Check for updates

Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering. Edited by James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans. Pp. x + 357. $45.

This collection of essays is an outstanding introduction to the wide range of contemporary positions and controversies regarding divine impassibility. Furthermore, as the editors observe, “to seek to understand better God and the mystery of suffering . . . obliges us to think more clearly about a dense constellation of Christian theological positions” (26). In other words, one’s stance regarding the question of whether God suffers cannot but influence and be influenced by one’s approach to a great many other crucial debates. The range of these debates is illustrated in this volume by essays that examine, among other matters, the immutability of God (Gilles Emery, 27–76), the relationship of God and history (Thomas G. Weinandy, 99–116), and the intratrinitarian implications of Christ’s suffering (Robert W. Jenson, 117–26). Such questions in turn trigger consideration of deep philosophical problems, such as the nature of suffering (Gary Culpepper, 80–82), the relationship between persons and natures, especially in the context of mysteries such as Christ’s agony in the garden (Paul Gondreau, 214–45), and his cry of dereliction (Bruce D. Marshall, 246–98). In addition, the various claims of influential theologians and schools of thought regarding divine impassibility can serve to interpret and evaluate their characteristic approaches more generally, as shown, for example, by Bruce L. McCormack in his essay on Karl Barth (150–86) and by David Bentley Hart’s passionate critique of “Baroque Thomism” (299–323).

Although the quality of these essays is almost uniformly high and the collection as a whole is reasonably well focused, the sheer range of interconnected topics and perspectives makes a short summary and evaluation both difficult and potentially misleading. A theme that emerges, however, is that those who defend traditional teaching in a traditional style are acutely aware of the dire consequences of conceding divine mutability, as can appear to be required by the notion of God’s suffering. Nevertheless, these defenders are less mindful of the dire metaphoric connotations of their claims, and how these connotations ought to raise doubts about the soundness of their reasoning and modes of expression. To give an example, Emery provides an initially cogent account of the reasons for defending divine immutability but ends up stating that God does not “re-act” and that the prayers we address to God “are not meant to ‘bend’ the will of God, or make him change” (72). Such language evokes angry reactions from those opposed to the implication that God is frozen and implacable. Jenson, for example, warns that “the face-values of the words we appropriate can creep back into the structure and tone of our discourse” (120), while Gondreau concludes, “Let no one look at Christ and assert that God does

not suffer" (245). On the other hand, those who defend God's passibility by arguing that God is inherently temporal risk implying that sin, suffering, and evil are constitutive of God (283–96). One might say that the impassibilists are most adept at the left-brain or syllogistic modes of addressing the problem, while the passibilists are most sensitive to the right-brain or metaphoric aspects of the problem and use of language.

These essays reveal some useful ways to help reconcile the two sides, in particular the need to avoid category mistakes. Of particular note is the way Marshall provides an excellent clarification of what can be properly attributed to a person and to a nature (278–83), an important bulwark against a kind of latent Nestorianism that can creep into certain expressions of traditional doctrine (15). Nevertheless, there is one major lacuna. As has been argued elsewhere, God's simplicity and pure actuality do not entail God's being unresponsive, as often implied by the language of what Hart calls "Baroque Thomism," since God is not the same in all possible worlds (see, e.g., Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* [2003], chap. 3.; see Aquinas, *ST* 1, q.25, a.5). There may, for example, be a world in which Hannah did not pray for a child and in which Samuel was not born (see 1 Sam 1:1–2). Yet, apart from a brief section by Jenson (121–26) aimed mainly at overcoming certain inadequate conceptions of God's eternity, there is little attempt in these essays to address the relationship of time to eternity or to exploit the conceptual resources offered by modal logic in examining possible worlds as opposed to changes over time within one world. This omission is unfortunate, given the obvious problems that result when God's suffering, responsiveness, and mutability are confused. With this proviso, however, I have no hesitation in recommending this collection for its clarity, insight, and accuracy into one of the most difficult and existentially important of all the great theological problems.

Oxford University ANDREW PINSENT

DOING BETTER: THE NEXT REVOLUTION IN ETHICS. By Tad Dunne. Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2010. Pp. x + 295. $30.

In the large corpus of his writings, Bernard Lonergan regrettably wrote relatively little about ethics. Dunne, a long-time Lonergan scholar, here offers a very suggestive approach to how Lonergan's work on method in theology might be fruitfully extended into the field of ethics.

The book seeks to expand Lonergan's invitation "to discover the methods natural to our hearts and minds" into the field of ethics (222). The early chapters accomplish this goal admirably by presenting a series of explanations, imaginative scenarios, and exercises that guide readers toward recognizing within themselves the innate "normative drives" that are the