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## REASONS OF THE HEART: Emotions in Apologetics

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### SYNOPSIS

Contrary to the popular view that emotions are essentially nonrational feelings, emotions are evaluative perceptions that convey information. This is significant for apologetics because emotions can help us to “see” features of the world that reveal God’s existence and divine attributes. The distinctive emotional life of the Christian also can serve as a kind of apologetic evidence for the truth of Christianity. Christian apologists thus should not neglect or ignore the emotions, but instead must learn how to cultivate accurate emotional perceptions in themselves and others so that, in the words of the apostle Paul, “the eyes of [our] hearts” might be “enlightened” (Eph. 2:18).

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In his classic apologetic work, *Pensées*, French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote that “the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing...It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason.”<sup>1</sup> While Pascal understood “the heart” to be the seat of all intuitive knowledge and not merely the seat of the emotions, the emotions are crucially important for such intuitive knowledge, especially the intuitive knowledge that comes through perceptual experience of God. Though the significance of emotions for apologetics is often overlooked and even explicitly rejected, emotions can aid Christian apologetics by functioning as evidence for God and for the truth of Christianity.

### THE EYES OF OUR HEARTS

Contrary to the popular view that emotions are essentially nonrational (or, worse, irrational) “feelings,” a growing number of psychologists and philosophers contend that emotions have cognitive content and are a kind of perception that provides information to us about our world.<sup>2</sup> Emotions present various features of the world to our minds in a characteristically perceptual way. Unlike sense perceptions, which present the physical features of the world to our minds, emotions are evaluative

perceptions of nonphysical features of the world; they present the value or disvalue of their objects to our minds. In fear, the object of fear really seems dangerous. In anger, the object really appears to be morally culpable for a serious injustice. In compassion, we perceive the object of our compassion as a being of worth whose suffering ought to be remedied.

As it is with sense perception, so it is with emotional perception—we often believe because we perceive. Emotions also are like sense perceptions in that they can be accurate or inaccurate; they can get their objects right or wrong. Recognizing that we often fear things that are not dangerous, get angry when no injustice has been committed, and feel less compassion than suffering individuals are due, many people reject the idea that emotions can be rational, reliable guides to truth at all. To do so, however, is to cut ourselves off from an important source of knowledge. As C. S. Lewis cautioned in *The Abolition of Man*, the solution to the problem of unreliable emotional perceptions is not to stop trusting our emotions altogether, but rather to work toward the cultivation of more accurate emotional perceptions (or “just sentiments”): “The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Christian apologists should not neglect or ignore the emotions, but instead must learn how to cultivate accurate emotional perceptions in themselves and others so that, in the words of the apostle Paul, “the eyes of [our] hearts” might be “enlightened” (Eph. 2:18).<sup>4</sup>

### **EMOTIONAL EVIDENCE FOR GOD**

Emotions, as evaluative perceptions, can help us to “see” features of the world that point to God’s existence and His attributes, and they can even help us to experience (perceive) God Himself. Of course, they can do so only when they are functioning properly; that is, when our emotional vision has not been too blurred or blinded by sin or other sources of emotional malformation. As is the case with other kinds of evidence for God, the emotional evidence for God is easily missed by those who are not looking and by those who, on account of emotional malformation, do not have “eyes to see.” Fortunately, just as sin has not completely deformed our physical senses or our ability to reason, neither has sin completely destroyed our ability to see the world rightly through our emotions.

### **Emotions about Creation**

Many people, for example, possess emotional evidence for God in the form of their emotional perceptions of the beauty, grandeur, and order of creation. The Psalmist observes, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). To perceive the physical properties of the world such as size, shape, and sound, we need our physical senses, but to perceive and fully appreciate the beauty, grandeur, and elegant order of creation, we need emotions. In particular, we need emotions such as wonder and awe. As N. T. Wright observes, “Beauty, whether in

the natural order or within human creation, is sometimes so powerful that it evokes our deepest feelings of awe, wonder, gratitude, and reverence.”<sup>5</sup> G. K. Chesterton likewise recounts that it was, in part, his own emotions of wonder and astonishment toward creation that led him to discover the truth of Christianity:

*Even nursery tales only echo an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement. These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water.*

*...though we walk the streets with a sort of half-witted admiration, still it is admiration...The wonder has a positive element of praise...Here I am only trying to describe the enormous emotions that cannot be described. And the strongest emotion was that life was as precious as it was puzzling.*<sup>6</sup>

While Wright, Chesterton, and other Christian apologists have recognized the profound emotion-evoking power of the cosmos, few have endeavored to explain why it is that humans respond emotionally to creation and just what this has to do with the evidence for God. Perhaps this is due to the common assumption, expressed here by Chesterton, that the relevant emotions themselves cannot be explained or described. To its credit, the perceptual account of emotions introduced in the previous section makes possible just such an explanation.

Wonder, like other emotions, is a perception of value. Specifically, wonder is a perception of some object as great or excellent in ways that we did not expect or are not accustomed to experiencing and that we do not fully comprehend.<sup>7</sup> Such greatness can take many forms. We wonder at the vastness of the solar system, the organized complexities of the human body, the beauty of a sunset, the depth of a mother’s love for her child, and the mind’s ability to learn. In wonder, we enjoy a glimpse of the greatness of the object and that glimpse serves as a sign of the extent of the object’s greatness, which we in our initial encounter have not yet fully discovered.

The greatness of creation that we perceive through wonder also serves as a sign of the greatness of the Mind responsible for its beauty and grandeur. For the greatness we perceive through wonder typically defies explanations that appeal solely to chance physical processes. Wonder thus often gives rise to other emotions, such as awe and admiration, through which we see and admire in the beauty and grandeur of the universe the handiwork of a very good, intelligent, and powerful Artist. We marvel at the artistic genius of Michelangelo as it is expressed and reflected in his sculpture of David and his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; how much more do we stand in awe at the creative Genius who sculpted Michelangelo himself, as well as the original David, not out of stone but out of flesh and bone, and whose artistry is manifest in every breathtaking sunset and magnificent mountain vista.

Moreover, when we recognize that creation is an astonishingly good gift to us, this amounts to evidence for God in the form of yet another emotion—namely, gratitude. Recounting his own spiritual and intellectual journey to Christianity,

Chesterton writes, "The test of all human happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?"<sup>8</sup>

Chesterton's feelings of gratefulness for his own existence seemed to him to point to the existence of a great Giver of Life. Our perceptual account of emotions can help us understand how gratitude can function as evidence for the existence and goodness of God.

The emotion of gratitude, like the other emotions we have been exploring, is more than a mere physiological feeling. To be sure, gratitude does have a characteristically positive feel or affect, but, like other emotions, gratitude presents us with information about the world. Indeed, gratitude is a complex perception of a situation as involving at least three things: a good gift, a generous giver, and oneself (or someone for whom one cares) as the recipient.<sup>9</sup> In other words, gratitude is a way of "seeing" or experiencing oneself as the recipient of a good gift from a generous benefactor. Therefore, gratitude toward a gift only God can give, such as a miraculous healing or pregnancy, the beauty of a spring morning, or life itself, forces the thoughtful atheist to choose between rejecting her atheism or disbelieving her eyes—that is, the eyes of her heart.<sup>10</sup> This is the truth behind the oft-cited quip that "the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank."<sup>11</sup> Gratitude, then, together with wonder and awe, can serve as evidence that points to the existence and divine character of God.

### **Moral Emotions**

Other common emotional evidence for God comes in the form of emotional perceptions of morality. Through a variety of "moral emotions," including admiration, indignation, anger, guilt, and contrition, we can see that some actions, emotions, attitudes, and beliefs are morally good (just, admirable, praiseworthy, etc.) and others are morally bad (unjust, condemnable, blameworthy, etc.). It is one thing to believe that the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was evil. It is quite another thing to feel indignation toward the perpetrators of the genocide or to be horrified by the fact that hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children were beaten, raped, and brutally hacked to death by machetes. In emotions such as moral horror and indignation, the evilness and injustice of the genocide is presented to the mind in much the way that the blue-green color of the spruces in my backyard is presented to my mind when I look at them; that is, the genocide really appears evil in and through these emotions. Likewise, when we experience the emotion of guilt, we appear to ourselves as being culpable for some moral offense. On the positive side, when we experience admiration toward virtuous moral exemplars like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Jesus Himself, we do not just believe that they are morally excellent; we also perceive their moral excellence.

Herein lies the evidential, apologetic value of the moral emotions. Emotions enable us to see for ourselves and really grasp the evilness of genocide, the sinfulness of our own thoughts and actions, and the moral excellence of our exemplars. They enable us to perceive, and thereby prompt us to believe, that there is a moral law and, at least in the case of guilt, that we are subject to it.<sup>12</sup> This is the starting point for traditional moral arguments for the existence of God. According to such arguments, if we can help the nonbeliever to see that there is an objective moral law, then we are on our way to demonstrating the existence of a divine Moral Lawgiver. We might even be able to experience God Himself (and help others to do the same) through emotions in which we see ourselves in relation to Him, such as contrition or reverential fear of the Lord.

Of course, moral arguments that appeal to emotions are often met with the objection that emotions cannot possibly serve as evidence for the existence of an objective moral law. After all, what could be more subjective than our emotions? As one young adult recently articulated the view in an interview with sociologist Christian Smith, "What makes something right? I mean for me I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it, but different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else as to what's right and what's wrong."<sup>13</sup>

In response, while it certainly is true that different people can perceive the same moral situation with very different and even conflicting emotions, this is no reason to give up trusting our moral emotions altogether. If a friend visits my house and reports that he cannot see the blue-green color of my spruces, I should not take this as a strong reason to give up my perceptual belief about the trees' color. Likewise, if someone tells me that she cannot see what was so bad about the Rwandan genocide (or the Holocaust, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks, etc.) because she does not feel any negative moral emotions toward it, or she has a negative emotion but thinks it is just her private feeling, the rational thing to do would be to doubt the moral-emotional maturity of my interlocutor, not to doubt my own moral-emotional perception of the evilness of the genocide. Fortunately, most people are not so emotionally malformed that they cannot see the evilness of the Rwandan genocide and other obvious violations of the moral law (through, e.g., compassion, indignation, moral horror, etc.) when confronted with the details of the event.

While it is important to remain humble about the accuracy of our emotional perceptions, recognizing that we are fallible creatures and that our emotions sometimes misperceive their objects, it also is important not to ignore the evidence for objective morality that comes to us through our moral emotions. Since emotions can serve as a kind of direct, perceptual evidence for the reality of their objects, Christian apologists should learn how to evoke accurate emotional perceptions of morality, as well as the beauty and goodness of creation. They must also learn how to appeal effectively (and not manipulatively) to such emotional perceptions as evidence for God.

### **THE EVIDENTIAL POWER OF CHRISTIAN EMOTIONS**

In addition to helping people perceive God and His divine character through creation and its moral order, emotions can serve as evidence for Christianity in yet another way.

In a passage that has become a kind of motto for Christian apologetics, Peter admonished Christians living in the first-century Roman empire, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). This verse is often quoted as evidence that Christians have an obligation to prepare themselves with well-reasoned arguments for the truth of Christianity, especially when its truth is called into question by non-Christian skeptics.

While that is one important implication of the passage, notice that Peter’s admonition is not concerned primarily with responding to the doubts of skeptics; rather, he emphasizes the importance of being prepared to answer the sincere inquiries of those who are struck by the Christian’s distinctive emotion of hope. In response to the frightening prospect of persecution, Peter encouraged his readers to see the world emotionally in light of the suffering, death, and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the context makes clear, he was admonishing them not to fear those who would slander them, mistreat them, and perhaps even kill them on account of their faith, but rather to internalize and live out the hope in the resurrection from the dead that was theirs in Christ.

Peter recognized that their distinctive Christian hope, expressed in the face of persecution and even death, would cause some nonbelievers to ask for an explanation for their strange and seemingly inexplicable emotion. Hope is not irrational optimism, but rather an emotional perception of the likelihood of good prospects. So it does not make sense to have hope in the face of inevitable and final bad prospects. Yet the Christian is able to remain steadfast in her hope in the face of mistreatment and even death, for she knows that this life is not all there is, and death is not the end. Indeed, the good prospects for which the Christian hopes have been guaranteed by the risen Savior who has conquered sin and death once and for all. As Paul explained to the Thessalonians, this is why Christians need “not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13).

For those who do not know Christ and the power and promise of His resurrection, hope in the face of death can seem very strange indeed. While some take the Christian’s hope in the resurrection as evidence for the irrationality and absurdity of Christianity, others are intrigued by the despair-defeating hope of the Christian and take it as a sign of the truth of Christianity. It is natural for humans to fear and even despair over death. So a faith that is powerful enough to give its adherents confident hope in the face of death and peace in the wake of the deaths of loved ones will often evoke sincere, not merely skeptical, questions. This is why Christian funerals are often excellent opportunities for evangelism.

Similarly, when Christians are able through the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome their anger with gentleness, their frustration with patience, their apathy toward the suffering of others with compassion, and their bitterness and envy with love, others are bound to notice and wonder at the power of the Christian God to help Christians overcome these pervasive emotional human ills. As Peter recognized, the counter-cultural emotional life of Christians thus often serves as a catalyst for

apologetic conversations. In this way, the distinctive emotions of the mature Christian can function as a kind of indirect evidence for the truth of Christianity. Christians, therefore, must develop the distinctive Christian emotions that demonstrate the resurrection power of Christ, while also preparing themselves to explain and defend the truth of the good news of the gospel that grounds their radically countercultural emotional vision of the world.

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND EMOTIONAL APOLOGETICS

In light of the evidential, apologetic power of emotions, Christian apologists must seek to grow in emotional- spiritual maturity. Indeed, Christian apologetics and spiritual formation go hand in hand. As the foregoing reflections reveal, proper emotional- spiritual formation can help to fulfill both of the primary aims of Christian apologetics—namely, increasing the confidence of the Christian and evangelism. As we grow in emotional-spiritual maturity, the truth of Christianity becomes more (emotionally) apparent to us, and we reveal this truth to others through our own emotional transformation. As we are transformed emotionally, learning to love God with all our hearts (Matt. 22:37), we see the evidence for Christianity more clearly and we become part of the evidence ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 127 (entries 423–24 [277–78]).
- 2 See, e.g., Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 13–14.
- 4 All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).
- 5 N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 44.
- 6 G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics/Orthodoxy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 212–13.
- 7 C.f., Paul Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 126–27.
- 8 Chesterton, *Heretics/Orthodoxy*, 213.
- 9 Cf. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, chap. 9.
- 10 This paragraph adapted from Daniel M. Johnson and Adam C. Pelser, “Affective Apologetics: Communicating Truth through Humor, Ridicule, and Emotions,” *Christian Research Journal* 35, 6 (2012): 46.
- 11 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 251.
- 12 C. S. Lewis argues relatedly that the excuses we make to assuage our guilt when we violate the moral law are “one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe in the Law of Nature” (*Mere Christianity* [New York: Harper One, 2001], 8.)
- 13 Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.
- 14 I am grateful to Ryan West, David Pelser, and Julie Pelser for helpful comments on previous drafts. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the United States Department of Defense, or the United States government.