James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., eds.


Reviewed by Michael J. Dodds, O.P., Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Berkeley, CA

This splendid book comprises twelve essays, most of them from a conference that was held at Providence College in 2007. The authors seek “to get beyond a mere trading in affirmations of the traditional teaching of divine impassibility and curt dismissals of it” (26). To this end, they engage and critique one another’s arguments, lending the collection a rich sense of dialogue. They also draw on their respective traditions (Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox), giving the volume an ecumenical dimension.

As Keating and White note in their introductory essay, for many contemporary theologians divine suffering is the “new orthodoxy” and divine impassibility is “a dead letter” (1–2). In reality, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in divine impassibility, especially in relation to human suffering. Keating and White review this new interest in terms of “three central dimensions of the debate: that pertaining to classical metaphysics, the issue of the continued theological relevance of Chalcedonian Christology, and the centrality of theodicy, or the question of providence” (3). They argue that, although patristic authors employed Greek metaphysics, their teachings on divine impassibility cannot be dismissed as a mere “hellenization” of the gospel (3–7). As patristic writers used Greek philosophy, contemporary theologians must be mindful of such influences as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger in their discussions of
God’s divine impassibility (7–12). At issue in Chalcedonian Christology is whether the doctrine of the two natures of Christ “reveals the plenitude of divine nature as unblemished love” or merely introduces “artificial abstractions” that obscure the meaning and mystery of the cross. If Christ’s sufferings are truly the sufferings of the divine Logos, must this imply a kind of “vulnerability” in God (13–20)? Under the heading of theodicy, they consider the relation between divine transcendence and the reality of evil and human sin (20–25).

The essay of Gilles Emery, “The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the ‘Suffering of God,’” is perhaps the most comprehensive in presenting the issues involved in the doctrine of divine impassibility. It is a translation of an article that originally appeared in the French edition of *Nova et Vetera* in 1999. Though not part of the Providence College conference, it fits in well with the other essays. Emery points out that divine immutability and impassibility were key theological teachings by which the early church defended divine transcendence, divine freedom, and the truth of the Incarnation against Arianism and other heresies. They have been such constant elements in the teaching of the councils of the church that “if one abandons the affirmation of divine immutability and impassibility, a rupture with the tradition is inevitable” (34). This teaching is now questioned due to certain philosophical influences (Hegel, Whitehead), concern for God’s real relation to creation, and a desire to read the sufferings of Christ into the Trinitarian being of God (Moltmann, von Balthasar, Galot). Emery concludes with seven “elements of reflection” from Aquinas addressing contemporary concerns and showing that divine impassibility is not only compatible with, but required for, the affirmation of God’s transcendence and God’s immanent, compassionate presence in creation, especially in the Trinitarian event of the death and Resurrection of Christ.

A particular concern of the essays is the relation of divine impassibility to the sufferings of Christ and of humanity. Do the sufferings of the Word Incarnate imply a suffering (of some kind) in the divine nature? Should the sufferings of humankind be understood to require suffering in God?

If suffering means “a being moved by another,” Gary Culpepper finds a twofold suffering in God, which he describes in his essay “‘One Suffering, in Two Natures’: An Analogical Inquiry into Divine and Human Suffering.” In one way, “God suffers eternally in the distinction between God’s antecedent and consequent providential will” (79n3)—in the intentional “difference” between God’s original plan for the world and God’s action in view of our sinful refusal of that plan. In another way, within the Trinity, there is a “reciprocal suffering of the existence of the other” in that “each person is moved to love by the other” (89). Culpepper implies
that Aquinas also affirms that one divine Person is moved by another, but his argument is based on a misunderstanding of Aquinas’s text. To illustrate the notion of a real relation, Aquinas notes how “in a heavy body is found an inclination and order to the center” of the cosmos (ST I, 28, 1, co.). Culpepper takes this to mean that as “the heavy body is moved by another (the earth),” so one divine person is analogously moved by another (89n29). In Aquinas’s cosmology, however, there is no gravitational pull of one body on another, but a simple (and in itself motionless) real relation of each body to its natural place in the cosmos. The Trinity implies processions, but precisely the kinds of procession that do not entail being moved (ST I, 27, 1).

In his essay, “God and Human Suffering: His Act of Creation and His Acts in History,” Thomas Weinandy offers a refutation of Robert Jenson’s theology, emphasizing that “the act of creation must govern, by metaphysical necessity, all possible subsequent interactions and relationships between God and creatures” (99) and that it is therefore “metaphysically impossible” that the “sin and evil” of the world “affect, in any manner, the ontological constitution of God” (107). Jenson responds with “regret” at Weinandy’s “attack” and hopes for “some rapprochement” (117). In his essay, “Ipse Pater Non Est Impassibilis,” Jenson uses the analogy of “meter bars” and “hyperbars” in musical compositions to suggests that God transcends not only time and eternity but also possibility and impassibility as we usually conceive them.

In his essay, “God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology,” Paul Gavrilyuk provides a masterful review of the patristic tradition on divine impassibility and brings this to bear on contemporary issues. He finds that “divine impassibility is not only compatible, but is actually a corollary of a proper understanding of God’s love and providential care” (144). Trent Pomplun also explores patristic themes in his “Impassibility in St. Hilary of Poitier’s De Trinitate.” He brings out the nuances involved in the patristic notion of impassibility and argues that “medieval and early modern treatments of Hilary largely make more sense than most of our contemporary historical treatments” (213). Bruce Marshall provides patristic and medieval perspectives on the contemporary problem of divine impassibility in his essay, “The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God.” He reviews the interpretations of Christ’s cry of forsakenness in the theologies of Moltmann and von Balthasar and contrasts these with the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas. He concludes that “God the Son . . . remains impassible in his own human suffering and death, since he there—above all, there—remains God” (298).

Closely related to this is Paul Gondereau’s article, “St. Thomas Aquinas, the Communication of Idioms, and the Suffering of Christ in the
Garden of Gethsemane.” He gives a nuanced presentation of how the suffering of Christ can be called the suffering of God, concluding with the admonition: “Let no one look at Christ and accuse God of apatheia. . . . Let no one look at Christ and assert that God does not suffer” (245).

Bruce McCormack explores Barth’s ideas on divine constancy in his “Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth’s Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility.” He suggests that Barth’s thought might take us beyond the impasse between passibilism and impassibilism. David Bentley Hart is also looking for a way through this impasse in his “Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God.” If divine and creaturely causality are viewed univocally, God must either determine or be determined: “there is no other alternative” (300, quoting Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange). This was the dilemma of Aquinas’s “classical commentators” who resorted to the “simply banal” (308) notion of physical premotion to explain God’s involvement in human willing. Hart sifts through this dilemma by employing the notion of divine transcendence. When God’s transcendence is properly understood, divine apatheia will be seen not merely as “the opposite of passibility,” but as “God’s transcendence of the very distinction between the responsive and the unresponsive, between receptivity and resistance” (301). It is only by rejecting the nontranscendent God—the God whose causality is considered univocal with that of creatures—that “Christians may help to prepare their world for the return of the true God revealed in Christ, in all the mystery of his transcendent and impassible love” (323).

The volume concludes with the keynote address of the conference, an essay by Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J. In a few pages, he reviews the discussion of suffering in Scripture, philosophy, and theology. He finds at least seven possible responses to suffering, ranging from rebellion and resignation, to repentance, virtue, silence, hope, and union with the sufferings of Christ. He concludes with some words of wisdom from Rabbi Harold Kushner: “What people going through sorrow need most is consolation, not explanation. A warm hug and a few minutes of patient listening mend more hearts than the most learned theological lecture” (335).

These essays demonstrate that divine passibility is still far from established as the “new orthodoxy” and that divine impassibility is hardly “a dead letter.” At the same time, they show the danger of embracing divine impassibility without due regard for divine transcendence and the inherently analogous nature of our theological language. With sometimes strong and sometimes refreshing rhetorical flourishes, they invite the theological community to find a way beyond the passibilist/impassibilist debacle to a deeper understanding of God’s relation to suffering humanity.
Teachers of undergraduates know the value of a high-quality introductory textbook. William Mattison has written a superbly refreshing, accessible primer to Catholic moral theology that will be of obvious and immediate use to a great number of teachers and students. The book is truly an introduction. It aims to be students’ first encounter, not only with moral theology, but perhaps also with any theological discipline. It makes all of the right first impressions—generous yet rigorous, relevant and timely yet anchored in the riches of the Christian past.

Mattison begins with Plato’s question: why be good? Like Socrates who famously invokes, against Glaucon, a conception of the good life as nothing other than the moral life, Mattison’s focus on the virtues is genuinely classical and is therefore the best safeguard against morality as disgruntled rule-following. Mattison would agree with Terry Eagleton (who surely learned from Herbert McCabe) that a good definition of morality is having a good time. Rules serve the good life rather than being, in killjoy fashion, at odds with it (as Kant supposed). But neither do rules merely spell out what is required for meriting good rewards, as so much Christian moralizing assumes. Instead, Mattison presents a single, coherent tradition for which the good life and the moral life are internally linked, something he demonstrates through faithfulness to Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas as much as to the Bible. The pressing question in the book is never about what is right, but what is virtuous.

The book sets out to accomplish a manifestly forthright task. It investigates the Christian tradition of thinking about the virtues as the key to the moral life, employing a good many everyday examples from life, Mattison’s own personal experience, pop culture, and the lives of great Christian figures. Mattison does not strive to break new scholarly ground but merely to explain traditional Catholic moral thought in a way that those encountering it for the first time will be able to understand and appreciate.

In addition to the standard theoretical progression toward the goal of happiness through habits and virtues, Mattison probes readers’ natural responses to common situations and experiences. For example, he treats the virtues of temperance and prudence in a test-case chapter called “Alcohol and the American College Life.” A discussion of just war is the setting for interrogating the virtue of justice, in which Mattison finds...
both salutary and unsalutary versions of both pacifism and just war. Moreover, America’s use of the atomic bomb on Japan situates a discussion of double effect in which Mattison challenges those who justify that bombing solely utilizing just war’s evaluation of proportionality. In a chapter on chastity, Mattison locates that virtue within a consideration of the goals and ends of marriage and sexuality. Like all of the virtues, rightly understood, chastity does not respond to attempts to instrumentalize it for the good. The good cannot be reached by means other than those which we designate as the virtues, but we designate them as such precisely because they are also the moral marks of a life well lived. On this logic, the fact that the procreative and unitive ends of sex coincide on the virtue of chastity makes perfect sense. Right intention also enters the discussion of euthanasia in a concluding chapter. Here Mattison introduces the common distinction between active and passive euthanasia and judges that the distinction begs more questions than it clarifies and ought therefore to be dropped. Extremely clear is his treatment of double effect, which had been introduced earlier when discussing war. In the context of euthanasia, death must be an intentional—rather than merely foreseen—consequence of action to warrant condemnation.

The book is particularly well-suited to classroom use. Each chapter concludes with questions for discussion and reflection, terms to know, and suggestions for further reading. Mattison is a gifted communicator with an eye for examples that undergraduates can relate to. In particular, he treats with irony virtues (like temperance) that many college students probably assume they don’t yet need.

Mattison has structured the book in two halves, addressing first the cardinal virtues and then the theological virtues. But he makes clear that this sequence should not imply a difference of importance because, like St. Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae*, the latter treatments are the unfolding of what is most significant about the former. For Mattison, the decision to structure the book this way is, he says, mostly strategic given his audience. He aims to show hospitality to students whose familiarity with Christian topics is limited. Regardless of their religion or lack of one, people will ask some moral questions and undertake actions that Mattison describes as “innerworldly,” by which he means not dependent on revelation—questions like the point at which life begins and whether the use of lethal force can sometimes aid in attaining greater justice.

Still, the decision also follows the logic of nature and grace in which grace completes and perfects nature. Love may be natural but it is best known in its goods and ends by considering the love of God in Christ and the high call of friendship to which Jesus calls disciples. In the same way, it is not until a later chapter that readers are introduced, through the example of Augustine’s conversion, to grace’s function within the larger Christian inheritance of virtue theory. Mattison skillfully shows that, in
Christian thought, the division between cardinal and theological virtues thoroughly breaks down, that acquiring the cardinal virtues through habit is not at all at odds with infusion, for example. He makes this most clear in the book’s epilogue, gathering up the all the virtues in their highest goals, in prayer, liturgy, and the sacraments. Here Mattison unfolds the happy life as one of participation in these things, as yearning both for God’s active life to be fulfilled in creatures and also for the virtues to find their true home.

It is easy to imagine this book being widely adopted for introductory courses. Its style is deceptively effortless since it just as clearly displays a great deal of sophistication, balance, pastoral sensitivity, and good sense. It manages to be simple without being simplistic. As he makes clear at the outset, Mattison strives to be hospitable and conversational with the real lives of his readers. This leads him to focus on the common, everyday moral questions that people have instead of the academic debates of moral theologians. Nevertheless, Mattison makes it easy for the eager student wishing to continue to pursue such debates beyond this book to know where to turn. It is a textbook that deserves to see wide use.