

at this point. In most places, he is critical of Barth's detractors and shows how, on the whole, one should give Barth at least the benefit of the doubt and follow his revolutionary dogmatics and ethics as a work carried out in and for the Christian community, society, and the political realm.

He mentions Barth's ecumenical concerns, but does not show Barth's critical yet also irenic approach to Catholic doctrine – a view typical of Barth's whole life and work. Again, little is said about Barth's critical view of capitalism and his leftward trend in social and political terms, and nothing on the one-sided view of F. W. Marquardt's book *Theologie und Sozialismus* which attempts to interpret Barth's theology (wrongly to our mind) largely by his socialism. The limits which are set by a book of this size should not be overlooked. Webster's omission scarcely detracts from a good introduction to Karl Barth's life and work as a whole.

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## PHILOSOPHY

**Being and Dialectic: Metaphysics and Culture.** Edited by William Desmond and Joseph Grange. Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2000. Pp. x+219. Price \$19.95. ISBN 0-7914-4626-3.

Originating as papers delivered at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America in 1995 at Loyola College, Baltimore, this book comprises eleven essays, organised into four parts, on pertinent and perennial concerns within metaphysics today.

Part I (Sources) attempts to delimit cardinal distinctions upon which the hinges of the door to thinking metaphysically rest, namely: *astonishment* in face of being 'that it is at all', as distinct from indifference towards being at all (William Desmond); *difference*, and not sameness, as the effective mark of being, since the difference

between existence and non-existence makes all the difference in the world, hence being makes a real difference as much as difference marks real being (Vincent Colapietro); *dialectic* as more than a mere method of thinking about being because the logical rubric of neither-nor (the dialectic of independence, identity), either-or (the dialectical strategy of the powerful), and both-and (the dialectic of plenty and the promise of harmony, and the dialectic of delusion) entail competition for (finite) resources and resolutions in the real world, granting that life is larger than, but not devoid of, logic and conflict is a fact of life (David Weissman); *the relatedness and unrelatedness of identity and difference* without which neither terms, nor being itself or non-being itself, could be thought, as nothing is more identical with itself than nothing, and yet this very difference itself between being and non-being – though 'difference (...) cannot even be the same as itself' – 'is the relation that holds the individual determinations within the frame distinct from one another' (Brian Martine).

Part II (Themes) examines: the way reflection on the concepts of unity, oneness, totality, being, truth, goodness and beauty all stand and fall together alongside intelligible talk about nothing (Carl Page); the question of substantial identity within the *topos* of ever widening and narrowing contexts of mutual interdependence upon which nature, life, society, and civilisation depend (George Allan); a hidden ethical exigency present in all our knowledge-claims wrought from reality, and this includes metaphysical knowledge-claims about being itself (Stephen David Ross). Ross's paper is particularly challenging. Echoing Plato's and, more recently, Levinas' defence of the idea of the Good as source of all knowledge and as otherwise than being, Ross argues that the extent to which metaphysical knowledge is concerned about *its own* knowledge-claims, then it harbours

within its own procedure the very 'offence' it seeks to forget. Following Lyotard's ethical critique of Heidegger's path of thinking about the Being-question, Ross's paper therefore is a sober reminder that theoretical knowledge gained about any matter at the expense of the Good, like practical justice dispensed without regard to the Good, are all too human and inhumane, blind paths of thought and action.

Part III (Thinkers) contains lively reflections of Kevin Kennedy and Giacomo Rinaldi on the work of Paul Weiss and William Desmond respectively. Rinaldi, however, while enumerating eleven points of critique of Desmond's position, returns to Hegel and the claim that '*the Absolute* is far more appropriate than *being* to designate the peculiar object of metaphysics'. Nevertheless, whereas Rinaldi is uncompromising in his appeal to re-appropriate the 'most genuinely *idealistic* core' of the Hegelian heritage for metaphysics, Kennedy sees in Weiss's speculative dialectic, a pluralism that, if consistently pursued, 'in the end, (...) reveals (...) that other fundamental perspectives on reality such as religion, science, or creative expression and artistic imagination cannot be completely absorbed by philosophy, nor can philosophy be displaced by them. [Hence] If philosophy can envision the Whole, it is only abstractly, while these others penetrate reality more directly.'

Part IV (Being and Dialectic in Cross-Cultural Perspective) presents two papers that defend two fundamentally antithetical theses on radical similarity and radical difference between Western and Eastern modes of thinking. Robert Cummings Neville notes (correctly) that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* has had a profound influence on all Judeo-Greek Western metaphysical speculation (including the participants of the Conference), whilst also claiming that the same issue is central to the

origins of Eastern and South Asian thought. Hence, both Western and Eastern traditions share a common development of such themes as 'ecstatic contingency, infinite plenitude, and the productive fire of nothingness [which] are three interconnected ideas of one thesis: that things are created *ex nihilo*.' In direct contrast, David L. Hall argues that engagement in any immanent critique of metaphysics by sympathetic or unsympathetic Western or Eastern philosophers will not produce a path for either the continued existence or the demise of metaphysics as we know it in the West. Instead, encounter with a particular different culture such as China – with its own culturally specific historical narrative unfolded from an acosmological standpoint – unmasks the ideology of universality and unity inherent in the very notion of being developed in the cosmological-oriented stories of Western philosophy and hence in the very business of doing metaphysics together. Absence of unity, however, as Hall well knows, from a dialectical perspective, implies multiplicity, not nothing, and it is the very way in which the Chinese have endeavoured to think about this multiplicity, encapsulated in the *yin/yang* couplet, that intrigues Hall. According to Hall, 'the best way to think of *yin* and *yang* is as ad hoc devices for organizing the ways in which one discriminates "thises" and "thats".' Hence, Hall rules out any facile dualistic or dialectical over-arching interpretation of the *yin/yang* relationship, whilst also ruling out any fixed, inherent unity in the nature of things comparatively designated *yin* and *yang*. Comparatively speaking, then, '[U]nlike Being or the Absolute – suggestive of completeness, perfection, and aseity – [the Daoist image of] a *Great Clod* [sic] merely names the inchoate process leading to the interactions of thises and thats'.

Hall's paper is a *tour de force* against the very possibility of reaching shared

and shareable cultural perspectives on Eastern and Western thinking about being. And yet, in pointing this out, Hall manages to give us shaper insight into the way being is thought in Western civilisation and the way thought is conducted in Eastern civilisation. In this regard, though Hall finds 'fascinating' and is 'neither surprised nor disturbed' by his own conclusion that "Being" and "Dialectics" have been immensely irrelevant to the development of Chinese thought and culture', globalisation processes today, for better or worse, will ensure that strategic *rapprochement* between Chinese and Anglo-European thought and culture will be fascinating, surprising – if not, enterprising – and definitely disturbing in the foreseeable future. And, dare I say it, this is because it is a metaphysical principle that unity produces difference; something that any particular Chinese man, woman, or child, as much as any particular Anglo-European man, woman, or child knows without being acquainted with the history of metaphysics.

If metaphysics, understood as the study of beings as beings, of the meaning of being, is to survive as a viable cultural concern and preoccupation for the philosopher today, then documenting its history, either in terms of its rise and fall, or beginning and end, will not be enough. Rather, engagement with the matter itself for thought will be required. *Being and Dialectic: Metaphysics and Culture* is an attempt to do just that. Herein, therefore, verifiably lie the merits of the participants' contributions and the editors' collection.

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#### SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

**Pathways To God: The Spiritual Classics.** Edited by Kevin Nichols and Peter Phillips. Dublin: Veritas, 2001. Pp. 161. Np. ISBN 1-85390-592-5.

It has been remarked that the 'classics' are those works everyone knows they *ought* to have read – and so seldom have! In the contemporary ecclesio-cultural context, are there any texts of a spiritual nature (the Scriptures apart, one hopes) which command such high regard? Is it folly or presumption for any editor to attempt to justify 'the spiritual classics' in this age of post-modern fracture and relativisation?

Introducing their selection, Nichols and Phillips argue that any classic merits the acclaim on the basis of its capacity to transcend the historical period and cultural context of its original creation. While formed within a living tradition, the genius of the individual author lies in his or her ability to 'disclose the realised experience of some enduring truth' (11). Each of the texts considered, they contend, are capable of translation, offering to every generation a truth, which confronts the human heart with the force of recognition.

Anthony de Mello writes somewhere of disciples who complained to their master that he forever spoke in parables, and never spelt things out for them: taking an apple, he asked if they wished him to chew it first before offering it to them to eat! Nichols and Phillips explicitly declare their intention to prescind from treating the classics as manuals of spiritual theology, declining to simply abstract the arguments and teaching of the original authors. The reader should not, however, be misled: their commentary is the very epitome of intelligent, succinct, and pertinent direction, while respecting the originality and diversity of their subjects, each text being prefaced and informed by the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the author.

Spanning the Christian tradition from Augustine's *Confessions* to Teresa of Avila's *Of the Mercies of God* (better known as her *Life*), the eight texts selected illustrate both similar themes and dissimilar counterpoint in the divine-human symphony of grace.