

William Desmond. *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity Among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics.* Columbia University Press 2016. 520 pp. \$65.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231178761).

The intimate universal is a metaxological concept between universality and particularity, balancing between indeterminacy and determinacy, the abstract and the concrete, and transcendence and immanence. These contrasting categories set forth the parameters of the problem of the universality that has preoccupied philosophy since its beginnings. Take, for instance, the contrast between transcendence and immanence. If, as the story goes, Platonism defined the universal ideally as transcendent to every instance of becoming, then Aristotelianism defined the universal empirically as immanent within every instance of becoming. If Platonic transcendence rendered the real world epiphenomenal to the ideal, Aristotelian immanence enclosed the world narrowly within its own domain at the expense of the ideal. Modern philosophy has decided in favor of the latter. Following Nietzsche, contemporary post-metaphysical philosophies presuppose almost without argument a commitment—what Desmond also calls a ‘postulatory finitism’—to atheistic immanence as forcibly reflected in the slogan, ‘*Il n’y a pas de grand Autre*’ (‘There is no big Other’). Desmond’s intimate universal navigates the Scylla and Charybdis of these Platonic and Aristotelian caricatures of the universal by proffering a metaxological metaphysics—a metaphysics determined by the ‘doubleness of the *meta*,’ which in ancient Greek means both ‘in the midst’ and ‘beyond.’ The intimate universal, then, is immanently ‘in the midst as intimate, yet beyond as pointing to what is not reducible to immanence alone’ (160). Desmond describes this irreducibility variously as ‘porosity’ when it concerns the openness of being, as ‘overdetermined’ or ‘surplus’ when it concerns the givenness (the ‘that it is’) of being, and as ‘agapeic’ when it concerns excessive generosity, shared community, of universal being.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part concerns ‘exoteric reflections’ of the intimate universal in religion, art, philosophy, and politics. Here the intimate universal emerges in each domain through the contrasting universal/particular extremes native to each of them. In religion, the intimate universal is manifest between cosmopolis and ghetto; in art, between imitation and self-creation; in philosophy, between theory and practice; and in politics, between servility and sovereignty. On their own, these extremes are skewed, but the intimate universal balances opposites at the point at which they are most true or, better, most porous to the other. There are, of course, counterfeit doubles pretending hybrid reconciliations, but the intimate universal is not a synthetic concept but a metaxological one, lingering in the tense ambiguity of the human condition between, or in the midst of, the aforementioned contraries.

The second part of the book consists of a systematic exposition of thinking the intimate universal metaxologically by ‘focusing on what it means for being human as such, how it is manifested in all the ontological dimensions of our being’ (12). Dedicating a chapter to each of them, Desmond expositis four primary ontological dimensions—the idiotic, aesthetic, erotic, and agapeic. Each of these dimensions offers an inflection of the intimate universal. The idiotic pertains to the predeterminate intimacy of the intimate universal as the deepest ontological intimacy of human being as seen in the way that each person’s porosity to otherness is uniquely and singularly their own. The aesthetic concerns the embodied communication of the intimate universal, incarnating the porosity of being. The erotic involves the hyperbolic surpassing and self-transcending ingredient in the aforementioned intimacies of being thereby intimating the rudimentary, even if not fully realized, universal ‘being-with’ (*sunousia*) of being. Lastly, the agapeic is the incognito of generosity that ‘slumbers in all things’ (390; c.f. 419), an overdeterminate, primordial commonality in which all things share with one another—an excess

that goes by the name of the good, a letting the other be in order to receive the other. Taken together, these four ontological dimensions manifest the between-being, the metaxological metaphysics of the intimate universal, implicated diversely and plurivocally in being human.

Due to the expansive scope and execution of the book, it would be impossible to do it justice in a brief review. However, a recurring theme reemerges among each of these inflections of the intimate universal and the metaxological metaphysics undergirding it; namely, the pivotal role of otherness. A pivot is a central point on which a mechanism turns or oscillates. Desmond's metaxu names the finite condition as constantly negotiating alterity—as being caught between opposites—and thus various dispositions toward otherness determine latent possibility of the intimate universal in each of the ontological dimensions. Stated otherwise, perhaps one could say that otherness marks the difference that makes distinguishing the ontological dimensions of being possible. Consider the difference between *eros* and *agapeics*: 'In *eros* the porosity of being is taken over by the striving to be of the *conatus*, seeking in and through the other to come to some self-fulfillment. In *agape* the love of being in porosity to the other does not need or insist on being self-fulfilled in relation to the other but offers the service of a compassionate goodness given for the other qua other' (360). The otherness implicated in *eros* is problematized insofar as *heteros* is taken as heteronomy standing over and against the self's autonomy. À la Kant, the other is always a potential liability since at any moment the other can impede self-determination. In contrast, *agapeics* consists of a different disposition toward otherness insofar as the other marks a fecund superabundance, a gift, to be received and through which the self can be defined through community with others (396). Although Desmond never phrases it quite this way, it is conceivable that the concept of being of his metaxological metaphysics receives its most precise formulation through concepts of otherness, whether as relation, 'being-with-an-other' ('we are what we are always in association'), or as gift, 'being-from-an-other' ('the *agapeic* is the incognito generosity in all things').

Religion, naturally, is where this aspect of Desmond's metaxological metaphysics is most evident. His metaxological metaphysics of the intimate universal holds an irreducible tension between immanence and transcendence. Desmond illustrates: 'Raphael's *School of Athens* captures the balance perfectly between the vertical pointing of the finger of Plato and the horizontal, even hand of the moderating Aristotle. The moderating hand reminds us of the just care for the *meta* as defining our 'being in the midst'; the finger pointing upward recalls us to the *meta* of the 'over and above' the moderate middle, reminds us of the exceeding of our self-transcendence and the excess of transcendence itself' (185-186; c.f. 381). In so many ways—whether in politics, religion, art, and philosophy—and across so many dimensions—from the idiosyncratic, aesthetic, erotic, or *agapeic*—the human experience consistently testifies to its metaxological condition in-between immanence and transcendence, the intimate and universal, insofar as it constantly manifests otherness even in its most idiosyncratic. How strange, then, that '*Il n'y a pas de grand Autre*' ('There is no big Other') has come to dogmatically denounce what the field of its origination, psychoanalysis, presupposes; namely, that various negotiations of alterity constitute self's becoming. Although rightly repudiating the univocal hegemony of a 'big Other', this kind of atheistic immanence opts instead for another univocity; namely, the absolute self-determination of the autonomous self. In both instances, otherness is problematized. Inversely, Desmond's intimate universal names the fecundity of otherness across the spectrum of human experience, but to be appreciated one must be equally open (porous) to its numerous and often equivocal instances, whether mundane (immanent) or sacred (transcendent). If Raphael's *School of Athens* illustrates the human condition between these two dimensions, it is his *Madonna and Child with Book* that best

portrays the otherness constitutive of intimate universality by depicting a face-to-face encounter between mother and child, God and humanity.

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