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# KIERKEGAARD ON FAITH, REASON, AND PASSION

Merold Westphal

Religious faith is often critiqued as irrational either because its beliefs do not rise to the level of knowledge as defined by some philosophical theory or because it rests on emotion rather than knowledge. Or both. Kierkegaard helps us to see how these arguments rest on a misunderstanding of all three terms: faith, reason, and emotion.

Religious faith is often criticized (patronized, ridiculed, rejected) in the name of reason as being irrational, or at least insufficiently rational. Sometimes this is because the beliefs ingredient in faith do not qualify as knowledge in some philosophically defined ideal sense which calls itself reason. At other times it is because religion is seen as too much a matter of emotion, of feeling. The two are easily combined: faith is irrational because it rests on feeling rather than knowledge.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard challenges this double critique as a misunderstanding of all three elements: faith, reason, and emotion.<sup>1</sup>

## *Faith*

The first challenge is to what we might call the "Platonic" view of faith, the notion that it is the failed attempt to be knowledge in some philosophically defined ideal sense. Thus, for Plato, true knowledge is to be found in mathematics and that moral and metaphysical intuition of the forms that is even purer, less discursive, and less tied to images. It is represented by the upper "half" of the divided line (*episteme, noesis, dianoia*) and by the world of sunshine outside the dank darkness of the cave. *Pistis* is the upper "half" of the lower "half" of the divided line and occurs in the cave. It is normally translated as 'opinion' to signify that it falls short of knowledge. At best it may include correct beliefs, but having them is like being a blind person who just happens to have found the right road.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately *pistis* is also the New Testament word for faith, which has opened the door in modernity for treating faith as a failed attempt at

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<sup>1</sup>By 'Kierkegaard' I shall mean the actual author who gave us various ideas to think about, whether pseudonymously or not. I am honoring his request not to attribute to him the views of his pseudonyms, since, in any case, our interest is not in what the historical Kierkegaard thought but what we might think. In the present context, recognizing a single source for the various pseudonyms is helpful in reading them intertextually.

<sup>2</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 506c. It would seem that Plato had been reading Gettier.



knowledge whose ideal is mathematics, or natural science (mathematical physics or evolutionary biology), or some more generic foundationalist model, or, in the case of Hegel, an anti-foundationalist, holist account of absolute knowing.

For Kierkegaard this is completely to misunderstand the sort of language game in which religious faith, at least in its biblical form, occurs. To criticize it for not being knowledge in the mode of mathematics, or natural science, or speculative metaphysics is like criticizing a football team for not serving aces. In response to such a critique, the football players might quote one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms: "It is just as you say, and the amazing thing is that you think that it is an objection."<sup>3</sup>

What, then, is faith for Kierkegaard, and what is the language game to which it belongs? Different pseudonyms give us different accounts. Anti-Climacus describes faith as the opposite of despair and gives the following formula for faith: "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself the self rests transparently in the power that established it."<sup>4</sup> For Christian faith, which is Kierkegaard's concern, this power is the Christian God, and what is at issue is relational and not epistemic, at least not obviously or primarily epistemic. It is a matter of being rightly related to oneself and to God. The suggestion is that these two relations are interdependent, but there is no suggestion that knowledge in some philosophically ideal sense is either necessary or even helpful to such faith.

Johannes Climacus defines truth as subjectivity this way: "*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing individual.*" Then he adds that "the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty."<sup>5</sup> We shall return to the passionate character of faith.

But let us focus on *Fear and Trembling*. Although Johannes de Silentio doesn't give us a neat formula, we can easily enough formulate one from his retelling of the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis

<sup>3</sup>PF, 52. The following sigla will be used for the works of Kierkegaard. All volumes are from *Kierkegaard's Writings*, published by Princeton University Press and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 1992.

FT *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 1983.

PF *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, 1985.

SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*, 1980.

<sup>4</sup>SUD, 49; cf 14, 30, 82, 131.

<sup>5</sup>CUP I, 203–204. Some rationalist ideals of what counts as knowledge have certainty built in, while empiricist ideals tend to be fallibilist. But for Kierkegaard faith is not just siding with empiricist fallibilism, which all too easily can play the Platonic game of assigning faith to the cave as either wholly unverifiable/unfalsifiable or not rising to the level of verification that scientific knowledge requires. Again the issue is relational, this time the relation of the self to its beliefs about God and the world. The emphasis falls on the "how" of believing, not on the "what."

22. Faith is trusting in the promises of God and obeying the commandments of God. The focus, of course, is on Abraham's obedience, first to the command to sacrifice Isaac, and then, at the last minute, to desist. But Kierkegaard calls our attention to the fact that Abraham's obedience is grounded in his trust in God's promises. "By faith Abraham emigrated from the land of his fathers and became an alien in the promised land. . . . By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed."<sup>6</sup>

The crucial issue is relational. The concern of Abraham's faith is to be and to remain in a right relation with God. There is no question that beliefs are involved here.<sup>7</sup> For Abraham the crucial belief is that there is a God who has given certain promises and commands. But this presupposes that God speaks, which in turn means that this God is truly personal; for the ability to perform speech acts would seem to be a necessary condition, possibly even a sufficient condition, of personhood. We do well to remember that for the Abrahamic monotheisms, the emphasis is not only on the oneness of God but on the personal character of God; for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worship a God who speaks, unless they have sold their soul to some extra-scriptural philosophy.<sup>8</sup> So the basic belief is not trivial, but precisely because of it faith must be understood as an I-Thou relation and not a failed attempt at some philosophical ideal of knowledge. It is a subject-subject relation, not a subject-object relation, and it is not self-evident that one can rightly trust the promises of God and obey the commands of God only if one has based this relation on Knowledge as defined by some extra-biblical philosophy.<sup>9</sup> That would involve the kind of spiritual elitism that Kierkegaard finds so odious in Hegel, who holds that philosophy provides the only truly adequate knowledge of God and that "Religion is for everyone. It is not philosophy, which is not for everyone."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>FT, 17.

<sup>7</sup>In *Sickness* the most central beliefs are that God (not nature, nor society, at least not ultimately) is the power that has established the self and that God offers forgiveness of sins, the various forms of misrelation to God and to self. In short, the beliefs are in God as Creator and Redeemer. In *Postscript* the central belief concerns the Incarnation, that the eternal God has become a particular human being and that our relation to God is mediated through this divine human being.

<sup>8</sup>On God as a performer of speech acts, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and my review, "On Reading God the Author," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 271–291.

<sup>9</sup>This does not preclude the possibility that the relation is between human communities and a personal God. But in *Fear and Trembling* the emphasis is on the individual so as to emphasize that God is the middle term between the individual and both the church and the state, and not the other way around. Kierkegaard's "attack upon Christendom" is already at work in *Fear and Trembling*. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Johannes Climacus bases a sustained case for spiritual egalitarianism on the notion that faith does not require the kind of knowledge philosophy sometimes requires, eliminating all risk and grounding one's security on one's own cognitive powers.

<sup>10</sup>Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. One-Volume Edition. The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 106.

Of course, one can reflect on the epistemic status of the beliefs ingredient in faith, but one must remember two things. First, it would be more than a little weird to assume that these beliefs can or should have the form of our beliefs in mathematics, natural science, or speculative metaphysics. *Prima facie* our knowledge of other human persons would provide the best analogy and clue, and it does not have these forms. Second, to engage in distanced reflection is to abstract from the fullness of faith. We need to avoid confusing the abstract, doxastic dimension of faith with its core concern of being rightly related to a personal God and thereby to oneself. The demons have the right, monotheistic metaphysics, we are told (James 2:19), but they do not have faith.

### *Reason*

Kierkegaard himself engages in such epistemic reflection. In so doing he challenges the assumption, typical of enlightened modernity, that reason in its autonomy has any rightful hegemony over faith, that the beliefs ingredient in faith require certification by reason. We need to be clear here about the meaning of our terms. For Kierkegaard, faith is a response to revelation, to the speech acts by which one has been addressed by God, and reason, in its most general sense, is the activity of human thought independent of divine revelation.

Thus, for example, in *Philosophical Fragments* Johannes Climacus argues that Christian faith rests on revelation and not on recollection, the assumption that unaided human thought has the ability to discover or at least to recognize the truth, in this instance about God. In *Postscript* he calls attention to the epistemic and existential risk involved in basing one's life on beliefs that are "objectively uncertain," incapable of the intuitive or discursive infallibility required and often promised by certain philosophical ideals of knowing. In other words, epistemic reflection calls attention to the distinctiveness of the beliefs ingredient in faith and exposes the dogmatism of the assumption that reason has a rightful hegemony over faith, either to dismiss it as irrational or to require it to be reinterpreted by the canons of a reason.<sup>11</sup> It's a bit like requiring astronomy and biology to justify themselves without the benefit of telescopes and microscopes.

The emphasis on the heterogeneity of faith and reason is especially strong in *Fear and Trembling*. In a Kantian tone of voice Kierkegaard describes human understanding as the "stockbroker of finitude." But beyond Kant, who emphasizes the *incapacity* of unaided human thought to grasp the divine as infinite, unconditioned, and eternal, Kierkegaard emphasizes the *incompatibility* of the worldview of reason with the worldview of faith.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>With regard to specific themes of Christian belief, Lessing is an example of the first strategy, Kant and Hegel of the second.

<sup>12</sup>Thus in *Postscript* Johannes Climacus insists that Christian faith is not merely beyond but more specifically "against the understanding" (*CUP* I, 565–566). We are dealing with what Paul Ricoeur calls a "conflict of interpretations," a radical conflict because the sources and norms of interpretation are different, not just the results.

He repeatedly uses three terms to express this conflict. *Vis-à-vis* reason as merely human understanding, faith will necessarily be seen as paradox,<sup>13</sup> as absurd,<sup>14</sup> and as madness.<sup>15</sup> These are relational, not intrinsic qualities.

There is a double relativity to this “irrationality” which needs emphasis. On the one hand, faith is not presented as intrinsically absurd but as bound to be seen as such from the standpoint of autonomous reason, which has left divine revelation out of account. To dismiss faith as “irrational” because it fails to conform to reason is to beg the questions of what ultimately makes sense and of what legitimate sources of knowledge are. It is to confuse the fact that faith will affirm what reason cannot confirm with the normative superiority of reason. As before, faith says to reason, “It is just as you say, and the amazing thing is that you think that it is an objection.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the paradoxical madness of faith, relative, as just noted, to “worldly understanding” and “human calculation,”<sup>17</sup> is also relative to the awesome transcendence of its “object,” the God who speaks on God’s own terms. Here Kierkegaard sounds more than a little like Rudolf Otto.<sup>18</sup> God is the *mysterium* precisely by being the *tremendum*.<sup>19</sup> Thus faith “shudders” and is “shattered” and “repelled” by its encounter with the “terror” (“terrible,” “terrifying”), the “*horror religiosus*,” the “dreadful.”<sup>20</sup> The God of biblical faith is not tame enough to fit without remainder into the horizons of the finite world of human speech and thought, the logos in terms of which reason defines itself.<sup>21</sup>

Kierkegaard also challenges modernity’s assumption that reason is ahistorically universal. He might have illustrated the historical particularity of “reason” with reference to the project of “religion within the limits of reason alone.”<sup>22</sup> In the seventeenth century, one of the most powerful versions of this project was Spinoza’s; in the eighteenth century, Kant’s; and in the nineteenth century, Hegel’s. But the project runs aground here. Each of these is fundamentally incompatible with the other two. Reason shows itself to be anything but univocal and universal. Lessing’s hope to

<sup>13</sup>FT, 33, 48–49, 51–53, 55–56, 62–66, 85, 88.

<sup>14</sup>FT, 34–37, 40, 46–51, 56, 59.

<sup>15</sup>FT, 17, 23, 76–77. *Silentio* calls faith a divine madness, referring to Plato, who speaks of “the superiority of heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity” (*Phaedrus*, 244d).

<sup>16</sup>PF, 52.

<sup>17</sup>FT, 17, 36.

<sup>18</sup>See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>19</sup>Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of the saturated phenomenon is also relevant here, with its notion of revelation as in excess of our ability to comprehend. See “The Saturated Phenomenon,” in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); *Being Given*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), Book IV; and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robin Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup>FT, 9, 33, 61, 72, 77–78, 114.

<sup>21</sup>FT, 46–47.

<sup>22</sup>This is indeed the name of a project undertaken by many and not just of a book by Kant.

find a universal religion of reason that would transcend the differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam<sup>23</sup> showed itself to be wishful thinking when reason's denominations turned out to be as different from each other as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

But Kierkegaard wants to show that the particularity of reason is not simply a matter of personal differences but of historical embeddedness. *Fear and Trembling* opens with a reference to "our age," and throughout the text with reference to matters aesthetic, ethical, and religious Kierkegaard calls attention to prevailing assumptions that differ from those of earlier ages. These are not just the superstitions that enlightened reason promises to dispel, but the very beliefs on which it prides itself. Thus, for example, while earlier ages thought that faith, like doubt and love, were tasks of a lifetime, never fully achieved, the present age proudly asserts that it has gone further than faith to the scientific system of philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, what calls itself reason turns out to be ideology, the self-defining and self-legitimizing discourse of a contemporary culture. Instead of being universal and necessary, it turns out to be both particular and contingent by virtue of the world it both reflects and ratifies. Having appeared on the literary scene in 1843, the same year as Marx, Kierkegaard suggests a non-materialist version of ideology critique.<sup>25</sup> It deflates the proud claims of Reason by showing it to be human, all too human.

An especially important way in which the present age is a particular culture rather than universal, pure reason is that it "has crossed out passion in order to serve science."<sup>26</sup> By science Kierkegaard clearly means detached, disinterested objectivity (both as a goal and a putative achievement). His reference is to the Hegelian system, though in our day reason's challenge to faith is more likely to be made in the name of the natural or social sciences than of speculative metaphysics.

### *Passion*

This brings us to our third theme, passion, which links our first two, faith and reason. Kierkegaard makes the following claims: that "the essentially

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<sup>23</sup>In *Nathan der Weise*.

<sup>24</sup>*FT*, 5–7, 121–123. The satire against "going further" runs throughout the text, but in these passages it is the bookends between which the entire text is placed. The system in question, of course, is the Hegelian system.

<sup>25</sup>I have developed this theme in *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987). Paul Ricoeur lists Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the "masters of suspicion," in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32. But Kierkegaard is equally a master of the hermeneutics of suspicion that detects particular self-interests hiding behind alleged universal objectivity and suggests that this hiddenness is not ignorance but self-deception (*FT*, 121).

<sup>26</sup>*FT*, 7. In this spirit, Charles Taylor writes, "Modern enlightened culture is very theory-oriented. We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings. . . . We can't accept that part of being good is opening ourselves to certain feelings." *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 555.

human is passion,"<sup>27</sup> that "faith is a passion,"<sup>28</sup> that faith is a "prodigious" and "supreme" passion,<sup>29</sup> and that "faith is the highest passion in a person."<sup>30</sup> The emotions he associates most closely with Abraham's faith are fear, trembling, distress, and anxiety.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, reason, in its scientific mode, is the attempt to become dispassionate. Like the ancient Stoics, but for different reasons, it wants to extirpate passion, to become apathetic, making *apatheia* the horizon of all human life.<sup>32</sup>

Here Kierkegaard anticipates his sustained contrast in *Two Ages* (a lengthy review of a current novel) between the present age as one of spiritless reflection and the revolutionary age as one of passion;<sup>33</sup> he complains that "what our generation lacks is not reflection but passion."<sup>34</sup> In an earlier draft he complained about his own age "whose insipid rationality has pumped all passion out of life."<sup>35</sup>

What is of interest to us here is that faith, so far from being inferior to reason by virtue of its passionate character, is precisely in this respect superior, more genuinely human. Reason without passion is as incomplete as reason without revelation. For religious questions and the closely related questions of ethics are about who we are and what we can and should do with our lives; and these questions deserve our passionate concern. Kierkegaard thinks it a vice, not a virtue, to try to become dispassionate about one's own existence.

*Fear and Trembling* does not help us very much in seeing how this might be true. Kierkegaard does not give us the phenomenology of passion that we would like.<sup>36</sup> He seems to think we can fill that in for ourselves. As

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<sup>27</sup>FT, 121.

<sup>28</sup>FT, 67.

<sup>29</sup>FT, 23.

<sup>30</sup>FT, 122.

<sup>31</sup>In *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard presents faith as the overcoming of various anxieties that the "heathen" have. The emphasis in *Fear and Trembling* on God as the *Tremendum* is not the whole story. "Anxiety" is the rendering in the earlier translation of *Christian Discourses* by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). In the later translation by the Hongs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), it is the "cares" of the pagans from which faith is free. But this can be misleading, for faith cares passionately about the relation to God.

<sup>32</sup>See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 9–10.

<sup>33</sup>Note the implication that reason is ideology, that the revolutionary conception of reason and the contemporary view of reason as systematic, speculative science represent two quite different modes of social self-legitimation.

<sup>34</sup>FT, 42n. In *Postscript* this becomes the complaint that what the System lacks is not objectivity but subjectivity, the "infinite, personal, passionate interest" in one's own existence (CUP 1, 29, 33, 55).

<sup>35</sup>FT, 257. The Preface to *Sickness Unto Death* contrasts the "earnestness" of the "ethical aspect of Christianity" that is concerned with upbuilding with the "scholarly distance" that is a "scientificity and scholarliness that is 'indifferent'" and is "a kind of inhuman curiosity" (SUD, 5).

<sup>36</sup>In addition to faith he identifies, randomly, other sites where passion appears: infinite resignation (FT, 42n), the willingness to distinguish, with Socrates, what one knows from

we attempt to do so, we can perhaps find some help in the “cognitive-evaluative” or “cognitive-intentional” understanding of the emotions that has gained widespread acceptance in recent philosophical discussion.<sup>37</sup> Although ordinary language doesn’t distinguish between passions, emotions, and feelings, clarity might be served if we do so as follows.

(1) To begin we can say that to have a passion for something is to care deeply about it.<sup>38</sup> To say of someone that he has a passion for, say, fly fishing, is not merely to say that he enjoys it. We enjoy many things that are not important enough to us to generate a passion. To have a passion for fly fishing is to care about it so deeply that it becomes part of one’s identity. Faith is a passion when we care deeply enough about our God relation that it becomes part of our identity; and faith becomes a “supreme” or “highest” passion when the God relation is the most important part of our identity.

(2) Our next thesis is that a passion is a disposition to have emotions such as grief, fear, love, joy, hope, anger, gratitude, hatred, envy, jealousy, pity, guilt, compassion, wonder, reverence, awe in the presence of certain beliefs.<sup>39</sup> Thus if I have a passion for fly fishing I may feel anger if I believe someone has stolen my rod and flies; I may feel envy if I believe someone has better equipment than mine or has a summer cottage I can’t afford near a great stream; and I may feel gratitude if I believe someone has recovered the stolen rod and flies or invited me to spend time at that cottage.

(3) In speaking of feeling anger, or envy, or gratitude I have acknowledged that emotions include feelings. The most natural way to speak about what anger is is to speak about what it feels like to be angry.<sup>40</sup> This feeling might be in part a bodily sensation such as a knot in the stomach

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what one doesn’t know (*FT*, 42n), irony and humor (*FT*, 51), repentance (*FT*, 99, 102), and love (*FT*, 121). He links passion with the understanding of faith as the task of a lifetime, always unfinished (*FT*, 7, 121–123). He links passion with the leap as opposed to mediation, his shorthand, borrowed from Lessing and Hegel, for the realm of objective uncertainty where I have to decide what to do or believe without the guarantees that some impersonal reason will make my decision for me (*FT*, 42n).

<sup>37</sup>I shall be drawing especially on the “neo-Stoic” view as developed by Martha Nussbaum historically in *The Therapy of Desire* and systematically in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The quoted phrases to describe the theory are from the latter. See also A Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge, 1963); G. Pitcher, “Emotion,” in *Mind* 74 (1965): 326–346; R. C. Solomon, *The Passions* (New York: Doubleday, 1976); and R. C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) and “Existence, Emotion and Character: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard,” in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177–206.

<sup>38</sup>Harry Frankfurt’s “The Importance of What We Care About” is therefore important for any account of faith as a passion. See *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80–94.

<sup>39</sup>This list is drawn from Nussbaum, *Upheaval*, 24, 54, 297ff.

<sup>40</sup>I’m obviously alluding to Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165–180. Nussbaum argues that we cannot assume that there is a single feeling, in this sense, that is uniformly found in each emotion.

or a felt increase in the pulse rate or breathing rate. Thus it can be what philosophers sometimes call “raw feels,” like a tickle or an itch or an ache. This dimension of emotions can be described as non-cognitive and, in that sense, irrational.<sup>41</sup>

(4) But emotions cannot be reduced to these “kinetic and affective” aspects.<sup>42</sup> As already indicated, they presuppose two other elements, a caring about something and a believing that something is the case. Only if, for example, I care about fly fishing and believe that you have been helpful to me (in this regard) will I feel gratitude toward you (in this regard).<sup>43</sup>

(5) Emotions, then, can be seen as complex wholes with three distinct aspects: caring, believing, and feeling.<sup>44</sup> The feeling component may be non-cognitive, but the emotion as a whole is not. It can be described as “rational,” an exercise of human reason, in three ways. First, it is intentional. It is about something or someone in a way that “raw feels” are not. I am angry at him, grateful to her, and so forth. Second, it has the form of a judgment, an evaluative judgment. It is a seeing as, a construal, an interpretation of something or someone with respect to what concerns me or what I care about. Third, because of its link to factual beliefs, it is subject to rational critique and, at least to some degree, to rational modification. If I am reminded that I lent my fishing equipment to my cousin and he did not steal it, my anger will be assuaged (unless it has some deeper, hidden motivating belief). In this sense emotions can be shown to be justified or unjustified.

(6) There is another sense in which the complex whole that is an emotion can be subject to rational evaluation, though this is likely to be more problematic. Whether or not my emotion is justified depends in part on whether the factual beliefs ingredient in it are true. But it also depends on

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<sup>41</sup>C. Stephen Evans points out that feelings in this sense are not what Kierkegaard means by passion and that a person whose life is governed by such “momentary feelings” or “involuntary urges” is pretty much what Frankfurt (see note 38) calls a “wanton.” *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21–22. Frankfurt’s notion of a wanton and Kierkegaard’s notion of the aesthetic stage or sphere of existence are at least first cousins.

<sup>42</sup>Nussbaum, *Upheaval*, 44.

<sup>43</sup>Frankfurt calls attention to the fact that sometimes we care about things because we believe they are important (as opposed to their becoming important because we care about them, like fly fishing), and Nussbaum notes that these beliefs can be culture-relative. Frankfurt, *Importance*, 92–93 and Nussbaum, *Therapy*, 38–39.

<sup>44</sup>I am deliberately speaking rather loosely, not trying to settle debates that do not directly concern my argument. Thus, Nussbaum raises the question whether the beliefs are constituent parts, necessary conditions, or sufficient conditions of emotions. They can hardly be sufficient conditions, since lacking the caring element the beliefs would not give rise to emotions. Rather than choose between the other options, I am content to say with her, rather vaguely, “Emotions . . . involve judgments [or beliefs] about important things.” *Upheaval*, 19, 34. Nor am I trying to settle the debate over whether we should speak of beliefs or belief-like states that involve construals on the ground that the former are involuntary and the latter somewhat voluntary. I am inclined to see all beliefs as construals, most of which, if not all, are a messy mix of voluntary and involuntary. See Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

whether what I care about, and in the case of a passion, what I care about so deeply that it becomes part of my identity, is worth caring about.<sup>45</sup>

Some things are worth caring about because they provide a pleasure sufficiently free from negative factors (for me or for others, including the environment) that cancel out this good. In a eudaimonistic framework, Nussbaum sees things as worth caring about in terms of their contribution to our flourishing, which, in an Aristotelian manner, is not equated with pleasure. In either case, what is worthwhile may be person-relative or culture-relative. But in the latter case there may be aspects of human flourishing distinctive of the human as such and thus worth caring about for everyone (as fly fishing obviously is not).

Biblical religion makes such a claim for the God relation. Whether such a claim is justified depends on whether there is a God, what this God may be like, and who we are. Such metaphysical matters are controversial and open to debate. But just as it would be sheer dogmatism to assume that reason, in the sense of human thought without the benefit of divine revelation, has an a priori privilege over faith, in the sense of human thought informed by divine revelation, so it would be question-begging to discredit faith because it is a passion that gives rise to a rich and complex emotional life before God, including fear, guilt, grief (sorrow for sin), love, joy, gratitude, compassion, wonder, reverence, and awe. For if the biblical picture of God is right, such emotions are in principle well justified value judgments and fundamental to human flourishing.

The opponent might respond that it is all right for well founded beliefs to give rise to emotions; the problem is that in religion it is emotions that give rise to beliefs, and this is irrational. Here we meet Plato again and his fear that the "lower" parts of the soul (appetitive and spirited) will rule the "higher" part. But this seems to presuppose that emotions are merely affective, feelings in the sense of raw feels. If, however, emotions are complexly cognitive, they may be well founded judgments, and there is no obvious reason why they should not play a role in the life of belief. The task is to sort out the good ones from the bad ones. The fact that this is no easy task is no good reason to dismiss the emotions wholesale.

That our emotions and the passions that give rise to them are neither good nor bad *per se* is Aristotelian. Thus, for example, the rational task is to learn how to be angry "with the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way." This is not easy, but it is "rare, praiseworthy, and noble."<sup>46</sup> It is within this horizon that Roberts can point out that some virtues, like compassion and gratitude,

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<sup>45</sup>Unless I am a positivist, I will not think that my judgments about what is worth caring about are themselves merely expressions of emotions.

<sup>46</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109a, 27–29.

are dispositions to the emotions whose name they bear,<sup>47</sup> and Nussbaum can argue that emotions have a proper role to play in moral reasoning.<sup>48</sup>

Kierkegaard seems to presuppose something like this analysis of our affective life and to extend it from the moral to the religious life. Religious life has gone astray, to be sure, when it rests on bad emotions or nourishes them. But this is just as true of secular life, and the politics of resentment, for example, is not an aid to personal flourishing or to the common pursuit of the common good. In neither case is the problem with emotion and passion as such.

So, in sum, Kierkegaard argues that when we pay sufficient attention to what faith, and reason, and emotion really are, we will not be in a position to say that faith is irrational because it rests on feeling rather than knowledge.

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<sup>47</sup>Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, especially chapter 2.

<sup>48</sup>Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 3.