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Why Can't the Impassible God Suffer? Analytic Reflections on Divine Blessedness

R.T. MULLINS
University of St Andrews
rtmullins@gmail.com

Abstract: According to classical theism, impassibility is said to be systematically connected to divine attributes like timelessness, immutability, simplicity, aseity, and self-sufficiency. In some interesting way, these attributes are meant to explain why the impassible God cannot suffer. I shall argue that these attributes do not explain why the impassible God cannot suffer. In order to understand why the impassible God cannot suffer, one must examine the emotional life of the impassible God. I shall argue that the necessarily happy emotional life of the classical God explains why the impassible God cannot suffer.
Keywords: Impassibility, Timelessness, Immutability, Simplicity, God

Throughout most of the history of Christianity, the doctrine of divine impassibility has enjoyed wide assent. However, its role in systematic theology has waxed and waned in different eras. During the early Christological debates, impassibility was the default view. It played an influential role against Logos-sarx models of the incarnation as well as a role in late Arian arguments against the full divinity of Christ.[1] Later generations, however, have not cast a favorable eye on impassibility. Before the turn of the 20th Century, various theologians began to endorse divine passibility in reaction to the unethical implications they perceived to be involved in the doctrine of divine impassibility. In 1900, Marshall Randles commented that this modern acceptance of divine passibility is merely a passing mood that "will probably turn out to be one of those temporary reactions which come and go."[2] For better or worse, Randles' prediction did not come to pass. Far from a temporary reaction, the doctrine of divine passibility received such a widespread acceptance in the 20th Century that it came to be referred to as the new orthodoxy. Many theologians came to see divine impassibility as deeply unbiblical because the bible has no problem affirming that God suffers.[3] Yet despite the complete lack of biblical evidence for divine impassibility, the doctrine does

[1] (Mozley 1926, 92-93; Eunomius 1987).
[2] (Randles 1900, 5).
[3] (Bauckham 2008; Moltmann 2001; Torrance 1989; Fretheim 1984).

enjoy several prominent defenders today.[4] In fact, I would hazard a prediction that divine impassibility is going to make a comeback in Christian theology.[5]

For many theologians, the debate between divine impassibility and divine passibility will seem deeply puzzling. The arguments for either view can sometimes be difficult to untangle, and the rhetoric from both sides can seem uncharitable at times. To make matters even more complicated, some contemporary theologians try to claim that God is both impassible and passible. How is the Christian theologian supposed to make sense of all of this? I strongly suspect that there is a lack of understanding in the contemporary world of theology as to what the doctrine of impassibility actually affirms. At times it seems as if contemporary Christian thinkers are simply talking past one another because they are focusing on different kinds of issues.

In contemporary discussions of the doctrine of divine impassibility, different groups focus on different questions. As Anastasia Scrutton has pointed out, contemporary theologians have primarily focused on the question, "Can God Suffer?" whereas contemporary philosophers of religion have focused on the question, "Does God have emotions?"[6] I believe that these questions are fundamentally related, but the way the debates have unfolded has sometimes missed these connections. As a way of exploring the dogmatic prospects for analytic theology, I wish to develop the connections between these questions in order to bring about greater clarity in our contemporary understanding of divine impassibility.

In this paper I have one primary question: why can't the impassible God suffer? Typically, it is thought that the answer to this question is due to impassibility's systematic connections to other classical attributes like timelessness, immutability, simplicity, aseity, and self-sufficiency. I shall argue that the systematic connections to these attributes do not obviously entail that God cannot suffer. Instead, I will argue that one must look for an answer in the impassible God's emotional life. In other words, the answer to my primary question lies in answering a secondary question: does the impassible God have emotions? The classical doctrine of God does in fact attribute emotions to the divine life, and understanding the classical divine emotions will help one understand why the impassible God cannot suffer.

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[4] E.g. (Weinandy 2000). It is worth noting that several recent defenses of impassibility offer no engagement with the work of biblical scholars and systematic theologians like Bauckham, Bruggemann, Fretheim, Moltmann, or Torrance. E.g. (Baines, et al. 2015). Other proponents of impassibility attempt to engage with these scholars, but their reading of the biblical material seems to assume that classical theism is easily read off of the surface of the biblical text. E.g. (Duby 2016, chapters 3-4). This reading classical theism 'off of the surface' of the biblical material is something that biblical scholars like D.A. Carson find implausible (Carson 2006, 165).

[5] Of course, in 100 years some theologian may well look at my prediction and say that it is just as deeply mistaken as Randles' prediction. Perhaps, in the eschaton, Randles and I can bond over our inability to predict the next theological fashion trend.

[6] (Scrutton 2013, 866).

Section I shall briefly define the classical understanding of God as timeless, immutable, and simple. Section II shall begin to explore the doctrine of divine impassibility, and argue that it is not obvious why the impassible God cannot suffer. Section III will explore the impassible God's emotional life, and explain why the impassible God cannot suffer.

1. Classical Theism

The classical understanding of God is a package deal that comes with attributes like timelessness, immutability, simplicity, and impassibility. To be sure, classical theism also affirms attributes like aseity, self-sufficiency, omnipotence, omniscience, and so on, but such attributes are also affirmed by modified or neo-classical theists, open theists, and some relational theists.[7] What makes classical theism unique is its commitment to divine timelessness, immutability, simplicity, and impassibility since these attributes are held to be systematically connected. Elsewhere I have given a thorough examination of the attributes of timelessness, immutability, and simplicity.[8] So in this section, I shall only offer brief definitions of these attributes.

To begin our discussion, allow me to make a few quick remarks about the nature of time. Classical theists have historically affirmed a relational theory of time, and a presentist ontology of time.[9] On a relational theory of time, time exists if and only if a change occurs.[10] This is because a change creates a before and an after, and part of the nature of time involves events being in before and after relations. On presentism, only the present moment of time exists. Past moments of time no longer exist, and future moments of time do not yet exist. The present exhausts all of reality. So whatever exists, exists at the present.

Classical Christian theism used these assumptions about the nature of time to articulate the doctrine of divine timelessness. On classical theism, one of the key characteristics of a temporal object is that it undergoes change and succession. One of the key characteristics of a timeless being is that it does not undergo change or succession.[11] To say that God is timeless is to say that God's life lacks a beginning, an end, and succession. A timeless God dwells in an eternal present that lacks a before and after.[12]

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[7] (Mullins 2016a).

[8] (Mullins 2016b, chapter 3).

[9] (Fox 2006, 134ff; Pasnau 2011; Anselm, *Proslogion* 13; Augustine 2001, XI). For a discussion of Augustine's puzzles over the present see (Sorabji 2006, 29-32). J.R. Lucas offers a critique of some of Augustine's puzzles about the present (Lucas 1973, chapter 4).

[10] For a classic debate over the relational theory of time, see (Alexander 1956).

[11] (Fox 2006, 226-227)

[12] (Pictet 1834, Book II.viii; Stock 1641, 91; Turretin 1992, 202; Strong 1907, 275).

Why does the timeless God dwell in an eternal present that lacks a before and after? This is because a timeless God is also an immutable God. An immutable God cannot change in any way, shape, or form.[13] Since part of the nature of time involves undergoing change, an immutable God is said to be void of all temporality because He is void of all change. On the classical understanding of immutability, God cannot undergo any intrinsic nor any extrinsic changes.[14]

Sometimes the classical doctrine of divine immutability is misunderstood in contemporary thought. Some modern theologians have reinvented the classical God by saying that the traditional, classical understanding is of a God who does undergo relational and Cambridge changes.[15] This is not the classical understanding of immutability. As Peter Lombard makes clear, God cannot undergo any intrinsic nor any extrinsic change.[16] This rules out Cambridge changes.

A Cambridge change is a change that an object undergoes in relation to something else. The object does not undergo an intrinsic change, but merely undergoes an extrinsic change. For example, as I am currently typing this paper, I am north of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty. The Divinity Faculty building has the relational property "being south of Ryan." Say that tomorrow I take a train down to Cambridge, and stand to the south of the Divinity Faculty. The Divinity Faculty building has changed relationally with regards to me, but nothing intrinsic to the building has changed. The building has merely gone from "being south of Ryan" to "being north of Ryan." When contemporary theologians say that the classical God can undergo these sorts of changes, they are misrepresenting the tradition. Boethius actually gives a similar account of relational, or Cambridge changes, in *The Trinity* V. So classical Christian thinkers are aware of the concept of a Cambridge change, though they do not refer to them under this moniker. Boethius, like most classical theists, makes it clear that God does not undergo relational changes. Why? Because, according to Boethius, the category of relation does not apply to God at all.[17] An immutable God, as classically conceived, cannot undergo relational, or Cambridge changes. In fact, from Augustine to Aquinas and beyond, classical theism denies that God is really related to creation in order to avoid saying that God undergoes relational, accidental changes.[18] The claim that God is not really related to creation is a complicated matter. Since I have discussed it at length elsewhere, I shall say no more about it here.[19] What matters for the purposes of this essay is that on classical theism,

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[13] (Vos 1999, 53).

[14] (Lombard 2007, Distinction XXXVII.7).

[15] E.g. (Gutenson 2002).

[16] (Lombard 2007, Distinction XXXVII.7).

[17] (Boethius, *The Trinity*, IV).

[18] (Augustine, *The Trinity* V.17; Boethius, *The Trinity Is One God Not Three Gods* IV; Lombard 2007, Distinction XXX.1; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.12; Arminius 1986, Disputation IV.XIV).

[19] (Mullins 2016b, chapter 3 and 5).

God is immutable in that God cannot undergo any kind of change, be it intrinsic or extrinsic.

With these admittedly brief statements on divine timelessness and immutability, we can move on to the doctrine of divine simplicity. On the classical Christian understanding of God, all of God's essential attributes are identical to each other, and identical to the divine nature. For example, God's attribute of omniscience is identical to God's omnipotence, and these in turn are identical to the divine nature. With creatures like you and I, we are substances that possess properties like knowledge and power. With the simple God, this is not the case. The simple God does not possess any properties. Instead, there is the simple, undivided substance that we call God. This simple substance does not have any intrinsic or extrinsic properties because it does not possess any properties at all.[20] As Peter Lombard makes clear, "The same substance alone is properly and truly simple in which there is no diversity or change or multiplicity of parts, or accidents, or of any other forms."[21]

Further, a simple God is purely actual. This means that the simple God does not possess any potential whatsoever.[22] On classical theism, it is assumed that to possess potentiality implies mutability since going from potential to actual entails undergoing a change. Classical theism has already ruled out any kind of change in God, so a simple God must be purely actual. The claim that God is pure actuality and simple has further entailments. It entails that all of God's actions are identical to each other such that there is only one divine act. Further, this one divine act is identical to the divine substance.[23] So the divine act of creation is identical to the divine act of salvation. And these identical acts are identical to the being of God. Which entails that God just is the act of creation! But let us not worry about that at the moment.[24]

There are two further attributes that are worth discussing for the purposes of this paper: aseity and self-sufficiency. One might wonder why I have withheld a discussion of these attributes until now. Classical theists often claim that God's aseity and self-sufficiency entail that God is timeless, immutable, simple, and impassible. I cannot find any such systematic entailment from aseity and self-sufficiency to divine timelessness, immutability, and simplicity.[25] Yet, classical theists insist that these attributes play such a role. For the purposes of this paper, I shall articulate these doctrines, then in section II, I shall explain why these attributes do not entail impassibility.

Some readers will be unfamiliar with God's self-sufficiency since it is not widely discussed in contemporary analytic theology. Further, it is often conflated with divine

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[20] (Augustine, *The Trinity* VII.10; Rogers 1996, 166; Church 1638, 23; Dolezal 2017, 71 and 123).

[21] (Lombard 2007, Distinction VIII.3).

[22] (Rogers 1996; Scythopolis 1998, 220; Dolezal 2011).

[23] (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.10).

[24] (Mullins 2016b, 137ff).

[25] (Mullins 2016b).

aseity in some recent theological and philosophical work.[26] As such, it will be worth clearly distinguishing the two for contemporary readers. Divine aseity can be stated as follows.

> Aseity: A being exists *a se* if and only if its existence is in no way dependent upon, nor derived from, anything *ad extra*.

If that is aseity, one will rightly ask what self-sufficiency is. As the 17th Century theologian Christopher Blackwood explains, God's self-sufficiency is an attribute of God's perfect nature. Self-sufficiency expresses the fact that God has all of the perfections that we find in creatures. His possession of these perfections is not dependent upon anything outside of Himself. He has no need for anything outside of Himself in order to be perfect. In fact, God is the cause and source of all the perfections we find in creation.[27]

Given these sorts of claims from Blackwood and others, I believe that we can formulate divine self-sufficiency as follows.

> Divine Self-sufficiency: A being is divinely self-sufficient if and only if that being's perfect essential nature is not dependent upon, nor derived from, anything *ad extra.*

For the sake of clarity, it is worth emphasizing the difference between aseity and self-sufficiency. Aseity is a claim about the existence of God. Self-sufficiency is a claim about the nature of God. Given the classical theist's commitment to divine simplicity, aseity and self-sufficiency are identical to each other. However, other theists who reject divine simplicity do not need to make this identity claim. I believe that this identity claim is the reason why some contemporary proponents of classical theism believe that aseity and self-sufficiency entail timelessness, immutability, and simplicity. However, I believe that they are smuggling in simplicity before laying out their arguments. More on that below.

What we have before us is the classical understanding of God. Now we must turn our attention to the classical doctrine of divine impassibility. Further, we must investigate the claim that the impassible God cannot suffer.

2. Why Can't the Impassible God Suffer?

Classical theism affirms that God cannot suffer because God is impassible. Somehow impassibility is supposed to logically follow from timelessness, immutability, and

[26] (Bird 2013, 128; Mann 2005, 36).

[27] (Blackwood 1658, 316).

simplicity. By way of example, John of Damascus explains that God is passionless because God lacks a body, and is without flux or change, and is simple and uncompounded. (*On the Orthodox Faith*, I.8) Here one can see a common theme with impassibility that God cannot undergo a change or alteration of His emotional state. This somehow entails that God cannot suffer, though I fail to see how lacking change can entail a lack of suffering.[28]

To see why this is not obvious, consider the following. It is logically possible for a timeless and immutable being to be in a state of eternal and unchanging torment.[29] It is logically possible in that nothing about this concept entails a logical contradiction. There is nothing of the form "A and not-A" in saying that a timeless being is immutably suffering. Perhaps the classical theist will wish to say that it is metaphysically impossible in that something about the nature of a timeless and immutable being is inconsistent with undergoing eternal torment. If the classical theist is correct about this, she has not yet specified why this is the case. The classical theist will need to bring in some sort of perfect being intuition, assumption about perfection, another divine attribute, or another Christian doctrine that is not captured in the doctrine of divine timelessness nor divine immutability.[30] In other words, nothing about God being timeless nor immutable by itself explains why God cannot suffer. What some of those other assumptions and attributes are will be discussed in section III.

Further, consider divine simplicity. There is nothing logically impossible about the notion that a simple God suffers. If a simple God suffers, this God will be identical to the act of suffering. Again, this entails no logical contradiction. As stated before, a classical theist will wish to deny that the simple God can suffer, but nothing within divine simplicity by itself can explain why this is the case. The classical theist must bring in other intuitions and assumptions about the nature of divine perfection in order to explain why the impassible God cannot suffer. Nothing about timelessness, immutability, nor simplicity by themselves makes it obvious why the simple God cannot suffer.

What about divine aseity? Whilst aseity is an important divine attribute, it cannot significantly motive impassibility. Aseity only tells us that God's existence does not

[28] (Weinandy 2000, 99-100).

[29] (Creel 1986, 132).

[30] I am aware of different kinds of arguments that seek to show the metaphysical impossibility of a timeless and immutable God suffering. Yet in each case, the argument focuses on some further inconsistency that goes beyond mere timelessness and immutability. For example, (Randles 1900, chapter 4) argues that the eternal suffering of God would be inconsistent with God's blessedness. In another argument, he says that the eternal suffering of God would be inconsistent with God's justice and the claim that all suffering is punishment. In a third argument, Randles says that God's eternal suffering would be inconsistent with the heavenly bliss promised to creatures. For a recent example of this third argument, see (Blankenhorn 2016, 458).

depend upon anything external to the divine nature. By itself, it says nothing of the emotional life of God. A proponent of divine passibility can easily affirm the aseity of God, and maintain that God undergoes a fluctuation of His emotions after He freely decides to create a universe, and enter into covenantal relations with it.[31] Nothing about God contingently experiencing moments of suffering threatens His necessary existence. Nothing about God freely creating a universe, caring for it, and suffering redemptively for it, entails that God has a cause for His existence. As already stated, the impassibilist will need to appeal to something else in order to explain why the impassible God cannot suffer.

It is interesting to note that many early Church fathers and later theologians continually speak of God's impassibility within the context of God's self-sufficiency.[32] By itself, self-sufficiency does not automatically lend any credibility to impassibility. This is because intuitions about what it means to be a perfect being vary. For instance, the contemporary philosopher, Linda Zagzebski, believes that maximal empathy, or omnisubjectivity, is a perfection. Omnisubjectivity is the perfect capacity to engage in maximal empathy.[33] An omnisubjective God is self-sufficient in that His essential perfect nature includes the power or capacity to engage in maximal empathy. Nothing *ad extra* to the divine nature makes God have this capacity. God's possession of this capacity does not depend upon anything *ad extra* to the divine nature either. So an omnisubjective God is a self-sufficient God. Further, the triune persons can eternally exercise this capacity with one another *sans* creation.

As Zagzebski makes clear, an omnisubjective God is a passible God.[34] When an omnisubjective God freely creates a contingent universe, He will exercise His empathetic capacity in new ways as He engages with creatures in the economy of salvation. By engaging in empathy with His creatures, He will have a perfect understanding of creaturely conscious states. Some of these creaturely conscious states involve suffering. In the act of being empathetic with His beloved creatures, God will have a perfect grasp of their suffering, and as such will experience empathetic suffering with them. This will not be something that impassibilists can coherently maintain because having empathy entails suffering at particular times as God empathetically engages with His creatures. As the impassibilist Girolamo Zanchius makes clear, empathy can bring suffering, and this is something an impassible God cannot do. So impassibilists rule out empathy from the divine life.[35]

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[31] (Mullins 2014). I believe that the arguments developed in defense of divine temporality can be modified to defend certain claims about divine passibility with regards to God's aseity.

[32] (Shedd 1888, 178-79; Cf. Marshall 2009, 293; Scrutton 2011, 17-19).

[33] (Zagzebski 2013).

[34] (Zagzebski 2013, 45).

[35] (Zanchius 1601, 357-358).

Notice, though, that empathy is ruled out from the divine life because it brings suffering upon God. Nothing about God's self-sufficiency has been called into question here. Instead, divine impassibility has been called into question. So it does not seem like self-sufficiency is doing any work to motivate divine impassibility. Yet, classical theists insist that self-sufficiency is logically connected to impassibility.[36] What is going on here? I believe that there are several things going on here that need to be clarified in this regard because self-sufficiency is not doing the work that the classical theist thinks it is.

In particular, it seems to me that divine simplicity is being conflated with self-sufficiency in most theological arguments for impassibility. In particular, the claim that God is purely actual, and cannot have any contingent or accidental properties. This rules out God having any dispositional properties such as powers or capacities that can be actualized. The divine passibilist seems to be claiming that omnisubjectivity is a power that God possesses. This power is considered to be a perfection by the passibilist because it gives God the ability to grasp the conscious states of all beings. The classical theist, however, has already ruled such things out of the divine nature since the classical theist affirms that God is purely actual. A purely actual God does not have abilities, or capacities, that He can actualize because that would entail God having potential. So a classical theist might say that her commitment to divine simplicity rules out possible perfections like omnisubjectivity from consideration. This is worth noting since it is divine simplicity, and not self-sufficiency, that is doing the work here in ruling out omnisubjectivity. Of course, a proponent of omnisubjectivity could say that God's omnisubjectivity is purely actualized, thus removing any potential in God. In which case, omnisubjectivity would be not be ruled out by divine simplicity. So, once again, nothing about divine simplicity by itself explains why the impassible God cannot suffer.

At this point in the conversation, one will most likely ask again, "Why can't the impassible God suffer?" It seems to me that there are no clear systematic connections between divine timelessness, immutability, simplicity, aseity, and self-sufficiency that will give us an answer to this question. I believe that one must look elsewhere within classical theism to discover the answer to this question.

3. The Emotions of the Impassible God

What must be understood is that classical theism affirms certain principles, assumptions, and divine attributes that other Christian theists will deny. These other assumptions and attributes can explain why the impassible God cannot suffer. Relevant for my purposes here is the classical understanding of God's emotions. Though 20th Century passibilist theologians have often asserted that the impassible God lacks any emotions, we will soon see that this is false.

[36] (Wittman 2016, 133).

To get us started in understanding these issues, I shall begin by focusing on the following definition of impassibility from James Arminius. He writes that,

> IMPASSIBILITY is a pre-eminent mode of the Essence of God, according to which it is devoid of all suffering or feeling; not only because nothing can act against this Essence, for it is of infinite Being and devoid of external cause; but likewise because it cannot receive the act of any thing, for it is of simple Entity.—Therefore, Christ has not suffered according to the Essence of his Deity.[37]

In order to gain some traction in our understanding of impassibility, it is worth summing up three common impassibility themes that I believe make up the core of the doctrine. First, there is a widespread agreement that the impassible God cannot suffer. The 'cannot' here is quite strong. It implies that it is broadly logically, or metaphysically, impossible for God to suffer.[38] Second, underlying this notion is the assumption that God cannot be moved, nor acted upon, by anything *ad extra* to the divine nature. Again, the 'cannot' is quite strong. It implies that it is broadly logically, or metaphysically, impossible for God to be moved, or acted upon, by anything outside of God.[39] Third, there is also a widespread agreement that God lacks passions, but this claim needs to be nuanced since there is disagreement among classical theists about the nature of passions. This disagreement makes it quite difficult to fully articulate the doctrine of impassibility.

Why is it a problem that there is no agreement on the nature of passions? Without this agreement, it is difficult to understand what is being denied of God in the doctrine of divine impassibility. On the level of grammar, to say that God is impassible is to say that God lacks passions. If we don't know what a passion is, we do not know what we are denying of God. Contrast this with divine timelessness. To say that God is timeless is to deny time of God. Throughout the Christian tradition there is a fairly widespread consensus that to undergo change is to be in time. There is a strong conceptual linkage between time and change. So when the classical Christian theologian says that God is timeless, we can understand that this involves undergoing no change. With regards to impassibility, there is not as much of a wide consensus on what is involved with having a passion. So this makes it difficult to figure out what is being denied of God in the doctrine of divine impassibility. For the purposes of this paper, it makes it difficult to understand why an impassible being cannot suffer or be acted upon by something external to God.

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[37] (Arminius 1986, *Disputation* IV.XVII).

[38] (Helm 1990, 120-121).

[39] (Creel 1997, 314).

What counts as a passion is a matter of dispute amongst the ancient and medieval Christians.[40] The Christian tradition shows an interesting variety of opinion on what counts as a passion. There are theologians who wish to say that mercy does not count as a passion, so God is merciful. Others, like Thomas Aquinas, hold that mercy is a passion and as such God cannot literally be said to be merciful.[41]

There is a further, and related, difficulty with emotions. In contemporary parlance, it is more common to speak of emotions than passions, and a great deal of the modern impassibility debate has revolved around whether or not God has emotions. A problem with this is that there is no agreed upon definition of emotions in the history of philosophy, and that debate continues to this day. Further, there is not a nice, neat, mapping of certain conceptions of emotions onto the differing conceptions of passions, though some promising proposals have been articulated.[42] As such, things in this regard can sometimes be a bit confusing. For example, the 19th Century theologian William Shedd denies that God has any passions, but he holds that God has two emotions: love and wrath. Shedd says that these two emotions are in fact one and the same moral attribute of God—holiness.[43] Shedd is not alone in affirming that God lacks passions, and yet is full of love and wrath. This is a fairly common claim throughout Church history, though not all agree that God literally has wrath.[44]

How does Shedd get to this conclusion that God lacks passions, yet has the emotions of love and wrath? To answer this question, we need to make impassibility less mysterious and vague. In order to demystify the doctrine of impassibility, I wish to focus on the following question: how does one go about deciding which emotions or passions can truly be literally attributed to an impassible God? I believe that the answer to this question will help us gain a great deal of understanding of the doctrine of divine impassibility. I focus on literal attribution because impassibilists have long held that various emotions predicated of God in scripture can be metaphorically attributed to God. What I am concerned with now is which can be literally attributed to God—i.e. emotions like love and wrath. Answering this question will help one understand why the impassible God cannot suffer.

There are several criteria that early and medieval theologians express that eventually become part of what later Christian theologians use to develop a clearer account of impassibility. To start, most impassibilists have some sort of inconsistency criterion. It can be stated as follows:

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[40] (Scrutton 2011, chapter 1).
[41] (Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 1.Q21.a3).
[42] (Scrutton 2011, chapter 2).
[43] (Shedd 1888, 174).
[44] (Gavrilyuk 2004, 51-60).

> Inconsistency Criterion: Any passion or emotion that is inconsistent with the divine nature cannot literally be attributed to God.

There are various examples of this criterion in Church history, and I believe that one can develop more precise inconsistency criteria from these examples. Identifying these criteria will help us overcome the disagreement about passions among classical theists, and help us discern which emotional attributes can be literally predicated of an impassible God.

Some early Church fathers held that all passions are of a sinful nature or sinful disposition. Not all agreed. Some argued that only certain passions are of a sinful nature. All agree, though, that God is morally perfect. So one criterion is inconsistency with God's moral perfection.[45] Any passion like lust, greed, or pride must be ruled out from being literally attributed to the morally perfect God. So let us call this the Moral Inconsistency Criterion.

> Moral Inconsistency Criterion: Any passion or emotion that is inconsistent with God's moral perfection cannot literally be attributed to God.

Another criterion relates to reason. Some fathers held that the passions are inherently irrational. According to this view, anyone who acts out of a passion must be doing so irrationally. The passionate person does not have her emotions lined up with reason. Such a person is out of control, and ruled by emotions instead of sober reason. However, other Church fathers held that not all passions are inherently irrational. All agreed that God is perfectly rational. His actions are always inline with, in fact identical to, His wisdom given divine simplicity. So another criterion is inconsistency with God's perfect rationality. Call this the Rational Inconsistency Criterion.

> Rational Inconsistency Criterion: Any passion or emotion that entails irrationality cannot literally be attributed to God.

Some theologians held that certain passions are morally and rationally neutral, whilst other passions are positive. For these theologians, God can have the positive passions, like love, but cannot have the negative passions that imply sin or irrationality.[46] Even though there is a disagreement here over what counts as a passion, or even a negative emotion, a clear picture seems to emerge. God can be said to have whatever passions or emotions pass the Moral Inconsistency Criterion and the Rational Inconsistency Criterion.

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[45] (Gavrilyuk 2004, 51).

[46] (Lister 2013, chapter 3; Scrutton 2011, chapters 1 and 2).

This is a good start to understanding impassibility, but it is not the whole story since a passible God can easily satisfy these criteria. Passibilists will say that God has an emotional responsiveness to creation, but never in a way that is immoral or irrational.[47] When the passibilist affirms that God only has emotions that are moral and rational, she is also affirming that God can experience suffering. How is this so? The claim from passibilists is that *some* emotions are cognitive, or intellectual, in that they are judgements about the world.[48] Not all emotional experiences are cognitive, but some are. The cognitive emotions can be rational or irrational depending on how well they track reality, and how well inline they are with one's pattern of commitments and considered judgments.[49] The claim is that cognitive emotions allow one to perceive the value of objects in the world. An emotional response to an object is partly constituted by the way the individual perceives the value of the object.[50] An object has value to an agent if she perceives it to be worthy of her attention, and worthy of her to act on behalf of the object.[51] If an emotional response fails to properly track the value of the object, the emotional response is not rational. If an emotional response properly tracks the value of the object, the emotional response is rational.[52]

For example, imagine that your friend Sally has just found out that she has lost her grandmother to cancer. As far as you know, Sally cares deeply about her grandmother. If Sally experiences grief and sorrow over hearing of the loss of her grandmother, that seems like an appropriate response to the situation. Sally is recalling the great value of her grandmother, and is upset by perceiving the great disvalue of losing her grandmother. The passibilist says the same is true of God. God cares deeply for the universe that He has made. He knows full well the value of the universe, and has declared it to be very good. (Genesis 1:31) The passibilist further claims that God greatly values His covenant people. God considers His covenant people to be worthy of His attention and action, and as such God is emotionally responsive to them. When they are unfaithful to the covenant, God is grieved by their unfaithfulness because He correctly perceives the disvalue of their immoral actions. In other words, God's grief is a rational and moral response to Israel's behavior. Yet, when unfaithful Israel suffers, God feels sorrow for them because He cares for them, and wants them to flourish according to His covenantal promise.[53] The passibilist claims that God's emotional responses to these situations accurately tracks the values in reality, and so God's emotional experiences are

[47] (Taliaferro 1989).
[48] (Scrutton 2011, chapter 3).
[49] (Helm 2001).
[50] (Todd 2014, 706).
[51] (Helm 2001, 195).
[52] (Todd 2014, 704).
[53] (O'Connor 1998).

rational and moral. In God's emotional responses to His creatures, He sometimes experiences suffering.

What this means is that nothing about the Rational Inconsistency Criterion or the Moral Inconsistency Criterion by themselves explains why God cannot suffer. So more is at play in the classical Christian tradition in trying to figure out which emotions can be literally attributed to an impassible God and which cannot. As I shall discuss below, it seems that the classical theist would agree somewhat with the passibilist about the nature of cognitive emotions. Cognitive emotions track the value of reality. Where the passibilist and impassibilist seem to disagree is over how God evaluates things. Understanding this emotional evaluation will help one understand why the impassible God cannot suffer.

There is a divine attribute that is often overlooked in contemporary discussions that will help us understand why the impassible God cannot suffer. It is an attribute that has wide affirmation in classical Christian and Hindu theology.[54] This divine attribute is often called God's *blessedness* in older theological texts. This is also sometimes referred to as God's happiness, bliss, or felicity. According to Scrutton, "the early church tended to see *apatheia* and/or blissfulness as an ideal on a 'metaphysical' as well as on a specifically moral level. Because passions were thought to be involuntary and to overcome reason, the experience of passions would disturb God's existence and bliss." [55]

What exactly is this attribute of divine blessedness? James Ussher explains it as follows: "It is the property of God, whereby he hath all fullnesse [sic] of delight and contentment in himself." According to Ussher, all felicity, happiness, endless bliss, and glory arises from God's perfect nature. So God has no need for anything else because He is perfectly happy in Himself. Ussher goes on to explain that, because God is perfectly happy, nothing outside of God can move His will. With creatures like you and I, we are moved to act by external factors. For example, if I see someone who is in a state of pure misery, I will hopefully be moved by this towards an action that will help alleviate this person's misery. Yet, according to Ussher, God is not like this. Since God is perfectly happy, He cannot be moved to act by anything outside of Himself. Instead, God can only will to act towards His own glory.[56]

Before moving forward, it is worth pausing to reflect on several things. In particular, note the connection to the impassibilist claim that God cannot be moved by anything *ad extra* to the divine nature. Ussher has not fully explained why this happy, impassible God cannot be moved by anything external to the divine nature. The passibilist might complain that such a God is failing to have emotional responses that properly track the values in reality. How can such a God know the suffering of the world, and yet remain

[54] (Radhakrishnan and Morre 1957, 63, 150, 514).

[55] (Scrutton 2011, 17).

[56] (Ussher 1645, 34).

perfectly happy? The answer to this lies in the impassible God's emotional evaluation of Himself.

Thomists have long reflected on divine blessedness, and it seems to me that one will find the answers we have been looking for here.[57] Like Ussher, Eric Silverman proclaims that God is the object of His own joy. How can this be? According to Thomists like Silverman, joy is an act of the will whereby one rests her will in a good object. On the Thomistic doctrine of God, God is identical to the supreme good. So if God rests His will in Himself/goodness itself, then God will be infinitely happy. Because God correctly recognizes Himself to be the supreme, and infinitely good object, He will rightly rest His will in Himself. Thus making Himself the object of His own eternal, and immutable joy. Silverman explains that God cannot fail to be the object of His own joy because such a notion would be incoherent. If God somehow lacked infinite joy, Silverman says that this would indicate that God is deficient in His evaluation of Himself as the ultimate good. Surely an omniscient God would not be subject to such a deficient evaluation.[58]

Again, it seems that the impassibilist is claiming that God's emotional life does involve tracking the values in reality. Shedd is quite clear that happiness is a pleasurable emotion that arises from the harmony of the emotion with its proper object. In the case of the impassible God, Shedd says that the object of God's happiness is Himself.[59] The impassibilist is saying that, as the supreme good, God is the ultimate value in reality. God knows that He is the ultimate value, and has the proper emotional response to that value—i.e. perfect happiness.

Yet this still does not fully explain why the impassible God cannot suffer. The passibilist affirms that God is the supreme good, the ultimate object of value in the world.[60] Yet the passibilist affirms that God places values on creatures as well as His relationships with those creatures, which explains why God sometimes suffers. The passible God values His creation in that He sees His creatures as being worthy of His attention and action. What is the difference between the passibilist and the impassibilist here? I gather that the impassibilist believes that God's value swamps all of the value of created reality in a particular way. What that particular way is, however, is not clear to me. Whatever that particular way is would explain why God cannot be moved from His state of perfect bliss or blessedness.

Perhaps the claim from the impassibilist is something like the following: nothing external to God is of such value that God could possibly be moved to experience joy or sorrow because of it. If the impassible God were to be moved to experience sorrow for some created thing, the impassible God would be failing to properly evaluate that

[57] (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.90).

[58] (Sliverman 2013, 168).

[59] (Shedd 1888, 174-177).

[60] The notion of the great chain of being has come under fire in contemporary thought. For a recent defense, see (Nagasawa 2013).

creature. The impassibilist is saying that God would be failing to properly evaluate that creature because God would be acting as if that creature has more value than the supreme good.[61] That is something that a proponent of impassibility will not allow for. As the omniscient supreme good, the impassible God cannot make such a deficient emotional evaluation. So the impassible God must be supremely happy or blessed.[62]

With this understanding of divine blessedness before us, one might ask how this helps us with articulating the doctrine of divine impassibility. Drawing on the Church tradition, William Shedd offers the following criterion of blessedness to sort out which emotions can be attributed to God: "The criterion for determining which form of feeling is literally, and which is metaphorically attributable to God, is the divine *blessedness*. God cannot be the subject of any emotion that is intrinsically and necessarily an unhappy one."[63] Call this the Blessedness Criterion.

> Blessedness Criterion: Any passion or emotion that entails a disruption of God's happiness cannot literally be attributed to God.

In this Blessedness Criterion, one can find an explanation for why the impassible God cannot suffer. God cannot experience any emotion that conflicts with the proper emotional evaluation of Himself—i.e. bliss. According to the impassibilist, it would be irrational, and immoral, for God to have the emotional evaluation of something external to God that would disturb His bliss. For example, Tertullian claims that God is perfect in all of His emotions such as mercy, gentleness, and anger. Yet, God experiences these emotions in such a way that it does not conflict with His perfect happiness.[64]

Conclusion

Due to space constraints, I must take stock of what we have discussed so far, though I think more needs to be said in order to fully grasp the doctrine of divine impassibility. Given the criteria and assumptions that I have identified, I believe that we can restate the three core impassible themes as follows. First, it is metaphysically impossible for God to suffer. Second, it is metaphysically impossible for God to be moved, or acted upon, by anything outside of God. Third, it is metaphysically impossible for God to have an emotion that is irrational, immoral, or that disrupts His perfect happiness.

My main question in this paper has been, "Why can the impassible God not suffer?" The answer seems to be that an impassible God has an emotional evaluation of Himself

[61] (Wittmann 2016, 145).

[62] I am not entirely satisfied with this explanation for why the impassible God cannot suffer, but space limitations do not allow for a further exploration here.

[63] See (Shedd 1888, 174; Gavrilyuk 2004, 51-62) for a discussion on divine anger and wrath.

[64] (Mozley 1926, 38).

as the supreme good. This emotional evaluation brings God such perfect happiness that nothing could possibly disrupt His happiness. The impassible God's evaluation of Himself and His creation is such that it is metaphysically impossible for Him to be moved by anything other than Himself. To be sure, there are many lingering questions about this impassible God. One might like to know how such a God could possibly resemble the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus, but that conversation must be left to another day. My hope is that with a clearer understanding of impassibility on the table, theologians can be in a better position to offer critiques and defenses of impassibility in future debates.

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