

*God and the Between* William Desmond (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). Pp. xiii + 347, ISBN: 978-1405162326, £23.74/ €27.15.

William Desmond's *God and the Between* (*GB*) is a most welcome arrival not only because it completes the trilogy that this author had planned and announced in the mid 1990s — *Being and the Between* (*BB*, 1995) and *Ethics and the Between* (*EB*, 2001) being the other two of the trilogy — but because it also pulls together, in a single study, pivotal points of thinking which this author has sounded in many of his hitherto notable and prodigious publications in philosophy. Though some acquaintance with Desmond's deftness to the 'plurivocity' of the meaning of being and the 'the flexible structure' of the 'fourfold understandings' of being (as univocal, equivocal, dialectical and metaxological) already articulated in *BB* would be helpful in understanding the issues addressed in this book, this third book of the trilogy, nonetheless, stands on its own. Indeed, one gets the impression from the author that *GB* is *the* book that he had always wanted to write, 'from the days of my doctoral studies' (Preface, p. xi) in the early 1970s, but postponed doing so, as he instead ploughed his furrows of

thoughts in his previous nine books and many, many articles in philosophy.

*GB* is a highly systematic study in metaphysics, but, remarkably, it does not produce a system of metaphysics nor argue from a pre-determined system of metaphysics nor unfold as a pre-figured possibility of a system of metaphysics (see, Ch. 6 'God and the Metaxological Way'). It is, rather, a carefully thought-through book in metaphysics, focusing primarily on the way both God and 'the between', by which he means the reality of life, death, being and non-being we experience all around us, is understood or misunderstood. Thus in *GB* Desmond engages in metaphysical reflection on reality in conjunction with accurate historical allusions to the philosophical arguments of major thinkers in Western metaphysics from Plato to Heidegger (a point that cannot be said of Heidegger's account of the history of metaphysics). It is divided into four main parts: Part I *Godlessness*, Part II *Ways to God*, Part III *Gods*, Part IV *God*, comprising fourteen chapters. The titles and organization of the

chapters indicate both the trajectory and the systematic nature of this study, hence, they are worth listing in order of presentation: (Part I) 1 'Godlessness and the Ethos of Being'; 2 'Beyond Godlessness' (Part II) 3 'God and the Univocal Way'; 4 'God and the Equivocal Way'; 5 'God and the Dialectical Way'; 6 'God and the Metaxological Way'; 7 'God Beyond the Between'; (Part III) 8 'God(s) Many and One: On Polytheism and Monotheism'; 9 'God(s) Personal and Transpersonal: On the Masks of the Divine'; 10 'God(s): On Passing through the Counterfeit Doubles of the Divine'; 11 'God(s) of the Whole: On Pantheism and Panentheism'; 12 'God Beyond the Whole: On the Theistic God of Creation'; 13 'God(s) Mystic: On the Idiocy of God'; (Part IV God) 'Ten Metaphysical Cantos'. The ten metaphysical cantos refer to 'a group of fundamental notions, sometimes called attributes, such as being, unity, eternity, immutability, impassibility, absoluteness, omnipotence, omniscience, infinity, goodness' which, since Kant, have received scant attention, 'with a few exceptions (such as some recent analytic approaches)' (p. 282). Desmond revisits these 'attributes', setting to work his metaxological metaphysics on these ten notions, 'mindful of difficulties pressed from a critical angle, mindful that the relative silence reflects the ethos of post-Kantian thought, but mindful also that a metaxological philosophy offers the resources of a different understanding of the ethos of being' (p. 282). And that *different understanding* of 'the ethos [read, value] of being' that is advanced by Desmond in *GB* is marked *definitively* by this author's philosophical meditations on the significance and

meaning of the good of *creatio ex nihilo*.

That creation is a good, from a metaphysical point of view, is of crucial importance to Desmond. To view reality otherwise misconstrues reality as valueless being. And if value cannot be found in the good of reality given to our experiences, a *Summum Bonum* will certainly not be found. In such instances both being and God become devalued and idols and 'counterfeit doubles' set in place. For this author, then, no less than 'everything is at stake: the goodness or the pointlessness of the whole; God or nothing at all' (p. 328). Far from avoiding the various nihilisms that have arisen in the aftermath of the demise of Hegelian metaphysics and the rise of Nietzschean death of God metaphysics, the author goes through these nihilisms by returning to the original value of 'the to be' and 'the not to be' with the intention of hollowing out 'a purer space' to 'seek anew' the divine (p. 30). *GB* unfurls, therefore, as a philosophical meditation that goes through and beyond nihilisms focusing on 'God' and 'the Between', where 'the Between' is where we find ourselves, in a created reality that lies between nothing and its Creator.

*GB*, therefore, offers an alternative approach to the three transcendencies which the author identifies that have dominated and captured the minds (and the hearts and the brains) of many post-Kantian, post-Hegelian and post-Nietzschean philosophers, namely: the transcendence of the otherness of nature ( $I^1$ ); the transcendence characteristic of human existence or human self-surpassing ( $I^2$ ), understood as one's own freedom to be (*conatus essendi*), however suspicious of such self-determination

the ‘three masters of suspicion’ of the twentieth century, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, would have us; and the ‘third transcendence’ (T<sup>3</sup>), which is one that bespeaks neither of the exteriority of beings to one’s own being nor of the interiority of one’s own being to other beings, but of the superior ‘other’ of God, an ‘agapeic God’, capturing ‘a *hyperbolic* sense’ of transcendence that is ‘Transcendence itself’ (p.22). This latter transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>) cannot be an object of transcendence that is either univocally or equivocally determined in relation to T<sup>1</sup> or T<sup>2</sup> precisely because it is the (pre-)condition of those transcendencies. These three transcendencies, nevertheless, are distinct but related for Desmond, and so, they must be thought both in distinction and in relation to each other. To tackle them differently or to truncate any one of them would be to contort and disfigure ‘Transcendence itself’ (pp. 41–3). Thus human openness to the divine as the unmeasured measure of all transcendencies, just as Augustine had intimated (see, p. 245, n. 6, p. 312, and esp., p. 157), is the key both to Desmond’s thought and to his understanding of the *mis*-understandings and *mis*-identifications of the relation between the human being, creation, and God that infect the discourse of so much religious and anti-religious thinking today. But *how* exactly can ‘a purer space’ for the divine be retrieved, if our natural ‘porosity’ to the divine has been culturally, existentially, experientially and philosophically ‘clogged’ (p. 35, 340)?

The way the author does this is through identifying a particular experience that evokes both a thinking of God and of the between (with which readers of his *BB* will be

familiar), namely, the giftedness of the tenuousness of be-ing a being in being ‘*at all*’ that is characteristic of any finite act of existence, and not just of one’s own be-ing in being that Heidegger isolates and thus mutilates out of the between in ‘*Dasein*’. (Thus I cannot agree with those commentators who maintain that Heidegger is ‘a consummate thinker of the middle’, and I doubt Desmond does too). Desmond’s scope and frame of reference is much wider than Heidegger’s because ‘(T)he “that it is” is known perhaps most intimately in the idiocy of our own being, though sometimes *even more so* in relation to the given being of the beloved other. But we can know it also in relation to the being of nature’ (p. 129, my emphasis). Thus ‘astonished perplexity’ (p. 128) extends not only to one’s self and to nature but also and ‘even more so’ to the given being of the beloved other precisely because this indicates — for those who have eyes to see it — a particular kind of giving (of the gift of another’s love) that is not mine to give, but shareable. The metaphysical significance of this experience of one’s fellow human being (*qua* beloved), for Desmond, is that it points to augmentation in being, agapeic origin and ‘agapeic community’. At an archaeological level, creation out of nothing, understood as creating out of love from nothing, is the only model, if there is to be any model at all, for thinking the relation of Creator and created, God and the between (p. 161; 232). Any other model of origination will less than suffice, and possibly be dis-enabling, e.g., regarding the analogy of machine and maker in any understanding of being (ontology) or of Deism — where there is no inherent community of spirit — the result is ‘the between will be lost, as

will also its agapeic origin' (p. 227). This does not mean that all analogies are to be rejected for analogies breakthrough univocal, equivocal and dialectical manners of thinking. Proper analogies are needed. Thus 'the analogical conception is obviously [to Desmond] relevant, for this clearly wants to keep open the space of transcendence, even while not blocking some relativity to the immanence of creation. [...]. It calls attention to the participation of finite beings in being, a participation first made possible as a gift of the origin, a participation pointing to both the intimacy of the origin and also to an *asymmetry*, since the gift is exceeded by the giver.' (p. 283) Analogy pushes Desmond's thinking, consistently, through the dialectical to the metaxological. There is, then, a very important role that 'analogy' plays in *GB* that was muted in *BB*. This is why *GB*, to this reader, stands on its own.

Despite their differences, Hegel and Nietzsche, and their followers (such as atheistic Heidegger or theistic Heideggerians), have this much in common: they prevent questioning the meaning of being in relation to the question of the meaning of God; or, at least, so the author argues, correctly in my opinion. When either being or God is understood from an univocal point of view, *both* the inability to question the very fact of the thereness of being *and* the insignificance of either the existence or non-existence of God and the relevance of such to the study of that-which-is (metaphysics) is not far off (and in their stead reflections on counterfeit doubles of both being and God emerge). When either being or God is understood from an equivocal point of view, the otherness(es) of both in the ontological equation are missed. And

when that otherness is thought together from a dialectical point of view, neither one nor the other is self-sufficient to account for the fecundity of that unity of opposites or the pairs of that unity. Thus it is only by going through the univocal, equivocal and dialectical understandings of God and being that one is lead to, or catapulted into, passively (*passio essendi*), the agapeic origin of being in God's transcendence, securing in turn access to the being of the between and beyond the being of the between to 'the richest expression of "being at one" as agapeic community [of the finite and the infinite]' (p. 289).

*GB* is a remarkable hermeneutic retrieval of the metaphysical significances of the experiences of God and the between where the latter is not just experienced but thought as a created reality that lies between nothing and its Creator. Mention of 'nothing' and of Desmond's treatment of 'nothing' in *GB*, therefore, deserves special attention, in conclusion.

Aristotle is famous for his saying that 'being can be spoken of in several ways'. Non-being too, however, can be spoken of in several ways: as privation (blindness), as potency (which is a kind of non-being), as actual non-being (future generations), and as ideal non-being (square circles). But there is also the 'not to be' that is constitutive of each and any actual finite act of existing that Desmond also distinguishes, 'constitutive nothingness' (p. 251), following Aquinas, and not Aristotle (p. 243 and p. 133, n.11). And there is absolute non-being which is not the no-thingness of God but that which out of which everything is created — a surd for Parmenides as for him *ex nihilo*, *nihil fit*, and for all of his followers, up to and including Hegel

(p. 234), and Nietzsche (ibid.), and their followers; but it is a surd requiring thought. This ‘absolute nothing’ is not reducible to the equally unwilling ‘nothingness’ experienced in the mood of *Angst* that Heidegger (following Kierkegaard) singles out. Nor is this ‘absolute nothing’ properly understood as God creating ‘from God’s *own* nothingness,’ as Gregory of Nyssa would have it, because this, as Desmond acutely notes, is still ‘a kind of “emanation”’ (p. 245, n. 6). Rather, in line with Augustine (*Confessions*, 13, 33), creation *ex nihilo*, for Desmond, ‘is “*a te, non de te facta sunt*”’ (ibid., ‘things are made by you, not made of you’).

And then, most tellingly, ‘there is an “It is nothing” of forgiveness [...] [which] is the willingness to set the evil “at naught”’ (p. 287). Such acts do not annul or cancel the evils done, as the latter are recognised and acknowledged for what they are. Nor do such acts of forgiveness wish away such evils, as their historicity cannot be removed. But acts of forgiving do something *more* than the ‘nothing’ that is produced by evil (natural or moral) precisely because ‘the forgiving “yes” [...] offers release again, beyond the “no” that blights being’ (p. 335). In this regard to set the evil at naught is ‘to offer again the promise of life, and so to restore primal faith and hope in being’ (p. 287). Thus in forgiving one imitates the creative process in the sense that creation is an act that unfolds out of and in deference to the goodness of being, the goodness of the other’s being, the goodness at being and in being. Forgiveness, then, can only be fathomed from an

agapeic origin that remains *at once* both in touch with and outside of the good of its receiver. This is why ‘being given to be at all *as an ethical being*’ (p. 314, my emphasis) pushes us to think of God as higher than that, and thus as never reducible to T<sup>1</sup> (nature transcendence) or to T<sup>2</sup> (human transcendence). God is ‘an overdeterminate goodness’. On this evidence, ‘the hyperbolic good suggests more than justice on the measure of human retribution’ (p. 334). There *is* in existence an exigency, however enigmatic, ‘calling us to a good in excess of the measure of our moralities, freeing in us of a forgiving agape, of mercy beyond justice, of service for the other beyond autonomy’ (p. 333). We could put it this way: What Levinas does in his thinking for Judaism in his retrieval of the significances of the meaning of the experiences of the other as othered in society (the poor, the widow, the orphan, the leper) that are documented in the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) for the re-cognition of the approaching otherness of God, Desmond does in his thinking for Christianity in his retrieval of the significances of the meaning of the experiences of the very giftedness of the good of being that are also documented in the Old and New Testaments for the re-cognition of the approaching otherness of Agapeic Love. Thinking the giftedness of finite acts of being, then, invites more, and not less thinking about one’s fellow human being, one’s self, nature (created reality), God and the between. The embargo on thought and metaphysics has been lifted. For that, one cannot but be grateful to the originality of this author’s work.

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