ADDRESSING THE DIVINE: RETHINKING GOD qua LOVE

Erik Zimmerman
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE

Abstract
This paper counters the Derridean argument that the divine cannot be experienced within the confines of earthly economics and, as a result, cannot be encountered in attributes like love. This paper first addresses the problem that Derrida defines through his explanation of negative theology. The paper then moves through the argument presented by Derrida by presenting Caputo’s argument concerning the kingdom of the impossible, and the idea that the divine operates outside of earthly economics. Love is necessarily an economical relationship, according to Caputo. However, this paper argues, with the help of Jean-Luc Marion’s The Erotic Phenomenon, that a rethinking of God qua love provides a way in which God can be experienced in love. Rather than being the object or subject of a love relationship, this project argues that the divine is experienced when one loves, in passivity, the beloved in the love relation.

For many in the various religious faiths, the divine has come to be recognizable through a wide array of characteristics. For those specific followers of the Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, love has come to be one of the benchmark characteristics by which God is experienced. However, with the arrival of a rethinking of the way in which one addresses the divine, one must necessarily reconsider how one experiences divinity with assigned characteristics. For many in the aforementioned religious faiths, when considering the divine, love is a necessary condition. However, one must consider if God can be experienced qua love and yet remain outside of human conceptualization. I posit that the divine is the experience of love while remaining outside of the concepts, economies, and reciprocities that are so naturally ingrained in a finite, human conception of love. By passively orienting oneself such that one recognizes that he or she is always, already loved, God is an experience rooted within the action of love. Such a foundation for the notion of the divine allows the divine to be an experience that is beyond the restricting conceptions of place while also freeing the divine within time. As such, I will argue that the divine escapes conceptualization while remaining qua love.

Jacques Derrida, in How to Avoid Speaking, presents his readers with an intriguing problem. As he explains, “… the absence of promise or of order – the barren, radically nonhuman, and atheological character of this ‘place’ – obliges us to speak and to refer to it in a certain and unique manner, as to the wholly other who is neither transcendent, absolutely distanced, nor immanent and close.”1 Derrida argues that thinking of the divine in reference to place forces one to speak of the divine. This is the core of the problem that Derrida is presenting. One cannot speak of God without making God into that which is spoken. By having God exist in a place, either as transcendent or immanent, God becomes conceptualized. By applying the conception of transcendence or immanence, one is giving the divine a place and this is problematic. Derrida argues, that one must encounter God as fully other. “But since it remains alien to the order of presence and absence, it seems that one could only invent it in its very otherness”2 Derrida presents the notion that one must encounter the divine through an address to the divine. The prayer, as Derrida references it, allows one to address the divine without limiting, conceptualizing, and, most importantly, naming the divine. The address is the way in which the divine is able to remain wholly other. But to overcome the problem that Derrida presents, the divine must be addressed as neither immanent nor transcendent. The moment that the divine is thought in such a way, the

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2 Ibid., 168.
divine becomes a concept. However, one must consider how the divine *qua* love addresses the individual while remaining in complete otherness. This is the problem of economical thinking that must be overcome to address God *qua* love.

Derrida lays his foundation for addressing God as absolute other by explaining that “…this unique unique address is not a prayer, a celebration, or an encomium. It does not speak to You.” This address to God as absolutely other is not a speaking of, but rather is simply an address to. Derrida is seeking to show that this idea of address is not merely a negative theology. Derrida references negative theology as that which seeks to avoid limiting the divine by not speaking of what the divine is and instead speaking about what God is not. In his address to the Frankish Court, John Erigena, a famous apophatic, or negative theologian, gives an account of negative theology that quite clearly connotes the error that Derrida will address: “We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being.” Negative theology is characterized by claiming the point “God is not.” However, what is very important about Derrida’s argument is that he wants to ensure his readers that he is not simply limiting himself to apophasis. “Between the theological movement that speaks and is inspired by the Good beyond Being or by light and the apophatic path that exceeds the Good, there is necessarily a passage, a transfer, a translation.” This is an important connection. Derrida wants to assure his readers that he is not merely resorting to negative theology. This is to say that Derrida is not limiting God by saying what God is not. Derrida argues that even the claim that God in fact seeks to limit the divine. Negative theology, according to Derrida, makes a fatal flaw by explaining that it is required not to speak of the divine. Making such an acknowledgment of the divine assigns the divine a specific place by referencing a linear past and future to which the divine is oriented. According to Derrida, explaining God in these terms is still attaching finite concepts to the divine. This is the very problem that Derrida presents to us in regard to typical talk in relation to the divine. As such, Derrida is attempting to connect to the divine in a way that does not reference the divine at all.

Herein enters a unique problem. Derrida would like to avoid speaking of the divine. However, one important characteristic of the divine for those in the Abrahamic faiths is that love constitutes the divine. As stated before, this appears problematic when one is attempting to avoid speaking of the divine. For Derrida, the apophatic attempts to overcome this problem but is unable to fully overcome it. The apophatic would describe the divine as not being hateful or lacking in love. But such a statement of negation leaves the divine conceptualized as a being with certain characteristics — again the problem we are seeking to overcome. Derrida explains the apophatic position as such: “Dionysus warns us: it is necessary to avoid using the word *erôs* without first clarifying the meaning, the intention. It is always necessary to start from the intentional meaning and not from mere words….” The apophatic attempts to confront the problem of God *qua* love by intending a meaning for love that is more than, or beyond, the mere descriptor. The apophatic, by claiming what God is not, is attempting to encounter a God that is a god of *erôs*. By defining the nature of love by which God should exist, *erôs*, even without using words leads to the creation of a divine being that is limited. However, this notion of love is problematic. By presenting God *qua* love as such, the apophatics assign a sense of meaning to God. However, one must be able to encounter God *qua* love without turning God into one’s own, individualized “love. God *qua* love must remain absolutely other, but, at the same time, the divine, according to the Abrahamic faiths, must be able to be experienced *qua* love. As a result, what arises appears to be a blatant paradox.

John Caputo further explains the issues of fixing or limiting God to the conception of a “worldly” love. Caputo seeks to further Derrida’s argument against the conceptualization of the divine by

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4 Derrida, *From How to Avoid Speaking*, 169.
5 Ibid., 168.
constructing an argument in which the divine is experienced in a wholly different way than is possible for human individuals. Caputo argues that any relation in the world is a relation of economics. That is to say that if one gives something to another one chooses to enter into an economy.\textsuperscript{6} I give to you and, whether stated or not, certain expectations result in a sense of needed reciprocity from the other. An individual would not enter into a relationship with another unless he or she expected the other to reciprocate similar relational needs back to that individual. Love enters, necessarily, into the economy of the world as well. Love is conceptualized as an economical relationship in that, as the lover begins to love the beloved, the expectations of being loved by the beloved become natural. The lover loves the beloved insofar as he or she believes that, even in the smallest sense, the beloved will return the love. One could posit that perhaps God cannot be an experience \textit{qua} love so long as love remains thought in such an economical way. If love is thought as an item to be given and received then the notion of God \textit{qua} love seems paradoxical. God cannot be an item that is simply traded. Furthermore, as Caputo explains, the divine necessarily cannot be experienced within finite economies. If the divine is restricted to such economies then the divine becomes caught up in a constant reciprocity. This does not work for God, though, because the divine does not operate within this sense of economy. As Caputo explains “God’s power to forgive sin was such that God could, were it good to do so, make it to be that the sinner was not only forgiven but rendered innocent…As a result, in the kingdom, when God rules, things take on an astonishing alterability, unpredictability, revisability, and contingency…”\textsuperscript{7} The divine cannot operate in typical, worldly economical terms because the worldly economy operates within the notion of “place” and “time” that lead back to the problem that Derrida presents. As Caputo explains, the notion of divine forgiveness lends itself to a sense of unprovoked forgiveness from the divine that cannot be repaid; we cannot forgive the divine in spite of the divine’s forgiveness. Caputo explains that such a description of the divine is incorrect because it is not simply located in “concepts and desire,” but rather, that the divine is in the in-between, in the distance between the two.\textsuperscript{8} Perhaps the Christian biblical references that describe God as such (1 John 4:8) are attempting to take the divine and put it into earthly context. Caputo argues against this notion. He introduces a phrase that is important to understanding God \textit{qua} love. Caputo explains that the divine operates within a context known as the poetics of the impossible. “We might say that a poetics is a logic with a heart, not a simple or bare bones logic but a logic with \textit{pathos}, with a passion and desire, with an imagination and a flare, a mad logic, perhaps a patho-logic, but one that is healing and salvific.”\textsuperscript{9} To understand the divine and the poetics of the impossible requires an understanding that one is not dismissing logic as being a false pretense of sorts, but, rather, one is embracing logic rooted in a sense of desire. This notion of desire becomes imperative to understanding the divine. More important to consider is how this divine desire is experienced within the notion of time.

As Derrida explained, speaking of God in terms of transcendence and immanence is a poor way of speaking of the divine. Speaking in such terms when referencing the divine can actually result in anchoring the divine to a “place” which is the exact problem that Derrida, and Caputo, would like to overcome, and the problem with which one must avoid when speaking of the divine \textit{qua} love. If one is to think of God \textit{qua} love then one must do so absent of an assigned place, be it transcendent or immanent. Caputo offers an interesting way to re-think the divine. “The kingdom of God is not a place but a time, a time when God rules rather than the world.”\textsuperscript{10} Caputo goes on to further explain this notion of the divine time.


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 474.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 472.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 470.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 472.
When we pray, we pray for the kingdom to come, asking that life in time become a time when God rules, that time be kept by God, as opposed to the way that time is kept in the world. Time is one of the keys to the kingdom, a sign or a clue that we are moving freely and easily with the rhythms of the kingdom, rather than being sucked into the vortex of the ways of the world. In the kingdom, time is like God’s pulse, God’s echo, God’s orchestration, whereas in the world time is money.\footnote{Ibid., 472-73.}

Caputo wants to construct a stark difference between the time in which the world exists, a time rooted in constancy and expectation and a time that is fluid and changing – refusing to meet economic expectations. This evident lack of expectation seems to be Caputo’s answer to Derrida’s problem of addressing and encountering the divine. The divine unexpectedly, and in blatant disregard of worldly time, ruptures time to encounter the individual. However, this still leaves one without an understanding of how God is experienced \textit{qua} love. If love can be rethought such that it is experienced counter to expectations then it can be freed from the economics of the world. If one is loved prior to showing love, with no expectations of returning said love, and lacking any expectation of being loved then one should be freed from worldly economics. However, if love continues to be thought of in objective terms – as something given and received – then love cannot be freed from economical speaking. Love must be thought as an action, and God must be rooted in that action. Such an action would be free from time and could occur unexpectedly. I as the lover do not offer love, but rather, I love. I love insofar as that love is rooted in the divine, insofar as the divine is love and love is the divine. However, a problem yet again arises. One must consider the notion of God \textit{qua} love and love \textit{qua} God in relation to the lover. The lover is able to address the beloved only insofar as the lover is first be-loved.

Caputo continues to describe his notion of desire by explaining that desire becomes central to the idea of the kingdom of God. Caputo explains that the kingdom of God encourages one “…to love what we dare not love, like a beggar in love with a princess, whose desire is not extinguished but fired by the impossibility of his plight.”\footnote{Ibid., 471.} This idea is the idea that loving the divine is seemingly impossible. However, as Caputo explains, impossible does not mean false. Rather, within the kingdom of the divine, the impossible is possible. The divine makes, by its very nature, that which is impossible possible.\footnote{Ibid.} To tie this argument to the notion of God \textit{qua} love, one must recognize that the idea is not to make God \textit{qua} love into a concept of the worldly economy. Within earthly bounds love is thought of as something one receives or gives. By nature, love seems to be rooted in constant reciprocity. Love becomes an item that one exchanges; he loves in hopes he will receive love back. Love is an economical resource. However, God cannot function as an economical resource. One must then consider how God \textit{qua} love can be experienced in spite of such a seemingly blatant paradox. Economies are a function of the world. God, however, does not function within the world, but rather functions within the poetics of the impossible. By functioning within the poetics of the impossible, God \textit{qua} love functions outside of earthly, finite economics. The experience of God \textit{qua} love must remain outside the confines of earthly economics. In order to think of God \textit{qua} love, one cannot think of love as an economic function. Love cannot be thought of as a “something.”

God, experienced as absolutely other cannot be thought of in terms of economies. Again, God \textit{qua} love is experienced in such a way that the experience is absolutely other. One cannot relate to God \textit{qua} love as an other. God is absolutely other; God is other than the other. God is experienced as a third party in the relation to the other. God is experienced in such a way that God is love, and, yet, God is not a concept. A new notion of love needs to be constructed; one must re-think how love is thought when
thought in relation to God *qua* love. Love can no longer simply be a defective love insofar as it seeks a constant and efficient return on its transaction. Such a love is a mere finite love that is deeply rooted in worldly economies. Rather, love must be rethought in such a way that it becomes a pure love of sorts. This pure love should be founded upon the notion of God *qua* love. The idea of pure love finds its roots in the poems of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth century troubadours. These love poets from various parts of Europe, especially Spain, were well known for poems dripping with desire and hope for a deep seeded love. The troubadours, however, were heavily influenced by the Islamic ideals that stemmed from the Arabic influence on portions of Spain. This notion of pure love was almost fully constructed by numerous Arab scholars and mystics. Again, mystics play a heavy role in influencing the way in which one is able to interact with the divine. 14

Jean-Luc Marion explains that the divine, God, is that which allows one to be passive in regard to the other. As Marion explains,

> In pronouncing the words, “Here I am!” I pass from the status of the nominative ego to the status of he who lets himself be called and summoned in the vocative (”Me? I am here, hic”); or rather, I expose myself henceforward to your point of view, different from my own, and my place is definer in relation to yours (“I am there, illic.”) But above all I recognize the privilege of the other, envisaged now as the pole of my exposure and my point of reference; I thus acknowledge her as the one to relate myself to….

Marion wishes to explain that love involves a sense of being rendered passive. One cannot actively love because such a love becomes deeply rooted in economy-talk. However, Marion seems to present the argument that if one renders him- or herself passive in the face of the other that, as such, the other exposes the lover to the originary love that is found in the divine. A rendering of passivity to the face of the other is how Marion seems to believe the divine is encountered and addressed *qua* love. This has an interesting relation to the Arabic notion of pure love.

This idea of the divine allowing for a pure love is seen throughout the writings of the troubadours. As Mrozek dumanowska explains, “In both, Muslim and Christian culture, pure love brings to the lover enrichment of his spiritual powers and a kind of enoblement.” 16 The divine allows one to be passive in relation to the other. This passivity is key in experiencing the act of God *qua* love. At the same time, it appears, that God *qua* love allows for the passivity of the same to the other. The two seem interconnected. Pure love can further be seen as a unifying force. 17 Pure love wishes to bring together. Pure love acts as a third party, an intermediary of sorts. This pure love works to unite the active and the passive. However, this unification of passivity and activity are not possible outside of pure love. The conception of pure love is one that “takes the lover out of himself in a quest for union with the beloved.” 18 Pure love causes both an activity and passivity. Furthermore, God *qua* love, now recognized as holding a sense of pure love, must connect in such a way that it does not become simply the other, or the beloved. Rather, God *qua* pure love must remain other than other in such a way that the divine does not become restricted in the ways that the beloved is. When one explores the Judeo-Christian view on love, one encounters the notion of love as an act of goodwill towards another. Geoffrey Claussen explains that the Jewish view on the *virtue* of love is one in which “small acts of wishing people well, here, cultivate the virtue of love,

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14 Anna Mrozek dumanowska, "Does Courtly Love Have an Arabic Background?" *Dialogue and Humanism: The Universalist Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1993): 107-08.
16 Mrozek dumanowska, "Does Courtly Love Have an Arabic Background?,” 109.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 110.
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contributing to a sense of fellowship and respectful concern for the well-being of others.” The most important characteristic of Jewish love, according to Claussen, is that love is a virtue. Love as a virtue does, in fact, problematically, conceptualize love. However, this also allows love to be an action. Love, as in the Arabic tradition, is something that unites. Love is a unifying action. Rabbi Simhah Zissel argues that “Loving God’s creatures is closeness to the Blessed One.” Love is the action that allows one to experience the divine. Love as an action, as a pure action, allows for one to encounter God qua love.

Again, one is able to think of love as a virtue. This allows for a unique perspective on the idea of love. A virtue is something that necessarily encompasses a resulting action. Love has a sense of action attached to it. Love is active. This notion of activity seems to be central to not only love, but God qua love. If God is experienced as love, then God is the experience of action. This action is also deeply connected to how one encounters the Levinasian other. According to Jewish tradition, one is expected not to privilege their own interests over the interests of the other. One’s natural tendency is to experience the world in such a way that one recognizes that which one desires. However, love results in action that orients the same to the other in such a way that one becomes oriented to that which is not desired. In the Jewish tradition, love is the virtue that results in the action of the same being oriented to the other. According to Jewish tradition, the divine, God, and love are playing the same role. Both serve as the action that results in an orientation and passivity in regard to the other.

However, the problem that arises in regard to the connection of the Jewish idea of love as a virtue in connection to the divine is that it conceptualizes and fixes the divine. This is the very problem that Derrida is attempting to overcome within the confines of his argument. One must consider the Jewish notion of love as a virtue, but one must rethink this idea. One must connect the ideas of the Muslim troubadours’ love, a pure love associated both with passivity and activity, to the notion of a Jewish virtue of love. One cannot constrain or fix the idea of love to a concept like virtue if one is going to connect love to the divine. One must view love as an action that causes passivity, but one must also view love as resulting from passivity. The action of love serves as that which orients the same passively to the other. The action of love also is that which results when one encounters the other in passivity.

God qua love can only be understood in an interaction with the other such that one is rendered passive. This rendering of passivity is important in that the economies of the world are overcome. By approaching the other as fully passive insofar as one recognizes that he or she is always and already loved render one fully passive in front of the other. God qua love is only understood when love is thought in such a way that it encompasses a love rendered as both fully pure love and fully virtuous love. By being understood as pure love, God qua love allows a God of love to orient a sense of passivity. Further, by being understood as virtuous love, one is able to encounter the divine in the passive encounter with the other. By understanding love in terms of both pure and virtuous, one is able to understand love in regard to the divine. This is because it allows God to be experienced as love in such a way that God is not fixed to a specific conception of love: God does not become subject, object, or even other. Rather, God is experienced as absolutely other in the action of love that both causes and results from an orientation of passivity to the other.

Marion also attempts to connect the divine to the idea of love: “Consequently, if love is only said like it is given – in one way – and if, moreover, God names himself with the very name of love, must we

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22 Ibid., 160.
conclude that God loves like we love, with the same love as us...”23 Marion is concluding his argument that a non-reciprocal, and non-economical, love can be experienced. Similarly, Marion is seeking to show that God can be experienced through love. Marion argues that since God is the experience of love, God is necessarily addressed in all the varying forms of love. As Marion explains, “[God] also reveals himself through the means, the figures, the moments, the acts, and the stages of love, the one and only love, that which we also practice.”24 Marion seems to be making the argument that the notion of God, or the divine, is experienced within all the various parts, portions, and consequences of the act of loving. And as such, God is revealed in the act of love. This argument is very important to understanding God qua love because it allows for a divine experience within an act, that of love, without being restricted as an object or a subject. Within the poetics of the impossible, as Caputo would describe the workings of God, God is able to encompass all that love is. Love, being an action, is made perfect when thought qua God. As such, God qua love is made capable of experience outside of mere transcendence and, as such, is able to satisfy the Derridian need for an other beyond the other.

This action of love towards the other, insofar as it is part of the notion “God qua love,” must be experienced in a completely non-economical sense. God qua love must be pure such that God is experienced passively but in an active sense. The lover must experience the divine in the love relation with the beloved. However, the divine cannot be the original love, or causa sui, of love. If the divine was experienced as Marion describes then the divine would fall, again, into the trap of onto-theology, of being the being in which all being is rooted. The divine would become the lover in “whom” all love is rooted. The divine becomes conceptualized and entrapped in this definition of love as original lover. We must reconsider the idea that God is in the action of love in relation to the other acting to purify the love that we show to the beloved. This love has to be shown without expectation of a returned love. We love insofar as we know that we are always already loved by the act of loving. Thus, as we passively love the other we address the divine. This passive love comes from an ingrained knowledge that the love will be constantly returned. This love does not necessarily come from the beloved, but the love comes from knowledge of the notion that the divine will be encountered in the act of love of the beloved whether or not the beloved returns our love. Thus, the notion of loss, of loving without gain, is decimated. We are not loved first such that the divine is the original lover, but we are loved such that we loved. By loving we experience the divine who in turn loves because the divine is the experience of love. This love, being that it is as such, assures us against loss making love and God qua love possible within the context of economy.

When God qua love is thought in the aforementioned way, the divine is not spoken “of” but is experienced in the “other than the other,” in the in-betweenness of the same and the other. God is encountered in the in-betweenness when the same acts in love towards the other. This love takes the form of a pure and virtuous love in which one is rendered passive in the face of the other. Rooted in historical forms of love found from varying mystics and scholars from the Abrahamic religions, the idea of God qua love can be encountered and not fixed. The divine, when thought qua love is able to remain absolutely other. One is able to encounter God qua love whilst avoiding “bad god-talk.” The problem of God qua love can be rethought and overcome.

23 Marion, The Erotic Phenomenon, 221.
24 Ibid.
REFERENCES