

Closeness with God: A Problem for Divine Impassibility

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ABSTRACT: Have you ever wondered what God's inner emotional life might be like? Within Christian thought, there are conflicting answers to this question. The majority of Christian theologians throughout history have said that God cannot be moved by creatures to feel anything. God does not literally have empathy, mercy, or compassion. Instead, God only feels pure undisturbed happiness. This view is called divine impassibility. In the twentieth century, Christian theologians by and large came to reject this understanding of God in favour of divine passibility, which affirms that God can be moved by creatures and God can literally have empathy, mercy, and compassion. Yet the twenty-first century has seen a renewed interest in this more historical understanding of God. How Christianity came to have two radically different portrayals of God is a puzzle, to be sure, but that is not one that I shall try to address here. Instead, my interest is in unpacking these two different conceptions of God, and briefly offering reasons for affirming divine passibility. The reasons that I discuss centre around a central theme within Christian thought—the goal of entering into a close, personal relationship with God. I start by defining some key terms, and then proceed to offer two arguments in favour of divine passibility. The first is the problem of knowing God well, and the second is based on the human desire for empathy.

Have you ever wondered what God's inner emotional life might be like? Within Christian thought, there are conflicting answers to this question. The majority of Christian theologians throughout history have said that God cannot be moved by creatures to feel anything. God does not literally have empathy, mercy, or compassion. Instead, God only feels pure undisturbed happiness. This view is called divine impassibility. In the twentieth century, Christian theologians by and large came to reject this understanding of God in favour of divine passibility which affirms that God can be moved by creatures, and God can literally have empathy, mercy, and compassion. Yet the twenty-first century has seen a renewed interest in this more historical understanding of God. How Christianity came to have two radically different portrayals of God is a puzzle, to be sure, but that is not one that I shall try to address here. Instead, my interest is in unpacking these two different conceptions of God, and briefly offering reasons for affirming divine passibility. The reasons that I discuss center around a central theme within Christian thought—the goal of entering into a close, personal relationship with God. I start by defining some key terms, and then proceed to offer two arguments in favour of divine passibility. The first is the problem of knowing God well, and the second is based on the human desire for empathy.

1. What is an Emotion?

The first important concept to define is that of an emotion. For the purposes of this essay, I shall define an emotion as a felt evaluation of a situation.¹ An emotion has two components: cognitive and affective. An emotion is cognitive in that it involves making a mental representation of the world. When one has an emotion, she is evaluating some object in the world as having a particular value. For example, if one sees a barking dog,

¹ For an overview on the nature of emotions, see Mullins (2020, 4-15).

one might evaluate it to be scary. An emotion is affective in that there is something that it is like to have this particular evaluation. Having this evaluation involves an experience—it feels a particular way. It is often said that the affect of an emotion has a hedonic valence of feeling either positive or negative. In the case of the barking dog, having this evaluation feels scary. Philosophers speak of knowledge of ‘what it is like’ as a kind of experiential knowledge that is distinct from mere propositional knowledge. Hence, emotions bring together both experiential and representational content.

It is also important to know that emotions are grounded in our cares and concerns. What we care about creates in us a disposition to have an emotion. This is because emotions involve taking a particular object to be worthy of our attention and worthy of our action. If you do not care about something, you will not take that thing to be worthy of your attention or your action (B. Helm 2015, 429). In other words, if you do not care about something, you will not be disposed to have an emotion about that object. For example, a wife’s love for her husband creates a disposition in her to have all sorts of emotional responses towards her husband from happiness, to anger, to sadness, depending on the situation. If her husband presents her with a loving gift, she will take this action to be worthy of her attention, and will act in a particular way, such as responding with an excited hug.

One of the most important breakthroughs in contemporary psychology and philosophy is a return to emphasizing the cognitive nature of emotions. Given the cognitive nature of emotions, emotions have an interesting relationship with truth, rationality, and morality. There is a common claim in popular culture that emotions are antithetical to reason. Yet this does not match with what most contemporary philosophers and psychologists say about the nature of emotions (Clore 2011, Roberts 2013). To be sure, we have all experienced our emotions getting out of hand and preventing us from thinking rationally, but that does not mean that emotions are irrational *per se*.

There are different standards by which one assesses emotions in terms of an emotion’s correctness and justification (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 7). Consider first the standard of correctness. As stated before, emotions are cognitive in that they represent the world as being a certain way. An emotion construes objects in the world as having certain values or axiological properties. The standard of correctness assesses an emotion’s truth-value. An emotion is true or false depending on if it accurately represents the values present in the world (Roberts 2013, 91). This presupposes that there are values or axiological properties in the world that serve as the truthmakers for our emotions. One can argue that it makes no sense to talk of emotions being subject to standards of correctness and justification if there are no objective values in the world. Part of what it means for an emotion to be appropriate or reasonable is for the emotion to justifiably represent an object as having certain values (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 41-49).

This brings me to the next standard for assessing an emotion—justification. An emotion is justified if one has good reasons for evaluating an object to have certain values, and if she lacks any defeaters for her initial evaluation. Oftentimes, in the absence of defeaters, the emotional experience itself will be the justifying reason for her evaluation. Emotional experiences give a person an initial evaluation of a situation, and these evaluations serve as the basis for our considered judgments. If a person’s cognitive faculties are functioning properly, she will often be warranted in accepting the evaluations of her emotions.

Of course, people often feel the need to question their emotions. There are many situations in which a person will feel compelled to seek out further justification for her judgment instead of simply accepting the evaluation of her emotion (Brady 2013, 86-90). Upon hearing a strange noise at night, one might initially feel scared, but then question

her own fear. She might think, “There is no reason to be scared. It is probably nothing. Surely it is not a scary monster...no, no, no. It is nothing. Just the wind!” Yet, notice that I said one will *feel compelled* to seek out further justification for her judgment. This is because it is one’s emotions that motivate her to seek further reasons to accept or reject her initial evaluation. So not only can emotions be justified by reasons, but emotions also facilitate the search for justifying reasons by focusing one’s attention on the object of our emotional experience for further consideration (Brady 2013, 93).

Now that I have discussed the nature of emotions in general, I can move on to discuss the emotional life of God. The return to emphasizing the cognitive nature of emotions in contemporary psychology and philosophy helps us to better understand classical debates over God’s emotions.

2. Does God have emotions?

I shall answer yes in due course, but I must first define what I mean by God. The concept of God is that of the greatest metaphysically possible being who is the single, ultimate foundation of reality.² Such a being will have all of the great-making properties or perfections. Further, if a great-making property is degreed, then God will have that great-making property to the maximal degree. A model of God is a particular conception, or articulation of the concept of God. A model of God does two things. First, it offers a particular set of unique claims about the divine nature, or what it means for God to be perfect or the greatest. Second, a model of God offers an articulation of the way in which God is the single ultimate foundation of reality. For example, some might say that God freely creates the universe out of nothing, whilst others claim that the universe is a necessary emanation from God.

When it comes to the divine nature, most models of God agree that God is a necessarily existent being with attributes like maximal power, maximal knowledge, maximal goodness, perfect rationality, and perfect freedom. While these attributes are interesting in themselves, they are not terribly interesting in terms of different models of God because they are uncontroversial. What matters for my purposes in this essay is the unique claims that different models of God make.

Of particular interest are the controversial attributes of impassibility and passibility. Both of these attributes affirm that God has emotions, yet they differ over which emotions God can have.³ This is important since many late twentieth century discussions falsely asserted that the impassible God does not have emotions, or falsely asserted that a passible God must be irrational for having emotions. This is due partly to the neglect of the cognitive nature of emotions. What is actually the case is that God’s perfect moral goodness and rationality entail that God has a particular emotional profile (Leftow 2012, 8; Ekstrom 2019, 114). The debate is over what that emotional profile looks like.

Impassibility is typically found in a model of God called classical theism. Classical theism affirms the four unique attributes of timelessness, immutability, simplicity, and impassibility. I shall not focus on these other three attributes, but interested readers can look elsewhere for my discussion on these (Mullins 2021). Passibility is often found in models of God like neoclassical theism, open theism, and panentheism. These models of God differ over various things like divine temporality, the extent of God’s

² Cf. Gocke (2017).

³ See Gavriluk (2004) for an account of the emotional life of the impassible God, and Scrutton (2011) for an account of the emotional life of the passible God.

foreknowledge, and God's freedom over creation. What concerns us here is the attribute of passibility.

Impassibility involves three core claims. First, it is impossible for God to suffer (P. Helm 1990, 120-121). Second, it is impossible for God to be moved or influenced by anything external to Himself for His knowledge, emotions, and actions (Creel 1997, 314). Third, it is impossible for God to have any emotion that is inconsistent with God's perfect rationality, perfect moral goodness, and perfect undisturbed happiness.⁴

On this view, God is in a state of pure undisturbable happiness that is grounded entirely in Himself. God's emotional life is only influenced by the greatest good, and He is the greatest good (Silverman 2013, 168). This view says that God is the greatest good in that God essentially realizes all possible goods in Himself without creation (Ward 2015, 25-26). Since God essentially realizes all possible goods, God cannot produce more goodness (Murphy 2017, 80-81). Thus, God cannot have any unfulfilled desires that are satisfied by creation because all possible goods are essentially realized in God (Beilby 2004, 648). This is ultimately why nothing external to God can influence Him to think, feel, or act in any particular way. Nothing external to God has any value that could move God to think, feel, or act in any particular way, which means that God's emotional life is only influenced by Himself. In this way, a proponent of impassibility claims that God's emotional life perfectly tracks the values in the world.

Passibility sees the matter differently.⁵ Passibility makes three parallel claims. First, God can suffer. Second, it is possible for God to be moved or influenced by things that are external to God for His knowledge, emotions, and actions. Third, while it is impossible for God to have any emotion that is inconsistent with God's perfect rationality and goodness, it is possible for God to experience emotions other than pure happiness. As the passibilist understands things, a perfectly rational being is responsive to reasons, and a perfectly good being is responsive to the appropriate values and disvalues in the world. The passibilist thinks that God's emotional life perfectly tracks the values in the world, and that there are more values to consider than God's own nature (Wessling 2020, 110-112). This is because it is impossible for God to realize all possible goods in Himself without creation. For example, it is impossible for God to realize the value of Creator-creature friendships without a created world. So, while God is the greatest good, there are more kinds of values that God can bring about through creative actions, such as creating human persons who can freely accept or reject God's offer of friendship. Creating a world with free creatures brings with it the possibility of those creatures using their freedom to add value or disvalue to the world. Since God is perfectly rational and good, His emotions will properly track those values and disvalues. If the world contains sin and suffering, those are disvalues that give God reason to be sad or angry. If the world contains instances of creatures accepting God's offer of friendship, those are values that give God reason to be happy.

Thus far, we have a snapshot of impassibility and passibility. Notice that each view affirms that God literally has emotions, though they differ over the range of emotions that God can literally have.⁶ My interest here is over which emotions can be literally predicated of God and not which emotions can be metaphorically predicated of God. Note that literal predication can be univocal or analogical. Analogical predication is literal, not metaphorical (Vainio 2020, 18-26, 35-39). Also notice that each view differs as to whether or not God can be moved or influenced by things external to the divine nature.

⁴ For a deeper analysis of impassibility and divine happiness, see Mullins (2018).

⁵ For a thorough articulation and defense of passibility, see Scrutton (2011).

⁶ Cf. Gavriluk (2004); Scrutton (2011, chapters 1-3).

There is one further dividing line that is pertinent to this discussion—divine empathy. Historical and contemporary proponents of impassibility like Anselm (2008, VIII) and Brian Davies (2006, 234) are clear that God cannot literally have empathy. To be clear, the impassible God cannot be said to analogically have empathy either because analogical predication is literal predication.⁷

Proponents of divine passibility strongly disagree and affirm that God literally has maximal empathy towards His creatures. However, passibilists disagree among themselves over the modal scope of God's maximal empathy and compassion. It will be helpful to define empathy so that one can understand why impassibility denies this of God. Consider two people named Sally and Ben.

EMPATHY: Sally empathizes with Ben if and only if (i) Sally is consciously aware that Ben is having an emotion E, (ii) Sally is consciously aware of what it feels like to have E, and (iii) on the right basis Sally is consciously aware of what it is like for Ben to have E.

Clause (iii) is one reason why proponents of impassibility will deny that God has empathy. The idea in (iii) is that something about Ben himself is what grounds Sally's empathy. Some sort of experience of Ben is required for Sally to have empathy with Ben. Otherwise, she is not empathizing with Ben. An impassible God cannot be influenced by things external to the divine nature, and thus cannot satisfy condition (iii) of empathy. Proponents of impassibility, like Girolamo Zanchius, consider this to be a good thing because if God did empathize with you, He would be influenced by you, and impassibility says that God cannot be influenced by anything external to the divine nature (Zanchius 1601, 357-358).

Another reason that impassibility denies that God has empathy is because of clause (ii). Say that Ben is in a state of misery because of his mother's current diagnosis of terminal cancer. Ben feels misery, and his emotion is grounded in a person that is external to himself. An impassible God cannot know what it feels like to have the emotion of misery because God is in a state of pure, undisturbed bliss (Randles 1900, 48-50). Further, God cannot know what it is like to have an emotion that is grounded in someone external to Himself. This is because it is impossible for an impassible God to be moved or influenced by anything external to Himself (Ussher 1645, 35). Thus, an impassible God cannot satisfy condition (ii) of empathy.

At best, an impassible God can satisfy condition (i) of empathy because God can have the propositional knowledge that Ben is having a particular emotion. This is why one will often find proponents of impassibility say that God can only metaphorically have empathy or compassion because God cannot satisfy all of the conditions for empathy. However, it is important to ask the classical theist how God can satisfy condition (i). It is not as if God just gets the knowledge for free. The classical theist needs to give an explanation for how an impassible God knows that Ben is having a particular emotion. God's knowledge of Ben's emotional state cannot be grounded in Ben lest one say that God is influenced or moved by things outside of Himself.

The classical theist does have an answer here. The classical theist affirms that all of God's knowledge is self-knowledge of His own nature or action. In order to avoid God's knowledge about Ben being based on Ben, the classical tradition has affirmed the doctrine of universal divine causality.⁸ This doctrine says that "God is the immediate cause of the existence of anything with ontological status at the time it exists" (Rogers 2020, 308). God knows all things by knowing the cause of all things (i.e., Himself). What

⁷ Cf. Muis (2011).

⁸ Cf. Grant (2019).

this means is that God knows what emotion Ben is having because God knows that He is directly and immediately causing Ben to have the emotion of misery, and directly and immediately causing Ben's mother to have cancer.

Before moving forward, it is worth pausing to consider what the impassible view of God looks like. In contemporary psychological literature, there are certain people that consistently fail to satisfy conditions (ii) and (iii) of empathy, and yet know that others have certain emotions because they are causing those people to have certain emotions. These are called psychopaths (Kauppinen 2017, 221; Shoemaker 2017, 243-250). Psychopaths are individuals who lack empathy, and are grandiose, manipulative, and deceitful. As a result of a reduced capacity for empathy, they also have a reduced capacity to form attachments to others (Brito, et al. 2021, 1-3). At this point in the paper, I am interested in the psychopath's lack of empathy. In the next section, I will consider if the impassible God is deceitful and manipulative.

To be sure, the proponent of impassibility will wish to distance herself from the claim that God is a psychopath. For example, she might point out that psychopaths can have some degree of success in satisfying conditions (ii) and (iii), though they disproportionately struggle to do so relative to the general human population. Thus, psychopaths are at least able to satisfy (ii) and (iii) every now and then, whereas it is impossible for the impassible God to satisfy (ii) and (iii). Hence, there is a difference between psychopaths and the impassible God because a psychopath can at least sometimes have empathy. Of course, arguing that human psychopaths are better at empathy than God might come across as unseemly, but I digress.

Things are different with the passible God. Divine passibility affirms that God has maximal empathy, but there is a disagreement over the modal scope of empathy. Linda Zagzebski (2013) affirms that God is omnibus, which means that God has the capacity to perfectly empathize with all creaturely conscious states. Others, like John Peckham (2019, 101), claim that God "does not essentially feel all the feelings of others indiscriminately." The idea here is that there are certain moral and rational constraints on divine empathy such that God cannot empathize with all creaturely conscious states, though God can empathize to the maximal degree that is consistent with God's rationality and goodness (Mullins 2020, 64-69).

With these issues clearly set out before us, I can turn to consider two arguments in favour of passibility.

3. Knowing God Well

When it comes to spiritual practice, Christians want to enter into a close, loving relationship with God. They want to know God well. According to Eleonore Stump, certain conditions must be in place in order for God and creatures to have a personal knowledge of one another. For example, they must be aware of one another as persons in order to grow close to one another (Stump 2010, 113-120). Stump also contends that empathy between persons is crucial to developing a close, personal relationship (Stump 2014, 221-223). The value of empathy for establishing close, personal relationships is something that contemporary psychologists and philosophers readily acknowledge. This is because the process of achieving empathy with another person provides important opportunities for people to reveal themselves to each other and bond with one another.⁹

David Eford (2021, 444) points out that when it comes to spiritual practice, Christians don't merely want to have some sort of personal presence with God; they want to know

⁹ Cf. Betzler (2021).

God well. Efrid offers 4 conditions for knowing someone well. He uses the example of Paula to help illustrate these conditions.

- 1) Paula has had a significant number of second-person face-to-face interactions with God, at least some of which have been relatively recent.
- 2) The contexts of those interactions were such as to permit God to reveal important aspects of himself, and God has done so.
- 3) God has not deceived Paula about himself in important respects.
- 4) Paula has succeeded in accurately perceiving what God has revealed, that is, Paula is not “blinded” by her own biases or other impairments.

For many Christians, the way to satisfy condition (1) is through reading scripture, having an active prayer life, and engaging in corporate worship. With regards to (2), Christianity says that God has provided an accurate revelation of Himself, and this revelation is documented in the Bible (Davis 2017, 566). It might seem fairly obvious to Christians that God can satisfy (3) since God cannot lie (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Condition (4) depends upon various factors about ourselves such as our moral character and cognitive abilities. My main interest is in (2) and (3) for the debate over impassibility and passibility. Can we know the impassible God well? That depends on what God has revealed about Himself and if God has not deceived us in important respects. I'll argue that the impassible God has deceived us in important respects.

To start the argument, focus on what God has revealed about Himself in scripture. The Bible contains zero evidence for divine impassibility, and consistently presents God as a passible being.¹⁰ The Bible ascribes a rich emotional life to God in which God is moved and influenced by creatures. For example, Psalm 7:11 says that God is righteous and thus feels indignation everyday towards sin. Psalm 103:13 says that God has compassion for those who fear Him. Lamentations 3:22 says that God's compassion never fails (Cf. Isa. 49:15). As John C. Peckham (2015, 178) explains, “the biblical language of *compassion* explicitly depicts ‘suffering along with,’ akin to sympathy/empathy, that is, [a] responsive feeling of emotion along with and for the object of compassion.” Psalm 149:4 says that God takes pleasure in His people. In Jeremiah 8:18-9:22, God is described as being provoked to anger by Israel's sin, and God is deeply saddened by Israel's pitiful state. Jeremiah 31:20 describes God as taking delight in His children as well as being deeply moved by His children to show them mercy. This barely scratches the surface of the rich emotional life that the Bible predicates of God, yet things have already gone in favour of divine passibility (Peckham 2021, ch. 2). Moreover, the Bible nowhere suggests that God does not have these emotions that are grounded in things external to the divine nature. As Bruce Ware explains,

Unlike in the case of Scripture's references to God's bodily parts, where other Scriptures tell us that God transcends those bodily qualities, understood literally, in the case of emotions we have no Scripture that would lead us to think that God actually transcends the emotions that Scripture ascribes to him. (2004, 146)

At this point, one might think that when it comes to condition (2) of knowing God well, God has clearly revealed Himself as passible. This is because impassibility denies

¹⁰ Cf. Fretheim (1984); Pinnock (1994, 118); Lister (2013, 173, 190); Peckham (2019); Hazony (2019). A reviewer has suggested to me that Acts 17:25 could offer some support to impassibility. This passage says that God needs nothing. As John Peckham (2021, 61) has pointed out, the fact that God needs nothing does not bring us remotely close to the claim that it is metaphysically impossible for God to be moved or influenced by creatures for His knowledge, emotion, and action.

that God can be moved or influenced by creatures, denies that God can have any emotion other than pure happiness, and denies that God is literally compassionate (McCabe 1987, 44). The passibilist William Hasker focuses on the claim that impassibility denies that God is literally compassionate.¹¹ Hasker (2011, 14) says the denial of divine compassion “is not at all what most of us would expect of a being who is said to be perfectly loving! And it is also difficult to reconcile with the Scriptures, according to which ‘As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him’ (Psalm 103: 13).” Given the fact that the Bible persistently describes God as compassionate, it would seem that God is revealing Himself to be compassionate. Surely if God wanted to reveal Himself as impassible, He would not have revealed Himself as having compassion.

Proponents of impassibility admit that God has in fact revealed Himself as passible, yet they reply that the Bible is filled with anthropopathic depictions of God (Peckham 2021, 56). This raises a particular question: why would God consistently reveal Himself in the Bible as passible if He is really nothing like that at all? Wouldn’t it make more sense for God to reveal Himself as He in fact is instead of the exact opposite of what He is? The answer from proponents of impassibility is to say that when God reveals Himself to us as passible, God is condescending to us, or speaking to us in a way that we can understand (P. Helm 2001, 44-47). They say that the idea of impassibility is too difficult for us to understand, so God cannot reveal Himself in this way to us in scripture (Dolezal 2019, 33). Helm maintains that the impassible God reveals Himself as passible in order to draw us closer to Himself. Helm (1990, 133-134) says it “is because God wishes people to respond to him that he *must* represent himself to them as one to whom response is possible, as one who acts in time.”

Recall again condition (4), which says that we can accurately perceive God’s revelation because we are not blinded by our own impairments or biases. What the impassibilist is saying is that we are impaired from accurately perceiving what God is like, and thus we cannot satisfy condition (4). God views us as children who are unable to grasp His actual nature. So, the impassible God reveals Himself to us as passible in order to draw us closer to Himself. Once we mature into adults, only then can we grasp God’s true impassible nature (Fiddes 1988, 17-18).

What is the passibilist to make of this? Hasker demurs at this suggestion. He writes,

In the biblical stories, Calvin says, God ‘lisps’ to us—that is, talks baby-talk—as an accommodation to our limited understanding. But this raises a number of questions, these two among them: Just how did Calvin—or, for that matter, Anselm—get to be the ‘adults’ who are able to comprehend the ‘deep truths’ about God that apparently could not be revealed to the apostles and prophets? And why should we trust the philosophical sources of classical theism (among which Neoplatonism is prominent, as Rogers says) to be more accurate in their depiction of God than the Bible is? (2011, 15)

I believe that the passibilist can make at least two responses to the impassibilist at this juncture. First, the passibilist can deny that humans are so impaired that they cannot accurately understand God’s revelation. Someone like Hasker can complain that the impassibilist really cannot maintain that humans are so childish that God must reveal Himself as the exact opposite of what He is like. After all, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin were adult enough to discern the deep truth of impassibility. Since impassibility has been the dominate view throughout most of Church history, it would seem that there are

¹¹ For a historical overview of the denial of literal mercy, empathy, and compassion, see Mozley (1926).

plenty of adults who can understand divine impassibility. In fact, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 anathematized anyone who denied impassibility. Given this, it would seem that there are more than enough adults around for God to reveal Himself as impassible. Thus, there is no justification for God to engage in this kind of accommodative language.

Of course, the impassibilist might push back and reply that the prophets who had God directly speaking to them were far more childish than a group of politicians in 451 AD. As such, it really was necessary for God to reveal Himself to Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Hosea as passible. My guess is that Hasker will find this pushback less than satisfying.

The passibilist can also offer a second kind of response here. Notice that the impassibilist maintains that God intentionally reveals Himself as passible in order to draw us closer to Himself. This violates condition (3) of knowing someone well. Condition (3) says that God has not deceived us about Himself in important respects. Classical theists are saying that the impassible God has intentionally revealed Himself to us as passible. The impassible God has no empathy, and yet has intentionally revealed Himself to us as being rich in empathy. The impassible God has no compassion, and yet God has intentionally revealed Himself as having compassion as a key part of His identity in scripture. Lamentations says that God's compassion never fails, whereas the classical theist says that God never has compassion. It seems quite clear that the impassible God has deceived us about important aspects of His character in order to draw us into a relationship with Himself. This being who lacks empathy is engaging in deceptive and manipulative behaviour, thus once again raising the spectre of divine psychopathology.

Yet the divine deception goes further. In the Old Testament alone, God is described as having wrath over 400 times (Lane 2001, 149). God is said to feel indignation every day because of our sin. This would strongly lead one to believe that God is deeply concerned with our sins, and His emotional life is deeply influenced by our sin precisely because that is how God reveals Himself in scripture. But the impassible God cannot be moved or influenced by things outside of Himself, so we have another violation of condition (3). God reveals Himself as being deeply perturbed by our sins when in fact God is in a state of pure, undisturbed happiness. God could not possibly be affected by our sins. According to the impassibilist James Dolezal (2019, 23), "Our sins, be they ever so many, have no effect on God." This seems like another clear case of divine deception, and that prevents creatures from knowing God well.

Long story short, the passibilist can say the following: if the impassible God really wanted creatures to know Him well, He could have done a better job at revealing Himself to us in ways that do not involve deceiving us about important aspects of His character.

In the next, and final, section, I offer a different argument in favour of divine passibility based on our desire for empathy and compassion. The classical theist says that the impassible God reveals Himself as empathetic in order to draw us closer to Himself. I say that this fails to satisfy our basic desire for empathy and would prevent us from being close to God.

4. The Desire for Empathy

Before the turn of the twentieth century, empathy became an important focus of moral philosophy.¹² The idea is that empathy plays a central role in being a moral person and in enjoying the good life. The increasing value that was placed on empathy has come to be a

¹² Cf. Herdt (2001).

central theme in arguments against impassibility. It has led people to take seriously the biblical portrayal of God as being rich in empathy and compassion. In this section, I will highlight one way that empathy plays a role in such arguments. I focus on divine empathy as satisfying a fundamental human desire.

Adam Morton points out that human persons desire to be treated empathetically, but that humans don't like it when the empathy is faked. We want the empathy to be genuine. "We resent empathy that is automatic and based on superficial aspects of our behaviour" (Morton 2017, 183). Imagine a situation in which you are crying, and someone superficially says, 'Oh you poor thing,' Morton says that you will likely be annoyed by this because the other person is not actually bothered by your situation. He also says that you will likely stop trying to explain your feelings to this other person because they are clearly not interested in, or not capable of, understanding your situation. Morton writes,

Life is full of situations in which you want someone to feel a congruent emotion, but want her to feel it for the appropriate reasons. We want accuracy. And inasmuch as empathy serves a central role in human life, we want it to be more or less accurate. Some of the reasons for this are clear. We don't bond with people who misunderstand us, because they are likely to misjudge our feelings and preferences on other occasions. And there are times when knowing the reasons for our emotions is needed for helpful action. (183-184)

By my lights, if God revealed Himself as empathetic, and it turned out that God is not empathetic, one should feel duped. It should force one to re-evaluate all of the biblical depictions of God as empathetic. This is because the impassible God has quite literally faked being empathetic in scripture. This very well could lead one to resent God for His faked empathy, and could very well lead to a failure to bond with God. After all, why pray to a being that cannot be moved or influenced by your prayers? Why bother trying to explain your situation to a being that cannot possibly understand what it is like to be you?

Morton says that there are other reasons that we desire accurate empathy. He writes, "there is a kind of loneliness that comes when people cannot grasp why you feel what you do" (184). Knowing that no one else really understands your situation, what you are going through, leaves a person feeling isolated and alone in this vast universe. Humans need to be understood, and the genuine empathy of another person can satisfy this desire.

Yet contemporary psychologists point out that empathic accuracy is something that humans struggle to achieve.¹³ This brings Morton to express a worry about the fact that human empathy is never perfectly accurate. He says that it is important to comfort people and make them not feel alone. However, "People don't want others assimilating their situation to that of everyone else whose case has some generic similarity" (Morton 2017, 185). Morton writes, "people's need for empathy is a need to be understood, to be the object of fellow-feeling for the right reasons" (185). Given the inaccuracy of human empathy, Morton wonders if the human need for empathy is an impossible desire (185).

An "impossible desire" is a desire that cannot possibly be satisfied. Desire satisfaction is a common source of human happiness, and desire frustration is a common source of human suffering. If the human need for empathetic accuracy is an impossible desire, then humans will ultimately have this desire frustrated. That is less than ideal for it means that there is a kind of human suffering that cannot be alleviated. However,

¹³ Cf. Ta and Ickes (2017).

omnisubjectivity says God has perfect empathetic accuracy. So, the human need for empathy is not an impossible desire if God is omnisubjective as some passibilists maintain.

What happens if God is impassible? Recall that an impassible God cannot have any empathy (McCabe 1987, 44). Thus, the human longing for empathetic accuracy is an impossible desire. It might lead one to wonder why God would create beings with the desire for empathy knowing full-well that this desire cannot be satisfied. Giving creatures such a desire for empathetic accuracy might seem absurd or make life less than meaningful. One could develop this line of thought into a reason for thinking that the existence of an impassible God has negative axiological consequences for the world. Perhaps one could even use this as a basis for an anti-theistic argument which says that the existence of God would make the world worse off.¹⁴ There certainly seems to be something cruel about an impassible God creating beings who desire empathetic accuracy knowing full well that they will forever feel lonely on the pale blue dot in a vast, empty universe.

5. Concluding Thoughts

I do not take this essay to have offered a decisive case against impassibility. Though I do think that I have offered important considerations for thinking through the debate over God's emotional life. As we gain more insights into the nature of emotions and the value of empathy, the debates over the emotional life of God can move forward in new and exciting ways.

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¹⁴ For more on the axiological difference that God makes to the world, see Kraay (2018).

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