Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion
BY WILLIAM WAINWRIGHT (Cambridge UP, 2016. Pp 203.)

William Wainwright's *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion* has *Inference and Argument in Religion* as its subtitle. This subtitle might, however, equally well read *The View from Somewhere*. This book really engages with ideas about embodiment that have been given prominence in recent decades, most famously by Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. As is well known, Nagel highlighted a tension between the ideal of a wholly objective standpoint, the "view from nowhere," that is untainted by subjective bias, and the fact that some phenomena of experience are irremediably subjective, especially what it is like to be a thinker with an inescapably particular and subjective perspective. Applied to the domain of religion, it is this tension that Wainwright explores masterfully in *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion*.

To set the scene and justify the need to explore these issues in religion, Wainwright begins by offering, in chapter 1, four examples of religious reasoning. He begins with Samuel Clarke's cosmological argument for the existence of God. He then presents arguments about the questions, "Is the concept of omnipotence coherent?" and "Is ultimate reality personal?" Finally, he summarises some of the key disputes over the relation of grace and free will associated with Pelagius and Augustine in the early Church, and much later between Calvinists and the Catholic Church. These and many similar issues in religion involve questions about which intelligent and well-informed people often reason differently and reach different conclusions. Wainwright argues, therefore, that such examples illustrate that it is extremely difficult, not only to find a neutral and wholly objective view from nowhere on religious matters, but even to think that such a neutral view is possible in principle. On the contrary, our emotions, desires, intuitions, and volitional commitments inescapably shape our assessments and constructions of such arguments.

But what are these factors, how are they shaped and what is their effect on inference and argument in religion? Wainwright's book takes four main approaches to addressing these questions. First, in chapter 2, he examines the ultimate motivations for constructing arguments in religion and stresses that these motivations are often far removed from concerns about formal exactitude or winning a game of logic in an arena of debate that focuses on demonstration or confirmation, on being licit or illicit. For instance, many arguments in religion are not about confronting unbelievers, or not only about such confrontations. Among the wide range of motivations, Wainwright points out, for example, that theistic proofs are sometimes developed as accompaniments to prayer, as is found in Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey to God* (p.35). Another influential example, noted in chapter 4, is the *Proslogion*, the source for Anselm's famous and controversial ontological arguments for the existence of God. Rather than being a series of dry propositions, this work is composed in the form of a prayer and is saturated with references to the Psalms and other scriptural texts. In addition, some arguments are framed, at least in part, as arguments *with* God rather than about God, as in the case of the Book of Job in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Across a range of traditions, arguments may also be developed as a kind of sacrificial devotion to God. Wainwright cites, for example, Udayana's theistic proofs principally in the *Nyayakusumanjali*, a title that he explains as meaning "a bouquet of arguments offered to God." (p.36) Although the *Nyayakusumanjali* is intended, in part, to help persuade unbelievers and strengthen the faith of believers, the writer adds that success in these goals is secondary to the primary goal, namely that the arguments are "acceptable as a gift to the Lord Shiva." (p.36). In other words, the principal purpose is seen as "the loving worship of Shiva for Shiva's sake," making the arguments into a kind of sacrifice. This motivation, Wainwright adds, is in itself an incentive to argue well, since a bad argument is like someone offering a blemished sacrifice (pp. 39-40).

Second, Wainwright examines many of the ways in which the subject putting forward an argument can also be shaped in specific cognitive and affective ways in specific religious contexts. In Chapter 3, "Religious reading and theological argument," he examines the role of the ingestion of core religious texts. For example, the texts of classical Buddhism, Christianity, and Vaishnavism, can be absorbed and appropriated to the point that they become part of one's being and shape what their participants consider to be good reasoning. Wainwright cites the importance of oral instruction and memorization in early Christian

catechesis and the way in which influential religious leaders have tried to live rather than merely cite the key texts of their traditions. Chapter 4, "Passional reasoning" examines the affective aspects of religious argumentation, drawing from classical philosophers, traditional Christian theologians, and Chinese Neo-Confucians to highlight a broadly acknowledged link between one's reasoning and the state of one's heart. He examines, in particular, Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, William James, and Wang Yangwing and concludes that appeals to the heart do not need to be subjective or viciously circular.

Third, in chapter 5, "The role of rhetoric in religious argumentation," Wainwright in effect switches from a first- to a second-person perspective by exploring the effective communication of arguments to other persons. In this section he highlights and challenges the negative appraisal and subsequent neglect of rhetoric that started in early modern philosophy, including specific objections from Kant and Henry W. Johnstone, as well as the general dismissal of rhetoric for being too tied to particulars. Wainwright argues, by contrast, for the place of rhetoric in classical philosophy and for the ongoing *de facto* and even necessary use of rhetoric today. He points out that methods of persuasion do not need to be hostile to the pursuit of truth (p.100) and that good rhetoric may dispose someone to receive good arguments. He also mentions that rhetoric is closely associated with the communication of understanding and may help to trigger a Gestalt shift to improved ways of understanding (p.95).

The fourth and final approach in the book examines the issue of the objective content of inferences and arguments in religion. In chapter 6, "Reason, revelation, and religious argumentation," he explores the question of purported, concrete revelation, and examines whether an appeal to purported revelation can be rational. His approaches to this question include an examination of traditional Christian attitudes toward philosophy and revelation, fideistic and deistic challenges, and a comparison of Vedanta's and Christianity's accounts of the relation of reason and revelation. He concludes with views expressed by Puritan divines and Cambridge Platonists about the importance of sanctified reasoning and the existence of mysteries that transcend reason. He picks up this theme again in chapter 7, "Theology and mystery," which begins by noting some early modern prejudices against mystery, some cautious modern reappraisals, and diverse religious and specifically Christian meanings ascribed to mystery. The chapter also examines reasons for the notion of mystery in general, and divine mystery in particular, and questions about the nature and extent of divine unknowability. This chapter is quite open ended, regularly introducing speculative and rhetorical questions such as whether the veil of mystery is removable, even in principle, and whether God's nature eludes even His own complete conceptual comprehension. In a final and brief conclusion to the book, Wainwright draws several parallels with Plato's approaches to these issues.

As regards an overall assessment, a good deal of the key content of Wainwright's arguments can be summed up as validating a point that goes back to Aristotle (cf. *NE*.6.6.1140b31-1141a8), namely that obtaining reliable premises is a prerequisite for reasoning well from premises to truthful conclusions. More precisely, in order to argue well one has to begin by trying to understand the kinds of things about which one is attempting to argue. As an example, for a two-dimensional being, an object with a closed boundary cannot be entered if one only moves in the same plane as this object. If, by contrast, one can also move through the third dimension, one can, nevertheless, enter the closed object by being lifted up and into this object. The latter claim, however, would make no sense to a two-dimensional being with no experience of higher dimensions, any more, perhaps, than the Resurrected body of Jesus Christ made sense appearing inside a locked room (John 20:19). To argue well about such matters, one ideally needs more than a list of rules for logical inferences. One also needs to try to gain an intuitive grasp of the situation in which such rules make sense. One further needs to be able to share that grasp with others, which is principally the work either of direct shared experience or of stories. Hence effective philosophers tend to combine sound arguments with regular appeals to appropriate experiences, often in the form of short narratives. Given that the subject matters of many theological topics are not usually part of everyday experience, this need is even more crucial in matters pertaining to religion. Hence, as Wainwright argues, some immersion in the religious texts and contexts of such topics can be an invaluable aid to sound reasoning about them.

A minor caution should be noted, however, regarding the practical implementation of Wainwright's work. Granted, all kinds of factors go into assessing arguments that are distinct from formal reasoning. In the case of religious arguments, in particular, immersion in the stories of a religious tradition, and a passional empathy for what these traditions mean for their adherents, credibly have a bearing on the ways in which these arguments are received and understood. Moreover, a good case can be made that arguments in the philosophy of religion can and should be improved by taking account of these factors. As one example, a common complaint of religious believers against the superficial rejection of belief in God found in some popular books is that they do not recognise the God that the writers of these books are rejecting. Nevertheless, an important reason for abstracting arguments into clean, propositional forms, even with the risk of distortion, is to facilitate the adjudication of truth and, moreover, to do so in ways that respect the freedom of participants in the arguments to abstain, at least initially, from accepting the worldviews of their opponents. The latter factor is especially important considering that one can have intuitions and feel passionately committed to causes that are unsound, destructive and harmful as well as those that are veridical, constructive and beneficial. Hence, although it seems clear that arguments in the philosophy of religion can and should be improved by taking Wainwright's lessons into account, the incorporation of such factors should not obscure the ongoing need for abstraction and adjudication.

Finally, there is an omission from Wainwright's work that is counterintuitive given the direction of his argument. Wainwright argues that we argue inescapably as embodied beings, and that communications with others must recognise that they are also embodied beings. Nevertheless, an important aspect of many religious traditions, and especially the Incarnation in Christianity, is that the object of faith is also embodied, with many embodied consequences for the world. After all, probably the most central metaphysical idea in the Christian faith is that of the concretely given supernatural. Yet although Wainwright has been rightly praised for his appreciation and knowledge of non-Christian and especially Eastern religions in this book, this core principal of the Christian religion and its implications are surprisingly absent from this volume. Indeed, it almost seems that, in places, Wainwright is deliberately avoiding the issue of concrete revelation, despite his arguments in favour of taking account of revealed religion in chapter 6. As one example, when Wainwright undertakes to describe "the Christian uses of 'mystery'," in chapter 7, on pages 135-137, he omits what has arguably been the most important historical and theological use of the term "mystery" over the last two thousand years, namely those concrete gifts of grace called "sacraments." As another example, Wainwright selects a fairly obscure passage from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* to suggest that Aquinas advocates the need to be free from all connection with sensibles (p.138), but the selection of this statement, to my mind, misrepresents the broader context of Aquinas's thought, which is extremely focused on the concretely given supernatural, in theology, liturgy, and culture.

In conclusion, Wainwright's book serves as an important and valuable reminder of those contributing factors to understanding that are a prerequisite to reasoning well, especially in regard to religious matters. One ought to make use of it, however, in ways that compensate for what it largely omits to cover, especially the challenges of the adjudication of truth and the concretely given supernatural in religion.

University of Oxford Andrew Pinsent