William Desmond on Default Atheism
Reflecting on the Metaxu

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Introductory Note

This paper was prompted by a close viewing of the 2017 Thomas Lecture presented by William Desmond at the Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in southern Indiana on April 6th 2017. The presentation was entitled "The Idiocy of Being in Aquinas’ Third Way." Although the lecture nominally served to address Saint Thomas Aquinas’ third argument for the existence of God, the greater part offered a privileged entry into Desmond's thought, particularly in regard to how the contemporary Western mindset has come to be one of default atheism. Desmond offers a highly individuated perspective on the intellectual currents and armoured modes of being that have contributed to this development.

Links to both the original video of the lecture and an abridged downloadable audio version of Desmond’s presentation are included at the end of the paper.
The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such.

Simone Weil 1

Between You and all of us
We do not have the
First Word
We are spoken to first
William Desmond 2

It may seem presumptuous for one not trained in the peculiarly exacting ways of academic philosophy to address the work of so powerful a philosopher as William Desmond. Yet to read the man, or to watch one of his presentations is to be gently drawn into an engagement with subtleties that are usually hidden within the wash and detritus of daily life. Desmond invites us to be attentively present to what presents itself each day, to remain in a state of openness and without prejudice so as better to be carried into the liminal and the unexpected.

Throughout his long career, William Desmond has closely and consistently examined the philosophical currents that have shaped the contemporary intellectual, cultural and political landscapes. As a philosopher of religion, Desmond has been particularly drawn to interrogate those streams of thought that have brought about a near-universal atheism that defines the ethos of late Western modernity. As he puts it, many today have "lost the taste" for any discussion of or inquiry into the nature of God. In a short two centuries, the long-established cultural theism of the Western world has been completely overturned and default atheism has now become the norm. Desmond observes:

"The interesting thing is that the default position isn't necessarily a worked-out position at all, or argued for. It can be a position in which one finds oneself or falls into without thought, and to which, when intellectual or existential pressure is put on one's orientation, one returns. One falls back on a taken-for-granted atheism." 3

What this means in real terms is that for those who identify themselves as atheist, certain facts and realities are summarily excluded from consciousness, removed from view, or flatly denied. One effectively insulates oneself from challenging or discomforting considerations.

In his own examination of the origins of and the influences behind contemporary secularism and atheism, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has postulated the development of a "buffered self" as one of the primary mechanisms whereby potentially challenging or discomforting considerations can be neutralised. According to Taylor, the modern buffered self (in contradistinction to the pre-modern porous self) sets up rigid
mental barriers that will not admit entry of ideas or influences that it perceives to be in opposition or hostile to its own. Taylor offers the following account:

"To be a buffered subject, to have closed the porous boundary between inside (thought) and outside (nature, the physical) is partly a matter of living in a disenchanted world. . . . Living in a disenchanted world, the buffered self is no longer open, vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces which cross the boundaries of the mind, indeed, negate the very idea of there being a secure boundary. . . . This sense of self-possession, of a secure, inner mental realm, is all the stronger, if in addition to disenchancing the world, we have also taken the anthropocentric turn, and no longer even draw on the power of God." 4

William Desmond has some sympathy with the notion of buffering, implying as it does an attenuation, a blocking, a self-elected filtering of subtle and potentially unsettling states of being that are neither entirely immanent, nor lacking in transcendental undertones. According to Desmond, to be in an open or porous state rather than a buffered one more readily facilitates an engagement with what he terms the metaux or the between. He elaborates:

"Think of our human being as thus double: inside and outside, immanent and transcendent, immanently self-surpassing yet surpassed by what is not determined entirely immanent. The metaux as immanence is a given porosity of being, already in relation to what is beyond itself." 5

Charles Taylor identifies the porous or open self as one of the signatory characteristics of a pre-modern, more specifically, medieval culture. William Desmond, on the other hand, identifies existential openness as a universal human attribute that is neither conditioned nor constrained by historical or sociological circumstances but that is rather, constitutive of our being. 6 In its human expression, porosity is an ever-present potential of human consciousness within which one may abide openly and without expectation, or which one may eschew, thereby cleaving to a strongly-bounded and autonomous sense of self.

Desmond sees the phenomenon of buffering as extending well beyond the personal dimension, and as capable of characterising communities or even the world itself. Such collective buffering would, like individual buffering, be reflected by a rejection of and even hostility towards particular positions or perspectives. The collective buffering that has led to a near-universal position of default atheism in modern Western societies is a case in point.

William Desmond describes the more primal - though presently-eclipsed - state of porosity in the following terms:

"The porosity of being is ontologically constitutive, not just historically or culturally relative, though it may be true that some epochs or cultures exhibit a feel for it, while others reconfigure the ethos of being, and of the human being, with the result that the porosity is, say, driven underground, or out of mind, or warped into forms not true to the promise of original givenness." 7

In examining the relationship between buffering and default atheism, William Desmond draws upon an extended reflection on religion by analytical philosopher Thomas Nagel. 8 Nagel offers a quintessential instantiation of how the buffered self effectively determines a priori what can and cannot be accepted as intelligible, true, or of worth. In his 1997 publication, The Last Word, Nagel unambiguously states his position:

"In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to an entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident
empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper - namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true and I am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I am right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God. I don't want the universe to be like that."  

Putting aside the sheer hubris of his concluding thought, we see here an affirmation by Nagel of his commitment to the Enlightenment project in his outright rejection of the institutions of religion and the notion of a personalistic God. In other writings however, Nagel reveals his dissatisfaction with the dominant mechanist/materialist ethos that conceives of a purposeless universe driven by impersonal laws and blind necessity. Nagel confesses that he has indeed tasted something of the mystery and wonder within which we find ourselves, but on his own admission, feels incapable of accepting the existence of a creator God or of a divine reality:

"I confess to an ungrounded assumption of my own, in not finding it possible to regard the design alternative as a real option. I lack the sensus divinitatis that enables - indeed compels - so many people to see in the world the expression of divine purpose as naturally as they see in a smiling face the expression of human feeling."  

Acknowledging the essential absurdity and contrariety to human experience of a purely purposeless and mechanistic view of life and the universe, yet unwilling to admit any possibility of a theistic interpretation, Nagel invokes the notion of an Aristotelian idea of teleology without intention. He states: "I am not confident that this Aristotelian idea of teleology without intention makes sense, but I do not at the moment see why it does not."  

This sounds a little like Nagel wanting to have his cake and eat it too, as the old saying goes. It is curious that one so penetrating in his thought as Thomas Nagel seems unconcerned by the inherent contradiction of such a position. Telos, by its very nature is more, far more, than blind, mindless tropism. What is clearly evidenced here is a buffering, a marked resistance to interpretive modes that were commonplace a couple of centuries ago, but which are today deemed by the dominant ethos to be irrelevant and unacceptable.

William Desmond notes that Nagel's position is the complete reverse of that taken by such earlier philosophers as Emmanuel Kant and William James both of whom wanted there to be a God, if not for any other reason than to retain a certain moral stability, and to provide moral guidance for the way we are to live our lives. Desmond considers the recent predominance of default atheism has "something to do with the reconfigured ethos within which intellectual investigations are pursued."  

Sailing out of the Mists

William Desmond holds that contemporary atheism is not simply an intellectual option or a philosophical position, but that it now represents an entire orientation to life that has effectively replaced the cultural ethos of earlier centuries. Desmond asks us to consider whether this ethical reconfiguration has brought us any closer to truth or to human fulfilment. He asks us to consider further whether the reconfigured ethos of late modernity may in fact not be the last word as some would have it be, but represents rather an over-riding, even a distortion of a more primal, more benign, more generous ethos that enfolds the interrelation and communion between ourselves, the world, and the forces that sustain the world. This more primal originary ethos is a pure givenness.
antior to our projections, constructions and manipulations. It can neither be abolished by philosophical dogmatisms, nor dismissed by the decrees of modernity and technocivilisation.

Desmond offers the following insight into the relationship between the originary primordial ethos and the reconfigured ethos of modernity:

"You can argue [that] there is a given ethos of being which we don't construct, but within which we construct. And there is a reconfigured, or a second ethos of being which we construct, but we construct it on the basis of what is already given to us. So that original givenness is extraordinarily important to acknowledge . . . because we have a tendency to think that what is really of ultimate worth is what we do with what is given to us, rather than the mode of a certain openness or gratitude and indeed reverence for the original gift of being." 13

To re-enter the ever-present primal ethos is potentially to overcome the disenchantment of which Charles Taylor has written, to be open to re-enchantment, to be re-awakened to an astonishment by which our experience of reality is enriched and re-animated. The potentialities of this primal ethos are always available to our consciousness if we care to give over the time, the attention and the patience by which it may reveal its abundance and restore our sense of awe and wonder. This is a becoming porous to the metaxu, or the between, a porosity that William Desmond constantly invites us to reclaim. This is the means by which we can re-evaluate and re-envision the buffered self that according to Charles Taylor has become normative over the past two centuries, the self that claims independence from what is given, from the world and from other beings, the self that is deemed to be an efficient, autonomous, self-determined agent reliably guided and enabled by rationality.

Without actively sensitising oneself to the original givenness of being and querying the ethos that has placed autonomy at the pinnacle of existential achievement, orchestrated the entronement of rational agency as the determinate and determining good of this world, and deemed the dismissal of both God and the project of metaphysics as fundamentally meaningless, one is constrained to live through the buffered self that Charles Taylor has so clearly delineated.

Such a sensitising may enable one to become both more open and more attuned to the transcendent dimension that conditions all immanence, thereby passing beyond the summary finitude declared as the unbreachable horizon of human possibility. Regardless of the contemporary mood, transcendental reality can be seen as infusing immanence once the openness or gratitude and indeed reverence for the original gift of being is awakened. As William Blake once sang:

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern." (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell)

William Desmond notes that Charles Taylor's Immanent Frame 14, like the philosophy of Kant that declared immanence to be the absolute horizon of life, needs somehow to be broken through so that the reality of transcendence can penetrate the conceptual armouring that insistently buffers its own self-determined limits of possibility.

The transcendent dimension is not altogether an otherness in which one places one's trust, as, for example, in the many excarnate paradises or heavens awaiting the faithful according to Christian, Buddhist and Islamic belief. Transcendence is a gift that also
abides in immanence, a gift that reveals itself in its own way and in its own time to an attentive, receptive, porous consciousness. Abraham Maslow gave some small voice to this aspect of reality in his description of the peak experience.

William Desmond identifies breaches of the commonplace and the ordinary in what he calls hyperbolic experiences, experiences that throw us above ourselves, outside of ourselves, beyond normal expectations, experiences that cannot be contrived or wilfully brought about but that are as gifts gratuitously given by what is both within and beyond human life:

"Properly porous mindfulness of the primal ethos is akin to the ancient thaumazein, or wonder, which Desmond refurbishes as the "hyperboles of being" are happenings in being that can give way to this type of astonishment, and especially awaken one to what exceeds finite determination, and autonomous self-determination. These hyperboles can allow intimation of the primal ethos, but also open channels toward thinking again about God." 15

**Between Ethos and Theos**

In the latter part of his lecture, Desmond explicates his own conception of the hyperboles of being and their various dimensions. His language is highly individuated but clear. Desmond identifies four such hyperboles, the first of which he describes as The Idiocy of Being. He uses the term idiocy not in its commonly held meaning, but in its original context as singularity, particularity, or idiosyncrasy. Poets, for example, will often write and speak in their own idiom, as also will neurosurgeons and philosophers.

There is an ungeneralisable quality to idiocy. It is central to being human. We are each of us singular beings with singular interiorities that are mysterious by their very nature. Yet Desmond notes that this singularity or idiocy "is inseparable from communicability." Apart from the ways of interpersonal communication, idiocy concerns an individuated participability within being itself, an intimacy of being, as he puts it. Being-in-the-world is a state experienced by the individual, and is not reducible to the more neutral or abstract universals that certain philosophers incline towards. Desmond notes that such highly influential philosophers as Kant and Hegel and some of their followers possessed a very limited capacity to enter into, and hence understand this intimacy, this ontological idiocy. He observes that they appear to lack the capacity for "ontological astonishment before the that-it-is of things." 16 Desmond develops this further: "I think that a default atheism is often deficient in this sense of ontological astonishment that is at work in what I am suggesting here," 17

It may be worth noting that there appears to have been no shortage of artists, dramatists, and philosophers who have pushed themselves to the limits of both liminality and astonishment, yet who have vehemently cleaved to a denial of God. Arthur Rimbaud, Antonin Artaud, and Friedrich Nietzsche readily come to mind. Theirs, however, was not a default atheism, but a well-considered and worked out position.

Desmond describes the second hyperbole as The Aesthetics of Happening. This refers to experiences that can irrupt unbeckoned and unexpectedly into our consciousness, completely overwhelming our egoic boundaries. Examples include such happenings as fragrance, music and the experience of beauty, all of which are capable of inducing a sudden and unanticipated entrancement.
Desmond describes the third hyperbole as *The Erotics of Selving*, and here once again, the term *erotic* is used not in its conventional connotation, but more in its Platonic sense as denoting a self-surpassing energy that can spontaneously arise within us. There is a potential within immanence itself that can take us "to the boundary or the threshold of immanence." 18

And finally, Desmond identifies *The Agapeics of Communication* as the fourth hyperbole. This points to an experience intimately connected with the highest form of love, of *agape*, that can irradiate our engagements and interactions with both others and with what lies beyond others. Agapeic love springs from an unbounded fullness of being, an excess that is never depleted in the giving. With agapeic love, both the giver and the one to whom is given are lifted and augmented.

These four hyperboles do not simply represent a categorisation of the variety of intense states of being that can occur when a self becomes porous to what is other than itself. An ascending progression of sorts is to be discerned in the four states described by Desmond, though it is difficult to find any explicit or systematic reference to such a progression in his writings.

The first state of *idiocy* can be likened to a simple realisation or awakening to one's unique and gifted presence in the world, to the fact that the world is at all and that one is in the world. The second hyperbole, *the aesthetics of happening* points to the limited nature of our supposedly autonomous ego as determinant of how we shall live in and experience the world. It acknowledges that we may assume a position of open receptivity to the abundance, and at times the over-abundance within which we find ourselves and remain porous to that which is offered to experience. The third hyperbole acknowledges our capacity to experience and to participate in energetic modes that lie far beyond circumscribed modes of being. These intense, even daemonic energies may move us equally in destructive as in creative ways according to our temperament and moral commitments. In the fourth or *agapeic* hyperbole, one both draws from and is drawn into the domain of love without limits.

Dutch philosopher Sander Griffioen reflects on this progressive aspect of Desmond's hyperboles:

"There is much in Desmond's work to suggest an ascendency from lower to higher levels of understanding and personal growth. . . .

I am pushing towards something that is not the author's prime concern. His first concern is to rediscover an essential openness ('porosity'), and not to trace some march of mind . . . [T]he schemes employed . . . strongly suggest an ascent. Therefore, the interpreter's task is to keep prodding the author to come up with a fuller account." 19

Griffioen here alludes to the suggestive, rather than the prescriptive nature of Desmond's philosophical explorations. Desmond's lexicon is highly individuated and truly his own, and despite the fact that such terms as *metaxological* and *the between*, are emblematic of his language and his philosophical position, nowhere are they fully spelled out or definitively explicated. The nature of Desmond's style is such that only through protracted immersion and close attention does one begin to grasp the originality and, to use his own word, the *finesse* of his approach. Words ultimately fail in the domains opened by Desmond, and one inevitably glides into the poetic, the nuanced, the polysemic, the paradoxical. The finger can only point to the moon. The called-for *fuller*
account cannot be dispensed at will, but only participated in experientially. Such is the nature of giving voice to the ineffable.

So where does William Desmond's call for porosity, for openness to the primal ethos lead? Some clues to his essential position are offered in the following:

"I think the most important manifestation of the porosity is connected with the meaning of prayer. Religious porosity would be the most intimate awakening of this porosity of being. Prayer at heart is not something that we do, prayer is something that we find ourselves in, something that comes to us as finding ourselves already opened to the divine as other to us and yet as in intimate communication with us. The porosity of prayer is the original site of communication between the divine and the human."  

Here we begin to get a little closer to William Desmond's difficult mission in the mixed and divided theatre of contemporary philosophy. Origins are important to Desmond, and he is a long way from those lines of thought that hold that mind is generated in the interactions between neurones, neurotransmitters, and sensory impressions of the "outside" world. Desmond's metaxalogical metaphysics carries an unspoken mystical sensibility founded on deep receptivity and trust of a greater-than-human origin that continually offers itself as a gift to a consciousness ready and willing to receive it. He spells this out further:

"Prayer is waking up to the already effective communication of the divine: not just our conversation 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 living 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," 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."  

Despite the fact that the stated theme of his presentation was "The Idiocy of Being in Aquinas' Third Way", Desmond deftly deflected much of the discussion away from Aquinas' argument for the existence of God by contingency, in favour of offering an living monstrance of the essential impossibility of rational proofs for the existence of God. By directing the discussion more towards the centrality of porosity, of the need for openness in apprehending or comprehending the transcendental dimension, Desmond emphasized the need to cultivate porosity as the means whereby one may come to participate experientially in realities that can neither be encompassed nor determined by linear rationality.

William Desmond, Default Atheism and The Idiocy of Being in Aquinas' Third Way

1. VIDEO. A high quality video recording of William Desmond’s presentation at the Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology can be accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7sJswuzO2g&t=4s

2. AUDIO. A slightly abridged audio version of Desmond’s lecture can be streamed or downloaded as an mp3 file at: https://archive.org/details/WilliamDesmondOnDefaultAtheism
SOURCES

3. William Desmond 2017, The 2017 Thomas Lecture on Philosophy and Theology: *The Idiocy of Being in Aquinas' Third Way*, St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, April 6th 2017, 8m 45s - 9m 08s. Viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz7sJsw4zO2q&t=4s
6. Ibid., p. 161
7. Ibid., p. 162
8. William Desmond 2017, op. cit., [embedded video], 13m 30s - 16m 20s
11. Ibid., p. 33
12. William Desmond 2017, op. cit., [embedded video], 16m 25s - 17m 18s
13. Ibid., 22m 30s - 23m 12s
16. William Desmond 2017, op. cit., [embedded video], 42m 10s - 42m 40s
17. Ibid., 46m 55s - 47m 05s
18. Ibid., 33m 58s - 34m 23s

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