

1-1-2022

Jordan Wessling, LOVE DIVINE: A SYSTEMATIC ACCOUNT OF GOD'S LOVE FOR HUMANITY

T. Parker Haratine
University of St Andrews, mr.pharatine@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Haratine, T. Parker (2022) "Jordan Wessling, LOVE DIVINE: A SYSTEMATIC ACCOUNT OF GOD'S LOVE FOR HUMANITY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 26.

DOI: [10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.1.13](https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.1.13)

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss1/26>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God's Love for Humanity, by Jordan Wessling. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 288. \$90.00 (hardcover).

T. PARKER HARATINE, University of St Andrews

Love Divine offers a thought provoking 'value account' of love which focuses on God's appreciative response to creation's intrinsic value. Jordan Wessling utilizes the tools of analytic philosophy on central theological topics, which makes it an excellent contribution to the ongoing project of analytic theology. The scope of the book is impressive for Wessling manages to apply the novel doctrine of love to central issues in theology while consistently offering alternative viewpoints to his own positions. In addition to the chapters on methodology and the 'value account' of love, Wessling addresses God's motivation for creation (Ch. 3), divine emotions (Ch. 4), the scope of God's love (Ch. 5), punishment and love (Ch. 6), and deification (Ch. 7). While technical at various places, Wessling's approach is laid out such that both the expert and the student can easily approach the text and find value in it. In what follows I offer a brief overview of each chapter with three constructive criticisms along the way.

Chapter One contains Wessling's methodological commitments, which include that the biblical text is a norm with which his arguments must coincide, and that reflection upon ideal human love can "significantly inform how we ought to conceive of" divine love (9). By the first, Wessling means that the theologian must take seriously the "concept of God that is given to her, at least in its broad contours, by Scripture. . ." (10). This is somewhat ambiguous, though it amounts to a bit of exegesis in each chapter. The bulk of Chapter One defends the second assumption. While not a full-fledged defense of perfect being theology (PBT), Wessling defends two assumptions which undergird PBT: the similarity thesis and the methodological thesis. According to the similarity thesis, "ideal human love is pertinently similar to God's love" (11). By ideal human love, Wessling means "how humans ideally should love, or how the best of a certain kind of love ideally should be expressed by humans" (11).

Where the similarity thesis addresses an actual similarity, the methodological thesis derives epistemic justification from this similarity. According to the methodological thesis, "the theologian is justified in adopting the practice of drawing conclusions about God's love by examining ideal human love" (11). For example, if A and B are similar, and one has epistemic access and insight into A, then the individual can most likely use the insight into A to discover more about B. Of course, since we are dealing with analogical reasoning, there is no entailment that B is like A (20).



Chapter Two develops the value account of love. Love “is that which responds to the perception of a person’s intrinsic goodness by valuing. . . the existence and flourishing of that individual as well as union with her” (40). Wessling argues that love involves dignity, which means the individual person has irreplaceable value. An individual ought to treat someone who has dignity with respect, that is, to restrain one’s self-interested intents with regards to another person. But love further involves being open to caring about the individual we love, or “emotionally disarmed” (46). Among other things, Wessling discusses how perception involves being open to being affected and how desire differs from value. He elaborates on the three necessary parts to love: valuing the beloved’s existence, valuing her flourishing, and valuing union with her. In terms of existence, one can merely be delighted by and value the existence of the beloved. In terms of flourishing, one must value the good of the beloved. Wessling simply assumes that there is an objective criterion for the good, and further, that in a significant sense, God is the *summum bonum* for individuals. Regarding union, he maintains the union thesis (UT):

X values union with Y only if X values (i) mentally attending to Y, (ii) intimately knowing Y, and (iii) Y’s loving X (58).

The upshot is that when an individual genuinely loves the beloved, she values the beloved’s existence, values the beloved’s flourishing, and values union with the beloved. Wessling unpacks the UT in conversation with Eleonore Stump’s account of what it means to mentally attend to and know an individual. He offers several qualifications to his account as he concludes this chapter, most notably that God loving and valuing union with human beings is not merely eschatological; rather, an individual may experience God’s loving presence through the medium of Scripture, His presence through icons, and or even powerful individual experiences (70-71).

A part of the model’s justification and motivation is that it is supposed to cohere with our “deepest intuitions and ideals about love” (42). While Wessling’s intuitions are that love is benevolent and desires union, he admits that it is not the only plausible model (43). In other words, he admits these intuitions might be wrong. This, I take it, is the consequence of the practitioner needing to consult her intuitions about ideal human love. It is therefore important to regard this as a model, not a decisive argument.

Chapter Three addresses two major views of why God creates: amorism and glorificationism. Wessling argues that these views are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. He distinguishes pure and impure glorificationism (PG and IG). According to PG, every divine action, whether indirectly or directly, always aims at the purpose of self-glorification. IG, in contrast, holds there to be some subsidiary divine actions which are not aimed at God’s self-glorification. In this view, self-glorification can be a secondary, and not a primary, aim. Even so, all other aims and actions still must coincide with the primary aim of self-glorification. Just as the

director of a movie can pepper the movie with subsidiary jokes which do not motivate the plot, so too can God act and allow things to happen which may not promote His glory. Yet the main events—meaning, “when it counts” (e.g., creation, atonement, salvation, redemption)—must motivate and direct the plot (79–80). Amorism, in contrast, maintains that God creates and acts for the primary purpose of expressing his love to creation—God “creates humans for the ultimate purpose of relating to them in love” (82).

Pure glorificationism entails that God only ever acts for his own glory. Impure glorificationism means that God primarily acts for his glory during the major plot points, as it were, and can act for other aims at other times so long as they coincide with the primary aim. As Wessling argues, neither of these positions allow for divine love to be for the sake of the individual, something established in Chapter Two. This conclusion is obvious for PG, though less obvious for IG. As Wessling stresses, IG means God does not act primarily for the sake of the individual “when it counts.” Thus, the value account of love provides a main criticism of glorificationism.

This brings me to my first constructive point. The reader will note that, on the given construal of IG and PG, IG is still compossible with divine love; they are not mutually exclusive, other than “when it counts” (a point merely stipulated). The reader will also note that the setup of IG, PG, and amorism tenuously assumes an individual may only have one primary reason for acting. Yet it is easy to conceive that an individual may have more than one reason for acting, each which may be sufficient (or further, that aims could have preconditions to meet or restraints to respect). Why could not one construe God’s aim to love humanity as a precondition to glorify Himself? A thicker account of motivation and reasons would augment this discussion.

Chapter Four argues for divine passibility: “Suffering-compassion is a way in which God identifies with His creatures deeply, a manner of identification that is valuable in itself, notwithstanding the negativity of the suffering involved” (115). Wessling argues that God expresses the highest possible form of love and thus the most valuable form of love (121); moreover, affective, suffering love is so highly valuable that it is worthwhile to predicate of God (122). The first argument is grounded in God’s perfection and maximal exemplification of whatever attributes he has. Because God loves, God exhibits the most valuable form of love. Wessling’s second argument could be construed in two ways: whatever is so highly valuable ought to be predicated of God, or (to put it without the obligation), to ascribe something which is highly valuable to God does not contravene God’s attribute as the most valuable form of that attribute. While the first assumption is more of a given, either construal of the second assumption relies heavily upon one’s intuitions about ideal human traits, in this case, love.

By analogy, Wessling argues that it is intuitively more plausible that the person who shows suffering-empathy better demonstrates ideal human

love. If this is the case, then ideal human love is compossible with suffering compassion and indeed appears to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable when “not in relation to another object or state of affairs” (117). And if it is the case that passible suffering love is intrinsically valuable, then one has reason to think that God experiences this. One of the most interesting points from this chapter, which I highly recommend, is Wessling’s discussion of how a complex whole (e.g., suffering-love) can be intrinsically valuable while being constituted by what may be an intrinsic evil (e.g., suffering) (131–134).

In sum, Wessling contends that if God must exhibit the highest form of intrinsically valuable love, and this love is suffering love (as witnessed in ideal human love), then God must exhibit suffering love. This brings me to my second constructive point. Wessling’s contention, thus construed, has an unwelcome consequence: God’s love is lacking without being a suffering love. And God on his own does not suffer. So, it also follows from this that God needs creation to have a suffering love, and that God’s love was lacking prior to creation.

Having more thoroughly addressed Chapters Three and Four, allow me to move more quickly through the remaining chapters. Chapter Five addresses the scope of God’s love. Wessling argues that, if God is maximally loving, one has reason to think “the scope of God’s supreme love is universal, in that God values and seeks the salvation of all humans. . . as much as he properly can” (147). To reach this conclusion, he reasons that God maximally loves all individuals who are appropriate candidates of his love, and human beings are the appropriate candidates for his love.

Chapter Six addresses the balance of love and punishment. Classically, there are two models: the divergent and the unitary account. The former holds that love and punishment attain different, exclusive ends. The latter holds that loves and punishment attain the same ends by different means. This chapter aims to provide a communicative model of divine love and punishment that is a unitary account. On the communicative model, “God’s punishment aims to communicate to offenders the censure they deserve, with the purpose of trying to persuade these individuals to start down the path of spiritual transformation” (185). Every divergent model must include severe retribution, meaning, retribution that excludes the possibility of future flourishing. On the communicative model, retribution communicates the nature of the wrongdoing to the sinner (or even Satan) so that the persons at fault could have the chance of “authentic repentance” and be restored to God (210, 212). Because Wessling’s model of communicative punishment excludes severe retribution, Satan (and presumably demons) could repent (210). Along the same lines, Wessling concedes that Hell may eventually depopulate, for those in Hell have the same “authentic opportunity” to repent as those on earth. Nonetheless, this does not entail universalism because hell can still in principle remain populated (217–18). Much of this chapter’s argument, Wessling acknowledges, is grounded in the conclusions from Ch. 3.

Chapter Seven develops a doctrine of deification in conversation with the atonement, the Spirit's indwelling, and God's triune life. Deification is roughly the process wherein humans come to resemble God's moral goodness and participate in the divine life (219). Atonement operates in the background as a necessary condition for deification and an example of love to motivate human deification. This relies upon William Alston's model of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Eastern Orthodox distinction of energies and essence. I will leave the reader to discern the merit of this discussion of essences, energies, and how the Spirit transforms a person. Suffice to say, sanctification and thus deification occur the more an individual takes on the divine consciousness as her own. Crucially, when Christ is incarnate, the Spirit shares in the divine mind of Christ. This way, the Spirit gains an "internal, first-person perspective. . . of perfect human life" (236). On this score, the life *and* atoning work of Christ ground and inspire the individual to cultivate the virtues of faith, hope and love.

In summarizing this work, I have pointed out some complications with the arguments in Chapters Three and Four. I shall close with a third and final comment. For being a systematic treatment of divine love, the underlying doctrine of God is unclear. It appears that the similarity thesis subscribes Wessling to a type of theistic personalism, where God is a person like human persons, though He is not embodied and exhibits personhood on a maximally perfect scale. It comes as no surprise that Wessling's arguments are incompatible with classical theism, as he himself admits. Chapter Four argues against impassibility and, thus, against immutability and eternity, for God's ability to change requires a duration of time; chapter seven tentatively trades divine simplicity for the essence-energies distinction. Though this is no surprise, Wessling must address whether theistic personalism is necessary to get the similarity thesis off the ground—otherwise, how is it that God is relevantly similar to humans? Additionally, it is unclear whether the similarity thesis squares with the concession that divine transcendence is problematic for our understanding of God. Wessling writes, "Even if it is possible for God to share certain aspects of the divine life with humans (e.g., certain beliefs), it is doubtful that the transcendent God can share His values, drives, and emotions with humans in a way that can be comprehended and enjoyed by them" (235). Even a moderate version of divine transcendence, he writes, renders it problematic "that God's love is the kind of thing that can be shared with humans in a manner that would be appreciated and made sense of by them" (223). It would strengthen the book to tease out how (if at all) this view of divine transcendence is compatible with the similarity thesis, what grounds the similarity thesis, and whether theistic personalism can ground it.

Notwithstanding these developments, the strengths of this book are its novel approach, presentation, and scope. On these grounds, *Divine Love* offers a commendable contribution to analytic theology and is sure to stimulate lively discussion.