

## Omniscience and radical particularity: a reply to Simoni

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**Abstract:** This paper is a brief reply to Henry Simoni's 'Divine passibility and the problem of radical particularity: does God feel your pain?' in *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997). I treat his discussion of my paper entitled 'Hartshorne and Creel on impassibility', *Process Studies*, 21 (1992). I argue that Simoni's examples used to illustrate the purportedly contradictory nature of the experiences of a God who universally feels creaturely states fail. For Simoni tacitly employs an inadequate notion of the law of non-contradiction, and thereby misses the relevant phenomenological fact that it is possible for human beings to have integrated mental states that contain spatially distinctive but conflicting hedonic properties. Thus, it is possible for God (at least under Hartshornean descriptions) to have such experiences. I also argue that I have not 'exploited an isolated passage' in Hartshorne to make his views seem more palatable. The point of the passage in question is in fact repeated by Hartshorne and is systematically connected with his doctrine of the 'objective and subjective form of feeling'.

In an essay published in *Religious Studies* (1997), Henry Simoni argues that Charles Hartshorne's passibilist theory that God fully experiences and sympathizes with the world – including all human emotions, pains, and other mental states – harbours contradiction. Very roughly stated, this contradiction is located in the notion that God feels *fully* and sympathizes *fully* with the experiences of creatures who, in their own 'radical particularity', have very different and conflicting emotions and whose experience of mortality must be radically different from the experience of an everlasting being. In the course of this essay, Simoni addresses in some detail my 1992 study which defends Hartshorne's emotional passibilist doctrine against the objections of Richard Creel.<sup>1</sup>

I here wish to give a succinct reply. I shall contend that Simoni has not correctly understood Hartshorne's theory or my interpretation of it. I shall also contend

that he has not provided sufficient reason for holding that Hartshorne's possibilist view is incoherent.

I will proceed by making five sets of comments which engage Simoni's direct discussion of my essay. While the first set makes some minor corrections concerning claims about the epistemic condition of Hartshorne's (and my) position and the second rejects Simoni's leading metaphor for Hartshorne's God as 'mirror', the main bulk of argument will be presented in the third and fourth sections. The fifth and final section adds a minor *ad verecundium* consideration of the valid sort (i.e. an appeal to appropriate authority).

### **Does Hartshorne concede paradox?**

Early on in his paper (329), Simoni discusses some exclusions to Hartshorne's theory that God feels the world 'fully' or 'universally': 'For example, God is said to, "face any and every real death threat with full participation in the sufferings of those whose death is in question", even though it is acknowledged that God cannot face God's own death' (1970, 263). He then proceeds to cite my interpretation of this passage, but suggests that Hartshorne is 'less sanguine' about the question of an everlasting God encountering the experience of mortality and that in fact Hartshorne concedes paradox here:

George Shields interprets: '[I]n knowing the human experience of threat of death, God is not thereby put in a state of fear, because God is everlasting and thus cannot die and God knows this because God is omniscient' (1992, 55). Hartshorne himself seems less sanguine about an easy resolution to the question of an immortal God facing mortality and, in fact, concedes that the case of an immortal being fully feeling and participating in the death of others results in a 'paradox'.

While neither Hartshorne nor I are 'sanguine about easy resolutions' to the whole complex of issues surrounding the notion of passibility – in fact at the outset of my essay I call the issues at hand 'some of the most difficult and tangled in the whole field of philosophical theology' (1992, 44), it is not at all *clear* that Hartshorne concedes that his position on God's awareness of fear of death amounts to a paradox. Simoni provides no textual documentation to *show* that Hartshorne actually says there *is* a paradox here. He simply claims that Hartshorne concedes paradox. In the passage from *Creative Synthesis* in question above, the word 'paradox' appears but, importantly, Hartshorne's actual language casts it in a very provisional context: he says in parentheses at 263 (my emphasis), '*If* this is a paradox so is any idea of adequate knowledge'. A more natural reading of Hartshorne's statement here is that he is suggesting that no one can make adequate sense out of knowledge claims if his views on divine experience are rejected, and thus the statement just as readily suggests rhetorically that there is no paradox here. If this is the passage Simoni has in mind, I think it is reasonable to say that he has read entirely too much into it.

### **Pure mirror of the world?**

Another difficulty I have is with Simoni's use of the language 'pure mirror of the world' (332, also see 329, 331) to describe God's universal feeling on Hartshorne's theory. While Simoni acknowledges that this is not Hartshorne's language (329), its use is hardly innocuous. The notion of 'mirror' is a quite misleading metaphor because it is disconnected from what, on Hartshorne's theory, God *does* with the prehensive data of the cosmos. The notion of mirror at best captures only the passive-receptive side of the 'feeling of feeling' relation. Hartshorne here follows Whitehead's doctrine of the *subjective form* of concrescence: if X is a process of becoming and prehends Y's feeling-content, then X includes *both* Y's feeling-content *and* X's response to Y's feeling-content. Without this response (Whitehead's 'subjective form'), X loses its integrity and merely duplicates Y. This is an important point as it has a bearing on how Hartshorne can maintain the position that one can feel the feelings of others without having those feelings as one's own. I will return to this point momentarily in the section below titled 'An isolated passage?'

### **The law of non-contradiction and 'bad phenomenology'**

Simoni holds the view that there is incoherence in the idea that God feels the world universally. He gives two examples to illustrate. (1) It is inconsistent to conceive God as containing 'contradictory experiences' such as simultaneous experiences of pain (without any accompanying pleasure of the masochistic sort) and pleasure (again without pain). (2) It is inconsistent to conceive God in such a way that 'God could fully empathize with the ignorance of a language while God is fully empathizing with people who speak that language' (333).

Regarding the first example, he asks rhetorically, 'How could God feel the precise qualia of an intense pain while also feeling the precise qualia of a completely pleasurable experience?' I want to argue that there is nothing whatsoever properly 'contradictory' about such experiences, although they contain elements that are indeed qualitatively different and even conflicting. Moreover, it is clearly possible to conceive God as having experiences which contain such qualitatively distinct content. This is because human beings in fact have such experiences, and what is assertorically the case is possibly the case. Thus, if it is logically possible for human beings to have such experiences, then presumably it is logically possible for God to have them (it would seem so a fortiori). Indeed, and significantly, Hartshorne would regard the notion that such qualitatively distinct experiences are contradictory or mutually exclusive as embodying 'bad phenomenology'.

Before getting to what I mean by this statement, let us first consider the law of non-contradiction. The way that Simoni is modelling this law in his claim

that God cannot have qualitatively ‘contradictory experiences’ seems to be as follows:

- (A) It cannot be the case that X has the property F and the property  $\sim F$  (where F = a specific feeling state).

But A is an inadequate expression of the law. It is better formed as follows:

- (B) It cannot be the case that, at  $t$ , X has a property F at a locus or in an aspect  $s$  and that X has a property  $\sim F$  at a locus or in an aspect  $s$ .

Given B, we see that one way in which contradiction can be avoided is as follows (where  $s \neq s'$ ):

- (C) At  $t$ , X has a property F at a locus or in an aspect  $s$  and has a property  $\sim F$  at a locus or in an aspect  $s'$ .

Now, as Hartshorne observes when commenting on Cartesian theories of mind (1983, 111f–112, 275; also see 1970, 37), it is in no way phenomenologically evident that mental states, such as experiences of *qualia*, fail to have extension in phenomenal space. For example, a mild burning sensation can extend for, say, an inch along my arm. Moreover, mental *qualia* can well be experienced in an integrated way where there are *distinct spatial quanta* of ‘hedonic’ content. I can simultaneously experience a mild burning sensation extended for an inch along my arm, and, say, a pleasant tickling sensation extended for three inches on my back. Thus, in the human case, simultaneous experiences of distinctive hedonic content can be had and contradiction is avoided by route C: at a time  $t$ , one can experience a feeling-content F at a locus  $s$  and a radically different feeling-content  $\sim F$  at a distinctive locus  $s'$ . Indeed, it is to be remembered that, for Hartshorne (cf. 1941, 174–211), the mind–body relation in its abstract features is the analogical ‘key’ to understanding the God–world relation. On such a theory, God both ensouls and is embodied by the natural universe, and thus, just as human experience of *qualia* is fundamentally characterized by a bodily grounded ‘phenomenal spread’, so likewise is divine experience of such *qualia*. Hartshorne explicitly and directly makes this analogical connection between divine experience and bodily, extensional sources of human feeling (1941, 185): ‘omniscience is related to [the world] as though every object were a muscle – *nerve*’. While this view may be faced with special problems of its own – specifically the problem of coherence with relativity theory in assuming a cosmically applicable ‘at  $t$ ’ in the formula C when applied to the divine case – this is clearly not, of course, what Simoni has in mind when attributing incoherence to Hartshorne’s view, and, in any event, I contend that there are a number of quite plausible responses to the relativity issue.<sup>2</sup> (Thus, it is by no means *obvious* that Hartshorne’s pantheistic theory of divinity is ruined by considerations of relativity physics.)

The second example regarding language can in principle be handled in the same way: God fully prehends the experiences of a person at one locus who is ignorant of a language – as well as all the antecedent experiences which are the causal grounds of such ignorance – and also prehends the experiences of a person at a different locus who understands that language. In fact by prehending the *full* and distinctive antecedent context surrounding a person's ignorance, it would seem that God has a better understanding of the condition of ignorance than does the person in such condition. Ordinarily, the question, 'Do you sympathize with my plight?', is answered affirmatively to the extent that someone understands the causal context surrounding the plight, not merely the plight itself. I see no reason why one could not at once understand such a causal context and understand a quite different causal context as well (such as the experiences of learning a language).

### **An isolated passage?**

Simoni contends that my version of divine emotional passibilism is an 'adapted version of Hartshornean divine relativity in which the problem of radical particularity, although not explicitly taken into account, has become resolvable' (340). However, such capacity for resolution has been purchased by presenting a theory of 'weak passibilism' that is not the same as Hartshorne's version. Says Simoni (340): 'Hartshorne's position is a strong passibilist one and Shields inappropriately presents it in a weaker version, making use of an isolated passage, which, although Shields interprets it accurately, goes against the grain of all Hartshorne's voluminous writings on the topic.'

I flatly reject this and contend that my so-called theory of 'weak' passibilism is in fact the same as Hartshorne's theory. Indeed, my cited remarks were intended as an interpretation of Hartshorne's view, and I submit that that interpretation is correct. I have hardly 'exploited an isolated passage', since (1) Hartshorne rephrases his statements at (1970, 241) in some detail in other published places, and (2) the fact that Simoni regards this passage as 'isolated' betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the Whitehead–Hartshorne concept of the 'objective and subjective forms of feeling'; in effect, I submit that my interpretation of the position expressed at (1970, 241) goes to the heart of Hartshorne's doctrine of divine 'feeling of feeling'.

As an example of an alternative expression of the view I attribute to Hartshorne, namely, that one can feel the feelings of others without having those feelings as indistinguishable from one's own, consider the following (1984, 199, my emphasis on 'objective affective part-content, etc.')

The subject includes the object, but for that very reason does not coincide with it. My (or your) feeling always embraces feeling which initially was not mine at all. This prior feeling does not thereby become my feeling of it, it becomes rather an *objective affective*

*part-content of my total affective state. I feel how the other felt, I do not feel as the other felt. I see no contradiction here. ... So, if God feels our feeling of trust in a false hypothesis, our feeling is on the far side of the duality, 'feeling of feeling', not on the hither side. True, the first or divine feeling includes the second but surpasses it as the inclusive surpasses the included. God feels how we trust the hypothesis but does not trust it. (My emphases)*

My emphasis on the language 'objective affective part-content of my total affective state' was designed to bring out a crucial misunderstanding involved in Simoni's account of the 'objective and subjective forms of feeling'. In discussing my Hartshornean distinction between 'the subjective and objective "form"', Simoni employs the following language (1997, 340):

Shields makes reference to Hartshorne's differentiation of the subjective and objective aspect (the subjective or objective 'form' in Whitehead's philosophy) of God's feeling ('prehension') of actual entities. And, in fact, this is the explanation that Hartshorne gives in response to questions about how God might avoid feeling afraid or wicked. (1970, 241) This method of differentiating the *immediate, subjective aspect* of fear or sadistic lust, which God does not inherit, and the *objective fact* about fear of mortality or sadism, which God does inherit, does insulate the divine essence from untoward associations with evil.

The problem here is that it is no mere *objective fact* that God inherits, but rather, as Hartshorne makes clear in the above passage, an objective *affective content* that is inherited. It is 'feeling of *feeling*' that is involved. As I read him, Simoni would make it seem that Hartshorne's God has some sort of mere propositional 'knowledge' of a person's hatred, somehow denuded, as it were, of any aesthetic-hedonic content. If such a denuded mere 'objective fact' inheritance scenario were to be attributed to God, then I submit that God would simply have no knowledge of any emotions or colour sensation, or for that matter any experience whatsoever (since all experience has some aesthetic properties – this holds, it would seem, even for logico-mathematical experience, because at least the semiotic or representational aspects of logico-mathematical languages are inseparable from aesthetic content). This is surely a disastrous consequence for the doctrine of omniscience. Indeed, there is an enormous epistemic difference between the following two contexts for understanding or deliberating locutions: (a) being presented the 'objective fact', the mere sentence 'I feel zig-zaggy', where one has no notion whatsoever of the psychological state 'zig-zaggy' (and thus no semantical clarity about the sentence's predicate), and (b) being presented the sentence 'I feel zig-zaggy', after one has somehow experienced 'zig-zagginess' (say, extraordinary sensations brought on by the internal physiological inertia involved in 'extreme' snow-boarding exercises). One could conceivably have knowledge of such a state of affairs under the conditions of (b), but not under the conditions of (a). Under the conditions of (a), there is no 'proposition', but instead only a propositional schema: 'I feel X'.

However, as Hartshorne also makes clear in the above passage, such experience of objective affective content (label it O) is not to be confused with *my* total affective state (label it A) which includes O. This is so for at least three reasons: (1) O is only *part* of the content of A, and consequently A is, we might say, ‘mereologically’ distinguishable from O; (2) O does not coincide with A, because O is ‘evaluated’ or ‘contextualized’ in the subjective form of the process of concrescence which arrives at A (although in so doing, O is not transmuted into something not – O, i.e. O is still the aesthetic datum given in A’s prehension of O); and (3) there is an essential temporal distinction between O and A in that O is essentially an antecedent of A. This third element prompts Hartshorne to make the following significant gloss on the above passage, which provides a weak but discernible experiential analogue for conceiving how God might contextualize ‘hatred’ or ‘trusting a false hypothesis’ without transmuting the aesthetic content of those experiences (1984, 199, my emphasis): ‘we do *something like this* in remembering vividly how we formerly trust in something that we now distrust’.

I should add that some theists have independently harboured intuitions that are quite similar to Hartshorne’s. This is because they agree that having another’s mental content that is only *part* of one’s own mental states is sufficient for dispelling confusions about ‘ownership’ of such states. Significantly, a commitment to Hartshorne’s complete metaphysical account, involving the doctrine of prehension, actual occasions, notions of societies of occasions, etc., does not seem to be required. Consider the following passage from Thomas V. Morris, where he is deliberating some issues of philosophical Christology (1986, 159):

Consider a case of telepathy. Person A has telepathic access to the mind of person B. Suppose if you like that A telepathically has complete access to the mind of B. Does it follow that B’s thoughts are A’s thoughts, that B’s mental states are A’s mental state? Of course not. From B’s believing that it is raining outside and A’s having perfect telepathic access to the mind of B, it does not follow that A believes it is raining outside, for A can have independent reason to think that B is wrong. The accessing relation itself does not alone constitute ownership. So from God’s standing in a perfect accessing relation to all our minds it does not follow that all our minds *are* his mind or that all our thoughts are his thoughts.

Notice the salient point here that A’s understanding of B’s belief state is a *pre-supposition* of A’s evaluation of B’s belief to the effect that B’s belief is false. Thus, *both* an understanding of B’s belief state *and* an evaluation of that belief state are constitutive of A’s integrated mental state. This brings out the significance of Hartshorne’s ‘mereological’ distinction between the other’s feeling (or other mental state) and the ‘total affective mental state’ possessed by the one who is feeling the other’s feeling (or other mental state). While such agreement does not establish that Hartshorne’s position is sound, it does show that Hartshorne’s intuitions on this score are by no means idiosyncratic, but are shared even by philosophers having quite different metaphysical and theological orientations.

In Morris's case at least (notice the epistemic qualifier 'of course not' above), such intuitions are in fact obvious.

### **An appeal to proper authority**

Finally, I offer a minor (but valid) *ad verecundium* consideration. I observe that my interpretation of Hartshorne's view is not my opinion alone. In a recent article on Simoni, Hartshorne scholar (and original philosopher in his own right) Donald Wayne Viney, makes the following statements (2001, 164):

For this reason [expressed in Hartshorne's statement above] we must disagree with Simoni-Wastila when he criticizes Shields for 'making use of an isolated passage' (cf. footnote 26 [reference to above passage]) to make Hartshorne's views about God's sympathetic understanding seem weaker than they are. Hartshorne's views are exactly as Shields presents them.

While, of course, Viney and I could well be wrong, and the arguments and readings must be considered on their own merits, it is at least odd, *prima facie*, that we would both be so mistaken on this *interpretive* issue. Again, this is a minor consideration and is best taken in the light of the whole of my reply.

### **Conclusion**

I conclude that Simoni has not shown that Hartshorne's doctrine of God's universal feeling is incoherent, and that in fact Simoni has not fully understood Hartshorne's theory or my interpretation of it.

Notwithstanding, I agree with Simoni's positive assessment that the passibilist theory I present circumvents the problem of radical particularity in so far as its acceptance of emotional passibilism does not import a diminution or moral devaluation into the divine essence. However, if I have read and argued the issues correctly, my theory *is* Hartshorne's theory, and thus Hartshorne's position equally well circumvents the problem of radical particularity.

I thank Professor Simoni for raising some very interesting questions and for provoking whatever clarifications I may have been able to bring to Hartshorne's theory of divine emotional passibilism.

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## Notes

1. For what it is worth, I should mention that, at the 1998 meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion in Atlanta, Professor Creel, in his admirably generous and fair-minded way, informed me that he now agrees with theistic emotional passibilism. Creel and I now share three basic areas of agreement: God is impassible in essential attributes, but passible in knowledge of actual states of affairs, and in states of feeling. We still disagree on the issue of divine volitional states. I continue to hold with Hartshorne that God's will cannot be 'eternally pre-decided' for reasons specified in my 1992 *Process Studies* essay. See Creel (1986).
2. For a tightly reasoned presentation of arguments on behalf of Hartshorne's perspective, see Griffin (1992). For interesting arguments in support of the view that 'past', 'present', and 'future' can have uniform, physically well-defined meanings even while assuming special relativity, see Storrs McCall (1995).