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Creel, DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY: AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Ronald J. Feenstra

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BOOK REVIEWS

Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology, by **Richard E. Creel**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. xi and 238. \$39.50.

RONALD J. FEENSTRA, Marquette University.

The recent revival of interest in philosophical theology has led to renewed attention to a number of features of traditional theism, including such assertions as that God is simple, eternal, immutable, and impassible. Theologians, process thinkers, and analytic philosophers of religion have devoted much effort to determining whether these claims about God are coherent and, if so, whether they are compatible with statements that God is loving, active in history, and responsive to prayer. Richard E. Creel's *Divine Impassibility* addresses these issues in an impressive and important defense of the doctrine of divine impassibility. Creel's work includes extensive interaction with the thought of both Thomas Aquinas and Charles Hartshorne.

Creel cuts through the jungle of debate about impassibility by pointing out that God could be said to be impassible in nature, in will, in knowledge, and in feeling. He then observes that even advocates of divine passibility generally do not hold that God is passible in nature. Creel endorses the widespread agreement among philosophical theologians that God's nature cannot be affected or changed by anything—not even by God. God's nature is impassible.

In his discussion of God's will, Creel rejects the position of those who say that a being that is impassible in will cannot respond to others and therefore cannot be loving. He suggests that God's impassible will could be eternally indexed to all future possibilities so that all of the intentions God will ever have have always existed. Creel describes his position as follows:

. . . as a result of a change in us (repentance), we experience God's forgiveness at t_2 rather than his wrath, as at t_1 , because he has eternally willed that if we did a_1 at t_1 we would experience his wrath and if we did a_2 at t_2 we would experience his forgiveness (p. 27).

God's "response" to an action we perform, therefore, involves no change in God's will, but only a change in our experience of God's eternal will.

While Creel holds that God knows all future contingent possibilities, he agrees with Hartshorne that God does not foreknow future individuals and events, saying that ". . . a thing cannot be known as actual before it becomes actual." Creel offers a sympathetic yet critical discussion of Hartshorne's views of God's omniscience and future events.

Creel rejects the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, arguing that this doctrine cannot account for the existence of possibilities that God then actualized in creating the

world. He instead proposes and defends the existence of a plenum, which is uncreated, distinct from God, and the repository of all possibilities not inherent in God. Creation by God involves God's acting upon the plenum so as to cause some of its non-actualized possibilities to become actual. Creel unfortunately does not explore the relationship between his concept of the plenum and recent discussions of the ontology of possible worlds.

In discussing God's impassibility in knowledge, Creel argues that, while God's knowledge of abstract possibilities is impassible, God's knowledge of concrete possibilities is both passible and dependent upon the changing character of concrete possibilities. In addition, God lacks knowledge of the future free actions of free creatures. So Creel holds that God has impassible knowledge of that part of the future that is entirely dependent upon his will, but has no knowledge of future events that are contingent upon the decisions of free creatures.

Creel argues that there is no sufficient reason for rejecting God's impassibility in feeling. God's relationship to free creatures does not require God's passibility in feeling. He says that God's purpose in creating free creatures was to give them the opportunity to choose freely whether they want to be part of his kingdom. Free creatures' choice for God's kingdom makes a contribution to, but neither increases nor decreases the intensity or purity, of God's happiness. So God can be perfectly happy whatever happens to his free creatures in this life, and whether they choose for or against his kingdom. Not even the creation of the world requires God's passibility in feeling. If God had not created a world, says Creel, the content of his happiness would have been different than it is now, but the perfection of his happiness would have been unaffected.

In his last chapter, Creel argues that God can create the best possible world. In creating, God made morally free creatures over whose actions he has no control and whose free choices he does not foreknow. So God cannot unilaterally create the best possible world if that implies creating a world with morally free creatures and no moral evil. God can, however, create a world optimally suited to morally free creatures, a world that both respects their freedom and provides for their welfare in ways that other worlds could equal but not surpass. Creel describes the best possible world as follows: (1) there is no evil in this world that could have been prevented without diminishing the good that obtains in it; (2) the free creatures that inhabit this world have freely willed to live in it by choosing, during the world's initial phase, in favor of God's kingdom; and (3) those free creatures who have chosen God's kingdom are everlastingly both perfectly happy subjectively and beneficiaries of increasingly higher levels of bliss. Creel holds both that such a world could take infinitely many forms and that God could create such a world. He adds that, since no other world can be actualized once God actualizes a given possible world, any world God actualizes will be both the only possible world and the best possible world. So the actual

world did not become the best possible world (as well as the only possible world) until God actualized it.

Creel's book offers much for philosophical theologians to ponder and much with which to disagree. Two noteworthy virtues of the book are its distinctions among four senses in which God can be said to be impassible and its wrestling with the thought of both Aquinas and Hartshorne. The book is also reasonably clear and well-written.

The book suffers from a number of defects. First, in discussing God's will, Creel does not adequately consider the following objection to his position. If God's will is indexed to future actions of free human agents, and if God does not foreknow those future free actions, then what has been determined is only what God intends to will if certain future circumstances hold. Since what God's will actually is, however, depends upon the free actions of creatures, according to Creel, God's will is, in an important sense, passible or mutable. If our action at t_2 determines whether we experience God's wrath or God's forgiveness at t_2 , and if our experience of God accurately reflects God's attitude towards us, then God's will either to forgive or to be angry with us seems to be both passible and dependent upon our actions. If, on the other hand, there is no real difference in God between expressing wrath and showing forgiveness, then the concepts of forgiveness and wrath that are applied to God seem to be unrelated to the ordinary senses of these concepts.

Second, Creel seems to think that God's foreknowledge of future contingent events involves God's considering these future events to be actual before they become actual. The advocate of God's knowledge of future contingent events would, however, say that God knows future events as future until they occur, at which time God knows that they have occurred.

Finally, Creel adheres to a peculiar notion of possibility, so that any world actualized by God thereby becomes the only possible world. This permits him to say that the actual world is the best possible world since no possible world can surpass it in goodness, given God's creation of this world. It seems that he should also admit that the actual world is the worst possible world, since there is no possible world worse than this world, given God's creation of it. What Creel fails to see is that, while the actualization of one possible world indeed precludes the actualization of other possible worlds, these other worlds are still logically possible because they could have been actual.

Creel's book should be studied by philosophical theologians who are interested in either the impassibility of God or the differences between the concepts of God in Aquinas and Hartshorne. The book contains an index and helpful bibliographies for each chapter.