



Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness

An Essay on Origins

SECOND EDITION

William Desmond



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James Clarke & Co

and

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An Essay on Origins

SECOND EDITION

William Desmond



James Clarke & Co

To my Father and Mother

James Clarke & Co

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Contents

Preface to the First Edition xi

Preface to the Second Edition xiii

Introduction 1

Dialectic and Otherness: The Historical Problem 1

The Problem of Otherness: Four Fundamental Possibilities 7

Desire and Origins 12

PART 1: INTENTIONAL INFINITUDE

1. Desire, Lack, and the Absorbing God 21

Finite Desire and Lack 22

Particular Possessions and the Infinitude of Desire 27

The Difficulty of Discourse and Desire 31

Infinite Lack and the Absorbing God 34

Afterword 41

2. Desire and Original Selfness 43

The Issue in Historical Context 44

The Being of Self and the Difficulty of Discursive Access 46

The Original Self as Fact 51

The Original Self as Ideal 54

The Original Self as Concrete Ideality 58

The Original Self and the Empirical Ego 63

The Original Self and the Transcendental Ego:

Being and the “I Think” 68

Afterword 80

3. *Desire's Infinitude and Wholeness* 83
 Univocal and Equivocal Desire: Wholeness Shortcircuited 84
 Intentional Infinitude and Wholeness 89
 Between Incompleteness and Absolute Closure:
 Art and the Dialectical Tension of Wholeness 94
 The Open Circle of Desire 102
 Afterword 104

PART 2: ACTUAL FINITUDE

4. *Desire, Transcendence, and Static Eternity* 109
 Transcendence, Time, and the Problem of Dualism 109
 Desire and Equivocal Becoming 113
 Static Eternity and Its Defects 117
 Becoming as Process of Positive Othering 122
 The Self as Free Becoming 126
 The Positive Pluralization of Identity and Difference 128
 Afterword 132
5. *Desire, Knowing, and Otherness* 133
 Immediacy, Self-mediation, and Intermediation 134
 Hegel, Identity, and Self-Mediation 142
 The Dialectical and the Metaxological Relations 149
 Afterword 153
6. *Desire, Concreteness, and Being* 155
 Desire and the Identification of Otherness 155
 Univocal Particularity and Equivocal Predication 157
 Dialectical Comprehension and Form 160
 The Metaxological Affirmation of Being 164
 The Fourfold Sense of Being and Traditional
 Philosophical Views 169
 Afterword 171
7. *Desire, Otherness, and Infinitude* 173
 Desire, Infinitude, and the "Between" 173
 Three Forms of Infinitude 177
 The Sublime and Aesthetic Infinitude 184
 Agapeic Otherness 193
 Afterword 206

PART 3: ACTUAL INFINITUDE

8. <i>Desire and the Absolute Original</i>	211
The Absolute Original and the Metaxological View	212
The Absolute Original and the Givenness of Being	216
The Absolute Original, the Regulative Ideal, and the <i>Ens Realissimum</i>	220
The Absolute Original as Whole and Infinite	223
The Absolute Original as Beginning and End	232
The Absolute Original, Heights and Depths	234
The Absolute Original and the Absorbing God	239
The Absolute Original, Man, and the World	241
Afterword	244
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 247

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.
—SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR*, III. IV. 105–10.

Τίνες οὖν ἔφην ἐγώ, ὦ Διοτίμα, οἱ
φιλοσοφοῦντες, εἰ μήτε οἱ σοφοὶ μήτε οἱ ἀμαθεῖς;
Δῆλον, ἔφη, τοῦτό γε ἤδη καὶ παιδί, ὅτι οἱ
μεταξὺ τούτων ἀμφοτέρων, ὧν αὖ καὶ
ὁ Ἕρως.
—PLATO, *SYMPOSIUM*, 204A8–B2.

Preface to the First Edition

Today one commonly comes across talk about philosophy's place in "the conversation of mankind," but the nature of that conversation is far from clear. Sometimes one senses that the professorial voice has usurped the voice of mankind. On occasion one overhears the unwearied murmurings of different camp followers. Sometimes one fears that one has wandered into the vicinity of Babel full of the confusion of interminable tongues. But sometimes a singular voice rises above the clamor, almost to a shout—I think here of Nietzsche. Sometimes again the singular voice is swallowed up by the conversation of the commentators, and we hear only a carefully orchestrated symphony of echoes and repetitions. The avant-garde commentator resorts to the shock tactic of cacophony: the rhetoric is the rhetoric of difference, but the language tends to be the repetition of the same. The more cautious traditionalist, by contrast, dutifully reproduces a set of drab clones of the past.

There comes a point in philosophical reflection when one must risk saying something that neither merges with the past nor breaks with it violently. In this work I make no pretense of speaking some philosophical *Ursprache* that would gather together the many competing voices. But as I write, I hear two voices. The first is one of Nietzsche's many voices, which intones the skepticism, metaphysical distrust, even nihilism, of modernity. The second is the measured voice of Hegel, which serves as a reminder that fear of error may be the first error. Though we have been saturated with suspicion since Hegel, we are not condemned to a paralysis of silence forever. Metaphysical perplexity may prove to be the spur to constructive thought, not an excuse for perpetual philosophical procrastination. The time may never be ripe for philosophy; yet somehow the time is always right.

The voice of this work—if indeed it has a distinctive voice—derives mainly from what is thought of as the Continental tradition. By this I do not mean the set of philosophical attitudes struck since Nietzsche. It is true that

some of the older voices have become strangely mute since Nietzsche; even so, if there is a conversation of philosophy, it did not start around the beginning of this century. Post-Hegelians may suspect me of being too Hegelian. Hegelians, if there still be any of pure pedigree, will convict me of not being Hegelian enough. Analytical philosophers will suspect the recrudescence of a form of metaphysics whose ghost they thought was laid to rest when G. E. Moore, gasping incredulously at the exotica of British idealism, wrung his hands in defense of what he took to be common sense. Be that as it may, if there is a conversation, I ask first the courtesy of a hearing.

I want to mention especially Carl Vaught and Stanley Rosen, whose voices ring in the views expressed here. I wish also to thank George Kline, whose meticulous reading of my manuscript greatly lightened the burden of revision, and Jeanne Ferris of Yale University Press, whose encouragement was the measure of editorial tact. The support of Maria, my wife, is incalculable. I thank William and Pangur for frivolity, Hugh for a new beginning, and my father and mother for first showing me something of agapeic otherness.

Preface to the Second Edition

Origins

This book was not my first published book but it was in essence my first written one. *Art and the Absolute* (1986) was the first to be published, and *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* appeared within a year of that (1987). The book had its origins in the doctoral dissertation I had written while studying at Pennsylvania State University (1974–78) and, in that earlier incarnation, had the cheekily ambitious, if also slightly ironical title: “The World as Image and Original” (1978). There was a double allusion in that title: first to Schopenhauer’s *magnum opus*, *The World as Will and Representation* (written when he was a young man), a work that has continued to interest me; second to the Platonic metaphysics of image and original as defining a crucial attunement to being. On a number of occasions I considered publishing this dissertation and had opportunities to do so, but did not, sometimes for reasons connected with publishers, sometimes for reasons connected with hesitations of my own. It was not written in a manner that found a well-prepared audience in professional philosophy. I found responses that were mixed and quizzical. Some of the quizzical responses: How credit it that someone would try to philosophize *modo directo*; that someone would attempt something systematic, and not just summarize research results; that someone might have the temerity to philosophize in their own voice; that someone did not know what “everyone” knew, namely, that the systematic impulse in philosophy was dead as a doornail; that someone would address elemental metaphysical issues again, as if the perplexities were virgin? I say quizzical too because I did receive the response that thinking was going on in these ruminations, even if it did not conform to any currently fashionable camp.

I believe I did not write as a foolish philosophical virgin, given that I knew the fundamental perplexities were as ancient as the philosophical

tradition. I hope I wrote as a somewhat wiser virgin, not green to contemporary trends, and awake to the longer tradition of philosophy as assisting one in having oil in one's lamps, aiding with light on certain fundamental issues that asked to be wrestled with again and again. I had been well schooled in the history of philosophy, as well as contemporary Continental and analytic philosophy. I had an interest in the intersection of art and philosophy and had written on the imagination in R. G. Collingwood for my MA. Collingwood was one of the last of the idealists in Britain and his style of philosophizing, while not in vogue, I thought admirable for its literary lucidity, its efforts at some systematic organization, as well as its sympathetic appreciation of some of the great philosophers in the longer philosophical tradition.

All these last excellences have been points of reference for me, but coming under Collingwood's influence was also to be touched by a strong tendency to historicism—in his case, even influencing how he understood the task appropriate for metaphysics as an essentially historical discipline. I mention this given that those were times when also a kind of Marxist claim to engage history was huge, not to mention—among a smaller elect—the idea of historicity in the Continental tradition, massively with Heidegger, but elsewhere too. I was touched by this then and the skepticism going with it about metaphysical questions as claiming to pose perplexities that had a timeless character. In this frame, my own studies of Hegel were significant in moving me from the comparatively modest philosophical ambitions of Collingwood to the hyperbolic claims of Hegel in relation to philosophy and history. Hegel was meaty in a way that Collingwood could not quite approximate. He was also very dense and puzzling and one got many bumps on the head (especially initially) from running against him as a conceptual wall. Some have found in Hegel the temptation to a certain historicism of philosophy when it understands itself as being its own time comprehended in thought. Additionally, we might think the consequence of this historicism is the superannuation of metaphysics as a discipline of systematic reflection dealing with ultimate questions, questions neither of yesterday or today or tomorrow, but expressive of perplexities posed in the dark space between time and eternity, between history and time's other. My years at Penn State were apprentice years in trying to take some initial measure of Hegel, both in understanding something of his fundamental logic or the basic patterns of his philosophizing, as well as alertness to some of the necessary questions that we need to pose to Hegel. Hegel was seductive and a huge challenge, not least in claiming to offer such a comprehensive vision. Fortunately the woo of philosophical perplexity also turned my head in different directions and not least towards Plato.

At Penn State the focus on contemporary Continental philosophy was very strong. It was one of the very few places in the USA at that time with such an emphasis. It might seem odd to go to America to study Continental philosophy while one might have gone to somewhere like Louvain, but this choice, given the philosophical ethos I found there, was undoubtedly the right one. Twinned with this Continental strain, there was strong stress on the longer tradition of philosophy (and the fashion of deconstructing that tradition without knowing it deeply had not yet possessed the profession). While I had an interest in phenomenology, and am often asked about the relation of my thought to phenomenology, my earlier immersion in the “idealism” of Collingwood now met the much more ambitious idealism of Hegel. Concurrently, the longer vista of the tradition opened out to Plato who, unlike Hegel, draws us towards a challenging sense of transcendence as other. The radical dialectical immanence of the one confronted the radical dialectical transcendence of the other. Between the tendency to self-mediating totality of the one and the propensity to dualistic difference of the other, I sought an open intermediation of immanence and transcendence.

I thought a reformed reading of Plato would allow this open intermediation much more so than any reconfiguration of Hegel. Also of great interest to me was the practice of philosophy in Plato. In practice he is a plurivocal philosopher, even if the practice is not always explicitly thematized. In that plurivocity the intermediations of philosophical thought with the importances of geometry, art, and the sacred are crucial. In Hegel, and in a kindred familial space, we find the doctrine of absolute spirit where art, religion, and philosophy constitute the apex of *Geist's* efforts to come to true knowing of itself. This space was of central concern to me but Hegel's practice of dialectic does lead to a higher speculative holism in which philosophy, as Hegel himself understood this, is at the end the sovereign of all it surveys. This to me was not fully true to the plurivocal practice of philosophy, as well as the challenging otherness of both art and religion. The practice and the otherness required what I called a metaxological intermediation.

It was in reading Plato's *Symposium* that I first lighted on the word *metaxu* as shimmering with some of its surplus promise: eros as a *metaxu* (a between) that intermediates between mortals and divinities and somehow binds up the whole. In consideration of Plato, I was helped towards a renewed seriousness about the question of transcendence, since the *metaxu*, as binding together mortals and divinities, must also safeguard an essential openness and otherness between them. These were among some considerations that turned me from the temptation to historicism of contemporary Continental philosophy, turned me back in the direction of what Dostoevski called those “accursed eternal questions.” The outcome: a confrontation

with Hegelian immanence and its aftermath, a confrontation that continued later and still continues with me. Remember this was in the 1970s when the concern with the other and otherness generally had not yet become the pervasive fashionable theme it was to become later. I was not bewitched by the rhetoric of “overcoming metaphysics.” I admire Heidegger for his efforts to re-raise the question of being but wonder if we are now suffering from a further, second post-Heideggerian forgetfulness of being, with Heidegger’s own rhetoric of “overcoming metaphysics” a contributory factor. The language of the “overcoming of metaphysics” does not fertilize the soil of thought with seeds of metaphysical astonishment, always new and always old. Heidegger himself was the recipient of that astonishment, but blaming the cure (metaphysics) for the ill (“metaphysics”) reveals a symptomatic equivocation. Even then I demurred when confronted with the discouragements of the already defeated. I did not want to be coopted for the company of copyists of contemporary Continental philosophy, exotic copyists to be sure, since they seemed to promise something unprecedented somewhere over the metaphysical rainbow. But when it comes to the colors of new dispensations, we find that what always comes back are the primary colors of the recurring metaphysical rainbow.

I felt it urgent to attempt a first address to what I suspected were systematic weaknesses of Hegelian dialectic with respect to its configuration of otherness and the relation to the other. I could see the power of dialectic to confront any dualism of identity and difference, same and other, to call into question the fixation of binary oppositions, but questioned whether there were forms of otherness not to be stylized as binary oppositions to be so overcome. Dialectical thinking in the hands of Hegel has the virtue of making more fluid for thought these fixated oppositions and bringing to philosophical attention the dynamic character of the relation between opposites, as well as of the very terms fixed in opposition. There was mediation between opposites, but what was the nature of the mediation? My conclusion was that there was interplay between same and other and yet in the fuller unfolding of the interplay by Hegel, the “inter” serves the constitution of a more inclusive self-mediation—not in opposition to the other but in and through otherness. This meant converting otherness into the other of self as the self’s own othering. What was at stake could not be captured in a dualistic otherness, I agreed, but it also had to be more than this form of self-mediating dialectic. Hence the stress on the between, the *metaxu*, not for purposes of a more holistic self-mediation but with a different accent on otherness. And this latter with regard to both the inward otherness of the selving, and other forms of otherness that exceed the terms of inclusive self-mediating dialectic. There was an inter-mediation, a more than holistic

self-mediation, a pluralized intermediation that is more than pure self-recognition in absolute being-other (*das Reine Selbsterkennen im absoluten Anderssein*), as Hegel famously described it in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹ This phrase is sometimes cited by those among Hegel's admirers who want to make him a philosopher of radical otherness. I take the absolute otherness (*Anderssein*, being-other) precisely to be an "absolved" otherness that is a *medial* otherness through which the self passes to "*pure self-recognition*." Hegel himself emphasizes the *pure* nature of the self-recognition: the absolute otherness is its own otherness, that is, of the "self" itself.

While at Penn State I wrote a first paper on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which I tried to argue along the lines in the present book that Hegel's stress on self-knowing did not do full justice to knowledge of the other qua other. The point here was never to paint Hegel as the bogeyman he was to become in some postmodern caricatures. Given my earlier sympathetic interest in Collingwood, the point also had nothing to do with the analytic anathematizing of Hegel. In fact, *Art and the Absolute* tries to give Hegel a sympathetic run for his money, though the nagging issue of transcendence as other was never banished from mind. The relation of art and philosophy was always of concern for me, and I found Hegel's aesthetics impressive, and still do. I believe it deserves to be given sympathetic treatment, as I tried to do in *Art and the Absolute*. There is a tale here with regard to my own relation to the confraternity of Hegel admirers. While *Art and the Absolute* was generally approved by the Hegelians, I now think I sometimes ventriloquized through Hegel—I was making him say things I would have liked him to say. This is a widespread practice now with every invention of a "new" Hegel. There are some who today want a more pluralistic Hegel, one who *mirabile dictu* is one of us in the postmodern *Zeitgeist*. Ventriloquizing through Hegel, he becomes the plastic dummy through whom we can say what we think Hegel would say, if Hegel were us. I find Hegel himself more interesting, more challenging, and more to be challenged.

The struggle with Hegel is worth it philosophically. *Art and the Absolute* tried to offer a more "open" reading of the relation of art and philosophy, and indeed a sense of the art work as a kind of "open whole." The Hegelians first welcomed me as a sympathizer, then I seemed to mutate from a critical sympathizer into a sympathetic critic, thence into just a critic, and finally, when I published *Hegel's God* (2003), the pious Hegelians pointed to the back of the church and the door. I have lived through much of the so-named "Hegel revival" in English to realize that many interpretations practice too much the art of the ventriloquizing hermeneutics, with Hegel emerging as a

1. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 24; Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 14.

contemporary who has been buried under the false babble of the “received interpretation” of almost the last two centuries. I myself have become more critical of Hegel to the degree that I perceive a systematic bias at work in his practice of dialectic. Hegel is the only philosopher to be somewhat more extensively analyzed in *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* but the germ of criticism here has been finessed and extended. If I could put it in terms of an issue even then fundamental for me, the unsurpassable transcendence of God, I came to see how this is systematically reconfigured by Hegel, producing in my estimation what I called a counterfeit double of God (*Hegel's God*). Many read Hegel without enough finesse for dialectical equivocity, on the systematic side, and too innocently, on the hermeneutical side—a point especially true with commentators who try to put him to religious or post-religious uses. Even granting this dialectical slipperiness, there is something about Hegel as a thinker it is essential to encounter, engage, and confront. He is a Janus figure who points retrospectively to the tradition of philosophy, and prospectively to many significant developments that have taken place in philosophy since his time and that still continue to affect us. Dialectic is not univocal. A recuperation of the significance of dialectic, both in its Hegelian and non-Hegelian forms, remains a continuing task for philosophy.

Philosophy without Footnotes

Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness is not just a response to Hegelian dialectic. I was never certain then what the future might bring in terms of opportunities to continue to think philosophically (this is usually connected with a teaching position, of which then, as now, there is no guarantee). This communicated a certain urgency to attempt a sketch of fundamental philosophical possibilities with respect to the basic relations between same and other, identity and difference. These latter notions crop up in some form or other in our efforts to make intelligible sense of things. I thought an exploration of such fundamental forms of each, as well as relations between each, would offer a framework to articulate something essential to being and to being intelligible, as well as a basis for further development (something that proved true for me in subsequent work). Once again, this was not a matter of beginning from nothing but of seeing virtualities in the longer tradition that held promise of something as much new as old. Hence the fourfold sense of being: the univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological. Univocity and equivocity would be recognizable to students of Aristotle (and Aquinas) with the addition of analogy. Since I found myself in the business

of interpreting and contesting dialectic, a revision in the direction of this fourfold struck me as appropriate, not to shortchange analogy, but to take up the challenge of modern dialectic, and indeed perhaps to keep under guard the space of the analogical, though reformed in a metaxological direction.

In broad and crude terms: univocity suggested a sense of unmediated identity; equivocity a sense of unmediated difference; dialectic (in modern form) a sense of self-mediating identity inclusive of difference; metaxology a sense of plurally intermediated relatedness between identity and difference, offering a renewal of the openness of this between, where identity exceeds its own self-mediation and difference can define robust othernesses irreducible to any dialectical self-mediation. Beyond the thought that circled around itself, this metaxological between asked the re-thinking of identity and difference, sameness and otherness beyond thought thinking itself.

If I were to put the matter in terms of Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, thirdness, I was attempting the addition of the category of fourthness. Aristotle said that the least number, properly speaking, was two. I thought that truly to count to two you had to count to four. Four here means, at its simplest, two twos; means that each two is marked by an internal overdeterminacy, preventing the exhaustive definition of each in terms of any binary oppositions, and also in terms of moments in a more inclusive dialectic of the Hegelian sort. The latter dialectic seems to count to three, but in counting to three, it ends with the one, once again—the one initially indeterminate, now at the end, the absolutely self-determining one. Counting to four gives the basis for secondness, rightly affirmed by Peirce but open to the difficulty of dualistic opposition, on one side, and on the other, the difficulty of being included in thirdness by a further process of self-mediation. One can see this metaxological fourthness as confirming the insight of Peirce but not the terms needed to do justice to secondness.

There is a note from the first edition (ch. 7, n. 33) that captures broadly what is at stake, and while there are nuances worth further attention, it is still worth citation: "An image expressing the fourfold possibilities here in regard to the univocal, the equivocal, the dialectical, and the metaxological might be this. The univocal is a clenched fist, a unity closed in on itself. The equivocal is two hands spread apart, the fingers of each splayed wide, thrusting away in a movement of separation. The dialectical is one fist clenching, one hand enclosing the other. The metaxological is two hands entwining, clasped in reciprocal friendship."

I should stress that the point is also an affirmation and recuperation of the dynamic power of dialectic, but not an endorsement of the Hegelian practice of dialectic. Dialectic is itself plural, as we know from the earlier practices of dialectic we find in Socratic-Platonic dialogue. Hegel's version

is under the sway of the modern overstress on the self-determination of thought, to the detriment of its more basic openness to otherness as such. A metaxological philosophy includes a critique of Hegelian dialectic that is a post-Hegelian recuperation of the power of dialectic, and this by being a post-dialectical or trans-dialectical metaxology that does not fall captive to either the univocities of positivism and scientism or the equivocities of deconstruction and some practices of negative dialectic.

Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness seeks to be primarily concerned with the matter itself, *die Sache selbst*. It is not an essay in erudition. An earlier version had almost no footnotes, and I once thought it a worthy ambition to philosophize without footnotes. That did not always meet with approval. In the version published the footnotes were added in response to uncertainty in some readers when a writer simply talks about the things themselves. In fact, on publication I have had congratulations on my footnotes from some, otherwise silent about the systematic merits of the thoughts at the core of the work itself. I still think that, rightly handled, it can be an honorable thing not to wear one's erudition on one's sleeve.

The work is written in a (sometimes veiled) systematic style, though it is an essay on origins. These two, the systematic and the essayistic, are not incompatible, if the systematic sense of things is a dynamic and open one. Important then is the *movement* of ideas, in which later ones modify without rejecting earlier ones. The full sense of the purposive unfolding is not comprehended at the outset. This dynamic unfolding is very Hegelian, in many ways; nevertheless, the purpose is not Hegelian. This could again be described as *working through* the univocal, the equivocal, and the dialectical senses of being to arrive at a more metaxological standpoint. This working through and towards is reflected in the structure of the book, once again a dynamic structure. From the exploration of what I call intentional infinitude in Part I, the lineaments of the standpoint of actual finitude are plotted in Part II, leading to the articulation of a complexly intermediated metaxological space from which is enabled an essay to think the absolute origin as actual infinitude.

This dynamic structure might seem counterintuitive, since often in philosophical reflection we come across a process that starts with finitude, only then to surpass this towards infinitude. By contrast, I wanted to arrive at finitude in the middle, but in a manner that signaled that this middle could not be the end of the matter, as it tends to be with many contemporary philosophies of finitude. What I called intentional infinitude here refers us to the movement of self-transcending or self-surpassing that we find in the exceeding restlessness of our desire, as refracted not least in the unlimited openness of our desire to know. Intentional infinitude makes of our desire

an energy of being more than a lack. As such, it is not directed towards an actual infinitude that would set at naught, or place in suspense, or leave behind the finitude of being. Quite the opposite, the quest was to arrive at finitude out of something like the equivocality of our intentional infinitude, and in the metaxological intermediation of that equivocality rethink what the absolute origin as actual infinitude might be.

The stress on the *intentional* I would qualify now, since I think this way of talking reflects too much the *conatus essendi* and not enough of the *passio essendi* and our primal porosity to being. Both the given origins of the infinitude of our desire and the encountered limits of its self-determination mean that intentional infinitude can never be identified with actual infinitude. We are not the masters of our own infinite self-surpassing, and this self-surpassing cannot be turned into an absolute self-determination. The Hegelian dialectic tries to do something of this and it does not work.

The movement from desire as lack, through the absorbing god, the struggle of selving for an open wholeness, and further to our return to finitude in the inadequacy of static eternity, all of this movement does not put the issue of the eternal out of play. Rather we come to ourselves differently, now having to continue the odyssey through post-dualistic, more dialectical ways and finally to trans-dialectical, metaxological ways. This is effected in Part II, actual finitude, when dialectic itself is rescued from the self-determining form, and a renewed porosity to overdetermined otherness comes to the fore. This is done in an understanding of knowing that cannot be a matter of self-knowing; in an ontology of beings, according to the fourfold sense, in respect of a metaxological "realism" beyond idealism; in an understanding of the aesthetics of the sublime as the sensuous manifestation of infinitude (not at that time the fashionable topic it was to become); in understanding the love at work in agapeic otherness beyond the will that wills itself.

By contrast with opening with desire as lack, ending with agapeic otherness makes more clear a view of finitude that could not at all be called the lacking one with which we seemed to begin. The move from desire as lack to agapeic love brings out some of the agapeics secretly in the desire all along but not understood as such. At the end of Part II there is the convergence in the middle of a sense of our own immanent infinite restlessness with a sense of infinitude as surpassing our essential finitude. This convergence in the middle enables the concluding essay to think metaxologically the absolute original. An essay on origins, *Desire, Dialectic, and Origins* arrives at an end that is no end. The agapeic origin is from the end seen to be always already at play, mostly not known as at play in the middle, though we participate in what it enables; and if "known" at all, it is not by negation of what gives itself

or by decamping from it in a subtractive self-transcending, but by dwelling with what is given in the agapeics of love, and by being released to the superior otherness, as much within us as outside or above us.

This is one of the reasons why I described the book as an “*Augustinian* odyssey, embarked on in the wake of Hegel,” using Augustine’s description of his own itinerary in thought, his sense of the soul’s itinerary: from the exterior to the interior, from the inferior to the superior. I felt that modern philosophy with its turn to the subject represented a version of the first move, but that the second move had become problematic, not least because the turn to the self left in equivocality the essential nature of our relation to otherness. There was the fact too that the stress on the autonomous self-determining power of the self left in a more elusive equivocality the issue of the superior, as both intimate and other. I mean what is more than us, what is hyperbolic to our own self-determination, what exceeds the turn of the subject to the subject. An important reflection of this that I do not address in this book—but which was central, say, to *Ethics and the Between* (2001)—is the relation of heteronomy and autonomy, the depreciation of the former, and the elevation of the latter into all but identity with freedom as such. How enact the move from the exterior to the interior without closing off the movement from the inferior to the superior? How do it without making the exterior—or the interior—simply inferior in an invidious sense? How think the superior such that the worth of the exterior and the interior was elevated rather than depreciated? Such questions asked for a non-dualistic conception of finitude and infinitude and also, I believe, more than a dialectical conception, in Hegel’s sense, since this too weakened the full ontological robustness of the finite, as well as the superiority of actual infinitude. I end with an agapeic view of the superior, and a metaxological view of the relation between the finite (marked with its own infinitude) and actual infinitude. Far from being a weakening of the exterior and the interior, this view requires a comprehension of the overdeterminacies of the exterior and the interior, their excess to determination and self-determination, overdeterminacies that put us in mind of the hyperbolic overdeterminacy of the superior. These diverse overdeterminacies require thoughtful exploration, something I try to do in later books.

Metaxology, System, and Poetics

More evident later, but nevertheless implicit in *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* is the development of a post-Hegelian systematic form of thinking that tries to give due acknowledgement of what transcends system. I now can

articulate more fully what is involved in the sense of systematic thinking as metaxological: as articulating passages between univocal determinacy and equivocal indeterminacy; as opening to excesses beyond the circling of modern dialectic back to itself; as renewing an ontological porosity to being beyond ourselves, and beyond the claim of Hegelian dialectic to absolute knowing where thought asserts itself as unsurpassable self-determining. In all of this, I grant one has to recognize the longer tradition's tendency to define being and intelligibility in terms of univocal determinacy (a claim contemporary deconstruction tries to contest). One has to take the measure of the skeptical turn of reason against itself in the feel for equivocality that we find in a good number of post-Hegelian philosophers. Beyond that, one has to move towards a trans-dialectical form of thinking, one capable of recuperating the openness of earlier forms of dialectic, while dissenting from the often accepted view that Hegelian dialectic represents the consummation and *nec plus ultra* of dialectical thinking.² To the contrary, one could claim that a more metaxological orientation is truer to the plural forms of dialectic, as well as its more abiding inspiration, in so far as dialectic's attentive mindfulness of the other as such always exceeds any self-determining form of thought.

It is interesting to ask if some recent thinkers who are not hostile to metaphysics—Deleuze and Badiou, for instance—have passed through dialectic in a fruitful way and to what extent they are genuinely trans-dialectical thinkers in a manner that would allow communication with metaxological possibilities of thought. Generally, in the last part of the twentieth century dialectic seems to have fallen into deep silence. It is traduced by Deleuze in his book on Nietzsche and philosophy. If dialectic itself harbors plurivocal promise, we must resist what one might call agenda-driven philosophy that has a project, say, carrying through the Nietzschean inversion of Platonism, or as with Badiou, a Marxist inspired reformulation of dialectic. Philosophy is not a project, shaped and driven by an agenda. Let the matter itself take thought where it will, even towards the philosophical friendship of “Plato.” There is a deep patience to truer thinking.

I know the term “system” and what it is taken to imply is not in good odor with many philosophers in the Continental tradition these days, and generally this is a carryover from Hegel's influence and the repudiation of system by many post-Hegelian thinkers. Many seem to have taken to heart Nietzsche's disputable claim that the will to system reveals a lack of integrity. “System” seems to be a catchword for Laputan constructions of abstract concepts that have to be treated suspiciously or deconstructed. I would agree

2. See my “Are We All Scholastics Now?”

with Hegel that some sense of system is unavoidable, without subscribing to the view that there is *the* system which Hegel brings to completion. If there is a systematic side to philosophy it has to do with the fundamental interrelations of being and mindfulness. When we think of one thing, or think it through, we find ourselves driven to think of another thing fundamentally related to the first, and further again. This is not only true of the processes of thought. The happening of being is intelligibly articulated, and to attend to the articulations of that happening is to see the dynamic of a certain systematic unfolding occurring in happening. The growth of a tree, for example, is the becoming of a botanical system, and our thinking is to stay in faithful attunement with that systematic unfolding when it is true to it. In such a view, what is systematic is dynamic, while yet articulate and intelligible; it is not static simply, though there can be systems that are less dynamic and that tilt towards the more static end of the spectrum. Rhetorical assaults on “system” do not help mindful attention to the intricate, immanent richness of the happening of being, nor to the call of a certain fidelity that is asked of us in mindful attention of that intricacy. The fourfold sense of being that structures the unfolding of *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* is systematic in the more supple sense I am here trying to suggest.

If this systematic side to thinking is essential, it is also essential to pay attention to the *trans-systematic*. One way to put the point would be to speak of a philosophical thinking that occurs between system and poetics.³ Poetics I take as referring to a more original coming to be, and as witnessing to energies of being that cannot be exhausted in this or that determinate formation, or systematic articulation. There is not so much an immanent whole as open wholes: open wholes that, in the first instance, are opened in a process of their own becoming, and that always shimmer with energies of being that exceed every finite determinate and systematic whole. This notion of an open whole is introduced in *Art and the Absolute*, with regard to the art work, and in chapter 3 of the present work where it bears on the human quest for wholeness. More generally, a systematic network, in a sense bearing on an open whole, can be said to be metaxological, as exceeding its own self-relation, and always marked by an other-relatedness that cannot be completely enclosed in its own immanence. What I am calling poetics pays attention to sources of origination preceding a system, to energies of becoming that move a system, to energies moving in and through a system, and also to energies of transcending that open to what is beyond this or that determinate system, open to what exceeds system. What above I referred to as overdeterminacy is one way in which I have come to speak of this

3. See my piece “Between System and Poetics.”

surplus to system. This overdeterminacy comes to expression in what I call the hyperboles of being, which are happening in immanence, which exceed the terms of immanence. They allow porosity to thinking of transcendence, and crucially divine transcendence, as irreducible just to immanent transcending.

This issue of what is more than system reminds us once again of the claim that Hegel represents the end of metaphysics, by contrast with which it is said we need a philosophy in which metaphysics is “overcome.” But does Hegel stand for the consummation of the metaphysical tradition? I would say no. Does Hegel bring about the completion of dialectical thinking? Again I would say no. Many anti-Hegelians answer yes to these questions. I say no and engage the metaphysical tradition and dialectic differently. I can understand “overcoming” a kind of scholastic rationalism in metaphysics, but the practices of metaphysics are more plurivocal, as indeed are the senses of being. One looks around for practicing metaphysicians answering the job description and does not find many. And then one asks if there is some shadow boxing going on here? Are commentators calling spooks up from a past of scholasticism long quietly resting in the grave? Why disturb such spooks, when the great metaphysical questions still are alive and facing us constantly as querying companions?

It is also a question whether all the rhetoric about “post-metaphysics” is a dead end, finally stultifying for thought. Perhaps certain forms of metaphysics are behind us but there is no post-metaphysical thinking, since *all* thinking is informed by the fundamental senses of being, which are at work whether we think about them or not. Being post-metaphysical without attention to these senses is being a poor metaphysician, not a post-metaphysician. The practices of metaphysics are plurivocal. Obviously, one of the voices is that of univocity, and in modernity one could especially say that an excessively ascendant univocalizing project has come to the fore. This project may have recessed roots in some premodern practices of metaphysics, though I think the earlier porosity between philosophy and its others, and especially religion, prevented philosophy from closing in on itself and claiming absolute rights to self-determination. Relative to this plurivocity of the tradition, those who totalize the same tradition ironically exhibit the same univocalization, albeit in meta-reflective form. An appreciation of the poetics reflects a renewal of something of that porosity. In some strands of philosophy (frequently under various influences from Nietzsche) one sees poetics as turned *against* system. I share with the post-Hegelians a concern for otherness and hold that we need finesse for equivocalities beyond system, but worry that we are often left with too simple an oscillation between univocity and equivocity. This is another reason why a continued wrestling

with the Hegelian possibilities of dialectic is important—that is, as a thinking in the between that yet is not properly metaxological in the way this dialectic circles the overdeterminacy of being in terms of the self-determining of immanent thought. This is why an engagement with the poetics of philosophizing, whether understood in a more Platonic or Nietzschean manner or otherwise again, enters intimately into the practice of a plurivocal philosophy.

Germs and Later Births

Some of the germs that will be nurtured to fuller flowering in my later works are there in *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* and perhaps a final word on how I see this is appropriate. There is a deepening of my understanding of the significance of this fourfold sense of being, as well as an extension of the range of considerations taken into account. The development is both more intensive and extensive, though the focus of it all is to give a *logos* of the *metaxu*, to understand what it might mean to say that “to be is metaxological,” to “word the between,” as I put it recently.⁴ The sense of “being between” is not confined to the human being as an intermediate being, though in the human being it finds something of the acme of its immanence singularization. This articulation of the between, both intensively and extensively, finds expression in the metaphysics of *Being and the Between* (1995). Nor is a metaxological metaphysics an ethically neutral system of categories but is inseparable from an ethics. This I tried to articulate in *Ethics and the Between*. The deepening of the immanent sense of the between is coupled with the realization that immanence is porous to what exceeds immanent determination. Thus the space of the between is also between immanence and transcendence as other, and in this space the urgent need to think the significance of religion makes itself more and more felt in my work. Though this culminates in *God and the Between* (2008), in a sense this concern has always been with me. The final chapter of *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* is entitled “The Absolute Original” and is almost verbatim from the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation—without the footnotes. There is a continuity of concerns over many years. I have also found that in other books there might be something in germ that grows into a more flourishing bloom in a later book. I am thinking about how chapters in *Philosophy and Its Others* (1990), such as “Being Ethical,” or “Being Religious” become full length books with an integrity in their own right in, say, *Ethics and the Between*, or *God and the Between*. The chapters on “Selves” and “Communities” in *Being*

4. See my “Wording the Between.”

and the Between open into what became Part II and Part III of *Ethics and the Between*, each of which has something of the character of a monograph unto itself. But there are germs of what I later say about “Selves” and “Communities” also in *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*.

In addition to this development and deepening, I will mention just a few new concepts that have come to the fore over the years: the primal ethos of being and the reconfigured ethos; posthumous mindfulness; thought singing its others; the potencies of the ethical; counterfeit doubles (of God); the senses of selving and being in community according to the fourfold sense of being; the importance of what I call the porosity of being, and the *passio essendi*; the move to a givenness and receptivity more primal than determinate and self-determining being; the overdeterminacy of being; the intimate universal; the hyperboles of being and their importance for the philosophical renewal of the question of God, beyond what I call the postulatory finitism of much post-Hegelian thought. I have always had the ambition to philosophize in a plurivocal manner, and in my practice of philosophizing one can find more systematic work, more meditative, more interpretative, and indeed visitations from more poetic and religious voices. Finishing the trilogy, *Being and the Between*, *Ethics and the Between* and *God and the Between* brought a systematic undertaking begun many years before with *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness* to a kind of completion—not a closure but more a kind of “open wholeness,” I hope. In more recent writings I am trying to find something of a balance between more meditative thinking and more systematic, with allowance for the more singing voices of the poetic and the religious. Once again my work tries duly to acknowledge with respect the longer tradition of philosophy, as well as more recent developments. The point is not to be just an echo of an echo of an echo, or to offer commentary on commentary on commentary. Nor is it primarily to be concerned with giving “readings.” It is to think about things, in that respect to fulfill my early ambition to do philosophy without footnotes. At best, the substance of the longer tradition has entered into the textures of one’s thinking, so this substance is there intimately, and does not have to appear in the form of philological prosthetics. That said, I do believe that if we show an indifference or even stupidly antagonistic attitude to the longer intellectual and spiritual traditions of philosophy, we are likely to become the inventors of new wheels. These new wheels are not necessarily better helpers to motility of mind and spirit. Bad wheels bring motion to a standstill and we cannot move forward. Sometimes we need to rock backwards to get out of a rut and budge the jam and then roll with release into the future. Philosophy in the *metaxu* has to move with something of this rocking motion—and with it releasing promise. Rocking back allows forward release.

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