

Agape and Community between William Desmond and Cornel West

What might it mean to call God the agapeic origin? That is to name agape, the love that binds human community, as the plurivocal manifestation of God. Agape is the excess, the surplus of the divine that is also manifested in our human world. Thus, to call God the agapeic origin is to give a metaxological manifestation of the plural as plural by opening the individual to the divine porosity of being. This answer gives shape to a philosophy of God that is also a philosophy of community and of human relationships.

My contention is that this central intertwining of God, agape, and community bears a striking resemblance to the theological-pragmatist philosophy of Cornel West. Both Desmond and West have one foot in an Augustinian constitution of community through love of God, extending a sort of ontologically charged reading of the command to “love thy neighbor *as thyself*,” and the other in a twentieth-century philosophical tradition that expresses skepticism towards eternal truth and traditional theology. For both Desmond and West, the result is a philosophy of God with an attunement to historically grounded community, a skepticism towards universal, absolute truth, and a basic commitment to some sort of openness to the divine. In this essay, I use these striking connections as a starting point to explore the theme of God as the agapeic origin. I begin by outlining what this means in William Desmond’s terms. I take an excursus into Hannah Arendt’s reading of the concept of love in Augustine to elucidate the stakes of some of these points. I then turn to a concise elaboration of Cornel West’s work on this theme. In the final section, I consider how the work of each author might provide mutual illumination, and conclude by briefly offering my own thoughts.

In his work *God and the Between*, William Desmond suggests that we might find a rich understanding of God “most evident with the agapeic name — the self-naming of God as the agapeic giver.”¹ This self-naming under the heading of *agape* opens us to the unity of God as a community. For William Desmond, the agapeic God offers the notion of God that is “truest to the being of the metaxological between.”² This God is one founded on agape. Love for the neighbor is love for oneself is love for God. In short, the agapeic God is the richest approach to the divine in both its unity and its porosity. As Desmond puts it, this notion of God “offers us a plurivocity that is no mere scattered manyness but bespeaks a community of togetherness.”³ This notion is thus founded on the acknowledgment of plurivocity of both *being* and of *being religious*. For Desmond, this plurivocity is reflected in a plurality of ways of thinking about the divine. These ways of approaching the divine might be reduced to equivocal signs, but these signs bear a relationship with the divine surplus.

So, then, how might we signify the divine *plurivocally*? Such a plurivocal manifestation, Desmond writes, “has to do with the intertwining of selving and othering.”⁴ Traditional signification relates a signifier, the self (the believer), to a signified, the object (God). To signify in this way is to univocalize. For example, it would be to insist on a rational sign in philosophical language that pins down God under strict parameters. The opposite would be to give up on signification, acknowledging the hyperbole of sublime divinity as incomprehensible to philosophical thought. But Desmond wants to insist on the possibility of a plurivocal manifestation of the divine that avoids both these extremes of signification. Desmond insists that the practice of signification become precisely that — a *practice*, in this case of love. Loving your neighbor is the “intertwining of selving and othering”: love is a practice of the self that is necessarily a relation to the other. In particular,

¹ William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 173.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 179.

practicing the love of the neighbor *is* the manifestation of God in plurivocity. The unity of the divine, the glue holding it together, is the same glue that holds us mortals to one another in community: love.

This love is both immanent/equivocal and transcendent/univocal. Desmond writes: “there is a metaxological togetherness of One and many, in which the many is given its being as good, in which the One, while hidden in its own intimate reserves, yet is manifested in the aesthetic glory of the world, and in the loves of being.”⁵ With agape, the divine stands in-between, in the midst of mortal beings. In this sense, the divine is immanent and present in equivocal signs. (An example of such a sign is the holy kiss which Augustine called the “sign of peace”; when Christians kiss each other after saying the Lord’s Prayer, they demonstrate love for each other, they constitute their community, and they *practice* their love of God.⁶) Yet because agape originates in God (it is in fact the very unity of God), agape is also transcendent. It is univocal because God’s love is the ultimate unity, the burning-hot sun which casts its light to illuminate all other things. God as the agapeic origin is, in Desmond’s words, “an excessive One that transcends itself, beyond itself, giving finite plurality out of surplus.”⁷ Thus, God as the agapeic origin is both equivocal and immanent on the one hand and univocal and transcendent on the other.

One of the crucial notions we can discern in Desmond’s work is that agape founds a *community*. Because the unity of love is God, which gives “finite plurality out of surplus,” agape is the source for both the prophetic community here on earth and the Kingdom of God in the heavens above. Through agape “the manyness of creation, though it is not divine, is not de-divinized; the pluralism between origin and creation is upheld.”⁸ Agape is itself in the *metaxu*, between the human and the divine, the earth and the heavens. To say that God is the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Augustine, Sermon 227.

⁷ Desmond, *God and the Between*, 180.

⁸ Ibid.

agapeic origin is not to abandon secular, worldly projects. Quite the opposite. As Desmond puts it:

This community of agapeic service is the ethical-religious image of the agape of divine being. If this is a prophetic community, it does not desert the earth, nor is it necessarily antagonistic to the mystical relation, for its prayer is participation in the intimate universal that ceaselessly asks an absolved porosity between the human and divine.⁹

Love is indeed the plurivocal manifestation of God, which is a kind of signification — a kind of response to a project of a philosophy of God. But love is a *practice* that must involve others. It is hard for lone believers each praying by themselves to fashion an “ethical-religious image of the agape of divine being.” To make a *faithful* image of God’s love must rather mean to fashion a “prophetic community” that “does not desert the earth.” This does not mean secularizing the divine, or understanding God just as the source of command (“love your neighbor!”). Rather, agape is basically about a *porosity* between the human and the divine that necessarily involves other human beings.

One person who similarly thought of love as the foundation of community, but was less open to the divine as the agapeic origin, was Hannah Arendt. It is not always noted that Arendt’s PhD thesis, written in 1929 under the guidance of Karl Jaspers, bore the title *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*, translated as *Love and Saint Augustine*.¹⁰ In many ways, Arendt sought out precisely this part of Augustine — the agapeic community — as the aspect of his thought that resonated with her own concerns for plurality and human dignity. Reading her work allows us to see how important love is for community, and how this community is on its way to a profound concern with politics that would become the hallmark of her work. At the same time, re-assessing her reading of Augustine alongside William Desmond and Cornel

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

West pushes us to question what is at stake in secularizing political projects, and what the place of God is in thinking about community.

Augustine, in Arendt's reading, sets out three contexts in which we might understand the commandment to "love one's neighbor." The first is a sort of Neoplatonic context, a material world where God is understood as the *summum bonum*, the Highest Good. Here, love "desires a worldly object, be it a thing or a person";¹¹ to borrow the words of the Arendt interpreter Roy T. Tsao, "love as desire chases at wisps, knowing nothing of true enjoyment — except for those who seek their enjoyment in God."¹² Love of the neighbor here is simply a transient desire, incompatible with true love of God. The second context is where God is understood as the Creator or Demiurge, in a world not of material things but rather of human activity. Here, love of the neighbor is secondary to our love of God, which is driven by our fear of death. Neither of these contexts provides a satisfactory reading for the commandment to love one's neighbor.

For Augustine, in Arendt's reading, the only suitable context in which one might obey the commandment to love one's neighbor is the context of a Christian community. And this love of the neighbor *is* a love of God the Redeemer. As Arendt puts it:

I never love my neighbor for his own sake, only for the sake of divine grace. ... This indirectness turns my relation to my neighbor into a mere passage for the direct relation to God himself. ... We are commanded to love our neighbor, to practice mutual love, only because in so doing we love Christ.¹³

For Augustine, this comes in the context of an argument against loving God as merely the Neoplatonic Highest Good or as the Creator-Demiurge. Instead, we should love the God that redeems us mortal humans from our lives on earth. But in so doing we do not disregard the world we live in. To the contrary, as Arendt again writes:

Salvation itself is made to depend on the conduct of the world, or rather, on its conquest. Thus

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43.

¹³ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, III.

the world is relevant, not because the Christian still lives in it, to a certain extent by mistake, but on the ground of his constant tie to the past and thereby to original kinship, which consists of an equal share in original sin and thus in death.¹⁴

Here, we see why these comments are useful in contextualizing Desmond's notion of the agapeic God. The community, the world, is relevant for the faithful who love God because love of the neighbor is a necessary part of our striving for salvation. We do not love our neighbor because we happen to both be Christians, or because we happen to both love the same God. Instead, our love for our neighbor is a *manifestation* of our love for God. The grounds for this love are our common constant tie to the past, our "equal share in ... death." The distinctly Heideggerian ring to this phrase is not incidental. It is part of Arendt's move to take what she finds valuable in Augustine — the strong foundation of community in love, agape — and remove it from its necessary foundation in Christian faith. In many ways, Arendt tries to have her cake and eat it too. She writes:

Divine grace gives a new meaning to human togetherness — defense against the world. This defense is the foundation of the new city, the city of God. Estrangement itself gives rise to a new togetherness, that is, to a new being with and for each other that exists beside and against the old society.¹⁵

The love of God as love of the neighbor is a new, strong foundation for a pluralistic community, the world we humans make together. This is both a deeply Christian notion and one that is on its way to an existentialist, non-religious foundation. As Roy T. Tsao puts it, Arendt's "question concerning the neighbor's relevance is really a question about the bearing of social relations on human self-understanding."¹⁶

Reading Arendt on Augustine helps us understand how naming God as the agapeic origin can push us to rethink *human* community and *human* self-understanding. I think Arendt's focus on social relations is a salutary turn to the inner workings of community that

¹⁴ Ibid., 106–7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹⁶ Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," 42. I closely follow Tsao's analysis in the subsequent paragraphs.

foreshadows her later seminal work on politics. But I believe she did not spend much time thinking about what remains of the divine. On this point, Desmond is very clear and helpful. However, I think the most interesting work marries the two aspects: seeing, on the one hand, the implications for human community of naming God as the agapeic origin; and, on the other, the continuing relevance of the divine. Cornel West, I believe, offers us something of both.

Reflecting twenty years later on the 1982 publication of *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Cornel West wrote that his explicit intention was “to put forward a prophetic interpretation of the Christian tradition rooted in the Afro-American struggle against white supremacy, informed by progressive Marxist theory and fallibilist pragmatic thought and tempered by a profound tragic sense of life.”¹⁷ This statement encapsulates the characteristics of West’s corpus. The key strains that can be heard coming together in his work are (1) Christianity, specifically through the African-American religious tradition; (2) progressive (Western) Marxism; (3) American (neo-)pragmatism; and (4) an artistic sensibility based on a profound appreciation for the tragicomic.

How do these plurivocal strains come together in something like harmony? For West, the touchstone remains the arts, and especially the blues:

The blues is profoundly tragicomic. What I really mean by tragicomic is the ways in which you look catastrophe in the face, understand radical incongruity, the inability to make sense of it in any holistic, coherent, and consistent way. Yet you still find something — fragments, pieces, relics — and deploy it in an improvisational manner to keep keeping on: “I been down so long that down don’t worry me no more, that’s why I keep keeping on.” That’s the blues. ... That’s like Antigone in Sophocles’ classic. Everything’s against you. You’re in the tomb all by yourself. Dark. You’re still alive. But there’s style, smile.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), i.

¹⁸ Miriam Strube and Cornel West, “Pragmatism’s Tragicomic Jazzman: A Talk with Cornel West,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 58, no. 2 (2013): 294.

In many ways, West seems to find the model of the philosopher in the jazz or blues musician. Indeed, in recent years he has often spoken of himself as “a blues man in the life of the mind, a jazzman in the world of ideas.”¹⁹ In West’s view, it is the arts that provide the necessary inspiration for philosophical thinking, which must refuse to align with any one school or doctrine, but must nonetheless be open to combining influences from many sources. For West, philosophy must “go to school with the arts in general and music in particular” to learn how to bring together seemingly discordant strains — like progressive Marxism and a deep faith in Christianity.²⁰ Following West, I would say that it is this same model we must adopt to think through the consequences of naming God as the agapeic origin, thinking both with Desmond about the signification of the divine and with Arendt about social relations and the human condition.

West says of himself that he “must be in some ways one of the few philosophers in the world, past and present, who would deliberately model myself on musicians.”²¹ What does this mean? After alluding with admiration to Gadamer’s work on Paul Celan, West expands on this thought in a remarkable variation on a theme from late Beethoven:

But I would want to go further and say that you take Opus 131, Beethoven — which I listen to nightly, which I think is the greatest string quartet of any of his quartets and that’s just beyond the stratosphere in light of his, not just genius, but unbelievable achievement — where the wrestling, the radical incongruity of this exemplary romantic composer at one point, post-romantic in another, and in the string quartets there is no category, no school of thought, there is no –ism, he cannot be subsumed under anything. It just *is* Opus 131. ... And that’s what I mean by trying to get philosophy to become so concretized that when you see how musicians have done it maybe we can learn something from it. I’m not saying philosophers should become musicians, but I think that we not only need to be conversing with it, but that we need to enact and embody the styles, the courage, the adventurousness, and the openness to failure, because I think that even in the later Beethoven there’s a sense of profound failure, given the goodness of that failure.²²

¹⁹ See, for instance, Judith Butler et al., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 93.

²⁰ Cornel West and Eduardo Mendieta, “What It Means to Be Human!,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2 (July 17, 2017): 150.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147–49.

²² *Ibid.*, 150.

But it would be a mistake to think that West takes as his model the genius composer, the virtuoso, the Romantic vision of Beethoven the solitary maker of masterpieces. For West cares even more about *community* than he does about the tragicomic.

The true greatness of the musician comes not in their own openness to failure but in what their work *does* in community. In West's terms, artists, at their best, express hope. Hope for West isn't optimism, which is a statement of likelihood about a possible future. Instead, hope is a *practice* in the present that authorizes a reality. In West's terms, we are "prisoners of hope."²³ To be a prisoner of hope means "to choose at the level of humando" to be a "lover of wisdom, lover of justice, lover of neighbor" so that hope is about *motion* and about *movement* (in both senses of the word).²⁴ For West, this is a strongly pragmatist line. Hope is not about optimism; the slaves didn't have anything to hope for, really. But the performance, the practice of lifting up voices, *authorizes* reality. What we say ultimately has meaning insofar as it has practical effects on the world. To hope is to make possible a new reality.

For West, love functions similarly. We choose to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love justice (which are all one and the same love, agape) because this basically helps us make a new world, shape a different community, and authorize a new reality. Indeed, this is perhaps the most profound convergence between West and Desmond. Both turn to love as a *practice*, one that is found meaningful in the light of Christian faith and tradition. West writes: "Coming out of King's tradition and being a Christian, 'love thy neighbor' and, for me, love thy enemy, has as close to a priori status as anything."²⁵ This is a strong assertion for a philosopher to make. What are the consequences of this a priori? West writes:

I think that all we have as persons who are deliberately wedded and consciously tied to the struggles of the weak and vulnerable, the oppressed and subjugated are subversive memories that keeps traditions of subversion alive and personal integrity ... this personal integrity that has an intellectual conscience and, for me, a moral and spiritual high ground, which is to say

²³ Ibid., 156.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

that it refuses to *ever* drink of the cup of bitterness, revenge, hatred, bigotry, or xenophobia.²⁶

The implications of this a priori are basically practical. This is West putting into practice his methodological guiding framework of following the arts. Like Desmond, he sees God as primarily an agapeic origin: the a priori is “love thy neighbor.” Yet in drawing out the consequences, West does not remain on the level of theology or philosophy. As can be seen in the path his career has taken, West assumes the mantle of a public intellectual whose role it is to have the courage of his convictions. “Love thy neighbor” is the a priori for West; put differently, West understands God as the agapeic origin. The consequences, at least for West, are to authorize a new reality that requires us to follow different practices.

In short, this paper has been an exercise in thinking through what it might mean to call God the agapeic origin. In the first place, I read William Desmond’s work to elaborate on what this means in terms of the philosophy of God. As Desmond acknowledges, though, thinking of God as the agapeic origin is equally about the realm of human community and human relations. Reading Arendt helped us see the stakes of making God the agapeic origin for society and politics, and reading her work on Augustine illuminated some of the common origin of these various projects. I offered a reading of Cornel West in the end as an exemplar, to me, of how to think together politics and the divine: how to maintain an openness to God that Desmond so rightly insists on without thinking less of the very immediate concerns of human politics that Arendt cares so much about. West offers us the resources for doing so in two ways. First, we should take as our model musicians and thus in doing philosophy “remain jazzlike: protean, flexible, fluid, open-minded.”²⁷ Second, we ought to re-commit to the a priori of loving our neighbor and think through not just the *theoretical* consequences but

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 155.

also the *practical* imperatives that follow. In other words, what it means to call God the agapeic origin is to put agape into practice in human relationships.

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