

INTRODUCTION

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.
And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

—Genesis 1:31 (NRSV)

“So correct opinion is the kind of thing we are looking for, between understanding and ignorance.”

“What can Eros be, then? A mortal?”

“Far from it.”

“What, then?”

“As in the other examples, something between a mortal and an immortal . . .”

“What power does such a spirit possess?”

“He acts as an interpreter and means of communication between gods and men . . . Occupying this middle position he plays a vital role holding the world together.”

—Plato¹

The True is the whole.

—Hegel²

Untimely—that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.

Untimely men: their home is not in this age but elsewhere, and it is elsewhere too that their explanation and justification is to be found.

—Nietzsche³

William Desmond was born and grew up in Cork city in southern Ireland. As a young man, he was briefly a Dominican novice. While he developed an early interest in the poetry of the English romantics, Desmond eventually

committed to the study of philosophy at University College Cork. He then earned his doctorate at Penn State where he studied with Carl Vaught and Paul Weiss. Afterward, he taught at Loyola College in Baltimore for twelve years. (While at Loyola, Desmond came to know Weiss as a friend and fellow metaphysician.) Since 1994 he has been a professor of philosophy at the Higher Institute of Philosophy at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In this time he has held several honorary and visiting chairs including the David Cook Visiting Chair at Villanova University (since 2005).

In numerous essays and in a dozen books—from his sustained meditations upon and engagement with Hegel to his original and magisterial trilogy (*Being and the Between*, *Ethics and the Between*, and *God and the Between*)—William Desmond has been a consistently *untimely* thinker, addressing the times from a position of a certain outside. Sensitized to the other, Desmond calls attention to a “between,” a community, a relation to the other. Desmond addresses the question of relation after the moment of difference—seeing that relation without otherness negates relation, collapses into oneness (what relation?) and that otherness without relation is a negated, absent other (what other?). In doing so, Desmond returns to classical and yet persistent, undying questions of being, of the good, of God—a different, affirmative saying of and returning to traditional themes (untimely if not unwelcome for the pathologically novel modern) after the ascetic severity of the turning-from and not-saying of difference in the present age.

To such an end, Desmond’s work evinces an attentive reading of key figures in the Western philosophical tradition. We note the three most prominent. From Plato, Desmond gleans the *eros* of thought, of our being self-transcending toward ultimacy, an immanent orientation and exigency directing and propelling us toward the transcendent; the *metaxu* of being, of our between-being, between being and nothing, between the self-same and the other; the plurivocity of philosophy, the fruitful if less-than-fully-determinate excess of a poetic philosophy speaking in many voices. From Hegel he gleans the dynamic resources of dialectic, the unfolding play of determinacy and indeterminacy; the persistent attentiveness to the question of intelligibility in the progression of thought; the sense of a complex whole even opening beyond dialectic. From Nietzsche he gleans the recognition of becoming and the equivocal; the yea-saying, affirmative, Dionysian celebration of the finite and the earth; the critique of rational reductionisms, the nihilism of our merely human valuations; the poetic mode of philosophy (like Plato).

In regard to a reliance on the resources of a broadly Christian theology, Desmond can be seen as a thinker between theology and philosophy, between Jerusalem and Athens, not merely a philosopher who has religious insights, who has philosophical ways of thinking about God, but as a part

of the great tradition of Christian philosophical theologians drawing on the philosophical font of Neoplatonism extending from Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine to Bonaventure and Aquinas and beyond. Desmond, as with these earlier figures, thinks that philosophy and theology can relate to each other intimately, constructively—complementing and completing each other—that indeed theology and philosophy are better off for their interrelation. Desmond can be seen as taking up this tradition (in spirit if not in the letter) that went into recess with the rise of modernity.⁴

Desmond's philosophy is both metaphysical and continental. In this he has been on the vanguard of metaphysics' surprising return around the turn of the century under the influence of figures such as Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and John Milbank. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, Desmond spoke of metaphysics (and God) when it was decidedly not fashionable to do so—in the midst of a “postmodern” continental philosophy committed to the critique of ontotheology and the overcoming of metaphysics. Instead of seeing metaphysics as an imperial and misguided option that should be avoided, inoculated against, its influence extracted, Desmond sees metaphysics as, at once, unavoidable and unending (without closure). Metaphysics arises from an urgent need to be mindful of, to interpret, to grasp the “plenitude” of the “intimate strangeness” of the enigmatic happening of being in the world around us.⁵ This task is an infinite one—with no completion or realization or consummation or end of metaphysics that brings it to a close and to an end.

Likewise, Desmond's work was and is untimely in his speaking explicitly of God—not just human religiosity or transcendence generally (though he does certainly address these), but God—in a milieu in which atheism is *de rigueur*. Desmond characterizes the modern ethos up into the present as displaying a certain “allergy to transcendence”—an indifference about the question of God, if not an irritation or hostility toward the question.⁶ Our once “porous” ways to God have become “clogged.”⁷ The modern picture of the world that is still very much with us is a godless one—a world of inherently worthless, neutral being where humanity's valueless valuations are little more than fictive whistlings in the dark. In this milieu, God has become problematic, needing to be justified on secular terms, in terms of an immanent already deracinated ethos. In this context, Desmond's work calls our attention to the *hyperbolic* and excessive givens within finitude that call, carry, “throw” us, beyond the immanent frame toward the transcendent. Even after the modern death of God we are always already *with* God—bearing a *porosity* that is a primal and intimate being-open-to and being-with God; we are always already *unto* God—bearing an *urgency of ultimacy* in which we are oriented, driven, propelled in our own exceeding of ourselves beyond ourselves, toward God.

The aim of this reader is to provide a needed way into William Desmond's important and yet often difficult body of work—to enable one to gain an understanding of Desmond's philosophy in his own words in a single relatively brief volume. This book consists of selections from Desmond's works, carefully chosen to best represent and to clearly introduce the key ideas, perspectives, and contributions of his philosophy as a whole. The selections are intentionally laid out so that one can gain an understanding of Desmond's thought in his own words—with later selections often building on earlier ones. Indeed, many of Desmond's key ideas are introduced in the first part on metaphysics. On the rare occasion that an unfamiliar term is used that is not more or less immediately explained, the reader should refer to the index. The readings are organized into four parts representing the major topoi of Desmond's work: metaphysics, ethics, religion, and art. Following the readings is an original essay by Desmond reflecting on these topoi in his thought. The volume concludes with an interview with Desmond conducted by Richard Kearney.⁸

NOTES

1. Plato, *Symposium* in *Symposium and Phaedrus*, tr. Tom Griffith (Everyman's Library, 2001), 202a, 202d–e.
2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60, 198.
4. Further, in his work as a post-Hegelian, protopostmodern, yet metaphysical, theist (indeed, robustly Christian) thinker—sometimes poetic, sometimes systematic—Desmond stands in striking proximity to Kierkegaard. For more on this resonance, see my *The Truth Is the Way: Kierkegaard's Theologia Viatorum* (London: SCM Press, 2010).
5. William Desmond, "Neither Deconstruction nor Reconstruction," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (March 2000): 157; *Being and the Between* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), xiii. A revised version of this essay will be included in Desmond's forthcoming *The Intimate Strangeness of Being: Metaphysics after Dialectic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press).
6. William Desmond, *Hegel's God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 4.
7. William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 25–27.
8. For a secondary work that gives a systematic introduction to Desmond's thought, see my *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). For a collection of essays on aspects of Desmond's thought in dialogue with other thinkers and disciplines, see Thomas A. F. Kelly, ed., *Between System and Poetics: William Desmond and Philosophy after Dialectic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).