

Introduction

Many who affirm that God exists also believe that God is personal in some sense. Being personal is often associated with having a mental life that involves emotions. Does God have emotions? If so, which emotions does God have? As you are pondering these questions, consider how your answer makes you feel. Does the idea of an emotional God make you feel happy or sad? Do you feel comforted by the thought that God understands what it is like to be you? Perhaps you want a God who can say, “I feel your pain.” Of course, the idea of an emotional God might disturb you. As you reflect on your own emotional state, or the emotional state of others, you might hope that no deity could be like that. Maybe instead, you are comforted by the thought that God is completely beyond all emotional states. These are interesting issues, and the history of philosophical theology is divided over how to think about them. Traditionally, these issues have centered on a debate between those who believe that God is impassible and those who believe that He is not.

During the patristic era of Christianity, the impassibility of God was held as an indisputable fact by orthodox and heretic alike. In part, the doctrine of divine impassibility teaches that God cannot suffer. As I shall explain later, various criteria were used to arrive at the conclusion that God cannot have the emotions associated with suffering. The assumption of impassibility played an influential role in shaping the early debates over the incarnation with positions being developed around ways to preserve the divine nature from suffering. Divine impassibility remained unquestioned throughout the Middle Ages, but received some scepticism during the Reformation and beyond. Yet the majority of Christians still affirmed that God cannot suffer.

Before the turn of the twentieth century, however, things began to change. A debate arose and the doctrine of impassibility underwent a newfound scrutiny. Various philosophers and theologians began to affirm the passibility, or suffering, of God with a greater fervour than before. In 1900, Marshall Randles commented that this modern rejection of divine impassibility is merely a passing mood that “will probably turn out to be one of those temporary reactions which come and go.”¹ Given the long track record of divine impassibility, Randles’ prediction would have seemed like a safe bet. However, the prediction turned out to be deeply mistaken. Far from a passing mood, the doctrine of divine passibility eventually came to be declared as the new orthodoxy within twentieth-century Christian theology. Various factors help explain this change of heart, but it is difficult to offer a full explanation of this new theological mood. For example, many theologians came to see divine impassibility as

¹ (Randles 1900, 5).

deeply unbiblical.² Others saw a conflict between impassibility and divine love because divine empathy became a hallmark for understanding God's love.³ This is quite different from the traditional impassibilist view, which explicitly denies that God has empathy.⁴

One interesting feature about the affirmation of divine passibility in twentieth-century theology is that it serves as a common ground between seemingly diverse theological systems. Divine suffering is affirmed in process theism, liberation theology, ecofeminism, open theism, and beyond. One can even find Calvinists and Arminians affirming divine passibility. Groups of theologians who can often find little to agree on can all share their love of the suffering God. Truly, we live in a golden age of divine suffering.

However, not all are able to rejoice in an age of divine suffering. Indeed, one might think that such an age is something to be lamented. In spite of the apparent orthodoxy of divine passibility today, the doctrine of divine impassibility continues to have support from theologians and philosophers.⁵ In fact, I would hazard a prediction that divine impassibility is going to make a comeback in twenty-first-century philosophical theology. If I, like Randles, am deeply mistaken in this prediction, we can both have a laugh over this in heaven.

For many, the debate between divine impassibility and divine passibility will seem extremely puzzling. The arguments for either view can sometimes be difficult to untangle, and the rhetoric from both sides can seem uncharitable at times. Passibilists will accuse the impassible God of being apathetic. Impassibilists will assert that the passible God is a creature or an idol. With rhetoric like this, one might think that we are living in a golden age of theological suffering. To make matters even more complicated, some contemporary theologians try to claim that God is both impassible and passible.⁶ How is one supposed to make sense of all of this? I strongly suspect that there is a lack of understanding in the contemporary world of philosophical theology as to what the doctrine of impassibility actually affirms. At times, it seems as if contemporary thinkers are simply talking past one another because they are focusing on different kinds of issue.

In contemporary discussions of the doctrine of divine impassibility, different groups focus on different questions. As Anastasia Scrutton points out, contemporary theologians primarily focus on the question, "Can God Suffer?" whereas contemporary philosophers of religion focus on the question, "Does God have emotions?"⁷ I believe that these questions are fundamentally related, but the

² Cf. (Bauckham 2008) (Moltmann 2001) (Fretheim 1984). ³ (Herdt 2001, 369).

⁴ (Davies 2006, 234). ⁵ (Dolezal 2019).

⁶ (Lister 2013) Cf. (Helm 2014, 151–3) for criticism of Lister. ⁷ (Scrutton 2013, 866).

way the debates have unfolded has sometimes missed these connections. This is partly due to the fact that contemporary critics of impassibility sometimes caricature the impassible God as lacking all emotion. As one shall see in Section 2, the impassible God does have emotions, and these emotions explain why God cannot suffer. Thus, the issue is not *if* God has emotions. The real debate between impassibility and passibility is over which emotions God *can* have.

In this Element, I shall offer an introductory exploration on the nature of emotions, and examine some of the critical issues surrounding the emotional life of God as they relate to happiness, empathy, love, and moral judgments. I shall introduce the different criteria that are used in the debate between impassibility and passibility to help readers begin to think about which emotions can be predicated of God and which cannot.

In Section 1, I shall introduce some relevant issues within the philosophy of emotion. In Section 2, I shall locate the doctrine of divine impassibility within classical theism. This section will look at the classical criteria for discerning which emotions can literally be predicated of God.⁸ Then I will argue that the classical understanding of God's happiness explains why the impassible God cannot suffer. In Section 3, I shall turn my attention to the doctrine of divine passibility. Given the diversity of theological positions that affirm passibility, I shall narrow my focus on a model of God called neoclassical theism.⁹ It will be shown which criteria the passibilist affirms for discerning which emotions can literally be predicated of God. I will argue that the passibilist's understanding of God's omnibusjectivity, or maximal empathy, explains why the passible God can suffer.

With these positions demarcated, I will examine arguments for and against impassibility and passibility. These arguments will tease out various issues surrounding the nature of emotions and God's emotional life. Section 4 will consider the issue of God's love, and whether or not God's love is responsive to the value of creation. It will be shown that the impassible God's love is completely uninfluenced by the value of anything external to God, whereas the passible God's love is responsive to the value of creation. Based on this, passibilists often argue that the impassible God cannot genuinely love His creatures. Classical theists typically reject these arguments because they affirm

⁸ It should be noted that both analogical and univocal predications of God are literal. Cf. (Muis 2011).

⁹ The term "neoclassical theism" was once used to describe process theism before process theism became a well-established model of God. Following contemporary taxonomies for models of God in (Diller and Kasher 2013), neoclassical theism is now considered a distinct model from process theism. The details of neoclassical theism will be discussed in Section 3.

a different understanding of divine love from their passibilist interlocutors. I will consider a new argument that seeks to show an inconsistency between impassibility and the classical theist's own understanding of divine love. I will argue that divine passibility can better satisfy the classical understanding of divine love.

In Section 5, I will turn my attention towards God's evaluative moral judgments. I will argue that there is an incoherence between divine wrath and impassibility. I will also consider objections to the passible God's evaluative judgments. Some have argued that a passible God's emotions are so unstable that God cannot make sound moral judgments, or issue trustworthy promises about future salvation.

In Section 6, I shall consider objections to divine passibility based on moral problems for divine empathy. Some have argued that an empathetic God would have immoral emotions. I shall examine two possible ways for the passibilist to respond to this objection.

Given the short, introductory nature of this Element, I will not claim to have made a decisive case for either position. My aim here is merely to introduce readers to some of the complicated problems surrounding the topic of God and emotion. My hope is that by untangling these issues, and laying the problems bare before the reader's eyes, progress will become possible in the debate over God's emotional life.

1 Emotions

In this first section, I shall introduce some basic concepts within the philosophy of emotion. In particular, I shall discuss the cognitive and affective nature of emotions, and the relationship between emotions, truth, and morality.

§1.1 More Than a Feeling

What is an emotion? An emotion is a mental state that involves an evaluation that has a positive or negative affect. This implies that an emotion has two features: a cognitive component and an affective component. The cognitive component is what the emotion is about. The affective component is what the emotion *feels* like.

This might sound like an odd definition of an emotion, but its roots go all the way back to the Stoics in ancient Greece, and it still has many able defenders to this day. Of course, one might complain that this definition of an emotion is too cold, too clinical, perhaps too Stoic, to capture what an emotion really is.

Most of us today are not ancient Stoics. When a contemporary person is asked to think about emotions, what will most likely come to mind are feelings.

However, a Stoic philosopher might ask us to calm down and consider the Stoic definition for a moment. The philosopher will agree that feelings are an important constituent of an emotion. She will remind you that the definition of an emotion given above includes an affective component. An affect of an emotion is the way an emotion feels, and the feeling has a valence of positive or negative, or pleasant or unpleasant. Yet the philosopher will go on to say that feelings are not enough to capture what an emotion is. This is because there are several different kinds of phenomenon that involve feelings, like bodily sensations, and not all these feelings are emotions. As we shall see in Section 2, proponents of impassibility will even say that some emotions need not involve any bodily sensations at all. For the moment, however, a Stoic philosopher is merely wishing to say that there is a distinction between emotions and all the things that we typically associate with feelings. She will say that more is needed than mere feelings in order to distinguish emotions from these other phenomena.

Consider the statement, “Sally is cold.” There are several ways to interpret this. In one interpretation, “Sally is cold” is a description of Sally’s body temperature. In another, “Sally is cold” is a description of Sally’s emotional life. Both interpretations involve feelings. The temperature of Sally’s body certainly feels a particular way, but nothing about the feeling of being cold obviously implies anything about Sally’s emotional life. According to the philosopher, in order to accurately describe Sally’s emotional life, one will need to appeal to more than mere feelings.

Many philosophers contend that emotions cannot be mere feelings because emotions have a cognitive component as well as the affective component. To say that emotions are cognitive means that emotions have a representational content about the world. When one is having an emotion, one is seeing the world as being a certain way. Emotions involve evaluations about something in the world, and the content of that evaluation often makes one feel a particular way.¹⁰

What distinguishes emotions from bodily sensations is that emotions are always about something. Emotions always have some object or situation that they aim to evaluative and represent.¹¹ As Martha C. Nussbaum explains:

If we really were to think of emotions as like bodily tugs or stabs or flashes, then we would precisely leave out what is most disturbing about them. How simple life would be, if grief were only a pain in the leg, or jealousy but a very bad backache. Jealousy and grief torment us mentally; it is the thoughts we have about objects that are the source of agony – and, in other cases, delight.¹²

¹⁰ (Roberts 2013, 114–15). ¹¹ (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 3–6). ¹² (Nussbaum 2001, 16).

For philosophers such as Nussbaum, emotions have cognitive and affective features. The cognitive feature of emotions is what makes emotions unique from other affective phenomena, including bodily sensations. For instance, having a stubbed toe involves the feeling or affect of pain, but the pain of a stubbed toe is not an emotion. The pain of a stubbed toe will most likely cause one to have an emotion, but the emotions it can cause will be varied. One might become angry at the table for always being in the way. Or one might become annoyed at oneself for not turning the light on before walking down a dark hallway in the middle of the night. Yet, notice that the bodily sensation of pain is not an emotion. The pain of the stubbed toe has no cognitive content. It is not about anything, it is simply pain. Whereas the emotion of anger is about something. When angry, one judges that the table is an appropriate object of one's wrath. This judgment might involve describing the table with all sorts of colorful evaluative terms.

If you are feeling confused by this distinction between the cognitive and affective features of emotions, notice that you are judging this to be a confusing idea. Further, notice that there is a way that it feels to be confused. Hopefully, this confusion has turned into curiosity, and you feel motivated to investigate the cognitive nature of emotions further.

§1.2 The Cognitive Nature of Emotions

One of the interesting developments in contemporary studies of emotion is the focus on the cognitive nature of emotions. To help one understand the cognitive nature of emotions, philosophers will sometimes say that emotions are something akin to perception. When a person perceives something, she is seeing or construing the world to be a certain way.¹³ Her perception is a kind of responsiveness to the object of her perception. Emotions are like this, too. Emotions involve a kind of responsiveness to the world where one construes the object of the emotion as being a certain way, such as *good*, *bad*, *fearsome*, *hopeful*, or *exciting*. For example, one might construe a barking dog as dangerous, and thus judge the dog a thing to be feared.

There are more similarities between perceptions and emotions that are worth considering. Perceptions are subject to standards of correctness depending on how well the construal tracks reality. If a person's construal of the object fails to properly represent the object, her perception will need to be corrected. The same can be said of emotions. If an emotion fails to construe an object or situation a certain way, it will be subject to correction.¹⁴

¹³ (Roberts 2013, 46). ¹⁴ (Helm 2015, 417–18).

Perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine that Sally walks into her living room and perceives that her pet cat is sitting on the mat. Her perception is responsive to a particular object – the cat on the mat. Her perception involves her immediately forming the belief, “The cat is on the mat.” Her belief is correct insofar as there is a cat sitting on the mat. If there is no cat on the mat, her perception has misled her, and she will need to correct her belief.

Now imagine that Sally has a son named Ben who likes to play practical jokes. Ben has found a toy cat that has an uncanny resemblance to the family pet. Unbeknownst to Sally, Ben has placed the toy cat on the mat. When Sally walks in the room, she sees the cat and forms the belief, “The cat is on the mat.” She calls the cat over so that she can pet it, but the cat does not move. She then hears Ben giggling. At first, Sally is confused, but then investigates further. She soon discovers Ben’s clever ruse, and forms the belief, “The cat is not on the mat. That is a toy cat.” In this instance, Sally no longer accepts what she perceived to be the case. She saw the world to be a certain way, but has come to reject the perception as a mere appearance that fails to track reality.

The claim from various philosophers of emotion is that emotions are similar to perceptions in that emotions involve a kind of representation of the world that is subject to correction depending on how well the emotion tracks reality. However, there are differences between emotions and perceptions that are salient to the discussion of this Element. Perceptions and emotions both give one a kind of experiential acquaintance with the object being perceived, but emotions are not mere perceptions. With perceptions, one has a direct access to the objects in the world, and this access need not be mediated by any other mental states. Emotions, however, are always grounded in some other mental states that are about the object of the emotion. These other mental states serve as the cognitive basis for the emotion.¹⁵

Some philosophers claim that the cognitive basis for emotions involves what one cares about or is concerned with.¹⁶ Hence, emotions are not merely perceptions or ways of construing the world. Instead, emotions are *concern-based* construals that involve evaluative judgments about the objects being perceived. Unlike emotions, a perception need not involve any kind of evaluation of what is being perceived, whereas an emotion involves an evaluation of what is being perceived. This might sound somewhat technical, so I shall explain a little more what evaluations and concern-based construals are.

What does it mean to say that emotions are evaluative? To say that an emotion is evaluative is to say that one believes that the object of her emotion has certain kinds of value or axiological properties.¹⁷ An object or circumstance has value

¹⁵ (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 5). ¹⁶ (Roberts 2007, 15). ¹⁷ (Todd 2014, 706).

to an agent if she perceives or judges it to be worthy of her attention, and worthy of her to act on behalf of. In making this evaluation, she perceives an object or circumstance to have certain values, for example, *good*, *bad*, *fearsome*, *hopeful*, or *exciting*. Depending on which values she judges the circumstance to have, she will act differently. For example, if a person judges a barking dog to be fearsome, she might respond by running away. She deems the barking dog to be worth paying attention to, and worth responding to.

What does it mean to say that emotions are concern-based construals? In order to better understand this claim, it is worth emphasizing that emotions always have what we care about or value in the background. These cares and concerns are shaped by our beliefs, our desires to see the world change in a particular way, and the different narratives that make up our psychological identity. For example, the concerns of a devout Jew will be shaped by the narrative of Moses. The concerns of a devout Christian will be shaped by Moses, but will be more deeply influenced by the narrative of Jesus. The concerns of a Wall Street stockbroker will most likely be different from the concerns of a Marxist given the kind of economic policies each one affirms. These different kinds of concern make up one's cognitive basis.

The cognitive basis of what one cares about creates a disposition to have certain kinds of emotional responses or evaluative judgments about objects or circumstances in the world. If you don't care about something, you are not disposed to pay attention to it, neither are you motivated to act on its behalf.¹⁸ If you do care about something, you will be disposed to pay attention to it, and you will be motivated to act on its behalf.

There are different ways that philosophers speak of these dispositions.¹⁹ Sometimes these dispositions are referred to as a person's sentiments, and other times the dispositions are taken to be part of a person's moral character. A moral character trait is a disposition towards certain virtues or vices. For example, a person might have the character trait of *kindness* or *cruelty*. A kind person is one who is disposed to act in kind ways, whereas a cruel person is one who is disposed to act in cruel ways. A sentiment is similar, but involves a disposition towards a specific thing like a person, an animal, or an institution. Love and hate are classic examples of sentiments. Two lovers are disposed to act in loving ways towards one another, whereas two enemies are disposed to act in hateful ways towards one another.²⁰

It is important to distinguish between the disposition to have an emotion, and actually having an emotion. One might be disposed to be angry with an annoying neighbor, but that is different from actually being angry with the

¹⁸ (Helm 2015, 429). ¹⁹ Cf. (Heil 2018). ²⁰ (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 108–9).

neighbor. An emotion is a mental state that involves the evaluation or concern-based construal, and involves a positive or negative affect.²¹ The emotion is a manifestation of the disposition that makes up one's cognitive basis.

As a way to tease out these notions, let's consider Sally again. For as long as you have known Sally, it has been clear that she cares deeply about her grandmother. In other words, Sally has certain sentiments or dispositions towards her grandmother. Imagine that Sally has received a phone call. The person on the phone is a nurse informing Sally that she has lost her grandmother to dementia. Sally experiences sorrow over hearing of the loss of her grandmother. Her sentiments towards her grandmother find expression in the emotion of grief. 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. Sally's attention is on the loss of her grandmother, and Sally's tears are the fitting action. In that moment, nothing else around Sally grabs her attention. Her attention is focused on the news about her grandmother. One might say that Sally's sadness tracks the values of the circumstances.

§1.3 Emotions and Truth

All of this talk about tracking values naturally raises an important question for our discussion. Can emotions be true or false, rational or irrational? Sometimes people feel uncomfortable with this question. Sometimes different voices in our contemporary culture say that it is unacceptable to tell someone else how to feel, or that one cannot tell a person that her emotions are wrong. Yet, one will often hear that she should be outraged by the most recent political event. She might even notice that people will give her judgmental looks if she does not share their outrage. This should push us to consider the relationship between emotions, truth, and rationality a bit further.

Consider some more mundane expression that you often hear such as, "You are overreacting," or, "There is no use in crying over spilt milk." Perhaps you have said something like, "There is no reason to feel bad about what happened. You did the right thing." These common examples seem to presuppose that emotions can be subject to some sort of standard of correctness. These examples assume that there is a way that an emotion should correspond to reality, thus suggesting that the emotions can be rational or irrational, or true or false, depending on how well they track the values in reality, and how well in line they are with one's pattern of commitments and considered judgments.²²

²¹ Cf. (Soteriou 2018). ²² (Helm 2001, 195).

Julien A. Deonna and Fabrice Teroni point out that there are different standards by which one assesses emotions in terms of an emotion's correctness and justification.²³ Consider first the standard of correctness. As stated before, emotions are cognitive in that they represent the world as being a certain way. An emotion construes objects in the world as having certain values or axiological properties. The standard of correctness assesses an emotion's truth value. An emotion is true or false depending on if it accurately represents the values present in the world.²⁴ Imagine that Sally is watching a sad movie. Sally's emotion of sadness towards the movie is true if and only if the movie is sad.

Another standard for assessing an emotion is justification. An emotion is justified if one has good reasons for evaluating an object to have certain values, and if she lacks any defeaters for her initial evaluation. Often times, in the absence of defeaters, the emotional experience itself will be the justifying reason for her evaluation. Emotional experiences give a person an initial evaluation of a situation, and these evaluations serve as the basis for our considered judgments. If a person's cognitive faculties are functioning properly, she will often be warranted in accepting the evaluations of her emotions. Again, if Sally sees a sad movie and starts to cry, one might say that Sally's emotion of sadness is warranted because any fairly normal person who sees that movie would feel sad.

Of course, people often feel the need to question their emotions. As Michael S. Brady points out, there are many situations in which a person will feel compelled to seek out further justification for her judgment instead of simply accepting the evaluation of her emotion.²⁵ On hearing a strange noise at night, one might initially feel scared, but then question her own fear. She might think, "There is no reason to be scared. It is probably nothing. Surely it is not a scary monster . . . no, no, no. It is nothing. Just the wind!" Yet, notice that I said one will *feel compelled* to seek out further justification for her judgment. This is because it is one's emotions that motivate her to seek further reasons to accept or reject her initial evaluation. So not only can emotions be justified by reasons, but emotions also facilitate the search for justifying reasons by focusing one's attention on the object of our emotional experience for further consideration.²⁶

The relationship between emotions, truth, and justification is what helps distinguish emotions from other affective states such as moods. Moods have an affect in the same way that emotions do, but moods do not have a representational content or any obvious connection to truth. With emotions one can ask

²³ (Deonna and Teroni 2012, 7). ²⁴ (Roberts 2013, 91). ²⁵ (Brady 2013, 86–90)
²⁶ (Brady 2013, 93)