

FOREKNOWLEDGE & DIVINE EMOTIONS: A FURTHER EXPLORATION INTO THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF A PASSIBLE GOD

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Abstract. In this essay, we move to further advance the work done on God and emotions by RT Mullins, exploring the role exhaustive divine foreknowledge plays as it relates to God's emotional life. Given our preliminary investigation at the intersection of divine foreknowledge and divine emotions, and focusing specifically on the neoclassical theistic conception of God, we argue that in light of God's foreknowledge, his emotional life is (in certain important respects) dissimilar when compared to that of his creation. That said, our primary aim is one of exploration: Should divine foreknowledge play a role in how we understand God's emotional life? Given our analysis, we answer in the affirmative.

I. INTRODUCTION

R.T. Mullins¹ has recently written a fascinating (though brief) exploration into the nature of God's emotional life. Mullins contrasts two different conceptions of God—Classical Theism (roughly, the view that God is timeless, immutable, impassible, and simple) with Neoclassical Theism (a rejection of at least one of the attributes of the classical God)—with a specific focus on how God's emotional life is to be understood in light of each account.² While a number of central issues related to God and his emotions are analyzed, one topic that is missing from Mullins' work is the degree to which exhaustive divine foreknowledge of future contingents might affect God's emotions.³ Here, our aim is to further explore the relationship between God and his emotions by taking up this issue. We will focus specifically on the neoclassical conception of God. Generally, the neoclassical theist affirms divine passibility (the position that God can be affected by his creation). We argue, however, that even if the neoclassical theist is right regarding God's passibility, considering the nature and scope of divine foreknowledge, God's emotional life is so dissimilar, at least in certain respects, to human creatures, that we should think that God doesn't have emotions in the same way as human creatures. Finally, we tease out why this could be problematic for at least some neoclassical theists. Ultimately, however, our primary aim is one of exploration: what (if anything) is the role of divine foreknowledge on God's emotional life. Regardless of if one finds our thesis persuasive, we hope (nevertheless) to motivate further analysis of the issues raised.

II. GOD & EMOTION

We begin by laying out Mullins' work on God and emotions.

1 R.T. Mullins, *God and Emotion* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020).

2 *Ibid.*, 15–16; 25.

3 Given that Mullins' book is only a very brief introduction to the topic, one, of course, should not expect him to have addressed every related issue.

II.1 Emotion Defined

Important for understanding Mullins' account of God and emotions is to first look at how he defines an emotion. Mullins provides a fairly robust definition of emotions, however, for the purposes of this paper, we will focus only on the central elements. For Mullins, an emotion is "a mental state that involves an evaluation that has a positive or negative affect."⁴ Thus, emotions consist of two components: a cognitive component or "what the emotion is about" and an affective component or "what the emotion feels like."⁵ It is also important to note that *emotions are evaluative in nature*. An agent experiences an emotion (whether positive or negative) as the result of her evaluation of a given circumstance. Mullins explains, "emotions are always about something. Emotions always have some object or situation that they aim to evaluate and represent... emotions are concern-based construals that involve the object being perceived."⁶

For example, suppose I (Mike) wake up to see my wife holding my smiling toddler and, as a result, experience great happiness. My emotional state of happiness is the result of perceiving my wife and smiling child (mental contents) and the feelings that are elicited are a result of my evaluation of my perception (affective). This example also highlights one last key element of emotions: what is being evaluated has some level or degree of relevance or significance to me. Mullins writes: "To say that an emotion is evaluative is to say that one believes that the object of her emotion has certain kinds of value or axiological properties."⁷ In other words, it is the fact that one cares about something or someone that results in her evaluation of an object or circumstance eliciting an emotion. Because I deeply love my wife and son, my evaluation of them as being happy results in me being happy. In contrast, I don't care much about the rock outside my window. If something were to fall from the sky and destroy it, I wouldn't experience any positive or negative emotion as a result (though, I would be interested in what was falling from the sky around my house!). All of this in mind, we can summarize Mullins' definition of an emotion as follows:

Emotion: A positive or negative mental state that is the result of one's evaluation of a given object or circumstance involving something or someone of value to the subject.

Hence forth, when we refer to an emotion, we suppose the above definition.

II.2 God's Emotions

Accordingly, in order for God to be understood as having emotions, God would need to have an experience(s) that meets the criteria laid out in the above definition. Mullins has argued that this understanding of emotions is hard to make sense of for the God of Classical Theism. According to the Classical Theist, God is impassible, which (roughly) means that God cannot suffer, be acted upon, or experience passions in the way that creatures do.⁸ In fact, given that God is timeless, and thus doesn't experience temporal succession, God doesn't experience any kind of emotional state *in the evaluative sense*. God may be eternally happy or peaceful, but these emotional states don't come and go, and aren't the result of God's evaluating (or experiencing) a given object or circumstance. Mullins explains, "Whatever emotions the classical God has, He has them timelessly and changelessly."⁹ Moreover, some may find it hard to make sense of God's having much of an emotional life if, as the Classical Theist tells us, God cannot be moved. Even if God could evaluate persons or circumstances, if nothing affects him, then evaluations wouldn't elicit corresponding emotions. Thus, if one wants to affirm Mullins' account of emotions, and one wants to affirm that God has emotions in a similar sense, then one must deny Classical Theism.

4 Ibid., 4.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 5;7. It is worth noting that there could be (probably are) emotions that are not due to the evaluation of some object or situation. This seems to be the case for those suffering from anxiety or other psychological disorders, where the emotions brought on are the result of irregular cognitive activity, free from any external referent. Granted, a perfect God wouldn't experience any irrational emotions, but it could be the case that there are some (rational) divine emotions that are not the result of any evaluative process. We leave this issue (if it is one) for others to take up.

7 Ibid., 7.

8 Ibid., 20.

9 Ibid., 19.

For the passibilist God, this is not a problem. While passibilism can be understood in several ways, for the purposes of our paper, we define it as simply the denial of impassibility as outlined above. On passibilism, God is not timeless, can be acted upon, and does experience suffering and passions as creatures do. Mullins lays this idea out well:

[The passibilist] maintains that God can be moved or influenced by things external to the divine nature. This is because God has willingly created a universe in which He is capable of responding to, and cooperating with, His creatures in order to satisfy His purposes for His creation. Given this, the neoclassical theist maintains that God is capable of suffering. The passibilist affirms that God is as happy as one can be in any given circumstance. Yet, she claims that God's happiness is disturbed by what transpires in the universe because a morally perfect God cannot be unmoved by the evils of the world.¹⁰

Furthermore, God's emotional responses are perfectly rational — i.e., he doesn't over- or under-react. God infallibly knows every situation that is occurring within the universe and is perfectly emotionally responsive to each one. We will further expand on this understanding of God below, but for now we turn to evaluate the emotional life of the passibilist God (as defined above) in light of divine foreknowledge.

III. DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ITS EMOTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

III.1 Foreknowledge and Foreknowledge Prime

One area of commonality (generally) for the Classical Theist and the Neoclassical Theist is that they are both committed to divine foreknowledge. T. Ryan Byerly defines foreknowledge as follows:

Divine Foreknowledge: $\Box_t \forall t, t', S, A$ (God believes at t that S does A at t' * S does A at t')

In English, as Byerly puts it, "It is logically necessary that, for any time t and t' , any human agent S and any action A , if God believes at t that S does A at t' , then S does A at t' ."¹¹ Here, divine foreknowledge is understood in a strong sense which includes infallibility. As such, if God believes at the creation of the universe that tomorrow, I will have coffee for breakfast, then, when tomorrow morning arrives, given that God's beliefs cannot be wrong and that the past is fixed, I will have coffee for breakfast. God's foreknowledge includes not only knowledge of future actions but involves knowledge of all true propositions about the future.

As it relates to God's emotional life, there are two more important components of divine foreknowledge worth stressing. First, God foreknows how every situation will unfold throughout the course of human history *in exact detail*. For God, there is no vagueness, there are no blind spots, no missing information in his foreknowledge. Not only did God know at the creation of the world that I would be typing on my computer at the moment of writing this, he knew it down to the exact location of every single subatomic particle in my body at a given time. Call this the comprehensiveness of God's foreknowledge.

Secondly, God foreknows all future contingent events or situations through the use of perfect cognitive abilities. By this I mean that whatever it is like for God to know, understand, feel, perceive, think, etc., he is doing so in a way that is without cognitive defect. Similar to the comprehensive component of God's foreknowledge, God knows every detail in a manner that is in no way limited by any cognitive deficiency like those of human cognition. For example, as I write, I see the computer in front of me, I feel the keyboard as I type, I hear my children in the background, but each of these cognitive abilities are working less than optimally. If my hearing were more accurate, I'd be able to listen in to the exact conversation my children are having as they play. Likewise, if my vision were enhanced, I could see the colors of my surroundings in much greater detail (maybe even colors that I didn't realize existed). For God, these cognitive limitations are absent. All instantiations of his cognitive abilities are perfect. Call this the cognitive perfection of God's foreknowledge.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ T. Ryan Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge and Providence: A Time-Ordering Account*. (Bloomsbury, 2014). 9.

With these two points in mind, for the purposes of this paper let's define divine foreknowledge as follows:

Divine Foreknowledge Prime (DFP): God knows all true future contingents with comprehensiveness and cognitive perfection.

Let us now revisit God's emotional life taking into account Mullins' definition of emotion and DFP.

III.2 DFP & God's Emotions

To reiterate, in order for God to be understood as experiencing emotions he must have positive or negative mental states that are the result of his evaluation of a given object or circumstance involving something or someone of value. With this in mind, take the following story:

Scott is a Cleveland Brown fanatic. Cleveland has had a great season and the team is playing in the Super Bowl.¹² As Scott watches the game, he experiences sadness and frustration when he sees his team not playing well. On the contrary, he experiences joy and excitement when his team is succeeding and when his favorite player scores a touchdown. When the Browns end up winning the game, Scott experiences immense happiness and elation. After the trophy celebration, Scott needs to take a nap because he is so worn out from all the emotions he has experienced during the game.

Of course, all of us have experienced something akin to what Scott experienced at some point in our lives. Given DFP, however, one wonders if God experiences emotions like this. If God has comprehensively known about a given event like the one described above, substituting in something of value to God, from an eternity past, with cognitive perfection, how much different are the effects of such a situation on God's emotional life in the present as compared to the past? One salient difference between Scott in the above scenario, and God in similar circumstances as it relates to emotional affect, is the evaluative component. For Scott, what makes watching the game so emotional is his ignorance of what is going to occur. For God, this is not the case.

To draw this out, suppose Scott didn't have time to watch the game but recorded it instead and was planning on watching it later. However, during that time, one of Scott's friends revealed to Scott the outcome of the game. Would Scott now have precisely the same emotional reactions to the game when he watches the recorded broadcast? Our intuition is no. It seems right to think that the intensity of Scott's emotional response to the game would be significantly different compared to the first illustration. This is due to the fact that Scott's ignorance of what is going to happen has diminished and, in turn, his evaluation of the game is likely to result in his being less emotionally responsive. This is not to say that Scott will have no emotional response to the game. Rather, simply that Scott's response, arguably, wouldn't be as impassioned.

To make Scott's situation even more analogous to God's, let's imagine that Scott's friend gives a vivid description of each play to Scott. While listening closely to his friend, Scott takes the time to write out all the details of every play. We can even imagine that the details include how each touchdown was celebrated and how the crowd reacted to each play. Scott then takes the next week to memorize what he wrote down. And given Scott's near photographic memory, we can trust that by the end of the week, Scott will have the whole game memorized. Finally, let's say that Scott decides to watch the game. Scott might still enjoy seeing the game play out and he will of course gain new experiences and know more about the game than he did before he watched it. But, at the end of the day, emotions are evaluative reactions and his study of the details of the game will clearly radically minimize his reaction. We can plausibly see the same thing with respect to God. Due to God's exhaustive foreknowledge, if God's emotional life were akin to Scott's, God's emotional reactions would be so unimpassioned, one begins to wonder if God would have any emotional response whatsoever.

This is not to say that it follows necessarily from these examples that God's emotional life, in light of DFP, is unimpassioned. It is simply to highlight the point that, given how the evaluative component

¹² Some may question the legitimacy of this analogy given that it may be metaphysically impossible for the Browns to ever make it to a Super Bowl. If that's the case, simply substitute in your favorite team.

in many (most?) circumstances requires ignorance, and God isn't ignorant, if the evaluate component is central to God's emotional life, then, given DFP, God's emotional life is significantly different than that of his creatures' emotional life.

III.3 Objection: Foreknowledge is Only Propositional

At this point, one may object to the picture that we have been painting regarding the effects of foreknowledge on God's emotional life by arguing that comprehensive foreknowledge is completely unrelated to experiential knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowledge of whether or not the proposition is true or false. Experiential knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge of subjective, first-person experiences. God's experiential knowledge, Mullins explicitly states, "is not reducible to God's propositional knowledge."¹³ As such, God's foreknowledge, according to the objector, should be understood as propositional rather than experiential.¹⁴ Given that God's foreknowledge is solely propositional and completely unrelated to experiential knowledge, we shouldn't expect that God's emotions would differ much from those of his creation in the present.

First, it is not clear to us that propositional knowledge doesn't have an emotional effect.¹⁵ In fact, just the opposite: a big source of anxiety or fear is due to propositional knowledge of what is going to happen in the future. For example, the propositional knowledge that I (Mike) have a flight to the UK this summer, given my fear of flying, causes me much stress and anxiety when I reflect on this knowledge. Thus, even if divine foreknowledge was simply propositional, it doesn't follow that it would lack emotional affect. It would be odd to think God has emotions like you and I, and yet, God's propositional knowledge doesn't influence His emotions.

More substantively, the sharp demarcation between God's propositional knowledge of future contingents and God's experiential knowledge of events as they actually occur, becomes much less clear when the doctrine of omnisubjectivity is taken into account. Before drawing out this idea further, we now turn to briefly define omnisubjectivity.

IV. OMNISUBJECTIVITY & GOD'S EMOTIONS

Linda Zagzebski argues that in order for God to be understood as being cognitively perfect "he must grasp what it is like to be his creatures and to have each and every one of their experiences."¹⁶ Thus, Zagzebski concludes that a necessary divine attribute is omnisubjectivity, which she defines as "the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness every conscious state of every creature from that creature's first person perspective."¹⁷ For example, not only does God know in the propositional sense that I (Mike) had eggs for breakfast this morning, according to Zagzebski, he knows this fact in the experiential sense as well, having experienced the tastes, smells, sights, etc. from my first-person perspective.

Zagzebski, extends God's omnisubjectivity, not only to the present, but also to the counterfactual present. She explains:

[I]t seems as if God ought to grasp counterfactual subjective experiences for the same reason he ought to grasp actual subjective experiences...If God grasps what it is like for Mary to see red, he has a more extensive grasp of his creation than if he merely knows the propositional fact that Mary sees red. But then it seems that God would be even more cognitively perfect if he grasped what it would be like for Mary to have any conscious state she could have, and what it would be like for any possible conscious being to have any conscious state possible for that being. If some other possible world containing conscious beings were

13 Mullins, *God and Emotions*, 30.

14 John C. Peckham raises this sort of objection in "Qualified Passibility" in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 109 n. 79.

15 Again, Mullins' view on the role of foreknowledge in God's emotional life (even if solely propositional) isn't explicit stated. It's safe to assume that he would probably deny the claim that the two are entirely unrelated.

16 Linda Zagzebski, *Omnisubjectivity: A Defense of a Divine Attribute*, (Marquette Univ. Press. 2013), 15.

17 *Ibid.*, 10.

actual, that world would contain first person subjective experiences. Lacking grasp of those experiences as they would be experienced by individual beings in that world is a failure to fully grasp that world, and hence, it is a failure to grasp the ways the actual world could have turned out.¹⁸

Thus, for Zagzebski, in order for a being to be considered cognitively perfect, it must possess omnibus subjectivity of not only the actual present but also the counterfactual present. However, if God possesses experiential knowledge of counterfactuals, it's hard to see why he wouldn't also possess experiential knowledge of future contingents. What is the relevant difference between the two? Unless some argument can be given as to why God's omnibus subjectivity can reasonably extend to counterfactuals but not future contingents, we hold that God possesses both experiential knowledge of ways the world would have been and ways the world will actually be. To embrace the former and reject the latter is to draw an arbitrary demarcation. If we grant that God has omnibus subjectivity, then it seems like God has perfect experiential knowledge of what the future will be like. Thus, for the neoclassical theist who endorses omnibus subjectivity, God's propositional knowledge of future contingents and God's experiential knowledge become closely tied.

Alas, God's omnibus subjectivity forces an even more nuanced understanding of God's emotional life. If God has perfect experiential knowledge of the future, and has this knowledge *from an eternity past*, it becomes much less clear exactly what God's emotional response to events happening in the present is like. As Richard Rice notes, "If God knows the possible future as fully and as clearly as if it were an actuality, what would its actual occurrence contribute to God's experience?"¹⁹

IV.1 Objection: Counterfactual v. Present Experience

One may worry that we have mistakenly conflated God's counterfactual experience with his actual experience of a given event at the time at which the event occurs. Surely God's counterfactual knowledge of another's first-person experiences (or his own experiences) is different than his own first-person experience of the relevant events as they take place in the present moment. Thus, one might object that we don't draw a sharp enough distinction between God's counterfactual knowledge and God's experience of an event as it happens.²⁰

This is certainly the right question to ask as it raises an important issue for further exploration. What is different for God in the present as it relates to his emotional life compared to his counterfactual knowledge of said events from eternity past? In other words, what, exactly, will God's emotional response be as it relates to both the qualia of God's own first-person experience, as well as his knowledge of counterfactual experiences? As a first step in the direction of a response, it seems that we can wholeheartedly grant that there is a distinction between God's counterfactual experience and His experience of a given event as it happens. Nonetheless, if we assume that God has DFP, omnibus subjectivity of future contingents, and he has had this counterfactual knowledge from eternity past, it still seems that God's emotional response to events in the present will be significantly different when compared to the emotional life of his creation. Thus, while the present, first-person experience may add something to God's emotional response, again, in light of factors laid out above, our thesis is unaffected. Again, this is an important issue that deserves its own essay length treatment. However, given the arguments laid out so far, it seems right that, in both respects, God's emotional life will be different (perhaps vastly different) than his creatures' emotional life. With this in mind, we now turn to why the neoclassical theist may find this conclusion problematic.

V. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

At this point one may ask, "So, what?" What is the problem with God having an emotional life that is different from that of his creation? First, the primary aim of this paper, again, is to analyze Mullin's novel

18 Ibid., 35–36.

19 Richard Rice, *The Future of Open Theism: From Antecedents to Opportunities*. (InterVarsity Press, 2020). 99.

20 Thank you to a blind reviewer for this helpful objection.

account of God and emotions in light of DFP and the omnisubjectivity of divine foreknowledge to determine whether or not, for the neoclassical theist, a more nuanced understanding of God's emotional life is required. We have argued in the affirmative. However, this is not to say that the neoclassical theist need necessarily find the arguments presented here as problematic. Rather, our hope is that the analysis provided above will prompt further discussion and, ultimately, further advance the work done on this important issue.

That said, we think there is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed as it could potentially pull the neoclassical theist closer to the classical theist in understanding God's emotions. A move that might not be welcomed by all neoclassical theists. That is, if our emotions are so dissimilar to God's, then it might not make sense to understand God's emotions univocally.

So, one consequence of our thesis being correct, is that the neoclassical theist could be forced to reject a completely univocal understanding of all of God's emotions. Of course, one needn't adopt a strict apophatic construal of divine predications. A more modest appeal to analogy would suffice. For brevity's sake, statements P and P* are univocal just in case P and P* share the same exact meaning; and P and P* can be said to be analogical just in case P and P* share an approximate but not precise meaning. Let's take the following statement to help elucidate what we mean by endorsing an analogical approach to understanding God's emotional life:

God is sad because I have sinned against him.

In light of DFP, we know that God's reaction of sadness to one's sin is not exactly like what our emotional reaction would be like if someone had sinned against us. Rather, to say that God is sad is merely an approximation of what God is like. Obviously, even accounting for DFP, God more than likely still feels something like sadness when his creatures do wrong. But it wouldn't be sadness in any univocal sense of the term. As such, the atomic: 'God is sad', could be understood more analogically, where the predication is loosened a bit to allow for some dissimilarity in application to God as opposed to human beings. Of course, appealing to analogy is exactly what classical theists do to help motivate their own project. Therefore, neo-classical theists may be hesitant to embrace such a move. We are not suggesting that the neoclassical theist can't make use of analogy—here, our worry is that she might undercut some of the motivation for her own project. For example, part of the neoclassical theist motivation is that she can take the biblical text talking about God more literally, however, here, she'd be forced to postulate an analogical understanding of God's emotions. Thus, one may see this as partially undermining her own project.

VI. CONCLUSION

There are a number of issues regarding the nature of God's emotional life in light of divine foreknowledge that still need to be addressed. We didn't address, for example, specific modalities of emotion and how different types of divine emotions may or may not be impacted by divine foreknowledge. We leave this issue for others to take up. However, this paper, while certainly not an exhaustive, will (hopefully) prompt further exploration at the intersection of divine foreknowledge and divine emotions. What does seem clear, however, and what we have argued, is that, for the neoclassical theist, a robust understanding of God's emotional life is lacking without addressing the influences of divine foreknowledge on the issue.²¹

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²¹ Acknowledgements: We are indebted to Jussi Suikkanen, Nikk Effingham, Gregory Sadler, Jamie Collin, and two blind referees for helpful feedback that significantly improved this essay.

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