Spiritual Exercises for a Secular Age? William Desmond's Theological Achievement

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Spiritual Exercises for a Secular Age? William Desmond's Theological Achievement

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Spiritual Exercises for a Secular Age?
William Desmond's Theological Achievement

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This project attempts to respond to Charles Taylor's invitation, made in *A Secular Age*, for "new and unprecedented itineraries" capable of guiding seekers toward an encounter with God. Today, many Westerners find belief in God difficult if not impossible. This essay begins with an overview of Taylor's secularization narrative and explores the causes and pressures that have made belief in the Transcendent problematic. To respond to Taylor's summons for new itineraries, I turn in Chapters 2-4 to the work of philosopher William Desmond. After introducing readers to Desmond and locating him on a landscape dominated by phenomenologists, I introduce Desmond's metaphysical philosophy and argue that this his thought can be approached as a form of spiritual exercise capable of reawakening a sense of the Transcendent. In Chapters 3 and 4 I engage the work of Pierre Hadot to show how Desmond's philosophy can work to transform the way one perceives the world. Read within this framework, I believe Desmond's metaxological metaphysics provides a series of spiritual exercises needed in an increasingly secular age. Read within the framework, metaxology becomes less a philosophy about which one must be informed than a philosophy capable of forming readers to perceive reality anew. In Chapter 5, I draw out some of the theological implications for this interpretation of Desmond's work. In the conclusion, I survey the project and indicate what I consider to be the theological achievement of Desmond's project and indicate opportunities for future engagement between metaxology and theology.

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Acknowledgements

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My love of theology began at Saint Ignatius High School in Cleveland, Ohio. Six teachers in particular helped me to find my voice as a student and as a man: Tom Pasko, Joe Buzzelli, Kay Goebel, Jim Brennan, Jim Skerl, and Michael Pennock. As an undergraduate at Canisius College, Dan Liderbach, SJ and Ben Fiore, SJ were my go-to mentors. During my first stint of graduate studies at John Carroll University, Joan Nuth and Howard Gray, SJ were stalwart guides both of my head and my heart.

At Fordham University, I had the pleasure of studying with a number of brilliant minds. Brian Davies, OP introduced me to the study of Thomas Aquinas and Terry Klein gave me an appetite for Wittgenstein. Jane Dryden was a frequent coffee companion and guide in those early years of philosophy studies. Vinnie Sullivan, my rector, schooled my heart and Matt Malone…well, you gave my liver a workout (along with Dennis Baker, Jim Keane, and Drew Marquard). At Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry I was blessed to study with wonderful Jesuit scholars and exemplars of the type of priest and scholar I desire to become: Mark Massa, Jim Keenan, Tom Stegman, Jim Gartland, Randy Sachs, Dick Clifford, Jim Bretzke, Joe Weiss, Don MacMillan, John Baldovin, Arthur Madigan, Jim Bernauer, Oliver Rafferty, Joe O'Keefe, Bob Daly, James Conn, Frank Herman, and Dan Harrington. The friendship of men I lived and studied with – John Nugent, Paul Shelton, Cathal Doherty – has been one of the great joys in my life. Benjamin Dahlke, Bernhard Knorn, and Niall Coll: I will forever remember with great fondness our many long, cold, walks through the snowy streets of Chestnut Hill.

My most formative years as a Jesuit were surely the years I taught at the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy. To the students and families I met, I say thank you for allowing me to learn how to be a teacher. My head may always be in the university but my heart will always belong to the high school. You taught me the meaning of "To give and not to count the cost."To my Jesuit brothers – Brian Lehane, Karl Kiser, Jim Boynton, and Matt Wooters – I say thank you for your friendship. I want to thank in a special way Patrick Peppard, SJ for giving me hours of entertainment and teaching me more about hyperbole than he could EVER know. To the John Carroll University Jesuit community, especially the rector Martin Connell, I am indebted for providing the ideal situation to write a dissertation. To my provincials Tim Kesicki and Brian Paulson: thank you for entrusting me with the mission to study.

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theologian and priest to duplicate this lesson, to get out of the way so that others can do what they are called to do.

Thank you to my parents Bob and Michele and my siblings and their spouses: Colin and Charity, Torrey and Brian, and my sisters Reilley and Hagan. You endured much over these years and, even though you care little about Karl Rahner or William Desmond, you were generous with listening to me. To my aunts and uncles and legions of cousins: we are at our best when we are together as a family. When we gather, we make good on the legacy left to us by Billy and Mary Kay, Alice and Junior.

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To my brother Jesuits: there are no words to express what it means to stand in your company. Thank you for giving me the resources to follow my passions and to use what talents I have to help build God's Kingdom. My greatest desire is that, when I meet Jesus one day, he will be able to say, "Welcome home, Ryan. I have seen something of myself in what you have done." Over his shoulder, I hope to glimpse Saint Ignatius nodding in approval. Adam DeLeon and Denis Weber – we've hung in there since 2004: thank you for being constant companions. If I have come to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ in this life it is because you have formed me to do so.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge Emma, Quinn, Con, and the soon-to-be born nephew my family awaits. I have loved each one of you from the moment I knew you were to be born. Thank you for the gift you have been to our family. My greatest hope for you is that you will each open yourselves to the blessing and burden that is the life of Christian discipleship.

Introduction

It is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances of its time and place. The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them. The truly creative writer, by interposing his or her perception and expression, will transfigure the conditions and effect what I have been calling "the redress of poetry." The world is different after it has been read by a Shakespeare or an Emily Dickinson or a Samuel Beckett because it has been augmented by their reading of it.

-Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*

We have shortage of images capable of describing the spiritual environment of our age. From John of the Cross, one might retrieve the "dark night of the soul." With Louis Dupré we might see ourselves as abiding in the "desert of modern atheism,"[1] with Karl Rahner as weathering faith's wintry season,[2] or with William Desmond as enduring the "night of atheism."[3] Each metaphor attempts to express a shift in the possibility of religious belief. As Charles Taylor poses the question, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[4] How has it come to pass that paths once reliably trod by our spiritual ancestors appear, today, increasingly incapable of conveying us toward the sacred or leading us to linger upon the question of God?

Across the plane of unbelief, a theologically trained ear cannot help but hear echoes of Rahner's prophecy: "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has experienced 'something,' or he will cease to be anything at all."[5] A theologian whose life spanned the long and bloody twentieth century, Rahner never

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[1] Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 139.
[2] Karl Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season* trans. Harvey Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
[3] William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 338.
[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.
[5] Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today," in *Theological Investigations VII*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

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surrendered his confidence that God could be encountered in one's life. His optimism

about the possibility of experiencing the divine, however, was tempered by his

recognition that naïve or taken-for-granted belief had become impotent to mediate such

an encounter. "All the societal supports of religion are collapsing and dying out in this

secularized and pluralistic society," he observed, and if one is to have an authentic

Christian spirituality it will only be "through an ultimate, immediate encounter of the

individual with God."[6] In something of a Rahnerian spirit, Taylor muses:

> inevitably and rightly Christian life today will look for and discover new ways of
> moving beyond the present orders to God. One could say that we look for new
> and unprecedented itineraries. Understanding our time in Christian terms is party
> to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way
> through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless
> wastes, to God.[7]

If the desert sands of secularism have eroded ancient paths, or if atheism's dark night

appears to have eclipsed the light of faith, believers face a choice. Either choose to

abandon the pilgrimage and become a permanent resident in the spiritual desert or find

the courage to venture out again and chart new and innovative itineraries to the sacred.

This essay records an effort to show how William Desmond's metaxological

metaphysics offers a compelling response to Taylor's call for "new paths." The reader's

eyebrows raise: "Metaphysics? In this day and age? Have we not finished with that?" I

know, I know: many today think the code has been called on metaphysics. To wit: long

before Heidegger announced its overcoming, David Hume concluded his *Enquiry*

> If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for
> instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or*
> *number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of*

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[6] Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-
1982,* trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1986), 176.
[7] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 755.

fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing
but sophistry and illusion.[8]

If I risk singing my hand by reaching into the flames to rescue Desmond's texts, it is

because I believe his works are needed by philosophers and theologians. It will be the

task of this essay to argue for the viability Desmond's thought and to demonstrate how,

properly interpreted, metaxology can transfigure the way we behold the world around us.

Metaxology offers something akin to Heaney's "redress of poetry," a transformed vision

whereby giving us to behold not a different reality but reality differently.

As will become clearer, metaxology is not a philosophical "system" one reads and

masters. Nor is it a grid or a Procrustean bed of concepts. Metaxology is better likened to

an undertaking or, in the wake of Taylor's call, perhaps a "passionate itinerary." The

word "passion" finds its origin in the Latin *patere* meaning "to suffer" or "to undergo."

Taken in this sense, Desmond leads us to the shore of Arnold's Dover Beach where

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.
>
> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.[9]

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[8] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett,
  1993), 114.
[9] Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach and Other Poems* (New York: Dover, 1994), 86-87.

Desmond offers us a way of standing firm on the shore and discerning within the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" not the *end* of belief but a silent prelude to a re-awakened sense of the Transcendent. He gives a way of dwelling on the "darkling plain" not in a forlorn spirit of resignation but in receptive openness to or vigilant listening for the advent of the Holy One. This is not metaphysics as an abstract system of idle speculation but metaphysics as an *askesis*, a spiritual practice, and a way of life. For those today who belief in the Transcendent difficult, vexing, or exercising, to them I suggest reading Desmond's philosophy as a form of spiritual exercise or as a practice capable of renewing one's sense of the Transcendent.

Nearly two years before beginning this project, Dominic Doyle shared a bit of advice given to him by Michael Buckley. The gist of the counsel: "A dissertation is only as good as the question it seeks to answer." To provide an overview of my project, allow me to put forward the question with which I have struggled, the resources I believe we need to answer the question, and then what happens when we answer the question. Or: *What* is the problem, *Who* can fix it, and *Why* does it matter?

At the risk of hyperbole, I would say page 755 of *A Secular Age* changed my life. On this page, as quoted above, Taylor issues a summons for new itineraries to the sacred. To my mind, as I elaborate in Chapter One, this is Taylor's Narnian moment. If you recall *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, at the end of the book the children discover that the wardrobe no longer conveys them to Narnia. The closure of this route does not, of course, mean Narnia has ceased to exist; it means, rather, that the children must remain attentive to the appearance of new routes. To his credit, Taylor offers several exemplars of figures who have attempted to uncover such routes: Charles Peguy, Ivan Illich, and

Gerard Manley Hopkins. But Taylor's summons got me thinking: do we really need new routes or might we need to repristinate some of the old ones? Although our first response to Taylor's summons may be to set out to extend the borders of his map, I am of a mind that there are other approaches. What if, instead of looking for new routes to the sacred, we look at old routes anew? Rather than a pilgrimage into distant lands, why don't we undertake an archaeological expedition and dig vertical shafts to allow us to excavate the ground beneath the old routes to see if we might not discover hitherto concealed depths that give us to perceive map of our age in a new, transformed, and transformative way?

I ask this because I accept as a truism that a map should never be mistaken for the territory: even the most vivid depiction of a terrain cannot replace having to negotiate it for oneself. Talk about something – whether it be our secular age, or a workout program, or literature – cannot substitute for engaging the issue for oneself. Taylor's call for new itineraries struck me as requiring not so much a new way of thinking as a new way of being mindful. The central question, the *what* animating my reading and writing, arises from page 755: even if we must labor beneath the hoary light of an eclipsed Transcendence, can we find a thinker capable of guiding our search for new itineraries to God? In the figure of William Desmond, I contend, we find one such guide.

If Chapter One surveys the map and territory of our age, Chapters Two through Four suggest how Desmond's metaxological metaphysics allows us to dwell within the territory Taylor so vibrantly explores. The core of this essay, these chapters unfold in three moments. First, in Chapter Two, I introduce readers to Desmond. After a brief biographical sketch, I enter into a conversation with a series of thinkers – Martin Heidegger, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal – about the viability of

a theological engagement with metaphysics and, somewhat playfully, suggest a set of "Five Commandments" metaphysics must obey. The bulk of this chapter provides a general overview to the systematic nature of Desmond's thought and shows how he and Taylor, while not engaged in identical projects, can complement one another.

While Chapter Two offers a broad overview of and introduction to metaxology, it falls to Chapters Three and Four to show *how* metaxology works. My argument: Desmond's philosophy is best approached as a form of spiritual exercise aimed not so much at *informing* readers as *forming* them to perceive reality anew. The reader will rightly detect the presence of Pierre Hadot beneath this claim. In Chapter Three, I use Hadot's work to frame Desmond's project. Approaching metaxology as a form of spiritual exercise, I believe, can aide the willing reader in cultivating attitude in which the question of the Transcendent may be resurrected. I admit immediately: to my knowledge, Desmond does not regard his own work in this way. Indeed, nearly thirty years ago he wrote, "The philosopher undergoes the discipline, not of spiritual exercise, but of mindful thought."[10] Even if this counts as a protest against my interpretation – which I doubt – I am resolute in my conviction that Desmond's philosophy is best approached as something that must be practiced, undertaken and undergone, as a type of spiritual exercise. This chapter concludes with reading what Desmond calls the "Return to Zero" as a type of exercise capable of cultivating a renewed sense of metaphysical mindfulness.

In Chapter Four, I offer a series of four exercises drawn from Desmond's *God and the Between*. Rather than straightforward directions to or proofs of God, he offers a series of "indirections." These indirections transform how we understand and behold the territory of our age. Rather than offering us a new map, these indirections lead us into the

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[10] William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others* (Albany: SUNY, 1990), 41.

very heart of existence itself. They are reflexive exercises aimed at transforming the way we behold the whole of reality. In these exercises we begin to see how metaxology and theology are not antagonistic and how metaxology can overlap with, and contribute to, theological reflection.

In Chapter Five, I indicate the effect these exercises can have on the one undertaking them. This chapter is by far the most speculative and tentative, intended more to issue a series of promissory notes in need of redemption at a later date. By transposing it into an explicitly theological register, I show how metaxology is a fecund resource for theologians. To be sure, one can approach metaxology as a form of natural theology. Yet within theology itself metaxology provides a remarkably fecund resource allowing us to rethink issues pertinent to fundamental theology (revelation and grace), theological method and theological anthropology. I hesitate to be too explicit here in the introduction: if the net gain of this project were able to be stated succinctly at the beginning, then there would be little need to write, or read, hundreds of pages to get to it. The nuggets brought forth in this chapter need to be refined and purified and tested further. But there are nuggets to be found – of this I am convinced – and if Desmond's metaphysics helps to guide us toward a rich lode of theological insight, I am willing to risk unearthing a lot of "fool's gold" if this endeavor eventuates in the discovery of a rich vein of insight we might begin to mine.

I conclude this essay with a brief recapitulation of the itinerary we have traversed, a journey leading us from Taylor's Quebec to Desmond's Cork. We find our way to a pub where Taylor and Desmond can, at the day's gloaming, raise a pint and give a toast to the Transcendent. If we find Desmond a reliable guide through our secular age, we

should here praise his efforts and assess where improvements might yet be needed. For if he can show how the eclipse of the Transcendent, or the dark night of atheism, is not a *fait accompli* but only a transitory phase, then our journey is far from over. Only at the end of one day's expedition can we decide how best to proceed the next day, who we might enlist to join us, how we might begin to share the news of any discoveries. There is no definitive "The End" but only a pause, a wink, a celebratory swig, and a resolution to continue digging as we await the dawn of a new day.

Let me now say something of method, scope, and limitation. Richard Kearney recounts how Paul Ricouer began his 1977 seminar by asking *d'oú parlez-vous*? or "where do you speak from?"[11] I speak from the stance of an Irish-American, a Jesuit priest, an Irish musician and theologian. My sense of the Church and faith comes as much from being raised a Catholic as it does from talking about religion and faith at the end of the bar. I speak most, though, from my experience having taught high school boys in Detroit. Perhaps my best homiletic lessons were learned teaching $9^{th} - 12^{th}$ graders: if you can make something interesting to sleep-deprived, hormonally charged adolescents, you can make anything interesting. I write this as I tried to teach: I am no Moses come down from the Mount, so I proceed tentatively and allusively, more inductively and intuitively than deductively. Or, said with Pascalian flare, I aim to write with *esprit de finesse* more than *esprit de géometrie*.

This plays out in two ways. First, I admit to being an allusive – though hopefully not elusive – writer. I always have found it helpful to offer concrete examples and to draw connections between ideas. You will find this in my many advertences to narrative, poetry, and music. I do not do it to show off erudition – there is not much to show – but

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[11] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia, 2010), xi.

to help "build bridges" and make connections between Desmond and other thinkers and modes of reflection. Desmond is not yet well-known and it seems needful to show, in an era skeptical of metaphysics, how engaging his thought can be enriching and illuminating in a host of areas. My goal throughout is to show how beholding the world with metaxological eyes allows for the revelation of too-easily concealed depths and riches. There is more to reality, as I hope to show, than meets the secular eye. Second, I am reluctant to carry on side conversations in footnotes. As was beaten into my head by my first advisor, Joan Nuth: if it is not worth including in the text, it is not worth including. Consequently, I try to reserve footnotes for citations and I resist, to the best of my ability, from carrying on with sub-conversations. I am not always successful in this, but I do try. If this exploration proves successful, there will be time and space enough for those conversations to be had. If this is a flop, well…at least I am not wasting the reader's time.

Now a word about the project's scope. First, it is not my intent to offer a digest of the whole of Desmond's thinking. I do not engage much with his work on Hegel, on aesthetics, or on ethics. His writings on these topics are interesting in their own right, but they do not seem as vital for answering Taylor's solicitation for new itineraries. Furthermore, while there have been developments in Desmond's philosophy over the course of his career, his metaphysics has remained consistently coordinated by what he regards as the "fourfold sense of being." No doubt, one might dedicate an entire study to examining the developments in how this fourfold is understood. This is not that study. After a long career as an author and teacher, it would be shocking were his thought to have failed to develop. These developments, though, tend to have a "deepening" effect: concepts introduced earlier in his career do not disappear or change so much as deepen

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and mature. As a result, my reading and interpretation of his philosophy takes for granted a certain integrity to his metaphysical reflections.

Finally, an observation. Graduate students are reminded over and again that the dissertation is not their life's work – thank God! – and that it is an exercise mean to get them into the guild of scholars. In a way, this essay is an exercise on exercise. Rest assured: our journey is not into a funhouse's "Hall of Mirrors" where we get lost in reflections on reflections on reflections. If we imaginatively return to Dover Beach, this essay is an extended meditation whereby we stand on the shore of the Sea of Faith, scan its surface, and allow the reality of our age to be present fully to us. If we stand with Desmond, we will find we have no reason to quake or quail: the surrounding darkness need not be seen, or experienced, as extinguishing the Transcendent. His reflections uncover within the very being of creation, and within our abyssal selves, secret sources of strengthening. He gives us resources to stand firm beneath the dark night, to endure the shattering of nihilism, and to open our eyes to see amidst the dust and rubble the hints and glimmers of a new dawn. By morning's light, the Sea is transformed: no longer does it rush away from the shore but comes back again with a surge.

Such, at least, is what I want to argue as we embark upon this exploration. We set out with Taylor and let him show us the shape and contours of the shore's map. When we meet Desmond, we will allow him to convince us to take off our shoes and wander the shoreline where, perhaps, we will experience as though for the first time the rush of the Sea of Faith's waters and feel it pool and swirl around our ankles. I do not want only to describe spiritual exercises for my reader. I want to show, instead, how William

Desmond's philosophy can be read as a type of *askesis* one must undertake for oneself. In this I am reminded of Paul Elie's observation about pilgrimage:

> A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search of the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness. The pilgrim seeks not only to confirm the experience of others firsthand but to be changed by the experience. Pilgrims often make the journey in company, but each must be changed individually they must see for themselves, each with his or her own eyes. And as they return to ordinary life the pilgrims must tell others what they saw, recasting the story in their own terms.[12]

As an essay, this work certainly adheres to scholarly convention and it will, I hope, *inform* the reader. But I hope it works on a deeper and more affective level to invite the reader, as Augustine heard so many years ago: *tolle lege*, take up and read. Grandma Kilbane never tired of reminding us that "the proof of the pudding is in the tasting." I reckon it might take a bit of coaxing to get some readers to sample this metaphysically-infused pudding. Even if you do not abandon all other fare and take up a strictly metaxological diet, I should like to think you will find how well Desmond's metaphysics can accompany, and flavor, lots of ways of thinking. Come along, then, if not for the pudding then to see some new sights and meet a thinker you might well never have heard of before. I hope we can have a laugh along the way, share some verse, and try to discern together, as we spend time on the shore of Dover Beach, how our era has come to experience the eclipse of transcendence and whether Desmond might be capable of offering a new itinerary to the sacred needed in an increasingly secular age. Perhaps we will find that what to many eyes and hearts is the permanent eclipse of the Transcendent can become but a dark prelude to reborn faith.

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[12] Paul Elie, *The Life You Save Might Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), x.

Chapter 1

BEATING THE BOUNDS OF *A SECULAR AGE*

> One way to put the question that I want to answer here is this one: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?
>
> -Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

"There is a generalized sense in our culture," Charles Taylor observes, "that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost."[13] He continues:

> I put it in the optative mood, because people react very differently to this; some endorse this idea of loss, and seek to define what it is. Others want to downplay it, and paint it as an optional reaction, something we are in for only as long as we allow ourselves to wallow in nostalgia. Still others, again, while standing as firmly on the side of disenchantment as the critics of nostalgia, nevertheless accept that this sense of loss is inevitable; it is the price we pay for modernity and rationality, but we must courageously accept this bargain, and lucidly opt for what we have inevitably become.[14]

That there has been a change in the West's attitude toward questions of the Transcendent is hardly debatable. Seminars entitled "Theology in a Secular Age," declining rates of religious involvement,[15] and countless YouTube channels, radio interviews, essays, journal articles and monographs leave little doubt: our sense of contact with something "beyond ourselves" has attenuated.[16] What is not entirely clear, though, is what this "loss" means. Some regard the "eclipse of the transcendent" as an achievement: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."[17] Others, Louis Dupré notes, refuse to be called atheist because "atheism is still 'an inverted act of faith.' The humanist must

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[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 307.

[14] Ibid., 307.

[15] Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," (DC: 2015), http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/ August 3, 2017.

[16] Representative of such works would be Louis Dupré's *Passage to Modernity*, Michael Allen Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God*, and Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 180.

start not with the denial of God, but with the affirmation of the human, the sole source of meaning."[18] Yet others, like Paul Crowley, perceive an opportunity to develop "a theology that unifies the *fides quae* with the *fides qua* in a deeper understanding (mystagogic task), thereby enabling Christian theology to function within and address a people of the church and of the world who are steeped in a secular milieu (the missionary task)."[19] The "eclipse of the transcendent" admits of a wide variety of interpretations; it has "its boosters as well as its knockers"[20] and allows for a range of positions in between.

In Charles Taylor's work, we find a penetrating interpretation and analysis of the space between modernity's "boosters" and "knockers" wherein we can recognize both what "is admirable and much that is debased and frightening."[21] As we will see, this sense of *between* is as central for Taylor as it is for William Desmond, whose metaxological metaphysics (a *logos* of the *metaxu* or "between") I explore in subsequent chapters. Both thinkers contest claims that the "eclipse of the transcendent" is a settled matter, a *fait accompli*. Instead, each guides his reader beneath the eclipse where one can feel the stress and strain of what Taylor calls the "Jamesian open space" where "the winds blow, where one can feel the pull in both directions"[22] toward both belief and unbelief. In their writings, both thinkers permit readers to experience what is lost, or gained, when the transcendent horizon is wiped out. They charge readers with discerning whether the eclipse is total or transitory, whether it records a permanent loss of the sacred or opens onto a purgative process to be undergone as a prelude to a new dawn.

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[18] Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 133.
[19] Paul Crowley, "Mystagogy and Mission: The Challenge of Nonbelief and the Task of Theology," *Theological Studies* 76 (1), 2015: 7—28 at 12.
[20] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592.

If the "eclipse of the transcendent" is a feature of our secular age, we should get clear on what the word "secular" describes. Taylor identifies three meanings:

- **Secular₁** – the emptying of God, or an ultimate reality, from public and social spheres; religion has its own "sphere" in which it operates.
- **Secular₂** – enshrined in "subtraction stories," this describes the "falling off of religious beliefs and practices."
- **Secular₃** – focuses on the "conditions of belief." Belief in God has ceased to be axiomatic or presumed; belief *and* unbelief are contested options.[23]

In *A Secular Age*, he is occupied chiefly with tracing the development and contours of Secular₃. What distinguishes Secular₃ from previous ages is "the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people."[24] Ours is an age in which we need not refer our actions, or direct our lives, toward anything beyond the terrestrial order. In fact, we daily encounter myriad beliefs varying in commitment and intensity: fervent Muslims, milquetoast Christians, upright atheists, duplicitous agnostics. The title of Greg Epstein's book sees as possible what once, earlier in the Latin West, would have been unthinkable: one can be *Good Without God*.[25] The "eclipse of the transcendent" does not, of course, necessarily mean our age has been plunged into depravity or nihilism; rather, it means appeal to or belief in the transcendent – an impersonal Good, a personal God – has become one option among many: belief, unbelief, agnosticism, hostility to transcendence, etc.. Taylor's map of the "the spiritual shape of the present age"[26] can be read as an effort to rethink the nature of what Max Weber called "disenchantment." Whereas Weber saw the rise of science and technology as pushing religious belief out of the picture, Taylor tells a different story, a counter-narrative, of why belief has become challenging.

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[23] Ibid., 2-3. Cf. Ruth Abbey's "Theorizing Secularity 3" in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age,*
[24] Ibid., 20.
[25] Greg Epstein, *Good Without God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010)
[26] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.

Taylor admits: *A Secular Age* "lays out, unashamedly, a master narrative"[27] of how belief in the transcendent became increasingly difficult. We risk missing the force of his account if we approach the text only as a retrospective chronicle of events. What makes his story so compelling is that it is at once *informative* and *performative*: his text implicates the reader so that in reading the text one finds oneself "being read" by it. *A Secular Age* does not tell *a* story but, rather, reveals *our* story as it is read. By implicating the reader in its telling,[28] the reader is given to feel how, with eclipse of the transcendent,

> our actions, goals, achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance. There is a deeper resonance which they lack, which we feel should be there.[29]

James K.A. Smith corroborates this, observing that Taylor's goal "isn't demonstration or proof; the point isn't to offer a syllogism that secures analytical truth. Instead, the appeal is to a 'sense,' a *feel* for things."[30]

Taylor invites us to dwell within the story and to feel from within what he calls the "malaises of immanence."[31] Without gainsaying modernity's gains, he is keen to induce a sense of what has been lost on account of the eclipse. These include

> (1) The sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.[32]

In a way, he wants us to sing with Peggy Lee's and ask: "Is that all there is?"[33] Beneath the eclipse's waning light, can we hope for anything other than what we see before us?

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[27] Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 301.

[28] "Self-implication" here is taken from Sandra Schneiders and will be developed later in the project.

[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 307.

[30] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 132.

[31] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

[32] Ibid., 309.

[33] Ibid., 311.

I am convinced the answer to Peggy Lee's question is a resounding *no*: we need not resign ourselves the "fragility of meaning" or the "emptiness of the ordinary." Indeed, my project seeks to demonstrate how William Desmond's metaphysics, approached as a form of "spiritual exercise," can re-awaken in our age not only the question of the Transcendent but also cultivate a practice of philosophical mindfulness capable of rendering us increasingly attentive to the Transcendent. I admit: this is a tall order, not least because our age has grown suspicious of metaphysics and Desmond remains an unrepentant metaphysician.

To make my case that Desmond deserves to be taken up and read by theologians, I have made a strategic decision to begin my investigation with a chapter on Taylor. I do this, first, because Taylor offers us a richly informative and highly influential narrative of the forces and pressures resulting in modernity's eclipse of the transcendent. He gives us, in other words, an historical account or map of how and why questions of "the Transcendent" became increasingly "exercising" or problematic. A second reason is the style of argument Taylor uses throughout *A Secular Age* endows the text with its performative character. The text works by inducing readers to experience the pressures and movements it narrates: we set out to read *A Secular Age* and find ourselves implicated by and drawn into its story. My goal: if I can show how this text "works," I will have a reference point and model for my subsequent investigation of Desmond's thought. Finally, and quite simply, Taylor is better known than Desmond. Still, it is my belief that Taylor poses a question – How did the Transcendent become *exercising* or problematic? – to which Desmond offers an answer. As I hope to demonstrate, when Taylor calls for new routes leading seekers to an encounter with God, Desmond responds

with a practice of metaphysics which, undertaken as a form of spiritual exercise, opens up an innovative itinerary reawakening us to a sense of the sacred needed in a secular age.

This chapter unfolds in three parts. Part One offers a "key" to interpreting and experiencing the force of Taylor's narrative. *How* he argues is as important as *what* he argues. By examining his argumentative strategy, we get a sense of how *A Secular Age* works as a performative text to reorient our perception of history and of ourselves. Part Two uses metaphors drawn from "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy"[34] to guide us through key moments of *A Secular Age*. Rest assured: this is not an exhaustive summary of his project.[35] Nevertheless, I think I can provide a sense of the transitions and developments which have made appeals to the transcendent increasingly otiose. In Part Three, I evaluate how Taylor has "beaten the bounds" of our age and commend him for providing us a viable map for navigating our age, a map capable of being deepened and enriched through an engagement with Desmond's metaphysics.

1.1   Taylor's Argumentative Strategy: "Reasoning Through Transitions"

I believe the hermeneutical "key" to unlocking Taylor's method to be found in "Explanation and Practical Reason."[36] Termed "reasoning through transitions," this style of argument is employed throughout his works, not least in *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*. Taylor, however, seldom adverts attention to its use. It is hardly surprising that readers are frustrated by his wending prose and a seeming unwillingness to advance a

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[34] Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011)

[35] For overviews, consult Ruth Abbey's *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Nicholas Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). For two volumes that engage *A Secular Age* consider *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age* as well as *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*.

[36] Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34-60. will need to make recourse to other essays to bring clarity to Taylor's overall goal in "Explanation and Practical Reason."

clear thesis from beginning to end.[37] Truth be told, Taylor does need a good editor. Still, a charitable way of approaching his work is to regard its perlocutionary effect: the text's zig-zag narration disorients the reader and induces cognitive dissonance. The way he unravels his tale works to unsettle readers by implicating them in its telling and forcing them to reflect on whether, and how well, they find themselves reflected in its telling.[38]

I think this strategy becomes apparent in his effort to challenge and undermine a picture of the human subject Taylor regards untenable and deleterious.[39] His recent *Retrieving Realism* begins with Wittgenstein's aphorism "A picture held us captive (*Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen*)."[40] The "picture" he challenges, Peter Gordon observes, is of the self as "'punctual,' that is, atomistic, individualistic, and only contingently bound to its cultural or historical surroundings."[41] Yet it is just this picture that has become our *de facto* understanding of the self. And herein we face a vexing problem: just how do you get people to "see" or grasp that what we conventionally assume to be the meaning the self is, actually, not only open to but in need of other, better, interpretations? How, in other words, do you get someone to recognize one's framework when one is generally oblivious to or unaware of being enframed?

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[37] See Jon Butler's "Disquieted History in *A Secular Age*" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. On page 197 he writes that *A Secular Age* could have been "half its size, even a third, because fewer pages would almost inevitably have forced more focused arguments and clearer expositions."

[38] This is not counted a gain by all readers. Although Taylor limits his scope to "Latin Christendom," some critics have resisted his mega-narrative as insufficiently attentive to subaltern narratives. Saba Mahmood notes that "Latin Christendom" is hardly homogenous. Rather than "a" story, attention needs to be given to many stories. Because he neglects to account for subaltern narratives, Taylor's efforts might themselves be seen as enclosing or constraining others by imposing a story not their own upon them. See Saba Mahmood, "Can Secularism Be Otherwise?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 282-299.

[39] Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1995), 1-19; Charles Taylor, "Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (New York: Cambridge, 1993), 317-36; Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2015).

[40] Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 1.

[41] Peter Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's "A Secular Age"", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (2008): 647—653 at 650.

1.1.1 Apodictic Reasoning

To get his reader to look at the frameworks they customarily look through, Taylor needs to show how our lives could be framed otherwise. He needs, that is, to show how other frameworks can make better sense of our lives and experiences. By employing a form of practical reasoning, described as "reasoning in transition," he tries

> to establish, not that some position is correct absolutely, but rather that some position is superior to some other. It is concerned, covertly or openly, implicitly or explicitly, with comparative propositions. We show one of these comparative claims to be well founded when we can show that the *move* from A to B constitutes gains epistemically. This is something we do when we show, for instance, that we get from A to B by identifying and resolving a contradiction in A or a confusion which A relied on, or by acknowledging the importance of some factor which A screened out, or something of the sort. The argument fixes on the nature of the transition from A to B. The nerve of the rational proof consists in showing that this transition is an error-reducing one. The argument turns on rival interpretations of possible transitions from A to B, or B to A.[42]

Implicit is a contrast between two models of practical reasoning identified as "ad hominem" and "apodictic."[43] Ad hominem reasoning is rooted in biographical narrative and reflects how "we have lived a transition which we understand as error-reducing and hence as an epistemic gain."[44] It goes "to the person" to enter into dialogue. This is contrasted with the "bad model" of apodictic reasoning which seeks to ascertain some "criteria" capable of neutrally deciding the contested issue.[45] To appreciate the distinction between these approaches, let us consider the promise and limits of apodictic reasoning.

Inspiration for apodictic reasoning is found in the "naturalist temper of modern thought."[46] This has been a longstanding concern for Taylor, dating back to his early and

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[42] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 72.
[43] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 36. Stephen Long similarly recognizes the importance of ad hominem reasoning in Taylor's *A Secular Age*. See Stephen Long, "How to Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of A Secular Age," in *Pro Ecclesia* 18 (Winter 2009): 93—107.
[44] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 72.
[45] Ibid., 73.
[46] Ibid., 39.

polemical engagement with behaviorism.[47] The task of behaviorism, as Nicholas Smith

notes, is "to give a mechanistic account of behavior at the 'molar' level, that is, at the

level of the gross movements of an organism and the organism's environment."[48]

Behaviorism is modeled on scientific methods developed during the scientific

revolution.[49] Behaviorist psychologists, for instance, try to explain human behavior as

they would explain the behavior of any other animal without any appeal or recourse to

thoughts or feelings, intentions or motivations. One model, described by Smith as

Stimulus-Response, [50] tries to "map" the connections between any given stimulus and the

response it elicits. The belief: given enough time, one could eventually predict, for human

and non-human animals, all future actions and behaviors.

      Taylor regards this sort of atomistic or disengaged depiction of the human agent

as grossly misrepresentative: there is no neutral "view from nowhere" or Archimedean

point. As Ruth Abbey observes, apodictic reasoning is hampered by a category error

whereby human reasoning is construed as

> proceeding from its independent starting ground and employing neutral
> procedures, it presses on to conclusions that are final and certain. But once again,
> he sees it as a category error to use or expect this sort of reasoning in
> normative debates. While this mode of reasoning might work in some parts of the
> natural sciences, it cannot be transplanted into areas where the disputes are
> primarily ethical in nature.[51]

Apodictic reasoning errs in taking as its canon a model of reasoning arising in the 17th

century. This model presumes that reason "should be as disengaged as possible from our

implicit commitments and understandings, as it is in natural science, and as it must be if

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[47] Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964)
[48] Nicholas Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals, and Modernity* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 42.
[49] Charles Taylor, "Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 117.
[50] Smith, 42.
[51] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 166-7.

we are not to be victims of the status quo with all its imperfections and injustices."[52] By

no means does Taylor deny the importance or gains of the natural sciences; he objects,

rather, to the belief that this form of reasoning provides the sole standard for all inquiry.

The shortcomings of apodictic reasoning become apparent if we consider the

argument of his "What is Human Agency?" Here Taylor asks: What is it that we attribute

to ourselves as human agents which we would not attribute to animals?"[53] He approves

Harry Frankfurt's distinction between first- and second-order desires, meaning humans

> are not alone in having desires and motives, or in making choices. They share
> these things with members of certain other species, some of which even appear to
> engage in deliberation and to make decisions based on prior thought. It seems to
> be peculiarly characteristic of humans, however, that they are able to form what I
> shall call "second-order desires" or "desires of the second order."[54]

So, for instance, the family dog may strongly desire to eat the steak on the table but

checks this desire, contenting itself with kibble, lest it get a whack on the nose; a little

girl wants to fling a Brussels sprout at her brother but checks her desire and eats it, lest

she be denied dessert. Both have desires, but there is a stark difference between them.

With Frankfurt, what Taylor believes is "distinctively human is the power to *evaluate* our

desires, to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable."[55] The girl reflects and

realizes that flinging food is not nice and that she should not waste food or hurt her

brother. Dogs cannot reflect in this manner: they may be conditioned, they may

remember effects of prior experiences, but they can neither articulate nor evaluate their

desires.

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[52] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 59.
[53] Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*
    (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15.
[54] Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 no. 1,
    (1971): 5—20 at 6.
[55] Taylor, "What is Human Agency," 16.

Taylor then goes on to draw a further distinction within second-order desire. In day-to-day life, we are confronted with a host of options requiring us to order a variety of desires. Yet these desires are not evaluated in the same manner, leading Taylor to distinguish "weak evaluation" from "strong evaluation." Take his example of choosing between a vacation in the north or the south. Each is uniquely attractive: a more rugged northern vacation appeals to one's sense of adventure, a more tropical southern vacation promises relaxation. One recognizes a qualitative difference between the options but, ultimately, opts for the northern holiday simply *because one feels like it*.[56] For Taylor, "weak evaluation" involves a comparison between objects (two vacations) and choosing the one that promises to bring about the greatest satisfaction to the choosing agent. It is a choice made for no other reason than one "feels" like a northern holiday.

"Strong" evaluation, by contrast, takes account of the "quality of our motivation" and is concerned with "the qualitative *worth* of different desires."[57] This type of evaluation records a linguistic shift away from expressing merely personal preferences toward an attempt to articulate how and why one judges one desire more estimable than another. The strong evaluator experiences an expansion and an enrichment of her language; she develops "a vocabulary of worth" in which she is able "to express the superiority of one alternative, the language of higher and lower, noble and base, courageous and cowardly, integrated and fragmented, and so on."[58] A strong evaluator's growth in articulacy serves to cultivate ever-greater internal depths within the agent:

> now we are reflecting about our desires in terms of the kind of being we are in having them or carrying them out. Whereas a reflection about what we feel like more, which as all a simple weigher can do in assessing motivations, keeps us as

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[56] Ibid., 17. Emphasis added.
[57] Ibid., 16.
[58] Ibid., 24.

it were at the periphery; a reflection on the kind of beings we are takes us to the center of our existence as agents. Strong evaluation is not just a condition of articulacy about preferences, but also about the quality of the kind of beings we are or want to be. It is in this sense deeper.[59]

Weak evaluators distinguish between *what* one wants yet, on this level, not much reflection is demanded; by contrast, the strong evaluator must take a stand, commit oneself, and if needed give a rationale for one's choice. Growth in articulacy, our ability to dialogue with others about *what* we have chosen and to give an account for *why* we did so, is not epiphenomenal to what it means to be human. On the contrary, it is constitutive of personhood: "our capacity for strong evaluation is an essential feature of a person."[60]

Our capacity to grow as "strong" evaluators proves a surd to "the recurring ambition of our rationalist civilization to turn practical reflection as much as possible into calculation, an ambition whose major expression has been the doctrine of utilitarianism."[61] If strict utilitarianism seeks to restrict one's range of options, growth in strong evaluation actually leads to a proliferation of choices. Faced with a host of options, the strong evaluator must take a stand on who one is and who one desires to be:

> The simple weigher may hesitate, as before the éclair and mille feuilles, and his momentary preference may go back and forth. But we would not say that he envisages his situation of choice now one way, now another. With strong evaluation, however, there can be and often is a plurality of ways of envisaging my predicament, and the choice may not be just between what is clearly the higher and the lower, but between two incommensurable ways of looking at this choice.[62]

Think of it as a distinction between Spock and Kirk. In *Stark Trek*: *Into Darkness*, Spock's logic that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few" renders him

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[59] Ibid., 26. This is akin to Ricoeur's distinction between the *idem-* and *ipse*-identity. The *idem*-self is the perduring *who* announcing itself through *what* one is. These overlap, of course, but *who* one is – one's identity – is irreducible to any single *what* or amalgam of *whats*. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 120-1.
[60] Ibid., 43.
[61] Ibid., 17.
[62] Ibid., 26.

willing to sacrifice his own life rather than violate the Prime Directive.[63] Kirk brazenly

contravenes Spock's choice, risking his life and exposure by rescuing Spock from

imminent death. On the surface, it seems we are faced with two protagonists committed

to incommensurable goods: Spock's "needs of the many" and Kirk's "friendship." Is

there, though, parity between their positions? No one seems willing, Taylor observes,

> to challenge the view that, other things being equal, it is better that men's desires be fulfilled than that they be frustrated, that they be happy rather than miserable. Counter-utilitarians challenge rather whether the entire range of ethical issues can be put in these terms, whether there are not other goals which can conflict with happiness, whose claims have to be adjudicated together with utility.[64]

If Spock's apodictic reasoning reflects a commitment to utilitarian principles, we must

ask, first, just what are the "needs" of the many? How is the "good" of defined and

enacted? Are these principles self-evident or are they based on unexamined premises? In

short: to what canon does Spock appeal? The limits of Spock's reasoning become

apparent when contrasted with Kirk, whose *in extremis* actions gives a sense not only of

his character as a strong evaluator but also provides the negative contrast with Spock who

now appears "insensitive or brutish or morally perverse."[65] We admire Kirk not for being

reckless – which he is – but because in taking account of the goods of loyalty, courage,

and fidelity, he shows the exiguousness of Spock's reasoning.

What limits apodictic reasoning in all its varieties – behaviorism, naturalism,

utilitarianism, etc. – is that its reach exceeds its grasp. It may be appropriate in certain

settings but, when applied to nettlesome human conflicts, it preserves its explanatory

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[63] The gist: there is a prohibition on using technology to influence or alter the course of another civilization. In the film, Spock regards it a violation of the Prime Directive to be seen by the aboriginal population of the planet they are trying to save. The "good" of the people, as encoded in the directive, trumps the "good" of his life.

[64] Charles Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 241.

[65] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 37.

force only by distorting what it means to be human. Spock's cool and disengaged logic chills us because, compared to Kirk, he appears inhumane. We regard Kirk all the better because Spock proves a foil: his inhumanity reveals Kirk's humanity. Roddenberry wrote better than he knew: even in the final frontier of space, where traveling at light speed is commonplace, the depths of humanity have not been filled in or exhaustively explored.

Apodictic reasoning is appealing because it seems heir to a model of reasoning remarkable in its explanatory power. When subjected to scrutiny, though, the Procrustean bed of disengaged logic cannot accommodate the width and depth of human selfhood. It cannot fulfill its promise to resolve all dilemmas because it cannot account for the reality's inexpungable complexity. Nevertheless, buttressed by the prestige of the natural sciences, it has been imbued with an aura of indisputability. In the work of Sam Harris[66] and Daniel Dennett,[67] there continues to be an outright "hostility to the notion of strong evaluation" and an insistence that reason "be as disengaged as possible from our implicit commitments and understandings."[68] It would seem we are left in a quandary: if apodictic reasoning cannot resolve all disputes, are we to be pushed toward "a half-despairing, half-complacent embracing of an equivocal ethical subjectivism"?[69]

1.1.2   Ad Hominem Reasoning

Whereas apodictic reasoning relies upon a belief that interlocutors can be brought to recognize a single neutral criterion to resolve disputes, ad hominem reasoning assumes otherwise. Note: by ad hominem Taylor is *not* indicating the logical fallacy that attacks

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[66] Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
[67] Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
[68] Ibid., 59.
[69] Ibid., 41.

one's opponent rather than her argument. By ad hominem he means an argument that goes "to the person" and assume the interlocutor's point of view. Essentially, ad hominem argument begins from another's standpoint and, by means of dialogue, shows how adopting another position might prove beneficial. Rather than trying to find neutral ground or territory, it seeks to engage the subjectivity of one's interlocutor. This requires

> showing that there is what Ernst Tugendhat calls a "way of experience" which leads from one's interlocutor's position to one's own via some error-reducing moves, such as the clearing up of a confusion, the resolving of a contradiction, or the frank acknowledgement of what really does impinge.[70]

Unlike apodictic reasoning which strives to achieve absolute certainty without appealing to human experience, an ad hominem approach moves progressively through a series of biographical transitions toward formulating a provisional "best account" or way of seeing able to make better sense of one's experience and remains open to further modification.[71]

How would this type of argument resolve disagreements, especially when the parties cannot agree a neutral criterion? For Taylor, in the absence of "externally defined criteria,"[72] we have no choice but to engage in dialogue.[73] Each party must begin by assuming, "my opponent already shares at least some of the fundamental positions toward good and right which guide me."[74] For example, take X and Y as representing two competing positions. According to an apodictic mode of reasoning, an argument succeeds by showing that "X is false and Y true, or X has probability n and Y has $2n$."[75] But assume there is no neutrally agreed upon premise both X and Y share. Are we doomed to

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[70] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 505.
[71] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 54.
[72] Ibid., 42.
[73] Certain, apodictic, judgments can indeed appeal to external criteria: strike zones, tax codes, speed limits, exchange rates. These appeal to an objective standard. The question is whether *all* disagreements – from evaluations can-openers to speed limits to debates about abortion – can appeal to a neutral premise to adjudicate the dispute in an apodictic and remainder-free manner.
[74] Ibid., 36. Otherwise stated: you need a hermeneutic of charity.
[75] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 51.

skepticism or "agreeing to disagree"? No, not if we engage in a process of ad hominem reasoning with an openness to making some sort of modification to one's own position.[76]

Taylor offers three examples to show how "reasoning in transition" can work:

> (a) Y can be shown to make better sense of difficulties internal to X than X can.[77]
> (b) Y can be shown to present a development that cannot be explained in X's terms.[78]
> (c) Transition from X to Y is shown to be error-reducing through the removal of "a contradiction, or overcoming of a confusion, or the recognition of a hitherto ignored relevant factor."[79]

Ad hominem argument differs from apodictic reasoning by refusing to appeal to an external or supposedly neutral criterion. Reasoning in transition proceeds by initiating a dialogue through which an agent in position X might recognize the benefits and advantages of position Y (or vice versa). It is potentially therapeutic inasmuch as the agent in position X, through this dialogue, comes to see how position Y is in fact more desirable or error-reducing. The trajectory of the argument is toward making "better sense" of one's life or bringing greater coherence to one's experiences. Rather than a zero-sum game of winner/loser, these arguments aim to facilitate growth in self-understanding. In option (c), for instance, the agent begins from position X and attempts to imagine her life *as if* she had transitioned to position Y by imaginatively weighing how this transition ameliorates otherwise intractable aporiae, makes better sense of her life, or promises to be somehow error-reducing and advantageous.

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[76] I borrow here from Zane Yi, "The Possibility of God: An Examination and Evaluation of Charles Taylor's Transcendental Critique of Closed Worlds" (PhD diss, Fordham U, 2013), 19-20.

[77] The transition from Aristotelian to Galilean theories of motion. In adopting the latter, scientists were able to make sense of "violent" motion in a way not possible to Aristotelian science. By adopting the standpoint Y (Galilean science), hitherto unclear or hazy elements of X are made clear.

[78] Taylor refers to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and the execution of a man guilty of attempted regicide. This type of public spectacle is unthinkable to us but it made sense in a former framework.

[79] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 51. The more therapeutic model, it involves one interlocutor helping the other to identify a contradiction and to transition, gradually, to another point of view.

It should be pointed out that, of their nature, ad hominem arguments are

irrefragably open-ended. They are ongoing and ambiguous, not "cut-and-dry," because

> the claim is not that Y is correct *simplicter* but just that whatever is "ultimately true," Y is better than X. It is, one might say, less false…Its message is: whatever else turns out to be true, you can improve your epistemic position by moving from X to Y; this step is a gain.[80]

Further developments are likely to occur and, as Alasdair MacIntyre contends, "our

beliefs about what the marks of 'a best account so far' are will themselves change in what

are at present unpredictable ways."[81] These arguments possess a limitless "growing edge"

and are open to and expectant of further innovation and change.

The third argument (c) derives its force, not by assuming Y to be *obviously*

superior, but by engaging the interlocutor in a dialogue aimed at shifting the other's

vantage point to see the advantages of Y over X. In so doing, it opens up a space of

hypothetical conjecture in which both think along with one another and re-imagine how

life would look were one to change position. This is a departure from arguments (a) and

(b) which are contrastive, meaning they compare two positions in order to show that a

transition to Y marks a definitive, clear-cut, improvement over X. Jason Blakely views

much of *A Secular Age* as engaging in (a), "an attempt to give a better theory of what

secularism in fact means in light of the anomalies plaguing traditional secularization

theories."[82] Elements of (b) are also present as Taylor tacks back-and-forth through his

story in an effort to show what was gained in each transition and, also, what was lost.

What sets (c) apart is that it proceeds "not through comparison to a rival theory

but by direct appeal to a specific individual's lived experiences, intuitions, or sense of

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[80] Ibid., 54.
[81] Ibid., 54, cited by Taylor.
[82] Jason Blakely, "Returning to the Interpretive Turn: Charles Taylor and His Critics," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 383-406 at 402.

what is true."[83] Through dialogue, we become aware of certain inconsistencies and contradictions present in our lives. What one had once regarded the stability of position X, through the course of sustained interaction, begins to appear fragile and less able to support one's life. One begins to transition from X toward Y because it is there one senses the possibility of a better form of life. We are given to imagine ourselves *otherwise* and, coming to see this as a better way, we reform our lives accordingly.

Colin Jager rightly identifies how Taylor's narrative implicates the reader in its telling and can induce the transformation of one's life. He describes *A Secular Age* as a story to be "told, experienced, undergone, in order for its force to be felt."[84] Taylor, he contends, uses "philosophic song" as a "mode of critical thought because it forces it readers to undergo the very thing it is describing."[85] To develop further the scope of the "philosophic song," I would say Taylor not only sings to his readers but also tries to sing with them. He challenges us to surrender modernity's hymnal and to take up and sing from a new musical score. Taylor's wager, it seems to me, is that readers will find his composition more capacious, accommodating, and truer to human experience. Taylor wants to show how his choral arrangement better reflects the depth and breadth of human experience and allows us to the hit "transcendent notes" modernity's songs cannot reach.

Let me conclude with a distinction between apodictic and ad hominem arguments, a distinction I think proves illuminating of Taylor's work and will also be used in the next chapter as we explore Desmond's thought. To my eye, the goal of apodictic reasoning – whether in moral argument or, as we will see, in modernity's subtraction narratives – is to *incapacitate* one's opponent. You either show a fundamental premise to be false, or the

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[83] Ibid., 402.
[84] Colin Jager, "Charles Taylor's Romanticism," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* 191.
[85] Ibid.

other's reasoning to be riddled with errors, and you dismiss his or her position as foolish, misguided, or woefully ignorant. The goal: to win at any cost. Ad hominem approaches intend, by contrast, *capacitate* one's interlocutor through dialogue. The goal is not to score points, or achieve a takedown, but rather to facilitate a new way of thinking. It is a biographical argument, one that offers a new form of life, that initiates an ongoing process of growth in articulacy as one approaches asymptotically the goal of human flourishing. The style of argument mirrors its anthropological presuppositions; our choice of argumentative strategy, or narrative style, reveals much about how we understand what it means to be human. I will refer to and develop this distinction throughout this essay.

1.1.3   A Post-Modern Socrates?

Taylor's argumentative strategy, in a sense, is nothing new. Its roots can be traced back at least to Socrates whose elenctic method enabled him both physically and philosophically to accompany interlocutors along the way (*meta* = along, *hodos* = way) of discovery. Socrates did not impose or appeal to neutral criteria but walked and conversed with his partner. Nor does the road ever terminate, and it is fitting for so many Socratic dialogues to end without firm resolution, because there is always more to say, always more roads to traverse. Desiring to preserve something of the "order of discovery" made possible by Socrates, Taylor recognizes the deleterious consequences of the apodictic mode of argument that bracket out or disqualify appeals to biography and experience.

The consequence of being implicated by Taylor's text, of setting out to walk along the road with him, is that the textual performance opens up new vistas and horizons. One finds, having surveyed and evaluated the story he shares, that one's very way of seeing and judging has been affected. One is formed through the text and

one's range of rational argument is greatly extended…once we see that not all disputes are between fully explicit positions…I would argue that a great deal of moral argument involves the articulation of the implicit, and this extends the range of ad hominem far beyond the easy cases where the opponent offers us purchase in one explicit premise.[86]

This "philosophic song" is neither a paean nor a panegyric, sung neither in praise nor lament nor nostalgia. Its performance invites readers to take part, to become newly "attuned," and to learn to sing in a key open to transcendent variations. The song he invites us into, along with the song Desmond's philosophy makes possible, proves nothing less than an exercise *in* and *of* our humanity: we only become ourselves by dialoguing, or singing, with others.[87] We turn now to Taylor's account of how we fell out of tune with the transcendent and consider how the map he draws might offer a return route to the Transcendent. The question: does Taylor offer a contemporary retrieval of Augustine who discerned in Book X of the *Confessions* how the whole of the created order offered choral testimony to the One who "made us (Ps. 99:3)?"[88]

1.2   Transitioning to a Secular Age

In the final chapter of *A Secular Age*, Taylor considers several figures who broke free from the "immanent frame" by undergoing a conversion.[89] He focuses especially on Ivan Illich, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Charles Péguy. Taylor takes these figures as exemplars who sought, each in his own life, a greater sense of fulfillment or flourishing than he found available to him. Each one, in turn, broke out and charted with his life a

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[86] Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," 55.
[87] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 231.
[88] Augustine, *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 183.
[89] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 728.

new pathway to an encounter with the sacred and found, consequently, a new way of being. For Taylor, the process of conversion is not meant to return to

> an earlier formula, inspiring as many of these will undoubtedly be; there will always be an element of imitation of earlier models, but inevitably and rightly Christian life today will look for and discover new ways of moving beyond the present orders to God. One could say that we look for new and unprecedented itineraries. Understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.[90]

To my mind, this is the book's most powerful and exciting claim. Taylor's solicitation is not for a repetition of old ways but, rather, for a renewal that takes the shape of forging new itineraries. To the dismay of Nietzsche's madman, Taylor has heard the news of God's death but does not believe it. Our ancestors' routes may no longer be reliable, but we are not bereft of options. We may, and some of us must, strike out again.

I want to turn, in light of this call for "new itineraries," to consider why, in the first place, a "return" is necessary. Taylor's question may again be posed: Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?[91] Many, though not all, Westerners have come to feel the tension of Secular$_3$. On the same shelf at Barnes & Noble one finds copies of Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God* alongside A.C. Grayling's *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism*. Yet, as Taylor observes, our age permits of a host – a nova – of un/belief options. If we are to make sense of Taylor's call to discern future paths, it is necessary to understand why it is necessary to do so in the first place. We need to occupy the space between un/belief's boosters and knockers get a sense of how the "eclipse of the transcendent" came to pass.

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[90] Ibid., 755.
[91] Ibid., 25.

To guide us through Taylor's mapping of Secular₃, I use three metaphors drawn from "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy": the "moral corral," the "ethical field," and the "forest of the unconditional." I focus in particular on the transition *between* the metaphors as especially illuminating of key historical developments. Indeed, by developing these metaphors I think I can show how Taylor's text performs by implicating the reader and giving a sense or "feel" for each transition.

I structure each subsection similarly, beginning by identifying the metaphor and offering a suggestion about what it communicates. Next, I consider how the metaphor serves to encapsulate key historical transitions. Finally, I suggest how the metaphor functions descriptively and performatively. In this, I am inspired by Desmond: playing on the bivalent meaning of the Greek *meta* meaning "in the midst" and "beyond," I explore how each *metaphor* (*meta* + *pherein* "to transfer") makes sense of the transitions by guiding us "in the midst" of history and how the metaphor can "carry us beyond" its own limits.[92] If my argument about the performative character of Taylor's work proves successful, we will see how the power of metaphor opens up vistas *beyond* the immanent order openings capable of serving as routes for our return to the Transcendent.

1.2.1 The Moral Corral

By the metaphor of "moral corral" Taylor means to indicate how Anglo-Saxon philosophy has artificially truncated the scope of its inquiry into morality. With Iris Murdoch, Taylor faults this tradition for focusing on "questions of what we ought to do," while failing to address, "questions about what it is good to be or what it is good to

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[92] William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 210.

love."[93] This narrowed scope, focused upon questions of the "right" over the "good," resulted from attempts (1) "to work out exactly what the considerations are which tell us which action is *right*" and (2) to demonstrate that these "are the right considerations, against other rival candidates."[94] Until the mid-twentieth century, the two systems of normative ethics responsive to this were utilitarianism and deontology. Their answer to (1) taking *right* to be either maximizing benevolence or adhering to duty/justice was developed into deliberative procedures as a response to (2). What made these so alluring was "in each case, the answer to the first has the intellectually satisfying property of being a single criterion. Morality can be derived from one source."[95] The shadow of apodictic reasoning falls long on such moral reasoning.

Just a corral restrains animals, taking them from their natural environment and penning them in within its fences, so too does the "moral corral" communicate a sense of an agent having been "penned in" and deprived of a more natural environment. Compare the image of a "corral" with Taylor's description of a pre-modern sense of the human as embedded within and in congress with the cosmic order or Great Chain of Being. *Theory* was not, as in modern philosophy, a disengaged description; it was a practical and contemplative activity. Indeed, theory was "one of the highest activities of man, one which bring him close to the divine."[96]Theory is less a calculation than a contemplative stance, a way of seeing whereby one recognizes how

> The complete good of human life as rational doesn't simply consist in ethical
> excellence; it also includes the excellence of science. And the fulfillment of these

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[93] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 3.
[94] Ibid., 4. Emphasis added.
[95] Ibid., 4. I discuss "single-criterion" below.
[96] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 125.

requires a grasp of the cosmic order. Attending to both orders is thus constitutive of the human good.[97]

The "corral" metaphor is richly allusive. On the one hand, it stirs a mindfulness of the kind of creatures who typically inhabit these structures, leading us to wonder whether humans and livestock are equipollent. On the other hand, the structure of a corral reminds us not only that it is an intentional construction but, also, that it serves as much to keep things within itself as it is does to keep things out. Clearly, this is not a value-neutral metaphor and is meant to be provocative: Taylor wants us to get a sense of its contours and to evaluate how well it accounts for our lives.

1.2.1.1 The Moral Corral: Encapsulated History

A first enticement into the moral corral came from what appeared, especially in utilitarian reasoning, as a debt to the West's Christian heritage:

> If one objects to a utilitarian that one might legitimately put, say, one's own integrity before the obligation to do the act which has the highest utility consequences, one invites the retort that one is self-indulgent and not really single-mindedly committed to human happiness, as one *ought to be*.[98]

Reasoning in accord with utilitarianism's canon of benevolence means we are *expected* to be the Good Samaritan; looking out for the good of others is the norm and expectation. Such codification, Ivan Illich inveighs, actually marks the corruption of Jesus' parable: what Jesus summoned his listeners to was not a perfection achieved by adhering to a norm; perfection, he insisted, is found only in and through relationship. Utilitarian ethics "fixes" in code form what had been Christianity's radical innovation. Whereas the parable opens the possibility that in and through the body of another we can hear a call "to be a neighbor," utilitarianism fixes the call of charity into a code. "Charity" no longer

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 5. Emphasis added.

empowers an action; instead, it becomes an adjective affixed to bureaucratic agencies whose job it is to take care of those I leave unattended.[99] Charity no longer quickens the virtues, no longer converts the heart or elicits a response to someone's need. What utilitarianism held out as a promise of continuity with the Christian past becomes its perversion: *Perversio optimi quae est pessima*, the perversion of the best is the worst. Utilitarianism persuades by dissembling charity. Instead of entering a network of *agape* that overturns old conventions, we have opted to codify "charity" and domesticate it.[100]

In a drive to universalize benevolence, utilitarian reasoning narrowed its vision to focus on fulfilling requirements stipulated by a code and lost sight of the Good Samaritan for whom charity was an empowering and, by the measure of its day, anarchic call. By narrowing the focus of moral reflection to questions of what it is "right to do," it lost sight of a deeper concern with "what it is good to be." It is not surprising that this form of reasoning ascends in popularity with the advances of the scientific revolution. The desire for universally applicable procedures prompted a search for the criterion on which to ground moral reasoning. If we take the desire for a universalized "maximal benevolence" it seems that we could develop a procedure capable of achieving this goal. The drawback, as we saw earlier with Spock and Kirk, is a single criterion is incapable of meeting the needs of human fulfillment. Only by stripping away what appears fuzzy – emotions, desires, appeals to a sense of calling – could the calculus work. Adding in the fuzzy "variables," which vary according to each agent, the calculus breaks down.[101]

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[99] Ivan Illich, *Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2005), 52-4.
[100] Ibid., 197.
[101] *Mutatis mutandis* a similar argument could be made for deontology as an iteration of Luke 6:31 – "Do unto others as you would have them do to you."

Now, Taylor's claim is not that at some point thinkers collectively sat down and decided, "let's cut out all appeals to the transcendent when reasoning." It is more the case that within the last few centuries such appeals to the transcendent became obsolete as appeals to anything "higher" became increasingly unnecessary. We get a sense of this in his explication of the "affirmation of ordinary life." Gaining momentum during the Reformation, this affirmation "dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the civic life and put the center of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production, and the family."[102] For the Reformers the "sanctification of ordinary life" meant, first, ordinary life became the "site for the highest forms of Christian life" and, second, entailed "an anti-elitist thrust."[103] A point held in common to all Reformers

> was their rejection of mediation. The mediaeval church as they understood it, a corporate body in which some, more dedicated, members could win merit and salvation for others who were less so, was anathema to them. There could be no such thing as more devoted or less devoted Christians: the personal commitment must be total or it was worthless.[104]

A homology exists between this rejection and the commitment to practical benevolence: both try to universalize what had been, previously, a summons discerned in the life of individual Christians. By universalizing the call to holiness and affirming ordinary life, one does away with the need for an ecclesial hierarchy or a set-apart group of contemplatives to pray for, intercede on behalf of, or mediate an encounter with the divine. God's accessibility to all walks of life effaces any hierarchy of holiness and inculcates a sense of egalitarianism among believers: ditch diggers and sheep shearers, women and men, merchants and pastors. None better, none worse, all called by God in equal measure.

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[102] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 5.
[103] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 179.
[104] Ibid., 215

For Taylor, the transitions toward "practical benevolence" and the "affirmation of ordinary life" are parts of a larger cultural revolution. What we need to see is how our sense of contact with the Transcendent is separated from the quotidian. Charity is a code of conduct, not God's gracious and empowering overture to Christians to "prolong the Incarnation."[105] The Reformers disallow any "higher" calling to the monastery or priesthood because all are equally called to holiness. There is a diminished sense of any divine insistence calling women and men to a new form of life. It is not so much that God is being deliberately jettisoned from the quotidian round. The opposite is the case: God becomes so drawn into the world as to lead to the domestication of the divine. As a consequence, the image of God morphs from the Transcendent One met at privileged moments in the liturgy or during the liturgical year into a God of the everyday. The irony of the Reformers' accomplishment of democratizing access to God is, by shearing God of transcendence and making the Divine immanently accessible, they expedited the slide from robust theism to a weakened deism and, eventually, to exclusive humanism.

To get at the burgeoning "exclusive humanism" we need to take account of four "anthropocentric shifts" severing us from our sense of, or our need to appeal to, the Transcendent. No one of these was sufficient to foreclose an appeal to self-transcendence or the Transcendent, but combined they exacerbated a sense of alienation from our place within Great Chain of Being. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Taylor cites four "eclipses"

1. The Eclipse of Further Purpose – we owe to God's providence only the achievement of our own good. We do not need to refer our lives to a Transcendent God or appeal to transcendence – anything beyond ourselves – to achieve flourishing. Focus given exclusively to inner-world *telos*
2. The Eclipse of Grace – God's plan is manifest for those willing to see it. We need nothing extra in order to grasp God's providential ordering of creation.

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[105] Ivan Illych, 207.

3. The Eclipse of Mystery –created order evacuated of mystery because (1) our good is inner-worldly and (2) we can, using reason, understand God's purposes.
4. The Eclipse of Our End – we lose the sense that God has a final transformation in store for us; the idea of "theiosis" or divinization or becoming a partaker in the divine life evanesces.[106]

Over time this four-fold eclipse led to an increased fixation upon the importance of daily life. Nevertheless, although we lost a sense of our lives as illuminated or guided by God, we did not dwell long in darkness: we fixed greater attention to the light we humans can create. This was accompanied by a change in our spiritual lives: what had once been *kairotic* time measured by liturgical seasons and observances was drained of the divine and became secular time. We lost a sense of eschatological tension, of God's action in and through the world, and there began to take shape a new spiritual outlook that believed "our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity."[107] The "eclipses" were not, of course all bad: it is estimable that we became increasingly attentive to new demands. But lost in transition, as Taylor recounts, is any appeal to Transcendence. We can pursue good, and be good, without appealing to grace or to God.

Albeit traced with rough lines, what I am trying to bring into relief is a remarkable transformation within what Taylor calls the "social imaginary." He describes the social imaginary 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. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature."[108]

We live and act against this background without ever giving much thought to it. It is conveyed in narratives, enshrined in monuments and institutions, and observed in the way

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[106] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221-4.
[107] Ibid., 5.
[108] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 25.

our calendars are structured around civic holidays and observances. The social imaginary provides the shared know-how when it comes to cultural expectations, social interactions, inter-personal dynamics, and humor: the way sarcasm works, or the give-and-take of a joke, depends on a vast and intricate background that makes such exchanges possible. In effect, the social imaginary is "that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[109]

With the gift of hindsight, Taylor shows how contingent developments within history affected, and continue to shape, our current understanding of what it means to be human. In an earlier age, we had a sense of porosity or openness to the divine; space and time were configured in such a way that the divine presence was always immediate. Given various transitions and developments, however, we grew increasingly "buffered" to the divine. Increasingly unmoored from our collective imagination, the Transcendent eventually drifted away and, in its waning light, we ceased looking toward it for our fulfillment. Instead of pining for an eschatological horizon, we put trust in our abilities and began to focus more on "how we deal with others, in justice and benevolence."[110] As he observes, the exaltation of "justice-benevolence over issues of fulfillment and the good life" can be seen as contributing to an advance: we grow in a sense of justice applied blindly and due process; we develop a sense of universal human rights and dignity. What we gained in universal applicability – a single canon to bind them all – casts a shadow on appeals to biography or subjectivity. As apodictic reasoning grew in dominance, such appeals began to atrophy and, eventually, wither away.

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[109] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.
[110] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 6.

As a further enticement into the corral we must also consider the way epistemological developments affected our sense of human agency. For Taylor, one of Descartes' signal contributions was to develop a sense of disengaged reason. For Descartes, this meant "self-monitoring reason, reasoning which can turn on its own proceedings and examine them for accuracy and reliability."[111] This ideal of accuracy and reliability is enshrined in his *les ideés claires et distinctes*.[112] Anyone who has read his *Meditations* knows Descartes denies that sense impressions are capable of conveying certain and indubitable knowledge; there is always a threat that one may be misled. So, if contact with the world cannot be the bearer of knowledge, how can one be certain of anything? His solution involves an inward turn. "Of course, the theme that the sage has to turn away from merely current opinion, and make a more rigorous examination that leads him to science, is a very old one, going back at least to Socrates and Plato."[113] What sets Descartes apart from this older tradition is "is the reflexive nature of his turn. The seeker after science is not directed away from shifting and uncertain opinion toward the order of the unchanging, as with Plato, but rather within, to the contents of his own mind.[114] After Descartes, one no longer needs to appeal to the cosmos or an external authority to secure knowledge. One needs only to turn away from the fleeting impressions of the flesh, to focus inwardly, and to ascertain for oneself what is, and is not, certain. Here we see the nascent formation of an ideal "disengaged perspective." Trust is placed in a neutral procedural method promising to arrive at truth. For disengaged reason, the *cogito* stands aloof from the vicissitudes of daily life; one need only follow procedural reasoning to

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[111] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 6.
[112] Ibid., 6.
[113] Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," 4.
[114] Ibid.

achieve the certainty of knowledge. The Cartesian subject becomes the ruler and measurer of all reality. God is not, of course, jettisoned from the picture but is invoked more as a divine insurance policy of the veracity of the *cogito*'s reflections than as the Creator and sustainer of all creation.

Methodologically, Descartes catalyzed a shift away from the older, Aristotelian, model toward what became the ideal of disengaged reason. This this model of disengaged reason, however, can hardly be counted an unalloyed gain:

> In fact, we can say that the founding move of the modern dualist sorting, and of the mechanization of the world picture, was this Cartesian kind of disengagement, which disinvests the world of objects around us of any meaning, be it the ordinary everyday meanings that things have for us as embodied agents – being available or out of reach, pressing on us or open, attractive or repulsive, inviting or forbidden – or be it the intrinsic purposes defined by Ideas.[115]

Disengagement is an affected pose, a deliberate way of beholding, bracketing out the ordinary appearance of things. Because *assumed*, it falsely suggests its neutrality and objectivity. Dreyfus and Taylor identify two "deeper levels" of motivation one rooted in power, the other in pride, beneath this purported neutral stance:

> At a deeper level, the stance of disengagement has also benefited from a powerful ethical charge. It is strongly valued insofar as it is seen as inseparable from freedom, responsibility, and the self-transparency which we gain by reflection on our own thinking…But once we come to see the world as mechanism, a domain of efficient causation, but without inherent purpose, then we are free to treat it as a neutral field where our main concern is how to affect our own purposes. Instrumental reason becomes the only appropriate category, and knowledge can be seen as the basis of power.

> Disengagement is not only a source of power; it is also the instrument of disenchantment. The world ceases to be the locus of spirits and magic forces…There is a sense of invulnerability, in relation to the immemorial sense of being at the mercy of spirits and forces – but also the intuition that this invulnerability was hard won. It required effort, and also courage, to face down

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[115] Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 13-14.

the primordial fears, and abandon the sense of comfort in our niche that a meaningful cosmos offers. And this generates a feeling of pride.[116]

Here, Dreyfus and Taylor cast a critical eye at the claim of "value-neutrality." Indeed, they detect beneath its surface claim deep and ulterior motives. To be sure, they are not decrying Descartes' project as misguided or errant. What they are pointing to, though, are the motivational dynamics at play in the stance of the disengaged knower. Knowledge, power, and pride: the disengaged stance is less a natural pose, a disinterested "seeing things as they are," than it is an achievement with dire ramifications.

One of these ramifications is a hypertrophied "procedure envy" modeled too-closely on the supposedly disengaged or neutral scientific inquiry. The achievement of scientific reasoning became the index of *all* reasoning and provided not only the standard by which reason was measure but, also, the procedure of reasoning. Our trust need not be in the fallibility of a world in flux but in the power of our reason to apply an operational procedure leading toward knowledge. Single-term moralities, symptomatic of "procedure envy," prove irresistible to moral philosophers:

> At last the fuzzy intuitions of common sense can be reduced to clarity. What is more, all incommensurabilities, and hence, difficult decisions, can be ironed out. Utilitarianism both satisfies demand for rigor and homogeneity and fits well with the disengaged stance of instrumental reason….But Kantianism also gets a charge from being rigorous and homogenous.[117]

If one could *just* ascertain the central term – either benevolence or duty – and articulate the procedure to follow, one could then debate the superiority of one model over the other. Consequently, moral reasoning became increasingly concerned with foundations, canons and codes, and fell increasingly out of touch with humanity's depths.

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[116] Ibid., 25.
[117] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 6.

The convergence of moral and epistemological temperaments helped to shift our understanding of the world and our role within it. Taylor identifies three traits marking the emergent modern subject:

> The first is the picture of the subject as ideally disengaged, that is, as free and rational to the extent that he has fully distinguished himself from the natural and social worlds, so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what is outside him in these worlds. The second, which flows from this, is a punctual view of the self, ideally ready as free and rational to treat these worlds – and even some of the features of his own character – instrumentally, as subject to change and reorganizing in order the better to secure the welfare of himself and others. The third is the social consequence of the first two: atomistic construal of society as constituted by, or ultimately to be explained in terms of, individual purposes.[118]

These are traits associated with the modern subject: disengaged, rationally in control, and directing one's intentionality without interference.[119] As a description it resonates with the image of "buffered self" seen as "invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it."[120] Or, as Murdoch notes, for the modern subject "morality is a matter of thinking clearly and then proceeding to outward dealings with other men."[121]

We have, however, reason to be skeptical of this agent. As suggested, "disengaged" is hardly synonymous with "disinterested" or neutral. It is an affected stance; simply scratch beneath the surface to find that "neutral ground" actually conceals less-than-disinterested motivations. The modern subject chants "neutrality, objectivity, valueless inquiry," but is this a proclamation or an incantation? Is it possible for the process of "disenchantment" to have actually worked its own enchantment? Could it be that the freedom promised by disenchantment has actually delivered the modern agent

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[118] Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *Philosophical Arguments*, 7.
[119] Consult also René Girard's distinction between the "novelistic" and "romantic" in *Deceit, Desire, & the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Frecco (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965), 1-52.
[120] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.
[121] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, 8.

into a too-restrictive cell? Perhaps it is the case that modernity's heroic figure is, at the end of it all, remains little more than a member of a vast herd.

1.2.1.2 The Moral Corral: Function

So, how does the metaphor of the "moral corral" work to (1) carry us "amidst" history and (2) can it ferry us, or at least point us, beyond itself to something more?

The work of the metaphor, in response to (1), is to encapsulate *one* way of living within what Taylor calls "the immanent frame."[122] Of this he writes:

> the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call the "immanent frame." There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a "natural" order, to be contrasted to a supernatural one, an "immanent" world, over against a possible "transcendent" one.[123]

A frame, like a corral, is at once inclusive and exclusive. It holds things in, creates the space in which they are held, and serves as a barrier. There is a way of doing business, or living life, "within" the corral that seems natural. Heidegger captures this with his understanding of the "referential totality"[124] against which our lives and actions make sense. What is easy to lose sight of, and what Taylor is keen on highlighting, is that the corral has been constructed. By telling about how the concerns of morality became artificially foreshortened, Taylor makes it possible to re-assess the story and to see whether a better narrative might be told. By narrating how various forces converged and led to a limited understanding of human agency, or with the suggestive metaphor of the corral, it is possible for us to become mindful of what is missing. In tracing out a

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[122] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.
[123] Ibid., 542.
[124] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 99.

genealogical account that describes how questions of "what it is good to be" were increasingly bracketed, we ask ourselves, "Ah, but can we cut these out? Are they not necessary?"[125] Rather than an inescapable fate, we begin to see how the moral corral is, in fact, an achievement.[126] We managed, that is, to buffer ourselves from cosmic forces, to imagine the self as atomic and punctual, and we settled for these narrower confines because they seemed capable of accommodating our needs. We were not pushed into the corral, we were lulled into its depths; not every achievement is an unalloyed gain.

The coral metaphor conveys a sense of dwelling within a "Closed World Structure (CWS)."[127] If the West's social imaginary is "the immanent frame," then the CWS is a "spin" or interpretation that is "clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one seeing important aspects of reality."[128] The narrowness and restrictiveness of the corral gives us a feel for of the CWS. Yet, and this is crucial, this is but *one* way of interpreting what it means to be a self; it is not the only way. In the very act of telling a story, of interpreting the history leading to the development of the "immanent frame" and the CWS, Taylor shows that the corral, or CWS, is not a settled matter. Because he can offer an interpretation or alternative narrative to "subtraction stories," he puts into play the possibility that there may be better accounts available.

Herein we see an answer to (2). By showing us what has been gained and what has been lost through the transitions encapsulated by the corral metaphor, Taylor invites us to weigh whether the corral sufficiently accounts for the needs of human beings. The metaphor works not only retrospectively to describe transitions but also, and more

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[125] Taylor seems to be enacting a narrative "breakdown" that leads us to "see again" our situation, to assess and evaluate our situation. His debt to Heidegger is clear, especially *Being and Time*, 95-103.
[126] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 255.
[127] Ibid., 551.
[128] Ibid.

importantly, to carry us "beyond" itself by showing the corral's inability to account sufficiently for human life. If we find the corral inhospitable to a thicker description of human agency incapable of accommodating our constitutive natures as strong evaluators, we need to move beyond its confines to an environment where this is possible. The metaphor is neither neutral nor static. It is not neutral because it does not envision the corral as fitting for human agents. It is not static because, by awakening us to the restricted confines of the corral, it provides an impetus for us to move beyond the corral's fence and to find our place upon a wider and more welcoming terrain.

1.2.2   The Ethical Field

Through the metaphor of "ethical field," Taylor offers a broader "take" on what it means to be a modern subject. Human reasoning, he has argued, is not sufficiently understood within the confines of the corral; its full potency, so restricted, cannot be realized. We need wider expanses and broader vistas if we are to flourish. Again, this is not a value-neutral metaphor: we were "trapped in the corral of morality" and have been "liberated" to enter the wider field.[129] And it is just this I want to stress: there is liberation in coming to recognize the insufficiency of one narrative (corral) and the gain to be had in transitioning to another (field).

From a stance within the ethical field, we see more clearly the limitations of the corral, that it possesses an overly "narrow view of what morality is as a dimension of human life."[130] From the field we appreciate better the limitations of what Taylor calls "subtraction stories" as having played a role in luring us into, and keeping us penned in, the corral. James Smith describes subtraction stories as those

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[129] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 5.
[130] Ibid., 8.

tales of enlightenment and progress and maturation that see the emergence of modernity and "the secular" as shucking the detritus of belief and superstition. Once upon a time, as these subtraction stories rehearse it, we believed in sprites and fairies and gods and demons. But as we became rational, and especially as we marshaled naturalist explanations for what we used to attribute to spirits and forces, the world became progressively disenchanted. Religion and belief withered with scientific exorcism of superstition.[131]

A subtraction story of the CWS's evolution would portray it not only as an inevitability of modernity's advance but also, and more importantly, as an indisputable gain. On such a telling, there is "no epistemic loss involved in the transition; we have just shucked off some false beliefs, some fears of imagined objects."[132]

Taylor disputes this story. In fact, by means of counter narrative, he shows how modernity's subtraction story could have been different and can be narrated otherwise. In effect, *A Secular Age* works to disrupt common "subtraction stories" that purport to recount neutrally the natural progress of history. Subtraction narratives of modernity, those claiming that the eclipse of transcendence was inevitable, are frequently "haloed" by an aura of disengaged scientific inquiry. They claim to tell a factual story, chronicling from a distance those events that led to the eclipse of transcendence. But can they really claim neutrality? Taylor sees, with Ricoeur, how in emplotting a narrative one cannot sever the telling of the story from ethics and politics. A story's narration does not neutrally tell "one thing after another" (*meta*) because, in crafting a plot, one invariably makes decisions about what to include and what to exclude. When we tell stories we draw connections between events that try to show causality, "one thing because of

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[131] Smith, *How Not to Be Secular*, 24.
[132] Taylor, "Afterword," 303.

another" (*dia*).[133] *How* we tell the story, how we connect events and portray their

unfolding, is every bit as important as the events themselves.

What Taylor is getting at is that subtraction stories often masquerade as objective

"telling the facts" but this conceals its ethical and political aims. He dissents from, and

wants to expose as far from neutral, the "coming of age" stories that depict our loss of a

sense of transcendence as an unalloyed good or gain. He writes

> I am arguing that it is only within some understanding of agency, in which
> disengaged scientific enquiry is woven into a story of courageous adulthood, to be
> attained through a renunciation of the more "childish" comforts of meaning and
> beatitude, that the death of God story appears obvious.[134]

Secularization narratives are as much a moral story as they are accounts of scientific

progress, historical contingencies, or philosophical insights. By offering an alternative

account, a re-figuration of the events within a new narrative, Taylor exposes the

subtraction narratives' lack of neutrality and sheds light up their own moral commitments

to a certain, limited understanding of human agency. But it is only once one has broken

through the corral's fence and found oneself in the wider field that the limitations of the

corral become apparent. It is to a description of this move we now turn.

1.2.2.1 The Ethical Field: Encapsulated History

Taylor contends that the fatal flaw of single-term moralities is that it "perpetrates

a drastic foreshortening of our moral world, by concentrating only on what we are

obligated to do."[135] By excluding or ignoring "what it is good to be" we lose a broader

sense of what it means to be human. Still, even though much contemporary philosophy

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[133] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University
      of Chicago Press, 1984), 41.
[134] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 565.
[135] Ibid., 10.

has focused on the *right* over the *good*, there is a sense in which the two can never be completely disassociated:

> The sense that such and such is an action we are obligated by justice to perform cannot be separated from a sense that being just is a good way to be. If we had the first without any hint of the second, we would be dealing with a compulsion, like the neurotic necessity to wash one's hands or to remove stones from the road.[136]

This, perhaps, reaffirms our dis-ease with Spock: in his application of logic, he seems intent on sundering "being" (a friend) from "doing" (application of logic).

By articulating a more robust or "thicker" anthropology, Taylor appeals to our need for "life goods" and "constitutive goods." Part I of *Sources of the Self* elaborates these in detail. For our purposes, it is enough to note that by "life good" he means what it is good for humans *to be*. The language of virtue, literary exemplars, and Christian hagiography all provide patterns for a person's life. But what motivates the person, anchoring and coordinating one's aspirations, Taylor calls the "constitutive good." This good is what moves us to act. A courageous soldier gives his life *because of love of state*; a martyr suffers death *for love of God*. Homologous actions do not betray identical intention: each can explain himself, can articulate why he acted in such a manner, through an appeal to of motivational content, or the good, orienting his life.

There is an intertwining of "life good" and "constitutive good" such that *what* one wants is rooted in, and articulated through appeals to, *why* one reckons this good. This is part of our task as thick evaluators and it proves itself an exercise in humanity: we must examine our lives, what we desire to be, and discern and gain clarity on the constitutive good that motivates us and anchors us. We grow in articulacy and come, gradually, to recognize gaps between *what* we are and *who we desire to be.* In coming to know what

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[136] Ibid., 9.

we love, we find the motivation to strive to attain it; we make changes, we evaluate and re-evaluate, we gain a sense for *why* we are motivated, we press onward.

When we place the robust vision of human agency Taylor advocates against the etiolated depiction of the corral dweller, we see why the human drive to flourish needs more than just a single-term morality. Within the corral, we have to discount just what a transition to the field offers us: a chance to consider both what it is good for us to be and what it is that we love. The fullness of our lives cannot be subtended by a single term because one size of life cannot fit, and one *regula* cannot measure, all:

> The fullness of ethical life involves not just doing, but also being; and not just these two but also loving…what is constitutively good. It is a drastic reduction to think that we can capture the moral by focusing only on obligated action, as though it were of no ethical moment what you are and what you love. These are the essence of ethical life.[137]

The conceit of single-term morality, to "capture the moral" and fix it into a code, simply cannot encompass the scope, or plumb the depths, of what it means to be human. Iris Murdoch concurs, adding

> The concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness. It is not a mere value tag of the choosing will, and function and casual uses of 'good' (a good knife, a good fellow) are not, as some philosophers have wished to argue, clues to the structure of the concept. The proper and serious use of the term refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know ('There is no good in us') and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence.[138]

Good's transcendence does not, she continues, mean an appeal to God – she is atheist. It means, though, a refusal to index the good to human calculation. Instead of accenting the necessity of obligation, she advocates growing in attention through the contemplation of the Good. This is not "the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right

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[137] Ibid., 12.
[138] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 93.

away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated

energy, a source of *new* and quite undreamt-of virtue."[139] Murdoch and Taylor align:

there is more to life than what the single-term moralities hold. In the light of the Good,

Taylor and Murdoch would have us see, the hero of the CWS appears pallid and anemic.

The transition from corral to the field also reflects Taylor's rejection of the

"confused inarticulacy of modern naturalism."[140] A naturalist account of humans treats its

subject as it would any other object in nature, eschewing "what we might call subject-

related properties."[141] Appeals to motivation, or intention, only "express the way we feel,

not the way things are."[142] A naturalist-inspired approach to morality dismisses as fuzzy

or unscientific any non-measurable property. So reduced, one seems able to calculate

what it is right to do – the single-criterion – and develop procedures necessary to do it.

What Taylor sees is how naturalist approaches take as a premise a point in need of

argument, namely, "that our accounts of man should be naturalistic in just this sense."[143]

What supports this claim? Is it that "objectivity" is objective or that neutrality is neutral?

This seems to beg the question, as the stance of "objectivity" reflects a value of a subject.

In valuing "objectivity" the inquirer claims to remove anything "fuzzy" or subjective, but

this performs its own contradiction: in valuing objectivity, the agent projects *value* upon

the research field. To this effect, Taylor cites Richard Lewontin in a footnote:

> It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept
> a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, we are
> forced by our a priori allegiance to material causes to create an apparatus of
> investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter

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[139] Ibid., 101.
[140] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 12.
[141] Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods," 242.
[142] Ibid., 243.
[143] Ibid.

how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.[144]

A supposedly neutral inquiry can be anything but; as we see above, a materialist commitment decides in advance both the questions and the answers one will entertain.

Discomfited by the corral's narrowness, "we are induced to burst the boundaries of the foreshortened world and recognize the relevance for this world of what we are and love, as well as what we do."[145] Note the verbs: *induced* and *recognize*. He wants us to see that the subtraction stories cavalierly narrating God's death are *stories*. They are narrations, deliberately arranged and structured (*dia*); subtraction stories, like all stories, have a *mythos* or plotline that organizes the events of history into a narrative.[146] Yet there are other ways of telling the story, and Taylor offers an alternative. *A Secular Age* performs by interrupting the monologue of the substitution narrative and offers a competing account to those who see secularism as the consequence of "subtraction stories" or as a result of Intellectual Decline.[147] Through narrative and metaphor, Taylor's story functions as an ad hominem argument that gives us both a new way of framing history (interpretation) and experiencing for ourselves whether the transitions he recounts do, in fact, make better sense of our lives. He brings us to the edge of the corral and, helping us to recognize what is missing from this picture, stirs our imaginations to consider which of our potencies are *not* being actualized within the current framework. He uses an ad hominem approach, engaging our subjectivity and rousing us to consider just how it is we inhabit the immanent frame and whether a better way is possible.

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[144] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 835.
[145] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 14.
[146] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 129-30.
[147] Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame*:* University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (*Malden: Blackwell, 2006)

What Taylor appeals to, however, is something "subtraction stories" seek to dismiss. What animates our capacity as strong-evaluators is not whim or passing fancy but an insatiable desire for fullness. Indeed, he claims it is "axiomatic that everyone, and hence all philosophical positions, accept some definition of greatness and fullness in human life."[148] Additionally, "I believe there is no escaping some version of what I called in an earlier discussion 'fullness'; for any livable understanding of human life, there must be some way in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should."[149] Once we realize that our yearning for fulfillment cannot be sated by the thin gruel of the corral, we may begin to move toward the field. But this step is not without its own difficulties. For while the enclosure of the corral could be criticized for truncating the scope of our humanity, it had its comforts; within its confines, we were sheltered from the pressures and travails that come with venturing outside into new territories.

In moving into the broader field, led by a desire for fulfillment, we must confront and feel the full force of Taylor's "cross pressures." We are being led to experience

> A mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks both of belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendence. The cross pressures are experienced more acutely by some people and in some milieu than others, but over the whole culture, we can see them reflected in a number of middle positions, which have been drawn from both sides.[150]

Our exit from the corral exercises us, and this in two ways. As strong evaluators, we must discern our desires and coordinate in relation to some form of the good. We must *exercise* our humanity and grow in articulacy, yet we are *exercised* by choices: can we be sure that

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148 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 597.
149 Ibid., 600.
150 Ibid., 595.

this exit is for the best? How do we negotiate the nova of options and spiritual paths set before us? Liberation into the field marks us with the grace and curse of freedom.

Taylor grasps what the Grand Inquisitor saw all too clearly: freedom is fraught and perilous. In the field, we are forced to bear the burden of freedom:

> Instead of a firm foundation for appeasing human conscience once and for all, you chose everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite, you chose everything that was beyond men's strength, and thereby acted as if you did not love them at all – and who did this? He who came to give his life for them! Instead of taking over men's freedom, you increased it and forever burdened the kingdom of the human soul with its torments.[151]

The freedom of the field places at a remove from the security of the corral, rendering us vulnerable to forces beyond our control. What we gain in expanded horizons and greater opportunities for exploration we lose in a sense of certainty, security, and order. In the field, we must choose from a seemingly endless host of options; we are free to choose, yet we are fated to live the consequences of our choice tormented by the thought that we may have chosen poorly.

Encapsulated within the field metaphor is an ambiguous gain: we attain an insight into the insufficiency of the corral but the liberation into the wider expanses of the field burden us with having to commit ourselves to something we can live for. If we are induced to break free from the corral, what we gain in freedom and a hope for fulfillment carries the price of having to negotiate a host of options. Exiting the corral involves a gamble, a risk, a reckoning with a host of new pressures. For the field is wide and many pathways are possible; from behind us, old friends cry out for us to return to the corral while, in the distance, we see the silhouettes of others who have gone in search of something more. We find ourselves as though on a mountain pass:

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[151] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 254-255.

> In the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of a good courage." Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes…If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."[152]

Having inhabited the space of the corral, we have seen for ourselves that it is ultimately inhospitable for humans and we move beyond it. We begin to inhabit an ethical life wherein we can come to "know what to do but also know what we want to be, and more crucially makes us love the good."[153] Instead of a single code, we find many ways of living that appeal to us. We are called to roll the dice, to pledge ourselves to the search for fulfillment. It is a fraught gain, for now we must face the nova of options that defines Secular₃ and discern, among the goods, which holds out to us the promise of fulfillment.

1.2.2.2 The Ethical Field: Function

How, then, does the metaphor (1) carry us "amidst" history and (2) can it ferry us, or point us, beyond itself?

Obviously, in terms of spatial imagery, the metaphor is contrastive. The restricted domain of the corral contrasts with the wider-range of inquiry made possible by the field. Taylor gave us a feel for the narrowness and limited scope of the corral and, by extension, of the broader CWS in which the corral is rooted. We have seen its limitations, confronted its hidden biases, and we have listened to Taylor's counter-narrative. Whereupon, having heard an account that made better sense of elements ignored or discounted within the corral, we ventured forward. Yet the gain in freedom comes at the expense of a sense of security, even if ersatz. For released into the field, standing between

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[152] Fitz-James Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (London: 1853), 353, quoted in William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), 109.
[153] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 15.

the corral and forest, we are exposed and vulnerable. Countless voices call to us. We open our eyes and strain our ears to discern how, and toward what, we should move.

The move from corral to field does not entail leaving the immanent frame but in finding a way to live within it anew. This is fraught with potential and peril. No doubt, within the field's expanses we may resurrect the ancients' question *What is it good to be?* Even more, we can ask in our own way a question posed by Augustin: "What is that I love when I love you, my God?" It is our vocation to find, as Thomas Becket seeks in *Becket*, "an object worthy of my freedom." To enter the field is to discover one must exercise agency *within* history: we are not rudderless ships, listing in the sea of time, but agents capable of charting a course. Where do we go when, buffeted by wind and blinded by rain, dragged by currents and threatened by rocks, it is hard to steer or find a clear course? There is no single-criterion formula or rubric to guide us. We must discern.

Turning to (2), does the field direct us beyond itself? This is harder to answer because Taylor is coy. He says he desires to talk about "our *sense* of things. I'm not talking about what people believe."[154] Or, in analyzing closed world structures, "I will not be arguing either for or against an open or closed reading."[155] He shows us options, offering a three-cornered engagement between secular humanists, neo-Nietzscheans, and acknowledgers of some good beyond life.[156] The field he opens admits of many pathways and there are many ways to dwell thereon: some ways appeal to an immanent transcendence, others to God or the Transcendent itself, still others hold that fulfillment requires nothing other than self-reliance. The way of the field, it seems, is to confront many ways.

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[154] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 325.
[155] Ibid., 551.
[156] Ibid., 636-7.

We might see the metaphor of the field, then, as a deliberate indirection. It does not definitely indicate which way to go. Instead, it records our liberation into a burdensome freedom: we are freed to take a stand for ourselves but pressured by a host of options. It is faced with these options that we can make a wager with our very selves by discerning something of surpassing value toward which to direct our lives. The push and pull of many voices, of competing positions, will buffet our ears and make us question which direction we should head. Forward, backward, or stay in place: to what do we commit our freedom?

1.2.3 Untracked Forest

If Taylor succeeds in guiding his reader from the corral to the field, it remains to be seen whether one enters the *forest*. A move toward the forest's edge, he admits, "is hard to talk about…clearly and in a recognized common language."[157] This is because

> The forest is virtually untracked. Or, rather, there are old tracks; they appear on maps which have been handed down to us. But when you get in there, it is very hard to find them. So we need people to make new trails. That is, in effect, was Iris Murdoch has done.[158]

Old routes, laid down in a different time and rooted in a different social imaginary, seem increasingly incapable of guiding modern pilgrims toward an encounter with the Transcendent. I call this Taylor's Narnian insight. Returning from Narnia, the children

> felt they really must explain to the Professor why four of the coats out of his wardrobe were missing. And the Professor, who was a very remarkable man, didn't tell them not to be silly or not to tell lies, but believed the whole story. "No," he said, "I don't think it will be any good trying to go back through the wardrobe door to get the coats. You won't get into Narnia again by that route. Nor would the coats be much use by now if you did! Eh? What's that? Yes, of course

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[157] Taylor, "Irish Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 15.
[158] Ibid.

you'll get back to Narnia again some day. Once a King in Narnia, always a King in Narnia. But don't go trying to use the same route twice.[159]

The Professor does not deny the existence of Narnia, nor does he see the "modern" world as prohibiting access to it. He is mindful, though, that the route that took the children there in the first place cannot do so again. There is no hint of nostalgia for what has been; rather, one must remain watchful and attentive for signs of new pathways.

I think the reason Taylor finds this "hard to talk about" is because entering the forest demands a response to a personal summons; there is no "pre-paid tourist package" that guides a person into the forest, offering a direct route toward what it is that "commands our fullest love."[160] To the contrary, entrance into the forest is perilous, for one risks losing oneself in the attempt to find oneself in the presence of the Transcendent who bids us enter. In the metaphor of the "forest" is a cipher for a passionate itinerary that is animated by our deepest desires. We are led by our restless desire beneath the forest's canopy where we navigate not only its depths but also, and more importantly, our own. In coming to name and know these depths, we are gradually tutored into a language not of our own devising, a language of divine pedagogy that promises and enacts within those open to it a "transformation" of our drives and desires.[161]

It must be said: not all who stand in the "ethical field" behold the forest as invitatory. There is no shortage of persons who are content to remain resolutely on the plain. The potential transformation luring some into the forest is seen, at least by those standing with Nietzsche and Nussbaum, as a threat. To them, the forest is spurned as a "doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men

[159] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 188.
[160] Taylor, "Irish Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 5.
[161] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 668-70.

with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness."[162] The metaphor is not

neutral. There are boosters who encourage (Illich, Hopkins), and knockers who

discourage (Nussbaum, Nietzsche), entering its depths. The latter sentiment seems to hold

sway for our age, he muses, appears "very inhospitable to forest-dwelling."[163] If we

regard Taylor's itinerary so far as directing us to a place of indirection as we stand on the

field, then it is incumbent upon us to understand what pressures may lead us to the forest

or induce us to remain where we are.

1.2.3.1   The Untracked Forest: Encapsulated History

Following Taylor, it seems that being drawn into the forest involves committing

to three premises. First, "acknowledging that life is not the whole story," and admitting

"the point of things is not exhausted by life."[164] Second, enacting a "radical decentering

of the self."[165] And third, effecting a stance of "*agape/karuna*" through a willing

renunciation of life that, in a paradoxical return, promises to bring about the flourishing

of life. Committing oneself in such a way, though, is incredibly difficult because

> We have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as
> unproblematically outside of or "beyond" human life, to a conflicted age in which
> this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different
> ways) "within" human life.[166]

What is contested in our age, unlike previous eras, is *where* one finds fulfillment.

Nothing compels entrance to the forest; one does so because one seeks something *beyond*

oneself that will lead to fulfillment. But among the field-dwellers, appeals to the God or

the Transcendent finds both boosters and knockers. Let's tease this out a bit.

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[162] William Faulkner, *Go Down Moses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 183.
[163] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 20.
[164] Ibid., 16.
[165] Ibid., 17.
[166] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

We have in our age a seemingly endless array of "life goods" and "constitutive goods" vying for our allegiance. A distinctive mark of Secular[3] is the "nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond."[167] Thinkers like Nussbaum, for instance, regard efforts to "transcend humanity" as potentially "mutilating us."[168] For her, human fulfillment can be found without appeal to external transcendence; the Modern Moral Order possesses all necessary resources to enable flourishing. A neo-Nietzschean spin, by contrast, rejects both appeals to anything beyond the immanent frame (appeals to external transcendence) and the sufficiency of the Modern Moral Order. For this group, the possibility of "untroubled happiness is not only a childish illusion, but also involves a truncation of human nature."[169] Finding ourselves in the company of other plain-dwellers, we see various "spins" on what is necessary to attain flourishing: an appeal to (a) external transcendence, (b) internal transcendence, and (c) no transcendence, just "will to power."

Options (b and c) agree, against (a), in at least one important respect: they hold that there is *nothing* beyond life. Taylor sketches out what he takes to be the climate of our era in which the appeal to transcendence beyond human life (a) meets resistance:

1. Life, flourishing, driving back the frontiers of death and suffering are of supreme value.
2. This was not always so; it was not so for our ancestors and for people in other earlier civilizations.
3. One of the things which stopped it being so in the past was precisely a sense, inculcated by religion, that there were "higher" goals.
4. We arrive at (1) by a critique and overcoming of (this kind) of religion.[170]

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[167] Ibid., 299.
[168] Ibid., 624.
[169] Ibid., 635.
[170] Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," 19. In regard to (1) options (b) and (c) will differ on *how* this is understood and enacted, but they agree *that* this is the supreme good.

On this telling, it was the insidious role of religion in (3) that *held us back* from affirming the supreme value of human life. We can recognize this as subtraction story explaining how, once we removed the obstacle of religion, the human situation improved. And, as Taylor sees it, this is a dominant, if not hegemonic, view among religion's knockers.

Within the immanent frame, the "spin" of the Closed World Structure is *prima facie* closed to any appeal to extra-human transcendence. But the consequence of the CWS is that "the field is turned into another corral."[171] That is, "life" emerges as the constitutive good that orients and motivates life. But it should be noted that within the CWS "Life" is not personal, it does not call, it does not woo, it does not entice with the promise of transformation. Oriented by "Life," Nussbaum can appeal to the Modern Moral Order as sufficient to furnish the resources necessary to bring about flourishing. Or Nietzsche, in a Dionysian key, can encourage a form of life in pursuit of one's maximal potential by unleashing the "will to power." Even if they would regard one another with mutual skepticism, "Neo-Nietzscheans and secular humanists together condemn religion and reject any good beyond life."[172]

Against its knockers, those who appeal to extra-human transcendence can gamely point to the "continued disappointments of secular humans"[173] in achieving its end. Tipping his own hand, Taylor observes how the position of exclusive humanism

> closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond. More, as though it weren't an irrepressible need of the human heart to open that window, and first look, then go beyond. As though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world-view, bad conditions, or worse, some pathology.[174]

Once more the question arises: which position gives the better account of our lives?

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[171] Ibid., 20.
[172] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 636-7.
[173] Ibid., 637.
[174] Ibid., 638.

What makes the question of a "better account" so difficult to answer is that there is the array of options available to us. Standing amidst the crowd on the ethical plain, it seems "an *ultimate surd* that people find very different ways to God, or the Good, or Nirvana, ways that seem to involve incompatible assumptions."[175] Of course, many of us know exclusive humanists who live with charity and confessing Christians who are hostile to the stranger. We know humanists who seldom, if ever, raise the question of "God" but who are committed to building a better world. Figures such as Murdoch appeal to a transcendence beyond human flourishing, akin to Plato's impersonal Good, but her itinerary responds to the allure of beauty and not, as an avowed atheist, to God.

Even though Taylor's theological commitments prevent him from taking on board fully Murdoch's approach, it is instructive to peer down the path she blazes. For her, an appeal to beauty provides an occasion for "unselfing." She writes

> Art, and by 'art' from now on I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul. It is able to do this partly by virtue of something which it shares with nature: a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness.[176]

The contemplation of beauty develops habits of attention, of learning to direct a "just and loving gaze upon an individual reality.[177] Great art "teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self."[178] Further still, she believes "it is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists." She continues

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[175] Ibid., 15.
[176] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, 86.
[177] Ibid., 34.
[178] Ibid., 65.

> The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding, self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called 'will' or 'willing' belongs to this system.[179]

The process of "unselfing" is an *askesis* or disciplining oneself to see beyond the self. Her aim is not to annihilate the self but to enact a transformation that enables one to see with new eyes. Learning to gaze lovingly at what is beyond myself and beyond my control, I am "rewarded by a knowledge of reality."[180]

What we see in Murdoch, and find in the exemplars Taylor cites, is less a disengaged argument or logical proof than incarnate testimony: in recounting the routes they have traversed, he hopes to inspire us to follow their lead. Can he do otherwise? Having rejected appeals to apodictic, one-size-fits-all approaches, his only option is to appeal to exemplars who have gone before us. His strategy is not to incapacitate his opponent or demonstrate that Nietzsche, or Nussbaum, is totally wrong. With characteristic magnanimity, he observes "no position can be set aside as simply devoid of insight."[181] He means to capacitate us, to help readers to recognize competing ways of dwelling on the field and to evaluate which, if any, can fulfill the "highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity.[182] Exemplars do not give us a behavioral code but show us, in word and deed, how one might live.

Taylor's appeal to biographies, rather than argument or syllogism, does not impose, but proposes, examples of itineraries into the forest. The nova of options confronting us on the plain is met by examples of exemplars whose stories we need

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[179] Ibid., 66-7.
[180] Ibid., 89.
[181] Ibid., 22.
[182] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 640.

we need to enlarge our palette of points of contact with fullness; there are those which involve a contemplative grasp of this fullness (Bede, Havel, epiphanies of Loyola, Jonathan Edwards); as well as visions of the negative absence of fullness: desolation, emptiness, and the like. And there are those which consist in life-changing moments, being "surprised by love". This distinction can be, of course, merely notional: that is, the same event may partake of both.[183]

By reflecting on the lives of the converted, in hearing their stories, we grasp how "they bring into view something beyond that frame, which at the same time changes the meaning of all elements of the frame."[184] We find in the examples of our forbearers a source of inspiration to respond to desire of our restless hearts seeking fulfillment.

1.2.3.2   The Untracked Forest: Function

Carrying us "amidst" history, the forest metaphor leads us to the field's edge. The dense ridge of trees spreads before us: obstacle and invitation. For those who see no reason to sacrifice the light of day to walk beneath the canopy of trees, who have no desire to cut and hack their way through the brush, there is scant reason to enter. Some would question the desire to enter because all resources necessary for flourishing are already available in the field. Yet there are those who have heard a voice from the forest depths who decide to enter its depths without knowing where they are going or how they will get there. Yet they set forth in search of fulfillment and, in the process, come to find their stories drawn up into a larger account of those who have gone before us to seek, those who have found, and even those who have been surprised by, the Transcendent.

In a way similar to the field's indirection, a forest makes for an ambiguous metaphor. We know Fangorn forest was reputed to be haunted but, in the *Lord of the Rings*, the Ents became heroic allies of the Fellowship. In Faulkner's "The Bear," Sam

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[183] Ibid, 730.
[184] Ibid., 731.

divests himself of his gun, his watch, and his compass – tools of the modern hunter – and

finds himself lost in the woods. There, in woods' depths, without direction or orientation,

he sees the bear. Prone and vulnerable to nature, it is an epiphanic moment

> Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed
> in the green and windless noon's hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but
> as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity,
> looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an
> instant into the sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at
> him across one shoulder, Then it was gone. It didn't walk into the woods. It faded,
> sank back into the wilderness without motion as he had watched a fish, a huge old
> bass, sink back into the dark depths of its pool and vanish without even any
> movement of its fins.[185]

Forests, though, are dangerous: ask Hansel and Gretel. And Taylor observes that

"religious faith can be dangerous. Opening to transcendence is fraught with peril."[186]

Contact with the Transcendent may tempt one toward a crusade intent on purifying the

world of its ills; or, transformed by *agape*, to put one's life on the line for the neighbor.

Can the forest ferry us beyond the CWS? Yes, but not easily. Read along the grain

of the subtraction narratives, the metaphor seems foolish: why ever leave the field? But if

we pause to think maybe, just maybe, there is more to our story than the affirmation of

life, or that the fullness for which we long can be sated only by risking such a venture,

then we might be goaded into the forest. There can be no denying the risk: this is not a

pre-packaged pilgrimage where one walks the way of the Lord only to stay in four-star

hotels each night! We, like Faulkner's Sam, must make ourselves vulnerable as we enter

the forest and face the peril and promise of being transformed by our journey.

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[185] Faulkner, 198.
[186] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769.

1.3   Taylor's Map: How a Road from Quebec Leads to Cork

Let me draw together the strands of my argument. I will first recapitulate my general argument that Taylor's story of our "secular age" is a performative text. Second, I will evaluate the nature of Taylor's map. Third, I will begin my more explicit engagement with William Desmond's philosophy. If Taylor has given us a sense for how and why the question of the transcendent became *exercising*, my proposal is to consider how Desmond enables us to *exercise* transcendence as a spiritual practice. The transition recorded here follows the road from Taylor's Quebec to Desmond's Cork.

1.3.1   Text as Performance

In Parts I and II I tried to demonstrate that Taylor's us of ad hominem reasoning affected not only his approach to negotiating moral disagreements but also the narrative unspooled in *A Secular Age.* He rejects, as insufficient to the thickness and depth of human life, recourse to apodictic-style arguments. Such arguments appeal to an external, supposedly neutral, criterion as the canon by which one can resolve disputes. The gist of this type of argument is that if we could get the right, if we could establish the right procedure, *then* we could resolve our disagreements. Apodictic arguments are on the lookout for an unassailable and universal principle, always and everywhere binding.

Subtraction stories textually instantiate this form of argument. These stories recount how, in earlier times, constraints placed on humans (superstitions, religion) worked *against* human flourishing. Once these impediments were removed, however, things improved. These are stories of addition by subtraction: by liberating ourselves

"from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge"[187] we gradually come of age as courageous, illusion-free, adults.[188] The loss of religion, the increased sense of autonomy or of the buffered self, these are taken as net gains over the conditions of the past. All that was lost, needed to be lost in order for humans to flourish. *Then* we were held back, in those dark ages, but *now* we stand beneath reason's light.

Centuries before Taylor's effort, Hegel narrated a version of the Enlightenment's subtraction story that contains a prescient critique. For the Enlightenment, Hegel writes, faith is "a tissue of superstitions, prejudices, and errors."[189] Ludwig Heyde continues:

> What the Enlightenment asserts is in principle not foreign to the people. The Enlightenment does nothing more than awaken the rationality and critical sense which lie as yet dormant. That is why it carries out its activity by way of a peaceful diffusion through the entire society. The mentality of the society changes gradually without any real opposition.[190]

The change in conditions of possibility of belief, the dawn of what Taylor called Secular$_3$, did not shift suddenly. It took time to incubate in a process, Hegel writes,

> comparable to a silent expansion or to the *diffusion*, say, of a perfume in the unresisting atmosphere. It is a penetrating infection which does not make itself noticeable beforehand as something opposed to the indifferent element into which it insinuates itself, and therefore cannot be warded off. Only when the infection has become widespread is that consciousness, which unheedingly yielded to its influence, *aware* of it.[191]

Note, first, the changes wrought by the Enlightenment were not wrought directly, as though presented as propositions and accepted after reflection. It was more akin to *diffusion*, atmospheric, inescapable like the germs from a sneeze. The Enlightenment was something caught, not taught, and we only become aware of it after it grasped us.

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[187] Ibid., 22.
[188] Ibid., 574-5.
[189] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford, 1977), 330.
[190] Ludwig Heyde, *The Weight of Finitude*, trans. Alexander Harmsen and William Desmond (Albany: SUNY, 1999), 21.
[191] Hegel, 331.

Second, and here we find the critique, Hegel's metaphor portrays this insight as virulent; like a virus, it infects faith and

> infiltrates the noble parts through and through and soon has taken complete possession of all the vitals and members of the unconscious idol; then 'one fine morning it gives it comrade a shove with the elbow, and bang! crash! The idol lies on the floor. On 'one fine morning' whose noon is bloodless if the infection has penetrated to every organ of spiritual life. Memory alone then still preserves the dead form of the Spirit's previous shape as a vanished history, vanished one knows not how. And the new serpent of wisdom raised on high for adoration has in this way painlessly cast merely a withered skin.[192]

The fever caused by the Enlightenment breaks "one fine morning" when the idols of superstition are cast down and broken. Reason triumphs! Until, at least, we see that it has erected "the new serpent of wisdom" as an object of adoration. The Enlightenment's anti-idolatrous drive undermines itself by falling before an idol of its own devising. Hegel's critique: the Enlightenment's exorcism of the supernatural requires its own exorcism.

Taylor's style of argument and narration better accounts for such vicissitudes and contradictions. Whereas apodictic reasoning took as its model a style of inquiry originating in the scientific revolution, ad hominem reasoning has deeper roots, extending at least as far as Socrates. What is distinctive, especially in our age, is that rather than assuming an aloof or disengaged stance, ad hominem reasoning demands greater proximity among interlocutors. It requires going "to the person" as a fellow traveler. No doubt: it is time-consuming and arduous to engage in the back-and-forth of sharing stories. Yet one can find oneself in the story of another: on hearing Taylor's tale, one can find oneself implicated in it and behold one's life appears in a new light. Niggling and unresolved issues arrange themselves in new patterns, nagging questions are addressed,

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[192] Hegel, 332. The embedded quote comes from Diderot's *Nephew of Rameau.*

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longstanding dissatisfactions find succor. I called this a "capacitating" argument because it empowers its hearer to make an ameliorating transition toward a better form of life.

So why tell a long story that, he claims, could and should have been longer?[193] Taylor's recourse is to narrative because "we grasp our lives in a narrative."[194] He challenges subtraction stories by telling a counter story that acts as a mirror; our challenge is to judge how well we see ourselves reflected. Again, Taylor has precedents in this approach. The prophet Nathan[195] told a story of terrible injustice and kindled David's anger, but Nathan's story is David's. So implicated, David experiences the judgment leveled against him, and repents. Walking to Emmaus, the stranger's re-telling of events sparks a flame within the disciples. Their story is re-narrated by their companion who walks with them and opens the scriptures anew. With eyes opened at the breaking of the bread, they return to their companions not to resume an old way of life but capacitated to live anew in the light of what had happened.[196]

The zig-zag movement of Taylor's story destabilizes the hegemony of modernity's subtraction stories and, by exposing their weaknesses and shortcomings, makes possible a new understanding of our age. I tried to express the main movements and contrasting "feel" of his story by showing how his metaphors encapsulate history and express ways of dwelling in our age. By allowing ourselves to be implicated in his account, we are capacitated to see our lives, and our history, with new eyes. The sealed-off borders to the Transcendent may not be as solid as some of religion's knockers would

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[193] Taylor, "Afterword," 301.
[194] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47.
[195] 2 Samuel 12:1-14.
[196] Luke 24:13-35.

have us believe, the "eclipse of the transcendent" may be less an inescapable feature of history than a remediable blindness.

1.3.2   A Taylor-made Map: Is There Any *There* There?

A line from 2017's *Twin Peaks* expresses well Taylor's map: "This map is very old, but it is always current; it is a living thing." By narrating transitions from the "corral" to the "field" to the "forest," Taylor sketches a map accounting for historical landmarks and developments as well as the existential forces that weigh upon, push, and pull those living in our age. Taylor is less interested in erecting "Do Not Enter" signs than he is in showing *how* various routes or modes of life arose, were appealing, and continue to have appeal. He allows us to inhabit the map, to get a feel for its topography, and he gives us some avuncular advice and indications about how we might venture into the forest.

The map tells an old story, dating back many centuries, but it is a story we cannot help but to find ourselves within. We recognize that shifts have taken place. In many social settings, at least in the West, the name "Jesus" is less likely to occasion the tip of a hat, or a bend in the knee, than it is to elicit the name of a lawyer over charges of proselytization. Taylor gives us a sense of *how* we got here and what this means for how we understand ourselves. He maps out a story with many twists and turns, remarkable convergences, and remarkable coincidences. But it is not entirely retrospective: by implicating the reader, by providing a counter-narrative that gives an alternative setting to the "facts" of history, we can decide the trajectory we will follow the future.

So, what do the bounds of our age look like? Recall that the beating of the bounds, in earlier eras, "involved the whole parish, and could only be effective as a

collective act of this whole."[197] As an event within history, it interwove time with space, *kairos* and *topos*, as the parish re-defined its boundaries and defined what, and by participation *who*, was within the bounds and who was out. The act provided as much a sense of geographical coordinates as it did an existential terrain helping to define where, and to whom, parishioners belonged.

What distinguishes the bounds of our age, on Taylor's narration, is a perduring openness to moving *beyond* toward a sense of fulfillment *neither* mapped nor mappable. The restless stirring of the human heart must be taken account of in to get any semblance of an adequate picture of human life: much to the chagrin of reductive efforts. Furthermore, neither the Modern Moral Order nor Nietzsche's dithyrambic appeals have stilled our yearning hearts and burning desires. We have a seemingly insatiable thirst for transcendence. Taylor cannot compel us by logical argument to enter the sacred but he does provide exemplars who have gone before us. We can follow their tracks. Taylor's map is, indeed, a "living thing" that grows with each new itinerary taken.

Allow me, though, to raise a potentially scuttling objection. Put pithily: what if there isn't any *there* there? What if appeals to transcendence are, actually, appeals to nothingness? Taylor may be right that all humans feel drawn to attain human fulfillment. He may, moreover, be correct in giving a powerful account of what it is to live beneath the "eclipse of transcendence." But what is to prevent this from being a snipe hunt? "Go out and pursue the snipe," we are told, but behind our backs it is whispered, "if there is any such thing at all." Paul Janz seems to be making this critique when he observes:

> The crux of the problem…stems from Taylor's continuous treatment of
> transcendence merely according to its linguistically or conceptually analytical

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[197] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 149.

definition as that which is "beyond" the immanent (which effectively turns out to be the merely negative definition of transcendence as "not the immanent").[198]

For Janz, the issue is a "the term 'transcendence' is not yet an independent or 'ontological' *source* of anything; it is rather solely a *product* of logical thinking, and entirely abstract and negative one at that."[199] Janz's critique: Taylor has repeatedly gestured in the direction of transcendence, has furnished exemplars who claim to have encountered this "source," but he has not yet demonstrated or shown us that the Transcendent is really out there. A gap would seem to appear between logic and ontology or, for that matter, theology. "Go out and hunt the divine snipe. Enter the forest and risk the encounter," our well-meaning uncle tells us, and gives us a reliable map. But this begs the question: the quest for new itineraries to God is possible because we know of exemplars who have forged new itineraries to God. But what reason do we have, apart from a yearning for fulfillment, for setting out in the first place?

I think Janz makes an important point. It would be helpful were Taylor to give an account "of *how* that which is transcendent announces itself uniquely and genuinely as a life-meaningful authority for questions of moral sources or human fullness."[200] It seems to me that Taylor does this, in a way, by means of his exemplars. Conversion stories give us instances of embodied palimpsests which recount, in and through their lives, how the Transcendent has made a new life possible. Janz, though, wants a more robust accounting for how the Transcendent enters into human history. Indeed, the weight of his point must not be ignored. A reader who has accompanied Taylor through *A Secular Age* may feel a stir of desire to embark on a new itinerary to the sacred, may want to uncover a new

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[198] Paul Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space" in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*, 49.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

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route, yet may nevertheless pause. The hesitation: a lack of confidence that what, or who, is sought in the forest actually abides there. We are left to wonder whether our map is indeed a reliable guide, whether it reveals openings through which we might begin to approach the Transcendent, or if what seems to be openings are actually spots where the ink of the map has been rubbed away and needs to be filled in. The map is complete, there are no openings to the Transcendent, this *is* all there is.

1.3.3   From Quebec to Cork

With Janz's question in mind, let me begin to pivot toward the work of William Desmond. Desmond distinguishes his project from Taylor's in the following observation:

> My emphasis is less on telling the story of modernity, offering hermeneutical narratives of the complex unfoldings of multifarious impulses, inspirations, trends, dreams, excesses, rational sobrieties, and so forth, defining the shaping of modernity. My interests have a certain metaphysical character to them.[201]

It is in this "metaphysical character" of Desmond's thought that I believe we can find a necessary supplement to Taylor's map. Indeed, I want to argue that Desmond is a figure necessary for those who dwell on the plain, who yearn for a sense of fulfillment, but feel so exercised or vexed by the question of transcendence they can hardly assay all their options, let alone choose to commit themselves to any one of them.

I am convinced that Desmond can assist those who feel beset by the surfeit of choices. His philosophy, he writes, aims "to bring a developed habit of mindfulness to bear on what is at play in being, especially with regard to the basic presuppositions, sources, and orientations toward the 'to be' that mark our being in the midst of things."[202]

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[201] William Desmond, "The Porosity of Being: Towards a Catholic Agapeics." in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age: Holistic Dialogue and Kenotic Vision*, eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, (Washington D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), 287.
[202] William Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2012), xvi.

The task I set before myself is to understand both *how* Desmond enacts this goal and *how* his works can be approached in such a way that they aide in developing a "habit of mindfulness" attentive and responsive to the Transcendent. I do this by approaching Desmond's philosophy in the light of ancient spiritual exercises, broadly described by Pierre Hadot as "voluntary, personal practices intended to bring about a transformation of the individual."[203] Desmond's philosophy needs to be undergone and allowed to re-ignite a feeling of metaphysical astonishment that raises anew and opens a pathway to encountering the Transcendent. Desmond's philosophy works by capacitating his readers, systematically and poetically, to perceive the world in a new way.

We leave Quebec, for now, and move to Cork. Taylor has given us reason to believe that stories of the impossibility of transcendence, or the demise of the Transcendent, may be premature. Our passage is aided by a conviction that Taylor's map is a living document open to further additions. Thus, we need to consider Desmond's "Augustinian odyssey embarked upon in the wake of Hegel"[204] to see if we can learn from him how to exercise transcendence in a way capable of sating the spiritual hunger in our age. Lessons learned in Cork can be delivered back to Quebec to preserve and advance Taylor's work. Preserve: offering a response to Janz's desire for "some sort of critical or rationally demonstrative account, however indirect it might have to be, of what the meaningfully authoritative 'content' of the transcendent might be for human life."[205] Advance: answering Taylor's call for "new itineraries" capable of guiding seekers toward a horizon where we may behold the new dawn of the Transcendent in a secular age.

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[203] Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 87.
[204] William Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness: An Essay on Origins* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 17.
[205] Janz, 49.

Chapter 2

A Crack in Everything:
Introducing William Desmond's Metaphysics

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.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation"

This chapter introduces readers to William Desmond and his metaphysical philosophy. Born in Cork, Ireland, in 1951, 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."[206] At an early age Desmond fell in love with poetry, especially Wordsworth, and later took an 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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[206] William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 2.

Befitting one fêted as "Ireland's most distinguished living philosopher,"[207] 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.[208] Finally, two of his monographs have been the focus of special issues of journals[209] and two volumes of essays inspired by his thought have been published within the last decade.[210]

In the introduction to *Between System and Poetics*, Anthony Kelly describes Desmond's philosophical ambition as follows: "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."[211] 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."[212] 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

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[207] Thomas Kelly, "Introduction" to *Between System and Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

[208] Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern* (Bloomington: IUP, 2009); *The William Desmond Reader* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012)

[209] *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.

[210] 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).

[211] Kelly, "Introduction," 3.

[212] William Desmond, "The Porosity of Being," in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, 287.

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.[213]

Kearney aptly likens Desmond to the solitary marathoner, a thinker in for the long haul. This seems fitting especially 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…[214]

Desmond's philosophy, as will become apparent, offers no shortcuts and cannot be traversed quickly. A decision to take up his work requires risking being transformed as one reads. This is philosophy as *askesis*, as a formative exercise, aimed not at doling out discrete thoughts but at cultivating a renewed mode of mindfulness.

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.[215]

An "unrepentant" metaphysician, Desmond 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."[216] One wonders: is this the wish of a philosopher too stubborn to accept the overcoming of metaphysics? Clearly, it would seem, Desmond has not yet read John

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[213] Richard Kearney, "Two Thinks at a Distance," in *The William Desmond Reader* ed. Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 237.
[214] William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), xvi.
[215] William Desmond, "The Porosity of Being," 287.
[216] Ibid.

Manoussakis's recent essay which begins with the following observation: "William

Desmond is arguably in our times the last metaphysician."[217]

As mentioned, my project advances a reading of Desmond's metaphysics as a

form of "spiritual exercise" capable of awakening a sense of the Transcendent and

transforming the way one views the world. Thus, when a major philosopher of religion

dubs the figure whose thought you promote "the last metaphysician," you should

probably take note. To be sure, Manoussakis is not alone in thinking that metaphysicians

are, or should be, extinct. Consequently, before I argue for a theological appropriation of

metaphysics, I need first to canvas some fairly strident critiques of metaphysics coming

from Martin Heidegger, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal, to see

whether a theological engagement with metaphysics is advisable, let alone possible.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In Part I, I employ Taylor's *ad hominem*

strategy to engage Heidegger, Caputo, Kearney, and Westphal in a form of capacitating

argument. Rather than showing how Critic-X incapacitates all attempts at metaphysics, or

how Desmond incapacitates Critic-Y, I consider how each critic brings to light

inconsistencies, contradictions, and missteps that have hampered earlier attempts at

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, for Desmond,

> 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.[218]

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[217] John Manoussakis, "The Silences of the Between," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*
269.
[218] William Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 101.

An *ad hominem* or 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."[219] 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 Part II, I offer a broad 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."[220] Metaphysics needs to think with categories but its task cannot be delimited by its categories; metaphysicians must remain always "mindful of what exceeds system."[221] Hewing closely to Simpson's schema, I orient the reader to Desmond's metaxological framework and the key concepts essential for understanding his project. Throughout, I draw attention to areas of overlap with Taylor's project.

In Part III, I examine 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 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.

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[219] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 147.
[220] Desmond, *Between System and Poetics*, 20.
[221] Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 10.

Metaxology, we may come to appreciate, is not simply a method of thinking philosophically; it offers itself and makes possibly metaphysics as a way of life.

I conclude by first affirming my belief in Desmond's ability to preserve Taylor's project and I how he advances it. Second, more playfully, by offering a metaxological reading of the line, "there is a crack in everything God has made." So read, the "crack" is no tragic flaw but, rather, a graced opening allowing us to experience "the deepest ontological intimacy of our being."[222] Finally, I lead us into a pub where I propose Desmond as the metaphysician of the "crack" and explore how his understanding of metaphysics makes it possible to approach metaxology as a form of spiritual exercise.

2.1   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'."[223] Yet, even in Heidegger's own writings,[224] the equation of metaphysics and ontotheology demands nuance. John Betz, following Cyril O'Regan, asks whether Heidegger has "forgotten or misremembered something?"[225] Might it be possible Heidegger's his description of metaphysics as ontotheology too-cavalierly lumps together all practices of metaphysics, from Plato to Aquinas to Hegel to Desmond? Betz suspects this the case: "Unfortunately, under Heidegger's solvent influence, all these

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[222] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 13.

[223] Iain Thomson, "Ontotheology? Understanding Heidegger's *Destruktion* of Metaphysics," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 8, no. 3 (2000): 297—327 at 297.

[224] Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics" in *Identity and Difference* trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969).

[225] John Betz, "Overcoming the Forgetfulness of Metaphysics," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 67.

colors bleed into one."[226] 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 permit a range of stances. Rather than a binary

either/or, metaphysics can admit a range of knockers, boosters, and those in-between.

2.1.1 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?"[227] 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.*[228]

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 placed 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.[229]

In the final sentence, we recognize Aristotelian and Hegelian metaphysics as prime

culprits of "ontotheology" as their philosophy aims at giving an account, a *logos*, of

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[226] Ibid.
[227] Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 55.
[228] Ibid., 56. Emphasis added.
[229] Ibid., 54.

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."[230] 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.[231]

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."[232] One may be better equipped to think the Holy Other by resisting efforts to reduce the Divine to the immanent realm.

Essentially what Heidegger rejects, D.C. Schindler observes, is the "absorption of theology into philosophy."[233] Yet, as 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."[234] Heidegger's atheism is less an outright *denial* of God *à la* Nietzsche than a methodological decision to dislodge the god co-opted by a certain strand of metaphysics.

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[230] Ibid., 60.
[231] Ibid., 72.
[232] Ibid.
[233] D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 237.
[234] Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham Press, 2001), 257.

In this, Heidegger enacts a repetition of Kant's "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."[235]

Accordingly, claims of Heidegger's "overcoming" of 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."[236] 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*."[237] Heidegger's justified refusal is directed toward a metaphysics denuding 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[238]

These share a common root: a "rationalist demand for total intelligibility."[239] Onto-theology 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 little personal interest in theology, his "overcoming" of

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

[236] Ibid., 262.

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

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

[239] Ibid.

metaphysics as ontotheology can be read as a salutary effort to chasten the pretense of human reason in its effort to corral the divine. Maybe Heidegger is not so radical, having as a forbearer Augustine: *si comprehendis non est Deus* (if you understand, it is not God).

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.

2.1.2   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."[240] 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*."[241] 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*."[242] If metaphysics wants to study the "really real," then

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[240] Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 7.
[241] John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.
[242] John Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 113.

"physics is all the metaphysics we're ever going to get."[243] His advice to an aspiring

metaphysician stings: "brush up on your 'superstring field theory' or whatever will

supersede superstrings next week."[244] 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."[245] 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.[246]

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).[247]

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."[248]

The hot vehemence Caputo directs against metaphysics leads him to proffer what

he calls a "cold hermeneutics" that does not believe in

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[243] Ibid., 191.
[244] Ibid., 192.
[245] John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 113.
[246] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 1.
[247] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 191.
[248] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 3.

"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.[249]

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."[250] 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."[251] 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."[252] True religion comes not from acquiring knowledge or infallible propositions but is lived as a "restlessness with the real that involves risking your neck."[253] God comes to us as a question, not an answer, and we enact religion as our response.

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[249] Ibid., 189.
[250] Caputo, *On Religion*, 140.
[251] Ibid., 141.
[252] Ibid., 139.
[253] Ibid., 114.

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 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.

2.1.3   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.[254]

And, with Paul Ricoeur, he observes

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[254] Richard Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," in *After God*, ed. John Manoussakis (New York: Fordham, 2006), 11.

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.[255]

Like Heidegger, 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."[256]

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."[257] 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.[258]

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."[259] 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."[260]

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[255] Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: IUP, 2001), 24.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 72-3.
[258] Ibid., 73.
[259] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 53.
[260] Ibid.

Thus, amidst the rubble of the collapsed "Grand Metaphysical Systems that construed God in terms of formal universals and abstract essences,"[261] Kearney does not leave us destitute. 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.[262]

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.[263] 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."[264] 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 "micro-eschatologies" manifesting and disclosing 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.[265] Through the concept of micro-eschatology, Kearney exhorts us to train

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[261] Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday," 4.
[262] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 7.
[263] Richard Kearney, "God After God" in *Reimagining the Sacred,* eds. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (New York: Columbia, 2016), 7.
[264] Ibid., 9.
[265] Kearney, *Anatheism*, 88-99.

our eyes not to a far-off horizon but to the quotidian where we encounter the divine in the

mundane, hearing the woo of the Holy One in "the least ones calling for a cup of cold

water, asking to be fed, clothed, cared for, heard, loved."[266] He describes this as a micro-

eschatological "fourth reduction" returning us to 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 in the day-to-day, he stands with Caputo. On his own, he remains

without equal as an interpreter of texts. Indeed, Kearney makes for a most hospitable

author as his prose invites the reader to dwell within the text and to reconsider it from

within. 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."[267] 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.[268]

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

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[266] Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday," 11.
[267] Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 49-51.
[268] Ibid., 51.

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."[269] The micro-eschatological reduction 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."[270] 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."[271]

2.1.4 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

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[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid., 13.
[271] Richard Kearney, "Enabling God" in *After God*, 46.

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claim for this claim itself is that it is true, that it is the best way for us humans to think about the matter.[272]

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

> 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.[273]

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."[274] 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.[275]

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."[276] 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.

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[272] Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham, 2001), 87.
[273] Merold Westphal, "Hermeneutics and the God of Promise" in *After God*, 85.
[274] Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 253.
[275] Ibid., 259.
[276] Ibid.

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 metaphysics, on its danger to the life of faith, its role as abuser of biblical faith."[277] 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.[278]

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."[279]

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

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[277] Ibid., 272.
[278] Ibid. Emphasis added.
[279] Ibid.

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 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.

2.1.5   Capacitating Metaphysics

In an effort to emulate Taylor's *ad hominem* strategy of argument, I have tried to engage Heidegger, Caputo, Kearney, and Westphal as representing a continuum of "boosters" and "knockers." Each "no" raised in a justified refusal of earlier practices of metaphysics, I am claiming, need not be read as an embargo on all future metaphysics. To the contrary, each offers a corrective negation, a "no" affirming an absence, indicating something recessed and in need of being surfaced. Metaphysics, in effect, can be capacitated by learning from previous missteps. Allow me, then, to propose Desmond's philosophy as a viable metaphysics in compliance with our Five Commandments:

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)

Throughout the forthcoming exposition of Desmond's philosophy, I will advert attention to the ways in which his metaphysics prove eminently faithful to these directives.

2.2   Speaking of Metaphysics: Approaching 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,"[280] Simpson's observation is equally apt: "Desmond's work can be complex, dense, meditative, and full of neologisms."[281] 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.

2.2.1   Metaphysics Defined

Desmond's *Being and Between* opens with the primordial metaphysical question: What is being? What does it mean to be?[282] 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*).[283] 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."[284] 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 are already at work, and continue to be at work, even when we claim to be 'postmetaphysical'."[285] Or, per Westphal, some engagement in metaphysical reflection is unavoidable.

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[280] Catherine Pickstock, "What Shines Between: The *Metaxu* of Light" in *Between System and Poetics*, 107.
[281] Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 5.
[282] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 3.
[283] Ibid., 16.
[284] Ibid., 45.
[285] William Desmond, "Wording the Between" in *The William Desmond Reader*, ed. Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 195.

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"[286] by awakening his readers to the intimate strangeness of being.

For Desmond, metaphysics is not an architectonic or totalizing system but "a form of reflective thinking under fidelity to the truth of what is thus at play."[287] 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."[288] 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 that points us to the porous boundary

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[286] Kelly, "Introduction," 3.
[287] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, xvii.
[288] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 5.

between immanence and what cannot be determined entirely in immanent terms.[289]

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."[290] 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"[291] 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.[292]

Like Taylor, Desmond 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,

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[289] 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.

[290] Ibid., 545. Emphasis added.

[291] Ibid., 547.

[292] Ibid., 547-8.

responding to Taylor, observes, "the movement to this Western buffered self goes 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."[293]

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."[294] 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."[295] 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.[296]

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."[297] 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."[298]

So far, Desmond's metaphysics avoid transgressing our commandments. Whatever the cause of astonishment, Desmond recognizes that metaphysics (1) is not

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[293] 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.

[294] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 5.

[295] Plato, *Theatetus*, 155d3-4

[296] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.

[297] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 8.

[298] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 15

self-wrought or projected by us, (2) responds to something that exceeds the limit of our speech, thereby requiring a 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 being *is* at all.

In sum, one must see Desmond's metaphysics not as a hegemonic "system" but as style of 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.[299]

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

2.2.2 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 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.[300]

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.[301]

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

Here Desmond indicates a vital 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."[302]

  This may become clearer if we connect Desmond's *metaxu* or ethos with Taylor's "social imaginary." Taylor's social imaginary, he writes, 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.[303]

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"[304] 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. As we considered previously, between the years 1500

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[302] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 212.
[303] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke, 2004), 23.
[304] Charles Taylor, "Afterword," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 308.

and 2000 there were dramatic shifts within our common practices and beliefs that were not implemented by fiat but that crept in over time

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."[305] 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,"[306] 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 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*, he stands in need of a metaphysical supplement capable of convincing the seeker – even if via indirections – that the search for the Transcendent is not a snipe hunt.

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[305] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.
[306] Ibid., 24.

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Herein 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 appreciation for how beings "point" to what is beyond finite being (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."[307] As I develop later, this complements Taylor by making possible a new way of comporting oneself within our age. If Taylor's ontological approach can be faulted as taking being *for* granted, then we will engage Desmond's metaxological

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

approach to re-awaken a sense of being as gratuitously granted and to allow our philosophical gaze to be directed to the creative and sustaining source of all that is.

This re-awakening is necessary to respond to Janz's critique and to negotiate the terrain beneath the "eclipse of the transcendent." Taylor and Desmond equally take an ambivalent stance toward the regnancy of instrumental reasoning in our age. Without denying technology's benefits, Desmond detects within modernity a a problematic "devaluing objectification of being" and the "subjectification of value."[308] 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.[309]

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."[310] This, for Desmond, results in the antinomy between autonomy and transcendence.[311] 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."[312] 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.

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[308] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 41.
[309] 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
[310] Ibid.
[311] William Desmond, "*Autonomia Turannos*: On Some Dialectical Equivocities of Self-determination," in *Ethical Perspectives* 5 (1998): 233—253 at 235.
[312] Ibid., 239.

This iteration of the modern ethos, however, is not the whole story. Indeed, an important contribution of deconstruction has been to challenge modernity's "notion of a fixed univocal unity."[313] 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.*"[314] 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 a metaxological 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 "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.[315]

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,

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[313] William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 287.
[314] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 45. Emphasis original.
[315] William Desmond, "God, Ethos, Ways," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45 (1999): 13—30 at 27.

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."[316] A properly attuned 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 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."[317] 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."[318]

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[316] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 120.

[317] William Desmond, "On God and the Between," in *Between Philosophy and Theology*, eds. Lieven Boeve and Christopher Brabant (New York: Routledge, 2010), 102.

[318] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, xi.

One way of getting at the theological importance of Desmond's thought is by recognizing him as leveling a direct challenge to the postulatory finitism of our age. By attempting to renew metaphysical mindfulness by stirring up a sense of astonishment at the gratuity and givenness of 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."[319]

2.2.3   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."[320] 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.[321]

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

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[319] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128
[320] William Desmond, "The Theater of the *Metaxu*: Staging the Between," in *Topoi* 30, no. 2 (2011): 113—124 at 113.
[321] Ibid.

alone."[322] 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."[323] We cannot abandon the flux because we come to mindfulness *within* it. Our question is not whether to dwell in the ethos, but how:

> 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.[324]

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."[325] 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.[326]

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[322] William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal* (New York: Columbia, 2016), 167.
[323] Ibid.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, xiii.
[326] Ibid.

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.

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.[327] 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.

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[327] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.

2.2.3.1   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."[328] Univocity stresses "sameness, or unity, indeed sometimes immediate sameness, of mind and being."[329] No doubt, univocity speaks to common sense and we are reminded of Bishop Butler's quip, "a thing is itself and not any other."[330] Univocity's rallying cry: *to be is to be intelligible, and to be intelligible is to be determinate*.[331]

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.[332] 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."[333] The univocal sense is "*indispensable* in identifying and distinguishing" beings in the quotidian, but there remains always 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,

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[328] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 425.
[329] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.
[330] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 49.
[331] Ibid., 18.
[332] Gladwin Hill, "For Want of Hyphen Venus Rocket is Lost," *The New York Times*, July 27, 1962.
[333] William Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*. (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 99.

Spinoza, and Deleuze. For univocity in the form of a "calculative *mathesis*"[334] 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 denounced the book as "The shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker" and Daniel

Dennett described Nagel as part of a "retrograde gang" whose work is "cute and it's

clever and it's not worth a damn."[335] Nagel's heresy? He had the audacity to claim

> 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.[336]

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.[337]

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."[338] Reductive

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[334] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 50.
[335] Andrew Ferguson, "The Heretic," Weekly Standard, March 25, 2013, accessed August 17, 2017,
    http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-heretic/article/707692
[336] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 8.
[337] Ibid., 12.
[338] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 82.

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."[339] Univocity's reach, like apodictic reasoning's, exceeds its grasp.

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 the study of philosophy. Desmond contrasts the figure of 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[340]

Geometry, for Plato, was essential to philosophical inquiry because it trained 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."[341] 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

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[339] Ibid., 63.
[340] Ibid., 19.
[341] Plato, *Theatetus*, 150d-e.

contrary and, according to the proverb, the better state, as is the case in these instances when men learn the cause."[342] Nor is the desire for geometric precision exclusive to Aristotle: one may think of Descartes, Spinoza's *ordo geometricus*, Kant, and Husserl.[343]

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 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."[344] 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!"[345] 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.

2.2.3.2   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."[346]Whereas univocity accents unity, sameness, and

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[342] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983a18-20.
[343] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 7.
[344] Ibid. 191.
[345] Desmond, "Between System and Poetics," 17.
[346] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 421.

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."[347] 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.[348]

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."[349] For equivocal speech to be communicative, it must be

about some determinate something. 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.[350]

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[347] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 87.

[348] Ibid.

[349] 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.

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

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."[351] 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.[352]

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.[353]

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"[354] 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

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[351] *Rhetoric,* 3.5.1407b12
[352] *Rhetoric*, 3.5.1407b15-18.
[353] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 11.
[354] Terry Pinkard, "Analytics, Continentals, and Modern Skepticism," *The Monist* 82 no.2 (1999), 189.

postmodern thought. Indeed, I think he would gladly take on board 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…[355]

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. Long before the efforts of Derrida, Caputo, Foucault, and

Judith 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.'"[356] It is

the story of double appearances: a loyal vassal and his hospitable wife exposed through

their act of traitorous regicide.[357] 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.[358]

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[355] John Caputo, *What would Jesus Deconstruct* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29.
[356] Desmond, *Is there a Sabbath for Thought*, 59.
[357] William Desmond, "Sticky Evil: On Macbeth and the Karma of the Equivocal," in *God, Literature, and Process Thought*, ed. Darren Middleton (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).
[358] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* 2.4.2

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.

Mindful attention to equivocity requires an ongoing hermeneutic of the interplay 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."[359]

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

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

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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, 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."[360] 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."[361] The sublime can simultaneously "fill us with awe" while "reminding us how little we are."[362] 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

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[360] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 347.
[361] Pascal, *Penseés*, 66.
[362] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 347.

light. Metaxology, in sum, seeks to provide 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*[363] where Socrates claims

> 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.[364]

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."[365] 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."[366]

For Desmond, desire's *telos* is present in its origin, disquieting desire 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

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[363] Ibid., 22.
[364] Ibid., 22.
[365] Ibid., 24.
[366] Ibid., 24.

process he calls "selving."[367] 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."[368] In acknowledging this drive, Desmond stands with

Augustine and Aquinas:

> 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.[369]

> 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.[370]

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.

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, [371] 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

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[367] See *God and the Between*, chapter 2
[368] *Symposium*, 192e
[369] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, i.
[370] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* Ia-IIae 9 ad. 6
[371] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 177-8.

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.[372]

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 realized particulars. It is open to the possibility of bringing into being and endlessly continuing the line of such entities.[373]

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."[374]

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 flux in favor of determinacy; equivocity revels in indeterminacy but betrays determinate particularity. Both capture elements of the truth, but neither expresses the truth of being exhaustively. 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.

2.2.3.3 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."[375] Dialectic, Desmond continues, is

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[372] Ibid., 178.
[373] Ibid., 177.
[374] Ibid., 183.
[375] Desmond, *Intimate Universal*, 421.

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.[376]

In this section, we shall 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*" equivocity en route to a whole capable of reconciling differences.[377] The question: does the sense of the "whole" attained by dialectic remain truthful to being?

At its simplest, the practice of dialectic "seeks to recover what the univocal sense offers"[378] 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. Yes: *to be is to be intelligible,* but *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)."[379] 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

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[376] Ibid.
[377] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 131.
[378] Ibid., 143.
[379] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 17.

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.[380]

To borrow Taylor's phrase, Desmond reads Hegel as offering a hermeneutical dialectics "which convince us by the overall plausibility of the interpretations they give."[381] Hegel's system is often seen as "the consummation of reason"[382] but Desmond denies this claim. For Hegel "hides nuances, nuances that, if resurrected for rethinking, shed a different light on metaphysical thinking, and the possibilities of its contemporary renewal."[383] By inquiring into the truth and limits of dialectic, Desmond exposes the nearly-imperceptible cracks in Hegel's philosophy, exposing openings in the Hegelian system capable of leading us toward a renewal of metaphysical thought.

The goal of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Desmond suggests, is to give an "insight into what knowing is."[384] This requires an investigation into the role of mediation. Mediation, for Hegel, "is nothing but self-identity working itself out through an active self-directed process."[385] 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.[386]

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[380] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 55.
[381] Ibid., 64. For Taylor, "hermeneutical dialectics" is an alternative to "strict dialectics." The latter takes its starting point a position that is beyond contest and then traces how it unfolds. Taylor sees "strict dialectics" as riddled with flaws. So, while Hegel might not accept the distinction between strict and hermeneutical dialectics, Taylor sees the latter as preserving Hegel's accomplishment.
[382] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 24.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 142.
[385] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford, 1977), 11.
[386] Ibid., 18.

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."[387] 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.[388]

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.[389] 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

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[387] Ibid., 144.
[388] Ibid., 19.
[389] Ibid., 2.

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."[390] In other words, while dialectic does account

for plurality, it is a plurality subsumed into a larger whole. This, Desmond contends, 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. The creation is God's self-othering and hence not other, but the
> ontological mediating detour in God's dialectical self-mediation with Himself.[391]

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."[392] 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 totalizing whole: "Hegel's speculative unity is marked by, as we might call

it, a kind of 'dialectical univocity'."[393] 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.

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[390] Simpson, 31.
[391] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 19.
[392] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 172.
[393] William Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 14.

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.[394]

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, Desmond's writes,

with God's "counterfeit double"[395] 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.[396]

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."[397] He continues, noting how for Hegel "*I* as a human being,"

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[394] 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*.

[395] William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).

[396] 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.

[397] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 11.

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.[398]

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-determination; man is the medium of God's knowing."[399] 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 downplays equivocity. Although it pays lip-

service to 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

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[398] Ibid., 29.
[399] Desmond, "*Autonomia Turannos*," 242.

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 displayed in the articulation of human desire."[400] 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.[401]

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 preserves practitioners from complacency by reminding them that no single answer, no *thing* of any sort, 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

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[400] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 179.
[401] Reneé Ryan, "An Archaeological Ethics," in *Between System and Poetics*, 127.

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.[402]

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, 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."[403] 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 accusation of ontotheology sticks: this is not the God *of* the Whole but God *as* the Whole.

2.2.3.4 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,

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[402] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 197.
[403] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 11-12.

Desmond writes, "sees philosophy as seeking a logos of the metaxu, an intelligible

account of what it means to be between or intermediate."[404] 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 own otherness. It puts the emphasis on an
> intermediation, not a self-mediation, however dialectically qualified.[405]

In its emphasis on "pluralized mediation," metaxology "tries to redeem the promise of

equivocity beyond univocity and dialectic."[406] 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:
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> 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.[407]

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) 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

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[404] William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness* (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 21.
[405] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 36.
[406] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 178.
[407] Jere O'Neill Surber, "Reading Desmond" in *Between System and Poetics*, 59.

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*. True interest is beyond self-interest, for it is truly beyond self and is in the *inter*."[408] 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."[409] 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."[410] 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 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

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[408] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 452.
[409] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 4.
[410] Ibid., 5.

included in the immanence of a dialectical whole."[411] 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, 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."[412] Westphal and Kearney nod in

agreement, as 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."[413] 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

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[411] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 164.
[412] Desmond, "Wording the Between," in *The William Desmond Reader*, 197.
[413] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 423.

these voices so no one dominates the other. As a task, then, metaxology leads to a "*practice* of a kind of thinking"[414] mindful of the plurality of voices at play within being.

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."[415] 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?"[416] 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?[417]

For Desmond, the paradoxical lack points "deeper than lack to a more positive condition of being."[418] 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

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[414] Ibid.
[415] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 55.
[416] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 130.
[417] Ibid., 130.
[418] Ibid.

asleep in the garden. Penia, or "poverty," who had been begging outside the gates of the

party seized this opportunity to "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,"[419] the child in whom

abundance and lack intermingle.

Too often, it appears, 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

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

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.

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."[420] 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.

2.2.4   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

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

"transcendence" arise from amidst the between and point beyond the *metaxu*. 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 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.[421]

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.

2.2.4.1 Exterior Transcendence (T_1)

Desmond claims: "the happening of the between is a metaxological community of

transcendences."[422] 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.[423]

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

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[421] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 44.
[422] Ibid., 206.
[423] Desmond, "The Theater of the *Metaxu*: Staging the Between," 114.

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 transcendence of *beings as other* in exteriority."[424] 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."[425] 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."[426] 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. Ontically, I know *what* she is: a bird. I see 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

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[424] Desmond, *Art, Origins, and the Absolute*, 268.
[425] Simpson, 46.
[426] Ibid., 90.

only fleetingly.[427] Along with every other finite being, she bears within herself the crack

of equivocity rendering her susceptible to the ebb and flow of time.

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.[428]

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*.[429]

Metaxology responds to the address of exterior transcendence and empowers our

response. Philosophical approaches guided by Descartes, for instance, would look

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[427] 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."
[428] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 206.
[429] Hopkins, 129.

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.

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.[430] 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).

2.2.4.2   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

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[430] Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.

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in the self-surpassing power of the human being."[431] The capacity for self-transcendence

renders us creatures of possibility who, in freedom, take a stand on who we become:

> 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.[432]

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"[433] 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 a prior 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.[434]

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

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[431] Desmond, *Hegel's God*, 3.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 5.
[434] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 120.

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

2.2.4.3 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*."[435] 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.[436]

What is most distinctive about "transcendence itself" can be encapsulated in one word: possibilizing.[437] 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

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[435] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 19.
[436] Desmond, *Hegel's God*, 3.
[437] 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.

key to the meaning of the whole of being."[438] With Heidegger, Desmond views Hegel's

god as the palmary example of ontotheology. For Hegel, "God 'needs' man, and hence is

defined as what it is or may be in terms of its relativity to us."[439] 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.[440]

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."[441] 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. Desmond's 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 in order to achieve any self-serving goal. God does

not need humanity to work out God's issues or to become God. The origin, creator, and

sustainer of all creates not out of poverty but from overabundance; God possibilizes the

whole of creation for no "reason" other than the sheer 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

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[438] Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 261.
[439] William Desmond, "Maybe, Maybe Not," *Irish Theological Quarterly* no. 68 (2003): 114.
[440] Ibid.
[441] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 230.

the transcendent God who evades capture in finite speech. Instead of the "erotic absolute" who *needs* creation, he employs metaphors of the agapeic absolute,[442] absolute original[443] and agapeic origin[444] 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.[445]

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 by drawing upon Kearney's meditation on *The Song of Solomon* 3:1-4. This provides not only a clearer sense of Desmond's three transcendences but also shows how they implicate one another. Kearney begins by quoting 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;

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[442] Ibid., 230.
[443] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 235.
[444] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 208.
[445] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 235-6.

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.

For Kearney, as Desmond, "the anxious, expectant seeking of the love-struck bride is reversed into a *being-found*, that is, a *being desired*."[446] 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."[447] 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. As 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 populated by monads; 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

446 Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 54
447 Ibid.

are launched upon our own iteration of the Augustinian itinerary *ab exterioribus ad interior, ab inferioribus ad superiora*: from exterior to interior, from inferior to superior.

2.3   Minding the Between: The Furrowing Brow of Immanence

In this final part, I round out our consideration of Desmond's systematic

metaphysics by thinking through the modes of "minding" the between. For Desmond,

mindfulness of being unfolds in stages: astonishment, perplexity, and curiosity. 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.[448]

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

2.3.1 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."[449] 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.[450] 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.[451]

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"[452] 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."[453] 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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[449] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 5.
[450] *Theatetus* 174a
[451] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.
[452] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 106.
[453] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 8.

Calling to mind our "Five Commandments,"[454] 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.[455]

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 for his family. Children live comfortably in the "primal and elemental"

stage of astonishment, unafraid to show their wonder or to ask the "big questions."[456]

Indeed, childhood astonishment may augur the future: she may become a physicist, he an

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[454] (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
[455] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 106.
[456] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 11.

actor. Yet, though we grow out of childhood, we do 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."[457] 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."[458] 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."[459]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

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[457] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 270.
[458] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 53.
[459] 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.

to an original favor bestowed on him, something for which, a priori, the "I" will never find the sufficient reason in himself.[460]

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. Desmond describes the porosity of being as 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."[461] 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. If the porosity of being, however,

> 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.[462]

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

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[460] Ibid., 16, quoted in Schindler, 46.
[461] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 201-2.
[462] Ibid., 202.

our determinate relations to determinate beings and process, whether these relations be knowing ones or unknowing.[463]

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.[464] 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."[465]

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[463] Ibid.
[464] Ibid.
[465] Ibid., 203.

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* would be as a narrative of how *once* we were porous but now we are *buffered*. Desmond wants to resist such readings because porosity is

> 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.[466]

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.[467]

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.[468]

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[466] Desmond, "The Porosity of Being: Towards a Catholic Agapeics," 289.
[467] Ibid., 288.
[468] Ibid., 291.

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 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."[469] 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.[470]

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[469] Desmond, "Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal," 164.
[470] Ibid.

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.

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.[471]

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."[472] The recession of the *passio* and the gradual clogging of porosity leaves the *conatus* to seize the center stage.

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[471] Ibid., 163-4.
[472] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 270.

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 overlooked modern promoters of the *conatus*. Whereas thinkers such 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.[473]

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. When it comes to our inherent rationality, Lady Gaga sings the anthem: we are "Born This Way."

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

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[473] Ibid., 165.

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. Being is, yet need not be. The rupture of astonishment *that there is anything at all* includes a moment of self-reflection *I am, although I 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."[474] 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.[475]

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."[476] 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.

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[474] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 11.
[475] Ibid.
[476] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 104.

2.3.2 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."[477] 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 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."[478] 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 it strikes out to assert its freedom and autonomy.

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[477] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 188.
[478] Simpson, 36.

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.[479]

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 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. [480]

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 and must not sever all 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

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[479] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 9.
[480] Ibid.

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."[481] 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 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.[482]

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

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[481] Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God* (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 8.
[482] Ibid., 23.

general advance of human beings toward real knowledge."[483] 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."[484] 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.[485] For 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."[486]

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 in his insight 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

[483] Ibid., 9.
[484] Ibid., 15.
[485] Ibid., 18.
[486] Ibid.

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.[487]

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."[488]

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 seeks to bring a sense of determinacy 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*

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[487] Ibid., 19.
[488] Ibid., 20.

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."[489]

2.3.3 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 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.[490]

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."[491] 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

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[489] Ibid., 37.
[490] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 281.
[491] Simpson, 38.

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.[492]

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."[493]

If Newton proved an exemplar of a hypertrophied perplexity, let me offer Denis Diderot (1713-84) and Baron D'Holbach (1723-89) as exemplars of how the narrow eyes of 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.[494]

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*

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[492] Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 41.
[493] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 283.
[494] Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God*, 34.

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."[495]

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."[496] 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 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."[497] Curiosity, with 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

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[495] Ibid., 34-35.
[496] Ibid., 37.
[497] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 81.

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.[498]

Recalling 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."[499]

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, 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 we move

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[498] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 288.
[499] Desmond, *Art, Origins, and Otherness*, 271.

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.[500]

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 *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.[501]

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[500] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 283.
[501] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 262-63.

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. Metaxology's paradox: 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 actually 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. Recognizing our incapacity to control the Transcendent capacitates us to 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.

2.4   Conclusion: Discovering the "Crack" in Everything

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."[502] In keeping with this theme of thought as *singing*, I want to conclude this chapter with three brief considerations.

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[502] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 259.

First task: allow me to offer another 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 might 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 what Taylor calls a "subtler language."[503] This is needful 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. [504]

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,

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[503] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 353-361, 755-761.
[504] Ibid., 761.

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comedy, tragedy), and second in that the making (also unmaking) of selves and community has dramatic pattern with both comic and tragic elements.[505]

Desmond's texts, as 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."[506] Metaxology can draw the reader into a form of metaphysical meditation able to allow a revelation or a disclosure of what otherwise easily remains 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.

Confronted by the Mystery of God the curious mind, or Taylor's buffered self, recoils and throws its hands up in exasperation. God, actual infinitude, or Transcendence itself: the divine resists enclosure and capture in "the system." Hopkins saw 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.[507]

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 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 something akin to a philosophical prayer.

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

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

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

Second task: let me return to Emerson for whom the presence of "a crack in everything God has made"[508] 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. In the *metaxu,* the crack in all finite beings is simultaneously a sign of fragility and utter 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.[509]

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.

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

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

of the dialectical whole."[510] 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."[511] 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.

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

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[510] Ibid., 164.
[511] Ibid., 173.

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. Sometimes we have to find other ways of speaking – art or poetry or song – to convey the too-muchness.

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 open and hospitable 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.[512]

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*, we are not called to close our ears to what unfolds before us. We are bid to enter, to experience, and undergo what it means to be in the between.

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[512] William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130-131.

I am convinced that Desmond's theological achievement is found in his ability to give us a way of recognizing and interpreting the metaphysical "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. To make my case, I turn in the next chapter to consider "The Poetics of the Between" to give an account for how Desmond's philosophy *works* as a form of "spiritual exercise." As we walk more intensively with Desmond, we will invite French philosopher Pierre Hadot to join us as we consider how regarding metaxology as a practice of a way of life has precedent in the history of Western thought.

Chapter 3

The Poetics of the Between:
Metaxological Metaphysics as Spiritual Exercise

What is needed is a conversion to an attitude in which existing is more than taking, acting more than making, meaning more than function – an attitude in which there is enough leisure for wonder and enough detachment for transcendence. What is needed most of all is an attitude in which transcendence *can be recognized again*.
                                                                -Louis Dupré, *Transcendent Selfhood*

In its infinitival form, "to exercise" can be taken in two ways. In some contexts, it means "to vex" or "to exasperate" while elsewhere it can mean "to engage" or "to practice." In chapters one and two, we explored why Charles Taylor and William Desmond regard the question of transcendence as "exercising" in the first sense. Taylor's immanent frame and Desmond's reconfigured ethos both try to account for what many experience as the "eclipse of the transcendent." In chapter one, I considered how *A Secular Age* offered a persuasive historical narrative of this eclipse. Taylor's map, I argued, "works" to implicate the reader: Taylor does not simply tell us *a* story but tells us *our* story. By weaving us into the map, his text performs by inducing a sense of the cross-pressures experienced by those dwelling within the immanent frame. I concluded the chapter by surfacing Paul Janz's critique of Taylor and suggested we take a trip to Cork where, in Desmond's philosophy, we might find a needed supplement to Taylor's map.

In chapter two, I introduced Desmond's systematic metaphysics as a resource for reflecting on what it means to be "in the between." Metaxological philosophy, like Taylor's map, also implicates its reader and works to re-orient the way one perceives the ongoing happening of the *metaxu*. We probed Desmond's *systematic* philosophy

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in the sense of a disciplined understanding of enabling connections; connections stabilized but not frozen by sameness; connections defined and developed by dynamic difference; connections not enclosed in one immanent whole; and all in all, connections enabling complex interplays between sameness and difference, interplays exceeding the closure of every whole on itself.[513]

Yet metaxology is hardly the architectonic "system" rejected by many of metaphysics' critics, for it neither dragoons God into its service (ontotheology) nor claims an exclusive possession of "The Truth." It remains true to its humble origins, arising as a response to having been provoked by astonishment. Desmond's is a finessed approach to metaphysics, attentive to the plurivocity of being and committed to keeping the voices in play within an open, rather than closed, whole. Although he does not tell the story of modernity as Taylor does, we saw areas of overlap and I gestured to ways in which metaxology complements and develops Taylor's map.

This chapter argues for reading metaxology as a form of "spiritual exercise" and does so by considering the *poetic* dimension of Desmond's thought. Like "exercise," the word "poetic" bears a double meaning. First, he distinguishes poetics from systematics:

> Poetics deals with creative overdetermination; systematics with created determinations and self-determinations. Poetics reveals the more original coming to be, or showing; systematics articulates forms of interconnection that issue from the more original forming. Poetics concerns the forming power(s), prior to and in excess of determinate form, for it is intimate with the overdetermination of the original source(s).[514]

Echoes of *passio essendi* and the porosity of being resound: being must be given to be before it can be reflected upon. Systematics reflects upon what Desmond calls "becoming" wherein "one becomes a determinate something, out of a prior condition of determinate being and towards a further more realized or differently realized

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[513] William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 10.
[514] Desmond, "Between System and Poetics: On the Practices of Philosophy," 21.

determination of one's being."[515] Metaxological poetics do more than point or designate; they are revelatory, permitting us to peer beneath the surface of "becoming" to consider the dynamic process of "coming to be." As Desmond observes, "becoming itself suggests something more primordial about coming to be. Creation is connected with this more primordial coming to be – a coming to be that makes finite becoming itself possible but that is not itself a finite becoming."[516] Singing within the reconfigured *metaxu* or the immanent frame, Peggy Lee croons "Is that all there is?" and Desmond responds once more with a lilting *No*. Every finite being points back toward and serves as a sign of a more originative power giving being to be *at all*.

There is also a second sense of poetics at work. For Desmond, poetic language is not just a rhetorical

> embellishment that otherwise puts drapery over the sturdy drab furniture of thinking. It has more to do with *enactment*: the words are not just a matter of "talk about" a something, but are uttered or written somehow to bring to pass a happening, to enact it mindfully. Performance is a (per)forming, a coming to be of significant form, through (*per*) a passing from silence to speaking. The saying is as important as the said; and sometimes the saying says more than the said.[517]

"Poetic" in this case expresses how a text's language can enacts a performance. Rather than laying out a grand system, Hadot might observe that Desmond's goal is "to put the minds of his readers or listeners to work, placing them in a specific disposition."[518] Poetics here indicates how rhetoric not only describes but also implicates the reader within the happening of the *metaxu*. At times, his texts roil and vibrate as metaphor, allusion, symbol, and hyperbole collide. This is hardly a result of careless writing:

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[515] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 248.
[516] Ibid., 249.
[517] Ibid., 26. Italics original.
[518] Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase (Stanford: Stanford, 2011), 59.

metaxological poetics enacts a discursive performance aimed at arousing a sense of the *metaxu*'s dynamism. Desmond's texts, I believe, cannot simply be "gone over" and mined for analytic arguments or syllogism. To be appreciated, they must instead be "undergone" as a form of spiritual exercise. Metaxology is not just a way of thinking; it is, instead, a way of perceiving in an entirely new way. In terms of the last chapter, we can be attuned to detect the presence of the "crack in everything" and to discern how the "crack" serves as a sign, pointing beyond the immanent realm toward the creative origin of being itself.

Approaching metaxological metaphysics as a form of spiritual exercise, I believe, can aide the willing reader in cultivating attitude in which, as Louis Dupré notes above, transcendence can be recognized again. My argument unfolds in three parts. I begin with Pierre Hadot for whom philosophy is "a concrete act, which change[s] our perception of the world, and our life: not the construction of a system. It is a life, not a discourse."[519] By exploring Hadot's understanding of spiritual exercise, we gain insight into (1) how they cultivate philosophy as a way of life and (2) how metaxology might be interpreted similarly. In Part II, I test my wager by interpreting Desmond's "Return to Zero" as an exercise in "Learning how to Die." By pushing nihilism to its limits, this exercise induces not despair but "a different nihilism: a nihilating of despair in despair."[520] Guided by Desmond, one enters the darkness of nihilism in order to be reborn into a state of "posthumous mindfulness" renewed in its sense of the elemental goodness of being. In Part III, I consider how posthumous mindfulness attunes us to the poetics of the between, what Desmond calls the "hyperboles of being," as pointing beyond the immanent order

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[519] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 279.
[520] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 31.

$(T_1\text{-}T_2)$ to the Transcendent (T_3). By way of these hyperboles, in Chapter IV, I shall

consider how metaxology offers four "itineraries to the sacred" fitting for those who

desire to encounter the Transcendent again in our secular age.

3.1   Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as a Way of Life

Mention of "spiritual exercise," at least in the company of those familiar with

Christian spirituality, will likely evoke Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. By

spiritual exercises, Ignatius meant every method

> of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer,
> and other spiritual activities, such as will be mentioned later. For just as taking a
> walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of
> spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid
> itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and
> finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.[521]

His *Exercises* unfolds over the course of four "Weeks" as the retreatant undertakes a

process of discerning God's will. The goal of the 30-day retreat is not to tell the retreatant

where to go or what to do; what is intended, rather, is a conversion of heart enacted by

God's grace. Instead of accruing gobbets of facts or information, the *Exercises* facilitate

an encounter whereby the retreatant may grow affectively in an "interior knowledge of

the Lord, who became human for me" in order that he or she may come to "love him

more intensely and follow him more closely."[522] Ignatius's *Exercises* are not meant

primarily to be read or studied but received and lived out in a life of discipleship.[523]

Though rightly regarded as an innovation in Christian Spirituality, Ignatius's

Exercises are not without precedent. Paul Rabbow's *Seelenführung* convincingly

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[521] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, ed. George Ganss (New York: Paulist, 1991), 121.
[522] Ibid., 148.
[523] The *Spiritual Exercises* are not a do-it-yourself program. Undertaken as Ignatius envisioned, they are
    part of a living tradition as the *Exercises* are "handed over" from the director to the retreatant.

demonstrates how Stoic and Epicurean contained "*spiritual* exercises of the same kind as

we find in Ignatius of Loyola."[524] The Stoics, Hadot continues,

> declared that philosophy, for them, was an "exercise." In their view, philosophy
> did not consist in teaching an abstract theory – much less in the exegesis of texts –
> but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle,
> which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated
> merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress
> which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better.[525]

Unlike today, where philosophy would typically be approached as an abstract or

theoretical discipline, ancient philosophy was the practice of the whole person. This

insight is a signal contribution of Hadot's scholarship: philosophy was not just a way of

thinking but contributed to one's very way of being; it was, "above all, a way of life."[526]

Hadot defines spiritual exercises as "voluntary, personal practices intended to

bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self."[527]

Approached in this light, we may read Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and catch sight of

> the practice of spiritual exercises – captured live, so to speak. There have been a
> great many preachers, theoreticians, spiritual directors, and censors in the history
> of world literature. Yet it is extremely rare to have the chance to see someone in
> the process of training himself to be a human being.[528]

As Maria Antonaccio observes, "this idea of self-training is at the heart of Hadot's thesis

that ancient philosophy was not primarily an abstract mode of discourse, but rather a

form of *askesis*, a practice of shaping oneself to an ideal of wisdom."[529] Aurelius offers a

guide to the practice of daily life. His wisdom can be appropriated even by those who

wish to hit the snooze button as they try to avoid the day: "When you have trouble getting

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[524] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 126.
[525] Ibid., 83.
[526] Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998), 35.
[527] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 87.
[528] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 201.
[529] Maria Antonaccio, "Contemporary Forms of *Askesis* and the Return of Spiritual Exercises," *The Annual*
      of the Society of Christian Ethics 18, (1998): 49-92 at 69.

up in the morning, let this thought be in your mind: I'm waking up in order to do a man's work."[530] Nearly two millennia after the death of this Roman emperor, readers still turn to the *Meditations* both out of historical interest and in them we "catch a person in the process of doing what we are all trying to do: to give a meaning to our life, to strive to live in a state of perfect awareness and to give each life's instants its full value."[531]

To provide a sense of how philosophy can be a way of life, Hadot distinguishes "between *discourse about* philosophy and *philosophy itself*."[532] *Philosophical discourse* was divided into three parts: logic, ethics, and physics. By this he means that when

> it comes to teaching philosophy, it is necessary to set forth a theory of logic, a theory of physics, and a theory of ethics. The exigencies of discourse, both logical and pedagogical, require that these distinctions be made. But philosophy itself – that is, the philosophical way of life – is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in *living* logic, physics, and ethics.[533]

Stoic philosophy, for instance, required putting theory into practice. Thus Epictetus: "A carpenter does not come up to you and say, 'Listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry,' but he makes a contract for a house and builds it…do the same thing yourself."[534] Philosophical discourse and philosophical life are incommensurable yet inseparable; presaging Kant, the ancients understood well: philosophical discourse without practice is empty, philosophical practice without theory is blind.[535]

How does one move from discourse about philosophy to the actual practice of philosophy itself? How does one learn to live the philosophical life? Unfortunately, "although many texts allude to them, there is no systematic treatise which exhaustively

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[530] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 201.
[531] Ibid., 202.
[532] Ibid., 266.
[533] Ibid., 267.
[534] Ibid.
[535] Kant: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," *CPR* A51/B76.

codifies the theory and technique of philosophical exercises (*askesis*)."[536] Still, we do

have clues. In *On Exercises* Musonius Rufus "affirms that people who undertake to

philosophize need to exercise."[537] This, Hadot continues, indicates how the notion

> of philosophical exercises has its roots in the ideal of athleticism and in the
> habitual practice of physical culture typical of gymnasia. Just as the athlete gave
> new strength and form to his body by means of repeated bodily exercises, so the
> philosopher developed his strength of soul by means of philosophical exercises,
> and transformed himself.[538]

In addition, we have two lists of spiritual exercises courtesy of Philo of Alexandria:

> One of these lists enumerates the following elements: research (*zetesis*), thorough
> investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention
> (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things. The
> other names successively: reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the
> passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and the
> accomplishment of duties.[539]

The range of activities indicate just how "these exercises in fact correspond to a

transformation of our vision of the world, and a transformation of our personality."[540]

One does not undertake a process of spiritual exercise merely in order to *think* differently;

one does so, rather, in order to be-in-the-world in a transformed mode.

A full treatment of ancient spiritual exercises is beyond my project's scope and

my competence. My more limited task: to explore how philosophy can function as a

spiritual exercise capable of transforming our perception of reality. Following Hadot, I

examine philosophy as an exercise in (1) learning to live, (2) learning to die, and (3)

learning to read. In each, I to understand, first, how philosophy can be undertaken as a

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[536] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002), 188.
[537] Ibid.
[538] Ibid., 189.
[539] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.
[540] Ibid., 82.

way of life and, second, how contributes to reading metaxology as a form of spiritual exercise capable of transforming the way we live in and perceive the world.

3.1.1 Learning to Live

For Hadot, "the passage from discourse to life is a tightrope walk that is hard to make up one's mind to try."[541] This seems an odd claim, especially if the goal of ancient philosophy was to transform one's life by raising "the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom."[542] Who would not want to live authentically? As we shall see, putting philosophy into practice requires much more than reading *about* philosophy. Indeed, it requires an investment of self as one undertakes a sustained and deliberate effort to recognize and retrain one's passions. The tightrope image is apt for it, like the Jamesian open space, draws one out into a position of vulnerability. One hovers above the abyss and must find and preserve one's balance in order to cross over safely.

A key obstacle to attaining the balance necessary to cross this tightrope can be summed up in a word: *passions*. For the ancients, the "principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears."[543] Each philosophical school regarded philosophy as "therapeutic of the passions" capable of transforming an "individual's mode of seeing and being."[544] Stoics believed "all mankind's woes derive from the fact that he seeks to acquire or keep possessions that he may either lose or fail to obtain, and from the fact that he tries to

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[541] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 116.
[542] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.
[543] Ibid.
[544] Ibid.

avoid misfortunes which are often inevitable."[545] Epictetus's *Enchirdion* begins by

observing: "Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are

opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things

not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever

are not our own actions."[546] We should focus only on things within our control for these

are "by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered." Things outside control should be regarded

as "weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others." As a therapy, Stoicism trained

practitioners to discern the difference between what can and cannot be controlled and to

balance between them. One needed to develop a discerning eye:

> Work, therefore, to be able to say to every harsh appearance, "You are but an
> appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be." And then examine it
> by those rules which you have, and first, and chiefly, by this: whether it concerns
> the things which are in our own control, or those which are not; and, if it concerns
> anything not in our control, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.[547]

Such a transformation of vision does not take place instantaneously nor can it be achieved

simply by reading *about* discernment. It requires a process of *askesis* to recognize

disordered passions and sustained effort to bring one's passions back into balance.

The balance sought within the philosophical life is cultivated through an attitude

of attention (*prosoche*). Hadot describes this as "a continuous vigilance and presence of

mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit."[548]

Attention is cultivated through and enacted as an active stance before the real in which

"the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he *wills* his actions

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[545] Ibid.

[546] Epictetus, *The Enchiridion* trans. Elizabeth Carter, The Internet Classics Archive, accessed September 20, 2017, http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html

[547] Ibid. Compare Epictetus with Ignatius of Loyola's "Rules for Discernment" found in annotations #313-336 or the "First Principle and Foundation" in #23.

[548] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.

fully."[549] Hardly an abstract purely cognitive act, attentiveness is an embodied disposition or a way of living in the world. Ongoing practice cultivates attentiveness as a *habitus* or a settled disposition as *prosoche* is made incarnate and allows its practitioner to concentrate fully upon the present moment.[550] Attention makes possible a releasement, a letting-things-be; instead of trying to impose oneself on what is other to the self, one allows for the genuine manifestation of alterity. Attention is a form of hospitality, welcoming the other *as* other and not as we would have the other to be.

As a practice of metaphysical thinking, metaxology also fosters a form of attentive mindfulness, one "that does not float above the ethos of being in abstraction, but comes to itself in the midst of things."[551] Desmond continues:

> Of course, human living is not abstract theory but also practical and ethical. Our being in the midst extends to a mindful way of life and a life of mindfulness. There is something before the contrast of theory and practice, or the subordination of one to the other. Original mindfulness is not so much an act as a passion. It is a patience before it is an endeavor, a receiving before it is an activity.[552]

Metaxology tutors one to live within the *metaxu*, knowing that before we can take a stand on or grasp at being (*conatus*), we have first to be given to be (*passio*). Before we can assert ourselves or grasp at being, we must first be receivers. Metaxology possibilizes a meditative way of dwelling within the *metaxu*, attentive to "certain elemental experiences or happenings, or exposures that keep the soul alive to the enigma of the divine."[553] This is a form of "hyperbolic watchfulness," keen to discern in the happening of the *metaxu*

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[549] Ibid.
[550] Ibid., 85.
[551] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 196.
[552] Ibid.
[553] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 1.

how the "crack" in everything can be interpreted as a sign pointing to and revealing the Transcendent.[554]

In the writings of the Stoics, we find several techniques for cultivating *prosoche*. Through a practice of *praemeditatio malorum* we are "to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death. We must confront life's difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us."[555] William Irvine calls this technique "negative visualization" aimed at rousing us into an appreciation of what we have.[556] He cites Epictetus' advice to parents: when you kiss your child goodnight, "silently reflect on the possibility that she will die tomorrow."[557] In Part II, we shall consider how Desmond offers a variant of this meditation – "The Return to Zero" – as a necessary ingredient in rekindling a sense of astonishment needed for the practice of metaxological metaphysics.

Attentiveness can also be developed through the meditative reading of poetry, literature, and philosophy. Even activities such as research and investigation can cultivate attentiveness. The study of physics, for instance, was especially important for Epicurean philosophers. Indeed, note the effect Epicurus's doctrine has on Lucretius:

> For as soon as your reasoning [Epicurus] begins to proclaim the nature of things revealed by your divine mind, away flee the mind's terrors, the walls of the world open out, I see action going on throughout the whole void…from all these things a sort of divine delight gets hold upon me and a shuddering, because nature thus by your power has been so manifestly laid open and uncovered in every part.[558]

Herein we find an ancient example of a text being doubly poetic: the written text functions not only to inform Lucretius, not only to "tell about" something, but also to

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[554] Ibid., 55.
[555] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.
[556] William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 68.
[557] Ibid., 69.
[558] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3.14-30, quoted in Glenn Most, "The Sublime Today?" in *Dynamic Reading: Studies in the Reception of Epicureanism* eds. Brooke Holmes and W. H Shearin (New York: Oxford, 2012), 249.

form him by transforming his vision of the cosmos. A text of Epicurean "reasoning" enacted within Lucretius a moment whereby he came to behold a cosmic happening.

Finally, Hadot also describes a "method of physical definition" as practiced by Marcus Aurelius. This is a way of beholding reality "in its nudity, by separating it from the value-judgments which people feel obliged to add to it, whether by habit, under the influence of social prejudice, or out of passion."[559] Sexual intercourse, so viewed, is described as the "rubbing together of abdomens, accompanied by the spasmodic ejaculation of a sticky liquid."[560] Music fares no better:

> A seductive melody…you can despise it if you divide it into each of its sounds, and if you ask yourself if you are lesser than each one of them taken separately; if you are, you would be filled with shame. The same thing will happen if you repeat this procedure in the case of the dance, by decomposing it into each movement or each figure…In general, then, and with the exception of virtue and its effects, remember to head as quickly as you can for the parts of a process, in order, by dividing them, to get to the point where you have contempt for them. *Transpose this method, moreover, to life in its entirety*.[561]

Neither music nor dance should induce a person to get "carried away," so by breaking each into its elements, one gains perspective on it. As an exercise in divide-and-conquer: even the most daunting tasks can be decomposed into smaller, more manageable, parts. As a way of life, this is a stance of ongoing vigilance within each moment enabling one to resist being overwhelmed even by unexpected occurrences.

Metaxology, likewise, employs a method of decomposition. As a philosophical practice, it seeks to discern the voices at play within the happening of the *metaxu*. Space is made for the symphonic interplay between univocity, equivocity, and dialectic. One "decomposes" the senses of being into its parts, not in order to vitiate the *metaxu* but in

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[559] Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 105. Hadot also refers to this as the "method of decomposition."
[560] Ibid.
[561] Ibid., 133. Emphasis added.

order to discern within each voice its contribution to the happening of the whole. Unlike Aurelius, for whom decomposition sought to attain to mastery, metaxological decomposition means to expose the "crack" in everything and awaken a sense of the mystery at the heart of being. To assuage those suspicious of metaphysics, we might take as a tag-line for metaxological metaphysics: we desire not mastery but to know mystery.

3.1.2 Learning to Die

The practice of spiritual exercise, whether cultivated within the discipline of sustained *prosoche* or through commitment to ongoing dialogue, serves as an affirmation of one's existence. Spiritual exercise does not involve fleeing the world or denying the quotidian flux. Instead, it involves our way of beholding the world from a renewed vantage point. Indeed, we can come to see the world in a new way: the *praemeditatio malorum* awakens us to the fragility and gratuity of existence, Aurelius's "method of physical definition" permits us to see things as they, in their most elemental form. If spiritual exercise transforms perception, this is because it involves a self-duplication

> in which the "I" refuses to be conflated with its desires and appetites, takes up a distance from the objects of its desires, and becomes aware of its power to become detached from them. It thus rises from a partial and particular vision to a universal perspective, be it that of Nature or that of the Spirit.[562]

This is a movement we saw described as Desmond's "Augustinian odyssey" *ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*. Like metaxology, Hadot's spiritual exercises begin *media res*: there is no privileged or neutral starting point, because one begins in the midst of reality. "I" take a stand in the midst of reality, distinguishing myself (T_2) from the flux of the external world (T_1). This inward movement, however, directs me also beyond the flux as the vector self-transcendence

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[562] Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 190.

directs me upward and outward toward a sense of the whole. The inward movement of

spiritual exercise is complemented with an outward straining beyond the self.

No practice captures this dual movement better than what Hadot calls "learning to

die." Socrates famously observes in the *Phaedo*:

> I think that a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be
> of good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will
> attain the greatest blessings yonder…the one aim of those who practice
> philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.[563]

Of course, Socrates did not harbor a secret death-wish. The practice of death is purgative

in gradually separating the soul from its bodily concerns:

> Does purification not turn out to be…to separate the soul as far as possible from
> the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the
> body and to dwell by itself as far as it can both now and in the future, freed, as it
> were, from the bonds of the body…any man whom you see resenting death was
> not a love of wisdom but a lover of the body, and also a lover of wealth or of
> honors, either or both.[564]

No morbid fixation, this is an exercise intending "to liberate ourselves from a partial,

passionate point of view – linked to the senses and the body – so as to rise to the

universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demand of the

Logos and the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die *to one's*

individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality

and objectivity."[565]

As a spiritual exercise, the practice of death is not limited to Plato. The

Epicureans and Heidegger made use of it, as did Seneca, Aurelius, and Montaigne.[566]

Since I treat Desmond's version of this meditation in Part II, let me focus here on its

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[563] *Phaedo*, 64a.
[564] Ibid., 67c-68c.
[565] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 94-5. Emphasis original in text.
[566] Ibid., 95-6.

overall effect. Why, one might ask, should anyone give ear to Charon's exhortation to

mortals? What is the gain? Let us listen to Charon as he ferries across the River Styx:

> Fools (I might say), why so much in earnest? Rest from your toils. You will not
> live forever. Nothing of the pomp of this world will endure; nor can any man take
> anything hence when he dies. He will go naked out of the world, and his house
> and his lands and his gold will be another's, and ever another's.[567]

Why should anyone take to heart Aurelius' apothegm "Each of life's actions must be

performed as if it were the last,"[568] or Horace's *carpe diem*? Why are Christians signed

on Ash Wednesday "you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19)?

We meditate on death because "training for death is a spiritual exercise which

consists in changing one's point of view. We are to change from a vision of things

dominated by individual passions to a representation of the world governed by the

universality and objectivity of thought."[569] This conversion, or *metastrophe*, involves

both an inward contraction as one examines oneself and recognize one's finitude and an

outward expansion as the soul soars toward the infinite. Delivered from bodily

preoccupations, the soul takes wing to range across the expanse of the cosmos. By

practicing death, the philosopher becomes "aware of his being within the All, as a

miniscule point of brief duration, but capable of dilating into the immense filed of infinite

space and seizing the whole of reality in a single intuition."[570] We see things, as it were,

from the other side of death; with Charon, we look upon the shores of mortal concern and

behold how the things we pursue in life – riches, honors, property, power – come to

naught. To imagine how we would behold ourselves from the side of death "confers

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[567] Lucien, *Charon*, trans. Jacobitz, Teubner (1901), in The University of Adelaide Library, accessed
    September 22, 2017, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lucian/works/chapter11.html
[568] Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 135. Marcus Aurelius (II, 5,2).
[569] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 96.
[570] Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 205.

seriousness, infinite value, and splendor to every present instant of life."[571] The

philosopher learns to die and is born again to the fragility of existence and sees

> all things are mutually intertwined, and the bond is holy; and there is hardly
> anything unconnected with any other thing. For things have been coordinated, and
> they combine to form one universal order. For there is one universe made up of
> things, and one God who pervades all things, and one substance, one law, one
> common reason…and one truth....[572]

The practice of death invites us to live anew in the present moment and "to rediscover a

raw, naïve vision of reality" and to behold "the splendor of the world, which habitually

escapes us."[573] To view life from the side of death gives one the vantage point from

which to perceive how what is past cannot be undone and what is future cannot be

controlled: one can act only in the present moment.

Training for death raises us "from individual, passionate subjectivity to the

universal perspective" and is ingredient in the philosopher's "greatness of soul" as one

purged of illusion and capable of beholding reality as it is.[574] This exercise is not a denial

of life but an attempt at rekindling a sense of primal delight and wonder at being at all.

3.1.3 Learning to Read

At the core of any undertaking of spiritual exercise, and consequently at the core

of the philosophical life, is a desire for transformation. One undertakes these exercises

with a desire to grow in self-knowledge, to gain control over one's passions, and to lead a

more authentic and integrated life. The diastole of *prosoche* contracts the soul inward as

it cultivates vigilance and a discerning eye on life's essentials; the systole of *metastrophe*

expands the soul toward a cosmic view of nature and a sense of being interwoven within

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[571] Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 135.
[572] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VII, 9.
[573] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 173.
[574] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 97.

the Whole. The goal of these exercises was "a kind of self-formation, or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions – for social life is itself a produce of the passions – but in conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason."[575] The process of uncovering the authentic self, furthermore, admits of any number of metaphors: training in spiritual gymnastics, Plotinus's image of sculpting a statue, Plato's allusion to Glaucos, the sea-god whose true figure remains hidden until shorn of its barnacles.[576] In sum, "all spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires."[577]

The philosophical way of life cannot avoid personal upheaval and reorientation as one embarks upon this "return to self." The philosopher is fated to live "in an intermediate state."[578] The philosopher is an incarnate *metaxu* pulled between "the non-philosophical and the philosophical life, between the domain of the habitual and the everyday…and…the domain of consciousness and lucidity."[579] Nevertheless, although this intermediate state often requires periods of solitude for introspection and self-examination, it is not a solitary endeavor. Ilsetraut Hadot describes how, with the rise of philosophical schools in Athens, the philosopher became a "spiritual guide" (*kathegemon*) or "the one who leads, who shows the way."[580] One stands in relation to one's teacher or master who instructs the student in this way of life. She continues:

> in the fourth century BC, all philosophical schools had regarded the written word, the book, only as a temporary measure in place of personal instruction. For Plato

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[575] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 102.
[576] Ibid., 102-3.
[577] Ibid., 103.
[578] Ibid.
[579] Ibid.
[580] Ilsetraut Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Crossroad: New York, 1986), 445.

the only valid form of philosophical instruction was a dialogue, which consists of questions and answers – dialectic. This form of instruction actually presupposes the active participation of the student, because the dialectical dialogue can only proceed when the respondent gives critical approval at every stage of the dialogue – that is, when questioner and respondent, teacher and student, reach agreement at every stage of thought.[581]

Dialogue between student and teacher, or the inner dialogue required for an ongoing examination of conscience, is unending. The point of philosophical dialogue is not to arrive at a solution but, rather, is to journey along the road together in search of the truth.

What the Hadots suggest is the necessity to approach philosophical texts as dialogue partners. Pierre Hadot: "I always prefer to study a philosopher by analyzing his or her works rather than trying to uncover a system by extracting theoretical propositions from these works, separated from their contexts. The works are alive; they are an act, a movement that carries along the author and the reader."[582] A text must be approached as a dialogue partner: one must be implicated in its unfolding dialogue, and allow oneself to be questioned and, in turn, be willing to question the text. What Sandra Schneiders says of Scripture seems applicable here, for approaching the philosophical text as a dialogue partner means "taking a chance on hearing one's name called at close range."[583]

The trouble in our day, Hadot contends, is that we have forgotten how to read. We have forgotten how works of philosophy and theology emerge from within life of an author and the author's community. Scripture scholars, of course, know well the importance of the *Sitz im Leben* for exegesis. Yet how many courses present Plato, or Augustine, Aquinas, Hume, or Nietzsche without putting them into context? How often do theologians succumb to a form of "theologology" or "talking about talking about

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[581] Ibid.
[582] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 91.
[583] Sandra Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality," 52.

God" without actually undertaking philosophical reflection or, dare one say, encouraging prayer?[584] To be sure, it is no mean feat to identify an argument, evaluate its merits, and assess its overall coherence. But Hadot is right to resist reducing philosophy to merely analyzing a text's argument. Philosophy, like theology, should be approached as an exercise teaching us how to read again by training us "how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. This, too, is a spiritual exercise, and one of the most difficult."[585]

No doubt, Desmond is acutely aware of how the poetics of a text contribute to informing and forming the reader. In his own writing, he finds that:

> one can find some extremes of abstract dialectic – I can do that – leaving some readers exasperated or gasping for more familiar concreteness – and then, by contrast, the eruption of another language – poetic – seemingly entirely other, imagistically concrete, too concrete for some abstract thinkers. Some of my readers are discomfited by this doubleness. Others, I am happy to report, approve of it in some way. Perhaps the mixture of being discomfited and being moved has something right about it.[586]

Metaxology weaves together the abstract and the concrete to refresh our mindfulness of the dynamism of the *metaxu*. Instead of "the system," Desmond provides his reader with an invitation into a meditative consideration of what it means to be. The poetics of the text, intermingling the abstract and the concrete, induce within the reader a sense of dis-ease and disorientation. This interplay throws us off-step and exposes those places where our pattern of thought has fallen into a rut and how we have grown inured to the

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[584] Sarah Coakley and Tamsin Jones, "Silence, Prayer and Desire in Pedagogical Practices: A Conversation with Sarah Coakley," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 12 (2012): 47—51 at 49.
[585] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 109.
[586] Desmond, "Between System and Poetics," 25.

plurivocity of being. Metaxology's poetics force us to slow down and to discern the

voices at play within the text and, over time, in the *metaxu* itself.

In this vein of spiritual exercise, we might regard Desmond as teaching us how to

read in the space between philosophy and religion. Of his own upbringing he writes:

> if the influences shaping me as a young person were those of a strong Irish
> Catholicism, this was one in which something like a pagan appreciation for the
> earth was not absent, and no absolute incompatibility between these two was felt.
> This reflects a feel for nonhuman nature as a creation in which traces of the
> enigmatic God are not absent.[587]

Desmond teaches us "to read" attentive to the fundamental porosity of being. Philosophy

and religion are not separated by an insuperable wall but by a porous threshold. Each

possesses its own integrity, but this is an integrity-in-relation because philosophy and

theology both attempt to respond to the intimate strangeness of being. Instead of pitting

them against one another, he invites us to stand at this threshold to behold, paradoxically,

how the poverty of philosophy and religion is a sign of their richness.[588] His texts "speak"

not of an "absolute system" but of a *docta ignorantia* or learned ignorance whereby the

"knowing of nonknowing…is the point of exodus where *intellectus* must seek a new

faith, a new fidelity, or rather renew a fidelity that its previous efforts to know seem to

have betrayed."[589] To occupy the space between philosophy and religion necessitates

reflecting on being-as-given and, mindful of the "crack," reflecting on the giver-of-being.

Learning to read Desmond's philosophy as a "poetics of the between" does not lead

conceptual mastery over the *metaxu* but, rather, forms us to recognize the abiding

mystery at the heart of being giving rise to and animating philosophy and theology.

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[587] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 17.
[588] Ibid., 105.
[589] Ibid., 132.

We are about to immerse ourselves in the "poetics" of metaxology by exploring how metaxology "works" to renew our mindfulness of the between. As will become clear, although these exercises are analogous to the *psychagogy* of Platonic or Stoic practices, they possess a pronounced theological character rendering them *mystagogic* exercises. As I argued previously, metaxological metaphysics originates in being awakened by the advent of transcendence; it is, thusly, first and foremost a response to the poetics of the *metaxu*. In this it is akin, as Hadot's alludes, to the way

> a bicycle's movement provided for its lights. In the night one needs a light that illuminates and allows one to guide oneself (this is theoretical reflection), but in order to have light, the generator has to turn by the movement of the wheel. The movement of the wheel is the choice of life. Then one could move forward, but one had to begin by moving for a very short time in the dark.[590]

We turn now to consider how metaxology teaches us "how to die." We begin by peddling in the dark, beneath the "eclipse of the transcendent" in the hope that by turning our metaphysical wheels we might produce light enough to navigate the darkness.

3.2   Metaphysics as *Askesis*: "Return to Zero" and Posthumous Mind

I now test my wager that William Desmond's metaphysics can be undergone as a form of spiritual exercise. To borrow from Charles Taylor, I believe Desmond's metaphysics can be "tested in practice"[591] or, better still, that metaxology can be "tested through practicing it." To test a theory in practice, means "not to see how well the theory describes the practices as a range of independent entities; but rather to judge how practices fare when informed by the theory."[592] Approaching metaxology as a "way of

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[590] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 104.
[591] Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and The Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge, 1985), 104.
[592] Ibid., 113.

life" requires one approach the text with a willingness not only to be informed about metaphysics but also, and more importantly, to be formed by undergoing it.

A few preparatory notes. First, given my interest in Desmond's contribution to theology, I focus primarily upon *God and the Between*. *God and the Between* concludes a metaphysical trilogy published between 1995 and 2008 and manifests a rich maturing of his thought.[593] This decision, too, is strategic and pragmatic. Strategically, a limited scope permits a more intensive engagement with the text. Pragmatically, few scholars are willing to read through the whole of one thinker's *oeuvre*. If theologians are going to "take up and read" one of Desmond's books, this is the one.

Second, in probing *how* the text works and *what* it accomplishes, we are exploring metaxological poetics. This requires considering poetics both rhetorically and performatively. In the chapter and the next, I consider how metaxology works to renew the reader's mindfulness of the Transcendent. If the last chapter gave us a broad outline of *what* metaxology is about, these next chapters show what it can do. Expressed in Austin's notion of speech acts, we are looking at how one can be informed by the text's illocutionary act (rhetorical poetics) and potentially formed through its perlocutionary effect (by being awakened to and implicated within the poetics of the *metaxu*).

Third, I believe Desmond offers our age something akin to what Jean LeClercq describes as *philosophia* or a practice designating "not a theory or a way of knowing, but a lived wisdom, a way of living according to reason."[594] Moreover, what is observed of Rupert of Deutz well apply to Desmond who similarly writes "with such a deeply

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[593] *Being and the Between* in 1995 and *Ethics and the Between* in 2001. Throughout his *oeuvre*, Desmond recurs to the fourfold. There is a monomaniacal dimension to Desmond's thought such that, while it is developed and extended, the fourfold remains consistent throughout.

[594] Jean LeClercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham, 1982), 101.

religious feeling and such a rich poetic orchestration that he awakens in his reader new conceptions of mysteries."[595] Full disclosure: I admit my hermeneutic proposal is tentative and exploratory. Desmond does not cast his thought within the mold of "spiritual exercise." Paradoxically, my argument succeeds only to the degree that it fails: my words are not meant to dispel mystery but to show how Desmond's philosophy works by reawakening the reader to the enigmatic nature of existence. Instead of availing myself of the high noon of reason which casts no shadow, I want to linger beneath the crepuscular sky as we dare to undergo the full effects of the "eclipse of the transcendent."

Betraying my own Ignatian roots, I divide this first exercise into three parts. First, I offer a metaxological "composition of place" to offer a sense of where we begin. Second, I follow the itinerary of Desmond's "Return to Zero" as a process of undergoing nihilism. Third, I examine the "fruit" or "grace" of this exercise by considering what Desmond calls "Posthumous mind." If this succeeds in suggesting how this exercise might inculcate a renewed *way* of perceiving, in Part III I will take up a consideration of just *what* posthumous mind permits us to perceive.

3.2.1   Composition of Place: The Reconfigured *Metaxu*

Ignatius of Loyola describes the first of his *Spiritual Exercises* as "a meditation by using the three powers of the soul."[596] By "meditation," Michael Ivens comments, he means "a prayer in which material is thought out or mentally processed, in the light of faith and in the desire to hear and respond to God's word to oneself."[597] And by "using

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[595] Ibid., 218.
[596] Ignatius of Loyola, 136.
[597] Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1998), 46.

the three powers of the soul" he indicates how the whole person is to be engaged. Ivens

describes the unfolding of Ignatian meditation as involving three movements:

1. Summoning to consciousness a truth already held in the memory.
2. Exploring the content with the mind.
3. The response of the affections (or of the "heart").[598]

Like ancient practices, Ignatian meditation requires the active engagement of the

retreatant: one receives the *Spiritual Exercises* willingly, with a desire to come to know

God's will in one's life. What distinguishes this as a spiritual exercise, Hadot observes, is

"these exercises are not merely of thought, but of the individual's entire psychism."[599]

As mentioned earlier, there survives no extant treatise codifying the practice of

ancient spiritual exercise. Yet, given the rootedness of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* in

ancient soil, it seems warranted to use his text as a template for approaching Desmond's

philosophy as a type of spiritual exercise. For while the content of the exercises varies

over the course of the retreat, the approach one takes to each meditation remains basically

the same. Thus, before entering into each prayer period, Ignatius counsels the exercitant

to offer a preparatory prayer: "ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions,

actions, and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of his Divine

Majesty."[600] What Hadot observed of ancient practices remains true even within

contemporary approaches to Ignatian spirituality: one embarks upon the *Exercises* with a

desire for transformation. After this prayer stating one's desire, Ignatius turns to a "first

prelude" called the "composition of place." As Ivens notes, "in imaginatively composing

a place or situation corresponding to the subject of prayer, one 'composes oneself', in the

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[598] Ibid.
[599] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82.
[600] Ignatius, 136.

sense of 'getting oneself together', or becoming recollected."[601] One recollects, deliberately and thematically, where one is now and how one stands before God. One steps back from the quotidian to gain perspective on one's life. Composition of place is not a flight from the real, but an intensification of attention to it, allowing the present moment to manifest itself fully. This is an Ignatian iteration of *prosoche* whereby one opens oneself to being addressed by the real: we cannot meditate *apart* from the flux of the day-to-day but only from *amidst* and *as part* of it.

A metaxological "composition of place" begins in "the between" by considering how our age has reconfigured the primal ethos. Much of the work in the first two chapters tried to trace the contours of this map. For Desmond, our age has been configured according to the drive of the curious mind: "The momentum of modernity dominantly conceives our development as away from astonishment and perplexity towards as definite a determinate cognition as possible."[602] This momentum can be variously described. One might see is as a "coming of age story" in which scientific materialism "is seen as the stance of maturity, of course, of manliness, over against childish fears and sentimentality."[603] Or one might follow Auguste Comte who opens his *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* by positing three states passing through "the theological or fictitious state, the metaphysical or abstract state" to culminate in the "scientific or positive state."[604] Nor is Comte alone in expressing "irritation with intractable perplexity,"[605] as thinkers such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett continue to attest. Any vestige of "mystery" needs, especially for the New Atheists, to be exorcised. Our

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[601] Ivens, 47.
[602] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 20.
[603] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 365.
[604] Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, ed. Fred Ferré (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 1.
[605] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 20.

age seems bewitched by a Cartesian dream of *mathesis universalis* manifested in "an unprecedented will to univocalize being."[606] As we stretch out being upon the Procrustean bed of univocity, we have no room for concepts of the good. The Platonic form of the Good is rejected, Aristotle's *entelechy* is jettisoned,[607] and Descartes does away with final causality. The latter comes with a hefty price because, Buckley writes, "the self-enclosed physics of Descartes was established as autonomous, however much it might find its roots in first philosophy. Once launched, it was on its own with matter in movement inevitably finding its predetermined contours. With the Universal Mathematics, Descartes removed any final causes, any notae or *vestigial* of god, from the world."[608] A point of contrast: whereas Augustine heard creation sing of its transcendent Creator, the Cartesian universe falls mute. Rather than sing of a creator, Descartes's mechanical universe invokes its god as a divine linchpin holding the system in place.

Our composition of place includes both a consideration of the reconfiguration of exterior being or *topos* (T_1) and the reconfiguration of our self-understanding as *anthropos* (T_2). Stated in metaxological terms, we live in an era wherein "our *conatus essendi* seems rather spurred into an activism, a self-activation that can lead even to an extreme of hyper-activism. Then the *passio essendi* is forced into recess as the *conatus essendi*, expressing itself without hindrance, goes into overdrive."[609] A hypertrophied *conatus* coupled with the devaluation of being leaves us in a state of ontological nihilism. Modern thought has, Desmond notes, grown accustomed to the standard

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[606] Ibid. Louis Dupré in *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* writes "rationality, which formerly had constituted the essence of the real, now became the exclusive attribute of the mind." In *The Phenomenon of Life*, Hans Jonas writes, "Materialism is the real ontology of our world since the Renaissance, the real heir to dualism, i.e., to its residual estate, and with it must be our discourse."

[607] See Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* for a contemporary attempt to resurrect this sense of teleology.

[608] Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 349-50.

[609] Ibid., 21.

distinction of fact and value. We think of being as there, just there, a fact or set of fact. We think of values as human constructions that are imposed or projected on the otherwise valueless being. In itself being is worthless. The degrading of the value of being is itself the product of the mind of mathematical and scientistic univocity; it lacks the sense of metaphysical integrity that the univocal can sometimes reveal. This scientistic univocity produces ontological nihilism.[610]

Given this image of the human agent as the sole author and determiner of being's value, it is little wonder we see the development of an antinomy between autonomy and transcendence. Ludwig Feuerbach was aware of this antinomy: "to enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing."[611] So also Zarathustra who sings in praise of the Higher Man

> Before God! But now this God has die! You Higher Men, this God was your greatest danger.
> Only since he has lain in the grave have you again been resurrected. Only now does the great noontide come, only now does the Higher Man become – lord and master.
> Have you understood this say, O my brothers? Are you terrified: do your hearts fail? Does the abyss here yawn for you? Does the hound of Hell here yelp at you?
> Very Well! Come on, you Higher Men! Only now does the mountain of mankind's future labour. God has died: now *we* desire – that the Superman shall live.[612]

The self-assertion of autonomy has no tolerance for talk of the Transcendent. Zarathustra: *if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god? *Therefore* there are no gods.[613]

Louis Dupré captures well the consequence of our modernity's reconfigured ethos: "In the present situation, the very reality of the transcendent is at stake, more than its specific conceptualization. The very possibility of a relation to the transcendent in the modern world has come under fire."[614] Desmond reiterates this in a metaxological key:

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[610] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 508.
[611] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst: Prometheus, 1989), 26.
[612] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1969), 297.
[613] Ibid. 110.
[614] Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 142.

Third transcendence (T_3) has been made problematic in modernity, both by a univocalizing objectification of first transcendence (T_1), and by developments of second transcendence (T_2), especially when this last defines itself in terms of its own autonomy. Then a logic of *self-determination* stands guard over all our thinking, and the thinking of what is other to our self-determination.[615]

For the curious mind committed to univocity, Transcendence can be neither measured nor managed and so cannot be counted. A self-transcendence (T_2) concerned only with preserving autonomy cannot but regard recourse to Transcendence (T_3) as a threat. Modernity's reconfigured ethos bears the mark of a "postulatory finitism" refusing to postulate a God, either because the Transcendent is irrelevant or anti-human.

A metaxological composition of place does not allow us to shirk from standing beneath the "eclipse of the transcendent." On the contrary, we have no choice but to stand beneath its hoary light and to consider the implications of ontological nihilism. "Valueless being leads to nihilism," Desmond notes, and "it does not matter whether by a scientific, political, or aesthetic route."[616] Indeed, it is hard not to see the signs of such nihilism surrounding us: ecological crises, surging nationalism, global poverty and inequality. As Pope Francis observed in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "…today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a new item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"[617] Nietzsche extolled the will to power as a substitute for God's death: "*This world is the will to power – and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!*"[618] Yet, if we have truly succeeded in "wiping away the entire horizon" and "drinking up the

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[615] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 23.
[616] Ibid., 28.
[617] Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2013), 27 (§53).
[618] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 550.

sea,"[619] these words seem cool comfort. For Desmond, "if all being is valueless, we too

are valueless finally, in the valueless whole, and all our brave, heroic valuing is

swallowed by the valueless whole."[620] Severed from a Transcendent source, is not every

instance of self-assertive striving little more than a "tale, told by an idiot, full of sound

and fury, signifying nothing"?[621] Beneath the eclipse, we stand in a "Desmondian open

space," feeling the buffets and pull of the wind and the tension of the crushing silence of

the *nihil*. Here we open our ears to hear once again the song of creation sung by a

transcendent Creator.

3.2.2   Exercising Nihilism? The "Return to Zero"

Desmond's "Return to Zero" is a meditation on the implications of the total

eclipse of the Transcendent. It is meant to *exercise* those undertaking it. He writes:

> Suppose though there is *some* truth to nihilism. Suppose the origin is worthless,
> the world void of inherent value, our energy of being either reactive to or
> transformative of this worthlessness. What then? No transformation we can effect
> will change the basic truth of being: It all comes to nothing. But this outcome also
> includes *us*, and all our grand projects come to nothing. Our reconfiguration of the
> primal ethos comes to lack any ultimate point.[622]

Imagine: existence is worthless. Nothing we do, no endeavor or project, changes this: the

absence of value goes all the way down and includes ourselves. The weight of

nothingness presses upon us and slowly penetrates into the marrow of our being. In this

meditation, we are meant to experience "such coming to nothing in our knowing, our

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[619] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181.
[620] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 28.
[621] Dennis Vanden Auweele argues that Nietzsche evades Desmond's critique. Although a compelling
      reading of Zarathustra's "Other Dance Song," he misses Desmond's point: Nietzsche may well be
      offering an existential "no" to the divine origin, but can he follow through on the full implications
      of this utterance? "Metaxological 'Yes' and Existential 'No': William Desmond and Atheism,"
      Sophia 52 no. 4 (2013): 649—654.
[622] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 29.

doing, our feeling for life."[623] Desmond wants us not only to *think about* but to *feel* how

the crush of the *nihil* recasts our lives within the *metaxu*. We are implicated in

1. *Knowing*: the more we rationalize life the more life seems to lack reason. Englobed by the *nihil* of nihilism, the *ohne warum* (without why) of the rose is hardly a mystical insight, the threshold of reason. Without a determinate *why* reason comes to see itself a surd.
2. *Doing*: Nietzsche's "will to power" may encourage us to leave our mark upon being, but what fuels this courage?
3. *Feeling*: "the élan of life is drained when we lose the aesthetic feel of the agape of being." We move from cheap thrill to cheap thrill – think of the popularity of horror films – but, in the end, it all comes to nothing. [624]

We are indeed clever animals, capable of any number of ruses to anesthetize ourselves

against the *nihil*. Yet Desmond challenges us to face squarely the implications of a

thoroughgoing nihilism and to experience fully the consequences of a radicalization of

our finitude. He holds before our faces a dark mirror and asks, "Can you see yourself

reflected? Can you feel in your blood the chill grasp and utter despair of nothingness?"

In effect, Desmond invites us to stroll along the shore of Dover Beach where we

can stand beneath the "eclipse of the transcendent" to behold how

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreat, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.[625]

Desmond would have us stand resolutely upon this "darkling plain." He bids us to discern

within the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" not the *end* of belief but a silent prelude

to a renewed porosity to the Transcendent. Passed gall of *nihilism*, we drink it to the lees.

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[623] Ibid.
[624] Ibid.
[625] Arnold, "Dover Beach"

As an exercise, the "Return to Zero" challenges us to "live the shattering" of

nihilism deeply.[626] We must feel the full weight of nothingness:

> We do come to nothing. We are as nothing: a double ambiguous conjunction of
> being and nothing. We are but as nothing, and experience our nothingness as the
> frailty of our finitude, as the perplexity of being that resists being dispelled, as the
> mystery of being that remains despite our best conceptual maneuvers. The truth
> brings us to despair of truth, and of ourselves, and of the good. Nihilism, the truth
> of nihilism brings us to despair of God.[627]

This is not the ersatz nihilism of teenage angst. Nor is Desmond trying to get us simply to

understand its implications. This is *askesis*, a practice we undertake in order to feel fully

the force of the *nihil*. In this exercise, none is spared the blow of Nietzsche's *Götzen-*

Dämmerung as its blows shatter our idols and bring to nothing even the greatest

monuments to our *conatus essendi*. This exercise leads us into the desert – Shelly's

"antique land" or Dupré's desert of modern atheism – where we cannot evade irony:

> Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.[628]

The "Return to Zero" requires us to face a dark reality: everything comes to nothing. The

inherent instability and equivocity of being – the "crack in everything" inflicts all finite

beings the wound of constitutive nothingness. Ozymandias's epitaph strikes deep into the

heart, but not for the reason he envisioned. What had once been an awesome sight

intended to evoke despair in his enemies remains a source of the deepest despair: the

ravages of time reduced his accomplishment to rubble and will do likewise to all of our

endeavors. Despair indeed: all being is as nothing and will return to the nothing.

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[626] Ibid.
[627] Ibid.
[628] Percy Bysshe Shelly, "Ozymandias," in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 198.

This evocation of "despair" has theological resonance. The setting of the First Week of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* weaves the retreatant into a dialectic of sin and grace, brokenness and wholeness. One despairs of sin, not to elicit God's mercy, but as a response to realizing the depths of God's love. Despair is a dark grace: we despair of sin because we see truly our feeble "no" against the horizon of God's "yes" to us. Our despair becomes a purgative prelude to a revitalizing encounter with the Father. And, in a Lenten reflection delivered in Munich in 1945, Karl Rahner describes how it can even be

> the true greatness of man to despair. Only such a despaired one, who has finished and figured out everything and has noticed that behind everything there is nothing, is the actual, the true man, who has elevated himself above the everyday bourgeois, who bravely and honestly professes the only greatness of man that there is: the honest realization of man's nothingness; the greatness of man is the knowledge of his misery.[629]

True despair can dispel one of illusions, show the caducity of one's idols, and expose the emptiness of the human heart that longs for ultimate fulfilment. One must not shirk away from this process. Indeed, speaking to women and men who had lived through bombing raids, Rahner exhorts his listeners to abide within their "rubbled over hearts" because

> When you stand firm and don't flee despair, nor in despairing of your former gods – the vital or the intellectual, the beautiful and the respectable, oh, yes, that they are – which you called God, if you don't despair in the true God, if you stand firm – oh, that is already a miracle of grace which shall be bestowed on you – then you suddenly will become aware that in truth you are not at all rubbled-over, that your jail is closed only to empty finiteness, that its deadly emptiness is only the false appearance of God, that his silence, the eerie stillness, is filled by the Word without words, by him who is above all names, by him who is everything in everything. And his silence tells you he is there.[630]

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[629] Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, trans. Bruce Gillette (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 5.

[630] Ibid., 8.

With Rahner, Desmond unflinchingly confronts the winnowing darkness and learns: "Whatever can be taken from you is never God."[631] The crisis of despair, from the Greek *krinein* or "to decide," rouses us from somnolence and demands we take a stance. "In a paradoxical way, the night of *nihilism* may come to the aid of metaphysical mindfulness. For this night makes *the light itself* perplexing. It makes us wonder if we really know anything important at all, even as we progressively come to know everything determinate."[632] As with Rahner, so with Desmond: as the false gods erected throughout our life disintegrate beneath the weight of despair, the breakdown of the idols need not break us. Indeed, amidst the dust and rubble, this breakdown makes possible the Holy One's breakthrough. "Coming to nothing," in the end, "may be the reopening in us of the porosity of being."[633]

Plato saw philosophy as a training for death, a catalyst for a conversion (*metastrophe*) of the soul. Marcus Aurelius, too, exhorted himself to a mindfulness of death in order to remain attentive to the present moment: "each of life's actions must be performed as if it were the last."[634] With them, Desmond hears the grating whisper: *memento mori*. Yet Desmond does not want merely to be mindful *of* death but to become possessed of a mindfulness that has passed through and been purified *by* death. Thus, he writes, "the return to zero may be the nihilism of despair, but it need not only be that. It may be a different nihilism: a nihilating of despair in despair."[635] The poetic force of Desmond's prose is in full display in the following passage:

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[631] Ibid.
[632] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 203.
[633] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 29.
[634] Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 135.
[635] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 31.

One wanders a desert that bleaches with burning light, or one is exiled to a Siberia of soul that freezes, or one is fleshed together with perishing, as with one's Siamese twin; one has become as nothing, and one is kissed, before one knows it, by the angel of death. What is the kiss? It is a Golgotha of our human hubris. The kiss opens our sightless eyes. One sees the same things but sees the sameness as other. The wings of the angel beat quietly but in the unbearable terror of her approach being suddenly shows the beauty of thereness as absolute gift. Being is given, and it is given for nothing – nothing beyond the goodness of its being, and of its being given. The terror liquefies the world that one has fixed. The world configured as worthless also seems to dissolve. Something else is offered: a taste of the elemental goodness of the "to be" – abundance without a why, beyond the sweetness of its being at all. Here commences the reversal of nihilism, and a redoubled search for God, for we seem to be given again, redoubled in being.[636]

Recalling the double sense of "poetic," consider first the rhetorical power of the text. This is not an indifferent description but a passionate appeal; arid desert to frigid tundra to the shadow of death, Desmond wants to involve the whole reader into undergoing this meditation. Carnality and sensuality abound as we are kissed, taste, and see with purged eyes. In a single passage, we find a phantasmagoria of images and metaphors; the text, so to speak, is saturated with a too-muchness verging on the hyperbolic.

This is the point of the text's hyperbole: it aims, literally and literarily, to "throw us over" (*hyper + ballein*) into the happening of which it speaks. Again, rather than telling *about* this happening, the text implicates the reader in the unfolding of the angel's wings and allows us to undergo the "kiss of death." We are drawn rhetorically into an elemental happening, invited into a purgative un-making that both threatens and promises some form of re-making. The rhetorical saturation the passage performs by throwing the reader into this *poeisis* which renews our perception of reality. This is not a logical proof or a dispassionate argument. On the contrary, it is a passionate wrangling (from the Latin *patere* = to suffer) aimed not at changing our minds but at transforming our perception. The text is an arena of encounter where we, like Jacob at the Jabbok Ford, wrestle with a

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[636] Ibid., 31-32.

shadowy figure who seems intent on bringing about our demise. We strain against our opponent and, at daybreak, find ourselves victorious. Successful passage through the "Return to Zero," however, bears with it a steep cost. Jacob limped away from his nocturnal battle with a dislocated hip. Similarly, we suffer an existential dislocation: the "Return to Zero" gives us to behold the world around us with eyes purged by death's kiss. Even if we sojourn at length in the desert, we do so as heirs of Israel who bear within their bodies the trace of those willing to struggle with God.

Without question, this is a fraught proposition. The "Return" is a painful process. The shattering of our idols, the dissolution of our illusions, may lead one to the utter despair of godlessness. Yet, amidst the dust and rubble, one may catch sight of the outline of the Angel of Death. The wreckage of the *conatus essendi* lets in new light as we behold with astonishment: all that is, *is*, though it need not be. No longer neutral or valueless, we behold being in its elemental goodness. For Bede Griffiths, Taylor recounts, this is the moment of conversion when the buffered layers are transpierced and the world is seen with renewed eyes. Even the sky, for Griffiths, was experienced as too awful to behold because "it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God."[637] To use a more traditional metaphor, the "Return" is a *via purgativa* through which "we find ourselves in the reversion to what we are without God, which is nothing."[638] Without God we are nothing, yet we are not nothing: *we are*.

As an ascetic practice, the "Return to Zero" functions as a purgative exercise intended to "un-clog" our primal porosity and reawaken us to the *passio essendi*. In this way, it is an archaeological undertaking: it leads us downward into the depths of being

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[637] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.
[638] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 338.

itself, depths paved over by modernity. This exercise intends to transform our disposition

toward creation into one of "deep openness to the ontological enigma of the 'that it is' of

beings."[639] The anarchic shattering of the *nihil* uncovers the *archē* of existence itself and

awakens us to its too-muchness and overdeterminacy. "This is," he writes, "the elemental

wonder of metaphysical astonishment: astonishment at the sheer being there of the world,

its givenness as given into being, not the 'what' of beings, but 'the that of being at

all.'"[640] The kiss of death opens our eyes to the goodness of the elemental ethos whose

vibrancy has been covered over or anodized by modernity. Our return to our origin

releases us for "a *new interface with creation*"[641] mindful of the goodness of creation and

attentive to the call of its creator. The poetics of the text permit a return to the origin so

that we may come to perceive, in the *archē*, the abiding presence of the Transcendent

who is creation's origin and end (*telos*).

3.2.3 Posthumous Mind

Willingly undertaken as a spiritual exercise, meditating through the "Return to

Zero" cultivates a "way of mindfulness, beyond the reductive alternatives either of being

as reduced to a particular finite teleology (the kind that some attribute, not justly, to

premodern views) or of being as reduced to the valueless world of modernity, be it the

worthless thereness of the scientistic picture, or the purposeless being beyond good and

evil of Nietzschean becoming."[642] Dubbed "posthumous mindfulness," it is a recurrent

theme throughout Desmond's work. In *Philosophy and Its Others,* he describes it as "a

thinking from the future when we are dead, about the ontological worth of the present,

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[639] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 13.
[640] Ibid.
[641] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 32.
[642] Ibid., 32.

imagined from beyond death as our past. (The Irish call death *slí na fírinne*: the way of truth)."[643] Posthumous mind offers not merely a new way of thinking but expresses the transformation of perception itself:

> So imagine this: what would it be like to die, and come back to your home after a hundred years? Would you like to see everything changed, utterly changed? Would you be dazed? Would you be lost? What would you mourn? What are the nameless, intimate things we now love, and which in our posthumous return we would delight to greet again? Or rather, the intimates of being that might greet us, like old, trusted friends? These things have no name in the technicist's vocabulary, no price in the economist's world. Yet they give charge to life and worth of a different sort. What do we love now, that its loss or desecration would grieve us to the roots on our return? If we cannot name any golden thing, anything that now blesses being, anything that we would want to perpetuate into the future, perpetuate even beyond our death and regardless of death, has not life become metaphysically bankrupt?[644]

For one accustomed to analytic argument, this cannot but be bamboozling. To my mind, the way to make sense of passages such as this – other than writing them off as digressions – is to apply Hadot's observation about ancient philosophers to Desmond: they "did not aim, above all, to provide a systematic theory of reality, but to teach their disciples a method with which to orient themselves, both in thought and life."[645]

As a way of beholding, posthumous mind stands in continuity with yet moves beyond its ancient forebears. With Plato, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Plotinus, Desmond's meditation is "linked to the contemplation of the Whole and elevation of thought, which rises from individual, passionate subjectivity to the universal perspective. In other words, it attains to the exercise of pure thought."[646] Nevertheless, for Desmond, this "pure thought" does not involve any disengaged, disinterested, or neutral stance toward reality. The posthumous minded person is not a voyeur peering into the flux or

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[643] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 278.
[644] Ibid.
[645] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 90.
[646] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 97.

one who refrains from entering into reality. In fact, the opposite is the case: the "Return" brings about a rebirth of astonishment at the givenness of being itself. "The kiss of the angel of death awakens posthumous mind to the thought of God," Desmond observes, because by meditating "coming to nothing awakens us to finitude as finitude, and thus also to the beyond of finitude in the very gift of finitude."[647]

The reader's eyes glaze over: "Desmond, grasp the nettle and give an argument!" Herein rests the problem for, as Desmond claims, "there is no absolutely univocal way to God."[648] Yet, while metaxology offers no "geometry of God," geometry certainly does not exhaust all modes of thinking. Dostoevski, "on the morning of his first death," undergoes a rebirth of mindfulness:

> He was sentenced to death for political conspiracy. He was halfway into death, on the verge of execution, tilted over the brink of nothing. There was no geometry of death to help. But he was suddenly reprieved, brought back from death, resurrected to life again. The sweetness of the morning air struck him, the song of morning birds, the sky. He was stunned into marveling at the sheer fact of being. This is the resurrection of agapeic astonishment. But it is experienced in a blinding and a groping. Will systematic science ever do justice to what is communicated in this stunning and resurrection?[649]

Unexpectedly drawn back from the brink of nothingness, Dostoevski perceived everything with renewed senses. He sees the world with reborn eyes: he stared into the abyss and his eyes were purged by death. His reprieve gives him, as it were, a "new lease" on life attuned to the very goodness and gratuity of existence. "To be" can no longer be taken *for* granted because, having confronted its fragility and gratuity, it is beheld in astonishment *as* granted.

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[647] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 33.
[648] Ibid., 4. We will return to this point in the next chapter.
[649] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 25.

Desmond's point: there are modes of mindfulness beyond Pascal's *esprit de géométrie*. Yet, in an age in which life is often regarded as "finite and nothing but finite,"[650] it is difficult to recognize the elemental goodness of being. But, in something of a reversal of Taylor's sense of disenchantment, Desmond asks: "Is it possible that an age could fall under a bewitchment? Could it be that especially since the early nineteenth century many of the major intellectuals of the era live under the bewitchment of godlessness?"[651] Elsewhere he broaches this exploring whether our age has been "ensnared in a kind of spell" and lulled into the sleep of finitude.[652] So, rather than seeing our age as *disenchanted*, he suggests we have been *bewitched* into a state of postulatory finitism. Postulatory finitism delimits the agenda of questions our age is permitted to ask. Indeed, many of us live *als ob* or "as if" the question of the ultimate had ceased to be a live or valid question. Just as we no longer inquire about "aether" or "phlogiston," we increasingly have less occasion to inquire about God: there is no place for God in an increasingly mathematical order because if it cannot be measured, it cannot matter. Nevertheless, as Dostoevski reminds us, there are modes of mindfulness capable of perceiving the elemental goodness of "to be." If many in our age have been bewitched into this sleep, if we ourselves have felt a sense of drowsiness as our eyelids droop with skepticism, we ask: is there a counter-charm?

Alas, there is no technicolor prince(ss) whose kiss can break this spell. To lift the enchantment, one must undertake the arduous route of nihilism, risk the "Return to Zero," and push postulatory finitism to its limits. By undergoing the buffets of the *nihil*, we submit to being flayed by thoughts of coming to nothing, we watch as the idols erected

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[650] Desmond, *Is there a Sabbath for Thought*, 25.
[651] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 2.
[652] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 65.

by the *conatus* crumble. We find ourselves seated next to Job, surrounded by loss, yet within the maelstrom and chaos we cry out "I know that my redeemer lives!" (19:25). We pass through death but we do not die; indeed, we are stirred into wakefulness. We sense a seepage, perhaps even a trickle, as our primal porosity is gradually unclogged. And so we drink from this uncovered well, we drink of a water ever ancient and ever new, and are regenerated, born again to see the good of "to be." The scene of the breakdown of finitude's idols becomes, after the night of godlessness, occasions the breakthrough reborn mindfulness. We are awakened from the sleep of finitude and freed into a world revitalized to live and move and have our being able to perceive the gift of creation.

The cultivation of posthumous mind is rooted in ancient practices. As Hadot observes, ancient *askesis* called for "a kind of self-duplication in which the 'I' refuses to be conflated with its desires and appetites."[653] Spiritual exercise requires not that one flee the quotidian but find a way of beholding it in a new way. Posthumous mind

> as the metaphysical imagination of being dead, involves mind in a step beyond time, and so is both in and out of time. It involves a *doubling of the self* between the here and the beyond. In looking on life as if dead, the self discovers distance in time, outliving time, rummaging through time for what made it good.[654]

This doubling of self is a redoubling, simultaneously *intensive* in "going most intimately into the depths of our being" and *extensive* "in carrying us beyond ourselves, in promise of community with all others, human and nonhuman, but also with the divine origin, as giver, sustainer, and consummation of all that is."[655] Nevertheless, posthumous mindfulness does not allow one to linger within the Empyrion, for the "Return" does not mean to escape the flux but to renew our mindfulness of it. We do not see a different

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[653] Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 190.
[654] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 280.
[655] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 23.

ethos or an alternative reality; rather, we see *through* the reconfiguration of our ethos and catch sight of the primal ethos of being. With eyes purged of the rheum of finitude, we behold reality with eyes capable of perceiving the "crack" in all things as pointing beyond themselves toward a creative origin. We behold reality with eyes purged of the rheum of finitude and perceive the "crack" of infinitude in all beings. Posthumous mind does not make us indifferent to the poetics of the between; on the contrary, it aims to renew our sense of astonishment that being *is* at all.

3.3   Mindfulness Reborn: Idiotic, Aesthetic, Erotic, Agapeic

By approaching the "Return to Zero" as a spiritual exercise leading one through the darkness of ontological nihilism, it is possible to be reawakened from the bewitchment of postulatory finitism. The Angel of Death's kiss stirs us from the sleep of finitude and gives us to perceive the *metaxu* with renewed eyes. Posthumous mindfulness, however, cannot be counted as an end-result of logical argument. It is an undertaking, an undergoing, jolting one from somnolence into wakefulness. One is struck or rocked back; this astonishment, Desmond writes, "has the bite of an otherness given before all our self-determining thinking: it opens a mindfulness that we do not self-produce."[656] In the next chapter, we will consider how Desmond's philosophy accomplishes this by exploring reformulation of four traditional "proofs" for God's existence. These reformulations do not offer univocal "proofs" but articulate four hyperbolic "ways." By cultivating a metaxological mindfulness by practicing these metaphysical exercises, we can become attentive to the overdeterminacy of being and provoked into raising the metaphysical question: why is there anything at all?

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[656] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 106.

Posthumous mindfulness describes a way of perceiving oneself within the community of transcendences (T_1-T_3). A renewed sense of the *passio essendi* reminds us: before you could take a stand on being, you were given to be. One senses again the fluid intermediation and dynamic passing of the porosity of being: to be, in some enigmatic way, is to be intimately related to all other beings. One is re-woven into the *metaxu* as a member of the community of being.[657] The universal impermanence of being, mortally wounded by the equivocal "crack" in everything, sings no dirge but points beyond itself to its infinite source. Posthumous mind becomes a gift: having passed through death, *slí na fírinne*, we are greeted by Aletheia who gives us to behold all things anew.

In a sense, one needs to meditate through, or have existentially undergone, the "Return to Zero" as essential for understanding metaxological metaphysics. Like *ad hominem* style of argument Taylor employs, this meditation capacitates us to view the *metaxu* otherwise. Just as Taylor does not tell us about a different history but narrates history differently, so too does posthumous mind give us to perceive reality in a new way. In the next four sections, I want briefly to describe just how undergoing the "Return" capacitates us to behold reality anew by rendering us attentive to the hyperboles of being: idiotic, aesthetic, erotic, and agapeic. We encounter these hyperboles *within* the immanent order of the *metaxu* but, as hyperboles, they "throw us over" (*hyperballein*) toward the transcendent. Again, Desmond's hyperbolic language is not merely a form of rhetorical poetics but, rather, performs by directing the reader's attention beyond the between and toward the Transcendent (T_3). In the next chapter, I treat more fully how

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[657] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 64. "Since Descartes we have been wont to think in terms of the antithesis of subject and object, out of which antithesis emerges an understanding of mind as essentially objectifying. The world of being-other is there, as having been made an object for the subject…the intimacy of being is dissolved in the modern antithesis of subject and object." Posthumous mind reverses this dissolution.

each of these ways offers an "indirection" to God; here, though, I consider what posthumous mind allows us to behold with new eyes.

3.3.1 The Idiocy of Being

In the reconfigured ethos of modernity, being is taken for granted. To the curious minded, being is no more than a neutral substrate to be examined, manipulated, and mastered. Yet, as Desmond describes in Dostoevki's near-death experience, one's perception of the world can be transformed by staring into the abyss of death. The world ceases to be "just there" and is seen as though first the first time. There is a disorientation as one is wrenched from the ruts of everyday practice and put on new footing. How many breaths had Dostoevsky taken before his morning? Pulled back from the brink of oblivion, he felt his senses purged and came to exult in what he had hitherto taken for granted. To perceive the idiocy of being means, as Hadot observed, "to get rid of the conventional and routine vision we have of things, to rediscover a raw, naïve vision of reality, to take note of the splendor of the world which habitually escapes us."[658]

By no means is "idiocy" pejorative. Going back to its Greek roots (*idiotes*), Desmond wants to convey a sense of "what is private, intimate, not publicly political."[659] This sense of idiocy "goes to the roots of intimacy of self-being, our pre-objective, indeed pre-subjective, powers of being. Here we come alive again to the porosity of our own being and its *passio essendi*."[660] We find ourselves unclogged, senses purged, because struck by the incommunicable excess of being. The world is beheld as though for the first time and with reignited astonishment. Yet idiocy is not solipsistic, enclosing us in upon

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[658] Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 173.
[659] Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 361.
[660] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 11.

ourselves; it is, rather, a hyperbolic happening: within the immanent order, we are astonished *that anything is at all*. We are propelled outside of ourselves because addressed by and implicated within the happening of exterior being (T$_1$). Once more, we find a familiar vector moving *ab exterioribus ad interiora*. The advent of exterior transcendence stirs within us a sense of abiding intimacy. Desmond rightly recalls Augustine's God who is *interior intimo meo* (more intimate to me than I am to myself).[661] Self-transcendence (T$_2$), we saw earlier, is not self-wrought; it is, rather, an empowered response made possible by an abiding presence within the depths of one's restless desire.

Exercising the "Return" results in an idiotically reborn mindfulness, and this in two ways. First, it occasions a renewed sense of the gratuity of being: *It is!* yet need not be. The fragility of being reminds us that all finite being is marked by a constitutive nothingness: it is, for now, but will eventually cease to be. Posthumous mind, without being blind to this fragility, has a sense of the elemental goodness and gratuity of being. Second, like Dostoevsky and Scrooge, idiotic rebirth affects the way we dwell within the community of beings. Rather than casual onlookers, we experience ourselves as engaged participants in the *metaxu*. Self-transcendence *responds* to the abiding presence of being's intimate strangeness and bids us to dwell amidst exterior being in a renewed way.

Perhaps we can detect in Wittgenstein a similar development in appreciating the idiocy of being. Recall how he begins his *Tractatus* with the following proposiitons:

1.   The world is all that is the case.
1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not things.
1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts. [662]

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[661] Ibid., 36.
[662] Ludwig Wittengenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1974), 5.

Early in the *Tractatus*, it seems as though the entirety of world is to be subsumed into a

univocal logic wherein reality is reduced to the "finite and nothing but the finite." All that

is can be examined as an amalgamation of facts. Yet, by the work's end, we become

aware of a sort of "mystical" upheaval. Wittgenstein's initial attempt to reduce the world

to atomistic proposition breaks apart as language cannot exhaust or constrain reality:

> 6.4321 The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution.
> 6.44   It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.
> 6.45   To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole.
>   Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.
> 6.522   There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.[663]

As he writes in 6.54, his "propositions serve as elucidations" akin to rungs on a ladder

allowing us to climb *beyond* the propositions. Once we have ascended and reached the

summit, we kick away the ladder and "see the world aright."[664] He seems to have intuited

the "crack" within atomic facts and, rather than mourn the caducity of his system,

interpreted these cracks as signs pointing beyond immanence toward the transcendent.

    My point: within the workaday world, the idiocy of being is easily submerged and

forgotten. In a different voice, Denise Levertov poetically expresses how

> Days pass when I forget the mystery.
> Problems insoluble and problems offering
> their own ignored solutions.
> Jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
> Along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
> Their colored clothes; cap and bells.[665]

Our re-awakening to the too-muchness of being occurs, as with Wittgenstein, with the

breakdown of a univocal logic incapable of constraining the mystical element of

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[663] Ibid., 88-89.
[664] Ibid., 89.
[665] Denise Levertov, "Primary Wonder," in *The Stream and the Sapphire* (USA: New Directions, 1997), 33.

existence. Or it can be rekindled by passing through an encounter with death. Regardless

its origin, the bite of astonishment, *that it is at all*, does not offer new information about

the world; rather, it forms us to behold the world anew by rendering us porous to

elemental mystery. Levertov concludes her poem:

> And then
> Once more the quiet mystery
> Is present to me, the throng's clamor
> Recedes: the mystery
> that there is anything, anything at all,
> let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
> rather than void: and that, O Lord,
> creator, Hallowed One, You still,
> hour by hour sustain it.[666]

A renewed sense of being's idiocy instigates an existential stirring, a mindfulness of what

is and remains in excess of any system. Our grasping at being (*conatus*) is forced to relax

into and recognize the primal *passio*, the originary address of being that remains beyond

our control. The woo of mystery calls us to recognize the abiding presence of the intimate

universal abiding within our depths and sustaining the whole of creation in its being.

3.3.2   The Aesthetics of Happening

The capaciousness of posthumous mind is reflected both in its ability to be

astonished *that being is* and in its openness to being astonished by the particularity of any

given being: *that this is*. For Desmond, in aesthetic rebirth

> astonishment becomes ontological appreciation of the incarnate glory of the
> manifest creation which, showing itself sensuously, exceeds finitization. Native to
> the material world, our nativity is saturated with rich ambiguity resistant to our
> intervening domestications. Appreciation of immanence passes a threshold of
> immanence into mysterious love of transience that exceeds transience.[667]

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[666] Ibid. The placement of "and then" reflects the Levertov's schema.
[667] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 225.

If Desmond's description of this is not entirely clear, perhaps it would help to think of how a father holds his newborn infant. This is not a baby like any other baby, for it is *this* child, *my* child whom I love beyond all telling. The exquisite fragility of each finger and toe, the boundless potential of a life, is swaddled in blanket and placed gingerly within the father's eager arms. He makes contact physical contact not with an anonymous future but with *this* future, this being, who has a name: *my* daughter, *my* son, *my* beloved.

Aesthetic rebirth re-weaves the astonished subject into the community of being. We move from a Cartesian Subject-Object or disengaged apprehension of the world and find ourselves in congress with reality. This results in a renewed sense of togetherness:

> This togetherness is both "objective" in that *it is there*, out in the world, and "subjective" in that *it is here* in the concrete thereness of our fleshed presence to the world. I call the rebirth aesthetic, because aesthetic invokes both *ta aesthētika* of other-being and *aisthēsis* on our part. There is an immediate dynamic flow back and forth between the aesthetic things and our *aesthēsis*, a fluency richly articulated, though not acknowledged initially in our reflective categories. Our patience of being vibrates in attunement with the saturated glory of creation.[668]

Aesthetic rebirth elicits ecstatic affirmation: This is beautiful! My child! There is a surplus incapable of being exhausted by any words. Aesthetic rebirth attunes us not only to beauty in general but renders us receptive to the beauty of each finite being.

Let me offer an example of aesthetic rebirth found in *The Little Prince*. When the little prince meets the fox, he is in a state of sorrow because he has found that the rose on his planet is not unique: in a garden he finds five thousand roses like his. When he meets the fox, he invites the fox to play with him. Yet the fox demurs for, as he says, "I am not tamed." To tame, the fox observes, "means to establish ties." The bond of friendship, forged over time, transforms the way they behold one another. When they become

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[668] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 38. In Chapter Five I will explore the concept of what I call orthoaesthesis or "right perception" as a consequence of metaxological attunement.

friends, when they establish ties, then, "To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world." In a deceptively simple manner, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's text directs us to the *poiesis* of friendship. After they have become friends, and just before the prince takes leave of the fox, he re-visits the rose garden. Again he stands before the other roses but he sees them in a new way, in a new light:

> "You are not at all like my rose," he said. "As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world."

> "You are beautiful, but you are empty," he went on. "One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you-- the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen…because it is she that I have listened to when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is *my* rose.[669]

Aesthetic rebirth equips one with eyes to discern within ordinary the penumbra of the extraordinary. There is a re-opening of one's porosity to what is other to oneself. When the prince returns to the fox, the fox shares with him a secret: "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Posthumous mind bears a sort of second-sight, a sight beyond physical sight, capable of penetrating the shell of "valueless being" to perceive what is at the core of reality.

Aesthetic rebirth leads us to experience how we are able to glimpse what Duns Scotus called *haecceitas* or the "thisness" of each finite being. Being is not "neutrally present" but is an active "presencing" announcing itself. Hopkins captures this:

> Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: For that I came*.[670]

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[669] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Irene Testot-Ferry (Hertfordshire: Wordsworht, 1995), 79.

[670] Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," 129.

The sensuous manifestation of being calls out to each of us. Moreover, this is not "being" as monumental unity, proclaiming itself in one voice. It is plurivocal, addressing us in many and various ways: in the cry of the child, the power of the hurricane, the gloaming of a summer's evening. Aesthetic rebirth focuses our attention not on the broad category of "beauty" because it re-orients us to the singularity of each given being. We return to Kearney: "Transcendence in a thornbush. The Eucharist in a morsel of madeleine. The Kingdom in a cup of cold water. San Marco in a cobblestone. God in a street cry."[671] Posthumous mind permits us to discern how the singularity of each being – its *haecceity* – actively proclaims its origin in a Creator who calls the whole of being into existence.

3.3.3 The Erotics of Selving

Whereas the "idiocy of being" and the "aesthetics of happening" are hyperboles of exterior transcendence (T_1), what Desmond calls the "erotics of selving" addresses how, although we are finite beings, we are nevertheless "infinitely self-surpassing."[672] Human beings are "intimately hyperbolic" because we are endowed

> with transcending power, but we do not endow ourselves. The immeasurable passion of our being as self-exceeding exceeds also the selving we are. It witnesses to a more primal porosity to what exceeds us. This erotics of selving is hyperbolic to a *conatus essendi* that drives itself to its own most complete self-determination in immanence. The *passio essendi* is marked by a primal porosity to what exceeds all determination and our own self-transcending.[673]

As discussed previously, eros cannot be defined solely by indigence or lack. The progeny of *poros* and *penia*, it is marked by an enriched poverty, bearing within itself a promissory note guaranteed by *poros*'s resources. By undergoing the "Return," according to Desmond, "we become intimate again with this gifted poverty, and in the elemental

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[671] Richard Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," 3.
[672] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 12.
[673] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 225.

eros of our being. To become mindful of the porosity is to come closer to the primal

ethos."[674] It is an archaeological endeavor, entering into our intimate depths to uncover

fertile resources easily concealed on account of the incessant grasping of the *conatus*.

The "Return" unclogs and reawaken us to the porosity of being. One is struck by

what Desmond calls the urgency of ultimacy, an "absolute, infinite restlessness for the

absolute or the ultimate that is not satisfied by any finite good."[675] In its reborn state,

erotic mindfulness resists the seductions of idolatry as it searches for the object of its

love; like Augustine, it but finds no finite being capable of sating its infinite longing.[676]

Indeed, the inherent equivocity of finite being – the "crack" in everything – points

beyond finite being toward a creative origin. Desmond adverts to "Augustine's

description of the double nature of his own quest for ultimacy" where

> in the middle of things – the exteriors – we come to know the dunamis of our own
> being as an interior middle, a mediating self-transcending power of openness.
> This is the first movement. The second movement is: in the interior middle,
> within the self-transcending urgency of desire, there is an opening to an other,
> more ultimate than ourselves. We are the interior urgency of ultimacy, this is
> ultimacy as superior. This superior ultimate is not identical with our own erotic
> self-mediation; it is irreducible to us and mediates with us – the inferior – through
> the agapeic excess of its own unequalizable plentitude.[677]

Our most intimate desire is animated by the presence of this superior transcendence

whose presence piques our appetite for the infinite and goads us along on our quest for

fulfillment.[678] Reborn eros, mindful of the *passio*, affirms each finite being yet continues

to move beyond finite being in its quest for the infinite. Every affirmation of finite being

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[674] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 41.
[675] Simpson, 100.
[676] Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.
[677] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 11.
[678] One might explore connections between Desmond's erotics of selving Rahner's *Vorgriff auf esse* or pre-
apprehension of being. The *Vorgriff* is "the dynamic movement of the spirit toward the absolute
range of all possible object[s]. In this movement, the single objects are grasped as single stages of
this finality; thus they are known as profiled against the absolute range of all the knowable." Karl
Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994), 47.

is accompanied by a negation as though one were to say inwardly: "You are *a* being, yet you cannot sate my hunger for the infinite. I long for ultimacy."

Revitalized eros does not forsake the *conatus* although it does correct it by re-emphasizing the priority of the *passio*. If contemporary notions of "the erotic" accenting the *libido dominandi* or a drive toward sexual conquest, Desmond's sense of eros reborn absolves itself of the rush to conquest. Instead, it is open to being "wooed" and "willing to wait in love."[679] Desmond describes wooing as

> a distension of eros that is true to the intimacy of the *passio essendi*. There is a kind of readiness for gift in this, as when we truly listen to music. We hope to be hearers because we are ready to be patient listeners. There is a kind of obedience in wooing, and the porosity asked of the attendant is again not unlike a kind of praying…Wooing is the *passio*, faithful to the porosity of love, waiting in patient readiness for the surprise of the other, the gift of the secret beloved.[680]

Westphal's call for a "humble metaphysics, acknowledging that it rests on faith and not pretending to be the Voice of Pure Reason"[681] is heard. For Desmond, prayer's wooing cannot be regarded one's own accomplishment: "Prayer at heart is not something that we do. Prayer is something that we find ourselves in, something that comes to us as we find ourselves already opened to the divine as other to us and yet as an intimate communication with us."[682] Having passed beneath the Angel of Death's wings, unclogged eros allows itself to be wooed by the intimate universal abiding in the deepest recesses of one's being: "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16).

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[679] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 325.
[680] Ibid.
[681] Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," 272.
[682] Desmond, "Idiot Wisdom and the Intimate Universal," 166.

Gerard Manley Hopkins beautifully explores the contours and tensions of eros in his poem-prayer *Nondum* (Latin: not yet). The poem's epigraph comes from Isaiah 45:15 "Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself." The 22-year old poet writes:

We see the glories of the earth   We guess; we clothe Thee, unseen King,
But not the hand that wrought them all: With attributes we deem are meet;
Night to a myriad worlds gives birth,   Each in his own imagining
Yet like a lighted empty hall   Sets up a shadow in Thy seat;
Where stands no host at door or hearth   Yet know not how our gifts to bring,
Vacant creation's lamps appal.   Where seek Thee with unsandled feet.

Ingredient in these verses is a sense of unfulfilled longing for the *deus absconditus* or hidden God. Hopkins voices his deep longing for the Holy One yet finds it hard to read the signs of creation as pointing beyond the immanent order toward the Creator. Unable to endure the silence, we mortals "clothe Thee, unseen King" according to our own image and likeness; God becomes *imago homini*. The poem swells with grievous sorrow as the Divine refuses to break its alienating silence. Yet Hopkins endures, moving along "life's tomb-decked way" and he invokes "patience with her chastening wand." The final verse:

Speak! whisper to my watching heart
One word – as when a mother speaks
Soft, when she sees her infant start
Till dimpled joy steals o'er its cheeks
Then, to behold Thee as Thou art,
I'll wait till morn eternal breaks.[683]

In no way does this prayer seduce or compel divine disclosure. Hopkins waits, patiently and attentively, for the word he longs to hear to spring forth and steel his resolve as he endures the dark night. He effects the stance of a listener, a potential hearer, one who takes up the night watch for any sign of the Holy One's advent. Albeit less poetically, Rahner observes, "We are the beings of receptive spirituality, who stand in freedom before the free God of a possible revelation, which, if it comes, happens in our history

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[683] Hopkins, 82-3.

through the word. We are the ones who, in our history, listen for the word of the free

God. Only thus are we what we should be."[684]

With the balance between the *passio* and *conatus essendi* restored, the eros reborn

in posthumous mind permits us to dwell within the community of transcendence anew.

Nourished at the wellspring of the *passio* and mindful of the porosity of being, the

antinomy between autonomy and transcendence evanesces: rather than competitors vying

for space, an increase in one's sense of actual transcendence (T_3) allows for an increase in

one's freedom (T_2). The equivocity in our own being – we are, yet we need not be – is, as

Desmond observes, "a negation not nihilistic."[685] Every denial serves to affirm something

more. No finite being encountered in the realm of exterior transcendence (T_1) can fulfill

this longing. Eccentric and ecstatic, self-transcendence reaches outward toward what is

other to itself. Born-again eros, purged by having passed through the night of nihilism,

finds itself able to detect and discern the subtle wooing of an abiding intimacy emanating

from within oneself and guiding one beyond the self. Augustine's question is, in effect,

rekindled in the posthumous mind: instead of asking "*What* is the object of my love?" the

purgation of the "Return" opens the self to the God beyond the finite order, and gives us

ears to hear the refrain sung by the chorus of creation: "He made us."[686]

3.3.4 The Agapeics of Community

Just as the rebirth of eros leads one to recognize the intimate universal abiding in

the depths of one's being, the resurrection of agape permits one to perceive how all

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[684] Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 142.
[685] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 41.
[686] Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.

created beings are intimately related with one another. We awaken to our own having been given to be and the gratuity of our existence and are struck into astonishment:

> we are given to be before we can give ourselves to be. Nothing is alone, hence the idea of finitude as for itself alone, and nothing other, cannot be taken as the last word, or the first. The agapeics of community intimates a surplus generosity that makes itself available in an absolved porosity of the *passio esssendi* that ethically lives itself as a *compassio essendi*. This is a sign of something more than the ethical, since it incarnates the holy.[687]

Astonishment is enkindled not only by the non-necessity of *other* being (idiocy of being) but also by recognizing how our own being is non-necessary. We can be rocked back on our heels as we see how we are woven into the fabric of creation. The unclogged *passio essendi* bespeaks no autism of being as it is revealed to be a *compassio essendi*: we receive the gift of creation in solidarity with the whole of being. Indeed, Desmond reckons the *compassio essendi* a "graced patience" serving the good of others "even if it does little or nothing to serve the advancement of some agenda of the servant."[688]

Lest there be confusion: Desmond does not oppose eros to agape.[689] The movement of eros is elicited by agape's call; or, as Desmond observes, eros "seeks more than itself in seeking itself because its energized striving is already empowered by a secret agapeic surplus to which it is (called) to remain true, though it is free to turn it away and turn itself awry."[690] Here we see how Desmond's archaeology probes the contours of eros to discover the "secret" presence of agape. It is the agapeic advance of actual transcendence (T_3) that empowers and orients erotic self-transcendence (T_2). Eros and agape as twinned: eros accents self-mediation whereas agape calls attention to how

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[687] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 12.

[688] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 201.

[689] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (Chicago: U Chicago, 1982). Kearney notes the danger of reducing eros to agape or agape to eros and suggests possibly teasing out "a very specific modality of eros, *agapeic eros*, which would be suitable to God." See Kearney, "William Desmond on God," 195.

[690] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 360.

the intermediation of the *metaxu* arises from and remains open to the transcendent. The hypertrophied *conatus* of the modern age, as we have seen, clogs the porosity between self-transcendence and transcendence as other (T_1 & T_3) results in *eros turannos* rather than the balance of *eros ouranios* made possible to posthumous mind.[691]

By undergoing the "Return to Zero," one is given to behold the *metaxu* in a new way. One is astonished by the idiocy of being and the aesthetics of happening; one is re-awakened to the elemental wellspring of the *passio essendi* empowering erotic self-transcendence. We are stirred to see ourselves as implicated within the community of beings: we are not over-and-against others because we are one-amidst-others. What was taken *for* granted by unpurged eyes is beheld by posthumous mind *as* granted. The hyperboles of being – idiotic, aesthetic, erotic, and agapeic – are not "facts about" reality but events adverting us to the *poesis* or happening of being, stirring us to rethinking the rethink the "grounding origin" who gives all things to be.[692]

In *Perplexity and Ultimacy* Desmond asks, "Is there an agapeic mindfulness that transfigures the ugly?"[693] Faced with the loathsome, the abominable, or the grotesque, is there anything capable of stirring within us a response of love? Desmond seizes upon the figure of Saint Francis as an exemplar of this agapeic mindfulness. Paul Crowley recognizes this when, drawing on Kazantzakis' *Saint Francis*, he describes how Francis

> prays to God to ask what more God might be asking of him. He has already restored the Church of San Damiano and given up everything else for God. Yet he is riddled with fear of contact with lepers. He confides to Brother Leo: "Even when I'm far away from them, just hearing the bells they wear to warn passers-by to keep their distance is enough to make me faint." God's response to Francis's prayer is precisely what he does not want to hear: he must face his fears and embrace the next leper he sees on the road. Soon he hears the dreaded clank of the

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[691] Ibid., 311-12.
[692] Ibid. 45.
[693] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 162.

leper's bell. Yet, Francis moves through his fears, embraces the leper, and even kisses his wounds.[694]

For Crowley, "it is only by driving into the reality of suffering, and not evading it, that one can find a pathway to hope and encounter with the sacred."[695] There is an overcoming of fear by undergoing what he fears most: in the leper's embrace, Francis submits himself to death and is born again to behold Christ's figure in each leper, the one who had neither "form nor comeliness" (Is 53:2), the one who appeared in history marred and despised, the "stone the builders rejected" who is now the cornerstone (Ps 118:22).

Francis's kissing of the leper hardly reflects sober calculation. And this is the point: the figure of Francis is hyperbolic, one who leads us to ponder what fuels his actions and motives by "throwing us over" ordinary logic. For Christians, Francis and the saints offer embodied testimony to agapeic hyperbole. Francis enacted the love he received from God, moving by grace from a terrestrial logic to a theo-logic which boggled his father's mind and has inspired generations of followers. Viewed with posthumous mind, we see how agape cannot ever admit of a logical mean or calculation. As Aquinas observes, "never can we love God as much as He ought to be loved, nor believe and hope in him as much as we should. Much less therefore can there be excess in such things. Accordingly, the good of such [theological] virtues does not consist in a mean, but increases the more we approach to the summit."[696] Posthumous mind is alive to this excess and finds itself energized and empowered by it. So, too, Taylor who writes: "what has always been stressed in Christian agape is the way in which it can take us

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[694] Paul Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 85. Though acking the same panache, one might also consult Bonaventure's "Life of St. Francis" for his version of this encounter.
[695] Ibid., 86.
[696] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia-IIae Q.64, a.4.

beyond the bounds of any already existing solidarity."[697] Agape, Taylor writes, "moves outward from the guts; the New Testament word for 'taking pity', *splangnizesthai*, place the response in the bowels."[698] The woo of agape loosens the grasping hands of the *conatus* and relaxes them into the open receptivity of the *passio*. Francis kisses the leper not out of self-loathing but as an act of other-affirmation; in embracing the leprous other and discovers, beneath disfigured flesh, the visage of a transfigured brother.

Let us contrast Francis's diurnal encounter with the leper with Zarathustra's "Night Song." Francis, we saw, undergoes the dark grace of an answered prayer as he embraces the leper as he is moved by an agapeic *compassio essendi* and impelled into service of his neighbor. Francis awakens to a porosity empowering a movement through fear into a new way of beholding: he undergoes an encounter with death and is graced with a mindfulness reborn by agape. Nietzsche, too, sings of this porosity but in a nocturnal key. *Das Nachtlied*, for Desmond, "is perhaps one of the most beautiful things Nietzsche has written, and yet for all its energy of self-affirmation, it is full of a nameless sadness, of something missing or missed."[699] It is, ultimately, a hymn to solitude:

> Light am I: ah, that I were night! But this is my solitude, that I am girded round
>   with light.
> Ah, that I were dark and obscure! How I would suck at the breasts of light!
> And I should bless you, little sparkling stars and glowworms above! – and be
>   happy in your gifts of light.
> But I live in my own light, I drink back into myself the flames that break from
>   me.
> I do not know the joy of the receiver; and I have often dreamed that stealing must
>   be more blessed that receiving.
> It is my poverty that my hand never rests from giving; it is my envy that I see
>   expectant eyes and illumined nights of desire.[700]

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[697] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 246.
[698] Ibid., 741.
[699] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 227.
[700] Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 129.

Zarathustra's song performs a parodic absolution. Whereas Francis's prayer leads him into communion with the leper, the *Nachtleid* absolves him from community. The contrast is stark: Francis's porosity is a freedom *for* relationship, Zarathustra exults in an autistic freedom *from*. Francis's prayerful openness to God (T₃) transforms forever how he dwells within the *metaxu*. Yet such a deep weaving into the *metaxu* is not available to Zarathustra, for he regards himself a mediator, a giver, and in no way as receiver. The Holy Fool faces fear and finds agape; he is overcome by the *compassio essendi* and made lover of all. The Ultimate Man hungers for wickedness as "spite wells from my solitude" yet no draught slackens his thirst "which yearns after your thirst." [701] Zarathustra's Song incarnates a sense of utter absolution (ab-solo): from himself and by himself, alone.

To be reborn to the agapeics of community is to find oneself caught up in the interplay of the *metaxu*. But we are not casual onlookers peering into the happening as voyeurs; we are, to the contrary, implicated in the interplay being. Indeed, posthumous mind permits us to glimpse how the unclogging of the *passio essendi* gives rise to the *compassio essendi*. The *compassio* inverts the will the power: instead of asserting oneself over-and-against another, the *compassio essendi* is the ethical power to will the good of the other by standing in solidarity as sister or brother. Perceived with eyes purged by death, we can be struck by the agapeic love of community and inquire into the ground that gives rise to such generosity and empowers acts of self-sacrificing love and devotion. Stirred to recognize the agapeics of community, the entire *metaxu* shimmers as a ceaseless interplay of signs capable of pointing beyond "the between" and directing us from the immanent order toward the transcendent source who grounds and sustains all being.

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[701] Ibid.

3.3.5 Perceiving Hyperbolically

Let me offer a summary of Part III. The hyperboles of being we examined – idiotic, aesthetic, erotic, agapeic – can roughly be indexed to Desmond's three transcendences. The "idiocy of being" and "aesthetics of happening" both show how exterior transcendence (T_1) can "throw us above" the immanent order. We can be struck *that being is at all* and by singular being's thisness (*haecceity*) and made mindful of the endowing source of being. Erotic desire, purged by having passed through the night of nihilism, finds itself awakened to the presence of a transcendence within its innermost depths. Self-transcendence (T_2) is not induced by lack or indigence but as a movement toward satisfying a restless longing incapable of being sated by finite grasping. Posthumous erotic transcendence does not search, accordingly, for any finite *what* because it longs for an infinite Who whose call animates its longing. Reborn agapeics endows us with an ability to see *all* of the created order as somehow implicated in the ongoing act of creation. The intimate universal binds together the entire community of being: we participate in a shared economy (*oikos* + *nomos* = law of the home). Actual Transcendence (T_3) or the creative agapeic origin does not impede or interfere with autonomy. In fact, in being reawakened to the primordial *passio essendi* and porosity of our being, we find ourselves in a state of absolved freedom: sustained in our being and called to dwell anew within the community of transcendence.

Posthumous mind does not have a direct eye-line into the divine. What it possesses, though, is the gift of perspective: not removed *from* the flux but a way of beholding the flux with renewed eyes, eyes attuned through the darkness of the *nihil*. Posthumous mind is not simply a way of thinking; it is a way of comportment or "being

in the world." Because it has faced squarely its own mortality, it recognizes the wound of finitude in each created being and marvels at its gratuity. *It is…yet it need not be*. No cause for sorrow, one is ever and again stirred into astonishment at the prodigal generosity of creation. The crack in each thing, a sign of mortality, is the aperture through which it contributes to the symphony of creation. In the workaday world, we are all but deaf to this melody but, for ears chastened by death, the song heard proclaims the gratuity of existence. The hyperboles of creation are not rhetorical flourishes but poetic expressions pointing those attuned to them toward the poetic happening of creation itself.

3.4   A Subtler Exercise: The Poetics of the Between

The reader will not have missed the incorporation of poetry into the text. This is deliberate: there are times when poetry, or music, or great art communicate far more than prose. Indeed, metaxology requires us to speak of being between, of dwelling within the *metaxu*, with many voices. There are times when abstract language may be appropriate; other times require a defter touch. Sometimes a concept must be allowed to sing; elsewhere, one must feel fully the gravity of thought. Poetry demands intentionality: one must linger on the words and allow the meaning of the verse to unfold. Verses must be savored, stewed over, and meditated upon over time. To draw this chapter to a close, let me cite Desmond's poem that begins a chapter entitled "Beyond Godlessness"

We have looked too low   In the leap
The ground beneath us   Joy looks up
Falls away   As well as out
& joy leaps up in us   We dare no longer
Out of nothing   Look too low
Leaps out of itself   We look for more
& the elemental world is there Again
Again

The poem appears to recount a double rebirth. First, there is the rebirth of the "elemental world" arising through the sudden surge of joy. Recall the image of the furrowed brow: the curious-minded person is hunched over and fixated upon a determinate *this*. Suddenly, however, the ground falls out; one is caught off-guard as "joy leaps up" as one unbidden yet not unwelcome. Rocked back on one's heels, the world is beheld again as one stands, anew, amidst (*meta*) beings.

Nevertheless, the joy that leaps is not alien to us. It is *our* joy yet not at our command; it is intimate yet strange. Joy buoys our gaze, granting it both an outward view over being but also an upward view beyond (*meta*) being. Suddenly, one is freed from the sediment and given to roam again freely. The wound of joy disallows us to remain in the sediment, thwarts any sense of complacency. No longer permitted to look "too low," our expectant eyes scan the horizon and sit vigil as one awaits patiently, attentively, the advent of the one who has stirred us from our slumber and bid us to sit the night watch.

Desmond's poem guides the reader through two rebirths and expresses in poetically compressed form the trajectory of Desmond's entire chapter. The reader, to borrow the title of a collection of essays honoring Desmond's thought, is led to occupy a space *Between System and Poetics*. Within this space, one can learn the grammar of metaxology. Being tutored in the grammar of metaphysics, however, is not sufficient; one must put it into practice. As Desmond observes, "the metaxological space of the intimate universal is always a communal setting for conversion, for *metanoia*. There is a metanoetics of the metaxological: being born again, a second birth in the dimension of

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the hyperbolic."[702] Metaphysics, rightly approached, can become a disciplined mindfulness open to the very goodness of the "to be" of existence.

Drawing upon Pierre Hadot's work, I argued for approaching Desmond's thought as a form of "spiritual exercise." The non-negotiable *terminus a quo* for this approach is "a real desire to dialogue."[703] As with any spiritual exercise, one must embark upon it with a willingness to undergo the transformation of one's life. Spiritual exercise is a pilgrimage, a journey of seeking and finding aimed at transforming the one who sets out on it. Whereas a tourist follows a pre-planned itinerary, moving from defined point to defined point, the pilgrim's route is shrouded in mystery. For the *terminus ad quem* of spiritual exercise is not a physical destination but a re-orientation of one's life and a transformation of one's vision. One sets out from the workaday world upon a quest not to conquer but to encounter, not solely to be informed but to be gradually formed and re-formed as one opens oneself to the divine.

I tested my wager "in practice" by reading Desmond's "Return to Zero" as an exercise in death. This is an exercise in which one is invited to live the "shattering" of a godless nihilism and experience, paradoxically, a different nihilism: a nihilating of despair in despair."[704] Indeed, as Renée Köhler-Ryan observes, this experience of nothingness places Desmond in the company of Augustine and Aquinas: "Augustine's *nihilne plus* and Thomas's *videtur mihi ut palea* each speak to Desmond of the nothingness which is the 'return to zero' without which knowledge of God and of self, as

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[702] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 54.
[703] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 93.
[704] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 31. For a Patristic iteration of this exercise, one might consult Evagrius Ponticus in Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1984), 63-64. Ignatius of Loyola also has a death-bed meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (#187).

sources of transcendence in intimate relationship to each other, are impossible."[705] Read

as an exercise, the "Return to Zero" serves as an existential unclogging of primal porosity

as idols erected by the *conatus essendi* crumble under the *nihil*'s weight. Amidst the dust

and rubble, though, we are struck into astonishment at the senseless gratuity of existence

– *being is!* – yet need not be. In a way, posthumous mind is our graced affliction because

it refuses us to settle for any finite good. All that promised to sate our restless desire

seems now so much dust and ash. Yet, now that we can detect the "crack" in everything,

we discern within the hyperboles of being a glimmer of hope. We can allow the signs

encountered within the *metaxu* to direct us – even if only indirectly – toward the

Transcendent origin and ultimate fulfillment of our restless longing.

What Desmond offers us is a spiritual exercise drawing on the subtle language of

poetry. This proves needful because, as Taylor notes of our era, "the constitutive,

revelatory power of language is totally sidelined and ignored, or even denied. This

understanding of language-use is correlative with a stance in which we treat things, and

even each other, in purely instrumental terms."[706] Our language has been bewitched into

the sleep of finitude and needs to be awakened. Herein lies the promise of poetic speech:

because it "doesn't already rely on already recognized structures"[707] it can provoke

readers to see things in a new way. Poetry requires us to pause, to learn to read again, and

to dwell mindfully on the text. Poetry, Taylor continues, "opens new paths, 'sets free'

new realities, but only for those for whom it resonates."[708] Desmond's poetics performs

by opening these new paths. Metaxological poetics both revitalizes our appreciation for

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[705] Renée Köhler-Ryan, "Thinking Transcendence, Transgressing the Mask," in *William Desmond and
Contemporary Theology*, 195.
[706] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 758.
[707] Ibid.
[708] Ibid.

the depth of language and also, by attuning us to the hyperbole of being, gives us to perceive the happening of the *metaxu* with new eyes. To draw once more on Taylor, we might say that metaxological poetics is less designative or enframing, neutrally pointing toward the happening, than it is constitutive.[709] By tutoring us into a subtle metaphysical language, metaxology "gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings."[710] In this way, it is a capacitating language that endows those tutored not to perceive a different world but to be attentive to the poetics of reality in a new and different manner.

If posthumous mind enables us to recognize the hyperboles of being and to discern the presence of the "crack" in all finite being, then we must explore how we might read these signs not only as pointing toward actual transcendence (T$_3$) but also, and more importantly, as providing what Desmond regards as "hyperbolic indirections" toward the divine. By approaching them in this way, we can read them as self-implicating exercises capable of directing willing seekers along a mystagogical itinerary leading to a renewed sense of the sacred. It is to this task I now turn.

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[709] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016), 3-50.
[710] Ibid., 4.

Chapter 4

Exercising Transcendence:
Indirect Ways to God

One must lose oneself in a state devoid of particular form or measure, a state of darkness in which all contemplatives blissfully lose their way and are never again able to find themselves in a creaturely way. In the abyss of this darkness in which the loving spirit has died to itself, God's revelation and eternal life have their origin, for in this darkness an incomprehensible light is born and shines forth.

John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*

Approached as a spiritual exercise, Desmond's "Return to Zero" is capable of transforming the way we perceive and abide within the world. Stated in a more traditional idiom, the "Return" guides us along a *via purgativa* through the night of nihilism and, in bringing us to and through the nothing, gives us to behold everything anew: being is yet need not be. We see through an era's reconfigured ethos, glimpse the primal ethos of being, and are struck into astonishment. We marvel before the overdeterminacy of exterior becoming (T_1) as beings come into being and pass away. We behold the "crack" in everything not as a flaw but as a sign of gratuity and non-necessity. So purged, self-transcendence (T_2) is renewed as we recognize beyond the self-assertive "will to power" (*conatus*) a more primordial power first giving us to be before we grasp at being (*passio*). The "Return" becomes an *askēsis* of "agapeic nihilism." The "Return" attunes one to the sheer gratuity and of all being. "God gives for nothing," Desmond writes, yet this

> *nihil* is not any negating or destructive *nihil*. God does nothing for Himself; everything is done for the other. There is a sense in which nothing is *for* God. God lets be, since everything given by God is for that thing, given for that thing itself.[711]

Agapeic nihilism plunges us into the dark abyss of the *nihil* where our senses are purged and we are given to perceive the ethos anew, allowing a renewed rapport with creation.

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[711] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 231.

In this chapter, I show how metaxology, undertaken as a spiritual exercise, offers four "indirections" to God. For Desmond, we have "no direct univocal pathway to God" but only "indirections directing human transcending."[712] In Part I, I discuss why there can be no univocal "proofs" and explore how we must speak, poetically and indirectly, of "ways" to God. In Parts II-V, I explore how the hyperboles of being – idiotic, aesthetic, erotic, agapeic – open up four indirections or itineraries leading us toward a renewed sense of God, indicating throughout how metaxology contributes to Christian theology and enriches Taylor's map of our age. Guided by Hopkins's "Hurrahing in Harvest," I conclude by showing how metaxology works to attune readers to disclosures, or epiphanies, of the divine. I do this because, as Desmond holds, metaphysics

> is not just the philosophical discipline that examines and evaluates categories and arguments for their rational cogency; not just the philosophical interpretation of the ethos as reconfigured in light of the fundamental presuppositions and enabling (re)sources of intelligibility and value of a particular era, or people, or particular way of life; deeper than these, it seeks to open a pathway of philosophical mindfulness concerning the primal ethos of being.[713]

Metaxological *askēsis* contributes to a way of reflecting about, living within, and beholding reality. These exercises can render us attentive to discerning, even in a secular age, "signs in immanence of what transcends immanence and that cannot be fully determined in immanent terms."[714] We can be tutored to recognize in the hyperboles of being signs of a God "more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me."[715] Metaxology returns us to the primal ethos of being wherein, by exercising transcendence, we become "epiphanically attuned" to detect in the happening of the *metaxu* traces of the Creator who sings and sustains all of creation into existence.

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[712] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 122.
[713] Desmond, "On God and the Between," 106.
[714] Ibid., 108.
[715] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 43.

4.1   No Univocal Way to God: The Subtler Language of Indirection

According to Desmond, there can be no univocal "proof" for God's existence because univocity "contracts the ontological charge of the aesthetics of happening, makes too determinate the porosity of our being, fixes the urgency of ultimacy on objectified beings, and overall enfeebles the feel for transcendence as non-objectifiable."[716] Univocal proofs seek apodictic certainty and universal applicability but, as we have seen, univocity, by itself, cannot account for the full happening of the *metaxu*. But in an ethos reconfigured according to *l'esprit de géometrie*, it is little wonder we find the likes of Richard Dawkins who dismiss Aquinas's first three "proofs" because they

> rely upon the idea of a regress and invoke God to terminate it. They make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress. Even if we allow the dubious luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to an infinite regress and giving it a name, simply because we need one, there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God…[717]

Dawkins assumes modernity's *mathesis* of nature: the only beings that count are those capable of being counted. And he is right: *if* God is such a being amidst other being, then it would illegitimate to absolve the deity from being implicated in the infinite regress. Sophomorically posed: if God created everything, then what created God? The god Dawkins dismisses would be a countable being within the system, not the God on whose account there exists a system in the first place.

Treating God as *a* being amidst other beings is symptomatic of post-Cartesian and ontotheological modes of reflection. To counter this tendency, Desmond draws a distinction between modern "theory" and pre-modern *theōria*. On his account, modern theory "offers a general hypothesis or model, that itself is as mathematically precise as

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[716] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 122.
[717] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 101.

possible, and that is to be determined as true, verified, in terms of evidence from sense experience or experimental data…[it] is an abstraction of mind from being as given, with a view to ordering the given, and perhaps to gain control over it."[718] Earlier practices of metaphysics, by contrast, possessed a mindfulness rooted in *theōria*:

> The *theōroi* were religious delegates sent by the city states to the [pan-Hellenic] games, which were themselves religious festivals, celebrations of the largess of being, largess evident in the great performances and deeds of outstanding humans. *Theōroi* were sent to enjoy the agape of being as ritualized in religious festivals. There is a watching here, a being spectatorial, but it is a joyful vigilance; it is an entirely active mindfulness…to the extent that a metaphysician is a *theōros*, he too is called to this essentially joyful vigilance, this celebrating mindfulness of the ultimate powers, at play in the between.[719]

Metaxological mindfulness refuses to be abstracted from the *metaxu* because it insists on remaining faithful to the flux of reality. Rather than an exhaustive system it enjoins a contemplative way of life, one vigilantly watchful for the "crack" in everything and attentive to signs pointing to the overdeterminacy of being. Whereas univocal proofs would ignore equivocity and freeze the flux, metaxology promotes inquiry in the mode of *l'esprit de finesse*. Thus, in lieu of proofs, metaxology plunges us into the *metaxu* where must discern passages or "ways" leading us, even if indirectly, to God.

Fidelity to the equivocity of the between requires a subtler philosophical language, one employing a discourse "tentative and open, suggestive of what is elusive, rather than dogmatically assertive with regard to some reality supposedly mastered."[720] Metaxology employs four ways of figuring or representing the divine: metaphoric, analogic, symbolic, and hyperbolic. We begin with the metaphoric. A living metaphor, Desmond holds, "has the power to surprise and open our receptivity to unexpected

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[718] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 42.
[719] Ibid.
[720] Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*, 214.

otherness."[721] A theological metaphor arises from our being *amidst* beings and directs us toward the God *beyond* being. We know God is not literally a shepherd, but the metaphor serves to refresh a sense of God's fidelity and commitment. Indeed, a well-articulated metaphor "has the power to stun us into surprise and open our receptivity to unexpected otherness."[722] Poetic metaphors stress the identity between sign and signified: God "is" my rock, God "is" my stronghold. The "is" expresses an intimate link between the *metaxu* and God. There would appear to be no limit to the potential metaphors for God: from leavening yeast to the host of an eternal banquet, from the rock to the Father of all, these metaphors draw strength from and keep us mindful of our porosity to the divine.

The use of metaphor, however, is not without peril. It is possible to be tempted into univocity: when "God is Father of all" is taken to mean the Transcendent is a male with XY-chromosomes, we vitiate the metaphor. Dennis Vanden Auweele observes: "metaphors carry the danger that we are ferried (*pherein*) so far beyond (*meta*) the difference that we identify the sign with God: we conflate the sign for what it designates."[723] The "is" of metaphor can be seduced into forgetting difference and can be tempted to accent sameness, thereby denuding a metaphor of its communicate power.

To address this, we need recourse to analogy. Analogy, Desmond writes, "is a relation of likeness, and likening clearly keeps open the space of difference. Hence, if univocity is not absolutized, neither is equivocity."[724] The analogical figuration of the divine aims to preserve a sense of unity-in-difference and attentive to the "constitutive

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[721] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 123.
[722] Ibid., 123.
[723] Dennis Vanden Auweele, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Desmond's Hyperbolic Gifts and Caputo's Events," in American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, 87 (3): 411—432 at 419.
[724] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 123-4.

ambiguity to all our speaking about the ultimate."[725] Speech about God requires

vigilance: whatever we say of the Divine can never exhaust or fix determinately the

mystery of being. Metaphor and analogy permit us to speak of God using concepts drawn

from the *metaxu*, although no concept can exhaust or capture the divine mystery.

Of course, analogy is not without pitfalls. Although intended to preserve a sense

of equivocity, it can also be statically "fixed" into a mathematical relation on account of

> its root in mathematical proportion, and in that respect one is also inclined to a
> kind of univocity: the difference of the between and ultimate transcendence is
> mapped as a ration on a quasi-univocal grid of relations. Such a grid easily freezes
> into a two-tiered system of otherwise unrelated terms, and hence risk the dualistic
> opposition between "here" and "beyond," between immanence and transcendence
> as other that it is the greater power of analogy to circumvent.[726]

Vanden Auweele names the risk: if we "fix" our relationship to the divine through an

analogy too-closely modeled on mathematics, analogy "recedes then to become our

'relation' to the divine and not our self-transcending 'relating' as infused with marvel."[727]

A fixed analogy informs *about* the divine, whereas a metaxological analogy preserves

"divine disproportion."[728] Against the temptation to slide into a fixed or determinate

proportionality (*a:b* as *c:d*), metaxology insists on preserving the teaching of Lateran IV

(1215) that "between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without

implying a greater dissimilitude."[729] When God creates "humankind in our image,

according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26), the analogical likeness to the divine must be

tempered by an awareness of the infinite disproportion between us and the Creator.

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[725] Ibid., 124.
[726] Ibid.
[727] Dennis Vanden Auweele, 419.
[728] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 251.
[729] DH, 806.

Symbolic figurations of the Divine stress togetherness. The symbol, Desmond writes, "is a throwing together (*sumballein*) of the differents; it is the sign of a 'being with,' a *sun-ousia*. A broken ring is divided and shared by two lovers, each half a token of their original togetherness and in their separation a sign of their promised and renewed togetherness"[730] In a religious symbol, the immanent and transcendent conjoin in "equivocal promiscuity."[731] Symbols can elevate the immanent toward the transcendent or, in a counter-move, to drag the transcendent downward:

> Suppose we take the erotic absolute as a symbol of God…This symbol is one major way of trying to name the involvement of the divine with immanence. God is in love with creation, passionate for its good, zealous for the realization of its promise and integral wholeness. Is God then dependent on that immanent wholeness for God's own fulfillment?[732]

Here we find the nub of Desmond's concern with Kearney's God. Given the tendency to emphasize eros's *penia* or lack, the symbol of God as somehow possessed of "eros" risks portraying the divine as being in need of humans. Rightly, Desmond is leery of any hint of Hegel *redivivus*, although Kearney's divine eros does not render God a "counterfeit double."[733] Desmond's caution is warranted for, as Ricoeur observes, "symbols have roots. Symbols plunge us into the shadowy experience of power."[734] The metaxological symbol plunges into the primal ethos and allows the elemental to comingle with the transcendent. Attentive to the surplus of the ethos, symbolic indirection directs attentiveness toward "*immanent disproportion*, or *disproportion in immanence* irreducible to any univocal or dialectical concept."[735] The believer's "amen" when

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[730] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 125.
[731] Ibid., 126.
[732] Ibid.
[733] Kearney, "William Desmond on God," 195. Here he suggests a middle position: an agapeic eros. Taylor, in *Hegel and Modern Society*, notes God's "need" for and dependence on humanity to be God.
[734] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1976), 69.
[735] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 126.

receiving the consecrated host records the believer's assent to the symbolic of immanent disproportion encountered as the "infinite immanent in the finite, passing *incognito* in its festivity and travail."[736]

The fourth figuring is hyperbolic. Where the symbol stresses togetherness, the hyperbolic figure accents overdeterminacy or excessiveness by giving

> us a figure of the overdeterminate in the determinate and the self-determined, the overdeterminate that cannot be exhausted by determinacy or self-determination, the "beyond" of immanence in immanence. The symbolic throws together, but stuns us with disproportion *in* immanence; the hyperbolic "throws us above" (*huper-ballein*) in the disproportion *between* immanence and transcendence, just out of that being stunned with excess of being here.[737]

Alert to the poetic nature of Desmond's language, we can appreciate his desire for hyperbole both to inform readers and to reform, or induce a reborn, mindfulness of what exceeds being. Rightly approached, the metaxology provides a staging area or theater wherein one may practice or exercise the poetics of the text in order to be implicated in and transformed by the poetics of the between. Hyperbole "throws us above" the *metaxu* toward a power beyond any immanent will to power. We are thrown into the presence of a Creative Other who preserves creation in its being simply because it is good to be.

For Desmond, hyperbole preserves and maximizes the potencies of metaphor, analogy, and symbol. Metaxological metaphysics intends for us to be carried away and "thrown over" as we celebrate the breakdown of univocal categories and seize the chance to explore newly-opened indirections toward the divine. In effect, the incapacitation of univocity capacitates our return to the Transcendent by opening up hitherto concealed paths. Hence my advocacy for approaching his work as a form of exercise: it is not

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[736] Ibid.
[737] Ibid.

enough to "go over" the text because they are meant to be undergone. We have, in other words, to allow ourselves to be implicated in the text's rhythm and moved by its beat.

To conclude, I return to a point made in the first chapter about ad hominem reasoning. Such reasoning, we saw, "is directed at the participants in conversation and at the things they posit or value rather than introducing a set of neutral, independent criteria from outside the positions of the parties."[738] My proposal was to consider arguments based on ad hominem reasoning as *capacitating*. Instead of scoring points off one's opponent, or engaging in agonistic or winner-take-all combat, a capacitating strategy of argument willing enters into a process of dialogue in the hope of showing how a transition from position X to position Y would be error-reducing or would make better sense of one's life and experience. Such an approach remains always tentative because of its commitment to an ongoing and open-ended search for a "better account." Taylor's use of this latter form of reasoning endows his texts with their performative character. Instead of "telling about" history, Taylor's texts serve to "implicate us in" an unfolding narrative. The text performs by giving readers to experience for themselves the various pressures and forces at play. When it comes to narrating the "eclipse of the transcendent," Taylor's account is not a "show and tell." Animated by the form of ad hominem and capacitating argument considered in the first chapter, *A Secular Age* draws reader into a dialogue by inviting them to try his account on "for size" to test its adequacy.

As I hope now to demonstrate, Desmond's metaxological metaphysics not only informs the reader but can also transform the way one perceives the world. These indirections do not pretend to be neutral arguments or disengaged proofs. They are, rather, finessed approaches akin to gymnasia where one may philosophically exercise

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[738] Abbey, 166.

oneself not simply by reflecting *about* the Transcendent but risking a re-awakening to a sense of the Sacred. Hence my argument for the doubly poetic nature of Desmond's metaphysics, as rhetorically the texts communicate information and work "performatively" to implicate the reading in a process of metaxological formation. The willing reader can undergo the text and be transformed. In our age, as Hadot noted, we are not accustomed to this style of philosophy. We, or at least many of us, have been weaned on the thin gruel of univocity and have lost our taste for more robust fare. By reading metaxology within the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises, of approaching philosophy as a way of life, I hope to convince readers *not* that Desmond has an irrefutable logical argument for God's existence but that metaxology can capacitate new and exciting ways of thinking philosophically and theologically. Metaxology, approached as a type of discursive performance, seems gets the gist of Martin Büber's story of a rabbi

> whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem, was asked to tell a story. "A story," he said, "must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself." And he told: "My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!"[739]

Desmond's hyperbolic indirections, read as spiritual exercises, can likewise cure us of our spiritual lameness by rekindling the question of the Transcendent and renewing once-reliable itineraries to the sacred. It is to this task of renewal, then, I now turn.

4.2   A First Indirection: The Idiocy of Being

Even students new to the study of philosophy and theology are familiar with "proofs" for God's existence. Some, like Aquinas's "Five Ways," are *a posteriori* and

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[739] Martin Büber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 17-18.

probe the happening of the exterior world for signs of the divine; others, like Anselm's "ontological" argument, are *a priori* and appeal to nothing other than reason itself. But think of how these "proofs" tend to be presented in textbooks, usually as stand-alone arguments to be read, analyzed, and evaluated. "A common view of the arguments for God's existence," Desmond observes, "sees them as neutral uses of reason that are purportedly convincing, or not, on the basis of a reason separate from any religious claims of revelation or faith."[740] Yet, he continues, "we do an injustice to the 'proofs' if we abstract them from the ontological context in which they are formulated."[741] His metaxological reformulation of traditional proofs, consequently, requires us to remain attentive to the interplay between each "way" and its originary ethos.

I earlier suggested the "Return to Zero" as propaedeutic for undertaking Desmond's indirections to God. Desmond would concur, writing: "I do not think we can fully appreciate these hyperboles without genuine metaphysical mindfulness of the primal ethos of being."[742] Hence the need to pass through the purgative night of godlessness and to experience the shattering of coming to nothing: all comes *from* nothing, all returns *to* nothing, yet now *it is*. By re-awakening to the primal ethos, we are struck by the hyperbolic idiocy of being. Shocked by its non-necessity, we face a choice: take being "for granted as the final surd, just senseless idiocy" or meditate on it "as granted, though as disquieting us with its radical ambiguity, and in that ambiguity tantalizing with a light that is not its own light."[743] Our first indirection is guided by this idiotic light.

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[740] Desmond, "God, Ethos, Ways," 13.
[741] Ibid., 14.
[742] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 224.
[743] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 130.

Let me offer a composition of place by drawing on Desmond's insight into the difference between "becoming" and "coming to be." We begin, then, by observing how

> the primal givenness of the "that it is" is not a matter of the "becoming" or "self-becoming" of beings. There is a "coming to be" prior to "becoming." The latter presupposes a prior "that it is," even granting that this "that it is" is given with an open promise, and not as a static and completed fact. Granted, there is the openness of (self-)becoming, but there is granted a "being opened" to be, prior to determinate becoming. This is idiotic, since all determinate sense presupposes it, and no determinate sense can exhaust it. This "being opened" is the primal giving of the porosity of being, the between as enabling an astonishing diversity of becomings, self-becomings, and together-becomings.[744]

Roused from the slumber of postulatory finitism, posthumous mind is doubly struck. First, it is stirred to recognize that before one can take a stand on oneself, before any exercise of the *conatus essendi*, one must first be given to be through the *passio essendi*. Second, posthumous mind is struck by the bivalent meaning of "being opened." For, on one level, "being opened" testifies to our own condition of being *opened* by the advent of transcendence. On another level, posthumous mind is given to marvel at *being* opened, that is, being as fundamentally porous. So opened, we are mindful of abiding in the *metaxu* not as sealed-off monads but as porous participants implicated in the rhythm of being. Indeed, all around us hums as a symphonic interplay of coming to be, of becoming, and passing away. We take our place in this cosmic chorus and tremble, for we sense its fragility as all of being dangles precariously above the abyss of nothingness.

Our exercise begins by acknowledging ourselves as participants in the *metaxu* of creation, which we may regard as a "suspended middle" (*schwebende Mitte*) hovering between being and nothingness.[745] One is stirred into astonishment at the idiocy of being:

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[744] Ibid.

[745] For a discussion of "suspended middle" Patrick Gardner, "God and the Between: Desmond, Przywara, and Catholic Metaphysics" in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 167-172.

finite being shows a sheer "that it is" which shines with an intimate strangeness. It happens to be without inherent necessity, and it might be called a surplus surd, but it is not absurd. The surplus givenness makes all finite intelligibilities possible, but it is presupposed by all and is not itself a finite intelligibility. Its surplus stuns us into mindfulness about what gives it to be at all, since it does not give itself to be, or explain itself.[746]

Rekindled astonishment does not, of course, prove God's existence.[747] But it can re-open our sense of the porosity of being, permitting us to perceived with purged eyes a halo of gratuity surrounding the whole of being. Rather than a strict logical argument, this approach unfolds along a different path. In allowing oneself to be implicated by the text, one considers the idiocy of being meditatively, opening oneself to a "mindfulness turned towards ultimate sources. Arguments come out of this turn; arguments alone do not get us there – and in that sense there is no argument for God."[748] Instead of an abstract proof abstract from its originary ground, Desmond's indirect method returns us to the primal ethos where we probe the "crack" in everything to discover how it points beyond immanence toward the Transcendent source of being.

Readers will recognize echoes of Aquinas's Third Way[749] or cosmological argument. Desmond summarizes this "way" as: *If all being is possible being, ultimately all possible being is impossible*.[750] He offers this metaxological reconstruction:

The finite world is contingent: things come into being and pass out of being. In the endlessness of becoming, there is one possibility that would be realized at some point: namely, that there would be no contingent being. After all, everything finite might not be; and at some time, in the infinite time of endless becoming, the possibility of everything *not being* will be. If this possibility of everything *not being* is possible, then nothing could ever come to be; for nothing comes from nothing; hence nothing could *now* exist. Thus, if everything is contingent, not even contingent existence now is possible. This is absurd, because the world of

[746] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 225.
[747] If astonishment accomplished this, there'd be fewer atheists after the 2016 presidential election.
[748] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 131.
[749] *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1 a.2, 3.
[750] Ibid., 132.

contingency is actually given. There must be another being, not contingent, to make contingency intelligible, possible, actual.[751]

Essentially, the equivocity of being communicates a common origin and destiny in the *nihil*: beings come from nothing and return to this nothing. Herein we confront the potential surd: in a world of becoming we can ask *Why anything at all* or *Why did being come to be* in the first place? Is the whole of being little more than "senseless idiocy" or, in the enigma of it being at all, does it testify to a creative origin who gives it to be?

For Desmond, this surd is not absurd. On the contrary, it entices us to dwell more intensively with the mystery at the heart of being. By immersing ourselves in the happening of the *metaxu*, by pondering how beings come to be and pass away, we can be stirred or provoked into a mindfulness of

> an Other that *is* not through another, or does not *become* through another, but through whom all others *come to be*. One might call this an other origin, hyperbolically necessary. This origin is necessary in a sense that has neither come to be, nor become; rather it is the reserved source of all coming to be and becoming. This other origin, the ultimate necessary being exists – that is, God.[752]

As an exercise in transcendence, willing immersion in the flux (T_1) makes us susceptible to the "bite of otherness"[753] leading us to recognize the intimate strangeness of being: all beings share in existence yet no being, nor the totality of beings, exhausts existence. Or, as Brendan Sammon writes, "beings are constituted not only by their unique univocal identity but also by an otherness that is bound up with that identity."[754] The "bite" provokes contemplation of being's overdeterminacy and leads us to contemplate *why*

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[751] Ibid.
[752] Ibid.
[753] Ibid., 133.
[754] Brendan Sammon, "The Reawakening of the Between" in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 47.

anything at all and "throws us" hyperbolically beyond finite and provokes within us the thought of a Transcendent source who gives being to be.

This first hyperbolic indirection invites us to abide within the *metaxu* and to risk "being struck (as I think Aquinas was struck) by the incontrovertibility of being."[755] This works, though, only if the reader allows herself to be implicated by the text. She must accept Desmond's invitation to dwell mindfully in the *metaxu* and behold how "the incontrovertibility shines out in the given, outlined as gift before the nothing that is also now always possible."[756] As a spiritual exercise or what Heyde calls an "experience of thought," one is drawn given to contemplate how "the contingent is not what it is in a necessary manner. Its being appears to be a sort of *suspension* of the hegemony of nothingness. Every moment of its existence it hangs, as it were, above the abyss of nothingness."[757] Metaxologically exercising the Third Way directs the reader's attention to the primal ethos, rekindles a sense of contingency, and allows the interplay of the ethos and Aquinas's way to point toward a transcendent origin. Victor White captures this interplay as provoking a sense of the mystery at the heart of all being:

> St Thomas's position differs from that of modern agnostics because while modern agnosticism says simply, "We do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle," a Thomist says, "We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call *God*. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified.[758]

Stirred to recognize the givenness of being, we are directed *beyond* givenness to a giver. Following this indirection toward the Creator, however, does not permit us to rest as though our querying had come to an end. Quite the opposite: the surd not absurd

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[755] Ibid.
[756] Ibid.
[757] Ludwig Heyde, *The Weight of Finitude*, 40.
[758] Victor White, *God the Unknown* (London: Harper, 1956), 18.

bespeaks an inexhaustible surplus of mystery. Space is created wherein one can reflect upon God as enigmatic reason why *there is something rather than nothing*. The "crack" in all things becomes the locus of encounter, the point where the metaxologically attuned subject hears the ever ancient, ever new, woo of the Holy One.

Before considering how metaxology overlaps with and can contribute to theology, it might be helpful to recall our Five Commandments:

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

If this indirection awakens a mindfulness of the divine, it does so by drawing attention to the overdeterminacy of being. Whatever "God" is, it is not one more being *within* the system, nor is it Kant's *ens realissimum* who is "completely determined through its own concept."[759] If this is not ontotheology's God, neither is it a deity encountered by infidelity to the flux. As it turns out, it is through our intensive dwelling *within* the flux that gives rise to our awakened sense of the Transcendent. Caputo relaxes: metaxology makes no claim to possess "the Truth." What metaxology calls "God" is not a determinate *something* but, in a way, the least-worst way to name to the intimate and inexhaustible mystery at the heart of existence. "God" is not a neutral word but an exclamation – God! – to the advent of the One who comes unbidden and whose arrival overwhelms our finite and idolatrous concepts. Kearney, too, is allayed: the quotidian announces the too-muchness of the Creator, disclosing in the ordinary the extraordinary generosity of the divine. Finally, metaxology is a response, a restless venturing forth impelled by the presentiment that its searching is a consequence of its first having been

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[759] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A606, B634.

sought. The happening of the *metaxu* does not confront us with a God-shaped hole but, rather, awakens us to the presence of a mystery intimated at the heart of all being, a mystery neither surd nor absurd but solicitous, bidding us to "come and see."

If metaxology has not (yet!) violated any Commandment, permit me to make a connection with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In his "Undergoing Something From Nothing: The Doctrine of Creation As Contemplative Insight," Brian Robinette approaches the doctrine as a site for the prayerful contemplation of the sheer contingency and gratuity of our being. Like Desmond, Robinette recognizes that God does not create to achieve a selfish purpose; there is no determinate *why* or reason for God's creativity. But being without a determinate reason does not mean creation is irrational. In fact, if our metaxological exercises have helped to "teach us how to read," then one might even approach *Creatio ex nihilo* is a hyperbolic text "throwing us" toward the Creator. Thus, to Robinette's *Why create at all?* Desmond offers the following:

> Because it is good. Creation is not arbitrary fiat, modeled on the capricious finger snap of some oriental despot. The metaphor of originative speaking is suggestive. God says "Let there be . . . and there was . . ." Creation is an original speaking letting be. Speaking brings the word to existence. The word, speaking, lets being be. A word is not a roar. The roar would be more like the diktat of the despotic divinity. The word, spoken originatively, is the expression of communicative being. The originating word issues from the goodness of generosity. The word is the creative expression of being as agapeic and as communicative transcending. Word brings a world to be, word communicates a world, lets it issue into a space of sharing with others. . . Wording the between: a sung world—a song not only sung, but a song giving rise to new singers. The originative word would be the primordial "yes" that gives coming to be, a word that is also a blessing with being. We know this elementally in our own being given to be, lived as an affirmation of being that first lives us before we live it. The agapeic "yes" not only blesses with being, it blesses being: It is good to be.[760]

Robinette muses: "I find this passage astounding, worthy of reading aloud, worthy of rumination, worthy of singing, indistinguishable from prayer. What it communicates can

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[760] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 253.

only be 'beheld.' It does not translate into a hypothesis, even if it provides endless

pasture for thought. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that our beholding is to share in

God's own beholding."[761]

These insights have deep roots, not least in Aquinas's own treatment of creation

in the *Summa Theologiae*. In Q 104, a.1 he asks, "whether creatures need to be kept in

being by God?" In other words, is creation a one-off act, a *fait accompli* or is it an act of

ongoing preservation? His answer presages metaxology's response:

> a thing is said to preserve another per se and directly, namely, when what is
> preserved depends on the preserver in such a way that it cannot exist without it. In
> this manner all creatures need to be preserved by God. For the being of every
> creature depends on God, so that no for a moment could it subsist, but would fall
> into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power.

Herbert McCabe offers a musical image to capture this: "God must be at the heart of

every being, acting in every action (whether determined or free), continually sustaining

her creation over against nothing as a singer sustains her song over against silence – and

that too is only a feeble metaphor, for even silence presupposes being."[762]

Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider Katherine Keller's critique of *creatio ex*

nihilo. Theology, she contends, taught the West

> to shun the *depths* of the creation. Christianity established as unquestionable the
> truth that everything is created *not* from some formless and bottomless something
> but from nothing: an omnipotent God could have created world only *ex nihilo*.
> This dogma of origin has exercised immense productive force. It became common
> sense…Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own
> depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation.[763]

Keller sounds a Caputo-like chord in voicing suspicion, as Robinette observes, that

"*creation ex nihilo* represents the 'dream of metaphysical theology' enthralled by the idea

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[761] Brian Robinette, *The Difference Nothing Makes*, forthcoming.
[762] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Continuum: New York, 2005), 59-60.
[763] Katherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xvi.

of God's absolute dominion over creation and nonbeing, and thus a God who exclusive and expels all that evinces liminality, ambiguity, and process."[764] Christian belief in a God who creates *ex nihilo* gradually enshrined "dogmas of omnipotence: not just of the biblical lord of great if somewhat unpredictable power, but an immutable, unilateral All-Power clothed in the attributes of a single male Person (or two; or…)."[765] Embedded in this belief is a fear of the primordial chaos of the deep recounted Genesis 1:2

> a fear of whatever shadows our light, whatever transgresses boundaries, leaks across categories, sneaks out of closets, whatever she-sea might suddenly flood our fragile confidence. Fear of the 'female thing.' Of all things too deep and too fluid: we may call this fear 'tehomophobia.[766]

Tehomophobia is reflected in the binary logic of *creatio ex nihilo* according to which "one is either good or evil, corporeal or corporeal, eternal or temporal, almighty or powerless, propertied or inferior."[767] *Creatio ex nihilo* serves not to awaken astonishment at creation's gratuity but, more sinisterly, to bless efforts to control and constrain chaos.

Even the word "Creator," for Keller, comes "barnacled with stereotypes: of a great supernatural surge of father-power, a world appearing-zap-out of the void; a mankind ruling the world in our manly creator's image; a gift soon spoiled by its creatures' ingratitude."[768] Such stereotypes are symptomatic of *tehomophobia*. She admits, however, "one need not argue that this grid of dualisms *necessarily* accompanies the *ex nihilo* argument – only that historically it has done so."[769] It is this admission that makes Robinette's intervention so needful: rather than casting *creatio ex nihilo* aside, he recasts it as a site of transformative encounter. Reading the doctrine contemplatively, a

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[764] Brian Robinette, The Difference Nothing Makes: *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, Resurrection, and Divine Gratuity," *Theological Studies* vol. 72 (2011): 525—557 at 525.
[765] Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 16.
[766] Katherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 58.
[767] Ibid., 49.
[768] Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 6.
[769] Ibid., 49. Emphasis added.

lectio divina, is an exercise capable of forming and informing those who undertake it.

Such prayerful consideration can allow one to perceive how God's creative action records

no act of dominative "power over" but is, in actuality, an act of empowerment as God lets

"finite creation be as irreducibly other."[770] Or, as Desmond describes it,

> the scandal of absolute power is that it communicates itself in an enabling *letting*:
> it lets the finite being be as other, it lets it be power – and the letting forces
> nothing, constrains nothing, coerces nothing; it simply releases into the goodness
> of free power itself. The scandal of divine (over)all-power is that it is the ultimate
> patience: it is manifest in giving, in giving away from itself, not giving such that
> the recipient is forced to recognize the good of the giver, for the pure giving is for
> the good of the receiver, who may not comprehend he, she, or it is the recipient.[771]

A contemplative approach to reading *creatio ex nihilo* with metaxological eyes opens us

to dwelling upon the enigma *that anything is at all* and allows us to be transformed as we

prayerfully "inhabit that mystery through a long 'letting go'."[772]

4.3   A Second Indirection: The Aesthetics of Happening

Desmond's second indirection approaches the divine by way of the "aesthetics of

happening." This approach dwells intensively on the *haecceity* of individuals: <u>*this is*</u>. As

a "happening," the givenness of being "shines forth with its own intimate radiance,

coming to manifest its own marvelous intricacy of order."[773] Aesthetic happening, then,

indicates a "sensuous figuration or figuring forth of the ontological potencies of the

primal ethos."[774] If the modern reconfiguration of the ethos has left creation "seared with

trade; bleared, smeared with toil," posthumous mind perceives the stubborn presence of

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[770] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 283.
[771] Ibid., 320.
[772] Brian Robinette, "Undergoing Something from Nothing: The Doctrine of Creation as Contemplative
      Insight," in *The Practice of the Presence of God: Theology as a Way of Life*, ed. Martin Laird and
      Sheelah Treflé Hidden (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24.
[773] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 134.
[774] Ibid.

"the dearest freshness deep down things."[775] To exercise the aesthetics of happening is not to formulate a theory about beauty but to risk being implicated in the call of beauty and becoming one of the *theōroi* whose mindfulness is alive to and enlivened signs of the Transcendent perceived within "the glory of creation – offered both in given beauty and sublimity, and in what we ourselves create."[776]

We return to the *metaxu*, this time with an eye to how our experiences of beauty might be illuminated with the "finesse of religious poetics." [777] We can experience beauty in any number of ways: the music of Bach's Cello Suite seeps into the heart; Picasso's *Guernica* seizes the spectator with its savage beauty and draws one into contemplation. Desmond offers the following description of his climbing *Dún an Óir*, the Fort of Gold:

> On an autumn evening, near the feast of Samhain, I recall climbing the promontory at *Dún an Óir*. The climb was through boggy earth, watery on the hillside…The height hovered in the air between earth and sea and sky, their conjunction in a massive rock. The late sun spilled over the height as we ascended, but the shadow was increasing on this side of land and harbor. Just before attaining the top we were wrapped for a time in sober shadow.[778]

This ascent is "aesthetic" (*to aesthētikon*) in the broadest way: Desmond is not *thinking* his way up the mountain but *physically* climbing. Allusions to "sun spilled" and being "wrapped…in sober shadow" point to the physicality of this ascent. In a single step, he emerges from the shadow to find himself "in a reversed world – a golden world at almost the furthest reaches of the Western world."[779] "The sun was a revelation," he writes,

> But we were not given this gift without some call on us. On the height and on the side of the sun, the cliff was sheer. Gulls and crows hung there in the silence, a thousand feet above the silent wash against the wall of rock below. More used to the level plan, to us this vantage was vertigo. The gut knots at this height, but

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[775] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," 128.
[776] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 135.
[777] Ibid., 137.
[778] William Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 268.
[779] Ibid.

holding itself together the spirit exults…Sky and sea merged, the water itself becoming a golden liquid. The air too, empty of obstruction, was a liquid gold…to stand was impossible on the rim of this cliff, and to lie down was almost to bow in reverence.[780]

At dusk he begins his descent, "the sun being obstructed, and me bearing down, like a priest with a monstrance, the memory of the other side."[781]

Without mentioning "God," Desmond's recollects how the experience of beauty, or of the sublime, points toward something beyond the immanent order. In the happening at *Dún an Óir*, "something *beyond wholeness* is intimated in the showing there. There is a *saturated* equivocity to the aesthetics of happening."[782] This is a sensuous occurrence: the advent or "call" of the sublime is a rupture that somehow releases. The in-breaking of beauty unclogs porosity, rekindles a sense of the *passio essendi*, and breaks us free from the stale confines of the enclosed self. To encounter the sublime is to be afflicted with a dark grace, a wound serving a monstrance letting the divine shine forth or as a scar of one's fragility and finitude.[783] Neither beauty nor the sublime can be corralled by any system; both shatter the constraint of concepts yet, in rupturing conceptual frameworks, release us to marvel at and bow reverently before the surplus beauty of being.

Although he does not offer a metaxological reformulation of it, in *God and the Between* Desmond refers to Aquinas's fifth way as an indirection leading us to marvel at the intelligibility of finite creation. Aquinas's "way" unfolds as follows:

For we see that some things that lack intelligence (i.e., material objects in nature) act for the sake of an end. This is clear from the fact that they always, or usually, act in the same way so as to achieve what is best (and therefore tend to a goal and

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[780] Ibid.
[781] Ibid., 269.
[782] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 135.
[783] I think of *Jaws* when Hooper and Quint compare scars, each body a palimpsest of past experience. But it is the invisible trace– Quint's removed tattoo – that exposes his *pathos* or, perhaps, his *passio*. Quint's monologue: he has been "given to be" after the sinking of the *Indianapolis*.

do not reach it by chance). But things lacking intelligence tend to a goal only as directed by one with knowledge and understanding. Arrows, for instance, need archers. So, there is a being with intelligence who directs all natural things to end, and we call this being "God."[784]

This way, John Wippel observes, "begins with something which Thomas regards as evident to us from the world of everyday experience. Natural bodies, that is to say, things which are equipped with their own natures but lack the power of cognition, act for the sake of an end."[785] From our place within the *metaxu*, the observant eye detects something of an "unconscious teleology of nature."[786] Natural beings seem to act purposively and the natural order itself can appear to be orchestrated as an ecological concert. Lyrics from *The Lion King* capture the symphony of nature:

From the day we arrive on the planet But the sun rolling high
And, blinking, step into the sun   Through the sapphire sky
There's more to see than can ever be seen Keeps the great and small on the
More to do than can ever be done   endless round
There's far too much to take in here   It's the circle of life
More to find than can ever be found   And it moves us all.[787]

The movie opens at dawn; all of creation stirs as music guides bird and beast on their journey to behold a new lion king. Nature and its denizens, if only for a moment, appear balanced. We suspend disbelief: lions and hyenas and elephants bowing in unison is a scene more Isaiah 11:6 ("The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb") than Animal Planet! Let us see, though, if these lyrics might speak more truly, more subtly, than we realize.

Desmond wants us to dwell upon Aquinas's claim that "certain things act for an end." We slow down and fix our attention on the world of exterior becoming. Things

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[784] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 3, quoted in Brian Davies *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.
[785] John Wippel, "The Five Ways," in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 187.
[786] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 137.
[787] *The Lion King*, directed by Rob Minkoff, Roger Allers (Disney Pictures, 1994). DVD.

lacking in intelligence seem, somehow, to act harmoniously and in concern with the rest

of creation to "achieve what is best." For Brian Davies, it is as though Aquinas were

asking us to consider the whole of creation and be piqued into asking, "How about"

> the fact that female cats regularly and instinctively suckle their newborn kittens
> and thereby help them to become healthy cats? Or what about the fact that my
> heart regularly functions so as to circulate my blood and, accordingly, keep me
> alive? ...In instances like these, he perceives goal-directed activity, but not activity
> that is goal-directed because a human being is at work.[788]

One is seized not only by the beauty of the *metaxu* but also by its orderliness. Just as a

single rose may evoke wonder, so also can one can be astonished at the order of the

whole cosmos. One can try to take it all in, yet a surplus remains. Sir Elton is right, for

there is "more to find than can ever be found." Thus, Desmond offers, "the aesthetics of

happening is seen to suggest an origin figuratively to be likened to the artist."[789]

The key word is "suggest." Instead of a univocal proof[790] this indirection reads the

aesthetic happening of the *metaxu* as a hyperbolic sign of a divine artist whose "art"

> would not just be the technical imposition of form upon matter, but a more radical
> bringing to be from which both the elemental good of matter and form are
> themselves derived. Its *poiesis* would originate a coming to be: not just a self-
> becoming or selving of beings, not a mechanical ordering, not just a "forming" or
> self-forming, not just an organismic self-organizing, not a work of art giving birth
> to itself. Given this likening, this origination would be *unlike* any artistry we
> could adequately conceptualize, since our artistry always operates in the context
> of the givenness of being. This other art is hyperbolic to our artistry.[791]

The intelligibility of creation, considered metaxologically, suggests some type of

Creative origin. This indirection does not convince by arguing, as though in a syllogism,

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[788] Davies, 47.
[789] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 137.
[790] Ibid., 140. He continues: "'Proof' is the misplaced demand for a univocity that betrays what is most
powerful and suggestive in that aesthetics of happening, what keeps open the space of
transcendence, whether that of nature as other, or our own self-surpassing, or that of the ultimate
transcendence as other to us…Instead of seeking an inappropriate univocity, we need mindfully to
read the signs."
[791] Ibid., 137.

but by goading us deeper into reflection where we confront the enigma of intelligibility:

Is the intelligibility of finite intelligibility itself intelligible in finite terms?[792]

> Does it require reference to a source of intelligibility beyond itself that gives rise to the determinate intelligibles? This suggests a variation of the argument from *coming to be*: intelligibility as determinate is there as having come to be, and cannot make its own intelligibility intelligible; to make intelligible the intelligible means to appeal to a further determining source; since this cannot be our intelligence, relative to the cosmos as the aesthetics of happenings, it must be other.[793]

Desmond's consideration of Aquinas's way offers no syllogism or proof concluding with a triumphant QED. Transposed into a metaxological key and undertaken as an exercise, it is more finessed. It enjoins a mindful attentiveness (*prosochē*) to allow the reality of the exterior world to manifest itself. We find, in creation's intelligibility and beauty, a logic or *logos* we did not impose upon it. Astonished, we consider whether there might be something beyond human intelligence, something "*huperintelligible*"[794] endowing the created order with intelligibility. For Desmond, recognizing "*that beings are intelligible at all* rouses astonishment and perplexity that cannot be answered in terms of a determinate intelligibility."[795] We contemplate the sheer givenness of being, the restless beauty of creation, the intelligibility of the tiniest particle and the vast cosmos and we are indirected toward an originative source or a God "who not only thinks but loves, or whose thinking, as agapeic minding, is love of singulars, or living communities, love of the intimate universal not just of the abstract."[796] Jesus' hyperbolic depiction of a God who numbers the hairs on our head (Lk 12:7)[797] is more apt than might be supposed.

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[792] Ibid., 138.
[793] Ibid., 138-9. Emphasis original.
[794] Ibid., 139. Consult Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* for a non-theistic view of teleological laws.
[795] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 139.
[796] Ibid.
[797] A task made easier on the Holy One by some of us who have less to count.

The skeptic's groan is not unheard and Desmond admits: "there is nothing univocally clear about this, nor could there ever be…Because this is an aesthetics, it is always equivocal to some degree, and always will be."[798] Indeed, the only way for us to interpret the "crack" in everything is by venturing outward to confront the equivocity, not to control it but to allow it to point us beyond the finite toward the infinite. What is true of great works of art is true of anything or anyone worthy of love: we embrace mystery. The surplus of meaning behind a text, a painting, a person invites us into ongoing engagement. Hence the need to train ourselves through exercise to abide fruitfully with the enigmatic. This second indirection may not tie a bow around a discrete object called "God" but it can, for those traversing it, create the space wherein may contemplate the beauty and intelligibility of creation and discern, in the order, traces of the Divine.

This aesthetic itinerary suggests four areas where metaxology and theology can converge. Each could be treated at length, but I want only to gesture to places where a fruitful engagement might occur. In keeping with Desmond's own ascent of *Dún an Óir,* I begin with the theme of mystical ascent as found in Bonaventure's *The Journey of the Mind to God*. Our first step in our ascent requires "setting the whole visible world before us as a mirror through which we may pass over to God, the Supreme Creator." [799] We are not called out of the world but, rather, to behold the world rightly, attentive to how "the supreme power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator shine forth in created things."[800] Bonaventure's itinerary does not enjoin simply a way of thinking but intends to facilitate a grace-guided transformation of vision:

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[798] Ibid.
[799] Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 8.
[800] Ibid.

1. First way of seeing: observer considers things in themselves and sees in them weight, number, and measure. (T_1)
2. Second way of seeing: the way of faith, believer considers world in its origin, development, and end. (T_2)
3. Third way of seeing: follow the created order toward Creator. (T_3)[801]

The movement: from the exterior to the interior, from the inferior to the superior. In at least two areas can *The Journey* and metaxology converge. Both are (1) progressive, for each requires ongoing discernment within creation and (2) perfective, for each attunes one to perceive the overdeterminacy, or perhaps the graced dynamism, of the between.

A second locus would be a metaxological consideration of the icon. Consider the saturated equivocity of praying before an icon: is one beholding or beheld or both? Icons do not call for a glance but solicit the gaze; as one's eyes traverse the space between, one senses oneself as being drawn or invited deeper. What to the casual onlooker appears a finite depiction becomes, in prayer, a portal to the infinite. Nicholas of Cusa expresses the overdeterminacy of the icon. "I behold as in a mirror," he writes,

> in an icon, in a riddle, life eternal, for that is naught other than that blessed regard wherewith Thou never ceasest most lovingly to behold me, yea, even the secret places of my soul. With Thee, to behold is to give life; 'tis unceasingly to impart sweetest love of Thee; 'tis to inflame me to love of Thee by love's imparting, and to feed me by inflaming, and by feeding to kindle my yearning, and by kindling to make me drink of the dew of gladness, and by drinking to infuse in me a fountain of life, and by infusing to make it increase and endure.[802]

Sensuous imagery overflows as the interplay between beholding and being beheld erupts in spiritual frenzy. The proliferation of images and metaphors conveys the too-muchness into which one is drawn. The iconic gaze mediates, in metaxological parlance, its own hyperbolic indirection throwing us beyond the immanent realm toward the Transcendent.

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[801] Ibid. Bonaventure, of course, did not index his three forms of sight to Desmond's three transcendences.
[802] Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God* trans. Emma Gurney Salter (Escondido: Book Tree, 1999), 17.

Lest one think all "ways" are somehow passive or contemplative, one may interpret the aesthetics of happening to be inclusive of active indirections. One might, therefore, consult Pascal or Dostoevsky for embodied practices leading to transcendence. Belief in the Transcendent does not require one to think differently but to comport oneself in a new way. Pascal advises someone struggling with belief:

> You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have…follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.[803]

As in ancient exercises, so too here: one must desire some form of transformation and then apprentice oneself to those who have learned the way. Similarly, the Elder Zosima rejects logical proofs for God, although he suggests another way to be convinced:

> By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.[804]

Kearney nods: The Kingdom is found not in dusty tomes or syllogism but in a cold cup of water offered to the thirsty stranger and the morsel of bread extended to the hungry beggar. But not only in the cup. In the cry of the poor, in the face of the widow and orphan, in an act of amnesty for the alien: each and every summons to pour oneself out in loving service to others can tap into the infinite wellspring the Creator's agape and gradually reform us to be women and men of agapeic minds. Any event of aesthetic happening bears the potential of leading us, throwing us over, toward the threshold of the sacred where we can encounter again, or for the first time, the Transcendent God.

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[803] Pascal, *Penseés*, 125.
[804] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 56.

A final point of convergence comes from Joseph Ratzinger.[805] His argument

begins by noting how the act of professing belief in God "implies opting for the view that

the *logos*…stands not merely at the end but also at the beginning, that it is the originating

and encompassing power of being."[806] The *logos* encompasses the whole of creation,

reaching "mightily from one end of the earth to the other" (Wis 8:1). He then turns to

consider the scientific inquiry of nature. Scientists, he observes, also presuppose a logic

within nature, otherwise their inquiries would be guideless. But where does this logic

come from? This logic, cannot have been "projected" by humans: nature's logos is

discovered, not implanted, by humans. Thus, he proposes viewing nature's intelligibility

as "the impression and expression of subjective mind and that the intellectual structure

that being possesses and that we can *re*-think is the expression of a creative *pre*-

meditation, to which they owe their existence."[807]

Ratzinger cites Einstein for whom, in nature's laws, "an intelligence so superior is

revealed that in comparison all the significance of human thinking and human

arrangements is a completely worthless reflection."[808] But Einstein erects a wall between

an impersonal god of mathematics and a personal god of revelation. For Ratzinger, this is

not surprising: as Desmond would observe, this is symptomatic of postulatory finitism.

Ratzinger: "Can the mathematician who looks at the world mathematically find anything

else but mathematics in the universe?"[809] The drive to universal *mathesis* may give us

power and dominion, but in its narrow focus it fails to account for the surplus of aesthetic

happening: can mathematics account for superfluous beauty or shattering sublimity?

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[805] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004)
[806] Ibid., 152.
[807] Ibid.
[808] Ibid. 153.
[809] Ibid., 154.

Mindfulness of aesthetic happening leads Ratzinger to posit nature's intelligibility as a sign of its being-thought by a Creator. Such hyperbolic "thinking" is a creative release of "what has been thought into the freedom of its own, independent existence."[810] Nature's *logos* points beyond the natural order toward a Creative mind who creates not out of compulsion, nor due to lack, but solely out of love. Consequently:

> if the supreme point in the world's design is a freedom that upholds, wills, knows, and loves the whole world as freedom, then this means that together with freedom the incalculability implicit in it is an essential part of the world. Incalculability is an implication of freedom; the world can never – if this is the position – be completely reduced to mathematical logic.[811]

Desmond agrees: "mindfulness of the signs is not the same as a mathematics of design."[812] These "ways" do not guide us to a univocal conclusion; the perform, rather, hyperbolically to induce a mindfulness of the too-muchness of the *metaxu* and "throw us over" toward the Transcendent. We undertake Aquinas's 3rd and 5th ways, or think along with Ratzinger, as a way of growing in attuned to the overdeterminacy of being. These "ways" provide oases for thought where one may seek refuge from the driving sands of the desert of atheism, refresh oneself in meditative waters, and be struck by beauty and order into a mindfulness of a God who creates freely and agapeically.

4.4   A Third Indirection: The Erotics of Selving

Whereas the idiocy of being and the aesthetics of happening indicate hyperbolic indirections discerned in exterior transcendence (T_1), the itinerary probed in the erotics of selving follows a course set by self-transcendence (T_2). This indirection requires us to turn inward and to explore the inner dynamism of human desire. "The human being,"

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[810] Ibid., 157.
[811] Ibid., 160.
[812] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 140.

Desmond observes, "is intimately hyperbolic as both finite and yet infinitely self-surpassing. We are endowed with transcending power, but we do not endow ourselves."[813] Continuing our Augustinian odyssey, we move from the exterior to the interior where, even in the depths of apparent solitude, we are stirred to recognize that we are not alone but always already in the presence of the Agapeic Creator and Sustainer.

To keep this section manageable, I focus on Desmond's reformulation of Anselm's ontological argument as an exercise aimed at awakening us to the hyperbolic thought of God. I then briefly address the viability of this indirection vis-à-vis Gaunilo and Kant, both of whom offered critiques of the ontological argument. I conclude by drawing a connection between metaxology and prayer.

One of the fruits of exercising the "Return to Zero" was a rekindled sense of the *passio essendi*. Beneath the conative "will to power," Desmond discerns the presence of the more primordial power that gives being to be *at all*. In his interview with Richard Kearney, Desmond asserts, "I've tried to talk about the *passio essendi* as more primordial than *conatus essendi*. Our endeavor to be is subtended by our being given to be. Our self-affirming will to be emerges out of a more primal being given to be."[814] The emphasis on the *passio*, D. C. Schindler observes, has implications for our understanding of reason:

> Reason does not first set itself in motion, in order thus to achieve itself, but is rather at its core by what is other than it (even if this "being moved" is not a dead passivity). Reason is therefore primordially receptive in its structure, and its most basic act is affirmation and assent, even if it goes on at a later moment to doubt or take a critical distance. Reason first "lets be."[815]

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[813] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 225.
[814] Simpson, *The William Desmond Reader*, 243.
[815] D.C. Schindler, "The Positivity of Philosophy," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 126.

In a similar vein, Desmond speaks at times of the "vocation of reason" as a call to "ponder the exceeding" or overdeterminacy of being.[816] Human reason, like self-transcendence, is eccentric and ecstatic: an eccentric response to the advent of transcendence as other eliciting an act of ecstatic other-reaching. Drawn by the call of the intimate universal, self-transcendence directs us both outward toward exterior becoming (T_1) and inward into our own abyssal depths (T_2) where the echo of this call resounds.

When he offers his reformulation of the ontological argument, Desmond reminds us of the need to remain attentive to the ethos from which the argument springs. Anselm did not argue according to the canons of univocal logic or geometry; his milieu was a monastery and the generative ground was a life disciplined by prayer and meditation. Too often, Desmond observes, "the argument is treated as a kind of logical puzzle: in question is the logical validity of the deduction from the concept of God to God's existence, purely on the basis of the concept alone. This is more the neutral universality of reason than the living intimacy of the soul."[817] Kant's critique of the argument misses the mark precisely because it severs Anselm's argument from its ethos. I address this shortly.

Desmond's reformulation invites us into a type of philosophical meditation. We begin by recollecting how our posthumous mind beholds the world. We know our fragility, our non-necessity, we savor the gratuity of existence. We answer the call to ponder the overdeterminacy of being as our imaginations range across the created order. We turn, venturing inward and downward; we probe our depths. Now Desmond:

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[816] William Desmond, "Analogy and the Fate of Reason," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 16, accessed November 9, 2017
http://www.oxfordbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566273.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199566273-e-4.
[817] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 10.

> Suppose thought thinks itself, and explores the inner abyss of itself, what does it come upon? The thought of what is in excess of all excesses. In the exploration of thought thinking itself the thought of what is other to thought emerges. The overdeterminate thought of what is radically other to determinate thought emerges in the immanent self-exploration, even self-determination, of thought itself.[818]

This passage must be read meditatively. This is no argument moving from premise to conclusion. It is an exercise, a performance of thought, pushing reason to its limits. Thought confronts what is "in excess of excess" and this excess cannot be determined or objectified. In its overdeterminacy, it eludes expression in word or concept. Our foray into meditative thinking does not bring us mastery over our depths; to the contrary, it chastens us through an encounter with the fathomless mystery at the heart of our reason.

This is consonant with Anselm who, in *Proslogion* 2, describes God as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" (*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*).[819] Ludwig Heyde regards this formulation as more of a "*rule* for thought (whosoever wishes to think God must follow the rule that nothing greater than God can be thought) than a positive content of thought (what is then the content of this being greater than which nothing can be thought?)."[820] Anselm's definition of God, paradoxically, succeeds because of its failure as a definition: it fails to point to or indicate any determinate *thing* or *being* we might call God. God, per Anselm's definition, cannot be picked out of a line-up of deities because God is not the sort of thing that can be counted or ordered or identified as being-among-other-beings. Read metaxologically, Anselm offers us with a hyperbolic definition of God, one we need to sit with and meditate upon. If we are vexed by ambiguity, this is a healthy uneasiness, a sign that

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[818] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 144.

[819] Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: OUP, 1998), 87.

[820] Heyde, 47.

"Anselm's acid" is dissolving our conceptual idols and freeing us to move beyond our idols toward the God of whom Augustine wrote: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*.[821]

Desmond, in effect, is teaching us how to read in a metaxological register. Instead of imposing our logic upon it, he wants us to allow the text to speak on its terms. He does not ask us to bracket our experiences or suspend our awareness of being in the *metaxu*. In fact, the exercise works only so long as one brings one's whole self to it, allows oneself to be implicated within the meditation. For, as a spiritual exercise:

> the ontological proof, just in its truth, shatters the illusion of "proof," whether determinate or self-determining, whether univocal or dialectical. It brings us into the company of the incontrovertibility of the divine excess, an incontrovertibility that is never the outcome of any proof because it is the *incognito* necessity that precedes and exceeds every proof.[822]

In place of "proof," this way is a "probe," giving us to explore our inwardness and to follow the flow of porosity to its source. We "go with the flow" and are struck by the vector of movement: *ab inferioribus ad superiora*. We are humbled by our inferiority, astonished by the disproportion between our fragile finitude and the Absolute. But before we can despair there occurs something like a flash of insight as we realize:

> We could not erotically seek at all, were not the effective urgence of the other transcendence already wooing in selving, calling to selving, and bringing back selving to transcendence itself, itself that never left and that always was available for us as other to it.[823]

If posthumous mind rendered us attentive to the "crack" within ourselves, this exercise encourages us to dwell in the space of rupture. The hyperbolic thought of the God encountered via the ontological argument, "*shatters in immanence itself the illusion of*

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[821] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 144.
[822] Ibid.
[823] Ibid., 143.

self-contained immanence."[824] This shattering does not leave us destitute; it creates, instead, the space of an empowered openness wherein we find ourselves in intimate congress with abiding presence of the Agapeic Creator.

I once taught Anselm's "way" to high school seniors. In place Gaunilo's "Lost Island" one proposed a "Lost Cupcake." This would be, he proposed, the most perfect cupcake ever; I endured the back-and-forth about flavors, size, and types of sprinkles for a few minutes before ending the debate. They, like Gaunilo, seem to have been caught off guard by Anselm's hyperbole. At times, even Gaunilo misquotes Anselm, writing of "that which is greater than everything."[825] Gaunilo, and my students, violated Heyde's grammatical rule, for the object of Anselm's definition "is so defined that it remains transcendent to the definition."[826] They (mis)read Anselm positing a contrastive definition of God, as though God were one among a series. Of course, it takes finesse not to think of God as a *thing*, but this is an error hard to avoid given our finite language. This is a peril of language, as our facility with metaphor, analogy, and symbol can easily mislead us into thinking we know *what* we are talking about when we speak of God. Anselm and Aquinas would aver: we do not. This metaxological exercise, requiring us to remain attentive to hyperbole, draws us toward the original ethos out of which Anselm's way emerged: his own encounter, in prayer, with a God *beyond* any concept.

Rather than going into a detailed analysis of Kant's critique of the ontological proof – or of the cosmological and physico-theological proofs – we can take a shortcut by homing in on Desmond's challenge to Kant. "Kant's formulations," he writes, "mirror the modern reconfiguration of the ethos, hence they are heir to the univocalization of being

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[824] Ibid., 144.
[825] Anselm of Canterbury, 104.
[826] Heyde, 47.

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consistent with Newtonian mechanism."[827] Absent from Kant's philosophy is any sense

of existence as "redolent with the fullness of being, or the astonishing fact 'that it is at

all,' or the glorious good of the 'to be'."[828] The *Proslogion* begins with, and unfolds as, a

sustained prayer to God; of prayer, Kant writes, "kneeling down or groveling on the

ground, even to express your reverence for heavenly things, is contrary to human

dignity."[829] Even if Kant had read Anselm's argument – Desmond believes Kant was

working with arguments inherited from Christian Wolff and René Descartes – it seems

unlikely that his critical evaluation would have changed. Uprooted from its originary

ethos, any "proof" or "way" cannot but limp along anemically. It is hard to imagine

Anselm's argument, re-rooted in Kantian soil, thriving at all.

Of this "way," Joseph Gordon and D. Stephen Long observe that, "Anselm is not

an analytic philosopher providing an irrefutable logical argument; he prays, and in his

prayers he becomes astonished by what 'importunes him.' A way is opened, but it is not

the univocal way of the modern ethos."[830] They are correct: the "way" is not a direct path

or a stepwise argument leading a dispassionate inquirer to a conclusion. Hewing closely

to a metaxological approach, any way to God must follow an indirection returning to and

being renewed in the primal ethos. This, though, necessitates a subtler approach to

philosophical reflection. One cannot approach Anselm's *Proslogion* and expect to be

convinced of God's existence merely by going over the text. It can perform only if

approached with a vulnerability and an openness to enter into a dialogue by which one is

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[827] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 94.

[828] Ibid., 95.

[829] Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 99.

[830] Joseph K. Gordon and D. Stephen Long, Way(s) to God," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 144.

informed[831] and potentially transformed. As Hadot observes, "every spiritual exercise is a

dialogue, insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence, to oneself and to others.[832]

This is especially true in the case of the *Proslogion* where we are allowed to eavesdrop

on Anselm's prayer where thought and prayer intermingle. One can, of course, play the

role of the voyeur who peers in from the outside, looking in without being looked at. Or

one can kneel down next to Anselm and risk making his prayer one's own: "I do not try,

Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But

I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves.

For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may

understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand.'"[833]

 I conclude with a discussion of prayer. In a few lines, Desmond encapsulates

beautifully the dynamics at play within the erotics of selving and in Christian spirituality:

> Prayer is waking up to the already effective communication of the divine in passage: not just our communication with the divine, but our being already in that divine communication, within which we participate, now in sleep, now more mindfully awake. Prayer is awakening to the passing communication of the divine in the finite *metaxu*. We do not produce it; it is not the result of our determination or self-determination; we are "determined," or better, released into the middle where we can sink deeper into ontological sleep, or begin to awake more fully to what communicates us to be at all.[834]

If we approach Anselm as offering not a "proof" but a "way" of prayerful probing, I think

the hyperbolic nature of his understanding of God comes into focus. For Desmond,

prayer is not an action of the *conatus* but is an awakening to something anterior and prior,

something more primordial: the *passio essendi*. In our reconfigured ethos, many have

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[831] Brian Davies, "Anselm and the Ontological Argument," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, eds. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (New York: CUP, 2004), 157—178.
[832] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 90.
[833] Anselm, 87.
[834] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 130.

fallen into the sleep of finitude, but sleep fitfully. Our days, too, are fitful: in our workaday world, where anxiety and depression are common, how are just getting by? Addicts, before they hit rock bottom, are convinced that the next role of the dice, the next shot, the next hit of heroin will be the last. But it is never "the last." Suddenly, everything collapses. One sinks to one's knees and prays in a voice not one's own and in ancient, almost wordless, words. Breakdown possibilizes breakthrough; a light pierces the darkness and a new way is possible; a new life, a new day, dawns.

This Anselmian indirection seeks, in the innermost recesses of the self, to commune with this primordial power. Prayer, as Robinette puts it, is a "long letting go" as we are caught up in and carried away by a rhythm not of our making. Anselm's way capacitates a "letting go" at our most intimate and porous level where we respond to 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 space in which communication of the power to be is given and different selving take determinate form. One is not alone, even when one is alone.[835]

The hyperbolic God encountered as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" chastens the *conatus* and blunts its attempts to control the divine. One is aroused to a finessed sense of the divine, *Deus semper maior*, whose summons to us enables each act of self-transcendence. In prayer, we watch the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence collapse as we realize how we are made for the infinite. Divine power is, ultimately, empowering: freeing us to respond to the source of life who gives us to be out of love. We open our hands and hearts in prayer and receive what we have always been offered and what is ever present: the divine life coursing through us, sustaining us, loving us, and knitting us into one body, one agapeic community.

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[835] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 49.

4.5 A Fourth Indirection: The Agapeics of Community

With each indirection, Desmond encourages us to remain attentive to signs of
overdeterminacy hinted at in finitude; he wants us to dwell contemplatively on how the
"crack" in everything bespeaks an originating and sustaining source. Read as spiritual
exercises, these meditations have not simply informed us *about* the "crack" but have
actually worked to form us in a mindfulness *of* it. We now pursue a fourth indirection, the
"agapeics of community," wherein we explore how "our being is in receiving and in
giving."[836] Whereas the erotics of selving focuses on self-transcendence, this indirection
probes the intimate relatedness of all beings and intimates what Desmond calls the
compassio essendi.[837] At the end of this section, I will try to show how Desmond's
insight contributes to and augments Taylor's map of our age.

I begin by once more invoking Hadot's contention "that philosophy was a
concrete act which changed our perception of the world, and our life: not the construction
of a system. It is a life, not a discourse."[838] As an exercise, this meditation serves to
transform the way we behold and live within the *metaxu*. Like the other exercises, it is
connected with a sense of the elemental goodness of being. This exercise, though, aims
consider how our communal life serves to reawaken a sense of the good of the "to be."

Let us take as our composition of place an awareness that we are denizens of the
metaxu. The metaxological sense of being, Desmond remarks,

> articulates being in the between as a community of the plurality of open integrities
> of self-transcending being. The community is not a formation, after the fact, of
> beings first given to be as fully for themselves. They are given to be for
> themselves, but the first giving is a communication of being, and from the first

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[836] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 12.
[837] Ibid., 151. Emphasis original.
[838] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 279.

giving they are communicative beings, and hence in immediate rapport with beings other than themselves.[839]

Metaxologically stated: to be is to be in community. As an anthropological claim, this rejects a depiction of community as an outcome of a social contract: humans do not constitute community; they are themselves constituted by community. Desmond's claim, though, is not limited to human communities. To be *at all* is to participate within being's community. Moreover, "beings are not monadic but communicative; their selvings are self-transcending and embody communicative power, more or less extensive and intensive, depending on ontological endowment."[840] The *haecceity* of each being is not mute but self-disclosing; as Hopkins observed, "Selves – goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells; Crying *What I do is me; for that I came.*"[841] Indeed, Psalm 19:1 restates not only of Augustine's discovery in the *Confessions* but also Aquinas's 3rd and 5th ways: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

We stand amidst the plurality of beings in the between and marvel at the dynamism of this community. We discern within the flux an abiding ecology – a *logos* of our *oikos* or home – and are stirred to wonder if the "togetherness of the community of immanent being reveals a primal porosity to the communication of an origin or good hyperbolic to the immanent 'whole'."[842] Our task, then, is to consider the enigmatic harmony of creation and whether, and how, its sings of its Creator.

The exercise begins by returning to the ontological way and probing how it sheds light on our being in community. Desmond offers an admittedly unconventional take:

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[839] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 151.
[840] Ibid.
[841] Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," 129.
[842] Ibid., 152.

> The power of the ontological way is just *its dwelling on a consummate relation, or an ultimate togetherness*: the ultimate togetherness of God with the mindfulness that comes to wakefulness in human selving. It is the being of the human to be communicative, but its communicative being finds itself in an inescapable community with ultimate communicative being. We come to the community in the ontological intimacy of human being, community given in the intimate soul but calling us beyond ourselves, above ourselves.[843]

Desmond returns to the Anselm's ontological way and extends its implications. If this way leads us to encounter God in the abyssal depths of our being, this encounter does not lead us to solipsism or self-enclosure. On the contrary, it awakens our self of porosity not only to the Holy One but also to the whole of being. What, or rather Who, we discover in meditation is the intimate universal "hyperbolic to self-enclosed subjectivity and any objectifying universality."[844] The intimate mystery at the heart of "my" being rests at the heart of *all* beings; it is, simultaneously, intimate and universal which means we are constitutively and inescapably in community with one another and with God.

The ontological way serves as "a way of immanence, but this *immanence itself turns out to offer us an intimate symbol/hyperbole of transcendence as other to our own self-transcendence*."[845] It is an archaeological way, probing our depths where we find ourselves confronted with a presence somehow in excess of our depths. The eccentricity of this way is captured by Heyde:

> The Other is the source of our ownmost I. The Absolute does not lie outside ourselves as a strange reality, but is "*ours*" as the "*Other*" that constitutes our own being. This also implies that what is most essentially and personally "ours," is not a secure possession. We have received it.[846]

It is eccentric because it destabilizes the centrality and feigned independence of the "I." The "I" does not set the terms for the Absolute's arrival, although we need the

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[843] Ibid.
[844] Ibid.
[845] Ibid., 153. Emphasis original.
[846] Heyde, 58.

ontological way to enact a "metaxological rumination and anamnesis"[847] to re-member, or make present again, our awareness of the Absolute's priority. *I* am, and *We* are, because God gives us to be and sustains our being. We traverse this indirection and discover: there is no self *apart* from the *metaxu* and its Creator but only *as* a part of it.

If each of Desmond's indirections serves to awaken within readers a sense of being's overdeterminacy, the fourth way stresses in particular the nature of being *as good*. As an exercise, a metaxological meditation upon the community of being enables

> a very different mindfulness of being in the between: an intimation of inexpressible good breaks through, inexpressible because overdeterminate, as beyond specific determination and our self-determination. Beyond this and that good, beyond our self-determination, the overdeterminate good of being shines in the fittingness of the community that is the metaxological between.[848]

We reflect upon the overdeterminate reserves of goodness intimated in the between both to learn *about* the good and, more importantly, to be transformed by it. Desmond: "A fitting way of life, keeping reverence, cultivating finesse, devoted to serve, is as needful, as is the thoroughness of one's reflective thinking. More needful."[849] We must turn, then, to consider how we are capacitated to respond to this goodness in a life lived out in ethical service as participant in the *compassio essendi*.

Now, when Desmond writes about ethics, he is not writing about theories like utilitarianism or deontology. He takes, instead, "a kind of 'step back' from this or that ethical theory, to address the ethos within which ethical theories come to articulation, as well as the different ethical potencies that are diversely formed by different ethical practices, and expressed reflectively by a variety of ethical theories."[850] His is a search

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[847] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 153.
[848] Ibid., 154.
[849] Ibid.
[850] William Desmond, "Finding Measure in Exceeding Measure: On *Ethics and the Between*," *Ethical*

for the surplus source that makes it possible *to be* good, and not just *to do* good. In fact, for Desmond, metaphysics and ethics are not two separate fields of inquiry, for each requires the other. Ethical practice, he contends,

> is mediated by a mindfulness, just as mindfulness is shaped in its openness by ethical integrity, and just as the integrity of both openness and mindfulness is nourished by living fidelity to the original patience of our being. A corruption of one infects the other.[851]

One need not look far to find evidence of corruption. Consider our ongoing ecological and humanitarian crises. Both attest to what Desmond calls the attitude of "serviceable disposability" endemic in modernity's ethos: "things must serve us, be serviceable for us, but once they have served their use for us, they are disposable. Used, they are used up. Persons are also liable to be treated as disposable items."[852] The elemental goodness of the "to be" is relativized and judged based on "its goodness for me."

Desmond's indirections, by returning us to the sources of mindfulness, can serve as a remediation of this corruption. By renewing our sense of being participants within the *metaxu*, Desmond piques our mindfulness of how "*there is an ontological solidarity that is not neutral but ethical.*"[853] This ontological solidarity is grounded in and nourished by the intimate universal abiding at the heart of all beings:

> we are opened to each other, before we come to ourselves. Here we the porosity of our being between as ethically qualified, not only relative to the good of the "to be," but the good of the being of the other, and indeed of selving. This communication of the good of the "to be" is not dominated by the *conatus essendi* but, rather, derives from fidelity to the more original *compassio essendi*.[854]

Perspectives 8, no. 4 (2002): 319-331 at 320.
[851] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 146.
[852] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 425.
[853] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 155. Emphasis original.
[854] Ibid.

Earlier, I suggested Saint Francis as an embodied testimony to this sense of the *compassio essendi*, for his heart was moved in a moment of "graced patience" to recognize in the leper not a figure of disease but a beloved brother. The past century, to be sure, has no shortage of women and men who provide similar testimony to a power *beyond* will-to-power: in the figures of Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer we find examples of a *compassio essendi* which empowers the service of others even at great cost to oneself. Not long before her death, Ita Ford wrote the following note, tragically testifying to the empowerment of the *compassio essendi:*

> Yesterday I stood looking down at a 16-year-old who had been killed a few hours earlier. I know a lot of kids even younger who are dead. This is a terrible time in El Salvador for youth. A lot of idealism and commitment is getting snuffed out here now. The reasons why so many people are being killed are quite complicated, yet there are some clear, simple strands. One is that many people have found a meaning to life, to sacrifice, to struggle, and even to death. And whether their life span is 16 years, 60 or 90, for them, their life has had a purpose. In many ways, they are fortunate people.
>
> What I'm saying is, I hope you come to find that which gives life a deep meaning for you...something worth living for, maybe even worth dying for...something that energizes you, enthuses you, enables you to keep moving ahead. I can't tell you what it might be -- that's for you to find, to choose, to love. I can just encourage you to start looking, and support you in the search. Maybe this sounds weird and off-the-wall, and maybe, no one else will talk to you like this, but then, too, I'm seeing and living things that others around you aren't...[855]

Ford remained rightly elusive: whatever, or whoever, empowered her to stay amidst the people could not be pointed to or argued toward, but only sought in, and as, love. The *compassio essendi* is not an achievement; instead, it is more akin to a vocation or a calling *to be* and to enact what one has received. We are called to be agapeic.

As a way of life, the agapeics of community provides a hyperbolic sign that points to the agapeic source of being. We look to the examples set by other women and men and

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[855] Ita Ford, *"Here I am Lord": The Letters and Writings of Ita Ford*, ed. Jeanne Evans (New York: Orbis, 2005), 195.

are goaded into contemplating *how* their lives testify to, or derogate from, a sense of the

agapeic creator and sustainer of all being. Indeed, this can be read as a truly catholic

exercise because it requires us to consider not only the examples of well-known martyrs –

Etty Hillesum, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. – but also the lives of countless others

who witnessed, in various ways, to the elemental goodness of being through lives of

service to others. We gaze upon those who have shown us how to live because

> the community of agapeic service is a hyperbolic sign of transcendent good. Our
> participation in agapeic transcending is our fullest self-transcendence: our love, in
> transcending self, transcends to transcendence itself. We find ourselves in a love
> that not only passes beyond self, but more ultimately passes *between* ourselves
> and transcendence itself.[856]

Agapeic service "is not a matter of possessing power but of being empowered and being

able to empower – but not with one's own power but within the energy of the divine in

which it is one's privilege to participate."[857] Lives of agapeic service testify to a

hospitality to the call of the Transcendent who universally holds all of creation in being

and who intimately dwells within the center of each being. Indeed, for Christians, the

martyrs themselves possess something of a Christomorphic shape. This is to be expected

because the *compassio essendi* "reaches its absolute form in the God of Christ – absolute

porosity, absolving porosity, passing into and through the mortal agony of the human and

its *passio* – absolute passion become a *compassio essendi*."[858]

Allow me to link these ideas with Charles Taylor. I do this, first, because we now

have sufficient metaxological resources to begin to make good on my pledge to show

how Desmond's thought augments Taylor's narrative of secularity. Second, Taylor also

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[856] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 156.
[857] William Desmond, "Consecrated Thought: Between the Priest and the Philosopher," *Louvain Studies* 30
    (2005): 92—106 at 106.
[858] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 115.

recognizes something of the hyperbolic nature of the "Kingdom of God." Without using the language of hyperbole, he reminds us "not to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian liberalism. We should find the center of our spiritual lives beyond the code, deeper than the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time to subvert it [sic]."[859] The Kingdom, for both Desmond and Taylor, encapsulates not only a doctrine or a teaching but enshrines and makes possible a way of living agapeically.

"At the heart of orthodox Christianity, seen in terms of communion," for Taylor, "is the coming of God through Christ into a personal relation with disciples, and beyond them to others, eventually ramifying through the church to humanity as a whole. God establishes the new relationship with us by loving us, in a way we cannot unaided love each other."[860] The church is called into being by and is placed at the service of agape, "the love God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power."[861] The church was meant to catalyze a new network of relations based, not in ethnicity or race or kinship, but solely on the divine gift of agapeic love. Alas, the ideal hardly ever achieves status as the real; for, as Taylor observes, "the church lamentably and spectacularly fails to live up to this model; but this is the kind of society it is meant to be."[862]

Following Ivan Illich, Taylor reads the "Good Samaritan" as a parable tapping into the anarchic potential of the agapeic network.[863] Moved by the wounded man, the Samaritan defies cultural and religious proscriptions to assist him. This action creates

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[859] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 743.
[860] Ibid., 282.
[861] Ibid., 20.
[862] Ibid.
[863] For more on the influence of Illich on Taylor, see Eric Gregory and Leah Hunt-Hendrix, "Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age*, 217-239.

a new kind of fittingness, belonging together, between Samaritan and wounded Jew. They are fitted together in a dissymmetric proportionality which comes from God, which is that of agape, and which became possible because God became flesh. The enfleshment of God extends outward, through such new links as the Samaritan makes with the Jew, into a network, which we call the Church. But this is a network, not a categorical grouping; that is, it is a skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property.[864]

Therein rests the anarchic potential: the network of agape is based in and draws its strength from a divine source and can unfold irrespective of extant commitments and allegiances. Agape is irruptive, breaking in to overthrow old orders as it inaugurates the Kingdom here and now, in this place and time. Nor is agape indexed to any metaphor, analogy, or symbol: Jesus's parables possess multiples images not because he lacked imagination but because the Kingdom cannot be expressed in images or words. The parables are hyperbolic, not meant to *inform* hearers but to *form* them as Kingdom dwellers, capacitating them to perceive and encouraging them to abide within it.

The corruption of the network of agape occurs when "it falls back into something more 'normal' in worldly terms."[865] We keep the practices but lose their originary spirit:

The network of agape involves a kind of fidelity to the new relations; and because we can all too easily fall away from this (which falling away we call "sin"), we are led to shore up these relations; we institutionalize them, introduce rules, divide responsibilities. In this way, we keep the hungry fed, the homeless housed, the naked clothed; but we are now living caricatures of the network life. We have lost some of the communion, the "conspiratio," which is at the heart of the Eucharist. The spirit is strangled.[866]

Modernity, Taylor and Illich fear, has domesticated the transformative anarchy of agape. Eric Gregory and Leah Hunt-Hendrix capture the bureaucratization of agape when they write: "When a homeless shelter is built down the road, Christians put away the candle

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[864] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 739.
[865] Ibid.
[866] Ibid.

and extra mattress that they had always kept ready for the stranger who might appear, in need of a bed for the night. Now, when the Christian opens the door, she gestures in the direction of the hostel down the street and washes her hands of the need to engage personally with the visitor in need."[867]

Desmond and Taylor align in believing the ethos of the Kingdom can neither by captured by nor fixed into a code of conduct. Yet Desmond's agapeic indirection offers more than an exhortation to "find our spiritual lives beyond the code."[868] In a way, he desires for us to probe the surface of Taylor's map to uncover and unleash the primordial force that is at the heart of and animates all being. Desmond beckons us reflect intensively on whether, and how, our communities serve as expressions of the agapeic generosity of our Creator. Are we animated by the secret sap of agape or do we betray this primordial love in our words and deeds? This has ecclesiological significance as even the Church, the Body of Christ, must examine its conscience:

> The Church of an agapeic catholicity would be Church of the *compassio essendi*… one would have to say that this is not unrelated to the kenotic poverty of the highest that gives for the lowest. We should have to see divine kenosis as an agapeic *compassio essendi*…And would not this be something more intimate with the divine kenosis: a poverty of highest fullness that empties itself in porous creation and gives itself for the good of the lowest?[869]

Rightly does Desmond conclude with a question, rather than an assertion. His is an invitation to pause and consider mindfully how one stands within the *metaxu*. Instead of giving us a map different from Taylor's, he supplements the map drawn of our secular age. Even if this means trekking out beneath the eclipse of the transcendent, or standing at the shores of Dover Beach, or wandering the desert of atheism, metaxological

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[867] Gregory and Hunt-Hendrix, 226-7.
[868] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 743.
[869] Desmond, "The Porosity of Being," in *Renewing the Church in a Secular Age*, 305.

mindfulness trains us to discern, even in the most inhospitable conditions, the secret sources of divine life at the heart of being. Desmond captures metaphysically what Antony and Evagrius knew existentially and spiritually: "sometimes the desert brings us closer to the primal ethos than the sophistications of the city of man."[870]

It is by drawing our attention toward the inexhaustible depths of the primal ethos that Desmond augments Taylor's map not by extending its borders but by penetrating its hidden depths. The agapeic network is not imposed upon the *metaxu* but exposed as abiding at the core of creation itself. Agape is not, so to speak, a *lagniappe* or "additional something" added to creation. It is, rather, the innermost essence of all creation. If Taylor furnishes us with a map to guide our pilgrimage into the desert of unbelief, Desmond carries with him a metaxological dowsing rod capable of divining the presence of secret life-giving streams. He bids us to pause, to dig deep into the sands, and to drink as we uncover a vast reservoir beneath the surface. With Desmond as our guide, we come to understand how there is no point on the map – ourselves included – not somehow rooted in and nourished by these agapeic streams. Taylor's map gives us the breadth of our secular age. Desmond's dowsing rod uncovers the infinite agapeic depths.

Exposing the hidden metaphysical depths of Taylor's map serves to reconfigure our understanding of what it means to participate in the *metaxu*'s community. All of creation, rooted in the agapeic generosity of its Creative origin, is transformed into a common home. Taylor's map, metaxologically conceived, provides us with a sense of how the intimate strangeness of being inscribes all of creation into a shared *oikos*. The *logos* of this *oikos* is agape, and what Desmond gives us to understand is the metaphysical depths of an authentic ecology. In coming to know ourselves as subjects *of*

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[870] Desmond, *God and the Between*, 155.

divine mystery, as persons who are implicated in the ongoing act of creation, our

response not only to one another but to the whole of the natural world must be one of

agapeic service. This, perhaps, roots Pope Francis's understanding of the "integral

ecology" described in *Laudato Si*. Pope Francis cites Saint Francis as the

> example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived
> out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in
> the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was
> particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast…He shows
> us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the
> poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.[871]

The Holy Father's integral ecology, galvanized at its core by agape, is effectively an

integrating ecology summoning its participants to work for the good of our shared home.

What Desmond helps us to see is how, on Taylor's map, there is no neutral ground on

which we may feel unconstrained by the call to agapeic service because there is no point

on the map outside of Divine reach. Every point, above and below the map, bears the

trace of the Transcendent upon it. To senses attuned by metaxological *askēsis*, what had

appeared to be the gloaming of the Transcendent and its disappearance upon the horizon

comes to be seen, not as the encroachment of night, but as the prelude to a new dawn. By

this dawn's light, we perceive how deeply we are interwoven into the agapeic network

and discover how our "simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence,

exploitation and selfishness"[872] contribute to the common good of all creation. In leading

us into the primordial depths of creation, metaxology gives us the courage to sing with

Saint Francis a canticle to Brother Sun, Sister Moon and celebrate our kinship in our

common home.

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[871] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*: *On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2016), §10.
[872] Ibid., §230.

In the hyperbole of the agapeics of community, we find ourselves drawn into the ceaseless give-and-take of the *metaxu*. We are finite yet discern within finitude signs of the infinite exterior to ourselves, interior within ourselves, superior to ourselves. This porosity reminds us how "our being is in receiving and giving. We are receptive to the gift of the other, and we are free to give beyond ourselves to others, and in some instances, simply for the good of the other as other."[873] Taylor's map, viewed having traversed a metaxological indirection, becomes a living breathing tableau proclaiming the Transcendent present in and disclosed through all beings. We call to mind exemplars of lived-out generosity, saints known and unknown. Words attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola spring: "Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve. To give and not to count the cost...". Agapeic giving, a kenotic generosity, a "good measure, pressed down and overflowing" (Lk 6:38). Not just words, but incarnate expressions of the Agapeic Origin. A sense of agapeic astonishment "throw us over" toward the Transcendent whom we encounter not as a faceless or nameless force but as the vitalizing force of the *compassio essendi* which gives us a foretaste of the divine love had for us and endows us with courage to love others as we have been loved. Metaxological indirection leads us into the depths of Taylor's map where we hear the call, and are empowered to respond, to the challenge to "go and do likewise."

4.6 Exercising Transcendence: Hurrahing in the *Metaxu*

Guided by Gerard Manley Hopkins, I conclude by suggesting how Desmond's metaphysics offers a resource to anyone desiring to encounter the Transcendent in a secular age. Simply stated: undertaken as a spiritual exercise, metaxology *enables*

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[873] Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought*, 68.

practitioners to re-open the question of the Transcendent and *ennobles* us by giving us to behold how we are inscribed into the *metaxu* not as isolated monads but as participants in a community given to be, and sustained in its being, by an Agapeic Creator. Metaxology is not only an exercise in thinking but also, and more vitally, a transformative attunement into a way of metaphysical beholding and an awakening to one's own being beheld.

In 1878 Hopkins described his "Hurrahing in Harvest" as "the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing in the Elwy."[874] The sonnet captures a rekindling of astonishment that, read with metaxological eyes, encapsulates the "poetics of the between" and subtly weaves together each of the four indirections we have explored:

> SUMMER ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise
>   Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
>   Of silk-sack clouds! Has wilder, willful-wavier
> Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?
>
> I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
>   Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
>   And, éyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
> Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?
>
> And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
>   Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet! –
> These things, these things were here and but the beholder
>   Wanting; which two when they once meet,
> The heart rears wings bold and bolder
>   And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.[875]

The end of summer in North Wales, a portent of an impending bleak, raw, winter, provides Hopkins an unexpected moment of reaping. Around him, "stooks" or sheaves of grain have been gathered and stacked; in the sky above, the "wind-walks" as tumbling

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[874] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (London: Oxford, 1955), 56.
[875] Hopkins, "Hurrahing in Harvest," 134.

clouds form and re-form themselves as they drift along. As he walks, it is as though he hears nature's wordless call to prayer; he lifts up his heart and his eyes, taking part now in creation's liturgy. The allusion to Ruth 2:3 is deliberate, for just as Ruth met her future husband Boaz while "gleaning" in the field behind the harvesters, Hopkins "gleans" in creation hints and intimations of the Savior's presence in all things. As Kevin Hart writes, "what was at first was the gathering of the *vestigia dei* has suddenly become something more whole and more real than could have been anticipated. The gleaning has resulted in a rich harvest: Christ greets Hopkins in a manner that could not be 'realer' or 'rounder.'"[876] The advent of Christ reverses our understanding of communication because, as Desmond observes, "communication is from what is other to us first, and then from ourselves toward that otherness as other. The first initiative does not lie with us, and yet something is initiated. As initiating, we are always seconds."[877] This sonnet does not conjure Christ into creation but offers a poetic response to an epiphanic disclosure of the divine presence indwelling in all things.

This brings us to the sonnet's key line: "these things, these things were here but the beholder Wanting." The doubling of "these things" is a redoubling, a stuttering intensification of his sudden awareness of creation's overdeterminacy. It is not Hopkins who imposes order and beauty upon nature but, rather, he is awakened, as if out of a deep sleep, and given to behold creation with new eyes. Newly roused, he wipes the rheum of postulatory finitism from his eyes and is given to perceive that it is he who has been Wanting, that it is he who has been blind to creation's splendor. His poetic metaphor

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[876] Kevin Hart, "For the Life Was Manifested," in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, eds. Gregory Stallings, Manuel Asensi, Carl Good (New York: Fordham, 2014), 86.

[877] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 266. Desmond uses Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" to explore the interplay between beholding/being beheld.

works, literally and literarily, to "carry us beyond" the terrestrial toward Transcendent as the "heart rears wings bolder and bolder" and bears him aloft in rapturous ascent. Hopkins awakens to being beheld by his Savior and, in knowing himself as beheld, is given to behold things anew. The created order is not an inert substrate awaiting our imprint. Instead, creation communicates itself as an unsurpassable moment revealing "Rapturous love's greeting."

"Hurrahing in Harvest" can be read as a poetic concretization of Desmond's indirections. For it is *Hopkins* who is moved idiotically to raise his entire self – "I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes" – toward the "all that glory in the heavens." What had been, just lines before, the "skies" are transformed into the "heavens" as the heart's perception now directs his eyes and allows him to behold the divine presence immanent in the created realm. Sensuous aesthetic imagery communicates, furthermore, the surfeit of beauty and the rupture of the sublime as it paradoxically captivates the poet and liberates his heart to approach the Holy One. The "hurrah" of the harvest comes as he gleans the presence of Christ, the creative *Logos*, mysteriously present not in a distant Empyrion but as the sustaining presence glimpsed in "azurous hung hills." As an erotic indirection, the beholder's "Wanting" is not grudgingly acknowledged but ecstatically celebrated, for this "Wanting releases the beholder to follow the heart's longing toward the one for whom it most longs. Finally, we have a profound sense of the agapeics of community: the heart takes wing and "hurls for him, O half hurls earth." Why only "half hurls?" Because Christ is present *within* creation, not hovering in the ether but concretely "under his feet." For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, we are given to behold how all created beings are always "together with" in community with the Creative *Logos*.

The "Hurrahing the Harvest" proves simultaneously enabling and ennobling. It *enables* Hopkins to peer beneath nature's taken-for-granted surface and to perceive within creation signs pointing beyond the immanent order. The scenery of the end-of-season harvest is transfigured for, in but a moment, he finds himself being drawn into a harvest that is never out of season: the harvest of Christ himself who plays, as Hopkins notes elsewhere, in "ten thousand places." Herein, for the Christian, the poem proves ennobling. For instead of telling the reader what to think *about*, the sonnet draws the reader into an event of disclosure as the created order reveals its hidden depths, thereby allowing Hopkins – and perhaps his accompanying readers – to dwell within creation attuned to being called by, and englobed within, the divine presence.

What Hopkins captures in poetry is present, *in nuce*, in Desmond's metaxological poetics. Approached as a form of spiritual exercises, we are drawn into and made able to perceive the "happening" of the between. No single instance of this "happening" points directly toward God, as though the Holy One were something one could point toward. Rather, one is indirected and returned to the primal ethos where one is refreshed at the wellspring of astonishment. Metaxology, as an *askēsis* does not tell the reader *what* to think because it "works" to transform *how* one perceives. Whereas the modern ethos would emphasize the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence, metaxology seeks to restore a sense of porosity between them: "I" cannot be apart from the Transcendence because my existence, as well as the existence of every other finite being, is inescapably *a* part of the created whole.

Undertaken as an exercise, Desmond's indirections permit us to "exercise transcendence" by equipping us to search within the immanent order for signs of the

Transcendent. One can, of course, select any one of the indirections and contemplate *that being is*, the intelligibility of nature, the intimate strangeness of being encountered in prayer, or the way our communities can be reconfigured according to an agapeic logic. Each one, taken singly, can stir us into contemplation. But if we take these indirections as a way of life, as a way of beholding, then we can see how each of them intermediate with one another. As we get caught up in the interplay of these ways, we can find our way of being in the *metaxu* undergoing a transformation. Like Irish musicians in a *seisiún*, each "way" contributes to and enhances the way we stand in the between, gradually attuning us to the rhythmic interplay of voices. Rightly attuned to the "crack" in everything, we find ourselves dwelling in, and overcome by, a sense of the "good *craic*" of creation. Desmond's ways are not dispassionate inquiries but, rather, exercises in attunement aimed at getting us to detect the rhythm and to find our place within the symphonic composition of creation.

What Desmond offers, then, is a nuanced and exciting response to Taylor's call for "new and unprecedented itineraries" to the sacred. As a response, Desmond offers us four indirections beginning in the here-and-now which attempt to make sense of our experience of being within the *metaxu*. Rather than abstract logical arguments, Desmond's ways are performative: they invite us to consider things mindfully from a metaxological vantage point in order to see if this new way of beholding makes better sense of our experience. For those weaned on the thin gruel of univocity, Desmond's recourse to subtle poetics cannot, at least at first, but be maddening. But by undergoing these "ways" as exercises, we begin to detect within the finite realm various hints and glimmers of the too-muchness or overdeterminacy of being. Desmond's itineraries do not

take us so much into new realms of Taylor's map as much as they uncover the map's own hidden depths. Instead of directing us elsewhere or off the map, Desmond goads into an archaeological exploration of the primordial ethos where we uncover long-clogged springs whose water is capable of refreshing our sense of the divine.

But, in a way, Desmond's innovative itineraries are little more than recuperations or repristinations of a venerable tradition. For, as we saw, his "ways" are efforts to return to the originary ethos of older arguments for God's existence. He would agree, at least in part, when Taylor observes that our goal "is not to return to an earlier formula, inspiring as many of these will undoubtedly be…."[878] Desmond's task, however, is not an atavistic retrieval aimed at preserving the "older arguments" just as he finds them. We saw this in his reformulation of Anselm's argument. Instead of articulating it as a logical proof, he returns Anselm's way to its origins in prayer and meditation. This "way" is not meant to be read over but must be undergone as a practice. The same can be said of Aquinas's 3rd and 5th ways regarded not as artifacts but as still-viable "ways" to approach the divine. Each offers an opportunity to "exercise transcendence" as one pauses within the *metaxu* and gives oneself over to a form of philosophical contemplation or, dare it be said, philosophical prayer. If metaxology unclogs porosity and reawakens the *passio essendi*, this creates a space for a fruitful rapprochement between theology (*fides quarens intellectum*) and philosophy (*intellectus quarens fidem*).[879] I explore this relationship in the next chapter.

By leading us through a series of meditations aimed at returning us to the primal ethos of being, Desmond intends to rekindle within his readers a sense of astonishment

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[878] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 755.
[879] Desmond, *Is there a Sabbath for Thought*, 19.

or, with Hopkins, to induce one into "Hurrahing" in the *metaxu* as we get swept away into the poetics of the between. We cannot, of course, compel our own astonishment; yet, by approaching metaxology as a form of spiritual exercise, it certainly seems possible to "prime the pump," so to speak, by raising the question of the Transcendent in new ways. We can read metaxology not as giving us "the answer" or as possessing "the Truth" but as a theater of encounter where the poetics of the texts gives us to behold the *metaxu* with transformed perception. Indeed, each of the ways aide us in loosening our conceptual grasp on being, allowing us to relax and begin a process of inhabiting the mystery through a process of letting go. Letting go of our concepts, of our striving to master and control, need not precipitate an internal crisis. Indeed, the opposite is the case as the revitalized *passio* communicates a sense of being beheld. Before we can behold, we are beheld and sustained in existence by a source beyond our control. As beholders, we are "Wanting" insofar as desire admits no finite satisfaction: our hearts, as Augustine knew, restlessly hunger for the infinite. But we are "Wanting" in still another way, "for now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12) and we await a moment of breakthrough or epiphany whereby we might behold the full splendor of the *metaxu*. Desmond writes:

> We tend to think of beholding as a movement from us to something other to us. Beholding something seems to put the perceiver in a position of active superiority to the being beheld as other. My beholding seems to confer on me the preeminence: the other beheld may be marvelous but my beholding seems to be the privileged glory. This kind of beholding, I would say, is too full of itself, and hence lacks the fertile emptiness that is filled with openness.[880]

Desmond's achievement: in the "Return to Zero," he leads us back to the "fertile emptiness" of the *nihil* and then, through each of the indirections, allows our posthumous mind to consider creation in a new way. The purgative process of agapeic nihilism clears

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[880] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 266.

away the debris of self-assertion, demolishes idols erected by the *conatus*, and stirs

within us a sense that before we can behold we must first be beheld.

The epigraph from John Ruusbroec offers a mystical expression of how

metaxology "works" as a type spiritual *askēsis*:

> One must lose oneself in a state devoid of particular form or measure, a state of darkness in which all contemplatives blissfully lose their way and are never again able to find themselves in a creaturely way. In the abyss of this darkness in which the loving spirit has died to itself, God's revelation and eternal life have their origin, for in this darkness an incomprehensible light is born and shines forth.[881]

Metaxology performs to the extent it is able to disorient one and then, gradually, reorient

the way one understands oneself in the between. Before it speaks, before it makes claims,

metaxology is first and foremost a response to having been addressed. It is a call, a

summons, a vocation leading us, mystagogically, into a refreshed sense of and

relationship with the Mystery at the heart of all being. Metaxology cannot, consequently,

be limited solely to describing a way of thought. It is a way of life enlivened by a

mindfulness nourished at the source of thought itself. Metaxology, furthermore, remains

hospitable to a porosity between the disciplines of philosophical and theological inquiry.

Fittingly, metaxology would seem to endow those willing to undertake and be

transformed through its practice with what Keats called a "Negative Capability" enabling

one to abide in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact

and reason."[882] My task now is to suggest how metaxology can contribute in an explicit

way to capacitating the agent in this way through the inculcation of what I want to call

"epiphanic attunement."

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[881] John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals, The Sparking Stones, and Other Works*, ed. James Wiseman (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 147

[882] John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 277.

Chapter 5

Epiphanic Attunement

We are the beings of receptive spirituality, who stand in freedom before the free God of a possible revelation, which, if it comes, happens in our history through the word. We are the ones who, in our history, listen for the word of the free God. Only thus are we what we should be.

<div align="right">-Karl Rahner, Hearer of the Word</div>

Readers familiar with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* will recall the scene when Aslan offers his life in exchange for Edmund Pevensie's. Per the law of the "Deep Magic," the Witch had a claim on the life of every traitor in Narnia and Edmund had betrayed his siblings. During their negotiations, Aslan challenges the Witch's knowledge of the law, inviting her to tell him of its meaning:

> Tell you what is written on that very Table of Stone which stands beside us? Tell you what is written in letters deep as a spear is long on the firestones on the Secret Hill? Tell you what is engraved on the scepter of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea? You at least know the Magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to kill.[883]

Mr. Beaver minces no words: "So that's how you came to imagine yourself a queen – because you were the Emperor's hangman. I see." The power she exercises over life and death is not her own but parasitic; it is seized, not granted. Metaxologically stated, her reign bears the mark of a dominative *conatus* severed from any sense of congress with, or responsibility to, an endowing *passio essendi*.

As the dark night of Aslan's sacrificial death cedes to dawn, Lucy and Susan hear "a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate." They return to the Stone Table only to find it broken in two pieces and Aslan's body no longer there. In this moment of the ancient Table's breakdown the children, and the reader, are astonished

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[883] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 141.

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by an unexpected breakthrough: there, "shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself." Aslan reinterprets the events. For although the Witch

> knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know: Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.[884]

Metaxologically expressed: the Witch's way of self-assertive grasping failed to root itself in the depths of the law. Her knowledge of the Law was severed from its originary ethos and had become a univocal rule subtending her claim to dominion. Aslan knew, however, of its enigmatic origins; he knew the "way" of the Law was not the way of domination but a non-disabling vulnerability to an ancient power stronger even than Death. In Aslan's appearance amidst the Table's rubble, we glimpse what Richard Kearney identifies as the "epiphanic paradigm of descent into darkness (*kenosis*) and ascent into light (*anabasis*)."[885] His sacrifice subverts the regnant order and, by breaking it down, possibilizes the breakthrough of a new order. In Narnia's darkest hour, when all hope is lost, he is an epiphany, an "irruption of light in opacity,"[886] whose manifestation reveals the Deep Magic's power and unleashes a counter-movement of good against evil.

In this chapter, I explore how "exercising" metaxology might transform our mode of perception by inducing what I call "epiphanic attunement." The itinerary of our exercises follows Kearney's epiphanic paradigm: we endured the breakdown of the "Return" and, our eyes purged by death, our return was guided by the light breaking

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[884] Ibid., 163.
[885] Richard Kearney, "Secular Epiphanies: The Anatheistic Hermeneutics of Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 367-374 at 369.
[886] Ibid.

through the "crack" in everything. Posthumous mind renders us attentive to signs of the infinite in the finite, traces of the Transcendent in the immanent. A restored sense of the *passio essendi* allows us to assume a new stance toward reality: we open ourselves in a gesture of hospitality and vigilantly listen in silence for the Divine to speak. We are beings of perpetual expectancy who abide in an endless season of Advent; we are those who, with the whole of our being, listen within history for a revelatory word from the Transcendent. Epiphanic attunement describes how we are made able to recognize, and to respond, to events of divine disclosure. As a way of life, metaxology transforms the way we perceive, and abide within, the *metaxu* by giving us to behold all things anew.

The chapter has four parts. In Part I, I retrieve from Husserl a concept of orthoaesthesis (right perception) and transpose this concept into metaxological register. This transposition allows me, in Part II, to explore the dynamics of epiphanic attunement in two narratives describing a process of "coming to perceive rightly" as a response to what Desmond calls "godsends." In Part III, I suggest how the Road to Emmaus narrative offers a palmary example of epiphanic attunement and I gesture toward areas where the concept may be developed fruitfully in the future. I conclude by considering the relationship between metaphysics and theology and indicate how metaxology exposes the "crack" and fundamental porosity between them. Metaxology does not force us to choose between them because it shows how both ways of thought are both rooted in, and respond to, the mystery of being. By leading us back into this primordial mystery, we will come to recognize and appreciate metaxology's mystagogical impulse.

5.1   Orthoaesthesis: From *Status Quo* to Salutary Breakdown

"Edmund Husserl blazed a path toward a phenomenology of the flesh," Richard

Kearney remarks, "when he broached the crucial theme of the living body (*Leib*)."[887]

This emphasis on the role of the living body emerges explicitly in Husserl's *Ideas II,*[888] a

text written in 1912, rewritten in 1915, and continually revised until he abandoned it in

1928. Husserl's assistants Edith Stein and Ludwig Landgrebe published the text

posthumously, in 1952, after further redaction.[889] At its core, *Ideas II* "concentrates on

the unity of the self as person and on the self as an embodied, spatially oriented, and

temporally located subject, thus providing a corrective to the rather disembodied idealist

standpoint" of his earlier philosophy.[890] If Husserl's earlier work emphasized a

disembodied transcendental ego, this works serves as a corrective by restoring to the ego

a body of living flesh.

To show why this restoration is important, let me offer a quick point of contrast

between Descartes and Husserl. In the "Sixth Meditation" Descartes writes that from

> the fact that I know that I exist, and that at the same time I judge that obviously
> nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I
> rightly conclude that my essence consists entirely in my being a thinking thing.
> And although perhaps (or rather, as I shall soon say, assuredly) I have a body that
> is very closely joined to me, nevertheless, as I am merely a thinking thing and not
> an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body,
> insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that
> I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.[891]

For Descartes, as students of philosophy know, the body was a hindrance to the

attainment of clear and distinct ideas. *I* am essentially "thinking thing" or *res cogitans* for

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[887] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism,* 87.
[888] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*,
      trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989)
[889] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 172.
[890] Ibid., 172.
[891] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 96.

whom it is vital to bracket out the misleading information conveyed by my senses. In *Ideas II*, Husserl puts together what Descartes had sundered: "The Body is, in the first place, the *medium of all perception*; it is the *organ of perception* and is *necessarily* involved in all perception."[892] Rather than an impediment to knowledge, Husserl's body (*Leib*) is the means by which we apprehend and constitute the world we perceive. We do not "float" ethereally above the flux because, as embodied subjects, we are immersed within it. The body, consequently, is "the bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses."[893] Where Descartes sought filter out the contribution of sense data, Husserl's turn to the body effects a medieval retrieval: *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*.[894]

For Husserl, the body is the "bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses."[895] It is the *Nullpunkt* where the axes of space and time intersect in one's flesh. Yet it is seldom the case that we experience our bodies as this zero-point. Drew Leder describes this phenomenon as the body's disappearance.[896] For Leder, "disappearance" does not mean the body vanishes; trading on the "*dis-*" as a prefix of negation, it is more the case that the body simply does not appear to consciousness. Think, for instance, of the countless bodily movements and adjustments needed just to get us from our beds to the shower each morning. The way we move throughout the day with ease belies the ongoing interplay taking place within the body. I walk through the airport, thinking about being on

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[892] Husserl, *Ideas II*, 61. Edith Stein, on p. 43 of *On the Problem of Empathy*, makes the same observation.
[893] Ibid.
[894] Nothing in the intellect not first in senses.
[895] Husserl, *Ideas II*, 61.
[896] Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 26-7.

holiday. Yet I can think of skydiving only because I am not thinking about a host of sensations and stimuli besetting my body. I move without much, if any, thought of the operations of my viscera as my body digests lunch; I am not aware either of the change in tile color as I pass through concourses or to the cacophony of voices buzzing around me. Now consider: how do your socks feel? Your underwear? Are you now attentive to areas of your body you were not previously thinking about? This makes sense because, accustomed to wearing clothes, we have learned to "filter out" our sense of their weight and texture and we pay them little heed. Or think about how when we become engrossed in a good novel, or a ripping dissertation, entire regions of our body "disappear" in what Leder calls *background disappearance*:

> Bodily regions can disappear because they are *not* the focal origin of our sensorimotor engagements but are backgrounded in the corporeal gestalt: that is, they are for the moment relegated to a supportive role, involved in irrelevant movement, or simply put out of play.[897]

Immersed in the flow of some activity, some or even all of our bodily regions may disappear into the background. A master chef does not think, "Now I lift the knife, now I bring it down" nor does the pianist focus on "now this finger, now that." The body does not evanesce into nothingness but "disappears" to allow the subject to focus on a task.

In *Ideas II*, Husserl describes this "background disappearance" with a neologism: orthoaesthesis. Etymologically, the word means "right perception" and, as Husserl uses it, we can detect two meanings. On one level, orthoaesthesis conveys how the world *normally* appears, the way appearances typically "coalesce into the unity of one concordant experience."[898] In an orthoaesthetic system, there is harmony between the subject and her surroundings world allowing her to operate in a relatively unobstructed

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[897] Ibid., 26.
[898] Husserl, *Ideas II*, 71.

manner. The master chef negotiates the kitchen by chopping, slicing, weighing, tasting, etc., without giving much attention to *doing* it. A *habitus* cultivated over many years allows, under orthoaesthetic conditions, for her to navigate the kitchen space with relative ease. Furthermore, on a second level, orthoaesthesis refers also to how one perceives, or does not perceive, one's body. Remaining with the chef, under orthoaesthetic conditions she does not think about her alimentary canal, her core temperature, or her gall bladder: these operate in the background and, so long as they work in concert, their smooth running allows her to focus on teaching new chefs how to julienne carrots.

But what happens when there is a breach in the orthoaesthetic system or a sudden disruption to the harmony? The chef grabs a hot pan from a hapless rookie and burns her hand. Blistered, it "feels" different and differently. How so? She runs a finger across her skin and feels swollen flesh where it had been smooth. She picks up her favorite knife and it feels somewhat awkward in her wounded hand. Things feel different, but the change is not with the exterior world but in my apperception of it. Husserl writes:

> The changed data of the field of touch are indeed still apperceived according to appearances but precisely as anomalies, versus the concordant appearances of normally functioning sensibility, in which the same things are given in relation to the equally concordant and normally appearing parts of the Body and in relation to the whole of the Body.[899]

Muttering under her breath, she continues cooking but must now favor her other hand. She works now more deliberately, more cautiously, because the knife is no longer an extension of her body but, in her left hand, a hard-to-wield tool. There is a breakdown in the formerly smooth operation; what had been recessed and disappeared now obtrudes in a way making her task more onerous because it requires a new focus on the body. Any change in a sense organ, Husserl observes, effects a change in how "things appear in a

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[899] Ibid., 72.

corresponding way, and this modified givenness refers back to the normal.[900] As we face

the obstacles presented in moments of breakdown, we become aware of having fallen

from a "normal" state. Moments of discord reveal taken-for-granted concordance.

Husserl's point, as I take it, is that we seldom recognize an orthoaesthetic or

normally functioning system until *after* some type of rupture has occurred. We become

aware of how clothes "usually" fit only when our pants are too tight or a tag scratches our

skin. We rue our clumsiness when we cut a finger and have to finish peeling potatoes

with the other hand. And a breach with more permanent consequences, like losing a limb

or one's vision, can necessitate a total reorganization of life: learning to walk with a

prosthesis, or having to re-design the house, or to develop new strategies for executing

tasks once easily accomplished. Regardless the severity, the experience of disruption

recalls a sense of prior harmony, how things "worked together" and flowed normally.

Viewed orthoaesthetically, the pile of unpeeled potatoes is a pre-dinner chore and the

steps leading upstairs are a means of getting to the bedroom. For one with a burned hand,

the pile is an obstacle to mashed potatoes; for one with a broken leg, the stairs once taken

two at a time seem now an insurmountable feat. In some cases, we pine for things to go

"back to normal" or to resume their orthoaesthetic flow; in other cases, measures must be

taken to establish some semblance of a "new normal."

As you may have noticed, the model of orthoaesthetic perception is based on

pathology, on the breakdown of an organ affecting one's apprehension of the world.

Indeed, to denominate something as a "breakdown" requires the ongoing functioning of

the other organs; a systemic failure of all organs would be death. Again Husserl:

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[900] Ibid.

> Anomalies as such can therefore occur only in this form, namely that the normal world remains constitutively preserved, i.e., experienced, by the rest of the perceptual organs, the ones which, functioning reciprocally for each other as such organs, continue to give us experiences in the normal way.[901]

What is true for organ systems holds, in a similar way, in instances of inter-subjective disagreement. As I interact with others, I may recognize how extensive

> complexes of assertions about things, which *I* made in earlier periods of time on the ground of earlier experiences, experiences which were perfectly concordant throughout, are *not corroborated* by my current companions, and this not because these experiences are simply lacking to them (after all, one does not need to have seen everything others have seen, and vice versa) but because they thoroughly conflict with what the others experience in experiences, we may suppose, that necessarily are harmonious and that go on being progressively confirmed.[902]

Through inter-subjective experiences, the possibility that *I* have misperceived a given state of affairs arises. We encounter resistance to our settled claims about "how things are in the world" by rubbing up against others. Indeed, it may turn out that as "I communicate to my companions my earlier lived experiences" they will realize "how much these [experiences] conflict with their world, constituted inter-subjectively and continuously exhibited by means of a harmonious exchange of experiences."[903] Inter-subjective engagement requires we negotiate our claims within a shared social space where conflicts can, and do, arise. I have a cousin who was appalled when he went to school having mixed a red Christmas sock with a green St. Patrick's Day sock. To his (then undiagnosed) colorblind eyes, the socks *appeared* identical; to his fashion-conscious classmates, his attire appeared, at best, quaintly anomalous. Within the social nexus of a classroom, the fashion breakdown was made manifest and he learned to get a second opinion on his clothing choices before leaving the house each day.

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[901] Ibid., 77.
[902] Ibid., 84-5. Emphasis original.
[903] Ibid., 85.

While I want to preserve the core of Husserl's understanding, let me transpose the concept of orthoaesthesis into a metaxological register. The dynamism of Desmond's *metaxu* and the ongoing intermediation of beings can, I think, welcome Husserl's sense of the embodied subject emplaced within a nexus of other bodies. Husserl's sense of inter-subjective mediation between beings resonates, to my ear, with Desmond's sense of the fundamental porosity of being. We are not, for either thinker, solitary subjects or monads. Not only are we the "porosity of being become mindful,"[904] but also, for Desmond, we are the porosity of being become flesh. This porosity

> is embodied as an aesthetic field. Aesthetic environment means the milieu of all that surrounds us, all that envelops us, and all that seeps into and invades us. We are in it, but it is also in us. The aesthetic environment is originally not a neutral objective outerness. It is a field saturated with equivocal significance.[905]

Like Husserl, Desmond understands our lives as lived in congress with other beings. But when it comes to Husserl's sense of "orthoaesthesis," Desmond has reason to demur. For Husserl, it seems we become aware of "perceiving rightly" only in the breach, only *after* we suffer a breakdown of concordance. We experience a descent or, better, a decline from the "normal" and need to work to restore previous balance. For Desmond, however, the opposite seems to be the case: it is the breakdown of "normal" modes of perception that a breakthrough into a new and transformed mode is possible. One risks the *katabasis* or descent of the darkness of the "Return" so that one's *anabasis* or ascent may be guided by a posthumous mind attentive to the "crack" in everything. This breakdown is not *pathological* but, by rekindling our sense of the Transcendent, deeply *theological*. By inducing a sense of the intimate strangeness of being, a strangeness too easily embedded in the sediment of the quotidian, our exercises seek to penetrate the mantle of the taken-

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[904] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 203.
[905] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 253.

for-granted. By returning us to the primal ethos, we are given to discern in the *metaxu*

signs of the infinite in the finite, glimmers of the transcendent within the immanent.

My point: inscribed into a metaxological framework, orthoaesthesis need not refer

backward or nostalgically to a lost sense of the status quo. On the contrary, I want to

suggest that "right perception" actually apprehends otherwise concealed depths and

allows one to behold the "qualitative charge of the 'to be' of aesthetic happening."[906] Our

exercises have aimed, with each hyperbolic indirection, to jostle us from the status quo

and to reawaken within us the question of the Transcendent. Desmond does not want

readers to languish in a neutral metaxu, a reconfigured order lacking in value, but to coax

us onto an itinerary indirecting us toward the primal ethos:

> The value-saturation of the original elemental aesthetic field contradicts the
> abstract notion that we live in a neutral world. There is no neutral world. The
> neutral world is a neutralized world – neutralized of the charge of ontological
> worth already constitutive of the aesthetics of happening. The neutralization does
> not destroy the charge, only diminishes or deforms it.[907]

Orthoaesthesis, metaxologically framed, does not mean seeing things "neutrally." Instead

of describing the status quo, I consider "right perception" as is an achievement wrought

through metaxological *askesis*. Just as the breaking of the Stone Table occasioned the in-

breaking of the Deep Magic, so too does breakdown induced by the "Return to Zero"

capacitate perception of the "crack" in everything. This breakdown of the reconfigured

ethos allows us to discern by means of the in-breaking light various indirections toward

the Transcendent. For the metaxologically minded, this breakdown is a salutary

breakthrough giving us to behold not a different reality but enabling us to perceive reality

newly attentive to the inextirpable mystery encountered in the depths of being.

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[906] Ibid., 254.
[907] Ibid.

Before turning to consider *how* orthoaesthetic perception attunes us to divine

manifestations or epiphanies, I want to think along with David Bentley Hart and

transpose our concept of orthoaesthesis into a more theological key. At the risk of

saturating my reader with a lengthy passage, let me offer his description of the "gaze of

love" as enabling us to perceive

> each thing's fortuity, its mystery, its constancy within a "transfinite" unity, its
> immediate particularity, its radiant inherence within its own "essence," its
> intelligibility, and its way of holding together in itself the diversity of its
> transcendental aspects as a realized unity amid, and in unity with, multiplicity and
> change. The gaze of love seeks the being of things in the abiding source in which
> they participate; it is a way of seeing that is acquainted with moments of
> enchantment, which awaken it, however briefly, to a recognition of the
> persistence of being's peaceful and sustaining light…and of this light's
> "gratuitous necessity"; and these moments, however fleeting or imperfect, compel
> thought to risk a conjecture toward the infinite.[908]

The "gaze of love" perceives being not as a neutrally inert "thereness" but as a roiling

and shimmering happening. The gaze beholds the singular in its *haecceity* but allows

itself to be directed to its endowing source. The gaze of love is not a voyeuristic

"peeping" in on the happening but a beholding aware of one's always already being

beheld and sustained by the Agapeic Creator. Hart elaborates:

> This gaze of love, that is to say, sees being as an infinite font of manifestation,
> knowing itself in the existence and essence of things, kenotically allowing (and so
> without alienation from its own diffusive goodness) the arrival in itself of what is,
> in itself, nothing: the pure ontic ecstasy of contingent existence.[909]

Hart's gaze perceives what our metaxological exercises seek to attain, namely, a sense of

being's overdeterminacy, its hyperbolic too-muchness encountered idiotically,

aesthetically, erotically, and agapeically. We can be hyperbolically indirected toward the

Transcendent and, through a renewal of our porosity, fall silent in astonishment as we

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[908] David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 35.
[909] Ibid.

behold the gratuity of creation. Rocked back on our heels, struck by the reawakened sense of the *passio essendi*, our silence is transformed into a vigilant listening. Not only our ears, but our whole selves, open outward in ecstatic anticipation of a word we cannot command or compel but a word we long to hear with the entirety of our selves. "Only thus," as Rahner observed in the epigraph, "are we what we should be."

As I use it, orthoaesthesis or "right perception" describes a way of beholding that is attentive to the "crack" in everything and is attuned to the rhythmic interplay as beings intermediate with one another. Rather than prescribing *what* we perceive, it expresses *how* we are mindfully present within the *metaxu*. It does not equip us with a theory but draws us into an attitude of intellectual contemplation; by undertaking metaxology as an *askesis* we are offered not a theory but an opportunity to be transformed into one of the *theōroi*. So transformed, we realize how not every breakdown, not every interruption, proves pathological. In fact, moments of breakdown can be moments of salutary breakthrough. Our exercises provide practices in "breaking through" an era's reconfigured ethos to behold the primordial ethos where we can be recharged at the well of astonishment. By arousing a sense of the overdeterminacy of being, we are tutored to behold all things aright with what Hart rightly calls the "gaze of love." The created order, perceived rightly, not only points beyond itself but becomes the locus of revelatory moments, divine epiphanies, or what Desmond has taken to calling "godsends."

5.2   Orthoaesthesis as Epiphanic Attunement

I want now to develop this sense orthoaesthesis in an increasingly theological register by showing how it capacitates epiphanic attunement. If, as Hadot writes,

"attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude,"[910] I propose epiphanic attunement as the fundamental spiritual attitude of the metaxologically-minded subject. By means of metaxological *askesis*, one can join ranks with the *theōroi* who actively contemplate the whole of creation with joyful vigilance. Attentive to the hyperboles of being, the whole of creation is beheld as a communicative tableau rife with signs and indirections pointing toward the Transcendent. Epiphanic attunement is a way of perceiving the whole of creation rightly or orthoaesthetically with the whole of one's being on the lookout for any "chink or crack through which the light appears – a kind of gap, or permeability, a porosity to a light that comes from a source beyond."[911] Attentive to the "crack" in everything, we incarnate vigilant hospitality to the Divine and await, with the whole of our being, a word of address. To be sure, as Rahner observed, this

> listening does not necessarily imply any actual hearing (neither in fact nor for the content). Perceiving God's silence is also an answer that makes the listening meaningful. Under God's silence too we may become what we have to be at any rate: personal finite spirit before the personal infinite free God, with whom we necessarily have to deal, at least by being aware of God's silence.[912]

Though we cannot compel the Transcendent to speak, we can ready ourselves should a revelatory word enter into history Creator speak. We open ourselves to the silence and pray with the Psalmist: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning" (Ps 130:5-6). We watch, and pray, and await in anticipatory silence for a word to shatter the silence.

In an essay entitled "Godsends," Desmond offers a fascinating, if not unambiguous, reflection on the nature of revelation. This is a signal development, as it

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[910] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84.
[911] William Desmond, "Godsends: On the Surprise of Revelation," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92, no. 1 (2016): 7-28 at 7.
[912] Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 151.

marks an engagement with a topic central to theology. Indeed, one might wonder if this is not something of a response to Christopher Ben Simpson's suggestion that, perhaps,

> Desmond would benefit from a more positive account of revealed, confessional theology. Indeed, Desmond might need to "come out of the closet" as a theologian as well – to be able to give a more robust accounting (and so remedy a kind of incompleteness in his present accounting) of the indeed necessary relation between, not only philosophy and religion, but philosophy and theology.[913]

Even if Desmond is not forthcoming about the relationship between metaphysics and theology, we may still attempt to discern in this more explicitly theological essay the nature of their relationship. Does Desmond need to "build a bridge" between metaphysics and theology or might it be the case that his archaeological explorations have succeeded in uncovering an oft-neglected yet fundamental porosity between the disciplines?

5.2.1   Godsends and Revelations

Desmond begins his reflection on godsends by consulting its definition in the Oxford English Dictionary. He is quick to point out the word's amphiboly. True, a "godsend" normally refers to an unexpected boon or fortuitous turn. An anonymous benefactor pays the balance on all lay-away items in a store; in dire financial straits, an unexpected inheritance arrives in the mail. At the same time, godsends may not always be received, at least not initially, with joy. The loss of a job, or the diagnosis of a disease, creates an upheaval in one's life. Looking back upon the event, given some time and perspective, one may eventually come to regard it as a salutary disruption. One sees it, in a sense, as a "dark grace," a painful yet beneficial breakdown leading to a positive change. My friend lost a six-figure job on Wall Street in 2008. At first stunned, and then forlorn, the shock did eventually wear off. He started to see, in the rubble of his career,

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[913] Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 94.

prospects for him to move in a new direct. He sold his apartment and returned to school to earn a degree in education. Now a teacher in a Detroit public school, he regards the collapse of his former life as a gift – a secret godsend – allowing him to discern and embrace what he recognizes now as his vocation.

Thus "godsend" cannot, then, be taken to have a univocal meaning. Indeed, Desmond emphasizes its equivocity when he defines a godsend as:

> an event or happening that befalls us, and that may open out the opportunity of a benefit or boon, or surprising gift; an even that might well be shadowed by something suffered, and suffered not just in the receipts of gifts, but also in the visiting on some of pain and disaster or death.[914]

There is a Shakespearean element at play: what seems fair can be fair or foul and what is foul can be fair. If my friend's lifestyle change is an instance of the latter, one may think of how winning the lottery can at times help, and at other times ruin, a family's life.

In the word "godsend" there is, moreover, the "implication of a sending, by the divine to us, perhaps, and hence the insinuation of a kind of revelation."[915] A godsend is not experienced as a random bit of luck, a mere happenstance, but as a moment of divine communication; the godsend appears as having been deliberately sent by the divine. Yet neither the godsend's arrival nor its purpose is always clear. As Desmond observes

> A godsend might be noted but often we do not know what the meaning communicated is. Ambiguity and mystery may attend that more painful sense of equivocity that comes with the disaster that is a curse to one and a blessing to another. In the word "send" also there is the implication of being sent on a journey, being called on a mission. The godsend may be a sending that causes us to set off on a way in the name of a mysterious cause.[916]

One needs both to be attentive to the godsend's arrival and to discern its meaning with care. For it is one thing to hear one's name called in the darkness; it is another, as Samuel

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[914] Desmond, "Godsends," 10.
[915] Ibid.
[916] Ibid.

learned, to make oneself vulnerable by responding, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:9). The godsend can rouse us from somnolence to reveal new vocational opportunities or to open up unimaginable pathways. If the godsend is communicative, and arrives as a call, how one responds, or does not, cannot but have consequences for the whole of one's life.

For Desmond, the godsend might be characterized as an irruptive or shocking surprise whose arrival restores a sense of being's fundamental porosity. Mindful of Charles Taylor's "buffered self" and the "immanent frame," he describes how

> A godsend comes and we are no longer within the buffered closure in which we previously were. A veil is drawn back – the literal meaning of apocalypse (*apokalypsis*). A chink or crack happens in the closure of the "immanent" frame," to use Charles Taylor's phrase. We have to ponder the light that comes through the chink and wonder how far we might travel in its illumination.[917]

If the arrival of the godsend catches us off guard, it is a disorientation that reorients us to behold things in a new and transformed manner. The godsend bursts open the bounds of the ordinary to reveal hitherto concealed depths. Think of Thomas Merton:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.[918]

Something within Merton gave way, a clog dissolved, and it was revealed to him how all of us were intimately, if not strangely, connected to one another. What had been understood as parallel tracks of the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane, appeared in the godsend's wake to crisscross and interpenetrate. The godsend

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[917] Ibid., 11.
[918] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 153.

did not dispel mystery but served to draw Merton into its depths where he experienced

the depths of his interconnectedness with, and porosity to, those around him.

It is important to insist: the arrival of the godsend, even when welcomed, cannot

but have an effect upon its recipient. The godsend, as a communication, is a moment of

epiphany or disclosure. It involves moments of *katabasis* and *anabasis*. Its arrival, put

otherwise, induces a breakdown before yielding to a transformative breakthrough:

> We have to be divested of the shutters before the chink that opens to the light is
> felt – felt as suffering that breaks down the shutters. And perhaps it is not
> surprising that the surprise of the godsend is very often in the dawning of a
> destitution where we can no longer count on anything, and not on ourselves
> either. Beyond all possible determination or self-determination the godsend visits.
> Perhaps we have to become as nothing for it to communicate in the newly
> evacuated space of porosity.[919]

Within the context of an increasingly secular age, I have emphasized the "Return" as a

propaedeutic. In pushing nihilism to its limit, in meditating on the implications of

standing beneath the Angel of Death's wings, we faced the truth of existence: we come

from, and return to, nothing. In the wreckage of monuments built to honor the *conatus*,

we may yet be astonished to hear a whisper: *yet it is*. Light bends around the Angel's

wing and we perceive the gratuity of being. Gifted with posthumous mind, we behold all

things with purged senses. In the wake of breakdown instigated through "Return," one

comes to see with new eyes, come to perceive orthoaesthetically, how all that is, is a gift.

Each of Desmond's "hyperboles of being" can, he avers, be regarded as at least

partly "requisite conditions for fleshing out the character of our being porous to a

godsend.[920] By framing each of his indirections as an *askēsis*, we found four distinct yet

related ways to perceive anew our fundamental porosity to the Transcendent. My claim is

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[919] Desmond, "Godsends," 21.
[920] Ibid., 22.

not, of course, that the practice of metaxology *renders* us porous or that it somehow pierces the so-called immanent frame. The exercises are effective to the extent they rouse us from the sleep of finitude and sensitize us to the primal porosity of being; the exercises attune us to the crack, they do not make it. "There are always cracks in the frame,"[921] Desmond observes, but in our reconfigured ethos we have become blind to this porosity. He clears his throat, takes mic from Leonard Cohen, and croons: "there is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in." Then he adds a line: "but we need eyes trained, or attuned, to see this light."

At this point, a reader may begin to share Simpson's worry over "a possible logic of dualism here, where philosophy on its own can perform such that theology is redundant, unnecessary, rejected."[922] Desmond, though, can at least partly allay this concern. For while it is true that the hyperboles perform by throwing us toward the Transcendent, our movement toward the divine is not and cannot be self-initiated. Rather

> what the godsend brings out is that the movement comes to us. The ball of the divine play is first thrown to us. There is the gift of receiving. There is something of a reversal – it is not we who are intentionally in search of something, but something finds us, finds us out, and unexpectedly to us. When it comes, there is a surprising consonance of what is sent with secret desire hardly known or perhaps denied by us; and it is we who are the beneficiaries.[923]

Desmond is not positing two disciplines – metaphysics and theology – separated by an impermeable barrier. On the contrary, the advent of the godsend reveals not only a permeable threshold between them but also recovers, as D. C. Schindler notes, "a certain priority of religion *over* philosophy."[924] Or, to hearken back to our earlier discussion, we find here an instructive reaffirmation of the Westphalian 5th Commandment: *Be Still and*

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[921] Ibid., 21.
[922] Simpson, 94.
[923] Ibid., 23.
[924] Schindler, "The Positivity of Philosophy," 134.

Know: Metaphysics is a Vocation. We are capable of self-transcendence because we have been opened by the advent of the Transcendent. The initiative rests always with the divine. Our openness is itself a gift, a godsend.

Let me tie this together with a joke. When I was a kid, my grandfather told a story of a tourist in Ireland who stopped to ask a local for directions to Dublin. The Irishman's reply: "Well, sir, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here." The gist: if you really want to get someplace, then it is better to start out nearer to where you want to arrive at. I have to admit: I never found it funny. But tweak it a bit. A spiritual seeker comes and asks for "the" way or even "a" way to God. For the jokester, or the univocal minded philosopher, the punchline remains the same. For the metaxologically minded, though, no punchline is necessary. For the answer to the question is simple: one can be directed to God from *any* point within the *metaxu* because *all* points within the *metaxu* pulse with the secret life of the divine. *Creatio ex nihilo* is not a formula but a framework for perceiving how all of creation is held in being by its Creator; Anselm's way is not a neutral argument but an archaeological expedition into the self's recesses where one discovers how, even when alone, one is never alone. Whether discerned within the exterior world or one's interiority, we can come to perceive how the "crack" in everything reveals how the light illuminating the *metaxu* directs our gaze to its Transcendent source. In this way, for the epiphanically attuned, "everything that is is a godsend; and yet nothing that finitely is is the source that communicates and reveals itself in the godsend."[925]

Above, I mentioned an ambiguity in Desmond's treatment of revelation. On the one hand, he is at his most finessed when probing how the "crack" in everything communicates a sense of an agapeically creative Origin. Rightly perceived, creation can

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[925] Ibid., 12.

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be seen as the locus of "general revelation" in a way biblical religions gladly affirm: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies display his craftsmanship" (Ps 19:1). John Scotus Eriugena: "the whole world is a theophany."[926] And if I am correct, our metaxological exercises not only *informed* us about metaphysics but have also *formed* or attuned us to perceive these traces within the *metaxu*. We have been attuned, in other words, to behold creation orthoaesthetically with epiphanically attuned senses. To view creation as a revelatory godsend is to view creation as an event in which we participate: we, too, are implicated in the revelatory happening of the *metaxu*. Those who have undertaken the "Return" and traversed the indirections, have been re-formed to behold all of creation with epiphanic eyes. The arrival of the godsend, does not and cannot leave us unscathed. In being struck, we bear a wound of knowledge – a trace, a scar, a graced reminder of the Transcendent's ingress into our lives. As Frodo's scar alerted him to the approach of the Ring Wraiths, this wound attunes us to the presence of the divine in all things and sensitizes to moments of disclosure occurring in the everyday.

What I find lacking, however, is Desmond's treatment of special revelation. In a metaxological philosophy or theology, how are we to make sense of Jesus and the prophets? No less than Richard Kearney describes Desmond's brief consideration of these latter figures as "an unusual moment."[927] It is unusual given how his brief treatment is richly allusive to and draws upon theological concepts and language:

> What of the special revelation claimed for Jesus Christ? Christ would be the absolute godsend – the singular absolute, absolutely intimate with the absolute sender, and yet absolute as sent; not a nothing intermediate, though a kenotic intermediary absolutely porous to the sending source; there is an absolute community of God and godsend (Father and Son) and yet the revealed godsend

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[926] Ibid., 12.

[927] Kearney, "William Desmond and the Gift of Creation," not yet published will get page number.

does not diminish the transcendent mystery of the source, even while revealed in absolute immanence…Christ the absolved and absolving godsend?[928]

Simpson's eyebrows raise: "Desmond, you speak of intra-divine community and kenosis. Is your theological slip showing? Declare yourself or explain why you end, not with a *Credo*, but a question mark!" Simpson's impatience is shared by Manoussakis who is vexed by Desmond's silence about "Christ, even when writing on God."[929] He continues:

> So the majority of references to Christ in *GB* [*God and the Between*] are to a Christ that serves merely as an example (see esp. 187, 338, 145) – in a sense not different from the Christological exemplarism one meets in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Desmond avoids assigning to Christ's role and place any uniqueness as the in-between par excellence, or if he alludes to such an exception (as on pp. 185, 194, and 196) this is done in Christianity's name while carefully avoiding any personal endorsement.[930]

Kearney is more sanguine, observing of his fellow Corkman, "While hinting at his own personal Christian commitment, Desmond retains his position as a philosopher of religion rather than a proponent of dogmatic theology in leaving us with Christ as a *question*."[931] Finally, Patrick Gardner makes a similarly irenic observation: "Desmond, of course, stops short of taking up the mantle of Catholic theology, and we need not force him to abandon this sense of methodological integrity."[932]

Gardner and Kearney let Desmond off too easily and, to my mind, Simpson's call for him to "'come out of the closet' as a theologian"[933] needs to be entertained. For although he is not a confessing theologian, his language resonates with and is at times saturated with theological allusions. I ask: what role does Christ play within Desmond's thinking? Is metaxology haunted by Jesus? Is he a secret cousin to Hazel Motes who

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[928] Ibid., 13.
[929] Manoussakis, "The Silences of the Between," 270.
[930] Ibid, 284.
[931] Kearney, above
[932] Patrick Gardner, "God Beyond and Between," in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, 182.
[933] Simpson, 94. Simpson raises the question to Desmond in "Theology, Philosophy, God and the Between" published in *Louvain Studies* 36 (2012): 226-238.

saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.[934]

Is Christ clandestinely present within Desmond's thought, a shadowy figure who emerges only to invite us deeper into the woods? Should Desmond exorcise this presence to prevent Christ from contaminating the pure pursuit of philosophical reasoning? Does he need to build a wall between Athens and Jerusalem?

Then again, it may be that we have been seduced into seeing walls and impermeable barriers where none exists. What if, in its archaeological endeavors, metaxology has actually exposed a fundamental porosity between metaphysics and theology? What if philosophy as the "love of wisdom" and theology as a receptive listening to the Word of God were both nourished by the same wellspring of mystery? A revelatory godsend would not, then, be imposing something alien upon reason but would be exposing these mysterious depths. What if, by guiding us toward and resurrecting our sense of this mystery, metaxology were actually a sort of mystagogy? If seen as mystagogical, our metaxological exercises could work on two levels. Generally, for those seeking to return to a sense of the sacred in a secular age, they would work to resurrect a sense of astonishment at being's givenness and lead us to a consideration of how the "crack" in everything serves to point toward an Agapeic Creator. For those reading it on a theological level, this approach would a potential "Hopkins option" whereby one is given to behold from within the *metaxu* the many and various disclosures of Christ's presence. Metaxology's poetics work not only to point to reality but to disclose its hidden depths. We witness such a revelatory disclosure when Hopkins writes:

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[934] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 16.

> I say more: the just man justices;
> >   Keeps grace; that keeps all his goings graces;
> > Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
> >   Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> > Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> >   To the Father through the features of men's faces.[935]

Metaxology, by reawakening our sense of and guiding us deeper the mystery at the heart of being, has a mystagogical dimension goading us to rethink the relationship between metaphysics and theology. Rather than an antinomy – reason *or* faith – metaxology's mystagogical element works to reveal how both reason and faith are rooted in and nourished at the wellspring of mystery. There exists, at a most basic and primordial level, a porosity between them. If Christ appears to be at play within Desmond's thought, it may be because metaxology and theology are sourced in, even if they respond differently to, the mysterious presence of the *Logos*. Let us turn, then, to consider how the rupture of the godsend's arrival may expose and guide us into these abyssal depths where we might probe the nature of the threshold separating metaphysics and theology to see if there might be a greater porosity between reason and faith than is often realized.

5.2.2 Panting with Secret Life: Epiphanies in O'Connor's "Revelation"

In discussing "godsends," we must resist the temptation to linger at the level of abstract theory. We need to see how a godsend, by precipitating a revelatory event, works or performs by "drawing the curtain back" to reveal the secret and mysterious depths of being. I share Desmond's esteem for Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" as brilliantly illustrating how godsend arrives and can lead to a transformation in perception. The godsend's arrival does not deliver Ruby Turpin to a new reality but enables her to behold reality anew. The narrative unfolds according to what Kearney describes as

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[935] Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," 129.

a triangle between author, text, and reader. Or to borrow from Ricoeur's terminology: the *prefigurative* epiphany of lived experience passes through the *configurative* epiphany of the text before finding its achievement in the *refigurative* epiphany of the reader. Epiphany may thus be construed as a triadic movement from life to text and back to life again – a movement amplified and enriched by the full arc of hermeneutic transfiguration.[936]

This triad is vividly and clearly present in "Revelation" and my hope is that by focusing on the godsend's arrival in Ruby's life, and probing two subsequent epiphanies, we will have a better sense of *what* orthoaesthesis is and *how* it works to attune us to the epiphanies of the everyday. The dynamics uncovered and explored in this story will allow us to offer, in the next section, a metaxological reading of John 20.

O'Connor's story is rich and merits lengthy consideration, but I want to focus only on the triadic movement from life, to text, back to life. The story opens with Ruby Turpin's entrance into a crowded doctor's office. It is apparent from the beginning that her physical size does not reflect any such spiritual magnanimity. While she exchanges pleasantries with a "pleasant" looking woman seated nearby, the reader is drawn into her harsh inner monologue. Around her, she observes

> The well-dressed lady had on red and grey suede shoes to match her dress. Mrs. Turpin had on her good black patent leather pumps. The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks. The old woman had on tennis shoes and the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them – exactly what you expect her to have on.[937]

The "ugly girl," named Mary Grace, broodingly reads a textbook entitled *Human Development*. To her chagrin, Ruby senses Mary Grace's hostility toward her. She stares at Ruby, stares through her; to Ruby, "the girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give."[938] The more Ruby expatiates

[936] Richard Kearney, "Secular Epiphanies: The Anatheistic Hermeneutics of Gerard Manley Hopkins," 373.
[937] Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Literary Classics, 1989), 635.
[938] Ibid., 637.

on her uprightness, outwardly and in an inner monologue, the more hostile Mary Grace

becomes. In a moment of inward revelry, Ruby proclaims her gratitude to Jesus:

> "When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little
> of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank
> you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different!"
> For one thing, somebody else could have got Claud [her husband]. At the thought
> of this, she was flooded with gratitude and a terrible pang of joy rang through her.
> "Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!" she cried aloud.[939]

Her ecstasy is fleeting, for at that moment Mary Grace heaves her book and strikes Ruby

over her left eye. Mary Grace lunges at Ruby and digs her fingers into her neck. One she

has been pulled away and restrained, a dazed Ruby cannot keep from looking at her. The

girl's eyes were now "bluer than before, as if a door had been tightly closed behind them

was now open to admit light and air."[940] Seduced by her eyes, Ruby realizes the girl

somehow knows her deeply, personally, and she speaks directly to her:

> "What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting as
> for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gazed locked with Mrs. Turpin's.
> "God back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered.[941]

These words, the reader realizes, have more of an impact upon her than the book. Her life

has, quite literally, been ruptured by a rather sudden and violent encounter with a text.

That afternoon, after she returns home, Ruby tries to rest but "image of a razor-

backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears" visits her

imagination. There is no mistaking it: Ruby knows deep down that "she had been singled

out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have

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[939] Ibid., 644.
[940] Ibid., 645.
[941] Ibid., 646.

been applied…The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman."[942] Her anger at this godsend erupts as she rages at God:

> "What do you send me a message like that for?" she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?"[943]

Just as the sun is setting, and in a "final surge of fury," she roars, "Who do you think you are?" Her Job-like challenge ricochets and strikes her, putting *her* into question.

What may have appeared, to any onlooker, as a random act of violence is recognized by Ruby as a godsend or divine communication. The godsend's arrival is irruptive and destabilizes her sense of certainty and security. Until her encounter with Mary Grace, Ruby thought herself endowed of an illusion-free view of the world. The wake of the godsend, in the rubble of the breakdown, there is glimpse of breakthrough. Struck silent, Ruby beholds her pigs as though their pen were a monstrance:

> like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor and on the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life.[944]

Bowed in silent adoration, Ruby finds herself implicated in something beyond herself. As day cedes to night, she remains transfixed by the hogs, her "gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge."[945]

Allow me to suggest, by drawing on Desmond, that what we are observing is the process by which Ruby is being brought to "perceive rightly" by undergoing a process epiphanic attunement. The arrival of the godsend, as Desmond observes, carries with it a sense of the "intimate universal." The godsend, he writes,

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[942] Ibid., 647-8.
[943] Ibid., 652.
[944] Ibid., 653.
[945] Ibid.

> Opens up the porous space of our being between: this means not only being ourselves at all and in the first instance, but in the first instance being with the other in a *co-natus*, a "birth with." The godsend is the giving of the intimate universal, the "birth with" of the intimate universal…We are recipients of communication, and receivers of a sending.[946]

Mary Grace's book is a projectile, he observes, but in striking its target the "projectile upends all the projects of Mrs. Turpin" and reveals "something prior to and beyond all projects."[947] Unbidden and unwanted, the breakdown makes breakthrough possible. The pig-pen epiphany does not inform Ruby but forms her to perceive within the hogs her share in a secret life. This is a re-birth leading, as Cardinal Newman's gravestone reads, *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*, "out of shadow and phantasy into the truth."

If the first epiphany allowed Ruby to perceive her share in the hogs' "secret life," the second epiphany overturns her understanding of the status quo's propriety. Lifting her gaze from the pigs to the sky, she sees only

> a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. There was only She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right…They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.[948]

Like the prodigal son who "comes to himself" amidst the pigs (Lk 15:17), Ruby comes to see her old life in a new light. The order according to which she had lived has been

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[946] Desmond, "Godsends," 25.
[947] Ibid., 26.
[948] Ibid., 654.

upended and refigured. The chink in Ruby's world lets new light flood in and the logic of the status quo is subverted: the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Mt 20:16).

The reader is left to wonder: does Ruby's life change? Does this experience have an ethical edge inducing, as Kearney observes of narrative, "a re-evaluation of one's world."[949] We are not told, although we have a clue. The story ends with Ruby making

> her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.[950]

Though her vision has faded, she seems attuned to something she did not hear, and could not have heard, before. She bears upon her flesh and within her soul the wound of this graced encounter. In giving her to behold all things anew, a new way of life has been opened before her. To be sure, the swelling above her left eye will eventually dissipate, but the expansion of her soul need not shrink back to its original proportions. She has been gifted, or perhaps afflicted, by a subversive theo-logic overturning her sense of righteousness: her ways are, clearly, not God's ways. If there is a gossamer strand of hope for her conversion, it is in her attunement to the crickets' melody. If she hears now in nature the whoops and cheers of those leading the way to heaven, perhaps she can find in this song the rhythm for a new way of life, one granting her admission to the horde of those "rumbling toward heaven."

Ruby moves triadically from life to a text and then back to life, although not the life she once knew. The breakdown of the status quo, for Ruby and reader alike, exposes our primal porosity and gives us to see how the intimate universal binds us to hogs and crickets and "battalions of freaks and lunatics." If we descended with her into darkness

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[949] Richard Kearney, "Narrative imagination: between ethics and poetics" in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 184.
[950] O'Connor, 654.

(*katabasis*), our upward ascent (*anabasis*) is guided by the chink of light opened by the godsend. We stand with her, taking our place between the hogs and heaven, and behold all things with renewed senses. We perceive a kinship with all of creation and are struck by the falsity of our hierarchies based on clean and unclean, redeemed and the damned. If Jesus is present in the story, it is not the Jesus who serves as the guarantor of the bourgeois status quo. It is, instead, the Misfit's Jesus who lurks here, the one who has "thrown everything off balance." For those epiphanically attuned, one may exercise the "Hopkins option" and catch sight of a liberated Jesus at play in ten thousand places and within the horde's faces. Serenaded by the cricket chorus, Ruby returns home. Haunted by nostalgia, does she block out the godsend and resume her former life? Or might her ears be forever attuned to hearing the horde in the crickets, and might this nocturnal music provide her with a new rhythm by which to live her life? We can only imagine.

I hope the reader has not judged this an indulgent detour. The arrival of a godsend marks a *transitus*, the crossing of a threshold as one is led from a life configured according to one logic and refigured according to another. This crossing, though, cannot remain at the level of theory and must find flesh. And O'Connor is an author committed to understanding this *transitus*. In 1958 she wrote:

> The action of grace changes a character. Grace can't be experienced in itself. An example: when you go to Communion, you receive grace but you experience nothing; or if you do experience something, what you experience is not the grace but an emotion caused by it. Therefore in a story all you can do with grace is to show that it is changing the character.[951]

Of course, O'Connor never heard of metaxological metaphysics and probably had never heard of orthoaesthesis. Nevertheless, I think her story enfleshes the process of epiphanic attunement. If our spiritual exercises cultivate a general attentiveness to the "crack" in

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[951] Ibid., 1067.

everything, what "Revelation" offers us is a sense of what takes place when we undergo a particular encounter with grace. Ruby's encounter with Mary Grace refigured did not impart new knowledge – at least not immediately – but initiated a process of being re-formed or attuned. The effect of Grace caused a breakdown and allowed a breakthrough into new layers of meaning. "All of my stories," O'Connor writes in the same letter, "are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it."[952] While not without noetic content, grace acts to initiate the slow, and sometimes painful, event of conversion as one comes not only to *think* differently but to *behold* all things anew.

I conclude by making a connection between the godsend and fundamental theology. A distinction can be made between the *fides quae* or the "faith in which" someone believes (the content) and the *fides qua* or the "faith by which" one believes. They are not, as Paul Crowley observes, "two distinct tracks or ways of believing, but are distinguishable aspects of a single, unified act of faith."[953] In Ruby we witness a conversion whose leading-edge cuts at the level of the *fides quae*. It is not that Ruby suddenly comes to belief, but in the rupture of the status quo, her beliefs are transformed and refigured. In coming to see things rightly, she falls mute because she no longer knows *what* to think: the content of belief has been changed. What was revealed in the godsend *may* transform her faith (*fides qua*) but that part of the story remains unknown. As she walks home in silence, she must draw out for herself the consequences of what she has beheld and decide whether, and how, to incorporate this godsend into her faith.

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[952] Ibid.

[953] Crowley, "Mystagogy and Mission: The Challenge of Nonbelief and the Task of Theology," 10.

5.2.3 *My Lord and My God*: Beholding Christ's Graced Porosity

I want to treat John 20, Thomas's encounter with the Risen Christ, as a scriptural instance of the godsend's irruption. To begin, though, let me start by tweaking Wittgenstein's aphorism: "A *painting* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our imagination and our imagination seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."[954] The painting to which I refer is Caravaggio's "The Incredulity of Saint Thomas" (Italian: *Incredulità di San Tommaso*) which depicts Thomas's encounter with the Risen Christ. Thomas, who had not been present for Jesus' first appearance (John 20:19-22), rejects the disciples' testimony when they tell him, "We have seen the Lord" (20:24). Rather than doubtful or skeptical, Thomas is better regarded as resolute in his unbelief (*apistos*) and tells them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25). It is Jesus' second appearance to the disciples that Caravaggio paints. Three disciples huddle around Jesus with Thomas at the forefront. Jesus serenely pulls back his robe and guides Thomas's right hand toward his pierced breast. Thomas's finger slides into the wound and his face becomes the picture of astonishment: eyes widen and astonishment ripples across his brow as, in this haptic happening, faith is born.

The trouble, though, is that Caravaggio's painting seems to have enframed or set the imaginative parameters on the way many read and interpret this text. For while Jesus does say to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving (*apistos*) but believe" (20:27), there is no scriptural evidence for Thomas actually having touched Jesus. As Brian Robinette

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[954] In the *Philosophical Investigations* §115, "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."

observes: "Thomas's response is not to touch in a strictly empirical way – again, we are never told that Thomas does what he originally set out to do – but to make a bold acknowledgment only possible in faith."[955] Thomas's responses to Jesus' invitation is memorialized as follows: "My Lord and my God!" On this, Robinette:

> This is among the clearest affirmations of Jesus as "God" in the New Testament, and it comes as a response to an unanticipated upsurge of insight into the meaning of Jesus as the crucified-and-risen One. The theme of Jesus' unity with the Father is found throughout John's gospel…but here we have an affirmation from a disciple who discerns the reality of God in Jesus' crucified-and-risen "form." To "see" this form is to "see" the Father.[956]

If Caravaggio's painting would have us believe Thomas' faith comes as a result of touching Jesus' wounds, a close reading of the Gospel's should give us pause. In his remonstration of Thomas, Jesus does not mention touching but only *seeing*, and seems to indicate that sight not essential for belief: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe" (20:29). "In other words," Robinette writes, "blessed are those who enter into this structure of faith as a response to apostolic testimony: 'We have seen the Lord.'"[957]

I will return to Robinette in a moment, but I need first to retrieve an insight from Hilary of Poitiers. In *The Trinity*, Hilary observes how, as a Jew, Thomas would have daily recited the Sh'ma: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord they God is one" (Dt 6:4). In addition, Thomas would often have heard Jesus say: "I and the Father are one" and "All things that the Father has are mine" and "I in the Father and the Father in me."[958] So, how is it that when Thomas says of Jesus, "My Lord and My God," he is not "unmindful of the

[955] Brian Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 102.
[956] Ibid.
[957] Ibid.
[958] Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington D.C: CUA Press, 1954), 235.

principal commandment?"[959] The Sh'ma would be, to the faithful Jew, wholly at odds

with Jesus' claims to unity with the Father. Yet, Robert Wilkens notes, "during Christ's

lifetime these words apparently made little impact on him. It was only when Thomas

knew the resurrected Christ that he grasped the meaning of what Jesus had said

earlier."[960] We have a seeming aporia: how could Thomas affirm both the oneness of God

and, in meeting the Risen Christ, identify him with as Lord and God?

Although Wilkens appears seduced by Caravaggio's depiction of this scene, he

nevertheless captures the importance of Hilary's question:

> During Christ's lifetime his followers did not grasp fully who he was. Even
> though some of his sayings imply that he had a unique relation to God, and he
> performed miracles and revealed his heavenly glory to his most intimate followers
> at his Transfiguration on the mount, his disciples did not have eyes to see who he
> was. They had sound theological reasons for their opacity. They knew by heart
> the words of the Sh'ma, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord." Hence
> Hilary asks a question I am sure many other readers of the New Testament have
> asked themselves: How could a faithful Jew who had recited the Sh'ma since
> childhood, whose prayers were addressed to God the king of the universe, address
> Christ as God or Son of God, as the earliest Christians did? Hilary's answer is that
> the Resurrection of Christ transfigured everything. When Jesus came and stood
> among the disciples and put his finger in his side, Thomas said, "My Lord and my
> God!" When confronted by the risen Christ one does not say, "How interesting,"
> but "My Lord and my God!"[961]

As Thomas beholds the wounded Christ, he undergoes a transformation of perception. In

the ruptured flesh of the Risen One, Thomas undergoes a rupturing of his own

understanding of God. His encounter does not add information to, or stack another

proposition upon, the content of faith (*fides quae*). It elicits, rather, the birth of an

explicitly Christian mode of believing (*fides qua*). Christ's wounds are, for Thomas, a

blessed porosity which transforms his very mode of perception: he sees, not a different

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[959] Ibid., 235-236.
[960] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 90.
[961] Ibid., 90-91.

reality, but reality differently. And, as Robinette, pointed out above, future generations do not need to duplicate Thomas's experience in order to participate in this faith. The apostolic witness – enshrined in their preaching of the Gospel and expressed in the ministration of the Church – is sufficient to mediate an encounter with the Risen Christ. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, captures this: "Faith comes from what is heard" (10:17). Coming to faith is entering into, or living into, an ongoing dialogue rooted in the experience of the apostle. We do not come to faith as a solo endeavor but only as a part of a community. In a positivistic era convinced "only what can be counted can count," Sandra Schneiders lays down the gauntlet: as was the case with Mary Magdalene and Thomas, our "obsession with the historical-physical must give way to faith in the ecclesial-bodily presence of Jesus."[962] We come to belief in the risen Christ not as monads, apart from the Church, but only as a part of the *ecclesia*. In an ideal world, it would be a bumper sticker slogan: "No Church, No Jesus. Know Church, Know Jesus."

Although it is not his word, I think Robinette would agree: what we find in Thomas's encounter with the Risen Christ can be described as a grace-initiated process of *orthoaesthesis*. The Risen Christ's in-breaking into the upper room induces an eventual breakdown for Thomas, but in the wounded body of Christ – a porosity glorified by the Resurrection – there is an opening to a breakthrough. Robinette:

> the gospel of John imparts a knowledge of the risen One that requires something far more demanding than the assimilation of a piece of information within a pre-established framework of intelligibility. "Jesus is risen" is not merely a proposition. It is something to be "lived-into." It entails a profound shift in perception, judgment, and action on the part of those who would be its witnesses. It requires a conversion to a new way of "making sense."[963]

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[962] Sandra Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), xviii.
[963] Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection*, 102.

The conversion described is not, of course, a "making sense" that involves imposing new schemas upon what is perceived. "Making sense," then, would seem to involve becoming attuned to a logic in excess of our categories. Robinette, drawing on Jean-Luc Marion, regards the Resurrection as the "saturated phenomenon *par excellence.*"[964] And, noting an overlap between the godsend and the saturated phenomenon, Desmond writes:

> If there is an idea of the godsend, it is one exceeding our concepts, and the saturated phenomenon expressly exceed the embrace of (conceptual) intentionality. It overflows what conceptual intentionality can contain within itself; indeed reverses its more normal direction as aimed at that with which it can be in (mutual) correlation. There is a kind of asymmetry communicated from the other side, so to say, which is not the other side of intentionality conceived as a subject-object relation.[965]

The godsend, like the saturated phenomenon, is not something we exercise control over. It is something to which we respond only after its arrival. It remains always in excess and any of our attempts to wrestle it into determinate concepts and categories is doomed to failure. The claim "Jesus is risen" is a gobbet of information to be tucked away as trivia. Rather than a proposition, it is a claim to have been confronted with a mysterious porosity in the very fabric of reality. It is an anarchic claim, disrupting the way we normally perceive the world by confronting us with a logic, a theo-logic, of a Creator whose creative intent extends into the dark origin of time itself. In the Resurrection, death itself is turned backward and a new way of life is made possible for those who, in hearing the apostolic testimony, are drawn into the community of faith where we meet, in ten thousand faces and places, the ecclesial presence of the Risen Christ.

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[964] Ibid., 110.
[965] Desmond, "Godsends," 22.

While Desmond does not treat in depth the special revelation of Christ, I believe my preceding "take" on the godsend shows how the concept can accommodate and express the dynamism of coming to faith in the Risen Christ. I turn again to Robinette:

> Resurrection belief cannot simply be apprehended. It is *given*. It *manifests itself* It *presents itself* as a possibility through apostolic witness It invites. It summons. Responding to it will entail some kind of self-dispossession, a leaving behind, but also a new welcoming and in-habitation. Faith comes *ex auditu*, as Gift.[966]

Rahner seems vindicated: we are beings of a receptive spirituality. Faith is not our achievement, the result of conative striving, but is a gift we undergo. For Thomas, this receptivity took place in beholding the glorified wounds of the Risen Christ. There he beheld a paradoxical occurrence of discontinuous continuity; with the breakdown of old patterns of thought and expectation occurs the breakthrough of faith. In Christ's wounds, wounds inflicted in a public execution, Thomas perceives more than the phenomenon of the Risen One; peering into those wounds, Thomas perceives the ontological depths of creation itself. There is a life, a logic, a *Logos*, unleashed through Christ's porous flesh and, through Word and Sacrament, future generations may participate in this hidden source of life. Thus, we need neither haptic nor optic confirmation to "prove" or ground our faith. Faith is to be "lived into" as we respond with our lives to the Word proclaimed in and through the life of the Church. To encounter and confess the crucified and Risen Christ as the deepest and abiding truth of all creation is not to undergo a change of mind but means, fundamentally, to be drawn into the movement and life of discipleship.

5.3   Discerning Patterns of Perception on The Road to Emmaus

Having explored the general dynamics of orthoaesthesis and its development, I want to push it further in order to consider how it might contribute to theological

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[966] Robinette, 113.

reflection. Thus we now turn to accompany Jesus' disciples as they travel from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The story begins in the wake of a *breakdown* as the disciples' hopes in Jesus appear, at least to their eyes, to have been crucified with Jesus at Calvary. With grief-laden hearts, Cleopas and his companion are deep in conversation when they are joined by a third. The Gospel writer divulges the identity of this stranger, although the two companions do not recognize Jesus in their midst because "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). The stranger breaks into their conversation and asks, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" The disciples pause. Cleopas: "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" When the stranger asks, "What things?" the disciples retell the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth.

Jean-Luc Marion offers an incisive take on their response, likening their re-narration of recent events to a

> a police report: that Jesus of Nazareth, "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" was condemned to death, then crucified by the authorities. Here is the accident, the incident, the "event", in short the fact guaranteed by an intuition offered to all, to the public, and to which an entire city (and what a city!) can testify.[967]

The disciples are, as it were, "facing the facts" and feeling the disappointment of the events of the past few days. They "had hoped he that he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 20) but now these hopes are dashed. Yet the cold, hard, univocal "facts" of Jesus death are now a matter of contest on account of the testimony of some women from their group who, upon visiting the tomb, did not find his body but encountered angels. These women, moreover, delivered a truly incredible message: Jesus was alive. Other members of the

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[967] Jean-Luc Marion, "They Recognized Him; And He Became Invisible to Them" in *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (April 2002): 145—152 at 146.

group, of course, had gone to verify the women's testimony and they, too, discovered an empty tomb, "but they did not see him" (v. 24). As Marion points out, it is not the lack of evidence preventing them from recognizing Jesus in their midst; it is, rather, the sheer excess of evidence which overwhelms them and keeps them from "making sense" of it.

On that Easter morning, the disciples found themselves torn between two rival and irreconcilable claims: Jesus is dead, Jesus is alive. They, like the rest of Jerusalem, are "in the know" about what has transpired. Dead is dead, just as A = A, and Jesus is dead. They had observed first-hand the brutal efficiency of Rome's death apparatus, and the publicity of crucifixion left little ambiguity about Jesus' fate. Yet from the women in their group a new and wholly subversive "take" on events: Jesus *was* dead but *is* no longer. A = not-A. How to make sense of this dissonance? They choose to extricate themselves from the equivocal flux of claims and head to safety. They seek to preserve not only the safety and integrity of their bodies but also of their psyches: the claims made are just too much. They do not yet have a framework capable of reconciling these claims. As Marion observes, in this the disciples are very much like us:

> it is thus not the intuition of facts that they lack, but rather the intelligence (the concepts), as do we, today: well do they know, as do we, with scientific certainty, that Jesus died and that one does not come back from the dead; we can deplore this fact, especially in this case, but in the end that's how it is; we must stay reasonable and not lose our heads.[968]

The disciples are doubly beset: not only have they endured the breakdown of their hopes, but the news born by the women threatens their understanding of the world. They mourn the loss of Jesus and are loath to give up their understanding of reality. They give embodied testimony to Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus*: "The world is all that is the case" (§1). They are pragmatic realists who, in the wake of their leader's ignominious

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[968] Ibid., 147.

death, flee in order to preserve their own lives. Even if they carry grief in their hearts, at least they can take comfort in their logic and realism: "The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts" (§1.11)[969] and they *know* the facts.

The tension and strain placed on their concepts comes to a head, a breaking point, with the *in-breaking* of the stranger. Their recapitulation of the "facts" betray them, for although they have seen they clearly have not understood the meaning of these events. The stranger offers them not a word of consolation but a rebuke: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" (v.25). Their slowness of heart, their clinging to terrestrial logic and their refusal to accept the theo-logic of the Kingdom, prevents them from seeing rightly. Even as he walks alongside them, they remain blind. Why? Marion suggests:

> What concrete sign, what sensible perception, what intuition was lacking? None whatsoever, clearly. In fact, they kept themselves from recognizing him. Why were they denying the evidence? Not because it was deficient – it wasn't lacking in the slightest – but because it contradicts their entire comprehension (their miscomprehension, or at the least, their pre-comprehension) of a phenomenon that is nevertheless patently beneath their eyes, and in their ears. They do not recognize him because they cannot even imagine that this is really him, Him, who has rejoined them, so far do their poor, cobbled-together, honest-to-goodness concepts find themselves outstripped by "events" that leave them petrified within a matrix of irrefutable prejudices.[970]

Locked into a very fixed and definite view of the world as organized by the "facts" they have seen, all other testimony and evidence is deemed inadmissible. Their imaginations are held captive by a of postulatory finitism where life is finite and cannot but be finite. Or, as Marion writes, a world in which "the dead man is dead, period. Every other possibility finds itself completely excluded, not even considerable."[971]

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[969] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.
[970] Marion, 147.
[971] Ibid.

Note the unfolding of this pericope. Jesus does not offer a new piece of information or a proposition, nor does he lay out a syllogism or argument. He resumes his role as teacher and begins to re-frame the events in order to reveal the meaning of all that has transpired: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in the scriptures" (v. 27). The disciples undergo a moment of divine pedagogy or, as Charles Taylor might put it, they are "starting to be educated by God."[972] Indeed, this a moment of education in its most literal and etymological sense: they are being "led out" (*educare*) of one framework of understanding and drawn into a new way of perceiving events. They are being offered, Taylor might note, a "better account" of what happened. Rather than an apodictic argument for *what* they should see, Jesus goes to them, *ad hominem*, and instructs them step-by-step. In the retelling of the story and by expanding the narrative horizon, they are capacitated to behold all things anew. Just as Aslan had to disclose to the children the meaning of what they had seen but not understood, so also does the Risen Jesus tutor his disciples into a new mode of perception not by telling them *what* to see but by expanding the horizon of their understanding and teaching them *how* to perceive in a new manner and according to a new logic or, as it turns out, according to the *Logos*.

As the disciples approach a village, the stranger looks as though he wishes to continue his journey. But they enjoin him: "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over" (v. 29). In the climax, having taken his place at the table with them, the stranger "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (v. 30-31). Suddenly, they are given to perceive rightly and everything "clicks" into place as they recognize Jesus in their midst. They

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[972] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 668.

behold him not because of an effort on their part but because they have been capacitated

to perceive his presence. In the aftermath of this *breakthrough*, they become what they

have received. That is to say, they become godsends, sent back to Jerusalem, as bearers

of Good News: "The Lord has risen indeed" (v. 35).

In the breaking of the bread, the disciples come to see rightly, orthoaesthetically,

Christ's presence. They have been attuned to perceive, in the blessing and breaking of the

bread, an explicitly Christological epiphany. In the breaking of the bread, the disciples

are not given a numinous sense of the Transcendent. They perceive, in that moment,

Christ's presence in their midst. Again, we perceive a triple pattern of breaking:

1. An *in-breaking* of Christ's presence in their midst, the one who guides their understanding and perception to behold all things new.
2. A *breakdown* of old categories as the stranger tutors them into a new mode of perceiving.
3. A *breakthrough* into a new mode of life, a new way of being in the world, animated by the proclamation: "The Lord has Risen indeed."

Of course, we know this new mode of seeing is not the result of any grasping on the

disciples' part. The narrative shows how they are utterly incapable of understanding what

has happened by their own lights: they have seen but cannot interpret the evidence

correctly. But if the disciples coming to see rightly is not the achievement of the *conatus*

essendi it is not exactly the fruit of the *passio essendi*. For while this moment of divine

pedagogy is something the disciples undergo, this undergoing does more than renew their

sense of the intimate strangeness of being. As their hearts burn, as they are tutored to

recognize the Risen One in their midst, they undergo what we might call a *passio*

caritatis or a "undergoing of charity" endowing them with the grace to perceive not only

the "crack" in everything but also, to perceive through the "crack" the presence of the

Crucified and Risen One.

The *passio caritatis* is not found in Desmond's oeuvre, although he does write "of a sacred *passio essendi*: the receiving of our being as patient to the divine communication."[973] The sacred *passio*, he continues, can come in many forms: the sudden urge to pray, a sudden moment of artistic inspiration as though visited by the Muses, or in liturgies where one is drawn into the sacramental life of the congregation where "the agape of the divine dying and rising is commemorated."[974] It seems to me, however, that we can develop this "sacred *passio*" in an even more explicitly theological manner whereby the *passio caritatis* would express how we are mystagogically drawn by grace to perceive and abide within an order configured by divine charity. For Christians, it is this gift of charity that allows us to partake in God's own triune life. So, where a rekindled sense of the *passio essendi* awakens us to the mystery at the heart of all of creation, the *passio caritatis* would capacitate a new mode of perception capable of discerning the presence of Christ within this mystery. For the Christian, undergoing the *passio caritatis* leads one to behold the world with senses formed by Scripture and Tradition. If the *passio essendi* leads us to the crack where we open ourselves to listen for a word to be spoken, it is by undergoing the *passio caritatis* that we find ourselves addressed by, and invited by the Holy Spirit to participate in the life of, the Triune God made known in history through Jesus Christ.

As a theological expansion of Desmond's thought, I believe the *passio caritatis* provides a dynamic way of thinking how God's grace, or charity, is not an "object" or gobbet but is a process of being drawn into and reconfigured by God's life. Rather than an alternative to the *passio essendi*, the *passio caritatis* would be used to describe how

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[973] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 402.
[974] Ibid., 402-403.

one comes to discern in and through the life of the Church the presence of the Risen

Christ at play in the whole of Creation. The effect of this undergoing would be to attune

one to perceive with what James Alison has dubbed "Easter Eyes."[975] Desmond's own

take on the Emmaus story inclines me to believe he would not object, at least not too

strenuously, to this suggestion. For he, too, observes in this pericope a process of

attunement, a dawning of new awareness, as endowing the disciples with a new mode of

perception:

> Before one did not see, but now one begins to see; begins to see because a light
> that one cannot command is coming up and going over one. One is being lighted;
> one is not enlightened, one is being enlightened. We are the recipients of
> something that we cannot entirely specify or pin down. It stuns us into silence.
> The seeds of a metanoetics are being sown. A new *noesis*: a new mindfulness that
> does not know what it knows, and yet it knows that the same things will no longer
> be the same…It is more like a slow conversion, a turning, a kind of *periagogē*, a
> being turned around.[976]

Indeed, for Cleopas and his companion, there is a radical turning: having glimpsed the

Risen Christ, they turn around and go back to Jerusalem with senses made new. Brian

Robinette observes: "What they had not understood in 'real time' became respectively

intelligible through the Easter experience. Their memory was, as it were, reconstructed:

'They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to

us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'" Christ, revealed in the

breaking of bread, sends them back Jerusalem not to resume an old life but to embark

upon a new one. To undergo the godsend is to discern, in the undergoing, a sending-forth.

Now, were I to write another chapter, I would develop the *passio caritatis* at

length. In keeping with our theme of spiritual exercises, this could mean exploring how

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[975] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998)
[976] Desmond, "Godsends," 28.

we might approach Jesus' parables as opening up something akin to a "parabolic indirection." Jesus' parables, as is well known, often have an element of the hyperbolic within them as they struggle to use finite words to express the abundances of God's love and mercy. Yet these parables, as Gerhard Lohfink observes, do more than communicate "the overflowing generosity of God."[977] His parables are meant to exercise us, to vex us, and stir our imaginations to consider how a reality reconfigured according to the logic of God's Kingdom might appear. The parables do not inform us about the Kingdom but form us to participate within it. If we see the whole of the Christian life as an ongoing process of undergoing charity in the *passio essendi*, then we might approach the parables as theaters of encounter: we contemplate them with an openness to being addressed through them. Contemplation on the texts cannot compel the divine initiative, but it can sensitize our imaginations to perceive explicitly Christological patterns in and disclosures through the *metaxu*. In forming our imaginations through their imagery, parabolic indirection would help to capacitate Christians to perceive Christ at work in history and to discern how we are being called to participate in the work of the Kingdom.

If the *passio caritatis* describes the process through which one lives into and lives out one's relationship with the Triune God, then this "living" will be manifested in and through history with other believers. What would it mean for Christians today to be implicated in the unfolding of Jesus' parables? Would they rest content with the status quo or would they find, in their friendship with the Risen Christ, an encouragement to allow the logic of God's Kingdom to challenge and subvert our human logic? The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-15) is more than a nice story about God's

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[977] Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 113.

abundant generosity. The story intends to create a fissure within our own order and to show how our terrestrial order could be reconfigured. Parables work by transforming our imaginations and reforming our perception of the world; they give us a glimpse of the "crack" through which God's Reign is beginning to break into the world, a Reign where

> different rules apply. It is true that people work from morning to night here too. God's world is not a land of the lotus eaters. But here work has dignity, and no one need go home in the evening filled with worry and anxiety. No one is alone. Above all: it is possible to live without rivalry because there is no something greater and more expansive than all ones own desires: work for God's cause. Precisely this common cause desired by everyone creates a solidarity that makes it possible to suffer with the suffering of others and to join in others' joy.[978]

For those undergoing the *passio caritatis*, this parable reveals not a fanciful utopia or "no place" but a prolepsis of what could be. In quickening or enlivening Christian faith (*fides qua*), the *passio caritatis* allows us to read and respond to these parables not as propositions but as possibilities. They open up parabolic indirections in and through which we allow the proclaimed Word of God to assume our flesh in each era.

What would it mean to embody and enact in our daily lives the subversive grace of God's Kingdom? What would it be to be re-formed by the *passio caritatis* in a parabolic way? If Hart's "gaze of love" appears too passive, too aligned with the *passio essendi*, perhaps we might turn to Metz. If parabolic indirections inform us about God's Kingdom and form us to detect its inbreaking presence, then perhaps instead of the "gaze of love" we could see ourselves as being offered the dark grace of a "mysticism of open eyes, which sees more and not less. It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and – convenient or not – pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it, for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings."[979]

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[978] Ibid.

[979] Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J.

Epiphanically attuned by grace, the Christian is by no means delivered from the flux of the quotidian. On the contrary, the Christian is returned to the flux not *with* a mission but *as* a mission. The godsend's in-breaking is a rupture opening us to perceive how, as David Tracy writes, "God reveals God-self in hiddenness: in cross and negativity, above all in the suffering of all those others whom the grand narrative of modernity has set aside as non-peoples, non-events, non-memories, non-history."[980] It is into fraught and dangerous spaces the godsend sends us as bearers of glad tidings – "The Lord has risen indeed!" – and empowers us to stand with the suffering and the forgotten in solidarity. The Risen Christ glimpsed through the "crack" in everything bids us to bear "Good News" to the interstitial places in history and bring them glad tidings of Christ risen.

Let me gesture toward another way in which the sense of orthoaesthesis might be developed. Students of theology are, no doubt, aware of the reciprocal relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As David Tracy observes, "without orthopraxis, orthodoxy is always in danger of becoming the shoddy shell of a once vital religion; without true orthodoxy, orthopraxis is always in danger of becoming a diffuse, confused, and confusing spirituality."[981] But Jon Sobrino, to my mind rightly, insists on adding at least a third category: orthopathy. By this he means, "the correct way of letting ourselves be affected by the reality of Christ."[982] Although I cannot go into detail here, I want to suggest how orthoaesthesis provides a dialectical partner to orthopathy and, furthermore, taking the four "orthos" together may serve as a contribution to theological anthropology.

Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 163.

[980] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 43.

[981] David Tracy, "A Hermeneutics of Orthodoxy," in *Concilium*, no.2 (2014): 72.

[982] Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims,* trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 210.

To stay with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, recall how they responded to Jesus as they walked. Before they cognitively knew or recognized him, they experienced an inchoate movement of their affect: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us?" (v. 31). As they journeyed, as Jesus tutored them to perceive rightly the meaning of the Scriptures, the disciples' affect was transformed. They came to "feel rightly" in the company of the Risen One because they were being tutored to perceive him in their midst. There is, moreover, a necessary dialectic between them as one discerns how one's affect is being stirred as a consequence of how one is being invited into, and is living out, discipleship with Christ. If I may be permitted to tinker with Tracy's observation: without orthoaesthesis, orthopathy is always in danger of becoming a solipsistic enclave concerned only with one's own feeling; without true orthopathy, orthoaesthesis is always in danger of becoming a detached and disengaged stance toward the world. As they journey toward Emmaus, they undergo a fourfold transformation and total reorientation as their day's journey falls under the direction of the concealed Jesus (orthopraxis), their theological horizons are deepened (orthodoxy), their affect is enkindled with the fire of faith (orthopathy), and their perception is transformed by the inbreaking of the Stranger in their midst (orthoaesthesis).

The addition of orthoaesthesis makes possible a fourfold way of dwelling in the between. Without gainsaying the need for the dialectic of knowing-doing, I think a more robust and adequate anthropology would be attentive to the dimension of perceiving-feeling. *What* we know and *what* we do need to be brought into conversation with *how* we perceive and *how* we respond. This quaternary would provide a cruciform model usable by philosophers and theologians alike. We stand between all four and need to

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negotiate, for ourselves and within our social nexus, the consequences of a modification to any pole. The intermediation between the *what* dialectic (doxy/praxis) and the *how* dialectic (aesthesis/pathy) converge in and contribute to *who* one is as a subject. If we consider the event of religious conversion, for instance, can see this interplay clearly: conversion is irreducible to a change in *what* one thinks because it involves a revaluation of *how* one perceives and interacts with the world. Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Cleopas did not gain a piece of new information but, in encountering the Risen Christ, were drawn into a new mode of perception in which *what* they learned had to be integrated. Christian faith, considered from the standpoint of orthoaesthesis, cannot be portrayed only as a way of thinking but as a way of perceiving.

5.4   A "Crack" Between Metaphysics and Theology

In this concluding section, I reflect on the relationship between metaxological metaphysics and theology. Given Simpson's observation about the theological tones detected in Desmond's thought, this discussion seems necessary. To be sure, in the years since Simpson wrote his book more work on Desmond's thought has been done and both D. C. Schindler[983] and Cyril O'Regan[984] have reflected on the relationship between metaxology and theology. Rather than offering a digest of their work, let me chart a course connecting Cork to Quebec to respond to a question posed in my first chapter.

Toward the end of Chapter One, we considered Paul Janz's critique of Taylor's *A Secular Age*. As Janz observes, one of Taylor's key commitments in *A Secular Age* is to a universal desire for human flourishing. In the aftermath of Kant and a growing mistrust

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[983] D. C. Schindler, "The Positivity of Philosophy" in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*
[984] Cyril O'Regan, "What Theology Can Learn from a Philosophy Daring to Speak the Unspeakable" in Irish Theological Quarterly 73, (2008): 243-262.

of metaphysics, it has become commonplace "to appeal to 'human flourishing' as a nonfoundationalist, yet truly general, normative point of reference for philosophy."[985]

And so, for Janz, it is not especially problematic when Taylor makes the following claim:

> Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can't help asking these and related questions in our life. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by, or between which we hover.[986]

This seems, at first, unobjectionable: of course we all want our lives to flourish! Yet Janz draws attention to an easily-missed ambiguity in how the word "transcendence" works:

> Beginning from this quite common question, Taylor uses it as a backdrop against which to formulate the question of "transcendence" and its relation to "immanence." In other words, the question of transcendence is here defined not first with respect to "God" or "the sacred" or "the supernatural" or any other specifically religious point of orientation, but rather more broadly and formally, simply with respect to a question about "human flourishing."[987]

For Janz, Taylor's appeals to the "transcendent" presume what needs to be argued. Taylor needs to offer, in other words, "some sort of critical or rationally demonstrative account, however indirect it might have to be, of what the meaningfully authoritative 'content' of the transcendent might be for human life."[988] Taylor may appeal to theological sources, may invoke *agape*, yet "these claims are not demonstrated, in any critically constructive way, to be attributable *uniquely* to transcendent or theistic sources."[989]

Perhaps we could phrase Janz's critique of Taylor in metaxological terms: is Taylor guilty of "postulatory theism," does he presume what needs, in the end, to be argued for and proven convincingly? He may draw a compelling map, he may well

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[985] Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space," 47.
[986] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.
[987] Janz, 47.
[988] Ibid., 49.
[989] Ibid.

exhort us to discover new itineraries to the sacred, but why should we bother looking? If we want to appease Janz, what we need is not merely a logical appeal to the transcendent but an ontological account of its reality.

Can Desmond offer a response to Janz's call for a "rationally demonstrative account, however indirect it might have to be"? My answer: yes, Desmond provides us with a series of indirections capable of awakening us to, and informing us about, the transcendent. Desmond supplements Taylor's map by giving us a way to dwell mindfully upon it and thickens Taylor's narrative by revealed the ontological depths of the *metaxu*. Metaxology capacitates and encourages its practitioners to assume a contemplative stance toward the whole of the created order. Desmond's indirections do not gesture toward an aloof reality "out there" in the Empyrion. His metaxological route leads us, mystagogically, into the depths of being where our sense of the mystery abiding at the heart of creation can be rekindled. In drawing us toward this mystery,

> the strangeness of the middle returns in an otherness beyond the middle as comprehended. The strangeness is not that of a hostile stranger, but rather of an intimate from which one has been estranged, which estrangement now begins to be slowly overcome. We move back closer into proximity to the "It is good." Our ears, long caked with misunderstanding, hear sporadically only a faint echo of song. We have been deaf for too long. This deafness can last centuries, as with Western modernity that has systematically closed its hearing to "It is good."[990]

Metaxological metaphysics does not offer us a neutral "proof" of the Transcendent. By implicating us within the poetics of the between, metaxology capacitates us to behold the "crack" in everything and gives us a systematic way to reflect on how all of creation is interrelated not only with one another but also, and more importantly, with its endowing source. If we take "being religious" at its most basic level (*religare:* to tie or bind), by renewing our sense of the primordial porosity of being we come to realize how we are, all

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[990] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 205.

of us, "bound up with" the rest of the created order. To be is to be in relation, to be intimately related to all other beings including the Creator who sustains being. To be, in effect, is to be radically or fundamentally religious.

For Desmond, the relationship between reason and faith, or philosophy and theology, does not require *us* to build a bridge between them. It requires, instead, embarking upon an archaeological expedition, a seeking where we may come into contact with the *logos* at the origin (*arche*) of reason itself. Desmond writes:

> We are enabled to seek the truth before we possess the truth, and this prior enabling is not determinate thought, nor determined through ourselves alone, hence it cannot be defined in the logic of autonomy. This prior enabling is just what allows us to be relatively autonomous at all. We would not be autonomous were not autonomy enabled by something prior to and other to autonomy. Self-determining thinking is released into its own freedom to think for itself by an enabling resource that is not self, a source not be captured in terms of this or that determinate thought, or by thought's own determination by and for itself. There is more that allows thinking to be itself more than itself.[991]

Theology and philosophy are, each in its own way, responses to the call of the Transcendent, a call not only heard "out there" in the happening of exterior transcendence (T_1) but also in the very depths of our own being (T_2). Each discipline records a response: *fides quarens intellectum* and *intellectus quarens fidem*. For a faith seeking understanding, a metaxologically awakened porosity serves to "remind theology that the task of coming to understand is never simply left behind, and truth is not something that can be grasped in a closed fist."[992] Caputo kicks up his heels and dances: the "Truth" is not something one grasps, or can claim dominion over, but is approached asymptotically without hope of possessing it. Rather than a closed fist of possession, theology's gesture is an open-armed gesture of receptivity and welcome to One who cannot be encompassed

[991] Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 217.
[992] Schindler, "The Positivity of Philosophy," 132.

by our arms. Likewise, a "seeking intelligence" is a response to a call; reason, like faith, has a vocation. Whereas the modern theorist would affect a pose of cool and calculated indifference, Desmond exhorts us to join ranks with the *theōroi* who luxuriate in the ludic happening of the *metaxu*. Perhaps, he writes,

> the vocation of reason is to ponder this exceeding. Perhaps it is to grant anew the porosity of philosophy and religion, closed in the interim of univocalizing modernity, now itself coming to a close. In the interim of new time, the secret enigma of being, the mysterious love of the divine, passes beyond that closure.[993]

Philosophy's vocation is not to take wing at dusk and survey, from a distance, all that has transpired during the day. Philosophy is called, instead, within the *metaxu* where it can respond to its vocation to be a "lover of wisdom" by discerning "what is most import, and ultimate: what it means to be, to be true, to be good, to be a human person, what is or is not sacred, what God is."[994]

I wish to dwell for a moment on philosophy as a vocation. For it is nothing out of the ordinary to speak of theology as a vocation to reflect on the revealed content of faith. But, Desmond avers, a sense of vocation applies to the philosopher:

> Since there is a call, there is a receiving more primal than any self-asserting. The receiving so qualifies the self-asserting, that all self-affirmation might undergo a *metanoia* in which our indebtedness to an endowing source beyond ourselves move us in the direction of gratitude rather than self-glorification. There is reverence for what has been given rather than arrogance for what is claimed as one's own.[995]

As an activity philosophy is elicited, invited, rather than self-initiated. In this, it shares with theology the task of listening and discerning, of opening itself to what is Other to self. As practices, philosophy and theology share a common commitment: before speaking, or reflecting, they are open – because opened – and receptive. Both have roots

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[993] Desmond, "Analogy and the Fate of Reason," 16.
[994] William Desmond, "Consecrated Thought: Between the Priest and the Philosopher," 97.
[995] Ibid., 98.

extending deep into the primal ethos where the secret sap of Mystery flows into and enlivens each. Philosophy, as metaxology, and Christian theology discern, in the "crack" separating them, a shared sense of an abiding *logos*. For the philosopher, the *logos* sings the ancient melody of Creation; for the theologian undergoing the *passio caritatis*, Scripture and Tradition attune her ears to hear in this melody a call to discipleship. She is capacitated in this way and given to behold the abiding presence of the Risen One.

To assist Taylor and to respond to Janz, we might read Desmond as providing not *an* indirection but a series of indirections enabling us to perceive in the immanent order signs of the Transcendent. He gives us a way of being mindful upon Taylor's map, a mode of perception capable of seeing all things in a new light. If Taylor wants new ways to encounter the sacred, Desmond allows him to look anew at old ways to see if the old routes may yet have life within them. Tutored by Desmond, we do not need two different maps, one philosophical and one theological, because we can see how every map of creation possess philosophical and theological layers. The "crack" in everything renders philosophy and theology, or at least a metaxological philosophy and theology, porous to one another. The theological layer is not imposed but exposed and revealed by the godsend and our response, in faith, is to live according to the logic of these depths. Theology, like philosophy, becomes a way of life. A metaxological map leads us to the "crack" and bids us listen. Attuned by the *passio caritatis*, we hearken to the woo of the divine as the *metaxu*'s theological layers are revealed and we are drawn deeper into the Mystery at the heart of all being where we encounter the Risen One.

The "crack" between a metaxological metaphysics and theology allows an intermediation between the disciplines at their most basic level. But "crack" could, and I

think should, be taken not simply as a passage but as a festive happening in its own right. Just as the Irish speak of the "crack" or the happening, there is a rhythmic interplay between philosophy and theology, reason and faith, into which all can be drawn. What metaxology does is to show how we are always already caught up in the happening, in the "crack" of being. Again, as Desmond observes, we start in the midst of things and

> we are open to things. We are open because we are already opened. Before we come 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. This ethos of being I call "the between," and for me metaphysics is not an abstraction from this but a more deeply mindful engagement with it. We are already enabled to be within the between.[996]

If Taylor draws us a reliable map of our secular age, if he has shown us how the desert of modern atheism has taken over once lush fields, perhaps Desmond offers us something of an oasis. For Desmond gives us, not a new map, but the permit and the tools to begin excavating Taylor's map in order to uncover wellsprings of life-giving water. As a response to Janz, Desmond might say: the sources of human fullness do not hover above us but reside deep within the earth. We do not need abstract arguments; we need, instead, archaeological courage. As Desmond's understanding of the godsend would seem to make clear, the irruption of the godsend does not deliver us over to a different or alternative reality. By inducing a breakdown, the inbreaking of the transcendent is a breakthrough transforming the way we perceive, and dwell within, the *metaxu*.

Let me conclude by asking: have we helped Desmond out of the theological closet? Do not think me cheeky, but I reckon my answer can be no other than a metaxological yes-no, allowing the "yes" and the "no" to interpenetrate and qualify one another. Yes, Desmond's recent writing, as seen in "Godsends," demonstrates an

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[996] Desmond, "Wording the Between," 196.

openness to theology, even if only generally. His treatment of the revelatory godsend, his language of *kenosis*, and his understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* are all elements drawn out of a theological idiom. Metaxology, in this way, is certainly hospitable to theological language; as he observes, philosophical thinking is at its richest when it is in "intermediation with its significant others, such as art and religion."[997] Then again, I must a No, as he does not offer any sort of a confessional or explicitly Christian theology. Christ may be an exemplar, or *the* exemplar, but he never advances beyond this point. *God and the Between* is hospitable to Christ, perhaps is even haunted by Christ, but Desmond's feet remain, as Kearney notes, within the philosophy of religion. If Desmond's personal commitments come to the surface, this need not be taken as a sign of contamination. It may well show the porosity between philosophy and theology and illustrate how the *Logos* of theology is no stranger to metaxology.

On more than one occasion I have muttered, not without irony, the phrase "For Christ's sake!" when reading Desmond. For me to make a theological case for developing the *passio caritatis*, I would need to show how it converges with and departs from what Desmond calls the *compassio essendi*. This is easier said than done. Consider the following where, writing mostly of pagan gods, Christ seems suddenly to slip in:

> The gods come to nothing but it is in their coming to nothing that they come to be as for the suffering mortal. In coming to nothing they come to be reborn as the providers of agapeic festivity. They are offered as sacrifices of laughter. They too consent to the *passio essendi* in laughing with it, and at the folly of the *conatus essendi*. As offers, they become *compassio essendi*. This reaches its absolute form in the God of Christ – absolute porosity, absolving porosity, passing into and

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[997] William Desmond, "Responses," in *Louvain Studies* 36 (2012): 302-315 at 302. Of *God and the Between* Desmond observes: "The last part of the book is so explicitly theological as to make me wonder who among philosophers might hear what it is trying to do, just because it is theological, and who among theologians is willing to think through the suggestions made, because of their undisguised commitment to metaphysical thinking in the metaxological mode."

through the mortal agony of the human and its *passio* – absolute passion now become a *compassio essendi*. This absolves the intimate universal.[998]

Amidst the idols, a reference to the God of Jesus Christ! Is this a God amidst gods or at the exclusion of them? Christ as literary exemplar or Savior? One of a kind or unique? Is this *compassio* an achievement or a gift of grace? Does Desmond have a twinkle in his eye as he writes this, knowing how muttering "Ah, for Christ's sake!" might lead to further speculation in a theological key? We may ponder, but he offers no ready answer.

My answer, a qualified yes-no, places Desmond neither in, nor out, of any closet as though theology and philosophy were at root two hermetically sealed-off. In keeping with the *Chronicles of Narnia*, maybe Desmond is more an owner of a wardrobe through which one finds secret and unexpected passages between modes of thought. What a speaker leaves unsaid does not mean it is unspeakable; if Desmond has not worked out the theological implications of his thought fully, there is no reason for others not to take up this task. To be sure, I would like more clarity about how he sees his religious commitment affecting his metaphysics. If porosity allows for passage between disciplines, it would then be helpful to hear something about the rationale behind his selection of certain exemplars (Christ) and concepts (*kenosis*). In fact, I think Desmond would find such disclosures most welcome. As Walter Kasper writes, Christology itself:

> inquires not just into this or that existent, but into existence in general. A Christian is so to speak compelled to become a metaphysician on account of his faith...A pluralistic approach to philosophies and theologies is not only legitimate but necessary. But, fundamentally, Christology cannot be inserted into any predetermined philosophical system. And there is no question of applying predetermined philosophical categories within Christology. On the contrary, faith in Jesus Christ is a radical questioning of all closed systems of thought.[999]

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[998] Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 115.
[999] Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 9.

Christ, once more, throws everything off balance and punctures hitherto closed systems of thought to reveal the depths of being itself. While Desmond does not come out directly to posit Christ as *the* in-between, perhaps it is the case that the very nature and structure of metaxology is deeply inflected by this Christological insight. The scope of metaxology, and Christology scope, may resonate in their depths at the level of *Logos*.

5.5   Conclusion

I entitled this chapter "Epiphanic Attunement" because I believe this to be the effect metaxology has on those who practice it as a mode of philosophical and theological reflection. As a philosophical *askesis*, it encourages us to see how extraordinary the ordinary is. As I have tried to show throughout, metaxology opens up a new mode of perception by giving us to behold the "crack" or equivocity of being. This way of seeing runs counter to the normal mode of perception operative in our modern ethos. Consequently, we have needed to "exercise" ourselves metaxologically to attune our vision to detect the "crack." Like any spiritual exercise, this *askesis* was not primarily directed at changing the way we *think* but, instead, at forming and transforming the way we perceive and abide in the *metaxu*. Metaxology, undertaken as a form of spiritual exercises, aims to cultivate a mode of mindfulness and a concomitant mode of life.

But, when Desmond introduces his idea of "godsends," he seems to move us into close proximity with the realm of theology. Having developed a metaxological sense of orthoaesthesis, I tried to "test it" by looking at Flannery O'Connor and two Gospel narratives. I wanted to demonstrate how not every breakdown was a defeat or a loss. Paradoxically, instances of breakdown can be counted as a gain when they facilitate some form of transformative breakthrough. The breakdown/breakthrough dialectic undergone

in the "Return to Zero" pulses within "Revelation" and the Gospels. To be implicated in this dialectic is to undergo a gradual attunement leading to a transformation of the *fides quae* and the *fides qua*. In the register of Christian theology, epiphanic attunement gradually tutors us to recognize not only general disclosures of the Divine but, in Scripture and Tradition, the presence of the Risen Christ in the *ecclesia*. I then introduced the idea of the *passio caritatis* and suggested adding orthoaesthesis to the triad: orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathy. Although in need of development, both suggest ways in which metaxology can be expanded and put in the service of the life of faith.

Finally, I returned to Quebec in order to raise the question about the relationship between metaxology and theology. Rather than regarding philosophy and theology as impermeable disciplines, Desmond locates at their abyssal depth a shared grounding in the primal ethos. Philosophy and theology are vocations, responses, to a call not of our own issuance. Instead of constructing bridges, Desmond leads us down into their origin in the Mystery of being. Metaxology systematically guides our inquiry and poetically implicates us in the happening of the between and rekindles a sense of being "bound to" (*religare*) the whole of creation. If we are astonished to find ourselves in this shared home, in listening to the "crack" we may find ourselves drawn into an even deeper layer by the *passio caritatis* who draws us not toward an anonymous presence but into the heart of the divine life itself. Though they are distinct, philosophy and theology are unified in a sort of enriched poverty: theology *knows* its content to be a gift and not its achievement, and philosophy *knows* it cannot on its own that for which it hungers. In this shared confession of poverty, the antinomy between reason and faith dissolves and they are enjoined to help one another discern, and live into, their vocations.

In an era of fragmentation and suspicion of grand claims, Desmond sounds a discordant metaphysical note. He arrives not as the grand architect of "The System" but as one who has painstakingly worked out a new way of being mindful. He offers us, in effect, something of a training program: a long and at times arduous syllabus of exercises and practices aimed at transforming *how* we dwell in the between. Instead of informing about how the world is, these exercises capacitate us to behold the world with new eyes. Of course, this apprenticeship never ends: the overdeterminacy of being cannot ever be exhausted or plumbed by finite beings. Rather than a source of frustration, to perceive the *metaxu*'s inexhaustible depths is the gift and grace of our renewed eyes. The whole of being does not only point, but can to those who are epiphanically attuned, sing of its Creator. Moreover, if our senses have begun to be tutored by the *passio caritatis* to hear the call of the Risen One who plays in ten thousand places, then our sojourn in Cork has not been in vain. Indeed, our time has allowed us to return to the arterial vein of Mystery that nourishes philosophy and theology and has allowed us to see how, rather than rivals, both are vocations to listen to, and to respond, to the address of the Transcendent One.

Let us take our leave of Desmond's hearth and head over to the local pub where we can invite Taylor to join us as we assess our travels. As dusk falls over this stage of my project, as the heathery purple light of the gloaming proclaims the end of one day and the beginning of nightfall, it is time to take stock of our travels.

(In)Conclusion

If transcendence as other is vertical to time, cutting into it, cutting across it, we are asked to be ready for renewal in the interruptions of immanence…The mystery is always there, seldom named, never dispelled. In ethical, religious, and philosophical service, beyond all determinate cognition, we live from agapeic astonishment, live in metaphysical perplexity before this mystery. In a mindfulness beyond determinate knowing, the Unequal comes toward us, offering over and over again, the unearned gift of the agape of being, singing to our deafness the unbearable music of the ultimate amen.

-William Desmond, *Being and the Between*

Charles Taylor and William Desmond place an order at the bar and find a table. They are just in time. In the corner, a handful of musicians sit in a circle. An old man in the knit sweater taps his bow upon the table and the musicians fall silent. He begins to play the first notes of a tune he learned as a boy, a tune he has in turn taught to generations of other musicians. The tune's provenance is unknown, its author long forgotten. But the melody lives on in an unspoken and unbroken musical tradition. Flute and harp, whistle and pipes, accordion and fiddle: the *seisiún* begins. An ancient melody is born anew in the pub as musical voices interweave and intermingle, each drawing strength from the other. One tune leads effortlessly into another. A pause and then a set of reels led by a young woman, a fine whistle player. Desmond recognizes the tune, raises his glass to Taylor, and drinks deep. Words are neither needed nor adequate. Here where the odor of turf hangs in the air, where the music englobes its listeners, where women and men reminisce about the past and look eagerly toward the future, where poems are recited and songs are sung: this is good *craic*. No determinate thing in itself, the *craic* is an atmospheric happening, an overdeterminate event of being together. All are implicated in the *craic* for it surrounds and binds all together. Not even the world-weary resist tapping a foot in time or holding themselves back from the *craic*, or "crack," in everything.

We have come a long way since we first met Charles Taylor in Quebec. The map he drew of our secular age helped to orient us as we began our journey. He guided us from the restrictive constraints of the moral corral out into the wider ethical field and then, in a most daring move, bid us to enter the untracked forest where we might encounter the sacred once more. Yet, as Paul Janz trenchantly observed, Taylor leaves a key question unanswered: why should we trust Taylor's map? Tolkien drew detailed maps of Middle Earth, but the map is not the territory. Without some sort of "rationally demonstrative account, however indirect it might have to be, of what the meaningfully authoritative 'content' of the transcendent might be for human life,"[1000] Taylor seems susceptible of the charge of having committed the philosophical error of dogmatism, the "rationally unsustainable reification or hypostatization (into a putatively objectively authoritative or ontological source) of a 'transcendent' point of reference that is, in truth, only a linguistic (and negative) notion of the intellect."[1001] Taylor's map, one might say, stands in need of some sort of metaphysical mooring lest his summons for new itineraries to the sacred be dismissed as little more than a snipe hunt.

We then set off from Quebec and made our way to Cork where we enjoined William Desmond to uncover the hidden metaphysical depths of Taylor's map. We began our pilgrimage by canvassing several prominent philosophers of religion – Heidegger, Caputo, Kearney, and Westphal – to find out how previous metaphysical undertakings had erred. We then compiled a list of "Five Commandments" the would-be metaphysician would need to obey. The bulk of Chapter Two then served to introduce readers to a considerations of Desmond's metaxological philosophy. Without any

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[1000] Janz, 49.
[1001] Ibid.

pretense being an all-encompassing "system," metaxology provides us with concepts and categories capable of describing what it means to be in "the between" or *metaxu*. Riffing on Emerson and Leonard Cohen, we saw how metaxology was especially attentive to the "crack" in everything. Metaxology capacitates us to perceive the "crack" in all things not as a fatal flaw or mortal wound but, rather, as the mark of the porosity of being itself. To be at all is to be in relation with the whole of creation. The "crack" in everything bespeaks the fragility and gratuity of being itself and points beyond finitude toward the endowing source of all existence.

In Chapter Three, we used the work of Pierre Hadot to frame Desmond's philosophy as a form of spiritual exercise. Here I tried to show metaxology, approached as an *askesis* or practice, "worked." The poetics of the between not only inform but also, and more importantly, form the way the reader beholds the *metaxu*. Metaxological poetics "work" not only to communicate what it means to be in the between but also to implicate the reader the *metaxu*'s happening. One might see this as being capacitated with what Keats called "negative capabilities" – the ability to stand in the darkness, ambiguity, mysteries and doubts of existence. We are led into the crushing darkness of the *nihil* where we undergo the breakdown of our determinate categories and conceptual idols. This breakdown, though, makes possible a breakthrough into a new way of beholding the whole of being. The patterns we followed in Chapter Four was that of *katabasis* and *anabasis*, of descent and ascent, as we considered how undergoing metaxology can serve to transform the way we perceive the created order. Metaxology does not deliver to a different reality but gives us to behold reality differently. We are endowed what I called

"epiphanic attunement" and made able to perceive the disclosures of the Transcendent in and through the immanent order.

In Chapter Five, I borrowed a term from Edmund Husserl – *orthoaesthesis* – and gave a metaxological sense of what "right perception" might mean. We moved from Ruby Turpin's pig parlor to the Road to Emmaus and saw how the irruption of the godsend works to uncover the concealed depths and to reveal the secret life at the heart of being itself. The godsend is, in this way, less an imposition than a graced exposition allowing the innermost reality of creation to shine forth. The Holy One is disclosed through the Taboric light of the Transfiguration and, as Saint Teresa of Avila once noted, "amidst the pots and pans." Epiphanic attunement becomes an abiding disposition, a vigilant patience as one awaits with one's entire being the advent of Sacred. Epiphanic attunement, cultivated through the practice of metaxological *askesis*, cannot compel God to speak but maintains a stance of hospitality for the unexpected arrival of the Divine. Where others would see the unwanted and despised, the epiphanically attuned agent perceives not an alien Other but a sister and brother. If Gerard Manley Hopkins is right, if Christ does indeed play in ten thousand places, then the whole of the Christian life can be seen as bristling with joyful anticipation as one strains to perceive the visage of Christ in all persons. The epiphanically attuned subject incarnates what Saint Paul exhorts: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thes. 5:16-17). One becomes a living embodiment of prayer; one who, in word and deed, enacts an eschatological petition: *Maranatha*, "Come, O Lord, Come!"

What, then, might be said of Desmond's achievements, both philosophical and theological? Should Taylor take Janz's critique to heart, Desmond arrives as a welcome

presence. Rather than extending the borders of Taylor's map, Desmond's archaeological

endeavor penetrates deep into the soil to uncover hidden reservoirs of life-giving water.

Even in the midst of the desert of modern atheism – to recall Dupré's metaphor – one can

dig down and discover wellsprings sufficient to turn the parched desert into an oasis.

Desmond has, in my estimation, aided Taylor in helping to firm up the metaphysical

foundations of his map. There is, indeed, a *there* to be sought. This is no snipe hunt. And

this *there* is not just at the borders but is, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear,

everywhere. The Transcendent abides in the immanent; God is found in all things.

In guiding us along a series of indirections, Desmond seems to respond to

Taylor's call for new and innovative itineraries leading us toward an encounter with God.

Some of these ways, as we saw, are repristinations of formerly reliable ways. Rather than

severing "the ways" from the ethos, Desmond allows the "ways" to reframe and

transform the way we behold all of reality. He tutors us through these indirections to

perceive the excessiveness and gratuity of creation. Just as a *seisiún* is more than the sum

of the musicians and their instruments, so too there more to creation than the totality of

beings. The *craic* or "crack" bespeaks this too-muchness, this overdeterminate

atmosphere of happening. Music, like the *metaxu*, points beyond itself to an inexpressible

surplus incapable of being pinned down or captured by concepts. The "crack" in

everything is porous to another logic, the logic of a wholly, nay Holy, Other. Metaxology

gives us to behold how living according to this logic is not a threat, *pace* Kant, to our

autonomy. On the contrary, it is this absolving heteronomy that endows us with authentic

autonomy: we are as we should be precisely because we have been given to be by this

Origin. At the root of existence, of *all* existence, is not the wanton exercise of power but

the agapeic creativity of the One who sings creation into being. The Christian, in turn, is the one who has encountered in the graced porosity of the Risen Christ's wounds, the human face of this Agapeic Creator.

As a theologian, I might say with a wink: William Desmond has shown that metaphysics does have a prayer. In dubbing Desmond the "Last Metaphysician," perhaps Manoussakis underestimates the staying power of metaphysics. In Desmond, perhaps, there as has been a metaphysical awakening. After a long slumber and generations of desuetude, a metaxological approach to metaphysical reflection seems to be *one* viable metaphysical option. Should Desmond be regarded as a 21st century prophet of metaphysics, his address echoes Mark Twain who, upon hearing rumors of his own death, quipped, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." Without any pretense to being *the* way, metaxological metaphysics records *a* way. It is not a hegemonic attempt at grasping and controlling but is, instead, a vocation to give an account of what it means to be at all. It originates not in idle speculation or abstract reasoning but as a response to the astonishment of having been addressed by the advent of the Transcendent. One hazards to speak as a metaphysician because one recognizes oneself as having been bidden to do so.

As a discourse, metaxology serves the philosophical and theological life. In this way, metaxology has a prayer insofar as it leads its practitioners to assume a stance of vigilant listening. Attentive to the "crack" in everything, one patiently listens. One opens oneself to the silence and waits in longing. Of this act Rahner once wrote:

> Perceiving God's silence is also an answer that makes the listening meaningful. Under God's silence too we may be become what we have to be at any rate: personal finite spirit before the personal infinite free God, with whom we necessarily have to deal, at least by being aware of God's silence.[1002]

[1002] Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 151.

The caducity of discourse is the happy fault, the *felix culpa* of human reason: when our words are exhausted and our concepts shattered, then in the rubble one may hear in the silence the woo of the Holy One. A metaxological itinerary, guiding us through the "Return to Zero" traverses a mystagogical path whereby our senses are purged as we undergo the dark night of nihilism. The purgation of darkness unclogs our primal porosity and we cry with Samuel: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening! And, as night cedes to dawn, as our eyes peer through the dust and debris of our fallen idols, the dawn from on high breaks upon us. The dawn does not dispel or banish the Mystery into which we have been drawn but deepens it. We blink with orthoaesthetically attuned eyes and perceive how the *logos* of being is *agape*. The *Logos* is not a disengaged canon floating high in the sky like Plato's sun; it is, rather, incarnate and present in history. Thus Balthasar:

> It is too good to be true: the mystery of being, revealed as absolute love, condescending to wash his creatures' feet, and even their souls, taking upon himself all the confusion of guilt, all the God-directed hatred, all the accusations showered upon him with cudgels, all the disbelief that arrogantly covers up what he had revealed, all the mocking hostility that once and for all nailed down his inconceivable movement of self-abasement—in order to pardon his creature, before himself and the world.[1003]

For those with eyes to see, Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24) is encountered the core and essence of being itself. The scandal of Jesus' particularity is, for many, an utterly idiotic and impossible to believe claim. But for those given the dark grace to experience how "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25), the idiocy of Christianity's claim records the breakthrough being itself, *agape* itself, as it works to reconfigure our ethos according to the logic of God's Kingdom. The Christian,

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[1003] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 102.

consequently, finds oneself caught up in the pierced-yet-glorified grasp of the Agapeic One and invited to say nothing more and nothing less than *Amen* with one's being. The credibility of Christianity depends upon this assent, upon one's willingness to become an *idiot* for Christ as one is moved by love to "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

Would that I could now write, "In conclusion" and bring this project to a close. Such resolution may sate an appetite for closure but would, I fear, betray the spirit of the project. There can be no cut-and-dry resolution, no Answer, no final sentence after which one might "drop the mic" and exit the stage. There is only, as I hinted above, an (in)conclusion. When the last order of the night is placed, when the musicians play the evening's last set and as the barkeep washes glasses, there is but a temporary cessation of activity. Revelers will go their separate ways and the musicians will pack their instruments, but the *craic* is neither expunged nor exhausted. It lives on in memory and coaxes us, over and over again, into the future. Heraclitus: you can never step into the same river twice. The *seisiún*: you can never play the same tune twice because the living tradition refuses to be fixed and insists on growing and evolving. Metaxology: speak of the between as much as you like, sing of it and commend it to verse, but there will always be too much to be said and sung. Metaxology bids us to stay faithful to the flux, to remain awake and alert to the dynamism of the *metaxu*, and to allow ourselves to be drawn into and transformed by the intermediation of being. On the proscenium of the *metaxu*, there are no objective spectators: we are, all of us, a part of the ongoing performance.

To read Taylor's map with metaxological eyes is to perceive, even in the most unlikely places, openings to the Transcendent and new ways of reflecting on how the Holy One is disclosed in time and space. I have endeavored, throughout this essay, to

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show how metaxology can enter into fruitful and illuminating dialogue with poetic, musical, literary, and theological sources. I have indicated, furthermore, certain places where these insights might be further developed. How might metaxology be illuminated by, and reciprocally illuminate, the work of Ian McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* or social psychologists such as Kenneth Gergen and Jonathan Haidt? How might Desmond be brought into conversation with theologians such as René Girard, Sarah Coakley, and Karl Rahner? I have suggested how one might develop something like the *passio caritatis* or offer a fourth dimension (orthoaesthesis) to the triad of orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxis. If we are sensitive to the dynamism of metaxology, what would it look like to re-read, say, the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE)? Might we find in Chalcedon an anticipation of metaxology's unwillingness to "freeze the flux" and it tries to express the paradoxical fullness of Christ's humanity *and* divinity? Could our understanding of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist be enriched by a metaxological re-framing? Might metaxology assist us in re-thinking the relationship not only between theology and philosophy but also between theology and science?

To my mind, William Desmond's theological achievement is found in metaxology's ability to provide not just a way of thinking but, when undertaken as a form of spiritual exercise, a way of living. Metaxology, studied in this way, concerns less *what* one perceives than *how* one does so. It makes possible what Paul Crowley has called a "mystagogy of believing" drawing one into the depths of the Mystery at the heart of all creation.[1004] In an odyssey akin to Bonaventure's *The Journey of the Mind to God*, one is guided stepwise to perceive God's presence in all things. Led by grace along this itinerary the wayfarer undergoes, like Francis, a *transitus* from slavery to freedom, from

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[1004] Crowley, "Mystagogy and Mission: The Challenge of Nonbelief and the Task of Theology," 24.

death to new life. We are plunged into the purgative darkness of divine Mystery and given to behold, in time, the form of the Crucified One in whom we are called to sabbatical rest. By practicing metaxology as an *askesis*, by exercising transcendence as we journey through the *metaxu*, we may begin to find ourselves rocked back on our heels: what had seemed the unstoppable eclipse of transcendence, when beheld with metaxologically attuned eyes, appears now to be a new dawn. As the darkling plane is gradually illuminated by the new morning's light, one is astonished to experience oneself englobed by and caught up in the presence of the Holy One who sings to us in our deafness and renews our porosity to the Transcendent.

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