

Living like common people: emotion, will, and divine passibility

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Abstract: This paper explores the perennial objection to passibilism (conceived as susceptibility to or capacity for emotion) that an omnipotent being could not experience emotions because emotions are essentially passive and outside the subject's control. Examining this claim through the lens of some recent philosophy of emotion, I highlight some of the ways in which emotions can be chosen and cultivated, suggesting that emotions are not incompatible with divine omnipotence. Having concluded that divine omnipotence does not exclude emotional experience *in general*, I go on to address an objection to the idea that God experiences the emotions involved in suffering *in particular*, suggesting one possible way of arguing that God's suffering is chosen while also maintaining the authenticity of divine suffering.

She came from Greece, she had a thirst for knowledge.
She studied sculpture at Saint Martin's College, that's where I caught her eye.
She told me that her Dad was loaded
I said 'in that case I'll have a rum and coke-cola'.
She said 'fine', and in thirty seconds time she said, 'I want to live like common people.
I want to do whatever common people do, I want to sleep with common people,
I want to sleep with common people like you'.
Well, what else could I do? I said, 'I'll see what I can do'.

I took her to a supermarket
I don't know why, but I had to start it somewhere, so it started there.
I said 'pretend you've got no money'; she just laughed and said 'oh, you're so funny'.
I said 'yeah? Well I can't see anyone else smiling in here.
Are you sure you want to live like common people?
You want to see whatever common people see?
You want to sleep with common people,
you want to sleep with common people like me?'
But she didn't understand, she just smiled and held my hand.

Rent a flat above a shop, cut your hair and get a job.
 Smoke some fags and play some pool, pretend you never went to school.
 But still you'll never get it right,
 'cos when you're laid in bed at night watching 'roaches climb the wall
 If you called your Dad he could stop it all.
 You'll never live like common people
 You'll never do what common people do
 You'll never fail like common people
 You'll never watch your life slide out of view, and dance and drink and screw
 Because there's nothing else to do.

Sing along with the common people, sing along and it might just get you through.
 Laugh along with the common people,
 Laugh along even though they're laughing at you, and the stupid things that you do.
 Because you think that poor is cool.

Jarvis Cocker, Pulp, 'Common People'

Introduction

This paper is about the relationship between emotions and the will, and how this relationship affects the impassibility debate. As a working definition, I take 'impassibility' to mean incapacity for or insusceptibility to emotional experiences. In defining 'impassibility' in this way, I follow Richard Creel and Marcel Sarot in moving away from the idea of impassibility as being solely about God's incapacity for or invulnerability to suffering and the emotional experiences involved in suffering specifically, to consider the question of whether God can have emotional experiences more generally, though the question of divine suffering will be foregrounded at various points in the paper.¹ Accordingly, I shall take 'passibility' to mean capacity for or susceptibility to emotional experiences. These definitions of impassibility and passibility are *working* definitions, however, and part of the purpose of my discussion of the relation between emotions and the will is to come to a better understanding of whether experiencing emotions is a susceptibility and therefore a weakness, or whether it is a capacity and therefore a strength, and what sort of being can or would experience emotions.

Contemporary overviews of the impassibilism debate suggest that the impassibilist consensus remained almost entirely unchallenged until the turn of the twentieth century, from which point *passibilism* increasingly became the predominant position among theologians and philosophers of religion across most denominations.² As Thomas G. Weinandy puts it, 'Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, there has been a growing consensus that the traditional claim, held to be axiomatic since the Fathers of the Church, of God's impassibility is no longer defensible.'³ The Protestant passibilist theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, asserts that '[t]he doctrine of the essential impassibility of the divine nature now

seems finally to be disappearing from the Christian concept of God', and the Catholic passibilist philosopher of religion, Sarot, argues that,

... during this present [i.e. twentieth] century the idea that God is immutable and impassible has slowly but surely given way to the idea that God is sensitive, emotional and passionate By now the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has so much become a theological common place, that many theologians do not even feel the need to argue for it.⁴

Despite the passibilist consensus of the twentieth century, there remain some serious critics of the passibilist position, and, arguably, a backlash against passibilism in later twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century theology and philosophy of religion. Among these dissenters to the passibilist consensus we might mention Richard E. Creel and Paul Helm and, more recently, Weinandy and Robin Cook.⁵ In common with the passibilist position, the impassibilist literature encompasses a surprisingly wide range of different positions, from the Calvinism of Helm to the Thomism of Weinandy, but a few shared concerns may be noted here as common to most kinds of recent impassibilism.

First, impassibilism is either seen as an aspect of immutability or as entailed by immutability. One argument for this, rooted in the idea of divine eternity (the idea that God is outside time rather than within it), is very clearly expounded by Helm. Impassibility is entailed by immutability which is entailed by eternity. From a Thomist perspective, Weinandy deduces divine impassibility from the fact that God is pure *esse* and pure act and thus immutable. God must be perfect, for a thing is perfect to the extent that it is actualized and, being pure being, God is perfection itself. Therefore God must be immutable: 'Because God is pure act it is impossible for him to acquire more perfection through some change which would make him more actual.'⁶ In addition, creation requires an immutably pure act, so God's immutability is the *sine qua non* for creating.⁷ This immutability is not opposed to God's vitality and dynamism; in fact, the reason that God is immutable is precisely that God is fully in act. God is impassible precisely because (as pure act) God is supremely passionate and loving and cannot change to become any more passionate and loving.⁸ Helm and Weinandy's arguments demonstrate that, if one holds to the Boethian conception of divine eternity, one cannot hold that God has emotions.

Second, and closely related to the first point, it is argued that an impassible God is utterly reliable and more able to help sufferers than a non-suffering God. This view is expressed by Weinandy when he writes that 'A God who does not suffer is more loving, compassionate, and merciful than a God who does.'⁹ In some situations, Weinandy argues, the human susceptibility to suffering actually hinders the lover's love of the beloved:

In many situations it is precisely sin and the prospect of suffering that hinders the full development and expression of love. A person may desire, on one level, to love

someone wholly and entirely, but be incapable of doing so because of the sinfulness which resides with his/her own person causing fear of the sacrifices required of such love. Selfishness, pride, etc. hinder the full growth and expression of love.¹⁰

According to Weinandy, then, it is not only the case (*contra* some passibilists) that suffering is essential to love (or essential to love where the beloved is suffering or is not living up to their full potential because of their sin); it may also be the case that the prospect of suffering is one that *hinders* love. An impassible God, on this view, is more free to love than a passible God who may fear the suffering that love would cause Him. Likewise, Helm argues that the susceptibility to suffering and change are likely to impede God's love and helpfulness, such that only an immutable and impassible God can be known to be completely reliable: 'A God who was subject to change from some external force or agency could not console his people in this unconditioned manner.'¹¹

Third, it is argued that God cannot be passible because God is omnipotent, while emotions are something that affect the subject and remain outside the subject's control. Passibilism is not an option for Weinandy, partly because 'suffering normally implies that some event outside of God has caused him to suffer'.¹² Cook claims that God cannot have emotions more generally, for emotions (as subjectively experienced) are beyond our immediate control, and so experiencing emotions would negate God's omnipotence. According to this argument or set of related arguments, both suffering and susceptibility to emotional experience more generally involve vulnerability to sources outside the subject's control, and as God is omnipotent, He is in perfect control, and so cannot be made vulnerable to things outside His control. As Cook puts it:

Although the concept of divine impassibility is thought to involve a number of ideas, the core idea is that nothing 'external' to God can cause Him to suffer or evoke an emotion in Him The rationale behind this idea is God's independence of the world and His complete sovereignty over it. Things and events in the world are part of creation's matrix of cause and effect, a matrix which God, as creator, cannot be part of. And because God holds the world in being, He has perfect control over it in all its aspects. There is nothing in the world which can in any way control Him or limit Him.¹³

Again:

... a God who suffers is a God under constraint, and my objection to this idea is that it conflicts with a central feature of traditional Christian theism, namely the idea that God is omnipotent. God's ability to control His world is perfect, and therefore there is nothing that can constrain Him in any way.¹⁴

But are we right to think that emotions are necessarily something outside our control, and that they are something that make us passive, susceptible, and vulnerable? This belief certainly has age on its side, and it seems *prima facie* to be true because of the way that we speak about a lot of emotional experiences. For example, we talk of 'falling in love', being 'paralysed by fear', 'struck by jealousy', and 'overwhelmed by sadness'.¹⁵ There is also the etymological link

between ‘passions’ and ‘passive’ to strengthen this assumption. However, some recent philosophy of emotion has emphasized the voluntary and chosen aspects of emotion, and claimed that our emotions are more under our control than we might at first think. While the other impassibilist arguments against divine emotionality are equally worthy of consideration, it is these conflicting claims about the relationship between emotions and the will, and the implications these have for the impassibility debate, that are the primary focus of this paper.

In the first part of the paper (‘Emotions and choice’) I shall follow Solomon in supporting a voluntarist account of emotion (that is, an account of emotion that highlights the role of the will) and shall argue from this that emotions are not ruled out of God’s life by divine omnipotence. In the second part of the paper (‘Subjective experience and the passivity of emotions’) I shall respond to Cook’s objection to passibilism that the determinative factor for the impassibility debate is not about our susceptibility to emotions, but about whether the *subjective experience* of an emotion is within or beyond the subject’s *immediate* control, and that as the subjective experience of an emotion is beyond the subject’s immediate control, an omnipotent God cannot be thought to experience emotions. The third part of the paper (‘Suffering and passivity’) will address the argument that God’s omnipotence, while not excluding emotions in general, nevertheless excludes God’s capacity for or susceptibility to suffering.

Emotions and choice

Foremost among those who have challenged the ‘passive’ view of the emotions is the late Robert Solomon, who began his career stating (and, he later conceded, overstating) the case for the voluntary nature of the emotions at a time when the idea that emotions could be chosen was the preserve of a few Existentialist philosophers, and who has been at the forefront of the emergence of the voluntarist view of emotions in Anglo-American analytical philosophy.¹⁶ Central to Solomon’s thesis is the idea that emotions can be chosen ‘at least sometimes, and to some extent’.¹⁷ Notably, Solomon defines emotions as distinct from reactions such as startle reflexes and the burst of physiological feeling in embarrassment. He regards the Stoics as correct in viewing these physiological reactions not as emotions but as ‘first movements’: ‘by “emotion” I mean not those momentary phenomena but those long-lasting complex experiences such as Othello’s love and growing jealousy, Iago’s insidious and dangerous envy, Franz Fanon’s escalating rage, and Lily Bart’s fateful pride’.¹⁸ Solomon argues that part of the problem with physiological accounts of emotion is that they tend to focus on specific instances, and often short bursts, of emotion. This provides a one-sided view of emotion, for it is difficult to see with these one-off instances the extent to which people cultivate their emotions and emotional responses. Solomon’s view is that emotions are far more long-term, and that they are often

cultivated and nurtured by the subject in line with deep-rooted desires and character traits. For instance, we may cultivate an ability to get angry in order to be able to avoid being walked over or in order to stick up for someone else, or we may cultivate our ability to love because we hold this up as a great virtue and regard it as essential to being a good and happy person.

Crucially, most emotions are not single episodes or ‘bursts’ of affect, but are processes over time. While physiological accounts of emotion exclude long-term love and other long-term states (such as long-term anger, indignation, resentment, and envy) from the category of emotion and class them instead as ‘dispositions’, Solomon argues that while these states do indeed involve many dispositions (in the case of love, for example, the disposition to feel protective, to feel jealous, and to feel moments of passionate affection), this does not make these states *just* dispositions simply because they are long-term and do not continuously display physiological arousal. To limit emotions to short-term and physiological responses is arbitrary, counterintuitive, and reductive. Many emotions, and ‘especially the morally interesting ones’, are processes and not just dispositions or episodes. It is these emotions in particular that are potentially voluntary and over which we have considerable control.¹⁹

By defining emotions as processes rather than episodes, and thus by excluding instantaneous or automatic reactions, Solomon’s account might be criticized as being one-sided, just as non-voluntarist accounts of emotion are one-sided in defining emotions as short-term bursts involving physiological affects. However, as Solomon’s thesis is simply that emotions are voluntary *some of the time and to some extent*, this potential one-sidedness need not concern us too much, and elsewhere Solomon is careful to say that not all emotions should be regarded as voluntary, and not all to an equal extent. Furthermore, I suggest that because most of our emotional experiences are inconspicuous because they are ongoing and are part and parcel of our everyday lives, Solomon’s view of emotion reflects the vast majority of our emotional experiences, in opposition to views of emotion that focus on violent and conspicuous emotional outbursts.

I would add to Solomon’s point a further, related (though perhaps obvious), point: while we speak of having ‘emotions’, this is rather misleading, for it is not the case that we live our lives emotionlessly and then have emotions inserted into our lives at dramatic moments. Rather, we experience life emotionally through and through. At some points we become aware of particular emotions, as, for instance, when these are especially intense or sudden or unusual. However, that is not to say that we do not experience everything emotionally, from small everyday events which are imbued with our deeply rooted hopes and fears, to dramatic and uncommon events which cause us to be particularly aware of our emotions and to reflect consciously on them.

A further aspect of Solomon’s definition of emotions is that emotions involve social narratives and not just physical responses. In viewing emotions like this,

Solomon roots emotional experience in human narrative, rather than seeing emotions as physical events that happen extraneously to human life. In emphasizing the role of the will in emotions, Solomon highlights the moral and ethical dimension of emotions against involuntarist views of emotion, holding that emotions are not value-neutral, and that we can be held responsible for some of the emotions we feel. To Paul E. Griffiths's criticism that philosophical accounts of emotion are intrinsically 'moralizing', Solomon responds that emotions are moralized through and through. People are in some ways responsible not only for what they do but also for what they feel, and this is at the root of many traditions, including the Judaeo-Christian tradition: 'To "command" people to "love their neighbor" may be a bit far-fetched (depending on the neighbor); but it is by no means nonsense or inappropriate. It just turns out to be rather difficult to do.'²⁰

Solomon's contention that emotions are, sometimes and to some extent, chosen and under our control leads to a second important argument, namely that we should not equate intentionality (in the sense of what we mean to do or feel) with voluntariness, or voluntariness with responsibility. Just because something is non-intentional does not mean it is involuntary, or that we are not responsible for it. This is related to the distinction between a choice being conscious and being voluntary: in order to be voluntary, a choice need not necessarily be conscious. We can make unconscious and subconscious choices. I might choose to push the clutch in my car, change gear, and remove my foot from the clutch; but if I am an experienced driver this choice might be voluntary without being conscious.

Solomon further clarifies this idea when he discusses and illustrates what we might mean when we speak of emotions being under our *control*. Many philosophers have held that we can control, but not choose, our emotions, and only then by constraining them or controlling their expression. But, he notes, there is an ambiguity about what 'controlling' means here:

Is controlling an emotion something like controlling a wild animal within? (Horace: 'anger is like riding a wild horse.') Is it like controlling one's blood pressure, or one's cholesterol level, something that (certain Yogis excepted) we can only do indirectly? Or is it rather like a boss controlling his or her employees by way of various threats and incentives, the 'boss' being reason? (Plato's model in *The Republic*.) Or is controlling an emotion like controlling one's thoughts, one's speech, one's arguments, putting them into shape, choosing one's mode of expression as well as one's timing? ... Or is it like coordinating one's actions through practice, like riding a bike, which may be 'mindless' (that is, wholly unreflective and unselfconscious) but is nevertheless voluntary and both very much within one's control and a continuous matter of choice?²¹

It is the last of these images of 'controlling' that Solomon prefers, and here he draws on Sartre to develop the idea of cultivating a good character, which involves cultivating the right emotions and right emotional responses.²²

While Solomon claims that emotions are voluntary and involve choices, he nevertheless distances himself from the following claims. First, Solomon rejects the idea that emotions are *deliberate* actions, the result of overt plans or strategies: ‘We do not think our way into most emotions. Nor do emotions fit the philosophical paradigm of intentional action, that is, actions which are preceded by intentions – combinations of explicit beliefs and desires and “knowing what one is going to do”.’²³ Emotions are not like conscious or intentional actions, but more like ‘semiconscious, inattentive, quasi-intentional, habitual, spontaneous action’.²⁴ Solomon makes the important point that, despite the fact that in philosophy actions tend to be seen as conscious and intentional, there is a huge range of behaviour and action lying between the completely active and the straightforwardly passive.²⁵ We should therefore reject the polarization of emotion in philosophy: the tendency to regard emotions either as intentional actions or as something that happens to us and victimizes us ‘from the inside’.

Second, Solomon distances himself from the claim that having an emotion is a ‘basic action’; that is, an action one performs without performing any other action (such as wiggling one’s little finger). One does not simply *decide* to have an emotion. One might, however, decide to do a number of other things that might set oneself on a trajectory to emotion – for instance, one might enter into a certain situation, or not take one’s medication, or think about a situation in a different way. One might object to this that choosing to put oneself in a situation is not choosing the emotion itself. However, emotions are inseparable from the narrative of one’s life as a whole, and the choices one makes are inextricably bound up with the emotions one has, and so putting oneself in the situation of, say, visiting one’s ex-wife and her new boyfriend, may also be choosing to be susceptible to certain emotions (whether of love, anger, jealousy, *schadenfreude* etc.).

Solomon also perceives that one might also choose to have a certain emotion by acting as though one had a certain emotion and, by acting in a particular way, cause that emotion to come into existence. As William James advises, ‘Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must be frigid indeed if it does not gradually thaw.’²⁶ Virtually all human actions involve doing something by doing something else – for example, typing on a keyboard in order to write a journal article. However, this does not mean that the ‘doing something else’ causes the ‘doing something’. Rather, it *is* the doing something.

Third, Solomon separates himself from the idea that *all* emotions are devoid of premeditation and deliberation, though he argues that most are. For example, we often pursue love, or ‘work ourselves into’ a rage, sometimes with certain objectives in mind. Sometimes the intention to have an emotion, and even the announcement of this intention, help to bring the emotion about – and it is an

oversimplification to think that because an emotion is deliberate it is therefore less genuine.

In order to propound the idea that emotions often involve choice, Solomon proceeds by drawing a distinction between the situation that evokes the emotion, and the emotion itself. One objection to the voluntarist view of emotions is that we do not usually deliberate and choose our immediate emotional responses, and it does usually seem as though our emotions arise uninvited, in the face of an unexpected and possibly disturbing situation. However, Solomon argues, 'it is the situation and circumstances that suddenly confront us, not the emotion'.²⁷ He goes on to illustrate the point:

I am driving along a mountain pass and I suddenly see a rock slide in front of me. Depending on my driving skills, my self-confidence, and my previous experience (not to mention my tendency to panic, etc.), both my emotional response and my actions (which cannot be easily separated), are just that, *my responses*. They may be spontaneous, unthinking, and, if I am practiced in the art of driving in dangerous conditions, habitual. My response need not be fully conscious. It certainly need not be articulated or explicitly 'thought' at the time. There is no room for deliberation. What I do and feel no doubt depends on my history of habits and kindred experiences, but it is the situation, *not my emotion* that suddenly confronts me. My response, whatever else it may be, is a *response*, an action of sorts, not a reflex. I am not its recipient or its victim. I am the *agent* of my emotion, and as Aristotle argued in his *Ethics* ... we are responsible for *even those actions which are involuntary* if we can be held responsible for the *cultivation* of the relevant habits, perhaps from childhood.²⁸

This claim requires some thought. Is Solomon right to say that someone could choose to build their character or disposition so as to cope in this situation? Could a naturally nervous person ever overcome their tendency to panic in this sort of situation so as to react calmly and rationally? Perhaps the answer to this lies in Solomon's 'some of the time and to some extent', though I think we might want to add here, 'and depending on the latent potentialities in our character'. Some people seem to be 'naturally' able to react calmly, others are more nervous and prone to panic. The question of whether a person might overcome his panic and react calmly in the road example may depend on him having a particular kind of intelligence, in that he would have to perceive that he required more confidence in order to remain calm, and that in order to attain greater confidence he would need to adopt positive rather than negative thoughts about himself. Likewise, someone with a propensity for self-reflection may become aware both of his strengths and his limitations, and develop strategies to cope with or compensate for his weaknesses.

Broadening this out to other examples, someone who is aware of her personality and character traits may avoid certain situations (if she knows that she is prone to becoming violently angry at seeing certain relatives, or very depressed at a sad film, or carried away by lust after a few drinks) or that she develops strategies to cope with these propensities (the proverbial 'counting to ten' when

angry, or eating chocolate cake during a sad film, or only getting drunk in the company of celibates). In addition to factors concerning the subject's personality, social factors may also play a part. For example, if the subject is consistently told by her family and friends that she is a bad driver, and particularly if her confidence has been eroded from an early age, she is unlikely to build up her confidence, and so more likely to panic than to remain calm. Thus, while I think that Solomon is right that we can choose our emotion, the 'some of the time and to some extent' is crucial, and we might also add that the sorts of emotions we can choose differ very much from person to person (depending on natural propensities and social context, among other things), so that the emotions that one person can choose to have or to avoid might be thrust on someone else against their will.

As a caveat to voluntarist accounts of emotion, therefore, I would add that it is naïve and dangerous (as well as frustrating) to think that we can always control our emotions (even when control is more like learning to ride a bike than turning a light switch on and off), and that sometimes the honest recognition of what our emotions and emotional propensities are (through self-reflection) and consideration of how to act, given their existence, is the closest we can come to living with our emotions in a wise and healthy way.

At the same time, Solomon is surely right that we need to appreciate the power and pervasiveness of choice in our emotional life – if we do not, we 'choose' to become passive to our emotions. In fact, reflection about our emotions is key in the cultivation of them. Reflecting upon our emotions leads to a further kind of agency and responsibility concerning emotion, in that thoughts about our emotions may lead to certain actions. However, it should be borne in mind that the distinction between the thoughts involved in emotion and the thoughts reflecting on emotion is a very messy one. Developing James's earlier point about the causative nature of expressive behaviour, Solomon observes that 'To *think* that one is in love, or jealous, or angry is not just to recognise one's emotional state. Such thoughts are part and parcel of the emotion.'²⁹

Solomon concludes from his discussion that some emotions are voluntary while others are not, conceding that 'to insist that, across the board, we are agents of and responsible for our emotions is surely wrong. However ... it is at least as wrong, and far more irresponsible, to insist that, across the board, we are passive with respect to our emotions.'³⁰ Emotions are neither totally passive nor entirely active, but range across a broad volitional spectrum: 'The upshot is that both emotions and their expressions span the entire spectrum from deliberate, intentional actions to "automatic" responses.'³¹

In conclusion then, we have seen that Solomon highlights the volitional aspect of emotion, particularly with respect to cultivating and nurturing certain aspects of one's character that lend themselves to some experiences and not others, by developing strategies to cope with unwanted emotional propensities, and by

putting oneself into (or else avoiding) certain situations. Central to an appreciation of Solomon's argument is that emotions must be understood within the context of the narrative of the subject's life as a whole, and that (relatedly) emotions are generally long-term processes and not short-term affects. Solomon's argument also involves the idea that emotions are on a volitional spectrum, with most being somewhere between completely chosen on the one hand, and thrust upon one against one's will, on the other. Solomon's argument is persuasive in that it 'rings true' to experience, provided that one keeps in mind his all-important qualification that emotions can be chosen '*some of the time and to some extent*', and, I have suggested, depending on the latent potentialities of one's personality, age and emotional education.

It is notable that the 'sort' (as distinct from type) of emotions that Solomon says are (or can be) chosen, cultivated, and controlled the most are the long-term processes, which are the most 'morally interesting' and the least likely to be 'unintelligent' or strongly physiological. This is important because the sorts of emotion that are intelligent and morally interesting are the emotions passibilists are generally most concerned to attribute to God. For the theologian, Solomon's work suggests that the impassibilist argument against divine emotions that is based on the idea that emotions are incompatible with God's omnipotence is not conclusive, because some emotions can be chosen, cultivated and controlled. Furthermore, it is arguable that it is precisely these voluntary emotions that we would want to attribute to God anyway, because these emotions are also likely to be the most intelligent, non-physiological, and 'morally interesting'.³²

Subjective experience and the passivity of emotions

While Solomon argues that our susceptibility to having an emotion can be under our control to some extent, Cook contends that the determinative factor for the impassibility debate is not about our susceptibility to emotions, but about whether the *subjective experience* of an emotion is within or beyond our *immediate* control. Cook asserts that we cannot have an emotion at will, or stop having it at will, and, additionally, throughout the duration of an emotion we are more or less preoccupied with the emotion's object, and that this preoccupation is generally not entirely of our choosing.³³ Because our subjective experience of an emotion seems beyond our control, emotions are passive, and should not be attributed to an omnipotent God.

Cook begins by clarifying his position: he does not claim that emotions are essentially overpowering (though there are situations in which they are overpowering) but, rather, that emotions are essentially passive. We are passive to something when something *happens to us*. This, claims Cook, entails that we have no control over it: 'an essential and central characteristic of emotion is that it is a *passive* experience. An emotion involves something that *happens* to us. And in

this sense, it is something over which we do not have control.³⁴ However, it is worth noting at this point that the fact that something happens to us does not entail that we have no control over it. I might go to a health spa and ask for a massage. During the massage I would have something done to me – I would be passive in the relevant sense – and yet I would nevertheless be in control of the situation: I would have instigated the massage, and I would be able to stop it at any time I pleased. Thus, it is worth noting that, despite the link that Cook makes, there is no necessary connection between passivity and not being in control. Therefore, while Cook is correct that we often do not control things that happen to us, there are situations in which we do control things that happen to us, and that ‘not being in control’ is not essential to something happening to us. We may choose to have something to happen to us, and be in control of it when it does happen.

Cook argues that two components of emotions are affects (changes that occur in our body and/or minds), and evaluations or perceptions. Affects, he claims, are beyond our immediate control when we have emotions. For example, in the case of non-bodily ‘psychic’ or mental affects, ‘one cannot produce or eliminate a non-bodily feeling of pleasure or pain merely by willing it. Rather, it is necessary to think or to cease thinking about something pleasant or painful.’³⁵ With respect to the evaluation/perception component of emotion, Cook argues that one cannot start evaluating or perceiving, or cease evaluating or perceiving, a particular object at will, such that one starts having or ceases having the relevant emotion:

However, changing my perception (or evaluation) is not something I can do at will, because changing my perception would involve changing some of the beliefs, desires, and attitudes which go up to make my perception, and these are not the sorts of things that are susceptible of change at will.³⁶

So both components of emotion – affectivity and evaluation – are passive, and cannot be turned on and off at will.³⁷

Suffice it to note for the moment that Cook’s argument here raises serious questions about what we mean by ‘control’. If, by control, we mean that we can turn something on and off at will in the way that we have control of a light switch, then Cook is surely correct, since we cannot simply turn our emotions or our beliefs on or off. If, on the other hand, we adopt Solomon’s view of ‘control’ as ‘like coordinating one’s actions through practice, like riding a bike, which may be “mindless” (that is, wholly unreflective and unselfconscious) but is nevertheless voluntary and both very much within one’s control and a continuous matter of choice’,³⁸ then Cook’s position is more debatable. I shall return to this point later.

A further respect in which emotions are, according to Cook, passive and out of the subject’s control, is that when we have an emotion we experience our thoughts being focused and intensified in relation to the object of the emotion. This focusing and intensification is not something we choose; rather ‘we find that

the object of our emotion always attracts or engages our attention in a way that is not entirely voluntary. Sometimes the emotion is so strong that the object can be said to *grip* our attention.³⁹ While this is most obviously true of powerful emotions, Cook asserts, though without evidence or illustration, that ‘the general idea holds good for milder experiences of emotion as well’.⁴⁰ Thus, he argues, our attention is passive in relation to the object of the emotion.

That the object of even mild emotional experiences ‘grips’ our attention seems to me counterintuitive in that it seems contrary to our experiences. I might be mildly looking forward to having a bath this evening, or mildly dreading having to eat my mother-in-law’s cooking at Christmas, but these emotions are unlikely to grip my attention involuntarily if they are only mild emotions. Again, I might be mildly irritated with a friend for being late when meeting me for coffee, or mildly pleased with my flatmate for remembering to get some washing-up liquid when she went into town. However, I cannot imagine any of these emotions gripping my attention involuntarily, and I think that I am not unusual in this respect. It is possible to imagine a very highly strung person becoming very angry about his friend’s lateness, or a very excitable and domestically minded person being overjoyed that their flatmate remembered to get washing-up liquid and so having their attention gripped by the particular object in question; but in these cases the emotion would cease to be a mild emotion and become an intense or powerful emotion. Therefore, I think that Cook’s account of emotion is one-sided, and that he emphasizes the characteristics of one-off, intense, and powerful emotions over and against the characteristics of long-term and/or mild emotions.⁴¹ While we noted that Solomon tends to emphasize the opposite sort of emotions, i.e. emotions that are long-term processes, the one-sidedness is more problematic in Cook’s thesis because Cook is claiming that *all* emotions are passive, while Solomon only claims that emotions can be active some of the time and to some extent.

Cook adds to his diagnosis of the passivity of the emotions that ‘Whereas non-emotional cognitive judgements are made “*actively*, consciously, and (for the most part) freely”⁴² this is not the case with the judgements that are involved when we have an emotion.’⁴³ I think Cook’s point here is deeply flawed. This is because, I would suggest, it is not at all clear that non-emotional judgements are active or conscious or voluntary (we make lots of unconscious/subconscious and involuntary judgements, such as ‘That ball is going to hit me – I’d better move’) and, as Cook himself has already noted in the quotation above, we often cannot simply change our judgements at will (or, as Cook puts it, our beliefs and attitudes, which are surely closely related to judgements if not identical), just as we often cannot just change our emotions at will. Conversely, as we have already argued, emotions are not always passive or unconscious or involuntary. In addition, following Solomon, it seems reasonable to suppose that emotions involve evaluations and judgements. Thus Cook’s polarization of judgement and emotion

is very problematic, since it does not accurately reflect the interrelatedness of emotions and judgements, and the fact that both emotions and judgements are sometimes passive, unconscious and involuntary, sometimes active, conscious and voluntary, and often a mixture of all of these things.

Cook concludes from his discussion so far that 'To a considerable extent – more so than is generally the case with non-emotional thinking – our thoughts are not under our control, but cluster around our perception of the object of the emotion'.⁴⁴ It is undoubtedly true that the thoughts that are involved in our emotions are not always under our control and that they tend to focus on the object of our emotion, and it may even be true that this is the case more with emotional thinking than with 'non-emotional thinking' (though I have some reservations about this); but what it does not show is that emotional thinking is *always* passive in these senses; even less that it is *essentially* so.

Cook proceeds to relate the idea that emotions are essentially passive and cannot be controlled to divine passibility. His argument is basically that the fact that emotions take place independently of the subject's immediate will means that attributing them to God is extremely problematic. In order to argue this, Cook begins by outlining the distinction Abraham Heschel makes between necessitated reactions (a reaction that is wholly determined by external factors or conditions; e.g. chemical reactions, reflex responses, and hypnotism) and occasioned reactions (in which the subject chooses how to respond to the object), and the analogous distinction Sarot makes between being causally affected (=a necessitated reaction) and being personally affected (=an occasioned reaction). Heschel and Sarot attribute occasioned reactions and being personally affected to God, aiming to show how God can be responsive to the world without the world determining His response.

Cook argues that the problem with this solution is that it does not take account of the 'occurrence' of the emotion – that is, of the emotional experience itself.⁴⁵ Sarot's analysis of emotions is actually an analysis of emotional tendencies and not of emotions themselves. While emotional tendencies may be occasioned reactions, Cook argues, emotions themselves are necessitated reactions. He explains that although

... when we have an emotion, we access or evaluate the particular object in a certain sort of way, there is not a process of deliberation whereby we decide whether to have the emotion or not. This is a basic difference between a response to someone's attempt to persuade us to act and our emotional 'response to some situation that has occurred. One is an *activity* and the other is a (passive) *reaction*.⁴⁶

Thus, according to Cook, the attempt to justify divine emotions on the basis that they do not cause God to be acted upon does not accurately reflect the nature of emotions. Again, I suspect a tendency on Cook's part to treat emotions as one-off events, separate from the emotional narrative that goes on in our lives all the time, and of which conspicuous emotions are only one small part. I shall discuss

this in greater depth below. Cook closes his discussion by saying that if we conceive of a divine emotion as something that God *chooses* to have, then it is difficult to see how it is a real emotion, for emotions are basically and essentially passive experiences.

Throughout my discussion of Cook I have intimated various objections that could be made to Cook's argument, and here I would like to develop four of them further. First, Cook unquestioningly adopts an understanding of 'control' in relation to emotions that is only one of many models of control, and one which puts the idea of emotions being controllable at an immediate disadvantage. Cook's argument is basically that we cannot control emotions (and beliefs, attitudes, desires, and evaluations) because we cannot turn them on and off at demand, as we would turn a light switch on and off, or push a pen across a table. However, many other understandings of control are possible. As Solomon argues, one of the most appropriate models of control for the way in which we control our emotions is that of co-ordinating our actions through practice. While some instances of emotion are more controllable than others (and some are doubtless not controllable at all), many instances of emotion are (like beliefs and attitudes) open to re-evaluation, cultivation, and correction, and are not beyond our control.

Second, Cook is exclusively looking at emotions as one-off events, not as processes integrated into our lives as a whole. This means that he erroneously separates the subject's susceptibility to emotions and the emotions themselves. In reality, my anger is both my susceptibility or predisposition to anger, and my ongoing angry outbursts, as well as being the general anger that goes on all the time and of which I am not generally aware. Likewise, my love for my husband is both my disposition or tendency to feel certain things towards or about my husband, and also the specific feelings that are foregrounded during a romantic meal out or when he volunteers to do the housework. Moreover, both my anger and my love are things I carry into every situation in my everyday life, regardless of whether or not I am aware of them at any particular time. Thus, what Cook regards as our susceptibility towards certain emotions is actually also the emotions themselves, and in nurturing our emotional tendencies and susceptibilities we are also choosing which emotions to have and which emotions to avoid. For this reason, Cook's argument that the subjective experience of emotions is passive and that this renders emotion inappropriate to God is not conclusive, since (while it may seem to us that we are passive to our subjective experiences) in fact we have nurtured and cultivated our emotional tendencies and emotional lives of which these seemingly one-off emotions are simply one small part.

Third, partly as a result of the fact that Cook's account of emotion is one-sided because he tends to view emotions as one-off events (which tend to happen to us in a way that long-term emotions such as love for a spouse or child do not), Cook persuasively shows that our emotions are sometimes passive, but he does not

show that they are always passive, and so he cannot begin to show that they are essentially passive. That sometimes our subjective experiences of emotions do seem to render us passive is not conclusive, since the fact that we also sometimes seem to be active in our subjective experience of emotion (such as in someone's freely chosen love of their spouse) means that passivity is not essential or necessary to emotion. Thus Cook's argument does not show that an omnipotent God could not have emotions, but only that an omnipotent God would not experience emotions that overcame Him beyond His control.

Fourth, as a result of the fact that he erroneously regards passivity as entailing that one is not in control of a situation, Cook overlooks the possibility that God might choose to have something happen to Him, or to be passive, and thus overlooks the possibility that God might choose to have emotions. As a result, Cook does not discuss the question of whether God not being able to have emotions is more or less of a threat to divine omnipotence than the alternative idea that God's impassibility renders Him unable to choose to have emotions, and whether experiencing emotions might be a capacity (and thus a strength) rather than a susceptibility (and so a weakness). This suggests that Cook's philosophy of emotion is a flawed response to voluntarist accounts of emotion, and that Cook's ensuing case for impassibilism is inconclusive.

Suffering and passivity

While I have argued that emotions in general do not entail passivity, there is a problem with the emotional experiences involved in suffering more particularly. At the root of the problem lies the fact that, in order to avoid diminishing God's omnipotence and sovereignty, some passibilists have argued that God chooses to suffer. For example, Jürgen Moltmann argues that there is in God not 'a fateful subjection to suffering', but rather an 'active suffering ... [in which God] lays himself open to the suffering which love for another brings him; and yet, by virtue of his love, he remains master of the pain that love causes him to suffer'.⁴⁷ Similarly Paul Fiddes is keen to emphasize that God always remains in control of His suffering:

When God chooses to make our suffering his own he is *subject* to suffering, but not *subjected* by it; he is under constraint from suffering, but it has no power to overwhelm him because he has freely chosen it as part of his own being. He triumphs over suffering because he chooses it for a purpose.⁴⁸

One objection to Moltmann's and Fiddes's assertions that God chooses and controls His suffering is that it seems to be an integral aspect of suffering that we do not have control over our suffering, and that we do not choose to suffer. Simone Weil expresses the non-volitional nature of suffering when she says: 'it is the essence of affliction that it is suffered unwillingly',⁴⁹ and Origen defines suffering as 'an experience outside the control of the will'.⁵⁰ It is part of what

suffering is that we do not want it or control it. This point is made in the song 'Common People': while the wealthy and educated woman in the song hopes to experience what common people experience, and believes she can acquire this by living like common people, the lyrics in the song tell us that although she can take on most aspects of poverty and suffering, the aspects she cannot take on are that she always will have chosen suffering, and the suffering will never be outside her control: because she can call her Dad to stop it all she will never be helpless in the face of suffering.

By analogy, a situation in which God suffers but chooses this suffering and where He remains in control of His suffering perhaps means that, like the woman in 'Common People', He will fail to suffer authentically. Clearly this is a problem for passibilists, for the idea that God mimics suffering rather than suffering authentically calls into question God's moral credibility, omniscience, intelligence, and ability to console those who really do suffer.

In response to this challenge, I suggest (*contra* Weil, Origen, Jarvis Cocker, and others) that involuntariness is not essential to authentic suffering. A woman who chooses to open herself to the possibility of morning sickness and later birth-pains in order to have a baby, or a martyr who is tortured and executed because he won't relinquish his beliefs, could both choose not to risk suffering – the woman could choose not to get pregnant after all, or could terminate her pregnancy, and the martyr could agree to relinquish his beliefs – yet we would not want to say that the sufferings of the martyr or the pregnant woman are less severe or less authentic simply because they could do something about them.

To give a fleshier example, consider the following situation. A young man from a rich family who has hitherto led a luxurious and sometimes debauched life believes that he has been told by God to give away all his possessions and to dedicate himself to the poor. After some initial resistance, and much to the chagrin of his parents (who believe his choice to be a passing whim), he gives his wealth to the needy, stops working in the family business, cuts off ties with friends who are addicted to vice, and passes over the opportunity of making a lucrative or politically advantageous marriage. Dressed in rags and eating only leftovers, he makes his way to a nearby leper colony where he embraces these social outcasts, and tenderly looks after them, seeing in them the image of God, identifying with their sufferings as well as experiencing his own. His compassion and humility are deeply rooted, and he sees this compassion and humility as rooted in the compassion and humility of God in the incarnation. Gathering like-minded people, he founds a school for the orphans of lepers, and a church in which lepers and their families will not be shunned. Eventually, and foreseeably, he contracts leprosy too, but continues to lead a life of prayer and service to others, remaining tender, cheerful and faithful to the end of his life.

The saint in this story is not unlike the woman in 'Common People'. Like the woman, the saint comes from a rich background, and his descent into poverty

is freely chosen, not inflicted by birth. Like the woman, he is also able to escape the situation if he pleases, since he need only return home to be welcomed back. He has both chosen his suffering, and is in control of it. Yet, despite the similarities to the woman in 'Common People', we intuitively feel that his suffering is authentic while that of the woman is mimicry. So, if the crux of the matter lies not the volitional nature of suffering, what is it that distinguishes our saint from the woman in the song?

One possible answer to this question is to do with the person's motivation for becoming poor, and the value we give these motivations. Jarvis Cocker is not particularly explicit about the woman's motivations in the first half of the song, and leaves it open to us to interpret why she might want to live like a common person. One option he presents us with is that the woman 'has a thirst for knowledge' – the implication seems to be that he initially believes that the woman wishes to experience poverty to learn what it is like. The way the song develops, however, suggests that (despite having agreed to her plan at first), he quickly becomes disillusioned with her plan and suspicious of her motivations. By the end he offers us a more explicit explanation for why she began the project: because she thinks that being 'poor is cool'. Far from realizing the suffering that does in fact take place for people who live in poverty, the woman sees poverty as a sort of fashion accessory. Her motivation, then, is to do with her own image – both in terms of the way she sees herself and in terms of the way she is perceived by friends. This makes the suffering less authentic, I suggest, not because she could stop it all, but because the reasons for which she accepts suffering are lacking in value: they are superficial, pretentious, and lacking an appreciation of what poverty and suffering really are.

In contrast, the saint accepts suffering because of his love for God and his identification with the poor and outcast, in whom he recognizes God. He does not enjoy the suffering for itself or think of the suffering as something that enhances his self-image; rather, the suffering is something he takes on in order to care for the sick, whom he loves, and because he believes it to be the out-working of God's salvific love in the world. His suffering is authentic, because it is accepted as part and parcel of a greater good – service towards God and humanity. The woman's suffering is mimicry, then, because everything about the way she undertakes it is mimicry – she makes pretences, she is concerned with how she looks and not how she is. The saint's suffering is authentic because he undertakes it authentically – not with pretences about who he is, but hoping to become more fully what he is, and not because he is concerned with his appearance towards others, but because he seeks to live out his experience of God's love. Therefore, the idea that suffering is only authentic if it is not freely chosen and if we have no control over it is erroneous; it is rather that the authenticity of chosen suffering is dependent upon the value of the motivations for which the suffering is chosen.

This conclusion naturally raises the question of God's motivations for choosing to suffer, a question that it would be far too complicated to try to answer here. What the conclusions of this paper do suggest about God's motivations is that, if we are to distance God from the superficial suffering of the woman in 'Common People', then God cannot choose to suffer for selfish reasons. This means, for example, that we ought to reject David Brown's suggestion that God chooses to suffer in the incarnation partly because Christ's suffering gives God a certain sort of knowledge (that God had 'a thirst for knowledge'), and so adds to His perfections.⁵¹ Rather, any discussion of God's reasons for choosing suffering must be rooted in an appreciation of God's selfless passionate love for humanity, a love which arguably gives rise to a need for divine compassion, though the reasons why this might be so must be left outside the current discussion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper I began by following Solomon in arguing that emotions are not always passive and not always suffered involuntarily, and that some emotions can be cultivated and nurtured in line with our desires and beliefs about the world, suggesting (in opposition to the impassibilist position) that passibility is compatible with omnipotence. In the second part of the paper, I responded to Cook's argument that the subjective experience of emotion is passive, and that this renders emotions inappropriate to an omnipotent being. In the third part of the paper I discussed a specific problem concerning the predication of suffering to God in passibilist theology, arguing that the authenticity of suffering depends not on the involuntariness of the suffering but on the value of the motivations for which suffering is undertaken. If God's suffering is to be seen as authentic, I have suggested, God's motivation for suffering must be portrayed not as superficial or selfish but instead as freely undertaken out of God's love for the world.

Notes

1. See Marcel Sarot *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House), 30, who defines impassibility as 'immutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life', and Richard E. Creel *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–9, who defines impassibility as 'imperviousness to causal influence from external factors' with respect to nature, will, knowledge, or feelings.
2. See Thomas G. Weinandy *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 1–2.
3. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. Jürgen Moltmann *History and the Triune God* (London: SCM Press, 1991), xvi; Marcel Sarot 'Suffering of Christ, suffering of God?', *Theology*, 95 (1992), 113.
5. Paul Helm 'On the impossibility of divine passibility', in N. M. de Cameron (ed.) *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy*, Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology series (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1989); Robin Cook 'Divine impassibility, divine love' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cardiff University, 2006).

6. Weinandy *Does God Suffer?*, 123.
7. *Ibid.*, 132–134.
8. *Ibid.*, 127.
9. *Ibid.*, 159.
10. *Ibid.*, 160, n. 25.
11. Helm 'Impossibility of divine passibility', 139.
12. Weinandy *Does God Suffer?*, 168.
13. Cook 'Divine impassibility', 3.
14. *Ibid.*, 52.
15. These and other examples can be found in Robert Solomon *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 190.
16. For other accounts that support the view that emotions are primarily cognitive and therefore partly voluntary (in opposition to purely physiological accounts of emotion), see Martha Nussbaum *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ronald de Sousa *The Rationality of Emotion* (London: MIT Press, 1987); Jerome Neu *A Tear is an Intellectual Thing: The Meanings of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Antonio Damasio *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Picador, 1995), and *idem The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000).
17. Robert Solomon *Not Passion's Slave: Emotions and Choice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vii.
18. *Ibid.*, viii. For more on Stoic 'first movements' or 'pre-passions', see Richard Sorabji *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
19. Solomon *Not Passion's Slave*, 202.
20. *Ibid.*, ix.
21. *Ibid.*, 191.
22. *Ibid.*, 195.
23. *Ibid.*, 199.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. William James, cited in Solomon *Not Passion's Slave*, 199.
27. Solomon *Not Passion's Slave*, 201.
28. *Ibid.*, 201.
29. *Ibid.*, 210.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 222.
32. This conclusion presupposes an allegiance to perfect-being theology, and may also be objected to on the grounds that it is not clear whether God should be regarded as 'moral' or whether God's emotions would have to be 'morally interesting'. As I do not have space to defend these presuppositions here, I refer the reader to Sarot *God, Passibility and Corporeality*.
33. See Cook 'Divine impassibility', 58.
34. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
35. *Ibid.*, 71.
36. *Ibid.*, 74.
37. However, we may note that by the same criteria, and by Cook's own admission, beliefs and attitudes (in short, thoughts) are also beyond our control and passive. As Solomon recognizes, if we want to change our beliefs and attitudes we have to open ourselves to new influences, rethink related beliefs, revisit the evidence, and so on. Presumably Cook nevertheless attributes beliefs and attitudes (correct ones) to God in line with the rest of Christian theism.
38. Solomon *True to our Feelings*, 191.
39. Cook 'Divine impassibility', 74.
40. *Ibid.*, 75.
41. That an emotion is long-term and ongoing does not entail that it is mild – though it is not likely to be *felt* with equal intensity all the time.
42. B. W. Helm *Emotional Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65 [Helm's emphasis].
43. Cook 'Divine impassibility', 75.
44. *Ibid.*, 78.

45. *Ibid.*, 83.
46. *Ibid.*, 84.
47. Moltmann, quoted in Richard Bauckham 'In defence of *The Crucified God*', in N.M de S. Cameron (ed.) *The Power and Weakness of God* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), 106.
48. Paul Fiddes *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 62.
49. Simone Weil *Gateway to God* (London, 1974), 87–88.
50. Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.23, Henry Chadwick (ed. and tr.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 88.
51. See Sarot *God, Passibility and Corporeality*, 56, 70; David Brown 'The problem of pain', in Robert Morgan (ed.) *The Religion of the Incarnation* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 55–56.