Should we value emotions or treat them with caution? Humanity has wrestled with this question since the time of antiquity, and the ambivalent answers that emerged continued in the early modern world. On the one hand, most conventional treatments affirmed that the passions performed an essential function in motivating behaviours that were necessary to human survival and flourishing. On the other hand, there was an alertness to the dangers they posed, that to grant the passions a free hand could enslave or corrupt the soul and thereby undermine well-being and morality. Central to these discussions was the place of reason in moderating the passions and promoting virtue. The Stoics held that the good life was a state of ataraxia, or tranquillity, attained when all passion was overcome by reason. For the Aristotelians, the passions contributed to virtue, but required the direction of reason to restrain them and ensure they responded appropriately to their objects. Then there was the perspective of the Platonists, who believed that some emotional responses should be intense while others should not be felt at all. Philosophical enquiry in the early modern period drew upon

1 I would like to thank my colleague, Andrew Leslie, and my son, Michael, for reading an earlier draft of this chapter.
this classical heritage, but made various modifications in the light of ongoing intellectual developments.⁴

**Perspectives on emotions in the history of Christian thought**

Christian doctrine played a central role in this refashioning of traditional understandings of emotions and rationality and their significance for the virtuous life. Rejecting the Stoic binary opposition of passion and reason, Augustine affirmed that the goodness or the otherwise nature of affections was determined by the state of the will.⁵ When the will loves in a rightly ordered and directed manner, that is, in accordance with the ends for which God created human beings, then the various affections that follow are fitting and praiseworthy:

> the citizens of the holy city of God, who live according to God in the pilgrimage of this life, both fear and desire, and grieve and rejoice. And because their love is rightly placed, all these affections of theirs are right.⁶

This voluntarist strain of spirituality, acknowledging the importance of the human will and the affections, particularly love, in the pursuit of the godly life, influenced Christian thought and practice in subsequent centuries. At the theological level, this Augustinian emphasis came to be particularly associated with Duns Scotus, who believed that the will was the noblest of the human faculties and that final blessedness was an act of will – loving the God who is the greatest good (*sumnum bonum*) of the human soul. Such an approach resisted theological speculation and viewed theology as primarily a matter of practice, since its aim was to move people to love God. This voluntarist position can be contrasted

---


⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, Book 14, sect. 9, 452.