Is Metaphysics Viable in a Secular Age?

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Achilles is not quite invulnerable; the sacred waters did not wash the heel by which Thetis held him. Siegfried, in the Nibelungen, is not quite immortal, for a leaf fell on his back whilst he was bathing in the dragon's blood, and that spot which it covered is mortal. There is a crack in everything God has made.

<div align="right">-Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation"</div>

This thesis records a twofold effort to argue, first, for the possibility of metaphysics after the so-called "overcoming" of metaphysics and, second, to show how in the work of William Desmond we find a viable form of metaphysics. First, though, a bit of an introduction to the central figure. Born in Cork, Ireland, in 1951, William Desmond describes himself as having grown up in the Middle Ages, "an Irish Catholic, fostered on a sense of the mystery of God and God's ways, on a sympathy for the rejected and the outside whom we cannot judge not to be God's favored, fostered, too, on an esteem that God's creation, nature, was good."[1] At an early age Desmond fell in love with poetry, especially Wordsworth, and later took a great interest in the works of Shakespeare. After a year spent in the Dominican novitiate, he enrolled at University College Cork where he eventually focused his studies on English and Philosophy. After earning an MA in philosophy, with a focus on Collingwood's aesthetics, he moved to America where he earned a PhD in philosophy at Penn State University. After completing his PhD, Desmond taught at St Bonaventure for one year (1978-79) before returning to Ireland with the intention of making his home there. This was not to be: three years later, he returned to America to teach at Loyola University in Baltimore (1982-94). In 1994, he again crossed the Atlantic to take a position at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, where he taught until retiring in 2017.

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[1] William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 2.

Befitting one fêted as "Ireland's most distinguished living philosopher,"[2] Desmond's work engages an array of thinkers – Heraclitus to Hegel, Plato to Nietzsche – and topics ranging from metaphysics to ethics to aesthetics to religion. His interlocutors include Richard Kearney, Cyril O'Regan, John Caputo, and a growing body of students who write appreciatively of his wisdom and generosity. Not least among these is Christopher Ben Simpson whose work has gone a long way in making Desmond's thought more widely known.[3] Finally, two of his monographs have been the focus of special issues of journals[4] and two volumes of essays inspired by his thought are now available.[5]

In the introduction to *Between System and Poetics*, Anthony Kelly describes Desmond's ambition: "Desmond sees it as his task to find an adequate place for genuine alterity, the other which is nevertheless not alien to revitalize the transcendent and to show its ineluctability for the ontological constitution of the human and of any understanding of the human which can lay claim to adequacy."[6] A daunting task, to be sure, seeing as Desmond's philosophy is incorrigibly metaphysical in character and, he admits, "metaphysics is a word not in good odor in some quarters today."[7] Yet, Richard Kearney observes, Desmond has always had a skeptical eye for

> the fast and quick, for cheap notions of the destruction of metaphysics when not properly understood or when used as an excuse to ignore the rich complexity of the Western philosophy of Being, as if one could just sweep it aside and begin all over again from scratch, from the ground zero of our transcendental egos.[8]

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[2] Thomas Kelly, "Introduction" to *Between System and Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.
[3] Christopher Ben Simpson, Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern (Bloomington: IUP, 2009); The William *Desmond Reader* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012)
[4] Ethics and the Between was the focus of Ethical Perspectives 8 (2001) 4, 231-331. God and the Between was addressed in *Louvain Studies* 36 (2012) 2-3, 219—317.
[5] In addition to *Between System and Poetics* there is *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology* eds., Christopher Ben Simpson and Brendan Thomas Sammon (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2017).
[6] Kelly, "Introduction," 3.
[7] William Desmond, "The Porosity of Being," in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, 287.
[8] Richard Kearney, "Two Thinks at a Distance," in *The William Desmond Reader* ed. Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 237.

Kearney aptly likens Desmond to the solitary marathoner, a thinker in for the long haul. This seems apt, given the request Desmond makes of would-be readers:

> I do not ask for uncritical readers, but I do ask for disciplined readers – reader who have studied hard and long, who can take their time to think; readers who have not shunned solitude; readers suspicious of themselves before being suspicious of others; readers patient when demands are made on them; readers themselves adventurers; readers who ask for more than the rhetorics fashionable in academic philosophy, and who hate the substitution of "relevant" ideology for the seriousness of truth…[9]

Desmond's philosophy, as will become apparent, offers no shortcuts and cannot be traversed quickly. A decision to take up his work requires one investing one's whole self and allowing oneself to be formed as one reads. This is philosophy as *askesis* or an exercise aimed not at a new thought but at cultivating a renewed mode of mindfulness attentive to the disclosures of the divine in in the everyday.

Those familiar with the mood of contemporary philosophy, however, may feel reluctant to accept this invitation. Per his olfactory allusion, Desmond admits:

> I know that metaphysics is a word not in good odor in some quarters today, whether among some technical virtuosi of the analytical persuasion, or among the hermeneutical mandarins of the Continental persuasion, to say nothing of the dithyrambic textualists among the deconstructionists.[10]

An "unrepentant" metaphysician, Desmond still insists we "need to ask the question of being; we need to ask the question of human being; we need to ask the question of the being of God."[11] One wonders: is this the wish of a philosopher too stubborn to accept metaphysics' overcoming? Clearly, Desmond has not read John Manoussakis's essay which begins, "William Desmond is arguably in our times the last metaphysician."[12]

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[9] William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), xvi.
[10] William Desmond, "The Porosity of Being," 287.
[11] Ibid.
[12] John Manoussakis, "The Silences of the Between," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology* 269.

The "last metaphysician"? Mayhap he is. Or mayhap not: Desmond, in my estimation, is a pioneer who has launched an entirely new form of metaphysical reflection. Before I can make this case, however, a certain amount of terrain surveying must be done. To argue *for* the viability of Desmond's approach to metaphysics, I need first to canvas the various critiques *of* metaphysics as found in the works of Martin Heidegger, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal. Of course, other figures could and should have been engaged: Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, and Kevin Hector all have interesting things to say about metaphysics and its purported overcoming. Indeed, each of the authors I selected could be treated singly and at great length. My choices owe as much to my competence (meager as this may be) as to my biography: I spend more time reading these figures than I have others and, in the case of Westphal and Kearney, I have had the privilege of being taught by them.

In this chapter, I want to take seriously the critique of metaphysics made by Heidegger, Caputo, Kearney, and Westphal. My tactic may appear odd. For is not my goal to "take down" any thinker or to show why his critique wrongheaded. I am not looking to incapacitate the foes of metaphysics! On the contrary, I want to take seriously what they say in order to generate a series of "rules" or "commandments" a metaphysics worthy of theological engagement must obey. My goal is to consider how each critic brings to light inconsistencies, contradictions, and missteps that have hampered earlier attempts at metaphysics. By taking these critiques to heart, I hope to show how critique can work to capacitate a viable form of metaphysics. Each of our critics is right to level a "*justified refusal* of what is not to be affirmed," but while each "no" forecloses an earlier effort at metaphysics, this does not necessarily mean the "no" forecloses all future efforts. Indeed, the salutary "no" of skepticism, as William Desmond writes,

grows out of the presentiment that there is a norm or ideal that is short-changed or betrayed…the "no" of genuine skepticism is the overt expression of something more deeply recessed – something not just a matter of negation.[13]

A capacitating approach permits us to see how critique proves error-reducing. The "no" of critique affirms by recognizing absence and each critic identifies "something that is missing" in earlier practices of metaphysics. Indeed, this is a crucial task of metaphysics: as we will see, the absence metaxology remains mindful of is not an empty *nihil* but, rather, what Desmond calls a "fecund void."[14] Thinking along with these critics leads me to propose five "commandments" to be obeyed by any metaphysics wishing to be considered a resource for theological reflection.

In Chapter Two, I provide an introduction to Desmond's systematic metaphysics. I stress *systematic* because he maintains, "one can reflect systematically without necessarily claiming possession of the system in the closed and totalizing sense."[15] Metaphysics needs to think *with* categories but its task cannot be delimited *by* its categories; metaphysicians must remain always "mindful of what exceeds system."[16] Hewing closely to Christopher Ben Simpson's schema, I orient the reader to Desmond's *metaxological* metaphysics and the key concepts essential for understanding his project. I try throughout to draw attention to points of overlap between Desmond's project and Charles Taylor's and I show how Desmond's work can serve to enrich Taylor's account of our secular age.

I conclude the second chapter by considering *how* Desmond's philosophy functions to inculcate a style of metaxological mindfulness. Metaphysics does not offer, at least as Desmond practices, a disengaged description of being. We are implicated in the happening of being and metaphysics reflects our effort to account for what it means "to be" caught up in the midst of

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[13] William Desmond, The Intimate Strangeness of Being, 101.
[14] Desmond, The Intimate Universal, 147.
[15] Kelly, Between System and Poetics, 20.
[16] Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 10.

things. Desmond, like Taylor, tries to tell us *our* story in a way that gives us to perceive what it means "to be" anew. Here we see how Desmond complements and deepens Taylor's map by bringing to the surface otherwise recessed resources. Metaxology, we may come to appreciate, is not simply a method of thinking philosophically; it offers itself as a "practice of a way of life."[17]

I conclude this thesis with three summative points. First, I re-affirm the viability of Desmond's metaxological metaphysics by showing how augments the map Taylor draws of our secular age. Second, and more playfully, I offer a metaxological reading of the line, "there is a crack in everything God has made." So read, the "crack" is no tragic flaw but a graced opening exposing "the deepest ontological intimacy of our being."[18] Finally, I lead us into a pub where I dub Desmond the metaphysician of the "crack" and ask how his understanding of metaphysics makes it possible to read metaxology as a form of spiritual exercise.

1.0   Contesting Metaphysics: Between Knockers and Boosters

It is common coin among philosophers and theologians that metaphysics and ontotheology are synonymous. Surely Iain Thomson is not alone in believing that "Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the metaphysical tradition leads him to the view that *all Western metaphysical systems* make foundational claims best understood as 'ontotheological'." Yet, even in Heidegger's own writings,[19] the equation of metaphysics and ontotheology demands nuance. John Betz, following Cyril O'Regan, asks whether Heidegger has "forgotten or misremembered something?"[20] Might it be possible that his description of metaphysics as ontotheology too-

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[17] Ibid., 184.
[18] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 13.
[19] Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics" in *Identity and Difference* trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969).
[20] John Betz, "Overcoming the Forgetfulness of Metaphysics," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 67.

cavalierly lumps together all practices of metaphysics, from Plato to Aquinas to Hegel to Desmond? Betz fears this to be the case: "Unfortunately, under Heidegger's solvent influence, all these colors bleed into one."[21] So while it is right for Heidegger, Caputo, Kearney, and Westphal to reject ontotheology, this rejection may not necessarily require a wholesale jettisoning of metaphysics. On the contrary, a consideration of each of their positions may actually exhibit how these thinkers offer a range of stances. Rather than a binary either/or, metaphysics can admit a range of knockers, boosters, and those in-between.

1.1   Martin Heidegger

We get to the heart of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as "ontotheology" with his question, "How does the deity enter into philosophy?"[22] He answers:

> assuming that philosophy, as thinking, is the free and spontaneous self-   involvement with beings as such, then the deity can come into philosophy only   insofar *as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and   determines that and how the deity enters into it.*[23]

For Heidegger, the god of ontotheology does not irrupt freely into the human order: this is not the theophanic deity of the Burning Bush or Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration. The god of metaphysics, rather, has been dragooned into philosophy and put at its service. Philosophy, as it were, writes the job description and employs god in a narrowly circumscribed position. This is a longstanding problem because Western metaphysics

> since its beginning with the Greeks has eminently been both ontology and theology, still without being tied to these rubrics. For this reason my inaugural lecture *What is Metaphysics?* (1929) defines metaphysics as the question about beings as such *and* as a whole. The wholeness of this whole is the unity of all beings that unifies as the generative ground.[24]

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 55.
[23] Ibid., 56. Emphasis added.
[24] Ibid., 54.

In the final sentence, we can recognize Aristotelian and Hegelian metaphysics as prime culprits of "ontotheology" as their philosophy aims at giving an account, a *logos*, of beings that includes *theos* as subtending the whole. The god comes into metaphysics, not as the wholly other, but to serve as the divine glue binding all beings (*ontos*) together.

The god of metaphysics, then, proves a functional god who acts as the "*causa prima* that corresponds to the reason-giving path back to the *ultima ratio*, the final accounting."[25] This god is implicated within creation and placed at its service. Evoking Pascal's critique of the god of the philosophers, Heidegger claims *causa sui* is

> the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.[26]

It would be better, as he sees it, to abandon "god as *causa sui*" and to step back out of metaphysics where a "god-less thinking" may prove to be more open to the advent of the true God "than onto-theo-logic would like to admit."[27] One may be better equipped to think the Holy Other by resisting efforts to reduce the Divine to the immanent realm.

What Heidegger rejects, D.C. Schindler observes, is the "absorption of theology into philosophy."[28] Yet, as Merold Westphal notes, this critique does not hit *all* metaphysicians. "It is not always sufficiently noticed that his paradigms are Aristotle and Hegel and that the target of his analysis of 'the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics' is a tradition that stretches from Anaximander to Nietzsche, which isn't quite the same as the tradition that stretches from Augustine to Kierkegaard."[29] Heidegger's atheism is less an outright *denial* of God *à la*

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[25] Ibid., 60.
[26] Ibid., 72.
[27] Ibid.
[28] D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 237.
[29] Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham Press, 2001), 257.

Nietzsche than a methodological decision to dislodge the god co-opted by a certain strand of metaphysics. In this, Heidegger enacts a repetition of Kant's "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."[30]

Accordingly, claims that Heidegger "overcomes" metaphysics need to be finessed. Certainly, he overcomes a *type* of metaphysics, one that incorporates god into its system as an explanatory cause, a "cog" in the machine. Such metaphysics, as ontotheology, obviates the distinction between Being and beings; it inscribes god and beings within the same framework and tasks god with making "the whole of reality intelligible or transparent to human understanding."[31] Evacuated from this picture is any sense of mystery because "in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God, for representational thinking, can lose all that is exalted and holy, can sink to the level of a cause, of *causa efficiens*."[32] Heidegger's justified refusal is directed toward a metaphysics that denudes being of wonder and sacrality.

Westphal succinctly and helpfully summarizes Heidegger's critique:

1. Onto-theology is calculative thinking
2. Onto-theology is representational thinking
3. Onto-theology is bad theology[33]

These share a common root: a "rationalist demand for total intelligibility."[34] Onto-theo-logy turns the biblical God into a god, a being among beings, invoked only to hold the system together and to "make sense" of the whole. But it would be too hasty to interpret Heidegger's advocacy for a god-less thinking as a summons to, or warrant for, outright atheism. Even if he demonstrates

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[30] Merold Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," *Modern Theology* 23:2 (April 2007), 263.

[31] Ibid., 262.

[32] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings* ed., David Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 331.

[33] Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* (Bloomington: IUP, 2004), 19.

[34] Ibid.

little personal interest in theology, his "overcoming" of metaphysics as ontotheology can be read as a salutary effort that chastens the pretense of human reason in its effort to corral the divine.

Let me conclude by articulating a first "Commandment" for a theological engagement with metaphysics. Inspired by Heidegger: *Thou Shalt Not Index the Divine to Human Reason*. Even if often interpreted as a hostile "knocker," a nuanced reading of Heidegger recognizes that his critique does not apply universally to metaphysics. His "no" to ontotheology can be read as pointing to something recessed, something in need of being drawn out by an adequate metaphysics. A metaphysics capable of interacting with theology (1) cannot set *a priori* terms for God's arrival and (2) cannot invoke god to "make sense" of the whole or to render the whole transparent to human reason.

1.2   John Caputo

Christopher Ben Simpson summarizes Caputo's "problem" with metaphysics as follows: "Metaphysics is not faithful to life insofar as it is an abstract system that privileges static unity in order to provide a stable foundation for life."[35] It is *not faithful to life* and *abstract* because it offers "eloquent assurances about Being and presence even as factical existence was being tossed about by *physis* and *kinesis*."[36] Elsewhere, Caputo sharpens this criticism, decrying metaphysics for providing a disengaged "account of what is called 'mind-independent being', that amounts to an account of the way things are *when we are not there*."[37] If metaphysics wants to study the "really real," then "physics is all the metaphysics we're ever going to get."[38] His advice to an aspiring metaphysician stings: "brush up on your 'superstring field theory' or whatever will

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[35] Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 7.
[36] John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.
[37] John Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 113.
[38] Ibid., 191.

supersede superstrings next week."[39] Metaphysics has been supplanted by physics: better, then, to bone up on math than to waste oneself speculating on being and substance.

Metaphysics, he continues, privileges a *static unity* that claims to provide a *stable foundation for life*. For him, neither religion nor metaphysics can lay claim to a perspicuous viewpoint or unassailable foundation on which to stand. Metaphysics, like religion, "is a human practice…always deconstructible in the light of the love of God, which is not deconstructible."[40] Metaphysics, in other words, purports to provide the "system" in which all things fit and in which the flux is controlled. But in its attempt to measure and manage the vicissitudes of daily life, metaphysics betrays by removing us from the flux.[41]

Finally, lest any doubts linger about Caputo's feelings, he writes with brio

I do not embrace a naturalist metaphysics, no more than I embrace a supernaturalist metaphysics. I resist every embrace of metaphysics. When it comes to embraces, I vastly prefer flesh and blood (which is my materialism).[42]

Having sworn off metaphysics, Caputo offers instead his "radical hermeneutics." This approach, he avers, stays with the difficulty of life, avoids the "easy assurances of metaphysics," and "pushes itself to the brink and writes philosophy from the edge."[43]

The hot vehemence Caputo directs against metaphysics leads him to proffer what he calls a "cold hermeneutics" that does not believe in

"Truth" – it renounces all such capitalization – something hidden by and stored up in a tradition which is groaning to deliver it to us. It has lost its innocence about that and is tossed about by the flux, by the play, by the slippage. It understands that meaning is an effect…Just when the metaphysics of presence is about to convince us that being clings to being, that truth is a well-rounded whole, a hermeneutical or eschatological circle, cold hermeneutics opens up an abyss.[44]

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[39] Ibid., 192.
[40] John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 113.
[41] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.
[42] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 191.
[43] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 3.
[44] Ibid., 189.

Caputo desires to remain faithful to the messiness of the quotidian, to remain in the flux rather than seeking a back door out of it. There is, moreover, a Heideggerian trace in Caputo's denial of a "Truth" that can be systematized or controlled. There exists no privileged access to, or possession of, the Truth; one cannot claim any Archimedean point that affords an uninhibited or disengaged view.

We can see in Caputo, furthermore, a link between his claim that "meaning is an effect" and his understanding of God. "The *meaning* of God is enacted in these multiple movements of love, but these movements are simply too multiple, too polyvalent, too irreducible, too uncontainable to identify, to define, or determine."[45] God is not "the Truth" arrived at through disengaged speculation, nor is God the object of privileged propositions guarded by magisterial authority. God, for Caputo, "is not only a name but an injunction, an invitation, a solicitation, to commend, to let all things be commended, to God."[46] The meaning of "God" is not arrived at through disengaged speculation but through action; it is enacted in "openness to a future that I can neither master nor see coming."[47] True religion comes not from acquiring knowledge or infallible propositions but is lived as a "restlessness with the real that involves risking your neck."[48] God comes to us as a question, not an answer, and we enact religion as our response.

This suggests two further commandments. 2nd Commandment: *Thou Shalt Not Be Faithless to the Flux*. 3rd Commandment: *Thou Shalt Not Produce Counterfeit Gods*.

2nd Commandment: If we hope to allay Caputo's concerns about metaphysics, it seems that it must give a faithful account of the flux of the everyday. This means it must account for

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[45] Caputo, *On Religion*, 140.
[46] Ibid., 141.
[47] Ibid., 139.
[48] Ibid., 114.

concrete lived reality while remaining attentive to the inherent fragility of existence. Within the quotidian, furthermore, there is an ethical summons to fidelity to the Other *beyond* codified obligation. Metaphysics cannot only *not* evade the flux but must also inform an ethic of "risking one's neck" for one's neighbor.

3rd Commandment: if we have any desire to claim to have knowledge of the Absolute, we must foreswear absolute knowledge. We cannot pretend to have privileged access to, or an infallible knowledge of, Truth. Knowledge of God arises indirectly, amidst the flux, as we are moved by metaphors and "thrown above" by hyperboles (*hyper + ballein*) toward an encounter with God. The God of metaphysics cannot be one we craft as an idol; a God worthy of the name is not a god conjured from our own resources. A praiseworthy God arrives unbidden, unexpectedly, and catches us off guard.

1.3   Richard Kearney

At first blush, Richard Kearney might appear more comfortable being grouped among the knockers. He writes, for instance, that

> for too long theology and metaphysics have identified the divine with the most all-powerful of Beings. Sovereign, Self-sufficient substances. Transcendental Forms. First and Final Causes. Immutable essences.[49]

And, with Paul Ricoeur, he observes

> without the encounter of Greek metaphysics with biblical religious thought, philosophers "would have never reached the idea that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God's very essence."…this conjunction of God and Being was to survive for many centuries – from Bonaventure and Aquinas to Gilson and the neo-Scholastics. Thus did the God of Exodus secure ontological tenure in the God of metaphysics.[50]

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[49] Richard Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," in *After God*, ed. John Manoussakis (New York: Fordham, 2006), 11.
[50] Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: IUP, 2001), 24.

Like Heidegger before him, Kearney regards God's cooption into metaphysics as ontotheology's key transgression because of its "tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seinde*) – albeit the highest, first, and most indeterminate of all beings."[51]

When Nietzsche and Freud trumpet God's death, Kearney once again agrees with Ricoeur: the death of god they celebrate is the false god of ontotheology, the god who "who deserves to die."[52] After the atrocities of the *Shoah*

> so dies the omnipotent God of ontotheology understood as Emperor of the World. So also dies the omniscient God of "self-sufficient knowledge" that places the "powerful over the good and law over love and humility that are superior to law." And along with the omnipotent and omniscient God goes the omnipresent God who condones evil as well as good. So dies, in short, the Omni-God of theodicy invoked to justify the worst atrocities as part of some Ultimate Design.[53]

One imagines Kearney presiding at the wake of the "Omni-God," reciting over the casket Etty Hillesum's prayer "You God cannot be God unless we create a dwelling place for you in our hearts."[54] We must abandon as otiose the God of "power and might" and risk an encounter with the *kenotic* God of the Incarnation, the one who divests the divine being of omnipotence. The God who comes *after* the death of the God of metaphysics is not the "Highest Being" but, rather, the one encountered as a "promise, a call, a desire to love and be loved that can not *be* at all unless we allow God to be God."[55]

Thus, amidst the rubble of the collapsed "Grand Metaphysical Systems that construed God in terms of formal universals and abstract essences,"[56] Kearney does not leave us destitute.

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 72-3.
[53] Ibid., 73.
[54] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 53.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday," 4.

In fact, he charts amidst the debris a course directed by what he calls "anatheism" as capable of opening a space

> where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such anatheism is about the *option* of retrieved belief. It operates *before* as well as *after* the division between theism and atheism, and it makes both possible. Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God.[57]

Kearney's anatheism does not rest on metaphysical certainties or syllogisms; it makes, instead, a wager or "existential drama" calling us to discernment and decision.[58] We may return to God; we may not. Anatheism is less a command than a coax to openness "to someone or something that was lost and forgotten by Western metaphysics."[59] We cannot dance before or sing praises to the Omni-God, nor can the God of metaphysics still our restless hearts. Perhaps, though, *just* perhaps the opening of anatheism can lead us to the God who comes after the God of metaphysics, enabling us to hear the call of the God who may be, a God who will and wants be God for us…*if* we allow it.

In place of the "Grand System," Kearney privileges what he calls the "micro-eschatologies" that manifest God in the everyday. For Kearney, the *eschaton* is not a cataclysmic event; it is a "sundering" breaking open and revealing the presence of the divine in the everyday, a "sacramental vision" attuned to immanent transcendence.[60] Through the concept of micro-eschatology, Kearney exhorts us to train our eyes not to far-off horizons but to the quotidian where we encounter the divine in the mundane, hearing the woo of the Holy in "the least ones calling for a cup of cold water, asking to be fed, clothed, cared for, heard, loved."[61] He describes

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[57] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 7.
[58] Richard Kearney, "God After God" in *Reimagining the Sacred,* eds. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (New York: Columbia, 2016), 7.
[59] Ibid., 9.
[60] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 88-99.
[61] Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday," 11.

this as a micro-eschatological "fourth reduction" leading us back into the everyday and thrusting us into "face-to-face encounters of our ordinary universe" where the divine is disclosed in the face of the stranger, where we intuit the presence of the divine amidst St. Teresa's pots and pans.

In his critique of metaphysics as ontotheology, Kearney aligns with Heidegger; in his call for us to remain faithful to the quotidian, he stands with Caputo. On his own, he stands without parallel as an interpreter of texts. Indeed, Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics permits him to dwell amidst varying genres of writing – poetic, philosophical, theological, and literary – and allow their voices to intermingle. He does not merely write *about* texts but philosophizes *through* them in a way that reveals otherwise concealed resources. His hermeneutical phenomenology, moreover, extends beyond texts toward a hermeneutic of lived existence. He offers, for instance, "a number of more personal reflections on the enigma of transfiguration, as it relates to the specifically paschal testimonies of the resurrected Christ."[62] He writes

> The post-paschal stories of the transfiguring *persona* remind us that the Kingdom is given to hapless fishermen and spurned women, to those lost and wandering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do no despair of their lack, to little people "poor in spirit." The narratives of the transfigured-resurrected Christ testify that after the long night of fasting and waiting and darkness and need – afloat on a wilderness of sea – breakfast is always ready. The transfiguring *persona* signals the ultimate solidarity, indeed indissociability, of spirit and flesh.[63]

If the God is to be credible after the *Shoah*, after the death of God, it will be no "Omni-God." The Kingdom's God speaks "in stories and act of love and justice, the giving to the least of creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and act which bear testimony – as transfiguring gestures do – to that God of little things."[64] The micro-eschatological reduction

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[62] Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 49-51.
[63] Ibid., 51.
[64] Ibid.

awakens us to the immanent transcendence of the little things and gives us to behold the world

with eyes open to the everyday epiphanies of the divine.

Hence a 4th Commandment: *Thou Shalt Be Attuned and Attentive to Everyday*

Disclosures. A compliant metaphysics will not impose categories but will empower an

interpretation of the day-to-day attentive to the "small things left behind, unheard and unseen,

discarded and neglected."[65] It calls for hermeneutical metaphysics that does not pine for a

different world, but one that makes it possible for us to live in our world differently, attentive to

"epiphanies of the quotidian" revealing the Divine not in Power and Might but in "mustard

seeds, grains of yeast, tiny pearls, cups of water."[66]

1.4   Merold Westphal

I treat Merold Westphal last not only because he is the most hospitable of our thinkers to

a theological engagement with metaphysics but also, and blessedly, he sets out his own criteria.

But before I enumerate these and try to formulate his commandment, let me position him vis-à-

vis the other thinkers.

Like Heidegger, Caputo, and Kearney, Westphal insists on the need to overcome onto-

theology. And, like Kearney and Caputo, he is committed to a form of hermeneutic

phenomenology. But compare the following with Caputo's take on "the Truth"

> the truth is that there is Truth, but in our finitude and falleness we do not have access to
> it. We'll have to make do with the truths available to us; but that does not mean either
> that we should deny the reality of Truth or that we should abandon the distinction
> between truth and falsity. Moreover, the most we should claim for this claim itself is that
> it is true, that it is the best way for us humans to think about the matter.[67]

Now recall Kearney's refusal of the metaphysical traits ascribed to the "Omni-God":

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[65] Ibid., 13.
[66] Richard Kearney, "Enabling God" in *After God*, 46.
[67] Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham, 2001), 87.

In order to have a biblical, personal, eschatological, and ethical God, the goal Kearney and I share, it is necessary to overcome ontotheology. This does not require that we abandon abstract and impersonal metaphysical categories in our God talk, but only that we put them in their proper, subordinate place.[68]

We must overcome ontotheology, but this overcoming need not require jettisoning all metaphysics. Instead, we need a chastened metaphysics that recognizes (1) the limits of human reason and (2) puts metaphysics at the service of faith.

In a recent article, Westphal engages Kant, Heidegger, and Marion in an effort to understand why "metaphysics is seen as abusing the life of faith by leaving no room for "it."[69] In his treatment of Kant, for instance, he detects an apparent paradox:

We seem to be overcoming metaphysics in order to make room for metaphysics. But there is no contradiction here. The metaphysics to be overcome is not the same as the metaphysics for which room is made. The one is an enemy of faith, the other is an essential component thereof.[70]

Kant, on Westphal's reading, resists the encroachment of any dogmatic metaphysics that (1) asserts human reason as the "highest tribunal by which all questions of right (*quid juris*) regarding our God talk are to be settled" and (2) reshapes God to "fit the Procrustean bed by which it defines human rationality."[71] But, it should be noted, neither this critique, nor those of Heidegger or Marion, deal the death stroke to metaphysics. In fact, and quite to the contrary, Westphal reads these critiques as having the potential to capacitate a metaphysics that can contribute to and serve the life of faith.

The capacitating power of critique becomes most apparent in the essay's conclusion. Westphal reminds his reader that, up until this point, he has been "focused on overcoming

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[68] Merold Westphal, "Hermeneutics and the God of Promise" in *After God*, 85.
[69] Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 253.
[70] Ibid., 259.
[71] Ibid.

metaphysics, on its danger to the life of faith, its role as abuser of biblical faith."[72] And by "overcoming metaphysics" he means the metaphysics that would fall prey to the charge of ontotheology. So far, nothing new. Then he writes

> but I have said only three things, and ever so briefly, about the use of metaphysics for the life of faith: first, that faith and the theology that accompanies it *presuppose and include metaphysical beliefs*; second, that this *metaphysics can be and must be different* from the metaphysics that needs to be overcome… third, that this metaphysics will need to be *a humble metaphysics,* acknowledging that it rests on faith and not pretending to be the Voice of Pure Reason.[73]

In other words: (1) some type of metaphysics is inescapable; (2) ontotheology will not do; (3) the metaphysics needed to serve faith emerges from within faith and cannot proceed as a form of disengaged inquiry. Finally, he writes, "the metaphysics that properly belongs to faith, not as its ground but as its cognitive content, must be a *pragmatic metaphysics*." Such a pragmatic metaphysics would "arise out of the practice of faith" and inform "private prayer, character formation, public worship, and service to others." It would be a practice "embedded in a spirituality that is simultaneously an inward journey, and upward journey, and an outward journey. It is not a preamble to faith but a reflection that arises out of faith and seeks to serve the life of faith."[74]

Finally, a 5th Commandment: *Be Still and Know: Metaphysics is a Vocation*. A theologically viable metaphysics will recognize that metaphysics finds its origin as a response to something other to it. Rather than a neutral practice of abstract reflection, metaphysics arises because of a presentiment that its searching is a consequence of having first been sought and called by something anterior to it. The overcoming of metaphysics as ontotheology may, should we allow Westphal to play the role of Moses, delivers us from the land of captivity and frees us

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[72] Ibid., 272.
[73] Ibid. Emphasis added.
[74] Ibid.

to take faltering steps out into the Promised Land led by the voice of the One who bids us to come. Metaphysics is not a map we draw for ourselves but, rather, the itinerary along which we are drawn.

1.5   Capacitating Metaphysics?

Let me now draw together the "Five Commandments" and indicate how I mean to employ them in the next section. Based on the aforementioned critiques, any theologian who wishes to engage in metaphysics would be wise to obey the following precepts:

1. *Thou Shalt Not Index the Divine to Human Reason* (Heidegger)
2. *Thou Shalt Not Be Faithless to the Flux* (Caputo)
3. *Thou Shalt Not Produce Counterfeit Gods* (Caputo)
4. *Thou Shalt Be Attuned and Attentive to Everyday Disclosures* (Kearney)
5. *Be Still and Know: Metaphysics is a Vocation* (Westphal)

Each critic makes, as Desmond might note, a "justified refusal" of previous overreaches by metaphysical systems. Yet each "no" need not be read as an embargo on all future endeavors to think in a metaphysical key. To the contrary, each offers a corrective negation, a "no" affirming an absence, indicating something recessed and in need of being surfaced. These are salutary negations that can prove to be capacitating: by pointing out where prior attempts have proved fruitless or problematic, each "no" closes off errant pathways and makes it possible for non-errant efforts to be launched. My task in the next, and rather long, section will be to introduce readers to Desmond's metaxological metaphysics and to show not only how metaxology evades the criticisms leveled at earlier practices of metaphysics but also, and more importantly, provides a viable resource to theologians who wish to think in a metaphysical register.

2.0 Speaking of Metaphysics William Desmond's Philosophy

I entitle this section "speaking of metaphysics" because it introduces to the categories and vocabulary Desmond uses throughout his philosophy. While there is truth in Catherine Pickstock's claim that "Desmond is astonishingly direct and astonishingly clear,"[75] Simpson's observation is equally apt: "Desmond's work can be complex, dense, meditative, and full of neologisms."[76] Thus I begin by considering the nature and task of Desmond's metaphysics. I then take up key categories: "ethos," the "fourfold way," and his tripartite understanding of transcendence. These furnish our "grammar" for speaking metaphysically, one we will continue to build upon and enrich throughout this project.

2.1 Metaxological Metaphysics Defined

Desmond's *Being and Between* opens with the primordial metaphysical question: What is being? What does it mean to be?[77] This is not the question of what it means to be *this* or *that* but what it means *to be* at all. A seemingly simple question becomes, upon reflection, maddeningly complex; for, as Aristotle noted, "there are many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be'" (*to on legetai pollachōs*).[78] Aristotle and Aquinas, for instance, recognized three ways that being can be "said": the univocal, the equivocal, and the analogical, none of which is capable of giving an exhaustive account of being's meaning. They understood that metaphysics "puts a strain on language."[79] This is, though, a necessary and inescapable strain: we cannot but take up the question of being because "in all our thinking, and living, certain fundamental senses of being

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[75] Catherine Pickstock, "What Shines Between: The *Metaxu* of Light" in *Between System and Poetics*, 107.
[76] Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 5.
[77] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 3.
[78] Ibid., 16.
[79] Ibid., 45.

are already at work, and continue to be at work, even when we claim to be 'postmetaphysical'."[80]

Or, per Westphal, some engagement in metaphysical reflection is unavoidable.

If Desmond and Westphal are correct, if some type of metaphysics is necessary, we must ask: which one? If a theologian wants to make friends with a metaphysician, to whom should she turn? There is a range of choices, ranging from Aristotle to Aquinas to Hegel to Badiou. Some of them fall afoul of the "Five Commandments" enumerated above: Aristotle and Hegel were, for Heidegger, culprits of ontotheology while others, like Badiou, manifest little interest in the God question. In my estimation, Desmond is a theologian-friendly metaphysician who harbors no aspiration to constructing a grand "system" in which to schematize or explain the whole of being. His task, rather, is "to revitalize the transcendent and to show its ineluctability for the ontological constitution of the human"[81] by awakening his readers to the intimate strangeness of being.

For Desmond, metaphysics is not an architectonic system but "a form of reflective thinking under fidelity to the truth of what is thus at play."[82] The final clause is key: "at play" indicates that his philosophy arises in the midst of, and as a reflection upon, finding oneself "in the midst of beings."[83] Instead of a disengaged or abstract "answer" to the question of being, Desmond's metaphysics is better thought as a form of mindfulness, a method of reflection leading us "along the road" as we plumb the question of being. By remaining faithful to what is "at play," his philosophy originates in, and stays faithful to, everyday flux. This becomes clear if, recalling the dual meaning *meta* ("in the midst" and "beyond"), we follow his suggestion that

> this double sense of "meta" can be taken to correspond to the difference of *ontology* and *metaphysics*. Ontology (as a *logos* of *to on*) can be taken as an exploration of given being as immanent; metaphysics can be seen as opening a self-surpassing movement of thought

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[80] William Desmond, "Wording the Between" in *The William Desmond Reader*, ed. Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 195.
[81] Kelly, "Introduction," 3.
[82] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, xvii.
[83] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 5.

that points us to the porous boundary between immanence and what cannot be determined entirely in immanent terms.[84]

The question of being that arises from dwelling amidst beings (ontology) can spur us into a mindfulness of what is in excess of, or beyond, beings (metaphysics). Rather than a denial of the quotidian, metaphysics begins amidst the flux and guides us to reflect upon the fact that "all beings, events, processes are, or happen to be. That they are *at all* is something that exceeds what they are."[85] Mindful attention to the ordinary proves revelatory of how extraordinary being is.

We are in need of this renewed mindfulness because – here Desmond and Taylor align – we have lost our sense of wonder at the sheer existence of being. One of the symptoms of the "eclipse of the transcendent" in modernity is an "epistemic irritability with the equivocity of being"[86] that fuels a rage for imposing order:

> One thinks of the modern mathematization of nature and the hope of empowering technological interventions. One thinks of how in the scientific objectification of nature, externality is stripped of all its qualitative textures, these being consigned to mere secondary qualities…There is an evaporation of the good as defining the teleology of being. The good of the whole is no longer there, and in its place we find ontologically devalued thereness.[87]

Like Charles Taylor argues at length throughout *A Secular Age*, Desmond also detects a shift away from appeals to the transcendent and an increasing reliance upon the power of human reason. With the rise of modernity, the very nature of metaphysical reflection transforms. What had been a festive mindfulness of "enchanted" world, porous to intermediation with the divine, is strangled as the passages between the immanent and the transcendent orders became clogged. Desmond, responding to Taylor, observes, "the movement to this Western buffered self goes

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[84] William Desmond, "The Metaphysics of Modernity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought,* eds. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 546.
[85] Ibid., 545. Emphasis added.
[86] Ibid., 547.
[87] Ibid., 547-8.

together with the disenchantment of the world and the construction of the immanent frame. This construction leads by circuitous ways to *default atheism*, as I would put it."[88]

Unlike Taylor, however, Desmond does not respond to this "clogging" by means of a counter-narrative. He issues, instead, a call for a "return to the sources of metaphysical thinking."[89] He hearkens us to heed Socrates' words that "this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering (*thaumazein*): this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else."[90] Metaphysical thinking begins, he writes,

> in a primal astonishment. Astonishment itself is primal. It is elemental and irreducible. Plato speaks of *thaumazein* as the *pathos* of the philosopher. This is sometimes translated as wonder and this is not inappropriate. Astonishment, however, captures the sense of being rocked back on one's heels, as it were, by the otherness of being in its givenness. Plato says *pathos*: there is a pathology in metaphysics. There is a suffering, an undergoing; there is a patience of being; there is a receiving that is not the production of the metaphysician or mind.[91]

Herein we find a synopsis of what Desmond take to be the nature and task of metaphysics. Its nature: metaphysics originates as a *response* to suffering a "certain shock or bite of otherness."[92] Metaphysics reflects being opened, both *being* as opened toward us and our being *opened* as a result of it addressing us. The task of metaphysics, then, is keep alive this astonishment, to remain faithful to its vocation to renew the "opening to transcendence that comes first to us."[93]

So far, Desmond's metaphysics avoid transgressing our commandments. Whatever the cause of astonishment, Desmond recognizes that metaphysics (1) is not self-wrought or projected by us, (2) responds to something that exceeds the limit of our speech, thereby requiring a

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[88] William Desmond, "Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal: On Immanence and Transcendence in an Intercultural Perspective," in *Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy*, eds. Nahum Brown and William Franke (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 161.
[89] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 5.
[90] Plato, *Theatetus*, 155d3-4
[91] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.
[92] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 8.
[93] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 15

plurivocal attempt to speak of it, (3) induces a mindfulness arising "amidst" the flux, and (4) is a

vocation responding to the summons of transcendence. Desmond's, in short, is a searching

metaphysics that seeks to return to the sources that elicit and refresh our sense of wonder that

anything *is* at all.

In sum, one must see Desmond's metaphysics not as a hegemonic "system" but as style

of philosophical mindfulness reorienting how we dwell amidst beings (*meta*) in a way making us

mindful of what is in excess of beings (*meta*). What Desmond offers in place of a system is a

systematic approach keen on teasing out the interconnections and inter-mediations occurring

between beings. If ontotheology inscribes the deity within "the system," a systematic approach

provides a mode of inquiry committed to retaining its openness to what cannot be contained by

the system. This marks a significant counter-move to the modes of mindfulness typically

associated with modernity, where

> instrumental mind takes for granted, in a potentially mindless way, the beings that are
> given, and goes to work with its categories on what is there, devoid of metaphysical
> astonishment before the *that* of its being there at all. It bustles with activity, but just this
> its virtue may crowd out an essential otherness. To restore mindfulness of this, one must
> stop thinking in that mode, stop thinking that instrumental thought exhausts the energy of
> thinking. Silence, patience, a different ontological vigilance is needed. Solitude may
> prepare an opening for different thought, for a celebrating mindfulness of being.[94]

Desmond's philosophy encourages an "ontological vigilance" mindful of what "instrumental

mind" brackets out. Metaphysics, as a practice, aims to put us in touch with energies otherwise

recessed and ignored in modernity. Contemplative receptivity mindfully takes "*as* granted" the

beings that are given and, attuned to this gratuity, permits us to dwell anew within what

Desmond calls the *metaxu* or ethos of being.

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[94] William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others* (Albany: SUNY, 1990), 229.

2.2   The Ethos of Being: the *Metaxu*

Far from being a disengaged practice, Desmond's metaphysics is better viewed as a response to one's awakening "in the midst" of beings (*meta*) and feeling oneself struck into a sense of astonishment at being's very givenness. This astonishment refreshes our sense of what it means to be: beings are not neutrally "just there" but are perceived as a part of a dynamic system of signs pointing beyond themselves toward their ultimate origin. Desmond's refusal to separate ontology from metaphysics leads him to plead

> for a practice of philosophical thinking that does not float above the ethos of being in abstraction, but comes to itself in the midst of things. There the astonishing being given of being(s) opens us for thought, and cries out against any form of Laputan abstraction. We start in the midst of things, and we are open to ourselves as more reflectively thoughtful, we already are in a porosity of being, and are ourselves as this porosity of being become mindful of itself.[95]

Unlike the residents of Swift's Laputa, the floating island whose residents become lost in abstractions and must be struck with a "bladder" to remind them to move, Desmond's metaphysician remains engaged with the happening of being; metaphysics enjoins a practice of dwelling amidst beings mindful of a source in excess of being.

Having considered the *what* of metaphysics, we need to consider its *whence*. Central to Desmond's vision is this insight: metaphysics originates in "the between" or, as found in Plato's *Symposium*, the *metaxu*. This is the "ethos" or

> ontological context or overdetermined matrix of value in which our human ethos and ethics come to be articulated. This is prior to, and in excess of, every specific ethical determination that we define. For we reconfigure the elemental ethos, and so stay true or betray or disfigure its promise. What is at play in it cannot be stated univocally or made fully evident at the outset, since it is through the reconfigured *ethe* that we gain some sense of its potencies.[96]

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[95] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 196.
[96] William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (Albany: SUNY, 2001), 17.

Here Desmond indicates a key distinction between the "reconfigured" and "primal" ethos of being. In every age, humans dwell and negotiate their lives within the *metaxu*. What he advocates is a "step back" permitting us to look intentionally at our own ethos and to discern how our reconfiguration of it reflects, or distorts, the primal ethos. His is an archaeological endeavor to peer beneath the practices and values of any particular age, any reconfigured ethos, in order to explore "the enabling sources and powers that give being to be as it is, and give it to be as good."[97]

This may become clearer if we connect Desmond's *metaxu* or ethos to what Charles Taylor describes as the "social imaginary." The social imaginary is much broader and deeper

> than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.[98]

Both Taylor and Desmond emphasize that the social imaginary and *metaxu* are anterior to ourselves. Rather than being a determinate "thing," it is better to think of each as a matrix or encompassing context providing us with the "know how" by which we negotiate our shared space. Both reflect the "common understanding which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy"[99] expressed in cultural mores, customs, institutions, and expectations. But because they operate in the background, we are seldom aware of them – only when there is an occurrence of breakdown or an interference with the normal flow of events do we become thematically aware of the assumptions informing our practices. I highlight the word *flow* since neither the social imaginary nor the *ethos* is static.

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[97] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 212.
[98] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke, 2004), 23.
[99] Charles Taylor, "Afterword," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Jonathan VanAnterwerpen and Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010), 308.

Social imaginary, however, is not a synonym for *metaxu*. In my estimation, the social imaginary is better situated within the narrower realm ontology whereas the *metaxu* offers a more capacious metaphysical view. As I see it, the social imaginary describes the pre-theoretical way humans function and negotiate their lives. It describes this background as the "largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have."[100] These often-unstated assumptions inform, shape, and give coherence to our practices: things "make sense" against this horizon. Yet, the accent is primarily ontological in describing how "ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings,"[101] and live immanently *in the midst* of other beings.

Now, recall Janz's critique of Taylor: Taylor repeatedly gestures in the direction of transcendence, he gives examples of those who have encountered the Transcendent, yet he has not demonstrated or given any account for there actually being a transcendent anything. Taylor has not, Janz wants to say, demonstrated that there is any *there* there.[102] Sure: Taylor gives us a map of our age, but why should we believe any of its routes could lead once again to an encounter with God? Why should we trust this map and not, say, a map of Middle Earth or Narnia? In short: mapping of our age says much about being *amidst* beings but does not point beyond itself in an explicit way toward anything *beyond* being, namely, God. In Desmondian terms, Taylor's map reflects an ontology dealing with being as immanent, being *amidst* beings. Limited to this first sense of *meta*, Taylor needs of metaphysical supplement to convince the seeker – even if via indirections – that the search for the Transcendent is not a snipe hunt.

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[100] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.
[101] Ibid., 24.
[102] Paul Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space" in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*, ed. Carlos Colorado and Justin Klassen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2014), 49.

Herein, I believe, we find where Desmond's *metaxu* is capable of making a helpful intervention by providing a more robust account of what it means to be in the between. Taylor's genealogy in *A Secular Age* offers an account of *how* we came to live and negotiate our lives within the "immanent frame" in a way either open or closed to the question of the transcendent. It is a richly suggestive ontological/phenomenological portrait of how our "social imaginary" came to be formed, what was gained and lost through its formation, and how we ourselves might feel anew the "cross-pressures" unsettling us, goading us to ask whether or not we might strike out in search of the transcendent. But note: Taylor remains at the level of ontology which can take being *for* granted. Desmond, in his exploration of the *metaxu*, wants to push readers to consider how being must be approached *as* granted, gratuitous, and wholly unnecessary. So, whereas Taylor provides an account of *how* things came to be as they are, Desmond's more capacious metaphysics poses a more primordial question: *why beings are at all?*

Desmond's explicitly metaphysical inquiry is by no means hostile to *A Secular Age*. In fact, it serves to widen and deepen Taylor's map. For Desmond, the *metaxu* encompasses both an ontological concern for being amidst beings (first *meta*) and a metaphysical sense of beings pointing us to what is *beyond* beings (second *meta*). But we only arrive at the second *meta* through a mindful consideration of the first. Approached as a form of metaphysical reflection, metaxology opens mindfulness "to transcendence by means of an exploration of the signs of irreducible otherness, even in immanence."[103] As I develop later, this complements Taylor by making possible a new way of comporting oneself within our age. Whereas, for Desmond, ontology takes being for granted, a metaxological approach awakens a sense of being *as* gratuitously granted and directs our mindfulness beyond beings towards the endowing source.

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[103] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 166.

This endeavor is necessary not only to respond to the critique of Janz but also to respond

to the "eclipse of the transcendent" we have experienced in modernity. Like Taylor, Desmond

takes an ambivalent stance toward the developments of instrumental reasoning. Without denying

the benefits of technology's advances, he finds within the modern ethos a dual movement of the

"devaluing objectification of being" and the "subjectification of value."[104] This means:

> Being is objectified in that it is neutralized or devalued or evacuated – emptied of any
> value or worth or goodness in itself – and made into a "merely empirical" mechanism.
> The subjectification of value comes about as there is a "revaluation" of value in terms of
> human self-determination that comes to see the supreme value as freedom understood in
> terms of human autonomy – ultimately flowering to reveal its core in the will to power.[105]

The dialectic between "objectification of being" and "subjectification of value" is, as Simpson

notes, reciprocal. Its dialectical movement generates, furthermore, the belief that "humans cannot

be truly autonomous if there is any value or good other than that which they create."[106] This, for

Desmond, results in the antinomy between autonomy and transcendence.[107] He observes, "The

antinomy: absolutize autonomy, and you relativize the good as other, or more than our self-

determination; absolutize the good as other and you must relativize autonomy."[108] One thinks

immediately of Kant, but Hegel and Nietzsche are no less beholden to an antinomy stressing self-

determination and bristling at any semblance of heteronomic interference.

This iteration of the modern ethos, however, does not account for the whole story.

Indeed, an important contribution of deconstruction has been to challenge modernity's "notion of

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[104] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 41.

[105] Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 27. For a similar take, see Martin Heidegger,
"The Question Concerning Technology" to see how an instrumental stance – enframing or reconfiguring –
renders the world a "standing reserve." Soil becomes a mineral deposit; tracts of land become coal fields,
rivers become power sources

[106] Ibid.

[107] William Desmond, "*Autonomia Turannos*: On Some Dialectical Equivocities of Self-determination," in
Ethical Perspectives 5 (1998): 235.

[108] Ibid., 239.

a fixed univocal unity."[109] Deconstruction destabilizes the sediment of modernity, thereby exposing the modern ethos as but *one* possible figuration. The gain in this insight is in exposing how *the constructed ethos tries to absorb the giving ethos*.[110] The ethos of modernity takes itself *for* granted but, in the wake of deconstruction, we see it as an achievement. Instead of rushing to reconstruct in the wake of deconstruction, Desmond wants us to perceive the primordial ground that manifests such hospitality to our constructions but that resists being exhausted by our efforts. We need to learn, that is, to read the signs of the reconfigured ethos that give us a glimpse of the primordial ground, the elemental *metaxu*, as bespeaking its originary source.

If the eclipse of the transcendent leads to an etiolated sense of being by limiting it to an immanent ontology, Desmond's task for metaphysics is restorative and therapeutic. That is, he conceives metaphysics as enabling us to take a step back from the modern milieu and to ask with Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" Desmond's resounding "no" comes by way of a mindfulness renewed through a practice of metaphysics which

> is not just the philosophical discipline that examines and evaluates the arguments for their rational cogency; not just the philosophical interpretation of the ethos as reconfigured in lights of the fundamental notions of a particular era, or people, or particular way of life; metaphysics, at its most deep, requires philosophical mindfulness of the primal ethos as such.[111]

From amidst the reconfigured *metaxu* Desmond desires us to awaken to and become mindful of the "intimate strangeness of being." Strangeness: being has "an otherness, indeed marvel, of which we are not the conceptual masters." Intimate: "this very strangeness allows no stance of thinking 'outside' being – we are participants in what we think about."[112] A properly attuned

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[109] William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 287.
[110] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 45. Emphasis original.
[111] William Desmond, "God, Ethos, Ways," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45 (1999): 13—30 at 27.
[112] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 120.

metaphysical mindfulness perceives the "crack" in modernity's shell and permits us to be drawn by the intimate strangeness of being as it invites us to behold anew the primal ethos and coaxes us to refresh ourselves at the spring of the elemental *metaxu* where we remember of the good of the "to be."

All of this is easier said than done. But Desmond has forbears resisting the neutralization or commodification of the *metaxu*. Of his own ethos, it may be helpful to recall, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, "…the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod." Clad in our mass-produced shoes we are now, as then, insulated from the earth and soil; we have lost our taste for earth's sacredness. We live, today, in an era where even to broach the question of the sacred, let alone God, can be interpreted as gauche or inappropriate. Ours is a time of what Desmond calls "postulatory finitism" which "first supposes, then later presupposes, that the finite and nothing but the finite constitutes the ultimate horizon for human thinking, one greater than which none can be thought."[113] Postulatory finitism is akin to a deep "sleep of finitude" content to slumber without being bothered by talk of the transcendent. From within his own scholarly career he recalls "a time when to mention God or religion in the company of advanced intellectuals was like mentioning sex in a prudish Victorian drawing room. An icy silence would descend, and the silence communicated more than overt argument possibly could: *we* do not now talk of these things."[114]

One way of getting at the theological importance of Desmond's thought is by recognizing him as level a direct challenge to the postulatory finitisim of our age. By attempt to renew metaphysical mindfulness by stirring up a sense of astonishment at the gratuity and givenness of

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[113] William Desmond, "On God and the Between," in *Between Philosophy and Theology*, eds. Lieven
     Boeve and Christopher Brabant (New York: Routledge, 2010), 102.
[114] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, xi.

being, he aims to re-open the question of the divine. Contrary to Nietzsche's madman, God is not dead. We need, though, to be stirred from the sleep finitude and to dare to encounter the divine once more. It is the task and goal of Desmond's philosophy to lead us on something of a purgative itinerary that opens us so that we may come into contact with the Source of creation's beauty on whose account, "nature is never spent" and because of whom in all created beings abides "the dearest freshnesss deep down things."[115]

2.3   The Fourfold Sense of Being

I pivot now to Desmond's fourfold – the *how* of metaxology – by linking the *metaxu* with metaphysics. A neologism, "metaxological philosophy is concerned with a *logos* of the *metaxu*, or a wording of the between."[116] Our lives, Desmond holds, unfold

> between diverse extremes: birth and death, nothing and infinity, abysses of abjectness and superlatives of heights, interiorities of secret intensity and exteriorities of vast extension. Human being is a between-being, but more often than not these extremes are recessed in the domestication of everyday life.[117]

Yet metaxological philosophy is not limited to reflecting on human being, for it seeks to discern "in the very ontological robustness of immanent otherness an original communication of an even more radical otherness, hyperbolic to the terms of immanence alone."[118] This is a searching metaphysics, exploring the ethos attentive to disclosures of something in excess of the immanent order; it is a philosophy attuned to epiphany, mindful that "what is hyperbolic *in* immanence points to what is hyperbolic *to* immanence."[119] We cannot abandon the flux because we come to mindfulness *within* it. Our question is not whether to dwell in the ethos, but how:

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[115] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128
[116] William Desmond, "The Theater of the *Metaxu*: Staging the Between," in *Topoi* 30, no. 2 (2011): 113—
        24 at 113.
[117] Ibid.
[118] William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal* (New York: Columbia, 2016), 167.
[119] Ibid.

if there is a return to the recalcitrances of given immanence, in their otherness to self-defining thought, there is also a searching of the "more" of the given world, as charged with signs of what exceeds immanence alone. Reading the signs of this "more" as communicated in the saturated equivocity of the given world is intimate to the vocation of metaxological metaphysics.[120]

To interpret these signs, we turn to the "fourfold sense of being" to orient us to a practice of metaphysics enabling us to recognize the *metaxu* as a milieu allowing communication with other beings and as porous to the creator and sustainer of being itself.

Desmond's "fourfold" engage seriously Aristotle's observation, "being is said in many ways." The fourfold provides systematic categories for thinking and speaking about being without any pretense to being "the system" in which being is schematized or dominated. As both systematic and hermeneutic, it "offers itself as an unfolding interpretation of the many sides of the plenitude of the happening of being, as manifest to mindfulness in the between."[121] This is a fraught undertaking because remaining

> absolutely true to the plenitude of this happening is all but impossible for us, and indeed failure of some sort is inevitable. But this impossible truthfulness is asked of us, even if inevitable failure brings us back to the truth of our finitude. This failure may itself be a success of sorts, in renewing metaphysical astonishment before the enigma of being that was, and is, and always will be too much for us, in excess of our groping efforts.[122]

The inevitable failure of metaphysics to be "absolutely true" recalls Heidegger's critique of ontotheology: whatever it is that gives being to be cannot be indexed to human reason. We will always come up short as we stutter and stammer to speak what exceeds speech. Like Levinas for whom the Saying always exceeds the Said, we might say that within the metaphysician's vocation the act of Responding always exceeds any Response.

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, xiii.
[122] Ibid.

The fourfold denominates four voices or senses of being: univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological. If being can be said in many ways, this is not because we are accomplished polyglots who wantonly ventriloquize through being. On the contrary, and truer to the vocation of metaphysics as a response, we are tutored into a metaphysical articulacy by the fourfold thereby enabling us to speak of the plurivocal happening of being. This is essential if we wish to articulate a coherent metaphysics given that "our understanding of what it means to be comes to definition in a complex interplay between indetermination and determination, transcendence and immanence, otherness and sameness, different and identity.[123] To be true to being in the between, to dwelling in the *metaxu*, we need a way to speak faithfully of determinacy (univocity) and indeterminacy (equivocity), of immanence and transcendence, and of the interplay between otherness and sameness (dialectic and metaxology). The fourfold provides a set of imbricating lenses revealing, with every addition, a richer and more finessed way to think about and respond to being. Rather than seeking to dissolve metaphysical perplexities, the fourfold (re)attunes us to the plurivocity of being and bids us to remain open to the sources of "wonder" and "astonishment" that inaugurate and animate philosophical inquiry.

2.3.1   Univocity and its Limits

We begin with the univocal sense of being which Desmond takes to be "motivated by a desire to reduce the manifoldness of given being to one essential meaning."[124] Univocity stresses "sameness, or unity, indeed sometimes immediate sameness, of mind and being."[125] No doubt, univocity speaks to common sense and we are reminded of Bishop Butler's quip, "a thing is

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[123] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.
[124] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 425.
[125] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.

itself and not any other."[126] Univocity's rallying cry: *to be is to be intelligible, and to be intelligible is to be determinate.*[127]

Without question, univocity is indispensable. We daily talk of discrete things – *this* jar, *that* car. Certain fields of inquiry, such as math, science, and engineering require univocal precision: recall the 1999 Mars Climate Orbiter disaster because English units were not converted to the metric system or 1968's Mariner I's failure due to a misplaced hyphen.[128] Without gainsaying the need for determinacy and precision, though, Desmond observes that "recurrently throughout modernity, certain scientific orientations to nature have tended toward the reductive."[129] The univocal sense is "*indispensable* in identifying and distinguishing" beings in the quotidian, but there is *more* to being than what can be measured or managed. Being is more ambiguous and complicated than strictly univocal, or scientistically reductive, approaches would have us believe.

That said, it takes but a cursory look at philosophy's history to reveal no shortage of thinkers who take univocity as the ideal canon of human knowledge. In its ontological and logical forms, one thinks of Parmenides, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Duns Scotus, Spinoza, and Deleuze. For univocity in the form of a "calculative *mathesis*"[130] one turns to Descartes, the early Wittgenstein, and Badiou. Additionally, the siren's song of univocity continues to be heard in our own day. When Thomas Nagel published *Mind and Cosmos* as a challenge to "reductive materialism," the outcry was astonishing. Steven Pinker described the book as "The shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker" and Daniel Dennett described Nagel as part of a "retrograde

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[126] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 49.
[127] Ibid., 18.
[128] Gladwin Hill, "For Want of Hyphen Venus Rocket is Lost," *The New York Times*, July 27, 1962.
[129] William Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 99—124.
[130] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 50.

gang" whose work is "cute and it's clever and it's not worth a damn."[131] Nagel's heresy? He

claimed

> the great advances in the physical and biological sciences were made possible by
> excluding the mind from the physical world. This has permitted a quantitative
> understanding of that world, expressed in timeless, mathematically formulated physical
> laws. But at some point it will be necessary to make a new start on a more comprehensive
> understanding that includes the mind.[132]

Without denying the power of math and sciences, Nagel recognized their inability to wholly and

definitively explain all phenomena. A more comprehensive approach is needed to accommodate

what more reductive accounts leave out. This critique of reductive materialism comes, no less,

from a philosopher who not only lacks a *sensus divinitas* but also strongly opposes any

invocation of a transcendent being.[133]

Neither Nagel nor Desmond reject univocity; determinacy is necessary for intelligibility.

They deny, though, that univocal determinacy *exhausts* intelligibility. In fact Desmond argues,

"the will to absolute univocity is self-subverting, and cannot evade its own opposite, equivocity.

This very insistence on univocity itself proves to be equivocal, for no univocal meaning can be

given to the univocal insistence."[134] Reductive materialism abstracts from the plurivocal flux and

fails to account for the emergence of the mind. This leads him to observe that "simply as self-

transcending, mind is an anomaly to the universal mechanism; it is excess, a surplus, ultimately

indeed a surd. In a word, scientific univocity reduces being to something that cannot account for

scientific mind itself."[135] Univocity's reach, like apodictic reasoning's, exceeds its grasp.

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[131] Andrew Ferguson, "The Heretic," Weekly Standard, March 25, 2013, accessed August 17, 2017,
       http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-heretic/article/707692
[132] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 8.
[133] Ibid., 12.
[134] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 82.
[135] Ibid., 63.

In Plato's philosophy, Desmond finds an intimation of a way to preserve the determinacy of univocity without the pretense of rendering *all* being determinate. He recalls how, above the gates to Plato's Academy, a sign is said to have read: Let none who has not studied geometry enter here! For Plato, the rigors of geometry were propaedeutic for philosophical study. And Desmond contrasts Plato with Aristotle, for whom *thaumazein* or wonder terminates in

> a determinate *logos* of a determinate somewhat, a *tode ti*. But this end is a death of wonder, not its refreshening at a level of mindfulness marked by deeper or higher metaphysical sophistication. Not surprisingly, Aristotle invokes *geometry* to illustrate the teleological thrust of the desire to know (*Meta*, 983a13ff). What is geometry but a figure for determinate knowing in which all the ambiguity of perplexity is overcome or dissolved in the solution[136]

Geometry, for Plato, capacitates philosophical inquiry by training the would-be philosopher in the rigors of logic and critical thinking. Philosophy, beginning in wonder, requires "midwives" possessing, like Socrates, the know-how and finesse to help others "discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light. But it is I, with God's help, who deliver them of this offspring."[137] For Aristotle, geometry proves less the training ground than the *telos* or destination of philosophy. Philosophical inquiry, rather than preserving wonder, "must end in the contrary and, according to the proverb, the better state, as is the case in these instances when men learn the cause."[138] Nor is the desire for geometric precision exclusive to Aristotle: one may think of Descartes, Spinoza's *ordo geometricus*, Kant, and Husserl.[139]

The rage for order that leads to the privileging of geometric precision as the ideal standard for knowledge is not limited to philosophy or its history: there is no shortage of reductive approaches (behaviorism, scientism) requiring being to fit within a determinate system

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[136] Ibid., 19.
[137] Plato, *Theatetus*, 150d-e.
[138] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983a18-20.
[139] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 7.

of categories. Such efforts manifest the ongoing relevance of what Pascal considered the *l'esprit de géometrie*. The "geometric mind" fixates on "objective truths such as we pursue in the hard sciences and mathematics."[140] Desmond playfully describes the geometrically-minded systematizers as those "who (mis)behave like the ugly sisters of Cinderella: the glass slipper will fit the foot, must fit the foot, never mind the blood on the carpet!"[141] The ambiguities of human reality cannot all be fitted into a single system; we require, rather, Pascal's *l'esprit de finesse*. A spirit of finesse resists temptations to dominate being, preferring instead a subtler and more discerning approach. It recognizes and appreciates being's inherent equivocity and, rather than seeking to squelch it, aims to be mindful of the ambiguity and flux. The finessed mind does not revile geometry or univocity but sees it as part of a larger whole.

2.3.2   Equivocity and the Restlessness Search for Wholeness

Desmond's equivocal sense of being refers "to a plurality that resists reduction to one univocal meaning and one alone."[142]Whereas univocity accents unity, sameness, and clarity, equivocity stresses manyness, difference, and ambiguity. One is reminded how the word *dog* can refer both to a pet or to a star with "no community of meaning between the earthly and heavenly dog."[143] Taken equivocally, *dog* has two distinct meanings. There is a limit, though, to the fluidity of equivocal speech. Just as pure univocity

> is a limit, so it is difficult to find absolutely pure instances of equivocity, which would imply a difference without even the hint of a possible mediation. Absolutely unmediated difference seems to be absolutely unintelligible; for even to state the putative absolute difference is in some way already to transcend it.[144]

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[140] Ibid. 191.
[141] Desmond, "Between System and Poetics," 17.
[142] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 421.
[143] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 87.
[144] Ibid.

Any attempt at an absolute or thoroughgoing equivocity proves self-subverting because equivocity is limited by an unavoidable recourse to determinacy: discourse is constituted, as Ricoeur observes, "by a series of sentences whereby someone says something to someone about something."[145] For equivocal speech to be communicative, it must be about some determinate something. So, despite its recognition of fragmentation and flux, equivocal speech cannot evade speaking of integral beings, even if only to call their integrity into question or to point out its inherent instability.

Within our daily lives, we find ourselves situated between the theoretical limits of absolute univocity and absolute equivocity, inflexible determinacy and unremitting flux. How one stands between the extremes will be influenced by the reconfigured *ethos* or "social imaginary." Aristotle, for instance, took a dim view of equivocity due to

> his commitment to the law of identity and the law of excluded middle. A being is itself and not another thing. It is logically impossible to suppose that the same thing is and is not, as some think Heraclitus said. To be is to be determinate, a *tode ti*. If this is the case, our quest for intelligibility will always be marked by a certain predilection for univocity.[146]

Elsewhere, in Book III of *Rhetoric*, we find one of Aristotle's more ironic statements: "It is a general rule that a written composition should be easy to read and therefore easy to deliver."[147] Aristotle's target is not surprising: Heraclitus. Aristotle continues, observing

> to punctuate Heraclitus is no easy task, because we often cannot tell whether a particular word belongs to what precedes or what follows it. Thus, at the outset of his treatise he says, "Though this truth is always men understand it not", where it is not clear to which of the two clauses the world "always" belongs.[148]

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[145] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action* trans. Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 82-3.

[146] William Desmond, "Flux-Gibberish: For and Against Heraclitus," *The Review of Metaphysics* 70 (March 2017): 473-505 at 478.

[147] *Rhetoric,* 3.5.1407b12

[148] *Rhetoric*, 3.5.1407b15-18.

For a thinker such as Aristotle, for whom geometric precision serves as the ideal canon for human reasoning, any trace of Heraclitean flux must be brought to heel. And, as we have seen, he is not alone in desiring to exorcise ambiguity. René Descartes, in the *Discourse on Method*, articulates as his first rule that the investigator ought

> never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it into doubt.[149]

Let there be no doubt: this *l'esprit de géometrie* was hardly exhausted with Descartes's death in 1650. In our own age, Terry Pinkard observes the gradual abatement of the acrimonious relationship between "continental" and "analytic" philosophers; to dismiss the continentals as "a bunch of wooly minded gasbags"[150] no longer carries the punch it once did. Cool comfort, indeed, as the majority of Anglo-American philosophy departments are analytic in orientation; so-called "wooly" thought is perhaps tolerated, but toleration is hardly the same as celebration or appreciation.

Due to its recovery of equivocity from the stranglehold of modernity's fixation on univocal determination, Desmond expresses measured approval of certain strains of postmodern thought. Indeed, I think he would welcom welcome Caputo's description of deconstruction as

> organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody has to come along and "deconstruct" things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth. In a deconstruction, the "other" is the one who tells the truth on the "same"; the other is the truth of the same, the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalized, or sometimes just plain murdered…[151]

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[149] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 11.
[150] Terry Pinkard, "Analytics, Continentals, and Modern Skepticism," *The Monist* 82 no.2 (1999), 189.
[151] John Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29.

With Caputo, Desmond recognizes in all things an inextirpable ambiguity resistant to constraint. Hence the contribution of deconstruction in unsettling univocal complacency. The "inner truth" of being refuses constraint and its struggle against repression calls out to us, demands that we open our ears and eyes, to look again for what has been concealed beneath the too-neat and too-tidy accounts rendered by univocal reduction.

Desmond's appreciation of equivocity's truth does not rely solely upon the work of contemporary philosophy. Centuries before the efforts of Derrida, Caputo, Foucault, and Butler, William Shakespeare penned *Macbeth* as *the* play about equivocity: "Radical equivocity attaches to time, to daring, to trust, to power, to the elementals, to the nefarious powers, to sleep, to life itself and to death. 'Fair is foul and foul is fair.'"[152] It is the story of double appearances: a loyal vassal and his hospitable wife exposed through an act of traitorous regicide.[153] Consider the flux following Duncan's death

> **Old Man:** 'Tis unnatural/Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,/A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place/Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.

> **Ross:** And Duncan's horses, a thing most strange and certain,/Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,/Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,/Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make/War with mankind.[154]

Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare deconstructs the stable categories of good and evil, light and darkness, pure and impure. Hands are washed free of blood yet remain bloody; courage screwed to the sticking place is cowardice. Perhaps there is no better instance of the suppressed "truth of the other" than the ghost of murdered Banquo who bursts death's constraint to give silent testimony to his concealed, nay murdered, truth.

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[152] Desmond, *Is there a Sabbath for Thought*, 59.
[153] William Desmond, "Sticky Evil: On Macbeth and the Karma of the Equivocal," in *God, Literature, and Process Thought*, ed. Darren Middleton (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).
[154] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* 2.4.2

Mindful attention to equivocity requires an ongoing hermeneutic of text and action. Actions, like words, can bear of multiple meanings. Recall *Casablanca*

You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss/A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply/As time goes by

A lovely sentiment, but true? Univocal reasoning wishes it so: everything is what it is, and no other. Equivocal reasoning notes a difference: the kiss of "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (Song 1:2) is not the same as "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" (Lk 14:48). A kiss can be a kiss, a physical gesture, but it cannot be reduced only to a gesture; there is *more* to it than univocity can convey.

It is here we see metaxology's ability to negotiate the space between univocity and equivocity by preserving the truth of each and refusing to slide into univocal dogmatism or equivocal skepticism. Metaxological metaphysics neither insists on a single univocal *regula* nor does it valorize equivocal flux in its indeterminacy. In short, what recommends Desmond's approach is its ability to mediate between those "who are obsessed with inflexible determinacy and those who turn away from any kind of determinacy with disgust."[155]

We can see how our earlier consideration of Taylor's argumentative style illuminates Desmond's strategy. By discerning and preserving the truth of both univocity and equivocity, Desmond's metaxological approach capacitates both voices by holding them in a creative tension. He positions himself between univocity and equivocity to show how each speaks truthfully, albeit incompletely, of being. Instead of committing to one or the other voice, he searches for a way to capacitate speech in a way that can speak in multiple tongues, plurivocally. If all is not one (univocity) and all is not flux (equivocity) then we need a more nuanced, subtler,

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[155] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 33.

language able to speak of the *metaxu* the truth of both. Taylor gets at this interplay by recollecting Pascal's image of the reed: "the human being in the universe has all the fragility of a mere reed, but its greatness lies in the fact that it is a thinking reed."[156] The human is so fragile, Pascal writes, "a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him" yet, in all the universe, "man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying…The universe knows none of this."[157] The sublime can simultaneously "fill us with awe" while "reminding us how little we are."[158] We are equivocal beings: we are yet need not – and at some point will no longer – be at all. We incarnate, in our very being, the interplay of these voices.

As a result, Desmond's philosophy "works" to the extent it implicates the reader within the *metaxu* and initiates a process of attunement to the voices at play within being. Rather than a hegemonic system imposed from above, Desmond's metaphysics is better likened to a process of learning a foreign language by immersion in the flux. We learn vocabulary words and grammar, but our appropriation of the language comes about inductively, tentatively, and we often fumble when we try to say the right word. But, as we grow in articulacy, we find ourselves capacitated to give an account of what it means to be in the between: we see the world differently and understand ourselves in a new light. Metaxology, in sum, provides a tutorial empowering us to speak more faithfully about being because it permits us to dwell more mindfully amidst beings.

This becomes clearer if we consider how the dynamism of our desire bespeaks a restless longing for wholeness. Desmond, showing his Platonic slip, recalls for his readers the discussion of desire found in the *Symposium*[159] where Socrates claims

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[156] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 347.
[157] Pascal, *Penseés*, 66.
[158] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 347.
[159] Ibid., 22.

anyone who has a desire desires what is not at hand and not present, what he does not have, and what he is not, and that of which he is in need; for such are the objects of desire and love. (200e)

Desire is not self-enclosed and has not the resources to sate its lack. Desire is intentional, it is *for* something, which leads Desmond to observe how desire always already

reaches beyond itself. For this reason, lack is not solely negative: it attests to the stirring of an impetuous power through which desire begins to be more than itself. Negatively understood, it is a witness to unfulfillment; positively understood, it may make desire aware of itself and so awaken it to what is more than itself.[160]

Desire impels us to reach outside of ourselves in a quest for wholeness. We do not merely *have* desire, like a passing craving for chocolate; desire, rather, is constitutive of creaturehood. It is "a form of life which, while originating in lack, wars with lack, seeking thereby to keep despair at bay."[161] But the lack animating desire does not betray desire as indigent or impoverished. Though the end is absent – otherwise we would not desire – it is not *wholly* absent; our anticipation of the end "is a relation which, in being dissatisfied with the gulf between a desire and its goal, refuses sheer absence."[162]

For Desmond, desire's *telos* is present in its origin, disquieting it by reminding it of its lack and as-yet unachieved wholeness. Yet it is nothing less than the presence of the *telos* that impels us to begin the adventure of negotiating our identity in a process he calls "selving."[163] Disquieted desire propels us on a passionate itinerary which, recalling Plato, is driven by Eros as "the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete."[164] In acknowledging this drive, Desmond stands with Augustine and Aquinas:

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[160] Ibid., 22.
[161] Ibid., 24.
[162] Ibid., 24.
[163] See *God and the Between*, chapter 2
[164] *Symposium*, 192e

> You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.[165]

> Because the will is a power of the rational soul, which is caused by God alone, by creation…Second, it is evident from the fact that the will is ordained to the universal good. Wherefore nothing else can be the cause of the will, except God Himself, Who is the universal good: while every other good is good by participation, and is some particular good, and a particular cause does not give a universal inclination.[166]

We are made and ordained to be agents of desire, unsettled and driven by an abiding longing that impels us outward in search of fulfilment. No matter what we count as possessions, we are always first possessed by a desire admitting no finite satisfaction: ours is a ceaseless, restless, and passionate quest for wholeness.

For Desmond, desire is a response elicited by the advent of being. We are, so to speak, struck into desire by being awoken to the ceaseless interplay of the univocity and equivocity of being. We come to ourselves a world of constant flux, one in which beings are born and die, come into being and pass away. Spread out before and behind us, we are aroused by and summoned to behold what Desmond calls the "infinite succession" of beings,[167] a notion tied to the categories of

> of univocity and equivocity in this sense. Our immediate inclination is to perceive the external world as a dispersed multiplicity of univocal particulars. In time, inevitably, this fixed definiteness is loosened up by our recognition of becoming and its open-endedness. Things in their determinate particularity, carried beyond themselves by the generating power of becoming, pass away and ultimately disappear into the indefinite succession of other particulars.[168]

We need both univocity and equivocity to speak truly of the infinite succession of beings we encounter in the world of external becoming because

> external becoming might be seen as the dynamic process of coming to be and passing away that concretizes particular entities, yet is not spent by the plurality of already

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[165] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, i.
[166] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* Ia-IIae 9 ad. 6
[167] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 177-8.
[168] Ibid., 178.

realized particulars. It is open to the possibility of bringing into being and endlessly continuing the line of such entities.[169]

Metaxology holds in creative tension the univocal stability of particular entities with the equivocal dynamism of becoming. It preserves the truth of each voice and permits them to express "two sides of the same orientation to the immediate."[170]

To capacitate our ability to speak faithfully of the *metaxu*'s dynamism, metaxology makes use of univocal and equivocal categories. Neither one, on its own, is capable of accounting for the happening of the between. Univocity downplays the flux in favor of determinacy; equivocity revels in indeterminacy but betrays determinate particularity. Both capture an element of the truth, but neither expresses the fullness of the truth. By resisting the pressure to offer an either-or to the universal impermanence of being, metaxology makes possible a more finessed understanding of the infinite succession of beings.

2.3.3   The Dialectical Sense of Being

The dialectical sense of being draws attention to "a *process of interplay* between same and different, between self and other."[171] Dialectic, Desmond continues, is

> etymologically in the same family as "dialogue": mindful communication between self and other. Dialectic can refer us to a rhythmic process of unfolding, whether of process or events, thoughtful articulations or communications. There are many forms of dialectic. Socratic-Platonic dialectic, for instance, is bound up with dialogical openness to others. Modern dialectic, of which Hegel is perhaps the master exponent, is shaped by the ideal of autonomous thinking in which the self-determination of a process tends to be given primary place.[172]

In this section, we consider how the practice of dialectic mediates between the self and other in search of a more inclusive unity. Rather than denying ambiguity, dialectic *thinks through*

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[169] Ibid., 177.
[170] Ibid., 183.
[171] Desmond, *Intimate Universal*, 421.
[172] Ibid.

equivocity en route to a whole capable of reconciling differences.[173] The question: is the "whole" attained through dialectic truthful to being?

At its simplest, the practice of dialectic "seeks to recover what the univocal sense offers"[174] without turning away from the complexities and ambiguities of the equivocal. It claims to uncover a unity *beyond* flux, a deeper and more abiding totality comprising a coherent whole. In thinking *through* the flux and gathering it into a whole, dialectic offers a nuanced version of univocity's mantra: *to be is to be intelligible, and to be wholly intelligible is to part of an encompassing whole.*

Hegel, for Desmond, serves as the exemplar of modern dialectic. We risk, though, misreading Hegel if we naively assume he operates according to a formal method. As Desmond observes, "Hegel offers no static formalization of thesis, antithesis, synthesis (now recognized by scholars to be attributed to Fichte, more properly speaking)."[175] Taylor, reinforces this insight in noting how dialectic is neither a method nor approach:

> If we want to characterize Hegel's method in his great demonstrations we might just as well speak of it as "descriptive", following Kenley Dove. For his aim is simply to follow the movement in his object of study. The task of the philosopher is "to submerge his freedom in [the content], and let it be moved by its own nature" (*PhG*, 48). If the argument follows a dialectical movement, then this must be in the things themselves, not just in the way we reason about them.[176]

To borrow a phrase from Taylor, Desmond wants to read Hegel as offering a hermeneutical dialectics "which convince us by the overall plausibility of the interpretations they give."[177]

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[173] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 131.
[174] Ibid., 143.
[175] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 17.
[176] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 55.
[177] Ibid., 64. Taylor offers "hermeneutical dialectics" as an alternative to "strict dialectics." The latter takes as its starting point a position that is beyond contest and then tracing how it unfolds. Though Hegel believed this to be his accomplishment, Taylor sees the "strict dialectics" as riddled with flaws. So, while Hegel might not accept the distinction between strict and hermeneutic dialectics, Taylor sees the latter as preserving Hegel's contribution.

Hegel's system has to many seemed "the consummation of reason"[178] but Desmond insists this is illusory. Hegel, he argues, "hides nuances, nuances that, if resurrected for rethinking, shed a different light on metaphysical thinking, and the possibilities of its contemporary renewal."[179] By means of an inquiry into the truth and limits of dialectic, Desmond seeks to expose the nearly-imperceptible "cracks" in Hegel's system, indicating thereby a way of escaping "the system" and opening up an itinerary capable of leading us toward the renewal of metaphysical thought.

The goal of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Desmond suggests, is to give an "insight into what knowing is."[180] This requires, consequently, an investigation into the role of mediation. Mediation, for Hegel, "is nothing but self-identity working itself out through an active self-directed process."[181] The following gives a sense of this process

> The movement of a being that immediately is, consists partly in becoming an other than itself, and thus becoming its own immanent content; partly in taking back into itself this unfolding [of its content] or this existence of it, i.e. in making *itself* into a moment, and simplifying itself into something determinate. In the former movement, *negativity* is the differentiating and positing of *existence*; in this return into self, it is the becoming of the *determinate simplicity*. It is in this way that the content shows that its determinateness is not received from something else, nor externally attached to it, but that it determines itself, and ranges itself as a moment having its own place in the whole.[182]

Hegelian mediation is self-mediation: "through self-mediation he endeavors to complete (captured pictorially in the image of the circle) the incomplete self-knowledge of immediacy."[183] In a line sending shivers down Caputo's spine, the consummation of self-mediation leads to totality: *Das Wahre ist das Ganze*, the true is the whole.[184]

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[178] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 24.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 142.
[181] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford, 1977), 11.
[182] Ibid., 18.
[183] Ibid., 144.
[184] Ibid., 19.

We should register no small degree of awe at the scope of Hegel's self-mediating Idea. For here we find an approach with much to recommend itself to those who wish to preserve the truth of univocity and equivocity. Hegelian dialectic, first, describes a dynamic and gradually unfolding process which remains true to the flux of change over time. His own example of the bud → blossom → fruit illustrates a finessed understanding of the organic unfolding of this process.[185] Second, dialectic does not shirk away from having to take account of the other; indeed, what Hegel calls the process of self-sublation (*aufheben*) describes how the *Subject* becomes determinate by sublating its other in a process that simultaneously cancels and preserves the other. Through sublation, the distinction between "self" and "other" is abolished by preserving the "other" within the self. Thus, Hegel's dialectic holds out the promise of guiding us safely between the Scylla of a dogmatic univocity and the Charybdis of a chaotic equivocity. And, if we take the unfolding of Hegelian dialectic as a description of history's unfolding, we could chart through the ages a record of inexorable progress as *Geist* unfolds itself forward in time as it becomes increasingly determinate and moves toward its ultimate consummation.

Yet, as Desmond is keen to alert us, we should be skeptical of Hegel's grand system. For while dialectic *does* take account of equivocity, it does so in a way failing to respect the irreducible alterity of the other. As Simpson writes, "the dialectical sense taken on its own tends to absolutize itself and its self-mediation such that thought thinking itself becomes a univocal totality that is deaf to any mediation but its own – a solipsistic circle that closes in on itself."[186] In other words, while dialectic does account for plurality, it is a plurality subsumed into a larger whole. This, Desmond continues, is clearest in Hegel's theology where God "others" Himself

> in finite creation, not to allow finite creation to be as irreducibly other to Himself, but because without God's own self-othering, God Himself as beginning is all but nothing.

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[185] Ibid., 2.
[186] Simpson, 31.

The creation is God's self-othering and hence not other, but the ontological mediating detour in God's dialectical self-mediation with Himself.[187]

Desmond, consequently, refuses to take part in the "coronation of absolute spirit" or consummation of Hegel's "system" when "Hegel places the crown on its head, and the hymn he sings is Aristotle's *Te Deum* to *noesis tes noeseos*. This is Hegel's highest amen to being."[188] It is an "Amen" directed not toward the God who transcends the whole but, rather, to the God who has become the whole. Little wonder, given this depiction of Hegel's God, Heidegger refused to sing or dance before it.

Modern dialectic – in its Hegelian iteration – runs aground because it subsumes alterity into a more totalizing whole: "Hegel's speculative unity is marked by, as we might call it, a kind of 'dialectical univocity'."[189] Hegelian self-mediation results in a closed system unfolding from germ to full maturity according to its own logic. Looked at theologically, although it pays lip service to God, it cannot admit of revelation or irruptive grace, as these would require an intrusion *into* the system by a God who transcends it. Moreover, this would be a God alien to orthodox Christianity: the movement of Hegel's dialectic unfolds from a state of lack and moves through stages toward ever-greater determinacy. God, in effect, has to *become* God over time. God is *posse*, possibility, but not that of Cusa or Kearney, neither of whom hold that God creates in order for God to be God.[190] Prayerful appeal to the transcendent seems impossible because there is no transcendent Other; Hegel's god occupies the same plane as humans. We are left,

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[187] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 19.
[188] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 172.
[189] William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 14.
[190] Richard Kearney, "William Desmond on God," in *Between System and Poetics*, 195. Given Desmond's suspicion of Hegel, it is not surprising that he looks askance – at least in his review of Kearney's book – at Kearney's notion of God as *posse*.

Desmond's writes, with God's "counterfeit double"[191] who masquerades as the Transcendent Other while remaining squarely within the immanent realm.

In attempting to think through the equivocity of becoming to recuperate a sense of univocity, Hegel's dialectic overreaches and inscribes god within the system. As Heidegger noted, philosophy employs Hegel's god: render the whole of reality transparent to human reason. This is not the god before whom we bow and pray but, rather, the one who subtends the centrality of the human being. Hegel writes:

> The love of truth, faith in the power of mind, is the first condition in philosophy. Man, because he is mind, should and must deem himself worthy of the highest: he cannot think too highly of the greatness and the power of his mind, and with this belief, nothing will be so difficult and hard that it will not reveal itself [*sich eröffnete*] to him. The essence of the universe at first hidden and concealed [*verborgene und verschlossene*], has no power which can offer resistance to the search for knowledge; it has to lay itself open before the seeker – to set before his eyes and give for his enjoyment, its riches and its depths.[192]

In mediating between self and otherness, Hegel's dialectic places humans center stage. Hegel's *Geist*, Taylor observes, "lives as spirit only through men. They are the vehicles, and the indispensable vehicles, of his spiritual existence, as consciousness, rationality, will."[193] He continues, noting how for Hegel "*I* as a human being,"

> have the vocation of realizing a nature which is given: and even if I am called on to be original, to realize myself in the way uniquely suited to myself, nevertheless the scope for originality is itself given as an integral part of human nature, as are those unique features of me on which my originality builds. Freedom for man thus means the free realization of a vocation which is largely given.[194]

Desmond regards this as "dialectically instrumentalizing" the individual who becomes "an instrument of the absolute whole: man, so to say, is the means by which God comes to self-

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[191] William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).
[192] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances Simson (London: Routledge, 1963), 1:xiii. Quoted in Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 81.
[193] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 11.
[194] Ibid., 29.

determination; man is the medium of God's knowing."[195] Hegel's god needs us, indeed uses us, to become god; transparent knowledge of reality is not a gift given *to* humanity but the achievement of *Geist through* humanity.

Hegel's practice of dialectic is found wanting because, in its commitment to preserving a sense of being's univocity, it quells equivocity. So, although it remains cognizant of alterity, it does so in a way that fails to preserve the otherness of the other. Hegel, in other words, over-emphasizes the "self" in self-determination, thereby reducing the Other to an instance of the Same. In Hegel's system, there is a place for everything and everything in its place. One hears the howls from Caputo and Levinas!

This becomes clearer by situating the practice of dialectic within the *metaxu*. Recall the question posed at the end of the last section: how do we mediate with an infinite succession of beings? Infinite succession, we saw, describes the external world of becoming. Confronted by an infinite stream of beings who come to be and pass away, how do we "make sense" of the external world of becoming. Impelled by a desire for wholeness, how do we remain true to being's determinacy and ambiguity? Neither univocity nor equivocity appear sufficient: a univocity without equivocity is static lifelessness, and equivocity without univocal determinacy would overwhelm us with chaotic flux. We yearn for wholeness, but neither seems capable of sating our appetites. How are we to respond from within the *metaxu*, the "Desmondian open space" where we feel wooed by both voices and their promise for wholeness?

What keeps us intact and permits us to withstand the univocal and equivocal forces buffeting us is called *intentional infinitude*, or "the power of open dialectical self-mediation

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[195] Desmond, "*Autonomia Turannos*," 242.

displayed in the articulation of human desire."[196] Intentional infinitude refers to our restless

desire for the infinite. Our desire to mediate between unity and multiplicity

> seeks unity, rather than dispersal. We want to mediate between ourselves and the world;
> but more, we want to communicate ourselves to ourselves. Desmond describes this
> potency as circular, though not in a closed way, and founded in the appreciation that
> humans seek to know themselves. In this search they strive for open wholeness, as the
> desired end to their infinite restlessness.[197]

A single clause distinguishes between intentional infinitude and Hegel's dialectic: circular,

though not in a closed way. Indeed, if we trace its roots to more ancient practices, intentional

infinitude attests to the salutary potential of dialectic. In Socratic-Platonic dialogues,

interlocutors journeyed together and engaged one another in open-ended in cooperative argument

that seldom terminated in cut-and-dry answers. Perhaps this is the point: instead of giving "the

answer" they offer "the invitation" to discern for oneself what it is that we love and, through

discernment, grow in articulacy about their loves. As an exercise, dialectic seeks to preserve

practitioners from complacency by reminding them that no single answer, no *thing* at all, can still

the restless human heart.

Compared with Socratic-Platonic dialectic, Hegel's totalizing system represents

dialectic's modern mutation. For whereas dialectic was an ongoing and unending practice for

Socrates, Hegel employs dialectic in a way privileging self-mediation and

> takes its sights from the ability of thought to think what is other, and to bring the other
> into relativity to itself. The conclusion then drawn is that the thought that thinks the other
> overreaches the other; hence in thinking the other as a thought, it ends up as the thought
> that thinks itself, but now inclusive of otherness.[198]

By closing the circle and terminating the dialectic in favor of the self, Hegel's dialectic betrays

the *dia* by abrogating the open-endedness of intermediation. Dialectic's rhythmic give-and-take,

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[196] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 179.
[197] Reneé Ryan, "An Archaeological Ethics," in *Between System and Poetics*, 127.
[198] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 197.

call and response, is arrested and freezes the community of being into a totalized whole. Its sentiment: "I go toward the other out of my own lack, I tend to the other not primarily to attend to the other, but as perhaps requiting my own lack. I am tempted to possess the other to enable my own achieved self-possession."[199] There is something vampiric or predatory about the self, or Spirit, who brings itself about not by reverencing the other but by using the other instrumentally to effect one's emergence.

In the end, while it succeeds in recuperating a sense of univocity from the flux of equivocity, modern dialectic fails to account fully for the inherent ambiguity and universal impermanence of being. Dialectic recognizes alterity, but only in order to instrumentalize the other as a means to achieving its own end. Dialectic betrays eros by settling for what is not infinite. The problem: dialectic enacts a closure upon itself, creating a system in which individuals are sublated into the larger whole. Otherness is preserved, but at the cost of being counted now amidst the Same. The charge of ontotheology sticks: this is not the God of the Whole but God as the Whole.

2.3.4 The Metaxological Sense of Being

The metaxological sense of being is Desmond's neologism, a combination of the Greek *metaxu* or "middle" with *logos* meaning "word, discourse, account." Metaxology, Desmond writes, "sees philosophy as seeking a logos of the metaxu, an intelligible account of what it means to be between or intermediate."[200] It stresses

> the mediated community of mind and being, but not in terms of the self-mediation of the same. It calls attention to a pluralized mediation, beyond closed self-mediation from the side of the same, and hospitable to the mediation of the other, or transcendent, out of its

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[199] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 11-12.
[200] William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness* (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 21.

own otherness. It puts the emphasis on an intermediation, not a self-mediation, however dialectically qualified.[201]

In its emphasis on "pluralized mediation," metaxology "tries to redeem the promise of equivocity beyond univocity and dialectic."[202] Whereas Hegel's dialectic suppressed equivocity, metaxology recuperates equivocity and balances it with univocity.

Jere O'Neill Surber indicates how metaxology moves beyond Hegel's dialectic:

1. While univocity and equivocity remain…complexly interrelated, the true complexity and nuance of their interrelations cannot be adequately described in terms of some dialectical synthesis or "higher univocity."
2. Although a systematic framework for exploring this complex web of interrelations is indispensable, it cannot constitute the sort of "closed system" that the dialectical stance implies.
3. While a metaxological perspective is not opposed to concepts…its concepts must continually maintain their connection with concrete experience, which lends to them a sort of openness and "jaggedness" or "irregularity of contour" suppressed in the dialectical approach.[203]

In other words, metaxological philosophy (1) strives to preserve the truthfulness of both univocity and equivocity, (2) resists closure upon itself as "the system," preferring to retain its openness to the happening of being, and (3) it swears off any pretense to "taking the measure" of being; indeed, its fidelity to the flux of being means that there is a surplus to being that remains inexhaustible by philosophical concept.

Metaxology cannot be thought of as attempting to transcend the *metaxu* or to offer a way of escaping the flux. On the contrary, it is a form of reflection attuned to beginning *media res*. "In a literal sense," for Desmond, metaxology is necessary because "being between is an *inter-esse*, where the interest is in the being of the *inter*. All genuine interest is *inter-esse*, not at all just what we normally call self-interest. The latter bends the *inter-esse* back to the self from the *inter*.

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[201] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.
[202] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 178.
[203] Jere O'Neill Surber, "Reading Desmond" in *Between System and Poetics*, 59.

True interest is beyond self-interest, for it is truly beyond self and is in the *inter*."[204] Metaxology as a way of life, endeavoring to remain faithful to and speak truthfully of what it means to be in the between.

Now, while not antagonistic to *all* practices of dialectic, metaxology may be seen as needed in order to avoid Hegel's "dialectical reduction."[205] Whereas Hegelian dialectic privileges a singular self-mediation encompassing the Other within the Same, metaxology remains committed to a form of double-mediation. For Desmond, to be true to the nature of the *metaxu* means remaining mindful not only of self-mediation but also of the inter-mediation originating in what is other to the self. "Genuine philosophical thinking," he avers, "must be *both* self-mediating and also open to the intermediation between thought and what is other to thought, precisely as other."[206] In this way, metaxological philosophy makes good on the promise of the *dia* in dialectic by resisting efforts to subsume the other into its categories, preferring instead to initiate a dialogue *with* the other. Such a give-and-take, essential to metaxology, renders it a dialogical, rather than a monological, practice. Instead of a soliloquy delivered by a self who "struts and frets his hour upon the stage," metaxology initiates a dialogue. To be metaxological means that one "dwells with the interplay of sameness and difference, identity and otherness, not by mediating a more inclusive whole but by recurrence to the rich ambiguities of the middle, and with due respect for forms of otherness that are dubiously included in the immanence of a dialectical whole."[207] In its commitment to abiding within the flux and ambiguity of existence and giving ear the call of voices suppressed in other philosophical practices, metaxology affects a stance of ongoing vigilance, open and attentive to the call of the other. Metaxology, so framed,

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204 Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 452.
205 Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 4.
206 Ibid., 5.
207 Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 164.

becomes akin to a form of philosophical prayer listening for and willing to respond to the call of the Other.

Whereas Hegel, as Aristotle before him, sought to achieve a determinate system, Desmond resists closure of the whole. Rather than proceeding by imposing categories upon being, metaxology proceeds more tentatively and in a style hewing closely to Socratic-Platonic dialogue. "I think of Socratic dialogue as witnessing to an honesty to where we find ourselves," he writes, "an honesty also willing to confess that in the midst of the ordinary something beyond comes to make a call on us. We can receive the call(er), or we can turn away from the invitation."[208] Westphal and Kearney would nod in agreement, for here Desmond manifests an openness to Kearney's micro-eschatology, the irruption of the transcendent into the immanent order, and to Westphal's understanding of the nature of metaphysics as a vocation, a response to having first been called.

Instead of seeing metaxology as a "penthouse" on top of the univocal, equivocal, and dialectic sense of being, Desmond envisions it as a way of bringing "to truer articulating what is at work in them."[209] The Hegelian slip shows as each sense of being is *aufgehoben* and incorporated into the metaxological. Metaxology neither supplants nor annuls these voices but hold together to allow each to speak of being. Metaxology symphonically weaves together each voice and allows it to speak its truth yet balances these voices so no one dominates the other. As a task, then, metaxology leads to a "*practice* of a kind of thinking"[210] mindful of the plurality of voices at play within being.

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[208] Desmond, "Wording the Between," in *The William Desmond Reader*, 197.
[209] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 423.
[210] Ibid.

Like dialectic, metaxology is a mode of mindfulness that "tries to think beyond an oscillation back and forth between univocity and equivocity, while facing both of these fair and square."[211] And, like Socratic-Platonic philosophy, metaxology unfolds as an ongoing dialogue – a process of being questioned and questioning – with being. Yet this surfaces a paradox: every time we question, we acknowledge a lack (otherwise we would not ask) and a presentiment of what is missing (we are, after all, asking *about* something). So, he asks, "How can mind be beyond lack, be somehow already full?"[212] His answer:

> Plato (as we see from the *Meno*, and elsewhere) was attentive to the issue and puts the essential question: if we are in search, how do we recognize what we seek, did we not already have some sense of what we seek? If we did not have this prior sense of what we seek, we could not seek it at all in the first place. Contrariwise, if we do have this prior sense, why do we seek at all, since we already seem to have what we seek, and we cannot really seek what we already have?[213]

For Desmond, the paradoxical lack points "deeper than lack to a more positive condition of being."[214] Like Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas, Desmond posits the presence of the end (*telos*) as abiding at the origin of our search (*arche*). Desire moves not from indigent lack to fullness but from the presentiment of plenitude toward actual plenitude.

This will become clearer if we return to the *Symposium* and the myth of Eros. Recall how Socrates, speaking in the voice of Diotima, recounts the birth of Eros to the group gathered at Callias' bacchanal. Eros, Socrates-Diotima recounts, was conceived on the night of Aphrodite's birthday. *Poros*, or "resource," became drunk on nectar and fell asleep in the garden. Penia, or "poverty," who had been begging outside the gates of the party seized this opportunity to

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[211] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 55.
[212] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 130.
[213] Ibid., 130.
[214] Ibid.

"relieve her lack of resources: she would get a child from *Poros*." The offspring of Poros and Penia, Eros bears a likeness to both

> he is always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead, he is trough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky, having his mother's nature, always living in Need. But on his father's side he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a love of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings. (203d)

Eros is a being of the between: between mortality and immortality, poverty and riches, wisdom and ignorance. Indeed, Eros serves as one of the daimons, traversing the space between gods and mortals "conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to gods, while to men they bring commands from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices" (203a). Eros appears as the "paradoxical mixture of poverty and plenitude,"[215] the child in whom abundance and lack intermingle.

It seems the dual parentage of Eros as the offspring of Poros and Penia is commonly forgotten. Hegel, for one, so stressed the indigence of *Geist* that no heed was paid to Poros; Hegel's god moves from lack to fullness, from indeterminacy to determinacy, through a process of self-determination that overcomes what is lacking. A metaxological consideration of desire remains attentive, however, to Eros's two inheritances: the surplus wealth of Poros and the poverty of Penia. Heir of both, Eros is born into a state of enriched poverty, bearing within itself a promissory note guaranteed by Poros's surplus riches. Though it does not yet possess the fullness of its patrimony, the promise of fulfillment goads Eros's restless adventuring. Contrary to the image portrayed in movies and novels, a properly Erotic itinerary is not one of promiscuity but of pilgrimage guided by desire's restlessness toward the promise of infinite fulfillment.

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[215] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 316.

Our restless desire for fulfillment, animated by the enriched poverty of Eros, implicates us *in* the *metaxu* and *as* a *metaxu*. The between describes not only *where* we find ourselves on the map of being (topology) but also *who* we are as beings (anthropology). We began to see this, at least inchoately, when we discussed "intentional finitude" as the way we respond to infinite succession. Faced with the coming-to-be and passing-away of beings, we experience a drive to "mediate between unity and multiplicity in our search for wholeness."[216] We experience ourselves as being between lack and fullness and we intermediate between ourselves and things in search of wholeness. Our enriched poverty resists premature closure: *no, this will not satisfy…continue your search*. But the promise of dialectic, at least in its more modern forms that emphasize the self in this mediation, is betrayed when the circular movement between self and what is other *terminates* in the self. The vicissitudes of the flux are, in dialectic, brought under determinate control; the circle of inter-mediation is gradually closed in upon itself. The dynamism of being is ossified.

2.4   Transcendence: Exterior, Interior, Superior

In this section, I consider the role of "transcendence" in metaxological philosophy. Transcendence, like being, can be said in many ways. Indeed, we have anticipated this discussion when we took up the nature of *infinite succession, intentional infinitude,* and *actual infinitude*. We need now to clarify how Desmond's three types of "transcendence" arise from amidst the between and point beyond it. If metaphysical mindfulness arises in the midst of beings, then

> the question of transcendence has nothing to do with a leap out of being into the void, but with the deepest mindfulness of what is emergent in the middle itself. Again, the double meaning of *meta* is relevant. "*Meta*" is being in the midst; "*meta*" is also reference to what is beyond, what is transcendent. Metaxological metaphysics must think the

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[216] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 179.

doubleness of this tension between being in the midst *and* being referred by self-transcendence to the transcendence of what is other, what is over and above.[217]

Tutored into a form of metaxological mindfulness, we will be able to recognize how the signs we encounter in the midst of the *metaxu* point beyond themselves to a superior transcendence on account of whom being *is at all*.

2.4.1　　　　Exterior Transcendence (T_1)

Desmond claims: "the happening of the between is a metaxological community of transcendences."[218] Note, first, the between or *metaxu* is not static; it is a happening, an ongoing event. Metaxology reflects upon this happening in a plurivocal manner:

> Univocity puts the stress on something or someone *determinate*, this or that character or thing. Equivocity puts the stress on something more *indeterminate*, something neither this nor that, something ambiguous, especially in the heart of acting human beings. Dialectic puts the stress on a togetherness of oneself and others, on a meditation of our differences in the exchange with each other. Metaxology does not dispose of these three senses but aligns them more truly with what in the between is *more than determinable* and *beyond our self-determination*. It is attentive to many-meaninged inter-play, bringing more to the fore the plurivocity of inter-mediations between oneself and others.[219]

As a happening, second, the between possesses a communal character. The "happening" does not take place solely within each being; it happens between and amidst them. Thus, when Desmond refers to the "community of transcendences," he is indicating how at the basic and most primordial level of being, each and every being is in relationship with what is other to it. To be at all is to be in relationship because *being* is relational.

The first transcendence in this community is what Desmond calls "exterior transcendence" (T_1). We saw this above when we treated infinite succession, referring to "the

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[217] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 44.
[218] Ibid., 206.
[219] Desmond, "The Theater of the *Metaxu*: Staging the Between," 114.

transcendence of *beings as other* in exteriority."[220] It is easy to take for granted that beings are other to us and exist independently of us, each with its own integrity. Exterior transcendence, Simpson observes, keeps us mindful how "the otherness of the world precedes and exceeds our thinking of it."[221] There are determinate beings other to us and irreducible to any system; being, in its intransigent resistance to schematization, bears witness to something in excess of determinacy. Being as other to us is not *indeterminate* or awaiting our impress to give it form; being as other to us is and remains *overdeterminate* and cannot be fixed or frozen in place. *Esse Semper Maior*: being is always greater and its overdeterminacy cannot be systematized or exhausted.

A metaxological mindfulness of T_1 remains alert to how we are always immersed within a world of beings. Beings come into being and pass away; flowers bloom and wither, animals are born and die. "There is a constitutive doubleness that, as coming to be and passing away, is inscribed ontologically on their being as becoming."[222] This doubleness affects the way we perceive and reflect upon what it means to be. In the tree outside my window, a robin builds her next. On an ontic level, I know *what* she is: a bird. I behold her and am aware of her ontological doubleness: last spring, she was not but now in late summer, she is; in a year, in all likelihood, she will be no longer. She *has* being now, but only fleetingly.[223] Along with every other finite being, she bears within herself the crack of equivocity rendering her susceptible to the ebb and flow of time.

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[220] Desmond, *Art, Origins, and the Absolute*, 268.
[221] Simpson, 46.
[222] Ibid., 90.
[223] Fragility is a frequent Scriptural theme. Isaiah 40:6-7 "The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass." Psalm 37:2 "For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb."

Metaxological mindfulness does not, however, despair at the inherent fragility of being. This is because the wash of infinite succession can both

> appall us and exalt us. We face our own nothingness, and yet we feel ourselves strangely native to the cosmos. We shrink to nothing before the immensity, and yet we sing our thanks out into the openness. And there are breakthroughs beyond the sense of void infinity, such as made Pascal afraid, into an appreciation of infinitude as plenitude. We breathe the glory of the sublime creation, in its disproportion to our power to master it.[224]

Where the ontic question probes *what* something is in its determinacy, and the ontological question considers *how* something perdures as an identity-in-impermanence, it falls to the metaphysical question to ask after the whole of being: *why being at all*?

For one metaxologically attuned, the question *Why being and not nothing?* erupts as a response to having heard the address of being. We come to be in the midst of being's happening and grow mindful of how beings are interconnected and intermediate with one another. Metaphysics begins, consequently, as a *response* to dwelling amidst and stirred into mindfulness by being. The external world communicates itself, poetically expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins in *As kingfishers catch fire*:

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves—goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*.[225]

Metaxology responds to the address of exterior transcendence and empowers our response. Philosophical approaches guided by Descartes, for instance, would look askance at this approach, perhaps even deeming it eccentric. And, in a way, metaxology is eccentric: it is neither centered in nor does it index being to the Cogito because it is elicited as a response in a dialogue initiated from outside oneself.

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[224] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 206.
[225] Hopkins, 129.

The vector directing every act of self-transcendence finds its origin, accordingly, not in the self but in the advent of transcendence. Again, recall Augustine's *response* to creation as he seeks the object of his love. Over and again, no being satisfies his quest, each pointing beyond itself and the created order toward its Creator.[226] Far from a dispassionate looking about, his odyssey is an eccentric quest enacted as a response to experiencing the call of exterior transcendence manifested in beauty. Augustine, having been addressed by being, is implicated in a quest to move beyond himself toward being (T_1) and, finding no created thing capable of satisfying his restless desire, toward the one of whom all beings in exterior transcendence sing "He made us" (Ps 99:3).

2.4.2 Interior Transcendence (T_2)

Confronted by the oscillation of exterior beings as they come to be and pass out of being, we are struck with metaphysical wonder: *why anything at all?* Being does not unfold neutrally before us; rather, we are drawn into the interplay of being where we take a stand on ourselves. What Desmond called earlier *intentional infinitude* proves doubly implicating, by launching us into a quest for an ultimate origin and exposing within ourselves the abyssal depths of a restless desire to know. Thus, the "transcendence" in self-transcendence conveys both (1) the act of reaching out beyond oneself and (2) an awareness of transcendence abiding within the depths of one's being. Interior transcendence (T_2) indicates "the transcendence of *self-being* such as we meet especially in the self-surpassing power of the human being."[227] The capacity for self-transcendence renders us creatures of possibility who, in freedom, take a stand on who we become:

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[226] Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.
[227] Desmond, *Hegel's God*, 3.

the meaning of possibility can here be defined immanently rather than just determined externally. There is possibility as freedom, perhaps even as the promise of free finite creativity. Human self-transcendence awakens to itself in the astonishing givenness of being, awakens to its own astonishing powers of self-surpassing. Human beings are finite yet exceed finitude in their self-surpassing.[228]

Self-transcendence, moreover, bears the dual mark of eccentricity and ecstasy. Self-transcendence originates in its *being awakened* to itself in the midst of beings, an awakening instigated by the address of being. Self-transcendence is eccentric in being a response to having been astonished. As ecstatic, it is not just "outer reaching" but *other* reaching: it reaches out toward being *other* to itself, directed by being's call to the self. The "vector of transcendence"[229] originates neither in the self nor is it self-authored; its origin is external and, consequently, each act of self-transcendence must be thought of as a response to an anterior summons. We are open to self-transcendence, to reaching out beyond ourselves, because we are first opened by transcendence.

Self-transcendence responds to and is guided by our awaking to what Desmond calls the "intimate strangeness of being." Intimate strangeness

> refers to the middle condition of our thought of being: being is strange because it has an otherness, indeed marvel, of which we are not the conceptual masters; it is intimate, in that this very strangeness allows no stance of thinking "outside" being – we are participants in what we think about. Being indeed gives us to be before we think about the meaning of what it is to be. The strangeness of being is as much about us, as we are within it.[230]

Stirred by being, one knows oneself as one among other beings, yet recognizes that their "strangeness" eludes any conceptual schema. We know beings intimately because we are among them and we are because of them, yet they elude capture by our concepts. Self-transcendence possesses, then, a double movement. The self is awakened *by* the advent of transcendence, the

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 5.
[230] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 120.

address of being other to self; the self is awakened *to* transcendence, impelling it outward in a ceaseless quest for wholeness.

2.4.3   Superior Transcendence (T₃)

We turn now to what Desmond calls actual infinitude, superior transcendence, or *transcendence itself* (T₃). This is not to be confused with "the highest being in the sense with which God is often identified – namely, the *ens realissimum*."[231] The God of whom he writes is not "a" being because transcendence itself (T₃) is

> in excess of determinate beings, as their original ground; it would be in excess of our self-transcendence, as its most ultimate possibilizing source. It would be beyond the ordinary doublet of possibility/reality, as their possibilizing source; it could not be just a possibility, nor indeed a realization of possibility. It would have to be "real" possibilizing power, more original and other than finite possibility and realization. It would have to be possibilizing beyond determinate possibility, and "real" beyond all determinate realization.[232]

What is most distinctive about "transcendence itself" can be encapsulated in one word: possibilizing.[233] Transcendence itself is the possibilizing source of the other two transcendences as their origin and sustaining ground.

Desmond's "possibilizing" God bears no relation to the god rejected as ontotheological. Ontotheology's god takes up residence and has a job to do *within* the immanent order. Such a god becomes, as Westphal writes, "a Highest Being who is the key to the meaning of the whole of being."[234] With Heidegger, Desmond views Hegel's god as the palmary example of

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[231] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 19.
[232] Desmond, *Hegel's God*, 3.
[233] Kearney, in "Maybe Not, Maybe: William Desmond on God," cites Desmond's accent on possibilizing as rendering Desmond less sympathetic to Kearney's understanding of divine *posse*. Desmond's response to Kearney's *The God Who May Be* identifies six different senses of the word "possibility" and invites Kearney to specific precisely how he uses *posse*. Their exchange is a model of scholarly rigor and charity: each takes the other seriously and they think together to understand their disagreements and look for a way forward. It's a model of capacitating argument.
[234] Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 261.

ontotheology. For Hegel, "God 'needs' man, and hence is defined as what it is or may be in terms of its relativity to us."[235] Rather than a possibilizing divinity, Hegel's god is one for whom divinity remains but a possibility:

> a God that is not truly what it may be in the beginning, but has to become itself, fully realize what it might be, or may be, in a process of becoming or self-becoming, in which it is teleologically, or eschatologically, more fully itself or complete at the end of the process. I think this way of thinking runs a grave risk of producing counterfeit doubles of God, even it gives to some the satisfaction of being needed by God.[236]

Hegel's god is an "erotic absolute" defined by an "indefinite abstraction or lack; self-exit into otherness; return to self through and from the otherness; now in the end explicit self-constitution, finally determined as fully real."[237] This god unfolds and is driven by the indigent lack of Penia with scant recognition of the enriched poverty inherited by Poros.

By describing it as possibilizing, Desmond means to extricate "transcendence itself" from the plane of being. God is not *a* being but, rather, the origin, creator, and sustainer of being. This is not a God of inner potentiality or a need to create. God's relationship to the whole is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal: God possibilizes being, gives being to be *at all*, but not to achieve any self-serving goal. God does not need humanity to work out God's issues or to become God. The creator and sustainer of all creates not out of poverty but from rabundance; God possibilizes the whole of creation for no "reason" other than the goodness of being itself.

Any recourse to a God not confined to our immanent order cannot but stress our language. Indeed, Desmond recurs to several metaphors in an effort to express a sense of the transcendent God who evades capture in finite speech. Instead of the "erotic absolute" who *needs*

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[235] William Desmond, "Maybe, Maybe Not," *Irish Theological Quarterly* no. 68 (2003): 114.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 230.

creation, he employs metaphors of the agapeic absolute,[238] absolute original[239] and agapeic

origin[240] to draw attention to the "too muchness" and excess of God's creative power. Metaphoric

speech is inescapable when speaking of God. For instance

> The absolute original as depth is a metaphor for the ground of being. Interestingly, the Latin for "high," *altus* can also mean "deep"…As a vertical transcendence, the absolute original is beyond a univocal either/or; it is double, both high and deep. It requires a metaxological both/and. As height, it is transcendent to the world; as depth, it is its immanent ground…This ground, or, better, this grounding, is the profound upsurge of the power of being, that most intimate constituent of beings without which they would be nothing…To say that the absolute original is the ground is to say that all finite being is shot through with its own dynamic orientation toward absoluteness, toward its own potential wholeness and participation in infinite for which all creation grown.[241]

Note how the metaphor works to portray "transcendence itself" as intimately present to the

whole of creation. It spans the heights and depths of created being; indeed, by grounding creation

it leaves upon the created order a trace of its creative excess, an enriched poverty, orienting us

toward fulfillment. The metaphor opens consideration what it means to be in the midst of being

(*meta*) while gesturing beyond itself to what is beyond being (*meta*) as the creative and

possibilzing source of all that is.

Let me conclude this section with Kearney's meditation on *The Song of Solomon* 3:1-4.

This brings into relief not only a sense of Desmond's transcendences but shows how they

implicate one another. Kearney quotes the following passage from the Shulamite bride

> Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves;
> I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.
> "I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares;
> I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but found him not.
> The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city.
> "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
> Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves.

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238 Ibid., 230.
239 Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 235.
240 Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 208.
241 Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 235-6.

For Kearney, as Desmond, "the anxious, expectant seeking of the love-struck bride is reversed into a *being-found*, that is, a *being desired*."[242] A nocturnal yearning stirs the bride and impels her from the bedchamber. This is not a feckless search, a random casting about, but a deliberate quest for her Beloved. She *knows* the one for whom she seeks, the one who awakened within her the stirring of a desire that takes her out into the city streets (T_2). She canvasses the city in search of traces of her beloved (T_1). But, as Kearney points out, "it is only *after* the bride has passed the sentinels who found *her* that she finds *Him* whom her soul loves."[243] It is because God first calls to us, calls us into being, calls us into relationship, that we can call out and search for God. The deepest longing of the human heart is an enriched poverty endowed by its Creator who is at once the origin and end, *arche* and *telos,* of desire and its fulfillment.

The range of transcendences considered ($T_1 – T_3$) comprise what Desmond calls the metaxological community of being. And, as it should be clear from his inclusion of self-transcendence, *we* are, each of us, included within the community of transcendence wherein each and every being intermediates with what is other to itself. The world around us is not a neutral tableau; it, too, has been called forth and is sustained by Transcendence itself. The beauty of creation addresses us as we are struck, or pierced, by a face, a vista, a song. Metaxological reflection does not bring us *into* the community of transcendence; it as a response to awakening within it, in *media res*, as we are launched upon our own iteration of the Augustinian itinerary *ab exterioribus ad interior, ab inferioribus ad superiora*: from the exterior to the interior, from the inferior to the superior.

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[242] Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 54
[243] Ibid.

2.5   Minding the Between: The Furrowing Brow of Immanence

In this final part, I round out our consideration of systematic metaphysics by thinking through the modes of "minding" the between. For Desmond, mindfulness of being unfolds in three stages: astonishment, perplexity, and curiosity. Of these he writes

> there is something excessive and overdetermined about the astonishing beginning; then there is a troubled indeterminacy and sense of lack, in the perplexity of mind that is subsequently precipitated; finally, there is a drive to definitive and determination in curiosity that seeks to overcome any survival of troubled indefiniteness and lack, such as we find in perplexity.[244]

He distinguishes these modes because, in the modern era, we have stressed the determinate drive of curiosity and recessed the other two. In tracing the evolution of our mindfulness of the between, he actually gives us a metaphysical genealogy in many ways complementary to Taylor's. Hence "the furrowing brow of immanence" describes the historical process moving from "wide-eyed astonishment" to "squinted-eye perplexity" to, finally, the "furrowed brow of curiosity" insistent on total determinacy.

On the ontological level, Desmond's description of our preference for *l'esprit de geometrie* over *l'esprit de finesse* complements Taylor's. But, as a metaphysical account, Desmond opens up a new vista for us to explore: for while the modes of mindfulness may *forget* their origin in astonishment, they can never un-inherit their ancestry. The curious mind may bristle at, or think itself allergic to, overdeterminacy, but astonishment abides in its DNA. By re-activing even long-dormant seeds of astonishment within our mindfulness, metaxology holds the promise of renewing the way we live in the between.

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[244] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 10.

2.5.1 Wide-Eyed Astonishment: Porosity of Being and *Passio Essendi*

"The beginning of mindfulness," Desmond writes, "is in an original wonder before the givenness of being. Such wonder is often recognized but its significance is not always plumbed."[245] This insight has roots in Aristotle, Plato, and Thales of Miletus. Thales, Plato writes in the *Theatetus* was so enraptured by the stars he fell into a well.[246] Aligned with these figures, Desmond considers "the advent of metaphysical thinking is in a primal astonishment." Indeed, this astonishment is primal, elemental, and irreducible:

> Plato speaks of *thaumazein* as the *pathos* of the philosopher. This is sometimes translated as *wonder* and this is not inappropriate. Astonishment, however, captures the sense of being rocked back on one's heels as it were, by the otherness of being in its givenness. Plato says *pathos*: there is a pathology in metaphysics. There is a suffering, an undergoing; there is a patience of being; there is a receiving that is not the production of the metaphysician or mind.[247]

Note the imagery: we are *rocked back*, we *suffer* and we *undergo* the address of what is other to ourselves. In astonishment, we experience the "bite of otherness"[248] inflicting a wound opening us to what is other than ourselves. We are open because opened by the givenness of being, a givenness defying delimitation by concept or exhaustive expression by speech. The overdeterminacy of being breaks upon us as a "rupture and renewal, at once a refreshed distancing and a drawing close of mind and being."[249] Unlike Frodo, who bore a sliver of the Morgul-knife within his shoulder, this wound does not inhibit or threaten to incapacitate our adventure; to the contrary, the rupture of astonishment capacitates us by rending us open to what is other to ourselves and prompts us to pose the question of what gave us *to be*. Wounded by astonishment, we ask: *Why anything at all?*

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[245] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 5.
[246] *Theatetus* 174a
[247] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.
[248] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 106.
[249] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.

Calling to mind our "Five Commandments,"[250] let us consider the following description of astonishment as the source of metaphysics. Astonishment, Desmond holds,

> opens a mindfulness that we do not self-produce. Astonishment is a precipitation of mindfulness before something admirable, or loveable, or marvelous, communicated from an otherness that has the priority in speaking to the porosity of our being. It comes to us, comes over us, and we open up in response. We do not first go toward something, but find ourselves going out of ourselves because something has made its way, often in startling communication, in the very depths or roots of our being, beyond our self-determination.[251]

If metaxological mindfulness originates in this sense of astonishment, the punches thrown by critics against metaphysics will not land. Metaphysics, first and foremost, *responds* to the advance of something other and outer to ourselves. It does not privilege any singular locus for "the Truth" because it originates in the everyday encounters, amidst the flux, where we are struck by what is "admirable, or loveable, or marvelous" communicating itself and pointing to something in excess of itself. Metaphysics answers the call heard as we stand amidst beings (*meta*), a call directing us beyond beings (*meta*) to the source of being itself. Opened by astonishment, we are creatures of ecstatic desire reaching outward and otherward from the abyssal depths of our enriched poverty as our desires strains forward toward the promise of ultimate fulfillment.

There is something inescapably *childlike* about astonishment. A girl grasps her father's hand and says in hushed awe, "Look, the moon!" A boy devours fairy tales and play-acts them. Children live comfortably in the "primal and elemental" stage of astonishment, unafraid to show their wonder or to ask the "big questions."[252] Indeed, childhood astonishment may augur the future: she may become a physicist, he an actor. Yet, though we grow out of childhood, we do

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[250] (1) Don't index the divine to human reason, (2) Do not be faithless to the flux, (3) Do not produce counterfeit Gods, (4) be attentive to everyday disclosures, (5) Metaphysics is a vocation
[251] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 106.
[252] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 11.

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not have to lose our capacity for childlike awe. Desmond observes, "the child is not only the father to the man, but the man is the shield of time that shelters, or denies, the idiotic child he was born as."[253] How many of us began careers only to lose zest and joy because, rather than nurturing a sense of childlike wonder or awe, we banished our inner child to the cellar?

My point: Desmond's description of astonishment not only *informs* by describing it but, in returning us to its origin in the *metaxu*, it also *invites* us to recollect experiences of being "rocked back" or "struck." This invitation requires a level of finesse, a certain patience, and a willingness to consider "the nuances of singular occasions."[254] But by ruminating on the "nuances of the singular," metaxology can bring to light otherwise concealed or recessed depths. In fact, I believe we can get at two more concepts central to Desmond's metaphysics –the "porosity of being" and the *passio essendi* – by looking at the following example drawn from the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Balthasar describes how, "the little child awakens to self-consciousness in his being-called by the love of his mother."[255]Translated into metaxological terms: the advent of the mother is irruptive and invitatory; her loving smile and tender caress addresses the child, simultaneously enabling and inviting the child's response. Balthasar continues:

> Since, however, the child in this process replies and responds to a directive that cannot in any way have come from within its own self – it would never occur to the child that it itself had produced the mother's smile – the entire paradise of reality that unfolds around the "I" stands there as an incomprehensible miracle: it is not thanks to the gracious favor of the "I" that space and the world exist, but thanks to the gracious favor of the "Thou." And if the "I" is permitted to walk upon the ground of reality and to cross the distance to reach the other, this is due to an original favor bestowed on him, something for which, a priori, the "I" will never find the sufficient reason in himself.[256]

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[253] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 270.
[254] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 53.
[255] Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Movement toward God" in *Explorations in Theology* vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 15, quoted in D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 45.
[256] Ibid., 16, quoted in Schindler, 46.

Desmond would agree: mother and child have their own integrities and inter-mediate. The awakening of self-consciousness, or the beginning of mindfulness in astonishment, have a similar dynamic: the call of transcendence engenders self-transcendence. Still more: the call of the other, the in-breaking of the other's address, capacitates the "I" by astonishing the "I" into movement. movement.

So, what does metaxology add?

For starters, metaxology surfaces the means by which intermediation is possible: the porosity of being. The porosity of being, for Desmond, describes the "between space where there is no fixation of the difference of minding and things, where our mindfulness wakes to itself by being woken up by the communication of being in its emphatic otherness."[257] One must resist reifying this idea by thinking of discrete beings as having "pores" or "openings" permitting transit and mediation. Porosity is not something to be *had* because it is no *thing* at all. However, if the porosity of being

> is not determinate objectivity neither is it indeterminate or self-determining subjectivity. There is fluidity and passing – a liquid matrix. The porosity is prior to univocal objectivity and it is prior to intentionality. In and through it we are given to be in a patience of being more primal than any cognitive or pragmatic endeavor to be.[258]

Porosity is more akin to the enabling milieu or the dynamic and ongoing happening of intermediation. There is something intrinsically paradoxical about it:

> Strange wording: filled with openness. For such a porosity looks like nothing determinate and hence seems almost nothing, even entirely empty. We cannot avoid what looks like the paradoxical conjunction of fullness and emptiness: being filled with openness and yet being empty. This is what makes possible all our determinate relations to determinate beings and process, whether these relations be knowing ones or unknowing.[259]

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[257] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 201-2.
[258] Ibid., 202.
[259] Ibid.

To be human means being confronted with this paradox. Astonishment fills us with emptiness: we behold being filled wide-eyed wonder, but wonder is *no thing*. We undergo at once the fullness and lack and later, in reflecting upon what is lacking, we intimate fullness. Etymologically heir to Poros, porosity conveys the enriched poverty, intermingling lack-and-fullness, at the heart of desire.

As a ceaseless happening, Desmond suggests meditating on porosity as a kind of "passing in passage." An elusive concept, he connects this "passing in passage" with the act of creation which "arising in being and setting, coming to be and passing out of being, creation brings to be the porosity within whose intermedium all things live and move and have their being.[260] Porosity is creation's endowing endowment: it is given to be in the creative act and it gives creation to be a dynamic happening. So, far from an inert "block" or static creation, porosity endows creation with the character of an intermedium or vibrant field of intermediation. The *metaxu*, seen in this light, shimmers with movement. The community of transcendence (T_1-T_3) does not simply take place *on* the *metaxu* as though on a proscenium. The *metaxu pulses* with happening of the between, the potent fluidity "passing in passage" as it doubly intermediates the "passing in passage" *amidst* created beings (*meta*) as its overdeterminate excess points beyond creation toward its creator (*meta*). The "porosity of being" means there is, indeed a crack in everything…and everyone. We are, Desmond writes, "the porosity of being become mindful."[261]

Herein we find an otherwise recessed feature of anthropology brought to light by metaxological reflection. Porosity is not a transitory feature or a function of history. One way of reading *A Secular Age* might be as a narrative of how *once* we were porous but now we are *buffered*. Desmond wants to resist such readings, point out how porosity is

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[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid., 203.

ontologically constitutive, not just historically relative, though it may be true that some epochs exhibit a feel for it, while others reconfigure the ethos of being, and human being, and the porosity is driven underground, say, or out of mind, say, or warped into forms not true to the promise of the original givenness.[262]

The porosity of being is anterior to any effort to reconfigure the ethos. Indeed, every era is but a reconfiguration of primal ethos. This means, accordingly,

> We do not have to identify the primal ethos of being either with a more porous world or with a more buffered world, though a more porous world is closer to the threshold of a more original receiving of being, less cluttered by the construction we have made according to the desires of our own endeavor to be. That there is a reconfigured world means that the modern world we have so configured has a relative character: it may reveal some potencies of the given ethos but it also may hide or repress or cover over other potencies.[263]

Every era, every "social imaginary" or reconfigured ethos, is relative to the primal ethos: each era shapes and forms it, but no reconfiguration exhausts it. Any given reconfiguration of the ethos may be more, or less, faithful to the "promise of the original givenness" but no reconfiguration will ever encapsulate or drain its endowment.

A recuperation of these repressed potencies has significant theological consequences. Responding to Taylor's account of the buffered self, Desmond observes

> perhaps it is the case today that many people have difficulty praying because we have a diminished feel for this more original porosity of being. Of course, if it is true as Professor Taylor says that we have become buffered ourselves, this should not be at all surprising. In the process of buffering ourselves we have not more truly realized our promise, in fact, to the contrary, we have reconfigured ourselves in forgetfulness, if not in mutilation, of the communication of original porosity.[264]

For Desmond, the distinction is not that we *were* porous and are *now* buffered. This latter description would be untrue and betray our constitutive porosity: we may be clogged or

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[262] Desmond, "The Porosity of Being: Towards a Catholic Agapeics," 289.
[263] Ibid., 288.
[264] Ibid., 291.

reconfigured against porosity, but porosity cannot be annihilated or overcome. It needs to be purged and awakened through a renewed sense of astonishment.

To Balthasar's account metaxology contributes an expanded and enriched horizon in which the address of being can be issued and answered. To be sure, there is something instinctively right about Balthasar's observation: ideally it is the mother (or father) whose love awakens the child to itself. But as Kearney urges, we need always be on the lookout for micro-eschatologies, the epiphanies of the everyday. By recollecting experiences of astonishment, by meditating on the overdeterminate happening of being, we can become alert to how the "nuances of the singular" communicate something in excess of singularity. We can be stirred by the intimation of transcendence within us, passing in passage through us, weaving us into whole of the *metaxu*.

Also at play within Desmond's treatment of the porosity of being is what he calls the *passio essendi*. The *passio* conveys the sense that before we grasp at being (*conatus essendi*) we have first to be given to be. It reminds us that "given being is mine, but that it is not given to me by myself."[265] For Desmond, the *passio*

> tells against every autism of being. In it is already an intimate mark of *being in community*. That communicability surges up in our passion of being means that it is already given as an active promise of being in relation to our very being at all. The doubleness of relativity (self-relation is never without other-relation) is expressed in the fact that we are *conatus essendi* as well as *passio essendi*. We are the endeavor to be as well as the patience of being.[266]

The interplay of the *conatus* and *passio essendi* are likewise central to Desmond's thought, so let me give a sense of how a wide-eyed astonishment might take note of them.

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[265] Desmond, "Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal," 164.
[266] Ibid.

For Desmond, the *passio essendi* refers to a patience or undergoing going of being and is the older twin of the *conatus essendi*. Emerging in the porosity of being, the *passio*

> refers to a certain ontological patience signaled by the fact that we are first recipients of being, of being received in being, before we flower as being active. There is an ontological receiving before there is an existential acting. As something ontological, this receiving is constitutive of our being but it is not self-constituted. To call it *passio* is not to imply a mere dead thereness devoid of its own energetic life. Its own life is not first owned by it; it is given to be its own on the basis of a giving that is not its own.[267]

Yet the receiving of the *passio* is no feeble receptivity. Better to think of it as an endowment seeding the self with freedom: one is given to be in order to become. Before one intermediates between beings (T$_2$) or beholds being as other to oneself (T$_1$), one must first be given to be. Only after "coming to be" can one assert oneself in freedom.

Students of philosophy, however, are surely more familiar with the *passio*'s younger twin, the *conatus essendi*, who figures prominently in Spinoza's thought. The *conatus* communicates a sense of grasping at being and self-assertion. Its exemplars include Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Hegel's self-determining *Geist*, Kant's autonomous subject, and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Over the course of the modern era, "the intimacy of being, articulated as *passio essendi* and *conatus essendi*, mutates into the twins of subordination and dominion, submission and overcoming. The first is the *passio* made abject, the second the *conatus* made superject."[268] The recession of the *passio* and the gradual clogging of porosity leaves the *conatus* to seize the center stage.

By no means does Desmond want to deny the *conatus*. His intention, though, is to finesse our understanding of it and to re-balance it with its. Indeed, part of this finessing involves surfacing an ambiguity modern promoters of the *conatus* seek to conceal. Whereas thinkers such

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[267] Ibid., 163-4.
[268] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 270.

as Spinoza and Nietzsche interpret the *conatus* as self-assertive, Desmond calls attention to an etymological fact that *co-natus*, properly speaking, is not

> an endeavor to be but a being "born with." *Conatus* refers us to a more original birth (*natus*) a being given to be which is always with or from another (*co, cum*). The pluralization is there but occluded in the ordinary way of thinking of self-interests and the *conatus*. The endeavor to be is often the more noted aspect of our being because it defines us as a *doing of ourselves.* Especially in the West, we forget the fertile doubleness about the endeavor to be…More truly, the *conatus* refers us back to the patience of being, and indeed to a coming to be, a birthing.[269]

We are both a conjoined "patience of being" and an "endeavor to be"; we incarnate both the *passio* and *conatus*. We assert ourselves because we have been given to be and this given being endows us with the porosity that permits self-transcendence. A reappraisal of the *co-natus* enjoins an even deeper mindfulness that beings are not monads: relationship is not epiphenomenal but constitutive of our having been called into existence.

Sourced deep in the philosophical tradition, metaxology is rooted in experience of originary wonder or astonishment. Struck by the advent of transcendence, we are "rocked back on our heels." Astonishment is a wide-eyed response: our eyes expand in order to take in the happening, but there is too much to apprehend all at once. Considered metaxologically, however, astonishment reveals more than just the bite of otherness catching us off guard. Mindful consideration draws attention to elements of the *metaxu* otherwise taken for granted: the porosity of being and the *passio essendi.* Porosity: the *metaxu* shimmers with the "passing in passage" of beings intermediating with one another, yet as each era passes by and the primal ethos undergoes constant reconfiguration, "…nature is never spent; there lives the dearest freshness deep down things." *Passio essendi*: being cannot be taken *for* granted but *as* granted and gratuitous. It is, yet need not be. The rupture of astonishment *that there is anything at all* includes a moment of self-

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[269] Ibid., 165.

reflection *I am, yet need not be*. Try as we might, the gratuity of being exceeds our grasp, remaining always overdeterminate.

Desmond often refers to astonishment as "agapeic" because "it arises from a surplus or excess out of which an affirmative movement of mind as self-transcending emerges."[270] And, elicited by *agape*, one's self-transcending response is not simply for

> purposes of a return to the self. I do not go out from myself toward the other to appropriate the other and through the other to return to myself. I go toward the other because the other is for itself and always irreducible to what it is for me.[271]

There is a prodigal festiveness to agapeic astonishment; it possesses an unconstrained exuberance in need of being shared, poured out, and given away freely. The agapeic mind, "names a mode of thought thinking what is other to thought, in which there is a release of thinking from itself toward the other as other."[272] As we shall see as we consider the gradual furrowing of immanence's brow, the way we mind the between has lost touch with its origin in agapeic astonishment. Other forms of mindfulness may wander far from their home of origin, but they cannot extirpate their lineage.

2.5.2 Perplexity's Squint

As we have seen, a metaxological understanding of astonishment points to two openings. There is, first, an "inarticulate coming towards us of the intimacy of being."[273] We undergo the opening rupture of being's advent, the *passio essendi* opening us and awakens us to the porosity of being. Second, having been opened, self-transcendence records our efforts to exercise our freedom in search of greater determinacy. The awakening of the *passio* empowers the

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[270] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 11.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 104.
[273] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 188.

adventuring of the *conatus* as it asserts itself in freedom. The rupture of otherness, witnessed in

astonishment, inaugurates the process of selving wherein the power of the *passio* giving us "to

be" concretized through the self-articulation of the *conatus*. The human being remains

inescapably a human becoming as it negotiates its identity *within* the *metaxu* after having been

given to be *in* the *metaxu*.

For Desmond, perplexity arises subsequent to astonishment and denominates a mode of

mindfulness attuned to the outward striving and self-assertion. Perplexity arises subsequent to

astonishment. As Simpson notes, "the intimate strangeness of being gives rise not only to

astonishment but also to perplexity. In perplexity, the focus of mindfulness is drawn to the

strangeness of being, while the intimacy of being becomes recessed, ambiguous, ambivalent."[274]

Whereas astonishment luxuriates in being enveloped by being's overdeterminacy, perplexity

finds itself ill at ease. Instead of overdeterminacy and surplus, perplexity detects indeterminacy

and negative equivocity. Perplexity, astonishment's prodigal son, sets out to "make sense" of

indeterminacy and puts the stick to the *conatus* as its asserts its freedom and autonomy.

In perplexity, the "eyes" narrow to size up what had bowled one over. Squinting eyes

enframe and take the measure of what is other to the self. For Desmond,

> perplexity is not patience to the otherness of being in quite the same way as is the original
> astonishment. In its troubled mindfulness there works a vector of self-transcendence that
> would go toward this otherness of being and, if possible, overcome its own perplexity.
> Perplexity is felt as a lack of definite cognition, driving out beyond itself to overcome
> that lack.[275]

The perplexed mind is troubled by overdeterminacy. The exuberant "It is!" of astonishment gives

way to "What is?" and impels perplexity forward in an act of inquiry. What was undergone and

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[274] Simpson, 36.
[275] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 9.

received in the event of astonishment elicits a counter-movement, one aimed at "making sense" or "getting to the bottom" of *what* took place.

Perplexity is "erotic" insofar as it arises out a sense of indigence. Erotic perplexity is driven by a desire forgetful of the endowed poverty inherited from *Poros*. Desiring to overcome its felt lack, erotic perplexity's seeking

> is qualified by the aim of alleviating perplexity's own troubled mindfulness. In this regard, it is tempted to turn the self-transcending into a search that finally is for the sake of returning the self to its own epistemic peace or satisfaction with itself. Then I go toward the other out of my own lack, I tend to the other not primarily to attend to the other, but as perhaps requiting my own lack. I am tempted to possess the other to enable my own achieved self-possession. [276]

Erotic perplexity regards what is other to self in terms of instrumentality. Whereas agapeic astonishment's self-transcendence moves in affirmation of otherness, erotic perplexity's self-transcendence moves to utilize otherness to sate its own need.

Perplexity, though, need not sever its ties with astonishment. Consider the first chapter of Michael Buckley's *Denying and Disclosing God* where he examines the increasingly fraught relationship between science and faith. Galileo accepted, as many today do not, a version of Augustine's insight in *De Genesi ad literam*: "the language of scripture is adapted to the preconceptions and understanding of the culture in which it was written. Its grammar does not bear upon the issues of astronomical inquiry."[277] Only when we confuse the grammar of the "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scriptures" do we find them contradictory. But because of God's authorship, both Revelation and Nature proclaim the Creator. For Augustine, faith and science were hardly antagonistic. What arose in response to the advent of the holy one (faith) did

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[276] Ibid.
[277] Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God* (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 8.

not forbid ordered inquiry into nature (science). A certain porosity allowed for an intermediation

of the truth *provided* one distinguishes the grammar according to which each speaks.

By the end of the 17th century, however, the intermediation between faith and science

became more difficult. The lives of Galileo (1564-1642), Kepler (1571-1630), and Newton

(1642-1727) trace a series of scientific developments interpretable as a gradual "perplexed

squinting" gradually delimiting scientific inquiry to an immanent field of study. Buckley

describes the consequences of this shift as resulting in

> three distinct settlements negotiated between the new knowledge and the ancient faith: in
> Galileo, they are separate enterprises, neither contradicting the other and neither having a
> place within the other. Where certainty is found, the one will correct the other as is the
> case with any knowledge. In Kepler, they are finally a single enterprise, a deduction of
> what is likely and appropriate within the universe from the triune nature of God and the
> suggestion or the confirmation of that deduction from observation and mathematic. In
> Newton's universal mechanics, science gives to religion crucially important evidence, its
> methodology, and its foundation in fundamental religion.[278]

Each in his own way, these were thinkers variously hospitable to God. For Galileo, "religion and

science differ in subject matter, purposes, appropriate methods, or procedures, and language. If

these differences are maintained, each can contribute to the general advance of human beings

toward real knowledge."[279] Kepler, by contrast, took the doctrine of the Trinity as an *a priori* and

sought to unify astronomy and theology. This alignment means scripture *and* geometry are

equally theological languages: "the study of geometry, then, and all of those things whose truth

is geometrical, is finally the study of God."[280] Newton turns Kepler on his head. Instead of

arguing from an *a priori* belief in the Triune God, Newton frames "a science that was universal

in its compass and which argued to the divine reality from the nature of the world.[281] For

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[278] Ibid., 23.
[279] Ibid., 9.
[280] Ibid., 15.
[281] Ibid., 18.

Newton, then, the basis of creation was not the Creative God of whom all creation sings but, rather, a universal mechanics giving "a foundation to both mathematics and religious belief."[282]

If we look at the movement from Augustine to Galileo, and from Galileo to Newton, I think we can get a sense of how perplexity has evolved. In Augustine, there is a sense of porosity between the human and creation. We saw this, earlier, in Book X of the *Confessions* and, more recently, in his insight found in *De Genesi ad literam*. In Augustine, we have a sense of the balance of the *passio* and *conatus*. By the time of Galileo, however, the balance has begun to tip. Instead of a fluid intermediation between religion and science, Galileo presages Stephen J. Gould's NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria) wherein faith and science have nothing to do with one another: live and let live, so to speak. A generation later, we find in Newton a thinker for whom the precision of the universe *requires* a God. His cosmos is a system,

> a unity composed of the sun, planets, and comets whose masses and motions are proportioned so carefully that they "could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being." Mechanics, if it is to be faithful to its reduction of movement back to force, must go beyond mechanical causes.[283]

By Newton, we have a cosmos stripped of metaphysical excess or overdeterminacy. The God countenanced by a perplexity bereft of astonishment is a *deus ex machina* invoked as necessary to push the start button on the universal mechanism. There seems no place in this system for the theophanic God who offers the divine name in Exodus 3:14 or the God revealed at Jesus' baptism. Rather than disclose its name, Newton's god it "from the mechanics that has furnished the warrant for his existence and attributes."[284]

Newton is not alone in being possessed by a rage for order. Descartes, Hegel, and the early Wittgenstein are all erotic perplexity's epigone as each tries to bring a sense of determinacy

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[282] Ibid.
[283] Ibid., 19.
[284] Ibid., 20.

to the whole. The point: in eras dominated by erotic perplexity, the chiaroscuro of exterior

transcendence (T_1) will be regarded as a sign of troubling equivocity in need of determination.

Hence the "squint" of perplexity: one squints in order to narrow the range of vision, to bring the

object of inquiry into greater relief. Wide-eyed astonishment cedes to the perplexed gaze which,

having registered, *It is!* tries to overcome its own sense of ignorance by establishing more

concretely *what it is*.

As a mode of metaphysical mindfulness, perplexity is itself a *metaxu*, between

astonishment and curiosity. There is no "one-speed" perplexity, because it admits of a range. It

can be wooed by *l'esprit de finesse* and remain in close contact with its roots, preserving a

balance between the *conatus* and the *passio*. It can be seduced by *l'esprit de geometrie* to wander

far from its origin in astonishment as it strives to "get the measure" of what it beholds. Newton,

to my mind, seems the incarnation of perplexity: harnessing the power of the *conatus*, he works

out a mechanics of the cosmos at least *prima facie* hospitable to the divine. Heidegger's critique

of ontotheology's god lands: this is hardly a god before whom one sings, or dances, or offers

prayers. Could it be otherwise? Only thinly connected to its origin in astonishment, Newton's

"God was not encountered as a presence; God was inferred as a conclusion from what one did

encounter."[285]

2.5.3   Curiosity's Furrowed Brow

Desmond's third form of mindfulness is curiosity. When perplexity strays too far from

astonishment, it mutates and becomes increasingly hostile toward being. For the curious mind

the overdeterminacy of astonishment

> can be too easily forgotten, just as also the troubled indeterminacy of perplexity can be
> dulled. If to be is to be determinate, here to be is nothing if it is not determinate. Being is

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[285] Ibid., 37.

nothing but determinacy and to be exhausted in the totality of all determinations. The danger: hostility to ontological astonishment is twinned with the annihilation of the wonder of being itself.[286]

Curiosity abhors vagueness and imprecision; for the curious mind "being is a mere strangeness to be domesticated; beings are mere strangers over against us to be fixed and conquered – strangers to be made, by us, no longer strange."[287] The play of equivocity cannot be countenanced and must be brought to heel: to be is to be determinate, and all will be determined. If astonishment was rocked back by overdeterminacy, and perplexity sought to *get* the measure of a seemingly indeterminate happing, the task curiosity sets itself is to *give* the measure as it tries to solve the "problem" of being.

Desmond regards curiosity as astonishment's "ungrateful child." It is modernity's *l'enfant terrible* at whose impatient insistence the *ethos* has been reconfigured

> out of distrust of equivocity, expressed in the univocalizing mentality of dualistic opposition that produces a devaluing objectification of being on one side and a subjectification of value on the other side. Both sides deprive value of ontological ground, and this devaluation, in turn, forces the subject to step into the emptiness where it manifests itself in a reactive activism, itself expressing a will to power that will to ground itself, or that claims to be self-generating, or indeed that in final exasperation dismisses all grounding and proudly stands there as groundless will to power that will brook no resistance from any other, that will make no apology for itself, but simply will insist that its way will be the way and the truth, and that it will get its way.[288]

Petulant curiosity turns its back on the festivity of astonishment (*It is!*) and the wanderlust of perplexity (*What is?*) to state soberly: *What is it?* as it trains its gaze at the "determinate being there of beings."[289]

If Newton proved an exemplar of a hypertrophied perplexity, let me offer Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Baron D'Holbach (1723-1789) as exemplars of how the narrow eyes of

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[286] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 281.
[287] Simpson, 38.
[288] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 41.
[289] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 283.

perplexity become the furrowed brow of curiosity. At their hands, Newton's universal mechanics undergoes a drastic modification. From Newton, Buckley writes,

> Diderot and d'Holbach accepted the universality of mechanics, that the mechanical method could deal with all of reality from mathematics to theology; what they rejected of Newton was his claim that the mechanical study of natural phenomena necessarily leads to a non-mechanical principle, to a transcendence source above nature, i.e., to God. From Descartes, Diderot and d'Holbach refused his metaphysics or first philosophy as nonsense – as Newton had before them; but from Descartes, they accepted the autonomy of mechanics, i.e., that all physical reality was mechanical and must be explained through mechanical principles.[290]

For Diderot and d'Holbach, there is no need to invoke the divine in order to make sense of the universe or its operations. The universe is a self-contained whole, closed in upon itself. By enacting a synthesis between "universal mechanics (à la Newton) with only mechanical principles (à la Descartes)" and revolutionizing "natural philosophy by making matter no longer inert, but dynamic," Newton's *deus ex machina* becomes a *deus otiosus*, "not so much denied as unattended to, detached and uninvolved, not influential in the world and of human beings, and finally yielding to oblivion."[291]

One of the key factors contributing to the rise of modern atheism was actually the inaction of theologians who bracketed out appeals to religious experience. Enamored of the explanatory power of scientific inquiry, they appealed less and less to the specifically theological sources that gave life to faith: out goes appeals to prayer, liturgy, mystics, saints, and scripture. Buckley observes, "to bracket the specifically religious in order to defend the God of religion was to assert implicitly the cognitive emptiness of the very reality one was attempting to support."[292] Theologians hitched themselves to the system of universal mechanics, convinced this would provide the sure and steady foundation to ensure the stability of their system. Yet thinkers

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[290] Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God*, 34.
[291] Ibid., 34-35.
[292] Ibid., 37.

such as Diderot and d'Hollbach aw what Wittgenstein expressed: "a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism."[293] Curiosity, its brow furrowed, brushes off appeals to God as "wooly" and unnecessary: if it cannot be measured, it cannot matter. Little wonder the metaphysical question *Why anything at all?* is written off as absurd.

In no way is this to be taken as a wholesale rejection of curiosity: in its insistent focus on determinate beings, curiosity *is* true to being. As we considered, we have a need for univocal precision. Curiosity betrays the truth of being, however, when it insists univocity is the truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth. While Desmond wants to preserve the healthy impulse of curiosity, he resists scientistic reductionism and its attempt to conflate curiosity with the extent of "being and knowing." For

> scientism the outlook takes hold that the univocalizing approach is the one and only approach. This is a contradiction of the plurivocity promised in the other modalities of wonder. Determinate curiosity has its place within the embrace of the more original sense of wonder, and while it occludes it, it cannot itself even function, much less prosper, if it does not dip back again and again into the primal modality of the originating astonishment.[294]

In light Taylor, there appears a homology between the "buffered self" and curiosity. Both have lost a taste for the transcendent, both affect a pose of disengaged inquiry and self-directed autonomy. They exhibit what Desmond calls an "allergy to transcendence" (T_3) because their understanding of "self-transcendence has been yoked to a model of autonomous self-determination: the self is the law of itself."[295]

Both curiosity and Taylor's "buffered self" need to be led back to the wellspring of astonishment. We may have reconfigured ourselves to be buffered, but "buffering" cannot be,

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[293] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 81.

[294] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 288.

[295] Desmond, *Art, Origins, and Otherness*, 271.

per Desmond's anthropology, an irreversible *fait accompli*. Not only are we constitutively

porous, we are porosity made mindful of itself. This porosity permits an intermediation between

stages of mindfulness. The *metaxu* admits of other reconfigurations, and we may contribute to

future reconfigurations by our efforts to re-awaken our age to a sense of astonishment. Human

mindfulness is not fated or condemned to sojourn in the *metaxu* bereft of wonder. The furrowed

brow of curiosity, too, may be struck by something in excess of determinacy – despite its best

efforts – and find itself renewed. Considered ontologically, the map of our age accounts for *how*

curiosity became the dominant mode of mindfulness. Read in a metaxological light, however,

one can perceive itineraries conveying us along return routes leading us to a rekindling of

astonishment. This is because, for Desmond, we move

> from ontological astonishment before being toward ontic regard concerning beings, their
> properties, patterns of developments, determinate formations, and so on. It is essential to
> the becoming of our mindfulness that we move into curiosity. The overdeterminate is
> saturated with determinations, not an indefiniteness empty of determinacy. The question
> "What is it?" turns toward the given intricacy of this, that, and the other thing, and there
> can be something even reverent in this turning, for it too shares in our porosity to the
> astonishing givenness.[296]

Ungrateful curiosity may furrow its brow and lock itself away to obsess on "this, that, and the

other thing" but even at its most anti-social, curiosity cannot rid itself of its origin in wonder and

awe. Even in its tunnel-like fixation on determinacy, it may turn a deaf ear to the woo of

astonishment, but it is not wholly deaf. It may not initially recognize itself in the web of the

metaxu but it is not impossible that, given the right twitch upon the thread, for curiosity to be

rocked back once more to marvel with wide-eye: *It is!*

Desmond's approach to metaphysics capacitates us with an approach to reflection

remarkable in its scope and its ability to offer a finessed account of what it means to live in the

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[296] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 283.

metaxu. Rather than telling us *about* it, he tries to develop our ear for the plurivocity of being and our eyes to recognize the crack in all beings. He shows, too, how our mindfulness of being undergoes shifts depending on our proximity to astonishment that inaugurates metaxological mindfulness. The spectrum of mindfulness becomes the speculum in which we are given to recognize ourselves. The renewal of wonder we need, however, is not a once-and-for all occasion but an ongoing commitment:

> So long as life continues, one has to say yes to wonder. This is not a matter of reviving our capacity for wonder. In a way, we do not have a capacity for wonder; rather we are capacitated by wonder – and capacitated through it to wise mindfulness. Since this capacitation is not determined through ourselves alone, we alone cannot revive it. Wondering is not a power over which we exercise self-determination; it witnesses to a given porosity of being that endows us with the promise of mindfulness. If there is to be a revival of the capacity, it is in coming home again to this porosity – and its capacitating of our powers.[297]

We may not be able to "exercise self-determination" when it comes to astonishment, but I believe we can embark upon a series of exercises that can sensitize us to the advent of astonishment. Indeed, we began this process some time ago when we began to learn the grammar and explore the nature of metaxological metaphysics. The paradox of metaxology: we are capacitated by knowing our incapacitation. This is a lesson learned over and again: metaphysics is capacitated by the advent of transcendence; our grasping at being (*conatus*) is capacitated by our being given to be (*passio*); our being-in-relation to being is capacitated within the community of transcendence in which we live and move and have our being; our incapacity to reduce being's flux into capacitates us to perceive the irreducible porosity of being, the "crack in everything," ourselves included. Our incapacity to sate our restless capacitates us to embark on the adventure of selving as we journey forward toward the promise of wholeness for which we most desperately long. Our incapacity to corral or control the Transcendent capacitates us to

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[297] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 262-63.

develop a form of patient mindfulness, attuned to the goodness and gratuity of creation, as we await in hope for any signs or hints of the advent of the One who sings us into being.

3.0   Conclusion

In *Philosophy and Its Others*, Desmond speaks "of the naming act of philosophical mindfulness as thought *singing its other*; for in singing we meet an outpouring of articulation of enigmatic affirmative power, even when the song airs the grief of suffering being."[298] In keeping with this theme of thought as *singing*, I want to conclude this thesis with three considerations.

First: a word about the relationship between Taylor and Desmond. At the end of the last chapter, I expressed my belief that Desmond preserves and advances Taylor's project. In this chapter, I suggested a way of reading Desmond's understanding of the *metaxu* as a metaphysical supplement to Taylor's ontological "social imaginary." A metaphysical supplement, attentive not only to *how* beings are but *why* they are, may help to allay Janz's concern over Taylor's reticence about offering a demonstrative proof for the Transcendent. Desmond, we shall see soon enough, offers a series of indirect "ways to God." In this way, we can think of Desmond as Taylor's consigliere who assures Janz, "Yes, yes, there is a *there* there. His map is trustworthy."

As well as providing indirect ways to God, Desmond's philosophy tutors us in a form of "subtler language."[299] This is necessary because our modern language

1. Has lost, and needs to have restored to it, its constitutive power.
2. The loss of this power means we deal instrumentally with the realities which surround us; their deeper meaning, the background in which they exist, the higher reality which finds expression in them, remain ignored.
3. Our language has lost power to Name things in their embedding in this deeper/higher reality.
4. This incapacity of language is a crucial facet of an incapacity of being, that our lives are reduced, flattened. [300]

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[298] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 259.
[299] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 353-361, 755-761.
[300] Ibid., 761.

Metaxology, in its attentiveness to the plurivocity of being, attunes us to otherwise obscured

depths. The language of metaxology works to *inform* and *form* the reader. Cyril O'Regan rightly

identifies metaxology as moving beyond the level of flattened discourse when he describes how

metaxology is doubly poetic

> first in the discursive sense that philosophy is a raid on the inarticulate that enlists in its articulation any and all available forms of discourse (e.g. symbol, myth, comedy, tragedy), and second in that the making (also unmaking) of selves and community has dramatic pattern with both comic and tragic elements.[301]

Desmond's texts, O'Regan observes elsewhere, "perform nothing less than a fundamental

reopening of a philosophical discourse, which, from its first appearance in the Occidental

tradition, intends the origin as the really real."[302] Desmond's texts implicate the reader in a

meditation aiming to reveal what remains often concealed. We need many words, multiple

metaphors and symbols, in order to awaken us to being's depths. Metaxology attempts to finesse

the curious mind, the instrumental mind, by wooing it back to the sources of astonishment.

The curious mind or the buffered self, faced with the ineffable Mystery of God, throws its

hand up in exasperation. God, actual infinitude, or transcendence itself is: the divine it cannot be

captured in a system. Hopkins knew this:

> We guess; we clothe Thee, unseen King,
> With attributes we deem are meet;
> Each in his own imagining
> Sets up a shadow in thy seat.[303]

Desmond offers us a metaphysically rich yet ever-humble form of speech cognizant of its own

limitations. Metaxology is wounded speech, bearing within it the rupture of transcendence. But

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[301] Cyril O'Regan, "The Poetics of Ethos: William Desmond's Poetic Refiguration of Plato," *Ethical Perspectives* 8, no.4 (2001): 272-306 at 278.

[302] Cyril O'Regan, "Repetition: Desmond's New Science" in *Between System and Poetics*, 69.

[303] Hopkins, "Nondum," quoted in in *A Secular Age*, 763.

we are capacitated by this wound, not only to speak a metaphysically subtle language but also, and more importantly, to watch vigilantly for any sign or disclosure of Transcendence's advent. In enjoining us to a patient watchfulness, metaxology becomes for us a way of living prayerfulness.

Second task: let me recall Emerson, a thinker for whom the presence of "a crack in everything God has made"[304] points to an intrinsic vulnerability or fatal flaw afflicting beings. His quote invokes two flawed heroes, but the truth of his observation is universally applicable. Hero or villain, saint or scoundrel, every being bears a crack.

The crack, though, need not be an occasion for sorrow. We bear upon us, within us, an open wound resistant to closure. Interpreted metaxologically, the crack is an opened opening, a rupture of the self *by* transcendence which opens us *to* transcendence. We bear this wound as a mark of our eccentricity, as it comes from outside ourselves, and this wound renders us beings of ecstasy capable of reaching beyond ourselves to the one who awakened us. We are led out into the *metaxu* where the crack in all finite beings is a sign of fragility and gratuity. We turn inward, to our abyssal depths where, in awe-struck astonishment or the intentional solitude of prayer, we encounter an abiding otherness

> marking one's intimacy to self. There is also the communication of the incognito God in the deepest ontological porosity of one's soul, so deep that it seems like nothing, since too the porosity is itself no thing – the open between space in which communication of the power to be is given and different selvings take determinate form. One is never alone, even when one is alone.[305]

On account of the crack in everything, ourselves included, we can awaken to the intimate universal: and interior presence weaving us into community with the whole of being.

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[304] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation" in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 292.
[305] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 49.

The crack in everything gives the *metaxu* it iridescent shimmer as beings mediate themselves and intermediate with one another. Indeed, it possibilizes metaxology, for it "dwells with the interplay of sameness and difference, identity and otherness, not by mediating a more inclusive whole but by recurrence to the rich ambiguities of the middle, and with due respect for forms of otherness that are dubiously included in the immanence of the dialectical whole."[306] The porosity of being is ontologically constitutive, the "condition of our being opened (intimately) and to our being open (potentially universal) to what is other and beyond us."[307] Rather than being incapacitated, we are capacitated to read the *metaxu* as a sign of immanent transcendence, the abiding presence and daily disclosures of the Transcendent who gives being to be and sustains creation in existence.

Third task: philosophy as *singing* its other. There is an expression regularly heard through the pubs of Desmond's native Ireland: *How's the crack*? In a pub, the "crack" is not a thing, but it is also not nothing. The crack is the milieu, the happening, the intermediation of beings, the "passing in passage" between the bar and the musicians playing in the corner and the laughter and stories shared at tables. A night of good crack: family from overseas are in town and the whole family turns out for a few pints. A fiddle player taps her bow and the *seisiun* lifts off with a set of fiery reels. An elderly couple, whose dancing days should be long behind them, forget themselves and dance a two-hand. A poem is recited, a song is sung, an aire is played: the gathering goes quiet. A joke told brings peals of laughter. A marriage proposal. A first kiss. New love. No one element makes the night, no one instrument accounts for all the music, but in the "passing in passage" they interweave and contribute to the happening of the night. Good crack.

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[306] Ibid., 164.
[307] Ibid., 173.

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Good crack must not be taken *for* granted but only ever *as* granted, an unexpected and welcome happening, never duplicable and always unique. It cannot be planned and must emerge of its own accord, unfolding organically and drawing participants into itself. It is not the achievement of the *conatus* as an endeavor, but the *co-natus* as a "being born with" each other in the moment. It is an undergoing, a suffering of something beyond the group, something that galvanizes the evening and leaves all in attendance wanting more. One becomes attuned to the crack and develops a knack for "sniffing it out."

Desmond offers us a metaphysics of the crack. As a happening, we only come to recognize "the crack" in the midst of it, awaking it its excess *media res*. By the time we are asked, "How's the crack" it already englobes us. To respond, "ah, it's good crack" says almost nothing, but how say more? Any respond will stammer because no word can say it all. To describe the crack risks betraying it.

Desmond gives us the subtler language, a form of poetic attunement, needed to speak faithfully of the *metaxu*'s happening. Rather than imposing an interpretation or trying to capture the between, he leads us into it with a renewed mindfulness of its richness and ambiguities. Desmond gives us a way of wording the between, of standing within the *metaxu* in a way receptive to undergoing it. Though Wordsworth's entire poem sings of this, let me quote the last two stanzas of "The Tables Turned"

> Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Enough of Science and of Art;
> Our meddling intellect Close up those barren leaves;
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: Come forth, and bring with you a
> We murder to dissect.   heart
>   That watches and receives.[308]

[308] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," The Poetry Foundation, accessed September 15, 2017,
    https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned

We, too, must arise and "quit" our books and venture, adventure, forth to immerse ourselves in the *metaxu*. We must stay the knife of murderous concepts and wait, patiently, in a stance of watchful receptivity. Like the happening of an Irish *seisiun*, must not close our ears to what unfolds before us. We must enter, experience, and undergo what it means to be in the between.

I am convinced that William Desmond, in his metaxological philosophy, gives us a viable metaphysics enabling us to recognize and interpret the "crack" in everything. And by "give us a way" I mean that he capacitates us for wonder because he does more than inform us *about* astonishment. His texts cannot just be read or gone over; they must be undergone. Having seen how this style of metaphysical reflection does not run afoul of our "Five Commandments," the way is open to probing how a theologian might draw on Desmond's metaxological philosophy as a resource for theological reflection. One might even dare to consider how metaxology can become, when approached as a form of spiritual exercise, the practice of a way of life. I think there is much exciting work to be done in developing Desmond's thought in dialogue with thinkers such as Pierre Hadot, but such reflection would need a much longer treatment than allowable in a thesis.

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