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The Derrida-Marion Debate: Performative Language and Mystical Theology

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Early in his career, during the winter of 1968, Jacques Derrida, writing in an essay entitled *Différance*, reminds us that there is no purely phonetic writing. Rather, unlike how we tend to think of speaking, writing is surrounded on all sides by what it is not, and by silence. This claim, that writing is never purely phonetic writing, and its companion assertion that the differing-deferring dynamic, known as *différance*, is at play in writing, is meant as a critique against the metaphysics of presence. As Jean-Luc Marion notes, although the phrase “metaphysics of presence” is a term only loosely defined, and absent from Heidegger’s corpus altogether, we are able to give a brief sketch of what is meant by it.¹ More or less, the metaphysics of presence is the ideology that the world can be rigidly divided into subject/object relations, and that the world is constituted of stable objects of which attributes are predicated. Said differently, because time serves as the horizon by which being is defined, and in turn beings, the prioritization of the present within the history of metaphysics has led to erroneous understandings of the phenomenon of experience. In order for Derrida to not fall into the same pitfall as the tradition that he is critiquing, or as he likes to call it, deconstructing, he must deny that *différance* itself is present within writing. In asking how we may speak from out of *différance* without predicating existence to it, he offers the following:

It goes without saying that [the *a* of *différance*] cannot be exposed. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present. Now if *différance* is (and I also cross out the “is”) what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present.²

Again, to emphasize that he is not talking about some object in the world, or even within language, of which certain definable attributes may be predicated, he says, “I would say, first off, that *différance*, which is neither a word nor a concept, strategically seemed to me the most proper one to think, if not to master.”³

As exemplified in the passages just cited, Derrida employs language in a way not unlike the mystical theology of the three Abrahamic traditions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. This fact will be critical for our investigation. Let us look at two similarities between Derrida’s quasi-concept *différance* and how the God of Abraham is envisioned within the three traditions.

First, both *différance* and God as such, cannot be encountered in the present; their arrival on the scene is always deferred. Yahweh warns Moses saying, “My face ... you cannot see, for no human being can see me and survive,” and John tells us “No one has ever seen God.”⁴ Likewise, Derrida says,

“The trace (of that) which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon ... Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*.”⁵

To think *différance* or God within the present, thus subordinating them within being, is to attempt to think otherness while also trying to include them in the category of the same, which is exactly what cannot be done. The mysterious God hidden in the burning bush, speaking silently in the wind, whose ways are unknowable cannot be encountered as, noting that everything turns on the “as”, knowable and un-mysterious.

With that said, a word of caution needs to be extended. The absence of God and *différance* can easily be thought of as a modification of the present. When it is said that God or *différance* are not present, or do not appear on the horizon of experience, it is not simultaneously conceded that God or *différance* could at some future moment come to the fore. As Derrida has it, one

misunderstanding of negative theology, one that led him to detach deconstruction from conflation with negative theology, is that it holds within its practices a secret to which only the elect have access. If this were true the secret could potentially be given public access and reveal itself in the present. However, the possibility that God or *différance* could become present is precisely the misunderstanding that needs to be avoided.

Second, *différance* and God are otherwise than the existence for which they provide the possibility. *Différance* within deconstruction and God within the Abrahamic traditions provide for something like the possibility in which beings can appear, or present themselves. Given this, to predicate presence or existence of God or *différance* would not make sense. As a circle cannot both delimit the enclosed space encapsulated within it and dwell within that space, neither can God nor *différance* present themselves within the present for which they create the possibility.

Given these similarities, and others, a number of questions are raised. Is *différance*, according to Derrida, or otherwise, the same as God? Is Derrida, a philosopher who quite rightly passes as an atheist, engaging himself in the discourse of mystical theology? If the answer to the first two questions is “no,” then does deconstruction find a rival in mystical theology? With that question in mind, it should be noted that mystical theology as understood by Marion, Dionysius, and, as I will argue, Derrida encapsulates the three movements of affirmation, privation, and performance, and not merely one of them, as for example, negative theology.⁶ Returning to the essay *Différance*, the answers to two of the three questions can be found easily enough. He, Derrida, states early in this essay that:

...The detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate *that différence is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being whether present or absent.⁷

From Derrida’s point of view, the language of mystical theology and the language employed in designating what *différance* is-not are similar. However, *différance* is not a supreme being. Later he notes, “This unnamable is not an ineffable Being, which no name could approach: God, for example.” Again, he says, “It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority.”⁸ Neither existence nor essence can be predicated of *différance*, therefore it is impossible according to Derrida’s own rules for understanding *différance* to say that it is anything, much less God. Furthermore, it is his claim that the manner in which mystical theology has chosen to speak of God, as opposed to deconstruction’s non-predicative manner of speaking from *différance*, is victim to the metaphysics of presence, and ends with an understanding of God subordinated to being.⁹ It is this claim, made by Derrida—that mystical theology, specifically negative theology, while denying the predicate of existence to God, ultimately gives way to positive theology, and posits that God does exist, however, in a higher, more-elevated, hyperessential mode of being—which Jean-Luc Marion contests. Conversely, Marion claims that the language of mystical theology, far from being chained to the bondages of the metaphysics of presence, has a performative aspect, to which he accuses Derrida of not giving credence, that does not merely state what God is or is not. Rather, the performative aspect of mystical theology, according to Marion, engages itself with, or is engaged by, the divine instead of merely speaking about God.

Arthur Bradley notes, “It is crucially important to put Marion’s argument into the philosophical context of the debate between metaphysics and theology. He takes as his starting point a critique of the role and status of metaphysics vis-à-vis traditional Christian theology.”¹⁰ As envisaged in the works of Thomas Aquinas, Leibniz, and Descartes, theology and metaphysics attempted, according to Marion, to join forces not only to establish a firm foundational truth on which to build a philosophical system, but also to delve into the infinite recesses of the essence and existence of God. Today, he thinks, it is fairly obvious that these

attempts were futile, and instead of being convincing only fuel the flames of atheistic arguments. All the arguments for the existence of God whether the argument from design, the ontological argument, the argument from experience, or the first cause argument fall under the heading of onto-theology. Taking his lead from Heidegger, Marion is wont to argue that onto-theology was a misstep on the part of Scholastic philosophers and theologians.

The following is one reason why from Marion's stance, and in general, that all arguments of the onto-theological sort are inappropriate for mystical theology. The meaning of the verb "to be" is taken for granted. That is, almost no one questions what it means for something "to be" or for something to exist. We use the verb "to be," and very often, it is merely implied, without a thought about its implications. Many things exist within our world: cars, other people, animals, houses, etc. In general, we refer to these as things, entities, or beings, that is, without the implication that beings in this generic sense are alive. Therefore, it is necessary that a distinction be made between the beings that dwell within the world, and the world all these beings share. This world, this totality of relations and references, has traditionally been referred to as being. All things, cars, people and houses included, are because they are caught up in the nexus of being, or take part in being. By saying that things are, we predicate of those things existence; we say they exist. However, being within this construction is primordially first. Beings are subordinated under being, are given their origin in being. Nonetheless, being should not be understood as a being among other beings, a supreme being before all others, or merely the sum total of all such beings. Therefore, if it is said of God that God exists, or even God "is," then God within this mental construction, the one onto-theology adopts, is subordinated under being. Since by definition God cannot be subordinated under anything else, God as understood in the onto-theological framework, as merely another being among others, is less than God. As Heidegger is more economical in stating the same, I will quote him at length:

I believe that Being can never be thought as the ground or essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience of

God and of his manifestedness, to the extent that the later can indeed meet man, flashes in the dimension of Being, which in no way signifies that Being might be regarded as a possible predicate for God.¹¹

The failure of onto-theology was not left unnoticed by all theologians. Neither was the way of predication, the way of affirmation, or as it is more commonly known, positive theology, thought of as the path through an apparent impasse. Whereas positive theology or onto-theology attempted to predicate certain attributes of God only to the detriment of the conceptualization of God, negative theology sought to show God's supreme eminence by way of saying what God is not. God, according to this path, is not of this world, is not mortal, is not human, is not being, and is not grounded in being. God is nothing: God is not a thing in the world. However, as will be shown, negative theology also predicates existence of God and thus subsumes the power of God under being. As we have been saying, there are at least two circuitous movements within mystical theology, the positive and the negative. Though each as we have been describing them appears distinct from the other, in that one predicates of God certain attributes, and the other denies the predicates, negative theology is reliant on the metaphysics of presence or positive theology for its ability to deny the predicates. To deny the factuality of a statement, logically that statement must first be made. Therefore, the radical nay-saying of negative theology also falls within the yes-saying of traditional metaphysics. Derrida says in an essay entitled *How to Avoid Speaking* that:

[The economy of mystical theology] is paradoxical. In principle, the apophatic movement of discourse would have to negatively retrace all the stages of symbolic theology and positive predication. It would thus be coextensive with it, confined to the same quantity of discourse. In itself interminable, the apophatic movement cannot contain within itself the principle of its interruption. It can only indefinitely defer the encounter with its own limit.¹²

For Derrida and Marion, this turn of events—that negative theology is just as suspect as positive theology in that it falls victim to the metaphysics of presence, and subsumes the essence of God under being, and more correctly predicates an essence of God at all—is problematic. Denigrating the value of negative theology, Derrida says,

“...negative theologies...are always interested with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.”¹³

According to Derrida, negative theology although at first denying existence and essence to the deity, in a reversal of predications, actually asserts that God exists hyperessentially.

Both Derrida and Marion would insist that mystical theology has two movements at play within it—the positive and the negative. However, Marion goes further claiming also a third movement within mystical theology that overcomes the problems of the previous two. What is more, Marion criticizes Derrida for not taking note of the third way. Marion says the task of his critique is to assess the advantage that “the deconstruction of so-called negative theology draw[s] from its ignorance (or refusal) of the threefold character of ways.” “In short,” he asks, “what end is served, for Derrida, in denying the third way and in sticking with a straightforward opposition between affirmation and negation?”¹⁴ If the first two ways are called the positive way and the negative way respectively, then the third might be called the way of excess or of saturated phenomena. Seeing that the debate between the two scholars revolves around an interpretation of the writer and mystic Dionysius the Areopagite one particularly succinct passage will be cited. In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius writes:

It is necessary at first to impose and affirm all theses of beings insofar as it is the cause of all, then deny them even more radically, as it surpasses all, finally let us not believe that the affirmations are the contrary of the negations, since the cause which is above every negation as well as every position is still more above every privation.¹⁵

Dionysius states very clearly that every attribute is predicated of God, then, realizing that God is otherwise than what this world is, mystical theology denies what was initially affirmed. He also intimates that there is another way, which is otherwise than every negation and affirmation. For our purposes, we will understand the positive way and the negative way of mystical theology as having true and false values. That is, both these ways of speaking aim to say something about what is true or not true about God through a propositional statement. The third way, then, we may surmise, does not take into consideration the categories of true and false.

Accordingly, Marion says that the advantage of the “third way” is that it “is played out beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short between the true and false.” Continuing down the page, “The third way does not hide an affirmation beneath a negation, because it means to overcome their duel, just as it means to overcome that between the two truth values wherein metaphysics plays itself out.”¹⁶ Given the advantage of the third way—that it overcomes the problem of subordinating God under being—and given that Marion believes that deconstruction knowingly ignores the third way in order to gain an advantage over mystical theology, it is surprising that while responding to Marion, at a conference held at Villanova in 1997, Derrida contends that within his texts *there is* to be found the third way of which Marion speaks. Derrida says of his texts, “They have a pragmatic aspect, a performative aspect that would require another kind of analysis” other than that to which positive and negative predications are subjected—namely, the test of truthfulness.¹⁷

Marion in concert with Derrida also refers to the third way as utilizing the pragmatic or performative function of language.¹⁸ The first two ways, the positive and the negative, predicate of God some attribute or another; they seek to speak of or about God’s essence. However, the third way seeks to *show* God as beyond or otherwise than being. Dionysius uses the term *hyperousios*, or merely the prefix *hyper* to designate that, as opposed to the positive and negative ways, the third way speaks to God as otherwise than

being. As Marion says, “Dionysius indicates this new pragmatic function of language, aiming at He who surpasses all nomination by giving him the title *aitia*—not the metaphysical “cause”, but what all those who demand demand when they aim at Him from whom they come and to whom they return.”¹⁹

Two characteristics need to be noted about the third way. First, it directs itself to, is on its way to, points itself toward, that which is otherwise than being, or beyond being. Therefore, and secondly, we may tenuously say the third way no longer aims at talking *about* or *of* God, but *to* God. For this reason, it would seem that the third way, would suspend all communication with the world at a true and false level. Marion defends the third way against the reproach that it cannot express itself in propositional statements, or statements of fact, by asking:

For if it is exact to say that we cannot think beyond Being... must this be held as a reproach against mystical theology and its third way? Should mystical theology be reproached for not knowing how to say, for not knowing or not wanting to say to us what this otherwise than being is all about—but doesn't this reproach at once seem a bit absurd?²⁰

Although I agree that the reproach that mystical theology cannot conform its manner of speaking—the performative speech act—to either the positive or negative modes of speech is absurd, I believe by Marion's own reasoning his argument against Derrida—that he does not include a third way in his texts—also is absurd. Should Derrida be reproached for not knowing how to say, for not knowing or not wanting to say to us what this third way is all about? How would this third way *as practiced*, and *not as conceptualized* be expressed? Within the context of theology it is often in the form of praise and prayer, is it not? The praise act contains a mode of speech that does not merely state a fact, a truth, or a falsehood; it performs the very act it indicates. Following the argument of J.L. Austin, praise and prayer are cases “in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something.”²¹ When a worshipper says, “Praise be to God,” or “Baruch hashem Adonai,” within the

context of praise, the very words constitute the praise act, or at least part of it.²² What the worshipper does not do is to announce the event of praise as such. It is considered inappropriate to the context of praise to say “I will praise Yahweh now...” or “Here is my praise to God...” Neither is the way of worship suited by a mere description of the matter of fact events, nor statements about the truth or falsehood of the act. Somehow, to do so, reduces the experience of worship, makes it less than it is. To know, in the know-how sense of the word know, what-worship-is is to be caught up in the worship, to make the movements of worship (or, in concert with Kierkegaard, the movements of faith) with sincerity of heart.²³ In merely speaking about worship, one has not worshipped as such, but only uttered words about the date, the place, the words said, and so on. To know this third way, is to do the third way, or the act of praise.

Considering this, can Derrida be blamed if he never mentions the third way explicitly? Might one reason for Marion's rash critique of Derrida be that he has not recognized the performative aspect of language at play, at work, because he only knows how to characterize the third way by what it is and is not, falling back, however much he may not want to, on the old metaphysical divisions of true and false?

With some hesitation, it was said that the act of praise or prayer escapes the dilemma of the metaphysics of presence by avoiding predicative language. Thus, in praising and praying one speaks *to* God, as opposed to speaking *about* or *of* God. However, understood in this manner, praise and prayer are intentional acts not unlike having a conversation. When having a conversation one usually converses *with someone*, even if that someone is the self. Therefore, is it not the case that by saying that praise and prayer speak to God, one assumes that *God is* someone who can be spoken to? Yes it is. Being a someone requires being present, being alive, existence. These attributes – presence and existence – are the attributes that cannot be predicated of God if the conceptualization of God is not to be diminished. In light of these considerations, it appears the original thesis that prayer and praise speak to God, as opposed to speaking about or of God, is problematic.

Apart from any other criticisms that can be advanced against him, Marion is most unique in addressing this problem. When naming, he notes, the thing named is inscribed or delimited by the name. In the case of God, the name cannot perform this function without accruing the problems of the metaphysics of presence. To delimit God by a name is to determine the undeterminable or to say that God exists. Nonetheless, Marion, drawing on Saint Paul's words in Philippians 2.9, argues that God's name is "the name which is above all other names."²⁴ The name above every name does not function in a fashion similar to the everyday names car, animal, tree, and house. Rather, the name of God inscribes God's adherents within the name, and accordingly, names them, speaking new existence into them. From this new perspective, prayer and praise do not so much speak *to* God, as they speak *from* God.

Put differently, God speaks his children out of the silence, the clearing, or the impossible. This echoes the sentiment of Eckhart's that we are all words of God and Heidegger's that it is not we that speak language, but language that speaks us.²⁵ Yet again, Saint Paul suggests that when, through some lack on our part, we are unable to pray, prayer originates with God the Spirit. He says:

The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God.²⁶

Coming to the ends of language, the supplicant submits herself to God. God, in an experience that could only be described as excessive, intercedes for and through the supplicant. The prophets knew this experience well. Yahweh, for instance, touches the lips of Jeremiah and announces, "There! I have put my words into your mouth."²⁷ The words the supplicant speaks are not her words; they are God's. God pours the words of God into the chosen vessel and through overabundance the words flow out to others. It is this

same movement of excess – the third way, which is undeterminable by statements of fact – that is operative in Derrida's texts as well.

Coming to a close, it has been noted by some, myself included, that Derrida while appearing cryptic in writing, is most often very lucid in dialogue. I suggest that Derrida's writings utilize a different mode of language than when he is caught up in conversation. Like a praise act, one needs a different means of analyzing what is being said within his texts. In order to understand one must be enraptured in the play of words, in the performance of language. If one is looking for the explicit mentioning of the third way, then one will not find it. In his response to Marion, Derrida, very much in line with what was just said, notes, "I would perhaps say that [Marion] gave me too much as to the alleged objections to the so-called negative theology, and by giving me too much, I am afraid that he did not find enough in my texts on the subject."²⁸ As we read, Derrida in *Différance* denounces negative theology as denying essence or existence to God, only to turn around and affirm it. Let us say for the moment that Derrida far from a literal reading of his denials is at play within the performative language of mystical theology. If mystical theology, taking into account all three ways, affirmation, negation, and performance, were to reflect back upon itself, would it affirm itself, deny itself, and allow itself to be caught up in the performance of words, as Derrida does in these passages? I believe it would. This is what Derrida's texts do through saying, say through doing. Derrida when speaking of religion, or, perhaps, speaking religiously, is not merely interested in stating a catalogue of facts about the three ways. He shows us something, indicates, points to, and utilizes a wide range of language-tools – denials, affirmations, performances. Marion in this particular debate wanted to hear Derrida submit his program to the "metaphysics of presence" by speaking of or about the third way, when Derrida attempts the impossible by performing and dancing in language.

Notes

- ¹ Marion, 20.
- ² Derrida 1982, 5-6.
- ³ Derrida 1982, 7.
- ⁴ *New Jerusalem Bible*, Exodus 33:20; John 1.18.
- ⁵ Derrida 1982, 17.
- ⁶ Marion.
- ⁷ Derrida 1982, 6.
- ⁸ Derrida 1982, 26.
- ⁹ Derrida 1982, 6.
- ¹⁰ Bradley.
- ¹¹ Quoted from Bradley.
- ¹² Derrida 1989, 11.
- ¹³ Derrida 1982, 6.
- ¹⁴ Marion, 6.
- ¹⁵ Rolt, 869d-872a.
- ¹⁶ Marion, 26.
- ¹⁷ Marion, 43.
- ¹⁸ Marion, 32; 38.
- ¹⁹ Marion, 27.
- ²⁰ Marion, 32.
- ²¹ Austin, 13.
- ²² Translated from Hebrew, Barush hashem Adonai means "Blessed be the name of the Lord!"
- ²³ Kierkegaard, 38-46; Heidegger.
- ²⁴ Marion, 37-38.
- ²⁵ Eckhart, II: 53.
- ²⁶ *New Jerusalem Bible*, Romans 8.26-27.
- ²⁷ *New Jerusalem Bible*, Jeremiah 1.9.
- ²⁸ Marion, 43.

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