

Chapter 1



Being Between: By Way of Introduction

1. *Ecce Homo!* What a depth of affrontery in Nietzsche's self-apotheosis! How we squirm before it! I see Aristotle swinging away in distaste. I fancy Spinoza loudly whispering—*Caute!* I hear Kant hissing—*Schwärmer!* I imagine Hegel's face stony with conceptual embarrassment. Can one, dare one talk about oneself, diffident about the disdain of the fathers?

What is Nietzsche's provocation? Philosophers are averse to advancing their singular selves right to the fore of the picture. We would fade into the neutral, public universal. We are anxiously equivocal about saying "I think." Let Descartes claim "I think therefore I am" as his first indubitable truth, nevertheless we show ingrained reluctance to identify our being with our thinking. Instead the "I think" seeks its home in "consciousness in general." The "I am" becomes "being in general"—the indigent of Hegel's categorial logic.

Can "I am," "I think" be given a modulation different to the Cartesian or idealistic one? Outside self-apotheosis, beyond self-sublation, I will try to be honest—something impossible. This is already a lie. But I will try.

I want to say: I think. I want to say: I am. But I cannot quite. Philosophical uneasiness gnaws. Why? One can stress the I; one can stress the thought. Stress the latter and the I masks itself behind the universal. Stress the former and the universal dissolves into the confession of personal idiosyncrasy. In one way or other, philosophers have always been between these poles. The unavoidable unease springs from the tension of their togetherness. One wants to be true to both, but they tug against each other.

The mask of the universal is public, hence in strain with the mask of thinker as singular. Hegel might stand for the first; Nietzsche for the second.

Nevertheless, both thinkers, and others too, can be read as *between* the two masks and indeed being both at once. Thus Socrates: a very singular self presenting himself as the representative of the rational ideal, the universal. He apologizes for himself as a philosopher, and one can only properly apologize for oneself; nevertheless his self-apology is for a way of being in quest of the ideal that would be a universal standard for all, for none. He philosophizes in between.

I have managed to begin without talking too directly about myself. But already in *medias res* the idea of "being between" comes to manifestation. In what follows I, too, must find a middle between merely idiosyncratic particularity and anonymous universality. Since the idea of being between is central to my thought and being, I revert to myself. I see my thought as concerned with this idea of being between, in the existential and systematic senses I will outline. I begin with the first.

2. I was born in Ireland and lived there for the first twenty-three years of my life.—I am now 40¹—whether a Dante-esque middle I cannot say. My being Irish shapes my thought. My family background contains no philosophical prefigurements; and I can offer no convincing sociological explanation for why I philosophize. But there was a strong religious influence in my life, both in my family and in the wider society. I grew up in the Middle Ages, an Irish Catholic, 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. I cannot identify the piety I inherited with Hegel's unhappy consciousness, though there were traces of the latter. The sense of divine transcendence from the Catholic tradition was balanced by a pagan appreciation of the mystery of nature itself, the sensuous being-there of the world in its sometimes unbearable beauty, its reassuring persistence and its elegiac evanescence.

When as a boy I studied the poetry of the English Romantics, especially Wordsworth, there was no abstraction in the latter's sense of one's trembling delight in and before nature. No feeling enforced a dualistic opposition between the beauty of the world and the transcendent mystery of God. The two flowed into each other. When later I read and prayed the Psalms, I was opened to the same in the sublime songs of David. I still cannot see an affirmation of God's transcendence as a downgrading of the astonishing beauty and goodness of the world. I cannot accept the Hegelian or Marxist or Nietzschean critique of transcendence; most certainly not the latter two who

1. This first appeared in 1991

enforce a choice between this world and God's transcendence. Staying true to the between implies a rejection of that enforcement. I still ponder the possibility that only the latter transcendence, suitably understood, allows us to grant the value of particular things, just in their intimate particularity. One rises on a bright morning with the darkness blown away, and it is hard not to think that the world is an ever fresh marvel, a miracle of absolute particularity. That esteem is still with me, though time can wear the ability to see what is there and to sing and to praise it.

But growing up was not rhapsody. I recall being between two extremes: mathematics and poetry. The study of mathematics, physics, and mechanics was mind-opening. I was deeply impressed by the power of ordered thinking which these disciplines embodied. Even then I remember once asking my physics teacher—he had just set out on the blackboard an astonishing system of intricate equations—why the laws governing light were thus so and not otherwise. The curt answer I received: “Why is the grass green?” My teacher answered a question with another question which dismissed the first question.

But I was asking about the ground of nature's lawfulness, though I did not then know it, nor did my teacher. I know now that I was asking a metaphysical question about physics. The question came *spontaneously*—I was not corrupted by the tradition of philosophy or ontotheology or “metaphysics of presence.” What at fifteen did I know about these things? Nothing. I was just struck into astonishment and perplexity that natural phenomena would be governed by what seemed like such mathematically precise formulae. While impressed by mathematical physics, my mind was never confined within mathematical order.

Being between mathematics and poetry, between mathematical science and metaphysics came home to me in the troubled reading of *Hamlet*. The study of *Hamlet* deeply influenced me around the age of fifteen with the brooding power of thought as metaphysical. Hamlet lived a condition of uneasy inwardness that the ordered precisions of mathematics cannot encompass. Out of the selfless consolations of the mathematical universal, Hamlet brought me back to the singularity of the troubled mind. The time was out of joint for Hamlet; the middle was fractured. In that fractured middle, Hamlet was a thinker of despair; ultimately despair is radically singular. Hamlet says: “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us” (*Hamlet* III, i, 128–130). There is no geometry of this “crawling between.” In the fractured middle, he was a thinker of the extremes, a thinker also of a different elusive thread of providence beyond despair, for there's significance in the fall of a sparrow. I still think that tragic art precipitates a deeper metaphysical perplexity than even the marvel of mathematical or quasi-mathematical order in the world. But the tension of these two will return.

When I was seventeen, I spent a little less than a year as a novice in the Dominican order, religious brotherhood of Aquinas. I took and still take religion with ultimate seriousness. I considered becoming a priest because of this. I do not know what I was then like. I recently met a fellow novice who had persevered in the priesthood—an accidental meeting in Rome, twenty years later. It was like meeting a ghost, a ghost that reminded me of a ghost of myself. He said I always argued that one had to keep “the whole picture” before one and not get lost in trivial details; he also said I had a kind of passionate impatience.

I had a certain kind of faith then. To have faith, however, can be dangerous; it can degenerate into a kind of spiritual arrogance. Would I have developed in that direction? I think spiritual arrogance is the thing to be rooted out of the soul. At some level I am sure that I thought I was loved by God. Where did this come from? From the fact that my mother and father loved me? From the fact that I was intellectually talented? But I never knew I was intellectually gifted until to my own surprise I won a scholarship at the age of ten. I had initially refused to be in the scholarship class (affectionately known as the “schol class”) and had taken myself back to the ordinary class. Without official permission I simply decamped back to the ranks of academic averageness. I was returned unwillingly to the “schol class.” And to my surprise I was successful.

I was never unintelligent. But I never really felt that there was any special status to this. I do not think it was intellectual talent that drove me to philosophy, even though I knew I was not untalented. Again I performed well in exams across the divide between the sciences and the humanities. I could just as easily have been a scientist as a philosopher—if intellectual talent was all that was at stake. In fact, when I initially signed up for my college degree, I enrolled in the engineering faculty because my scores in mathematics and physics and chemistry was so high, and the conventional advice was that an engineering degree was superior to an arts degree. Superior here meant: you will make money. This was after I left the Dominicans. I was accepted for engineering in a restricted class. I did not stay beyond a few weeks but transferred to the liberal arts faculty. Why? I simply decided to follow my heart’s desire at that time—to study poetry, possibly write some.

I wanted to do a degree in English to allow me to read the poets. I also took philosophy. Within the first year I discovered that the way poetry was taught did not answer the impatience of my thinking. I wanted to think, and poetry was presented as some ineffable gift that seized a few favored ones, recognizable only to the initiated. I now admit that great creators, in poetry, in philosophy, elsewhere, may be marked by enigmatic gifts. But this view is easily used in the self-serving connivance of mediocre talents. I found that my teachers of poetry did not seem capable of protracted thinking; perhaps I

was unjust to them. Great poetry exhibits a spiritual seriousness which can shame the thought of some philosophers. But then poetry was presented as if it had nothing to do with thought.

This approach is stupid, but it was the fashionable anti-intellectual imagism of the day. I did not lose interest in poetry. I took a joint honors degree, a double major in English and philosophy, and later continued my interest in philosophical aesthetics. But at the age of eighteen, I suspect, I dedicated myself to philosophy with a fervor not entirely unlike the religious seriousness I exhibited the previous year in the Dominican novitiate. This is why I say it was not just intellectual talent that brought me to philosophy. It was the search for an answer to some of the fundamental questions of being. The drive to such answers is not a purely intellectual matter. And when one is appropriately involved as a singular I, the mind itself becomes activated in modes that are not merely intellectual. Thinking undergoes an existential transfiguration.

Hence, a plurality of different modes of being between that marked my development: Religiously I was between Catholicism and a certain pagan celebration of the earth. Then I was between religion and philosophy in that the upsurge of the need to think drove me out of simple faith, and yet the merely analytical intellect had to be overcome to open up the richness of being that faith previously offered. I was between science and art, the engineer and the poet: the engineer with compass and log tables could not match the poet in speaking to the soul, but then the poet's singing seemed to soothe and finally stifle hard thought.

3. I dwell briefly on the philosophical import of some of these modes of being between. First consider the tension between religion and science. I mentioned my exposure to Wordsworth's poetry of nature. As set forth through that poetry, and Wordsworth's is only one example, albeit very powerful, nature comes to appearance as charged with value. It may even be the sign of an other origin, the concretion of an energy of being that moves us to wonder and to rejoice. By contrast, scientific reason seems to make cold the world, depersonalize the thereness of things, discharge all energy in impersonal forces in motion. It devalues the world in the literal sense of extruding from consideration all questions of value inherent in the being of things themselves. The ultimate result can be a nihilistic scientism. This nihilism is more pervasive than is realized. Reason seems to rob thought and life of an ultimate ground of value.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God, Hopkins wrote. If the development of mind disenchant the world, one may find oneself between God's world and the impersonal universe of scientific reason. One might acquiesce in this disenchantment, or take flight from it by arresting thought.

If one wants to remain true to the between, something other than acquiescence or flight is needed. One will have to reconsider the matter Nietzsche raises in connection with nihilism. In response to nihilism Nietzsche saw the need to recharge the world through what he calls a "transvaluation of values." I do not endorse Nietzsche's way of doing this; I do agree about the urgency of what he sought. There are many places in my work where this is an absolutely central matter for thought.

Some of the fundamental problems of modernity were understood very profoundly by the great Romantics. It may be fashionable now to dismiss Romanticism, and there are difficulties with some of its characteristic strategies, in the main, I believe, because of the ambiguous heritage of idealism which is still with us. The Romanticism that is dismissed is a sentimentalized, bowdlerized Romanticism. Moreover, the issue at stake here is not merely aesthetic. It concerns the very ground of value, the issue of being and the good. These matters will return.

Why not turn one's back on scientific thought? Why not throw in one's lot with poetry? I could not do this, perhaps partly because I always found something unacceptable about the anti-intellectualism of the poets in Ireland. Their fear of thought or their inability to think was sometimes expressed as a pseudo-superior irritation with the merely analytical intellect. We murder to dissect. Yes, this is true. There are forms of thought that are homicidal. The question then is whether there are forms of thought that are beyond murder. Philosophy, I believed, was capable of that thinking. If I ever was to write poetry, it would have to be poetry that did not call for a *sacrificium intellectus*. The poet and the priest were in a strange collusion in Ireland: For the many, faith; for the cultured elite, poetry; for none, real philosophy. I mean real hard thinking about the great issues of the spirit, which are also the great issues of poetry and religion.

It is not enough just to say: I believe philosophy is capable of this thinking. One has to do the thinking: not sing invocations to possibility, but work to bring forth the realization of the promise. In *Philosophy and its Others*² (more so than in *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*³), I have tried to enact what I call a "plurivocal philosophy": a philosophical thinking that is not reductive of all the voices of meaning to one overriding logical voice; a thinking that listens to what is other to more standard forms of philosophical thinking; a philosophy that lets its own voice be reformulated under the

2. William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

3. William Desmond, *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness: An Essay on Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

impact of philosophy's own significant others, like religion, science, art. Plurivocal philosophy tries to get beyond all this sterile caricaturing. A thinker has to have something of the poet, priest, scientist in him all together.

Hence, in *Philosophy and its Others* I sometimes speak as a philosophical poet or poetic philosopher. This is what I call: "thought singing its other." Here we need to be as much on guard about *philosophers* as about poets. For there are philosophers who *collude* with the poets to enforce the stereotypical opposition of poetry and philosophy. Readers of *Philosophy and its Others* will know that I take writing very seriously. The philosopher is as much a guardian of language as is the poet, and as respectful of the word as the priest claims to be. What else has the philosopher but words. "Words, words, words," says Hamlet (*Hamlet* II, ii, 195); this is the condition of the self. I refuse to concede that there is one warranted way of writing philosophy. There is no Platonic paradigm of writing written in heaven, and to which the professional philosopher has to conform.

Every act of genuine thought is an adventure, an attempt to say. The form of the saying is the very articulation of what is being said. A genuine act of philosophical thinking is such that it is almost impossible to separate form and content. When we summarize a thinker's doctrine we have performed just that separation. We have packaged the original articulation of thought, and made it currency to be passed around the economy of mind. The singularity of great thinkers becomes the more evident the closer we get to their living thought, and the more we also find it impossible conceptually to package this thought.

It is a cliché one hears: He writes well (take Santayana, as an example), but he is a literary philosopher, not a hard thinker. As if to be a hard philosopher you had to be a barbaric writer. This is nonsense, of course. This is to be taken in by the smoke and mirrors of *another* philosophical rhetoric posing as an anti-rhetoric. Really good writing is the last emergence of painful and struggling thought. *Ars est celare artem*. Some philosophers speak as if poetry were soft; yes there is a soft poetry—this is bad poetry. Similarly there can be a soft literary philosophy and this can be mediocre philosophy. There can also be a putatively hard philosophizing which one discovers, once having pierced the crust of concepts, to be an almost empty formalism. The thinness of thought of some hard technical philosophy, evident once translated into nontechnical terms, sometimes disconcerts one with the final softness of hardness.

A philosopher, like Nietzsche, is attacked as a "mere poet." What is a "mere" poet? Such jibes are complete *philosophical misunderstandings* of the spiritual greatness possible for poetry. We philosophers need the courage to write properly. But there is no a priori transcendental form of writing. There is no absolute authority dictating that we think or write in this or that form. This freedom, too, is related to what I call "plurivocal philosophy."

4. Even in my undergraduate studies in philosophy (1969–1972) at University College Cork there was a certain element of being between. At that time, talk about the rapprochement of Continental and analytical philosophy was not as fashionable as it was to become. Academic philosophy in Ireland epitomized this divide: some academics, and especially those in Trinity College Dublin looked to England, to Oxford and Cambridge; other academics looked to the Continent. The National University, of which University College Cork was a constituent college, was a secular institution, though traditionally it was thought to be Catholic, while Trinity was Protestant. Many academics in the National University looked to places like Paris and Louvain, instead of Cambridge and Oxford. As an undergraduate I was extensively exposed to both traditions, as well as to the history of philosophy and Aristotelian-Thomism. The bent of my soul was towards Europe. But since I wrote and thought in English, inevitably this meant some confrontation with Anglo-Saxon philosophy. I would say that as an undergraduate I had as much of David Hume as Thomas Aquinas, as of Heidegger and Sartre.

Eventually—and this was all done like a peregrinator or sleepwalker, since I did not altogether know what I was doing—I sailed into this between by not going to Great Britain or Europe for graduate studies. I came to the United States to study in a department with a reputation for European philosophy! America provided the home outside Ireland where the divide between England and the Continent could be—I do not say reconciled—but passed by. The bent of my soul is still towards the Continental tradition, since I think it is more deeply continuous with the great tradition of philosophy and is more radically self-conscious of the project of philosophy, more radically questioning about the whole nature of the philosophical enterprise.

For my M.A. in Cork, with Garret Barden as my supervisor, I wrote a dissertation on the concept of imagination in Collingwood. When I came to Penn State, I discovered that Hegel's idealism was much meatier than Collingwood's, presenting an enormous challenge to thought. This was coupled with intensive reading in the tradition of metaphysics. I found a shift of interests from aesthetics to metaphysical questions. I could have written a dissertation on Hegel but did not. I felt a certain urgent sense to locate where I stood, or might stand. With Carl Vaught as director, I wrote a dissertation called "The World as Image and Original." In retrospect this was the first draft of *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*. The major ideas of the latter were already extensively articulated in the dissertation.

My main concern could be put thus: I was especially concerned with the attenuation of otherness and transcendence in modern philosophy, and most radically in the Hegelian system. I have never been able to accept the caricatures of heteronomy, transcendence, imputed to Plato or to the Medievals, whether by Hegel or Nietzsche or other post-Kantians. The great speculative

thinkers of the classical and medieval world are still of interest to me. I think the Kantian and post-Kantian critique of metaphysics may be helpful for the workhorses of metaphysics, like Wolff and Baumgarten, where metaphysics has already been packaged into scholastic manageability. But the thoroughbreds of pre-Kantian metaphysics cannot be dismissed so quickly as “dogmatic metaphysicians.” Any thinker worth his salt tries to plumb skepticism to its deepest and most acid-filled abyss—deeper even than Kant, who drew back in alarm from the extremities of skepticism. There is something laughable about thinking of Plato as a dogmatic metaphysician, as if he were an academic scholastic.

Yet I recognized that there was a fundamental truth to the modern turn to the self, and in a qualified sense to transcendental philosophy generally. I wanted to take something like a transcendental starting point, in a generous sense, but not end up in an immanent idealism, where the other as other is redefined merely as a functional term of the “for-self.” I wanted to pass through the self and rethink what I took as the legitimate metaphysical impulses of premodern philosophers. I did not, and still do not want to offer historical studies of thinkers. I am interested in the matter in question, and in those thinkers who have profoundly thought the matter in question. Inevitably then my work has a strong systematic side: the philosophical perplexities themselves are the focus, not the interpretation of figures, though this last is not excluded.

In *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness* a certain hermeneutics of desire provides the dynamic vehicle for this project. The book offers an unfolding of thought, structured around the fourfold sense of being that I will outline in the next section. I was especially self-conscious of the fact that some of the great metaphysicians like Plato could not be interpreted in accord with an ideal of the merely abstractive intellect. Hence my emphasis on desire has very little to do with an empiricist understanding. It recalls, though it does not finally duplicate, the Platonic emphasis on philosophical eros. My intent was not to end up with a hermeneutics of desire which was the metaphysical apotheosis of the *for-the-self*. I wanted to stress desire as a metaphysical opening to being, being in its otherness, as well as the self-development of the human being in its own ineluctable search for its own wholeness. I thought that this opening to the other needed a fundamental reversal of some of the modern presuppositions about otherness and transcendence. This reversal could not be persuasively performed by a scholarly study of the texts of other philosophers. The *Sache selbst* had to be addressed. Only if thus addressed, could we be in a strong position to read the stated views of the other philosophers.

This has been my general philosophical practice since: On the one hand, a dedication to the systematic and nonsystematic exploration of the

thing itself, regardless of what philosophers have said about the matter. This is very difficult, for it sometimes means thinking without any guides, thinking about the otherness of the matter at issue, with nothing to guide one but a desire for honesty before being and a willingness to let that otherness confound one, unsettle one. Then, on the other hand, a need for a deeper hermeneutical self-consciousness about the essential metaphysical possibilities of the philosophical tradition. This means trying to get to know as best as possible the thought of the great philosophers; to think and rethink their ideas—not as dead schemas in a museum of thought but as the provocative and living thought of the best minds from whom we continue to learn. The thought of a genuine philosopher has a certain inexhaustibility. Hence my more systematic and independent work is complemented by a variety of studies of other thinkers. Sometimes the systematic and the hermeneutical come together. In developing a position in itself, one ought to have in one's bones a hidden knowledge of the philosophical possibilities of millennia.

5. In *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*, I developed a fourfold sense of being, a brief outline of which may be helpful. This provides a recurrent systematic framework for my ideas. It will also indicate why I chose the theme of being between to name the existential matrix which nourishes the more systematic project. There is no claim to a closed system. System is for me an after-the-fact articulation of the matter that must be allowed to take its own shape. System does not dictate to the unfolding matter what form it should take. This means that system is always open to its own possible dismantling, especially in so far as the system is open within itself to the acknowledgment of modes of being and mind that are other to complete conceptualization.

This is important because despite the strong systematic side to my work, there is an equally strong side which takes system to the limit, stands at the edge of all system. We sometimes need modes of saying that are other to systematic saying. These sayings seem idiotic to system, where idiotic carries connotation of the Greek "*idios*"—the private, the intimate, what is not completely available in terms of the public universal. The between has an idiotic as well as systematic articulation. The first corresponds to the mask of singularity, the second to the mask of universality, the two masks of the philosopher, mentioned at the beginning. Their tension is evident in *Philosophy and its Others*, but a careful reading of *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness* will uncover the same thing.

I develop what I call the "metaxological sense of being," in contrast to the univocal, the equivocal, and the dialectical senses. This idea derives from the Greek *metaxu*, meaning middle, intermediate, between, and *logos*, meaning discourse, speech, articulate account. The metaxological sense of

being is concerned with a *logos* of the *metaxu*, a discourse of the “between,” the middle. This *metaxu* is suggested, for instance, by the discussion of eros in the *Symposium*, though I do not subscribe to everything said there. Let me make the following points.

Eros articulates the self, and if we grant Socrates’ account, eros initially lacks what it seeks. But the restlessness of eros in the middle cannot stop short at any finite entity or concern; ultimately it is a restlessness for the ultimate. The pursuit of the ultimate itself testifies to a positive power of being in the self; it cannot be mere lack that drives desire beyond lack; it is the original power of being that constitutes the self as openness to what is other to itself; the *dunamis* of eros reveals a self-transcending openness to transcendence as other to desire itself.

There is possible an understanding of the *metaxu* which imposes no static definition on the middle. The latter becomes that in which and through which we have our being, but the articulating of our desiring being in the middle shows itself as an ineluctable quest of ultimacy. The middle as a dynamic field and the desiring energizing of our being there point beyond themselves. Here I would exploit Augustine’s description of the double nature of his own quest for ultimacy: *ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*; from the exterior to the interior, from the inferior to the superior. I interpret this to mean the following. In the middle of things—the exteriors—we come to know the *dunamis* of our own being as an interior middle, a mediating self-transcending power of openness. This is the first movement. The second movement is: in the interior middle, within the self-transcending urgency of desire, there is an opening to an other, more ultimate than ourselves. We are the interior urgency of ultimacy, this is ultimacy as the superior. This superior ultimate is not identical with our own erotic self-mediation; it is irreducible to us and mediates with us—the inferior—through the *agapeic* excess of its own unequalizable plenitude. So, in fact, this second movement also allows the possibility of a double mediation: our own erotic quest of the ultimate; the ingression of the ultimate as a superior other that interplays with the middle out of its own excessive transcendence.

I cannot do justice to such a difficult matter here. But I am particularly concerned not to collapse the ultimate in its transcendence into human self-transcendence. Yet I do not want to underplay the importance of the latter. Hence to articulate the relation of self and what is other to it, we need a certain complex balance of unity and plurality, identity and difference, sameness and distinction. Hegel’s answer—the middle is dialectical—offers a powerful articulation of the interplay of self and other, but I think that in the end it collapses the difference between the ultimate in its transcendence and our own self-transcendence. The middle as *metaxological*, as I develop this,

is such as to make impossible this collapse, for it articulates an irreducibly double intermediation.

If our intermediate condition of being is inadequately interpreted either by totalizing holisms of the sort attributed to Hegel, this does not mean we have to opt for the discontinuous plurality we find in deconstructive thought, indeed in Wittgensteinian pluralism. There is more openness and recalcitrant otherness in the middle than totalizing holism grants, more continuity and community of being than deconstructive pluralism allows. I concede the contemporary concern with difference and plurality, nevertheless I am uneasy with the sometimes sterile obsession with discontinuity. Our very encounter with otherness and discontinuity forces us to raise the question of the meaning of the community of being. Deconstructive thought very obviously, and Wittgensteinian pluralism less overtly, perpetuate the post-Cartesian and post-Nietzschean taboo on the question of ultimacy. This is, in part, attributable to an intellectual anxiety that is reactive to idealistic totalisms, as if the latter held an unchallengeable monopoly on the thought of the ultimate. It does not, as my invocation and questioning of Hegel is intended to indicate. If the middle is a certain community of being that sustains otherness, we must go beyond a philosophy of merely asserted difference, as well as any metaphysics of totalizing unity, for this ultimately suppresses differences and hence also real community.

I define the metaxological view in its dynamic interrelation to three other senses of being, namely, the univocal, equivocal, and dialectical senses, each of which has bearing on the question of ultimacy.

The first sense, the *univocal* puts the stress on simple sameness, hence on unmediated unity. The ontological sense of univocity is to be found in all metaphysics indebted to Parmenides, from Plato to Spinoza and Hegel. The logical sense of univocity pervades all the heirs of Aristotle with his insistence that to be intelligible is to be determinate: to be intelligible is to be a determinate *tode ti*. Examples could be multiplied, but modern positivism could be mentioned as making a reductive use of the ideal of univocity against metaphysics. I do not deny a role to univocity in any hermeneutics of being, but alone it is not enough, and it can wreak havoc if erected into the ideal before which metaphysics must bend the knee. It does not do proper justice to the complex differences we need to take into account, and forgets the great truth of a deeper side to Aristotle when he said: *to on legetai pollachōs*, being is said in many ways. I have already noted some inadequate consequences of univocity with respect to the question of the ultimate.

The *equivocal* sense of being, by contrast, calls attention to aspects of unmediated difference, or perhaps zones of tension and ambiguity that resist any simple reduction to univocal unity. Thus, a feeling for the equivocal often helps us recognize the rich ambiguity in the intermediate being of

things. Of course, we can so cling to equivocity that we turn our backs on any effort to think through the ambiguities. We fail at absolutely univocal mediation, so we give up on mindful mediation. Content with an endlessly reiterated equivocity, we claim to celebrate sheer plurality, but this is devoid of the promise of any deeper relatedness. Plurality then does not condition community, but becomes a dispersal of beings that is merely fragmenting. While the deconstructionist is extremely critical of the philosophical ideal of univocal unity, in a reactive move he risks this kind of equivocal thinking. Even the effort to *raise* the question of the ultimate is sharply dismissed as mere nostalgia for the univocal absolute of the "metaphysics of presence," or "ontotheology."

Say what you may, the question of ultimacy will not vanish into either its univocal reduction or its equivocal deconstruction. The third sense of being, the *dialectical* sense, can be stated relative to univocity and equivocity, though it is more complex than either. The dialectical sense recognizes the self-transcending dynamism of thought in its restless surpassing of limits, whether they be the fixations of being by univocal thought, or the dissolute, unmediated differences of equivocal thought. The dialectical sense knows the impossibility of avoiding the question of the ultimate, if we remain true to this self-surpassing dynamism of thought. This is one of Hegel's great insights. We are here also allowed to see the vacillation between univocity and equivocity that marks Kant's antinomies. Kant's thought of the antinomies anxiously oscillates between the Scylla of univocal reduction and Carybdis of equivocal deconstruction. Kant remains dissatisfied with both extremes, sought an indirect way beyond them, but he never quite could get beyond them with a clear intellectual conscience. In his own way, Kant was aware of the indeterminate ontological perplexity, but clung to the ideal of univocal intelligibility out of fear that this indeterminacy might be merely equivocal.

Philosophy must not run away from the potentially antinomic character of thinking. The antinomic character of completely determinate thinking, in fact, provides a major impetus to perplexity about ultimacy. Finite, univocalizing thought in the long run generates its own self-contradiction. Dialectical thinking does not run away from this antinomic condition but tries to think it through more radically. Hence it shares something with deconstructive thought, in that both raise serious questions about the finality of the ideal of univocal unity and any privileged stress on simple unmediated sameness. But there are different forms of dialectic, not all merely negative. Negative dialectic of the sort espoused by Adorno shares quite a lot with Derrida's deconstructive thinking in their courting of equivocity against univocity, and in their refusal of anything like the Hegelian speculative unity. I am not advocating the latter, but it is not clear if the former transcend an endlessly repeated oscillation back and forth between univocity and

equivocity. A dialectic which is not merely negative must be diffident with respect to any merely equivocal thought.

I put it this way: ambiguity is not only to be acknowledged, it is to be mediated, *thought through* in as mindful a way as is possible. Unlike deconstructionist thought, the dialectical sense of being suggests the genuine possibility of mediating equivocal difference. One reason why we cannot rest with unmediated difference is that it engenders a sense of alienating antithesis or dualistic opposition. One can see here the power of dialectical thinking to subvert the dualistic oppositions, for instance between time and eternity, said to beset the tradition of metaphysics. Dualistic opposition and equivocal difference subvert themselves, as does mere univocity, if we think the matter through. The possible togetherness of the opposites, indeed the passing of one side into the other, is opened up by the dialectical sense.

The fundamental difficulty here concerns the precise character of this "togetherness." This togetherness defines the community of being, of the self and the other in their likeness and in their difference. To be in the middle is to be articulated in and by this togetherness. We cannot say what the middle is unless we can say something about this togetherness of beings. Again both the middle and the togetherness are dynamic—dynamic relations of beings that themselves are energized by the original dynamis of being. A fundamental limitation I find with the dialectical sense, and this I find in Hegel and other idealist dialecticians, is that it encourages a tendency to interpret *all* mediation primarily in terms of *self-mediation*. The togetherness of self and other and their intermediation is, in the end, seen in the light of a certain privileging of self-mediation. This privileging of dialectical self-mediation continues the traditional metaphysical apotheosis of thought thinking *itself*, and so is shadowed by the ideal of univocity that it seems to transcend so trenchantly.

The dialectical sense grants the need to mediate equivocal difference; but this is done by reducing *all otherness* to a form subordinated to the putative primacy of such absolute self-mediation. The doubleness of self and other is not then properly sustained as articulating a togetherness that is irreducibly plural; it becomes dialectically converted in a dualism that is to be mediated and included in a higher and more embracing process of self-mediation. Such a dialectic converts the mediation of self and other into two sides of a more embracing and singular process of total self-mediation. The thought of everything other to thought risks getting finally reduced to a moment of thought thinking itself. Thus, Hegel's speculative unity is marked by, as we might call it, a kind of "dialectical univocity."

The metaxological sense of being is not the antithesis of dialectic. It is antithetical to any such reduction of otherness, and to the reduction of a pluralized intermediation to any monistic self-mediation. The togetherness is

to be articulated with a different stress on otherness. The space of the middle is open to a double mediation, a double that is no dualistic opposition. This was part of my intention in invoking Augustine's extremely suggestive formulation above. The middle is plurally mediated: it can be mediated from the side of the dialectical self; but also it can be mediated from the side of an otherness that is not to be reduced to a moment of self-mediation. Even Hegel held that the other mediates the middle; but for him this mediation invariably turns out to be a penultimate, hence, subordinate moment of a more ultimate process of dialectical self-mediation; indeed mediation by the other turns out, in the end, to be a mediation of the self in the form of *its own* otherness, and hence not the mediation of an irreducible other at all.

The complex "between" as articulating a metaxological sense of the togetherness of self and other cannot to be understood in terms of such an encompassing dialectical self-mediation, even granting the latter all its internal complexity. The "between" grants otherness its irreducible otherness. If otherness is to be mediated, and it is to the best extent possible, it must be mediated in terms other than dialectical self-mediation. The latter reduces the plurality of forms of mediation to one essential form that encompasses all the others. The shade of univocity rises again.

Metaxological intermediation is itself plural. There is an affirmative sense of the *double* that cannot be spoken of simply as a dualistic opposition. Nor is the other simply the self in the form of its own otherness. Our intermediation with certain others cannot be included in dialectical self-mediation. The mediation of the metaxological between cannot be exhausted either by the mediation of the self or the mediation of the other. Neither side can claim to mediate entirely the complex between. The "whole" is not a whole in the sense of a conceptual monologue with itself; it is a plurivocal community of voices in interplay just in their genuine otherness. This community is not a totality but an "open whole."

The double mediation of the metaxological means that genuine speculative mind must be both self-mediating and also open to the intermediation between thought and what is other to thought, precisely as other. This is not to reject the appropriate contribution from the univocal, equivocal and dialectical senses. It does mean that the deepest openness of speculative mind demands the impossibility of the final closure of thought by itself and in itself. Speculative perplexity is concerned with the mindful thought of being, and if the thought of being is metaxological, we are charged with a double imperative: thought must think itself; thought must think what is other to thought.

When thought thinking itself privileges only its own internal self-coherence, it is tempted to renege on potentially dissident forms of otherness that resist complete conceptualization. In modern philosophy this tempta-

tion follows from Descartes' classic formulation "*cogito me cogitare*"—a subjectivistic version of Aristotle's *noēsis noēseōs*, answering in its own way to the requisite self-mediation of thinking. When we elevate this into *the* essential form of thought, we produce a contraction of metaphysical openness to otherness. Thus, in the subsequent history of modern philosophy, we find that speculative perplexity is transformed into an endemic sense of mind's alienation from being's otherness. If we absolutize self-mediating thinking, the otherness of being is now reduced to a mindless dualistic opposite; or alternatively, it is dialectically dominated by an idealistic self-mediation; or it is simply mindlessly let be in its unmediated thereness; or it is irrationally celebrated in its brute facticity by post-idealistic philosophy. All of these are interwoven with the devaluation of being, discussed previously.

To think the middle and ultimacy means to struggle against every attempted closure of thought on itself. The *second* exigency of thought—that it be genuinely open to the otherness of being, even in forms dissident to complete conceptualization—must be allowed its freedom. For this second exigency reflects the indeterminate openness of ontological perplexity. And perhaps some contemporary accusations against speculation find their basis in a tendency of metaphysics to absolutize the first exigency of thought thinking itself. From this absolutization follows a certain logicism where metaphysicians create grand structures of conceptual abstractions without any community with being in its otherness. I see the significance of this second exigency and its indeterminate perplexity in its call for speculative *honesty*: philosophy may find its self-mediations ruptured by forms of otherness that its categories cannot completely master.

Speculative mindfulness need not be the conceptual monologue of thought thinking itself. The impact of otherness may strain the voice of thought into a perplexed saying that takes it to the edge of univocal and dialectical logos, if not beyond. The limit of the middle need not be a merely negative line of demarcation that says: so far, but no further, nothing more. It may become a place of meeting where the mind in perplexity genuinely opens itself to what the ultimate as other brings, on its own terms, to the metaxological between.

6. The Irish generally find it hard to leave Ireland, though they also have been adventurers, wanderers. Most have left because of economic necessity. I left because of a mixture of economic and intellectual necessity. I could have studied in England or perhaps Europe. When I came to America to a program with a nonanalytical focus, this coming for me constituted a movement between two worlds. My Irish world was then at the edge of modernity vis-à-vis technology and traditional religious values. America was a different country of the spirit. It did not have that smallness and intimacy of community one finds in Ireland. I was between my rootedness in a particu-

lar place, Cork, that I loved and still do, and the sense that there is an unmastered world of otherness beyond this; this sense of being between was heightened by coming to America.

I went through the move as an exile and was often homesick. In contemporary Continental philosophy one of the current buzzwords is “nostalgia.” It is hurled as an abuse against thinkers who supposedly long to return to the comforting self-sameness of the womb of being, unable to stand their difference before the uncontrolled heterogeneity of the decentered world. The critique of metaphysics as an ideology of identity, presence and so on, is tied up with this word “nostalgia.” I have no difficulty admitting the sentimentalized lack of honesty that can accompany some forms of “nostalgia.” But there is a kind of avant-garde braggadocio which play acts with “nostalgia.” This play acting has no real knowledge of the tension, war and pain, and stressed longing between sameness and otherness. My patience is thin with those who posture about exile and home, dismissing the desire to be at home with being as mere cowardly nostalgia. I can understand Socrates’ refusal to leave Athens: exile would have been a kind of death; I can understand this existentially as well as intellectually. It would require a mindless gall to dismiss Socrates’ refusal to leave as “nostalgia.”

I was between two worlds. In time I came to be relatively at home in my new country—relatively since a sense of dislocation never entirely deserted me nor has done so to this day. I live between two worlds and there is no *Aufhebung* that would unite the two into a seamless unity. I have been in exile from the first home; and in the outside there is not a second home, but a search to be at home with being even in this stressed between.

After completing my studies at Penn State, and after teaching for a year (1978–1979) at St. Bonaventure’s in upstate New York, we returned to Ireland, intending to settle there and make a home. We stayed for three years, but primarily for a mixture of economic and intellectual reasons I returned to America and Loyola College in Baltimore where I have been ever since. My life has been a series of crossings and crisscrossings in the between, and sometimes with respect to extremities of belonging and exclusion that stress the middle. There need be nothing middling, temperate about this middle.⁴

4. Since I wrote this in 1991, I and my family find ourselves undertaking another crossing. I am now Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the International Program in Philosophy at the Higher Institute of Philosophy at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Louvain) in Belgium. Given what I said above about Continental and Anglo-American philosophy, perhaps there is something fortuitous in this. Moreover, there is a deep historical connection between Ireland and Leuven, dating back many centuries.

The between become a kind of outside in the middle itself. There is an alienation from one's initial ground, yet also a liberation from a thoughtless immersion in the initial ground. There is a call to a being-at-home in not being-at-home. Thought itself is alienating, and unavoidably alienating. Is there any thinking that is not alienating? I do not mean a thought that overcomes alienation *simpliciter*. I doubt there is any such as long as we live. I mean a thought that dwells with and lives in the alien, non-reductively, and yet without turning into the wretched unhappy consciousness of Hegel. I side with Pascal when he reminds us of our double condition of wretchedness and greatness. There is no escape from wretchedness; but greatness in part consists in an honesty about wretchedness. Hegel is less than fully honest about the truth of wretchedness in his discussion of the figure of the unhappy consciousness.

Moreover, this between is not only an outside in the middle. There is a certain beyondness to it that is idiotic—idiotic in the sense of intimate, as other to the cold stony gaze of the neutral objectifying universal. This idiot intimacy cannot ever entirely appear in the public universal. If the philosopher thinks of himself as the high priest of the public universal he will twist before this idiocy and intimacy. This I have tried to suggest in my most recent writing: honesty demands that we not pretend that there is no such thing, even as we find it extraordinarily difficult to communicate it; one has to be something of a poet to do so effectively; but the main thing is a kind of honesty. Honesty itself is idiotic; there is no system of honesty; one is honest; I am honest or not. Honesty is an elemental intimacy of hard simplicity and openness that some manifest. No science or system or technique will guarantee it; it is a quality of character in its deepest intimacy of mindfulness and being; this is why honesty is a source of greatness.

Honesty is also a source of wretchedness. Honesty generates skepticism in philosophy; but too often the skeptics then blow it by wasting the honesty in futile parlor games of dismantling the positions of others, in an intellectual eristic. The most horrifying honesty, skepticism, is the one that searches the abyss of inwardness, the idiotic this of the thinker, for the lies and ruses and self-deceiving rancors and festering bile that lie hidden in the soul. Precondition of being an honest philosopher: skepticism about the crud corrupting mind, desire to be rid of that crud. And one may find that one cannot purify oneself on one's own.

Philosophers talk about truth and reason, perhaps even absolute truth or absolute knowing. The skeptical rejoinder is not easy to stifle: we know nothing. Honesty points to the condition of being between. It need not be imprisoned in either these extremes: the extreme that hubristically claims more than it can deliver; the extreme that dismisses philosophy as an old swindle of the human mind that masks its emptiness in swelling ideals.

Honesty's intermediate nature reflects the metaxological character of being. If we are honest, or trying to be honest, we let ourselves open to the truth, be it what it may; honesty presupposes a possible willing submission to what may be other to our heart's desire; hence honesty demands a certain unconditional respect for the truth, should we be able to encounter it. But honesty reverts on the human being, implicating the existential dimension to the philosophical quest for truth. I am between the possibility of knowing the truth and my repeated temptation to be closed against the truth. Honesty is a middle condition which need not possess the truth, but it is not thereby closed to the truth. Rather it is marked by its own truth of being, which is not the truth, but a willingness to be truthful. So the singular self can be truthful even when it does not possess the truth. This also suggests the need to move beyond the dualistic opposition of the honest singular self and the impersonal truth, existence and science. The between moves us to a further mediation which is other than the reduction of the universal to the particular, other than the absorption of the particular in the universal.

I was talking about being between America and Ireland. To anyone who has not gone through it, it is almost impossible to communicate the pain of being uprooted. I had lived in America for five years in the 1970s. One would think that I would smoothly fit into life again. Returning was like a kind of death, rather than a new beginning. Or: there was a new beginning but it was shadowed by a death. It took years to come to terms with this, and the trace of death is written on my thought ever since. For one who knows what I am talking about, this is no hyperbole or melodrama—being uprooted in an almost literal sense, like a tree that cannot draw sap up from the soil; and yet the tree lives on without that energy that should flow into it, unasked. I was between a plurality of worlds, each defined by their own intrinsic resources and limits, none reducible to the other, and neither reducible to a third principle or world. My experience of thus dwelling in the between deepened my quest for a non-Hegelian philosophy of community and otherness, and a double without *Aufhebung*. When we leave the immediate home we do not return to it dialectically; there is no dialectical return. There is called for a different commemorative living of the home, but always out of the distance of one's difference and the otherness of the home.

When one returns to the first home, one's eyes have been doubled, and one sees the same thing differently. One sees the home in a doubled way, in a redoubled way. There is no simple univocal home ever more. Again the great task is to find a way of being-at-home in this not being-at-home. I think this is coincident with the metaphysical destiny of being human. We are native to the world/ we are strangers in the world. We are at home with being/ we can never be completely at home with being. We

are double. The doubleness has to be lived in its stress. Perhaps we may turn the stress into a tension that drives a creative act. So by this paradoxical being-at-home in not being-at-home, I do not intend a mere equivocation. Nor do I mean it as a dialectical *Aufhebung* of our not being-at-home into a more encompassing home of thought thinking itself. I mean being wounded by exile, difference, distance, suffering. I mean singing in the wound. I mean letting the suffering of the otherness of being become the occasion of a great affirmation of being, a singing of being in its otherness, as for ever beyond us, and yet as always our home.

7. My first published book was *Art and the Absolute*.⁵ It was generally well received by Hegelians. They especially liked my critique of deconstruction, which the deconstructionists did not like. I would now say that for strategic reasons I pulled some punches about Hegel. I was tired of caricatures of Hegel. It is silly the way Hegel has been so many times overcome by mediocre minds. All one has to do is grind out a few clichés from Marx or Heidegger or Derrida; and presto!—Hegel is put in his place. I found this ridiculous, and still find it ridiculous, even though I criticize Hegel. Hence, I wanted to write a book which gave Hegel a run for his money. I wanted to read him with an eye as much on the thing itself as on texts. I wanted to read him clean of that hermeneutics of suspicion whose evil eye on the thought of an other brings forth a still born interpretation of that other. I wanted to explore the possibility of an open dialectic, an open interplay of art, religion, and philosophy. Granted, the desire for this open dialectic reflects my own desire to reinterpret dialectic. Nevertheless, I found and still find significant ambiguity in Hegel's enterprise, sufficient to offer room for some such openness.

I never did deny that we might need something else to do justice to a more robust sense of otherness and a different sense of openness, as note 6, p. 190, should make very plain. That note was the advance advertisement for *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*. *Art and the Absolute* was written *after* the major articulation of the systematic concepts of *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness* were developed (in "The World as Image and Original"). I was a post-Hegelian before being an Hegelian and again publicly becoming a post-Hegelian. The matter is simple: one has a purpose in writing a book; one cannot say everything; every act of saying is necessarily a silence about some other things; the fact that one says little about these other things does not mean that one has nothing to say about them, or no thought about them. Giving Hegel a run for

5. William Desmond, *Art and the Absolute: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).