

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

THE VEHEMENT PASSIONS.

By Philip Fisher. Princeton Univ. Press.
268 pp. \$26.95

With this persuasive and elegant essay on the paradigmatic human passions of fear, anger, grief, and wonder, Harvard University English professor Fisher joins a growing group of scholars bent on emotional rehabilitation: restoring to respectability the emotions so distrusted by Enlightenment rationalism and the forms of Stoicism that predate it. The oft-satirized affectless thinker, the dedicated scientific acolyte who is successful only because dead from the neck down, is being debunked. Emotion, the new thinking says, is itself a form of knowledge.

Fisher goes further than simply defending wonder as the impetus for systematic philosophical and scientific investigation. He wants to claim that more debilitating and unpleasant states, such as anger and mourning, are also forms of knowledge. “Each of the strong emotions or passions defines for us an intelligible world,” he writes, “and does so by means of horizon lines that we can come to know only in experiences that begin with impassioned or vehement states within ourselves.”

Unlike philosophers Ronald de Sousa and Martha Nussbaum, who are also keen to “cognitivize” emotion, Fisher wisely stops short of draining the feeling from feeling. This may have something to do with his background in English rather than philosophy. His book, though considerably less rigorous and exhaustive (or exhausting) than Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* (2001), is richer in insight and more human. It’s also—this is a hard judgment to defend but apposite—delightful. Fisher ingeniously mixes discussion of Achilles, Oedipus, Othello, Lear, and Ahab with careful critical assessments of Kantian ethics, rational choice theory, and the philosophical underpinnings of the legal system.

While the discussion ranges widely, Fisher’s particular concerns are those experiences we call “vehement”—when we are carried “out of our minds” or, more precisely, out of the worlds our rational minds most-

ly require us to inhabit. As Fisher persuasively shows, we cannot know the limits of mind and world until we butt up against them in passionate, unwilling conflict. Vehement passion is always rooted in affronts to the will, deep challenges to the integrity of the self. Aristotle, Baruch Spinoza, and David Hume are his main guides in this subtle phenomenology of contingency, revealing themselves not only as great systematic philosophers but as thinkers sensitive enough to see that my anger and grief tell me who counts and who doesn’t, that my body (with its quakings and blushings and hot flashes) is inseparable from my soul, and that there are “paths of passion” (as when grief gives way to anger and then to shame or bitterness).

The essential problem of all philosophy, Fisher concludes, is that *my* world—where I am afraid or enraged or resentful, and where I am always alone—is not, and cannot be, *the* world of the modern universalist imagination. Our patterns of thought, especially over the past three or four centuries, have attempted to play down this inconvenient reality, but in vain. Indeed, we could take his insight a step further. The questions of philosophy—the questions of existence—are all, ultimately, insoluble puzzles in epistemology. What do I know about my place in the world? How do I make sense of what I am feeling? How can I know what *you* are feeling? Maybe you love me, maybe you don’t. Can I ever know for sure? Thus does vehement passion take root.

—MARK KINGWELL

DRAWING THE LINE: Science and the Case for Animal Rights.

By Steven M. Wise. Perseus. 322 pp. \$26

“Legal rights” for chimps, elephants, dolphins, and other animals sounds very new and radical until you stop to consider that there is only one legal right that any animal could possibly exercise: the right to be free from human cruelty or other mistreatment. Whether we call it a “right” or something else