

THE PASSIBILITY OF GOD: A PLEA FOR ANALOGY

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The traditional doctrine that God is impassible (here, invulnerable to suffering) is subject to the objection that it is incompatible with belief that God is loving and compassionate. However, the doctrine that God is passible has grave difficulties as well. I argue that Christian believers should take an analogical approach, by believing that God does something relevantly *similar* to loving us in a way that involves vulnerability to suffering, and thus *conceiving* of God as loving us in that way, while simultaneously believing that God is in fact impassible. I conclude with answers to several likely objections.

According to the theology of the early and medieval Christian church, as well as of the early Protestant reformers, God is “impassible,” meaning he cannot suffer and is not vulnerable to being affected by creatures.¹ While this position was the nearly unanimous teaching of the Christian churches up until at least the nineteenth century, it is now often rejected in favor of the view that God suffers out of compassion for his creatures. Both positions come with costs for the theist. To assert that God is vulnerable to suffering seems to render him imperfect and perhaps even pathetic and worthy of pity. But to deny that God suffers in response to the suffering of his creatures seems to entail that God does not love his creatures in the fullest sense of the word. In this paper, I offer a mediating solution to this dilemma, one which involves a specific kind of appeal to analogy. If my strategy is satisfactory, it will not only resolve this particular dilemma regarding God’s passibility, but will also illuminate a generally applicable approach to tackling similar theological difficulties.

1. *The Case for God’s Passibility*

Numerous arguments have been proposed in support of the view that God suffers.² However, in the interest of space I will focus on the one reason

¹More recently, the topic of God’s “impassibility” has been explored in terms of whether God experiences *emotions*. See especially Creel, *Divine Impassibility*; Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality*; and Scrutton, *Thinking through Feeling*. I will not explicitly address that version of the debate here, though there is significant overlap between the two versions.

²For a good overview of the common arguments for passibility, see Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality*, chapter 3.



I find most compelling: that if God loves us, God must be vulnerable to suffering in response to our plight. By “suffering” here, I mean any qualitatively negative experience—anything felt by the subject as both unwanted and painful.³

One of the most prominent proponents of the view that God suffers is Jürgen Moltmann, who argues that if God loves us, he must suffer sympathetically with us:

A God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. . . . But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either.⁴

Similarly, Maldwyn Hughes asserts,

It is of the very nature of love to suffer when its object suffers loss, whether inflicted by itself or others. If the suffering of God be denied, then Christianity must discover a new terminology and must obliterate the statement ‘God is love’ from its Scriptures.⁵

And John Macquarrie argues that “a God of love is inevitably vulnerable, for there is no love that does not suffer.”⁶ The idea here is that to love someone is to care about what happens to them, and this entails feeling dismayed when something seriously bad happens to them. It does not seem possible to truly love without being emotionally affected by the fate of the other. And so if God loves us, he must suffer when we are harmed. No claim is more central to the Christian conception of God than the claim that God loves us: the Christian scriptures assert that God *is* love (and not, by contrast, that God is power or knowledge). So if the doctrine that God is impassible seems to undermine the doctrine that God loves us, that seems like sufficient grounds for a Christian to reject the doctrine that God is impassible.

However, the impassibilist may object that the above argument rests on an inappropriate conception of love as applied to God. One might, for example, argue that God’s love consists simply in *benevolence*—that is, in willing and acting for the good of his creatures. Something like this position is suggested by Anselm’s account of God’s compassion in the *Proslogion*:

But how are You at once both merciful and impassible? For if You are impassible You do not have any compassion; and if You have no compassion Your heart is not sorrowful from compassion with the sorrowful, which is what being merciful is. . . . In fact, You are [merciful] according to our way of looking at things and not according to Your way. For when You look upon

³In this I differ from Robin Cook, who takes “suffering” to indicate something more intense (*Divine Impassibility, Divine Love*, 32).

⁴Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 222.

⁵Hughes, *What is the Atonement?*, 94.

⁶Macquarrie, *The Humility of God*, 69.

us in our misery it is we who feel the effect of Your mercy, but You do not experience the feeling. Therefore You are both merciful because You save the sorrowful and pardon sinners against You; and You are not merciful because You do not experience any feeling of compassion for misery.⁷

Anselm acknowledges that compassion entails suffering, and thus that an impassible God does not have compassion in the normal sense of the word. However, God's *actions* are the sort which would naturally spring from compassion, and for that reason, we call God compassionate. One might take the same approach to interpreting the closely related claim that God loves us. On this view, God's "love" consists simply in his benevolent actions and intentions toward us.

Alternately, if benevolence alone seems too cool-minded to constitute *love* in the truest sense of the word, the impassibilist could posit that God also desires union with us in the form of a mutually loving personal relationship.⁸ On this view, God both seeks our good, and seeks union with us, as in full-blooded human love, but it occasions no suffering in God when these things he desires do not come to pass. This is not because God is "unfeeling" in the sense some human beings are—in the sense that his love lacks depth. Rather, God is impassible because he is free from the imperfections which make vulnerability to suffering the unavoidable accompaniment of human love.

However, many passibilists oppose this position on the grounds that, if it describes a kind of love at all, it is at best an *inferior* sort of love. For example, Charles Hartshorne argues,

sympathetic dependence is a sign of excellence and waxes with every ascent in the scale of being. Joy calls for sympathetic joy, sorrow for sympathetic sorrow, as the most excellent possible forms of response to these states. The eminent form of sympathetic dependence can only apply to deity, for this form cannot be less than an omniscient sympathy, which depends upon and is exactly colored by every nuance of joy or sorrow anywhere in the world.⁹

Similarly, Richard Bauckham ascribes to Moltmann the view that

being affected by the beloved and therefore vulnerable to suffering is essential to what is best and most valuable in human love. *Pathos* is not a deficiency of human love, which must be stripped from our concept of divine love, but is rather love's greatness, without which it is not recognizably love.¹⁰

On this view, the *highest* form of love is not passionless benevolence; it's the sort of love that involves vulnerability to suffering and some degree of dependence on the beloved for one's happiness. And so it is this form

⁷Anselm, *Proslogion*, c.viii, 91.

⁸Aquinas holds something like the position described here; see Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, chapter 5 for a detailed analysis of Aquinas's views. Cook notes that while passibilists sometimes ascribe to their opponents the view that God's love consists *solely* in benevolence, this is not the traditional impassibilist position (*Divine Impassibility, Divine Love*, 179–180).

⁹Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity*, 48.

¹⁰Bauckham, "In Defense of *The Crucified God*," 96.

of love which must be ascribed to God, rather than one of the less robust forms.

As Nicholas Wolterstorff argues in “Suffering Love,” to love in the fullest sense isn’t *merely* to be committed to certain policies with respect to the beloved, e.g., promoting their well-being. Someone who acts with perfect benevolence out of duty might perform the very same actions that a loving person would perform, but to act benevolently out of duty is precisely not to act out of love.¹¹ To love someone is to *care* about them—to personally *value* their well-being. But once we see that love requires caring about the beloved in this way, Wolterstorff argues, it becomes impossible to make sense of the thought that a loving God could be invulnerable to suffering:

If, believing some state of affairs to be occurring, one *values* that occurrence, whether negatively or positively, then one is correspondingly delighted or disturbed. . . . Some might question this assumption. Can valuing not be existentially colorless? Can God not value justice and shalom in his creation while yet his awareness of its presence gives him not a flicker of delight nor his awareness of its absence a twinge of unhappiness? My answer is that I do not know how to envisage such a possibility. . . . It is true, of course, that one can *evaluate* things coolly and impartially. One can work in a farmer’s shed evaluating potatoes without valuing positively those to which one gives top grade or negatively those that one tosses out. But that is a different matter. Evaluating is not valuing.¹²

Some may find this argument unconvincing, but it strikes me as entirely conclusive. Like Wolterstorff, I simply do not understand what it could mean to value something if it doesn’t involve feeling happier when one has it, and less happy when one does not. Of course someone could judge a particular person or object to be objectively valuable, and act to preserve it on the basis of its value, without being sad to see it destroyed. But to imagine this scenario is to imagine someone who does not personally care about the person or object in question. And not to care about a person is also not to love them, except perhaps in a weakened sense of the word.

One might object that we can imagine someone who is *less* susceptible to grief and other emotions than the average person without thereby being less *loving*. For instance, suppose A is psychologically wired so as to be subject to less intense emotions than most people are, and that B is a normally emotional person. If A and B are both parents and treat their children equally well, I would not want to conclude that A loves his children less than B loves his merely because A has less intense emotions regarding them. If we grant this point, then perhaps we can continue to imagine A’s emotional intensity turned further and further down, until it reaches zero, while still maintaining that he loves his children as much as B loves his.¹³

¹¹Wolterstorff, “Suffering Love,” 226–227.

¹²Wolterstorff, “Suffering Love,” 227.

¹³My thanks to Mark Murphy for this objection.

I have two responses to this objection. First, one reason we might not want to say of A that he is deficient in his love for his children is that his emotions regarding his children might have a perfectly normal intensity *relative* to the intensity of his emotions regarding threats to his own safety, the cancellation of his favorite TV show, and so on. And it seems plausible that love has more to do with the *relative* intensity of one's emotions than with their absolute intensity. But someone who has no emotional susceptibility at all would feel the *same* amount of grief at the death of his child as at the cancellation of his favorite TV show (i.e., none), and so cannot be said to love his child in the full sense of the word. Alternately, perhaps the reason we hesitate to infer from A's having unusually muted emotions that he loves his children less than B loves his is that saying someone loves his children less than the normal amount is ordinarily a damning moral criticism, and A deserves no such criticism. If we could set aside any implications of moral censure, perhaps we *would* think it appropriate to say that a man who grieves less intensely upon the death of his children loved them less. And so this thought experiment does not really seem to show that someone *completely* invulnerable to suffering could nonetheless love in the fullest sense of the word.

There is more that could be said here, but before addressing possible objections to the above argument, or considering what precise conclusions should be drawn from it, this is a good point at which to consider the case from the opposition.

2. *The Case for God's Impassibility*

The thought that a loving God must be capable of suffering is an intuitively compelling one, so it is not surprising that the doctrine that God is passible has gained such wide acceptance in recent years. However, the detriments of this position are often underestimated.

The most decisive arguments for God's impassibility stem from the classical doctrines of God's timelessness and aseity. The argument from timelessness can be made as follows: if God is timeless, he must also be immutable, and if God is immutable, then if he were to experience suffering, that suffering would have to be eternal.¹⁴ That is an appalling thought in itself, but what's more, as Wolterstorff points out, if the life of believers after death consists in union with God, sharing his bliss, this seems to suggest that we will also share in God's suffering for all eternity.¹⁵ All this seems both frightful and opposed to traditional teachings. The argument from aseity is even simpler: if one accepts that God is unconditioned by anything outside himself, then it is impossible for God to be caused to suffer by any being outside himself, or to have emotional states that are determined

¹⁴Classically, impassibility has often been paired with immutability for a different reason, because the claim that God is "impassible" has often been taken to mean that God does not experience *changes* in emotional state. However, that would not by itself establish that God is "impassible" in the sense of being invulnerable to suffering.

¹⁵Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love," 211; see also Scrutton, "Divine Passibility," 867-868.

by events in the world. And God, being perfect, surely will not have any source for suffering *within* himself either, so God does not suffer.

But while these two arguments are decisive for those who accept their premises, those who posit a suffering God generally reject the classical doctrines which serve as the premises for these arguments, and thus the above arguments will get little grip on many readers. So in what follows, I will focus on problems with the doctrine that God suffers which (in my view) ought to persuade even non-classical, personalist theists.

First, suffering is obviously an evil, and for that reason, vulnerability to suffering seems obviously to be an imperfection. Even if the source of the suffering is something good—for example, compassionate love—that does not affect what suffering is intrinsically, which is something bad. Suffering does play valuable roles in the lives of frail and fallible creatures like ourselves: we need it in order to be warned away from greater harms, in order to mature, and so on. But it would be perverse to deny that suffering is, in itself, bad. It would also be a morally worrisome stance to take, since one who does not think suffering is intrinsically bad will see far less reason to avoid inflicting it on others. So to deny that suffering is intrinsically evil would be an unappealing way to defend God's passibility.

One might object that God's suffering in response to human suffering and sin does not entail any imperfection in God's own essence: God's suffering is an imperfection in God's "quality of life," so to speak, but these sufferings are not part of God's *nature*. However, for God to be *vulnerable* to suffering *would* be a fact about God's nature, and not merely about God's "quality of life." And just as suffering is a paradigm example of an evil, vulnerability to suffering seems like a paradigm example of an imperfection. A God who can be made to suffer by his creatures is vulnerable to being harmed (however slightly) by his creatures, and this fact undermines God's perfection.

The passibilist might object here that vulnerability to certain sorts of suffering is in fact a *perfection* (or at least one aspect of a perfection), rather than an imperfection. Consider, for comparison, the perfection of omniscience. On a standard personalist conception of God, God's omniscience is a sort of perfect epistemic responsiveness to how the world actually is.¹⁶ God's knowledge of the evil aspects of the world is thus no imperfection in God; on the contrary, God's knowledge of evils is part of the perfection of omniscience. Similarly, the passibilist can argue that perfect love also involves a sort of responsiveness to how the world is—to how the objects of that love fare. Like God's knowledge of evil, God's feeling of sympathetic grief at the suffering of his creatures is the appropriate response to

¹⁶Classical theists like Aquinas would deny that God is in any way responsive to how the world is: God exists *a se* and is unaffected by any creature. On this view, God knows everything, not as a response to the epistemically prior facts of the matter, but rather by virtue of being the source of all existing things at every moment (*Summa Theologiae* I q.14 a.5 and a.8). But since my aim is to address the passibility debate from a personalist perspective, I will ignore the classical position in what follows.

evils outside himself. Thus although their *objects* are bad, these responses are good. And so they entail no imperfection in God, but by contrast are expressions of God's perfection.

But while it might sound initially plausible, the analogy I just sketched between knowledge and feeling doesn't work. God's omniscient knowledge of goods and evils alike is a perfection and not an imperfection because knowledge of evils really *isn't* itself an evil. In human beings, knowledge of evils might cause the knower pain, or contribute to moral corruption, and in those cases, it is a *cause* of evils. But I can't see any reason to think that knowledge of evils is *intrinsically* bad. The *object* of the knowledge is bad, of course, but the *knowledge* isn't. And because knowledge of evils isn't itself an evil, God's susceptibility to knowing evils isn't an imperfection. By contrast, suffering *is* an evil—a paradigm example of an evil. And because suffering is an evil, susceptibility to suffering *does* constitute an imperfection. Thus even if the passibilist is right that perfect love requires vulnerability to suffering, that would not prove that God's vulnerability to suffering is really no imperfection. *Nothing* could prove that. Instead, it would only prove that the perfection of invulnerability to suffering and the perfection of love are incompatible. If the passibilist is right that God's love entails vulnerability to suffering, then it is impossible for God to be free of imperfections.

Now, if the only way to save the claim that God loves us is to abandon the claim that God is perfect, then perhaps that is the price we must pay. But it should at least strike us as costly. To ascribe imperfections to God is all very well and good for process theists like Charles Hartshorne—theists who have by all accounts left orthodox theology far behind. But most theists are—rightly, I think—unwilling to ascribe imperfections to God. To assert that God suffers is to abandon a very deep element of traditional theology: the claim that God is perfect qua being.

The thought that God suffers in his love for creatures also has some disturbing implications, as Richard Creel demonstrates. On the one hand, some passibilists take the position that God is affected emotionally to an extreme. Bertrand Brasnett, for example, states that those who turn away from God cause him “unending pain and enduring agony,”¹⁷ and Charles Hartshorne describes God as “the cosmic sufferer, who endures infinitely more evil than we can imagine.”¹⁸ After all, the reason for saying that God suffers is that it seems to be a necessary condition of God's loving us. But God is not merely loving; God is infinitely or maximally loving. And so, if we follow the passibilist line of thought, it seems as if God must suffer more than any other being has ever suffered, because of the greatness of his love. But if we take passibilism to its natural conclusion in this way, the result is one that undermines religious faith. For one thing, as Creel

¹⁷Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God*, 78.

¹⁸Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God*, 331.

points out, such a suffering God would be the “highest object of pity,”¹⁹ but “surely pity cannot be an appropriate feeling toward God unless our notions of God’s majesty and self-sufficiency are shown to be illogical.”²⁰ If one truly believed God to be in such a state of suffering, Creel notes, one would want to pray for him—but to whom could one pray in order to pray for God? What’s more, it would be possible for creatures to deliberately wound God, by doing things they know will make God suffer, and they could be victorious in this.²¹ While God could not be decisively defeated by his creatures, we would be able to make a dent in him, so to speak. And all of this seems contrary to an adequate concept of God as the proper object of worship.

Furthermore, Creel argues, if we try to address this problem by taking a more moderate passibilist stance, one on which God need not become an object of pity, that solution gives rise to other problems. Some passibilists argue that God does suffer, but temper this claim by asserting that this suffering is in some way transmuted into joy, or that it is drowned out by God’s perfect happiness, or else that God does suffer, but only to a modest extent. The problem with all such moderate views is that they undermine the entire point of passibilism. If the reason we felt forced to say that God is vulnerable to suffering was so that we could understand God as genuinely loving us, then to double back and say that God nonetheless possesses perfect bliss, or that his sufferings are minor and calm, seems to entail that God genuinely loves us—but not very much.²²

Most of the literature on whether God suffers takes one of the three approaches described above. Some, like Hartshorne and Brasnett, endorse a strong doctrine of passibilism, thus allowing us to conceive of God as loving us deeply, at the expense of rendering God an object of pity. Others, like Creel in his earlier work, endorse a strong doctrine of impassibilism, arguing that God’s existence is one of perfect serenity, free of any suffering. This approach preserves a conception of God as perfect and self-sufficient, but at the risk of undermining the claim that God loves us. The third approach is to take a compromise position somewhere in the middle, attempting to avoid the disadvantages of both extremes—but such approaches also miss the *advantages* of both extremes. None of these existing approaches seems fully satisfactory.

3. A Solution to the Dilemma

So far, I have argued that there are good reasons both for thinking God can suffer and for thinking God cannot. On the one hand, we cannot imagine how love in the fullest sense could be compatible with a complete absence of grief when harm comes to the beloved. On the other hand, to posit

¹⁹Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 124.

²⁰Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 123.

²¹Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 126.

²²Creel, *Divine Impassibility*, 132–139.

that God is vulnerable to suffering renders God imperfect and has various distressing consequences for the believer. Each reader will probably feel that one of the sides of this dilemma is more acceptable than the other, if it comes to that. But what I have wanted to emphasize is that each side of the dilemma has a real theological cost—a cost it would be better not to have to pay.

However, the dilemma I have sketched is entirely avoidable. We can take the claim that God loves us to be *analogical*, in a specific way I will sketch out here, and doing so will allow us to affirm everything we'd like to affirm, without undermining our commitment either to God's love or to God's perfection.

Of course, the claim that we speak analogically of God is hardly a new and original one in the Western philosophical and theological traditions. Indeed, some sort of appeal to analogy is one of the most familiar responses to theological quandaries. The approach I'll be laying out in what follows is partly inspired by Aquinas's doctrine of analogy: like Aquinas, I argue that we should take certain words to have a different sense when said of God than when said of creatures. However, the analogical strategy I offer here is far less theoretically loaded than Aquinas's: it does not have embedded within it the substantial (and highly controversial) metaphysical and theological premises that Aquinas's account relies on. Accordingly, the analogical approach I propose here could be employed by classical and personalist theists alike. On the other hand, this approach is plagued by none of the imprecision about what exactly is being asserted that sometimes hampers other similarly minimalistic appeals to analogy.²³

First, I will take as a premise Wolterstorff's point that I cannot conceive of anyone genuinely valuing or caring about another without being susceptible to grief if the other is harmed. And as a consequence, I will follow Moltmann and Hartshorne in affirming that the highest form of love I am able to conceive of is a sort of love that renders the lover vulnerable to suffering. This does not entail, however, that the *actual* highest form of love is one that renders the lover vulnerable to suffering: the actual highest form of love may be a form I am unable to conceive of.

What I mean by saying I can "conceive" of something meeting a certain description is that I have some positive sense of what it would be like for something to meet that description which goes beyond understanding

²³I am thinking here of the sort of criticism of appeals to analogy raised by William Alston in "Irreducible Metaphors in Religious Language." Alston argues that those who appeal to irreducible analogy or metaphor are often guilty of a hand-waving imprecision that serves to disguise a lack of any coherent position. To put his point in terms of our current topic, when a claim like "God loves us" is paired with the caveat that it is merely analogical, its actual content becomes entirely indeterminate. If pressed to settle on a determinate content, Alston argues, the advocate of analogy generally ends up either covertly supplying a non-analogical explanation of the purportedly irreducibly analogical claim, or endorsing only a claim like "God is similar in *some way* to a being who loves us," which is so empty of content as to be religiously useless (31–35). While I cannot address Alston's arguments directly in this paper, the analogical account I offer here is neither imprecise about what it is claiming nor effectively empty of content, and so it is not defeated by Alston's objections.

the meanings of the component parts of that description. Furthermore, my understanding of what it would mean for something to meet the description cannot be purely negative, purely extrinsic, or purely irreducibly analogical, because those kinds of content are compatible with a total failure to know “what it would be like.”

For example, suppose someone informs me that a certain delicacy “tastes like fried liver, but good.” I can conceive of something tasting like liver, and I can conceive of something tasting good, but I am unable to conceive of something that both tastes like liver and tastes good. Although I’m told this dish tastes similar to liver, I have no guesses as to *which* specific taste-properties of liver that analogical description is intended to express, because the only candidate taste-properties I can think of either don’t taste like liver, or don’t taste good. And so the claim that this dish tastes “similar to liver” is *irreducibly* analogical for me: I understand the similarity claim in the abstract, but do not know what the specific property is in virtue of which that similarity holds. The only other ways I could try to flesh out what it would be like for something to taste “like fried liver, but good” are either negative claims (presumably it *doesn’t* taste foul and musty), or extrinsic claims (presumably it would lead me to describe it as “tasting like liver, but good” if I tried it). But to be able to genuinely *conceive* of something’s both tasting like liver and tasting good, I need some *positive, intrinsic, non-analogical* idea about what that might be like, and that is what I lack. Nonetheless, I can’t rule out the possibility that there is a food that would taste like liver and yet taste good to me, even though I cannot presently conceive of such a thing.

To return to the topic at hand, I can conceive of forms of love that don’t involve vulnerability to suffering—pure benevolence and desire for union, for example. But any such form of love I can conceive of seems *less* loving than a form of love consisting of benevolence, desire for union, *and* emotional vulnerability to the well-being of the beloved such that the lover will grieve if the beloved is harmed. I can construct no positive conception of a form of love which involves no vulnerability to suffering and yet isn’t inferior qua love to the highest forms of human love I know. Some such form of love may nonetheless be possible, but I can only posit it in an abstract way: I can say that perhaps there *is* a form of love that meets that description, but as in the liver case, I can frame no positive, intrinsic, non-analogical conception of what that might be.

Given this premise, what I propose is that we take the claim that God loves us to be analogical, by which I mean that we take it to involve an implicit and ineliminable appeal to *similarity*. Specifically, take “love*” to refer to love of the sort that involves valuing and caring for the beloved in such a way as to involve vulnerability to suffering. While the term “love” has different senses, love* is the highest and best form of love I can conceive of. My proposal is that the believer accept the following set of claims:

- (G1) Love* entails vulnerability to suffering.
- (G2) God is not vulnerable to suffering, and thus does not love*.
- (G3) However, God has something importantly and relevantly similar to love*, so much so that to *think* of God as loving* us is to get something importantly right about God, even though it is also partly incorrect.
- (G4) Human beings are unable to fully isolate the truth in the conception of God as loving* us, or to fully tease apart the aspects of the claim that God loves* us which are true from the aspects which are false, in such a way as would render unnecessary any reliance on the muddled, partly-true claim that God loves* us.
- (G5) Therefore we ought to (at least for certain purposes) *conceive* of God as loving* us, while recognizing that this representation does not fully align with the truth about God.

On this view, the closest we can get to the truth when we think of God is to think of God as loving* us. And yet it is not true that God loves* us. God is *similar* in some important respects to one who loves* us—so similar that we are best off simply thinking of God as loving* us—but we ought to append to this conception a sort of caveat: “but not in the way I understand.” Thus we conceive of God as being emotionally affected by what his creatures do and experience, insofar as such a conception is necessary for us to conceive of God as deeply loving his creatures, but we do not believe that God literally suffers. Rather, what we think is that a description of God as having the sort of love which involves vulnerability to grief has *some important analogy* to the truth about God. We trust that there is something fundamentally appropriate about conceiving of God as experiencing grief on our behalf, but also hold in mind that it isn’t literally true that God suffers in any sense of the term we understand, and thus that not all the things which a statement like “*x* loves me” ordinarily entails actually apply in the case of God.²⁴

I will flesh some aspects of this position out more fully in Section 4. But it is already possible to see how this position resolves our dilemma. On the one hand, the impassibilist’s worries are resolved straightforwardly, because my position entails that God is impassible and does not suffer. Therefore, we escape all the undesirable consequences of passibilism: the undermining of God’s perfection, God’s being made an object of pity, etc.

On the other hand, the problem we faced on the pro-passibility side of the dilemma stemmed specifically from our inability to *conceive* of God

²⁴My position here is reminiscent of the approach taken by many early Christian writers with respect to biblical ascriptions of emotions like anger and jealousy to God. For example, Origen argues that we should not take biblical descriptions of God as “angry” literally, because God is not subject to passions like anger (*Homilies on Jeremiah*, 18.6.7). Instead, the bible employs such anthropomorphic descriptions only as a way of “condescending” to human

as fully loving us without vulnerability to suffering. When Wolterstorff asks, “Can valuing not be existentially colorless?,” he does not respond by demonstrating the impossibility of such a thing. Instead, his response is, “I do not know how to envisage such a possibility.” Now, Wolterstorff quite reasonably intends this to function as part of an argument for saying that God *is* vulnerable to suffering and that the doctrine of impassibility is false. But it seems to me that “I do not know how to envisage such a possibility” — i.e., “I cannot conceive of that” — is in fact the strongest conclusion we’re entitled to draw. It’s true that in *some* cases, “I cannot conceive of *x*” is at least strong evidence for “*x* is incoherent and thus impossible.” But that move is not justified when it’s *God* we’re talking about. We cannot reasonably claim to know that it is impossible for God—a being vastly greater than and vastly unlike us—to truly value a thing without being vulnerable to suffering. And so the fact that we cannot conceive of God as valuing us without being vulnerable to suffering, when joined with the premise that God does indeed value us, does not entail that God *is* vulnerable to suffering. It may be that we are simply incapable of conceiving of God as he is.

One could object that the connection between valuing and vulnerability to suffering is an analytic one, and thus that we *can* know with certainty that it is impossible for anyone, even God, to value without being vulnerable to suffering. Indeed, passibilists like Hartshorne and Moltmann sometimes seem to suggest this. But that move would only shift the ground of the debate slightly. To this latter position, the impassibilist can respond that one cannot claim to know decisively that it is impossible for God to *shmalue* without being vulnerable to suffering, where *shmaluing* is an act *similar* to valuing in all those respects which are important to us, but which does *not* entail vulnerability to suffering.²⁵ And the impassibilist could quite reasonably insist that the true highest form of love—a form of

limitations (18.6.4); describing God as angry is useful for encouraging the childish and wayward to “convert and become better” (18.6.7). See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition*, esp. chapters 1 and 5, for a fuller account of this interpretive tradition. Like Origen, I think a conception of God as having passions (e.g., grief) can be religiously useful, even if it is inaccurate. However, Origen takes this stance mainly as a way of *explaining away* troubling biblical descriptions of God as angry. While he must allow that such conceptions of God have *some* purpose, he doesn’t actually want his hearers to conceive of God as angry, any more than he wants them to believe that God is angry. By contrast, I propose that all believers, not only the childish and wayward, conceive of God as subject to passions like grief, even though I agree with Origen that we should not *believe* that God is subject to passions.

²⁵This suggestion is inspired by the approach taken by Swinburne with respect to the question of whether God is a *person* (*The Coherence of Theism*, 268–278; see also 60–61). On Swinburne’s account, when a word “*W*” is used analogically, it has its meaning loosened to eliminate one of its normal entailments or criteria, but the word may still only be applied to things more similar to standard instances of *W* things than to standard instances of non-*W* things. However, unlike Swinburne, I do not take it to be possible for us to infer all the other normal entailments from a claim employing an analogical term. Paul Helm also makes a similar suggestion, arguing that God could have “themotions,” where a themotion is “as close as possible to the corresponding human emotion . . . except that it cannot be an affect” (“The Impossibility of Divine Passibility,” 140).

love which surpasses human conception—is one that involves shmaluing rather than valuing.²⁶

Given that we are discussing God, whose nature and operations will necessarily be mysterious to such imperfect creatures as ourselves, the passibilist cannot prove that for God, love *must* entail suffering. Rather, the most compelling and persuasive version of the passibilist case involves only an observation about ourselves: that we cannot *conceive* of God as fully loving us in the deepest sense without *conceiving* of God as vulnerable to suffering. And this consideration is satisfied by the position I have sketched in (G1) through (G5) above: that God does something relevantly *similar* to loving* us (that is, loving us in the highest and best sense of the word we know), and hence that we should *conceive* of him as loving* us. The sorts of passibilist arguments I have discussed here, those that rely on our intuitions about what is required for love, do not necessitate that we *believe* that God is vulnerable to suffering, but only that we *think* of him as vulnerable to suffering, and those two things can come apart.

4. Objections and Replies

Objection 1: The Analogy Solution is Inconsistent

My proposal seems to involve inconsistency or cognitive dissonance. The proposal is not itself inconsistent, because it is possible to *think of* God as loving* us despite *believing* that God does *not* love* us, and doing so does not require one to believe contradictory things. However, my proposal requires the subject to adopt inconsistent attitudes. I am proposing that one conceive of God as loving* us, not in the fanciful way in which I might conceive of a pansy as having a face, but in a veridical way: I am proposing that we think of God as loving* us when we are trying to think of God as *he is*. And yet I am committed to denying that God really does love* us.

It is true that my position involves a degree of internal inconsistency, or at least a real internal tension. One symptom of this is that one is likely to be able to do only one of these two things at a time: when one is thinking of God as loving* us, one is not holding in mind that God does not really

²⁶While the only pro-passibilism argument I am addressing in this paper is the argument from love, a similar approach should also work for many of the other pro-passibilism arguments. For example, some philosophers have argued for passibilism from God's omniscience: in order for God to know everything, he must know what it is like to suffer, but the only way to know what it is like to suffer is to have suffered (Brown, "The Problem of Pain"; Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God*, 163; Sarot, *God, Passibility, and Corporeality*, 68–77; Ward, *Religion and Creation*, 242–255). To this argument, the impassibilist can respond that while we cannot *conceive* of any way of knowing what it is like to suffer without having suffered, that does not prove it is impossible for God. If the passibilist insists that the connection between knowing what it is like to suffer and having suffered is an analytic one, and hence that it is logically impossible to know what it is like to suffer without having suffered, the impassibilist can respond that strictly, God *shknows* rather than knows everything, where shknowing is exactly like knowing in every respect that is important to us, but unlike knowing, never requires first-hand experience. The analogical extension this would require is so minor that no one could reasonably take it to constitute an abandonment of the doctrine that God is omniscient.

love* us, and vice versa. However, this inconsistency is not an indictment of my proposal, but simply a reflection of the human incapacity to comprehend a God who is vastly greater than and thus vastly unlike us. We ought to expect that the pieces of knowledge about God we receive from revelation and reason will not all fit neatly together like the pieces of a puzzle. *That* could happen only if God were sufficiently like created things to be properly comprehensible to us.

Consider, for comparison, the way one explains atoms to beginning students. One tells the student that air is not, as they might think, empty space, but rather that it consists of very tiny balls bouncing around in empty space. However, if a particularly clever student were to ask particularly clever questions, we would be forced to acknowledge that this picture has been simplified somewhat. Atoms are not actually just tiny versions of macroscopic objects like billiard balls. A physical object in the familiar sense is made of atoms packed close together, but an atom is not made up of atoms, so it cannot be a physical object in the familiar sense. Similarly, physical objects in the familiar sense have colors (or else are transparent), but atoms do not have colors (and not by virtue of being transparent). To describe atoms as tiny balls is to speak *analogically*. A very clever student indeed might thus adopt the following position which runs precisely parallel to the position I have proposed that we take about God's love:

- (A1) Physical objects* are made up of atoms.
- (A2) Atoms are not made up of atoms and so are not physical objects*.
- (A3) However, atoms are importantly and relevantly similar to very tiny physical objects*, so much so that to *think* of atoms as tiny physical objects* is to get something importantly right about atoms, even though it is also partly incorrect.
- (A4) Right now I am not ready to understand the full truth about atoms (or my teacher is not ready to explain it to me), so I am unable to fully isolate the truth in the conception of atoms as tiny physical objects*, or to tease apart the aspects of the claim that atoms are tiny physical objects* which are true from the aspects which are false, in such a way as would render unnecessary any reliance on the muddled, partly-true claim that atoms are tiny physical objects*.
- (A5) Therefore I ought to (at least for certain purposes) *conceive* of atoms as tiny physical objects*, while recognizing that this representation does not fully align with the truth about atoms.

The student here has the word of a trustworthy authority that atoms are tiny physical objects in some important and relevant sense, and that it will work for most of her current purposes to think of them as such, and that it

will get at a lot of the truth about atoms to think of them as such. However, she can also see that atoms cannot actually be tiny physical objects in the sense of “physical objects” she currently grasps. But she lacks, at least for the moment, the resources to resolve this tension. In this hypothetical scenario, the five-point position I have sketched above would be, epistemically, the ideal position for her to take. While there remains a certain sort of tension in her thinking about atoms, it is an epistemically *virtuous* tension, rather than a sign that she has made some sort of mistake.

Those human beings who take scriptural revelation as the basis for their beliefs about God are in a closely analogous situation to this hypothetical student: we have the word of a trustworthy authority that God loves us in some important and relevant sense, but we also have strong reason to think that God cannot love us in the sense we currently understand, and we lack the resources to resolve this tension. Thus my analogous five-point position about God’s love is the ideal one for us to take, just as my hypothetical student’s five-point position would be the ideal one for her to take about atoms.

Objection 2: The Analogy Solution Requires us to Deny that God Really Loves Us

The Christian scriptures assert that God is Love—not merely that God is similar to Love, or that it is good to conceive of God as Love. Does not my proposal require us to deny that God actually loves us—and is this not theologically unacceptable?

My response is that my position does *not* deny that God loves us. It denies that God loves* us. That is, my position denies that God has the particular kind of love which certain passibilists have (plausibly) picked out as the highest form of love we can conceive of—a form of love which involves vulnerability to suffering. But this is compatible with thinking that God nonetheless loves us in the *actual* highest and truest sense of the word.

I am appealing here to something like Aquinas’s theory of divine predication.²⁷ For Aquinas, predicates applied to God are (at best) analogical, and don’t mean the same thing when said of God that they mean when said of human beings. But because God is the source of all human perfections, we know that God must himself possess the highest possible form of all those perfections. Thus, although God is not “good” or “just” in the same sense of those words as a human being is, that does not mean that God is *merely similar* to a good and just thing. To say that would imply that it is human beings who are truly good and just, and that God is good or just in only a lesser analogical sense, and that would clearly be a theologically unacceptable position.

On the contrary, Aquinas insists, it is God who is truly good and just in the (ontologically) primary senses of those words; it is human beings who are good in only a lesser, secondary sense. Aquinas is a sort of semantic

²⁷See esp. *Summa Theologiae* I q.13 a.5–6.

externalist: he does not think the meaning of a word consists solely in the concepts we attach to the word in our own minds. If love is a real perfection which exists in its perfect form in God and in a derivative, muddled, and imperfect form in creatures, then our word “love” refers to the perfection itself, and thus more properly to divine love than to human love. This will be so even if our own concepts of love only adequately correspond to human love and are inaccurate as representations of divine love. Our own mental contents are not all that determine the proper referents of our words. Given this point, it is coherent to posit that my own concepts of love do not properly apply to God but that God nonetheless really does *love* us—i.e., that the most proper referent of the term “love” exists in God. My proposal is that the believer trust (on the basis of scriptural revelation) that the true perfection picked out by the word “love” exists in God, despite the fact that our highest and best concepts of love do not successfully represent anything that exists in God.

Objection 3: The Analogy Solution Requires Us to Think of God as Passible and Thus Imperfect

On the other hand, one might worry that my position fails to satisfy the impassibilist half of the dilemma. I have proposed that we grant the impassibilist position that God does not suffer. But my position requires that we *conceive* of God as vulnerable to suffering, and isn't this almost as bad as actually *believing* that God suffers? If the view that God is vulnerable to suffering renders God imperfect and perhaps even pitiable, doesn't *thinking* of God as vulnerable to suffering require us to *think* of God as imperfect and perhaps even pitiable? If so, it's not clear that this is any improvement over wholehearted passibilism.

However, while to think of God as loving* us does require us to think of God as vulnerable to suffering in some sense, it does not require us to think of God that way at all times, in all respects, or for all purposes. What I propose is that we think of God as vulnerable to suffering *only* insofar as we are thinking of God as loving* us, since thinking of God as vulnerable to suffering is an inescapable element of thinking of God as loving* us. But we should not think of God as vulnerable to suffering under that concept itself. Furthermore, since we do not actually believe that God is vulnerable to suffering, we should refrain from deducing any conclusions from the claim that God is vulnerable to suffering. Thus, while I think of God as loving* us, if this way of thinking leads me to explicitly think of God as experiencing great suffering, and thus to pity God, I will remind myself that the claim that God loves* us is only an analogy, and that these are respects in which the analogy doesn't hold.

Objection 4: The Analogy Solution Requires Us to Conceive of God Falsely

I have proposed that we think of God as loving* us, despite the fact that God does not love* us. That is, I have proposed that we conceive of God as

something he is not. Is it not wrong to deliberately encourage in oneself a conception of God which is unveridical?

All else being equal, it is better to conceive of things as they in fact are. However, that could serve as an objection against my view only if it were *possible* for us to conceive of God as he is. But if one accepts the premises of my argument in Section 3, it is *not* possible for us to form a positive conception of God as he is, at least not with respect to the specific issue of God's love. It is possible for us to *describe* God as he is: for example, we can correctly describe God as having something similar to love*, but without being vulnerable to suffering. One could adopt this description without adopting any *conception* of God as loving*. But to have a robust theistic faith seems to require that one have not merely a description of God one accepts as true in the abstract, but also a positive *conception* of the God to whom one prays and devotes oneself. And given the centrality of God's love in the Christian scriptures, it seems at least highly preferable to have not merely some or other positive conception of God, but specifically some positive conception of God *as loving us*.

But if the passibilist is right that love* is the highest form of love we can conceive of, then if we want a conception of God which specifically addresses the matter of God's love, our options are limited. Our options are to conceive of God as

- (1) a personal being who loves* us
- (2) a personal being who loves us in some lesser way—for instance, who is benevolent and seeks union with us, but without *caring* about us in such a way as to suffer when bad things happen to us or when we reject union with him
- (3) a personal being who does not love us in any way, or
- (4) a non-personal being who, consequently, does not love us in any way.

Assuming that the highest form of love we can conceive of involves vulnerability to suffering, the above list sums up all the available options: any positive conception of God one could have that addresses the issue of God's love would fall into one of those four categories.

On the theological position I assumed in Section 3, *none* of these conceptions of God is accurate. (1) is inaccurate because it suggests that God is vulnerable to suffering, (2) is inaccurate because it suggests that God loves us only in a weakened or less robust sense, and (3) and (4) are inaccurate because they suggest that God has nothing remotely like love for us. It is plausible that, from among these options, (1) could be the *closest* to the truth. (1) might be the image that *best* represents God as he is, given our particular human perspectives, interests, and limitations. Conceiving of God as loving* us, while simultaneously believing that this conception

is partly inaccurate, may be the closest we can possibly get to conceiving of God rightly.

Thus, if my premises are correct—if it is true that God is invulnerable to suffering, that God loves us in the (actual) highest and best sense of the word, and that the highest form of love we are able to conceive of is one that involves vulnerability to suffering—then the position I have sketched in this paper would constitute the best epistemic position available to the believer. To be a simple impassibilist would allow one to have all the correct *beliefs*, but would leave one impoverished with respect to one's *conception* of God, because a simple impassibilist could conceive of God as loving only in a weakened sense of the word. On the other hand, while the simple passibilist would have the advantage of possessing the best and most veridical conception of God available to human beings, that comes at the cost of holding the false belief that God suffers. Those who adopt my proposed analogical solution take the advantages of both positions and the disadvantages of neither, at the modest cost of some internal tension in our ways of thinking about God.

5. Conclusion

Despite its advantages, I expect that my proposal may leave some readers feeling dissatisfied. To appeal to analogy in the way I propose amounts to admitting that, in one important sense, one does not know exactly what one is saying when one talks about God. And that is hardly the sort of position the average philosopher is eager to adopt. But to simply rule out the possibility that an appeal to analogy might be necessary would be unjustified arrogance in the context of theology. It seems entirely plausible that there could be important truths about God which are literally inconceivable to human beings. And it also seems plausible, given a roughly personalist conception of God, that God might nonetheless condescend to communicate approximations of these truths to us, analogically, in something like the way we communicate truths about atoms to beginning students. And if such a thing has happened, a policy of avoiding appeals to analogy because they are somewhat unsatisfying in form would be a terribly misguided one. When theologians and philosophers of religion find themselves between a rock and a hard place, where none of the (non-analogical) theological options seems appropriate, an appeal to analogy may be not only the most theologically agreeable solution, but also the most reasonable.²⁸

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