

Introduction

William Desmond's philosophy begins in wonder. It wonders at the aesthetic richness of the world, at our own mysterious depths, at the strangeness of there being anything at all. Dennis Vanden Auweele claims, "It is abundance that propels thought [for Desmond], not emptiness."¹ Desmond argues that being is excessive, "overdetermined." It is more than we can take in. Being manifests a worth that we did not put there, a worth that can move us to care. The strike of wonder (re)awakens us to this abundance and worth. Perhaps we are struck by a starlit sky or by mote constellations suspended in a window's light. Perhaps we are struck by the face of a newborn child, the face of a lover, or the face of a suffering stranger.

Desmond's philosophy describes being's abundance and affirms its worth. He moves beyond the modern tendency to focus on the determinate, on what can be pinned down in propositions. Many philosophers, for instance, dismiss wonder at the strangeness of anything existing at all. They treat such wonder at the mystery of being as philosophical nonsense, subjective mysticism, or mere superfluity precisely because it cannot yield a determinate answer. Desmond, on the other hand, thinks that our thought must be continually renewed in such astonished wonder. Otherwise, it will be prone to false closure or bone-dry rationalism. Still, Desmond does not wish to trade a (modern) focus on the univocal and the determinate for a (postmodern) focus on the equivocal and the indeterminate, which when taken to an extreme seems to allow for no determinations at all.

Desmond instead stresses the "overdeterminate." He often turns to the work of art as an illustration of this. A work of art is "a unique singular," Desmond explains, "which is yet big with an inexhaustibility that no set of finite determinations can deplete" (*BB*, 187). Persuasive analysis must attend to an artwork's concrete particulars, must try to discern what

it communicates, but no analysis can exhaust the artwork's richness. Even the most authoritative critic cannot claim the last word. Another critic can always contest or supplement. This means that the artwork is neither simply determinate nor purely indeterminate. Desmond would say that it offers an excess of plausible determinations. This is what he means when he calls the artwork overdetermined.² For Desmond, reality itself and the many others we encounter are best understood as overdetermined. We can make any number of determinations about them, but we can never fully grasp them. "What is true of great works of art," explains Ryan Duns, "is true of anything or anyone worthy of love: we embrace mystery. The surplus of meaning behind a text, a painting, a person invites us into ongoing engagement."³

Desmond claims that philosophy needs not only propositions, then, but also poetic description. The latter evokes the overdetermined richness of being. Such description recurs throughout Desmond's writings. In his books *God and the Between* (2008) and *Godsends* (2021), Desmond even includes some original poems. One tells of a walk "Along the verge / Of the bay." The speaker notes "People promenading," a jet plane overhead tracing "a white line / To somewhere / Unknown," a limping man who "pretends / He does not need / His cane." The speaker notes a resurfacing cormorant, tracks the blood trail of a wounded creature, and then sits down on a bench to "Rest and write / Of these saturations":

Soul a dripping sponge
 Medium of a meaning
 Whose message
 It cannot pinion
 As it passes

This poem dramatizes several of Desmond's key concerns: our sponge-like receptivity; the sensual excess of the world that saturates it; the way universal propositions cannot contain the excess; the mystery of being, suggested here by the ocean depths and the "Unknown" passage overhead. This poem is marked by the "intimate strangeness of being," to use Desmond's own evocative phrase, by an awareness that we are intimately a part of a world that we can never fully grasp. It is not a saccharine poem. It reminds us of fragility (the limping man), finitude (the blood trail), and natural violence (the cormorant eating a fish). Yet it still affirms the excess and enigmatic worth of things:

I do nothing
 To merit it
 I ask for nothing
 I have already received
 Everything (*GB*, 116)

The speaker begins to write on the bench, and the words come to “consecrate” these things. Desmond’s philosophy often consecrates, blesses, affirms. It draws attention to this as one of the primal capacities of language, as a primal vocation of not only religion but also poetry and philosophy.⁴ This is a controversial or at least unfashionable claim in many philosophical circles. But Desmond argues that the affirming philosopher will be attentive to crucial dimensions that other philosophers forget, ignore, or refuse.

Desmond is a poetic thinker, then, but he is also a systematic thinker.⁵ He wishes to offer a systematic metaphysics of overdetermined being, a “metaxological” account of the relationships “between” overdetermined entities. Robert Cummings Neville claims, “William Desmond is one of those rare philosophers who has a philosophy, indeed a philosophical system. In this he is like Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, and Whitehead.”⁶ As should be clear, though, Desmond does not offer a closed system that ignores or explains away excess; nor does Desmond’s metaphysics adopt a god’s eye view. He resists the temptation to disappear behind an impersonal system. His departure point is his own astonished wonder at the world, like that of the speaker walking along the beach in his poem. This seemingly humble departure point, however, launches Desmond on a wide-ranging, adventurous quest. “If Desmond is a major critic of philosophical gluttony that insists on speculatively mastering the entire range and depth of the real,” explains Cyril O’Regan, “this should not disguise the fact that the refusal of system does not function to narrow, but rather open up multiple phenomenological-metaphysical vistas into individuals, communities, selves, desire, drive, receptivity, the nature of art, religion and philosophy, and the good, the true, and the beautiful to name but a few.”⁷ Desmond’s philosophy ranges widely, but it both begins *and* ends in wonder at a world about which we can continually learn yet never fully comprehend.

Because he attends to excess, Desmond evades the common charges that continental philosophers often level at metaphysicians. His metaphysics is not one of static presences or totalizing concepts. It is neither onto-theo-

logical nor logocentric. As his departure point in wonder suggests, he shares much with Heidegger, the great critic of metaphysics. Desmond acknowledges several valid concerns about metaphysics in the wake of Heidegger, concerns about overreach, static system, and false closure. Still, Desmond claims that Heidegger and his followers caricature the tradition(s) of philosophical metaphysics when they reduce it to, say, the forgetfulness of being.⁸ Desmond notes Aristotle's claim that "being is said in many senses" (*VB*, 2).⁹ Desmond argues there are practices of metaphysics that do not run afoul of Heidegger's concerns, and they are not as forgotten in the history of philosophy as Heidegger sometimes holds.

Furthermore, we cannot avoid metaphysics. We all have assumptions about the nature of being and its worth. We live an implicit metaphysics.¹⁰ Assumptions animate our cultural milieu as well. These of course mold our own. "Metaphysical presuppositions about the 'to be,'" Desmond observes, "are at play mostly unacknowledged, in common sense, in politics, in ethics, in art, in science, in religion, in philosophy, indeed in 'postmetaphysical' philosophy itself" (*VB*, 4). Desmond notes a pervasive modern sense of being as a neutral resource, of "real" value as use value, of other values as secondary or subjective. Desmond calls this the "ethos of serviceable disposability," wherein "things must be serviceable for us, but once they have served their use, they are disposable" (*WDR*, 216). He notes that "persons too are often treated as items of serviceable disposability" (*WDR*, 216). Desmond joins many continental thinkers in decrying crudely instrumental approaches to people and the world.¹¹ He breaks with most of them, though, in holding that the answer is not to "overcome" metaphysics but to offer a metaphysics that affirms value beyond use. Desmond wishes to recover a richer sense of being to counter the pervasive ethos of serviceable disposability and the politics it subtends. Our ongoing ecological crisis makes this a pressing metaphysical task.

It is also an aesthetic task. For Desmond, aesthetics does not narrowly pertain to art and literature. It deals broadly with our sensual experience of the world. It begins in the "aesthetics of happening," in the stream of sensuality that continually washes over and through us. Close attention to the aesthetics of happening reveals that being is not inert. It is not neutrally, flatly there. It manifests in aesthetically rich ways. It thrills, soothes, and stings. It makes our skin crawl or prickle in gooseflesh. It grabs our attention and startles. We can only treat being as neutral if we abstract it from this primordial experience. Such abstraction involves a dubious subject-object dualism, one untrue to our constitutive receptivity. We are not self-contained

subjects sealed off from the world “out there.” We internalize, and we are drawn out of ourselves. We are, as Desmond says, “porous.”

Still, while Desmond begins in the broad aesthetics of happening, he does not disregard art and literature. They not only depict being’s excess and worth—they also incarnate it. As noted earlier, the artwork is overdetermined. A single analysis can never exhaust it. The richness of the artwork can reawaken us to the richness of being more broadly. The artwork has the “ability to recharge our sense of the world” and its worth (*DDO*, 155). It can challenge the ethos of serviceable disposability.

According to Desmond, though, art cannot counter this pervasive ethos on its own. It needs religion and philosophy, its ancient “siblings.” All three have their origin in wonder at the mystery of being. This wonder is not stupefying. It stirs self-transcending desire. It might give rise to a work of art, to worship, or to speculative thought; it might give rise to care for being in its excess and mystery. Like so many siblings, art, religion, and philosophy have grown more distant over time and have often been hostile to one another. Desmond does not deny either the differences or the tensions between them. Yet he insists that their ancient kinship remains. To be healthy, to thrive, all three must still draw on wonder, and they must communicate this wonder to others. He claims that our contemporary crises call for a renewed sense of this kinship.

Desmond’s own roots are in art, religion, and philosophy.¹² He was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1951. His childhood passions were poetry and mathematics. He notes that his “family background contains no philosophical prefigurements” (*PU*, 2). He did grow up in a deeply religious community, though, “the Middle Ages” of mid-century Irish Catholicism, as he jokingly puts it. He was “fostered on a sense of the mystery of God and God’s ways, on a sympathy for the rejected and the outsider whom we cannot judge not to be God’s favored, fostered, too, on an esteem that God’s creation, nature, was good” (*PU*, 2). He spent time in the Dominican novitiate at age seventeen, claiming, “I took and still take religion with ultimate seriousness” (*PU*, 4). He began undergraduate studies in engineering, in part for pragmatic reasons and in part because of his aptitude in math, but he soon transferred to English to study his other first love, poetry. The big questions these studies raised, though, led him to transfer once more, this time to philosophy: “Great poetry exhibits a spiritual seriousness which can shame the thought of some philosophers. But then [at his university] poetry was presented as if it had nothing to do with thought” (*PU*, 5). Desmond stayed on at University College Cork to pursue an MA in philosophy, writing a

thesis on the aesthetics of R. G. Collingwood. He went on to study for a PhD with Carl Vaught and Stanley Rosen at Pennsylvania State University.

Desmond grappled with Hegel's philosophy at Penn State. He appreciated Hegel's sense of dynamic mediation, his feel for the concrete, his sophisticated aesthetics, and his claim that art, religion, and philosophy are "the three highest modes of human meaning" (*AA*, xii). Desmond later contributed to the North American Hegel revival and served as president of the Hegel Society of America. Even in his doctoral studies, though, Desmond feared that Hegel's dialectic tilted too much toward categorical determination and self-mediation. Hegel, he concluded, did not attend enough to the excess of being. In his dissertation, Desmond tried to honor this excess and to draw the Hegelian dialectic back toward the openness of the Platonic dialogue, to keep the dialectic open as a *metaxu*, a between, where self and other are not exhausted in mediations from either side. This dissertation, eventually published as *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* (1987), established the framework of Desmond's "metaxological" philosophy, which he would develop across more than a dozen other books, including his trilogy *Being and the Between* (1995), *Ethics and the Between* (2001), and *God and the Between* (2008). Desmond spent his early career at Loyola College in Maryland, but he eventually returned to Europe to take up a professorship at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven's Institute of Philosophy. He currently holds visiting chairs at Villanova University and Maynooth University. Desmond is highly regarded as a Hegel scholar, a philosopher of religion, and an original metaphysician. Paul Weiss, an influential metaphysician in his own right, once called Desmond "the leading philosopher of his generation."¹³

This is a study of Desmond's aesthetics. Because aesthetics are central to his thought, though, it offers an introduction to Desmond's philosophy as well as a more focused study of his aesthetic concerns. It aims both to orient newcomers and to offer texture to those who already know Desmond's work well. With the first goal in mind, I presuppose no prior knowledge of Desmond's philosophy. This study can serve as a primer for those who want to make their way into it.¹⁴ With the second goal in mind, I offer exegesis and synthesis but also extend Desmond's thought to topics such as literary influence and epiphanic art. I give Desmond a sympathetic reading, but I also note the prominent criticisms of his work and raise my own questions. I bring Desmond into conversation with a range of thinkers beyond the usual philosophical suspects. Among the most prominent of these dialogue partners are the twentieth-century philosopher Gabriel Marcel (a major but largely neglected influence on Desmond), the recently deceased polymath

George Steiner, and the contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han.¹⁵ Other interlocutors include Iris Murdoch, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Susanne Langer, Charles Taylor, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Catherine Pickstock, John Milbank, Rita Felski, Richard Kearney, William Franke, and Elaine Scarry. Many of these thinkers share, in their own ways, Desmond's concerns with receptivity, relationship, and affirmation. Several of them share his concern with religion. Another aim of this study, then, is to sketch out a loose philosophical countercurrent that has steadily persisted throughout the past century, one moved more by astonished wonder than by skeptical doubt. I aim to situate Desmond as an important figure in this countercurrent, indeed a particularly important one given the capacious, open metaphysics that he offers. This study would have gone in other directions with a different cast of dialogue partners. The same could be said about the choice of literary works. I discuss some that recur throughout Desmond's writings (Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, Hopkins's poetry), others that he mentions (Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"), and others of my choosing. Plenty of possibilities remain.

This is not only a study of Desmond's aesthetics, though. It is also an attempt to approach aesthetics and literature with Desmond, to give an account of them that can stand on its own. In this regard, I take my cue from Desmond's first published book, *Art and the Absolute* (1986), which is both a study of Hegel's aesthetics and a probing account of art. I hope this study might appeal, then, to some without a prior interest in Desmond (while also convincing them to read his works). It might appeal to those interested in contemporary aesthetics or the relationship between philosophy, art, and religion. It might appeal as well to humanities scholars looking to balance critique with affirmation. This is a hard time for the humanities, a time of declining enrollments and slashed budgets. Desmond offers a strong case for why art and literature matter.

This book might especially appeal to those interested in contemporary Christian thought about metaphysics, aesthetics, and art. Philip John Paul Gonzales claims that Desmond offers "the most complete and open systematic vision of a Catholic metaphysics" since Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis* appeared in 1932.¹⁶ And, like Przywara's student Balthasar, Desmond gives aesthetics central importance in his metaphysics. Desmond's religious concern also might appeal to those interested in the "post-secular" turn of continental thought. Others, though, may be wary of the religious dimensions of Desmond's thought. Desmond insists on the essential importance of religion, but he does not shrink from how it can be a problem rather

than a cure. Desmond draws on his Catholic tradition but, like the greatest figures in that tradition, remains open to what can be learned from other religions and from secular thinkers. To dismiss him as a sectarian or an apologist would be a mistake.

This study is divided into two parts. The first part offers a broad pass through Desmond's aesthetics. The second part focuses on literature. Chapter 1 begins in the aesthetics of happening, in our sensual experience. It surveys four main concerns in Desmond's thought: receptivity, abundance, affirmation, and wonder. It gives special attention to the similarities and differences between Hegel's dialectic and Desmond's metaxology.

Chapter 2 explores Desmond's account of beauty and the sublime. Desmond resists both the modern opposition of beauty and the sublime and the postmodern privileging of the latter. He claims there is a "permeable threshold" between them. Experiences of beauty and the sublime are experiences of wonder at aesthetic excess. They issue a call that we can respond to in many ways, including in gratitude and care. The final section of chapter 2 elaborates on this complex relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Desmond argues that aesthetics, broadly conceived, continually shapes our lives and actions. It does not, however, directly translate into a systematic ethics. It is instead an ethical "potency," an affordance that can be developed (or betrayed) in many ways.

Chapter 3 examines Desmond's account of artistic creation. Desmond stresses that art involves receptivity and the mediation of otherness. The artist does not create *ex nihilo*. Desmond conceives mimesis as the creative mediation of external otherness and inspiration as the creative mediation of inner otherness. The third section of this chapter explores the related question of artistic influence, using Dante and Virgil in the *Commedia* as its paradigmatic instance.

Chapter 4 ranges across aesthetics, art, and religion. It first surveys how different religious forms mediate the excess of being. The second section examines how the decline of religion contributed to the rise of the ethos of serviceable disposability. The third explores Desmond's own approach to God and ends with a brief consideration of Gerard Manley Hopkins as a key "companion" in his thought. The fourth section focuses on how religion and poetry both approach the unsayable. The final section of chapter 4 takes up Desmond's provocative claim that, having once asked too much of art, we now ask too little. It traces various modern attempts to re-enchant the world via art rather than religion and how those attempts failed in their grandest aspirations. The danger now, Desmond claims, is that we often

ask too little from art. We shortchange its ability to “recharge our sense of the world.” He claims that a renewed porosity between art, philosophy, and religion offers the fullest challenge to the ethos of serviceable disposability.

Part 2 of this study offers more focused forays into literature. The first section of chapter 5 sketches a “metaxological” approach to literature and briefly situates it vis-à-vis other approaches within literary studies. The chapter then develops an account of epiphanic encounters in art. It touches on a wide range of literary works, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to James Joyce’s “The Dead,” from the biblical account of Joseph to James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.”

Chapter 6 turns to tragedy. For Desmond, tragic figures become tyrants when their exaggerated wills close off their receptivity. The first section attends to Macbeth, who self-consciously becomes a tyrant. In killing the king, Macbeth also kills trust and sleep. He cuts himself off from the rejuvenating goodness of being. His life eventually becomes absurd. The second section considers Lear, a self-deluded tyrant. His suffering on the heath breaks him open. It returns him to porosity. In Desmond’s take on catharsis, such dramatized suffering returns the audience to porosity as well. This can lead to despair, but it can also renew our sense of the fragile goodness of things. The chapter’s third section considers what philosophy can learn from tragedy. It takes up Desmond’s argument that to be true to the singular, philosophy must attend to Lear’s howl at the loss of Cordelia. It must risk “being at a loss.”

Chapter 7 considers “redemptive laughs” and “festive rebirth.” The first section surveys philosophical accounts of laughter and then turns to Desmond’s own account of affirming laughter. The second considers Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a novel of many kinds of laughs. Perhaps its most important laugh, though, is an absent one: the laugh of release that will not come to Ahab’s lips. The third section turns to Aristophanes’s satirical Socrates and how comedy can “ground” philosophy. It can pull philosophy’s head out of the clouds, returning it to the body and the earth. The fourth section surveys theories of the festival from Desmond and a range of other thinkers. While these thinkers’ accounts differ in marked ways, they agree that true festivals involve collective affirmation and a heightened sense of time. They also agree that commodification and secularization warp the modern festival. Art can help keep the spirit of festivity alive, though. The final section of the chapter considers Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* as a novel of festive anamnesis. The three ghosts remind Scrooge (and perhaps the reader as well) that goodness beyond utility is not mere “humbug.”

The conclusion reviews a few ways that philosophy and literature relate to one another. It nods to their quarrels but focuses more on kinship and collaboration. The philosopher can draw on literature for illustrations, but even this is more reciprocal than it sounds because the philosopher must attend to the particulars of the illustration. The philosopher can also turn more openly to literature for insight (and vice versa). At the deeper level of shared language use, the philosopher “must go to school with the poets.” There are philosophical analogues to literary genres: epiphanic philosophy, tragic philosophy, and comic philosophy. Each offers different attunements to reality.

Following Vico, Desmond holds that philosophy grows out of poetic myth, which provides it with resonant images, “imaginative universals.” Plato, too easily dismissed as a critic of poetry, turns to myth at the limit of discursive reasoning. He offers philosophy some imaginative universals of its own—most famously the cave. The second half of the conclusion thus returns to Plato’s cave with Desmond. The ambiguity of everyday life plays on the cave’s wall: the “chiaroscuro” of peace and strife, pain and joy, love and hate. Desmond wants to ascend toward the sun. He wants to affirm the goodness of being. There are other possibilities, though. Many modern thinkers burrow down into the cave, seeking to uncover a subterranean origin that sources the horror of being. Desmond turns to another imaginative universal to model a different type of descent: Dante’s *Inferno* dramatizes a kenotic descent, one that opens Dante anew to the goodness of being when he emerges under the starlit sky. Sometimes, as Desmond says, one must go down to go up.