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## Rick Anthony Furtak, WISDOM IN LOVE: KIERKEGAARD AND THE ANCIENT QUEST FOR EMOTIONAL INTEGRITY

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Part of God's being "good to us" includes God's not depersonalizing us by robbing us of our volitional agency.

Some people, including Thomas Nagel according to his published writing, do not want to live in a universe governed by God, and they have this striking want resolutely, after careful consideration. God would not be good at all in suppressing their personal agency in this regard; in fact, God would then be a depersonalizing tyrant. If we hold, however, that God has no moral obligations toward human, we will then be open to holding that God need not respect human agency or robust, freedom-based love among and toward humans at all. We then risk obscuring the vast difference between a morally perfect God worthy of worship and a depersonalizing tyrant (regardless of that tendency in various medieval and later Reformed theologians). That would be a horror indeed. We all need a straightforward conception of God that clearly defeats that horror. Otherwise, an account of horror-defeat will seem to be a parlor game at best or, at worst, our alleged horror-defeater will be the worst Horror.

The apostle Paul is right in suggesting that this world has been subjected to frustration and futility by God, in divine hope that people will enter into "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:20–21). Even so, his God, in honoring "glorious freedom," does not rob people of their volitional agency. Otherwise, there would be no agents to enjoy the "glorious freedom" uniting the children of God. We still lack an account of why God's subjecting creation to futility or defeating horrors is at times and places so humanly painful, even crushing. If the closing chapters of the book of Job are on the right track, we should not hold our collective breath while waiting for the account. We may not be up to an account, or at least God may have no good purpose served by offering one to us now. Still, we can take some comfort in the fact that our having conclusive evidence of divine reality does not require our having any such account, and, in this horror-drenched world, we should take all the good comfort we can get.

*Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, by Rick Anthony Furtak. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. Pp. xii + 236. \$45.00 (hardback), \$22.00 (paper).

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This is a beautifully revised University of Chicago dissertation. If, in a dissertation topic, one is looking for something that connects richly with a current research focus (not to say craze) that is at the same time widely interdisciplinary, nicely matched with an interesting historical figure who has not yet been much exploited in that connection, and of intrinsic philosophical interest and human importance, it is hard to imagine being more successful than Rick Anthony Furtak in picking a dissertation topic. Emotions (even the cool and calm ones) are currently hot in academic life, and Søren Kierkegaard has much to say about them that is deep and interesting and not found elsewhere.

Furtak weaves here a discussion of emotions and ethics (both in a broad sense), by staging a kind of conversation between Stoicism and some writings of Kierkegaard. Roughly, Furtak accepts the Stoics' theory of emotions and rejects their metaphysics of value, and offers an interpretation of Kierkegaard in terms of this acceptance and rejection. Kierkegaard turns out to be a kind of Stoic on the question of what emotions are, but radically opposed to the Stoics' understanding of emotions' moral and spiritual significance.

Furtak limits himself, in this study, to the religiousness of "immanence" that one of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors calls religiousness A (see *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), the Socratic kind of religiousness that Kierkegaard thinks can be achieved without aid of special revelation. Thus, despite Furtak's personal concern "about (broadly speaking) Augustinian Christianity," this book omits the concepts of sin, atonement, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, Christ as the Way, the Holy Spirit, apostleship, and related concepts from the account of Kierkegaard on the emotions.<sup>1</sup> This is a significant limitation, given that Kierkegaard's self-described mission for his writings was that of reintroducing *Christianity* to a partially secularized Christendom.

The framework for the book is Kierkegaard's "stages"—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—and Furtak's strategy is to give a neo-Stoic account of the transitions between these stages. The primary example of an emotion is love, a theme that conveniently runs through all of Kierkegaard's stages. The emphasis on love as the primary emotion yields a less individualistic Kierkegaard than we may be used to.

As opposed to the 'isolated self' of the Stoic, the Kierkegaardian self is open and engaged in a network of caring relationships which define its identity. This is why we betray ourselves when we resist love's influence: we are who we are by virtue of what we love. (p. 109)

Furtak finds a middle way between a radical voluntarism of the emotions, according to which we have full control over our emotions and simply "choose" them, and a radical passivism of the emotions, according to which emotions just happen to us.

Love is not a product of the will, and the mode of receptivity in which value is perceived is not one in which the self projects value outward; but passionate impressions are not so coercive that we are entirely passive in yielding to them, either. (p. 120)

Furtak thus also rejects a subjectivism or constructivism of value according to which values have no objective standing in the nature of things, but are just human projections or inventions. He twice quotes *Fear and Trembling* to the effect that

If underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that, writhing in dark passions, produced everything, be it significant

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<sup>1</sup>Personal communication. I am indebted to Furtak for help with this review.

or insignificant; if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything—what would life be then except despair? (quoted on p. 50, and again on p. 117)

Similarly, Furtak rejects Rortyan constructivism:

[Richard] Rorty's ideal of "giving birth to oneself" is the pipe dream of a defiant pride, a goal predicated upon an untenable belief in the absolute freedom of the will; "passionate acceptance" of one's received individuality, on the other hand, is based on a more realistic appreciation of what is *not* up to us. (pp. 106–107)

Furtak has a strong internalist requirement of justification for rationality of emotions (see more below).

The book contains 60 pages of scholarly footnotes for just 140 pages of text, making it a rich guide for someone interested in studying what Kierkegaard thinks about emotions. According to the Stoics, emotions have two main parts. The first is an *impression* or *perception* of something as having a certain value, either positive or negative. In this first aspect, then, joy would be an impression of some state of affairs as good, and fear an impression of some impending evil. Because value is an important aspect of the object of the impression, the impression is likely to have a motivating character: the subject will undergo some urge to pursue the good or avoid the evil, for example. But the impression itself is not yet an emotion; it is only a "prepassion" or "first movement"—a sort of potential emotion. The second necessary condition for a mental state's being an emotion is the subject's *assent* to the value-impression. The subject has to take a "yes"-attitude toward the impression; a value-impression from which the subject dissents, or withholds assent, is not an emotion. Thus the Stoics think of emotions as a kind of perceptual *judgment* concerning a state of affairs in the dimension of its value. They also think that all emotions are about contingent states of affairs that are outside of human control.

The Stoics hold that all emotions are *false* judgments. The reason is that their metaphysics of value says that only two kinds of thing have value. The universe as a whole, being a beautifully harmonious and rational system, is one good thing. Another is the mind of the perfected Stoic sage, which mirrors the universe in its rationality and harmony. One would think that either of these could be the proper object of joy (and perhaps the failure of most of our minds to reflect the rational order of the universe a proper object of regret), but the Stoics don't, to my knowledge, dwell on this; and if they admitted it, they would have to think of the mental state as something other than an emotion; perhaps it is a "eupatheia." (The state of the universe as a whole is certainly beyond our control, but it isn't contingent; the conformity or not of the sage's mind to the order in the universe is contingent and is the *only* thing that is officially within human control.) Sometimes they seem to make it a necessary condition of an emotion that it be *disturbing*. At any rate, the vast majority of emotions, being attributions of values to situations other than the state of the whole universe or the state of people's minds, are *false* judgments because they attribute goodness or badness to things that are neither good nor bad. In emotions, contingent situa-

tions falsely appear to be good or bad, and are affirmed to be such, because of distortion created by the subject's personally involved point of view.

The conversation with Stoicism shapes Furtak's interpretation of the transitions from the aesthetic to the ethical stages, and from the ethical to the religious. Furtak follows Aristotle and Kierkegaard, against the Stoics and Kant, in making proper emotion-dispositions an essential aspect of the well formed, mature personality. The Stoic theory of the emotions provides the clue to the first transition. The problem with Kierkegaard's aesthete, on the neo-Stoic interpretation, is that he lacks a history of assenting to his emotional impressions (see pp. 74, 87–88), so the prescription for his transition to the ethical stage will be to start assenting to them. Furtak derives a conception of the second transition by inverting what he takes to be the Stoics' argument concerning their metaphysics of value. Only the religious person, who grasps love as a metaphysical structure of the universe, is adequately justified in taking his emotional life to be valid. The first transition gives the emotional life structure (thus character), the second gives it a ground (thus justification).

Kierkegaard's aesthete characteristically "plays" with his emotions. He takes a kind of spectator's view of them, "entertains" them so as to be entertained by them. He is preoccupied with keeping his experiences fresh and interesting, and thinks he can do so by preventing them from becoming dispositions, getting settled and *characteristic of him*. So he is an enemy of the kind of stolidity that he associates with having character traits. A prime example of this is his attitude toward romantic love. He is afraid that love will get old and lose its charm, and so he avoids commitment above all else.

How does withholding assent from an emotional impression prevent character-development? It seems to me the effect must be based in the structure of romantic love as an evaluative perception. Let us say the propositional content of this impression is something like the following: *She is uniquely splendid and precious; she is mine and I am hers forever.*<sup>2</sup> The qualifiers *uniquely* and *forever* have special bearing on character, inasmuch as they imply monogamous faithfulness, commitment, and steadfastness over time. The aesthete likes being charmed by his romantic love, but he is threatened by its implications. A plausible solution to his dilemma is to refuse to let the impression be more than an impression—to withhold his assent from it. Even if the neo-Stoic is wrong in denying that romantic love without assent is an emotion, there seems to be something to the idea that withholding assent is a way of preventing the emotion from getting a grip on one's life. Other emotions will also have character-bearing propositional content. Instances of Christian joy may be examples. The apostle Paul seems to think that redemption by the death of Jesus has implications for one's character (and thus behavior); were a person to rejoice about *such* redemption, and assent to the propositional content of *that* joy, he would be in for some strenuous living. So a religious aesthete might find it convenient to "toy" with such joy, feeling it in the excitement of the religious service but with a certain caution about assenting to its propositional content.

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<sup>2</sup>In this analysis I am elaborating on Furtak, who does not offer analyses of the content of emotions that is supposedly assented to.

But the neo-Stoic thesis that assent to emotions is the key to character-development needs to be qualified in several ways. First, not all emotions have character-implicating propositional content. People rejoice, for example, over the convenience of their new cell-phone. Such an emotion seems to apply little pressure for ethical development. Assenting to it will not tend to lift one from the aesthetic to the ethical stage. Second, some emotions have content that is *contrary* to ethical development. Envy has a justifiably bad reputation, at least in Christian circles, in large part because what it “says” is false: it says, *my value as a person depends on my equaling or bettering so-and-so’s X (beauty, intelligence, success, etc.), so it would be good for me if so-and-so did not possess X*. Furtak sometimes refers to “giving or withholding assent to immediate emotional impressions” (italics added), but does not make the extirpation of morally low-grade emotions a theme. Third, the object of some character-implicating emotions needs to be very particular for assent to that emotion to be good for one’s character. A person who assents to romantic love will develop character only if the person toward whom he directs that love is the *same* person across time. It is better for a college professor’s character to *dissent* from romantic feelings that he may feel from time to time toward some of his beautiful students. This more “Stoic” aspect of character-development by extirpation of selected emotions gets very little treatment in *Wisdom in Love*.

But assent to values itself seems to be only an aspect of moral character. Surely, many people assent to the content of the emotions they feel in their better moments, like compassion, or outrage at injustice, without being fully compassionate or just. The best emotions need to be steady, and they need to be connected to action-dispositions. We might say that felt compassion that does not dispose one to compassionate action thereby shows that the subject does not “really” assent to its propositional content. But this response raises the question about what assent is, after all. Is the assent the neo-Stoic has in mind just a disposition sincerely to say “yes” to the emotion’s content, or is something more (something “deeper”) needed? The neo-Stoic concept of assent also needs work, and I would predict that once the work is done, we will be well beyond anything people would usually call assent.

I wonder, too, whether some ethical virtues do not involve the capacity for partially fictional emotions—ones from whose propositional content the subject withholds assent. Let’s say that gratitude involves crediting a person with benevolent intentions for the action for which one is grateful to the person. Perhaps it is virtuous to be “generously” grateful—that is, to feel gratitude in situations where one is not sure that the giver was benevolently motivated, or even where one strongly suspects that the giver was not benevolently motivated.

On Furtak’s neo-Stoic interpretation, the second transition—from the ethical to the religious—is a matter of standing a certain “Stoic” argument about values on its head. The argument goes like this:

Only if some emotion is true, does some state of affairs have value.  
But no emotion is true, so no state of affairs has value. Love is justified only if some state of affairs has value. Therefore love is not justified.

We invert the argument by altering the first premise and denying the second:

If some emotion is true, then some state of affairs has value. Some emotions are true, so some state of affairs has value. If some state of affairs has value, then love is justified; so love is justified.

A succinct anti-Stoic formula would be: *Since some emotions are true judgments, something in the universe is lovable.*

Judge William (*Either/Or*, volume 2) represents the “ethical” stage. On Furtak’s interpretation, Judge William falls short of emotional maturity on two related counts. He is a partisan of a merely local morality (p. 87), following a Hegelian model of morality as *Sittlichkeit*; and he lacks moral imagination. (The aesthete was characterless, but in his boundless imagination of human possibilities he had something right.) The problem with a merely local morality, for a moral realist with classical foundationalist leanings like Furtak, is that it’s shaky ground. You don’t *know* you’re right, so if you became reflective, the instability of your position would become evident (p. 87); your supposedly solid character would be undermined. This is Judge William’s situation, on Furtak’s view. If one could know that something in the universe is lovable, one would escape both of Judge William’s moral liabilities. How could one know that something in the universe is lovable?

Here Furtak’s argument seems to me a little dim, but I think the answer is something like the following. Certain people, through moral-spiritual growth that involves both character (seriousness about their emotions) and imagination, come to see that the underlying structure of the universe is love. Kierkegaard seems to have been one of these people. This truth is of course not known through the slick little argument of a couple of paragraphs ago, with its unproven premise that some emotions are true. Rather, through living with integrity and imagination, inside one’s emotions (whose structure even the Stoics admit to be that of a truth-claiming perception), one comes to *see* that the universe is basically characterized by love. The potential to see this is built into human nature in its interaction with the universe, and to know this is to have it all, morally: the imagination of the aesthete, the character of Judge William (both properly transformed, of course), and the metaphysical foundation of the religious sage.

Is it true that “the tacit premise that something external to our moral control is of value . . . according to the Stoics, is false” (p. 91)? The Stoics think that the universe, in its perfect rational order (which surely is “something external to our moral control”) does have value. See Seneca, “On Providence.” So some Stoics do seem to believe in love, though they would deny that it is a passion. It looks to me as though Furtak confuses the Stoics with existentialists like Sartre and Camus.

The concept of love in the inverted “Stoic” argument and in the book more generally needs work. At least two concepts seem to be run together. The kind of “love” that is justified if some emotion is true is not *agape*, but just concern—for whatever. Furtak writes,

It is not an incidental fact about us that we are loving or caring beings—rather, it is “a structuring condition of the universe of our

possibilities." Along the same lines, Heidegger<sup>3</sup> writes: "It is not the case that objects are first present as bare realities, as objects in some natural state, and that they then in the course of our experience receive the garb of a value-character, so they do not have to run around naked." From the point of view of an unloving [read: affectively flat] observer, it would not even be self-evident that the external world exists. (p. 101; the first quotation is from Jonathan Lear)

Emotions all presuppose some kind of concern, some kind of caring about things; but in this sense even hatred is love—love of the destruction or suffering of what one hates. The other concept of love, the one that operates in the conclusion that something is lovable, is in the neighborhood of Christian *agape*; such a love, if it were true, could function as the ground of an excellent character and life. Furtak is aware of this distinction and writes of "love [being] cultivated into a caring, unselfish disposition" (p. 121; see p. 98), but we would like to see careful analysis of the distinction and of how the one kind of "love" may develop into the other. I say "at least" two concepts of love are run together, because others are also relevant to the discussion. Kierkegaard distinguishes preferential love from neighbor love (*agape*), and of course there are different kinds of preferential love—friendship, family affection, romantic attachment. But Furtak does not clarify and use these distinctions. Nor does he deal with the problem, in Kierkegaard interpretation, of the accessibility of *agape* to human experience. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard says that neighbor-love was not known to paganism, implying that it is known only through Christian revelation; but he sometimes also seems to treat it as though it is naturally accessible.

*Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status*, by James Anderson. Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2007. Pp. xii + 328. \$43 (paper).

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As far as I know, this book is the all-time most sophisticated, well developed, and plausible defense of the idea that Christians may rationally believe and know apparently contradictory doctrines. Theological literature on "mysteries" is too often marred with unclarity, epistemic carelessness and confusion, and even mystery-mongering, that is, perverse delight in inconsistency (apparent and/or real). In contrast, this book by a philosophically informed and capable young theologian sparkles with Plantingian clarity, sobriety, intellectual honesty, originality, and analytic power (and also, with a lot of Plantingian epistemology, as we'll see.)

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<sup>3</sup>Heidegger's 'Sorge' seems a better term for the generalized disposition that lies at the basis of all emotional life than 'love.' *Sorge* (as directed at contingent states of affairs) is more properly the opposite of Stoic *apatheia*.