



Book Reviews

PHILOSOPHY

Between System and Poetics: William Desmond and Philosophy after Dialectic. Edited by Thomas A.F. Kelly. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. Pp. xi+307. Price £60.00 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-7546-5206-9.

This collection of 18 essays is the ‘first book-length examination of the work of an important contemporary thinker in the continental tradition, William Desmond’ (p. i). It takes its title, in part, from Desmond’s own essay, ‘Between System and Poetics: On the Practices of Philosophy’ (Chapter 2), which comprises Part I of the book, entitled ‘Desmond on Philosophy.’ Parts II ‘Desmond and Irish Philosophy,’ III ‘Reading Desmond,’ IV ‘Desmond and Metaphysics,’ V ‘Desmond, Love and the Good,’ VI ‘Desmond on Eros,’ VII ‘Desmond and God,’ VIII ‘Reading with Desmond,’ and IX ‘Desmond, Science, the Arts and the Environment,’ contain a further 16 essays, assiduously arranged by the editor under the aforementioned headings, and that were written either by former students of his, fellow colleagues, the director of his Master’s thesis (Garrett Barden, of University College Cork), or by those particularly interested in Desmond’s contribution to philosophical thought. The diversity of the collection of articles in itself is testimony to the fecundity of Desmond’s own project in philosophy. The collection is edited by the late Professor Thomas A.F. Kelly of the Department of Philosophy at NUI

Maynooth, then Senior Lecturer in the Department, and who also prefaces the book with Chapter 1, aptly titled, ‘Introduction.’ And as with all introductions to books, introductions should be read last, and commented on last—more of the editor’s contribution later.

The topic of this book is both Desmond’s understanding of philosophy, in particular his practice of philosophy, and other thinkers’ critical engagement with that practice or efforts to advance some of his ideas. Therein the unity of the book holds. This is not a book for philosophers, therefore, but a book of philosophy. And as Desmond is well aware—and as others in this compendium are equally aware, and maybe because of him—philosophy is a most curious, if not most peculiarly, self-reflexive discipline in that doing philosophy necessarily contains, at least implicitly, a philosophy of philosophy in its very doing (whereas doing mathematics, for instance, does not contain a mathematics of mathematics, etc.). Not all philosophers, therefore, would or could agree with the philosophy expressed between the covers of this book—philosophy being a product of human life experiences and human creativity being what it is, a point never lost to Desmond or by Desmond—but, then, Desmond would not agree with all of the philosophy that has been expressed between the covers of those books written by Hegel and Nietzsche, and that have come down to us to influence the two main philosophic traditions that

are represented respectively by the twin pillars of 'system' and 'poetics.' In this regard, Desmond's philosophy is both historically and philosophically precisely locatable: it comes *after* Hegel and Nietzsche historically, and it comes *after* their manners of thinking philosophically; but, unlike Hegel and Nietzsche, Desmond thinks the system of poetics and the poetics of system from a 'metaxological' point of view, something that neither of these two thinkers on their own did, nor their following traditions can. Therein lies the challenge of Desmond's thought, a challenge admirably taken up by all the contributors in this collection, including Desmond himself.

This is not to suggest, however, that Desmond offers to those who come after him (both historically and philosophically) a way of doing philosophy for difference's sake; rather, the stakes are much higher, for, if Desmond is right about what he is doing, and I believe he is, what he is attempting to do is to offer another way of doing philosophy for philosophy's sake, one that approaches the between (*metaxu*) of system and poetics, but which remains *both* steadfastly 'systematic' (pp. 20–2) and 'a singing thought' (p. 29) [think of the Latin 'cantare' (to sing) a poem]. We must understand the term 'poetics,' however, in the strong Aristotelian sense of *poesis*, that is, of the on-going activity of bringing something into existence, not of nature, but of the human beings' makings, i.e., 'objects' of culture, a play, a poem, a thought, a philosophy, a bridge, an airport, a computer, a mathematical theorem, a scientific hypothesis, etc.; hence, the potential depth-dimension and breadth-expansion of the 'topic' that Desmond addresses in his thought, and one that marks the diversity of the other contributors' efforts too. From this point of view also, we can readily understand why '[T]he practice of philosophy,' as Desmond avers, 'is as much in the living of the thought, as in

the life of thought' (p. 14). Thus in this collection Desmond's own particular essay is more than a (re-)statement of his own previously held and highly commendable efforts towards making 'metaphysics' alive in 'the between' of so many competing towers of science and scholarship, and that are documented in his many publications (see, 'A Bibliography of William Desmond's Works,' pp. 293–302). His essay also offers his own reflective insight into his own position in philosophy, including some very telling snippets of particular experiences of his own life, his own academic, literary, religious and cultural life growing up in the Republic of Ireland in the 1960s, that led him to and beyond what his philosophy seeks today. Desmond calls it 'a calling' (p. 13). In the 1860s, some 100 years earlier, Franz Brentano likewise underwent a similar experience to Desmond's, regarding philosophy, and understood philosophy as a 'mission,' as his student, Edmund Husserl, recalls in his 'Reminiscences of Franz Brentano' (1919). And this 'sense of a mission' in philosophy was passed on to many more (think of Heidegger, for example, and his 1952 lecture-course *What Calls for Thinking?*, though Heidegger extinguishes the particular scientific sense to the mission in philosophy engendering Brentano and Husserl's thought). Unlike Desmond, however, Brentano had very little time for Hegel's thought; the latter appeared to Brentano as the antithesis of science, as windy mysticism. But, then, not all philosophers are equally interested in other philosophers' practices, or in all the branches of philosophy, and Brentano himself had thought that his so-called follower, Husserl, had argued against everything that he stood for methodologically. That Brentano spawned many different and various 'takes' on and in philosophy (Scholastic, phenomenological, analytic, psycho-analytic, and pragmatic) is remarkable. Desmond, however, gives Hegel's method more seriousness and

Nietzsche's method more clout than most thinkers who locate themselves in the traditions of Scholasticism, phenomenology, analytic and psycho-analytic and pragmatic philosophy. Thus the philosophy expressed in all of the articles between the covers of this book is very different from anything that Brentano or his followers produced or spawned, but that is to be expected as indicated from the second half of the title of this book *William Desmond and Philosophy after Dialectic*.

What, then, can be said of the rest of the book, the other 17 chapters? Each chapter deserves to be reviewed singularly, but both space and time prevent that. Yet their genuine originality, as well as Desmond's, needs to be noted and evaluated.

Desmond's originality is unequivocally his own, hence the pointless effort, thankfully not undertaken by any of the contributors, in pointing back to which (or to whom?) is the most significant and determinate historical-philosophical influence on his thought, such as: Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Hegel, Vico, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and so forth. Instead, each of the contributors takes a philosophical issue that either provoked or evoked Desmond's own thinking, and takes that thought elsewhere, as it were, to a new way of reading, for instance, the actual texts of Plato (Leask on *Phaedrus*, McGuirk and Moore on *Symposium*); or, to a new way of deciphering the significance of historical-hermeneutics and theological-biblical hermeneutics (O'Regan) in the very generation of meaning passed on in our arts, sciences and human endeavours, up to and including the synaesthetic experiences of 'visual music' (Milbank, p. 231), a term not used by Milbank but which captures this particular *metaxu* well; or, to a new way of exploring the significance of the between that is evidently present in 'light' in Augustine's philosophical method of interiority, but which is also 'in some way a dark mystery [for us

and to us]' (Pickstock, p. 119), or the significance of Augustine's meditation on and between the 'inseparable goodness of being' and 'reflection on this goodness' (Ryan, p. 148); to a new way of looking (for Hymers) at the relationship between the three elements of 'spontaneous environment' (nature), the 'constructed environment' (with specific focus on architecture) and 'human being,' but not in dualistic terms of 'ecotecture' (the architectural side of the 'weak-anthropologism' of ancient Greek and medieval buildings) versus the 'strong anthropocentric architecture of Modernity' (e.g., Le Corbusier) that monopolizes (human) functionality, but metaxologically, such as exhibited, for instance, in Day's 'Ecstatic Architecture' (pp. 276-277, n. 32). Herein, Hymers steps in to re-open the debate between deep and shallow ecology, without entering into or being confined to or by the parameters that both of these positions circumscribe and relatively stake out (i.e., human-centred ethics cannot render an adequate basis for an eco-friendly ethics precisely because they are human-centred *versus* only a non-human-centred ethics can do justice to the responsibility that human beings have for nature and that will invariably involve building roads, dams, bridges, houses, aeroplanes and airport terminals etc. through nature).

Schleiermacher once remarked that it is a basic principle of reading a text that when one cannot understand totally what an author means, one should not assume that the author is as mad as oneself (to express such unintelligibility). This hermeneutic principle of 'generosity' of the 'benevolent interpreter' (Sheers, p. 280; Kelly, 'benevolent regard' p. 5, but the allusion to Schleiermacher is mine) is applicable, of course, to the interpretation of the meaning of anything we do not fully understand in our encounters, and not just texts, and so, this includes (as Sheers argues) the meaning of plant life activity and animal

life activity and their modes of being-in-the-world (to borrow Heidegger's phrase, though, for Heidegger, such being-in-the-world is essential only of human 'existence,' in Heidegger's sense of that term). Thus the application of a 'metaxological hermeneutics' of plants and animals is an especially rich place for both the development and advancement of Desmond's thought and concern for bearing testimony to the value of cultivating 'agapeic minding,' (p. 283) a central theme of Desmond's philosophy, and a theme that invites, directs and teaches one to see differently, and so, to see imitatively and discriminatively. Thus 'agapeic minding' is of clear educational value to this commentator's approach.

Perception, nevertheless, is taught, a point underscored by and in all phenomenological philosophies of present, past and future. Plato is no different here to Husserl, and vice versa, in their recognition of such. And we do have to be taught to see 'being' differently in order to gain perspective on 'being.' This, I take, is the main point of Desmond's 'metaxological' metaphysics. The way we both see and receive films is taught too, and so, Simpson, in his paper 'All Things Shining: Desmond's Metaxological Metaphysics and *The Thin Red Line*' sets Desmond's way of seeing the world from a metaxological-metaphysical point of view to work. In this contribution, Simpson prefaces his analysis of Malick's film with a clear articulation of some of the main principles and themes of Desmond's thought relevant to the film's content (especially Desmond's reflections on life and death) that result in bringing out more in both the seeing and hearing of the 'voice overs' of the film for the seer of that disturbing film of senseless killing. And yet this contribution sits comfortably with a different way of seeing things in Smit's article on 'A World of Value of Cones and Planes,' wherein this author attempts to re-imagine the topic of ethics and the between that lies between system

and poetics in terms of 'cones' and 'planes'—again, reconfiguring the way to see the 'agapeic mind' of charity or the 'trust of charity' (p. 159), even if this issues forth in 'liabilities that we might not be able to discharge' (ibid.).

Reading is something that is taught too. See Leask's rich hermeneutic-metaxological analysis of the 'opening question' of the dialogue put to Phaedrus, 'where are you [are we] going and where have you [we] come from?' This topic of Plato's *Phaedrus* is pre-eminently suited to just such a reading—but such a reading has to be done by an author, and Leask does this exceedingly potently. McGuirk, on the other hand, carefully navigates Desmond between Nietzsche and Plato, but with Plato's steady eye on the Good both as a guide and as a way at looking differently on the child, *Eros*, that is, after all, the child of both *Poros* (Resource) and *Penia* (Poverty) in the *Symposium*. Thus 'to do justice' to Desmond is to acknowledge, this author argues, the venerable institution of justice that evokes both his thought (pp. 164; 169–173) and Plato's thought. To do this, however, entails acknowledging the injustices perpetrated against metaphysics either from the outside by 'a Nietzsche' or 'an Alcibiades' (p. 172), or from the inside of Hegel's 'self-mediated articulation' (ibid). But McGuirk is aware that '[W]hile eros entails a presentiment of the Good, . . ., for Plato [my emphasis] the Good is always profoundly absent' (ibid.). One cannot but think, then, that for Plato, to adapt and paraphrase a well-known phrase from Kant, justice without goodness is blind, goodness without justice, empty. And that is why the Good is beyond Being for Plato, but not so for Aristotle or for Desmond. Thus, Desmond's attempt to do justice to the goodness of being brings us away from this author's concern with Plato and back, maybe, to, if not Aristotle, certainly to Thomas, and to Desmond's first graduate supervisor, Garrett Barden.

Barden reminds us of the point that if the very fact that the world exists is a metaphysical *question* for the thinker—and its existence not taken as some *factum brutum* of scientific or everyday attitude, as Russell, for instance, did *against* Copleston in that famous debate in the 1940s, though this is not mentioned by this author—it can only be a question for that thinker as a person of a particular faith, and not as a person of science. Thus while it is clear to Barden that ‘only the religious person can properly be a philosopher of religion’ (p. 50, n. 21), it is unclear to this reader whether it is his faith in the intelligibility of a question demanding an answer—and the author is, no doubt, entirely correct in pointing out that a genuine question that has no answer ‘is not properly a question [at all]’ (p. 49, n. 20)—or his faith in his own philosophico-religious belief in the intelligibility of being created out of nothing, that renders transcendence intelligible to this author. Coming from a similar faith background, Kierkegaard, by comparison, advocates, as a matter of and for faith, a commitment to the absurdity of the existence of the world coupled with objective uncertainty in the existence of God, a position the author appears to rule out (pp. 46–47), on the basis of ‘Transcendence and Intelligibility,’ the title of his paper. For Kierkegaard, nevertheless, what calls for (religious) thinking is not so much the fact that ‘the existence of the world is mysterious’ (p. 47, a wonder that cannot be, quoting Barrett, ‘injected or inculcated p. 49, n.17),’ but the inexplicable factor that God exists and, of perhaps of more critical relevance in the interpretation of the significances of human life experiences, that God loves ‘us.’ Desmond’s position, in other words, appears somewhere in the between of his former Irish teacher of philosophical religion and his adopted Danish father of religious philosophy. Desmond does remark, at least in parentheses: ‘(Is Kierkegaard [*qua*

religious thinker] someone to think of as showing a way?)’ (p. 30).

That Heidegger *did not* (in the reviewer’s opinion and for reasons stated below) show Desmond a (positive) way of doing philosophy is, of course, a highly debatable issue. Any mention of Heidegger, however, and a debatable issue is not that far away. Nevertheless, Marsh’s article pays homage to Desmond’s identification (discovery?) of the metaphysical dimension of Being *in* metaphysical reflection as an argument *against* (p. 104) ‘the overcoming of metaphysics’—hence the title of his paper ‘William Desmond’s Overcoming of the Overcoming of Metaphysics,’ where that ‘overcoming’ (*Überwindung*) is to be understood as a (Heideggerean or Carnapian) duplicitous invocation for the conquering of metaphysics in full recognition of the unavoidable and inescapable fact of being conquered by metaphysics. ‘This argument [nevertheless] gives Desmond a basis in experience and reality for evaluating one-sided claims such as those made by Heidegger and Derrida’ (p. 104). Whether this ‘argument’ also puts Desmond’s thinking against Levinas’s equally one-sided argument for the radical priority of the reality of the other in our experiencing of the other as totally other, as it does in the opinion of the author, is doubtful, however, to this reader. Levinasian alterity is verifiable phenomenologically, but such will be considered as something ‘that cannot be verified phenomenologically’ (p. 105) only if phenomenology is defined, exclusively, by either Husserl or Heidegger. To what extent Desmond is a phenomenologist, in addition to Levinas, therefore, remains unaddressed, but we do know that answering this question will, to a greater extent, depend upon *who* it is that we take to be defining what phenomenology is.

O’Regan thinks ‘Heidegger is a consummate thinker of the middle’ (p. 69) and that there is ‘a congeniality’

(p. 70) between Heidegger and Desmond, especially in Desmond's *Being and the Between*. Heidegger, no doubt, is renowned for his effort in *Being and Time* (1927) 'to raise anew the question of the meaning of Being,' exclusively in relation to the awareness of one's own being (*sein*) in being and the 'ontic-ontological' priority and significance of the concern one expresses about one's own being (*es geht um*) in any 'Being-question.' Heidegger (believes that he) does this, however, without thinking of God and without reference to the actual human individual existence of others in 'the Call of Conscience' (O'Regan thinks remnants of 'cura' reside in Heidegger's analysis, p. 88, n. 32, but see Kelly's comments, p. 5), or, indeed, without reference to one's own actual self. Heidegger, then, is right to say he is neither an existentialist nor a follower of Schleiermacher's effort (very similar to Desmond's, at least in part, but not mentioned in any of the contributions) to think the existence of the finite together with the existence of the infinite. This means, however, that Heidegger misappropriates both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard's thought, a point that seems to be overlooked in the evaluation of Heidegger's early philosophy. This questioning of the meaning of being from within the particular experience of finitude that manifests itself in the mood of Angst and in anticipatory awareness of one's own death (and only of one's own death, *Vorlaufen zum Tode*) is the *metaxu*, nevertheless, of Heidegger's famous project of 'fundamental ontology,' founded on a 'hermeneutic of the facticity of *Dasein* (in Heidegger's sense of that term), and that is committed to thinking the finite (without the infinite) as O'Regan notes (p. 70).'

Identity in terms is not equivalent to identity in concepts, however. The way Desmond understands 'the middle' or 'the between' is qualitatively different to the way Heidegger addresses his topic in philosophy. In his attempt to think being and its meaning both differently

from and outside of the parameters that Heidegger had set *a prioristically* in *Being and Time* (and in subsequent works), Desmond, therefore, presents for his reader the possibility that there is more, and not less, for philosophy to do, than to respond (like puppets) to the historical sending of the meaning of Being (Heidegger)—therein the re-opening of philosophy for Desmond is also a (necessary) closing shop on Heidegger (as it was a necessary closing shop for Levinas in the 1930s prior to Desmond). O'Regan, nevertheless, is correct to situate Desmond (with Heidegger) in the broader tradition of a philosophical *commitment* to hermeneutics. 'Properly understood,' O'Regan remarks, 'the hermeneutic activity of philosophy [for Desmond or anyone] is a waiting on, a listening to, other more compact and symbolically dense discourses [he means 'art and religion,' as is evident from the context, but we could add some 'philosophies' too, for not all philosophies are conducive to philosophy of religion as Schleiermacher pointed out, and Heidegger's philosophy of *Being and Time* certainly is not], that can be elucidated but not adequately translated.' (p. 73). Given that Vico, as O'Regan notes, is closer to Hegel's notion of 'objective spirit' (p. 82 [thus to Dilthey?]), then the influence of Vico—or the suppressed influence of Dilthey's historical-hermeneutic flowing through Heidegger into Desmond work, minus Heidegger's Kierkegaardian-existentialistic rendering of Dilthey's famous triad of *Erlebnis-Verstehen-Ausdruck* in terms of the human being expressing concern in what goes about (*es geht um*) for that being's own individual temporal being in being, regardless of the death of others, others, time, culture, history, art, religion, and even all previous philosophy or metaphysics—it is the commitment to a *hermeneutic* practice that echoes through Desmond's alternative (and better) *philosophical* answer to the one that unfurls in Heidegger's 'path of thinking' about

'the question of the meaning of Being.' And that is why William Desmond is an original thinker, and an original thinker of and in 'metaxological metaphysics,' and why his particular style (practice) of philosophy cannot be imitated or appropriated, as O'Neil Surber argues, but, at best, admired or, at worse, ignored. It seems to me, however, that if the content of Desmond's metaxological philosophy is understood to lie between admiration and ignorance, then it is not admired and misunderstood. It is Desmond's intention that the content of his philosophy is communicable, however difficult such communication is for both reader and author (see O'Regan, p. 75). Thus Desmond's work is not a defiance of logic/dialectic but a defiance of any univocal understanding of the logical (in the dialectical) as the sole and primary criterion of what is thinkable. Hence O'Neill-Surber's attempt to think Desmond's 'idiotic' with the 'idiotic' (see parenthetical remarks, p. 61) of the 'conceptual persona' of a Deleuze and Guattari *against* Desmond may not do what it might claim it does (precisely because the concept of similarity implies difference, as well as 'commonalities,' see p. 62), in producing a better understanding of Desmond's metaxological philosophy through 'cinematics' more broadly conceived as 'dramaturgics' (p. 63), rather than through 'poetics' and 'singing thought' as Desmond *himself* argues.

Differences in identical terms (if they are not contingent identities) used by philosophers must be respected. And this is why in his contribution 'Maybe Not, Maybe: William Desmond on God,' Kearney can agree with Desmond's acute observation that 'A God that needs us to be God would be pitiable,' (p. 196), that is to say, pitiable as a God from our perspective, but maybe not from God's perspective—God weeps when we do terrible things to each other, hence the Good that is brought about by humans and that we await, when

absent (such as the experiences of the extermination camps) is a pointer to a God that desires us to be better and in this regard the God that is maybe not. Though God did not need to create us, God does, as Augustine remarks, need us, nevertheless, to fulfil creation. With that in mind, the way in which the relation of the human to the infinite, and that we call God, is, without doubt, that which calls both Corkonians to think, though that relation is, as Kearney acknowledges, thought differently by both (p. 200, n. 11).

And this is why Chapter 1, the editor's 'Introduction,' is so important to this work, for, herein the editor encapsulates beautifully and most elegantly Desmond's path of thought and in thought as a 'polyphony between many really differing, but somehow related voices' (p. 2). The editor thanked graciously all those who helped him produce this book, and noted 'I couldn't have done it without you' (p. 9). The book could not have been done without Tom either because it was his orchestral heart and voice that systematically arranged the singing thoughts of all the contributors into this meticulously edited and tightly arranged polyphony. And Tom left us with just one more added thought, being the generous philosopher that he was. The jacket cover of the collection is a photograph of an oil painting entitled 'As By the Sea Begun' which is one of Tom's own works of *poiesis*. Between image and text, therefore, Tom leaves his trace and his memory for which we are truly grateful. *Grásta Ó Dhía ar a anam.*

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