

10-1-2012

## Book Review: Thinking Through Feeling God-Emotion And Passibility

Richard Creel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Creel, Richard (2012) "Book Review: Thinking Through Feeling God-Emotion And Passibility," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss4/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

gratuitous evil, then it follows there one has good reason to think there is no gratuitous evil. It is just beyond the scope of human understanding to grasp what those reasons might be. The nontheist is not convinced of course, but also cannot easily show the theist's view about God and animal pain is irrational. It is hard to see how the suffering of this or that particular fawn dying slowly in a forest fire is logically necessary to lead to a greater good, even in the light of the more plausible CDs Murray defends. It may not be reasonable to expect a CD or combination of CDs to do that. The real value of Murray's book is that it attempts to take the problem of animal suffering seriously. The hope of the CD approach is to investigate what some of those reasons might be. The danger of the CD approach, at least for some of them, is they may unjustifiably minimize the significance of animal suffering or simply explain it away. Murray's work is a well-argued comprehensive examination of this topic making use of the best resources not only from philosophy of religion, but also philosophy of mind and ethics. It will provoke, I expect, lively discussion on this topic for some time. It does not, however, solve the problem of God and animal pain. That problem just won't go away.

*Thinking Through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility*, by Anastasia Philippa Scrutton. New York: Continuum, 2011. 227 pages. \$120.00 (hardcover).

RICHARD E. CREEL, Professor Emeritus, Ithaca College (NY)

Debates regarding the passibility or impassibility of God have to do, in large part, with whether God experiences, or even can experience, certain emotions. *Thinking Through Feeling* was written by Anastasia Philippa Scrutton out of her conviction that philosophy of the emotions has important implications for answers to questions about the passibility or impassibility of God. Scrutton prefers to speak of philosophy of the emotions, rather than of emotion in the singular, because "emotions are so diverse that few generalizations can be made about them" (144). Hence, she prefers to take a Wittgensteinian, family resemblance approach to emotions rather than seeking for an essence of emotion.

Through her historical survey at the beginning of *Thinking* and her many presentations of contemporary scholars, Scrutton's book proves to be a valuable resource and she proves to be an able thinker regarding her two central topics: the emotions and the nature of God *vis a vis* the emotions. Her careful, penetrating analyses reveal a serious, subtle, well-studied mind.

For readers unfamiliar with the divine impassibility debate and the philosophy of emotions, chapter 1 is a valuable survey. For readers familiar with those topics, chapter 1 might be skipped except that Scrutton does a good job of showing that, unlike what many believe, there is not a sharp *historical* divide between those who believe in divine impassibility

and those who believe in divine passibility. Yes, there has been a shift of balance in the last two centuries—the majority of thinkers from ancient Greece to the modern era being impassibilists with a shift toward passibilism in the twentieth century. Scrutton shows by citations, however, that there were passibilists long ago, such as Gregory of Thaumaturgus, and there are still impassibilists in the twenty-first century. Scrutton explains this shift in terms of the need of early Christians to defend the concept of God against the rampant anthropomorphism of their time and the need of twentieth-century theologians to defend against the notion that God is aloof and untouched by the horrors of human history.

Chapter 2 contains what is perhaps Scrutton's most distinctive contribution to the divine passibility and emotions debates, viz., her elevation of the distinction between *passiones* and *affectiones* as found in Augustine and Aquinas. The basic idea, as presented by Scrutton, is that emotions are not, as some people hold, either passive, physical, non-cognitive, and irrational, or active, non-physical, cognitive, and rational, but, rather, lie on a continuum from the one extreme to the other with various mixtures of the preceding characteristics, except for a few emotions that lie at each extreme.

In chapter 3 Scrutton argues that some emotions are unique, unsubstitutable sources of knowledge of the world—not propositional knowledge but experiential and axiological knowledge. It is one thing to have propositional knowledge that someone is in love; it is quite another to know what it feels like to be in love. In order for God to be omniscient, Scrutton argues, God must have experiential knowledge of emotions. That seems correct to me. However, she also claims that through compassion we learn the *intrinsic* value of other people, which seems to be, or at least involve, a kind of propositional knowledge. This is an important contention, but what I find in chapter 3 seems more like an extended claim than an argument for this position. It is one thing to point out that compassion reveals that we value certain things (that they are valued by us; that they are valuable to us); it is quite another to argue that compassion reveals in an objective sense that some things are valuable whether we appreciate that or not. It is even more to claim, as Scrutton does, that compassion is a unique, non-substitutable source of axiological knowledge so that even God must experience compassion in order to learn the intrinsic value of humans. I hope that in a second edition of *Thinking Through Feeling* or in another publication Scrutton will present a fuller argument to the conclusion that some emotions uniquely and unsubstitutably reveal the intrinsic value of things in the world and that therefore God, too, must gain this knowledge through compassion.

Using the *passiones/affectiones* distinction in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Scrutton explores whether God can feel compassion, anger, and jealousy. She covers many thinkers in each chapter, but in the chapter on compassion her main riding horse is Martha Nussbaum; in the chapter on anger it is Bishop Butler and Charles Griswold; and in the chapter on jealousy it is Vincent

Brummer and Anders Nygren—but Marcel Sarot and Nussbaum play prominent roles throughout the book. In Scrutton's analyses compassion is contrasted to pity; anger is contrasted to resentment; jealousy is contrasted to envy. Scrutton argues that the first emotion of each pair, carefully formulated, is compatible with the nature of God and, indeed, is an emotion that, given God's nature and the way the world is, God would necessarily feel.

In chapter 4, "Compassion," Scrutton argues that compassion moves one not only to seek to relieve the suffering of others but also to treat them with dignity, thereby providing a basis for morality (another big claim that needs fuller defense). God's anger, chapter 5, is rooted in love and aimed at righting injustice in a positive, redemptive way. This chapter contains a particularly interesting discussion of the nature of forgiveness and its relations to anger and resentment. In chapter 6, God's jealousy is said to be concerned with protecting and saving the well-being of *zer* creatures from persons and things that would undermine their well-being and ultimate salvation. [Editor's note: Creel's term *zer* is to be read as a non-gender pronoun.]

Scrutton emphasizes that these three emotions—compassion, anger, and jealousy—are not merely behavioral attitudes on God's part, as some medieval thinkers claimed, but are also feelings on God's part which ensure that God genuinely understands us through empathy and engages in deeply personal relations with us.

In chapter 7, "Emotion, Will, and Divine Omnipotence," Scrutton discusses whether emotions are voluntary. Traditional thinking is that emotions are involuntary and that anything involuntary is forced upon one; therefore emotions would be incompatible with the omnipotence of God and God would not have them. Scrutton's main resource here is Robert Solomon, with whom she agrees that, whereas some emotions are involuntary, there is a voluntary aspect to some other emotions. Involuntary emotions to which one is totally passive, as, for example, instinctive fear in response to danger, would be incompatible with God. But other emotions are not suffered involuntarily. They are chosen and can be cultivated in line with one's beliefs and desires. Hence, Scrutton concludes, some emotions, such as sympathetic suffering, God can choose for the sake of a divine objective, such as evincing compassion for *zer* creatures. God's omnipotence is not thereby diminished. (But because of God's nature it seems that Scrutton should reconsider whether some emotional reactions are involuntary on God's part. Isn't God's anger at injustice and cruelty involuntary? Could God choose not to be angry at injustice? Not to feel compassion for innocent sufferers? Not to feel jealousy when evil tries to seduce one of *zer* beloved children?)

Scrutton begins chapter 8, "Emotion, the Body, and Divine Incorporeality," by saying, "In this chapter I shall discuss the relationship between emotional experience and the body and ask whether it makes sense to attribute emotional experience to an incorporeal being." She utilizes the work of Marcel Sarot again, with additional references to Abraham Heschel,

Gilbert Ryle, William Alston, and others. Her conclusion is that some emotions, such as being horny, seem to require having a body, and so God would not *have* that emotion (but that does not imply that God could not know what it is like to feel that emotion), but, she argues, emotions such as love, compassion, anger, and jealousy do not require that the experiencer have a body; therefore it is conceivable that an incorporeal being experiences those emotions.

As to the editorial state of *Thinking Through Feeling*, there are more proofreading errors than there should have been, and not just typos. A bigger complaint is about the size of the print. Scrutton's book is valuable and is part of a valuable series, the *Continuum Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. I would rather see these books in paperback with larger print than in hardback with print of its current size. It is hard enough to struggle with dense, abstract prose without also having to struggle with the size of the print (or is it just me ol' eyes?). However, my biggest editorial complaint is that it is not always clear what Scrutton's own position is when she is discussing other authors, which is most of the time. She often seems to be taking a position, or to be about to, but then she doesn't. The good news is that she does a good job of clarifying her own positions at the end of each chapter and in some chapter summaries, but she needs to be clearer about her own position as she goes along or she needs to develop a way of not making the reader guess as to whether she is taking a position.

*Thinking Through Feeling* contains a helpful bibliography and many useful footnotes. It should definitely become part of the literature discussed by all who are interested in philosophy of emotion and the nature of God or just in philosophy of the emotions. Scrutton is a rich, articulate resource on these topics. I could have spent more time contending with some of her claims and arguments, but my main objective in this review is to alert the community of those who are interested in philosophy of the emotions and the nature of God that there is a valuable new book that should be read, discussed, and responded to.

*The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, by Brian Davies. New York: Continuum, 2006. 264 pages. \$44.95 (paperback).

R. DOUGLAS GEIVETT, Biola University

Many have thought that evil constitutes a reason to believe that God does not exist, either because the co-existence of God and evil is logically impossible, or because evils of a certain sort make it likely that God does not exist.

What is the logic of this problematic? The answer depends on how other questions are addressed. What sort of thing is God? What sort of thing is evil? How are the two related? Much debate about the problem proceeds