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RELATIONAL AGENCY AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING: AN ARGUMENT FOR A DENISIAN PASSIBILISM

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ABSTRACT: According to one conception of God, God is completely self-sufficient: nothing can affect or influence God outside of God. According to a second conception of God, God is emotionally responsive to others. These two conceptions of God reflect different ideals about agency. For the first conception of God, it is important that God is autonomous; that is, completely self-governing and able to act, unconstrained by any external agents or influences. For the second conception of God, it is important that God has relational agency; that is, that God can be affected by God's creatures such that God's creatures can cause God to feel joy or sorrow. Theists face an apparent dilemma in choosing between these differing conceptions of God: either they must forfeit God's absolute autonomy, or else they must forfeit God's relational agency. In either case, it seems, they must deny that God has perfect agency. This paper proposes a way out of this dilemma, in the form of what I call "Denisian passibilism," according to which God transcends not only positive but also negative language about God.

KEYWORDS: religious language; impassibilism; apophaticism; perfect being theology; anthropomorphism; classical theism; analogy

Introduction

In this paper, I will put the following intuition to the test:

> X: Relational agency (defined as an ability to relate emotionally to others) is a good in humans, and this gives us some reason to affirm passibilism (that is, to attribute relational agency to God).

In the course of responding to objections to X, I will affirm a version of X that has been qualified in two ways:

> Relational agency (defined as an ability to relate emotionally to others) is a *spiritual* good in humans, and this gives us a reason to affirm passibilism (that is, to attribute relational agency to God), *provided that the passibilism affirmed is Denisian*.

The paper falls into three parts. In Part One, I will argue that diminished relational agency is a central feature of depression, and that this gives us reason to think that diminished relational agency is a privation in humans and, conversely, that relational agency is a good in humans. I will then introduce two conceptions of God, one of which denies relational agency of God ("impassibilism") and the other of which affirms it ("passibilism"). I will then provide some reason for why and in what way we might think that the fact that relational agency is a good in humans supports a passibilist conception of God. In other words, I will explain why we might hold X to be true.

In Part Two, I will turn to three objections to X. This will lead me to qualify X in two ways. First, the salient point will be not that relational agency is a good in humans, but that it is a *spiritual* good (or an aspect of spiritual well-being) in humans. The second will be that, in order to avoid problematic anthropomorphism, the passibilism that is affirmed needs to be Denisian – that is, it needs to hold that ultimately God transcends both positive and negative attributions.

In Part Three, I will argue that Denisian passibilism is to be preferred over other passibilist and impassibilist alternatives for several reasons. In so doing, while I don't imagine being able to persuade all passibilists and impassibilists to Denisian passibilism, I hope to persuade some people that there is an option that meets some of the concerns and avoids some of the pitfalls of standard passibilist and impassibilist positions.

Part One: Why Think God Has Relational Agency?

Depression and Diminished Relational Agency

A central feature of illness is diminished agency (see Gipps, 2022, p. 15).[1] This is true of both somatic and mental illness in general, and of depression in particular. Thus, in the DSM-5, the most recent psychiatric diagnostic manual, symptoms of major depressive disorder include fatigue, insomnia or hypersomnia, and diminished concentration and decisiveness (APA, 2013, pp. 160–161). The centrality of diminished agency alongside distress and suffering to depression is further underscored by the fact that it is necessary for diagnosis of major depressive disorder that "The symptoms

[1] Gipps writes: "[…] illness involves not something done by us or to us but rather a failure in action – a failure in 'just getting on and doing things' or in 'ordinary doing'. Such a failure is said to be found in both mental and physical illness, and to be that in virtue of which they are both illness."

cause clinically significant distress *or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning*" (APA, 2013, p. 161) (I take it that impairment of functioning is one kind of diminished agency).

The centrality of diminished agency to depression can also be found in first-hand descriptions of depression, which often report the person having diminished agency due to feeling a sense of the impossibility of action. In accounts by people who suffer with depression they often note that "Everything requires massive effort and I'm not really able to do anything"; "Things seem almost impossible" (cited Ratcliffe, 2015, pp. 168, 169). Matthew Ratcliffe, whose work on the phenomenology of depression articulates the experience of depression drawing on a wide range of different first-hand accounts, notes that:

> People with depression often report an impaired ability to act. This not only affects actions that involve forethought or effort. Even habitual and undemanding activities, like making a cup of tea or having a shower, can seem overwhelmingly difficult and beyond one's abilities. (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 155).

However, not everyone who has depression seems to report a loss of agency in the sense of an impaired ability to act. For example, David Hilfiker writes that his symptoms have always been unusual, not only in terms of having "no thoughts of suicide" but also in terms of having "only occasional losses of energy," allowing him to be successful in his studies and medical practice (Hilfiker, 2002). Nevertheless, I think that unusual cases of depression like Hilfiker's usually exhibit diminished agency in other ways. Hilfiker reports experiencing diminished *relational* agency, in the sense that he reports feeling an "almost constant emotional distance" from his wife and children and describes his depression as interfering with his emotional relationship with others (Hilfiker, 2002). In Hilfiker's words:

> I feel an almost constant emotional distance from others: from Marja, from my children, from my friends, and from God. My daughter, now twenty-seven, recalls a childhood Christmas when she presented me a handmade gift. I said I liked it, and I said I was grateful, but even at age eight she knew I was faking it. That would have been typical for me: hindered from the positive emotions of the moment, emotionally blocked from the love and togetherness offered me by others. (Hilfiker, 2002)

To be unable to relate to others is a form of diminished agency because (as Hilfiker's case highlights) the person cannot do something that they wish to do and that is also a normal – indeed, objectively desirable – human thing to do (namely, to respond emotionally to loved ones) (see Timpe, 2022, p. 159).[2]

[2] Kevin Timpe writes, "Agency is typically taken to involve a broad range of capabilities and abilities: volition, intention, desire, sensation, emotions, proprioception, bodily control" (Timpe, 2022, p. 159).

Diminished relational agency, defined in this way, is extremely common in depression. In first-hand accounts of depression, people will frequently report (for example): "I couldn't feel anything for [my husband]. I couldn't feel anything for my children" (Anon, cited Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 218). Ratcliffe notes that "A common theme in almost every first-person account is the felt loss of interpersonal connection" (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 218). Likewise, David Karp writes that:

> Each person's tale of depression inevitably speaks to questions of isolation, withdrawal, and lack of connection. The pain of depression arises in part because of separation from others; from an inability to connect, even as one desperately yearns for such a connection. (Karp, 1996, pp. 26–27)

So far, I have shown that diminished agency, including diminished relational agency, is a central characteristic of depression. Depression is generally regarded as a mental illness or disorder, a form of psychopathology. The term "mental illness" highlights that there is something undesirable about depression for the person who has it – depression is an absence or loss of human flourishing and so a privation of the good.[3]

A distinctive feature of mental illnesses is that the symptoms of mental illness are typically identical with the illness' constituents (to be depressed *is* to experience the symptoms of depression). Therefore, the symptoms (or constituents) of depression – such as diminished relational agency – are privative in humans. Conversely, then, in humans at least, relational agency is a good.

Traditional Autonomy and Relational Agency: Two Conceptions of God

I now want to turn to the question of whether there are any implications of what I have argued for a conception of God. So far, I have argued that diminished relational agency, such as we find in depression, is a privation of the good in humans, and that relational agency is a good in humans. In the process of doing this I have touched on two kinds of agency. One kind of agency involves the ability to act (evinced, for example, in the ability to make a cup of tea or have a shower). The second kind of agency involves "relational agency," that is, the ability to respond emotionally to others.

These two conceptions of agency relate in different ways to two very different and competing conceptions of God. According to the first conception of God, God is completely self-sufficient: nothing can affect or influence God outside of God. This sounds very close to traditional notions of autonomy. On this conception of God, God is completely self-governing and able to act, unconstrained by any external agents or

[3] That we believe this to be true is evinced by our practical commitments: if we did not believe it to be true, we would not seek to avoid or prevent depression in ourselves and others, and we would not seek or advise sources of healing if it comes.

influences.[4] Concomitantly, nothing can "move" God and so God does not have emotions that are responsive to other people.[5] This idea is called "impassibilism." According to impassibilists, God cannot have emotions that are responsive to other people since to have emotions that are responsive to other people is to be susceptible to forces outside of oneself, and so not genuinely to be self-sufficient. If I am the sort of being who has emotions that are responsive to other people, then others can hurt me, make me angry, make me happy, and so on, and so I cannot be totally self-determined or self-governed.

According to impassibilists, then, God has an absolute form of the first kind of agency, since God can do whatever God wills without influence or coercion by others (no one and nothing could stand in the way of God if God wished to create a universe or to make a cup of tea). However, God does not have relational agency, since God does not have emotions that are responsive to others. God wills the good of those God loves, but without the emotions that are part of or typically go with love in non-depressed human experience. As impassibilist James Dolezal explains:

> In God nothing is made or caused to be. This means that whatever the character of God's relationship to the world, it is not one in which the creature produces anything in God – no knowledge, pain, or pleasure. The righteous man or woman gives him nothing, and the sinner does nothing to him. (Dolezal, 2023, p. 252)

Impassibilists will often point to St Thomas Aquinas' creation theology for support: if God is the uncaused cause, then (according to this line of reasoning) nothing can affect or influence God: "God […] is solely agent, and in no way does any passion have a place in Him" (Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* I c. 89).

According to a different conception of God, God is emotionally responsive to others. On this second conception of God, God has a significant degree of autonomy, traditionally construed (God has the freedom to do a number of things, unimpeded by outside influences) and yet God also has relational agency. God's relational agency means that God has less traditional autonomy in one sense: God can be affected by God's creatures so that God's creatures can cause God to feel joy or sorrow. Notably for the first impassibilist conception of God, being the sort of being who has emotions is a susceptibility, whereas for the second conception of God it is an ability: not to have

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[4] A difference here is that, in contrast to humans according to Kantian notions of autonomy, God is usually not thought to have libertarian free will: God could not choose to do evil whereas humans can. However the thought of being completely self-governed and free from external coercion or influence is the same.

[5] I am broadly sympathetic to the claim that impassibilists still want to ascribe some emotions (such as joy and bliss) to God provided that emotions are defined as subjective affective states rather than as movements responsive to external agents and events. Interestingly, St Thomas Aquinas, often taken to be an arch-impassibilist by other impassibilists, argues that God can have affections – that is, that God can love and desire and have joy where these terms denote simple attraction rather than perturbations of the soul (ST 1a. 82. 5 ad 1). Affections do not seem to be mere attitudes but rather "affectively warm and lively states" (Dixon, 2003; see SCG I sec. 90–91) and so it seems that Aquinas attributes some emotions to God (when emotions are defined in this way).

the capacity for emotions is a loss or a lack. This second position is often called "passibilism."

Does the Fact That Relational Agency is a Good in Humans Give us a Reason to Affirm Relational Agency in God?

Does the fact that (as I have argued) diminished agency, including diminished relational agency, is a privation in humans give us a reason to affirm the passibilist conception of God over the impassibilist one?

Those who answer affirmatively typically adopt a methodology in philosophical theology called "perfect being theology." According to perfect being theology, God is (definitionally) the most perfect being or, in St Anselm of Canterbury's words, "God is whatever it is better to be than not to be" (Anselm *Proslogion* 5). A modern way of putting this is to say that God must possess every "great-making property" (Rogers, 2000, p. 12). In order to know (to a limited extent) what God is like, in addition to drawing on biblical revelation, we can, according to perfect being theologians, use our reason – more specifically, we can come to know what God is like by reflecting on what a perfect being would be like, or what properties are great-making. Thus, God is thought to be omniscient because a being who is all-knowing is more perfect than a being who is partially-knowing or knowledge-less. Likewise, God is thought to be omnipotent because a being who is all-powerful is better (more perfect, more great) than a being who is only partially-powerful or impotent. And so on.[6]

If diminished relational agency is a privation in humans, and relational agency is a good, then we might think that a perfect being such as God must have relational agency ("X"). As far as I know no one has expressed an argument for passibilism in precisely this way. However, people have made analogous arguments. For example, Ryan Mullins suggests a structurally similar argument, but with respect to psychopathy (instead of depression) and empathy (instead of relational agency) (Mullins, 2022, p. 238).[7] In addition to structurally similar arguments, X is sometimes

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[6] Perfect being theology is often contrasted with the "uncaused cause" or "Creator" philosophical theology noted above in relation to impassibilism, since each begins with a different definition of God and proceeds to reason from this about what God is like. While "uncaused cause" theology looks especially to St Thomas, "perfect being theology" looks especially to St Anselm.

[7] Mullins writes: "[…] it is worth pausing to consider what the impassible view of God looks like. In contemporary psychological literature, there are certain people that consistently fail to satisfy conditions (ii) [i.e. the person 'is consciously aware of what it feels like to have' an emotion] and (iii) ['on the right basis' the person is consciously aware of what it is like for' someone else to have 'an emotion'] of empathy, and yet know that others have certain emotions because they are causing those people to have certain emotions. These are called psychopaths […] Psychopaths are individuals who lack empathy, and are grandiose, manipulative, and deceitful. As a result of a reduced capacity for empathy, they also have a reduced capacity to form attachments to others […]

To be sure, the proponent of impassibility will wish to distance herself from the claim that God is a psychopath. For example, she might point out that psychopaths can have some degree of success in satisfying conditions (ii) and (iii), though they disproportionately struggle to do so relative to the general human population. Thus, psychopaths are at least able to satisfy (ii) and (iii) every now and then, whereas it is impossible for the impassible God to satisfy (ii) and (iii). Hence, there is a difference

expressed as an intuition that motivates passibilism (see e.g. Webb, 2017, discussed below).

There are significant but inconclusive arguments for and against passibilism and impassibilism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all of them. Rather, I want to consider whether X, which seems intuitively plausible, can withstand significant objections against it. If it can, then it seems that X provides a further (non-sufficient and non-conclusive) argument for passibilism alongside other arguments for passibilism.

In order to test X, I will consider three objections to it.

Part Two: Three Objections to X

Objection 1: There is an Analogous Argument for Impassibilism

One objection to X is that impassibilists could make an analogous argument to X but for impassibilism. Let's call the parallel argument "Y." According to Y, suffering is a central characteristic of depression, and a privation in humans. Therefore an absence of suffering is a good in humans, and so an absence of suffering is appropriate to a perfect being such as God. The idea that God does not suffer is typically something that impassibilists affirm and passibilists deny, since suffering is an aspect of emotional responsiveness to others. The passibilist proponent of X, therefore, needs to show why, if her argument works, the opposite, seemingly analogous, argument does not work, since the conclusion of X and of Y are mutually exclusive.

Response to Objection 1: X and Y Are Disanalogous

To respond to Objection 1, I suggest that there is a disanalogy between diminished relational agency (on the one hand) and suffering (on the other). This disanalogy, I suggest, lies in the fact that, prior to the eschaton, suffering can be entailed by love. Because of this, while suffering is in itself a privation, in some cases suffering is a lesser privation[8] than *not* suffering (since, in the situations I have in mind, not suffering entails not loving either). An example of this kind of situation would be equanimity or apathy in the face of a person who is hungry and homeless, where the appropriate response is compassion, which is a kind of suffering out of love. Suffering will not be entailed by love at the eschaton since the circumstances that give rise to suffering entailing love (such as homelessness and hunger) will no longer exist. Suffering is

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between psychopaths and the impassible God because a psychopath can at least sometimes have empathy. Of course, arguing that human psychopaths are better at empathy than God might come across as unseemly […]" (2022, p. 238, my parentheses).

[8] To speak of a "lesser privation" might make it sound like a privation is a something rather than a nothing. What I intend by it is something similar to talking about "a bigger hole in a sock." A hole in a sock is not a thing but an absence of a thing. Nevertheless we can and do talk about socks having smaller and bigger holes and don't usually worry much about it. For more about the analogy between privative accounts of evil and holes in socks, see McCabe (1987).

entailed by love prior to the eschaton if the beloved is herself suffering (perhaps because she is hungry and homeless) or because she is not flourishing in some other way.

Suffering, then, can be entailed by love, and so can be a lesser privation than not suffering. The same does not seem to go for diminished relational agency: relational agency does not seem to be in tension with love, either now or eschatologically. X and Y both begin with what is a good in humans to infer what must be a good in God, but, while proponents of Y are correct that suffering is a privation, there are situations in which not suffering is a greater privation. The same does not go for diminished relational agency, and so X and Y are disanalogous.

Objection 2: Perfections are Kind-Relative, so Human Perfections Tell Us Nothing About What Perfections are Appropriate to God

X starts from a human and so creaturely good, and then moves to what we might think is a good in God. Someone might object that this approach leads to absurd consequences. For example, they might point out that tails are goods in haddock. Therefore, they might ask, should we say that God has a tail – perhaps a giant or infinite one? What this *reductio ad absurdum* highlights, they might say, is that perfections are kind-relative, and so human perfections don't tell us anything about what perfections are appropriate to God.

Response to Objection 2: Distinctively Spiritual Goods

In response to this, I want to modify X from referring to "goods" in humans to referring to "spiritual goods." By a "spiritual good," I mean that something is an aspect of spiritual well-being. Thomas Aquinas says we have four duties of love (STh IIii, q. 25, a. 12). First and foremost, we have a duty of love to God, and, second, to ourselves. Third, we have a duty of love to our neighbour. Finally, we must love our bodily life – for example, to ensure that we are safe, fed, at a reasonable temperature and so on. I think the first three of these could be described as spiritual goods (and so aspects of spiritual well-being), since they concern our relationship with God and questions about whether we live our lives virtuously and with integrity. The fourth, our commitment to our bodily life, includes goods such as "Tasia the human has a nutritious diet" and "Perpetua the haddock has a tail," and, while good, these do not seem to be spiritual goods or aspects of spiritual well-being. We might expect there to be a closer relationship between spiritual goods in humans (and potentially other creatures) and the divine life than other aspects of creaturely good (and the divine life) because spiritual well-being is the participation of creatures in the divine life, fully realised at the beatific vision but realisable to some extent in the here and now. Given this, I want to modify X in the following way:

> X2: Relational agency (defined as an ability to relate emotionally to others) is a *spiritual* good in humans, and this gives us a reason to affirm passibilism

(that is, to attribute relational agency to God).

Objection 3: X2 is Anthropomorphic

I now want to consider a third, nearby objection: namely, that the perfect being theology being utilised in support of X and X2 will result in the projection of human ideals on to God, and thus result in an idolatrous anthropomorphism (see Trakakis, 2010a; 2010b).[9] In other words, if we start from what we think a perfect being is like – which, by virtue of our humanity, will usually be about what a perfect human is like – then we will almost certainly end up conceptualising God as a kind of super-human. This is essentially a form of idolatry, since we end up worshipping a God made in our own image, rather than being responsive to a God who is radically other.[10]

To this, the proponent of X2 might point out that, while perfect being theology is still in the background, X2 does not start from any old human good to infer what God is like, but from something that is also a spiritual good or an aspect of spiritual well-being. As already noted, spiritual well-being is properly regarded as a creaturely participation in the divine life. and we have some additional reason for thinking that, by looking at distinctively spiritual goods we might be able to see a reflection of the life of God.

To this, the impassibilist might reply: human spiritual well-being is correctly seen as a participation in the divine life, but this participation in the divine life is experienced by humans in a distinctively human and creaturely way. Accordingly, relational agency is indeed entailed by spiritual well-being in humans, since, for humans, emotional responsiveness is properly a part of love (and she who loves lives in God). However, according to the impassibilist, emotional responsiveness is not

[9] Nicholas Trakakis writes, "God in the analytic tradition is understood as an individual entity or substance of some sort, usually a person or person-like being who exists alongside other personal beings (such as humans and angels) and non-personal things […] The anthropomorphism of this conception of divinity is especially clear in the case of 'perfect being theology', where the attributes of God are modelled on human virtues or excellences. In determining which properties are to count as 'great-making', the perfect being theologian typically looks to see which properties are great considered excellences or virtues in the case of humans. Given that properties such as power, knowledge and goodness would generally count as great-making in humans, the magnitude of each such property is then infinitely extended […] and finally that property, suitably maximized, is ascribed to God. Herein lies the anthropomorphic character of this methodology. God, on the perfect-being model, looks very much like a human being, albeit a quite extraordinary one, one inflated into infinite proportions: a 'super-duper superman' (in Andrew Gleeson's words), or 'the biggest thing around' (as David Burrell puts it). 'Such as view', as Barry Miller states, 'succeeds in presenting God in terms that are comfortingly familiar, but only at the price of being discomfortingly anthropomorphic'" (Trakakis, 2010b, pp. 130–131).

[10] I will presuppose that theological anthropomorphism is not necessarily idolatrous, since people may self-consciously anthropomorphise in order to gesture towards something about God they could not otherwise do. This is how we might understand language of, say, the world being in God's hands. Theological anthropomorphism is likely to be idolatrous when it is done unconsciously, since it is here that the person commits (in Trakakis' words) "a fundamental error, that of not recognising and acknowledging the one true God and instead believing in, or committing oneself to, someone or something that is not God" (2010a, p. 541).

properly a part of love in the case of God, and so God can love without the relational agency that accompanies love in humans.

The passibilist might reply that it is impossible to make sense of God's love while holding God to lack relational agency. However, what the impassibilist's point highlights is that moving from X to X2 is not sufficient to overcome the impassibilist's concerns about passibilism being anthropomorphic. The passibilist needs to find a different way of responding to this concern.

Response to Objection 3: Impassibilism is Just as Likely to be Anthropomorphic as Passibilism

Here the passibilist can reply that the impassibilist is just as likely to project human ideals and so anthropomorphise about God as the passibilist. One person who suggests this is the psychologist and passibilist theologian Marcia Webb, who seeks to dispel problematic theologies of mental illness (Webb, 2017). In the course of her book, Webb points to the ways in which psychological "research indicates that we tend to view ourselves and God in similar ways" (Webb, 2017, p. 146). Webb argues that our understandings of God and our self-images are in continuous interaction with one another, such that our self-image affects our conception of God, and our conception of God in turn affects our self-image (2017, pp. 146–148). Webb then turns to the theological cases of Docetism and impassibilism as historical and contemporary examples of the way that "distorted notions of God may be related to distorted notions of the self" (2017, p. 147).

Webb begins by endorsing Joseph Ratzinger's reflection that the Docetic rejection of Christ's suffering was congenial to Stoic thought (Ratzinger, Behold the Pierced One, 57; cited in Webb, p. 147). She then goes on to explain that:

> This 'congeniality' was due to Stoicism's rejection of all passion in human experience […] Perhaps not surprisingly, then, alongside the ancient Greek world that espoused a passionless ideal of humanity, the Docetic embraced a God who was removed from the messy miseries of this world. (Webb, 2017, p. 147)

Docetism, then, resulted from a negative evaluation of the emotions. Webb makes a parallel argument with respect to impassibilism today, connecting it with negative theologies of mental illness (such as the idea that mental illness is the result of a lack of faith) that, in her view, are also the result of a suspicion of emotion and the vulnerability that accompanies it. In her words:

> In the same way that Docetism may have reflected the Stoic ideal for humanity, an emotionally restrained Savior – and an entirely impassible God – may be the preferred correlates to negative […] theologies which portray Christian life as absent of all psychological distress. Such a depiction of God is more conducive to the ideal of

human invulnerability found in these theologies. (Webb, 2017, p. 147)

According to Webb, then, problematic conceptions of mental illness are to some extent the result of a suspicion of emotion and the ideal of a perfect human as emotionless, invulnerable and self-sufficient, and this human ideal is reflected in impassibilist notions of God.

Webb's argument suggests that the impassibilist is in no better position than the passibilist when it comes to anthropomorphism: while the passibilist may be projecting her ideal of relationality onto God, the impassibilist may equally be projecting her ideal of invulnerability.

I would add to Webb's case that the impassibilist's anthropomorphic projections might be less obvious to us because we live in a patriarchal culture and because, as some feminist philosophers and theologians have highlighted, invulnerability, independence and self-sufficiency are patriarchal or masculinist ideals (see e.g. Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 9).

If the psychological studies that Webb cites are correct that there is a symbiotic relationship between a person's conception of God and the image of their ideal self, then it seems likely that this will apply to the impassibilist as much as to the passibilist. And if we live in a patriarchal culture, that this is happening with respect to an impassibilist conception of God may be less obvious to us than when it happens in relation to a passibilist conception of God. (A person who has lived only in the desert doesn't notice more desert, but only when the landscape instead becomes verdant and green.)

Regarding Objection 3, it seems that the passibilist and the impassibilist are in a similar position, even if the impassibilist is less conspicuously in that position. Here, then, the passibilist and impassibilist are in something of an impasse.

Reply to the Passibilist Response to Objection 3: Apophatic Impassibilism

At this point, an impassibilist of a certain and distinctive kind might respond that there is in fact an asymmetry between passibilism and impassibilism that has not been taken into account in all of this. Passibility (according to this kind of impassibilist) affirms a positive attribute of God. Impassibility (on the other hand) simply denies that positive attribute; in this impassibilism is essentially an apophatic enterprise that simply rules out certain (anthropomorphic) attributes from the divine nature precisely to maintain God's radical otherness. I will call this kind of impassibilist an "apophatic impassibilist," because their focus is on "impassibility" as the negation of an attribute (i.e. of passibility). Perhaps the passibilist could counter that surely (according to the law of excluded middle) God will either have emotions or not have emotions; there is no third option. However, according to the apophatic impassibilist, this would be true of creatures but is a category error in the case of God. This is because, according to the apophatic impassibilist, the passibilist conception of God as a person who has emotions and is relational and vulnerable does not have its impassibilist counterpart in a conception of God as a person who is cold and emotionless and separate from

others. Rather, it denies the first without affirming the second, precisely by denying that God is a person at all (see Feser, 2023). In this respect, the apophatic impassibilist is like a mathematician denying that the number three is blue: it is true that the number three is not blue, but that is not because the number three is pink or yellow instead.[11] Or, as apophatic impassibilist Herbert McCabe puts this point, to deny that God is a Celtic supporter is not to affirm that God supports Rangers instead (McCabe, 1987, p. 41).

A Passibilist Response to the Impassibilist Reply to the Passibilist Response to Objection 3: Denisian Passibilism

Apophatic impassibilism seems like an important corrective, both to some critiques of impassibilism, which can start from the assumption that impassibilists think that God is a person and then conclude that impassibilists must think that God is a cold and emotionless person, and also to some formulations of impassibilism by impassibilists themselves. However, I think the passibilist can push back on the claim that her theology necessarily involves projection while the impassibilist's does not. In order to do this, I want to consider the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic language of God proposed by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (henceforth "Denise").[12] According to Denise, "there is no contradiction between the affirmations and the negations, in as much as he [God] infinitely precedes all conceptions of privation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions" (*Mystical Theology*, 1.2). As I read Denise here, she is not saying that we describe God more accurately when we use apophatic rather than cataphatic language of God, but rather, that while we use both cataphatic and apophatic language of God, ultimately God transcends both.

C.S. Lewis, who knew the works of Denise, makes a similar point though he describes it in terms of anthropomorphisms and abstractions rather than cataphatic and apophatic language. In his words:

> This talk of 'meeting' [God] is, no doubt, anthropomorphic; as if God and I could be face to face, like two fellow-creatures, when in reality He is above me and within me and below me and all about me. That is why it must be balanced by all manner of metaphysical and theological abstractions. But never, here or anywhere else, let us think that while anthropomorphic images are a concession to our weakness, the abstractions are the literal truth. Both are equally concessions; each singly misleading, and the two together mutually corrective. Unless you sit to it very lightly, continually murmuring 'Not thus, not thus, neither is this Thou', the abstraction is fatal. It will make the life of lives inanimate and the love of loves impersonal. (Lewis, 2020, p. 26)

[11] Thanks to Simon Hewitt for this example.

[12] Pseudo-Dionysius is widely assumed to be a man; however, we know nothing about them, and therefore they might equally well have been a woman. I am going to assume they were, to balance things out a bit.

In a later part of the same work, Lewis makes the link between abstraction and negative (or apophatic) language more explicit and relates this specifically to passibilism and impassibilism. Of the Bible's representation of God, which often speaks of God having emotions, Lewis says:

> We are constantly represented as exciting the Divine wrath or pity - even as 'grieving' God. I know this language is analogical. But when we say that, we must not smuggle in the idea that we can throw the analogy away and, as it were, get in behind it to a purely literal truth.[13] All we can really substitute for the analogical expression is some theological abstraction. And the abstraction's value is almost entirely negative. It warns us against drawing absurd consequences from the analogical expression by prosaic extrapolations. By itself, the abstraction 'impassible' can get us nowhere. It might even suggest something far more misleading than the most naïf Old Testament picture of a stormily emotional Jehovah. Either something inert, or something which was 'Pure Act' in such a sense that it could take no account of events within the universe it had created. (Lewis, 2020, p. 69)

As I read it, Lewis follows Denise in regarding not only cataphatic language (such as the language of passibilism) but also apophatic language (such as the language of impassibilism) as inadequate.[14] Both may be necessary, and both act as a corrective of the other, but God transcends both in the sense that neither succeed in pinning down the matter of the 'quality' of God's life more than the other.

If there can be an apophatic impassibilist (such as I have described above), I think there can also be a Denisian passibilist (of which Lewis may be one).[15] According to the Denisian passibilist, there may be some things we want to say about God (relating to relational agency) without claiming to provide a thick description of God's

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[13] It is odd that Lewis contrasts analogy with the literal truth since analogical language is, in Thomas and other philosophers, a literal kind of language. I think Lewis' words could be adapted, in keeping with Denisian passibilism, to say that we can never (in the case of either passibilism or impassibilism) get rid of the analogy and get behind it to the full truth – that is, the full truth will always transcend our understanding.

[14] I think Lewis differs from Denise in regarding cataphatic and apophatic language as analogical (and so literally true) rather than metaphorical (and so literally false). I agree with Lewis on this point. In spite of this difference I think Lewis' (and my) understanding of the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic language (or between "anthropomorphisms" and "abstractions") can be described as Denisian, because the central point remains that God transcends both forms of language rather than just one (as in apophatic impassibilism).

[15] I think Denisian passibilism is suggested by some (other) passibilists in addition to Lewis. For example, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel writes that "There are two pitfalls in our religious understanding; the humanization of God and the anesthetization of God" (1955). If the ideal state of Stoics is apathy, argues Heschel, the ideal state of the prophets is sympathy. Both are potentially anthropomorphic when applied to God (1955, p. 258). Accordingly, Heschel adapts Isaiah 55:8–9 in the following way: "My pathos is not your pathos […] For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My pathos than your pathos" (1955, p. 276).

emotional life. The difference between the apophatic impassibilist and the Denisian passibilist lies in this: the apophatic impassibilist still denies that God has relational agency (albeit in the same way that the mathematician denies that the number three is blue). In contrast, the Denisian passibilist regards "the number three is blue" and "God has relational agency" as disanalogous. This is because, while they regard the question "is the number three blue?" an odd one, at the end of the day the right answer is that the number three is not blue. This makes it a bad analogy for "God has relational agency," according to the Denisian passibilist, since she wants to affirm (in an analogous and so literal sense) "God has relational agency" but append "and yet" to that clause. In saying "and yet" the Denisian passibilism points to impassibilist language as a corrective to the anthropomorphising tendencies of passibilist language but the buck does not stop with impassibilism: because the two are mutually corrective, there is an infinite dialectic between them.[16] Perhaps a helpful image of this idea is of a rope made of two (equally-sized) strands, with one strand representing apophatic, impassibilist language and the other strand representing cataphatic, passibilist language. If one focuses on one part of the rope, one might see more of the apophatic or else of the cataphatic strand, but each of these is followed by the other strand, which is in turn followed by the other strand, and so on. Both parts of the rope are necessary and neither is sufficient (to be a rope) in itself.[17]

How does the idea of Denisian passibilism relate to the idea that language of God is analogical?[18] The Denisian passibilist agrees with the passibilist who wants to say that speaking of God's emotions and capacity for emotional responsiveness is analogical – that is, that it is literally true but that there are differences as well as similarities in the way God is passible to the way in which (some) creatures are passible (i.e. to the way they have emotions and the capacity for emotional responsiveness). In fact, Denisian passibilism can be seen as an extended reflection on analogical predication. However – and quite compatibly – the Denisian passibilist thinks that impassibility can also be analogically predicated of God: there exist things in the created world that are impassible, and God is analogically like these – both in that there are similarities and differences. In the case of both passibilism and impassibilism, for the Denisian passibilist, the dissimilarities will always be greater than the similarities. To appropriate the words of the Fourth Lateran Council, "Between Creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them." For the Denisian passibilist, the language of impassibility is there to remind the person of the differences between divine and creaturely emotion, but (unlike the impassibilist) the Denisian passibilist does not think the language of impassibilism captures more of the truth of the matter than passibilism does. In this, Denisian passibilism differs from apophatic impassibilism, since, while the Denisian passibilist wants to say that both passibilist and impassibilist language is analogical, I think that the apophatic impassibilist would want to say that passibilist language is metaphorical (it is literally false that God is compassionate, even

[16] This is not dialetheic since the way the two relate to one another are consistent but beyond human incomprehension rather than being genuinely contradictory.

[17] Thank you to Giovanni Ventimiglia for this illustration.

[18] Thanks to Mark Wynn for this question.

if that points to something else about God's nature), and that impassibilist language, and other negative predications, are univocal.[19]

So far in this section I have considered Objection 3, which claims that there is an asymmetry between passibilism and apophatic impassibilism which means that the former is more liable to anthropomorphism. In response to this, I have suggested another position that the passibilist can take with respect to religious language that suggests that God transcends not only cataphatic but also apophatic language that potentially evens the playing field again between passibilism and impassibilism with respect to anthropomorphism. I have called this "Denisian passibilism" and have cited the theology of C. S. Lewis as a likely example of passibilism of this kind.

I now want to be a bit more bold, and suggest that there are reasons to prefer Denisian passibilism over the other positions we have considered here: namely, over non-Denisian passibilism, and over impassibilism, including apophatic forms of impassibilism.

Part Three: Towards a Denisian Passibilism

The case for why Denisian passibilism is to be preferred to non-Denisian passibilism has already implicitly been made in the course of this paper. If God is thought not to transcend the passibilist (cataphatic) language applied to God, then the resulting theology will inevitably be anthropomorphic in a way that risks becoming idolatrous. Likewise, as I have argued, a non-apophatic form of impassibilism will be just as anthropomorphic as non-Denisian passibilism, albeit in a less conspicuous way.

Denisian passibilism is also to be preferred to apophatic impassibilism, I suggest, since the apophatic impassibilist has no way of balancing impassibilist claims that the lives of creatures have no effect on God (Dolezal) and thus will not have the tools to counter the claim that "the life of lives" is "inanimate" or the "love of loves" is "impersonal" (Lewis). To put it another way, apophatic impassibilism still (I suggest) ends up compromising God's love for God's creatures in favour of its emphasis on divine power and otherness (it is hard to make sense of the claim that God loves us if God cannot respond emotionally to us – for example, by feeling compassion when we grieve). Denisian passibilism, in contrast, is able to hold these in equal balance, because of its refusal to prefer apophatic (impassibilist) to cataphatic (passibilist) language.

Troubleshooting

It is not within the scope of this paper to answer the question of how Denisian passibilism can be squared with the idea of God as the uncaused cause, which has been taken by many impassibilists to entail that God cannot be affected (emotionally, or in other ways) by other beings. However, I think two things are worth noting. First, impassibilists – or at least those impassibilists who are libertarians about free will – face an analogous issue: if God is the primary cause of all creatures that do, and a

[19] Thanks to Simon Hewitt for a conversation about this.

human freely chooses to do an action – say, bake a cake – then the human makes God the primary cause of the human baking the cake, and so God is still affected by creation (see Rogers, 2023).

Second, perhaps a promising response to how Denisian passibilism might be squared with the idea that God is the uncaused cause might draw on the ideas of the third-century bishop St Gregory Thaumaturgos who argued that God's capacity to suffer (an aspect of responding emotionally to others) will be willed by God because of God's love, and so will be an aspect of God's omnipotence and perfection rather than something that is outside of God's control (see Mozley, 1926, pp. 66).[20] Such a response will place a high value on relational agency, and view more critically traditional notions of autonomy. In keeping with the Denisian emphasis on transcendence, such as response should also, I think, appeal to mystery. This reflects the fact that, in general, unlike both non-Denisian passibilism and certainly non-apophatic impassibilism, Denisian passibilism is rather vague and we are left without a thick description of God's mental and emotional life. I do not think this should worry us too much. Indeed it may even be a strength: as St Augustine put it, "if you understand it, then it is not God" (*Sermon* 52, 16; PL 38: 360).[21]

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that X2 carries some weight in defence of passibilism, provided that passibilism is understood in a Denisian way such that anthropomorphism is avoided. Furthermore, I have argued that Denisian passibilism fares rather better than impassibilism in other ways, since it is the only position that can hold together, without compromising God's love for God's creatures with God's radical otherness.

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[20] St Gregory is talking specifically about the incarnation, but because his (pre-Chalcedonian) Christology is miaphysite – in other words, because he believed that the incarnate Christ only has one nature – he regards Christ's suffering as belonging properly to the divine nature (rather than just by the communication of idioms, as in Chalcedonian Christology).

[21] Augustine writes, "So what are we to say, brothers, about God? For if you have fully grasped what you want to say, it isn't God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you think you have been able to comprehend, your thoughts have deceived you."

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