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DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY, DIVINE LOVE

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SUMMARY

The aim of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, to argue that divine passibilism should be rejected. Secondly, to show how the idea of a loving but impassible God is intelligible.

Divine impassibility is understood as the idea that nothing in the world can cause God to suffer or to have an emotion. The thesis examines the nature of subjective suffering and the nature of emotion, and it is argued that both types of experience essentially involve an element of something's not being under the subject's control. Since God is omnipotent and therefore in perfect control of all things, the conclusion is that He cannot have experiences of this nature.

Since the idea that God is loving is a non-negotiable part of Christian theism, it is important that the impassibilist try to show that the idea of a loving but impassible God is intelligible. Particular problems in this respect include conceptually reconciling the undisturbed blessedness of God's life with His care and concern for the world; trying to explain how a God who cannot have subjective experiences of suffering and emotion can fully understand the human condition; finding a suitable analogy for divine love from human experiences of love; and showing that the idea of love does not essentially involve emotions.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that God is impassible was an accepted part of theology for most of the two millennia after the idea was first adopted by the Church Fathers in the second century A.D. It was endorsed by Scholastics such as Anselm, John Scotus Erigena, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. J.K. Mozley informs us that in the Reformation period the status of the idea remained much the same.¹ It was similarly the case in the post-Reformation period. Mozley observes that ‘[a]mong the sixteenth and seventeenth century confessions of faith express mention of the divine impassibility is made in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, and in the Westminster Confession. But the doctrine, whether mentioned or not, may be taken as common to all, and its truth received without question by such eminent post-Reformation divines as Pearson, Butler and John Wesley’.² Mozley’s account confirms Marshall Randles’ observation, dated 1900, that ‘since patristic times, [the idea that God is impassible] has been taken for granted in the theology of the great ecclesiastical denominations’.³

However, in recent times there has been strong opposition to the idea of divine impassibility. In fact, according to Ronald Goetz, ‘the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has become a theological commonplace’.⁴

¹ J.K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1926, p. 119.

² Mozley, *ibid.* p. 126.

³ Quoted in Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality*. Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992, p. 1 n. 4. For references for the sources on which the preceding claims are based, see Mozley, *op. cit. passim*. For accounts of the development of this idea in patristic thought, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000, ch. 5; Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991; and Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴ Quoted in Sarot, *ibid.* p. 2. For similar remarks, see Weinandy, *op. cit.* p. 1; Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985, p. 5; and Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 1, 16.

Those who reject the idea that God is impassible do so for a number of reasons. Paul Fiddes lists five.⁵

The first objection concerns the nature of interpersonal love. It is held that interpersonal love essentially requires of each party to such a relationship a suffering or emotional response to the other, as occasion demands. A God who is unable to meet this requirement cannot be loving.

The second objection concerns the nature and significance of the Incarnation. The idea that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself implies that in some way God – as God – suffered when Jesus suffered on the cross. Further, the idea that Jesus reveals the nature of God implies that Jesus's passibility as a human being shows that God Himself is passible.

The third objection concerns the adequacy of traditional theodicy. A theodicy must do more than provide possible reasons for the coexistence of both evil and a perfectly good, omnipotent God. It must show that the God who is, as creator, ultimately responsible for the possibility of suffering in the world has not exposed human beings to something which He Himself is not willing to expose Himself to. In this connection, only a suffering God is morally credible.

The fourth objection concerns the idea that God must be conceived as having adequate resources with which to comfort us when we suffer. It is argued that it is not enough, when we suffer, for someone merely to appeal to some theodicean argument. We want to know that God understands our situation and is sympathetic towards us, and this can only be achieved if we think of God as responding to us in a suffering way.

⁵ Fiddes, *op. cit.* pp. 16–45. Actually, Fiddes says he detects four, but following Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 78ff. & pp. 96–101, I regard the question of the consolatory value of the idea of a suffering God as separate from the question of the moral value of the idea for purposes of theodicy. So although Fiddes puts these two reasons for accepting divine passibilism under a common heading, I, like Sarot, have treated them separately.

The fifth objection concerns the supposed remoteness of an impassible God. Greek philosophical theology is thought to have had a corrupting influence on the formation of the Judaeo-Christian concept of God. It is alleged that, in relation to human affairs, such a God is remote, insensitive, and unconcerned. For some, the ideas generated by ‘process philosophy’ provide the means for constructing a more acceptable concept of God – one which includes the idea that God is passible.⁶

I will comment later on these objections to divine impassibilism.

Although the concept of divine impassibility is thought to involve a number of ideas,⁷ the core idea is that nothing ‘external’ to God can cause Him to suffer or evoke an emotion in Him. This will be my understanding of divine impassibility throughout this thesis. The rationale behind this idea is God’s independence of the world and His complete sovereignty over it.⁸ Things and events in the world are part of creation’s matrix of cause and effect, a matrix which God, as creator, cannot be part of. And because God holds the world in being, He has perfect control over it in all its aspects. There is nothing in the world which can in any way control Him or limit Him.

It is important to try to determine whether the question of divine suffering is the same as that of divine emotion. For if they are in fact different questions, then the settling of one will not necessarily settle the other, and the issue of divine (im)passibility will not be adequately addressed. In talking about divine suffering, is one talking about some divine emotion? According to Nicholas Wolterstorff, the question of divine suffering is

⁶ Similar assessments as to why impassibilism has recently been rejected – ones which agree with Fiddes’ assessment in all or most of the items enumerated – can be found in Sarot, *op. cit.* ch.3; Weinandy, *op. cit.* ch. 1; and McWilliams, *op. cit.* ch. 1.

⁷ See, for example, Peter Forster, ‘Divine Passibility and the Early Christian Doctrine of God’ in Nigel M. de S. Cameron ed. *The Power and Weakness of God*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990, p. 23; McWilliams, *op. cit.* p. 4f; the article ‘Impassibility of God’ in F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 823; G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*. London: SPCK, 1952, pp. 5–9; Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 3–12; Gavriilyuk, *op. cit.* p. 15f & ch. 2; and Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 25–30.

frequently not distinguished from the question of divine emotion but ought to be, on the grounds that ‘suffering is in fact a distinct phenomenon from grief and the other “negative” emotions ...’.⁹ Wolterstorff in fact denies that God is capable of emotion, for in Wolterstorff’s view, emotion essentially involves physiological change and God, being incorporeal, cannot undergo physiological change.¹⁰ However, although he denies that God is ‘emotionally’ passible, Wolterstorff does affirm God’s ‘suffering’ passibility.¹¹

What, then, of the distinction between suffering and emotion? Some emotions are mild and negative (for example, sadness or regret); others are positive (for example, joy or exhilaration). However, in neither case could someone having such emotions be properly said to be suffering, simply in virtue of having the emotions. As I aim to show in chapter 2, suffering is something which is both negative and intense, and therefore cannot properly be ascribed to someone merely in virtue of the person in question having a mild or positive emotion. It follows, then, that the concept of suffering cannot be coextensive with that of emotion.

Is suffering, then, a *type* of emotion – or is it logically possible that someone can suffer without feeling an emotion?

Suppose, for example, that the intense pain I feel in my back is the result of a skiing injury. Suppose also that I take a calm and rational view of my injury because I have always regarded injury as an occupational hazard of skiing. Nevertheless, the injury is intensely painful, even after the pain has been alleviated with painkillers, and I am helpless to do anything about the pain that remains. It is likely that I will dislike the pain

⁸ In support of this claim, see Prestige, *op. cit.* pp. 5, 7 and Richard Bauckham, ‘In Defence of *The Crucified God*’ in Nigel M. de S. Cameron ed. *The Power and Weakness of God*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990, p. 105.

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Suffering Love’ in Thomas V. Morris ed., *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 214f.

¹⁰ Wolterstorff, *ibid.* p. 213f. I will discuss this question of physiological change and God’s incorporeality later in this chapter. See p. 14f.

¹¹ Wolterstorff, *ibid.* pp. 215–230.

intensely and will want it to go away. Thus I would have a strongly aversive attitude to the pain. However, it is not clear that this would amount to an emotion towards it. Nor if I were to writhe in agony could I properly be said, in virtue of that fact, to be having an emotion. In this connection, Roger Trigg's view of the matter is incorrect. He claims that '[w]hen someone writhes in agony, it is obvious that he is as much in the grip of an emotion as if he were furiously angry or mortally afraid. Emotions are characteristically instances of excitement and disturbance'.¹² Even if emotions are characteristically like this – which is questionable – the excitement and disturbance involved in the expression of severe pain does not, unlike emotion, derive from a certain perception or evaluation of our circumstances. There is not the intentional element which emotions essentially involve. The writhing is just the motor response to the pain that is felt. The pain is certainly something I have to endure, something I am constrained to undergo, something I have to put up with, and this – as I will argue in chapter 3 – makes it reasonable to describe such a condition as suffering. Yet there is no clear indication in any of this that my suffering in this situation just is my having some sort of emotion. I conclude that not only is suffering not the same thing as emotion, it should not be classed as a *kind* of emotion either.

Given that there is a logical distinction between suffering and emotion, what is the relation between these two ideas when we talk of the possibility of divine passibility? If we consider other attributes of God, certain forms of divine suffering must be ruled out. For example, since God is incorporeal, He cannot suffer physically. Nor – to use an example Wolterstorff uses in illustrating human suffering¹³ – can God experience the suffering that is sometimes involved in certain mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia. For God is rational and all-knowing, and cannot have the sort of distorted view of

¹² Roger Trigg, *Pain and Emotion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 42.

¹³ Wolterstorff, *op. cit.* p. 215.

Himself or the world that such illnesses involve. However, one common form of human suffering is the suffering that is involved when we experience certain intense, negative emotions such as grief or remorse. And it is grief¹⁴ over sinful humanity which passibilists frequently attribute to God. Usually, it is implied that because God grieves He suffers.¹⁵ Thus, if one has good reason to think that God cannot experience emotions – on grounds of His incorporeality, for example – there would be a strong case for thinking that God cannot suffer either. On the other hand, if one has good reason for thinking that God cannot suffer, it would still leave open the possibility that God could, in response to the world, feel certain types of positive emotion or certain types of mild, negative emotion. Nevertheless, in chapter 3 I will argue that one should not attribute emotional passibility to Him either.

My approach to the question of divine (im)passibility will be largely one of analysing the relevant concepts, and attempting to determine whether certain concepts are compatible with others. From what I have said so far, it is clear that this will involve conceptual analyses of suffering and of emotion. But, of course, attention must also be paid to the nature of the divine person about whom the (im)passibility claims are being made. Is God such that passibility is possible for Him?

One divine attribute which will have the decisive rôle in answering this question is divine omnipotence. This attribute is a central feature of traditional Christian theism. Gijsbert van den Brink observes that

almightiness or omnipotence has certainly been the most prominent of all attributes traditionally ascribed to God. Both in the Nicene and in the

¹⁴ Or even *severe* grief – Sarot, op. cit. p. 88.

¹⁵ I leave aside other forms of suffering which passibilists might attribute to God on account of His involvement with Jesus in the Incarnation.

Apostles' Creed it is the only divine property which is explicitly mentioned, in both cases at the very outset.¹⁶

It is on the basis of a consideration of this divine characteristic that I will reject divine passibilism. For I will argue that the experience of suffering, and to a lesser extent the experience of emotion, both involve – in a way which I will specify – a loss of control, and are therefore incompatible with the idea that God is omnipotent. This discussion will form the first – and ‘negative’ – part of my thesis, comprising chapters 2 and 3.

I said that my approach to the question of divine (im)passibility is *largely* one of conceptual analysis and of determining conceptual compatibility. However, what I have said so far suggests that my commitment to certain core ideas in traditional Christian theism will also be a determining factor in this enquiry. These ideas are, in my opinion, rooted in the Bible, and I will assume that for this reason they should control what we say about God when examining an issue in *Christian* theology. For the Bible is not, for the Christian, merely a source of ideas about God: it is an *authoritative* source.

So how does the Bible depict God? God is described as the creator of the world and as the one who sustains it in being. Further, the Bible contains an account of God's dealings with human beings, and in describing those dealings, we are provided with a picture of God – He is very powerful, far-reaching in knowledge, and shows kindness to His people.¹⁷ It is these biblical data which are the basis, in embryo form, for the later, fully-developed theological ideas of divine omnipotence and – to include the other ideas central to traditional Christian theism – divine omniscience, God's perfect goodness, and creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁶ Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence*. Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1993, p. 1.

¹⁷ Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:17; Jer. 32:27; Ps.139; and Ps.100:5 are representative of many references that could be cited in support of these claims.

I have said that, in this enquiry, the Bible and the related core of traditional theistic ideas are the sources of certain concepts I will be using, and that therefore they will have a part in determining the issue of divine (im)passibilism. At this point, however, a question might arise: why not settle the issue by a direct appeal to the Bible?

Unfortunately, things are not so straightforward. For the question presupposes that the Bible expresses a view on the matter. This is not the case. Nor is there any indication whether or not the biblical writers ever thought about the matter. It is therefore pointless trying to interpret the Bible with the aim of finding out 'the biblical view'.

This situation is similar to the one Paul Helm discusses when he considers the question of God's timelessness. The idea that we can find out 'the biblical view' of time and of God's relation to time presupposes that there are, in the Bible, what James Barr calls 'reflective contexts'.¹⁸ Helm explains that '[b]y a reflective context Barr means a second-order context, one in which a matter is considered in an abstract or quite general way'.¹⁹ It is not enough, say Barr and Helm, simply to examine words and sentences in the Bible with the aim of trying to construct a biblical view of time, and of God's relation to time: we need the reflective context 'in order to determine that the expressions used are metaphysically or doctrinally significant', and it is precisely this that the Bible does not provide us with.²⁰

Helm suggests that the presence of such a context is indicated when there is

a certain self-consciousness, or an appropriate level of debate, one in which certain possibilities are unambiguously excluded. The very idea of a doctrinal formulation, or at least a doctrinal formulation which involves metaphysics, is something that could not occur in a context in which there were not the conditions for such a debate.²¹

¹⁸ Paul Helm, *Eternal God*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 5.

¹⁹ Helm, *ibid.* p. 5.

²⁰ Helm, *ibid.* p. 5.

These remarks apply equally to the question of divine (im)passibility. In the Bible, there is no reflective context in which a view about divine (im)passibilism emerges, and nothing to indicate that it was a question that was ever thought about. As Helm says – concerning the question of divine timelessness – in order ‘to construct a metaphysical view about God’s relation to time ... a less direct method will have to be employed’.²² Later in his discussion, he makes clear what this less direct method is. He says that even if the Bible does not ‘teach’ us that God is timeless,

it teaches many things which make the idea of timelessness a reasonable theological concept to employ, given these data, when certain controversial questions which the biblical writers did not themselves raise have arisen over the question.²³

This, I submit, was precisely the situation that obtained when Greek philosophers raised and debated the question of whether the gods were impassible – and when Philo (a Hellenistic Jew) and the Church Fathers came to the conclusion that the God of the Bible was impassible.²⁴ Since this situation has arisen again in recent years, with divine impassibilism being widely questioned, it is necessary to turn again to the data, to the things the Bible *does* ‘teach’, at least in a rudimentary way, to the core ideas of theism, and to reaffirm as reasonable the theological concept of divine impassibility. This is what I am engaged in in the first part of this thesis.

²¹ Helm, *ibid.* p. 10.

²² Helm, *ibid.* p. 6.

²³ Helm, *ibid.* p. 11.

²⁴ On the ‘Greek’ debate, see Gavriilyuk, *op. cit.* pp. 21–36. On Philo’s views, see Gavriilyuk, *op. cit.* pp. 42–46; Weinandy, *op. cit.* pp. 74–82; and Hallman, *op. cit.* pp. 23–29.

To those who reject one or more of the core ideas to which I appeal in trying to determine the question of divine (im)passibility,²⁵ the argument in the negative part of my thesis will not be acceptable.

In the ‘positive’ part, I will attempt to answer the sorts of questions which Kelly James Clark, a passibilist, asks when reflecting on the need for a logical analysis of concepts relevant to the question of divine (im)passibilism, questions such as

Is it logically possible for an impassible and omniscient being to know of the suffering of another? Is it logically possible for an impassible divinity to love other than himself? Is benevolence sufficient for the kind of love that the Judeo-Christian God shows his children?²⁶

In view of the fact that many are convinced that love essentially involves passibility, it is necessary, in a thesis in support of divine impassibilism, to try to show that *impassible* love is intelligible. Otherwise, in the absence of convincing arguments to this effect, a passibilist might reasonably argue that since the idea that God loves us is an essential item in Christian theism and the idea of impassible love seems *unintelligible*, certain ideas about the nature of God which exclude the possibility of divine passibilism must be rejected, or understood in such a way that such a possibility is *not* excluded. So, by conceptual analysis, I aim to show that impassible love is not unintelligible.

I have not, as part of my enquiry, discussed certain divine attributes which some might consider to be decisive in settling the question of divine (im)passibilism. I refer to the attributes of divine immutability and divine incorporeality. My contention is that, as

²⁵ The sort of people I have in mind might, for example, subscribe to ‘process theology’, or be influenced by it. For brief accounts of process theology’s divergence from traditional theology in these matters, see Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, ch. 2 and Benjamin Wirt Farley, *The Providence of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988, ch.10. There are, however, some who appear to subscribe to the core ideas – for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Kelly James Clark, and Richard Bauckham – and yet who still reject divine impassibilism. For my sources of information about this latter group, see Kelly James Clark, ‘Hold Not Thy Peace At My Tears’ in K. J. Clark ed., *Our Knowledge of God*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, pp. 167–193 and Bauckham, *op. cit.* pp. 93–118.

things currently stand in philosophical debate, an argument against divine passibilism, using either of these ideas, would involve premises which would be considered by many as problematic.

Take an argument based on the idea that God is absolutely immutable. According to this idea, God cannot in any way change Himself or be changed by anything.²⁷ If God is immutable in this sense, then nothing in the world can cause Him to suffer or evoke an emotion in Him. For to be caused to suffer or to feel an emotion is to be changed in some way, and this is what, in part, the idea of absolute immutability rules out.

However, the idea that God is absolutely immutable is difficult to establish.

According to Thomas Morris, those philosophers who claim that God is absolutely immutable usually do so from a prior commitment to the idea that God is timeless.²⁸ This is the idea that God does not exist through successive moments of time but exists ‘outside’ time. Nor does He experience His existence successively – there is not for God a past, a present, or a future. Time is merely a creature of God and is something which He transcends.²⁹

In connection with this idea, Nelson Pike gives a succinct description of the temporal aspect of the nature of change. He writes: ‘If an object changes, that object is different at a given time from what it was at an earlier time. This is what it is to change. Thus, in order to change, an object must exist at two moments in time’.³⁰ However, *ex hypothesi*, a timeless God cannot exist in time, and so cannot change.

²⁶ Clark, *op. cit.* p. 178.

²⁷ I am not including ‘Cambridge’ changes in this description. Its being true that God is thought about by Smith at t_1 and false that God is thought about by Smith at t_2 does not constitute a change in God Himself.

²⁸ Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987, p. 83f.

²⁹ On this, see Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, pp. 120–130.

³⁰ Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 39.

The idea that God is timeless does not currently command widespread support from theologians and philosophers.³¹ And apart from various objections which are raised against the idea,³² there is a fundamental question regarding what exactly we mean when we say that God is timeless. According to Hasker, '[t]he correct answer ... is far from obvious, and often the doctrine is misunderstood even by those who claim to accept it'.³³ Certainly, any answer to this question presupposes some view – pre-theoretical or otherwise – as to the nature of time, for without such a view it is not possible to make sense of the idea that God is timeless. So what is time? This is a question which, according to Yates, has been 'virtually ignored in the ... literature' concerning divine timelessness.³⁴ Yet the cogency of the idea of divine timelessness 'can only be assessed in the light of a viable philosophy of time. It is not adequate to assume ... that we know what time is, for the question of the ontological status of time is one of considerable complexity'.³⁵ However, if there are uncertainties about the nature of time, one cannot be confident of the tenability of the view that God is *timeless*.

There are other arguments which have sometimes been used to justify the claim that God is absolutely immutable but there is not space to do more than to present them and comment briefly.

For example, another argument for conceiving of God as absolutely immutable concerns the supposed incompatibility between mutability and perfection:

³¹ On this, see Paul Helm, 'Divine Timeless Eternity' in Gregory E. Ganssle ed., *God and Time*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002, p.28. Defenders of the idea include Paul Helm, *Eternal God*, op. cit.; John C. Yates, *The Timelessness of God*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990; Brian Davies, *Thinking About God*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985. pp. 148–172; Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991; and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Eternity' in Thomas V. Morris ed., *The Concept of God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, ch. 11.

³² See references in previous footnote, plus William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

³³ Hasker, *ibid.* p. 145.

³⁴ Yates, op. cit. p. 295.

³⁵ Yates, *ibid.* p. 295.

... God cannot change, because all change is either change for the better or change for the worse. But God is necessarily a greatest possible being. So he cannot change for the better, since if he did, he would not have been the greatest possible being prior to the change. And he cannot change for the worse, since if he did, he would not be the greatest possible being subsequent to the change. Therefore, God cannot change.³⁶

The fault with this argument is that there is an assumption that all change is perfection-related, and this is clearly false. For example, I might describe my maximally efficient carving-knife as being ‘perfect for’ the job for which it was designed. If, however, I decided to replace the brown handle with an otherwise identical black handle – because I happen to prefer black – this would not be a change relevant to the knife’s perfection as a carving instrument.

Finally, another argument for God’s absolute immutability – at least, as far as His being changed by anything is concerned – is based on the sort of reasoning expressed in Aquinas’s ‘First Way’ argument.³⁷ Aquinas argues that in order to explain the existence of change in the world, we must posit something as the first cause in a causal chain of change that extends throughout the universe. In order to avoid the apparently unacceptable idea of an infinitely regressive chain of causes, there must be a cause of change which cannot itself be changed by anything, and this cause is God. Thus God cannot in any way be changed.³⁸

It is doubtful whether this argument succeeds in telling us anything more specific about the nature of God other than that He is the ultimate cause of all change. In order to offer an explanation of mundane change, it is sufficient to say that *God* is the cause: it is not necessary to specify an unchanging or unchangeable God.³⁹

³⁶ Morris, *Our Idea of God*, op. cit. p.127.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 2, 3.

³⁸ See Davies, op. cit. pp. 161–164.

³⁹ The argument is evidently not unproblematic. Brian Davies – who accepts it – observes that it is ‘frequently rejected’. See Davies, op. cit. p. 162. Anthony O’Hear remarks that Aquinas’s ‘writing on the subject [of such cosmological arguments] is largely vitiated by its dependence on medieval physics and by what appear to be strangely slipshod logical errors’. See Anthony O’Hear, *Experience*,

If the claim that God is absolutely immutable can be well supported, passibilists have something to worry about. For the idea that God is absolutely immutable completely excludes divine passibilism. However, if, as I contend, the arguments for this idea are based on premises which are problematic or false, this idea cannot, at the present time, be decisive in the issue of divine (im)passibility.

The other argument which some might consider decisive in settling the question of divine (im)passibilism is based on the idea of divine incorporeality. The problem is not with trying to justify the claim that God is incorporeal: that is widely accepted. The problem lies with ascertaining the nature of emotion.

Some think that the idea of physiological change is central to the concept of emotion.⁴⁰ That is, one's having an emotion is, in part, one's undergoing some bodily modification – change in heartrate, change in respiratory rate, change in muscle tension, blushing, trembling, sweating, and so on.⁴¹ Others think that emotions are just feelings of a certain sort, either bodily feelings or non-bodily – that is, 'psychic' – feelings.⁴² Oakley describes other variants of this view:

... [I]nstead of claiming that emotions are exclusively either bodily or psychic feelings, one may hold that emotions are bodily and/or psychic feelings. That is, the view here would be that emotions are feelings which are sometimes bodily, sometimes psychic, and on some occasions a combination of both.⁴³

Explanation and Faith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 106ff. See also Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp. 6–33.

⁴⁰ For references to those who do, see Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 193 n. 9. The list includes Aristotle, Aquinas, and Spinoza.

⁴¹ For further details, see William Lyons, *Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 116–119.

⁴² Oakley, op. cit. pp. 16–22. Oakley describes William James as having held a bodily-feelings view of emotion, and suggests that Descartes and Hume held a psychic-feelings view.

⁴³ Oakley, *ibid.* p. 196 n. 31. Michael Stocker and Peter Goldie are examples of contemporary philosophers who hold this view of emotions. See Michael Stocker, with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions*.

If emotions essentially involve physiological change, then an incorporeal God cannot have emotions. Nor, it would seem, can He have emotions if emotions essentially involve bodily feelings. For although bodily feelings are *mental* items, they are – as ‘bodily’ –located in the body by the mind. The view that emotions are just psychic feelings of some sort would not, on incorporeality grounds, preclude God from being able to have emotions. And if, according to the variant Oakley describes above, what is essential to emotion is that there be either a bodily feeling or a psychic feeling, or both, then God would not, on incorporeality grounds, be excluded from being able to have emotions of certain types or at certain levels of intensity, as long as these emotions did not involve bodily feelings.

Given the fact that there are these diverse views about the nature of the non-intentional aspect of emotion – the aspect that does not involve beliefs and desires⁴⁴ – it is not clear at the present time whether or not the idea that God is incorporeal excludes the possibility that He can have emotions. It is for this reason that I will not be discussing the relation between emotion and God’s incorporeality.

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Earlier in this chapter,⁴⁵ I listed – following Fiddes – five objections to divine impassibilism. They concerned firstly, the nature of love; secondly, the nature and significance of the Incarnation; thirdly, the adequacy of traditional theodicy; fourthly, the consolation we receive from God; and fifthly, the supposed remoteness of an impassible God.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 18–20 and Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, ch. 3.

⁴⁴ Some think that there is intentionality which is peculiar to psychic feelings. See, for example, Goldie, *op. cit.* p. 18f. and David Pugmire, *Rediscovering Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p. 60f. This is a view I will discuss in detail – and reject – in chapter 7.

I will not address here the first objection, concerning the nature of love. That will be the subject matter of chapters 6 and 7, a summary of which will form part of my thesis outline later.

Of the remaining four objections, three can be dealt with fairly briefly.

The second objection – the nature and significance of the Incarnation – is more a theological question than a philosophical one, and there is not space here for more than a few brief comments.

As far as the *nature* of the Incarnation is concerned, the traditional view is that God, as God, did not suffer in the Incarnation. Rather, it was the Son of God, as man, who suffered. This distinction is based on the two-natures view of Christ. He suffered in His human nature but not in His divine. This is how traditional Christian theism interprets the claim that ‘God was in Christ’. However, some reject the two-natures view of Christ as implausible or incoherent, and conclude that in the Incarnation, God – as God – did indeed suffer.⁴⁶

There is no need for this question about the nature of the Incarnation to detain me further. For the question of whether God as God suffered in the Incarnation logically depends on another question, the question of whether God *can* suffer. If God cannot suffer – as I will argue in this thesis – then the nature of the Incarnation is such that God did not suffer.

However, insofar as there is a question about the *significance* of the Incarnation for the question of divine impassibility, there is more involved. For the point of this objection is that the Incarnation has, by the suffering of Christ, revealed to us the passible nature of

⁴⁵ p. 2f.

⁴⁶ For discussion of this matter, see Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 26ff; Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 91–94; and Weinandy, *op. cit.* pp. 14–18. For an exposition of the patristic formation of the two-natures idea, see Weinandy, *op. cit.* ch. 8.

God. If Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, the fact of Jesus's suffering constitutes a further datum for the construction of our concept of the Christian God.⁴⁷

However, our response to this argument cannot be simply to decide that God is not impassible after all. For, necessarily, Jesus's suffering was part of His being fully human. It is part of the condition of being human that human beings suffer. No doubt Jesus's suffering was extraordinary because of His virtue and the nature of His mission. But because He was a man, His suffering was inevitable. So was His being thirsty and hungry and tired, and His being some particular number of years old and of a certain height. Yet none of these physical conditions or characteristics are regarded as being in some way revelatory of God. We do not, for example, conclude from these facts that God has a body or must be a certain number of years old.

Further, those who use this argument seem to assume that what they perceive as a revelatory aspect of Jesus's life has conceptual priority over the theistic framework in which the Person of Christ and His mission are understood. As Herbert McCabe writes:

Our use for the word 'God' does *not* begin with Christology. To put it at its simplest, we cannot ask the question: "In what sense is Jesus to be called the Son of God?" without some prior use for the word 'God'. And, of course, the New Testament did have such a prior use. The NT is unintelligible except as the flowering of the Hebrew tradition ...⁴⁸

In considering whether Jesus's suffering reveals that God Himself suffers, it is necessary to take into account the fact that our conception of Jesus is already determined by a certain concept of God, with all that that concept might imply about what we can accept as a revelation of God.

⁴⁷ This is an argument used in Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 94ff. Sarot provides a large bibliography of authors who use this argument – n.60.

⁴⁸ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*. London: Mowbray, 1987, p. 42 – his emphasis.

The third objection concerns the adequacy of traditional theodicy. Maurice Wiles sets forth the objection succinctly:

If God is 'responsible' for evil, in however modified a sense, because he has taken the risk of creating a world in which it was highly likely, or even logically bound, to emerge, then there are strong moral objections to any view of God which regards him as immune from the damaging consequences of that evil ... [I]t is incumbent on us to be able ... to say of God, in the haunting words of scripture, that 'in all their afflictions, he was afflicted' (Isa.63.9) ... [T]hat sentiment ... is implicit in the general picture of God's compassion to be found in so much of both Old and New Testaments, as well as being a requisite element within any moral theism.⁴⁹

Wiles is arguing that given the sort of world God has created, one which God had good reason to think would involve evil, God has a moral obligation to suffer with its suffering human inhabitants. The implication is that God should not have taken the risk if He was not willing to share the possible consequences Himself. However, since God is good, we can presume that He fulfils this obligation and does suffer.

Sarot and Creel reply to this objection with various – and in my opinion, convincing – arguments to the effect that it is doubtful whether God should be thought of as having a moral obligation to suffer. It is not necessary for me to go into these arguments here. For, as Sarot points out, the idea that God has an obligation to suffer is premised on the assumption that God is *able* to suffer, and without an independent argument to that effect, the objection fails.⁵⁰ If God is impassible, it is not a moral failing in Him if He does not suffer with His creation, for a necessary condition of something being moral or immoral is that an element of choice is involved. If a being is by nature incapable of what might be considered an appropriate moral response – appropriate in those who *are* capable of it and who are therefore liable to a moral appraisal of how they

⁴⁹ Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World*. London: SCM Press, 1986, p. 49. See also Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 34ff. and the references Sarot provides – *op. cit.* p. 96, n. 70. Discussions of this objection can be found in Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, *op. cit.* pp. 146–152 and Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 96–101.

actually do respond – we would not regard that being as morally deficient if it fails to exhibit the relevant response. It is for this reason, for example, that we do not judge an autistic person to be morally culpable for failing to show the emotional warmth which, in the appropriate circumstances, is expected of normal human beings. This is not, of course, to suggest that God is in any way pathologically deficient. If He is incapable of suffering, it is for reasons concerning qualities that are unique to His nature.

The fourth objection is based on the idea that, as Fiddes puts it, ‘it is a consolation to those who suffer to know that God suffers too, and understands their situation from within’.⁵¹ There is an implication here that if God cannot suffer, He cannot understand the sufferer’s plight. Further, the idea of divine suffering is consolatory not just because it implies that God understands; it also implies that God is with us in our suffering.⁵²

While those who look to God in their suffering undoubtedly want to think of God as understanding their suffering and as being with them, it should not be assumed that they have to conceive of God as suffering before they can think in this way. People seem to have different inclinations in this respect. While some might find the idea of a suffering God consoling – precisely because of the supposed implications mentioned above – others find it to be otherwise.⁵³

While human suffering may, in certain circumstances, be a sign that one person understands another and cares about him, it is not necessary to think of the divine-human relationship in this way. What, in part, constitutes a loving relationship between people is the element, on each side, of understanding the other and having a caring attitude towards the other, and this is what is sometimes indicated by suffering, but the suffering itself

⁵⁰ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 99f.

⁵¹ Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 31.

⁵² Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 32 & n. 50.

⁵³ So, for example, Fiddes and Sarot find the idea consoling; Creel and Friedrich von Hügel do not. See Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 14, 78ff. and Creel, *op. cit.* p. 156f.

should not be confused with what it indicates. As Weinandy puts it, concerning compassionate suffering,

[w]hile compassion is defined as ‘suffering with’, the heart of compassion is the love expressed within the suffering and not the suffering itself. Thus God is perfectly compassionate not because he ‘suffers with’ those who suffer, but because his love fully and freely embraces those who suffer. What human beings cry out for in their suffering is not a God who suffers, but a God who loves wholly and completely ...⁵⁴

The limitations of the human condition are such that, necessarily, human love involves suffering, but suffering itself is not essential to the quality of that love. This is a claim I will defend in chapters 5 and 7. In chapter 5, I will argue that God’s deep knowledge of our subjective experiences does not in any way depend on His having to undergo subjective experiences Himself. In chapter 7, I will argue that emotions like compassion can be logically reduced to beliefs and desires without any loss of valuational content, that is, without diminishing the compassionate person’s valuing of another implied by the concept of human compassion.

However, whether ‘the consolation argument’ for divine passibility is acceptable or not does not depend on subjective judgements about the consolatory value of the idea of divine suffering, nor does it depend on whether there are alternative ways of thinking about divine consolation. Rather, it depends on whether God is *able* to suffer, and this question is yet to be addressed.

The fifth, and final, objection to divine impassibility concerns the supposed remoteness of an impassible God.

It is a commonplace that passibilists accuse the Church Fathers of being too enamoured of the ideas of Greek philosophical theology, and as a result, importing into what should be a Bible-based conception of God ideas which are alien to those found in

the Bible. The biblical conception of God is thought to have been corrupted by Greek philosophy.

For example, Warren McWilliams observes that

[d]espite the emphasis on divine passion in the Bible, early Christian theologians gradually agreed on divine impassibility as the orthodox position. This development has been the target of most proponents of divine passibility, who generally agree that the main culprit responsible for the shift from passibility to impassibility is Greek metaphysics. Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides, the Stoics) developed an understanding of deity as immutable, self-sufficient, impassible, and static. Christian theologians eventually used these philosophical categories to describe God, even though this usually led to a distortion of God's nature. God appeared more and more like Aristotle's unmoved mover, for example, rather than the passionate, dynamic Yahweh of biblical faith.⁵⁵

Likewise, Paul Fiddes remarks that

[t]here is no need here to labour the point that has been made so often in recent theological discussion: that the early Fathers of the Church recast the God of scripture in the mould of Greek philosophy. God's unchanging faithfulness became an unchanging immobility; his moral otherness from the world (his holiness) became a philosophical otherness which effectively excluded him from direct involvement in the turmoil of history.⁵⁶

However, this charge against the Church Fathers is based on an inadequate knowledge of the philosophical milieu of the time, and of the Fathers' handling of the ideas that were available to them. Firstly, it assumes that the Church Fathers were uncritical in their use of Greek ideas in conceptualizing the Christian God. Secondly, it fails to take account of the fact that Greek theology was not uniform in its conception of God or the gods. Thirdly, terms such as 'immutable' and 'impassible' were used to emphasize the

⁵⁴ Weinandy, *op. cit.* p. 164.

⁵⁵ McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, *op. cit.* p. 10f. At least five out of the six passibilists whose writings McWilliams surveys hold this view – see pp. 34, 82, 104f., 127ff. and 156ff.

⁵⁶ Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 37f.

transcendence of God's being in relation to created being. There was no necessary implication that God was uninvolved in the world, or did not care about it.

Regarding the first point – the supposed uncritical use of Greek ideas – it is necessary first of all to understand that in order to try to explain, defend, and promote the Christian faith, the early Apologists would naturally use the thought-forms of their Hellenistic milieu. Further, in order to attack Greek mythological conceptions of the gods and their ways, and to promote the superiority of the only God of the Christians, the Apologists had to use every weapon to hand, including Greek philosophical theology.⁵⁷

However, this immersion in the ideas of Greek theology did not mean that the Apologists were uncritical in their use of these ideas. According to Richard Norris,

[f]rom the beginning ... the attitude of Christian writers toward Greek theology was ambiguous. Its ideas and methods played two distinct roles in their thought. On the one hand, they saw it, for the most part unconsciously, as the normal way of thinking about God and the world: that is, as a theological idiom whose logic was appropriate to the set of problems with which they were coming to grips. On the other hand, they saw it as a body of specific teachings which had to be accepted or rejected on their merits; and in this guise it was, for the most part, treated as dangerous at best. The simultaneous receptivity and hostility of the Apologists – and of later Christian writers as well – to Greek theology can only be understood when this distinction between its two roles is kept in mind.⁵⁸

In view of Norris's remarks, it is clearly an over-simplification to claim, as Fiddes does, that the Church Fathers recast the God of scripture in the mold of Greek philosophy. And what is particularly remarkable about this claim is that Fiddes supports it with a reference to Norris's book. By doing so, Fiddes seriously misrepresents Norris's account of the Church Fathers' attitude towards Greek philosophy. This is particularly apparent if one

⁵⁷ On this, see Richard A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology*. London: A. and C. Black, 1966, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Norris, *ibid.* p. 35.

reads Norris's closing remarks in his final chapter, 'The Achievement of the Fathers'. He writes:

... [W]hat we observe is not a surrender of Christianity to Hellenism ... but a fusion of ideas and themes which creates a new set of philosophical and theological problems, and thus lays the foundation for the working out, by future thinkers, of a new and necessarily more subtle understanding of man and his world in their relation to God.⁵⁹

And a little further on we read:

The fruit of [the Fathers'] work was not the canonization of a Hellenistic Platonism or Stoicism. It was rather a sort of map of the problems involved in the elaboration of something which had never existed before: a biblical philosophy ... The early church in fact failed – or refused – to make a perfect adjustment to the thought forms of the culture in which it existed ...⁶⁰

The second point concerns the fact that there was a diversity in Greek accounts of God or the gods. As well as Epicurean, Middle Platonist, and Stoic views, and the variants within each of these schools of thought, there was the possibility of syncretism.⁶¹ In addition, there were the 'suffering and passionate gods of the mystery cults'.⁶² At the end of his survey of Greek theology, which he does not intend as exhaustive, Gavrilyuk concludes that

[t]o see this complex web of theological views as involving for the Christian Fathers a clear-cut choice between the involved God of the Bible and the uninvolved God of the Hellenistic philosophers is extremely misleading. Enlightenment deism should not be read into the philosophical climate of late antiquity ... [T]here was no *consensus philosophorum* amounting to an

⁵⁹ Norris, *ibid.* p. 138.

⁶⁰ Norris, *ibid.* p. 139. Paul Gavrilyuk traces the view that patristic theology was corrupted by Greek philosophy to Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), and remarks that Harnack's view has been exposed as untenable – Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, *op. cit.* p. 4.

⁶¹ Gavrilyuk, *ibid.* pp. 21–36.

⁶² Gavrilyuk, *ibid.* p. 36.

affirmation of divine indifference and non-involvement. On the contrary, competing philosophical schools were keenly aware of profound differences in these matters. The Fathers could not possibly agree with the philosophers simply because the philosophers did not agree among themselves.⁶³

The third point concerns a misunderstanding about the use of negative characteristics to emphasize the transcendence of God's being in relation to created being. God is the only existent whose being is not derived from anything else. Every other existent derives its being from God. In order to mark this sharp distinction between two kinds of being, various negative characteristics were ascribed to God. Whereas the world was finite, visible, corporeal, and mutable, God's difference from the world was expressed by saying that He was none of these things. Thus He is *infinite*, *invisible*, *incorporeal*, *immutable*, and so on.

However, far from the idea of God's ontological separation from His creation implying that He is absent from it, it actually implies the closest possible involvement. Norris's exposition of Irenaeus's thinking about divine transcendence helps us to understand this point. According to Norris, Irenaeus's

notion of God's *limitlessness* ... is not merely that God cannot be measured, but also that nothing sets a limit to his power and presence. What makes God *different* from every creature ... is thus, for Irenaeus, precisely what assures his direct and intimate *relation* with every creature.⁶⁴

Corporeality, mutability, mortality, and corruptibility are all features of the world God has created. Insofar as a being has any of these features, it is limited in some way. In claiming that God is transcendent, one is claiming that He is not in any way subject to these limitations. And because God cannot be limited, there is nothing in creation which can prevent His direct and intimate relation with it.

⁶³ Gavriilyuk, *ibid.* p. 35f.

⁶⁴ Norris, *op. cit.* p. 70 – his emphases.

This last point about God's transcendence being the very reason He can be intimately involved with us indicates that the passibilist claim that the traditional God is remote is based on a misunderstanding of the traditional view of divine transcendence.

The above description of divine transcendence must be distinguished from a view which would place divine transcendence in *opposition* to divine immanence.⁶⁵ On this view, divine transcendence is inversely proportional to divine immanence. The more transcendent God is conceived to be, the less conceptual room there is for the idea that He is immanent, and *vice versa*. It is not surprising, then, that if it is assumed that God's transcendence has this oppositional relation to His immanence, the idea of God's transcendence is understood as His being remote from the world. On this view, the only way conceptually to lessen God's remoteness is to lessen His transcendence. Those passibilists who think like this wrongly believe that we can conceive of God as being near to us – being present and involved in the world – only if we conceive of His being near to us in an ontological sense. The more we conceive of God as being like us, the more immanent we will be able to conceive Him to be. Hence, some adopt a Hegelian or Whiteheadian conception of God, for according to these conceptions, God is not wholly distinct from the world, and therefore is nearer to us than the remote, insensitive, and unconcerned God of traditional theism. In Hallman's view, these are 'better ways ... to conceptualize the nearness of the divine'.⁶⁶ This way of thinking is well illustrated by a passage from Hans Küng. According to Küng,

Hegel unequivocally turned his back on dualistic deism, which expelled God into a faraway transcendence and permitted him to exist as a mere contrasted opposite (*objectum*) without connection and fellowship with man and the world. Does not this fact alone signify a turning to monistic pantheism? Hegel certainly did not want a faraway God; on the contrary, he

⁶⁵ On this, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, ch. 3 and Weinandy, *op. cit.* pp. 55ff.

⁶⁶ Hallman, *The Descent of God*, *op. cit.* p. 145. See also Fiddes, *op. cit.* pp. 42, 188.

wanted a God of nearness, but in such a way that the finite should exist *in* the infinite. Yet the finite was not meant simply to be merged in the infinite. The Frankfurt Hegel definitely wanted nothing to do with pantheism in the sense that ‘everything is God’. But he would have thought it right to affirm a *panentheism* in the sense of a vitally dynamic ‘being in God’ of man and the world ... God as the one over against us would appear to have been displaced by the all-encompassing divinity.⁶⁷

It is clear from this passage that God’s transcendence in relation to the world is understood by Hegel – at least, as Küng interprets the ‘Frankfurt’ Hegel – as God’s being absent from the world and uninvolved in it. This sort of transcendence is oppositional, and implies a lack of immanence, as I explained above. Since, as Küng expounds him, Hegel wanted a God of nearness, Hegel is described as seeking for a conception of God which brings God ontologically close to the world short of actually identifying Him with it.

Weinandy makes the interesting point that those who criticize the traditional idea of God for being too ‘Greek’ often do so on the assumption that the transcendence/immanence relation is one of opposition. Yet, says Weinandy, this view of transcendence is itself Platonic, and differs markedly from the biblical view of transcendence, according to which God is present to us precisely because He is the ‘Wholly Other’.⁶⁸

Why, on an oppositional view of the transcendence/immanence relation, would anyone want to expel God into a faraway transcendence – to use Küng’s expression in the quotation above? In order to conceptually protect the divine nature from corruption – to preserve God as God. However, this explanation assumes that, conceptually, God *needs* to be preserved from being too close to the world. This indicates that such a God is limited. As Tanner, expounding Tertullian, remarks,

⁶⁷ Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*. New York: Crossroad, 1987, p. 132 – Küng’s emphases.

God's distinction from creatures ... should be understood so as to allow for God's entering into relation with the creature under all possible circumstances without danger of compromising the divine nature. To suppose otherwise and attempt to secure God against a direct relation with creation is to suggest that God is finite, on the same level with things that can be altered by interaction and conditioned by external circumstance.⁶⁹

According to the oppositional notion of divine transcendence, moving God nearer to the world is going to compromise the divine nature. If we want a God of nearness – to use Küng's words again – the solution conceptually is not to bring the faraway God, with all His limitations, closer but to adopt a view of divine transcendence based on a radical difference between God and creatures.

In view of the account I have given above, it is clear that a conception of God which makes Him wholly distinct from the world cannot simply be written off as making Him too detached from human affairs. And if, in fact, such a God can have the closest possible involvement with human affairs precisely because of His complete ontological distinctness from the world, there is good reason to prefer such a God to the alternatives being offered us.

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The outline of my thesis is as follows.

In chapter 2, I will discuss the idea that God can suffer. I will analyse the kind of suffering which passibilists attribute to God, and I will aim to show that such suffering essentially involves in the sufferer a perception that he or she is under constraint in some way. I will argue that an omnipotent (and omniscient) God cannot have such a perception, and that therefore God cannot suffer.

⁶⁸ Weinandy, *op. cit.* p. 55 n. 21.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *op. cit.* p. 57.

I will examine various ways in which passibilists try to overcome the conceptual tension between divine omnipotence on the one hand and suffering, thus analysed, on the other, and will conclude that none of these attempts are successful.

Finally, I will justify my choice of the idea of divine omnipotence rather than the idea of divine unconditionedness in settling the question of divine suffering.

In chapter 3, I will extend the omnipotence argument to the idea that the world can evoke emotions in God. I will not deny that *expressions* of emotion are often under our control. Nor will I deny that the quality of one's 'emotional life' can to a large extent be determined by the attitudes and dispositions one cultivates in oneself. Sarot appeals to both these facts about emotions in order to try to show that the idea that God can have emotions is not a conceptual threat to His omnipotence. However, having examined Sarot's arguments in detail, I will conclude that he fails to go to the heart of the problem – that he fails to address the fact that emotions themselves are essentially passive experiences, in the sense that they are beyond our immediate control.

In the final section of chapter 3, I will examine Sarot's attempt to conceive of a divine emotion as something which God *chooses* to have.

Chapters 2 and 3 form the negative part of my thesis. In these chapters, I give my reasons for rejecting divine passibilism. In chapters 4 to 7, the emphasis will be on trying to show how the idea of a loving but impassible God is conceivable.

In chapter 4, I address the problem of how the blessedness of God's life can be conceptually reconciled with God's concern for the welfare of human beings. For although, as I will argue, this is a problem for both passibilist and impassibilist alike – both of whom wish to maintain in some form the idea that God is blessed – it is particularly acute for the impassibilist. For on the supposition that God's blessedness consists, in part, in His subjective happiness, how can God feel blissful – feel perfect joy and delight – in the face of human suffering and sin? The passibilist may be willing

conceptually to compromise God's blessedness, but the impassibilist can do so only on pain of abandoning his impassibilism.

I will examine how this problem is handled by each side of the debate, taking Sarot and Creel as representative of the passibilist and impassibilist, respectively. I will argue that both of them fail to solve the problem. Taking certain remarks made by Thomas Aquinas in this connection as my starting point, I will offer my own solution.

It is sometimes argued that the idea of divine omniscience implies divine passibilism. For, it is said, if God is all-knowing, He must know what it is like for human beings to suffer and feel emotions. However, God can know these things only by experiencing them for Himself. Therefore, in order to uphold the idea that God is omniscient, we must accept that He is passible.

In chapter 5, I will express my agreement with the view that human beings can have a full grasp of the concepts which relate to these sorts of subjective experience only if human beings actually have the experiences and know what they are like. I will argue, however, that although experience is *causally* necessary in order for human beings to be able to know what certain experiences are like, and so be able to grasp the relevant concepts, experience is not *logically* necessary. I will argue that God's knowledge of the various sorts of entity in the world – including human subjective experiences – depends entirely on His knowledge of Himself as creator. I will conclude that an impassible God is perfectly able to know what the subjective experiences of His human creatures are like, and that His love for them is not deficient because he lacks this type of knowledge.

Ideas about the nature of love are often appealed to as a reason for espousing divine passibilism. In chapter 6, I will describe some of these ideas and how they are used to arrive at a passibilist view of God. Since Marcel Sarot and Vincent Brümmer discuss these matters in detail, a substantial amount of this chapter will be devoted to their arguments. In particular, I will examine their characterizations of benevolence and mutual

love, types of relation which are often used as analogies for God's loving relationship with human beings. I will argue that their view of benevolence (or beneficence) is inadequate, and unduly slants things in favour of their preferred analogy of mutual love. Having redressed the balance, I will argue that Sarot's (and Brümmer's) strong mutualism fails to take account of some marked asymmetries that exist between God and ourselves, and that therefore their kind of mutualism is not entirely appropriate as an analogy for divine love. Further, in view of the fact that analogies involve using terms and ideas in a related but not identical way in a new context, I will challenge Sarot's assumption that the idea of a mutuality of emotions – an idea which is appropriate when conceiving of certain kinds of human relationship – automatically applies to the divine-human relationship.

Finally, I will argue that the two analogies should be seen as complementary and not as opposed.

My discussion in chapter 7 is a response to those who regard 'emotional' passibility as an essential element in all loving interpersonal relationships. Passibilists argue that without the ability to feel emotions, one party to an interpersonal relationship cannot respond to the other with the requisite understanding, sensitivity, and solicitude. This is a view which I will examine in detail, with the aim of showing that all these valued elements in emotion can be conceived in a non-emotional form. For example, I will discuss 'altruistic' emotions like sympathy and compassion, arguing that the value of an altruistic emotion does not reside in the emotion *qua* emotion, but in the beliefs and desires which partially constitute the emotion. I will conclude by observing that what matters for a conception of God as loving us is not that He is thought to have certain emotions – which, because of their essential passivity are conceptually problematic for divine omnipotence – but that He is conceived as having the relevant beliefs and desires concerning our welfare.

CAN AN OMNIPOTENT GOD SUFFER?

When passibilists say that God suffers, how is the term ‘suffers’ being used? This term can be used in various ways in everyday speech, most of which do not capture, or fully capture, what is meant when it is used in speaking about God. For example, there are the following uses of the term:

1. Smith suffers from diabetes.
2. When Smith fails to lift heavy objects in the right way, his back suffers harm.
3. Smith suffers the lack of amenities in order to save money.
4. This mountain suffers erosion.

In example 1, ‘suffers’ (+ ‘from’) means ‘has the medical condition’. In example 2, ‘suffers’ means ‘incurs’. In example 3, ‘suffers’ means ‘tolerates’ or ‘puts up with’. In example 4, ‘suffers’ means ‘undergoes’. None of these uses of ‘suffers’ expresses the kind of suffering I want to investigate in this chapter. For each use listed either excludes the idea that subjective experience is involved, or does not necessarily imply it. However, the suffering that passibilists attribute to God does involve a certain kind of subjective experience. And it is important to ascertain what kind of experience this is, for without doing so, one cannot assess the compatibility of the idea of divine suffering with God’s other attributes.

In this chapter, I will begin my investigation with a discussion of the nature of suffering. The sort of suffering I will discuss can be described as ‘subjective suffering’, in order to distinguish it from the sorts of (objective) suffering that might be suggested by the examples I gave above. This sort of suffering is experienced when, over some period of time, people feel an intense, negative emotion, for example, or have a very strong sensation of pain, or continually feel sick – when they undergo anything which is intensely disliked, and which they want to escape from but cannot. In suffering, we perceive ourselves to be under some kind of constraint. This characterization of suffering is, in one way or another, recognized by a number of writers who attribute suffering to God.¹ Yet it is a characterization that seems to conflict with the idea that God has complete control over the world. For if God is always able to exercise power where necessary, there is nothing in the world that is able to constrain Him in any way. And since God is omniscient, necessarily He cannot perceive anything as constraining Him in any way if in fact nothing can. Because He is omniscient, His perceptions about Himself and about His relation to the world must always be correct, and so He must always perceive Himself to be in perfect control of the world, and incapable of constraint.

Having argued that there is a conceptual conflict between divine omnipotence and divine suffering, I will examine attempts by passibilists to mitigate what they themselves seem to perceive as a tension between omnipotence and suffering. I will contend that those who emphasize the idea that God *chooses* to suffer do not avoid the problem. For, I will argue, chosen suffering is still suffering, and essentially involves constraint, so the problem remains. Further, I will examine and reject certain attempts to reduce the tension which involve reconceptualising divine power.

Finally, I will defend my decision to base my rejection of a suffering God on the claim that God is omnipotent rather than on the claim that God cannot be conditioned by

¹ See Sarot, op. cit. p. 169f; Fiddes, op. cit. ch. 3; and Wolterstorff, ‘Suffering Love’, op. cit. p. 214ff.

anything in His creation. I will argue that the former claim is easier to defend, and that by itself it is sufficient for excluding the idea that God can suffer.

*

Regarding the question of divine suffering, Paul Fiddes remarks:

If we are to answer such questions as ‘Does God suffer?’ or ‘How does God suffer?’, it seems sensible to begin by asking what we mean by suffering in our own experience. What is human suffering like? How well can this language be stretched for symbolic talk about God?²

With the analysis which then follows, Fiddes points us roughly in the right direction for answers to these questions. He writes:

We may discern two aspects of the experience of suffering; it is both an inner *feeling* and an *impact* from outside ourselves; that is, suffering is both felt and received. (a) On the one hand it is a movement within a person’s psyche, a feeling, an emotion, an impulse. As an inner troubling or disturbance of equanimity it may be called “pathos”. (b) On the other hand it is a conditioning from circumstances and causes other than ourselves. This impact or constraint need not only be physical, such as a blow from a fist; it can social, such as the blow of losing one’s home to the building of a motorway, or psychological, such as the blow of finding oneself misunderstood. Suffering then, is both felt and received; it is both an emotion and an impression, a feeling-tone and a constraint.³

The first part of Fiddes’ description of human suffering clearly concerns what I have called subjective suffering. Some sort of subjective experience is involved.

Fiddes’ list under heading (a) does not really enlighten us as to the exact nature of the subjective experience. The terms ‘movement’, ‘feeling’, ‘emotion’, ‘impulse’, and ‘disturbance’ each have very different meanings, and not all of them can be appropriately

² Fiddes, op. cit. p. 46.

used in a description of what subjective suffering is. In my introduction to this thesis,⁴ I used the example of a skiing injury to argue that it is conceivable that one could suffer, yet without feeling any emotion. Again, the term ‘impulse’ suggests something that is momentary. Yet we talk of someone ‘enduring’ or ‘undergoing’ or ‘going through’ suffering, and this suggests that suffering is not a momentary occurrence. The concept of momentary suffering is hardly intelligible – unlike that of momentary pain. I can feel a stabbing pain for just a second, but a second is too short to feel it as a constraint or to develop an attitude of aversion to it, things which, I will argue, are features of suffering.⁵

In the second part of Fiddes’ description of human suffering, the sufferer is portrayed as a *victim*, so to speak. Something adverse *happens* to the person – the person is passive in relation to the adverse occurrence. Part of the experience of suffering involves our perception that something adverse is imposed on us, something we intensely dislike.

Fiddes does not make it sufficiently clear that it is the sufferer’s *perception* of adversity and imposition that is an essential element in subjective suffering. It is the sufferer’s *reaction* to circumstances that determines whether or not the person suffers, and not the nature of the circumstances themselves. Things only have an impact or make an impression adversely if they are unwelcome.

In this connection, the image of someone being hit with a fist is misleading. To be hit with a fist is to receive a literal (physical) blow. The fist literally has an impact on the person hit. The event conceptually has the idea of impact built into it. However, in the other two examples, there is no necessary implication that these circumstances will involve a psychological blow for the person concerned. The compulsory purchase of my home may come as a relief to me if I have been wanting to move and have been dreading

³ Fiddes, *ibid.* p 47 – his emphases.

⁴ p 4f.

the ordeal of finding a buyer. Similarly, a genius may find himself misunderstood but may just shrug it off as being attributable to the intellectual limitations of lesser human beings. In these other examples, there is clearly more room for someone to perceive the circumstances in such a way that they are not received as a blow.

In the light of these considerations, we can make more specific Fiddes' description of subjective suffering. In subjective suffering, the sufferer perceives that something adverse has been imposed on him, something to which he has a very strong aversion, but which he is unable to avoid. This constitutes the element of constraint in suffering.

A typical example of this kind of situation is the experience, in certain serious illnesses, of intense physical pain. Despite the administration of pain-relieving drugs, the person concerned may continue to have periods of intense pain that is thus inescapable. A person in this situation is typically described as suffering. Conversely, it is sometimes said in mitigation of sadness felt about someone's death following a period of illness, 'At least he didn't suffer'. What is meant is that although he was fatally harmed, he did not feel pain, or at least did not feel intense pain. The implication is that if he *had* felt pain, or severe pain, he would have suffered. The assumption is that everyone has a strong aversion to intense pain but that if it cannot be avoided, the person concerned will suffer.⁶

Of course, because God is incorporeal, any suffering attributed to Him cannot involve pain caused by bodily sickness or injury, or by any physical interaction between Himself and the world. There is, however, the fact that people can suffer when they have certain kinds of intense, negative emotion such as grief or remorse. And it is less clear that the idea of divine incorporeality excludes the possibility that God can have an emotion like grief – an emotion which, passibilists claim, God frequently feels in relation to sinful humanity.

⁵ A *series* of stabbing pains could constitute an experience of suffering, especially if one had a fearful expectation that there would be a 'stab' every minute.

When someone grieves or feels remorse, the person concerned is reacting, in the case of grief, to the perceived loss of something very valuable to them or, in the case of remorse, to their perceived culpability for some wrong-doing. Their reaction is intense and painful. In each case, something has happened or been done which they intensely wish could be otherwise, and yet which they perceive as being beyond the possibility of change. In grief or remorse, a 'painful fact' *imposes* itself on the attention of the grieving or remorseful person, and it is that fact that is the object of person's grief or remorse. The painful fact is something that the person would exclude from his or her attention if that were possible, but for the time being it keeps reasserting itself. However averse the person may be to it, the presence of the fact to the person's awareness has to be endured until it finally diminishes.

In the situations I have just described, the person concerned has a strongly aversive attitude to the physical or emotional pain he is unable to free himself from. The pain is something over which he has little or no control. Generally, when we feel intense pain, be it physical or emotional, we have a sense of being – at least, temporarily – helpless. We intensely dislike the pain; we try to get rid of it and wish it would go away. This strongly aversive attitude to intense pain indicates the extent to which it is seen as a *distressing* constraint. This is evident from the fact that 'the more intense a pain is, the more difficult it becomes to pay attention to other things and to continue our ordinary life'.⁷ For example, people who feel grief or acute anxiety about something find it difficult to take a prolonged interest in others because their own painful thoughts keep demanding their attention, so that they feel compelled to keep turning those thoughts over in their minds. They may, of course, try to cope with their suffering by keeping themselves busy, but that is often only possible after intense pain has subsided.

⁶ On possible exceptions to the claim that everyone has a strong aversion to intense pain, see Roger Trigg, *Pain and Emotion*, op. cit. pp. 157–162, where he discusses the possibility of *enjoying* pain.

Central to my idea of subjective suffering is the notion that the sufferer *perceives* himself to be under an unwelcome constraint, perceives himself to be subject to something over which he has no control. The importance of this notion is corroborated by Sarot's remark that 'people more frequently report suffering from pain when they feel it is out of control'.⁸ This is said in the context of a discussion of physical pain, but there does not seem to be any reason why it should not be thought to be applicable to emotional pain as well.

This feature of suffering – the sense that one is being constrained – is compatible with the idea that people sometimes choose to do things they know will involve them in suffering.⁹ For example, I might decide to undergo an operation which I know will cause me considerable pain afterwards. Similarly, I might respond to some personal calamity by 'drowning my sorrows' in an alcoholic binge, knowing full well that I will have a severe hangover the next day. If the achievement of these aims necessarily involves activities which incur severe pain, then in this sense the pain is unavoidable, and for as long as one feels the severe pain, one perceives oneself as being under constraint. For in wanting whatever it is I have chosen, I cannot properly be said to want the pain which obtaining the thing in question necessarily involves. On the contrary, where pain involves suffering, there must – because of the nature of suffering – be an *aversion* to the pain. Moreover, as Anthony Kenny points out, 'we cannot say that if A wants that *p* and if "*p*" implies "*q*", then A wants that *q*'.¹⁰ In neither of my examples is the pain involved an object of my desire. Rather, the pain is a necessary condition of my obtaining the thing I *do* want. So the fact that I may choose to do something which involves me in suffering does not, in

⁷ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 169.

⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p.169. Sarot's claim is based on a number of sources – p. 169n. 35. See, in particular, Eric J. Cassel, 'The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine' in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 306, No. 11, pp. 639–645, where Cassel observes that '[t]he suffering of patients with terminal cancer can often be relieved by demonstrating that their pain truly can be controlled; they will then often tolerate the same pain without any medication, preferring the pain to the side effects of their analgesics' (p. 641).

⁹ Wolterstorff, *op. cit.* p.216.

virtue of the fact that I have exercised choice, make the element of perceived constraint any less essential to the experience of suffering.

The point I have just made is an important one. For passibilists sometimes try to lessen the conceptual tension between divine suffering and divine power by emphasizing the idea that God *chooses* to suffer.

For example, according to Jürgen Moltmann, there is not in God ‘a fateful subjection to suffering’ but rather an ‘active suffering ... [in which God] lays himself open to the suffering which love for another brings him; and yet, by virtue of his love, he remains master of the pain that love causes him to suffer’.¹¹ On Moltmann’s view, God’s suffering is not, as it were, imposed on Him by fate or chance, as is so often the case with human beings. God’s power is such that we cannot properly speak of Him being *subjected* to suffering. Rather, God’s subjection to suffering is one that He has chosen for Himself in His love for human beings, and in this sense He remains in control of what happens to Him. Clearly, Moltmann thinks that it is necessary to reassure us that a suffering God remains powerful. Likewise, Fiddes writes:

[W]hen God chooses to make our suffering his own he is *subject* to suffering, but not *subjected* by it; he is under constraint from suffering, but it has no power to overwhelm him because he has freely chosen it as part of his own being. He triumphs over suffering because he chooses it for a purpose.¹²

Fiddes is trying to steer between what he sees as two possible and opposite dangers in the passibilist position. On the one hand, if the passibilist, in order to preserve the idea that God is powerful, claims that God cannot be *constrained* when He suffers, he is in danger of removing from the concept of subjective suffering its central feature and depriving it

¹⁰ Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 122.

¹¹ Quoted in Bauckham, ‘In Defence of *The Crucified God*.’ op. cit. p. 106.

¹² Fiddes, op. cit. p. 62 – my emphases.

of meaning. If, on the other hand, the passibilist denies God any freedom in the matter of suffering, he is in danger of conceptually nullifying God's power.

Sarot likewise stresses the freedom of a God who suffers. When God responds with suffering concern to something in the world, that response is essentially a free act on God's part. This idea is strongly contrasted with any suggestion that God is somehow under constraint in this sort of situation. God is said to be 'in a supreme way ... master of Himself';¹³ 'He remains master of His own reaction';¹⁴ and He cannot be coerced or constrained.¹⁵ Much more could be said about Sarot's 'voluntarist' view of the nature of divine suffering, and I will give it more attention in chapter 3, when I discuss the passivity of the emotions.

The comments of these passibilists indicate that they perceive a tension between the idea of divine power and the idea of divine suffering, and that some adjustment needs to be made to the idea of divine suffering. Divine suffering must not be thought of in exactly the same terms as human suffering. It must be conceived in such a way that the power of God is not conceptually nullified.

Nevertheless, passibilists also make adjustments on the power side of the conceptual relation between divine power and divine suffering so that the idea of divine suffering can be accommodated. Thus, in passibilist literature, it is sometimes said that God limits His power, or, as it is more usually put, limits Himself.¹⁶

What does the idea that God limits His power mean? Sometimes it seems to mean that while God remains in complete control of every worldly situation, He *refrains* from actually controlling everything. Sometimes, however, it is clear that what is meant is that God brings about a situation such that He is *unable*, for as long as that situation lasts, to

¹³ Sarot, op. cit. p. 28.

¹⁴ Sarot, ibid. p. 29.

¹⁵ Sarot, ibid. p. 28f.

exercise complete control over it. In making this distinction between meanings, I follow Sarot's discussion of the matter.¹⁷ Sarot uses the term 'self-restraint' to refer to the idea that God remains in complete control of every worldly situation but refrains from actually controlling everything. In contrast, the term 'self-limitation' is used to refer to the idea that there are situations which God has brought about but which He is *unable* fully to control.¹⁸ Henceforward, I will use Sarot's terminology.

A typical example, in passibilist writing, of the use of the idea of self-limitation is in connection with God's creation of human beings. Terence Fretheim writes:

The creature is given power to reject God, power to make the world other than what God desires for it. Thus, human power can have an adverse effect on God's influence in the world. While God always works to overcome the effect of such wrongful uses of power, God has given up absolute power to this end so as not to violate the integrity of the established relationship [between God and the world].

There is a certain divine helplessness¹⁹

On this view, God is held to have (at least, temporarily) limited Himself by the act of creation. Since human beings are generally held to be able to will freely, there is a part of creation – so it is maintained – over which, necessarily, God cannot exercise complete control.

The fact that Fretheim attributes to God a certain helplessness indicates, not that Fretheim thinks that God merely refrains from fully exercising His power, but that he thinks that God *cannot* fully exercise it, that God has limited Himself in the act of creation. This interpretation is confirmed if one considers certain general remarks

¹⁶ See, for example, Fiddes, *op. cit.* pp. 33, 45 and Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p.44. See also the comments on Moltmann in Bauckham, *op. cit.* p. 107, and on Geddes MacGregor in McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, *op. cit.* ch. 4.

¹⁷ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 53ff.

¹⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 55.

¹⁹ Fretheim, *op. cit.* p. 76.

Fretheim makes earlier in his book, when he describes God's relation to the world. He writes:

The world is not only dependent on God; God is also dependent upon the world. The world is not only affected by God; God is affected by the world in both positive and negative ways. God is sovereign over the world, yet not unqualifiedly so, as considerable power and freedom have been given to the creatures.²⁰

Underlying this description is what Gijsbert van den Brink calls a 'conflictual theory of power'.²¹ The implication is that in giving power to His creatures, God has thereby diminished His own power because there are now conflicting centres of power, each one partly limiting the other. Since the world – along with God – co-determines its own future, and not only its own future but also *God's*,²² 'one must speak of divine risk *and* vulnerability, beginning with creation'.²³ The idea that one is vulnerable is the idea that one can be harmed in some way, and if one can be harmed in some way, it follows that one is not in complete control of one's circumstances. So although at one point Fretheim says that in relation to human beings 'God gives up the *exercise* of some power',²⁴ the idea of divine vulnerability implies that actually God gives up the *ability* to exercise certain powers.²⁵ In talking about divine risk and divine vulnerability, it is clear that Fretheim thinks that God is partly, as it were, in the hands of His creation, and that recognition of this supposed fact must 'qualify any talk about divine control or divine sovereignty'.²⁶

²⁰ Fretheim, *ibid.* p. 35.

²¹ van den Brink, *Almighty God*, *op. cit.* p. 122. For van den Brink's critique of this theory, see *op. cit.* pp. 119–123, and of its application to the God-world relation, see *op. cit.* pp. 218–224.

²² Fretheim, *op. cit.* p. 74f.

²³ Fretheim, *ibid.* p. 75 – his emphasis.

²⁴ Fretheim, *ibid.* p. 37 – my emphasis.

²⁵ G. van den Brink observes that a consequence of the conflictual theory of power 'is that the difference between the possession and the exercise of a power is obscured' – *op. cit.* p. 223.

²⁶ Fretheim, *op. cit.* p. 37.

Earlier, when I examined the nature of subjective suffering, I said that a central feature of such suffering is the sufferer's perception that he or she lacks control over the situation that is the cause of the suffering. This idea clearly has theological consequences when subjective suffering is attributed to God. For, as I said in the introduction to this thesis,²⁷ a core belief in traditional Christianity is that God is omnipotent. God always has complete control over His 'circumstances' (the world), and – since He is omniscient – cannot perceive Himself as not having complete control. If subjective suffering is attributed to God, then according to the analysis I gave earlier, it is necessary to alter one's conception of divine power so that one can accommodate the idea that God perceives in himself a loss of control.

This is a requirement that Fiddes clearly recognizes. Right at the beginning of his book on divine suffering he writes:

[A] careful examination is needed of what it *means* to talk about the suffering of God ... [M]any are happy to talk of it without facing up to its full implications; they invoke the theme of a suffering God but defuse it of its explosive effect upon the whole doctrine of God as they fail to follow it through into a theology that embraces divine weakness at the centre.²⁸

Fiddes is aware that the idea of divine suffering has an impact on one's conception of divine power. He rightly perceives that some cannot bring themselves to face up to the full implications of the idea of divine suffering because it would mean abandoning what they consider to be a non-negotiable part of their thinking about God. Fiddes himself is prepared to radically alter his own conception of divine power. He writes:

“The power of God is the worship he inspires”. With this dictum, A.N. Whitehead suggests that human ideas of power as force and aggressive strength fall wide of the mark of true power, which is a matter of winning

²⁷ p. 6f.

²⁸ Fiddes, op. cit. p. 1 – his emphasis.

people's minds and changing their attitudes. If a suffering God can inspire this kind of allegiance, then his weakness is indeed stronger than men.²⁹

Fiddes rejects what he takes to be the traditional view of divine power partly because he thinks that it involves a misguided appropriation of certain questionable ideas about power, as these relate to how we should conceive of God's dealings with human beings. In choosing to create human beings who could will freely to love Him, necessarily God chose to put Himself in a situation in which human suffering and hard-heartedness would cause suffering in Him. Nevertheless, thinks Fiddes, this very suffering of God is the means of human redemption. For

a suffering God can inspire worship ... the vulnerable God whom we adore in worship still has the power to change human wills and to shatter proud and self-enclosed egos. The suffering of God has the compelling power not of coercion but of persuasive influence ... It is the suffering God, we may say, that has the power to alter human attitudes to God and to other people, and there can be no stronger power than that.³⁰

In this passage, Fiddes seems to imply the following argument. Given the choice of coercion or persuasion, persuasion is the more effective way of getting people to change their attitudes. The idea of a suffering God is persuasive in this respect, whereas the non-suffering God of traditional theology is coercive. If we are to pay proper tribute to the fact that God is powerful, we must attribute to Him the stronger sort of power, and therefore we should think of God as suffering.

Fiddes then proceeds to describe ways in which what he calls God's 'power of persuasion'³¹ operates. It is not conceived as a causal activity of divine providence operating on the circumstances of each person's life. Instead, it is conceived as the power that the story of Jesus's suffering and death – and the idea of God's suffering too – can

²⁹ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 144.

³⁰ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 146.

have on the lives of human beings. Such a story and such an idea are inspirational and moving. They lend meaning to our own suffering and enable us to accept God's forgiveness of our sins.³² They are what Fiddes is referring to when he speaks of 'the Christian tradition of strength through weakness'.³³ It is through the weakness of the suffering Christ, and through the weakness of His own suffering, that God exercises persuasive power over human beings.

There is not sufficient space here to give a detailed exposition of Fiddes' views, nor to assess the cogency of all his arguments. However, I have a number of comments to make on his view of divine power. In particular, I will comment on his implied claim that this view accords with a strength-through-weakness tradition in Christian theology.

First, then, there is Fiddes' objection to what he thinks is the traditional idea of divine power. Fiddes' reference to human ideas of power as force and aggressive strength reflect his view that the traditional God is dictatorial and overbearing.³⁴ However, this caricature of the traditional view of divine power is based on the assumption that a sovereign or omnipotent God is one who *exercises* absolute control over the world, as opposed to one who has the *ability* to do so but who does not in fact determine everything. This assumption is another manifestation of the conflictual theory of power mentioned earlier. On this theory, as it applies to the God-world power-relation, the view that God has sovereign power over the world implies that human power and choice are of little or no account.³⁵ No distinction is made between divine omnipotence as the *possession* of absolute power and divine omnipotence as the *exercise* of absolute power. It is only in the former sense that omnipotence is traditionally ascribed to God.

³¹ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 144.

³² Fiddes, *ibid.* 146–173.

³³ Fiddes, *ibid.* pp. 1, 32, 145 & 180. For similar views, see Sally McFague, *Models of God*. London: SCM, 1987, pp. 63–69, and the remarks of Charles Hartshorne and A.N. Whitehead, reported in van den Brink, *op. cit.* p. 2f.

³⁴ Fiddes, *ibid.* pp.146–173.

Secondly, Fiddes assumes that persuasion rather than coercion is always the more effective way of getting people to change their attitudes. However, many parents will disagree. Good parents will restrain their children near busy roads, force them to do their homework, and insist on good manners, because parents understand the importance of these things and their children do not. It is frequently the case in these sorts of situation that attempts at persuasion are ineffectual. And although at first children do not appreciate the value of what they are being told to do, eventually, through good training, they do appreciate it. This is part of what the parents are working towards by coercing their children now. The day will come when, through discipline, they will come to see for themselves the value of what they have learnt, and will enjoy the possession of what they have learnt. Similarly, there is good reason to think that an element of coercion is necessary in the extremely unequal relationship that exists between God and human beings. If God is all-knowing and all-good, He knows and will desire for us whatever is to our greatest benefit. *We* are not in this position. Our understanding of what is good for us, and our desire for it, is weak, and so it is right that God should do everything in His power to ensure that we come to a place where our understanding of the good, and our desire for it, is strengthened. And in the New Testament there is plenty of evidence for a God who commands, threatens, disciplines, and judges.³⁶ These activities on the part of God are clearly designed to keep us under some sort of control, so that we do not forfeit our salvation. This fact implies that there is a coercive element in God's relation to us which can accomplish what no amount of persuasiveness on God's part could accomplish.

Thirdly, although it is no doubt generally true that persuasion is more effective than coercion in changing human attitudes, why accept that the ability to persuade is the

³⁵ For criticism of this 'omnideterministic' view of divine power, see van den Brink, op. cit. pp. 210–213 & 218–221.

preserve of a *suffering* God? It is a very subjective matter as to whether or not the idea of a suffering God is particularly effective in this respect. Such an idea might instead evoke feelings of pity for God, or even contempt.³⁷ It is therefore highly debatable whether we should regard such a God as powerful.

Moreover, as I have already said, the idea of God's absolute power should not be thought of as implying omnidetermination, so we do not have to accept that there are only two conceptual options in this matter. Why can we not conceive of God persuading us, inspiring us, changing us non-coercively, but in a way that does not involve the idea of suffering on His part? In this regard, it is reasonable to suppose that there is no end to the 'resourcefulness' of such a radically originative creator such as God is.³⁸ But then Fiddes rejects the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, and seems to play down the idea that God causes events in His creation.³⁹ So perhaps on Fiddes' account, God has little scope for persuading and inspiring us in a non-suffering way.

My fourth and final comment concerns part of Fiddes' description of the task he has set himself. He sees his task as conceiving of a God

who is without power in the sense of what the world – and all too often traditional theology – calls power ... and yet who remains recognizably God within the Christian tradition of strength through weakness. We must try to think of a God who can be the greatest sufferer of all and yet still be ... a God who can fulfil his purposes.⁴⁰

³⁶ For example, see Matt. 19:17; 1 Thess. 4:3–6; Heb. 12:6; and Heb. 4:13. Many more references could be cited.

³⁷ On this, see Creel, *op. cit.* pp. 123–126.

³⁸ See p. 143ff. of this thesis.

³⁹ Fiddes, *op. cit.* pp.75 & 39 respectively. Fiddes' views are heavily influenced by process theology, as he himself acknowledges (pp.37–45). The rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*, and the emphasis on God's being the final cause of the world rather than on His being the efficient cause, are both typical of process theology – on this, see, for example, Nash, *The Concept of God*, *op. cit.* pp. 24f, 28 and Farley, *The Providence of God*, *op. cit.*, pp. 217, 223.

⁴⁰ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 2f.

In this passage, Fiddes is suggesting that his conception of God and of divine power will in some way continue what he calls the Christian tradition of strength through weakness. This is highly questionable.

There are many places in the Bible where God is depicted as choosing weak or insignificant people for the fulfilling of His purposes, or as delivering those who are helplessly trapped in some circumstance and who call on Him for help. The motif in these stories is that because God is with them, the people concerned will accomplish what they are called to do or find deliverance, despite the odds against them. Typical examples of this motif can be found in stories about the battles of outnumbered Israelites, tongue-tied prophets, youngest (and therefore insignificant) sons, and barren women. Certain remarks which St. Paul makes to the Corinthians can be taken as summing up the import of these stories. In his first letter, he writes: ‘... God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God’.⁴¹ None of this indicates that God Himself is weak. Rather, it indicates His way of doing things. The strength-through-weakness idea is not the idea that God allows Himself to become weak in order to persuade people to love Him. Such an idea might in fact have the opposite effect, for people often despise what is weak. Rather, it is the idea that by choosing what is weak and insignificant, God can show His strength. The weakness is human weakness; the strength is God’s. When Paul says that ‘God’s weakness is stronger than human strength’,⁴² Paul’s use of the term ‘weakness’ can be understood as ironical. What is in fact God’s strength may be perceived as weakness because of a failure to understand God’s frequently chosen way of doing things. In his Pentecost speech, St. Peter refers to Jesus’s humiliation and death as being ‘according to the definite plan and foreknowledge

⁴¹ 1 Cor. 1:27–29.

⁴² 1 Cor. 1:25.

of God'.⁴³ Peter's claim suggests that God has the ability to control events and arrange circumstances in such a way that whatever He intends should happen at a chosen time will happen at that time. God is strong, in that He has this sort of control, even though circumstances themselves might appear to indicate otherwise. Those who do not perceive events like these as being part of God's providential design will not perceive such events as being an exercise of God's power – hence the despondency of the disciples immediately after the crucifixion, and the Jews' mockery of Jesus on the cross. Moreover, when Peter addresses the assembled Jews, he does not talk of God's power as the power of divine suffering. Rather, God's power is the power that raises Jesus from the dead⁴⁴ and places Him over His enemies.⁴⁵ It is in the context of *victorious* power – and not of the power of suffering – that Jesus's humiliation and death should be understood. We are expected to marvel at the demonstration of God's victorious power in these otherwise hopeless circumstances.

This is how I think the strength-through-weakness idea should be understood. The idea concerns the sort of people and situations God uses for His purposes – people who are of little account or situations which are hopeless, at least from the usual human point of view.

It is clear from the fact that he reconceptualizes divine power that Fiddes is acutely aware of the conceptual conflict that exists between the traditional view of God's power on the one hand and divine suffering on the other. As he sees it, his task in *The Creative Suffering of God* is to alter the conception of divine power in such a way that there is no incoherence involved in thinking of God as simultaneously both powerful *and* suffering.

Unfortunately, Sarot is less clear-sighted in this matter, and does not appreciate the extent to which his views on divine power conflict with his passibilism.

⁴³ Acts 2:23.

⁴⁴ Acts 2:24.

Sarot agrees with Nelson Pike's view that the idea that God is immutably powerful implies that 'God is such that nothing could cause Him to lose His power'.⁴⁶ However, in Sarot's view, the idea implies more than this. It implies not only that nothing can *cause* God to lose His power: it also implies that God cannot *make Himself* cease to be powerful – or as Sarot puts it, God cannot 'limit His own omnipotence'.⁴⁷ This means, in accordance with Sarot's distinction mentioned earlier,⁴⁸ that with respect to His power, self-restraint is possible for God but not self-limitation. God can refrain from exercising His power in a certain situation, but He cannot – on the supposition that He is immutably powerful – lose His *ability* to exercise His power. God cannot put Himself in circumstances which restrict His ability to exercise His power. According to this view of divine power,

God can end His self-restraint whenever He wants to, and this means that He can interfere whenever He wants. This means that if God restrains His omnipotence, He is more reliable than [He would be if He limited] it. For how reliable would God be if He [could] let things go out of control, if He were bound by our free wills ... ? To what extent could we trust a God of good intentions, but limited power? All in all, then, the idea that God restrains His omnipotence is more consonant with the divine perfection than the idea that He limits it.⁴⁹

Yet despite this forceful assertion that God cannot limit His power, Sarot elsewhere describes God's relationship with human beings as involving precisely a binding of God by human free will. He writes:

If God creates us to share His happiness with us in a relation of mutual fellowship, then He, regarding the good of humankind rather than His own good, indeed wants such a relation with each and every human being. For us this means Good News, for God sacrifice. It means that He who prior to His creation was perfectly happy without being in any way dependent upon

⁴⁵ Acts 2:34–36.

⁴⁶ Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*, op. cit. p. 178.

⁴⁷ Sarot, op. cit. p.53.

⁴⁸ p 39f.

⁴⁹ Sarot, op. cit. p. 53.

anything or anyone else, makes His own happiness partly dependent upon humanity.⁵⁰

What God is said to sacrifice is His own perfect happiness. His happiness is now partly determined by the free responses of human beings, some of whom will engage in a relation with God, and some of whom will not. This situation is something which God has chosen to enter into. However, what is particularly important to note is that Sarot describes God's choice in this matter as God's making His own happiness partly *dependent* on humanity's response to Him. It is not that God merely allows humanity to determine His happiness. The right sort of human response is a necessary condition of God's happiness.

The nature of this dependence becomes apparent when Sarot spells out what is involved in God's sacrifice. Regarding the choice He has made in creating human beings, 'the consequence for God is ... pain ... suffering ... grief. Though He remains the happiest Being in existence – this is guaranteed by His internal resources of happiness – His happiness will now be mixed with *severe grief*'.⁵¹ God experiences these things when someone

fails to respond to God's [love and] thereby contributes to God's suffering ... [W]e hurt Him by refusing to respond to His [love] ... But as soon as we realise that God's vulnerability to our refusal and His consequent suffering when we actually refuse are the result of His unselfish concern for our happiness, which made Him give up part of His own happiness in order to make us happy, it would be nothing less than callous to refuse to [love] Him in return.⁵²

The fact that our responses to God can make God suffer indicates that in creating human beings with free will, God has effectively put Himself under constraint – He has

⁵⁰ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

⁵¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88 – my emphasis.

⁵² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 91.

limited His ability to exercise His power. Human beings can do things to God which He cannot avoid.

Moreover, it is difficult to see how this portrait of the way God responds to human indifference to Him, or to hostility towards Him, can be reconciled with Sarot's claim – mentioned earlier⁵³ – that God is, in a supreme way, master of His own reactions. For according to Sarot's portrait, it seems that human beings can deliberately provoke certain reactions in God, and thus have a large share in determining the extent of God's well-being. Indeed, it is partly to this fact that believers should appeal when trying to convert non-believers to the faith.⁵⁴ So inevitable is the pain that God will suffer if we refuse His love that we must deal sensitively with Him who has sacrificed so much for us. Our failure to do so is nothing short of callousness.

The divine response which Sarot describes here involves subjective suffering on God's part. Yet given that perceived constraint is a central feature of such suffering, and the fact that the perceptions of an omniscient God must always be veridical, it is hard to see how Sarot's description of the divine response squares with his own rejection of divine self-limitation.

Subjective suffering involves an aversion to some perceived fact – in this case, God's aversion to the fact of human indifference or hostility towards Him – *and* an inability to remove the perceived aversive fact, to the point of experiencing distress. Nicholas Wolterstorff describes such a situation as being 'an existential No-saying to something ... With one's very existence one says "No" to the pain ... "No" to the loss ... "No" to the desire's being unfulfilled'.⁵⁵ This cannot be the experience of a God who is always in perfect control of His creation, for to suggest that it can be is to suggest something self-contradictory. It is to suggest that almighty God can create a situation – a

⁵³ p. 39.

⁵⁴ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 91.

world with free-willing human beings – which evokes in Him a suffering response, that is, a response which involves a ‘feeling of helplessness, a falling victim to what [He] cannot regulate’.⁵⁶

I have argued that, necessarily, a God who suffers is a God under constraint, and my objection to this idea is that it conflicts with a central feature of traditional Christian theism, namely the idea that God is omnipotent. God’s ability to control His world is perfect, and therefore there is nothing that can constrain Him in any way.

It might be said that my approach to this matter is not radical enough, that I have overlooked a more thoroughgoing objection to the idea of divine suffering, and of God’s emotional passibility generally. I mean the argument that God cannot be conditioned by anything. As Wolterstorff puts it,

to imagine that what transpires in the world could ... determine the quality of God’s life is to bump up against an assumption which, ever since Plotinus, has been deeper than any other in classical Christian theology; namely the assumption that God is unconditioned.⁵⁷

The idea that God is unconditioned is more radical than the idea that He cannot be constrained by anything. For if one is constrained by something – if one’s freedom is curtailed – one is, in virtue of that fact, conditioned by that thing. However, the reverse is not necessarily the case. One can be conditioned without constraint. Anything that affects us conditions us – it makes the quality of our existence to be different, however slightly, from what it would otherwise be. Our world impinges on us in many ways with sights, sounds, smells, physical forces, and human encounters, altering us in some way, but it is not necessarily the case that any of these conditionings involve a curtailment of our freedom.

⁵⁵ Wolterstorff, ‘Suffering Love’, op. cit. p. 216.

⁵⁶ Fiddes, op. cit. p. 61.

The idea that God is unconditioned marks a fundamental difference between God and the world. In the world, there is nothing that is not in some way affected by something else. However, according to the idea that God is unconditioned, God is not affected by other things precisely because He is not part of the world. God is not, and cannot be, part of the order of things in which one thing has a determining relation to another. Nothing can determine Him in any way, although as Creator and Sustainer of all, He can determine everything.

Traditional Christian theists affirm that whereas divine being is uncreated, not depending on anything else for its existence, non-divine being *is* created – it depends wholly upon God for its existence. The difference between these types of being is, in this respect, the most radical imaginable. As T.V. Morris puts it, ‘the fundamental activity of creation, as performed by God, is the most basic *giving of being*. Human creation, by contrast, involves a *using of being* in novel ways’.⁵⁷ A being who can give being is clearly very different from a being who is merely able to act on other beings, or from things which can only interact with other things. The fact that God is different in this way suggests that He transcends the determinants of the world He has created. He is not subject to their limitations. The ‘apophatic’ characteristics ascribed to God express this transcendence by saying what God is not. God is *incorporeal*, *immutable*, *incorruptible*, and so on.

Part of the idea of divine unconditionedness can be put in terms of causality. The fact that God can cause something to exist without the use of pre-existing material suggests that God’s causal relation with the world is very different from causal relations which exist within the world. For where there is creation *ex nihilo*, the creator does not *operate on* anything. It does not involve something *going on* between creator and

⁵⁷ Wolterstorff, *op. cit.* p. 217.

⁵⁸ Morris, *Our Idea of God*, *op. cit.* p. 141 – his emphases.

something else.⁵⁹ No change is involved because the idea of change presupposes the existence of something which initially has one set of characteristics and then has a different set. But *ex hypothesi*, there are no such initial conditions.

This fact about divine creation suggests that God's causal relation with the now-existing world is very different from causal relations which exist between created entities. For the latter involve the very features which are excluded by the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. There is good reason to suppose, therefore, that God cannot be acted on as if He were part of the mundane matrix of cause and effect. John Yates observes that

in the Creator-creature relationship we find the deepest possible example of asymmetry and non-reciprocity. That God creates, and conserves, makes an absolute difference to the creature and no difference to God. This is not a mere corollary of the relationship of creation but its very essence.⁶⁰

Yates's observation *suggests* that the determinative relation between God and the world is entirely in the direction of God to world, and never *vice versa*.

If God cannot be conditioned by anything, or be acted on, it follows that nothing in the world can evoke an emotion in God or cause Him to suffer. It was precisely on the basis of this idea about God's relation to His creation that the Church Fathers rejected divine passibilism.⁶¹

Nevertheless, although the idea that God is absolutely unconditioned by anything is deeply rooted in traditional theology, the idea is today questioned or rejected by many.⁶² One respect in which God has traditionally been thought to be unconditioned is in His

⁵⁹ On this, see David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 133 and Barry Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, pp. 127–135.

⁶⁰ Yates, *The Timelessness of God*, op. cit. p. 181.

⁶¹ See the introduction to this thesis, p. 3.

⁶² See, for example, Sarot, op. cit. pp.43–59; Fiddes, op. cit. p. 66ff; Keith Ward, *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982, pp.10, 81ff, 85f, 121; Creel, op. cit. ch.5; Wolterstorff, op. cit. pp. 217–223; and Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, op. cit. p. 96ff. For a contemporary defence of the idea, see Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, especially chs 2–6.

knowledge of creation, including His knowledge of the contingent events within creation.

As Gerard Hughes explains, on the view that God's knowledge of the world is unconditioned,

the source of God's knowledge cannot be anything other than God himself. God does not know things, nor which propositions about those things are true or false, as a causal consequence of the existence of those things, or of the states of affairs which true propositions describe. Whatever it is that God can be said to know must be known in God's awareness of his own nature, and of his own causal activity in sustaining his creation.⁶³

A criticism of this view is that if God knows other things only by being aware of His own nature and causal activity, then He lacks any acquaintance with creaturely things themselves. God's knowledge is merely mediate, and this is generally held not to accord with our ideal of the best kind of knowledge.⁶⁴

However, Hughes is concerned here with a specific application of the idea that God knows things in the world through knowing His own causal activity. If one applies this idea to God's knowledge of contingent events such as human beings choosing to do some particular thing, we are faced with the problem of trying

to find some characterisation of God's transcendent causality which is both causally efficacious, and yet does not wholly determine its effect, and which could be part of an overall explanation of how it is that God knows the complete effect. But can this be done?⁶⁵

Hughes thinks not. Certainly, God sustains human beings in existence. But if human beings are to will freely, divine causality must, as it were, stop short of completely determining everything. And if it does, how can God know what it is that we will freely? For the source of His knowledge is supposed to be His causal activity in creation, and yet

⁶³ Gerard J. Hughes, *The Nature of God*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 107.

that activity does not extend to human choice. Hughes concludes that in this case, it is not God's causal activity which is the source of His knowledge but the events themselves, and that therefore this sort of event causes God to have knowledge of the event.⁶⁶

There is no need for me to pursue this question further here. My purpose in introducing it is merely to justify my approach to the question of whether God can suffer or not. If there is some doubt as to whether we should think of God as being entirely unconditioned by the world, it is better not to appeal to that idea for the purposes of determining our acceptance or rejection of a suffering God. Where there is doubt, it is better to appeal to a characterization of God that is more widely accepted and therefore more likely to be successful in determining the question of divine suffering. I maintain that the idea of divine omnipotence fulfils that requirement. I have argued in this chapter that because God is omnipotent, He cannot undergo the constraint that subjective suffering essentially involves. The claim that God is unconditioned by anything is stronger than the claim that God has power over everything apart from Himself, and is therefore harder to defend. By appealing to the lesser claim, my aim has been to make the rejection of a suffering God more convincing.

⁶⁴ For discussion of this criticism and a defence of the traditional view in this regard, see Rogers *op. cit.* pp. 71–75.

⁶⁵ Hughes, *op. cit.* p.108.

⁶⁶ Rogers – who subscribes to the view that the source of God's knowledge of the world is His causal activity – says, regarding human free will, that 'the will itself, and whatever there is in the choice that can be said to have any sort of ontological status, must be kept in being by God and is known by Him' (p. 79). See Rogers, *op. cit.* pp. 75–79.

CAN GOD BE THE SUBJECT OF AN EMOTION?

In his chapter ‘Arguments against passibilism,’ Sarot opens the section headed ‘The Nature of the Experiences Involved in Passibility’ with the following remarks:

One of the most well-known objections against passibilism is clearly inspired by the classical ideals of *apatheia* and *ataraxia* [freedom from disturbance]. This is the objection that passibility always involves experiences that are incompatible with the divine perfection, since they are incompatible even with perfect humanity. By saying that a being is passible, we say in fact that it is capable of having certain experiences: experiences of feeling, emotion, pain, suffering, sympathy and others. It is sometimes argued that these experiences are intrinsically bad or evil, that it is better not to have them than to have them, and therefore that even human beings should try to avoid these experiences.¹

It is clear from this passage that emotion is one of the sorts of experience which impassibilists supposedly think are incompatible with perfect humanity, and therefore with divinity as well. According to Sarot, impassibilists think that emotions are, by their very nature, uncontrollable. Substituting the term ‘passion’ for ‘emotion,’ Sarot explains what he sees as the problem:

[A] passible being is subject to a causal relation in which “passion” is caused within the being by something outside that being overpowering its will. A passion “happens to” someone, it “strikes” or “overwhelms” one. This means that the subject experiencing the passion is nothing more than a passive victim dependent upon an external force or agent ... These experiences often have immoral results, influencing us to do what we do not really want to do, and sometimes even what we regard as morally evil.²

¹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 32f.

² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 34.

Unfortunately, in this passage Sarot describes what is clearly a *coercive* relation as a causal one. While, necessarily, coercive relations are causal, the reverse is not necessarily true. This confusion of ideas affects his treatment of the passivity of emotion, as will become apparent in this chapter.³ However, the point I want to emphasize here is that Sarot alleges that impassibilists deny that God can have emotions because they think that emotions are *essentially* uncontrollable – uncontrollable in the sense that emotions are experiences which overpower or overwhelm. Impassibilists supposedly think that human experiences of emotion are inimical to ideal humanity because, as overpowering experiences, emotions often lead us to do wrong. By parallel argument, divine experiences of emotion would be inimical to divinity because, as overpowering experiences, emotions might lead *God* to do wrong. If God can be overpowered, He cannot be omnipotent. Nor can He be wholly good. For how can He be wholly good if He can be self-absorbed in grief, or vengeful in His dealings with us because anger has overwhelmed Him?

In what follows, I will discuss Sarot's counter-thesis. I will accept his argument that emotions are not essentially overpowering, and that therefore we should not reject divine passibilism on these grounds. However, I will cast doubt on his further claim that we can always resist being overpowered by emotion. I will argue that certain types of emotion *can* be overpowering, and that therefore there are still grounds for being cautious about attributing emotions to God. Moreover, I will argue that the actual subjective experience of an emotion is beyond our immediate control. It is not something we can have at will, or modify the progress of at will, or stop having at will. And I will contend that throughout the duration of an emotion, our attention is more or less preoccupied with the emotion's object, and that this preoccupation is not wholly of our choosing.

I will reject as superficial Sarot's treatment of this topic, preoccupied as he is with the matter of one's *susceptibility* to having an emotion – and locating the question of control there – rather than with the matter of one's subjective experience of emotion.

³ A similar confusion occurs on p. 29 of his book, where Sarot equates 'causal influence' with 'causal constraint.'

In the final section of this chapter, I will examine Sarot's attempts to make God's emotions a matter of divine choice rather than being experiences that God undergoes. I will agree with Sarot that the idea of divine freedom and sovereignty should be emphasized. However, I will argue that in the light of my analysis of the passivity of emotion as a subjective experience, it is precisely on the grounds of divine freedom and sovereignty that the idea of divine emotions should be rejected.

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Sarot appears to shift ground when presenting his argument that emotions are not essentially overpowering.

He starts off – in the first passage I quoted, as it concerns emotions – by saying that impassibilists think that experiences of *emotion* are incompatible with ideal humanity and therefore with divinity. Then, in the second passage I quoted, he details this objection but uses the term 'passion', which is not always equivalent to 'emotion'. And then for most of the rest of the section, he presents his arguments as to why we should not think of experiences of *emotion* as essentially overpowering or overwhelming.⁴ In this connection, it is important to note that the term 'passion' can have more than one meaning, as Sarot himself recognizes.⁵ Of particular relevance to the present discussion are two meanings he identifies. Firstly, 'passion' is sometimes used synonymously with 'emotion.' Secondly, '“passion” is often used to signify especially the more violent emotions'.⁶ This is a very important distinction, and one that he fails to draw attention to in the present discussion. He simply uses the terms 'emotion' and 'passion' interchangeably. However, the claim that passions (= violent emotions) are essentially overpowering is very different from the claim that passions (= emotions) are essentially overpowering – and is far more plausible.

Sarot has little difficulty showing that people can have emotions without necessarily being overpowered by them. Often, a person can act contrary to what their

⁴ Sarot, *ibid.* pp. 36, 39.

⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 171f.

⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 172.

emotion is ‘telling’ them to do. By sheer will power, they can face a situation which they are afraid of and want to run away from, or can restrain themselves from expressing their anger. And although controlling the *expression* of an emotion is not the same thing as controlling the emotion itself, the fact that one can avoid ‘acting out’ one’s anger or fear shows that these sorts of emotion are not *essentially* overpowering or overwhelming. It follows from this fact that emotions generally are not such that, of their very nature, they lead to behaviour which is not subject to control.

Sarot is, in fact, making the very obvious point that emotions cannot essentially be overpowering experiences, for otherwise we would not be able to control our expression of them. According to the idea he is opposing, emotional experiences are such that our wills are overpowered and our actions are interfered with, so that we do things we do not really want to do.⁷ However, says Sarot, since we do often manage to control the expression of our emotions, it is clear that they cannot be *essentially* overpowering experiences. The measure of control we have over the expression of our emotions is to a large extent dependent on how strong they are. The weaker the emotion is, the more control we have over how and whether it is expressed.

Sarot’s claim that emotions are not essentially overpowering, it hardly needs to be said, is not the same as the claim that emotions are *never* overpowering. Yet it seems that Sarot wants to make the latter claim as well. He writes: ‘In human beings, emotions urge, but do not compel. There is reason to admit “emotional stress” as a plea of mitigation, not as a plea of exculpation’.⁸ He concludes with the general claim that ‘we are able to control ... the actions to which [emotions] tend to urge us’.⁹ The implication is that we are always able to resist acting on an emotion, and that therefore emotions are never overpowering.

In supporting this latter claim – that emotions are never overpowering – Sarot discusses only one type of emotion, the type which *urges* us to *do* something. He mentions anger, fear, and disgust. These sorts of emotion urge us to do something specific – to hit, to run, to turn away. However, not all emotions are of this impulsive sort. Grief or remorse do

⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 34.

⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 39.

⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 39.

not urge us to do anything. Rather, they are ‘wish-emotions’ which involve a powerful sense of loss.¹⁰ Far from urging us to do anything, the effect of such emotions, especially when strong, is to cause us to sink into inactivity and to have a sense of helplessness.¹¹ It is easier to check one’s impulse to hit, to run, or to turn away because these are very specific motor-urges, and one can focus one’s willpower on controlling them. However, it is more difficult to show that grief, for example, is not an overwhelming experience, because its expression cannot be checked in the same specific way that motor-urges can be.

Even in the case of urge-type emotions, which impel us to do something and the expression of which is easier to curb, there are certain extreme emotions like terror or horror whose expression one cannot always resist. Such emotions can be so overwhelming that one faints.¹² Far from being able to control the expression of such emotions, the person is incapacitated by them.

Of course, no one is likely to attribute emotions of terror or horror to an omnipotent and omniscient God. I make the point about these extreme emotions merely in order to challenge the claim that emotions are never overpowering. However, it will be recalled that Sarot does say that we should think of God as experiencing *severe* grief in His dealings with human beings, and I have already suggested that grief can be an overwhelming experience. So despite Sarot’s claim that it is never impossible for us to control our emotions, there is still something for the impassibilist to be worried about when Sarot attributes to God a capacity for severe grief.

The claim that emotions are essentially overpowering is so obviously false that one wonders whether Sarot is right in imputing it to impassibilists. Nowhere does he provide any references specifically in support of this imputation. The references he does provide are intended as evidence for the more general objection ‘that passibility always involves experiences that are incompatible with the divine perfection, since they are incompatible even with perfect humanity’.¹³ But in fact the evidence is inadequate. For the literature he

¹⁰ On this, see Lyons, *Emotion*, op. cit. p. 37 & 42ff.

¹¹ See G.D. Marshall, ‘On Being Affected’, *Mind* 77, 1968, pp. 243–259.

¹² Lyons, op. cit. p. 32.

¹³ Sarot, op. cit. p. 32.

cites (none of it is pre-twentieth century) is primarily about divine *suffering*, which is only one item in Sarot's list of experiences which a passible being is capable of. And since, in this list, Sarot distinguishes between the experience of emotion and the experience of suffering,¹⁴ one would expect him to observe the distinction in his discussion, and to provide further, more appropriate, references.

Paul Gavriilyuk does say that 'the term *pathê* had a negative connotation for the Greek-speaking world, which the term "emotion" does not have today'.¹⁵ However, it is clear from the context of his remark that he is referring to the belief that the expression of *pathê* needed controlling. This differs from the belief that the expression of the *pathê* cannot be controlled, and that therefore they should be eliminated from human life as incompatible with perfect humanity. According to Gavriilyuk, '[t]he role of emotions in human relations and in the formation of character was a deeply controversial topic among the various philosophical schools'.¹⁶ If this was the philosophical milieu in which the Fathers formed their idea of divine impassibility, we should be cautious about accepting Sarot's claim that the Fathers based their assertion of divine impassibility on an ideal human impassibility.

At the heart of Sarot's discussion of this matter is his concern to show that divine emotions are not a conceptual threat to divine omnipotence. Emotions need not overpower, he says, and in fact they can always be controlled. Therefore, we need not be anxious about attributing emotions to God: they do not threaten His omnipotence.

However, the impassibilist stance is more radical than this. For central to the concept of divine impassibility is the idea that God cannot 'be acted on by the created order'.¹⁷ Put positively, the '[d]octrine of divine impassibility was part and parcel of the view that God relates only actively to the world'.¹⁸ And yet an essential and central characteristic of emotion is that it is a *passive* experience. An emotion involves something

¹⁴ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 32.

¹⁵ Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, *op. cit.* p. 28.

¹⁶ Gavriilyuk, *ibid.* p. 26.

¹⁷ McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, *op. cit.* p. 4. See also Cross and Livingstone eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, *op. cit.* p. 823.

¹⁸ Bauckham, 'In Defence of *The Crucified God*', *op. cit.* p. 105.

that *happens* to us. And in this sense, it is something over which we do not have control. So there is still, for the impassibilist, an issue of control, and one that Sarot's discussion does not really address.

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So far, I have discussed Sarot's rejection of the idea that emotions are passive – passive in the sense that they are experiences which are essentially overpowering. Sarot seems to think that those who support this idea do so because they regard emotions as experiences which are *caused* in us. He states that 'emotions often present themselves as passive [read: overpowering] because they seem to be caused by their objects'.¹⁹ This statement is illustrative of the confusion I mentioned earlier,²⁰ whereby it is thought that if something operates on us as a cause, we are, in virtue of that fact, coerced. But this does not follow at all. If there are countervailing causes present, coercion does not occur. A graphic example of this is the causal action of gravity on human beings, and the thrust of the rocket engine that enables the astronaut to escape gravitational pull. Because Sarot identifies a causal relation with a coercive one, he thinks he has to show that emotions are not caused in us and therefore that we are not being coerced when we have an emotion. This will be evident in what follows.

When Sarot says that we take emotions to be passive occurrences because an emotion seems to be caused by its object, what he means is that the emotion seems to be caused by the event, thing, or state of affairs that is the occasion of the emotion. It seems that your saying something or doing something I dislike has caused me to be angry. It seems that my friend's death has caused me to grieve. Your comment or deed, and the event of my friend's death, are examples of what Sarot means when he refers to the object of the emotion. William Lyons calls this type of object the 'particular object' of the emotion.²¹ He uses this term in order to distinguish this type of object from what is

¹⁹ Sarot, op. cit. p. 36.

²⁰ p. 58.

²¹ Lyons, op. cit. pp. 104–109.

sometimes called the ‘formal object’ of an emotion.²² The formal object of an emotion is a description of how, in a general way, the subject of the emotion must perceive or evaluate the particular object if the subject is to be described as having some particular type of emotion rather than some other type. So, for example, someone cannot correctly be described as being afraid of something unless that person evaluates or perceives a particular object as being potentially harmful to him, and as being something he wants to avoid. Without an evaluation or perception of this sort, the person’s subjective experience cannot logically be one of fear. Similar conditions apply to other types of emotion. The formal object is a logical entity, not a particular, and so cannot enter into causal relations with anything.²³ Since Sarot is talking about emotions being *caused* by their objects, it is clear that he is referring to particular objects of emotion, and not formal objects. And what Sarot is challenging is the idea that there is, in the situations in which we feel an emotion, something external to ourselves that is causing us to have the emotion. However, because Sarot confuses causality with coerciveness, he treats this as a question about whether particular objects necessitate emotions in us, and whether we are passive in *this* sense.

Sarot argues – in line with ‘virtually all major contemporary theories of emotion’²⁴ – that the particular objects of emotion do not themselves determine whether or not we feel an emotion in relation to them. Rather, it is how we perceive them that determines whether or not we feel the emotion. That perception depends, in turn, on the beliefs and attitudes I have when I encounter the particular object.²⁵ We each have our own set of susceptibilities in this respect. What some people react emotionally to, others do not.

For example, take the event of someone’s death. In such a situation, we do not expect there to be a uniform response to the news of the person’s death. Some, no doubt, will grieve. Some will feel sad. Some may be indifferent. Some may even feel relief. There is no straightforward sense in which it can correctly be said that the event of the death – or of the news of the death – causes the grief of those who grieve. For if that were so, why is

²² Lyons, *ibid.* ch. 6.

²³ Lyons, *ibid.* p. 102f.

²⁴ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 37, n. 13.

²⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 36ff.

it that the others do not grieve? Clearly, there are other factors involved, factors such as the importance of the deceased in the lives of those who knew him, whether he was liked or disliked, and so on. These are personal factors in the outlook of each person who knew him, and they determine the response which the people in question have to the event.

Similarly, why is it that some take criticism well and others do not? Some are able to consider it objectively, accept what is justified, and remain calm. Others seem unable to do any of these things. Instead, they become angry or resentful. Again, there are personal factors. Perhaps the person who does not take criticism well had a parent who was never satisfied with their child's best efforts. Perhaps the person has a tendency to suspect other people's good intentions. And so on. The criticism is not perceived more or less objectively: it is taken as a personal attack.

As Sarot suggests, the view that I have just illustrated is standard in the contemporary philosophical literature on emotions.²⁶ It is an unexceptionable thesis, and I do not need to elaborate on it.

In making this point about perception or evaluation being the determining factor in whether we have an emotion or not, Sarot is trying to show that emotions are not necessitated in us by a particular object. They are not imposed on us from outside, as it were. There is a sense in which emotions do not just happen to us. Appearances notwithstanding, what we are – with our individual psychological histories and susceptibilities – predisposes us to react to certain things emotionally. In this respect, we are responsible for having the emotions we do. However, none of this shows that the particular object is not a causal factor in our having an emotion. All Sarot has shown is that the particular object is not the *sole* cause of an emotion – that by itself it is not a sufficient condition for an emotion to occur. And because Sarot confuses causality with coerciveness, he explicitly treats the causal question as a question about control.²⁷ This is evident in his discussion of emotional predispositions and susceptibilities.²⁸ As Sarot suggests, over time, we can eliminate already-established – and unwanted – emotional tendencies by

²⁶ For a clear exposition of this view, see Lyons, op. cit. chs. 3, 4 & 6.

²⁷ Sarot, op. cit. p. 36.

²⁸ Sarot, ibid. p. 37f.

eliminating the evaluations and attitudes on which they depend, and by substituting and cultivating other evaluations and attitudes.²⁹ For example, I might feel angry towards my boss less often if I spent less time dwelling on his faults, and more time trying to appreciate his good qualities. We can cultivate our attitudes and outlook on life in such a way that certain things no longer affect us emotionally, or if they still do, not to the extent they once did.

Nevertheless, although Sarot succeeds in showing that the particular object of an emotion does not necessitate the emotion is us, there is still an issue of control. One can grant that, over time, we do have some measure of control over our emotional tendencies, and can therefore be active in this respect. However, although we can be actively involved in the formation of our own psychological characteristics, it is actually some of these very same characteristics that contribute to the sense we have, when having an emotion, that something is happening to us, and in relation to which we seem passive, even if we are not compelled to express the emotion in a certain way. It does seem, at the time of having the emotion, that we cannot react to the particular object of the emotion in any other way. I will take up this point in detail below.

Sarot claims that his discussion of our ability to alter our emotional tendencies has ‘shown that we are able to control ... our emotions’.³⁰ However, this is a misleading statement. For it is equivocal between, on the one hand, meaning control of emotional tendencies; and on the other, meaning control of an emotion during its actual occurrence. Sarot has succeeded only in showing that *tendencies* are to some extent controllable. But what is required is for him to show that *occurrent emotions* are controllable. It is the *subjective experience* of emotion that is, according to Sarot, the focus of the enquiry into the passivity of emotions – at least, that is what Sarot sets himself to address at the beginning of his discussion. Controlling a disposition or susceptibility to having an emotion is not the same thing as controlling the emotion itself. The fact that we can control such a disposition or susceptibility only shows that many emotional experiences are

²⁹ On this, see Lyons, *op. cit.* pp. 197–200.

³⁰ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 39.

avoidable in the first place, not that if emotions do occur, they are not essentially uncontrollable in some way or other.

Underlying Sarot's denial – or at least minimization – of the particular object's causal rôle in the occurrence of an emotion is his concern to safeguard the idea of divine omnipotence. If he can show that nothing external to the person having the emotion has caused – read: coerced – him to have it, he has shown that one can attribute emotions to God without impugning His freedom. By emphasizing the subject's active contribution to the occurrence of emotions, Sarot suggests that in a certain sense we *choose* whether we have an emotion or not – the emotion is not imposed on us by the particular object of the emotion. In this way, Sarot tries to make more plausible the idea that God can, as it were, choose to have emotions – His experience of them is not a passive one.

I will argue in the next section of this chapter that passivity, rather than activity, is a central feature of the experience of emotion. Emotions cannot be produced at will, cannot be stopped at will, and moreover, involve a focusing of our attention that is not something we choose. In view of this central feature of emotions, I will argue – in the final section of this chapter – that it is difficult to make sense of Sarot's idea that God, in effect, *chooses* to have emotions. Further, I will argue that because emotions are passive in the way I have just described, one should reject the possibility that an omnipotent and all-knowing God can have emotions.

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It is important to understand what Sarot means by the terms 'passive' and 'passivity'. These terms mean more than simply being acted on by something, in the way the sun's rays act on a person's skin, for example. They refer to the idea that one is constrained in some way, one is subject to something over which one does not have complete – or any – control.

Unfortunately, Sarot has not probed the matter of the passivity of emotions deeply enough. His investigation does not go any further than discussing the control of behaviour

motivated by emotion, or the manipulation of the conditions for having and avoiding emotions. What Sartre has failed to address are the relevant aspects of the actual experience of an emotion. That is what I now propose to do. To what extent is there an element of passivity – in the sense just given – in our experiences of emotion?

There is a consensus in the literature on emotions that occurrent emotions are not completely and directly controllable. Even writers who are extreme in the emphasis they place on the subject's active involvement in the occurrence of an emotion acknowledge passivity as an essential characteristic of emotions.³¹

The prime example of a 'voluntarist' approach to the emotions is that of Jean-Paul Sartre.³² According to Sartre, the having of an emotion is a means we *adopt* for coping with our inadequacies in dealing with the world. For according to Sartre, we have emotions in order to give to the world a different appearance, and the world thus transformed is easier to deal with.³³ Yet as paradoxical as it may seem, although emotions are supposedly used in this way, Sartre regards passivity as an 'essential characteristic of emotion'.³⁴ An emotion is "suffered" ... it surprises, develops *of itself* according to its own laws, and ... conscious efforts cannot modify its course to any very appreciable extent'.³⁵ The reason there is an element of passivity in emotion is that although, on Sartre's account, emotions are had for a purpose, '[t]he qualities "willed" upon the objects are taken to be real'.³⁶ We are not aware that we have produced the qualities ourselves, and therefore they seem imposed on us.

It is useful for the development of my argument to expand on Sartre's description of the passivity of emotion, and to develop some of his points.

³¹ For this observation, see Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions*, op. cit. p. 130. Oakley mentions Jean-Paul Sartre and Robert C. Solomon. For bibliographical references for these writers, plus others, see p. 216, n. 19.

³² See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Routledge, 1994.

³³ Sartre, *ibid.* p. 63. On the implausibility of Sartre's theory of emotions, see Lyons, op. cit. pp. 27–32.

³⁴ Sartre, *ibid.* p. 49 – my emphasis.

³⁵ Sartre, *ibid.* p. 49.

³⁶ Sartre, *ibid.* p. 76.

The term ‘suffered’ should not be understood in a negative sense. Although someone may suffer if he has a painful emotion – suffer in the sense I discussed in the previous chapter – here ‘suffered’ merely means ‘undergone’.

The surprise element mentioned suggests that the experience of an emotion is not something we initiate. It seems to be something, or rather involves something, which *happens* to us. Moreover, as I will argue, it is not in fact something which we can have at will. These points will be relevant to my examination later on of the claim that God can somehow *choose* to have His emotions.

The idea that an emotion develops of itself, according to its own laws, suggests that some kind of mechanistic process is set in motion when we start having an emotion. As Sartre observes, it is a process over which we have little control. Elsewhere, he says that ‘[o]ne cannot get out of [an emotion] as one pleases; it fades away of itself, but one cannot put a stop to it’.³⁷

These points about not being able to have, or cease having, emotions at will are central to my objection to ascribing emotions to God. For this reason, they obviously need careful examination.

According to Justin Oakley, there is considerable support among writers on emotions for the idea that ‘the affective elements of emotions, “though sometimes checkable at will, are not normally producible at will” ’.³⁸ The affective elements – or ‘affects’, as Oakley elsewhere calls them – are the modifications that occur in the body and/or the mind whenever we have an emotion.³⁹ The term ‘affects’, as used by Oakley, is inclusive enough to avoid the implication that any one type of modification is essential to a correct concept of emotion. For as Oakley recognizes, there are differences of opinion as to what constitutes a correct concept of emotion in this respect. Some regard *bodily feelings* as essential to emotion; some regard *feelings* as essential, whether bodily or ‘psychic’ or both; and some regard *unusual physiological change* as essential. What these views have in common is that the condition of the body and/or mind is changed in some way. And my

³⁷ Sartre, *ibid.* p. 76.

³⁸ Oakley, *op. cit.* p. 130. Oakley is quoting Anthony Kenny.

³⁹ Oakley, *ibid.* pp. 7–14.

first point is that such changes are beyond our immediate control when we have an emotion.

It is important to note that these changes do not ‘simply coexist’ with the other elements in the emotion.⁴⁰ For, as Oakley points out, ‘if we have each of the components of a particular emotion but these components have radically different causes, then we do not in this case have that emotion’.⁴¹ For example, suppose I think that someone shows signs of imminent physical aggression towards me, and suppose that at that same moment I am trembling and pale. It does not follow from these facts alone that I feel afraid. For my trembling and paleness may be due to the fact that the ambient temperature is below zero and I am inadequately dressed. In order to justify describing me as being afraid, there is a further requirement. The trembling and paleness must be caused by my perception or evaluation of the danger, and by my desire not to be hurt, and not by something that is purely incidental to the situation.

Oakley is right to insist that affectivity – disjunctively described – is an essential component of emotion. Conceptually, it is the idea that we are *changed* in body and/or mind in the causally relevant way. And since being passive is being subject to change by something else, having an emotion involves being passive in a certain respect. What, specifically, is it that (it is said) we cannot have – and possibly cannot cease having – at will? There are three sorts of affect mentioned by Oakley.

Firstly, there are the affects which Kenny refers to, the physiological ‘symptoms of an emotion ... [t]rembling, blushing, psychogalvanic reflexes, and cardiac disturbances’.⁴²

Secondly, there are bodily feelings, which occur when we become aware of unusual physiological changes.

Thirdly, there are the so-called psychic affects, feelings that we do not ‘take ... to be of certain (not necessarily localisable) bodily happenings’.⁴³ The justification for this third

⁴⁰ Oakley, *ibid.* p. 15.

⁴¹ Oakley, *ibid.* p. 15f.

⁴² Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, *op. cit.* p. 98. Although Kenny refers to these physiological occurrences as *symptoms* of an emotion, it is clear from what I said above that some writers would regard such occurrences as part of the emotion itself, and therefore not as mere symptoms.

⁴³ Oakley, *op. cit.* p. 7 – emphasis removed. I say ‘so-called’ because, of course, *bodily* feelings are items of which we are conscious too, and are therefore, in that sense, ‘psychic’.

category of affects is that many types or intensities of emotion involve feelings but not *bodily* feelings – that is, not feelings that we relate to our bodies – or not only bodily feelings. For example, emotions like shame or anger can be fairly described as painful experiences, without any suggestion that we actually feel *physical* pain in having them, or that we relate that pain to our bodies.

It is hard to see how one could initiate or control physiological modifications like blushing or cardiac disturbances merely through willing them. For the initiation or control of such modifications cannot be basic actions like raising one's arm, which is a simple matter of motor control. It is necessary to do something else first. The modifications in question could be achieved on a purely behavioural level by (in the case of blushing) sitting in a sauna, or (in the case of cardiac disturbances) going for a run – but in neither case simply at will.

Similar considerations apply to having and ceasing to have bodily feelings at will. For such feelings are the effects of physiological changes, some of which, as I have argued, cannot be produced or eliminated at will.

In the case of psychic feelings, one cannot produce or eliminate a non-bodily feeling of pleasure or pain merely by willing it. Rather, it is necessary to think or to cease thinking about something pleasant or painful. For example, if I make an effort to dwell upon some very happy memories, or alternatively, upon some shameful or humiliating ones, I might be able to induce the relevant feelings. Similarly, if I withdraw my attention from something about which I am having pleasant or painful thoughts, I can cease feeling the pleasure or pain attached to these thoughts.

However, affectivity cannot be considered in causal isolation from the rest of what jointly constitutes an emotion. To be considered an affect of *emotion*, an affect must be in a causal relation with the other elements of emotion, as I said earlier. The concept of emotion includes the idea that the elements of perception or evaluation on the one hand, and affect on the other, are causally related. So although it is possible to consider the initiation and control of an isolated component of emotion, an adequate discussion of the

initiation and control of an emotion as a whole must take into account the fact that the components of an emotion are causally 'intrarelated'.

These considerations concerning the initiation and control of affect – and therefore concerning the extent to which emotions are passive experiences – bring me to my second point. When we have an emotion, we are affected in at least one of the ways described earlier. Whatever the affect involved, it causally depends on the evaluation we make of the particular object of the emotion. Without the evaluation, the affect cannot exist as part of an emotion. The affects or modifications, as part of an emotion, cannot be had or eliminated at will because their existence depends not on our willing but on our evaluation of the particular object. I blush because I judge an act of mine to be shameful, and do not like having committed it. I cease to feel mental pain because I have come to terms with my loss, and no longer think of it as badly as I once did. So, in relation to the passivity of emotions, the idea that there is something I cannot have simply at will or something I cannot cease having simply at will more centrally concerns the evaluative or 'perceptive' component in emotion rather than the affective component. The idea is that one cannot start evaluating/'perceiving' or cease evaluating/'perceiving' a particular object at will, such that one starts having or ceases having the relevant emotion.

I said earlier⁴⁴ that how we evaluate or perceive a situation or event depends on the set of beliefs, desires, and attitudes which we bring to it when we encounter it. By itself, the situation or event is not sufficient to cause in us an emotion. In general terms, having an emotion involves evaluating or perceiving a situation or event as either furthering or harming our well-being, or the well-being of someone we care about. This evaluation or perception depends, in turn, on various beliefs and desires, some of which are deeply entrenched in us.

For example, suppose I have a brother who is many years younger than I am, and who has, by the usual standards, been very successful in life. He is happily married, has three admirable children, a well-paid and fulfilling job, and lives in a grand house. And suppose that I would like all these things but that for some reason I have never been able to

⁴⁴ p. 64f.

attain to any of them. Suppose also that I am extremely envious of my brother's success, and sometimes complain about it. Finally, suppose there is someone who feels great sympathy towards my brother because he knows that my brother, for various reasons, had a very bad start in life and has now made good. Hearing me complain about my brother's success, he says to me, 'Be glad that your brother has managed to do so well!'

As an exhortation to begin to find a way to make a long-term transition from feeling envious to feeling glad, this is not an unrealistic thing to say. For being envious is not the only way that one in my position can react to his younger brother's success. No doubt there are others in a similar position to my own who do not feel envy. And it is possible that, over time, my beliefs, desires, and attitudes could change.

What does seem impossible is for me to stop being envious and start being glad *on demand*. What disposes me to envy, and sustains it, is a variety of beliefs and desires. For example, I might believe that, as an older brother, success should have come to me first, and its not doing so has for me merely underlined my own *lack* of success. Certainly, I believe (as many do) that the goods he has are highly desirable, and I myself desire them. However, it is necessary to add a further item to this list, namely, that I do not like the fact that my brother has these things and I do not. It is a fact I am displeased about. For the other items on the list could be true without my being envious. As William Lyons remarks, the concept of envy involves more than just my perceiving myself as being inferior in some respect to someone else; it also involves my being *displeased* with, or *not liking*, being in this position.⁴⁵ For example, I could merely note that I am inferior to someone else in some respect, without feeling any emotion at all. Merely noting the inferiority is not a sufficient condition of my feeling envious: it is necessary that I am also displeased about it.

My perception of my brother's success depends on these beliefs, desires, and attitudes of mine, whatever precisely they may be. My perception partially constitutes my emotion of envy, and causes the appropriate affects, which also partially constitute my emotion. In order for me to stop being envious, I need to stop perceiving the situation as I currently perceive it. I need to start perceiving it differently, so that I no longer see myself

⁴⁵ Lyons, *op. cit.* p. 83.

as inferior to my brother – or if I do, so that I am no longer displeased about that fact. However, changing my perception (or evaluation) is not something I can do at will, because changing my perception would involve changing some of the beliefs, desires, and attitudes which go to make up my perception, and these are not the sorts of things that are susceptible of change at will.⁴⁶

For similar reasons, it is not possible, on demand, for me to start being glad about my brother's success. For I perceive myself as inferior to my brother, and am displeased about it, and this evaluation logically cannot be an element in the emotion of gladness which I am exhorted to have. The concept of being glad implies that I evaluate something as furthering my well-being, or that of someone I care about, and being pleased about it, and clearly such an evaluation is absent in the present circumstances. It is necessary that certain beliefs and desires of mine change first before I can be glad, and as I have already said, these cannot be changed at will.

There is a further respect in which there is passivity and a lack of direct control in the experience of an emotion. This is the experience we have of our thoughts being focused and intensified in relation to the object of the emotion. The focusing and intensification of our thoughts in this regard are not something we choose to do. It is not an act of concentration, involving mental effort. Rather, we find that the object of our emotion always attracts or engages our attention in a way that is not entirely voluntary. Sometimes the emotion is so strong that the object can be said to *grip* our attention.

This is a characteristic which has been observed by a number of writers on emotion. G.D. Marshall describes the object of our emotion as possessing our attention.⁴⁷ Bennett Helm says that 'emotion, as passive ... usually seems to thrust a vision of the world upon us'.⁴⁸ Sartre speaks of the object of emotion as 'confronting the consciousness'.⁴⁹ Ronald de Sousa describes emotions as 'bringing some [beliefs] into the spotlight and relegating

⁴⁶ There is not room to defend this claim here. In support of this claim, see Oakley, *op. cit.* p. 131f. (plus his footnotes for further references).

⁴⁷ Marshall, 'On Being Affected', *op. cit.* p. 246.

⁴⁸ B.W. Helm, *Emotional Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 66.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *op. cit.* p. 88.

others to the shade'.⁵⁰ And Peter Goldie remarks on the fact that, with respect to emotions, the imagination is particularly 'intractable ... that is to say ... it tends actively to "run away with you" '.⁵¹ While most of these writers probably have the more powerful experiences of emotion in view, the general idea holds good for milder experiences of emotion as well. The idea is that when we have an emotion, our attention is passive in relation to the object of the emotion. In emotion, we are not actively focusing our attention; it is being focused for us. Thus, when we have an emotion, we always find that our thinking is being shaped in some way by the object of the emotion. We are not merely registering a perceived fact: willy-nilly, our thoughts cluster around it.

The drawing of the attention when we have an emotion occurs not only at the onset of the emotion, but also throughout its duration. Sartre expresses this feature well when he says that 'emotion returns to the object time after time and feeds upon it'.⁵² And when the emotion is strong, as is the case, for example, with severe grief (an emotion Sarot attributes to God), the object *demand*s attention. Our thoughts about the particular object of severe grief are insistent, and our preoccupation with the object becomes a kind of obsessional thinking. Our attention is engaged in this way because the particular object of the emotion is important to us. Our perception of the object is based on how the object affects our well-being or the well-being of someone we care about. Our evaluation of the object is not disinterested. And because, when we encounter the object, we already have certain general presuppositions about what is important for our well-being (or that of another), the evaluation does not seem entirely self-originated but instead seems to have an element of something imposed on us. Whereas non-emotional cognitive judgements are made '*actively, consciously, and (for the most part) freely*',⁵³ this is not the case with the judgements that are involved when we have an emotion.

Necessarily, if something engages one's attention, it limits one's awareness of other things. If we feel an emotion strongly – severe grief, for example – not only is one's

⁵⁰ R. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987, p. 243.

⁵¹ Goldie, *The Emotions*, op. cit. p. 58.

⁵² Sartre, op. cit. p. 57.

⁵³ Helm, *Emotional Reason*, op. cit. p. 65 – his emphasis.

attention intensely engaged, it is difficult to free oneself from the engagement. Freeing ourselves requires effort, and a due consideration of other things around us is sometimes difficult. Consequently, our view of the particular object of the emotion can be distorted.

Marshall writes:

Being affected restricts the range of considerations open to one's judgement and so reliable judgement is difficult. We have to redirect our attention away from the affecting object which possesses it to considerations different from and so alien to those which are natural to us at the moment, and we have to keep those considerations before our minds. And sometimes our faculty of judgement is entirely impaired. When proceeding purely cognitively we find neither of these to be true in the same way. Concentration is different from the volitional effort involved in thinking under restrictive conditions.⁵⁴

This fact about the cognitive limitations of emotional thinking raises a question about the extent to which an emotionally passible God could be aware of all the details of what happens in His world. How could a God who is intensely engaged with the object(s) of His grief give each worldly thing its due attention, and therefore always act appropriately in all circumstances. How could we trust a God whose judgement might be impaired?⁵⁵

An indication of how difficult it is conceptually to eliminate this feature of emotional passivity – in which our thoughts are drawn to the object – can be gained from considering Martha Nussbaum's account of emotions. Although she seems to try very hard to keep the idea of passivity out of her description of the subjective experience of having an emotion, she cannot avoid mentioning features of our emotional thinking which indicate to me the sort of passivity I have just been describing. According to Nussbaum,

the experience of passivity in emotion is well explained by the fact that the objects of emotion are things and people whose activities and well-being

⁵⁴ Marshall, op. cit. p. 246.

⁵⁵ I say only that it raises a question. For one must reckon with the idea that God's knowledge of the world is not an awareness of *the world* but is instead an awareness of His own will in sustaining the world in being. On this account of divine knowledge of the world, God's knowledge is not *a posteriori* – derived from worldly states of affairs – but *a priori*, that is, derived from a knowledge of Himself. It is possible that God's mode of awareness of worldly affairs would be unaffected by the intense cognitive engagements that emotions sometimes involve. Regarding the idea that God's knowledge of the world is *a priori*, see Anthony Kenny, *God of the Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 33–37 and Hughes, *The Nature of God*, op. cit. pp. 107–113. I have already discussed this idea in Chapter 2 of this thesis, p. 54ff.

we do not ourselves control, and in whom we have invested a good measure of our own well-being. They are our hostages to fortune. In emotion we recognize our own passivity before the ungoverned events of life.⁵⁶

According to Nussbaum, what we are passive before when we have an emotion are the chance events that affect our well-being, or the well-being of those we care about. Thus she assigns a wholly 'external' location to the things before which we are passive. As she puts it elsewhere, when we have an emotion, there is 'a certain passivity *before the world*'.⁵⁷ However, although we can agree that we are at the mercy of life's vicissitudes, and might well recognize this fact when we have an emotion, this is not the same thing as experiencing the emotion itself as something which is passive, or as something which involves passivity. By conceptually externalizing the passivity of emotion, Nussbaum is effectively denying that there is anything in the emotional experience itself before which the person having the emotion can be said to be passive.

Nussbaum's view of our experience of passivity in emotion is explained by the fact she holds a strongly cognitivist theory of emotion. On her view, emotions are simply judgements or evaluations we *make* about situations or events which are important for our well-being, or the well-being of someone we care about. The idea that in having an emotion we make something (a judgement or evaluation) suggests activity rather than passivity.⁵⁸ There is little or no room for the idea that when we have an emotion, we are subject to something internal to the subjective experience. And since, on Nussbaum's theory of emotion, the sort of affectivity Oakley identifies is excluded,⁵⁹ there seems to be little else left to account for our sense of passivity in the experience of emotion.

In adopting this minimalist view of the passivity of emotions, Nussbaum appears to have overlooked features of her own description of the subjective experience of an emotion. For although she does not describe any part of the experience in terms of the object of the emotion attracting or demanding our attention, she does say that the

⁵⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Nussbaum, *ibid.* p. 43 – my emphasis.

⁵⁸ Nussbaum, *ibid.* p. 27.

⁵⁹ Nussbaum, *ibid.* pp. 24–30; 56–64. See my earlier discussion of Oakley's views, p. 69ff.

experience of emotion is ‘cognitively laden, or dense, in a way that a propositional-attitude view would not capture’, and that there is a ‘tendency to focus upon the [particular] object’.⁶⁰ She explains the ladenness or density as a product of the imagination. She remarks that ‘even where I already invest the object [of the emotion] with significance, imagination is often at work, supplying more than the eudaimonistic thoughts [thoughts of my own or another’s well-being] themselves supply’.⁶¹ For example, in grieving, my thoughts are not necessarily just about the fact that I have lost someone dear to me. My thoughts may also dwell upon some very specific features of that person, or of her life: her smile, an item of clothing, a place she used to visit, and so on.

The idea that imagination is at work, as Nussbaum puts it, supplying these details, suggests that there is something not entirely voluntary going on. Moreover, her view that this feature of emotion is probably attributable to the need for evolutionary survival⁶² suggests that it is in fact *involuntary*. For such an attribution is usually proposed when one is trying to explain the presence of an animal instinct, reflex, or mechanism.

Nussbaum explicitly identifies the passivity of emotion with our being emotionally dependent on the vicissitudes of life, as I have said. However, despite what she says, I maintain that the idea of passivity is in fact present in her discussion of the thoughts we have when we are having an emotion. To a considerable extent – more so than is generally the case with non-emotional thinking – our thoughts are not under our control, but cluster around our perception of the object of our emotion.

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⁶⁰ Nussbaum, *ibid.* p. 65.

⁶¹ Nussbaum, *ibid.* p. 65.

⁶² Nussbaum, *ibid.* pp. 65, 67.

In the preceding three sections, I have made a number of points concerning the question of control of the emotions.

In the first section, I discussed Sarot's claim that not only are emotions not essentially overpowering, but also that we can always control the effects our emotions have on our behaviour. I accepted the first part of his claim but rejected the second. I argued that sometimes certain types of emotion could overwhelm us to the point of incapacitation.

In the second section, I discussed Sarot's argument that we should think of the control of emotions in terms of cultivating attitudes and predispositions. I argued that this idea concerned not so much the control of emotions as how we can often avoid having certain emotions in the first place. I pointed out that controlling predispositions to having certain emotions is not the same thing as controlling the emotions themselves.

In the third section, I examined the question of control as it concerns the emotion itself. I argued that the passivity of emotion is something which is an element in the actual experience of an emotion, and that it was here that the question of control should be located. I claimed that emotions cannot be had or stopped at will, because the beliefs and desires which are central to them cannot themselves be had or stopped at will. I also tried to show that there is an involuntary element in the clustering of our thoughts around the perceived object of the emotion.

I will now proceed to relate my points about the passivity and lack of control in the emotional experience to the idea of divine emotion.

The idea that emotional experiences occur and proceed independently of one's immediate will makes the attribution of emotions to God extremely problematic. For although a predisposition to having certain types of emotion could conceivably be part of God's character – and therefore not an effect of His will in the way creation is – one still has to reckon with the fact that any occurrent divine emotion would have a precipitating cause, one which would 'trigger off' the emotion independently of God's immediate will and sustain it in like manner until the cause ceased to exist.

Any account of divine emotion which is not metaphorical or highly analogical must reckon with the fact that an essential characteristic of emotions is their passivity.⁶³ Emotions involve passivity not merely in the sense that something *acts on* the subject, but also in the sense that to some extent the subject's freedom is curtailed. Hence, the passivity of emotion is clearly a conceptual threat to divine omnipotence if emotions are attributed to God.

There is a tacit recognition of the problem of divine emotion and omnipotence in the use Sarot makes of a passage he quotes from Abraham Heschel's *The Prophets*:

The divine reaction to human conduct does not operate automatically. Man's deeds do not necessitate but only occasion divine pathos. Man is not the immediate but merely the incidental cause of pathos in God, the '*occasio*' or '*causa occasionalis*' which freely calls forth a pathetic state in God. There is no nexus of causality, but only one of contingency between human and divine attitudes, between human character and divine pathos. The decisive fact is that of divine freedom.⁶⁴

In making all these denials, Heschel is evidently concerned that the idea that God *reacts* to human conduct might be thought to compromise the idea of divine freedom. Although it is doubtful that when he uses the term 'pathos', Heschel is actually referring to *emotional* reactions, or including emotions as one possible type of divine reaction,⁶⁵ what matters here is Sarot's application of Heschel's ideas to the question of divine freedom and emotional passibility. For it is in the very context of a discussion of this possible conflict that the quotation is used, and with the intention of reassuring us that 'God in a supreme way is master of Himself'.⁶⁶

⁶³ Necessarily, metaphorical or highly analogical uses of words dispense with certain essential characteristics of the things represented by the *literal* use of those words. In the present case, for example, talk of angry clouds or joyful streams carries no implication that the clouds or streams in question evaluate something in the relevant emotion-inducing way, for such inanimate things are not capable of doing so. Yet evaluation is an essential characteristic of an emotion, and when the term 'emotion' is used literally, what is intended by that use must involve evaluation as an item. For a comparative discussion of the semantic status of metaphor and analogy, see J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 64ff.

⁶⁴ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 28.

⁶⁵ According to Sarot, Heschel denies that he uses this term in a psychological sense. Rather, it 'denotes God's involvement in history, His participation in the human predicament ... the intentional and supremely moral act by which God summons man to justice' – Sarot, *ibid.* p. 173. It is an extremely 'comprehensive ... term that ... includes all that is meant by passibility and more than that' (*ibid.*). When a specifically psychological reaction is being referred to, 'he uses concepts like "emotion", "feeling", "pain", "suffering" and "to be affected by" ...' (*ibid.*).

⁶⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p.28.

Heschel contrasts necessitated reactions with occasioned reactions, and in attributing occasioned reactions to God, he rightly wants to emphasize the idea of divine freedom.⁶⁷ I will use Heschel's distinction to develop my argument against attributing emotions to God.

A reaction that is necessitated is wholly determined by certain conditions that obtain at the time. Given those conditions, the thing or person in question cannot react in any way other than the way the thing or person does in fact react. The model for thinking about necessitated reactions is physical science. For example, given the presence of oxygen, combustible material, and sufficient heat, the material's igniting is necessitated by the conditions that obtain. In the case of human reactions, there are certainly some which are necessitated. For example, there are various well-known reflex responses that can be triggered by the appropriate stimulus. A pinprick in one's finger will bring about the immediate withdrawal of the finger. A knock below the kneecap will cause a knee-jerk reaction. Throwing something at someone's face will cause them to blink. These reactions are all involuntary. On the part of the person reacting no choice is involved. The reactions are merely mechanical responses: they are the result of a body mechanism in operation, brought into play by the stimulus.

What I have just described are examples of physiological necessitation – necessitation in which bodily behaviour is determined purely by the operation of some bodily mechanism. Since God is generally regarded as incorporeal, He cannot be the subject of physiological necessitation. If one were to think of God as in any way the subject of (causal) necessitation, the kind of (causal) necessitation would have to be psychological.

Examples of psychological necessitation are hard to find. Hypnotism is one example – one which Sarot uses.⁶⁸ It may be that other examples could be found by studying the psychological reactions of those in extreme situations such as war, torture, or

⁶⁷ In accepting this contrast, I do not however endorse Heschel's treatment of causality as equivalent to necessitation. He seems to think that they are the same thing. Hence, the denial that man's deeds necessitate a divine reaction is treated as equivalent to a denial that there is a Godward nexus of causality in this respect. As I have already noted (p. 58), a similar confusion is present in Sarot's discussion of the matter.

⁶⁸ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 28.

famine. However, even in extreme circumstances like these, there is often a variety of reactions amongst individuals in similar situations.

Given that psychological necessitation is possible, one must agree with Heschel (and Sarot) that this is an entirely unsatisfactory way of thinking about God's 'responses' to human conduct. For the idea of divine omnipotence excludes the possibility that anything 'external' to God can necessitate something in Him.

Heschel prefers to talk about what he calls God's *reaction* to human conduct as something which is *occasioned* in God. An occasioned reaction, according to Heschel's account of it, is not determined by the thing it is a reaction to. Rather, it is determined by the choice of the person reacting. For example, imagine I receive a mailshot from a book club. The event of the mailshot landing on my doormat does not determine what sort of response I make to that event. I have considerable latitude as to how I can respond. I can throw the mailshot in the bin, shelve it for consideration later, subscribe, make further enquiries, give it to a friend, decide to gather information on other book clubs, and so on. I am free to choose how I will 'react'.

It is this idea which Sarot wants to emphasize when he talks about God's emotional reactions to human conduct. He does so by drawing a distinction – similar to Heschel's – between someone's being *causally* affected and someone's being *personally* affected.⁶⁹ According to this distinction, someone's behaviour is causally affected if something operates on him in a purely external, mechanical, and deterministic way; and someone's behaviour is personally affected if something operates on him in such a way that he can choose how to respond to the thing in question.

Sarot illustrates the idea of being *causally* affected with a description of someone who is hypnotized.⁷⁰ A hypnotized person cannot help what he does under instruction. His own free contribution to his actions is nil. He is merely acted on. Personal factors – attitudes, beliefs, desires – cannot come into play because the person's reasoning powers

⁶⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 27.

⁷⁰ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 28.

are suspended. He is entirely open to manipulation by the other person. That person operates on him in a purely external, mechanical, and deterministic way.

As an example of someone being *personally* affected, Sarot imagines someone attempting, with heartfelt pleas, to persuade another to jump into some water.⁷¹ The person who is the object of persuasion is portrayed as having some measure of freedom in choosing either to resist or give way. He is not operated on in a purely external way, as is the person who is hypnotized. Rather, he himself makes, as it were, an internal contribution to the outcome. The external stimulus (the act of persuasion) encounters his (personal and therefore internal) attitudes, beliefs, and desires, and the stimulus is rejected, accepted, or modified accordingly. As an object of attempted persuasion, he is able to control how he will respond because his attitudes, beliefs, and desires regarding the other person, and regarding what he is being asked to do, contribute to determining the outcome of the interpersonal encounter.

One can see how the idea of being personally affected applies to experiences of emotion. When we have an emotion, as I explained earlier,⁷² we are not just causally affected by the particular object of the emotion. Our evaluation of that object is what determines whether we have the emotion at all. And the evaluation in turn depends on our predispositions and susceptibilities – our attitudes, beliefs, and desires.

The point of the distinction I have just described is to show how God can be responsive to the human situation without that situation *determining* His response. Although, wrongly, Sarot discusses this point in causal rather than deterministic terms, it is clear what he is aiming at. He is trying to emphasize God's personal freedom in the way He responds to human beings. This is an idea that he develops later when he argues that we have a large measure of control over our emotional tendencies. I have already examined that argument in detail and will not revert to it here.

The problem with Sarot's argument is that he fails to pay attention to the 'occurrence' of emotions. He fails to pay attention to the emotional experience itself. His

⁷¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 28.

⁷² p. 64f.

analysis of emotions, as it relates to the matter of control, is actually an analysis of emotional *tendencies*, as I remarked earlier.⁷³ However, from the fact that emotional tendencies can to some extent be controlled, it does not follow that emotional experiences are themselves under our control. Put in Heschel's terms, it does not follow that occurrent emotions are merely occasioned and not necessitated.

The extent to which Sarot conceptually distances emotions from being reactions is clear from his example of someone trying to persuade another to jump into some water. Trying to persuade someone to do something involves presenting him with reasons as to why he should do whatever it is that one is trying to persuade him to do. It involves trying to get him to think about these reasons, in the hope that he will be led to perform the desired action. And the person one is trying to persuade will either accept or reject, wholly or in part, the reasons presented. However, if this example is a good illustration of what Sarot means by the idea of being personally affected (or having an occasioned response), then it is hard to see how that idea applies to the experience of having an emotion. For in Sarot's example, the person who is the object of the attempt at persuasion is assessing the reasons presented, and *deliberating* about whether or how to *act*. And although, when we have an emotion, we assess or evaluate the particular object in a certain sort of way, there is not a process of deliberation whereby we decide whether to have the emotion or not. This is a basic difference between a response to someone's attempt to persuade us to act and our emotional 'response' to some situation that has occurred. One is an *activity* and the other is a (passive) *reaction*.⁷⁴

Sarot's example, described above, is designed to persuade us that in our interpersonal dealings with each other, each side is, to a large extent, able to control how he responds to the other. In general, this is no doubt true. However, as I have argued, this is not the case with occurrent emotions. Given our attitudes, beliefs, and desires at the time, we have little or no control with respect to emotional reactions. We cannot have

⁷³ p. 66f.

⁷⁴ Of course, I am not denying that, for example, someone could be persuaded that he has been wronged by another, and as a result feel angry. In this sort of situation, he has the choice as to whether he accepts or rejects the claim. My argument is merely that granted he perceives himself as wronged, and evaluates the wrong in the relevant emotion-inducing way, his actually having the emotion is not itself an item of choice.

emotions at will. We cannot just *choose* to have them. Nor can we choose *not* to have them. Nor can we stop them at will. Occurrent emotions are not items of choice in the way that yielding to or resisting persuasion can be items of choice. I am not denying, of course, that there can be situations in which one reacts emotionally while at the same time choosing a response. I am merely denying that my having the emotion would count as an item of choice. For example, I can respond in a number of ways to someone who makes an offensive remark to me – make a retort, walk out, throw something at him, and so on. Yet at the same time, it is likely that I feel angry as well. It is this feeling or experience of anger that, unlike my behaviour, is not an item of choice.

Sarot's portrayal of God as someone who *chooses* His emotional responses to the world springs from a commendable concern to safeguard the idea that God is sovereign in His dealings with the world. Such a God cannot be constrained or manipulated by human beings to react to them in a certain way, and this is what we would expect of a God who is the most perfect being in existence.⁷⁵ God controls, but is not Himself controlled.

Unfortunately, by conceiving of a divine emotion as something which God *chooses* to have – something which God has on purpose – Sarot makes it hard to understand how such a thing can really be an emotion. For occurrent emotions are basically passive experiences. They cannot be had at will or stopped at will. They are independent of being directly controlled by our will. If emotions are not things that happen to God but instead are things He brings about Himself, a divine emotion is a very different thing from a human emotion. A fundamental characteristic of human emotion is missing from divine emotion – namely the fact that human emotions always involve passivity in the subject.

Moreover, Sarot's talk of God being master of His emotions, or of God being 'supremely master of Himself',⁷⁶ only underlines what I perceive to be the difficulty in Sarot's position. He writes:

[I]f we hold with Bertrand Brasnett that God experiences passion [emotion], we also have to maintain with him that "this passion is always a disciplined and controlled passion. *We* may be swept away by passion in defiance, as we say, of our better judgement. Not so the Deity ... God

⁷⁵ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 40.

⁷⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 40.

is master of his passions, not his passions of him. They subserve his will, but do not coerce it.”⁷⁷

Elsewhere, Sarot refers to God as being ‘master of His own reaction’ in relation to the world.⁷⁸ However, although these remarks are meant to reassure us, the very fact – as Sarot and Brasnett would have it – that God masters or controls or disciplines His emotions suggests that divine emotions, like human emotions, are not the sort of thing which is the direct expression of a person’s will, but are instead the sort of thing which has, as it were, a life of its own, and which requires *management*. For talk of mastering, controlling, or disciplining makes sense only when it is applied to something which, if not managed, progresses or develops independently of one’s will. So although Sarot and Brasnett say that God is master of His emotions, they do not succeed in entirely removing the suggestion that divine emotions are inimical to God’s omnipotence and freedom.

⁷⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 40 – my emphasis.

⁷⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 29.

DIVINE BLESSEDNESS

In his historical survey of the doctrine of divine impassibility, J.K. Mozley informs us that one of the main reasons the ancient and medieval church rejected divine passibilism was that divine passibilism was thought to be incompatible with ‘the conviction that the life of God is a blessed life, and, as such, happy with the *perfection* of happiness’.¹ Mozley continues:

The idea that elements in the life of the world, in particular, the sufferings and the sins of men, could impair that blessedness of God, which seemed to arise out of the perfection of His own nature, would have been interpreted as allowing to the world a power to affect God’s life, wholly incompatible with the belief ... in the bliss possessed by God²

According to Mozley’s description, the blessedness of God’s life is partially constituted by the fact that God is blissful, or happy with the perfection of happiness. That is, God is blessed partly because He *subjectively* experiences perfect happiness. This is certainly what the term ‘bliss’ suggests. God’s blessedness is not merely a state of objective well-being, having all the perfections which constitute the fullness of His life. It is something He ‘feels’. It is clear that divine passibilism must conflict with this view of God’s blessedness. For if God suffers, or feels ‘negative’ emotions, how can one maintain that He *experiences* perfect happiness? Will it not be the case that His suffering or His negative emotion will detract from His subjective happiness? The answer seems to be that they must, and that therefore a passible God could not be blissful. And such a

¹ Mozley, *The Impassibility of God*, op. cit. p. 173 – my emphasis.

² Mozley, *ibid.* p. 173. This historical objection to passibilism is noted by Fiddes, op. cit. p. 47 and Wolterstorff, ‘Suffering Love’, op. cit. p. 198. The objection continues to be raised – see, for example, Creel, op. cit. p. 132ff; S. Paul Schilling (in McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, op. cit. p. 18); Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, p. 41ff; and Marshall Randles, *Blessed God: Impassibility*. London: Charles H. Kelly, 1900, p. 44.

conclusion contradicts what the Church has traditionally held to be the distinguishing feature of God's life.

My aim in this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I aim to show that the conception of divine blessedness which I have outlined above creates problems for both the passibilist and the impassibilist. I will illustrate this by expounding and assessing the views of Sarot and Creel, respectively. I will argue that Sarot's view seriously compromises the idea of divine blessedness, and that Creel's view makes God insufficiently concerned for present human welfare. Secondly, I will aim to provide a conception of God's subjective happiness which is 'non-emotional' – in a way which I will specify – such that one can escape the tension which Sarot and Creel try, unsatisfactorily, to resolve. My proposal for an alternative way of understanding the idea of divine blessedness will take as its starting point my interpretation of certain remarks which Thomas Aquinas makes regarding this matter.

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Most passibilists seem to endorse some sort of conception of God as one who is blessed. Chapter 2 of Mozley's book, *The Impassibility of God*, is replete with examples of this from books written in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

Although these writers describe God as one who suffers, and who feels negative emotions, it is clear that they nevertheless want to preserve the idea that God is blessed.

These writers use various terms to express this idea – 'joy', 'highest bliss', 'perfect bliss', 'perfect and ineffable bliss', '[being] above the conflict', 'unclouded peace and self-satisfaction', 'noble gladness', 'happiness', 'perfect felicity', 'completeness of joy', and finally, 'rapture'.³

³ Mozley, *ibid.* ch. II *passim*. Contemporary examples include Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 59ff. and Jung Young Lee, *op. cit.* p. 42f. For further references to contemporary examples, see Creel, *op. cit.* p. 132ff. and Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 100ff.

Many of these writers seem to be aware of a tension between describing God as blessed and yet also as suffering or sorrowing. They usually try to deal with it by describing God's blessedness as something which somehow swallows up or diminishes or overcomes any suffering or negative emotion which God may feel.⁴

Another way of trying to deal with the tension – one that is common today since the advent of 'process' theology – is to conceive of God as some sort of duality. On this conception, God's attributes are divided into those which constitute what God is like in Himself, considered apart from His relation with the world, and those which constitute what He is like in His dealings with creatures. According to this account, when we refer to God's blessedness, we are referring to an attribute which belongs to the first set; and when we refer to God's suffering or negative emotion, we are referring to an attribute which belongs to the second set; and it is in this way – so it is argued – that we can avoid the tension that exists when blessedness and suffering are simultaneously attributed to a 'unified' God.⁵

I have already indicated that the idea of subjective happiness is central to the discussion of passibilism and divine blessedness. This is borne out by certain explicit statements Sarot and Creel make in relation to this question.

Sarot expressly states, in connection with the idea of divine blessedness, that his analysis of the concept of happiness is not meant to be complete.⁶ What is of interest to him is 'the fact that one's emotions and feelings partly determine how happy one is'.⁷ This fact is of obvious relevance to the question of divine passibilism, concerned as it is with the possibility of God being able to have emotions, and being able to suffer.

Likewise, Creel focuses on that element in happiness that may be described as '*satisfaction* with one's self and one's circumstances'.⁸

⁴ Mozley, *ibid.* pp. 137, 142, 146, 155, 156. For references to contemporary examples of this way of handling the tension, see Creel, *op. cit.* p. 132ff.; Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 100ff.; and McWilliams, *op. cit.* p. 144f.

⁵ For a 'pre-process' use of this approach, see Mozley, *ibid.* p. 140. For accounts of contemporary use, see McWilliams, *op. cit.* p. 126f. and Fiddes, *op. cit.* ch. 5. Although Fiddes is very sympathetic towards process theology, he is critical of the duality view – see p. 45.

⁶ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 59.

⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 59.

⁸ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 164 – my emphasis.

Neither Sarot nor Creel would deny that a complete analysis of the concept of happiness would include the idea of *eudaemonia*. Generally, God's life is thought to be a blessed or happy one not only because He is pleased with it, takes joy and delight in it, but also because He is *truly* fortunate or *truly* well-off or possessed of *true* well-being.⁹ Since God is perfect in every way and does not want for anything, God can be said to be perfectly happy not only subjectively but also *objectively*. Both Sarot and Creel implicitly recognize this objective sense of divine happiness. Sarot affirms that 'God, being perfect, indeed has *every reason* to feel satisfied with Himself'.¹⁰ Likewise, Creel says that 'God ... *should* be perfectly happy with himself'.¹¹ Both statements imply that God is possessed of true well-being, and that the appropriate response to this on God's part is to be pleased about it, that is, to be subjectively happy.

The tension that exists between divine passibilism and the idea of divine blessedness is a tension between divine passibilism and God's blessedness understood in its subjective sense. It is this tension that the passibilist must somehow resolve.

Creel maintains that it is a tension which cannot be resolved, and that in fact talk of a suffering yet perfectly happy being is self-contradictory.¹²

Here are two examples of the kind of thing Creel is criticizing. The first is a statement by H.P. Owen, the second a statement by Eric Mascall. Owen writes: 'Any suffering that God endures through his love for his creatures is immediately transfigured by the joy that is necessarily his within his uncreated Godhead'.¹³ And Mascall writes: 'He sympathizes with our sorrows ... but even this is infinitely surpassed by the beatitude which God enjoys in the interior fullness of his own divine life'.¹⁴

According to these statements, God's blessedness and His suffering do not co-exist as two more or less equally imposing items in the divine 'consciousness'. On the contrary, God's blessedness is described as so imposing that His suffering has no impact

⁹ These phrases are used by Elizabeth Telfer to describe *eudaemonia*, with my emphases. See Elizabeth Telfer, *Happiness*. London: Macmillan, 1980, p. 37.

¹⁰ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 61 – my emphasis.

¹¹ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 65 – my emphasis.

¹² Creel, *ibid.* p. 134.

¹³ Quoted in Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 101.

¹⁴ Quoted in Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 101.

on Him at all. As Fiddes rightly observes, ‘we must doubt whether this kind of continuous transfiguration of suffering can in fact be called suffering. Can there be suffering which does not disturb equanimity?’¹⁵ Creel is more forthright. Statements like those of Owen and Mascall ‘seem like double-talk whereby it is said that, though God suffers, he does not suffer – that the suffering is there but is drowned out, overwhelmed, transformed ... However, suffering that is not felt does not exist. Suffering exists only as experienced’.¹⁶ The idea that suffering exists only as experienced is one that I discussed in chapter 2, where I examined the logical relation between divine omnipotence and divine suffering.

Creel is clear that divine blessedness and divine suffering are conceptually irreconcilable. Fiddes is more sanguine. Although he fully accepts that ‘[a] suffering God must be a disturbed God’,¹⁷ he thinks that there is a sense in which we can legitimately say that God is both blessed and suffering. He writes: ‘[W]e can think of God’s victory over suffering in two ways – as his certainty of final victory, and as his choosing of it for himself’.¹⁸ According to Fiddes, what constitutes God’s blessedness for the duration of His suffering is the fact that God has this certainty. This certainty ‘is not prediction, but confident hope ... [and t]he strength of this hope amount[s] to beatitude in God ...’.¹⁹

Fiddes, however, has not resolved the difficulty. Firstly, victory over suffering is not what the issue is here. The issue is whether divine blessedness and suffering can be reconciled, and being victorious over suffering is not the same thing as being blessed in the midst of suffering. Secondly, hope, however strong, is not the same thing as beatitude, and is certainly not what is usually meant when the term ‘divine blessedness’ or ‘divine happiness’ is used. Thirdly, as I argued in chapter 2,²⁰ suffering which is chosen is still nevertheless suffering, and although such suffering may not be as bad as suffering which

¹⁵ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 101.

¹⁶ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 134.

¹⁷ Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 102.

¹⁸ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 102.

¹⁹ Fiddes, *ibid.* p. 103.

²⁰ p. 37f.

is imposed on the sufferer, it is not clear how it can be logically reconciled with the idea of divine blessedness.

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Sarot steers a middle course between Creel's rejection of divine passibilism and Fiddes' radical reinterpretation of the idea of God's blessedness. Although Sarot is committed to the passibilist view, his aim is to preserve, as far as possible, the idea that God is blessed. This is in line with Sarot's perfect-being methodology, which involves attributing to God every great-making quality, and maximizing it as far as is possible. In accordance with this procedure, Sarot declares that '[a] perfect God must be happy';²¹ for if God were not happy, He would be lacking something good, and would therefore fall short of a great-making quality.

However, it is important to understand that, although, according to Sarot, a perfect God must be happy, God's happiness is not itself perfect. For Sarot points out that one must also take into account the fact that God cares about, and is dissatisfied with, the evil and suffering that are in the world. It is right that God should be satisfied with the quality of His own life, but as Sarot sees things, it would be wrong to say that God is satisfied with or happy about the situation His human creatures are in. And moreover, this concern for and dissatisfaction with His creatures' situation is itself a good in God – a good which would be lacking in Him if one were to deny that He cares and is dissatisfied.²² So the good that is God's concern for and dissatisfaction with the world's situation must conceptually be set against the good that is His happiness. Consequently, we must not conceive of God's blessedness, in its subjective aspect, as *perfect* happiness, for necessarily, God's feeling of dissatisfaction about the world is a bar to such perfection. Sarot writes:

²¹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 61.

²² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 61.

The fact that one's emotions and feelings partly determine how happy one is, has as a consequence that the feelings and emotions of a blissful being should be constantly and immutably as pleasant as can be imagined. If they [were] not ... a fuller form of happiness could be conceived. It is here that a conflict arises between divine passibility and divine blissfulness, because the form of passibility that is required by the arguments for divine passibility implies that God is intensively mutable with regard to His feelings ... and thus that He cannot be blissful.²³

Sarot explains that by 'blissfulness' he means

"the fullest happiness that is imaginable." This fullest happiness cannot be intensively mutable, that is to say it cannot grow or lessen. If it could grow, it would not be blissfulness in the first place and if it could lessen, a fuller form of happiness could be conceived: happiness that lasted.²⁴

However, Sarot formally defines 'passibility' as 'mutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life'.²⁵ If God's feelings are able to change or be changed, God cannot be blissful in the way Sarot says blissfulness should be understood, for understood in this way, blissfulness implies *immutability* with regard to feelings. Therefore, says Sarot, although we must hold that a perfect God is happy, we must nevertheless reject the idea that God is *perfectly* and *immutably* happy – that is, blissful.

Later in this chapter, I will argue that God's subjective happiness should not be understood as something which is 'emotional' – as God's having emotions such as joy and delight. The basis for my argument will be similar to the one Sarot uses in arguing against the idea that God is blissful. For although it is not presented in quite this way, Sarot's point in arguing against the idea that God is blissful may be taken as this: in giving an account of divine blessedness, one may not simply ignore the fact that God cares about the suffering and sinful people who constitute His 'circumstances'. Even if one does not hold Sarot's view that God is emotionally passible in response to these circumstances, it is reasonable to expect any account of divine blessedness to reckon with the idea that God is aware of the evil and suffering in the world and that it matters to Him

²³ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 59f.

²⁴ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 59.

²⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 30.

that things are not right. I will argue that one cannot fulfil this requirement unless one ceases to think of God's blessedness, in its subjective aspect, as in some way emotional. Towards the end of this chapter I will offer a suggestion as to how one might conceive of that blessedness in a non-emotional way.

Having argued that there is an irreconcilable conceptual conflict between divine blissfulness and divine passibility, Sarot says we have to choose between 'the conception of a passible, and therefore not blissful being, or the conception of a blissful, and therefore impassible being'.²⁶ Granted that, on other grounds, divine passibility is an option, which conception should we choose?

In line with Sarot's declared methodological approach to the question of divine passibility, the answer is to be determined by considering 'which conception is most worthy of God'.²⁷ Which is it better for God to be: passible but not blissful, or blissful but not passible?

In order to settle this matter, he uses an analogy. He appeals to a notion of what a morally mature human being is like. According to William Spohn,

[w]e expect a mature moral agent to experience strong emotional reactions when deeply held values are threatened or violated. It would be aberrant to know the principle of justice with great clarity and yet remain unmoved in the face of human rights violations.²⁸

Sarot uses these remarks to argue that a God who is conceived as passible but not blissful is superior to a God who is conceived as blissful but not passible. He writes:

Now when we, human beings, are more perfect when our feelings can undergo the influence of suffering and moral evil in the world, why would this not also be true for God? What makes blissfulness so admirable that we should prefer the conception of a blissful God above that of a God who responds in an adequate fashion to events in the world?²⁹

²⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 61.

²⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 61.

²⁸ Quoted in Sarot, *ibid.* p. 61.

²⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 61.

I have two objections to this argument. Firstly, in Spohn's depiction of what he calls a mature moral agent, he seems to assume that the only way a moral agent can respond adequately to an injustice is to have a strong emotional reaction to it. However, this is questionable.

For example, a person may not have a strong emotional reaction to the killing of children by a terrorist bomb, but may nevertheless feel sad or concerned that these children have become the victims of political or religious extremists. The indignation that is often expressed in these circumstances, when it is not political posturing, is frequently the result of naivety, and therefore of surprise that anyone could do such a thing. It may be born of a failure to understand what motivates a terrorist. There may be a failure to appreciate the 'emotional distance' a terrorist can put between himself and his targets, especially if he thinks his cause is just or has divine sanction. A person who does appreciate these things might not therefore have a strong emotional reaction to the killing, but he may nevertheless be moved by the evil of it.

Spohn quite reasonably thinks that there must be something wrong when one's knowledge of what is good and true does not inform one's responses to evil. However, what is of importance here is that, knowing what is good and true, we not be indifferent to situations in which goodness and truth are harmed. In these situations, it is indifference that is morally reprehensible, not the lack of emotion. The absence of strong emotion does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of moral sensitivity.

Secondly, there are problems with Sarot's use of the implied comparison that Spohn makes between a mature moral agent and an agent who is not morally mature. The comparison that serves as the basis for the analogy differs in an important respect from the comparison that is being made between the two conceptions of God.

For it is clear from Spohn's remarks that he is comparing *passible* moral agents, for otherwise there would be no point in talking about expected emotional reactions. Spohn's implied contrast between the mature and the non-mature is not meant to suggest that *passible* moral agents are morally more perfect than *impassible* moral agents. For he is



not talking about the *natures* of the moral agents – their capacities in a metaphysical sense – but their *moral* capabilities. Their passibility is taken for granted.

If Spohn is assuming that both types of moral agent are passible, there is no basis in Spohn's comparison for Sarot's argument that an impassible and blissful God is morally inferior to, or less perfect than, a passible and not blissful God. For a comparison between two people in terms of the adequacy of their respective emotional reactions cannot be appropriate as a moral assessment if one of the persons in question is *by nature* incapable of an emotional response.

As I said earlier, Sarot defines 'blissfulness' as the fullest happiness imaginable, happiness that is immutably perfect. By definition, it is not something that admits of degrees. One is either blissful or not blissful. One cannot be slightly blissful, fairly blissful, or very blissful, for each of these descriptions implies that the happiness which is blissfulness can be less than immutably perfect, which by definition it cannot.

Happiness, however, does admit of degrees. If it makes sense to say that one's happiness is perfect, it makes sense to say that it can be less than perfect. For in saying that it is perfect, one is saying that it is present in the highest degree, which in turn implies that lower degrees of happiness are conceivable. And indeed, it makes sense to say that someone is very happy, fairly happy, or happier than Tom. This is why the idea of happiness, unlike that of blissfulness, need not necessarily imply the complete absence of suffering or negative emotion.

The idea of non-blissful happiness is useful to the passibilist. For while there is clearly a conflict involved when one attributes to God a simultaneous blissfulness and suffering, the conceptual prospects for eliminating that conflict when one attributes non-blissful happiness to God seem better.

In support of his view that God should be conceived as very (but non-blissfully) happy, and at the same time, passible, Sarot observes that it is 'a fact of common human experience that we can have negative experiences and still be happy, as long as the things that are most important for our happiness last'.³⁰ He gives examples to show that people

³⁰ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 63.

can still be very happy even if they feel negative emotions, or physical or mental pain, provided that these experiences are outweighed by the presence in their lives of sources of happiness.³¹ For example, if we derive much of our happiness from family life or from our work, then things which make us grieve, or which cause us some other kind of pain, can more easily be borne, and will not destroy our happiness.

Although Sarot is no doubt right about the sustaining effect of lasting sources of happiness, has he really addressed the issue?

What Sarot is supposed to be showing is that the subjective aspect of God's happiness is not substantially perturbed by God's having certain emotional reactions to the evil and suffering that are in the world. Sarot refers to that aspect when he says that 'one's emotions and feelings partly determine how happy one is'.³² He wants to show that although a passible God's emotions and feelings cannot be as 'constantly and immutably pleasant as can be imagined',³³ that is, blissful, God can still be 'happy to a very great extent'.³⁴ And in the present context, the idea that God is happy to a very great extent is the idea that He has these very pleasant emotions, albeit not quite to the degree that a blissful God would have them. Yet when it comes to trying to show how one may conceive of a passible God who is also subjectively happy, Sarot moves away from the idea of God's *subjective* happiness. Instead of talking about subjective happiness, he talks about the '*sources* of happiness,' 'the *resources* of happiness,' the things from which happiness is *derived*, and 'the things that are most important *for* ... happiness'.³⁵ As I explained earlier,³⁶ if one has certain goods, one can be said to be objectively happy. These goods might be said to be sources of happiness, or important for happiness, but they themselves do not constitute the possessor's *subjective* happiness. And one may possess these things, and yet still be subjectively unhappy because of certain circumstances. Having sources of happiness or the things that are most important for

³¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 63.

³² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 59.

³³ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 59.

³⁴ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 65.

³⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 63, 65 – my emphasis.

³⁶ p. 90.

happiness is not the same thing as being subjectively happy, and in God's case, it is the latter attribute which Sarot must show that a passible God has.

Although, according to Sarot, a passible God cannot be blissful, such a God can be happy to a very great extent – in fact, so much so, that He can even be said to be *perfectly* happy or *infinitely* happy.³⁷ There is, perhaps, an element of hyperbole here. For Sarot shares the view of Bertrand Brasnett, who affirms God's 'perfect' happiness while claiming that that happiness 'is a fluctuating quantity varying with the sinfulness of men ...'.³⁸ Again, although Sarot claims that a passible God 'remains the happiest Being in existence',³⁹ God's happiness is now less than the happiness He had before He created the world. For God, 'who prior to His creation was perfectly happy without being in any way dependent upon anything or anyone else, makes His own happiness partly dependent upon humanity'.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, although these statements indicate that the extent to which God is happy can change, the fact remains that for Sarot God is always more or less very happy, and He is never *less* than happy.

In contrast to this description of a subjectively very happy God is Sarot's description of a God who has strong emotional reactions to the world's evil and suffering. For example, when human beings reject God's love, 'the consequence for God is ... pain ... suffering ... grief. Though He remains the happiest Being in existence – this is guaranteed by His internal resources of happiness – His happiness will now be mixed with severe grief ... the grief of a rejected lover'.⁴¹ The emotion being referred to here is not something which is merely uncomfortable or unpleasant: it is something which involves acute mental pain.

In addition to the severity of this reaction, there is its frequency. For human beings continually resist God's love. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that 'the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For

³⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 62, 65 – my emphases.

³⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 62.

³⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

⁴⁰ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

⁴¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it'.⁴² According to this statement, those who resist God's love greatly outnumber those who do not. Thus, God is subject to what Terence Fretheim calls a 'barrage of rejection'.⁴³ Moreover, 'given God's decision to bear with the creation in all of its wickedness, this means for God a continuing grieving of the heart'.⁴⁴

Sarot does not succeed in resolving the conceptual conflict between the blessedness of God and His passibility. At the heart of his conception of God there remains the tension between a God who is described as someone who is subjectively happy, and a God who also grieves over the obduracy of humankind. The idea of being subjectively happy, as Sarot conceives of it, implies that the happy person feels certain emotions – for example, joy. Yet the idea of grieving implies the very absence of joy. And since there is always cause for God to grieve, it is hard to see how He can ever be happy.

Sarot claims that 'a finite creation can never evoke so many negative experiences in God that these cannot be overwhelmed by the infinite happiness God derives from the ... sources of happiness accessible to Him'.⁴⁵ In saying this, has Sarot improved on Owen and Mascall, referred to earlier?⁴⁶ Has he avoided Creel's charge of 'double-talk whereby it is said that, though God suffers, he does not suffer – that the suffering is there but is drowned out, overwhelmed, transformed ...'?⁴⁷ Sarot specifically refers to Creel's charge, and claims to refute it with the argument I have been expounding.⁴⁸ In my judgement, he does not succeed in doing so.

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The idea that God is *blissfully* happy is, for Creel, a theological datum, and it is one with which ideas about God's loving relation to human beings must be made to fit.

⁴² Matthew 7:13–14.

⁴³ Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, op. cit. p. 111.

⁴⁴ Fretheim, *ibid.* p. 112.

⁴⁵ Sarot, op. cit. p. 65.

⁴⁶ p. 90.

⁴⁷ Creel, op. cit. p. 134.

⁴⁸ Sarot, op. cit. p. 62f.

Creel refers to ‘a being that is by nature perfectly happy’, and whose happiness ‘could neither wax nor wane’.⁴⁹ What subjective content, if any, can be found in Creel’s conception of divine blessedness?

In Creel’s historical survey of how the term ‘impassible’ was used by the early church, one use he notes has the meaning “‘being in a state of mind that is entirely unperturbable and motionless”, whatever that state of mind might be, whether it involves emotion or does not’.⁵⁰ Whatever else the imperturbability of the divine mind might involve, Creel is certainly of the opinion that it involves an imperturbability of divine emotions. This is evident in Creel’s response to an argument for God’s ‘emotional’ passibility put forward by Charles Hartshorne.

Hartshorne claims that ‘God must have a system of emotions, including suffering, if he is a person’.⁵¹ In justifying the inclusion of suffering in that system, Hartshorne appeals to the idea that personhood involves an ability ‘to share the sorrows as well as the joys of others. Sympathetic suffering is no mere stepping stone [to maturity?]; it is an element in the highest achievement or form of personality’.⁵² Since God is a person – so Hartshorne’s argument goes – and since, as God, He must exemplify the highest achievement of personality, sympathetic suffering must be an element in His personhood. Therefore, He must be passible.

To this, Creel replies: ‘I would agree that a person *must* have some feeling for things, *an emotional life*, as it were. But I do not understand why this dimension to personal life must be subject to *alteration* by changing circumstances’.⁵³ He then illustrates his point. He invites us to ‘imagine an individual who has the gifts of awareness, abstract understanding, will, and feeling, who works diligently and intelligently against poverty, injustice, and loneliness in his society, yet who is *equally*

⁴⁹ Creel, op. cit. p. 164.

⁵⁰ Creel, *ibid.* p. 3.

⁵¹ Quoted in Creel, *ibid.* p. 116. Since I am here concerned with Creel’s views and not Hartshorne’s, I will not challenge the implication that suffering is an emotion. As I argued in my introduction (p. 3ff.), certain strong, negative emotions involve suffering (mental pain), but suffering itself is not an emotion.

⁵² Quoted in Creel, *ibid.* p. 116.

⁵³ Creel, *ibid.* p. 116f. – my emphases.

happy no matter whether he meets success or defeat'.⁵⁴ Likewise, the Stoics 'were not trying to cease to be persons by nursing the virtue of *apatheia*. They were trying to become persons with a proper attitude to the vicissitudes of life'.⁵⁵

The central thought in these passages is the idea that changing circumstances do not disturb the mature person's evenness of temper. It is not that such a person lacks an emotional life, but rather that the mature person's emotional life remains unperturbed. In replying to Hartshorne, Creel does not question Hartshorne's assumption that God is a person, and that being a person He must have a system of emotions. Indeed, Creel expresses his agreement.⁵⁶ What Creel objects to is the idea that, necessarily, mature personhood involves the person's emotional life being perturbed. Hence, when Creel concludes that we should think of God as emotionally impassible, it is clear that he means that we should think of God as having emotions which cannot be perturbed by what goes on in His world.

If God has emotions which are imperturbable – as Creel thinks – what sort of emotions does Creel think God has? As I have said, Creel conceives of God as 'by nature perfectly happy', so it is reasonable to assume that Creel thinks God feels joy and delight, and that it is these emotions in God which are imperturbable.

This exposition of Creel's view is corroborated by some of the examples Creel gives in defending the coherence of the idea that people can be emotionally imperturbable in the face of extremely difficult circumstances.

For example, Creel imagines a parent suffering miserably with a child who has some painful and apparently incurable disease, and later rejoicing that a new-found cure is being implemented, although its implementation causes more suffering for the child.⁵⁷ The point of the example is to show that there is no necessary incoherence involved in describing a loving person as *joyful* – and unperturbed in that joy – even though someone he or she loves is suffering. In certain circumstances, says Creel, this is conceivable.

⁵⁴ Creel, *ibid.* p. 117 – my emphasis.

⁵⁵ Creel, *ibid.* p. 117.

⁵⁶ Creel, *ibid.* p. 117.

⁵⁷ Creel, *ibid.* p. 119.

Similarly, Creel refers to the case of Helen Keller, who early in life became blind, deaf, and dumb. He describes her faith that death would not be the end of her own personal existence, nor that of those she loved. With that sort of belief, says Creel, ‘we should resist the grief and sadness that [friends’] deaths tend to trigger’, and instead ‘cultivate *joyful* confidence that our deceased friends have gone on to a more wonderful world than this one and that we shall meet them there some day’.⁵⁸ Again, Creel’s point is that we can conceive of situations in which the ‘bad’ things in life need not disturb one’s joyful equanimity.

These examples are part of Creel’s argument that the divine mind is not perturbed by human suffering. The argument seems to be that if *we* can be joyful when someone we love suffers or dies, then so can God. Like us, God can avoid sorrow and grief by looking to a future gain. There is a strong indication, then, that God’s emotional life is one of joy, although nowhere does Creel actually say so.

Creel sees no conflict between this conception of divine blessedness and the idea that God cares deeply about human welfare. However, in some of his arguments, Creel seems to me to be attributing to God an unduly detached attitude to human welfare. God’s knowledge of human evil and suffering seems disconnected from His blissfulness, and therefore does not seem to be something which would diminish His positive emotions.

For example, Creel discusses the argument that, even if the losses of the redeemed are eventually made good, there are those who reject Him, and in the case of those who reject Him, their losses will *not* be made good. If God really loves us – so the argument goes – He will be pained if we reject Him, and He will suffer if we are finally damned.⁵⁹

In reply to this argument, Creel writes:

God shows his love for us by creating us and by providing us with the dignity of making our own choices for or against his kingdom. If we choose against his kingdom, he will not be distraught. His fundamental will for us

⁵⁸ Creel, *ibid.* p. 120 – my emphasis.

⁵⁹ Creel, *ibid.* p. 141.

is not that we choose his kingdom but that we choose between his kingdom and its alternative.⁶⁰

According to this view, God created human beings primarily that they might have the *opportunity* to exercise a choice between accepting or rejecting His kingdom. God's will is merely that they choose one way or the other, not that they should gain the happiness which is to be obtained by making the right choice. From this it follows that if I choose to reject God and His kingdom, I will be fulfilling my God-given purpose in life simply in virtue of the fact that I have exercised my choice in this matter. Since those who reject God do so in accordance with His will – as objectionable as it may seem to say that – God's bliss is undisturbed.⁶¹

Creel's view that God is concerned that I have *freedom* to choose for or against His kingdom, and not that I make the *right* choice, is a view which certain New Testament writers do not share. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:4 Paul declares that God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'. And likewise, the author of 2 Peter 3:9 declares that God does not want 'any to perish, but [wants] all to come to repentance'. If God's 'fundamental will' is in fact that we be saved, as these passages make clear, then it cannot be a matter of indifference to God whether we choose His kingdom or not. Moreover, a further objection to Creel's view is that a God who is indifferent about which choice we make is not loving. Creel might make more plausible the idea that God's perfect happiness is unaffected by our choices, but he does so at a price. As Jerry Walls points out,

[Creel's] claim that God created us for freedom rather than for himself raises questions as to whether God really loves us. It is essential to traditional Christian belief that those who accept God's kingdom will be much happier than those who do not. So if God has no real preference whether or not we accept his kingdom, it seems he does not care whether or not we are really happy. And if God does not care about our happiness, he does not really love us, in which case he is not perfectly good.⁶²

⁶⁰ Creel, *ibid.* p. 141.

⁶¹ Creel, *ibid.* p. 144.

⁶² Jerry L. Wallis, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, p. 107f.

As I will explain in a later chapter,⁶³ part of how we should conceive of God's love for us is contained in the idea of benevolence. Benevolence is willing good for another solely for the sake of that other, and insofar as God loves us with benevolent love, He wills for us all that is good. And the primary good that He wills for us is union with Himself, and a necessary condition for such a union is that we freely choose to enter into it. Therefore, necessarily, part of what God wills for us is that we choose freely to enter into that union. If, as Creel maintains, God were indifferent about which choice we make, God could not properly be said to will our union with Him, for the idea of willing that union implies willing the necessary means of achieving it – our choosing it – and this effectively is what Creel denies God does. If God does not will our union with Him, a union that is our highest good, God's benevolence towards us is deficient.

Another example of the way Creel represents God's blissfulness as detached from human affairs is by emphasizing what may be called God's 'long view' of those affairs. Creel's God is always looking to the future with the knowledge that all will be well. Everything will turn out right eventually, and so God does not need to be disturbed by the present state of affairs. Creel writes:

We cannot ... rule out the possibility that God knows something about our destiny that renders it unnecessary and inappropriate for him to be disturbed by our suffering in this life. Moreover, it seems to me that he does have such knowledge if he knows that in order to enable us to choose freely for or against his kingdom he had to submit us to such risks of involuntary, even unfair suffering as we do in fact run ... and that those who do choose his kingdom will freely conclude that the joy of the end more than makes up for the suffering of the means.⁶⁴

In saying that such knowledge renders it unnecessary and inappropriate for God to be disturbed, Creel means that God does not have any good reasons for being disturbed. Certainly, God does not have any good reasons for being disturbed by human suffering, in the sense of being worried or disquieted by it. For God is in perfect control of the

⁶³ Ch. 6.

⁶⁴ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 121.

world, and the idea that He is worried or disquieted by human suffering implies that He is *not* in perfect control. However, if the sort of disturbance Creel is talking about is the interruption or modification of God's subjective happiness, it is not so clear that there are no good reasons for God to be disturbed. For even though God is in perfect control of all human situations, and moreover is in a position to set all present misery in the context of future well-being, the idea that God loves us suggests that He is concerned for our present welfare as well, and that this concern would affect His subjective happiness. Certainly, God's knowledge of how things will turn out might mitigate the impact of His concern on His subjective happiness. God's long view of the present situation might well serve as a control, limiting the extent to which He is unhappy about the way things are. But to say, as Creel does, that for God there would be no impact at all is to suggest a certain heartlessness in the perfectly happy God Creel conceives of. It suggests that God simply ignores present human misery, and instead looks to a better end for us.

In support of my claim that if we love someone, we are concerned about his present welfare as well as his future, take the experience of being a parent. Sometimes one makes one's children suffer so that they will learn to behave in a way that will contribute to their well-being in later life. Those who love their children sometimes find the task of disciplining their children an unpleasant one, and at these times they find it unpleasant because they are aware of the distress they are inflicting on their children. Parents can mitigate the unpleasantness they feel by thinking about the future benefit, but they will not be able to look on their children's distress with complete equanimity.

Similar considerations apply to Creel's example of the new-found cure. In this example, the parent is conceived as imperturbably joyful, despite the fact that the implementation of the cure of her diseased child causes the child greater suffering than the disease does. Whether Creel's description of such a situation is convincing or not depends on a number of factors, including the severity of the suffering caused by the implementation of the cure, the age of the child, and whether the parent is an agent in implementing the cure. For if the suffering were severe, the child too young to understand the situation, and the parent directly involved in implementing the cure, it would be

difficult to see how the parent could look on with equanimity. The distress of someone whom one loves is difficult to cope with at the best of times, but if in addition to that the person does not understand what is going on, and moreover believes that the cause of his suffering is oneself (oneself being possibly, therefore, a hate-figure), the idea that one could be imperturbably joyful in these circumstances seems extremely unlikely. I mention this possible situation because there are aspects of it which represent how it is with God and human suffering. Much human suffering is very severe, we cannot claim to know what God's purposes are in permitting it, and sometimes – at least, in the case of believers – God seems to be the agent of our suffering, to the extent that we form a 'conviction that God has become a personal enemy'.⁶⁵ These considerations, I submit, make less plausible the idea that God would regard all this with an unperturbed emotion of joy and delight.

As I have already said, the result of thinking of God as taking a determinedly forward-looking view of human affairs is that it then becomes difficult to think of God as being concerned about our present welfare. The fact that Creel is so concerned to emphasize the idea that God takes a long view of human affairs suggests that God's joy might easily be perturbed were He to dwell upon human suffering. On this view, God's joy is actually quite a vulnerable thing. What is needed is something more robust, something that is more deeply rooted in God's inner sources of happiness, something that is not so easily affected by how God thinks about the world.

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Having examined the idea that God's subjective happiness consists in an enduring emotion of joy, whether to some extent that emotion is subject to perturbation (Sarot's view) or not (Creel's view), I turn now to the idea that God's subjective happiness is entirely lacking in emotion. I will try to show that it is possible to make sense of this idea, and that on this conception of God's subjective happiness, one can affirm God's enduring

⁶⁵ James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, p. ix.

and imperturbable joy without sacrificing the idea that God cares deeply about present human welfare.

What content can be given to the idea that God is imperturbably joyful and yet lacks any emotion? Can any sense be made of this idea? Certain remarks in Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One* suggest an answer to these questions.⁶⁶ Aquinas writes:

[1] There are certain passions which, though they do not befit God as passions, do not signify anything by the nature of their species that is repugnant to the divine perfection.

[2] Among these passions are *joy* and *delight*. Delight is of a present good. Neither, therefore, by reason of its object, which is a good, nor by reason of its disposition towards its object, which is possessed in act, is joy, according to the nature of its species, repugnant to the divine perfection.

[3] From this it is manifest that joy or delight is properly in God. For just as the apprehended good and evil are the object of the sensible appetite, so, too, are they of intellectual appetite. It belongs to both to seek good and avoid evil, whether truly or by estimation. There is the difference that the object of intellectual appetite is more common than that of the sensitive appetite, because intellectual appetite has reference to good and evil absolutely, whereas sensitive appetite has reference to good and evil according to the sense. So, too, the object of the intellect is more common than that of the sense. But the operations of appetite derive their species from their objects. Hence, there are found in intellectual appetite, which is the will, operations that in the nature of their species are similar to the operations of the sensitive appetite, differing in that in the sensitive appetite there are passions because of its union to a bodily organ, whereas in the intellectual appetite there are simple operations; for just as through the passion of fear, which resides in the sensitive appetite, someone flees a future evil, so without passion the intellectual appetite does the same thing. Since, then, joy and delight are not repugnant to God according to their species, but only in so far as they are passions, and since they are found in the will according to their species but not as passions, it remains that they are not lacking even to the divine will.

[4] Again, joy and delight are a certain resting of the will in its object. But God, Who is His own principal object willed, is supremely at rest in Himself, as containing all abundance in Himself. God, therefore, through His will supremely rejoices in Himself.

⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book One: God*. Trans. A. C. Pegis. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, ch. 90, 1–4 – emphasis original.

Aquinas begins by saying that there is a sense in which certain types of emotion can properly be attributed to God. This is especially the case with joy and delight. For the idea that someone feels joy and delight logically presupposes that the person in question regards himself as possessing a good. If he does not regard himself in this way, he cannot properly be said to have those emotions. Recognition of this fact indicates that the person whom we describe as joyful or delighted has something in common with God. For when we conceive of God, we conceive of Him as making a similar evaluation with respect to Himself. For God possesses every good – indeed, He is the very source of all goodness. And because He is omniscient, He knows Himself perfectly, and therefore knows that He possesses every good. Given this similarity between those whom we describe as joyful and delighted, and God, it is to this extent fitting that joy and delight should be attributed to God.

However, says Aquinas, when we say that there is joy and delight in God, we cannot use these terms in exactly the same way in which we use them when describing human emotions. For according to Aquinas, part of what it means to have an emotion is to undergo a physiological change.⁶⁷ However, since God is incorporeal, He cannot undergo such a change. So if we are to ascribe joy and delight to God, it can only be in a sense which is *related* to the use of those terms in a human context, but not identical.

There is a further idea in this passage that is of relevance to the conception of God's subjective happiness which I wish to develop. It is the idea that joy and delight are a certain resting of the will in its object. One no longer seeks what one is joyful about or delighted in but instead *rests* in the enjoyment of it. When I am joyful or delighted about something, I am not merely acknowledging or recognizing that I possess a good. In addition, I have a sense of contentment, or security; there is an absence of striving. Such is the degree to which God is possessed of good, and knows it, that Aquinas describes God as being supremely at rest in Himself. God is free of desire as it concerns his own well-being. He does not have to seek what is good because He contains all abundance in Himself.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *ibid.* 89, 3.

In paragraph 3 of the passage I quoted above, Aquinas distinguishes between appetite that is sensory and appetite that is of the intellect. According to Aquinas, sensory appetite is a component in emotion. Aquinas uses this distinction between the two types of appetite with the aim of showing that there is something in the intellect that is a counterpart to the appetitive element in joy and delight considered as emotions.

Aquinas has already said that it is in a certain sense appropriate to attribute joy and delight to God, but he wants to avoid the physiological implications that attributing them to God as emotions would involve. Hence, it is necessary to show that there is a purely intellectual sense in which joy and delight can be attributed to God.

The connection which Aquinas makes between emotion and sensory appetite is basic to his theory of emotion. According to William Lyons, the emphasis in Aquinas's account is on the desire component in emotion rather than on the cognitive or evaluative component. Further, desire, in this context, is to be understood largely in physical and sensory terms – there is little or nothing of the intellect about it.⁶⁸ In Aquinas's view, emotions are largely unmediated responses to concrete particular things, things which are perceived in a sensory way through bodily organs. The sensory appetite which emotions involve is to be distinguished from appetite which is of the intellect, and which has as its objects things which are abstract, long-term, and general. Whereas sensory appetite is the desire for some particular cake, or drink, or house, or human being, intellectual appetite is the desire for things like knowledge, or wealth, or the good life.⁶⁹

According to the above account, Aquinas's view of emotions neglects to consider the evaluational component in emotion. This, in the present context, is a matter of concern. For earlier, I took Aquinas to be using this idea of evaluation to show that there was a sense in which it is fitting to ascribe joy and delight to God. Is his view of emotions in fact devoid of such an idea? I do not think that this is the case.

⁶⁸ Lyons, *Emotion*, op. cit. p. 35ff.

⁶⁹ For an exposition of these ideas, see Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind*. London: Routledge, 1993, ch. 5. See also Sarot, op. cit. p. 109f.

Firstly, I think it is a matter of emphasis, as Lyons himself implies.⁷⁰ Lyons qualifies his account, allowing that Aquinas's description of certain types of emotion has 'cognitive overtones'.⁷¹ Moreover, despite emphasizing the impulsive and desiring elements in Aquinas's theory, Lyons still classifies the theory as a cognitive one, implying that the component of evaluation is still important.

Secondly, Aquinas himself, in paragraph 3, says that it belongs to both types of appetite 'to seek good and avoid evil, whether truly or by estimation'. Clearly, there is an element of judgement involved, for what seems good may not be, and what seems evil may not be. Insofar as emotions involve sensory appetite, the implication is that they involve judgement or evaluation as well.

There is not space here to expound and critically examine the details of Aquinas's theory of emotion or his philosophy of mind, nor is it necessary for me to do so. The important point is the distinction Aquinas makes between joy and delight as emotions, and joy and delight as a resting of the will. It is the latter idea that I will now discuss.

Since God is incorporeal, and sensory appetite can properly be ascribed only to corporeal beings, it is clear that God cannot have sensory appetites. It follows from this that, on Aquinas's account of emotion, God cannot have emotions, for necessarily, sensory appetite is a component in emotion.

Nevertheless, Aquinas implies, there is in God an appetite that is of the intellect, otherwise known as God's will. For the idea of mind implies an ability to will things, and since God is a mind, He has the ability to will things. There is, therefore, something in God which is similar to what is satisfied in human beings when they feel emotions of joy and delight. Since God possesses every good perfectly, His will, as it concerns His own well-being, is perfectly fulfilled in Himself. According to Aquinas's conception of God, God's willing, as it concerns His own well-being, is not a seeking for the good, for if it were, there would be potentiality in God, and Aquinas denies that there can be.⁷² Rather, we are to think of God's will as resting in what He always possesses. The idea that God's

⁷⁰ Lyons, op. cit p. 35.

⁷¹ Lyons, *ibid.* p. 36.

⁷² *Summa Theologiae* 1a 3, 1.

will is at rest is, for Aquinas, equivalent to the satisfaction that is implied when human beings feel emotions of joy and delight. When Aquinas, at the end of the long passage quoted earlier, says that God through His will supremely rejoices in Himself, he suggests that we are to understand God's 'rejoicing' as precisely this resting of God's will in what He always possesses.

Aquinas is using the – for his purposes – limited, psychological terminology descriptive of human experiences to try to describe something in God the nature of which cannot easily be characterised. Nevertheless, joy and delight are, for us human beings, so strongly associated with the experience of a certain sort of feeling that it is very difficult to think of joy or delight in purely intellectually appetitive terms. According to Aquinas, divine joy and delight should not be thought of as in any way affective, and this idea is alien to our (human) experiences of joy and delight, which are experiences of *emotion*. It seems to me, then, that Aquinas's conception of God's subjective well-being is an obscure one. In what follows, I will try to make it a little less obscure.

According to Aquinas's conception of God's subjective well-being, God's will is at rest because He knows that He possesses all good perfectly. There is consequently no striving for the good, or striving to fulfil a need of any kind. It is God's resting in this fulfilled state that, for Aquinas, constitutes God's 'joy'.

In trying to conceive what Aquinas is talking about, it may be helpful to consider the idea of someone *treasuring* something. To treasure something is to attach great value to it as something the possession of which enhances the well-being of one's life. The goods one can treasure can be material or non-material. They can include an heirloom, a birthday present, or the garden to which one has devoted so much loving attention. They may include certain childhood memories (for example, family holidays), or skills and accomplishments one has striven to attain (playing the piano), or friendships.

These are not necessarily things one thinks about all the time. However, when one does think about them, they are thought of with a sense of satisfaction. Moreover, if one's life has been greatly enriched in many and various ways, a general sense of gratitude and satisfaction pervades one's life. The idea of treasuring these goods connotes feeling

satisfaction at the thought of what one greatly values and *possesses*. There must be an element of goodness *retained*, something that enhances life in the present, something for which one can *now* be grateful. For example, in the case of happy memories, they are not of themselves sufficient for a sense of satisfaction. For one may have happy childhood memories – or remember ‘the good old days’ – only to be made more keenly aware of present deficiencies.

One’s satisfaction regarding the good that one possesses – whether given or achieved – is a kind of resting. To see this, consider those who are denied or deprived of certain things in childhood – for example, affection, or the recognition of a talent they themselves are aware that they possess. Often, those who are denied or deprived in this way will spend much of their remaining lives striving for what is missing. Effort is spent trying to make good these deficiencies.

Although one can be said to feel satisfaction about things one treasures, it need not involve feeling any particular emotions. In fact, apart from occasionally dwelling on treasured things, such satisfaction is not on the surface level of consciousness at all. It affects our behaviour and general outlook on life, but it is an almost subconscious state of mind. It is more than the mere *knowledge* that we possess certain treasured things. It is, rather, a sense of well-being, but it is not easy to say exactly what this sense of well-being involves. It is easier to describe its effects. Feeling this satisfaction or having this sense of well-being, we live our lives with a certain buoyancy and resilience. We display a certain equanimity in the face of life’s trials. We do this because our well-being is to a large extent something that is internal to us.

It might be objected that the sort of non-emotional satisfaction I am describing could be disturbed, or even destroyed, if a person’s circumstances were bad enough – if, for example, the person’s family were wiped out in an accident, or the person suffered from a particularly distressing illness.

I do not deny this. The objection merely indicates the limitations of my example, but does not undermine it. I do not deny that in the case of human beings, even deeply-rooted satisfactions are vulnerable to overwhelming circumstances. In appealing to the

idea that human beings derive satisfaction from the things they treasure, I am trying to show how joy or satisfaction can be an enduring element in our lives – that is, an element that is not easily disturbed. My example is intended to give *some* idea of what I take to be the depth and durability of God’s sense of His own well-being, a sense that is far deeper than what is manifested in joyful emotions, and which Aquinas describes as a resting of God’s will.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that one can treasure something, without the satisfaction derived from what one treasures being at the expense of caring for the well-being of others. Even though a deficiency in the well-being of those whom one loves may limit the extent to which one has a sense of one’s own well-being – for those we love are, so to speak, part of us – it does not normally destroy all satisfaction derived from the things we treasure. Moreover, without some sense of well-being within ourselves, it would be difficult to care for others. We would be too limited by our own needs and unfulfilled desires to be able unselfishly to have a proper regard for the needs of others. A sense of well-being, a certain sort of self-contained satisfaction, is necessary for us to be able to turn ourselves towards others.

I have already indicated how difficult it is to give subjective content to the idea of treasuring something. I have suggested that it is something that is only obscurely perceived most of the time, something that exists in the background, so to speak, always there but barely noticed, and yet not diminishing or diminished by one’s concern for others. Unlike emotions, which exist as salient items in one’s consciousness, the sort of satisfaction I have been describing is not easily disturbed, and does not require an extremely positive evaluation of one’s circumstances in order for it to remain undisturbed.

In describing in some detail what it is like for someone to treasure something, I have tried to illuminate Aquinas’s idea that God’s ‘joy’ is in fact the resting of His will. I have stressed the almost subconscious nature of this sort of human satisfaction in order to try to show that there is no obvious conflict in thinking that someone can feel this satisfaction and at the same time care deeply about the welfare of others. However, at this

point, it is worth asking whether one should try to give any experiential content to the idea that God's will is at rest.

In this regard, Anthony Kenny makes a distinction that may be useful. Somewhat like the distinction made by Aquinas, expounded earlier, Kenny distinguishes between *desire* and *volition*. He writes:

An important difference between desire and volition is that desire, unlike volition, seeks immediate satisfaction: that is, it is a want for something now, a want that is felt more or less continuously until it is satisfied. Volition, by contrast, may be for something distant in time, and may be operative without being an item in the flow of consciousness.⁷³

For example, a person may want to learn a language. It is not a want that can be immediately satisfied and so, according to Kenny's distinction, would count as a volition and not as a desire. A person wanting to learn a language would organize his or her life in a way that would reflect that person's intentions – spending time reading, attending language courses, and so on. But, says Kenny, 'such purposes need not be present to one's imagination whenever they are operative. An intention may influence one's actions without being an item of consciousness in the way a headache or a tune hummed in the head may be'.⁷⁴

My point here is that if *willing* something is not necessarily an item in one's consciousness, it is not unreasonable to suppose that neither is one's will being *at rest* necessarily such an item. That is, it is possible that there is a certain sort of satisfaction – the fulfilment of a volition – that does not involve any sort of subjective experience at all.

The question remains as to whether or not it is possible to give any lucid account of God's subjective well-being – one that does not conflict with the idea that God cares deeply about the present welfare of human beings and about the choices they make. Even so, in my view, the difficulties involved in conceptualizing a divine happiness that is subjective but non-emotional are to be preferred to the difficulties that beset Sarot's and

⁷³ Anthony Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 36.

⁷⁴ Kenny *ibid.* p. 46.

Creel's accounts of divine happiness. At least *some* sense can be made of the idea that God's 'joy' is the resting of His will in His possession of all good, and this conception of God's subjective happiness is not clearly in conflict with God's concern for the present welfare of human beings.

PASSIBILISM: AN ARGUMENT FROM
THE IDEA OF DIVINE OMNISCIENCE

In his paper ‘On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes’, David Blumenfeld asks: ‘[W]hat is an omniscient being?’ He answers:

It is one who has unsurpassable knowledge. To have this degree of knowledge, one would have to have an utter and complete comprehension of the meaning of every significant proposition. If there were any significant proposition, any part of the meaning of which a being did not comprehend, his knowledge clearly could be greater. To enjoy a state of omniscience, however, one would have to know considerably more than just this. To be *all-knowing*, one would have to know of every true proposition that it is true and of every false proposition that it is false. If a being fully understood the meaning of every proposition, but failed to know the truth value of even one of these propositions, his knowledge, again, clearly could be greater. But if there were a being who fully comprehended the meaning of every significant proposition and who also knew of the true that it is true, and the false that it is false, this being would surely possess an understanding unlimited in its scope. He would be omniscient.¹

By the term ‘significant proposition’, I take it that Blumenfeld is wanting to exclude from his conception of an omniscient God the idea that God can know the truth-value of self-referential propositions (such as ‘I am thinking’), where the self is an individual other than God.² However, it is not my purpose here to pursue this particular

¹ David Blumenfeld, ‘On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes’ in Thomas V. Morris ed., *The Concept of God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 203f – his emphasis.

² On this, see Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 112ff; Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, op. cit. pp. 321–326; and Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, ch. 2. Wierenga argues against excluding such self-referential propositions from the scope of God’s knowledge.

question, nor to discuss other possible objections to ascribing to God a knowledge of unlimited scope.³ My concern in this chapter is with the first part of Blumenfeld's description of an omniscient being – that is, with the idea that an omniscient being has a complete comprehension of the *meaning* of every significant proposition.

In order to be able to determine for oneself the truth or falsity of any given proposition, it is necessary first to be able to understand it. Knowledge logically depends on meaning. And in order to be able to understand the meaning of a proposition, one has to be able to understand the concepts of which the proposition is composed. It is this fact which is the basis of what I will call *the argument from divine omniscience*.

The argument is this. In order to be able truly to say that God knows, for example, that *x* is sad or joyful or afraid, it is necessary to attribute to Him a complete understanding of the concepts expressed by the terms 'sad,' 'joyful,' and 'afraid'. If God lacks this, He lacks a complete understanding of propositions containing these concepts. If God does not fully understand such propositions, He cannot truly be said to know their truth or falsity. If He does not know their truth or falsity, He cannot be omniscient.

If we accept that God *is* omniscient, we must accept that He has a complete understanding of every concept, and therefore of every proposition, each one of which He knows the truth or falsity of. However, it is argued, a person cannot fully understand certain concepts – such as those of being sad, joyful, or afraid – unless that person has had the subjective experiences to which those concepts relate. So in order to be able to affirm God's omniscience, it is necessary to accept that, in those cases, He must have had the relevant experiences. If God has or has had these experiences, He must be capable of them – that is, He must be passible.⁴

³ For these, see Weirenga, *op. cit.* ch. 3 and 4, and Hoffman/Rosenkrantz, *op. cit.* ch. 6.

⁴ For this sort of argument, see Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 68–77. For discussion and rejection of this argument, see Creel, *op. cit.* pp. 128–132. Creel cites Charles Hartshorne and John Robert Baker as using this argument.

It is necessary, before I proceed any further, to qualify the above argument slightly. For it implies that for each and every concept relating to an experience, it is necessary for a person to have the experience in order to understand its related concept. Yet, as Creel points out, such a requirement cannot apply in God's case. For one would not want to claim, for example, that it is on the basis of His own experience of sadistic pleasure that God understands the concept of sadistic pleasure. The attribution of such an experience to God would be incompatible with the idea that God is perfectly good.⁵ So how can someone who thinks that God can fully understand certain concepts only on the basis of God's own experience avoid the problem Creel identifies? Sarot contends that it is not necessary for someone to have every possible kind of experience before they are able to understand fully every experience-related concept – it is necessary only to have a certain variety of experiences. Using Creel's example of sadistic pleasure, Sarot argues that since one can experience pleasure in good activities, one can conceptually connect that experience with the concept of a vicious act, and so come to an understanding of what sadistic pleasure is like without having to have the related experience first. As long as one has a certain variety of experiences, one can extrapolate from those experiences to an understanding of experiences one has not had or cannot have.⁶

It is questionable whether or not concepts are always transferable in this building-block fashion. For example, is the pleasure of eating one's favourite food the same *sort* of pleasure some might take in tackling a difficult mathematical problem? It seems that Sarot would assume that the respective experiences of pleasure would not be differentiated in terms of the quality of the experiences involved, but merely in terms of the context – eating or problem-solving – in which they occurred. And certainly, someone who understands the concept of the – clearly bodily – pleasure involved in eating one's

⁵ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 128ff.

⁶ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 74f.

favourite food might not be able to understand the intellectual pleasure of tackling a mathematical problem.

However, for the sake of argument, let it be supposed that in certain circumstances God *does* feel pleasure.⁷ And let it be supposed that concepts relating to such experiences *are* transferable. One may perhaps grant that God can understand the concept of sadistic pleasure in the way Sarot proposes. Nevertheless, although this procedure might be adequate for conceiving of how God can understand the meaning of certain experience-related concepts, there are some such concepts – like those of fear or embarrassment – for which this procedure might not be adequate. For example, from what supposed experience of His own would God be able to derive an understanding of the meaning of the concept of fear? Certainly not from ever having experienced fear itself, for as Sarot concedes, the idea of God ever being afraid is incompatible with the idea of divine omnipotence.⁸ And since fear is not like any other emotion an omnipotent God could have, it is hard to see how He could gain, by a transfer of concepts, an understanding of the concept of fear.

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My aim in this chapter is to show that God can be omniscient without having to have certain subjective experiences – that He can know what pain or suffering or grief are like for those who experience such things, without having to experience such things Himself.

In what follows, I will begin by endorsing Sarot's claim that human beings can have a full grasp of certain concepts – for example, the concepts of seeing the colour red or of feeling sad – only if they have at some point in their personal histories had the

⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 74f. Although one may doubt the extent to which an incorporeal God can *feel* pleasure.

experiences to which those concepts relate. It is in the light of this claim that some passibilists hold that, likewise, only an ‘experienced’ God can have a full grasp of the relevant concepts. I will argue that this further claim is based on a misleading distinction between ‘intellectual knowledge’ and ‘experiential knowledge’. The concept of experiential knowledge suggests not only that the person who has such knowledge knows what some experience *is like*, but also that he or she has had the experience in question. Yet having the experience and knowing what it is like are not the same thing. As knowledge, experiential knowledge is just like any other knowledge – it is an intellectual attainment, it is something grasped by the intellect, and in that respect does not differ from so-called intellectual knowledge, for all knowledge is intellectual in this sense. As to *how* one knows what certain experiences are like, that is another question. As far as human beings are concerned, it seems that the only way one can know seems to be by *having* the experiences in question. This is a causal necessity. However, as I will argue, a fact about causal necessity, in the present case, does not determine what is logically necessary. At the end of the first part of this chapter, I will conclude that it is logically possible that God could know what the relevant experiences are like, without His having the experiences themselves.

In the second part of this chapter, I aim to give theological substance to this otherwise mere logical possibility. I argue that there are good theological grounds for thinking that God’s grasp of experience-related concepts is indeed not in any way dependent on His having certain experiences. In particular, I appeal to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in order to argue that every *sort* of thing that exists or occurs – including the subjective experiences of human beings – is solely determined by God’s conception of it in willing the existence of the world. A corollary of this claim is that God’s understanding of the concepts that relate to the various sorts of created things is

⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 75.

something which is causally and logically *prior* to the instantiation of the properties which those concepts describe. The properties are what they are when they are instantiated ultimately because they are tokens of types which God conceives in creating the world. Among the properties which are instantiated are human experiences of pain, suffering, and emotion, properties which, if instantiated, causally depend on God conceiving such properties in creating the world. The various concepts relating to these types of occurrence are therefore ones which God fully understands.

I will conclude that since an ‘unexperienced’ God can fully understand all experience-related concepts, and therefore all significant experience-related propositions, He is able to know the truth-value of every experience-related proposition without needing to have the relevant experience. Thus, there is no basis on these grounds for arguing that an omniscient God must be passible.

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Intuitively, it seems correct to hold that an ‘experienced’ person understands certain experience-related concepts more fully than does someone who is ‘unexperienced’. For example, a comparison is commonly drawn between someone who is congenitally blind and someone who is sighted. Let it be supposed that the blind person has the fullest possible understanding of the concept of the colour red, including ideas about its wavelength, its status as a primary colour, its position on the spectrum, and so on. Let it be supposed that the sighted person’s understanding is at least as full as that of the blind person. The difference, however, is that the sighted person has *seen* the colour, whereas the blind person has not. On this comparison, it is reasonable to suppose that most people would attribute to the sighted person a fuller understanding of the concept than that of the blind person. The blind person might well know the same propositions concerning the

colour as does the sighted person – the extent of his propositional knowledge might be the same – but his understanding of some of these propositions would be less complete, particularly in the case of propositions which concern *experiences* of the colour red. For the sighted person would have had the experience of seeing the colour – the sort of experience which the proposition is about – and so would have a better understanding of the relevant concept.

In fact, it is even doubtful that the extent of the propositional knowledge of an unexperienced person can be the same as that of an experienced person, however good the former's understanding of the relevant concepts might be. For it is possible to conceive of circumstances in which an unexperienced person cannot know all the propositions an experienced person can know concerning certain experiences. For example, R.A. Sharpe argues that if having the concept of pain involves having a range of linguistic abilities in relation to the word 'pain', then one of those abilities should be the ability to describe the pain. Although someone who has a congenital inability to experience pain can learn from other people's behavioural expressions how to apply the word 'pain' correctly, what he cannot do, according to Sharpe, is to 'adjudicate on whether a new description of pain is adequate or not'.⁹ He envisages someone coming up with a new description of 'pins and needles' – something like 'ant-creepings' or 'fizzings' – and those who have experienced pins and needles adjudicating on whether the new descriptions are superior to the old one or not. Since someone congenitally unable to feel pain is unable to participate in this assessment, Sharpe concludes that not only does this person have a less thorough grasp of the concept of pins and needles than the adjudicators do: this person, *because* he has a less thorough grasp, *knows* less about the sensation. Since the adjudicators are in a position to correctly assert or deny that a

⁹ R.A. Sharpe, 'How Having the Concept of Pain Depends on Experiencing It' in *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol 6 (1983), pp. 142–144. I owe this reference to Sarot, p. 76f.

new description fits, and he is not, the extent of his propositional knowledge is less than that of the adjudicators.

According to Sarot, an unexperienced God is like the person who is congenitally unable to feel pain. If human beings were to produce new descriptions of their experiences, God would not be in a position to judge for Himself whether or not the new descriptions were better than the old ones, whereas human beings would be. Consequently, there would be some propositions which God could know only indirectly – only ‘by having knowledge of the knowledge of His creatures. This would mean that human beings would be in advance of God with respect to ... knowledge of creaturely experiences ...’.¹⁰ The suggestion seems to be that one must reject as unworthy of Him the idea that God is epistemically dependent on His human creatures. Human beings would, in this respect, be above God. Instead, Sarot implies, we must conceive of God as being able to know for Himself all true propositions. And if there are propositions which only the experienced can directly know, then God must be conceived as having the relevant experiences.¹¹

In *The God of the Philosophers*, Anthony Kenny opposes this line of reasoning. He maintains that an unexperienced God *can* know for Himself all true propositions. For Kenny denies that having the relevant experiences in any way adds to one’s knowledge of the world. He concedes that this view ‘seems to many people very difficult to accept. We have a strong inclination, reinforced by centuries of empiricist philosophy, to feel that there is some irreducible element of knowledge in experience which cannot be known in any other way than by sensation’.¹² However, according to Kenny, Wittgenstein has helped us to overcome this difficulty. Kenny writes:

¹⁰ Sarot, op. cit. p. 77.

¹¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 77.

¹² Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 30.

On this point, contemporary philosophy has made the notion of omniscience easier, rather than harder, to accept. For this natural feeling, this empiricist presumption, has recently been subjected to detailed criticism by Wittgenstein in his famous discussion of private language in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein argued that the feeling we have of the incommunicability of sensation is an illusion. Whatever we know about our sensations we can tell other people; what cannot be shared with others is not a piece of knowledge.¹³

According to Wittgenstein (and Kenny), communication about these matters is possible because appeals can be made to something that is *public* rather than private. In Wittgenstein's opinion, there are conceptual connections between various sorts of sense-experience on the one hand, and various sorts of behaviour that supposedly accompany these experiences on the other. Unlike subjective experiences, behaviour is something that is public. It can be 'pointed to' when concepts relating to (subjective) sense-experiences are taught to those as yet lacking such concepts. On this view, such concepts are understood primarily in terms of behaviour. Since one can in this way communicate an understanding of these concepts – and of any related propositions – one can communicate knowledge of these things.

Side by side with the claim that '[w]hatever we know about our own sensations we can tell other people; what cannot be shared with others is not a piece of knowledge' is another claim. It is the claim that human sense-perception is only one possible means of gathering information about the world. The job could equally well be done by machines, without the mediation of sense-experiences. In Kenny's opinion, sense-experiences do not in themselves have any informational value, and therefore do not in any way contribute to knowledge of the world. Having a sense-experience is merely the *manner* in which *human beings* receive information about the world (including information about their bodies) through their sense-organs. Broadly speaking, it is one of pleasure or pain.

¹³ Kenny, *ibid.* p. 31.

Although denying that ‘every sense-experience is either pleasant or painful’, Kenny’s view is that

a sense is essentially a faculty for acquiring information in a modality which admits of pleasure and pain. The distinction between the intellectual knowledge that *p* and the sensation that *p* is to be sought, as Aristotle said, in the different relationship of each mode of cognition to pain and pleasure understood in the widest sense. The traditional account of omniscience attributes to God the informational content of our perceptions without the hedonistic content. All the information which we can acquire by our senses is possessed by God but without the pleasure-pain modality which constitutes the acquisition of this information a form of sensation.¹⁴

Kenny observes that human sense-experience is a mode by which human beings acquire information about the world. Broadly speaking, the mode is one of pleasure or pain. With this view of human sense-experience is contrasted the idea that God knows all that human beings know about the world, yet without the hedonistic content.

However, if it is possible to acquire information about the world in a manner which does not involve sense-experience, it does not follow that the manner in which human beings acquire information about the world is not itself an item of information. What Kenny appears to have overlooked is that part of one’s knowledge of the world is how things look and sound and feel to those who perceive them, and on the face of it, it is not possible to know that unless one has oneself had similar perceptions.

Further, Kenny’s ‘information-gathering’ thesis only covers *sense*-experiences – he neglects to consider human experiences which are *not* a means of information-gathering, but are instead reactions to perceptions of the world and of ourselves. Grief or suffering, for example, are not primarily a means of gathering information about the world or ourselves – they are our reactions to some perceived loss or constraint affecting us.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kenny, *ibid.* p. 32.

¹⁵ I do not deny, however, that grief, for example, may reveal to us that we valued the departed person more than we realised. In this sense, non-sensory experiences may be informative.

My objection to Kenny's further claim can be put in terms of our needing to be able to understand certain (experience-related) concepts. The having of certain experiences is a necessary condition of our being able to make a correct analysis of the related concepts. For example, an analysis of the concept of the colour red should, according to a common view, include the phenomenal property that is instantiated when someone actually sees that colour. Someone whose analysis of the concept is deficient in this respect is said to have an incomplete grasp or understanding of the concept. Having an incomplete grasp of the concept, and therefore of any proposition containing the concept, the person in question cannot truly be said to know true propositions concerning people's sense-experiences of the colour red. And the same applies to other experience-related concepts.

Of course, the question of the *communicability* of knowledge of sense-experiences does not arise in God's case because, as indicated above, God should not be conceived as having to look to human beings for that knowledge. Kenny's point is that sense-experiences do not of themselves add anything to our knowledge of the world. If they are not items of knowledge, they are not items that anyone can properly be said to fail to know. Therefore, if it is correct to think of God as unexperienced, that fact would not detract in any way from the idea that God is omniscient. For if so-called experiential knowledge – that is, knowledge that is available only to the experienced – is not in fact knowledge, God's omniscience is not in any way impugned by His not having whatever it is that is incorrectly thought of as knowledge.

Kenny's confidence that information about our sense-experiences can be communicated to others is based on Wittgenstein's view that the language used in such communication expresses something which is understandable by all. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of psychological words depends, as does that of most words, on the way they are used within various language-games.¹⁶ However, as A.C. Grayling

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43.

notes, Wittgenstein's 'notion of use ... was essentially linked to the way in which people behave'.¹⁷ The link-up of psychological language with behaviour is an outcome of Wittgenstein's private-language argument. Wittgenstein contends that in order to establish the use of a term for referring to something, one needs a criterion by which to ensure that the term always refers to the same kind of thing. In the case of public objects like houses and cars one can cross-check one's use of a term like 'house' or 'car' with other speakers' use. But in the case of subjective experiences like pain or the perception of colour, if one assumes that these experiences are wholly isolable from any public manifestation of them, one would have to rely on a self-created rule for reliably applying any term one invented for designating a particular subjective experience. Wittgenstein argues – in his fragmentary way – that such a self-created rule is logically impossible. In each case, it would be impossible to verify whether or not one's use of the invented term was consistent or not. Yet the meaning of 'rule' in this context is precisely the idea that one does have a criterion by which one can judge consistently.¹⁸ The only way it is possible to ensure that words referring to subjective experiences consistently refer to the same type of experience in each case is to give them a *public* meaning¹⁹ – a meaning accessible to all. And this can only be done by establishing a conceptual link between subjective experiences and behaviour.²⁰ Behaviour is something which is public, and it is only through behavioural expression that subjective experiences ever got to be public in the first place. Only through conceptually 'externalizing' subjective experiences in this way can psychological terms be established for them and applied. Each of us comes to learn the use of psychological terms through subjective experiences being conceptually connected with the relevant behaviour. It is through their use in the context of behaviour that these terms gain for us their meaning.

¹⁷ Anthony Grayling, *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*. 2nd edition, London: Duckworth, 1990, p. 209.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *op. cit.* 258, 265.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 261.

Since, according to Wittgenstein, the meaning of psychological terms, and the use of the concepts those terms represent, are public in the way I have described, it is understandable that Kenny thinks that whatever we know about our own sense-experiences can be communicated to anyone else, whether experienced or not. For on Wittgenstein's account, reports of our own experiences express propositions the component concepts of which are conveyed to others by the use of a public language. And, according to the private language argument, the meaning of psychological terms can *only* be understood when used as part of a public language.

How, then, do psychological terms become a part of each person's language? Not in the same way in which material-object terms become a part. Terms like 'house,' 'baby,' and 'car' are given meaning by pointing to the relevant object and repeating the name.²¹ The meaning of a psychological term is learnt in a less direct way. We do not and cannot literally point to a subjective experience and repeat a name. Rather, our learning of psychological terms is a development of pre-linguistic behaviour. Each child learns to identify its sense-experiences and emotions by observing the application of a word to each instance of non-linguistic behaviour that is expressive of a sense-experience or an emotion. Once linguistically competent, it can identify its experiences on subsequent occasions and *verbally* express these experiences. For example, 'a child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour'.²² In this example, a primitive, natural expression of pain (crying) is the occasion for teaching the child a new form of behaviour – using the word 'pain,' for example – which will come to replace the crying as an expression of pain as the child gets older. The linking up of word with sensation is thus accomplished indirectly. It is through the medium of pre-linguistic *behaviour*. It is a process whereby 'words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 244.

sensation and used in their place'.²³ One can see why someone who has this learning process in view might think that references to prelinguistic behaviour give to psychological terms this behavioural emphasis in meaning. Since each of us has to learn the public language in the same way, there can be a strong presumption that psychological terms can always be conceptually connected with behaviour in this way.

There is not space here to expound Wittgenstein's views in further detail. The account I have given should be sufficient to explain why Kenny thinks that knowledge of subjective experiences is communicable to the unexperienced. It is the emphasis on the conceptual connections with epistemically accessible (public) behaviour that is at the heart of the Kenny-Wittgenstein thesis.

I will briefly mention certain criticisms of Wittgenstein's views about how we are to understand the meaning of psychological language, and, by implication, about how we are to understand the psychological concepts involved when that language is used. Following this, I will try to spell out what it means to say that one has an understanding of the concepts relevant to subjective experiences.

Wittgenstein maintains that there must be conceptual connections between sense-experiences and related behaviour because otherwise each of us would not be able to learn the meaning of psychological terms. However, from this fact – if it is a fact – it does not follow that the meaning of psychological terms is to be explained wholly in terms of behaviour. It does not follow that psychological terms can be translated into behavioural terms without loss of meaning. Wittgenstein himself seems to recognize this. He denies, for example, that the word 'pain' *means* crying, or, one may suppose, any other item of pain behaviour.²⁴ Moreover, he affirms the existence of *sensations* of pain, although he says he is uncertain about their ontological status. A sensation of pain 'is not a *something*,

²¹ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 15.

²² Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 244.

²³ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 244.

²⁴ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 244.

but not a *nothing* either!²⁵ Again, Wittgenstein recognizes that we use psychological language every day to name and to refer to certain subjective experiences.²⁶ If, as Wittgenstein himself seems to think, the meaning of psychological words is not to be explained wholly in terms of behaviour (logical behaviourism), it is reasonable to suppose that at least part of what people intend when they use a psychological term is to refer to the related subjective experience, and not just behaviour.

A further objection to Wittgenstein's account of how we are to understand the meaning of psychological language is that he over-emphasizes the contribution that conceptual connections of the sort described above make to the meaning of psychological terms. One can accept that the existence of a public language about psychological items logically requires the existence of connections between subjective experiences and what can be observed, without also having to accept that such connections must be *conceptual*. What is required for teaching and learning how psychological terms are used are frequent *de facto* connections between subjective experiences and (observable) behaviour. Often, when people are insulted, they react by raising their voices, thumping on the wall, walking away, or returning an insult. When, as children, we encounter this sort of behaviour, we are told that the person is angry. Similarly, we might notice that someone who has sustained a great personal loss often looks and behaves a certain way. For example, the person in question may have a long face, may cry and hold his head in his hands, walk ponderously, or express regret. We are told that the person is grieving. It is because anger and grieving are frequently accompanied by these sorts of behaviour that feelings of anger and grief can be identified. However, from the fact that this is how we learn the meaning of psychological terms it does not follow that being angry or grieving just *is* exhibiting such behaviour, or that such behaviour is an essential part of the

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 304 – his emphasis.

²⁶ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 244.

emotion.²⁷ I agree with William Lyons' negative answer to the question 'Does the way in which behaviour is typical of an emotion imply a conceptual link?'²⁸ This flatly contradicts Fergus Kerr, who declares that 'it belongs to the very concept of an emotion that it is visible'.²⁹ If Kerr is right, one could not, without doing so unintelligibly, talk about specific instances in which someone feels an emotion – say sadness or regret – without that emotion involving any behaviour of any sort. However, contrary to Kerr, it seems perfectly intelligible to say, for example, that although Smith was feeling sad (or frightened), he put a brave face on it – implying that although Smith felt these emotions, there was nothing emotional about his behaviour. In this sense, emotions can be private.

~~Yet another objection to Wittgenstein's account is that common experience does~~
not support his assumption that there are conceptual links between each type of psychological item and certain forms of behaviour. Wittgenstein may have been misled here by his frequent use of the example of pain. As some have noted, the strong tendency in human beings to express their pain is not typical of many other human subjective experiences and mental activities. Ayer remarks that 'Wittgenstein's preference for pain as an example is no doubt due to the fact that it is characteristically associated with a fairly limited set of outward expressions; something which is not true of all sensations, let alone thoughts and images'.³⁰ Many psychological experiences and activities do not necessarily involve any outward expression – for example, seeing a colour, calculating, excogitating, feeling warm, feeling a mild ache, being slightly anxious, and so on.

Even if one accepts that ideas of behaviour do form part of the concepts that are related to certain types of psychological experience (for example, rage, feeling terror, or feeling horror), why should this fact – if it is a fact – exclude the possibility that part of

²⁷ A.J. Ayer criticizes Wittgenstein for assuming that 'the meaning of words is indissolubly tied to the contexts in which they are originally learned'. A.J. Ayer, *Wittgenstein*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 77.

²⁸ William Lyons, *Emotions*, op. cit. p. 146ff.

²⁹ Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 87.

³⁰ Ayer, op. cit. p. 77. See also David Pears, *Wittgenstein*. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1971, p. 149.

the meaning of the terms expressing those concepts is supplied by reference to something *non-behavioural*, that is, by reference to the relevant subjective experience? Wittgenstein's 'use' theory of language does not itself seem to warrant the idea that language-users use psychological words in a strongly 'behaviouristic' way. With his 'use' theory, Wittgenstein is trying to get away from the over-simple idea that language can be atomized in such a way that words stand in a one-to-one relation with the respective items to which they are thought to refer. According to Wittgenstein, we should think about language less in terms of how one understands *the* meaning of a word, and more in terms of how that word *functions* in a language.³¹ The theory itself suggests that we should be cautious about accepting a single interpretation of the meaning of psychological terms. As Grayling remarks,

the use made of 'use' in the theory is very general and vague ... for, on the theory's own terms, there are multiplicities of uses to which expressions can be put, and consequently there are – or so the suggestion seems to be – multiplicities of (kinds of?) meanings. Accordingly, no univocal account of meaning is to be expected ...³²

Clearly, Grayling thinks that Wittgenstein's 'use' theory is *too* accommodating to serve as a theory of meaning. However, my point here is that if an implication of Wittgenstein's theory of 'use' is that no univocal account of meaning is to be expected, there is, on this view, no warrant for limiting the meaning of psychological words largely to ideas about behaviour. And the fact remains that the knowledge language-users have of what various subjective experiences are like determines, to a large extent, how those language-users use psychological words.

In the light of these considerations, I reject the Kenny-Wittgenstein thesis that because their meanings are largely determined by ideas of (public) behaviour,

³¹ There is not space here to give a detailed account of Wittgenstein's 'use' theory of language. See Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1973, ch. 8, especially pp. 153–158 and Grayling, *op. cit.* pp. 206–212.

psychological terms – and, by implication, the concepts which they represent – are fully graspable by the unexperienced. In using psychological language about subjective experiences, the experienced intend certain meanings – and concepts – which the unexperienced are unable to understand, precisely because the latter have not had the relevant experiences. I conclude that the experienced cannot communicate to the unexperienced a complete understanding of the relevant terms and concepts, and moreover, that the unexperienced cannot for themselves gain such an understanding without experience. The question is, does this fact about human beings undermine the idea that an impassible God can be omniscient? As the first step to answering this question, I will now address another question: how should one describe, in psychological terms, someone who has a grasp of the relevant concepts?

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In the previous section, I argued against the Kenny-Wittgenstein thesis that psychological words and concepts are to be understood mainly in terms of the behaviour that is supposedly conceptually connected with each type of subjective experience. I questioned the existence of such connections, and I argued that even if such connections do exist, what ‘experienced’ people intend by the use of psychological words and concepts is generally more than merely a reference to behaviour. What is intended is also a reference to some type of subjective experience. For example, John Foster says, ‘If I want to make clear to myself what pain is, or what I mean by the term “pain”, I always ... fall back on some imaginative rehearsal of what it feels like to have this sensation, rather than on the behavioural criteria for its ascription’.³² When clarifying his thinking about pain, Foster recalls his experiences of pain and what these were like. It is these

³² Grayling, *op. cit.* p.211.

recollective thoughts, he says, that for him give content to the meaning of 'pain', and not thoughts about behaviour, not thoughts about what sort of behaviour someone would have to exhibit before we could describe that person as being in pain.

I am not suggesting that, following our initial grasp of the meaning of psychological terms, our continuing meaningful use of them depends, on each occasion, on some imaginative rehearsal. Rehearsal is necessary only where there is uncertainty. For example, if someone tells me she is not sure whether she wants to paint her bathroom pink or mauve, I may find that I need to imaginatively rehearse to myself the exact colours to which these colour-words refer in order to be clear about the difference in effect. This presentation-in-imagination is not a *sensory* experience. Rather, it is a thinking of 'sensibilia in their absence', or a making of a mental picture.³⁴

Normally, however, it is not necessary to do any rehearsing when we use words meaningfully, and the concepts they represent. We do not, in relation to the meaningful use of words or concepts, have to picture anything or be conscious of anything. And using words meaningfully – and understanding their meaning – does not in itself involve any special state of consciousness. In particular, when we use and understand psychological terms, or the concepts which such terms represent, we do not need to recall our experiences, or relive them, before we can be said to use the terms or concepts meaningfully or to understand them. Nor does our understanding depend on there being – as a result of these experiences – after-images, lingering feelings, or faint after-effects continuing to impinge on our consciousness. As Wittgenstein tells us, 'believing, understanding, knowing, intending ... are not states of consciousness'.³⁵ If they were, a person could not properly be said to believe, understand, know, or intend something if, at the time it was said, he or she were not paying attention to the thing in question. Yet it is

³³ John Foster, *The Immaterial Self: A Defence of the Cartesian Dualist Conception of Mind*. London: Routledge, 1991, p.38.

³⁴ Anthony Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind*, op. cit. p. 116.

³⁵ Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol.II, 45.

not improper to say of someone who is asleep that he knows French or understands the meaning of 'sit'.

Memory, however, does play a part in our being able to understand and use words and concepts. In the present context, our understanding and use of certain psychological words and concepts depend on our being able to remember the relevant subjective experiences. But even so, our memory of experience *x* need not, and usually does not, involve us in being in some particular conscious psychological state which we might call 'having a memory of *x*' – any more than using, and therefore *remembering*, my wife's name involves my being in some appropriate psychological state. In fact, it is hardly correct to talk about *remembering* these experiences when we talk about them or refer to them. To do so is to suggest too readily some sort of conscious psychological state – that of remembering – and I think this is misleading. Although that is sometimes a correct description of remembering, more often it is not. The point is better put negatively. Wittgenstein makes a connection between knowing and memory: 'In one sense knowing is to have learned and not forgotten. In this way it hangs together with memory'.³⁶ At various points in our individual personal histories, we have learnt that certain words and concepts are related to certain types of experience. As long as we use those words and concepts in the way we have been taught, we can be said not to have forgotten their connection with the experiences they were originally related to. However, competence in this respect does not essentially involve some *act* of remembering, or any act or state of which we might be said to be *conscious*. It is sufficient to say that the relevant experiences have not been forgotten. To say more – to say that they are positively *remembered* – might seem to suggest that consciousness is involved. However, as I have said, I can properly be described as knowing and understanding certain things even if, at the time, I am asleep.

³⁶ Wittgenstein, *ibid.* 300.

Although the sort of subjective experience I am discussing in this chapter is itself phenomenalist, in that I *see* the colour red, *feel* pain, *hear* a sound, and so on, understanding what such experiences are like is altogether on a different level. My understanding of these things is not some sort of conscious state which involves there being something ‘before the mind in thought or experience’³⁷ – a sort of ‘presence’ or ‘representation’ to myself that this is what I mean when I use a psychological term.³⁸ Rather, my understanding of these subjective experiences is a purely intellectual quality, despite the fact that the objects of my understanding are themselves qualities of experiences – the feelings, the sensations, the perceptions.

In *The Metaphysics of Mind*, Kenny describes, in this connection, two kinds of relation. Between subjective experiences on the one hand and the concepts pertaining to those experiences on the other, there exist both a *causal* relation and a *formal* relation.³⁹

The idea of there being a causal relation is connected with the fact that in the normal course of things, we acquire certain concepts because we have had the experiences to which those concepts relate. Our having those experiences has been instrumental in our acquiring the relevant concepts. For example, my early experiences of pain are a causal factor in my acquiring the concept of pain. Having the specific experiences is the normal route by which human beings acquire these concepts. Of course, as I explained earlier when I discussed the Kenny/Wittgenstein thesis,⁴⁰ Kenny does not think that this *has* to be the case. He thinks there can be alternative routes. However, by and large, he thinks that experience is the means. It is this fact of human experience which Kenny has in mind when he refers to the causal relation.

However, what interests Kenny more is the formal relation. He writes:

³⁷ Grayling, *op. cit.* p. 187.

³⁸ Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 48, 69.

³⁹ Kenny, *op. cit.* p. 135.

⁴⁰ See specifically pp. 123–125.

Concepts may be said to be abstract not in the causal sense that they are abstracted from experience but in the formal sense that they are abstract ... in comparison with experiences. Sense-experience is always of a particular experience; intellectual conception, as such, is of the universal. This formal relationship is distinct from the causal relation; it would remain even if universal concepts were not acquired from experience.⁴¹

It is the abstractness of concepts that makes them communicable. That I am able to think of the qualities of a particular type of object or experience is due to the fact that these qualities can 'be abstracted by the human abstractive power, the human ability to classify and describe by the predicates of human language'.⁴² And it is by means of language that we communicate. However, what Kenny seems to overlook is the fact that included in what is abstracted from particular experiences is information about what those experiences are like. *Red as seen* – the phenomenalistic quality that human beings experience – is part of what is universal for those who use this concept.

Throughout the discussion so far, I have argued that human beings must have certain types of experience before they can properly be said to understand fully the concepts which relate to those types of experience. This is a causal necessity. However, this fact is a contingent feature of human nature. It is logically possible that a human being could have a complete grasp of the concepts without having undergone the relevant experiences. Moreover, I maintain that this knowledge and understanding would be as thorough as the knowledge and understanding I gain by actually having the relevant experiences. Historically, one expression of this logical possibility has been the notion of innate ideas and, by derivation, of innate knowledge. The fact that Locke devotes the whole of Book 1 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to a rejection of the notion suggests that the notion is not an obviously incoherent one. Moreover, he rejects it not because he thinks it is incoherent but because he sees no empirical evidence for its truth.

⁴¹ Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind*, op. cit. p. 135f.

In his article ‘On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes’, David Blumenfeld denies that it is logically possible for a person to understand what a given subjective experience is like without the person in question having had the relevant experience. In order to argue this, he chooses as an example a concept which has an undeniable logical connection with the idea of subjectivity – namely, the concept of the *sensation* of red. Whatever other ideas one may or may not think are included in this concept – red being light of a certain wavelength, its being a primary colour, its having a certain position on the colour spectrum, and so on – the idea of something *subjective* is clearly built into it. He thus presents us with a concept the meaning of which we cannot completely fill in merely by appealing to some objective facts about the colour red. He writes:

[W]ithout any acquaintance with redness, one could not fully comprehend *the sensation of red*. The reason for this is that part of the meaning of the concept consists of a certain subjective experience. One who failed to understand fully what this experience is like would thus lack a perfect grasp of its concept. But there is only one way of fully understanding what an experience of redness is like and that is to have it. There is in principle no access which allows a complete comprehension of an experience except having the experience itself. It is, therefore, a necessary truth that if someone had never experienced redness, there would be at least one concept whose meaning he did not fully understand.⁴³

Blumenfeld is claiming that we cannot make sense of the idea that someone can have a full grasp of the concept in question and yet lack the relevant experience. His claim is that, because of the very nature of this sort of concept, its being fully grasped cannot be logically separated from the idea of having the experience to which this sort of concept relates.

Blumenfeld says that part of the meaning of the concept of the sensation of red consists in a certain subjective experience. What exactly does this mean? It is not clear

⁴² Kenny, *ibid.* p. 137.

⁴³ Blumenfeld, *op. cit.* p. 205 – his emphasis.

how he thinks the subjective experience contributes to the meaning of the concept in question.

Are we to understand this statement as being merely a concise way of saying that part of the meaning of this concept is the idea that one must have the relevant experience? If this is what he means, then he is begging the question. For the aim of his argument is precisely that of showing that having the relevant experience is logically necessary for a complete understanding of certain sorts of concept.

If, on the other hand, Blumenfeld's words are taken as they stand, he seems to be suggesting that whatever else might be thought to contribute to the meaning of the concept in question, meaning in this case is partly a matter of *experience*. That is, Blumenfeld seems to be suggesting that having the relevant experience is somehow *itself* part of the meaning of the concept.

This is a suggestion that is difficult to make sense of. I presume that Blumenfeld does not mean that every time we talk about a sensation of red, or hear someone else talk about it, we ourselves have this sensation, and that it is necessary that this happen so that we can use and understand this concept. For it is quite clear that we can use and understand this concept meaningfully without simultaneously having the relevant experience.

If – somehow – part of the meaning of the concept *were* to consist of a certain subjective experience, then it cannot be denied that someone could not understand the concept without the experience. Logically, the requirement that one have the experience would be built into the meaning of the concept. It is difficult, however, to conceive how having an experience *can* be built into the meaning of a concept, because meaning itself is not something we experience.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In support of this last assertion, see Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, op.cit. 242 and 603; and *Philosophical Investigations*, II, 216f.

I have already mentioned the fact that a human being has to have certain subjective experiences before he or she can fully understand the concepts related to those experiences. For human beings, this is a causal necessity. For this reason, there is, concerning this matter, a strong association in our minds between understanding a sensation-concept and having the relevant experience. Any plausibility that Blumenfeld's argument may have is due to the fact that it trades on this strong association. However, as I said above, there is no *logically* necessary connection involved. And in the context of a discussion concerning the ability of an unexperienced God to understand such concepts, it is particularly important not to be influenced by ideas of *human* necessity.

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So far in this chapter, I have tried to establish three things.

Firstly, I have argued that knowing what a subjective experience is like is necessary for a complete understanding of the related concept. I have opposed Kenny's reductive approach to the question of God's knowledge of human subjective experiences, in which Kenny maintains that subjective experiences are informationally unimportant, and therefore not items we need to think God knows before we can attribute omniscience to Him.

Secondly, I have argued that our knowledge of what a subjective experience is like is not itself something that involves some sort of conscious psychological activity or state. Rather, knowing is something that is on an altogether different level. It is abstract compared with experience. For this reason, the content of our knowledge in this matter is able to form part of the relevant concept.

Thirdly, concerning the relation between subjective experiences and their related concepts, I have made a distinction between causal necessity and logical necessity. I have

argued that while subjective experiences are causally necessary in order for human beings to be able fully to grasp the related concepts, it is logically possible that someone could know what an experience is like and thus grasp its related concept without having to have the experience.

In view of the foregoing arguments, I conclude that although the idea of divine omniscience implies that God must know what human subjective experiences are like, it is not causally or logically necessary that God undergo any experiences. In what follows, I will aim to give theological substance to this rather formal conclusion.

Earlier in this chapter,⁴⁵ I argued that it would be difficult to attribute to God a knowledge of certain subjective experiences – for example, fear – if the basis for such an attribution were taken to be His actually having the relevant experiences. For certain subjective experiences, such as fear, could only be inappropriately ascribed to God. And although other experiences might enable God to make conceptual connections with experiences He could not appropriately be described as having, I suggested that subjective experiences like fear were too much in a category of their own to make such connections possible. So it is preferable if one can find some other way of conceiving how God can know what various subjective experiences are like. To this end, due consideration must be given to the idea that God is the world's creator, and to what that idea implies.

Those who argue that God must be 'experientially' knowledgeable if He is to be able to understand certain experience-related concepts assume that God's epistemic relation to the world is, as it were, that of an outsider looking in, or that of an observer looking on. On this assumption, the question of how God can know what human subjective experiences are like is put in terms of how we should think of God being able to gain epistemic *access* to whatever occurs in the minds and bodies of His human

⁴⁵ p. 119.

creatures. According to Thomas Aquinas, however, this is the wrong way of viewing the matter. He writes:

Natural things stand in the middle between God's knowledge and ours: for we get our knowledge from natural things of which God is the cause through His knowledge. Hence, just as the knowable things of nature are prior to our knowledge and are the measure of it, so God's knowledge is prior to natural things and is the measure of them. In the same way a house stands in the middle between the knowledge of the architect who made it and that of a man who gets his knowledge of the house from the house itself once made.⁴⁶

In this passage, Aquinas sharply distinguishes between the way human beings know the things of nature and the way God knows them.

Human beings' knowledge of such things can only be *a posteriori*. Human beings have to learn from their observation of what already exists. Further, they have to keep adjusting their beliefs about the world as more information about it becomes available. It is a process that is never completed, for there is always more to be known. And although omniscience about the world is never attainable by human beings, it remains an ideal towards which they work. In this idealistic sense, the knowable things of nature are the measure of the extent of human knowledge.

However, it is not so with God's knowledge, says Aquinas. God's knowledge of the things of nature is wholly *a priori*. It is not in any way derived from or determined by those things. God's knowledge of the world is derived from His knowledge of Himself, that is, from His knowledge of His own creative activity in willing the existence of the world.

I am concerned here solely with God's knowledge of the *types* of existent that go to make up the world God has created. I am not concerned with God's knowledge of particulars. God's knowledge of the world includes His knowing the *constitution* of the

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, op. cit. p. 37.

world – that is, it includes His knowing the nature of each type of thing in His creation. Because God causes the world to exist, His knowledge of its constitution is logically prior to the world's existence. I will expand on these claims in a moment. It should already be clear, however, that Aquinas's distinction between how human beings know about the world and how God knows about it is relevant to the question discussed in this chapter. For if the manner in which God knows about the things of nature is already very different from the manner in which we human beings know these things, this in itself suggests caution about claiming that only an experienced God can know what human subjective experiences are like. The claim seems to suggest that God must, in a sense, sample for Himself an aspect of His creation before He can fully know what that aspect is like, as if His merely conceiving what an experience is like is not enough. On the passibilist view, God is like a master chef who, having conceived and created a particular dish, needs to taste it so that he can be said to *know* what it tastes like.

A better understanding of Aquinas's claim that God's knowledge is prior to natural things and is the measure of them can be gained if one considers the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*.⁴⁷ This is the idea that in creating the world, God did not use already-existing material. Rather, God completely originated everything, including matter. The Church Fathers opposed religiously- and philosophically-based cosmogonies which described matter as *nonderivative* and therefore as standing in some sort of dualistic relationship to God. The early church was concerned to emphasize the fact that God's power in creation was exercised without any hindrance or restriction. Gerhard May suggests that part of the motivation for developing the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* was to express Justin Martyr's thesis that 'no limits existed to God's creative capability'.⁴⁸ The Fathers gradually came to realize that they could not accept that matter was some sort of second principle in the formation of the world, limiting God's creative capability. If God's greatness was to be

adequately affirmed, His creative capability needed to be conceived as wholly originaive and radical. The Fathers therefore denied that God started with already-existing material when He created the world.

A consequence of conceptually maximizing God's creative power in this way is that there is a corresponding emphasis on the idea that God's *will* is the sole determiner of the nature of all that exists. For if God's creative power knows no limits (apart from those that are logical), then God's will has free rein, as it were. Nothing stands in the way of its being exercised. A corollary of this fact is that every type of thing that exists exists as an expression of God's will. Matter is not a 'given', which God must make the best of in creating the world.⁴⁹ Matter is what it is because God *wills* it to be so. And what matter has a potential for – its possibilities – it has a potential for because God *wills* it to be so. Such is the absoluteness with which God's will determines the nature of all that exists that Irenaeus 'can ... explain that the will of God is the substance or *ousia* – and here that must mean the stuff – of all things'.⁵⁰ Using hyperbole, Irenaeus is emphasizing the fact that the nature of all that exists depends solely upon the will of God.⁵¹ As May puts it, in his explanation of Irenaeus' remark, 'God in his creative activity is bound by no ontological conditions; the sole ground for the origin of all being is his sovereign will'.⁵² The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* implies that the constitution and inherent possibilities of all that exists apart from God is the product of His will alone.⁵³

⁴⁷ In the following brief description of this idea, I rely on Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, and in particular on ch. 5.

⁴⁸ May, *ibid.* p.150.

⁴⁹ See May, *ibid.* p.167,168 n.118.

⁵⁰ May, *ibid.* p.169.

⁵¹ I am assuming that Irenaeus has not made a category mistake by implying that a person's will is the type of thing that can be the substance of things. In commenting on this remark, May implies that Irenaeus did not mean it to be taken literally (May, *ibid.* p. 171).

⁵² May, *ibid.* p. 171.

⁵³ My saying this should not be taken as a denial that there was a Fall involving a 'dislocation' of the created order. On this, see Joseph H. Crehan, 'Adam' in H. F. Davis et al. eds, *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, vol. I. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962, pp. 28–35. Whatever the extent of the dislocation, it can still be maintained that God always intended that this should happen if human beings disobeyed Him. I will not enter here into the difficult question of whether God can be said to will the existence of abstract objects such as numbers, sets, and properties. On this, see Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God*, *op. cit.* pp. 193–203.

There is, in the idea that God's will wholly determines the nature of all concrete existence, a certain implication which is important for my case. Necessarily, when someone wills something, that person has a certain conception of whatever it is that is willed. A conception of what is willed is logically prior to the willing. It is not possible to will something without having any idea of what it is one wills.

The idea that God creatively wills the existence of the world implies that God has a conception of the nature of that world. And if, as I have indicated above, God's creative willing is completely unconditioned and efficacious, the actual nature of the world must perfectly express God's conception of that nature.

Part of God's conception for His creation includes ideas about the nature of human beings – ideas concerning the capacity that human beings have for having emotions, feeling pain, seeing colours, and so on. Unless these are thought to be *emergent* capacities, that is, capacities that God could not have predicted would arise from His creation, it is reasonable to claim that God conceived beings with such capacities. If so, how could God conceive beings with such capacities without having any idea of what these capacities are capacities for? How could God conceive of human beings being *able* to see the colour red or feel pain if He did not also have a concept of what it is that they are able to do –namely, to see the colour red or feel pain? God must have concepts of *first-order* qualities (seeing the colour red, feeling pain) in order to be able to have concepts of their corresponding *second-order* qualities (being *able* to see the colour red, being *able* to feel pain).

Given that God conceived the natures of all things and willed them to be instantiated, on what basis can one then go on to claim that God *knows* what His creation is like? It is not enough merely to point to God's conceiving of His creation and willing it; one has to try to show how, in God's case, this amounts to His *knowing* what His creation is like. Unless that can be established, the problem of how God knows the nature

of all that exists remains. God can be said to know the nature of all that exists only if His beliefs about it correspond to what is actual, and if He is fully justified in believing what He does believe.

God's knowing what His creation is like depends wholly on His knowledge of *Himself*. Kenny expresses the same idea elliptically when he says that God's knowledge of creation 'is based on nothing other than his will to create'.⁵⁴ In knowing Himself, God knows His own will and what it can accomplish. God knows perfectly all His detailed intentions in willing creation. God knows exactly what effects follow from those intentions, and the fact that those effects are produced without the use of any intermediary. And God knows that, apart from logical impossibilities, there is nothing that He cannot efficaciously will.

The *immediacy* of God's knowledge of creation can be explained not only by the fact that He knows all there is to know about His intentions and their effects, but also by the fact that there is an immediacy between God's creative willing and whatever exists as a result of that willing. Kenny expresses this fact when he says that

in the case of God, there can be no possibility of mistake or of the failure of servant demiurges to carry out orders; there cannot be inadvertence as when one presses button A meaning to press button B; there cannot be recalcitrant material preventing the design from being realized, as might happen to a sculptor or an architect.⁵⁵

God's creative willing is, as it were, a basic action. God does not need to instruct a possibly unreliable other to carry out His intentions. God is not like a human architect, who has to depend on a builder faithfully carrying out his instructions. There can be no inadvertence involving buttons A and B because, other than willing, there is nothing else that God has to 'do' in order to realize His intentions. He does not, metaphorically

⁵⁴ Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, op. cit. p. 36.

⁵⁵ Kenny, *ibid.* p. 36.

speaking, have to press any buttons in order to make things happen. Again, God does not have to shape material to produce what He wants. As I explained above, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* involves a denial that God created the world using pre-existent material. God's creative willing is like a basic action in that it is His merely willing something that brings it about that that thing exists, and in a way that He intends.

Since God's knowledge of His will and its effects is *a priori*, I maintain that God has every reason to believe that whatever He wills to exist does in fact exist, and exists in such a way that it perfectly accords with His conception of it. There can be no 'epistemic gap' between God's beliefs about what He creatively wills the existence of and about what in fact results. God does not have to 'see' if what He wills to exist has in fact been produced. He does not have to try to find out about His creation in order to see if it accords with His original intentions. God's knowledge of His will is sufficient for His knowledge of creation.

My conclusion at the end of the first part of this chapter was that it is logically possible that God could know what any given subjective experience is like for someone, without Himself needing to have any experiences. My basis for this claim was my argument that *knowing* what an experience is like is not itself something that involves some sort of conscious psychological activity or state, but rather is something that is purely intellectual – something that is abstract, and thus able to form part of the concept relevant to the experience in question.

My purpose in the second half of the chapter has been to argue that this logical possibility is actually a theological fact. God knows thoroughly the nature of everything He has created. He knows this because in knowing Himself, He knows what He conceives in creatively willing the existence of each type of thing, and moreover, knows that whatever He wills the existence of must be instantiated, purely as a result of His willing it. Among the things God wills the existence of are human beings with capacities

for having certain types of subjective experience. I have argued that this fact presupposes that God has a conception of what these capacities are capacities for. Logically, God must have a conception of what it is like to see the colour red or to feel pain before He can conceive of something that has the *capacity* for such experiences.

In view of the above arguments, I maintain that it is both possible and reasonable to hold that an unexperienced God knows what human subjective experiences are like, and therefore is able to grasp fully the relevant concepts. I conclude that the idea of divine omniscience does not, on these grounds, require that God be passible.

THE NATURE OF GOD'S LOVE

Central to the Christian faith is the idea that God is love. However, there are serious differences of opinion about how that love is to be characterized, and this fact has consequences for the question of divine passibility. For divine love can be spoken of only in terms drawn from discourse about various types of human relationship, and some types of human relationship are strongly associated with the feeling of emotions and with vulnerability. Where this is the case, analogies for divine love which are based on these types of relationship are likely to import the idea that God Himself feels emotions, and suffers, in His relationship with human beings.

An example of this can be found in Vincent Brümmer's book *The Model of Love*. Brümmer examines various kinds of relationship between people, and concludes that what he calls 'mutual fellowship'¹ is the only kind of human relationship worthy of the name 'love'. Because love just is this kind of relationship, love

is necessarily vulnerable, since each partner in a relationship of love is necessarily dependent on the freedom and responsibility of the other partner for establishing and for maintaining the relationship. It is logically impossible for either partner to establish or maintain the relationship by him or herself ... Since love requires that we give up our autonomy and acknowledge our dependence on somebody else, love threatens our sense of security.²

Having described some of the characteristics of mutual fellowship, as he conceives of it, Brümmer proceeds to use this idea as an analogy – or as he would put it, as a

¹ Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 156.

² Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 157.

‘conceptual model’³ – for talking about the divine-human relationship. He writes: ‘If God is a God of love, as believers claim, then *all* this [the characteristics described so far] applies also to the sort of relationship which God wants to establish and maintain with human persons’.⁴ According to Brümmer, there are, in this assertion, some ‘especially important’ implications, one of which is that, in this sort of relationship, God is vulnerable, and ‘[i]n fact, in this relation he becomes even more vulnerable than we do, since he cannot count on the steadfastness of our love in the way we can count on his steadfastness’.⁵

As Brümmer correctly observes, his ‘view of the love of God conflicts with the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, according to which God’s perfection entails that he lacks nothing and therefore can have no desires which could be thwarted, causing him to suffer’.⁶ However, since Brümmer’s view is that we should, when theologizing, give conceptual priority to the idea of divine love,⁷ it is not surprising, given his view of that love, that he says that we must jettison the idea of divine impassibility. He regards this move with equanimity, however. For he adds that ‘[i]n contemporary theology ... most theologians seem to have very little difficulty’ abandoning the old idea.⁸ This fact apparently helps to make the outcome of his argument acceptable!

This summary treatment of a long-established idea about God illustrates Kevin Vanhoozer’s point that many contemporary theologians use the idea of the love of God ‘as a critical fulcrum in order to revise Christian tradition’.⁹ Vanhoozer’s claim is not just that the idea of divine love controls contemporary thinking about the nature of God – a

³ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 156.

⁴ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 162 – my emphasis.

⁵ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 163

⁶ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 227

⁷ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 3

⁸ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 227f.

⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001, p. 21.

control that Brümmer clearly approves of – but also that there is a certain conception of love, namely ‘[l]ove as [r]eciprocal [r]elation’,¹⁰ which is held to be the only coherent and defensible conception of love, and which, when applied to God, requires the modification or abandonment of certain other attributes traditionally ascribed to Him.

In this chapter, I will examine an argument for divine passibility that is based on the idea that God loves us with a certain type of love, the analogy for which is the mutual love that exists between human persons who are friends or lovers. I will not dispute the claim that the mutual love that exists between persons can be the most perfect sort of love, and that therefore such a love should be attributed to God as being most worthy of Him. Nor will I dispute the claim that human beings have a deep need for such relations. I will contend, however, that those who use the idea of mutual love as a basis for rejecting divine impassibilism fail to keep a proper analogical distance between the use of the idea in the human context and its use theologically. I will also contend that the idea of benevolence as an analogy for divine love is necessary for a proper understanding of divine-human mutual love. I will argue that these two analogies should not be opposed to one another, but should be understood in the context of the creator-creature relation and humankind’s intended union with God.

I will begin my treatment of these matters by describing some of the concepts that each side of the debate takes into consideration when determining their respective positions on the question of divine (im)passibility.

Next, I will discuss Brümmer’s account of the church’s failure to adopt what he calls a ‘relational model’¹¹ of divine love, and his criticisms of the idea of benevolence – or ‘beneficence’, as he prefers to call it¹² – as a type of human relationship. My aim will

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, *ibid.* p. 18.

¹¹ Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 33.

¹² Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 155.

be to provide a preliminary defence of benevolence as a non-exploitative human relation, in opposition to Brümmer's caricature.

Next, I will discuss what I call Sarot's 'benevolence-versus-mutuality argument' for divine passibility. This will occupy a substantial part of the chapter.

Sarot compares the ideas of human benevolence and mutual love as analogies for divine love, and argues that mutual love is a better kind of love than benevolence because it fulfils a deep human need for mutuality. The idea that God is perfect demands that God love us with the better kind of love, and so mutual love is the kind of love we must attribute to Him. But necessarily, says Sarot, mutual love involves a mutuality of emotional responses. Since God loves us with a mutual kind of love, He must have emotional responses towards those whom He loves. Therefore God is passible.¹³

Although, unlike Brümmer, Sarot does not claim that benevolence, or beneficence, is essentially manipulative, he does nevertheless regard it as an impersonal relation between human beings. I will contend that this is an unduly restrictive view of the benevolence relation, and will try to show that the idea of benevolence need not exclude personal considerations. Further, I will argue that in view of certain asymmetries that exist in God's relation to human beings, Sarot's type of mutualism is not entirely appropriate as a conception of the divine-human relationship. I will argue that Sarot fails to take seriously enough the fact that, if the idea of mutual love is used as an *analogy*, we do not expect the idea to have exactly the same meaning in the theological context as it has in the human. I will argue that if due caution is exercised, there is not sufficient warrant for drawing from the analogy the conclusion that God is passible.

¹³ Sarot, *op.cit.* p. 82–91.

Finally, I will argue that the two analogies – benevolence and mutual love – should not be set in opposition to each other, but rather should be seen as complementary, enabling us to have a fuller and more comprehensive conception of divine love.

*

In his survey of passibilist theology, Warren McWilliams mentions an interesting criticism that S. Paul Schilling makes of those who support divine impassibilism. They are faulted for ‘work[ing] with an *a priori* judgement about divine perfection rather than examining concrete experience. Consequently, God is seen as the absolute, unrelated supreme being rather than as a loving, suffering God’.¹⁴ The problem, thinks Schilling, is that the impassibilist argument starts in the wrong place. Divine impassibility is inferred from certain pre-conceptions regarding the nature of God. No account is taken of the phenomenon of human suffering, nor of what the human experience of love actually involves.

However, despite Schilling’s criticism of impassibilist methodology, passibilists themselves are no less *a priori* in their approach to the question of divine impassibility – it is simply that they start from a different *a priori* position. The fact that many passibilist theologians are preoccupied with questions about theodicy, about the theology of the cross, and about political liberation, must not mislead one into thinking that they do not work with an *a priori* judgement, but rather work with an examination of the concrete experience of human love and suffering. For at the heart of their arguments is a particular conception of love, to which any ideas about divine love must conform, and with which divine impassibility is judged to be incompatible. Neither the passibilist nor the impassibilist can avoid using *a priori* arguments for their respective positions. For neither

¹⁴ McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, op. cit. p. 20.

can know from observation what God is like in this respect, or even produce a probabilistic argument for their respective views, based on some empirically well-supported hypothesis. The idea of divine (im)passibility can only be inferred from certain pre-conceptions about the nature of God and the nature of love.

This point must be emphasized especially in the face of claims that the nature of love, and of God's love in particular, was revealed, *a posteriori*, in the event of Christ's suffering. Thus, according to Richard Bauckham – and Jürgen Moltmann whom he expounds –

it is not strictly accurate to regard this argument [from, as it were, love to divine passibility] as an argument from the *nature* of human love to the nature of God. In that case, it would be just another kind of natural theology, independent of the cross ... It is not this argument, but the *cross* which reveals God's love to be suffering love.¹⁵

According to Bauckham and Moltmann, it is the historical event of Christ's suffering and death on a cross which is decisive in showing us that love essentially involves suffering, and that God's love for us involves Him in suffering. However, as I explained in my introduction to this thesis,¹⁶ the significance of the Incarnation – what it means for us – is determined by a logically prior view of the nature of the Incarnation and of the nature of Jesus Christ. The idea that God's love is a suffering love cannot simply be 'read off' from the event of the cross. Therefore, an appeal to the cross does not show that passibilist arguments in this connection are *a posteriori*. Passibilists bring their presuppositions to their view of this event just as much as impassibilists do.

Generally speaking, passibilists start with a concept of what they regard as the true nature of love, and use it in a conceptual argument in support of the idea that God is passible. By 'conceptual argument', I mean the use of a concept held to apply to

¹⁵ Richard Bauckham, 'In Defence of *The Crucified God*', op. cit. p. 96 – my emphases.

¹⁶ p 16f.

something to make inferences about what one may or may not predicate of that thing. Such an argument is premised on the logical connections which are presumed to exist between the components of the concept.

The conceptual argument under consideration here goes roughly as follows. An adequate conception of love implies that the person who loves is solicitous of the welfare of the one loved. Being solicitous of the loved one's welfare implies having certain appropriate emotional responses to various types of situation – for example, feeling glad when something good happens, feeling sad when something bad happens, and as occasion demands, suffering over the loved one's situation. According to this conception of love, someone cannot be correctly thought of as loving unless they respond to the loved one in the ways described. Since, necessarily, God is loving, He must respond to the vicissitudes of our lives in the same sort of way. Therefore, God is passible.¹⁷

The reasoning I have just described spells out the conceptual argument for divine passibility, an argument which is often present in a highly elliptical form in passibilist writings.¹⁸

This argument is usually accompanied by objections to the way God is traditionally conceived in the Christian church. A common complaint is that the traditional conception of God makes Him too remote from human life. As Sarot puts it, such a God is regarded as 'unsympathetic, indifferent and static' in relation to human life.¹⁹ Because passibilists assign a conceptual pre-eminence to the kind of love I described above, many of them reject, or at least modify, the traditional theistic array of divine attributes in order to accommodate their view of divine love. In particular, the ideas of divine immutability and

¹⁷ For a similar description of the logical connections between the various ideas which are supposedly implied by the concept of love, see Creel, *op. cit.* p. 113f.

¹⁸ See, for example, the statements which are reported in Warren McWilliams's survey of passibilist theology. McWilliams, *op. cit.* pp. 82, 89, 132, 135, & 157.

¹⁹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 89. See, for example, the views of Jürgen Moltmann, Geddes MacGregor, Daniel Day Williams, and Jung Young Lee, as expounded by McWilliams, *op. cit.* pp. 39, 83, 128f., 133, and 158. Although Sarot thinks that passibilists have exaggerated the extent to which the traditional God is remote

divine self-sufficiency come in for criticism. They are seen as a legacy of the early church's uncritical use of Greek philosophical theology.²⁰

As I have said, the passibilist begins his argument with a consideration of what he regards as the true nature of love. However, the *impassibilist* begins his argument at another point. While he accepts that the idea of divine love is of vital importance in his conception of God – as the impassibilist Creel says, it is a non-negotiable item²¹ – he insists, for reasons that concern the preservation of the idea that God completely transcends His creatures, that certain divine attributes cannot be dispensed with. Such is the status of attributes like divine self-sufficiency and divine omnipotence. In affirming these divine attributes, one thereby places a constraint on what one can admit as a characteristic of divine love. The sort of love one attributes to God must not conflict with these other attributes. However, say impassibilists, the sort of love passibilists attribute to God – involving as it does longing, vulnerability, and suffering – does conflict with these other attributes, and therefore must be judged unsuitable as a characterization of divine love.

In previous chapters of this thesis, I have argued that the idea of divine omnipotence excludes the possibility that God can suffer or be vulnerable, and I have used the same idea to cast doubt on the possibility that God can be subject to emotions. This limits the conceptual options regarding the kind of love one can attribute to God.

I have said little about the idea that God is self-sufficient. This is the idea that God has no need of anything external to Himself, for there is nothing external to Him which could in any way enhance the life he already has in complete fullness.²² The impassibilist infers from this that any 'desire' God has concerning anything that is external to Himself

from human life, he nevertheless regards their criticisms as to some extent justified. I will comment on Sarot's views later.

²⁰ Five of the six passibilists whose work is surveyed by McWilliams are critical in this way. It is not clear what the sixth thinks.

²¹ Creel, *op. cit.* p. 2.

can only be for the benefit of that thing and not for His own benefit. Such pure altruism²³ does not often occur in *human* relationships: there is often some need in the person who loves, and the other is loved partly because he or she fulfils the need. This is particularly so, for example, in erotic relationships between human beings, where there is a (mutual) desire for the fulfilment of certain physical and emotional needs. It is less so in parental love, where the nurturing and educating of the child are of paramount concern. Nevertheless, even in parental love there is some seeking for fulfilment in being a parent. Much of the joy, sorrow, and suffering that people experience is related to whether these needs are fulfilled or not. For example, there is the joy of a mother over her new-born and the rejoicing in motherhood. And there is the sadness experienced at the death of one's spouse, connected with the loss of companionship. However, says the impassibilist, insofar as joy, sorrow, and suffering are related to the subject's needs, such experiences must be denied of God, precisely because God has no needs. Although the idea of divine self-sufficiency does not, of itself, rule out the possibility that God is passible, it does rule out the possibility that He is passible on account of His own needs.²⁴

The idea that love is a mutual relation – involving a mutuality of need – is at the heart of Brümmer's conception of divine love. In trying to conceive what divine love is like,

what we require is a *relational* model of love, in terms of which we can talk meaningfully about the very complex relation between God and human persons. If we turn to the Christian tradition, however, we will discover to our surprise that most of the comprehensive concepts of love developed within it have been attitudinal rather than relational. Love has generally been taken to be an attitude of one person toward another, rather than as a relation between persons.²⁵

²² For patristic references for this idea, see Hallman, *The Descent of God*, op. cit. pp. 28, 30, 33, 71, 86, 120.

²³ I defend my theological use of this term in ch. 7, p. 189f.

²⁴ For a passibilist view of God based precisely on the rejection of the idea of divine self-sufficiency, see Fiddes, op. cit. p. 84ff. Fiddes says that there is in God 'a drive or thirst for fellowship with persons who enrich His being' (p. 85), and that it is God's will that He, God, should be 'completed and fulfilled by fellowship with the world' (p. 88).

²⁵ Brümmer, op. cit. p. 33 – his emphasis.

The Church's supposed failure to develop what Brümmer calls a relational model of love 'can probably be explained by the fact that western thought has suffered from a systematic blind spot for relations'.²⁶ The category of relation, unlike that of substance and attribute, has supposedly not been part of 'Western' ontology since Aristotle.²⁷

However, one should not be misled by Brümmer's false dichotomy between attitudinal concepts of love and relational concepts of love – as if a relation of love does not always involve an attitude of love, or an attitude of love does not always involve a relation of love. Moreover, in talking about how love is to be categorized, Brümmer smuggles in - by an equivocal use of the terms 'relation' and 'relational' – the idea that the love relation is an essentially *interpersonal* relation, that is, according to Brümmer's view of interpersonal relations, one which essentially involves mutual dependency and vulnerability. That Brümmer *does* equivocate is indicated by the fact that immediately after making the point about relations, he announces that later, he 'will argue that love should be interpreted as an interpersonal relationship rather than as an attitudinal ... attribute of persons, as has traditionally been done'²⁸ – and by the fact that, in the later discussion, love is not just a relation but one which essentially involves mutual dependency, vulnerability, and so on.²⁹

What Brümmer really objects to is any conception of love according to which love is described as unilateral – *x* loving *y*, but not *vice versa*. According to Brümmer, this was the conception of divine love traditionally adopted by the Church. As I aim to show later in this chapter, this view is incorrect.³⁰ However, given the traditional idea that God is self-sufficient and therefore has no needs, it is understandable why someone might think

²⁶ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 33.

²⁷ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 33.

²⁸ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 34.

²⁹ See Brümmer, *ibid.* part IV.

³⁰ See pp. 178—181.

that only a ‘unilateralistic’ conception of divine love was deemed suitable by the Church. For if God has no needs, He does not need our love; rather, it is we who need God’s love. According to Brümmer, this is ‘love’ which involves an attitude – on God’s part – but no relation, that is, no interpersonal relation. Such ‘love’, says Brümmer, is ‘mere beneficence ... [For] love entails beneficence, but unlike beneficence it also seeks a relationship’.³¹ Unlike benevolence or beneficence, the idea of love

entails a desire for reciprocation ... Love wants to be returned, requited, and in this way fulfilled in a relationship of mutual love. Of course this does not exclude the possibility of unrequited love ... [L]ove ... does not logically require ... reciprocation, but it does normally entail that [one] should *wish* for [it]³²

However, Brümmer does not appear to be entirely consistent on this point. For elsewhere he says that ‘[l]ove must by its very nature be a relationship of free mutual give and take, otherwise it cannot be love at all’.³³

It is just as well that Brümmer is prepared to entertain a less restrictive idea of love, for otherwise there would be serious consequences for Christian theology. For if there were no such thing as non-mutual personal love,³⁴ it would be difficult to make sense of St. Paul’s claim that ‘... God proves his love for us in that *while we were still sinners* Christ died for us ... *while we were enemies*, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son ...’.³⁵ However, if a *desire* for reciprocation is sufficient to make love mutual, then the idea that love is essentially mutual does not exclude the possibility that God can love His enemies.

More to the point, if love can exist even when an interpersonal relationship is merely being sought and is not actual, then it is possible that love can be one-sided,

³¹ Brümmer, op. cit. p. 155.

³² Brümmer, ibid. p. 155 – his emphasis.

³³ Brümmer, ibid. p. 161.

though not by intention. If love can be one-sided, how can benevolence reasonably be disqualified as a form of love on the grounds that it is one-sided, unless it is thought that the intention to seek an interpersonal relationship is something that is, by definition, absent? Brümmer does, in effect, stipulate such a definition, as I will explain in a moment, but it is not obvious to me that we should understand benevolence in this way. It is reasonable to claim that God's love for us, while we are His enemies, is a form of benevolence. In this situation, God's love for us – at this stage – just is His seeking and making possible the interpersonal relationship whereof Brümmer speaks.

Above, I said that Brümmer rejects the idea that God's love can be conceived as benevolence (or beneficence). Brümmer offers various reasons for this, most of which seem to be connected with the idea that benevolence/beneficence is one-sided. However, what Brümmer actually rejects is not so much the idea of benevolence as his caricature of it.

Despite the fact that Brümmer calls his discussion an 'inquiry', he shows no hesitation in classing beneficence as a 'manipulative' relation, and therefore as unacceptable as 'an adequate conceptual model for talking about our relationship with God'.³⁶ In Brümmer's view, beneficence is a relation in which the benefactor controls the beneficiary, and treats him as an object rather than as a person.³⁷ Although he concedes that 'love entails beneficence', love 'also seeks a relationship', which beneficence does not.³⁸ Quoting John Macmurray, Brümmer goes so far as to suggest that beneficence without what he calls a relationship is unjust, tyrannical, destructive, sentimental, and egocentric.³⁹ It seems that, for Brümmer, the fundamental problem with beneficence is that it does not take account of the fact that 'we ... need to be needed. If I am not needed,

³⁴ I use the term 'personal' to distinguish such love from one's love of inanimate objects, which, clearly, are not capable of reciprocation.

³⁵ Rom. 5:8,10 – my emphases.

³⁶ Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 157.

³⁷ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 158.

³⁸ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 155.

I am nothing. To be loved and have literally nothing asked of one, and to be made to feel that there is no way in which one can ever give back anything of any value, is to be made into a pauper'.⁴⁰ The only way we can feel ourselves valued, it seems, is by other people needing us. And the only way we can feel ourselves valued by God is by *His* needing us 'to bestow value on him' through our worship.⁴¹

It is undoubtedly true that beneficent acts can be performed with malevolent or self-interested intentions, and therefore can be manipulative. However, it does not necessarily follow from this fact that beneficence without a 'relationship' or without mutuality is manipulative. Many of Brümmer's objections to the idea of beneficence as a model of God's love for us can be met by joining to it the idea of benevolence. For benevolence can be conceived as including a desire to minister to the interests of the beneficiary, interests which Brümmer thinks are under threat on the beneficence model. For a truly benevolent person will not be tyrannical, or egocentric, or intentionally unjust. A benevolent person will seek whatever is in the best interests of the person towards whom he is being benevolent, and where beneficence is shown, it will be of the right kind. To insist that beneficence is automatically manipulative if it is not exercised in the context of a relation of free mutual give and take is simply wrong. For example, it is hardly conceivable that the spontaneous help a passer-by might give to a person injured in a car crash could be manipulative. Yet in such a situation, it is unlikely that there will be any relation involving free mutual give and take. The injured person – if badly injured – will be wholly dependent on the practical help of the passer-by.

Brümmer's portrait of benevolence – or 'beneficence' as he seems to prefer to call it – is deeply unappealing.⁴² Sarot provides a more sympathetic treatment. Although Sarot is clearly influenced in these matters by Brümmer's thinking, he is rightly less dogmatic

³⁹ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 161.

⁴⁰ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 241.

⁴¹ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 242.

about how love should be conceived.⁴³ He is happy to entertain the idea that God's love should be thought of as 'benevolence-love' – a term which translates the theological phrase '*amor benevolentiae*'⁴⁴ – even though he thinks that a more adequate conception is based on 'the analogy of a human relation of mutual fellowship'.⁴⁵ Clearly, there is a parallel here with Brümmer's distinction between a beneficence relation and one which is interpersonal. Sarot provides a point-by-point comparison of these two concepts, making clear what he thinks are some of the differences between them.

Note: Sarot distinguishes between benevolence-love and (mutual) fellowship-love by using the notation 'love_b' and 'love₁' respectively. Some readers may not find this notation helpful. Consequently, I have dispensed with it, and in quotations from Sarot, I have replaced 'love_b' with 'benevolence', and 'love₁' with 'mutual love'. As is standard, I have indicated all such substitutions with square brackets. The term 'benevolence' should be understood to include reference to beneficence. For it is reasonable to suppose that benevolence will always issue in beneficence, unless circumstances prevent such an issue or beneficence is withheld for benevolent reasons (for example, in order to preserve the dignity of someone one would otherwise help). In choosing 'mutual love' as a substitute for 'love₁', I have wanted to emphasize Sarot's basic distinction between the two types of love:

The basic difference between [mutual love] and benevolence is that their aims are different. The aim of [mutual love] is a relation of mutual fellowship between the lover and his beloved, in which both partners are completely happy. The aim of benevolence, on the other hand, is the well-being of the receiver of benevolence.⁴⁶

⁴² For a similar view, see Fiddes, op. cit. pp. 18, 50f.

⁴³ Brümmer was Sarot's supervisor for the doctoral thesis on which Sarot's book is based, and there are many references in the book to Brümmer's writings.

⁴⁴ Sarot, op. cit. p. 82.

⁴⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83.

⁴⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83.

Mutual love is clearly bilateral, whereas benevolence is unilateral.

Sarot tells us that his two analogies for divine love are ‘imperfect’, and that he has ‘abstract[ed] from specific instances of human [mutual love] and benevolence and give[n] us a rough sketch of the logic of both phenomena’.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, despite these qualifying remarks, he makes some very specific distinctions between the two types of love, distinctions which for Sarot make one type of love acceptable as an analogy for divine love and the other not.

Sarot distinguishes benevolence from mutual love in four respects.⁴⁸ Firstly, in the case of benevolence, one person is active (the giver) and the other is passive (the recipient). Secondly, the benevolent person is benevolent not because the recipient is valued in any way, but purely because the benevolent person perceives the other as having a need. Thirdly, in being benevolent, the benevolent person need not – and usually does not – make a deep commitment to the recipient. His commitment is limited to relieving the need of the recipient, and by what he wants to give of his own resources. Fourthly, the object of benevolence is anyone in need. The particular uniqueness of a recipient – in the sense in which it is sometimes said that every person is unique – is not valued.

Mutual love, on the other hand, involves the opposite of these characteristics. Each person gives to, and receives from, the other. Each person values both his own well-being and that of the other, and acts accordingly. Each party is personally involved with the other, such that each can reasonably make demands on the other. And each regards the other as unique, and therefore as irreplaceable.

⁴⁷ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83.

⁴⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83ff.

Sarot's aim in comparing these two concepts of love is to provide a basis for arguing that God is possible. His argument may be summarized as follows:

1. There are two sorts of human love which are used by contemporary theologians as analogies for divine love, namely benevolence and mutual love.
2. Mutual love involves mutuality between the persons concerned, benevolence does not.
3. Mutuality in relationships is a fundamental, divinely-created need in human beings.
4. It is reasonable to suppose that God provides for the fulfilment of such needs.
5. Mutual love is superior to benevolence because it fulfils the need for mutuality.
6. Since God is perfect, He would not love us with an inferior type of love. Rather, one may presume that He loves us with the superior kind, namely with mutual love.
7. Therefore, the better analogy for divine love must be mutual love.
8. However, the concept of mutual love implies that each person is emotionally vulnerable to the other.
9. Since, as has been argued, divine love must be of the mutual sort, God must be emotionally vulnerable in relation to us.
10. Therefore, God is possible.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* pp 82–91.

It is important to understand that according to the conception of it used here, mutual love cannot be truly or fully mutual without it involving a mutuality of emotions. On Sarot's conception of it, mutual love 'is not only a thing of the will and the intellect, but also a thing of the heart, a thing of feelings and emotions. If God cannot experience these, He cannot' love in a mutual way.⁵⁰ This conception of mutual love forms an essential link connecting the idea that human beings have a fundamental need for mutuality of this sort, and the idea that God is possible in His relationship with us.

Sarot's conception of mutual love includes a number of ideas, the most prominent being that the persons involved have emotional responses to each other, as occasion demands. In this sort of relationship, my circumstances and my attitudes to you are matters of importance to you, and therefore evoke various emotional responses from you, as occasion demands. Moreover, your response to me – and even whether you have a response – are matters of importance to me. And it is likewise the other way round.

You feel certain emotions towards me because you have committed a substantial part of your life to me, as I have to you. You have made this commitment because you value me, as I value you. Your emotions are significant to me because they give me some indication of the value you place on me, and similarly with my emotions towards you. For this reason, it is important that neither of us be 'emotionally out of reach'.⁵¹

Sarot's conception of mutual love includes other ideas as well. For example, a mutually loving relationship is based on the understanding that the persons involved agree to it.⁵² The happiness of one depends on the responses of the other, and *vice versa*.⁵³ The love reciprocated is of the same type as that received. This is a logical requirement of the idea of mutuality used in this conception. If one person differed from

⁵⁰ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 85.

⁵¹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 89.

⁵² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

the other in the type of love shown, the relation of mutual love would not, by definition, exist.⁵⁴

Having argued that, necessarily, mutual love involves a two-way expression of emotions, Sarot asserts that '[h]uman beings ... have a profound need for such relations'.⁵⁵ Human beings need such a relation because it gives them a sense of being valued by another. It is the element of emotional mutuality that is of vital importance in this respect. When the life of one person deeply affects another, the responses evoked reflect back to the person the importance which his life has for the other. This is something which benevolence – as Sarot conceives of it – cannot achieve. This is why Sarot thinks mutual love is the better kind of love.

Sarot claims that 'we have been created with a desire for mutual fellowship that can be completely satisfied only by entering into a relation of mutual fellowship with God'.⁵⁶ If this is so, it is reasonable to suppose that a God who is perfectly good would not create us with such a desire and not also make provision for its fulfilment. And since God is perfect, He will love us in the way that is most effective in fulfilling it. If, when we conceive of a perfect being, we are presented with a choice between two possible types of love to attribute to that being, one type effective in fulfilling divinely-created human needs and one *ineffective*, we would expect to choose the one which is effective. Therefore, if the choice of analogies for divine love is between mutual love and benevolence, it is clear that only the analogy of mutual love will do.

Now the final step in Sarot's argument can be taken. Sarot has asserted that a mutuality of emotional responses is a necessary component in any conception of mutual love. A relation between persons cannot be one of mutual love if the possibility of emotional interaction does not exist. Since it has already been argued that God can love

⁵³ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 87.

⁵⁴ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83.

⁵⁵ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 88.

us adequately only with a mutual kind of love, mutual emotional responses between God and ourselves must be possible. In which case, God is passible.

Having expounded Sarot's benevolence-versus-mutuality argument for divine passibility, I will now present my criticisms of that argument. I will argue that in view of certain asymmetries that exist between God and ourselves – deriving from the fact that God is creator and we are His creatures – Sarot's description of what he calls mutual love is too mutualistic to be entirely suitable as an analogy for divine love. I will argue that Sarot fails to take seriously enough the fact that the success of an analogy depends on how close the resemblance is, in certain respects, between the two items being compared, and that care must be taken regarding the conclusions to be drawn from an analogy. Further, where terms and ideas are used analogically, meaning in one context is *related* to meaning in another, but not identical.

In the light of these considerations, I will argue that Sarot's benevolence-versus-mutuality argument is not sound.

Before I proceed with my arguments, I will comment on the distinctions Sarot makes between benevolence and mutual love, distinctions which I outlined earlier.⁵⁷

Although Sarot does say that his descriptions are only a 'rough sketch' of these two types of love,⁵⁸ they are, in my opinion, too rough, especially in view of the fact that they are the basis for 'draw[ing] some conclusions with respect to the differences between the interpretation of the divine love as [mutual love] and as [benevolence]'.⁵⁹ With so much at stake, one must be as accurate as the subject matter will bear.

For example, Sarot assumes that the benevolent person does not perceive a value in the other, but a need. The implications for the view that God loves us benevolently are serious. For if we use the idea of benevolence as an analogy for divine love, there is an

⁵⁶ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 90.

⁵⁷ p.163.

⁵⁸ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 83.

implication that we have no value in God's eyes. Not only is this a completely dejecting thought; it is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament.⁶⁰ However, there is good reason to reject Sarot's assumption. No doubt the recipient's need is what is focused on in any benevolent *act*, but benevolence itself is an attitude of goodwill. Goodwill does not just focus on relieving some specific need: it is a general desire for the well-being of another. And rather than assuming that the benevolent person does not perceive a value in the other, it is more plausible to assume that the benevolent person performs a benevolent act precisely because – minimally or otherwise – he or she perceives value in the person helped.

Again, Sarot is no doubt right in claiming that radical commitment is typically reserved for relationships of mutual love. However, there is no reason in principle why benevolence need exclude a radical or unlimited commitment to the well-being of another. It is not hard to conceive of various degrees of commitment. Sarot himself concedes that 'someone perfectly benevolent ... will do his utmost to provide [for] the needs of the other'.⁶¹ Imagine, for example, the various degrees of benevolent commitment it is possible to make to a tramp. One could run a soup kitchen and merely provide him with soup every lunchtime. One could go further, and provide him with a place in a hostel, supplying him with food, clothing, medicine, and so on. Or one could go further still, and invite him to live in one's own home. Nor need benevolence be confined to this kind of practical, material help. One's attitudes and the way one conducts oneself – including the expression of one's emotions and one's 'body language' – can all help communicate to another that one is concerned for and solicitous of his or her well-being. Why does Sarot think that these self-expressions belong only in the context of a relation of mutual love and not in the context of benevolence?

⁵⁹ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 83.

⁶⁰ See, for example, John 3:16.

⁶¹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 84.

Yet again, Sarot claims that according to the concept of benevolence, the benevolent person is not interested in the personal qualities of the recipient, and in how these may differ from the qualities of other people. Nor are the benevolent person's actions performed in any way that is responsive to these qualities. The benevolent person's responses to the recipient are wholly determined by the recipient's wants and needs. Where wants and needs are similar in two or more people, the benevolent response will be the same in each case. Thus, in the story of the Good Samaritan, 'if another man had been left half dead by the robbers, the compassionate Samaritan would have acted just as benevolently' as he did with the first.⁶²

According to this picture, the benevolent person has no regard for the person who has the need. Sarot seems to suggest that, necessarily, a benevolent person will, as it were, detach the want or need from the person to be helped and deal with it impersonally. As I mentioned earlier,⁶³ Brümmer's way of making this point is to say that the benevolent person treats the recipient as an object and not as a person.

Certainly, in acting benevolently towards someone, a benevolent person may ignore differences between that recipient and another in similar circumstances. Perhaps time and resources and the urgency of a problem do not permit any other approach. For example, when a soup kitchen is set up, such a provision is aimed only at the alleviation of the hunger of the destitute. Given the necessary limitations of the benevolent commitment, the service is relatively impersonal. However, this fact need not imply that the benevolent person would not go further and become more personally involved with a recipient if circumstances permitted, as I suggested above. And it certainly does not imply that a recipient is treated as an object, in the sense that he or she is merely a means of satisfying the benevolent person's desire to be benevolent. For if that were the case, it would be contrary to true benevolence, which is an unselfish desire for the well-being of another.

⁶² Sarot, *ibid.* p. 85.

Further, the concept of benevolence does not necessarily imply that beneficence is impersonal, in the sense of disregarding the preferences or wishes of those who are helped, or failing to take into account differences in qualities between one person and another. Rather, it is reasonable to suppose that a benevolent person can be equally beneficent to people in similar circumstances of need, while at the same time taking account of their diverse personal qualities.

For example, suppose that on my way to work I meet a tramp who is hungry and needs a meal. Further on, on the same journey, I meet another tramp who is hungry and needs a meal. The tramps' needs, at the time I meet them, are very similar – they are both hungry and they both need a meal. Being a benevolent person, I buy each of them a meal. Thus, I am as beneficent to one tramp as I am to the other. I show them equal consideration. However, this fact need not imply that I am unable to recognize differences between them, or that I am unable or unwilling to tailor my beneficence towards them accordingly. As Gene Outka remarks in a similar context, 'equal consideration is not the same as identical treatment'.⁶⁴ I can be equally beneficent towards the two tramps, and yet I can treat them in a way that shows I recognize personal differences between them. For even on the occasion of this simple act of beneficence, I can go some way towards showing this recognition. I can ask them what they would like for breakfast, and procure their respective preferences – one likes porridge, and the other bacon and eggs.

So far, I have argued that Sarot's description of benevolence needs amending. However, I have not yet investigated how far Sarot's idea of mutual love can be taken as an analogy for divine love. I will contend that this analogy is considerably weakened if one takes into account the basic asymmetry that exists between God and His human creatures.

⁶³ p. 160.

The love that God has for us does not, as it were, exist in isolation. Any conception of it must take into account the nature of the persons between whom the love exists, and their relation to one another in certain other respects. This 'contextualization' is something that occurs when we conceive of love between human persons. For example, the love between a parent and a very young child must be understood in the light of the fact that the child depends completely on the parent for its well-being, and is subject to the control and authority of the parent. Because of the nature of the parent/child relation, the love that exists between them is not mutual in the way that Sarot uses that term. They cannot, for example, love one another as equals. Yet equality is strongly implied by Sarot's description of mutual love. According to that description, there is an expectation on each side of the relationship that each will value the other, be committed to the other, respect the uniqueness of the other, and give to and receive from the other. There is a sort of equality in status between the parties in these respects. These are matters which should at least be considered when assessing the appropriateness of a type of love when the type in question is used as an analogy for divine love.

There are several respects in which the relation between God and human beings is *unequal*, and I will mention three that are of particular relevance to the question of suitable analogies for divine love.

Underlying these three inequalities is the asymmetrical creator/creature relation that exists between God and ourselves. The existence of each and every one of us depends solely upon God's creative and sustaining power. It is purely as an effect of His will that we exist. Any personal relationship that might be said to exist between a human being and God is possible only because ultimately it is God who originates and sustains the existence of that human being.

⁶⁴ Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, p. 20.

The first of the three inequalities concerns the theonomous relation that exists between God and human beings. God commands us to do – or to refrain from doing – certain things. This is established at the very beginning of the Bible’s account of God’s dealings with human beings. God commands humankind to ‘[b]e fruitful and multiply’,⁶⁵ and a little later forbids the man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁶⁶ Throughout the Bible, God is depicted as one who commands and prohibits. A constant theme is that obeying God is a necessary condition of human well-being. Further, it is assumed in the Bible that God is *entitled* to command and prohibit. For example, according to Daniel 4:35, God ‘does what he wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him, “What are you doing?”’. Similarly, in Romans 9:20, Paul says, ‘But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?’

Secondly, the divine-human relation is theocentric. Not only is God in the commanding rôle, with our well-being depending on our obedience to God’s commands; God’s will is that we be changed in such a way that we can have a share in the divine life. This is why Paul urges his readers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds⁶⁷ so that, as Peter puts it, they ‘may become participants in the divine nature’.⁶⁸ Having ‘created humankind in his image’,⁶⁹ God’s will is that *His* image in us be renewed so that we are fit to share in *His* life.

Thirdly, there is an inequality in respect of need. Traditionally, God is thought to be self-sufficient.⁷⁰ He has no needs: His well-being is perfect. This can hardly be said of human beings, who need things like food, rest, knowledge, companionship – and above all, spiritual renewal.

⁶⁵ Gen. 1:28

⁶⁶ Gen. 2:16–17.

⁶⁷ Rom. 12:2.

⁶⁸ 2 Peter 1:4.

⁶⁹ Gen. 1:27.

The asymmetries I have described count against the possibility that divine love can be strongly mutualistic in the way Sarot conceives of mutual love. According to Sarot,

within a perfect relation of mutual fellowship, both partners remain themselves, with their own character, their own will and wishes. If one of the partners allows the other to exercise complete control over all his actions, he does not behave like a free person any more, but like an extension of his partner. In such a case a relation of mutual fellowship is impossible.⁷¹

What Sarot is describing here is a meshing of two otherwise separate lives. Although one partner seeks to please the other, and for the sake of the relationship will accept some influence or control on the part of the other, there remains for each person a large measure of autonomy. One partner will not conform himself entirely to the will and wishes of the other. Separateness, autonomy, being one's own person, and the like, have an important place in close personal relationships between human beings, despite the fact that one person is to a greater or lesser degree sharing his or her life with the other. These things are necessary for one's self-respect and one's respect for the other person, and for the flourishing of the relationship.

However, these values do not play such an important rôle in the divine-human relationship. Certainly, it is God's will that we love Him freely, and not under compulsion. We do, in this sense, have a certain volitional independence in relation to God, an independence which God holds in being, as He holds all things in being.⁷² Moreover, it is not God's will that whatever is good in us should be obliterated, for whatever is good in us is part of God's image in us. However, ultimately, human well-being depends on our being transformed into the likeness of God, and this can happen

⁷⁰ See my brief discussion of this idea earlier in the chapter, p. 156f.

⁷¹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p 84.

⁷² On this, see McCabe, *God Matters*, *op. cit.* pp. 11–15.

only if our wills are conformed to His will. The change required is unilateral. It is not God's happiness that is at stake: it is our own.

Brümmer is alert to this problem.⁷³ 'It seems,' he says, 'that subjecting oneself unconditionally to the Will of God in this way, entails the abandonment of one's own moral autonomy as a person which ... is a necessary condition for one's relationship with God to be a relation of loving fellowship'.⁷⁴ Brümmer tries to deal with this problem by saying that 'every moral agent necessarily has to submit unconditionally to some ultimate standard of value',⁷⁵ and that in our relationship with God it is no different. It is simply that in this case it is God's will that is the standard.

However, Brümmer has not addressed the issue. Submitting to an ultimate standard of value is not the same thing as submitting to a person. While it is true that in submitting ourselves to God's will we are, among other things, making a *moral* choice, the fact remains that in purely human relationships we do not usually make such a choice by submitting ourselves to the will of the other person. Wherever our ultimate standard of value lies, it is not in the will of another human being. In that respect, the personal relationship between God and a human person differs from purely human interpersonal relationships. There is therefore a disanalogy in this respect between these two types of relationship.

Again, a great inequality exists between the blessedness of God's life and the imperfection of our own. As Paul Wadell says, we cannot partake of God's blessedness unless 'we are made to "fit" ... God. God is our happiness, but God is absolutely beyond us. In Thomas's language, we must made "proportionate" to God, we must fit the end we seek, and this is what grace achieves. Grace "elevates" us to the end that is our

⁷³ Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 221ff.

⁷⁴ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 222.

⁷⁵ Brümmer, *ibid.* p. 223.

fullness.’⁷⁶ Although God does not impose Himself on us, we cannot gain happiness in a relationship with God without submitting our wills to His and allowing Him to shape us as He sees fit. This is a fundamental principle of the spiritual life.

The idea that human beings need to be made to fit God or need to be elevated to His level cannot easily accommodate Sarot’s kind of mutualism, nor his idea of interpersonal autonomy. For the person who is fitted or elevated to God does not remain autonomous in the way Sarot describes. Nor do we, in human relationships of mutual love, fit or elevate others to share in our happiness. This is a further respect in which the appropriateness of Sarot’s mutual love analogy is doubtful.

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Whatever the differences between Sarot’s conception of benevolence and his conception of mutual love, the basic point that Sarot is making is that human beings have a deep need for mutuality of a certain sort, and only mutual love can satisfy that need. At this point, it is necessary to recall Sarot’s remark that mutual love is not only a thing of the will and intellect: it also involves emotions. Earlier, I explained the significance of emotions for Sarot in this sort of close interpersonal relationship.⁷⁷ One person’s emotions in response to another reveals to the other the value he or she places on the other, and *vice versa*. The expression of emotion communicates a valuation, and for this reason, says Sarot, emotions are essential to mutual love. In mutual love, we want to be valued, and we know that we are if the other responds to us with emotions in the appropriate way.

⁷⁶ Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, p. 125.

⁷⁷ p 165.

However, as I will point out in chapter 7, associated with this view of the rôle of emotions in close interpersonal relationships is the view that such emotions have valuational merit in themselves – emotions do not merely *indicate* the beliefs and desires which one person has concerning the other. Nevertheless, it is these beliefs and desires, I will argue, which are at the heart of such emotions, constituting the valuing of one person by another. And if, for human beings, emotions are, in fact, merely a *means* by which one person communicates his or her beliefs and desires to another, whatever is peculiar to emotion can be dispensed with in conceiving of God’s love for us – what matters are His beliefs and ‘desires’ as they relate to ourselves.

The starting-point for Sarot’s benevolence-versus-mutuality argument for divine passibility is his claim that the ideas of benevolence and mutual love are *analogies* which contemporary theologians use for thinking about divine love. And since they are analogies, the implication must be that the terms ‘benevolence’ and ‘mutual love’ – when used to describe God’s love for us – are not used in a straightforward sense. Rather, they are used in a sense which deviates from the sense in which they are normally used. Otherwise, why call the ideas they refer to *analogies*?

According to J.M. Soskice, terms which are used analogically are 'not exactly equivalent' to their straightforward use, although they 'are none the less related'.⁷⁸ This can be seen, for example, in the use of the term 'divine action'. What are we to understand by the use of this term? Not that God brings about a change in the world in the same way as in the world one thing changes another. For God is not part of the world. He is, as it were, outside the causal matrix of the world. Rather, God merely has to will a change in the world for that change to occur. Yet, because it is a change which He intentionally brings about, it is not inappropriate to call His bringing it about an action, for in virtue of the fact that it is intentional, it is like that which we call a human action. Applying a general remark of Soskice's concerning analogy to my specific example, 'here is a related but not an identical use' to the one we make of the term 'action' when we apply it to what human beings do when they intentionally bring about a change.⁷⁹

If, in a theological context, the terms 'benevolence' and 'mutual love' are used in a sense which is related but not equivalent to their use in a non-theological context, this implies that, in respect of the concepts referred to by these terms, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the various features of a concept used theologically on the one hand, and its related concept used non-theologically on the other. Some features will be common to both uses, others will not, and allowance must be made for this fact.

In this respect, Sarot and Brümmer are inconsistent. They both recognize that in using analogy and metaphor in theological discourse, one must be cautious about the implications drawn regarding the nature of God or regarding the nature of His relationship with us.⁸⁰ And yet both of them fail to exercise this due caution when they use the idea of mutual love between human beings as an analogy or metaphor for divine-human love.

⁷⁸ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 65.

⁷⁹ Soskice, *ibid.* p. 66. On the intelligibility of describing as an *action* God's willing, and thus bringing about, a certain change in creation, see William Alston, 'How to Think About Divine Action' in Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson eds, *Divine Action*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990, ch.V.

In Brümmer's case, this is apparent from remarks of his which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter.⁸¹ Having given us his description of mutual fellowship between human beings – a fellowship which essentially involves vulnerability and dependence for both parties – he asserts that *all* the characteristics which he identifies in this description apply to the sort of relationship God wants to have with us. Yet he does not, as far as I can tell, give any grounds for the legitimacy of such a wholesale application of this description to the divine-human relationship. He simply assumes an exact correspondence.

In the case of Sarot's conception of mutual love, Sarot maintains that the idea of having or being able to have emotions is an essential feature of the concept of mutual love, and that therefore any theological application of that concept must include the idea that God has or can have emotions. There is a one-to-one correspondence in this respect.

As a matter of fact, passibilist conclusions have not always been drawn from the use of the mutual-love or friendship analogy. This is particularly the case within the Roman Catholic tradition. There is within Roman Catholicism – which officially endorses divine impassibility⁸² – a strong tradition of using the idea of human friendship as an analogy for divine love. As Romanus Cessario remarks, in a handbook of Catholic theology,

[i]n the course of its theological development, the Christian tradition again and again identifies the good of friendship among human persons as the single human experience best able to illumine specifically the meaning of divine love.⁸³

⁸⁰ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 33 and Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 13ff.

⁸¹ p. 149f.

⁸² On this, see Weinandy, *op. cit.* p. 38 n. 21. McWilliams observes that divine (im)passibilism has been more of a Protestant issue than a Roman Catholic one – McWilliams, *op. cit.* p. 23.

⁸³ Romanus Cessario, *The Virtues, or the Examined Life*. London: Continuum, 2002, p. 61. For a very brief account of this tradition in the early patristic period, see Alan C. Mitchell, 'Friendship' in Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig eds, *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994, p. 334. For accounts of Aquinas's idea of divine love as friendship, see Wadell, *op. cit.* ch. 5; John Burnaby, *Amor Dei*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938, pp. 267–272; and Michael Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*. Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1986, pp. 282–292. See also E. Hardwick, 'Charity' in Davis, H.F. et al, *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology*. Vol. 2. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1967, pp. 22–27.

And while this relationship between God and the human person is possible solely because it is a benevolent gift from God – it is something which naturally we cannot attain to but to which we must be ‘elevated’ to enjoy – it is the human person who must receive the gift, who must have the right attitude and be rightly disposed towards God, who must cooperate, in order for the gift to be appropriated and enjoyed.⁸⁴ It is thus that there is in this relationship a large element of mutuality. And in view of this fact, Moltmann’s claim – as expounded by Bauckham – that ‘traditional theism has to eliminate from the notion of God’s love for the world any element of reciprocity’ is incorrect.⁸⁵ The reason Moltmann makes this claim is that he assumes that reciprocity in interpersonal relationships essentially involves each party to the relation being *affected* in some way, and since traditionally it is denied that God can be affected in His relationships with human beings, he assumes that traditionalists must deny that God’s love can be reciprocal. On the traditional view, says Moltmann, ‘God’s love ... has to be understood ... as purely *active* benevolence’.⁸⁶ However, why should reciprocity or mutuality be understood as a relationship which essentially involves not only activity but also *passivity* on both sides? Why can there not be activity without passivity, or with passivity on only one side? Like Sarot’s claim that mutuality in interpersonal relationships essentially involves emotions, no grounds are given for this stipulation.

It is noteworthy that a number of writers who address the issue of divine love and (im)passibility seem automatically to assume that impassibilists subscribe to a benevolence view of divine love.⁸⁷ One reason for this assumption may be that benevolence is thought to be impersonal, and therefore unemotional, a type of love that

⁸⁴ On this, see Hardwick, *op. cit.* pp. 22–27.

⁸⁵ Bauckham, *op. cit.* p. 95.

⁸⁶ Bauckham, *ibid.* p. 95 – my emphasis.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Sarot, *op. cit.* pp. 33, 89; Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 227; Fiddes, *op. cit.* p. 17f; Wolterstorff, ‘Suffering Love’, *op. cit.* p. 209f; and K. J. Clark, ‘Hold Not Thy Peace’, *op. cit.* p. 181.

would fit in with the impassibilist idea that God cannot have emotions. This is a view of benevolence which I questioned earlier in this chapter.⁸⁸

A good example of this assumption being made is Sarot's citation of Michael Dodds and Herbert McCabe as impassibilists who subscribe to the benevolence-love analogy.⁸⁹ Yet in the writings to which Sarot refers, there is clear evidence that Dodds and McCabe do not share Sarot's view of their position.

According to Dodds' description of divine love – which closely follows that of Thomas Aquinas, whom he expounds – God's love is not 'mere well-wishing',⁹⁰ it is not 'a sort of benevolence or beneficence which would accomplish good for others, but on a level which is [in fact] less than that of love'.⁹¹ Rather, says Dodds – following Aquinas – 'friendship is the most perfect sort of love and is the kind of love that can be found between God and human beings'.⁹² Such friendship-love is vigorous, powerful, and intimate.⁹³ It involves 'a mutual fellowship of lover and beloved founded on a certain communion or sharing'.⁹⁴

Similarly, McCabe seems to suggest that what we might call God's benevolence towards us – God's 'caring for his creatures and doing good for them'⁹⁵ – is scarcely worthy of being considered a kind of divine love. A more adequate conception of divine love is indicated by the kind of relationship that the Father and the Son have with each other. The love that exists between them is a love all human beings are called to share.⁹⁶

Clearly, whatever place benevolence may have in impassibilist thinking about divine love, one cannot assume that it necessarily excludes the idea of a mutual love between God and human persons – a love which God benevolently wills for each human

⁸⁸ See p. 168ff.

⁸⁹ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 82 n. 44.

⁹⁰ Dodds, *op. cit.* p. 289

⁹¹ Dodds, *ibid.* p. 302.

⁹² Dodds, *ibid.* p. 290.

⁹³ Dodds, *ibid.* p. 290f.

⁹⁴ Dodds, *ibid.* p. 290.

⁹⁵ McCabe, *God Matters*, *op. cit.* p. 17.

person. This particularly applies to those whose theology is Roman Catholic, as is the case with Dodds and McCabe.

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In the preceding section, the aim of my discussion has been threefold. Firstly, I have argued that Sarot's description of benevolence is unduly restricted, and requires certain amendments. Secondly, I have argued that his strongly mutualistic idea of interpersonal love, as applied to the divine-human relation, does not sit comfortably with the fundamental asymmetries which that relation involves. Thirdly, I have argued that the benevolence-versus-mutuality argument requires an undue restriction on the way the idea of mutual love is used as an analogy for divine love. The argument requires that, in the theological context, we use the idea in exactly the same way in which we use it in a purely human context. However, if this restriction is removed, Sarot's argument for divine passibility from the analogy of mutual love is considerably weakened. For if there is not an exact equivalence between how the term 'mutual love' is used in the two contexts, precisely because one use is analogical, then one must not presume that in the new (theological) context the idea of mutual love would necessarily imply an emotional element, or that those who use the idea of mutual love intend, in part, to refer to that element.

Shortly, I will close this chapter with some further remarks about the two analogies I have discussed. First, however, I want to draw attention to an assumption that Sarot makes regarding how God fulfils our needs.

Sarot argues that the idea of mutual love is better as an analogy for divine love than the idea of benevolence, on the grounds that a perfect God would love us with a love that

⁹⁶ McCabe, *ibid.* p. 18f.

fulfils our God-given need for mutuality, and this is something that divine mutual love could do and that divine benevolence could not. However, Sarot assumes that God fulfils such a need directly, in a relationship with Him. It does not seem to occur to Sarot that God might fulfil our need for mutuality indirectly, that is, by making it possible for human beings to have mutual relationships with one another. Inevitably, such relationships are imperfect, but the fact that they are mutual is what counts in the present argument.

One can think of other human needs that require this indirect approach. For example, we do not look to God to fulfil what may reasonably be claimed to be our human need for recreation. God fulfils this need insofar as He provides, as it were, the materials for its fulfilment, but it is only an indirect fulfilment on His part. It is human beings themselves who have to find ways of using those materials in order to provide themselves with recreational activities.

In the light of this fact, it is not therefore unreasonable to conceive of God as indirectly providing for a person's need for mutuality by providing other human beings with whom he or she can be in a mutual relationship. Thus, one could accept Sarot's point about human beings having a deep need for mutuality in relationships without having to accept that that fact – if such it be – determines the type of love God can be said to love us with. For God's love would not be directly involved in the fulfilling of the need.

Sarot claims that being in a relation of mutual fellowship is one of 'the deepest needs of human beings'.⁹⁷ Yet what is of importance for Sarot, in respect of need, is not so much the fellowship involved as the mutuality. The emphasis is not on sharing a life, but rather on the emotional responsiveness of each party to the relationship towards the other. What matters, according to Sarot's description of mutual love, is that A conveys to

⁹⁷ Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 90.

B that B is important and valuable to A, and vice versa, and this is done most effectively when each has appropriate emotional responses to the other.⁹⁸

Is this the best way to think about the relationship that exists between God and those who love Him? One can assume that human beings are important and valuable to God simply in virtue of being created, and created in His image. Likewise, those who love God do so because He is important for them. However, there is much more to the relationship than a mutual valuing. It is the sharing of a life. The happiness which those who love God aim at does not consist in their having a sense of being important or valuable to God, although that may be part of it. It consists in being united to God, being like Him, and sharing in His blessedness. These things are central to a Christian conception of the spiritual life. Sarot's requirement that we also build into the analogy of mutual love the idea of a mutual valuing that comes through mutual emotional responses is driven by the demands of his benevolence-versus-mutuality argument. The requirement does not necessarily arise from a consideration of what the terms 'communion', 'friendship', or 'fellowship' mean when applied to the divine-human relationship. And yet these terms are certainly appropriate for describing the believer's relation with God, for they express the being together, the likeness, the sharing of a life, that marks, or should mark, such a relation.

Moreover, these terms are not used in exactly the same way as they are used in a purely human context – for example, when speaking about friendship between two human beings, or about erotic love. For in the theological context, the ideas these terms express are regarded as perfectly compatible with the asymmetries in the divine-human relation I discussed earlier.⁹⁹ Firstly, I said, God demands obedience from us. Secondly, it is we who are to be transformed into *His* likeness. And thirdly, although God is benevolent towards us, we, on account of God's self-sufficiency, cannot be benevolent

⁹⁸ Sarot, *ibid.* p. 90.

towards Him. Yet none of this militates against the legitimacy of describing God's relationship with us as one of communion, friendship, or fellowship. It is simply that these terms must be understood in a sense which is *related* to their use in a human context, and not as equivalent.

Nor is it helpful to take an oppositional approach to the question of which analogy – benevolence or mutual love – is more appropriate for describing the nature of divine love. For there are merits in both analogies, and further, they complement each other.

Brümmer claims that 'love entails beneficence, but unlike beneficence it also seeks a relationship'.¹⁰⁰ However, what is implied in the second part of this claim is disputable. There is no reason in principle why a person who is benevolent (or beneficent) should not also seek to establish a 'relationship', as Brümmer puts it, with the person towards whom he is benevolent. This is precisely how we are to understand God's loving and benevolent initiative towards us in the Incarnation. And although success in seeking a relationship does alter the character of what was originally a purely one-way, benevolent relation, God's benevolence towards His human creatures remains at the heart of any friendship they may have with Him. God's benevolence is His willing and communicating His goodness to others, and in particular it is His willing that human beings be transformed into those who are able to share His life. To use, in another context, John Burnaby's words, union with God 'is the greatest of all good things' for human beings, and part of God's benevolence is His will 'to overcome all hindrance' to that union.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ pp. 170–175.

¹⁰⁰ Brümmer, *op. cit.* p. 155.

¹⁰¹ Burnaby, *Amor Dei*, *op. cit.* p. 310.

THE CONCEIVABILITY OF A LOVING BUT IMPASSIBLE GOD

It is not surprising that many people do not find it easy to conceive of a God who is loving but impassible. For all our experience of persons who are loving is of persons who also have emotions. The two attributes are strongly associated in our minds. As Paul Helm remarks, 'To us such notions as commitment and intense concern are strongly associated with feeling, and with the capacity to react to situations in appropriate ways'.¹ The strength of this association is such that many people consider there to be a *logical* connection between, on the one hand, the ideas of commitment and intense concern that are implied by the concept of love, and on the other, the idea of having certain emotions or feelings. So, for example, David Pugmire claims that

a feeling can be evaluative where the concern integral to it is not detachable from being felt. For the concern actually takes the form of having the feeling, of being moved in a particular way ... Feelings are valuings of the things evoking them in as much as they are *sui generis* ways these things matter to us²

In saying that the concern involved in these feelings or emotions is not detachable from being felt, Pugmire means it is not *logically* detachable. A concern fitting exactly the same description as the one integral to the emotion logically could not exist in a non-emotional form. For 'emotional' concerns (or valuings) are *sui generis* ways things matter to us. True, deep concern, such as love essentially involves, is logically possible

¹ Paul Helm, 'The Impossibility of Divine Passibility.' In: de S. Cameron, N. M. ed. *The Power and Weakness of God*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990, pp. 119–140.

² Pugmire, *Rediscovering Emotion*, op. cit., p. 58 – my emphasis.

only for the person who can have the appropriate emotions. According to this view, if God is impassible, He cannot be loving.

There is a confusion here between the idea that emotions are important evidence of someone's care and concern and the idea that emotions are part of what it is to be caring and concerned. People's emotional responses to us are often good indicators of what they think about us and how they regard our well-being. Thus, for example, we expect those who care about us to be sad if things are going very badly for us, and to rejoice if things are going very well. We would seriously doubt their love and concern for us if, in the vicissitudes of our life, they never showed a flicker of emotion towards us. Thus, in such relationships, the emotional responses of the other person are important evidence that he or she really does care about us. Emotions, insofar as they are expressed, are an important means by which one person can get a fairly accurate idea of how another views him.

To be distinguished from the view that emotions are evidentially important is the view that they are conceptually necessary for an adequate account of a loving and caring relationship. The fact that emotions, or their expression, are evidentially important can be attributed to the limitations of the human condition – to the fact that we do not have direct access to another's thoughts and desires as these concern ourselves. However, the importance of such evidence must not be confused with the view that emotions have some sort of value in themselves. On this view, emotions in some way *constitute* one person's valuing of another, so that without emotions, the person in question logically could not – or could not adequately – value the other.

Does it make sense to talk of someone's loving commitment and concern for another while at the same time denying that the committed and concerned person is capable of emotion? The answer to this question depends on whether we think emotions *qua* emotions bring to such a relation an element of valuing which the beliefs and desires that partially constitute emotions cannot by themselves bring to it.

In this chapter, I will argue that the ‘valuational’ content of the emotions we have in connection with our loving commitment and intense concern for another can be wholly accounted for in terms of beliefs and desires. To this end, I will examine three recent – or fairly recent – attempts to argue that there is a further fact about emotions which makes them unique in their cognitive or conative content. I will try to show how, in all the situations presented to us for consideration, an alternative interpretation – one that appeals solely to beliefs and desires – more convincingly accounts for the supposed uniqueness of ‘emotional’ valuation.

Note: I use the term ‘beliefs’ to refer to the cognitive component in emotion. However, I am aware that some philosophers argue that sometimes merely a thought or an imagining can be the basis of an emotion. That is, it is not always necessary to have a (‘full-blown’) belief – being convinced that something is the case – before one can have an emotion. For example, the mere thought that the police might find out that I was the one who committed the crime might be sufficient – along with my desire to avoid detection – to cause me to feel anxiety. I do not need to be convinced that my being detected is a ‘serious’ possibility.³

I do not necessarily disagree with this view of the cognitive component in emotion. In the present chapter, however, my discussion of emotion in terms of beliefs (and desires) reflects the fact that those whose views I discuss cast their own arguments in these terms. In order to avoid confusion and to engage with their views, it seems sensible simply to adopt the relevant terminology without any necessary implication that the use of the idea of belief is always the best way to represent the cognitive element in emotion.

³ For discussion concerning alternatives to belief as a component in emotion, see Robert C. Solomon, ‘Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: What is a “Cognitive Theory” of the Emotions and Does it Neglect Affectivity?’ in Anthony Hatzimoysis ed. *Philosophy and the Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 1–18 and Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions*, op. cit. pp. 14f.

Moreover, the point of my discussing emotions is to try to show that God's being able to have them is not a logically necessary condition of His being able to be fully perceptive about human need or of His being able fully to value us. Any emotion which might be attributed to God would have to be analysed, as far as the cognitive component is concerned, in terms of belief rather than in terms of imaginings or 'construals'.⁴ For imaginings and construals are too tentative or disconnected from reality to be appropriate types of cognition to ascribe to an omniscient God. 'Belief' is a more appropriate term to use to describe God's epistemic relation with the world.

Avoiding the use of these other cognitive terms does not beg the question concerning the rôle of emotions in the perception of others' needs, or in one person's valuing of another. For these supposedly special qualities of emotions are located by the writers whom I discuss in the *affective* element in emotion and not in the cognitive. The question of exactly how the cognitive element in emotion should be understood does not, therefore, affect the issue under discussion.

There have, in recent years, been a number of philosophers whose view it is that contemporary moral philosophy has tended, misguidedly, to neglect or reject the idea that emotions can be morally valuable. For example, Michael Stocker thinks that 'many contemporary ethicists, along with other contemporary philosophers, have lost sight of the evaluative importance of emotions and perhaps of emotions themselves'.⁵ Likewise, Justin Oakley thinks that 'important issues about emotions, such as the relevance of emotions for morality ... have received comparatively little recent philosophical attention'.⁶ Again, referring to what he calls 'altruistic emotions' – sympathy, compassion, and concern – Lawrence Blum states that '[c]ontemporary moral philosophy

⁴ 'Construal' is another term which is sometimes used instead of 'belief'. See Solomon, *op. cit.* p. 9.

⁵ Stocker, *Valuing Emotions*, *op. cit.* p. xv.

⁶ Oakley, *op. cit.* p. 1.

in the Anglo-American tradition has paid little attention to these morally significant phenomena'.⁷

These writers aim to redress this perceived shortcoming in recent ethical theory. Of the various ideas discussed, two in particular are relevant to the aim of this chapter. The first is the idea that certain types of emotion, such as compassion and sympathy, give us a better perception and understanding of the needs of others than we would have without such emotions. The second idea is that care, concern, and commitment to others are deficient or impossible without the relevant emotions, as occasion demands. According to these two ideas, emotions add to or constitute the valuational content – the quality of valuing – in situations in which one person cares for and is committed to another.

Discussion of these ideas makes explicit what is often merely assumed by those who reject the conceivability of a loving but impassible God. By engaging with these ideas, I aim to develop my own thesis that a loving but impassible God *is* conceivable. Since the writers I have mentioned are contending for the importance of emotions in moral theory, and may be appealed to by passibilists who come to think deeply about the nature of emotions, it helps my case if I can show that the claims for the moral importance of emotions are unjustified.

Before I proceed to the substance of my discussion, I want to comment on my use of the term 'altruistic'.

In his paper 'The Involvement of God', Herbert McCabe at one point remarks that God does not create the world in order to fulfil any needs within Himself. For this reason, he says, '[w]e could call [God's creating the world] sheerly altruistic, except that the goodness God wills for his creatures is not a separate and distinct goodness from his own goodness'.⁸ The reference to separate and distinct goodness concerns the fact that altruism is usually described in terms of one's willing or doing something for another

⁷ Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 1.

solely because it contributes to the good of that other and not to one's own good. It is precisely because such a description distinguishes between one's own good and that of another that the concept of altruism seems to imply that the respective goods are indeed separate and distinct. It is because of this supposed implication that McCabe does not want to describe God's creating the world as altruistic. For the goodness God wills is His own goodness, shared with us.

When in this chapter I use the term 'altruistic' to describe certain emotions, I do not mean to suggest that God is altruistic in the way that McCabe rightly rejects. I am merely referring to the connection these types of emotion have with benevolence and beneficence. Such emotions are characterized by the fact that they are connected with willing and doing good purely for the sake of another, and not for the sake of the benevolent or beneficent person. This distinction between the objects of intended benefit – one's self or the other – need not imply anything about the ultimate *origin* of the goodness intended. So although McCabe's point must be borne in mind when using the term 'altruistic' in connection with God or in talk about divine emotions, it does not invalidate the use of that term for describing those emotions, attitudes, and desires that are concerned solely with the benefit of another.

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I will begin with the idea that certain types of emotion give us a better perception and understanding of the needs of others than we would have without such emotions.

An example of this way of thinking about emotions can be found in Lawrence Blum's book, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*. Blum argues that beneficence which is

⁸ In McCabe, *God Matters*, op. cit. p. 45.

motivated by emotions like sympathy and compassion is superior to beneficence which is not motivated by such emotions. Firstly, the ‘emotionally’ beneficent person is better able than is the non-emotionally beneficent person to identify the interests of others, and so is able to exercise his beneficence more frequently. Secondly, when beneficence is motivated by sympathy or compassion, the benefit to the person benefited is increased because emotions tend to be ‘visible’, and the person benefited will see that the beneficent person is truly motivated by a concern for him. If, on the other hand, the person benefited has reason to think that the beneficent person is motivated by a sense of duty or by self-interest, the benefit will be limited. Hence, beneficence which is motivated by sympathy or compassion is morally superior to beneficence which is not motivated by these emotions.⁹

Blum’s first point about identifying the interests of another is that a person who has a sympathetic and compassionate disposition is more likely to apprehend *that* someone is in difficult circumstances than a person without such a disposition.¹⁰ It is not merely that both perceive the same thing but respond differently, one with sympathy and the other with indifference. Rather, they each perceive different things and respond accordingly. Where one perceives a person in difficult circumstances, the other does not.

For example, imagine a mother with a fidgety child in a church service. She looks uncomfortable because the child’s noises can be heard above the prayers. She speaks sharply to him, conveying to him her vexation. She makes strenuous attempts to occupy him with toys and books. According to Blum, the sympathetic sort of person will notice the mother’s agitation, and if possible, do something to help her – for example, by informing her that there is a play room at the back of the church. However, the person who is *not* disposed to be sympathetic will not even notice that the woman is agitated and needs help.

⁹ For Blum’s arguments, see Blum, *op. cit.* chs VI & VII.

This difference in the perception of another's situation – where need or distress is involved – 'should be taken into account in an overall assessment of the two types of person'.¹¹ This is because the frequency with which someone perceives the needs of others is relevant to that person's performance of beneficent acts. The sort of person not disposed to be sympathetic 'will less often actually be convinced of the need, pain, suffering, distress of others than will the sympathetic person. Therefore, he will not perform beneficent acts in every instance in which the sympathetic person does'.¹²

The greater effectiveness of beneficence motivated by sympathy or compassion compared with non-emotional beneficence can be understood not merely in terms of the frequency of noticing, but also in terms of the depth of understanding. In his essay 'Compassion', Blum claims that '[b]ecause compassion involves an active and objective interest in another's welfare, it is characteristically a spur to a deeper understanding of a situation than rationality alone could ensure'.¹³ Certainly, there is a strong association between compassion or sympathy on the one hand and understanding the needy or distressed person's situation on the other. This is indicated by the common readiness to charge with insensitivity those who fail to respond with sympathy and compassion towards those in difficulty. Those who are insensitive fail to appreciate – or understand – the situation of those in difficulty. However, whether sympathy and compassion are a *spur* to a deeper understanding or whether, on the contrary, they *depend* on such an understanding, is a question I will address below.

Blum claims that the emotions of sympathy and compassion make a unique contribution to our perception and appreciation of other people's difficulties. He closes his chapter on this topic with the remark that 'what *cannot* be gotten from reason alone is

¹⁰ Blum, *ibid.* pp. 129–135.

¹¹ Blum, *ibid.* p. 136.

¹² Blum, *ibid.* p. 136.

¹³ Lawrence Blum, 'Compassion' in A.O. Rorty ed. *Explaining Emotions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, ch. XXI.

the full-blooded moral agent, with his perception [of need] as well as his [moral] principles; all one can get ... is the principles themselves'.¹⁴ Without sympathy and compassion, our beneficence is limited, he says. For without being able to identify and appreciate other people's difficulties, the occasions for beneficence must be fewer.

However, despite this claim about the effectiveness of sympathy and compassion, Blum is unable to explain what it is in these emotions that makes for this effectiveness. To say, apparently by way of explanation, that '[p]art of what it is to have a certain emotion is that the situation which one apprehends presents itself to one in a certain way' is no doubt to speak truly, but unfortunately does not illuminate matters further.¹⁵

Moreover, despite what Blum says, it is not difficult to think of examples in which someone has a very good understanding of another's difficult or distressing circumstances, yet without feeling the relevant *emotions*.

For example, a sadist derives his pleasure from deliberately causing others to suffer. One may presume that he knows *that* his victims suffer, and *how* they suffer, for it is partly from this knowledge that he derives his pleasure.¹⁶ Yet, for the very reason that he is a sadist, one could not properly attribute to him sympathy or compassion for his victims.

Or again, suppose I am very experienced – and somewhat hard-bitten – social worker who has dealt with numerous cases of child neglect. Because of my experience, I am now a very acute observer of clues as to what has been going on in each child's life. A visit to the home and a conversation with the child concerned give me an accurate picture of what the child has had to suffer. Apart from certain individual details, there is nothing new in these situations – I have seen them many times before. It is perfectly conceivable that I could understand the child's circumstances without ever having

¹⁴ Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, op. cit. p. 139 – my emphasis.

¹⁵ Blum, *ibid.* p. 135.

¹⁶ And partly, no doubt, from the knowledge that *he* is responsible for causing the suffering.

emotions of sympathy or compassion, because my long experience of such matters would give me an almost intuitive grasp of his or her situation.

If the sadist and the social worker can be said to have, respectively, a very good understanding of the suffering of the victim and of the child, it is reasonable to claim that beneficence which is non-emotional can be as sensitive to and as informed by the needs of others as can the emotional variety.

The question of how to account for the fact that some people are more beneficently perceptive than others is obscured in Blum's discussion by his conflation of the idea of a disposition with that of an emotion. For example, although he claims that his discussion is about the relationship between, on the one hand, sympathy and compassion, and on the other, one's perception of the welfare of others,¹⁷ there is little or no explicit reference to (occurrent) emotions. Blum's use of the terms 'sympathetic person' and 'compassionate person' is equivocal between meaning someone who feels – or who is in the habit of feeling – (occurrent) emotions of sympathy and compassion and meaning someone whose disposition is sympathetic and compassionate. And since, in his introduction, Blum does say that his book 'focuses on sympathy, compassion, and human concern, considered *primarily as emotions* but also as character traits ...',¹⁸ it is reasonable to understand him as wanting, in the present discussion, to establish the perceptual value of (occurrent) *emotions*.

The thesis that sympathy and compassion involve a perceptiveness about another's welfare that is not available without them is made more plausible if sympathy and compassion are understood as attitudes and not as emotions, and if someone's being described as sympathetic or compassionate is understood as meaning that the person in question has a certain character trait rather than as having certain emotions. In this connection, it is noteworthy that Blum remarks at one point that '[t]he kind,

¹⁷ Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, op. cit. p. 132.

compassionate, sympathetic, or concerned person perceives people differently from someone lacking these qualities'.¹⁹ Here, Blum has moved away from the idea of compassion and sympathy as emotions and listed them with qualities which one would describe as attitudes or character traits. And it is not surprising that people with such attitudes or traits are perceptive about the welfare of others. If such people believe that the welfare of others is important, and generally have a desire to help them, then of course, they will be attentive to needs others may have. However, none of this shows that sympathy and compassion – understood as (occurrent) emotions – have some special cognitive feature solely in virtue of the fact that they are emotions. Whatever cognitive value sympathy and compassion do have is attributable to certain elements which are not peculiar to them as emotions, as I aim to show.

It is not sympathy and compassion *qua* emotions that make any difference to someone's perceptiveness about the welfare of others, but the beliefs and desires which partially constitute and – together with attitudes – cause those emotions. A person's perceptiveness about the needs of others can be explained by an appeal to the beliefs, desires, and attitudes which the person in question already has, and on which his emotion – sympathy or compassion – logically and causally depends.

I have already, in a general way, mentioned the rôle of beliefs, desires, and attitudes in the formation of emotions and do not need to repeat my remarks here.²⁰ Explaining people's sensitivity to the needs of others is a harder task. However, it is not necessary for me to try to give a detailed and comprehensive description of the possible causal antecedents to such an ability. My being able to suggest some of the ways in which various elements might contribute to someone's being sensitive should be sufficient to

¹⁸ Blum, *ibid.* p. 1 – my emphases.

¹⁹ Blum, *ibid.* p. 134.

²⁰ See p. 64f.

bring into doubt the claim that there is something special about the emotions of sympathy and compassion in this respect.

For example, one factor in this respect is someone's having beliefs about what things are important to people generally and therefore about how people react to the loss of such things. A person's experience of suffering may make him or her more sensitive to the sufferings of others. Family experiences of caring for younger siblings or elderly relatives develop in the carer an awareness of the practical needs of others. A person who has experienced great difficulties and who has benefited from the help and solicitude of another may, out of gratitude, want to help others and seek for ways to do so, such that the person in question is especially attentive to the needs of others. And so on.

So far, Blum's argument concerns the idea that those whose beneficence is motivated by sympathy or compassion are better able to notice and fully appreciate the needs of others than are those whose beneficence is not motivated in this way. Thus, for the sympathetic and compassionate person, there are more occasions (reasons) for acting beneficently – sympathy and compassion have more motivational value than is the case with other forms of beneficence.

In chapter VII, Blum introduces the idea that sympathy and compassion are valuable in themselves. That is, they have value apart from any value they have in bringing about beneficent acts. They add to the good brought about by beneficence. And even when beneficence is not possible, the mere fact that the person towards whom the beneficence would have been directed knows that the would-be benefactor feels or is likely to feel such emotions is itself of benefit.

Blum argues that if a beneficent act is understood by the person benefited as being motivated by sympathetic or compassionate concern, as opposed to being motivated by a sense of duty or by self-interest, the benefit to that person is increased. Not only will the

person in question benefit from the act itself, he will benefit from the thought that he is the object of sympathetic or compassionate concern.

This may seem an obvious point to make, but Blum makes it in opposition to what he perceives as a tendency in moral theory to separate the assessment of the rightness or wrongness of an act from the assessment of the rightness or wrongness of the *motive* for the act. He does not question the general correctness of this approach, but merely its adequacy as an assessment of actions motivated by sympathy or compassion.²¹ If the person being benefited has good reason to think that it is indeed sympathy or compassion which motivates the beneficent act, he will be further benefited because he believes that his welfare is genuinely being valued – he is not the object of merely ‘dutiful’ or self-interested beneficence.²² Thus, sympathy and compassion have a ‘moral significance ... [which] transcends their being motives ... to acts of beneficence’.²³ They have a non-motivational value.

Blum makes a further point. Sympathy and compassion are valuable even when they cannot actually motivate an action. This is a situation which can occur when, for some reason, no beneficent action is possible.

Blum asks us to imagine an astronaut in space whose life support system has failed and whose death is imminent. She cannot receive communications. Two technicians on the ground each perform the same actions in order to try to save her, and after much effort they have to concede defeat. One technician acts purely from a sense of duty towards her, and the other acts because he is her friend. (Set aside the fact that they both have duties as employees of the space agency.)

The astronaut knows these two technicians so well that she has good reason to believe that on this particular day – disastrous as it is for her – each responds to her

²¹ Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, op. cit. pp. 141–146.

²² Blum, *ibid.* p. 144ff.

²³ Blum, *ibid.* p. 145.

situation in a way entirely in keeping with their characters and with their respective relationships with her. The first one is dutiful, and the second one is sympathetic and compassionate. Although she is near death, she gains solace from thinking about what her friend must be feeling towards her, even though he is unable to help – a solace that her thoughts of the dutiful technician do not give her. Although both technicians are beneficently disposed towards her, and in other circumstances might have been able to convey good to her by beneficent acts, or given her good reason to expect beneficence from them, in her present situation neither of these things is possible. However, according to Blum, there is in this situation still a good that can, as it were, be conveyed to the astronaut – one which her friend can convey, and which the merely dutiful technician cannot. It can be conveyed to her in the sense that she has good reason for thinking that her friend will be feeling sympathy/compassion for her and thus cares about her fate, and from this she derives some comfort. The good conveyed ‘is not connected with beneficent action, but is involved simply in the emotional reaction itself’.²⁴

Throughout his discussion of the idea that sympathy and compassion have value in themselves, Blum compares beneficent acts which are motivated by these emotions with beneficent acts which are motivated by a sense of duty or by self-interest.²⁵ If we conceive the same act of beneficence being performed, on the one hand motivated by these emotions, and on the other, motivated by a sense of duty or by self-interest, then, he says, the ‘full good’ to the person benefited will only be brought about if the act is motivated by the emotions in question – assuming that those benefited can perceive the benefactor’s motive. However, this is only to be expected. Although dutiful or self-interested beneficence may have its place in government welfare programmes and business practice, in other contexts people like to think that when someone is beneficent

²⁴ Blum, *ibid.* p. 147.

²⁵ Blum, *ibid.* pp. 142, 144, & 146ff.

towards them, they are valued for themselves. If they have good reason to think that this is the case, they will be more fully benefited by the beneficence.

However, although Blum's argument shows how people are benefited if they perceive that the act of beneficence is motivated by emotions of sympathy or compassion, it does not show that an act of beneficence thus motivated is morally superior to the same act not motivated by such emotions. All it shows is the moral superiority of the beneficent act motivated by sympathy or compassion compared with the same act motivated by duty or by self-interest.²⁶ Blum has not explored the possibility of beneficence which is motivated by altruism, but by altruism which is *non-emotional*, altruism which does not involve the feeling of emotions like sympathy and compassion. The overall effect of comparing specifically *emotionally* altruistic beneficence with non-altruistic beneficence (which is motivated by a sense of duty or by self-interest) is that the altruistic emotions of sympathy and compassion seem – *qua* emotions – to be invested with special moral qualities. I have argued that this is not the case, but that the moral good of such emotions should be located in the beliefs and desires which are logically and causally prior to them.

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So far in this chapter, I have concentrated my discussion on the question of whether certain specifically altruistic emotions such as sympathy and compassion have moral value *qua* emotions. The question has been: is there some quality in sympathy and compassion which, purely in virtue of their being considered as *emotions*, brings a further good to those benefited which non-emotional altruism could not achieve?

²⁶ I merely note here that it is not always morally appropriate to show sympathy or compassion towards those in need – for example, towards the burglar who badly injures himself while trespassing on one's property. On this, see Oakley, *op. cit.* p.40.

My aim now is to broaden and deepen the discussion. I will not just be concerned with ‘altruistic’ emotions, but with emotions generally. This is because, in addressing the issue of divine (im)passibility, it is necessary to take account of the fact that passibilists ascribe to God a variety of emotions – for example, joy, grief, sadness, anger²⁷ – and not just sympathy and compassion. And I will continue to investigate the idea which underlies these ascriptions, namely that emotions somehow add value to God’s relationship with us.

The basic idea in Blum’s thesis about altruistic emotions is that such emotions involve an intentionality about the welfare of others which is not available without such emotions. As Blum puts it, ‘if there is such a thing as pure rational altruism’, it lacks ‘the attitude [and] ... the way the other person and his situation are viewed by the agent ...’.²⁸

This idea that there is something unique about emotions in respect of their intentionality is evident in a number of recent accounts of the nature of emotion.²⁹ In these accounts, this unique element of intentionality is located in what is called ‘psychic feeling’ or ‘psychic affect’, often with a view to showing how emotions add uniquely to the quality of interpersonal relationships. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine two of these accounts closely, and I will aim to show that the claims made for the unique intentionality of psychic feeling are highly questionable. From this examination I will conclude that, in terms of intentionality, there is nothing unique about emotions, and that consequently there is nothing about emotions *in themselves* which makes them uniquely morally valuable. Given that that is the case, I will draw the further conclusion that it is intelligible to claim that God’s love for us is perfect yet devoid of any emotion. For emotions *qua* emotions would not add to the moral value of the beliefs, ‘desires’, and attitudes which it is requisite to ascribe to a perfectly loving being.

²⁷ For references to passibilists who ascribe anger to God, see Fiddes, *op. cit.* pp. 20–25.

²⁸ Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, *op. cit.* p. 123.

One of the main aims of Stocker's book *Valuing Emotions* is to argue that 'emotions are internal to value, in fact so internal that they are inseparable from it or are even forms of it'.³⁰ According to Stocker, having emotions is a unique way in which a person can engage with the world around him. This is not because emotions involve complexes of belief and desire, for such complexes are not unique to emotions. Rather, it is because emotions uniquely involve the psychic feelings which Stocker calls 'care, concern, and interest'.³¹

Michael Stocker draws a distinction between the value a person takes something to have and *how* he values it.³² The distinction roughly corresponds to a distinction between one's theoretically valuing something and one's valuing it in practice. For instance – making more specific the example Stocker gives to illustrate this distinction³³ – I may theoretically value Schoenberg's music highly, may think it has merit and deserves classical status, and yet not care for it myself because I dislike atonal music. If Schoenberg's music does not really interest me, if I do not bother to listen to it, or care whether it is listened to or not, then although I have certain beliefs – and maybe desires – concerning his music, such that I can be said to value it, my valuing of it lacks something.

What is it that my valuing lacks? According to Stocker, it is not certain beliefs and desires which are lacking. For Stocker thinks that in cases like this, there is no difference between the beliefs (and desires) involved in theoretical valuing and the beliefs (and desires) involved in practical valuing.³⁴ I will question this claim later. For the moment, I want to focus on the element that Stocker thinks marks the difference in valuing.

²⁹ For example, Stocker, *op. cit.*; Oakley, *op. cit.* pp. 43–48; Goldie, *The Emotions*, *op. cit.* p. 18ff. & ch. 3; and Pugmire, *op. cit.* p. 60f.

³⁰ Stocker, *op. cit.* p. 1.

³¹ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

³² Stocker, *ibid.* p. 59.

³³ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 59f.

³⁴ Stocker, *ibid.* pp. 25f, 47.

According to Stocker, what is missing from my theoretical valuing of Schoenberg is the element of psychic feeling. It is this that marks the difference between the two types of valuing.

There is no single account of what psychic feeling is. According to Stocker, ‘some psychic feelings are panglike. A momentary tingle of psychic tension or excitement might be panglike’.³⁵ Perhaps Stocker is thinking, for example, of something like the sudden heart-in-the-mouth experience one has when one nearly falls off a high object, or the sudden, sharp pain when one remembers a recently-lost loved one. However, in the present context, such feelings would be too ‘conceptually impoverished’ to explain the difference in valuing.³⁶ The kinds of feeling Stocker thinks are needed to explain the difference are ‘intrapersonal and interpersonal, social, and ... are evaluatively and morally important’³⁷ – in fact, the kinds one might associate with altruistic emotions. They are not to be dismissed as ‘mere feelings’, for they are conceptually complex psychic feelings of care, concern, and interest.³⁸

On Stocker’s view, psychic feeling is a quality which may or may not accompany one’s valuing of something or someone. Its presence or absence supposedly explains why, respectively, I can value Schoenberg’s music in a practical way or a theoretical way, without there being any difference in my beliefs (and desires) concerning his music. Similarly, for example, I can be aware of poverty in another country and want to see that poverty alleviated, so that the inhabitants of that country can enjoy a better life. According to Stocker, I can have this awareness and this desire in two ways. I can have them in a non-feeling and therefore non-engaged way. Or I can have them in a feeling way, in a way that involves my being caring, concerned, and interested.³⁹

³⁵ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

³⁶ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

³⁷ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

³⁸ Stocker, *ibid.* pp. 11, 33, 47, 54.

³⁹ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

Stocker's interest in psychic feelings is part of his argument for the reinstatement of emotions in ethical theory.⁴⁰ According to Stocker, 'philosophers have thought emotions problematic and also unimportant for value and evaluation largely because emotions are affective'.⁴¹ That is, because emotions have been thought to be mere feelings, or to be complexes of belief and desire with an added element of feeling which itself has no conceptual complexity, the view has been that emotions as feelings are not able to do any conceptual or explanatory work in theoretical/practical valuational distinctions – or in ethics generally – over and above what is already done by feeling-less complexes of belief and desire.

The way Stocker opposes this view is simply by making the idea of psychic feelings more inclusive. Thus, although care, concern, and interest are normally regarded as attitudes, Stocker classes them as psychic feelings. The ideas of care, concern, and interest certainly have the requisite conceptual complexity. And since care, concern, and interest are clearly relevant to value and to ethics, Stocker thinks he has shown how psychic feelings – these ones, at least – are likewise relevant.

Stocker is right in saying that emotions 'have inestimable human value', and that 'without emotions it is impossible to live a good human life and it may well be impossible to live a human life'.⁴² However, unlike Stocker, I do not think this is because emotions constitute, or partly constitute, being good and living a good life. Rather, it is because, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, emotions have evidential value. They indicate how others regard us, and our own emotional responses to things can reveal to us what we count as important in our lives.

Certainly, care, concern, and interest are essential to human well-being. However, Stocker fails to show how emotions make any unique non-evidential contribution in this

⁴⁰ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 1.

⁴¹ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 20.

⁴² Stocker, *ibid.* p. 1.

regard. His attempts to do so are subject to the same objections which I raised against Blum's thesis. This supposed uniqueness of psychic feelings, which are regarded as an essential element in emotion, is found on examination not to be such. For the care, concern, or interest present in emotion can be explained by appealing to the complex of beliefs and desires which partially constitute the emotion, and which can exist in a non-emotional form. This can be shown using one of Stocker's examples. Stocker writes:

Before I slipped on the ice, I believed it was dangerous to walk on ice and I wanted to avoid these dangers. But I had only an intellectual appreciation of those dangers and a pro forma desire to avoid them. Having slipped, and without any change of beliefs or desires or values, I am afraid. It cannot be held that I have new beliefs, such as "I *really* could slip; it could *now* happen to *me*". For I already believed that. To be sure, I did not take it *seriously*, in the sense of taking it with fear. But this is just my point. This shift from not being afraid to being afraid is not given by a change in beliefs, but by a change in the emotional ways the beliefs are taken. When I am afraid, the beliefs are emotionally present, emotionally charged, and feeling-laden; when they are not, I am not afraid.⁴³

Stocker claims that there is no difference in content between his pre-fall beliefs and desires regarding ice and falling on it, and his post-fall beliefs and desires in this regard. Rather, the difference lies in the *manner* in which he has these beliefs and desires. This way of analysing the difference is in accordance with Stocker's view that 'psychic feelings ... often should be thought of not merely as connected with, but as "modes" of, action, reason, or desire'.⁴⁴ Before the fall, he did not *seriously* believe how dangerous ice can be and, let us suppose, did not *earnestly* desire to avoid slipping, but now he does. This distinction is similar to the one Stocker makes between theoretically valuing something and valuing it in practice. The beliefs and desires concerning the thing valued are the same whether it is valued theoretically or in a practical way. The difference is that

⁴³ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 47 – his emphases.

⁴⁴ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 54.

one kind of valuing – the valuing in practice – is done with psychic feeling, as I explained, while the other kind lacks such feeling.

According to Stocker, this is why having certain emotions – and not merely certain complexes of belief and desire – makes all the difference to living well, and in particular, to valuing others and their interests. To be sure, having certain complexes of belief and desire is necessary for living well and for valuing others, whether these complexes are part of an emotion or not. In this respect, there is nothing distinctive about emotions. As Stocker says, ‘we can have the very same thoughts, desires, and values when we do not have an emotion as when we do have it’.⁴⁵ What is distinctive about emotions is that the believing and desiring, and any actions the emotions lead to, are done seriously or enthusiastically, or – to include Stocker’s frequently repeated trio of adverbials – with care, concern, and interest.

However, reverting to Stocker’s example of his falling on ice, one can provide an explanation for the onset of his fear that is more plausible than the one he provides, and moreover, in precisely the terms that he rejects.

In saying that he had only an intellectual appreciation of the danger of walking on ice and a *pro forma* desire to avoid it, Stocker is effectively admitting that he did not fully appreciate the danger. Perhaps all his appreciation amounted to was a belief that ice is slippery, and that falling on it can be unpleasant. Certain new beliefs had to supersede the old ones before he was able to have a full appreciation of the danger – for example, beliefs about how easy it is to fall (easier than he had thought) and about how painful such a fall can be (more painful than he had thought). Whereas before the fall he had believed it was *easy* to fall and could be *unpleasant* if one did so, after the fall he believed it was *very easy* to fall and could be *very painful* if one did so. Believing it very

⁴⁵ Stocker, *ibid.* p. 25f.

easy and very painful are *new* beliefs, for the content of what Stocker believes about ice, and about falling on it, has changed.

My explanation of the onset of Stocker's fear of the ice is based on what Peter Goldie calls 'the add-on view' of the rôle of feelings in emotion.⁴⁶ It is the view that the intentionality of an emotion can be captured wholly in terms of the beliefs and desires involved, and that since the feelings involved are non-intentional, they can be merely descriptively added on in order to complete the account of what an emotion is.

Goldie objects to the add-on view of emotion because, in his opinion, it fails to allow an adequate distinction to be made between an action that is motivated by emotion and one that is not. According to Goldie, add-on theorists think that

action out of emotion [action motivated by emotion] is not fundamentally different from other sorts of action; so it can and must be explained, or made intelligible, just like other sorts of action, by appealing to feelingless beliefs and desires ...⁴⁷

However, says Goldie, the add-on theorist is mistaken in thinking that there is no fundamental difference between actions which are motivated by emotion and those which are not. For, he says,

[c]onsider doing these things unemotionally: striking a blow; making love; seeking safety. Now consider, and contrast, acting when you act out of emotion: *angrily* striking the blow; making love *passionately*; *fearfully* running away. The phenomenology of such actions – what it is like for the agent – is fundamentally different in character. And ... not just for the agent, but also for others involved ...⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Goldie, op. cit. p. 4.

⁴⁷ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 40.

⁴⁸ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 40 – his emphases.

What the add-on theorist has apparently overlooked is the ‘phenomenology’ of actions motivated by emotion – the way they are experienced by the agent, and where appropriate, by those who are affected by the actions.

However, it should not be assumed that the add-on theorist denies that there is any difference in phenomenology. This is not the point. The point is that the add-on theorist makes the *a priori* assumption that *any* type of action, properly so called, is motivated by beliefs and desires. Since action motivated by emotion is a type of action, it must – on this assumption – be motivated by beliefs and desires, and it is in these elements that its intentionality must be located. It is merely in virtue of the fact that action motivated by emotion is an *action* that it should be analysed in this way. It is in this sense that the add-on theorist claims that actions motivated by emotion are no different from those which are not. This is not the same as claiming that there is no difference in the way these different types of action are experienced. For example, the add-on theorist could point out the fact that action motivated by emotion is often accompanied by energetic motor movements, physiological reactions like trembling or blushing, and various ‘inner’ bodily feelings such as a sinking feeling or a ‘knot’ in one’s stomach. All of these things could contribute to the agent’s experience of an ‘emotional’ action, an experience which would differ from the ‘non-emotional’ equivalent. As Goldie suggests, this experience of emotional action would, for the add-on theorist, be ‘causally explained by reference ... to the physiology of emotion’.⁴⁹ If the agent were also to experience certain psychic feelings – understood as mental pleasure or pain, for example – these would make a further difference to the agent’s experience of his action. And as far as the observer of the agent is concerned, his or her experience of the agent’s action would be affected by noticing some of these features, as well as the facial expressions we associate with various types of emotion.

⁴⁹ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 39.

The add-on theorist's account of the differences in the experience of the two types of action would not satisfy Goldie. For according to Goldie, there is in emotion an intentional element which is *experienced* – what he calls a ‘feeling towards’ the object of the emotion.⁵⁰ It is this element which the add-on theorist's account omits, because according to that account, all intentionality – as it concerns the object of the emotion – is located wholly in the relevant complex of beliefs and desires. It is this element of feeling towards that, in Goldie's opinion, constitutes the difference between how ‘emotional’ actions are experienced and how ‘non-emotional’ actions are experienced.

Goldie's notion of feeling towards is the idea that when we have an emotion, what we *feel* has its own contribution to make to the emotion's intentionality. We perceive/evaluate/value things in a way that a belief/desire account cannot fully explain. When we have a ‘feeling towards an object ... [we have] a feeling towards that thing as being a particular way or as having certain properties or features’.⁵¹

Why is a belief/desire account insufficient in this respect? Because giving an account of someone's belief or desire involves giving an account of the propositional object of that belief or desire and, says Goldie, such an account, by itself, does not always completely capture the content of the concepts which the proposition in question contains.⁵²

For example, says Goldie, both sighted and blind people can use the concept of the colour red, and can express it in identical ways, and yet differ as to the content they give to the concept. For the sighted person can be thinking of the actual phenomenal experience of seeing the colour, whereas the blind person, because he has never seen the colour, must be thinking of something other than the phenomenal experience.⁵³

⁵⁰ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 18ff. & pp. 58–62.

⁵¹ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 58.

⁵² Goldie, *ibid.* p. 60.

⁵³ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 60. I used this example in chapter 5 when discussing the question of God's knowledge of human subjective experiences.

Goldie employs this idea of differences in conceptual content in order to try to show that a person who has a feeling towards something is conscious of features of that thing that another person, without such a feeling, could not be conscious of. This is where belief/desire accounts of emotion are inadequate, because they do not explain the unique cognitive value of emotions. The beliefs (and desires) that an emotion involves can be descriptively the same as the 'non-emotional' equivalent. So, thinks Goldie, one must locate the cognitive uniqueness of emotions in their affective element, in the element of feeling towards. 'In feeling towards', says Goldie, 'the feeling is essentially related to the content, so there could not be some other psychological episode, say belief or thinking of, with the same content but with no feeling'.⁵⁴ Part of what it is to have a feeling towards something is to have cognitive access to certain features of that thing which is not available in any other way.

From this description of Goldie's idea of what feeling towards involves, it is clear that there is a similarity between this idea and Stocker's idea of psychic feelings. In fact, Goldie specifically equates his term 'feeling towards' with Stocker's term 'psychic feelings'.⁵⁵ Like Stocker, he thinks that the onset of an emotion such as the fear of slipping on ice – he specifically refers to Stocker's example⁵⁶ – is not to be explained by a change in beliefs or desires. Rather, the beliefs and desires remain the same, but there is a change in the content of the concepts involved⁵⁷ – equivalent to Stocker's idea that he now takes his beliefs *seriously*.

Goldie's use of the colour-concept analogy is intended to show how conceptual content can change while beliefs and desires remain unchanged. However, the analogy can be misleading. For it might be taken as suggesting that the ice-experience is like perceiving a colour, and that a change from a theoretical appreciation of the danger of ice

⁵⁴ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 72.

⁵⁵ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 54.

⁵⁶ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 59.

to a practical one is like the change from a blind person's concept of red to that of a sighted person's. However, in the case of the colour-concept, all that is involved is the addition of a logically simple thought derived from a sensory experience – the thought of what it is like to see the colour red. Things are different in the ice-experience case. One is not having a perceptual experience of some simple quality which one might call 'the practical dangerousness of ice'. The experience of falling on ice does itself involve certain perceptions – the feeling of falling, the change of perspective, the feeling of an impact to one's hip and elbow, pain, and so on. But these perceptual experiences in themselves do not constitute one's experience of ice as being dangerous. Inferences have to be drawn, conceptual connections have to be made, so that one fully understands how ice is dangerous and what the factors are which contribute to that fact. This is especially so if the thought that ice is dangerous is to motivate care when on ice or the avoidance of being on ice in the first place.

At this point, one should recall the fact that Stocker recognizes that if psychic feelings (or feelings towards) are to do any conceptual or explanatory work in theoretical/practical valuational distinctions, such feelings must be conceived in a complex way. In the present case, the experience of slipping on ice is supposed to make a practical difference to the way one responds to the thought that ice is dangerous. What additions to the concept of the dangerousness of ice are necessary to make a practical difference, so that they motivate action in a way that a merely theoretical view of the danger is supposed not to? Once one has had the experience of falling on ice, inferences would have to be drawn about the properties of ice in relation to those who walk on it, inferences some of which apparently could not have been drawn before. Thus, if the content of my concept of ice as dangerous can be said to have changed, it is because I now have further beliefs about the properties of ice vis-a-vis the walker, beliefs which

⁵⁷ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 60.

affect the way I conduct myself when on ice or which determine whether or not I want to walk on ice at all.

Goldie claims that the affective element in emotions, which he calls ‘feeling towards’, is feeling which ‘is essentially related to the content [of the concepts involved], so there could not be some other psychological episode, say belief or thinking of, with the same content but with no feeling’.⁵⁸ However, he does not succeed in showing that such is the case. What he appears to have done is to have taken a certain fact about the type of thinking that goes on when one is having an emotion, and claimed that such thinking is not logically separable from the emotion. However, it may just be a fact of human existence that, for example, one cannot think of something as dangerous and to be avoided, in precisely the way we do think of it when we are afraid of it, without feeling the emotion. When we feel the emotion, this is always the way we think about the feared object. Such thoughts always occur in the context of the emotion because such thoughts inevitably *cause* the emotion. This may be a deterministic fact about human beings. However, this fact regarding the ‘constant conjunction’ of precisely this kind of thought and emotion does not necessarily imply that there is logical connection between the two, such that talk of having this kind of thought without emotion is unintelligible.

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I have examined three accounts of emotion, accounts which are meant to show how certain emotions can, in various ways, enhance a person’s engagement with the world and with others. It is claimed that these emotions are unique in this respect: that without such emotions, an adequate response to the world and to others is not logically possible. However, I have argued that whatever is supposedly logically unique to such emotions –

⁵⁸ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 72.

perceptiveness about other people's needs, care and concern for the welfare of others – can be reduced without loss of meaning to a description of the beliefs and desires which partially constitute emotions. That is, a description of the beliefs and desires involved wholly captures the 'intentional' element in emotion.

The philosophers whose accounts I have discussed appeal to a somewhat elusive feeling factor in emotion as being that which makes the difference, in terms of intentionality, between someone who relates to the world with emotion and someone who does not. However, none of these philosophers manage to do more than merely assert that there is a difference. As Goldie would put it, the difference is a 'primitively intelligible' fact about emotions⁵⁹ which is not susceptible of further analysis.

In view of my discussion of these accounts, I maintain that it is intelligible to speak of a God who cannot feel emotions and yet whose love for us is intense and profound. For what makes His relation to us a loving one is His having certain beliefs and 'desires' concerning our well-being. This intentional element in God's relation to us is not in any way enhanced by attributing emotions to Him. Emotions would not serve as evidence that God loves us, for we are not dealing here with a problem about how we can know God loves us. Rather, we are dealing with the question of how God's love can be conceived within the conceptual constraint of impassibilism. Nor would emotions constitute, or partly constitute, His loving relation to us, for as I have argued, the intentionality that is involved in God's loving us can logically and wholly be captured in terms of His beliefs and 'desires'. In the light of these considerations, I conclude that the idea of loving but impassible God is intelligible.

⁵⁹ Goldie, *ibid.* p. 5.

CONCLUSION

The idea that God is omnipotent implies that there is nothing in creation over which God does not have power, and that therefore there is nothing which can restrict God's freedom in any way. Yet, as I have argued in chapters 2 and 3, both the subjective experience of suffering and the subjective experience of emotion essentially involve some loss of control on the part of the subject. If one is to affirm that God is omnipotent, one must reject the possibility that anything in His creation can cause Him to suffer or to have an emotion.

However, as I explained in the introduction,¹ it is not sufficient, when trying to establish a theologically adequate concept of the Christian God, simply to reject divine passibilism. For the idea that God loves us is a non-negotiable part of Christian theism, and one therefore has an obligation to try to show how a loving but impassible God is conceivable. I have tried to do this, in various ways, in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Part of the thesis that creation cannot cause God to suffer or evoke an emotion in Him is the idea that the blissful quality of God's life remains unperturbed by human sin and suffering. Yet, as I argued in chapter 4, it is very difficult to conceive how God can, on the one hand, be emotionally blissful – experiencing emotions of joy and delight – and on the other, simultaneously have a deep care and concern for His human creatures. The idea that God loves us would seem to imply that God's

¹ p. 10.

life cannot be blissful in this emotional sense. For it seems that His knowledge of human sin and suffering, and His caring about us, must limit His joy and delight.

Having found two attempted solutions to this problem unsatisfactory, I argued that if God's blissfulness were to be conceived 'non-emotionally' – along the lines of someone *treasuring* something – one could make intelligible the idea of God being both blissful *and* concerned.

In chapter 5, I discussed what I called the argument from divine omniscience. This is the argument that if God is omniscient, He must know what human experiences of suffering and emotion are like, and He can be knowledgeable in such matters only if He Himself has certain subjective experiences of this nature. Therefore, a necessary condition for God being omniscient is that He be able to suffer and feel certain emotions.

As Sarot observes, it is not an argument that is explicitly used very often.² However, it is widely assumed by passibilists that if God cannot suffer or feel emotions, He cannot fully appreciate the human condition and so cannot love us adequately. So part of my aim in trying to rebut this argument was to show that an impassible – and thus 'unexperienced' God – would not in any way be deficient in His love for us through a lack of the relevant knowledge.

I argued that although, for human beings, having the relevant experiences is a causally necessary condition of knowing what various subjective experiences are like, and therefore of being able to grasp the related concepts, it is logically possible that someone could have the knowledge and conceptual grasp of these matters without having had the experiences. Having arrived at this conclusion, I gave theological substance to this possibility by arguing that the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*

² Sarot, *op. cit.* p. 67.

enables us to understand how God can know what human subjective experiences are like, and how He can therefore grasp the relevant concepts, without His having to be the subject of any experiences. In the course of opposing the argument from divine omniscience, I rejected Anthony Kenny's attempt to dissolve the issue with his claim that the 'phenomenology' of subjective experiences is informationally and conceptually unimportant.

In chapter 6, I discussed the argument that the nature of love is such that a loving God must be passible. According to this argument, a relationship of love essentially involves mutual emotional responses between the persons concerned, as occasion demands. If God truly loves us, then His relationship with us must be one that involves mutual dependence and vulnerability, mutual emotion and suffering.

Much of the chapter was devoted to Brümmer's and Sarot's argument in this regard. They both proceed by (a) effectively restricting the options for conceiving of God's love to *either* benevolence *or* mutual love; (b) arguing that benevolence is inadequate as a concept of love and that therefore love must be mutual; and (c) claiming that mutual love essentially involves a mutuality of emotions. They conclude that a loving God must be passible.

I responded to their argument by disagreeing with their characterizations of benevolence and mutual love. I gave a more favourable characterization of benevolence and argued for its place as an analogy for God's love for us. However, I did not deny the importance of the analogy of mutual love, but challenged Sarot's uncritical use of this idea in characterizing divine love. I argued that he failed to take into account the asymmetries in the relationship that exists between God and ourselves, and to give due consideration to the fact that not all features of an analogue are attributed to the thing it is used as an analogy for. I pointed out that the

idea of mutual love as an analogy for divine love has not traditionally, and for all Christians, carried the implication of passibility which Sarot finds in it. Finally, I argued that the two analogies should not be placed in opposition to each other but instead should be used to complement one another, so that we arrive at an adequate view of divine love.

In chapter 7, I addressed more directly the issue of conceiving of a loving but impassible God. The idea that love essentially involves emotions seems to rest on a confusion between emotions as evidence of love and emotions as constituting, or partly constituting, love. I discussed three accounts of emotion, all purporting to show that there is some further fact about emotion, over and above the beliefs and desires which partly constitute an emotion, which makes emotion uniquely valuable. According to these accounts, the intentionality embodied in emotions cannot exist in any other (non-emotional) form. This supposed fact might be appealed to by those who claim that God can love us fully only if He has the requisite emotions.

I argued that while, for human beings, emotions are often evidence of certain beliefs, desires, and attitudes, evidence which is undoubtedly valuable in interpersonal relationships, emotions do not constitute or partly constitute our love for one another. It is our beliefs and desires which fulfil that rôle, and it is for this reason that we do not need to attribute emotions to God.

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