticism” averse to reason. Yet he acknowledges that other Enlightenment thinkers, especially Kant, trod a more complex path in carefully distinguishing negative from positive affectivity in the realm of religion, and sought above all to align reason and faith. The Enlightenment presents no unified voice on these issues, then; and whilst it may have spawned one sort of problematic divide between religious fanaticism and reasonable “religion,” there was no one way in which it consistently drove a wedge between reason and affectivity tout court. There remains a more complicated story to be told on that front.

What then are the ultimate intellectual sources of these complex modern re-negotiations of faith, reason and the affections? One possible remote root is the Platonic one, which is excavated here by Catherine Pickstock in her “The Late Arrival of Language.” In an ingenious new reading of the Cratylus she urges that Plato’s theory of forms in no way denies an intrinsic connection between human cognition and (passion-filled) materiality. Rather, the account of language in this dialogue suggests a vital role for passion and embodiment, and it is the religious element in Plato, Pickstock argues, which sustains the right balance between materiality and reason. If this reading is correct, then Evagrius’s later Christian monastic advice about reason and the passions (as analyzed by Columba Stewart, OSB, in the next chapter on this theme) departs rather less from its Platonic heritage than might be supposed. What Stewart demonstrates is the remarkably systematic account supplied by Evagrius of the confronting, naming and taming of negative passions and
“thoughts” for the sake of the attainment of “pure prayer”—which is, according to Evagrius, the “proper activity of the mind.” This is not however in any way a recourse to what, post-Freud, would now be called “repression”; rather it is an ascetical program of affective and noetic transformation which has to be ardously and repeatedly practised. Such an integration of rationality and bodily practice is precisely what modern and contemporary philosophical theories of “affectivity” for the most part seem to lack; and this makes the rediscovery of certain late antique theories of affective transformation especially suggestive for contemporary philosophical discussion. To this point I shall return at the close of this “Introduction.”

Stewart’s compelling account of the contemporary relevance of Evagrius’s approach to the passions is followed by a strikingly original set of readings of Western philosophical authors on the topic of reason and feeling, in which tradition Augustine naturally holds a formative position. Paul J. Griffiths’s delicate chapter on tears in Augustine’s *Confessions* shows how Augustine can venerate the act of weeping—when rightly understood—as a confessional acknowledgement of human vulnerability, and thus as a truly appropriate means of intimacy with God; in such cases weeping is not in any discord with the rationality that is also inherently drawn back to its divine source by grace. Rather, it is, as Griffiths puts it, “communicative” of the “world’s transfiguration.” In this way Augustine can be seen to have established a positive and graced account even of seemingly uncontrolled grief; he carefully distinguishes between the merely self-indulgent, and the authentically transformative, effects of powerful feelings.

Eleonore Stump’s new reading of Aquinas on the passions strikes a somewhat similar note, deliberately challenging some currently regnant “Aristotelian” renditions of Aquinas’s ethics in the process. If Stump is right, the presumption of some contemporary “virtue ethicists” that Thomas disjoins feeling and reason is further compounded by another, and distinctively late-modern, misreading: one that drives a wedge between “Humean” and “Kantian” assessments of feeling in the ethical realm, and thus assumes a similar disjunctive choice between the affective and the rational (an exegetical problem which is addressed by other contributors to this volume). Further, such readings also misleadingly bracket away the significance of the third part of the *Summa Theologicae*, Stump argues, and especially the treatment of pneumatology there, for Thomas’s rich understanding of the virtuous life: “For Aquinas, there are passions, in an analogous or extended sense, which are infused by God into the intellective appetite or which are the fruits of the Holy Spirit. . . . These passions or analogues to the passions are foundational to all virtue and to the whole of the ethical life.”

By now the reader may be wondering quite when it was that the reason/feeling disjunction did rear its ugly head. If it is not to be found in any of these classic philosophical forebears, and the “modern” period is seemingly so complex and diverse, could Descartes perhaps, with his formidable
commitment to cerebral reflections on the foundations of knowledge, still be the one to be singled out for opprobrium? Yet once again, as John Cottingham’s chapter demonstrates, we need to deconstruct the twentieth-century straw-man rendition of a complex and subtle thinker. Not only is it not the case, argues Cottingham, that Descartes was wholly preoccupied with skepticism in the project of his Meditations; he was also not denigrating of passion in his Passions of the Soul, but rather concerned to clarify the ways in which passions could, under the right conditions, be “valued auxiliaries of reason in the quest for goodness and truth.” Descartes was, after all, an original pupil of scholasticism.

The exegetical issue about the reason/feeling division, then, and about whom to blame in relation to modernity, becomes yet more fraught and divided in the next two contributions to this volume. John Milbank, in characteristically gadfly mood (and wholly fulfilling Eleonore Stump’s predictions on this score about the Hume/Kant division), lards Kant with blame, by playing off Hume’s well-known prizing of the affective in the ethical realm against what he reads as “the contortions that Kant went through in relation to the role of feeling with respect to the ethical.”15 In a daring and undeniably contentious re-reading of the significance of Hume for the general fate of the affective in modern and contemporary philosophy, Milbank excavates Jacobi’s original response to Hume in aid of his central thesis. He argues that feeling, conjoined with habit, are for Hume inextricably and rightly connected to faith; whereas Kant in contrast (on Milbank’s rendition) “ensured the corralling of nature and reason in the sterile hall of mirrors which is the epistemological universe of representation . . . precisely through the banishment of the mediating but ineffable third which is feeling.”

Nothing could be further from John Hare’s account of the same Kant. Painstakingly laying out the relations Kant sees between “feelings,” “inclinations,” “affects” and “passions” (all subtly different categories in Kant), he shows that there are at least two positive ways in which Kant thinks that “feelings” and “inclinations” enter into moral judgment, and two ways also in which they can go awry. “Passion” has, indeed, become for Kant a negative word (in contrast to Descartes’s account); but that is not to say that the affective realm in general is unimportant for Kant’s ethical theory—far from it, on Hare’s reading; indeed, it has a vital role to play in the moral life.

Whereas Kant has unjustly garnered the reputation for a lack of interest in the affective dimension of the human, de Maistre and Kierkegaard have, in their completely different ways, tended to be associated with the opposite tendency—whether of violent passion (de Maistre), or of faith-against-reason (Kierkegaard). Once again, then, our contributors present us with readings designed to correct standard or lazy assumptions. Douglas Hedley’s account of de Maistre indicates how a lesser-known Catholic Enlightenment thinker has been wrongly pilloried as a defender of dark passions and violence, when his philosophical interests were, on the contrary, fuelled by
neo-Platonic, and specifically Origenist, interests in a universalist theodicy. Rather differently, Merold Westphal’s characteristically careful account of “Kierkegaard on Faith, Reason and Passion” shows that if we take attentive account of what Kierkegaard really means by “faith,” “reason” and “passion,” then we see that we are in no “position to say that faith is irrational [sc. for Kierkegaard] because it rests on feeling rather than knowledge.”

Whichever of the readings of Hume and Kant we find more persuasive in this section of the book, what at least becomes clear through the various assaults on the modern history of “feeling” is that the consolidation of the concept of “emotion” as a psychological category (even though it was a word already occasionally already utilized by Hume with slightly different overtones) is, in contrast to the various vicissitudes of the terms “feeling” and “passion” in Enlightenment philosophies, a relatively late development. Thomas Dixon’s chapter, “Revolting Passions,” surveys the backcloth to this shift in nomenclature and association in the late nineteenth century, and demonstrates how, once launched as a secular psychological category, “emotion” swallowed up and encompassed all the earlier and subtler distinctions between passion, affect, feeling and sentiment which for the most part had originally had a religious locus. Dixon concludes, then, that the “main casualty” in this new semantic transformation to a “secular, scientific, and sterilized” idea of “emotion” was the older sense of the cognitive and moral seriousness of the affective life which had attended the traditional discussion of the “passions.” Contemporary revisiting of that interest in integrative “seriousness” is in undeniable reaction to the sanitizing and scientizing developments of the nineteenth century. So we do well, too, as Dixon highlights, to remember just how recent is the phenomenon over against which there is such a notable contemporary reaction. It is not the “Enlightenment” which is the main problem vis-à-vis the denigration of feeling; it is its late nineteenth-century scientific outworkings which represent the problem.

Such a proposed re-integrative approach to feeling and reason as Dixon suggests, however, already finds an anticipatory, albeit only implicit, manifestation in the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein on religion, as Stephen Mulhall demonstrates in his chapter on the topic. It is vital here to read Wittgenstein aright, Mulhall urges, and not as the sort of expressivist who is merely attending to “feelings, attitude and emotions” where religious belief is concerned. Such a rendition trivializes the important contribution Wittgenstein makes when he talks of the importance of “pictures” to religious believing. To require a “picture” to account for the subtle status of a religious belief is precisely, for Wittgenstein, to refuse the disjunction between intellectual inquiry on the one hand and feelings states on the other. Thus Wittgenstein’s discussion of religious belief suggest a strongly affective dimension (the Kierkegaardian influence is writ large here), and a simultaneous resistance to any proselytizing in aridly intellectualist mode; yet it is also
fully “reasoned” in its own proper sense, as Mulhall clarifies. Wittgenstein’s capacity to combine the affective and the rational in his account of religious “forms of life” is well capable, when rightly understood, of escaping the false charge of “fideism.” It also shows a retrospective awareness of what might have been lost, well after Kierkegaard, in the separation of “emotions” from rationality.

Followers of Wittgenstein (as we shall discuss in the “Postscript” to this volume, below) tend to be strongly resistant to the idea that messages from the brain sciences can contribute anything to the sort of philosophy of mind that Wittgenstein envisaged. Nonetheless our volume closes with two inputs from the realms of the natural and social sciences which address the central question: What do these disciplines currently have to say about the realm of “reason” and “passion” (or “emotion”) and their relation? And what light—if any—might thereby be thrown on the philosophical and theological issues enshrined in these questions?

In fact a remarkable consensus emerges from these two disciplinary reports from a psychologist (Gerald Clore) and a neuroscientist (Michael Spezio). Both draw attention to the turn made in their disciplines in recent decades to seeking an integrated understanding of the relation of “thought” and “feeling.” Clore, having stressed throughout his account of recent trends in psychological research that “reason” cannot properly be accounted for without its affective dimensions, avers that, “Rather than suppressing or controlling emotion, . . . the power of cognition in emotion lies in the fact that emotions are cognitively-shaped affective reactions” (my emphasis). Evoking once more a Platonic heritage for these ideas at the end of his chapter, Clore concludes that “rather than thinking of emotion and cognition as horses pulling in different directions, we should think of them as strands of a single rope, made strong by their being thoroughly intertwined.”

The following contribution from Spezio has a not dissimilar message, but works from significant recent examples in neuroscientific research, many of them focusing on experiments with brain-impaired subjects. The field’s current approach to the neuroscience of emotion is, as Spezio admits, torn between at least two different factions. “Dual process models” (which presuppose a strong distinction between neural functions involved in intellectual goal-directed activities, and neural functions that are virtually automatic) have been, on the one hand, staging something of a comeback in recent neuroscience research. On the other hand, Spezio points to important work also currently being done on the “integrative” function of emotion for rational decision-making and moral action. These studies by and large take their cue from analyses of people with brain damage whose affective responses are impaired in some way. It is not only the celebrated case of the brain-damaged railway worker Phineas Gage (memorably analyzed by Antonio Damasio16) which is relevant here, but a more recent plethora of studies on patients with brain lesions who show “real-life social deficits and
moral insensitivity” given their failure to bring emotion into a “constitutive” relation to thinking and planning. Perfect utilitarian reasoning is a chilling capacity to observe in such patients, observes Spezio, and it is at the same time evidence of a clear “abnormality” in brain functioning. He concludes that, in the case of normally functioning human brains, there is “no clear evidence for dichotomous views of emotion and reasoning when investigating neural systems in detail.” On the contrary, emotion seems to be in some sense intrinsic to effective rational functioning when examined at the level of neural circuitry.

Our collection ends with a reflection by the noted philosopher of emotion, Peter Goldie, which forms an apt recapitulatory “book-end” to the opening piece by Charles Taylor. Goldie supplies a survey of the field of recent secular philosophy of the emotions and concludes—almost against his own better judgment!—that theological ethics may have much to learn from it, despite its apparently reductive presumptions. Again, the task of an integrative approach to reason, feeling and faith opens up creatively to the future; since Goldie avers that, in the case of well-balanced religious belief, “we would find that having the appropriate religious virtues would involve having the appropriate emotional dispositions, so that one would not be able to think or act virtuously without having the right feelings, towards the right objects, at the right time . . . so emotional engagement wouldn’t merely be an optional extra but a necessary part of what it is to lead a good religious life.”

To conclude: I promised earlier in this “Introduction” to detail the cumulative force of the proposals which emerge in this volume on “Faith, Rationality, and the Passions.” Perhaps the most important deliverances of the joint, interdisciplinary research to be found in this collection of studies may be expressed thus, albeit succinctly, in closing.

First, it is clear that important semantic distinctions in the affective realm (“feeling,” “will,” “passion,” “emotion”) carry very different freight in different historical and philosophical contexts, and that attention to those contexts is exegetically crucial in assessing whatever relation to “reason” and “faith” may be at stake. Secondly, the widespread assumption that it was the modern period that produced a new and stark disjunction between feeling and rationality is, as repeatedly shown, significantly flawed. It is much more truly the case that sophisticated thinking about “passion” and its implications (negative or otherwise) for reason was carried through from late scholasticism in one form or another into the modern period and continued to hold a position of some philosophical significance into the nineteenth century. The birth of “emotion,” therefore, as a quite new and psychologized concept in the later nineteenth century, marks the point at which much stronger dualisms between reason and the affective realm start to become apparent in evolutionary, medical and philosophical thinking, and the earlier and sophisticated range of distinctions between different sorts of affect seemingly starts to atrophy. Thus the current reaction to this disjunctive emphasis in
contemporary philosophy and science marks a new development of some interest to theology as well as philosophy, since, amongst other things, it may engender a reconsideration of the wisdom of *diachronic* and integrative theories of faith, rationality and the “passions,” based in practices, which are to be found in pre-modern monastic texts such as Evagrius’s. Finally, the potential significance of the disciplines of psychology and neuroscience for philosophical and theological reflection on reason and affect (whilst remaining a necessarily contentious matter methodologically in terms of philosophy of mind), does at least open alluring possibilities for further future interchange between the disciplines. That neuroscientists and psychologists are becoming increasingly aware of the *integral* significance of the affective dimension of everyday reasoning is at least food for philosophical and theological thought: if faith too is to be reasonable on this hypothesis, it must perforce also be affective. It is the delicate philosophical distinction between different *kinds* of rationality and of feeling which should thus exercise us, just as it did the ancients and the scholastics, and not the false presumption that “emotion” necessarily distorts and impedes a reasonable faith.

NOTES

1 I would like to record my particular gratitude to the John Templeton Foundation for generously funding the original symposium, and to Dr. Mary Ann Meyers of the Foundation for making all the practical arrangements for the conference with her customary grace.

2 *Modern Theology*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 217–361, contained an earlier version of this “Introduction” and the contributions from Cavanaugh, Pickstock, Stewart, Milbank, Dixon, Mulhall, Clore and Spezio, followed by my “Postscript.” *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 3–101, contained another brief “Introduction: Faith, Rationality and the Passions” by me, and the contributions from Taylor, Griffiths, Stump, Cottingham, Hare, Hedley, Westphal and Goldie. I am indebted to the editors of both journals for permission to republish these articles together, and also to their peer review readers for making the original process of production both professional and smooth.

3 Charles Taylor makes a start at such a defense in his opening chapter, “Reason, Faith, and Meaning,” arguing that rationality itself is intrinsically meaning-making and affective; it is thus an “illusion” to quest for a “disengaged reason” as an ideal of rationality, and a further illusion to define faith as “believing without good reason” (my emphasis).

4 An analysis of this development is importantly provided by William Cavanaugh in “The Invention of Fanaticism,” and this provides the contextual backdrop for the closer studies of the divergent renditions of “passion,” “feeling,” “faith,” and “reason” in Descartes, Hume and Kant in subsequent chapters.

5 On this point it is particularly instructive to compare William Cavanaugh’s discussion of Locke and Voltaire with John Hare’s close analysis of “passion” and “reason” in Kant in his “Kant, the Passions, and the Structure of Moral Motivation.”

6 I am thinking here particularly in Britain of the late Colin Gunton’s sustained attack on Cartesian individualism (as, in his view, intrinsically inimical to Christian “relational” theism) in his *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1985); and then of course of John Milbank’s celebrated assault on “secular reason” (especially as in Kant) in his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). But any number of other influential figures (most obviously Stanley Hauerwas in the United States) might be cited in evidence of this anti-Enlightenment revulsion in the theology of the 1980s and 1990s. While in this current volume Milbank now goes on to embrace a controversial, and highly positive, rendition of Humean affectivity over against Kant’s “secular” rationality, John Hare in his “Kant, the Passions, and the Structure of Moral Motivations” argues in contrast for the
strongly theological dimensions of Kant’s whole “Enlightenment” system, and for the overlooked significance therein of positive affectivity.

7 John Cottingham’s “Sceptical Detachment or Loving Submission” presents a particularly powerful riposte to false readings of Descartes along these stereotypical lines. But what all the chapters on particular philosophers share is the commitment to corrective readings of figures long misunderstood: either because their views on “reason” have been read in abstraction from their accompanying profound interests in feeling or passion (Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant), or because their perceived tendency to “irrationality” has led to an obscuring of their true intent (de Maistre, Kierkegaard).


11 This issue is regrettably only glancingly tackled in this present volume, and much work remains to be done. A revealing feminist-inflected account of the passions in the seventeenth century is provided in Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

12 I take a brief look at those issues in my “Postscript,” below.


14 Similar themes are however traced, for instance, in Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), though without the attention to Christian contemplative practice and sustained monastic discipline which are the hallmarks of Evagrius’s vision.

15 It should be noted again that Milbank’s rendition of Kant on this theme departs radically from that proposed by John Hare in “Kant, the Passions, and the Structure of Moral Motivation.”

1

REASON, FAITH, AND MEANING

CHARLES TAYLOR

There are two connected illusions, it seems to me, which have become very common today. The first consists in marking a very sharp distinction between reason and faith—even to the point of defining faith as believing without good reason! The second is to take as a model what I want to call “disengaged” reason. And these two are tightly linked.

To start with the first, since the Enlightenment, a notion has been developed of “reason alone” (I’m taking this from the title of Kant’s book, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone). By that was meant, reason no longer augmented (or disturbed) by revelation. It was in that way explicitly contrasted to reasoning which operates along with, or on the basis of, revelation.

Obviously, the proposal to dispense with revelation was something new, but there was still an important continuity with earlier understandings. For the scholastic tradition, reason was capable of establishing important truths on its own. It could demonstrate the rational nature of human beings, and the ethic which should follow from this. It could even establish the existence of a Creator. But it needed revelation to take us farther, for instance to bring us the insight that this Creator was the Triune God of the Bible.

What seems agreed between pre- and post-Enlightenment positions is that reason and revelation can be clearly distinguished as distinct sources of truth. Many post-Enlightenment thinkers took over this conception of the two sources, and simply discarded or denied one of them.

But I would like to argue that the vicissitudes of the appeal to “reason alone” force us to depart more radically from this tradition. For a whole host of important purposes, “reason” is not the name of a reliable source offering
univocal and reliable answers; and “revelation” itself is a category by which we try, rationally, to make sense of the truths we discern.

I have just said that “reason” doesn’t offer univocal and reliable answers in a number of domains. But there are some in which it seems to come very close to this. Let’s look at these, because they provide the basis on which the belief in “reason alone” has been grounded. (A) Reason gets pretty close to univocal validity when it comes to the kind of reasoning whose rules are codified in formal logic and mathematics. And we might see (B) the discovery of reliable truth in natural science as a fruit of reason. Being rational here involves applying a correct method; we painstakingly validate our observations; and then we infer from them to the best explanation.

But while the Vienna positivists in their heyday may have thought that this suffices to generate valid scientific theories, the reflections of philosophers of science like Canguilhem and Thomas Kuhn have shown us that we need more. Good explanation—and then the further rational discovery which this enables—depends on (C) an adequate conceptualization. Our explanations can improve radically with a shift in what Kuhn called our “paradigms.” As well as painstaking observation (1), and explanatory inferences (2), we need the exercise of (3) the theoretical imagination which enables us to reframe our questions. Sometimes our grasp of some domain remains very incomplete, and full of unexplained anomalies, until we transform our understanding of the crucial questions through a paradigm shift.

One famous example can suffice to illustrate this. Post-Galilean mechanics arose through shifting the crucial question. According to the Aristotelian mechanics which had dominated for centuries, in order to explain the continued motion of a projectile after it has left the hand (or the cannon mouth), one had to find some agency which went on propelling it. All motion required a motor force contemporary with it. The crucial question was: what causes continuing movement? Various candidates were proposed which all proved unsatisfactory. Continued motion remained an anomaly. The adoption of the inertial perspective changed the question; now it was: what causes changes in velocity? At once it became possible to make sense of the whole domain of imparted motion. The anomalies were explained and thus overcome.

Reason in this domain of natural science must include this third dimension, a creative recasting of the problem, which can’t be “delivered” through a reliable pre-existing method. It requires something in the nature of insight, which can be validated, but only afterwards, through the overcoming of anomalies. Now in the domain of natural science, this doesn’t seem to exclude our arriving at solid and agreed conclusions. Because even if the new insights can’t be generated at will, and we may labor a long time before someone hits on them, we can generally agree which paradigm shifts have
been valid. These impose themselves because they resolve the anomalies which earlier theories generated, without creating equally difficult ones in their place. This kind of progress can thus be credited to “reason alone.”

We should note, however, that this happy result is only possible through a stringent form of self-restriction; “scientific” language in the meaning of the act must be purged of all reference to its significance for us; it must be used to make “literal” claims, in a sense which excludes metaphor, except those which can be “cashed out” quite “literally.” It is a special “insulated” form of expression.¹

But when we come to those issues in which the explanation and evaluation of human life is at issue; when we come, for instance, to ethics, political theory, social science, history, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and the like, we are in a very different predicament. “Insulated” language is no longer adequate. New creations of our theoretical imagination (we might call this our “moral-anthropological imagination”) are not lacking. But we find it very difficult to arrive at the kind of universal consensus which we at least approach in natural science. On the contrary, people of different cultures, different ethical outlooks, different aesthetic and moral intuitions, adopt very different paradigms for their accounts of human action and the nature of our moral life; and they cannot easily convince each other, or converge on a favored view, except in certain milieux and often for a limited time.

Faced with this disagreement, some conclude to relativism, and claim that there is no fact of the matter. Human nature is shaped by the interpretations we offer of it, and there is no given basis on which we must eventually converge. I haven’t got the space to argue this here, but this inference doesn’t convince me. We don’t need to assume that there is no fact of the matter. Continued disagreement springs rather from this profound connection between the explanatory paradigms we find convincing in explaining human life, on one hand, and our moral and aesthetic, or spiritual sensibility, on the other. It is very often extremely difficult even to understand each other when we are arguing over a significant gap in spiritual outlook, and actually changing someone’s mind may involve a thoroughgoing reorientation of his/her spiritual life, and not simply a punctual shift in a particular opinion which leaves the rest of his/her being unchanged.

An example may help clarify this. Take a widespread paradigm (alas) in social science today, that is based on rational choice theory. The affinity with the ethical theory we call utilitarianism is fairly evident, and both share a faith in a kind of transparent rational grasp of our motivations and moral predicament, which others (myself included) believe is bought at the expense of a considerable distortion of human experience. The attraction of the explanatory account is obviously linked to the attraction of this construal of the human moral predicament, and both express the powerful draw of a
certain notion of rationality. You need a big change in your stance towards the world to get out of this pervasive construal.\(^2\)

So I would like to claim that there is a truth of the matter underlying this kind of dispute; I would like also to say that we can reason about it; for instance we can debate which view really makes sense of human action, and put rational choice theory under severe strain when it is confronted with certain human actions in history. We can also show a rational path from one to another moral construal, by demonstrating how the better account can free us to take account of important things which the inferior one was blocking out.\(^3\)

But I can’t argue this here.\(^4\) I would like rather to say what this means for our understanding of reason. What this means is that our reasoning always involves a third dimension, beyond accurate observation and reliable inference, namely what I called “theoretical imagination” in connection with natural science, and what we could call the “moral-anthropological imagination” in relation to human affairs. Reason has, in other words, a creative component; it can and must generate new ways of conceiving the reality it is trying to understand. How do we generate these? There is no standard answer, no sure method, but in general we can say that we do so by articulating what start as barely definable hunches, or inchoate insights. These unformed insights draw us strongly; we are willing to engage our attention very deeply in them. We have an as yet unfounded and nonetheless powerful anticipatory confidence in them; we might even speak of this as a kind of faith.

\textit{Fides quaerens intellectum:} it may seem shocking to invoke this formula in a discussion of scientific paradigms. But I believe that there is a distant but discernible analogy with the theological. There is, in other words, a similarity of structure which can be discerned in all uses of the imagination which leap ahead of and set the path for more certain knowledge. Of course, this structure is visible in an impoverished mode in the scientific “hunch.” The impoverishment resides in the fact that the act of faith is not in the general case in God, in the love and fidelity of one (a Being? but God is not really a Being) who is capable of these. And correspondingly, our faith emerges from and is nourished by our whole sense of what is of ultimate importance in life, whereas the scientific hunch relates to a much more circumscribed area. Thus one can say that the faith in God which seeks intellectual expression defines a direction for the intellect only because and to the extent that this faith gives a direction to our whole being. But nevertheless a loose analogy holds. The dawning sense of a new paradigm leaps ahead of what we know, and defines the direction of further inquiry which aims to clarify what draws us to it.

This richer notion of reason has often been neglected or forgotten in recent centuries, but it returns us to Plato. His “logos,” which we translate “reason,” involves the articulation in words of insight, whose full nature can
nevertheless not be fully communicated in words. Reason cannot be simply reduced to explicit reasoning, the methodical rational operations which we carry out on our already articulated insights.

It was Descartes among others who caused us to lose this broader understanding of reason. Descartes held that reasoning could be from start to finish guided tightly by a defined method. He had no place for the notion that reasoning relies on articulations, which then only justify themselves, if they ever do so, post factum, by the sense they manage to make of the reality under study. These articulations transform our understanding. So much so, that even the kind of sense we end up making may be undreamt of before the articulation is made.\(^5\)

The path through reason to truth inevitably involves a phase of near-blind groping which only later may be ratified in the clarity of the sense-making that ensues. There are two facets to this ratification. The first comes from the clarity of the sense we make, which each one of us may experience for ourselves. The second comes from the general agreement of all those engaged in reasoning, that we have really made sense of things. Because reasoning is something we don’t only do alone, but which also inescapably involves dialogical collaboration and exchange, these two facets can never be wholly separated from each other. Descartes not only neglected this interplay of groping and ratification, but he supposed the ratification as self-authenticating in the certainty of clarity and distinctness. The dialogical dimension dropped from sight altogether.

Of course, this two-step understanding of reason, moving from articulation to ratification, gives just the most general, abstract form of its progress. This notion has to be augmented and enriched as soon as we think of reasoning as situated in a tradition. I will return to this below.

But for the moment, we should ask: What does this understanding of reasoning do to the post-Enlightenment notion of “reason alone”? In fact, it makes it very problematic to say the least. If reason alone is defined in opposition to faith, then it threatens to collapse as a category when we see the role that faith in our inchoate insights must play. If it is opposed to revelation, then the problem is that “revelation” is a category which we come to articulate in order to make sense of our most fundamental insights. It is itself the fruit of reason-as-articulation.

Maybe we can salvage a category of reason alone as what is operative in certain everyday reasonings as well as in natural science (the categories that Vienna positivists were willing to declare as free from metaphysics). We can say that once the inchoate insight has been articulated in a new paradigm, and once this paradigm shift is ratified through the sense it enables us to make of things, the element of faith is transcended. But for this very reason, the category can’t apply to that whole domain which I outlined above where the anthropological-moral imagination is ever-active. On the contrary, in this domain ratification is never clear without zones of puzzlement and
So we begin to see how the too simple separation of reason and faith comes unstuck. It does, indeed, seem to hold in certain domains, for instance, in mathematics and natural science. But once we step beyond these, it breaks down.

Now this begins to make clear the connection of this first error with the second, the belief that reason must be disengaged. The domains in which reason can easily seem to dispense with faith are the privileged fields of disengaged reason. By that I mean a reasoning which in no way draws insight from the significances things have for us as embodied, social beings, who mark moral or aesthetic distinctions in things and actions. This pre-scinding from life meanings was the essential founding step of modern post-Galilean, post-Baconian natural science. This natural science can be convincing to everyone, regardless of culture, because its explanations recur to factors which are not defined by their meanings for us, but simply by their efficient-causal relations. Descartes for his part defines clear and distinct perception as a disembodied grasp of things, where our normal grasp of them as embodied beings counts as obscure and confused. Our seeing the color in the object, our sensing the pain in the tooth, these are obscure and confused; to objectify the process, and to see the pain as arising from some pathology in the tooth is to see things clearly.6

Now it is true that even in these domains, our hunches are often given force by their elegance and simplicity, and mathematicians’ intuitions can be drawn to what they see as beautiful forms. But the objects studied in each case have to be defined without reference to these meanings.

When, however, we come to the domains I mentioned above, including ethics, history, social science, literature, this kind of disengagement is impossible. How do we come to understand the emotions and reactions, the sense of beauty and the good, whether of another person, or of a strange society, without drawing on our own reactions? This may sound strange, because precisely in the case of cultures very different from ours, the easiest and most damaging mistake will often be to see them as operating out of the same gamut of possible emotions and reactions as we do. This will often make them come out as espousing the worse rather than the better, as being rude rather than refined, as addicted to pleasure rather than disciplined, as pagans worshipping the devil rather than revering the true God, etc. And it is almost always the case that these too ethnocentric perceptions are mis-readings, and we have to come somehow to see these other cultures in their difference.
But precisely, this can’t be done simply by setting aside our own reactions, and studying this alien group “dispassionately.” We can’t just neutralize our expectations, because that doesn’t help us understand. To observe these people outside of any frame of human meaning is to see them as another animal species, opaque and enigmatic. True, our expectations make their behavior puzzling, and we have to get far enough to see that these expectations are wrong. But the only way beyond them is to go deeper into the puzzlement they awaken in us, to live in and analyze this until a liberating insight comes into where the differences lie. This kind of science can only be done while one “inhabits” the meanings things have for us, rather than by disengaging from them.

We come to a similar conclusion when we look at what it is to make headway in ethical or spiritual insight. We ask ourselves what is really important in human life, for instance. Or we ask ourselves whether our spiritual life shouldn’t take a new direction. We can explore this kind of question only through our own sense of what is important, or where spiritual growth lies. Again, this sounds paradoxical, because we want precisely to grow when we ask these questions. So surely we need to set aside our present intuitions? And in one sense, this is true, but in another important sense, not.

We may indeed ask other people to guide us, or read books to get other points of view, but what we are trying to do here is to educate our sense of what is really important; we are not simply bracketing it and studying the question dispassionately. And indeed, what will help convince us that we are making headway is a changed insight into what is important, but this is also something that we feel. Such insights are not in the nature of things purely dispassionate. When we might want to use this term, it is because we sense that it is taking us beyond some passions, those for instance of narcissistic ego-satisfaction, not that we are coming to a pure, emotion-free perception of the meanings of things.

Such moments do exist—when we have a fleeting insight, for instance, that we are living on a much lower plane than we need to. But these are exceptional moments. Normally, our sense that X is important ethically is inseparable from our feeling its importance, from admiring those who follow it, for instance; or being inspired by it; or feeling relieved and grateful that this exists as a human possibility.

In other words, the perception of significance, of human meanings, can’t be detached from the experiencing of these meanings, an experience which can only be rarely and fleetingly indifferent. We grasp these meanings through our partiality to them. To such a point that we can often say, with Plato, that one hasn’t really understood the good unless one is drawn to it; unless one loves it—though one may be driven, and also drawn to incompatible ends.
This is what the disciples at Emmaus knew, when they said to themselves “did not our hearts burn within us?” (Luke 24:32). They meant: we ought to have known. Our hearts were recognizing the truth, even while we were resisting it.

But again, this sounds paradoxical. Does this mean that we ultimately judge by brute reaction? We feel this is good, so we judge it good? Does reason have no further role here? On the contrary. Just as in the case where we are trying to understand people very different from us, there can be reasons to mistrust our reactions. Maybe some of the things we are induced to do by our present ethical sense shock us or others in some way. Maybe we have reason to think that our reactions are coming out of something extraneous in us, that has no reason to be linked with a correct perception of this good. Thus my satisfaction with my reaction to some challenge may come not from a real perception of its rightness, but from a more narcissistic fulfillment: that I like the image of myself responding, giving the stinging rebuke to wrong-doing, for instance, or standing up with integrity. We can come to liberate ourselves from these irrelevant reactions, and the truer perception of what’s important that thereby emerges is all the more convincing, because it comes out of such an error-reducing move.  

In other words, just having the feeling that X is important doesn’t resolve the issue. Questions, puzzlement may remain; and they may be raised by others. This hunch can’t be fully ratified as long as these questions remain, and others disagree. The process of reasoning goes on. And this process involves the two phases of reasoning we identified above. Partly, it involves a re-articulation of our original insight: for instance, to distinguish what in it is really valid from what comes from narcissistic satisfaction. And articulation of inchoate insights is the first phase of reason. And we re-articulate in order to resolve anomalies and contradictions, which is the second phase: the good insight seems to have bad fruits, or our feelings of self-satisfaction are uncomfortably strong.

But without a perception which proceeds through a feeling of importance, there is no insight at all; neither the first off one which must face objections, nor an eventually more satisfactory one which has answered these. The whole process cannot go forward in disengaged mode.

The process of rational critique that I have just been describing is central to moral development. Moral growth involves, among other things, a change in our emotional reactions to people, acts, predicaments, making these reactions more accurate and insightful. But this doesn’t mean that the standards which we aim at in this process are—or even could be—set by an utterly disengaged form of rationality, such as might suffice to calculate utility consequences, or to check if a maxim could be coherently applied universally. The temptation to resort to such abstracted forms arises from the mistaken belief that our sentiments are brute, non-cognitive, uninformed by insight, whether accurate or not. I will take up this error in the next section.