

Critiquing the Argument for God’s Passibility from the Necessity of “Suffering Love”

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Advocates of divine passibility such as Jürgen Moltmann and Nicholas Wolterstorff (from whom the title of this paper is derived) have argued that God must be vulnerable to suffering if He is to have real affectionate love for humans. Divine Impassibility states that God cannot possibly suffer, for God cannot be affected by anything in His creation. I do not commit myself to the view nor will I be positively arguing in favor of divine impassibility. My objective rather is to explicate my thoughts on why this particular argument for divine passibility is unpersuasive.

Primarily at issue is what is necessary for love to exist between God and human beings. Moltmann and Wolterstorff (along with others) believe that to truly love someone requires (1) caring for the well-being of the opposite person, which entails (2) a negative emotional experience—in other words, to suffer—when the opposite person is harmed or incurs suffering. Accordingly, simply expressing the right care for another is insufficient for arriving at love. As Moltmann argues, “But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either.”¹ It follows from the argument that God must be able to be affected by humans. That is, it compels us to accept passibility or else reject the notion that what God has for us is genuine love. Since the latter is incompatible with biblical Christianity, the former must be affirmed.

(1) is uncontroversial. Both passibilists and impassibilists agree that God cares for human beings, regardless of the possibility of affection. (2) is where my dispute lies. Intended from (2) is not the idea that the opposite person must suffer as a precondition for truly caring for that person. Otherwise, one cannot be said to truly care for the opposite person until that person has suffered. The implication of (2), rather, is that *when* the opposite person suffers, there must be a sufficient internal emotional response by the one who claims to love the opposite person. And if that internal emotional response is not met, then that particular individual cannot be seen as truly caring for the well-being of the opposite person. Emotional suffering, according to the argument, is the sufficient internal emotional response necessary for caring, in fulfillment of genuine love.

My first contention is the possible justification for (2). Bauckham defends (2) by appealing to the human experience of love, “being affected by the beloved and therefore vulnerable to suffering is essential to what is best and most valuable in human love.”² Again, the objective is to apprehend what grounds genuine love. From that conclusion, we derive a larger philosophical understanding of how God, as all-loving, has and expresses that genuine love to the greatest possible sense—that is what it means to be all-loving. Even if Bauckham’s premise of the most valuable form of human love is granted, it still does not solve our objective. The goal of the argument is not to show what the greatest form of human love is, but rather what is essential for love to exist in God. I fail to see how the experience of human love advances (2) without additional arguments. Under the assumption that Bauckham’s assertion is correct, all that follows is that vulnerability to suffering is necessary for whatever the best and most valuable

¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 222.

² Bauckham, “In Defence of *The Crucified God*,” 96.

form of human love is. It does not show, as I understand it, that vulnerability to suffering is necessary for love in *any* real sense.

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.³

Why should we rely on the human experience of love and suffering for the advancement of the premise? Is the human experience of love congruent with love under all circumstances? It seems to me that Bauckham's evidence for (2) only applies to beings under passible circumstances. What I mean is this: Of course it seems likely that a wife, if she truly loves her husband, would feel a sense of sympathy suffering if her husband were to suffer—because humans are passible beings who are emotionally affected by the world around us, especially those who are nearest and dearest to our hearts. But why believe the way we experience passibility is true in an absolute sense? Invoking Bauckham's point as evidence for (2) seems to me to *assume* God's passibility more so than to support the *claim* of God's passibility. I am not convinced that the passible experience of human beings warrants (2) under all circumstances. Insofar as (2) can only be applied to passible beings and should not be applied to God without additional reasons to suppose that the human passible experience may be directly and appropriately convertible to the divine realm, it does not advance the objective of the argument. At best, all human experience of suffering love goes to show is that the same *might* also be true of God's love, which tells us nothing, at least until further arguments are made.

My second point against the argument is a theological objection that forces me to outright reject it. I must point out that rejecting the argument does not require one to reject divine passibility. The passibilist would simply need to provide another argument. My objection stems from carrying out the deeply troubling theological ramifications of the argument at hand. As a reminder, the argument states that for someone to truly love another, they must (1) care for the opposite person's well-being, which entails (2) that the suffering of the opposite person causes them to suffer.

A fundamental biblical concept follows: Because of God's love for the world (universally), God desires for all persons to be saved, though not all will be saved. Rooted in the very concept of hell is that its subjects suffer. Theologians debate whether hell is an active punishment of God upon its subjects or if those individuals simply chose to live eternally separated from God and the ramifications of such a choice are its own punishment. The nature of God's justice and punishment, however, are not relevant here. The point is that the awaited residents of hell will in fact suffer eternally. I presume my objection is becoming obvious: As a result of God's love for those who will suffer eternally in hell, God will experience its concomitant emotional suffering throughout eternity. God will suffer eternally. Any Christian should find this conclusion unacceptable.

Several responses are available, which I will mention and then counter. First, one could simply concede that God experiences emotional suffering throughout eternity on account of the

³ Chow, "The Passibility of God," 400.

suffering of those whom He loves. They find no problem with it. I find this concession to be quite frankly absurd. Second, if one desires not to resort to absurdities, one might adopt universal salvation. No one suffers eternally because all persons wind up in eternal paradise. Despite minority theological positions to the contrary, the Bible does intimate that many will suffer eternally in a place called hell. Third, deny that God loves all persons. God does love all persons, that is, until they submit their eternal fate of rejecting Him. Not only is this teaching unbiblical, but it is positively anti-biblical. The Bible teaches that God universally loves all persons. Abandoning basic orthodox theological positions is far too steep a price to pay, ruling out these initial responses.

Fourth, adopt the view that God does not love those who reject Him *in the same way* as those who accept Him. The sense in which God loves all people does not entail suffering. Essentially this response undermines the argument that love can exist without suffering sympathetically because it approves of a possible form of love that affirms (1) without (2). Regardless of whether a greater type of love exists—namely one that entails suffering—there still exists some type of love, according to this response, absent any vulnerability to suffering. So this will not suffice.

Fifth, one could posit that the kind of suffering one experiences in hell is disqualified from God's sympathetic suffering. Although the most persuasive response thus far, I think it is misguided. For what reason would it not constitute God's sympathy? Surely He desires that all are saved as opposed to suffering in hell, and He knows it is not in the best interest of their well-being. To affirm that God shows no sympathy to the damned is essentially to affirm that He does not love them anymore, which brings us back to the third response. Perhaps the point would be that hell is a punitive act on God's part, which accounts for the disqualification of His sympathy. But in what sense would the fulfillment of justice by way of punishment revoke God's sympathy? If He continues to care for their well-being, then He does not desire for them to suffer as punishment. Nonetheless His holiness and justice compel retribution. We are speaking of two sides of the same coin. His love cannot overrule His justice, and His justice cannot overrule His love. Or perhaps the point would be that those in hell are separated from God's love. Once the damned are damned, God's love no longer applies to them. However, this fails to understand that those in hell have chosen to separate themselves from God's presence and blessing. God has not abandoned them, rather, they are the ones who have abandoned God by their rejection of Him. It does not matter that they no longer receive God's love. Relevant to the argument is that God's love for them remains regardless. Hence, none of these angles help establish the fifth response.

Sixth, one way to make the consequence of God's suffering as a result of His love seem acceptable is to reduce the extent to which God experiences suffering. Interpreting God's suffering in a diminished manner makes His eternal suffering seem less radical and relatively insignificant. Recall in the argument that caring entails some negative emotional experience when the opposite person suffers. 'Negative' would be quantified in the lowest possible sense. However, I think this sixth response is inconsistent with the crux of the argument. The primary point of the argument is to demonstrate how love requires a sympathetic negative reaction when the beloved is harmed. From the passibilists perspective, it is the negative experience that qualifies and amplifies the love one has for their beloved. If the threshold of the possible

negative experience is reduced, by the passibilists own logic, it would seem the significance of the love is likewise reduced. Hence, this response accomplishes exactly the opposite of the arguments' intention. Furthermore, if the negative emotional reaction can be reduced for the sake of the appalling consequence that God suffers eternally, why stop there? Why not reduce the negative emotional reaction to zero and avoid the consequence altogether? Doing so consequents that God would not suffer at all! In which case, either the argument is false or God does not love.

I have yet to apprehend a plausible avenue to deal with the gross theological implications of the argument, namely, that God would effectively suffer eternally. Without a sufficient response, I submit that the argument should be rejected. All I have shown thus far is why (2)—feeling a sense of suffering when a loved one suffers—should not be deemed an absolute principle for love to exist. I have yet to put forth my own criteria for genuine love. I propose that we ought to adopt (1'): God wills the well-being of humans and acts accordingly. Some refer to this as divine benevolence. I would argue this sufficiently explains God's love in terms of its activity and relationality. God relates to us as He wills our best interest and *does* something as a manifestation of His love, most especially in the sacrifice of Christ. We in turn relate to God by accepting His love and giving whatever finite amount of love we may dedicate. Conversely, according to the argument, God's actions are not enough; He must have the ability to *feel* in a certain negative way in order for that love to be real.

Wolterstorff rejects the sole appeal to (1') on the basis that since God's will for humanity's well-being is not actualized in every case, in those cases it would be impossible for God not to suffer. He writes, "If, believing some state of affairs to be occurring, one *values* that occurrence, whether negatively or positively, then one is correspondingly delighted or disturbed."⁴ It seems Wolterstorff is applying a much bigger concept than the failure to satisfy the well-being of all individuals. Rather, the idea that there is a disturbance in God every time His will is not realized.

Such a view seems far too extreme, for every time any state of affairs not in perfect concordance with God's will is actualized, anywhere from stepping on a spider or telling a white lie to the fullest rejection of Christ, God is emotionally disturbed and thereby suffers. I do not share Wolterstorff's conviction that the nonoccurrence of God's will causes God to suffer. Rather, I think the lack of disturbance in God as a result is an entailment of His foreknowledge. First, consider all of the states of affairs that God wills, God knows which of those states of affairs will not be actualized. From my perspective it is difficult to see how those states of affairs could cause disturbances in God if He already knows they won't come to pass. Second, since God foreknows that the full magnificence of eternal life will be an actual state of affairs, any disturbance in the process would seem to be overwhelmed. I find it much more plausible to believe that while God's will is not always achieved, God rests in an undisturbed state from the

⁴ Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love," 227.

unobjectionable prospect of eternal salvation. For those reasons, I do not believe God experiences the emotional disturbances described by Wolterstorff.⁵

In conclusion, I argued that the “Suffering Love” argument is not persuasively evidenced and contains a major theological consequence that forces its immediate rejection. The argument holds that if God loves us, then He truly cares for our well-being; and in order for him to truly care for our well-being, He must experience suffering when we incur suffering. Instead I propose that we simply adopt the view that God’s love is genuine because He constantly wills and actively pursues our well-being.

⁵ Once again, I think passibilists are formulating premises upon human experience alone without acknowledgement of God’s unique state. All Wolterstorff’s statement represents, I would argue, is that humans feel a disturbance when their desired state of affairs does not occur.

References

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