

BOOK REVIEW

William Desmond, *The Voiding of Being: The Doing and Undoing of Metaphysics in Modernity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), xi+295pp.

William Desmond is a leading figure in contemporary continental thought, especially in the areas of metaphysics and philosophy of religion. He and Gabriel Marcel are also kindred spirits. References to Marcel appear throughout Desmond's works, and he shares some of Marcel's major concerns. Like Marcel, he emphasizes the inexhaustible richness of being and the need to cultivate receptivity to this richness. Like Marcel, he stresses the danger of treating mysteries (like love) as determinate problems. Both, too, are Catholic philosophers working outside of Thomist traditions. This is not to downplay Desmond's originality or the differences between his philosophy and Marcel's. Desmond is a more systematic thinker than Marcel, for instance. He defends systematic metaphysical thought that does not strive for complete closure. (See, in particular, the essay "Between System and Poetics" in the volume under review.) Still, Desmond is undoubtedly one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers who both recognizes Marcel's importance and develops Marcelian themes.

Students and scholars of Marcel are likely, therefore, to find much of interest in Desmond's philosophy. *The Voiding of Being*, Desmond's latest book, offers some good entry points. The title essay discusses how modernity lost a sense of being as rich and mysterious. This is a complex story of disenchantment, and Desmond acknowledges that he can only tell part of it in this essay. He focuses on how modern philosophy often facilitates the "voiding of being." He points to the rise of rationalism, which privileges the "univocities of scientific and mathematical exactitudes" in thinkers like Spinoza (27). He also points to the classical empiricism of Locke, which relegates the aesthetic richness of being to secondary qualities. He discusses Kant and Hegel at greater length. Philosophy often privileges autonomy in the wake of Kant, and this tends to flatten out otherness or treat it as a threat. Hegel, on the other hand, attempts a "consummation" of "autonomous thought" via speculative dialectics (40).

These thinkers drain being of its richness and thereby become insensitive to its mystery, to the strangeness that there is anything at all. Desmond's history of modern thought has similarities to Heidegger's in this regard, but he thinks the solution to the modern predicament is not to "overcome" metaphysics but to renew it. For one thing, metaphysics is unavoidable:

All of our efforts to be true, all our stabs at the intelligibility of beings and processes, are subtended by different senses of being, though mostly we are unmindful of these as such. We need to be awoken to these senses and their wide-ranging significance. Those who claim to be postmetaphysical are as much in the debt of these senses, indeed embody them diversely, as the metaphysicians they claim to overcome. Seen thus, there is no overcoming of metaphysics—overcoming metaphysics is itself metaphysics. (3)

Desmond emphasizes the plurality of approaches in metaphysics, echoing Aristotle's claim that "being is said many senses" (2). Premodern thought offers many affordances for recovering a richer sense of being, but Desmond also points to more recent thinkers who have broken with the reductive tendencies of modern philosophy, including Alfred North Whitehead, Paul Weiss, Edith Stein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Maritain, and Marcel.

Modern thought is often skeptical, beginning in doubt. Desmond, on the other hand, defends the ancient claim that philosophy begins in wonder. His account of wonder, elaborated in this volume in an essay titled "The Dearth of Astonishment," offers another good entry point into his thought. Desmond distinguishes between three different modalities of wonder: astonishment, perplexity, and curiosity. Astonishment is the most originary for Desmond. In astonished wonder we are struck by the mystery of being: "This has not to do with a process of becoming this or that but with porosity to the 'that it is at all' of being. That being is, that beings have come to be at all—this is prior to their becoming this or that, prior to their self-becoming. In a certain sense, all human mindfulness is seeded in this astonishment" (107). But astonishment also results from the "too muchness" of being, its aesthetic richness: "There is something of the blow of unpremeditated otherness in being struck by astonishment. The otherness seems to stun us, bewilder us, even stupefy us" (107). Natural beauty, religious experience, the face of the beloved or of a newborn child—all can strike us with astonishment. Such wonder often gives rise to gratitude and reverence. For Desmond, astonishment is at the root of not only philosophy but also of religion and art.

Perplexity is Desmond's second modality of wonder. If astonishment stresses the richness or "overdeterminacy" of being, perplexity is more concerned with its ambiguity or indeterminacy. Perplexity is a more anxious, unsettled, questioning form of wonder. Often it is stirred by what Desmond calls the "chiaroscuro" of existence, the mix of happiness and suffering, of peace and struggle, that runs through life. The prospect of our own death or the death of one we love, the so-called "problem of evil," can strike us with perplexity. (We might think of Schopenhauer as a great philosopher of wonder-as-perplexity, or in a different way the early Heidegger who emphasizes *Angst* rather than *Gelassenheit*.) Perplexity "can invade us with foreboding in the face of the mystery of life" (113). It can fill us "with dismay" (113). "At the same time," though, "this perplexity can awaken an urgent *seeking* for what is true in all significant art, in all intellectually honest philosophy, in all spiritually serious religion" (113). Indeed, as this quote suggests, art, philosophy, and religion share roots in perplexity as well as astonishment.

Desmond's third modality of wonder is curiosity. This is a concern with how things work. Curiosity points less to the intractable mysteries of existence than to gaps in our knowledge. Curiosity is concerned with what Marcel calls problems, which in Desmond's gloss, can yield "a determinate solution" (238). Curiosity concerns the intelligibility of things. In this regard, it is "absolutely indispensable" (116). While Desmond rejects modern scientism on the one hand, he rejects the postmodern relativizing of science on the other. He claims, "It is necessary to assert the *constitutive* role of curiosity in getting as univocal a grip as possible on the intelligibility of being, in addition to as precise an articulation as possible of that intelligibility" (116). The modalities of wonder are not rigidly opposed. They can accompany each other. We might think of how experiences of the sublime can blend astonishment and perplexity, or of how ontological

astonishment can accompany scientific inquiry. But curiosity can also be shorn of deeper wonder. Then inquiry can “run roughshod over the overdeterminacy of astonishment” (116). Such curiosity becomes instrumentalizing, even exploitative. Mysteries become obscured or distorted into problems, to return to Marcel’s language. Desmond suggests that such curiosity contributes to the “voiding of being” in modernity. It is crucial, he claims, for philosophy (and religion and art as well) to recover its roots in astonishment to counter this reductive tendency.

Most of the essays in this volume appeared elsewhere in shorter form. They cover a range of topics. One compares Desmond’s “hyperboles of being,” excessive happenings that offer “indirect ways” to God, to Jean-Luc Marion’s “saturated phenomena.” Another argues that Heraclitus is not simply a thinker of flux but also “of the *logos* that runs through all things” (262). Heraclitus is attuned to “the conjunction of the fluency of flux with the constancy of form” (262). Poking fun at the “flux-gibberish” of some of Heraclitus’s postmodern followers, Desmond claims that the task for philosophers is to think anew this “startling doubleness” (262). Yet another chapter, which explicitly draws on Marcel’s distinction between problems and mysteries, considers how we can be “true to mystery” (226). In short, *The Voiding of Being* is a striking volume, one that will especially interest those who have, like Desmond, been struck by the writings of Gabriel Marcel.

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