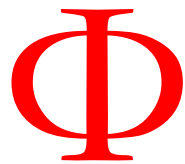


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WILLIAM DESMOND, *The Intimate Universal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 506. ISBN: 978-0231178761, Paperback, £50.00.

We are quite used to hearing about the history and significance of the problem of the one and the many as the impetus which first gave rise in Ancient Greece and the Ancient Greek speaking world to science and philosophy itself, that is, to reflection on things around us in *physis* in search for a principle that would explain the connection between those many things, the continued existence of this issue in the middle ages with the problem of universals and particulars that occupied those doing metaphysics in the mode of a Thomas, or a Scotus, or an other, its comprehensive resolution in modern philosophy by Hegel in his science of philosophy and its rejection in Nietzsche's science of no philosophy (postmodernism), up to and including today's big bang theory in contemporary physics. We are much less

accustomed to hearing about the problem of the intimate universal in philosophy. This, however, is the topic of the reflections of *The Intimate Universal*, and we have some indication of the direction in which this author's enquiring mind into this issue will go in its sub-title: 'the hidden porosity among religion, art, philosophy and politics'.

From this subtitle, one may think that the author has left science out of the equation. In one sense, he has. So, do not be disappointed, if you are looking for empirically verifiable or falsifiable statements, scientific hypotheses, or eternally true propositions in this work. In another sense, however, he has not precisely because the kind of 'science' that is sought and demonstrated in the book is exactly the 'porosity' of the thinking itself that occurs in the between of philosophy, religion, art, and politics.

This 'porous space of communicability' occurs in science too at atomic and sub-atomic, molecular and cellular levels (p. 233, see also his reference to his earlier *Being and*

the Between), but it is with the manifestation of the 'intimate universal' in the arenas of religion, art, philosophy and politics that guides and binds together this author's reflections on these distinct but related activities of the human spirit. So, it is of importance, then, to know what kind of 'science' the book actually delivers.

Underpinning Desmond's work is the (correct) assumption that Hegel adheres more rigorously to the Aristotelian motto '*Scientia non est individuorum*' than the medieval Aristotelian Scholastics did themselves.

Yet such a conception of 'science' (knowledge), before or after Hegel, presupposes both the existence and the intelligibility of singularly existing things. These singularities in existence and their intelligibility, nonetheless, are *not* grasped (known) or graspable (knowable) in science or through science. This, however, does not mean that such existences do not exhibit their own kind of intelligibility that is amendable to philosophical

reflection and science (knowledge); but such reflection, Desmond argues, has to steer a course that avoids the competing tendencies of the human spirit to engage in the (hasty and evacuating) generalisations of particulars and the (dominant and destructive) universalisms of totalitarianisms, that is, between what Desmond diagnoses in the history of western thought (metaphysics) and philosophy (science) as a 'servility' to individuals generalized and a 'sovereignty' of universals particularized.

Central to Desmond's concern, then, is the claim that there are 'two fundamental orientations to the universal and the intimate' (p. 23): one focused on the universal as opposed to the intimate; another focused on the intimate as opposed to the universal.

Desmond's alternative is to think the intimate universal, but 'not quite [in line with] the concrete universal of Hegel' (p. 25), since the latter absorbs the particular into the universal concept, difference into self-

contained sameness. A different approach is needed to preserve the universality in the intimate and the intimate in the universal, promising ‘a tantalizing harbinger of a being-between that cannot be confined to either alternative’ (p. 24). Taking up this invitation, in turn, enables Desmond to see and analyse pairs such as cosmopolis and ghetto, religion and secularity, public and private, immanence and transcendence, the inclusive and the exclusive, totality and infinity, in their many manifestations in philosophy, art, religion and politics in modernity and post-modernity (pp. 23–24). Whilst not rejecting significant affective accounts of ‘the horrifying *Il y a* of Levinas’ or ‘nauseating viscosity of Sartre’s *être-en-soi*’ (p. 206), Desmond favours ‘an effort to bring out of recess something of this prior affirming of the good of the “to be”’ (p. 230).

Those already familiar with Desmond’s previous work will recognise this approach as the continuation and fruition of his ‘metaxological metaphysics’,

and no doubt agree with his self-assessment that ‘without the *metaxu* it is hard to see how we could talk about the intimate universal’ (p. 33). In this regard, we could say that the *metaxu* acts as a kind of Kantian transcendental pre-condition of our experiences of the universal and the intimate, and that this book is not a new departure for Desmond. Some indeed may think that one would need to have a deep acquaintance with his previous works (e.g. *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, *Being and the Between*, *God and the Between*) to understand this book. Yet, this is not the case. This study is self-contained. There are plenty of passages that summarize any technical terms used—by which I mean the meanings that Desmond has wrought from words and concepts to enable us to see the ‘*metaxu*’ at work in thought, being and language. There are extensive and illuminating footnotes, a glossary of terms with paragraph explanations, and an index.

In his study of *The Logic of Analogy* in the early 1960s Ralph McInerny remarked that

the concept of analogy in Thomistic metaphysics is itself analogous in its meanings; so, you cannot find a univocal meaning for it (and so, *a fortiori*, it would be a mistake to construct one). The same applies to Desmond's concept of the *metaxu*; it is metaxological in its metaphysical meanings. Yet this is why the author can think through meanings of the intimate universal when dealing with the latter in religion, in art, in politics, in philosophy (metaphysics) and in their interconnectedness, which he has not previously brought together into one systematic focus of enquiry. This marks this book's originality.

The book is divided into two main parts: Part I The Intimate Universal—Exoteric Reflections, comprising four chapters: Ch. 1 Religion and the Intimate Universal: Neither Cosmopolis nor Ghetto; Ch. 2 Art and the Intimate Universal: Neither Imitation nor Self-Creation; Ch. 3 Philosophy and the Intimate Universal: Neither Theory nor Practice; Ch. 4 Politics and the Intimate

Universal: Neither Servility nor Sovereignty.

Part II The Intimate Universal—Systematic Thoughts moves outside of established and demarcated areas of the human spirit (art, philosophy, religion, politics) to a systematic unfolding of the 'intimate universal', also in four chapters, on: Ch.5 The Idiotics and the Intimate Universal; Ch. 6 The Aesthetics of the Intimate Universal; Ch. 7 The Erotics of the Intimate Universal; and Ch. 8 The Agapeics of the Intimate Universal. In Part II the starting point is not religion but 'the being of the human in all its ontological dimensions' (p. 202), beginning with the idiocy of being a human being in being, gifted with a 'primordial love of the good of the "to be"' (p. 225). The to be of this being, nonetheless, is gifted and thus cannot be thought in isolation from the absolute other, God as Creator, as the giver of being. Thus Desmond finds traces (*vestigiae Dei?*) of this relatedness to radical otherness in the very idiocy of one's 'own' (hence Des-

mond's scare quotation marks around this word) being.

This is Desmond's gratitude to Augustinian philosophical anthropology—the stone exists, the animal lives, but a human being knows that a stone exists and an animal lives, and that we love to be, all in one. This, as Augustine argues, grants a metaphysical superiority to individual living human beings to other kindred living and non-living beings in and of the world around that human being; but of most significance, the human being, and here again Desmond follows Augustine, is not the measure of all things precisely because that individual human being, by nature, is made for God and by God, and without compulsion but out of agapeic service; i.e., the 'agapeic giving' (pp. 213–214) is on God's part, parting *esse* to us before our *passio essendi* and *conatus essendi*. 'There is a measure higher than the human measure' (p. 315). Thus, '[M]an is the measure of all things but not the measure of himself' (p. 103).

What Desmond attempts for the concept of 'the intimate

universal' in Part II of this study is comparable to what Hegel attempted to do in the tracking of the dialectical unfolding of the concept of reason itself, but in an entirely different direction, that is to say, in a non-dialectically configurable construction of the human being that exists in the between of nothing and a God that willingly creates (gifts) out of nothing and out of love (and not out of necessity of the concept). This is why Part II is written and structured by the author's desire 'to offer systematic thoughts about the intimate universal in relation to the idiotics, the aesthetics, the erotics, and the agapeics of being' (p. 201) and with the conclusion that, when 'purged of its idols, the porosity of the soul is unclogged, its heart is ready in death for awakening, and the last passage, into the festivity of the divine' (p. 418). 'Restless is the heart until it rests in the Lord', as Augustine would put it, but God is no 'absolute monarch' of (post)modern times (p. 356).

It many respects, then, one should not be surprised that

Desmond starts Part I of this book with 'Religion and the Intimate Universal' and not say, with metaphysics or philosophy. Yet historical religions themselves have not measured up and paid heed to the 'reverent finesse', making a God out of God, instead, here on earth as 'counterfeit doubles', whether such religions posit the existence of the universal or singular god as the source of their 'intimate universal', or posit the religionless religions of godless socialism or capitalism, the universal human consumer or socialized individual, as the source of their 'intimate universal', which Desmond tellingly calls the 'privatization of religion' (p. 51). 'Does such immanent universals produce the counterfeit of the intimate universal?' (p. 25), asks Desmond. One here thinks Desmond is in agreement with Camus's critique of the 'substitute universes' of theistic or atheistic origins that set up future values (e.g., classless state, totalitarian regimes, heaven etc.) to justify man's gross inhumanity to man here

on earth in response to the absurdity of existence and that renders all values now nought (*L'Homme Révolté*, 1951).

Yet Desmond does not accept the meaninglessness of existence as the *fundamentum in re* of our metaphysical desire either to make sense of the socio-political-religious world around us or of our human natural desire for God which is not a man-made God ('Mangod', p. 44), for within the human being we find that being to be 'a surd surplus to absurdity' (Part II, p. 205). In other words, our experience of being human is oriented towards a transcendent being to whom we are open and opened up to receive and identify ourselves for whom we are, however obscurely that kind of being (*esse*) we find our strange selves to be, which is as beings in the between of nothing and the Creator. If this relationship is not properly held in balance, the mis-appropriation of this relationship will be manifested in the individual, social and particular lives of our thought, will and actions and the way society is organised, that is to

say, in power relations of the 'polis' and 'cosmopolis'. Thus chapter one concludes noting the implications of a kind of religious thinking that has gone astray and that leads to a distorted view of the relation between religion and politics. In light of this, one would expect the following chapter to deal with this—it does not, we have to wait until the last chapter of Part I (Ch. 4 'Politics and the Intimate Universal: Neither Servility nor Sovereignty'). In between chapters one and four, we have a chapter on 'Art and the Intimate Universal: Neither Imitation nor Self-Creation' and Ch. 3 'Philosophy and the Intimate Universal: Neither Theory nor Practice'. These chapters prepare one to see the relevance of Ch. 4 as a renewed way of looking at the connection between religion, art, philosophy and politics illuminated by a Christian metaphysics of creation out of nothing omitted from much contemporary approaches to philosophy, art, religion and politics. 'On the religious side of the issue,' Desmond writes, 'I

would underscore the importance of the personal God for any understanding of the intimate universal' (p. 41, see also, esp., p. 431, n. 17 for overcoming Pascal's distinction between 'the God of Abraham and Isaac with the God the savants'). This is underscored for any understanding of Desmond's account of the issue in relation to art, philosophy and politics too.

In Ch. 3, Desmond notes that '[T]o speak of Caesar and Christ is to speak of intimate singulars but also of communities with more universal reach' (p. 170). Since Desmond both lives and reflects on life after Caesar and Christ, he must think the benefits of both. This, however, means deploying what came after Casear, of how to live in the world mindful of our position in relation to both Christ, the world, and God the Father as creator of all that is out of love, as immanent critique to what went before, that is, Caesar's economic-political empire of the world, for the purposes of overcoming (in the sense of going beyond)

the bounds of Hegelian sovereignty and Nietzschean existentialistic exercise of will-to-power in face of servility of the masses characteristic of post-Kantian (post-) modern contemporary thought in religion, politics and ethics, e.g., 'capitalist "Right"' defence of 'totalizing market', and Nietzschean or Marxist 'voracious instrumentalism, whether individualist or communist' (p. 183). Not only do these extremists ideologies have negative impacts on interconnected and inter-dependent 'conatural' and 'communal' relations of family, selves, education, the state as guardian and outcome of the natural sociability of human beings, and the ordering and use of human and material resources, it has negative implications for any sovereignty or servility to religious forms of articulation. Yet since this is (should be) in deference to agapeic service that deals with the transcendent good, the universality of this position 'is not the exclusive possession of the Christian tradition or of the religious of the Bible' (p. 180). This means,

therefore, that in one of main sources of our (post)modern disquiet and antipathy about the involvement of religion in ethics and in politics— 'the wars of religion'—'the solicitation of agapeic service was *betrayed in religion itself*' (p. 182, my emphasis), that is to say, betrayed as manifested and undermined therein.

Consequently, 'an essential discrimination is lost—both for religion and for politics' (p. 182). It is Desmond's contention, then, that not only Hegel and his followers or objectors (e.g., Nietzsche), but also politico-religious bigotry 'closed off' and 'clogged up' the 'porosity' found in Augustine's *City of God* since '[W]hen [...] Augustine wrote the *City of God*, its composition was both transpolitical [at that time] and yet [subsequently, at another time] immensely influential in a political sense, since it mediates our understanding of different powers and their proper intermediation, without reduction of the *City of God* to the *City of Man*, as happens with Hegel and his successors

[and religious bigots]' (p. 184; and see, p. 335).

We could say, then, that Desmond's thinking fits fairly and squarely within Augustine's position (*Confessions*, 13, 33) that creation *ex nihilo* 'is "a te, non de te facta sunt"' ('things are made by you, not made of you'). This, for Desmond, includes the things made by us (politics, family, social formations, art, science, religious institutions, etc., the human-spiritual world)—these, no less than the things of nature, the sun or the moon or the stars, earth, wind, fire or water, cannot take the place of God as the transcendent being. This is why Part II of this study is necessary for it demonstrates the logic of the intimate universal in a positive manner. The task of Part I was to rule out false accounts and false localizations of the intimate universal in religion, art, philosophy and politics. In this regard, Part I is the prolegomena to Part II, but it is in Part II that the defence of Desmond's philosophy of religion is elaborated. For this reason, this book offers itself as the

starting point for a proper evaluation of Desmond's work as a whole for the past number of years.

One may think that this book (and any book of metaphysics) is intrinsically apolitical and highly abstract, and so, 'for the birds that fly high but who do not land where worldly power condenses, consolidates, and circulates' (p. 157). This judgement, nonetheless, would be the rash judgment of only a reader who did not read this book. Firstly, we could do well to remember that for Aquinas (and not Aristotle), prudence is *both* a moral *and* an intellectual virtue. This is already testimony to the power of the intimate universal that occupies a space between theory and praxis that is neither blind nor translucent, but demanding of one (the luminaries) to do better in light of experience, reflection and the exercise of judgment. This is why Desmond is correct to remind us today that '[T]he wise discernment of the genuinely political must be practiced in the art of detecting idols and dealing prudently

with the immanent havoc they threaten' (p. 161). 'For politics is not a "theory" but requires also a practice of phronetic discernment in the domains of relatives.' (p. 166). And such finesse in politics is needed to avoid 'the huckster' or 'the tyrant' taking over (p. 133). This task, however, lies ahead of us today.

This book is replete with detailed and specific analyses and metaxological reflections on issues of common concern that cannot but touch everyone's heart, mind, soul, body, and intelligence, whether in relation to: the self and the family, 'the family that stays together prays together', life and death, the pagan and the divine, 'wise blood and earth', original sin, 'I cannot picture Christ grim', cosmos and cosmetics, 'the divine *poiesis* of naturing', marriage as contract or vow, the three bachelors (Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer), forgiveness, fact and value, the 'asymmetry' of the good of the to be and evil, 'Hobbes is right [...] Augustine is more right', the politics and politicization of (the) today,

Heidegger as 'fundamental ontologist, even Nazi, of Catholic upbringing', and the 'secret source of love' in the intimate universal that shatters binary views of the idiocy of being a being in being and the absolute other attested to in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition and historical unfoldings of perverse and reified religiosity in philosophy, science, religion, art and politics, from Hegel down to the present American Idol. This book is a serious and engaged work of contemporary thought, intimately mindful of the present, past and future as the universal domain of discourse that requires not less but more finesse in thinking in religion, art, philosophy and politics about issues of common concern to progress things further not backwards. It is thus a challenging read, as all reading worth its salt should be.

It is not without reason, then, that the Metaphysical Society of America has awarded this book, *The Intimate Universal*, and honoured its author with the J. N. Findlay Award for the Best Book in Metaphysics (2016-2017)—an Award the

author also and first received in 1997 for his pioneering study in metaphysics of *Being and The Between* (1995).

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