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## Book Review: Reason And The Heart: A Prolegomenon To A Critique Of Passional Reason

Mark Talbot

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*Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason*, by **William J. Wainwright**. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995. Pp. x, 160.

MARK R. TALBOT, Wheaton College

Do our passions—our needs and interests, hopes and fears, wishes and willings, tastes and inclinations, feelings and attitudes—ever play a positive role in the epistemic justification of our beliefs? If they do, what role (or roles) do they properly play? More particularly, how might they contribute to the adequate assessment of the evidence for religious belief?

Suspecting that many contemporary philosophers of religion underestimate the role that evidence can and should play in mature Christian belief, William Wainwright sets out to show how religious belief may be based on evidence, but on evidence that can only be properly appreciated by those possessing specific moral and spiritual qualities.

Evidentialism claims our beliefs—or some proper subset of them—“are rationally held if and only if one has sufficient evidence for them” (p. 2). Many Christians, including John Locke, have been evidentialists about religious belief, assuming not only that there is good evidence for it but also that the evidence will convince all fairminded inquirers.<sup>1</sup> Yet two interrelated facts have led many to deny evidentialism as applied to religious belief: first, none of the evidence for it seems compelling to all “fully informed, sufficiently intelligent, and adequately trained inquirer[s]” (p. 3); and, second, it “seems to depend more directly on the state of one’s heart or moral temperament than on evidence” (*ibid.*).

Here Wainwright proposes a middle way: perhaps God is not known either by “‘objective reason,’ that is, by an understanding that systematically excludes passion, desire, and emotion” from the reasoning process (p. 3) or “only ‘subjectively,’ or by the heart” (*ibid.*), independently of any reasoning process. Perhaps proper religious belief results from processes that place “a high value on proofs, arguments, and inferences” even as they recognize “that a properly disposed heart is needed to see their *force*” (*ibid.*). This gives reason—as inference from evidence—an important although not unqualified place in the apprehension and defense of religious truth.

Similar positions have appeared throughout philosophy’s history. For instance, Aristotle claimed that our knowledge of the good life—our recognizing the right practical principles to be true—depends on our psychological health.<sup>2</sup> Yet they have probably been most common in the Christian tradition; for, as Wainwright says, the claim that Christianity’s evidence can only “be accurately assessed . . . by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications . . . was once a Christian commonplace” (p. 3) held by thinkers as seemingly diverse as Calvin and Aquinas (see p. 4).

This position was especially popular in the Reformed tradition of English and American Puritanism, and so it is especially appropriate that Wainwright’s primary emphasis, in elucidating and evaluating it, is on the American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards.

At first glance, as Wainwright stresses, Edwards's position makes it seem that he held contradictory attitudes towards reason. For philosophically Edwards was a foundationalist and an evidentialist who was undeniably attracted by the "almost uncritical confidence in reason's power and scope" (p. 7) that Continental Rationalists such as Nicholas Malebranche, Cambridge Platonists like Henry More and John Smith, the British Empiricist John Locke,<sup>3</sup> and the Newtonians all shared. This means that he often proceeded in the confidence that many truths about God could be philosophically established.<sup>4</sup> Yet theologically Edwards was "a Calvinist who shared the Reformed tradition's distrust of humanity's natural capacities and its skepticism about natural theology" (*ibid.*). And so he could claim that, without divine assistance, even "the best reasoner in the world . . . might be led into the grossest errors and contradictions" about God and His world (p. 8).

The appearance of contradiction disappears, however, when Edwards's position is fully elucidated. His Calvinism led him to insist that reason, like all our other natural powers and capacities, has been damaged by sin. Yet it did not require him to say that natural theology—where reason seeks to "prove God's existence, determine the nature of many of His attributes, discern our obligations to Him, and establish the credibility of scripture" (p. 9)—was thereby made impossible. Uninstructed human reason, Edwards thought, is likely to go very far astray, but even sin-damaged natural reason can *demonstrate* some of natural theology's claims to be true, provided it does not have to *discover* them. And Scripture reveals many of these claims to us. Moreover, natural reason can know that the Scriptures are God's revelation. So "[d]ivine testimony" can become "a rule of reason, a kind of evidence, and a type of argument like the 'human testimony of credible eye-witnesses,' 'credible history,' 'memory,' 'present experience,' 'geometrical mensuration,' 'arithmetical calculation,' and 'strict metaphysical distinction and comparison'" (p. 15; the internal quotations here and elsewhere are from Edwards).<sup>5</sup> Scripture can then be used to establish other truths—e.g., that there is a difference in kind and not merely in degree between those human beings who are spiritually regenerate and those who remain naturally unregenerate<sup>6</sup>—that are far beyond uninstructed reason's ken.

So reason, according to Edwards, even reason unassisted by grace, *can*—and, in fact, *occasionally does*—achieve "a kind of assent . . . to the truths of the Christian religion, from the rational proofs or arguments that are offered to evince it" (p. 17). Indeed, we should expect natural reason to have this ability, if Christianity correctly claims that God will someday justly reward or punish each of us for our belief or disbelief.<sup>7</sup> Yet natural reason seldom achieves such assent. Why is this? Edwards's answer is that we do not believe rightly because we do not inquire rightly; and we do not inquire rightly because we lack "a disposition to improve" the 'light' God has given us" (p. 17).

This "depraved disposition," Edwards argued, is "natural to all mankind" (OS, p. 148); it is only remedied supernaturally, by infusions of common or special grace.<sup>8</sup> Edwards's most interesting epistemologi-

cal claims concern the epistemic changes that follow on the infusion of special grace. Wainwright examines two of the ways that Edwards claims our grasp of religious truths is affected by such grace.

Most fundamentally, it changes our hearts.<sup>9</sup> Edwards, like most Reformed theologians, thought that while all human beings can attain to “a kind of assent . . . to the truths of the Christian religion, from the rational proofs or arguments that are offered to evince it,” a *saving* knowledge of God’s work in Christ cannot be arrived at without God’s special aid. For a saving knowledge of God’s work in Christ requires the Holy Spirit so to indwell and regenerate the hearts of his elect that He becomes, for them, “a principle or spring of new nature and life” (RA, p. 200). It is His life in them that brings spiritual light and knowledge—spiritual light and knowledge so different from anything that the unregenerate can experience that “conversion is often compared to opening the eyes of the blind” (RA, p. 204). And from this it follows, Edwards concludes, “that in those gracious exercises and affections which are wrought in the minds of the saints, through the saving influences of the Spirit of God, there is a *new inward perception or sensation of their minds, entirely different in its nature and kind, from anything that ever their minds were the subjects of before they were sanctified*” (RA, p. 205; my emphasis). This involves God laying “a new foundation . . . in the nature of the soul” for an entirely “new kind of exercises of the . . . faculty of understanding” that enables the saved to apprehend for the first time the true spiritual beauty of God and His works (RA, p. 206; cf. Wainwright, p. 25f.). And the saved apprehend this because God produces “a new simple idea” (RA, p. 205) in their minds—the idea of “the beauty of holiness” (RA, p. 260).<sup>10</sup>

Wainwright spends over ten pages examining these claims about a new simple idea and a new supernatural sense to see if they make any clear sense. He then explores how the heart’s experience of true spiritual beauty can result in reason’s grasping various religious truths. For Edwards, “true virtue”—or “benevolence to Being in general”—is the mechanism underlying the new spiritual sense.<sup>11</sup> So if, as Wainwright observes, “we can show that benevolence has a foundation in the nature of things, we can conclude that the spiritual sense, too, is aligned with reality” (p. 34). Edwards’s best attempts to show that benevolence has such a foundation presuppose theistic metaphysics; and so Wainwright spends a couple of pages showing why this does not involve him in circularity. As Wainwright says, Edwards’s account of this sense of the heart “goes some way toward filling an important gap in contemporary discussions—the failure adequately to explain *how* theistic belief-producing mechanisms operate” (p. 40), which is important both for judging the reliability of such mechanisms and for having any hope of judging which of several such mechanisms is most likely to be the one that produces true beliefs.

The second way that special grace may affect our grasp of religious truths is that it can sanctify reason, where *reason*, taken as our power to grasp truth, is contrasted with the *heart*, as that which grasps beauty or excellency. It does this both by removing prejudices “and so lay[ing]

the mind more open to the force of arguments'" and by positively enlightening and assisting us to see the force of rational arguments by "'adding greater light, clearness and strength to the judgment'" (p. 43). These claims become philosophically interesting when Wainwright details them; but space prohibits me from spelling them out.

Since Wainwright's larger project is not only to put Edwards's position back on the table but also to convince us that it is more difficult to refute than we may have previously thought, he then devotes a chapter apiece to the somewhat similar views of John Henry Newman and William James. Newman, he thinks, demonstrates that "the properties Edwards finds in religious reasoning are features of *all* [informal] reasoning," while James shows in some detail how "[i]nquiry in the humanities and social sciences, in everyday life, and even in science unavoidably reflects . . . our 'willing' or 'passional' nature—our temperament, needs, concerns, fears, hopes, passions, and 'divinations'" (p. 5). James's account, unlike Edwards's and Newman's, has the added advantage of making its points without presupposing theistic metaphysics.

Wainwright's second-to-the-last chapter confronts two interrelated objections: first, that positions like these are epistemically and morally objectionable precisely because they allow the passions a place in the reasoning process—which Wainwright argues begs the question "by implicitly assuming theism is false or that subjective qualifications are not needed to know God" (p. 115)—and, secondly, that this defense of these positions is vitiated by circularity—to which Wainwright replies that, while "theists do rely on their own assessments of the evidence's force, and this commits them to thinking that they are in a superior epistemic position with respect to its evaluation[,] . . . *any* reliance on one's own assessments in matters of basic dispute involves similar assumptions" (p. 116). There is, then, no "non-question-begging way of mutually resolving basic disagreements" for either side in these epistemological discussions (p. 123). Recognizing this, however, raises "the specter of relativism" (p. 124); and so Wainwright devotes a final chapter to discussing what fundamental disagreements over basic standards of rationality imply. His conclusion is that views like these can actually help to defuse relativism by explaining why such fundamental disagreements exist and persist. An "Epilogue" gives us more reasons to take such views seriously.

Anyone who is familiar with Wainwright's writings knows that much of the strength of his work lies in his careful, analytical elucidation of what various claims may mean and in his meticulous assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of various arguments. I have resisted engaging him on that level for fear that his more general claims would thereby be obscured. Indeed, my one serious reservation about this book is that Wainwright's painstaking attention to some of the details of Edwards's, Newman's, and James's historical positions tends to make it hard for a reader to see the forest for the trees. Yet ultimately it is his attention to those details that guards the general position from being rejected out of hand. This book does succeed "in placing a neglected view back on the table" in a way that ought to convince its readers "that positions such as

Edwards's"—who was consciously committed to defending the theology of historic Reformational Protestantism—"are more difficult to refute than they previously may have thought" (p. 6).

## NOTES

1. On Locke's opinions see, especially, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

2. See p. 149ff. See, as well, Plato, *Republic*, 401d-402a, which Wainwright does not cite. As Wainwright does make clear, Plato thought that our hearts' states affect more than our grasp of practical principles; they affect how we think about metaphysical issues as well. Kant thought the same thing.

3. From whose pages, Edwards said, he had received more pleasure "than the most greedy miser finds when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold."

4. So, e.g., it is not uncharacteristic for Edwards to begin his *Dissertation concerning the end for which God created the world* with a chapter entitled "What Reason Teaches Concerning This Affair."

5. So the second and final chapter of Edwards's *Dissertation concerning the end for which God created the world* is entitled "What Is to Be Learned from Holy Scriptures Concerning God's Last End in the Creation of the World."

6. See especially *Religious Affections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), Part III, First Sign (especially pp. 197-210). Hereafter cited intratextually as "RA".

7. Edwards's acceptance of this conditional is perhaps clearest in Part I, Chapter 1, Section 6 of *Original Sin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970; hereafter cited intratextually as "OS"), which is entitled, "The corruption of man's nature appears by its tendency, in its present state, to an extreme degree of folly and stupidity in matters of religion". Edwards assumes a Calvinist view on nonbelief here, which sees nonbelief as always being the consequence of culpable actions or omissions on the nonbeliever's part. (E.g., "if . . . every age, and every nation, and every man, [has] sufficient light afforded, to know God, and to know and do their whole duty to him; then their inability to deliver themselves must be a moral inability, consisting in a desperate depravity, and most evil disposition of heart" [OS, p. 151].).

Several of us have argued similarly since. See, e.g., the final section of my "Starting from Scripture," in Robert C. Roberts and Mark R. Talbot, eds., *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), and the articles by George Schlesinger, David Basinger, and myself cited there. In *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), J.L. Schellenberg claims that my 1989 *Faith and Philosophy* piece, "Is It Natural to Believe in God?," "is the only piece of writing in the contemporary literature of philosophy of religion devoted in its entirety to defending the Calvinist view of nonbelief" and then spends eight pages attacking it. Actually, my primary purpose in that article was more to articulate Calvin's position than to defend it—and so my defense was deliberately short and incomplete. Schellenberg would claim that Edwards's (and Wainwright's) similar epistemological claims would fall prey to similar objections, although Wainwright's book goes a long ways towards answering them.

8. In Reformed thought, common grace is available to everyone; regarding reason, it "helps the faculties 'to do that more fully which they do

by nature,' strengthening 'the natural principles [e.g., conscience] against those things that tend to stupify [*sic*] it and to hinder its free exercise'" (p. 42; the bracketed interpolations are Wainwright's). Special grace is extended only to God's elect and it is by its infusion that they become regenerate, with all that that entails, epistemically and otherwise.

9. For more on this, see the last section of my "Starting from Scripture," *op. cit.* As I say there, in Scripture the *heart* stands for the center of our personalities, the seat and source of all our powers—rational, volitional, emotional, and spiritual—and as such it ultimately determines what we believe, feel, do, and say. Consequently, throughout Scripture its change is singled out as the central and decisive factor in saving belief.

10. So the full picture, according to Edwards, is this:

there is given to those that are regenerated, a new supernatural sense, that is as it were a certain divine spiritual taste, which is in its whole nature diverse from any former kinds of sensation of the mind, as tasting is diverse from any of the other five senses, and . . . something is perceived by a true saint in the exercise of this new sense of mind, in spiritual and divine things, as entirely different from anything that is perceived in them by natural men, as the sweet taste of honey is diverse from the ideas men get of honey by looking on it or feeling of it [RA, 259f.].

11. Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 540. This is found in the second of Edwards's *Two Dissertations*, entitled, *The Nature of True Virtue*. The first dissertation is the previously cited *Dissertation concerning the end for which God created the world*. In the sentence after the one quoted in the text, Edwards says that true virtue, "perhaps to speak more accurately, . . . is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will."

*Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* by **Jerome I. Gellman**. Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. x and 211. \$32.50 (cloth)

JOHN ZEIS, Canisius College

As the author states in the Preface, "This book was written from the conviction that in an impressive number of instances God has been and continues to be known in experience" (p. ix). Gellman's book is an articulation of an argument that on the basis of the apparent experiences of God, it is rational to believe that God exists. A convenient way to view Gellman's project is as an attempt at a synthesis and strengthening of the arguments from religious experience found in the works of Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God* and William Alston in *Perceiving God*. Like Swinburne, he relies heavily upon a version of the Principle of Credulity. Unlike Swinburne, and like Alston, Gellman argues that apparent perceptions of God are sufficient on their own to show the rationality of belief in God. Gellman thinks that he provides a successful argument for a strong rationality thesis which leads him, unlike Alston,