Symposium: A Tribute to William Wainwright

Reason, Rhetoric, and the Role of Emotions: William Wainwright's Philosophy of Religion

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Many have cause to be grateful for what they have learned from William Wainwright's outstanding contributions to the philosophy of religion, and Kai-Man Kwan's magisterial survey article (see above, pp. 00-00) provides an impressive conspectus of the breadth and power of Wainwright's work. In the brief observations that follow, I should like to focus on one central strand in that work, namely what may broadly be called its Pascalian emphasis on the 'reasons of the heart'—a strand that runs steadily through Wainwright's publications from the aptly named *Reason and the Heart* (1995) through to the important later work, *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion* (2016).

In terms of style and methodology, Wainwright can appear very much in the mold of "mainstream" anglophone analytic philosophy of religion. But the message that emerges from what he says about the role of reason in supporting a religious worldview leads us, or I think *should* lead us, to have some serious reservations about the way in which the philosophy of religion is often practiced in the analytic tradition. As I have argued in my own work, when our philosophizing operates at too abstract and rarefied a level, aloof from the living currents of human thought and action that animate the area of human life we are supposed to be studying, then there may be a risk that we become, in a certain way, disconnected from the very phenomena we are trying to understand. So rather than following the prevailing analytic model of the philosopher as a kind of detached scrutineer, we may need to allow the possibility of a distinctive and valuable kind of philosophical understanding that requires a more *involved and engaged stance* (Cottingham 2024, Chapter One).

One principal way in which Wainwright indicates his own reservations about currently prevailing ways of philosophizing about religion concerns the role of rhetoric in religious argumentation. From Plato onward, philosophers have been suspicious of rhetorical skills on the grounds that they appear to subvert the operation of sound reasoning by playing on the emotions of the listener or reader. A great deal of today's analytic philosophy very much follows in the wake of these suspicions by adopting an austere and impersonal style that seemingly tries to filter out anything that could smack of emotional involvement or imaginative engagement. Against this, Wainwright insists not only that rhetoric is permissible in philosophical argument but also that philosophy's employment of rhetoric is nothing less than a "necessity" (Wainwright 2016, 91).

In support of this, Wainwright draws on the views of certain divines in the eighteenth century who maintained that the arguments of natural theology are able to obtain a "free admission into the assent of the understanding" only when they "bring a passport from the rightly disposed will" (Wainwright 2016, 91). This could be taken to mean that rhetoric's role is merely the auxiliary one of "softening up" the audience so that they become more receptive to the arguments deployed. In this interpretation, philosophical authority and validity are ultimately vested in abstract reason and rationality alone, though rhetoric can play a useful role in disposing a reader or listener to attend to the arguments. But Wainwright's view is more radical than this, since he assigns to rhetoric an authentic and legitimate role in its own right. It is not merely a "disposable tool" used to "induce acceptance"; rather, it is "an essential *part* of rational discourse" (Wainwright 2016, 92, original emphasis).

One important consideration deployed by Wainwright in favor of this view is the following relatively straightforward one. Reason's job is to derive conclusions from antecedent premises, but sooner or later it has to rely on premises that cannot themselves be established by reason. Here, what the philosopher has to do is represent the starting points in a favorable light, for example, by figurative or imaginative language, and we enter the domain of rhetoric (Wainwright 2016, 93–4).

So far, perhaps, so good; but we have not yet reached the epistemic core of Wainwright's thesis about the unavoidability of rhetoric in philosophy. The crucial epistemic point he goes on to make can, I think, be put as follows: An emotional shift can act as a *catalyst for the perception of new evidence*. In other words, as a result of being emotionally moved, one may become open to perceiving aspects of reality that were previously hidden from view. This, I believe, is the correct interpretation of Pascal's original contention that if you wish to believe but do

not see how you can, the answer is to start attending Mass—"This will train you, this will make you believe" (Pascal 1962 [1670] no. 418). On an unfavorable interpretation, Pascal is recommending that we should bypass reason altogether by embarking on a process of willed self-brainwashing. But on a more favorable and, I think, more subtle and more plausible interpretation, what Pascal has in mind is the transformative effect of engaging spiritual praxis: What he is inviting his readers to do is not to abandon reason or give abrupt assent to doctrines that are not properly substantiated, but rather to open themselves to a *process of spiritual transformation*, which will allow them to see things in a new way (see further Cottingham 2005, Chapter One, Section Three).

Very much consistent with this, Wainwright points out that conversion or "religious discovery" typically involves a Gestalt shift, as the world comes to be seen differently. He then explains:

> If the Gestalt shift is *appropriate*—involves a richer, truer, more satisfying (including rationally more satisfying in James's sense) view of reality, then rhetoric has performed a valuable *epistemic* role. (Wainwright 2016 95, original emphasis)

The phrase "rationally more satisfying in James's sense" refers to William James's thesis, in a number of his writings, that our passional nature includes not only desires and aversions, hopes and fears, but also concrete perceptions and intuitions that may be truth-apt (Wainwright 2016, 73). The idea of a Gestalt shift that Wainwright introduces in this context calls to mind the recent work of Judith Wolfe on the role of the imagination in shaping a religious view of the world. The term "imagination" should not be construed in the pejorative sense of a mere invention or flight of fancy. Rather, it refers to something much more pervasive, something involved even in our most ordinary perception of the world around us, namely the intricate interplay of responding and interpreting, of finding and making, that is involved in what Wolfe calls our "irreducibly constructive, imaginative participation in the world" (Wolfe 2024, 12). This connects with Wainwright's view that "poetry, myth, symbol, and story can express truths and insights that can't be adequately expressed in other ways" (Wainwright 2016 148). But it is important to add, as Wainwright does, that the insights so gained should not be dismissed as merely fanciful, but may be fully susceptible of rational support. One thinks here of the poet William Wordsworth's claim in *The Prelude* that imagination is "but another name" for "clearest insight, amplitude of mind/ And reason in her most exalted mood" (Wordsworth 1984 [1805], Book XIII, lines 169–70).

Wainwright aptly concludes his discussion of the epistemic role of the emotions in facilitating transformative shifts in perception by citing St Augustine's remark that "I did not think I had done anything when I heard my congregation applauding, but when I saw them weeping" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, Book IV [426 CE], Chapter Twenty-four, cited in Wainwright, 2016, 97). The point is not that the audience's rational and perceptual faculties are overwhelmed by emotion but rather that the rhetorical language of the sermon has moved them along the path to conversion, which crucially involves a change in their way of seeing the world.

Much more could, of course, be said about Wainwright's position and how he illuminates the nature and genesis of religious belief. But let me draw to a close by entering a caveat about the use of the term "rhetoric." Despite Wainwright's powerful arguments about the permissibility and the necessity of employing rhetoric in our philosophizing, especially in the philosophy of religion, the historical connotations of the term "rhetoric" may still leave a lingering suspicion in some minds that we are dealing here with *persuasive techniques* rather than legitimate elements of a philosophical argument, such as reason and evidence. (Thus, the first meaning that the Oxford English Dictionary gives for the adjective "rhetorical" is: "expressed in terms intended to persuade or impress ... composed or expressed in extravagant and grandiloquent language, as opposed to being soberly stated or argued"). I hope I have already said enough to show the plausibility of Wainwright's view as to the compatibility of rhetoric with rationality. And as to the matter of evidence, I perhaps cannot do better than quote his thesis in *Reason and the Heart* 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" (Wainwright 2016, 60, summarizing the position taken in Wainwright 1995).

Implicit here is the point that the kind of evidence relevant to religious belief is not going to be "spectator evidence," to use Paul Moser's useful term (Moser 2008, 47)—that is, the kind of evidence that can be laid out for scrutiny and assessed from a detached standpoint by any neutral observer. It belongs instead with the type of evidence that, though perfectly genuine and objective, demands a particular disposition in the perceiver in order to be properly discerned. Some may initially suppose that this makes things all too easy for the defenders of religion by putting evidence for religious belief in a specially privileged category of its own. But on further reflection, we can see that there are many areas of human life, including, for example, the appreciation of great works of literature, or music, or painting, where proper qualifications are required in order for discernment to operate properly, and for the relevant properties of the objects in question to be detected.

In the case of religious belief and perception, the "qualifications" are going to be not the kinds of expertise we expect from the connoisseur of art or music, but rather the fruits of forms of spiritual praxis that are in principle open to all. Wainwright has much to say about spirituality; for example, the "ingestion" of sacred texts and its effects on the subject's intellectual and emotional life (Wainwright 2016, 49–50). He draws our attention,

for example, to how repeated exposure to such texts, especially when reinforced by reciting, chanting, and committing them to memory, may have a lasting transformative effect on the fabric of one's intellectual and emotional life. That such topics offer rich scope for future research is no surprise, for this is one of many areas where I believe Wainwright's approach to the philosophy of religion can lead us in a fruitful direction by bringing our philosophizing about religion into closer contact with the practices and forms of life that animate religious belief in the first place. Here, as elsewhere, Wainwright's legacy in the philosophy of religion can be expected to yield a rich harvest.

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