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"God Suffers"—Sense or Nonsense

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> Thou hast no notion how He suffers, because He
> knows very well what pain suffering involves; yet He
> cannot change. . . Be assured that God suffers more in
> love than thou dost suffer, though by this He cannot be
> changed.[1]

These lines from Kierkegaard raise the question as to how one
can say that God suffers while admitting that God is not subject to
change. The aim of this paper is not to explore the conception of
God that would allow Kierkegaard to write the lines above. Rather,
it is to clarify the use of the talk, or expression, "God suffers" in order
to point out that it is neither an assertion nor a description of facts
concerning God. Yet, given its use, this kind of God-talk makes
sense, without suggesting the ascription of imperfection in God.

Talk about God suffering, it might be recalled, is of interest to
both philosophers and theologians. Classical theism insists on its
refusal to ascribe suffering, interpreted as a change or defect, to the
absolute, immutable, and perfect Being. As a result of this insistence
we find in Christian theology a continuous tradition upholding the
notion of a *Deus impassibilis.* The Church's treatment[2] of Patri-

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom"* (Princeton University
Press, 1968), p. 245.

[2] The Church rejected Patripassianism, Monophysitism, and Theopaschi-
tism. The first, also called Monarchism or Sabellianism, flourishing around
the second century, is the teaching that God was born, suffered and died. The
second, flourishing in the fifth century, is the teaching emphasizing that Christ
has one nature which is divine instead of two natures as the Council of
Chalcedon declared in 451. Just after the Council's declaration a Monop-
physite Bishop, Peter Fullo, extended the Trishagion formula, used in the
liturgy of the Eastern Church, to make it read "God was crucified and suffered
for us." Orthodoxy assigned the same "Theopaschitian" to them. Com-
menting on this group, Adolf von Harnack in his *History of Dogma*, Vol. 4
(Russell and Russell, 1958), p. 231, notes that Orthodoxy "gave the name 'Theo-
paschitian' a permanent place" in the collection of heretical names. According
to J. K. Mozley, who draws together materials to show a continuous tradition
upholding the notion of divine impassibility in Christian theology, the Church
"pursued a course and made distinctions" as a safeguard against any ascription
of possibility to divine nature and any form of doctrine to logically "involve

passianism, Monophysitism, and Theopaschitism, and Aquinas natural theology belong to this tradition. According to Aquinas *passio* does not have any place in a deity who is pure action, simple, perfect, and contains the perfection of all things. Therefore suffering as a passion or pathos cannot really be attributed to such a deity except by way of metaphor.[3]

Alongside this tradition is another tradition in Christian theology. In this other tradition the notion of a *Deus passibilis* believed to be closer in line with the biblical idea of God is upheld. Theologians such as Origen, Augustine, and Anselm acknowledged that God is capable of divine compassion or some "feeling-tone" and, hence, did not wish to deny him any suffering which might result from His own nature.

By not challenging talk about God suffering, modern theology tends towards this latter tradition and therefore does not appear to be committed strictly to or preoccupied with the notion of divine impassibility.[4] God suffers, but He is also immutable and impassible. Insistence on retaining the negative predicates has led to their reinterpretation in order to make them compatible with talk about God suffering. Impassibility is interpreted in such a way that the possibility of change is not precluded.[5]

such an error." *Vide:* J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 127. For a survey on the origin, historical setting and different forms of the Patripassian heresy *vide:* H. Maurice Relton, *Studies in Christian Doctrine* (Macmillan, 1960), ch. 2.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith,* tr. Anton C. Pegis (Doubleday, 1955), BK. I, Q. 89, 90, 91. *Vide* also *Summa Theologica,* I, 3.7, 9.1, 4.1-2; II A, 22.1.

[4] The tendency in this direction is evident in the writings of theologians such as William Temple and Karl Barth. Witness this also in the title of this work: K. Kitamori, *The Theology of the Pain of God* (John Knox Press, 1965).

[5] This is particularly true of the contemporary philosopher Charles Hartshorne in *The Divine Relativity* (Yale University Press, 1948) who places the emphasis on the social nature of God by the reformulation of the theistic conception of God's attributes. According to G.L. Prestige, impassibility in God means, instead of inactivity, that God's will is determined from within Him instead of from without. *Vide:* G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (S.P.C.K. 1952), p. 7. Also H. Maurice Relton (*op. cit.*, pp. 197f.) mentions that "Ottley suggests that when we say God suffered, we do not mean that Deity is passible, but that He who was personally God suffered." Relton says that Dr Ottley is an English scholar, but does not cite his name in full or the place and date of publication for Ottley's work, *Doctrine of the Incarnation.* I have not been successful, so far, in locating this work. Then, according to I. T. Ramsey, impassibility as a divine attribute is an invitation to treat passible stories about God as inadequate, or to bring about a discernment which provides a basis for talking about God. In other words, Ramsey interprets "impassible," the divine attribute, as an evocative word. *Vide*: Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (Macmillan, 1963), pp. 56-60.

The point of this paper is that there is no need to reinterpret the negative predicates in traditional theology to allow talk such as "God suffers." What is required is to discern the way in which such an expression functions.

For the discernment it is best to begin with Wittgenstein's remarks on how language functions. About sentences he writes,

> There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words," "sentences." And this type is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games,. . .come into existence. . .[6]

After explaining that the term "language-game" is meant to indicate the fact that the employment of language is part of an activity or, in his words, "of a form of life," he goes on to say that failure to keep the multiplicity of language games in view could lead to asking whether the cry "Help!" is the description of the crier's mental state of uncertainty.[7]

These remarks are significant in that they direct attention to the workings of our language. Naming of objects, asserting something about reality, describing facts, are only a few of the functions of language. It may function figuratively, poetically, ceremoniously, and so on. A particular linguistic expression might have two or three different meanings depending on the way in which it functions. To find its meaning the expression must be seen in its home or as a part of its "form of life." For instance the expression "He is dead" shouted by a child who has managed to touch one of his playmates in a game called "catcher" has a different meaning from when it is used by a doctor or the relative of a deceased person. In the latter instance one might distinguish between the doctor's pronouncement and the announcement by the relative of the deceased about the doctor's pronouncement. The expression uttered by the doctor is the judgment of one medically trained and certified. It can in a law court have a weight and importance which the expression uttered by the relative of the deceased lacks. The use of the expression by the relative might not even be to announce but to express grief or to indicate the temporary loss of one's ability to cope rationally and meaningfully with situations connected with the death. This would be particularly true if the relative was screaming "He is dead" and rolling on the ground, ripping off his clothes, pounding the ground, and so on.

Clearly, failure to keep in mind the way in which a verbal expression functions can create problems. For instance, one can insist that the statement necessarily implies the presence of a lifeless body or reference to one. But this would not be true in the case of the child playing the game. It would be senseless to ask that the body be produced for an autopsy, or to ask for the death-certificate. Yet it is quite possible to

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Macmillan, 1958), ≠23.

[7] *Ibid.*, ≠24.

associate mistakenly the idea of a corpse with the expression "He is dead." If this is done without discerning the way in which the expression is used, problems of a philosophical nature, deeply disturbing and perplexing ones, may occur. Wittgenstein puts it this way:

> Problems arising through a misrepresentation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.[8]

Now, language used in the sphere of religion is no exception to the way in which language functions in daily life. This is clearly obvious if one remembers that religion is a part of daily life. In religion language is used in a variety of ways. Words, concepts, modes of reasoning, and so on are employed as a means of engaging in activities such as praying, worshipping, performing ritual acts. Hence certain linguistic expressions become a characteristic feature of the religious way of life. This might be viewed as one level of the use of language in the sphere of religion.

At another level language is used to theorize about the activities mentioned above, to convey our notion about or to clarify a particular feature of the religious way of life.

At a third level language is used to express and discuss presuppositions made by language at the first two levels.

Regardless of whatever level of language is used, religiously the different levels are interwoven. It is therefore relatively easy to misinterpret the levels of religious language, to become confused, and perhaps even to insist that the language is not in order. The interweaving of the levels results from the fact that the words employed to express the states of affairs, processes, and events connected with an object *not only within* our world of experience have been devised to deal with objects and materials limited to our spatio-temporal observations. To put it another way, ordinary mundane words are also used to express convictions, ideas, feelings, intentions, etc., about an object that is not wholly within the world of our experience. Words used to talk about ordinary daily experiences are used also to talk about extraordinary experiences and the object associated with such experiences. The same words might be used to say something about our ability to comprehend that object or to suggest the limits of language in describing that object.

In some instances the words do more than just express one's inability to comprehend the object. Instead, they might serve to help one *become aware* of his inability to comprehend the object. This is the case when a person finds that he cannot help using contradictory language, e.g., "God is born," "God died," instead of non-contradictory language, for a corresponding fact.

[8] *Ibid.*, ≠111.

In such a case the logic of the language employed is different. It can be known only by discerning the way the language, or expression functions. Failure to see the logic of an expression gives rise to problems with the character of depth, to deep disquietudes. Consider for example, the expression "God became man." It might be used as a part of either a prayer or a confessional creed, or it may even be used to express belief in a supreme deity. In its use, it is a part of its form of life. When its use is kept in mind, the expression is not perplexing because prayers, affirmations and convictions are never assertions or descriptions of reality. To mistake the expression for an assertion or a description of reality, would be to miss its logic, and consequently, to see it as a piece of linguistic nonsense that is being uttered. This failure to see the logic or disclosure of the expression could create perplexing problems, especially when it is accepted that God, by definition, cannot become limited and totally instantiated.

As a reminder of another possible way in which language functions, attention is called to the expression "I exist." It is seldom used in daily life, but when used it does not picture a fact. Instead, it points out a range of facts, namely, I am alive and present; I breathe, wink, wiggle my toes, and show signs of irritability, and so on. One would hardly question its use or dismiss it as a piece of linguistic nonsense. One would hardly think of investigating the grammatical subject, oneself, to see whether it really exists, or question whether the "I" doing the examination is one and the same with the "I" in existence. This is because of the peculiar behaviour of the word "I." Unlike other pronouns and naming words, this word immediately involves its user. It is a self-involving word. So an expression containing "I" has a different logical power in that it points out or directs attention to what are the facts instead of describing the facts.

The expression "God suffers" is of a similar logical order. It does not picture facts or describe some aspect of empirical reality. Uneasiness about and difficulties with such talk arise from the insistence on seeing the expression as having the same logical behaviour as a common everyday expression such as "John stands." Both expressions are syntactically similar. And this similarity tempts one into thinking that, since such an expression has its own grammatical subject and predicate, and that the grammatical subject "John" is a proper name, the grammatical subject "God" must also be a proper name.

But this is not really the case. For "John" is the proper name of a particular entity that can be either pointed to or singled out in a group of people. The term "God" is not the proper name of *a finite being*. Its referent, which is Being itself, is infinite, incorporeal, and incomprehensible. It cannot be pointed to, or singled out. Therefore, to say that "God" is the proper name for the referent, is to break away from the Hebraic tradition of talking about God,[9] and to ignore

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[9] The use of the Tetragrammàton for reference to God suggests the Hebrew disinclination to express or utter the divine name.

completely the wisdom of the Early Church Fathers on this matter Clement of Alexandria, commenting on the referent for the term "God," said that it "is indivisible—without form and name. And if we name it, we do not do so properly, terming it either the One,. . .or God, or Creator, or Lord."[10] Hiliary of Poictiers writes: "There can be no comparison between God and earthly things. . .We must, therefore, regard any comparison as helpful to man rather than as descriptive of God."[11] And Augustine, echoing the same line of thought says, "God must not even be described as unspeakable (*inaffabilis*) (*sic*), since by the very use of this term, something is spoken. . ."[12]

The similarity in the grammatical predicates of the two expressions adds to the temptation to misrepresent the logical form of "God suffers." Although "suffers" and "stands" are grammatical predicates, they are logically different. In the expression "John stands," the grammatical predicate is a universal term. It describes or limits the particular or grammatical subject, "John." But "suffers" does not belong to the class of universals, for "God" is not a particular term. It does not logically describe "God" in the way "stands" describes "John." To put it another way, the logical behaviour of "God," being different from "John," does not allow for a similar logical predicate. And this is precisely what the Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nazianzen had in mind by saying "that it is impossible to express him, and more impossible to conceive Him."[13] So whereas "John stands" is a descriptive expression, in a logical sense "God suffers" does not function that way. To insist on seeing it as a description is to mistake syntax for logic, or to become bewitched, and possibly bewildered, by the use of language.

The mistaking of the syntactical for the logical form results in seeing the expression "God suffers" as a piece of linguistic nonsense. For, how can the incorporeal, immutable, and perfect being be subject to change?   In other words, the two terms of the expression are read to be contradictory. But if the expression does not describe facts or assert anything about reality, the two terms are not contradictory. There is no need to interpret the grammatical predicate, or universal, metaphorically in order for that expression to be perfectly sensible and meaningful.

The expression derives its meaning from the way in which it functions.   Instead of describing facts, it *points out* facts the way a gesture would call attention in a particular direction to a number of inter-related empirical facts which might not be easily and adequately described. The expression "God suffers" points out a nest of facts: that God became man, that God is love, that in Christ God's love came into human

[10] Clem. Alex., *Strom.* v. 12; v. 11, as cited by J. R. Illingworth, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Macmillan, 1907), pp. 102-110.

[11] Hil., *De Trin.* i. 19; iv. 2; ix. 72; xi. 44, cited in Illingworth, *op. cit.*

[12] Ang., *De Doc. Christ.* i. 6, cited in Illingworth, *op. cit.*

[13] Greg., Naz., *Orat.* 34, cited in Illingworth, *op. cit.*

form for all time, and so on. By pointing out, it induces awareness, in effect, about essentially the facts about the Incarnation, the Cross-event, and the Atonement. These, for the Christian believer, are basic, inter-related facts which baffle description. In Kierkegaard's works, for example, the expression calls attention to a conceptually baffling or paradoxical fact, *viz.*, the God-man, the fact that in Christ God out of His love has reconciled men with Himself once and for all.[14]

To delineate more sharply the meaning of the proposition "God suffers" requires that it be held separate from seemingly similar propositions such as "God became man," "God is love" and "God died."[1] The former derives its meaning from, and is epistemologically dependent on, the latter. This distinction becomes clearer still by bearing in mind Wittgenstein's perceptive remarks. He reminds us that "when we first begin to believe anything, what we *believe* is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions (Light dawns gradually over the whole)."[15] In this case, our latter propositions are the scaffolding of the Christian believer's thought.[16] They stand unmistakably fast for him. Propositions of this sort are exempt from doubt, for a language-game, reminds Wittgenstein, does not necessarily depend on doubting everything that can be doubted.[17] And this fact leads Wittgenstein to remark that "Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement."[18] The propositions "God became man," "God is love," and "God died" are epistemologically different from that of "God suffers" in that it is on them that "God suffers" hinges epistemologically. They form the scaffold of thought correlated with a Christian consciousness. Interdependent they constitute for the Christian his inherited background which is the starting point for his belief or world-picture. They give support to other criss-crossing propositions such as "God suffers," some of which are not yet hardened by tradition. It is to these facts—the Incarnation, the Cross-event, the Atonement, etc.—which have become hardened by tradition and, consequently, easy to overlook, that "God suffers" points.

Clearly, these facts cannot be pointed out for anyone who does not view the expression "God suffers" within the context of the long cumulative process of commitment, obedience, and reflection characterizing the Christian tradition. Some idea of the meaning of God and Christ, the Incarnation and Atonement, the Crucifixion and Resurrection for the Christian community is a prerequisite for understanding how "God suffers" makes sense instead of no sense. For the

[14] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 32-43, 69, 77, 125ff. *Vide* also: *The Sickness Unto Death* published in the same volume with *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 216. These references tell about God becoming Man for man's sake.

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Harper Torch Book, 1972), ≠141.

[16] *Ibid.*, ≠392.

[17] *Ibid.*, ≠378.

[18] Cf. *ibid.*, ≠341, ≠344.

expression points out not the unfamiliar, but the familiar. It calls to mind facts familiar to the believer, but facts whose significance he might easily overlook or forget. "God suffers" is clearly not a fact that requires pointing out, but is a linguistic means of pointing out to oneself, that is to a believer, facts which are unshakeably fast in his life. It is this function which distinguishes more sharply this proposition from others such as "God became man." A proposition with this function might be designated a recollective expression.

However, to hold that "God suffers" makes sense as recollective language is not to suggest a new or rare use of language for the removal of a particular philosophical perplexity. Language has many uses. To point out or to call to mind facts is a seemingly conventional use of language. If, for example, we read on a tomb-stone "In memory of John Doe," those who are acquainted with the deceased would have coming to their minds familiar events and happenings connected with him. They might recollect facts such as "he was a family man, and a loving husband," "he played golf on Tuesdays," and so on. Biblical references which strongly indicate this use of language are: "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt. 24:37), and "Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me" (Job 29:2). In these two examples, the recollective expressions contain the words "as (in) the days/months."

But there is yet another biblical example which could easily escape notice. In the account about Nathan and David (2 Sam. 12:1-12), Nathan tells David the story of the rich man who, owning a flock of lambs, took the poor man's only and beloved lamb to prepare a meal for the traveller. After David passes severe judgment on the rich man, Nathan says to David, "Thou art the man." This utterance can be mistaken for an identity-statement. If it is nothing more than a statement, then Nathan's purpose in telling the story would be unaccomplished. David does not recognize himself in the story unless, on hearing the utterance "Thou art the man," he recollects about himself facts also known to Nathan. Of course, the utterance does not point out facts for Nathan because he is informing David about himself. To make use of J. L. Austin's distinction between the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary aspects of a speech-act,[19] for Nathan the utterance is an illocutionary act, whereas for David it is a perlocutionary act. That is, it makes David recollect facts about himself. If Nathan's purpose in telling the story is to be accomplished, then his utterance (locutionary act) must be accepted as performing a particular job, namely, pointing out familiar facts.

These examples, meant to illustrate the existence and acceptance of the recollective use of language, suggest that this use of language is not always obvious. As we have seen with Nathan's utterance, it is possible for an expression to perform more than one job. The examples given do not appear to have a standard syntactical form or to

[19] See his *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962), lecture viii.

provide clues as to their use. And since not everything meant by our language is or can be said in language, the recognition of language functioning recollectively does not appear to be as easy as we would like it to be. Therefore, whatever difficulty there is in recognizing "God suffers" as a recollective expression is quite understandable.

However, as this paper suggests, the expression "God suffers" makes no sense if its function escapes notice. For it to make sense, it is necessary first to become acquainted with the ordinary accepted sense of both words "God" and "suffer," and then to understand that the expression has a use that is a part of its form of life. That use is to point out or recollect facts—the Incarnation and Atonement—characterizing a Christian form of life.