

God and the Between

William Desmond

Contents

Preface	xi
List of abbreviations	xiii
Introduction	1
Breaking Silence about God	1
God and the Ethos of Being	2
Passing in the Ethos: Between the Given and the Good	6
God, Ethos, and the Fourfold Sense of Being	7
God, Philosophical Systematics, Religious Poetics	10
Exceeding System, Hyperboles, Unclogging Ways	11
Structure of the Work	13
Part I Godlessness	15
1 Godlessness and the Ethos of Being	17
Godlessness	17
Devalued Being: The Stripping of the Signs	19
Idolized Autonomy: Eclipse of Transcendence as Other	21
Transcendences	22
The Antinomy of Autonomy and Transcendence	23
Dark Origins and Transcendence as Other	24
Will to Power and the Counterfeit Double of “Yes”	26
Return to Zero: Coming to Nothing	28
2 Beyond Godlessness	31
The Angel of Death, Being as Gift	31
God and Posthumous Mind	32
Out of Nothing: Porosity and the Urgency of Ultimacy	33
Redoubled Beginning: Elemental Yes	35
Idiotic Rebirth	36
Aesthetic Recharging	37
Erotic Outreaching	40
Agapeic Resurrection	43
Part II Ways to God	47
3 God and the Univocal Way	49
Ways to God	49
The Way of Univocity	49
Pantheistic Univocity: Immediate Sacrality	50
Equivocal Transience and Univocalizing God	52
Beyond Doubleness to the Absorbing One: The Parmenidean Way	53
Between the One and the Double: The Platonic Way	55
The One beyond the Double: The Plotinian Way	57

Reversing the One and the Double: Or How the Dualistic Defense of Transcendence Effects its Eclipse	59
The Immanent Double(ing): Or How the Shadow of Modern Monotheism is Atheism	61
Gods of Geometry	64
The One and the Double in Immanence: Kant's Transcendental One and its Humanistic Dissolution	68
4 God and the Equivocal Way	73
The Way of Equivocity	73
Nature's Equivocity	74
God's Equivocity	75
Equivocity and Evil	78
<i>Deus Sive Ego?</i> On the Equivocities of Religious Inwardness	82
Gethsemane Thoughts: Between Curse and Blessing	85
<i>Deus Sive Nihil?</i> The Equivocal Way and Purgatorial Difference	88
5 God and the Dialectical Way	91
God Beyond Opposition	91
Kant's Virtual Dialectic: Finding Direction by Unknowing Indirection	93
A Parable: Fishing for God	100
Dialectic beyond Dualism: Determining Origin beyond Determination	101
Dialectic and the Self-Determining God: On Some Hegelian Ways	103
Dialectic, Coming to Be, Becoming	107
God Beyond Dialectic: On Avoiding a Counterfeit Double of God	109
6 God and the Metaxological Way	116
Four Ways: God and the Metaxological	116
The Indirections of Transcending in the Between	122
God and the Between: First Hyperbole – The Idiocy of Being	128
God and the Between: Second Hyperbole – The Aesthetics of Happening	134
God and the Between: Third Hyperbole – The Erotics of Selving	141
God and the Between: Fourth Hyperbole – The Agapeics of Communication	150
7 God Beyond the Between	159
The Hyperbole of the Agapeic Origin	159
Reversing the Hyperboles and the Reserves of God	164
Bringing the Hyperboles Back to the Between	167
Part III Gods	171
8 God(s) Many and One: On Polytheism and Monotheism	173
Gods	173
Religious Imagination and Porosity to Archaic Manifestation	174
Sacred Namings and the Hyperboles of Being	176
Naming the Agapeic God	179
From Polytheism to Monotheism	180
Metaxological Monotheism	184
The Praise of Paganism	187
9 God(s) Personal and Transpersonal: On the Masks of the Divine	191
Personal God(s) and Plurivocal Manifestation	191
Monotheistic and Polytheistic Personalizations	193
Beyond Person, Beyond Mask	196
The Gods of Philosophers: Masks of the Impersonal or Transpersonal?	200

10	God(s) Gnostic: On Passing through the Counterfeit Doubles of the Divine	205
	Gnosticism and Religious Plurivocity	205
	Divinities Doubled Below and Above	208
	Gnostic Equivocity and the Fourfold Naming	211
	The Equivocal World as a Counterfeit Double?	215
	Passing Beyond the Counterfeit Doubles	216
	Agonistics: Divine and Human	218
	Doubling Back, Backing Out – Reversing Release	219
	Gnosticism and Metaxology: On Saving Knowing in the Equivocal Matrix	223
11	God(s) of the Whole: On Pantheism and Panentheism	225
	Holistic Immanence and the God of the Whole	225
	Pantheism Contra the Worthless World	226
	Affirming the World and the Immanent God	229
	God and the Whole	231
	Holistic Emanation and Pluralistic Creation	233
	God Beyond the Whole?	236
	The Holistic God and Evil	238
12	God Beyond the Whole: On the Theistic God of Creation	241
	What has Philosophy to do with Creation?	241
	Creation Beyond Univocal Intelligibility	244
	Creation Beyond Holism	246
	Creation, Coming to Be and Becoming	248
	Creation and Nothing	250
	Creation and Agapeic Origination: Dualism and the “Not”	251
	Creation, Hyper-Transcendence and Divine Intimacy	252
	Continuing Creation, Agapeic Self-Reserving	254
	Creation and Arbitrary (Will to) Power	255
	Creation, Hyperbolic Evil and Trust	256
13	God(s) Mystic: On the Idiocy of God	259
	The Idiotics of the Mystic God	259
	The Aesthetics of the Mystic God	263
	The Erotics of the Mystic God	268
	The Agapeics of the Mystic God	272
	Part IV God	279
14	God: Ten Metaphysical Cantos	281
	God	281
	First Metaphysical Canto: God Being Over-Being	282
	Second Metaphysical Canto: God Being (Over)One	288
	Third Metaphysical Canto: God Being Eternal – Surplus to Coming to Be	292
	Fourth Metaphysical Canto: God Being Incorruptible – Agapeic Constancy	297
	Fifth Metaphysical Canto: God Being Impassable – Asymmetrical Agapeics	300
	Sixth Metaphysical Canto: God Being Absolute – Absolved Agapeics	304
	Seventh Metaphysical Canto: God Being Infinite	308
	Eighth Metaphysical Canto: God Being (Over)All-Power	314
	Ninth Metaphysical Canto: God Being True – Agapeic (Over)All-Minding	321
	Tenth Metaphysical Canto: God Being (Too) Good	327
	Index	341

Preface

God and the Between has been long in the making, and brings a trilogy of works to a completion of sorts. It can be read on its own terms, but it also belongs with its companion volumes *Being and the Between* and *Ethics and the Between*. *God and the Between* is a venture in the philosophy of God, offering also something of a philosophical theology, but I have long been assailed by worries about the resources one would need to undertake any such a venture. To say nothing of what almost impossibilities it would ask in terms of religious porosity to the divine – purity of heart, for instance – it would require of the philosopher, at a minimum, something of finesse for both metaphysical and ethical perplexities. In the previous two works, I have tried to face up to these perplexities, as best as I could. Against some currently fashionable views, I see metaphysics as a living option, and have tried to articulate a viable metaphysics in *Being and the Between*. I also hold to the inseparability of ethics and metaphysics, and something of the result is to be found in *Ethics and the Between*. As the metaxological metaphysics I have developed opens us to transcendence as other, so a metaxological ethics culminates in the community of agapeic service, on the border between the ethical and the religious. Both ask for openness to the question of the divine. *Being and the Between* asks: What does it mean to be? *Ethics and the Between* asks: What does it mean to be good? *God and the Between* asks: What does it mean to be divine or God? As the metaphysics of the first work points further to the ethical philosophy of the second, *God and the Between* represents the philosophy of God continuous with both the metaphysics of the first work and ethics of the second.

Some of my recent work helps fill out a number of considerations that I cannot fully treat of here. Specifically, *Hegel's God – A Counterfeit Double?* tries to take the fuller measure of Hegel's dialectical-speculative reconfiguration of God, beyond what I could say in the present work about the dialectical way in more general terms. *Is there a Sabbath for Thought? – Between Religion and Philosophy* offers more extended reflections on notions like postulatory finitism, religion as the intimate universal, the poverty of philosophy, the counterfeit doubles of God, reverence, and so on. There is also an engagement with an array of thinkers such as Kant, Hegel again, Nietzsche, Pascal, Shestov, Solov'ëv, to name but some. I have been meditating of the many sides of the metaxological from the days of my doctoral studies, and not least with reference to the irreducibility of the divine to the terms of speculative dialectic, and in the context of post-Hegelian and post-Nietzschean atheism. The present work comes out of those long years of thinking about the between and God.

In relation to God, we all run the risk of being frauds. Knowing one does not know absolutely, one does know one must necessarily fall short. I do not lack in estimation for the atheist. To be a philosopher at all is to invite the atheist to take up lodging in one's soul. One wants to understand – understand even what one's understanding does not endorse. I do not doubt but that the dialogue with this lodger has no univocal, incontrovertible end. I do not doubt but that this guest can dislodge much of superstition and obfuscation. I do not also doubt but that, alas, much of true reverence can also be unhoused. This lodger of the soul can lay a clutch of cuckoo's eggs. Something like this, I believe, has happened in the souls of not a few intellectuals, and indeed in a more widespread cultural regard, in the last couple of centuries. These eggs hatch and evict the less robust religious fledglings. Are there more robust fledglings?

I believe there are. One finds witness to this in the ability of religion recurrently to resurrect itself, even in the direst of circumstances. One witnesses it at the heart of mindfulness itself, in its quarrel with its own atheist possibilities, and its intimate dialogue with the promise of the divine. One witnesses even the paradoxical resurrection of the religious at the heart of atheist philosophy itself. There are secular intellectuals who are engaged in a kind of colonization of religious notions, like grace, for instance. This might seem benign, but one worries that, in the end, this is an evacuation of the more properly religious significance of these notions. Pascal suggests that atheism displays a certain vigor of soul, but also that there is a religious faith whose vigor exceeds even this atheistic vigor. The dialogue of the soul with itself is the dialogue of the soul with what is other to it, with what exceeds it. Our dialogue with what transcends us will never cease, even when we say there is nothing there. The conversation, holy and unholy, is resurrected in the emptiness. We find vigor for it because we are first invigorated. The promise of being religious is recurrently resurrected because it is constitutive of what we are, what we are given to be, and what we are to be.

God and the Between may seem to the philosophical too religious, to the religious too philosophical. It speaks from a space between religion and philosophy and perhaps I will call down curses from the two sides. But stressed as it is, I think this is a good between in which to be. As a religious person, I cannot escape philosophical perplexity. As a philosopher of religion, I must necessarily be between philosophy and religion. Moreover, this between is not just dictated by religion having to prove its credentials to rational philosophy. It is also a matter of philosophy wondering if perhaps religion is the more original and ultimate partner in dialogue, such that the very identity of philosophy is itself called into question – an identity to be reformulated in terms of a porosity of thinking to what exceeds its determination purely through thought's own immanent resources.

There is a porosity between religion and philosophy, not a rigid separation, and communications can carry or be received from both sides. A new poverty of philosophy is needed, one all but the opposite of Hegel's absolute knowing whose attainment he describes as the point when knowing no longer needs to go beyond itself. Rather we begin to "know" the absolute, in a knowing that does not know, just when we understand that there is nothing more necessary for philosophy than that it should just so go beyond itself, without immanent reserve, without reserving the divine for its own immanence – in an agapeic exceeding of mindfulness beyond thought thinking itself. Without the proper friendship of the religious, it is hard to see how this would be possible for philosophy.

In keeping *God and the Between* within acceptable limits of length, I have had to exclude more detailed discussion of certain issues and thinkers. I have also tried to keep footnotes in hand, again for reasons of compactness, but also lest a clutter of erudition distract from the record of the journey undertaken. For *God and the Between* records a journeying – a crossing and criss-crossing in and of the between, and a venturing beyond the between. I think of the book as like a kind of passport, and I had toyed with the idea of having the whole text crossed out. No publisher would stand for that of course, and there is the fact that the gesture would appear tedious, if carried beyond a certain limit. One thinks of Heidegger's gesture of crossing (out) being – at first provocative, but the point once made tends to redundancy. My thought of crossing out the text was this rather. One recalls how old passports used to be crossed in red, when they had served their purpose, and a new one needed to be issued. But under the crossing out, stamps of the stations of a journey are still to be beheld. There is no substitute for the journey itself. But a passport that has served for passage is at least a witness that a journey, or journeys have been undertaken.

Introduction

Between You and all of us
We do not have the
First word
We are spoken to first

The first word comes
In the cooing of the mother
& we are wooed into words
Coming into conversations
Long under way
Without us

Wooed into words
We come too early
To presumption
And complaint

BREAKING SILENCE ABOUT GOD

There is a natural hesitation in speaking about God. One fears presumption. God exceeds if not our reach certainly our grasp. We overextend our powers and wound ourselves. There is also something intimate in so speaking. God is not to be bandied about in the highways and byways of facile discourse. One wonders if, rather, one should speak to God, and not with human witnesses to overhear. There seems to be an intimacy about being religious to which philosophical thought will never quite be true. Yet there comes a time when one must break silence, and break a silence that has been philosophically chosen or enforced in recent centuries. If one dares to speak, whether in interrupting that philosophical silence, or in venturing to say anything at all, one had better have something considered to offer.

Through much of the history of philosophy, to be a philosopher at all seemed to carry with it, as an inner part of the philosopher's vocation, concern with the question of God. In recent centuries, perhaps dating from around the time of Kant, it has not been possible to take that concern for granted, and, in our time, it seems rather that silence about God is the norm. That this silence seems to be so self-evident and self-evidently justified to many philosophers strikes me as perplexing. Relative to the longer history of the human family, and indeed most human beings today, such a silence is the anomaly rather than the rule. True, there is a certain analytic tradition that keeps alive the issues of natural theology, and, since the early 1990s, there has been a so-called phenomenological turn to religion. Nevertheless, the more general rule is an atheism that has been common among intellectuals since the Enlightenment, an atheism now in a phase of seeming to be entirely undisturbed about itself. I find this disturbing. For there are silences and silences. There is a silence of reserve and respect. There is a silence of reverence. There is a silence of disinterest. There is a silence of indifference. There are philosophers who affect this latter silence. Not for them the passionate repudiation of the monotheistic God of some earlier atheists, like Nietzsche. The matter is no longer an issue.

One can discover that once one scratches the surface of indifference, flashes of an old hostility flare up. It may take the form, for instance, of an irritation that anyone should invest this issue with seriousness at all. Nevertheless, it still is perplexing that there should be indifference at all, since surely it is the most natural thing that such a question

should strike one as of the most ultimate seriousness. I began to wonder if the hostility might be like the irritation of someone who, sleeping or half-sleeping, wants to be left alone and not bothered. I began to wonder if our being asleep to the question betokened a kind of bewitchment. Is it possible that an age could fall under a bewitchment? Could it be that especially since the early nineteenth century many of the major intellectuals of the era live under the bewitchment of godlessness? For the question of God is no longer a matter of reason or argument. Nietzsche, as usual, hits the nail on the head: God, he says, is not now to *our taste*. But who are we, and what is our taste? Why have we no taste for God? I have come to think that a postulatory finitism (*IST?*, especially Chapter 1) polices the kinds of questions allowed to arise as significant, and God is not among those questions. But what if one were to hold that this question not only should but does arise? Arguments alone will not wake people who are under the spell of an enchantment. More is needed.

The arising or not of the question of God has much to do with our understanding of the ethos of being wherein we dwell. If this ethos is dominated by, for instance, a devaluation of nature as other-being and an apotheosis of human autonomy, the issue of God as a superior transcendence other to our own immanent self-transcendence will not easily arise. We inhabit the ethos of being, but we also reconfigure the given ethos in terms of what we consider to be most important and ultimate. It is within this reconfigured ethos that questions proximately arise. Nevertheless, the proximate questions allowed to arise are dependent on a whole set of background assumptions and presuppositions that themselves never or rarely enter the foreground picture. These presuppositions take on a life of their own, and function as enablers and censors in terms of the questions that emerge in the foreground of the reconfigured ethos. They may block the arising of the question of God, or dull our taste for it. They may cast a spell in which atheism seems self-evident.

What then would it be to address a bewitchment? Among other things, it would mean trying to understand the recessed as well as the expressed, the backgrounding presuppositions as well as the foregrounded claims and articulations. We live and think *in* the foregrounded articulations, but we live and think *out* of these backgrounding presuppositions and sources. To see again if the question of God can arise, and how properly it must arise, would mean investigating not only the reconfigured ethos in the foreground but also its background sources and presuppositions. It would mean asking whether there is any sense of a primal ethos of being within which all our reconfigured ethē participate. For there are different reconfigured ethē, and differences might be noted between the premodern, the modern, and now the postmodern, and yet what each configures is the ethos as the given milieu of being. This ethos I also call the between. If the ultimate question is to be addressed, we must ask about God and the between.

GOD AND THE ETHOS OF BEING

I offer, in the two opening chapters of Part I, an account of why in the reconfigured ethos of modernity the question of God tends not now to arise for many, as well as suggestions for a renewed passageway beyond Godlessness. A reader might prefer to go immediately to that discussion, but I want to say something about the overall orientation of this book which, in the nature of the case, makes better sense after the fact. Nevertheless, it may be helpful for those who are worried about making a beginning at all. Something must be ventured about the ethos of being, since what is at stake is a complex interplay of ethos and ways to God or from God, including along those ways various silences and express arguments.¹

There is first the ontological ethos of what I call the between. We are in this intermedium of being and our participation in it contributes to shaping the form it takes for us. Our participation contributes to a *second* ethos which is the *reconfigured* ethos – reconfigured

¹ See “God, Ethos, Ways,” in *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, 45 (1999), pp. 13–30, where I say something about the ethos and the proofs of God. Here my remit is broader than the proofs.

in light of our fundamental orientations to what is, both actual and possible, our basic senses of good and evil, and so on. Consider a few instances with subtly different attunements to the ethos: the Greeks and their putative dread of the unlimited; Bruno and the infinite spaces as full, filling the soul with enthusiasm and furor; Pascal and the infinite spaces empty, stripped of univocal signs of the divine, fearful to the soul; Nietzsche and the immanent infinite as the open sea, limitlessness bringing on a dizzying creativity; beyond Nietzsche the fullness of the immanent ethos as a between, wooing us beyond the between with its hyperbolic tokens of the divine. These subtle differences of attunement engender variations in how we inhabit the second reconfigured ethos, and with repercussions for the quest(ion) of God.

The ethos of the between, the given milieu of being is the more primordial. The ways we construct formulate more definite passages of existing and thinking in and out of this first ethos. The ethos seems to be indefinite, since it is not this determinate thing or happening or that, and so cannot be definitively pinned down. It is the enabling milieu without which there would not be this or that determinate process or thing. When we find or construct a way, it helps to make determinate for us what otherwise seems to be indefinite in the ethos. But what seems indefinite for us is not necessarily indefinite in itself. We may have not yet understood what is at play in the ethos and so we think of it as something indefinite. In fact, it may be in excess of our determinations and hence not indefinite at all but overdetermined – not lacking in determination but more than any finite determination, and our self-determination. The given ethos of the between is overdetermined.²

We always live in a second ethos, since we find ourselves in the midst of things, as having already taken on a particular complex order of determinate happenings, relations, and so on. Waking up into that order, we tend to be taken up with what is before us – the network of determinate happenings, relations, and so forth. We are dull to the possibility that this configured ethos is in fact *second*, and possibilized by the ontological resources and reserves given with the first ethos. Now and then, in moments of astonishment and perplexity, an intimation of this first ethos may break through, and the second ethos takes on a new light of strangeness. Briefly, it seems other, and seems to show something other. Too briefly, for soon the more familiar second ethos reassumes its more domestic sway over us, and our readiness for mystery and strangeness falls asleep again. It seems to me that if we are to find true ways to God anew, we must be awoken from this sleep of the second reconfigured ethos, even while granting that it is there, in the midst of things, that we find ourselves. A fresh rethinking of God would have to do justice to where we find ourselves in a particular second ethos, but also undertake the venture of finding some ways to open again, or be opened again to, what is communicated of the primal ethos of being.

This is not simply a matter of reasserting old “proofs” of God or devising new. It calls for an exploration of what is prior to determinate “proof.” This is not to deny that in trying to situate “proofs” in light of the primal ethos, it might well happen that something of their slumbering promise is refreshed. It is not a matter of slighting them, but of stepping back, so to say, from the foreground of certain arguments, to try to discern some of the enabling metaphysical conditions that fund their intelligibility and potential persuasiveness. Of course, reference even to these “proofs” helps one make the present point about the importance of the ethos. Thus different arguments for God, even their repudiation, will reflect certain features of a second ethos. At the same time, if they have any truth, they tend to give expression to something of the primal ethos. It may be that not all of them put their roots deep enough down into the primal ethos. If they do not, they will tend to reflect, shall we say, the passing preoccupations of the *Zeitgeist*, perhaps its idolatries and bewitchments. Gods can be affirmed on the basis of these bewitchments, but they are gods destined to ephemeral existence. The best ways not only reflect

² On “overdetermination,” see, for instance, “Being, Dialectic and Determination: On the Sources of Metaphysical Thinking,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 48 (June, 1995), pp. 731–69; also *BB*, pp. 13ff.

the second ethos, they also break through its idolatries into the first ethos of elemental ontological resource, and hence have a perduring character that can survive the passing or alteration of the second ethos or its dominant configuration.

Ways to God are not identical with proofs about God. It may well be the case that many of the traditional proofs were too tied to determinate aspects of a reconfigured, second ethos, aspects that had their day, and that now no longer serve as signs to communicate the divine. This need not be always so, for even in the second configurations something can be shown of the first ethos, as the following consideration indicates. In Paley's argument from design, the image of the watch and its maker has communicative power in an era (say, modernity) when mechanical design serves as a paradigm of intelligible order. In an age not bewitched by mechanical design this sign has a weaker communicative power. And yet something about this argument continues to exert an attraction, because mechanical design is one rendition of intelligible order, which might equally be rendered by another sign, for instance, an organic whole. Nature conceived as an organic whole can also serve as a sign of intelligible order, and for pan(en)theistically inclined thinkers the organic whole is more beloved, and carries more communicative power, than the mechanistic sign. My point: intelligible order, whether mechanically or organically figured, exceeds these two ways of configuring it, but both qua intelligible order can put us in mind of an origin that, while not just an intelligible order, communicates the sign of intelligible order. It would seem that every age exhibits some attraction to this basic ontological possibility in the ethos as a *precipitating occasion* for thought on the divine. In that occasion is communicated, even if sometimes obscurely, something exceeding the particular configuration of being that we determine.

If there is an interplay of primal ethos and ways that we configure in the second ethos, there is no absolutely univocal way to God, for any such a way is itself a derivative from the interplay of ethos and ways. It seems to me that the search for God has to be approached in terms of that interplay and not just in terms of the produced configurations of the interplay, even granting that these might be powerful and suggestive as "proofs" that *probe*. Instance: the ontological "proof" can be interpreted as a deep probe. Probing of the thought of God in inwardness can loosen in us the bewitching effect of a finite configuration of the ethos, and open us, through the passageways of inwardness, to the thought of God as overdetermined, a thought that, in its excess to us, is a sign communicating of God. In the determinations, indeed self-determinations that we meet in the second reconfigured ethos we are shown something concerning the overdeterminacy of the primal ethos of the between, and its reserved promise.

These overdetermined signs I will later explore in terms of what I call the *hyperboles of being*. There is something ambiguous, in a saturated sense, about the hyperboles. They are overdeterminate signs in immanence communicating of what exceeds exhaustive immanent determination or self-determination. They do not announce themselves with literal univocity; but there is something importantly positive in this. They ask for mindful attention and for discernment. They ask of us, in Pascal's terms, *l'esprit de finesse* rather than just *l'esprit de géométrie*. There are ways to God that seek to univocalize the passage in terms of "geometrical" configurations in the second ethos. Think of how the concept of a triangle is used, for instance, by Descartes to offer a variation on the ontological argument. If what I am saying is correct, any such "geometrical" strategy risks being misleading, for it is tempted to reconfigure the ethos as a totality of determinations or self-determinations, and hence within the second ethos there can be no way to God as communicated to us through such overdetermined signs. "Proofs" will be a matter of passing from determination to determination, with at most the heuristic anticipation of the totality of all determinations, in Kant's terms the unconditioned as a regulative ideal.

If we are approaching God in terms of accession to the primal ethos, via the second ethos, God is not, cannot be such an unconditioned totality of determinations. God is in another dimension. As the astonishment that breaks through the second ethos to the first finds itself released into a space of mystery, so God as origin of the primal ethos is in a space of mystery redoubled yet again. Does this other dimension entail such an utter

transcendence that we end up with a dualism of immanence and transcendence? I do not think so. If the ethos of finitude is shaped by signs or communications that are themselves overdeterminate, then even the “geometrical” ways cannot do justice to the fullness of what is at play *within* the ethos, much less to the origin communicating in those signs. If we think purely in terms of univocal determination, there can be no such signs, and hence it is not surprising that we end up with the putative destruction of the proofs of God’s existence. This outcome is already an outcome dictated by a certain configuration of the ethos, rather reconfiguration of it in light of the univocal *mathēsis* of nature in modernity.

If there is a diversity of interplays of ethos and ways, and we have to do justice to this diversity, we need not succumb to a “relativism” which weakens any claim to binding truth. This would be to surrender to an equivocalism which backs off mediating the ambiguity of the signs. If we do this we then give up on a univocal way, and think we have no way at all. But there is *another* relativism in which the notion of *being in relation* is crucial. The ways are ways of relating to our being in the between and our attempts to comprehend what the signs communicate. This does not imply the relativism that, for instance, claims that faith is fine for the faithful but indifferent for others, that unbelief is suitable for secularists but neutral as to others. There can be a self-serving apartheid through which the religious, the non-religious, and anti-religious protect themselves, immunized from questions they cannot always handle, a live and let live attitude that amounts to a collusion in evasion. The diverse interplays of ethos and ways means that ways must be returned to the ethos and understood as relative to that intermedium. Philosophy is indispensable here, since there is always something about the ethos that is not comprehended entirely, and that shapes or influences basic attitudes to life. The “too muchness” of the ethos presents the occasion out of which the most pressing perplexities emerge. Philosophy can be a participation in articulating our finding of a way within the ethos – not only in ruminating on the ways already available for passage, and in keeping them open, but in the probe for new ways that reflect current configurations of the ethos.

Our being formed by the reconfigured ethos influences, in an often implicit and subtle manner, the forms of life we take to be acceptable, as well as the categories and patterns of argumentation we deem persuasive. The traditional “proofs” of God often mirror an implicit sense of the first ontological ethos, and should not be taken as “results” that can be detached from the context out of which they are constructed. Rather than just being jettisoned as “outmoded,” they might offer us yet some essential guidance into how we might diversely conceive the ethos, primal, and reconfigured. Deracinated from their ethos they wither. In some instances, the reconfigured ethos that lent them life might now be gone, but if there is a primal ethos there may be another promise of their life in a root not dead at all. To cultivate such a “root” would not be just to tell a historical, hermeneutical tale relative to the presuppositions of a particular era that we have now outgrown. It is not merely a question of historical relativism, applicable to a particular reconfiguration of the ethos but not to the primal ethos. It is a question of a systematic exploration of the fundamental ontological presupposition at stake in the primal ethos, refracted through the reconfigured. The question of truth is not done away with in favor of meaning. For the meaning of our configurations will be a function of their fidelity to the truth of the primal ethos.

Sometimes the diversity of basic contexts between the believer and non-believer is granted, with insulating tolerance as its justification: They just live in different worlds, that’s that, we say. This insulation is not my point. Each lives a configuration of the ethos of being and hence each enacts a shaping of the primal ethos, to which they may or may not be truthful. Being truthful is not a univocal affair, and hence each, believer and non-believer, is in question. It is not a case of the first having to offer the convincing argument, while all that remains for the second is to evaluate it critically. The fundamental sense of being of the latter is also in question. The ethos wherein “critique” seems self-evidently the task of the intellectual is in question as equally as an ethos wherein atheism appears as the anomaly. As already indicated, we secularized Westerners are the

freaks, considering the long history of humankind, when we take our secular ethos as the self-evident truth of the matter. That ethos, when blithely taken for granted, is in question *vis-à-vis* the perplexing truth of the between. Seen in a certain light, traditional ways can sometimes exemplify in concentrated manner what is fundamentally at issue in our religious being, and our perplexity about the ultimate. This is again not univocal, since they too can be severed from their enabling ethos – sometimes with disastrous results. Religion thus severed can become a matrix of atheism.

PASSING IN THE ETHOS: BETWEEN THE GIVEN AND THE GOOD

How to say anything at all about the primal ethos? It seems to retreat into elusiveness, beyond the determinacies and self-determinations within the reconfigured ethos. In due course I will be concerned with how the fourfold sense of being, as well as the hyperboles of being, orient us to some sense of it, and further again to some sense of the God of the between. I offer an anticipatory pass between the boundaries of the ontological and the ethical, the given and the good.

The primal ethos is more mindfully approached if we think less of determinate entities within the between than of the between in its primordial *ontological givenness*. It is always already given to be, before we understand it and reconfigure it through our determinate relations to it. Its being given to be is never identical with any of the determinate beings that are given to be within it. Moreover, we generally reconfigure the primal ethos in terms of figurations that reflect our own determinate concerns, our preponderant engagement with determinate beings, as well as our own desire to be self-determining. Thus ways can also be figured in terms of determinate forms of being or beings. And so, relative to the latter, and traditionally, we come across proofs of God as the highest being, or we anthropomorphically think of God in terms of magnified human qualities, and so on. The deeper way tries to be mindful of the primal ethos as given to be. We dwell in mindfulness of the “that it is at all” – given to be and not nothing. Struck by this, our thinking need not be dominated by any particular determinate thing or happening in the between – not the figure of the machine or the organism, nor indeed the human being.

Such mindful dwelling might be said to resource, say, the Third Way of Aquinas, or more generally the argument from contingency. The fullness of this argument means appreciating it at the level of the primal and not the reconfigured ethos. If we remain at this reconfigured level, it will be hard to avoid conceiving divine being in terms of infinitude construed as magnified finitude, and not in terms of the giving origin of finitude. Our ontological perplexity concerning primal givenness concerns our appreciation of finitude not first as becoming, but as *coming to be*: not becoming this or that, but finitude’s coming to be at all. This is extremely difficult to approach, for it lies at the boundary of determinate knowing, even though everything determinate, as already given to be, presupposes not just its becoming this or that, but its already having come to be.

The “that it is at all” is not the only access in which our ways open to something of the primal ethos. Something of our ethical being, our *being ethical at all* can be of immense moment. Kant, for instance, suffered ontological cramp relative to creation in its being given to be (surprising in that Leibniz influenced him). Nevertheless, Kant’s resort to the human being as a moral being seems to compensate for what he lacks in the way of ontological astonishment. Something about our moral being, in the unconditional demand immanently made on us, brings us into the nearness of the primal ethos – ethos here as the promise of the ethical. We are dealing with what at all is worthy to be affirmed as unconditional in an immanent world seemingly fully determined by conditional occurrences. This ethical way, in fact, cannot be separated from ontological presuppositions and consequences. The call of the good is such that we can never be its master but are always solicited to an often obscure obedience to what is unconditional. How make sense of this obedience? If nothing else, we must consider the hospitality of the ethos of being to unconditional ethical worth. Through the unconditional ethical charge on us, we are opened to the ethos of being as

a milieu of hospitality to the good, and made to ponder if something of a more ultimate original good is communicated in the signs of immanent good.

The turn to the ethical self opens a kind of pathway of “inwardness,” and a way to God as the good, and there is something very traditional about it. But the interplay of primal ethos, reconfigured ethos, and our way needs to be kept in mind, since the last two can be excessively determined in terms of our human-all-too-human sense of the good. Since human ethics, as Nietzsche reminded us with relish, can be human-all-too-human, this ethical way can become a consecration of idols rather than a faithful opening to transcendence as other. The possibility of generating idols is perennial in all ways, given the fragile complexity of the dynamical interplay of ethos and ways.

Unconditional good: there is something of an absolute charge laid on us coming from the difference between good and evil, and it is not something we produce, for we are always already what we are (to be) within this charging difference. We can configure the meaning of this difference in a variety of ways. However, it is our being within the charge of this difference which defines our situation in the ontological ethos. We become this or that moral character within this more original givenness. Reflecting on this, or finding our way back to this, is not simply finding the ethical charge within us; it is more *our finding within ourselves that we are “within” it*. Within the immanent exigence of the ethical, we find ourselves exceeded by the call of a good we do not produce ourselves. To come to some mindfulness of this excess is to approach something of the overdeterminacy of the primal ethos as communicative of a goodness that surpasses our measure. Ethos, thus minded, can become the deepest (re)source out of which our approach to the divine takes place. We are always “within” what makes that approach possible, though we may mistakenly think of our approach as one thing this side, and the thing approached as another thing on the other side. This last view makes no sense, and is rather due to a determination of the ethos, which misleadingly thinks of the ground of the ethos as another thing within it, or even as a determinate thing outside it.

GOD, ETHOS, AND THE FOURFOLD SENSE OF BEING

What metaphysics is and means is not a simple matter, and is much contested today. Since metaphysics itself and the philosophical quest for God are often criticized, if not dismissed, as “onto-theology,” I want to say something about it with relation to God.

Metaphysics, as I understand it, is not just the philosophical discipline that examines and evaluates categories and arguments for their rational cogency; not just the philosophical interpretation of the ethos as reconfigured in lights of the fundamental presuppositions and enabling (re)sources of intelligibility and value of a particular era, or people, or particular way of life; deeper than these, it seeks to open a pathway of philosophical mindfulness concerning the primal ethos of being. It is in virtue of such a mindfulness that light can be thrown on the particular configurations that shape ways of life, as well as determinate categories and arguments that claim rational cogency.

Metaphysical mindfulness of the primal ethos, thus understood, is to a degree reminiscent of the ancient understanding of the philosopher as seeking to understand the “whole.” I would rather speak of the between than the whole – this reflects our situation in the ethos, which, if it is a whole at all, is an “open whole” (see *BB*, 288), since it cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of a totality of determinations or self-determinations. There is no totalization of the overdetermined excess of being as given to be. There is a constitutive openness to the between which is not to be described in terms of either a totality of finite determinations or a self-determining totality. This openness makes it porous to what, as other to it, exceeds it. We find a double call on our mindfulness: both an ontological exploration of what is given in immanence and a metaphysical transcending in immanence to what exceeds any totalized immanence. This second call, moving mindfully beyond determinate and self-determining totality, though guided by what an exploration of immanence shows, is crucial in the philosophical search for God.

I do not subscribe to the view that Heidegger has a corner on being, and that to think God we must do so without being (Marion), as if Heidegger had a lock on being. Nor, for that matter, does Levinas have a lock on ethics. To have being without God seems as unsatisfactory as to have God without being. Likewise to have the good without being or God seems as unsatisfactory as to have being and God without the good. I understand the rationale of wresting God or the good free of (Heideggerian) being, if by this we intend to confine thought to immanent finitude. A different approach to being, to metaphysics, a different metaphysics and ethics informs my essay. I speak of God beyond the whole – the “totality” of immanent being – but speak from the between as the rich milieu of finite being, as given to be. At the same time, I dissent from the God of the whole of Hegel, as well as the deconstructive philosophies of immanence that are reactive to Hegelian holism. Despite major differences as to whether we affirm the whole, or deconstruct all wholes, both philosophies share this: they are philosophies of finally unremitting immanence. The issue here is not just a local one for late modernity, but a deeper one that is elemental and constitutive of our ontological endowment. There is the immanent between. Then there is the issue of what is between this immanent between and what is other to it. This is particularly urgent with respect to that between defining our relation to the origin, and our relation to the “beyond,” and how both these enter our passing sojourn in the middle of a given life.

This is not to deny the necessary exploration of immanence. Quite to the contrary, a philosophy of the between always thinks from the midst. Nevertheless, it is open to the possibility that in its exploration of immanence, it may come across what exceeds immanence. It is not a philosophy of sublatory infinitism such as we find in Hegel: the finitude is sublated in the infinite. Neither is it a philosophy of postulatory finitude, such as we find in Nietzsche and his heirs: finitude is postulated as the horizon of thought, greater than which none can be, none is to be, conceived. A philosophy of the between is not only in the between, but is of the between, that is, on the borderline between finitude and infinitude. It is on this borderline in a manner wherein the difference of the two is neither relativized as parts of an inclusive whole (as with sublatory infinitism), nor waved away or collapsed such that there is no other to finitude (as with postulatory finitism). On the border between, there is an opening of the finite between to what exceeds it: the God of the between is also the God beyond the between.

There are signs in immanence of what transcends immanence and cannot be fully determined in immanent terms. Among these signs are what I term the hyperboles of being. Being between is a communication of the beyond of the between. This beyond is not a dualistic opposite, the inversion of which, or its collapse, or its speculative sublatory, is taken to institute the reign of unsurpassable immanence. Our thinking of God relates to, while not being reducible to, the meaning of being, as understood by us, here and now. Taking our bearings from the being of the between, on the basis of the richest understanding and forms of being there, we venture thought about God. This venture is not one of compensation for some perceived lack in immanence, but rather proceeds from excess: what is too much for immanence in immanence itself points to what is more than immanence. Our best thinking about the richest and most ultimate senses of being offers us guidance in thinking about God.

One might object that this is still too immanent, too philosophical, too mum about claims of revelation. One might even accuse such a metaphysics of the between of making an idol of the God of the philosophers. I demur. A true philosophy of the between cannot a priori close off porosity to the divine and its communication. I accept that philosophers can put conceptual idols in the place of God; I cannot accept this as justifying the jettisoning of metaphysics. If there is revelation, or a communication addressed to our ultimate porosity, we still have to ponder its meaning, with a heart tempered by fear and trembling but with a head schooled in the best of human wisdom we have available. One might claim that Jerusalem and Athens have nothing to do with one another, and there is something very important to their difference, but I protest if we fixate on the difference as an unsurpassable dualism. Metaphysicians think in the between, and this

may also mean *between* Jerusalem and Athens. We must listen to the voices of Jerusalem, but we must listen mindfully. These voices may shock and shatter some of the inherited ways of philosophy and some ways of doing metaphysics. But while they provoke metaphysical thinking to a perhaps new self-understanding, they do not make it redundant. A metaxological metaphysician – or metaphysician of the middle way – listens to the voices of important others, such as religion and art, and is willing to grant that his or her own voice must re-voice itself to do justice to those others that have spoken, and, one hopes, been heard. It may indeed entail a new poverty of philosophy in which it is not simply religion that has to justify itself before the tribunal of philosophical reason, but philosophy itself may have to divest itself of its own conceptual hubris, and part ways with the rational idols that tempt it to adore its own counterfeit doubles of God.³

There are some who have nothing to do with Jerusalem but who also seem to want to have nothing to do with Athens, certainly not with the “onto-theological” philosophers. When it is said that we must think beyond or without metaphysics, one fears this “other” thinking is secretly captive to presuppositions that shape an inarticulate metaphysics. In claiming to be beyond metaphysics, we become unknowing metaphysicians – an inarticulate sense of the meaning of being informs our post-metaphysical, or non-metaphysical thinking. There seems no escape from metaphysics. Every escape is itself informed by a secret sense of the ethos of being, as well as a host of unexamined presuppositions, and so is no escape. One can fall into a self-congratulation ignorant of itself, for one’s repudiation of metaphysics is marked by neglected relations to being – an implicit metaphysics. One congratulates oneself that there is no shadow of metaphysics, but the shadow is not seen because one looks away, or in the wrong way, and does not turn and see what one cannot jump over. In the end there is only good and bad thinking – good and bad thinking about the senses of being already at work in all our efforts to make intelligible sense of our being in the midst of things. Genuine metaphysics is just the effort to think well, with reflective understanding of the work of those fundamental senses. We must also come to know our shadows.

As mindful of the ethos, metaphysics, I hold, must be metaxological, that is, attempting a *logos* of the *metaxu*, an articulated account of the between – and this with respect to the ultimate power(s) of being that make it possible to be, not only as thus and thus, but to be at all. As suggested, to speak of the primal ethos is to speak of the between: the milieu of immanent being which enables all beings to be, in their rich singularity, intricate communications, and complex intermediations. To speak more articulately of its overdeterminacy, and not mere indeterminacy, we resort to the fourfold sense of being: the univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological. There is a given metaxological community of being, though we do not know this in the beginning. Always participating in it, we can come to mindfulness of it through the immanent articulations it already communicates. We, as philosophers, must remain true to these articulations, thereby trying to construct a metaxological philosophy. With the aid of the univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological senses, we need to work through these different articulations to be brought mindfully into some knowing of this community.

Very crudely, the univocal sense stresses sameness to the diminution or underplaying of differences. The equivocal sense reaffirms the importance of difference(s), indeed a more dynamic sense of differing and differentiation, but sometimes to the neglect or shortchanging of more lasting constancies also emerging in the universal impermanence. The dialectical way is a mediation of the univocal and equivocal, and tries to do justice to the dynamic interplay of sameness and otherness, and while it can remain open, one finds a

³ See “Religion and the Poverty of Philosophy,” in *IST?* Chapter 3. I have an educated person’s sense of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and I would feel I were faking it were I to speak as if with any authority. The silence is a reflection of this, not any slight. In my own conversations with scholars and my own students from Asia I have found an immediate recognition that the between requires modes of thought that are not objectifying or merely subjectifying.

tendency to privilege a more ultimate identity as inclusive of identity and difference. This is especially so in the modern form of dialectic: the forms of mediation tend all to lead to the supreme form of an encompassing self-mediation of the whole that includes all differences within itself. The danger is a higher speculative univocity, and an underplaying of robust otherness and indeed enigmas and recesses of being not amenable to articulation or communication in the form of self-mediation. This self-mediating dialectic moves from the indeterminate (indefinite) to the determinate (definite) to the self-determining – but this can lead to the occlusion of the overdeterminacy.

The metaxological, as a philosophical logos, stands in openness to the overdeterminacy, even as it recurs to the interplay of sameness and difference. It reengages with the pluralism of intermediations, finding the “inter” itself to be irreducible. The participants in the intermediations are themselves not reducible to one all-inclusive self-mediation. There is no whole of wholes that includes everything in the majestic solitude of the immanent one. The all inclusive self-mediation of dialectical-speculative totality is not true enough to this “inter” and its participants. The immanent between is multiply stressed by differings and mediations, is witness to stirring constancies that give space for life in the universal impermanence but that are in passing. This passing is one that is also passing beyond, and hence is not just passage as from immanence to immanence but passage as fundamental porosity to what eludes determination or self-determination in the terms of immanence itself. This is the between as a porous passing, in community, in the universal impermanence, that is given to be by an enigmatic origin that is not itself the between, nor self-produced by the between, and that can never be closed into itself in terms of any totality of holistic immanence. Within the between there are hyperboles of being which communicate more than the terms of immanence can circumscribe: pointers to ultimate transcendence as other to the immanent between.

The struggle for mindfulness of the primal ethos is inseparable from appreciation of the importance of these hyperboles in the between. It is on the basis of the fullest senses of being thus given in the between, and our best efforts to articulate what this fullness communicates, that I think a philosophical renewal of the question of God is best approached.

GOD, PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMATICS, RELIGIOUS POETICS

The reconstruction of thinking about God here attempted has systematic aspects, but it also has existential, aesthetic, ethical, and religious, perhaps even mystical dimensions. We need a plurivocal practice of philosophy, one which while being systematic is mindful of what exceeds system. For one can reflect systematically without necessarily claiming possession of *the* system in a closed and totalizing sense. We might here speak of a metaxological “systematics,” by contrast with “the system.” We need systematics in the sense of a disciplined understanding of enabling connections; connections stabilized but not frozen by samenesses; connections defined and developed by dynamic differences; connections not enclosed in one immanent whole; and all in all, connections enabling complex interplays between samenesses and differences, interplays exceeding the closure of every whole on itself.

By the very nature of such systematics, we are awakened to mindfulness of what exceeds system. So also we need what we might call a *religious poetics*: mindful attentiveness to coming to be. We are marked by an original porosity which opens us to all that is other and that marks us with the passion of being, the *passio essendi*. One might say: Without religious poetics, no systematics. And: Without a more original porosity of being, and our given *passio essendi*, no religious poetics either, and hence also no systematics. This means there is a more original sense of being religious prior to being artistic and being philosophical. Poetics and systematics are ultimately less original than the porosity of being that opens us up as a being between, or as being a between. A human being is a medium of passage – a middle capable of becoming mindful of what has passed, what is

passing, and what is coming to pass. There is an original sense of being religious which is granted in the poetics of the given porosity of our being. There is the later being religious which is a way of life that lives this porosity, and that at certain extremes might find itself called to the impossible finesse of prophetic mindfulness or mystical love. Ultimately these are gifted and perhaps are some of the ultimate gifts.

Without the poetics of coming to be, for us there is no systematics of being at all. Poetics deals with a bringing or coming to be; systematics finds interconnections in what has come to be. Poetics deals with creative overdetermination; systematics tends to deal with created determinations and self-determinations. Poetics reveals the more original coming to be; systematics articulates forms of interconnection that issue from the more original forming. Poetics concerns the forming power(s), prior to and in excess of determinate form, and intimate with the overdetermination of the original source(s). In truth, systematics makes no intelligible sense without presupposing the poetics, poetics often forgotten when more formed intelligibilities have arrived and when what they bring has come to occupy us.⁴

Modernity after Descartes has often been infatuated with the systematics to the neglect of the poetics, especially in its religious significance. We might think of Hegel as the tutelary divinity of the system, of Nietzsche as the Orpheus of immanent poetics. By contrast, our metaxological approach to God and the between is neither the sublatory infinitism of the first nor the postulatory finitism of the second. It is systematic in following the lines of articulation of an interconnected web of thoughts, or happenings, each related to others. It also gives heed to a religious poetics which asks that we bring the mind of finesse to bear on the hyperboles of being and what they communicate concerning the immanent between – namely, that it is porous to something other to it. When the system overreaches the poetics and the systematics (as it does with Hegel), the overdetermination of poetics is turned into an indeterminacy lacking intelligibility until it is given determinacy and form by the systematics; systematics itself is overtaken by the absoluteness of the system as the apotheosis of self-determining thinking; immanent absolute self-determination claims to come to itself absolutely through its own otherness. Thus system, in its self-sublatory infinitism, overtakes religious poetics, and closes down the porosity of systematics to what is beyond system. This also has the effect of closing down our religious porosity to the transcendence of God. And a philosophy that *only* deconstructs such a system, even in the name of an immanent poetics, does not *per se* unplug our porosity to the divine, especially if the deconstruction of system is exactly like the system in being determined by entirely immanent considerations, though now dictated by postulatory finitism rather than sublatory infinitism. We need more than both of these.

EXCEEDING SYSTEM, HYPERBOLES, UNPLUGGING WAYS

Metaxological systematics requires both immanent openness to otherness and metaphysical hospitality to transcendence. It requires attentiveness to the hyperboles of being. The reader may find helpful a brief first description of four especially significant hyperboles.

The idiocy of being: the sheer “that it is” of given finite being. This can stun us into astonishment and rouse thought that is hyperbolic to finite determinacy or our own self-determination. In the stunning of mindfulness, our thinking can become porous to what exceeds finite determination rather than insisting that immanent finitude is the horizon greater than which none is to be thought.

The aesthetics of happening: the incarnate glory of aesthetic happening as given also rouses astonishment and appreciation before finite being yet it seems to exceed finitization. The aesthetic glory of finitude is impossible to characterize exhaustively in finite terms.

⁴On this more fully, see my “Between System and Poetics: On the Practices of Philosophy,” in *Between System and Poetics: William Desmond and Philosophy after Dialectic*, edited by Thomas A. Kelly (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 15–36.

Something more tremendous is incarnated in the beauty and sublimity of finitude that communicates an otherness exceeding all finitization.

The erotics of selving: finite though we are, we are also infinitely self-surpassing. We might claim to be the measure of finite being, yet we are not the measure of ourselves. Our being the measure exceeds itself as its own measure. As beyond measure in terms of ourselves as measure, we point and are pointed to a measure exceeding finite measure. The erotics of selving is more than a self-overcoming driven to its own most complete self-determination in immanence. It incarnates a primal porosity to what exceeds its own determination and self-transcending. In the fecund poverty of its given porosity, it is an opening to transcendence as other beyond self-transcendence.

The agapeics of community: in our relation to others, our being is in receiving and in giving. In the finiteness of our lives, there is the promise of a generosity beyond finite reckoning. We are given to be before we can give ourselves to be. Nothing is alone, hence the idea of finitude as for itself alone, and nothing other, cannot be taken as the last word, or the first. The agapeics of community intimates a surplus generosity that makes itself available in an absolved porosity of the *passio essendi* that ethically lives itself as a *compassio essendi*. This is a sign of something more than the ethical, since it incarnates the holy.

These hyperboles dovetail with what I see to be the existential, aesthetic, ethical, and religious unclogging of ways to God.

The existential unclogging: once again, system is not enough, if we think of system as a totality of abstract universals whose relation to concrete being is problematic. I am called to ponder the issue. No one else can do it for me, though every other person is called to do it. There is an intensive passion here, and an intimacy that strains to give birth to the right words. This is not a matter of the merely private, for there is a questionable privatization of the religious. Being religious has to do with the intimate universal. If one has not being there on the edge, on the extreme that juts into emptiness, or there where consent or sorrow or mercy breaks through, the philosophical categories will remain the mere letter of the abstract. We will be strangers on whom a foreign tongue falls incomprehensibly. If the tongue has fallen into disuse on a wide scale, one may find oneself an almost autistic member of an elusive remnant, stammering a strange language to strangers in one's time or place, no longer now one's own time or place.

The aesthetic unclogging: we need a continually refreshed attentiveness to the material marvel of sensuous givenness. This appreciative attendance is also at the edge of system, and cannot be produced or guaranteed by any system. There is no method or technique to bring it into being. There is an ineluctable singularity about our fostering of its power, or our being gifted with it. This is not something just subjectivistic. Marveling turns us to the manifestness of being as sensuous showing. We live in this manifestation and take it for granted, but then we take for granted the fact that it is granted, and that it is also a granting of itself. The giving of itself of sensuous being ceases to arouse our admiration. There is a poetics but no science of admiration. It is the happening of an opening in our self-transcending in a communicating with, or a going towards, the beauty or good of other-being.

The ethical unclogging: a certain integrity of mindful selving is asked; we are asked to embody a certain "being true." We make difficulties for ourselves the more we make ourselves into selves lacking this integrity. But there is no way a release beyond our shabby selves can be guaranteed by any system. At most, a system will offer a kind of abstract map where important pitfalls and encouragements will be marked. Of course, even to read the marks, one must *already* be the kind of person who has something of the discernment necessary to see their point or purpose. One must actually traverse the equivocal, and attempt to mediate it in life. The act of writing philosophically about God may be the end product of this traversal, but only a fraction of what emerges on the traversing appears in the surface of the categorial, or even extra-categorial account. If a philosophy is a kind of face, it is also a kind of mask. Faces can come to en flesh the

becoming of a soul. Philosophies come to wear the physiognomy of souls, even as they mask intimacies of soul, be these intimacies divine or gargoyle. Perhaps the question of God requires of us a kind of catharsis. In the initiation rites of contemporary professional philosophy, no academic credits are given for catharsis. One cannot even audit a course, or attend a workshop on it. The brilliance of cleverness is not enough. One must quietly close one's door and undergo in solitude the bitter purge.

The religious unclogging: the more one struggles, even as called to ethical integrity and solidarity, the more there crystallizes an estimation of the religious as not fully determined by the moral. The more one struggles the more one grows cognizant, not only of one's own equivocality, but of being much more deeply enchained than one thought to counterfeit doubles of God. There is a freeing not from equivocality but of knowing how much one is enthralled by, in thrall to, false doubles of God, conjured in the equivocality, especially of one's own being. One cannot free oneself from the equivocal magic of these false doubles completely. Even when one is rationally self-determining and thus "free," one is not free. Our autonomous freedom does not free us, for we are tempted to make ourselves the double of the divine and so to counterfeit God. Our being in thrall to this counterfeiting equivocality seems to be intractable. Brought to some realization of this, at a certain limit beyond all system one lays oneself open in an ultimate abandon to the mystery of all that passes beyond one's ken. This abandon, out of the intractable (en)thralldom, is companioned by an overdeterminate trust that comes to grace our suffering of coming to nothing. There is the willingness to assume the undergoing of what comes to one. Our abandon is a religious consent to ultimate community and our participation in the intimate universal. There are many sides to this, though one of them is consent to the excess of our own equivocal being as beyond complete sifting by ourselves alone. One whose being is equivocal cannot completely sift its own equivocal being. We have to be changed utterly, and not changed at all, changed into what we are, re-created into what we are to be. There is entry into a night, not simply of the equivocal, but of divine mystery.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

Here is a down-to-earth statement of the overall structure of the book. Part I addresses hard perplexities about Godlessness, as well as offering a reflection upon passage beyond Godlessness.

Part II is an exploration of ways to God, guided by the fourfold sense of being. First, the univocal way stresses sameness. We seek God as a One to be determinately fixed, but we end up with an unfixing of God. Second, the equivocal way accentuates difference beyond univocal fixation. Enabling a renewal of a sense of the mystery of the divine, it can also seed a post-univocal atheism, since there seems to be nothing there answering to the univocalized God. Third, the dialectical way mediates something of this difference in the direction of the togetherness of opposites. The modern form of dialectic, influenced by the ethos of autonomy and the perceived eclipse of divine transcendence as other, tends to stress the mediation which is self-determining. But there is more to the otherness of the divine than the speculative dialectic of the same. Fourth, the metaxological way renews fidelity to intermediated community, not in terms of the self-mediation of the same, but as hospitable to the communication of transcendence as other, out of its own otherness. It keeps open the spaces of otherness in the between. It helps unclog our porosity to the God beyond the whole, as well as the God intimate to the idiocy of our own being. At the culmination of Part II, we venture to speak not only of God and the between, but of God beyond the between.

Part III addresses the fact that we encounter a plurality of conceptions of the divine, such as the monotheistic, polytheistic, personalistic, Gnostic, pan(en)theistic, theistic, and mystic. We need to understand these differences with discrimination. We need to

make sense of this plurality, without making it a mere diversity without relation. The fourfold sense of being and the hyperboles allow us to make sense of these different conceptions, as following from definite emphases placed upon different dimensions of our being in the between.

In Part IV we venture to say something about God. Beginning with Godlessness and passing beyond it, we pass through different ways to God, we pass through different understandings of God, and finally we venture thought on the names of the agapeic God. The fourfold sense of being and the hyperboles offer us the means to give a plurivocal account of these “attributes,” moving towards speculative metaxology as the least untrue. That speculative metaxology is expressed in ten metaphysical cantos, ranging from God Being Over-Being to God Being (Too) Good.

Chapter 1

Godlessness and the Ethos of Being

They overlay the land
The locusts of development
Lay their eggs of promise
& hatch the larvae
Of meaninglessness

We have wiped out the line
& the horizon now is
Between us and nothing
Nothing
Except ourselves
We think

The light in between
We do not see it
We look on what is below
The sun is always above
It casts no shadow
We never see it
We face only forward
Nothing but ourselves
Before us
Our faces flat
Towards the future

GODLESSNESS

There is no question more ultimate than the question of the ultimate. This is the question of God. Non-philosophers may well be willing to grant this claim. They may even expect philosophers to come to their assistance. But we philosophers have long listened to the voices of suspicion, voices that when they do not make us hostile to the question, paralyze our thinking on the ultimate. We have become embarrassed by the question.

This is something astonishing. The most important question, the most fascinating question, the most enigmatic question, makes us squirm – squirm though we wear the unmoved mask of agnostic indifference. How make sense of this shame? Can we mark some of the way stations on this path of shame? And when we have passed along it, can we then ask: What then?

We in the West are heirs of a number of religious traditions, but as descendants we have turned our inheritance into hostility to itself. We emerge from religious traditions, notably the Jewish and Christian, but certain developments of just those traditions have made trouble for any untroubled living of those traditions. I mean that certain forms of theism are not to be absolved from atheisms that seem to be their opposite. Godlessness emerges from our being in relation to God. We think of ourselves as at the end of a “good” progress, even when we debunk progress. We are enlightened even when we pour scorn on Enlightenment. We see our scorn as our light – but suppose we are freaks. How freaks? Freaks because the natural condition is to be religious: it is unnatural to be atheist. This crime against nature arises from nature as we interpret it.

We open our eyes, we smell, we breathe, we touch, we are touched, by rock, by the satin of a flower petal, by skin. We are amazed, even delighted, we attend on a certain music of things. When much seems rough and repulsive our horror is the shadow of our astonishment. What is strangely there is strange because it intimates an other – in and through its very own otherness. There is no shadow of a question, yet: the divine is there,

though there as also not there, for there is nothing to which one could point univocally and say: That is God. But what that means one does not know.

Or say, one hears one's breath, in the quiet of sitting still, or in trepidation as if trailed, and one hears oneself in an intimacy idiotic to every conceptual objectification, and one does not know what the soul is, beyond knowing that one does not know. There is hinted a depth to selving beyond self, and the haunting of self by an other that slows one into uncertain expectancy. Is this then our being, this uncertain expectancy? But we do not yet know what this means.

Or again, another stirs delight and disquiet in us. We behold a beautiful boy or girl, woman or man, and the beauty can lift one up unbidden and yet also be unbearable, almost. It flows over one, and away from one, though one reaches to it, but it is always in excess, and gone. It comes forward to meet one, and yet is fugitive in its forwardness. A gift has been offered; it seems everywhere and nowhere; and one might be surprised into asking: Is this gift a sacramental sign? But what this all means, one does not know, and perhaps may never know.

But – knowing or not-knowing – there is *nothing contrived* about the question of God. It is elemental and enigmatic – elemental because of the givenness of self, other, nature; enigmatic because one is struck into an as-yet-uncomprehended astonishment by the givenness. The astonishing gift perplexes us about what offers it, or who. And our question is not something to which history determines us, even when it is historically mediated. It is not something grammar imposes on us, even when our speaking is grammatically conditioned. It is not the sly unconscious that presses it on us, though its roots go down deeper than the conscious or unconscious. It is not something to which our social status condemns us. It is not something insidious metaphysics imposes on us, though we cannot escape metaphysics, twist and turn as we will. The question is elemental and inescapable. But we have to be with the elemental, and face what cannot be evaded, to know what this means. Nor will we “overcome” the question, when we have baptized our chains as historicist chains, grammatological, psychoanalytical, socio-political, philosophical chains. There are other fetters, harder to unbind, for instance, the lie in the soul, not to mention vices not always dignified with names in philosophy.

Why has the face of being come for many to seem void of communication of God, when everything within and without seems to press on us the question? The changed attitude to being marking modernity has much to do with the matter. This has been recognized by many, and with many different emphases.¹ My emphasis falls on our reconfiguration of the primal ethos along a particular line of response to the equivocality of givenness. This produces a certain devaluation of being stripped of signs suggestive of divine transcendence. This is coupled with a culture of autonomy which, tempted to absolutize itself, eclipses transcendence as other, though behind the mask of autonomy is a will to power usurping absoluteness in a world said to be void of absolutes. The specter of nihilism, now expressed, now recessed, in which all other-being is instrumentalized haunts our claim to mastery, finally inverting into an outcome in which it all seems to come to nothing.

Suppose one holds to a God the creator of all, a God other than creation. Suppose, further, that the creation is given its own being for itself – given to be, it yet has its own otherness. Suppose God is other yet intimate, and other with an unsurpassable transcendence that nothing finite in creation can match. Suppose we seek to relate genuinely to this transcendence. If the transcendence is absolute, the search seems futile. If the search augurs of success, the transcendence seems not absolute. What then are the options? If we say the transcendence is absolute, we drive God away from us into a beyond, and our futility is just our search itself: the search drives away from itself what it seems to be driving towards, and hence lacks the basis to yield even a half success. Better then to search by not searching at all? If to seek God is to drive God away, cease to search, and

¹ For example, the progress of the more exact sciences, the increase in technological control over the conditions of life, the secularization of everyday life, the alleged maturing of rational humanity, human self-responsibility, or perhaps the refusal of given nature, or self-intoxicated will to power, and so on. All these have their truth, but we must still pitch the question at the level of what it means to be.

let God come towards one. But if no God seems to come? Let us wait. How long must we wait? Since we wait for eternity, must we wait for an eternity? But we grow restless and impatient. We have waited and nothing seems to come. Or perhaps it came but we did not see it pass? And perhaps it is there, and there is no wait, only the call of transformation? We have waited, and still wait, and no God seems to come. What then? Why then transcendence seems to turn over into immanence: first, immanence grieving over its own failure of self-surpassing; then immanence hostile over its previous desire for God; then immanence hostile to God as depriving its own self-surpassing of its own esteem in itself; finally, immanence as willing the immanent esteem of its own worldly self-transcendence. And then there is no more waiting and expectancy. We have arrived – God has arrived. Transcendence overturned. We–God–Ourselves.

If thought is too condensed in these statements, I will thin things in the sequel. To round off this opening sortie: We search other-being as *outer* – nature’s astonishing thereness. We search other-being as *inner* – the enigmatic abyss of our own selving. Each of these teases us into thought of God. (Kant: the starry sky above, the moral law within.) And yet God is other to both. But what if we conceive of divine transcendence in *dualistic terms*, as can easily happen? Then no community seems possible between God and creation. Not only does it seem that God withdraws into self-sufficient independence; world and we can seem to do so too. Or it might seem as if the flood tide of the divine ebbs, and world and we find ourselves beached on the solitude of a Godless shore. Something like this ebb of the great tide seems to occur in modernity.

What causes the ebb is very perplexing. Is it the self-withdrawal of God, as some have thought? Or was that space of transcendence always empty? Or have we, in a series of slight shifts – slight as singular, but momentous as a continuing series – blinded ourselves, deafened ourselves, numbed ourselves, though we call our sightlessness, our silence, our anesthesia enlightened? Something of the latter, I think, though I think so as one hard of hearing and as squinting. Yet, given the mystery of God, and the potential for equivocity in our openness to communication, there is some truth to the first suggestion. Our reconfiguration of the primal ethos produces a second ethos, and this makes more difficult our attunement to the signs of the divine. We can see this relative to the ebb: First relative to other-being as outer; then relative to other-being as inner. I mean, first, the desacralizing effects of the devaluation of being in modernity; I mean, second, the atheistic consequences of the self-assertion of human self-transcendence and its idolization of autonomy. In turning now to these points, our concern is the muffling of the signs communicating the divine in the ethos of being, a muffling our reconfiguration effects. At the ultimate, all this comes to nothing. In the chapter to follow, a reborn mindfulness of those signs, a mindfulness born out of the return to zero, will be at issue.

DEVALUED BEING: THE STRIPPING OF THE SIGNS

The sources of the question of God are many, but major sources occur in astonishment and perplexity: astonishment before the sheer givenness of being; perplexity about the intelligibility, the meaning, indeed goodness of that given being. The astonishment is a beginning that is overdetermined, in excess of all determinacy. The perplexity follows the beginning in being a troubled thought about intelligibility, meaning, worth; it begins a move from the overdetermined givenness to a more determinate articulation for us. This perplexity, in turn, begets definite curiosity about the processes at work in the givenness. Out of curiosity the determinate cognitions of science emerge, and with a definite drift towards the utmost possible univocity in our articulation of intelligibility. (I say nothing yet about the urge to use the givenness, to exploit it for our own desires.) This movement from astonishment to perplexity to definite curiosity shows the transcending power of our mindfulness, but it can be fatal with equivocation relative to God. For the question of God does not arise in the determinate cognition of a definite matter of fact about which we are curious. It concerns more our metaphysical astonishment before the givenness of the being-there of being, also our perplexity as to what it might all mean, in relation to origin and end, what the point

of it all is in relation to its worthiness to be affirmed as good. The beginning, as indeed the end, is in excess of every curiosity and every determinate cognition.

The question of God precedes science, outlives it, but also always shadows it. It exceeds the will to complete determination that marks the move of curiosity to definite answers. Its excess is not that of an emotional murk that surrounds, like a penumbra, the clear light of our cognition. It bears on a mindfulness impossible to capture completely in the determinate categories of a definite cognition. This mode of mindfulness has not been well respected in modernity, and now is less and less spontaneously understood. Why? Because the momentum of modernity dominantly conceives our development as away from astonishment and perplexity towards as definite a determinate cognition as possible. Even if wonder, astonishment, perplexity are granted in the beginning, these are to be dispelled once the proper unfolding of mind is effected. The former are merely indefinite, and our task is to make things as definite as possible, that is, to conquer completely the putative indefiniteness of the beginning. We may even erect this into a historical destiny: religion for the primitives or children; metaphysics for the rationalistic adolescents; science for the adults come of age. And, of course, *we* are the grown-ups – enlightened, post-Comtean adults. For us, no more religion or metaphysics.

This claim to maturity, one suspects, is rife with misunderstanding, and misunderstanding derived, ironically, from a surfeit of cleverness. For this surfeit of cleverness is accompanied by an enfeebling of astonishment and an irritability with perplexity, especially metaphysical perplexity. The latter resists encapsulation in definite conceptualizations and hence chastens our intellectual self-esteem. Impatience with this resistance, irritation with intractable perplexity, these issue in an unprecedented will to univocalize being, a will that also makes being God-forsaken. But this is not evident at first.

The will to univocalize being is manifest in the project to mathematicize nature such as we find in Galileo, Descartes, and others. My interest is the changed attitude to being in this reconfiguration of the primal ethos. Most important is the loss of intimacy between being and the good, an intimacy witnessed to in a variety of ways in the premodern ethos. In the modern reconfiguration there comes to be a separation of being and the good. For the good is enigmatic and resistant to complete objectification and determination; it poses challenges to the univocalizing mind that this mind cannot fully meet. The premodern sense of the good was often identified with the end, in Aristotle and others, but the end is not univocally determinable. Even less is it possible to subject it to mathematical measure. To the univocalizing mind this is not satisfactory, and so this good is called into question, indeed put out of question, by being denied any place in explanatory schemes of intelligibility.

Excise thus the good and what results? We find ourselves in the between, which is now the ongoingness of process without end: a purposeless between, unless perhaps we reconstruct *ourselves as purposing in the face of the purposelessness of other-being*. The beginning is not good either; it is efficient cause reduced to the mechanism of effecting a happening. The mechanical effecting happens; it has no purpose; it has no good; it is valueless happening. And our condition? Between a worthless beginning and a purposeless end, without end; in a middle that in itself has no worth or inherent end. Uprshot: the devaluation of being. Being is in itself worthless. It is there, yes; it is a happening, yes. Does it have value in itself, is its being a good in itself? Such questions should arise but do not properly. Univocalizing mind issues in the devaluation of being.

Can one find signs of God in being thus devalued? Very hard. It is not that efforts were not made; by Pascal, for instance, by Descartes, by many others. The efforts often have a taint of artificiality and strain; they lack the tang of the elemental. It is as if the devalued milieu forces us to more and more twisted ways of finding a way back into the proximity of the divine, and none quite works. Then there comes a point when the atheism of devalued being comes to seem elementally *self-evident*. The twisting and turning is given up; but so also is the mystery of God. Our question then: Are we true to being in devaluing it? Is being as devalued true to being? If not, do we not have to find a different way? Of what is devalued being itself a sign? Nothing, it seems. The outcome seems nihilism. Does the issue, then, become, at least in part, one of a “revaluation” of being, at least in the sense of some

restoration of other-being as other, and its inherent worthiness to be affirmed as, in some enigmatic sense, good? If so, would perplexity about God again flare up with passion?

IDOLIZED AUTONOMY: ECLIPSE OF TRANSCENDENCE AS OTHER

Devalued being is not the end of the matter. When we take into account our *own* being, the changed attitude also affects *us*. Just as the givenness of other-being in nature is stripped of the signs of qualitative worth, so also we assume an analogous relation to our own being given to be. For we are given to be before we give ourselves to be. There is a *passio essendi*, a patience of being, more primordial than our *conatus essendi*, our endeavor to be. This patience is intimately connected with our porosity to the divine, for we are first as having received our being rather than as having determined it for ourselves, through ourselves. The *passio essendi* is closer to the more ultimate energizing source of our *conatus essendi* but it also defines the vulnerability of our finitude. This vulnerability may seem exacerbated, if the ethos of other-being is valueless in itself; in fact, our *conatus essendi* seems rather spurred into an activism, a self-activation that can lead even to an extreme of hyper-activism. Then the *passio essendi* is forced into recess as the *conatus essendi*, expressing itself without hindrance, goes into overdrive. The patience of being is overridden in this overdrive of the endeavor to be, so overridden that the porosity to the divine constituting our being religious falls out of focus.

In the reconfigured ethos of devalued being, *we* find *ourselves* between a worthless beginning and a valueless, endless end. Nevertheless, in the middle *we* determine a relation to things. *Our* relativity is not neutral but charged with value. Even if other-being is valueless, *we* cannot be but as valuing being, again even if the value thus unavoidable is value *for us*. There's the rub. If we value other-being as *for us*, can we finally avoid a slide from valueless being into being as instrumentalized? Being is a means to an end; and what is the end? *We* are the end. Why? Because one necessity we cannot negate is that we are oriented to an end, some end, any end. Nietzsche hits the bull (albeit for different purposes than ours): man would rather will nothingness than not will.

We cannot be but valuing being; we cannot will not to be willing beings; for not willing or willing nothing is still willing. The question is what to will; and indeed how to will. What is the implicit sense of being that determines our relation to other-being, and the sense of our own being as willing? In the context of valueless being, being as a whole cannot escape its demotion to being instrumentalized. But is this not finally true of us also? We may assert ourselves as the power wielding the instrument, but the other we instrumentalize will finally be not only nature but human being itself. The end: *ontological tyranny on ourselves*. I will come to this, for at first the exact opposite seems the truth: namely, that now we are truly released into our own original freedom. As it turns out, the freedom is at best equivocal, at worst delusory and megalomaniac.

How dare one say this? Do we not live in the epoch of freedom? And was not Hegel at least right about this, though his critics will begrudge him? Let freedom ring! Unhesitatingly, we fall prostrate before this god. But is the prostration not in collusion with the devaluation? For the univocalizing of other-being wills to make being completely determinate, with the loss of inherent value, and so it prepares an empty space *for us* as its proper users. It makes straight the way for *our determining power* as the sole source of value. And so we are a determining origin that passes into and through other-being as a means to itself as the true end. Other-being becomes the medium of our own self-determination. This tends to be the dominant logic of modern freedom, and not in any merely negative sense of freedom from external restraint. There is that, but there is more, namely our freedom to become the power of being we are already in promise. It may take centuries to unfold the implications of these views.

My point is not to deny freedom, but to question any absolutizing of autonomy as the fullest truth of freedom. Modernity exhibits the self-assertion of autonomy: determination comes to mean our power to determine other-being, so that in the medium of other-being,

determination is self-determination. What is the problem then? The recession of the patience of being, and the reconfiguration, to the point of distortion, of the essential relation to other-being. Other-being serves as the medium of our self-determining; we mediate with other-being because we finally want to mediate with ourselves. We also do not do justice to the intimate otherness of our own *passio essendi*. Self-determination can become a kind of idol, so enchanting to our self-understanding we do not see the equivocal relation to the other it generates. The other may be a means to further freedom or a possible threat, but if the primary stress is on autonomy, the other will always be secondary, serving for the self. The idol: autonomy as a *nomos* of *to auto* subjecting to *heteros* to its law. Not only nature, but God and other humans carry the insinuations of threats to the *auto*, and so their otherness as other has to be “overcome.” Of course, if my autonomy must coexist with the justified autonomy of the other, then autonomy cannot be absolutized. We have to rethink freedom outside of the hegemony of autonomy (see *EB*, *passim* on this). This also means revisiting both our own intimate otherness and God’s.

The ontological danger here is that we idolize ourselves and think it our destiny to create the world anew in our image. This project of the will to power is the open secret of modernity. It is an *ontological necessity* that human beings be will to power if being as such is valueless. It has no good, it is no good, it is worthless; we cannot live with this; we must hence *make it worthy*. Worthy of what? Worthy of itself, worthy of God? Rather, worthy of ourselves. We are original, we are the power. And the goal? What could be the point of it all? We are not given the point; we make the point; we will the point to be ourselves. So we say. And the other? The point of the other must be the self. But what is the point of the self when the self is just for itself, and the other is for the self? Finally, no point at all, and the outcome is nihilism. We will come again to this.

TRANSCENDENCES

We can better find our bearings if we distinguish the following senses of transcendence. In broad strokes, they correspond to the other-being of nature, of the self-being of the human, and the difference of the divine. It is not only their character but their interrelations that are important. How we understand them is rooted in our attunement to the primal ethos, and reflected in the reconfigured ethos.

First transcendence (T¹): The transcendence of beings as other in exteriority. The transcendence of such beings consists in their not being the product of our process of thinking; their otherness to us resists complete reduction to our categories, especially in so far as they simply are at all. Their otherness as being at all gives rise to the question: What makes possible both their possibility, as well as their actuality? What makes possible the possibility of their being at all? This is a metaphysical question not about the “what” of their being but the “that” of their being there at all: Why beings and not nothing? The possibility of a further transcendence as other to their transcendence is opened by such questions.

Second transcendence (T²): The transcendence of *self-being*, self-transcendence. The meaning of possibility is here realized in interiority rather than determined externally. Human self-transcendence is of special moment here. There is possibility as freedom, as the promise of self-determination. We are impelled to the further question: Is this self-transcendence, in relation to the first transcendence (T¹), an anomalous overreaching into emptiness, or a genuine self-surpassing towards an even further transcendence as other? Is our self-surpassing driven by a lack to fulfill only itself, or to seeking fulfillment in what is other to itself? Is it more than lacking and seeking what is infinitely more than itself, whether lacking or not? An important question here: Does our understanding of our own self-transcending rely too much on the *conatus essendi* and not enough on the *passio essendi*?

Third Transcendence (T³): original transcendence as still *other – transcendence itself*, not as the exterior, not as the interior, but as the superior. This would be a *hyperbolic* sense of transcendence, bringing to mind the question of God beyond the immanence of transcendence in nature and human being. If we were to call this third hyperbolic form “Transcendence itself,” it would be in excess of determinate beings, as their original

ground; it would be beyond human self-transcendence, as its most ultimate possibilizing source. It would also be beyond the ordinary doublet of possibility/reality, as their most ultimate possibilizing source. It would not be just a possibility, nor indeed a determinate realization of possibility. It would have to be “real” possibilizing power, in a manner more original and other than immanent possibility and realization. It would have to be original, creative possibilizing beyond determinate possibility, and “real” beyond all determinate realization, beyond all self-determining self-realization.

If such third transcendence were in excess of determinacy and our self-determining, would it be but a merely *indefinite beyond* to finite being? If so, would not its participation in the happening of the between be feeble? Is there rather a third transcendence that is not such an empty indefinite but excessive: overdetermined in a surplus sense, hyperbolic, not indefinite? If so, it would not be comprehended under any finite category of the possible or real. It would be above, *hyper, über* them, and yet most intimate to finite being as enabling it to be at all, and to be free. What must this possibilizing power be, such as to give rise to finite being as *other* to itself, and hence as possibilizing the finite space, or middle, for first and second transcendence? Such a third transcendence could not be identified with any projection onto some ultimate other of the first two senses. There could be no objectification (T¹) or subjectification (T²) of third transcendence (T³). Rather it would seem that second transcendence (T²), in its ineradicable recalcitrance to complete objectification, is pointed beyond both objectness and subjectness to transobjective and transsubjective transcendence (T³). And perhaps first transcendence (T¹) is not also devoid of its own ambiguous signs of this hyperbolic transcendence.

Much more must be said, but for now this is the relevant point.² Third transcendence (T³) has been made problematic in modernity, both by a univocalizing objectification of first transcendence (T¹), and by developments of second transcendence (T²), especially when this last defines itself hugely in terms of its own autonomy. Then a logic of *self-determination* stands guard over all our thinking, and the thinking of what is other to our self-determination. Inevitably, third transcendence (T³) becomes endowed with an equivocal position. There is a tension, indeed an antinomy, between autonomy and transcendence. This is not just a mere contradiction, but a tension wherein different possibilities for human thought and life take shape. In this equivocal space the traditional respect accorded to third transcendence (T³) from an essentially religious point of view comes under onslaught. Into that space of equivocality, our “creativity,” our “poetry,” so to speak, inserts itself, as somehow answering the tension of autonomy and transcendence. Human “art” comes to assume roles previously accorded to religion. Is the antinomy resolved? Or does third transcendence still remain mockingly “beyond” – or welcoming?³

THE ANTINOMY OF AUTONOMY AND TRANSCENDENCE

What might be said here of this antinomy of autonomy and transcendence? The ideal of autonomy accents our determining power; it may indeed grant our relatedness to others, yet the primary stress is on self-determining, the *nomos* of the *auto*. By contrast, transcendence must put the stress on the importance of otherness; for the *trans* is a going beyond or across towards what is not now oneself. If God is third transcendence, there is an otherness not reducible to our self-determining. Third transcendence cannot univocally coexist with an absolutized autonomy which is absolutely for itself. Alternatives: if autonomy is primary, third transcendence has to be subordinated; if third transcendence is primary, autonomy cannot be absolute. Western modernity generally has opted for some version of the first alternative, with incalculable consequences for the second.

² We will come to explore the connections between these different senses of transcendences and the hyperboles of being: T¹ is perhaps more intimately tied to the idiotic and aesthetic, T² and T³ (especially with respect to the porosity and passage between them) are more bound up with the erotic and the agapeic.

³ See AOO, Chapter 8 “Art and the Impossible Burden of Transcendence,” where I also remark on the post-modern response to the antinomy, which tends to equivocate between the aesthetic and the religious.

The choice is more complicated in that the need of transcendence does not die, cannot die. Indeed autonomy is a formation of self itself derived from an energy of transcendence of which we are first beneficiaries rather than possessors. Something of this may even be granted when we acknowledge that the human being is an immanent transcending power. This power is *self-transcendence* (T²). And so we are tempted to say that in self-transcendence we have *both* autonomy and immanent transcendence; we have no need for an other transcendence.

Can we sustain this reassurance? Suppose we find ourselves, so to speak, slipping below the surface of our own self-transcendence? Open the door into this dark, and what then? What answers this opening is itself a new darkness. The more our self-transcending delves into its own immanent power, the more enigmatic that power comes to seem, and the less we are assured of our autonomy. Our self-transcendence goes beyond itself to what as outer is other, but it also goes beyond itself into its immanent resources, into depths bottomless, depths murky, depths terrifying. The infinite restlessness of human selving in its outward throw shows to us the external side of an infinitely enigmatic abyss in inwardness itself. Step into that abyss and the warm self-esteem of autonomy will soon shiver in strange icy blasts that blow from undiscovered bourns. There is an inward otherness whence energies erupt or surface, and the sure “self” is no master but a derivative therefrom. In a sense, these depths are more intimate with the mystery of the givenness of being in the primal ethos. Perhaps, then, autonomy is less the sovereign it takes itself to be as the dark issue of an origin more enigmatic than its own self-determining powers. Autonomy as self-transcendence opens into transcendence beyond autonomy – opens into, because it opens up out of this more mysterious other transcendence.

There is a dialectical lesson here, rather a double dialectical lesson. First autonomy as self-transcendence only *seems* to solve the antinomy and dialectically overcome the tension of autonomy and transcendence, and indeed surmount every need for reference to a “beyond.” This is the first dialectic. But there is a kind of *doppelgänger* dialectic behind or beyond this. There is an *other otherness* beyond the seemingly dialectically overcome otherness. Immanent exploration of autonomy as self-transcendence shows the self to be the issue of a transcending source not itself self-transcendence. Our self-transcending is first energized by the given endowment of the *passio essendi*, and only then by the endeavor of the *conatus essendi*. Self-transcendence is not made possible by an autonomous self, but the transcendence of the autonomous self is made possible by transcendence as other to self-transcendence. This other transcendence brings us back into the neighborhood of perplexity about God.

This last point is not often granted. If the *other* origin is granted at all, and if there is any breakthrough into the energies of the primal ethos, it tends to be in terms of the occlusion already pervasively at work in the reconfigured ethos. I mean that the devaluation of being produces further results here, both in thinking of human self-transcendence and thinking of the origin as other. The latter is seen in terms of what I will call the *dark origin*; the former is often understood as some variation of *will to power*.⁴ To these two points in turn.

DARK ORIGINS AND TRANSCENDENCE AS OTHER

What I mean by “the dark origin” concerns, first, the continued exigence for transcendence as other, even in devalued being, and second, a view of this transcendence that, nevertheless, perpetuates a reflection of the reconfigured ethos of worthless being – “worthless” sometimes in the sense of being merely neutral, other times in the presentiment of its being

⁴ My points of reference here include Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as Hegel, Kant, and others, and you might say “Surely these thinkers are behind us?” Yet Nietzsche brings something to a head that has not yet had its adequate response. What he uttered was in formation through those who came before him. We still live in the shadow of these thinkers, and how they found themselves in the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence.

hostile to us, perhaps even evil. Still we cannot but ask about the ground or origin of that valueless middle: What is ultimate, what is being ultimately, at bottom, or in origin? Above the reply was heard: there is no ultimate good in the end. Now we hear: there is no good at all in the beginning.

Undoubtedly, we are always tempted to define the ultimate relative to our being in the middle: we reconfigure the primal ethos in terms of ourselves. If we see the middle as worthless, it is hard not to think of the origin/ultimate as also worthless. You interject, benignly, “the middle as valueless is there, indifferently there, neutral: neither good nor evil.” I hear you. But can we maintain this stance, finally? For in the middle we twist in the tension of plurality, racked by strains between us and ourselves, between humans, between humans and other beings of nature, between beings in nature other than us. “Nature red in tooth and claw” is hard to blink away, despite all precautions of agnostic indifferentism. *Homo homini lupus*, no honest person can deny, despite all quarantines of studied neutralism. In truth, *no immunization from value is effective finally*. Any agnostic indifferentism seems only a way station along a slippery path from the worthless middle to the worthless origin. More, any suggestion that the origin might be good becomes incredible to those gliding along the frictionless pathway of ontological neutralization. And it is not that *we fail*, that *we* cannot live the truth of a “neutral” world. That is true but not the main point. We cannot live it, because to live always shows the truth of the value of life. Valueless neutrality is impossible because there lives no such thing. Its truth is death. And perhaps not even death, since there is nothing neutral about death.

The point could be elaborated relative to the longer arc of modernity, for the turning of this arc from its upward motion to its downward spiral can be shown *in nuce* in the transition from Hegel to Schopenhauer. It is not incidental that Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1812–16) was written at almost exactly the same time as Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* (Vol. I, 1818). We fail to take much notice of this, perhaps because Schopenhauer only exerted influence well after Hegel’s death. And yet the Hegelian hymn to ascendant reason is contemporaneous with the Schopenhauerian descent into a more ultimate darkness prior to reason. Can the ascent of one be divorced from the descent of the other? Do we not still live out of the consequences of that ascent and descent?

Hegel might be seen as the epitome, the consummation of the upward movement of modern self-determination from its first primitive expression to an extraordinarily complex dialectical determination. To be absolute is to be self-determining. I have given many essential qualifications elsewhere (e.g., *Hegel’s God*), but Hegel’s absolute is identified with the free self-realization of reason itself: the origin becomes itself fully by overcoming the indefiniteness of the beginning, becomes thus completely self-mediating and self-fulfilled. Hegel is one of the major philosophers in modernity who struggled against devalued being (he might not put it thus); but equivocities in his dialectic, with respect to self-determining being and relative to otherness, issue in *both* a claim to the completion of self-determining being, and the dialectical reversal of that completion.

The following is *one way* I would put it (there are others): thought thinking itself is reversed into thought thinking what is *other* to thought. The difficult question is: What is this other? There have been different responses, and the matter is still deeply in question. Schopenhauer reveals something about the reversal, though, oddly enough, it is already prepared in Kant, unbeknown to Kant himself. Reason becomes the bright side of a more basic energy of being other to reason; indeed, in the present instance, other in a way that turns reason into an instrument or means. Reason becomes the slave of will – not sovereign master but a tool. It can be both a *weapon* of the will identified with the dark origin, and a *protection* for humans against this very darkness. Schopenhauer’s will is a blind, insatiable striving, a dark version of an erotic absolute; Hegel’s *Geist*, or Idea, is a bright rational version of the erotic absolute (see *BB*, pp. 242–51, 260–1; *PU*, pp. 238–51). Could one venture that, after Hegel, the erotics of being present themselves more and more in the form of *eros turranos*?⁵

⁵ Whitehead speaks of the “eros of the universe” – *Adventure of Ideas* [1933] (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 253; also pp. 68, 251, 268; *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* [1929],

Schopenhauer explicitly stylizes himself as an “atheist,” contemptuous of the moral God (Hegel and Nietzsche share something of this contempt). Nevertheless, Schopenhauer has his “god,” though this god looks more like Descartes’ evil genius than any benevolent Providence. Hegel too has his “atheist” side, detected by Kierkegaard, enacted by Feuerbach and Marx, and other left-Hegelian spawn. A lesson I take from this: the question of God and atheism is not amenable to simple oppositional categories, despite the polemical crudities of some of Hegel’s successors. This is the main point here: there is something ironical, in an entirely *just* respect, in the emergence of the dark origin against the horizon of the consummate self-determining rational origin in Hegel. The dream of this idealistic origin begins to bring forth monsters. The human being also becomes hard to see as more than a puppet of this dark origin. We witness the beginnings of the decomposition of the “god” autonomy. More, we see the eruption of dark transcendence *in* human self-transcendence, and yet this darkness tells of a deeper, unfathomable darkness that is other to human self-transcendence.

Here begins the *downward* movement of the arc of self-determining being. It is foolish to think the question of God is finished because of the rash of “announcements” in recent centuries of humankind being beyond religion or God. The downward movement brings us to this point about will to power. We come to think of ourselves in the image of the origin, as well as the origin in our own image. For we are originals, are we not? What does this mean? It means we are sources of origination that instantiate the original power of the ultimate source. If the latter is will, other to thought thinking itself, we too are will, or more affirmatively, will to power. This resort to will to power unfolds rather than transforms the basic ontological attitude governing the situation. And so to the second point.

WILL TO POWER AND THE COUNTERFEIT DOUBLE OF “YES”

In Schopenhauer, art and religion are releases from the *eros turranos* of the dark origin, art episodically, ascetic religion more completely. It is by a radical “no” (a “no” at the roots) to the erotic origin that, pace Schopenhauer, ascetic religions release us. Religion is thus reconfigured in the image of the dark origin as itself the great “no” to life and the evil of the “to be.” There is here a certain reversal of “yes” and “no,” by contrast with the “yes” to life and the good of the “to be” that we find, for instance, in the great monotheistic religions deriving from biblical inspiration. This reversal is more reminiscent of a Gnostic revulsion to creation as given: “It is not good.” At one level Nietzsche inherits this reversal from Schopenhauer, but he also wants to say “yes” against Schopenhauer’s “no,” and so in a way reverse that reversal. Yet Nietzsche also revolts against the counterfeit double of “yes” he claims to find in the alleged religious “no.” But has the deeper truth of the primal religious “yes” to the good of the “to be” already been inverted and corrupted here? A more ultimate “yes” to the God of amen? A God and an amen impossible to grant, finally, outside of some agapeic sense of the origin, and not just an erotic sense? Yes, I think, though the equivocations at play in our intermediate condition are subtle.

Turn again to the downward movement. Kant’s affirmation of the autonomy of the moral subject, Hegel’s absolute as self-determining spirit, are high points in the upward curve of autonomy. But in the recesses of this development all is not quiet. Both Kant and Hegel contribute to a peculiar *chastening* of reason, the first by the putative *delimitation* of reason’s legitimate exercise, the second by its putative *release* from all such delimitation. The other of thought thinking itself shadows the ideal of autonomous being. For our reconfiguration of the primal ethos is always (under)grounded by those ontological reserves of

edited by David Griffin and Donald Sherburne. Corrected edition (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. 244, 346; *Religion in the Making* [1926] (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 68, 73). Other process thinkers, as well as evolutionary thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin, tend to agree. This eros tends to have resonances of a benign ontological desire, but what of the *tyrannical* form of eros? Mention of this can quickly dissipate the magic charms of eros – unless, of course, one is under the enchantment of a blacker magic.

the ethos that our reconfiguration consigns to recess. Thus our reconfiguration always has its reserved side, and what is recessed is not thereby put out of play. When we begin to suspect this, we will never cease to look over our shoulders at the source of the shadow we cannot see. Our reconfiguring reason will become unsettled and uncertain about itself. Not incidentally, Kant's idealism can be seen as the *self*-critique of reason. Hegel's idealism can also be seen as such – only the self-critique here claims to *overcome* its own critical nature in a speculative affirmation of thought thinking itself; it claims to consume its own shadow. Yet if the other to thought thinking itself gains a hearing, the self-critique opens into an abyss beyond reason; or at the least, reason's pretension to sovereignty is countered. The shadow we flee grows larger as we flee it. The dark on the other side of reason has no sufficient reason, at least in the classical sense: human reason emerges out of this other, and hence is derivative. Schopenhauer calls this other "will," claiming that it is really Kant's thing in itself. Nietzsche calls it will to power. I prefer to resort to the terms of the agapeic origin, for reasons that will emerge.

Will to power seems intelligible enough (paradoxically) if the world is not intelligible in itself. Moreover, if intelligibility is the product of will, we too must "create" the intelligibility, as well as the good of being. Of course, will to power can be given different renditions: the more common acceptance as power *over* the other, through superior dominance and so on; alternatively, as self-affirming power that affirms itself in its own self-increase. In either case, be it the cruder form or the more refined, will to power is finally for its own sake. Nietzsche mixes these senses, though the second is for him the most creative and ultimate source of value. Nevertheless, there is no inherent hospitality of being to value: there is a *disjunction* of being and good, a discordance. Nietzsche sees what is at stake: we cannot finally live with this discordance. Either we have to protect ourselves from the *horror of the truth of being*, be it through Apollonian illusion, Dionysian intoxication, or Socratic–Alexandrian dialectic, or, we can transvalue all value: sing the world beyond good and evil, in all its joy and monstrousness, its rapture and suffering. Nietzschean will to power seeks to overcome the discordance of being and good by affirming all being as "good": highest will to power is the will that in affirming itself affirms all being as it is. Something of all this is to be gleaned from Nietzsche's ultimate love: *amor fati*.

There is much more that could be said here (see *IST?*, Chapter 6). For myself I would ask: What love is this *amor*? Is it eros, or self-affirming love, or philia, or agape? What fate is this? Eternal necessity? *Moira*? The eternal return of the same? But why *love* that? You say it is consent to the happening of becoming? But does "It is so" now become "It must be so"? What kind of amen is this "must"? What kind of "So be it"? For there are counterfeit doubles of "yes." These are not entirely false, but something false in them makes what is true in them false, finally. Then they are false doubles of "yes." What is true in the "yes" to fate? The ultimate love of will to power seems altogether too close to an *eros turranos*. Is there not too much of a hypertrophied *conatus essendi* in this, to the atrophy of the religious porosity of the *passio essendi*? And what then of the bloody crushing of innocence: are we also to sing our "yes" to an evil fate? What kind of "yes" is this? Nietzsche has no satisfactory response to monstrous evil. And he joyfully tells of the world as a *monster* of energy, will to power, and nothing else besides.⁶ Who would dream of bowing to this monster? Who would dream of loving it?

You remind me: Nietzsche would not speak of being and good. I grant that, but that is not my problem. Nietzsche, properly interpreted, and this means sometimes interpreted against himself, is on the right track in asking about the ultimate amen; but he is betrayed by the whole horizon of his thinking. What is this horizon? I note four major aspects: First, it is defined by the view of valueless being, worse, by being as pain, even horror, at bottom. Second, by a view of the protective, recuperative power of creative will to power as affirming, *despite* worthlessness and horror. I call this whistling in the dark.

⁶ *Der Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1930), pp. 696–97 and *The Will To Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 549–50; see *AOO*, pp. 205–6.

Third, by a totalizing claim with respect to will to power (*all being* is will to power, and in either of the above two senses). But this totalized claim cannot sustain in full the sought affirmation. A different consent to otherness is needed – beyond the will to power that either dominates the other or wills its own will. We need an agapeic origination and self-transcendence. Fourth, by the fact that our affirming will to power collapses in view of the totalized will to power: if all being is valueless, we too are valueless finally, in the valueless whole, and all our brave, heroic valuing is swallowed by the valueless whole. Inference: for the Nietzschean affirmation to make any sense at all, there must be some *inherent hospitality* of being to good,

Nietzsche never provides us with the proper ground of this ontological hospitality. Quite the contrary. Despite the self-authorized official profile, he never really escaped from Schopenhauer's pessimism, and the bitter wisdom of the Silenus, companion of Dionysus, expressed in words Nietzsche, as Schopenhauer well before him, liked: "Best of all, not to be; and second best, to die quickly."⁷ There are no ontological resources in the later Nietzsche, which allow us unashamedly to say "It is good to be"; though this is just what Nietzsche in practice wants to sing. The song of affirmation of will to power is a song masking its own metaphysical despair, even as it overtly seeks metaphysical consent beyond despair.

What do we learn from this? Taking into account the reconfigured ethos of modernity, and against Nietzsche's own self-interpretation and self-advertisement, the metaphysics of will to power is a *reactive* response to the sickness of devalued being. Try as hard to hide it as he did, it seeks to affirm *despite*. Its sense of human will to power mirrors the sense of the origin as valueless. Is Nietzsche willing to say the origin is good? No. Why? Were he to do so, we would need some straighter talk about God, drawn otherwise than in the crude lines of polemical cartoons. If there is a worthlessness about the origin, there must be a futility about its consummation: there can be no end, only futile striving in the end; and our middle condition is an evasive alternation between a dishonest "creativity" that prides itself on being the original of the value of being and a half honest confession about the ultimate horror of being at all. Schopenhauer had already taken us closer to this point, with less baroque subterfuge. Perhaps Nietzsche never knew that he too arrived there, namely, back at his beginning, circling around a never dispelled despair. And even if active, really reactive, will to power acts, reacts once more, and once more again, there is no really *honest* way finally to avoid the futility of it all.

Valueless being leads to nihilism, it does not matter whether by a scientific, political, or aesthetic route. Let will to power sing its songs, hurl its curses, it still sings and howls within this horizon. It only produces the *posture* of affirmation. And where it seems to allow an other, it is still enthralled by its song of itself. Despite its posture of release to all being other than itself, it is a prisoner of the idol of autonomy. If the origin comes to nothing, the world comes to nothing, our will to power comes to nothing, our affirmation comes to nothing. The rest is rhetoric and pretense. We need an other thinking of origin, world, ourselves and others, an other affirmation. With a singular confusion of vision and blindness, Nietzsche felt the snap of chains, but he leaves us still in chains, even as he exhorts us to lift our legs in dance. We lift our legs, but it is despite the weight of chains. And in the soaring song, ecstatic in its strained and fevered beauty, we cannot quite deafen ourselves to the grim clink of iron. This song, too, is a counterfeit double of the ultimate amen.

RETURN TO ZERO: COMING TO NOTHING

Suppose though there is *some* truth to nihilism. Suppose the origin is worthless, the world void of inherent value, our energy of being either reactive to or transformative of

⁷ See especially, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy, 1872), sect. 3: Das Allerbeste ist für dich gänzlich unerreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu *sein*, *nichts* zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich—bald zu sterben." Also AOO, Chapter 6 "Eros Frenzied and the Redemption of Art: Nietzsche and the Dionysian Origin." See AOO, Chapter 5 on Schopenhauer's dark origin.

this worthlessness. What then? No transformation we can effect will change the basic truth of being: It all comes to nothing. But this outcome also includes *us*, and all our grand projects come to nothing. Our reconfiguration of the primal ethos comes to lack any ultimate point.

And do we not experience some such coming to nothing in our knowing, our doing, our feeling for life? *Knowing*: the self-critique of reason in modernity shows reason to *tear itself* apart: reason comes to this impasse – it cannot take *itself* seriously. We shine an excess of our own light on things and the now shadowless things lose their light and weight. The more we rationalize life the more life seems to lack reason.

Doing: we may will to stamp our value on things, but we have to “psyche” ourselves up to the needed act of faith in our willing. We have to become willingly deaf to the quieter sense that such willing is in a void. The will’s faith in itself must be sustained through itself alone, that is, through its own lack of faith. And then we meet the ethical relativism that is only the self-deceiving moral chatter that is penultimate to the collapse into ethical nihilism. We will show our hand, but this has no hidden aces, not even a joker, only a sheaf of null cards.

Feeling: the élan of life is drained when we lose the aesthetic feel of the agape of being. We may work ourselves into frenzies of excitement about the latest novelty, but this frenzy is the hysterical mask of a dead numbness. Feelings are the bodies of value. This anesthesia of being is this nihilism of the aesthetic. We should not be fooled by whoops of wow and floods of gush. The sincerity of sentiment is affected in the end if, in the end, it all comes to nothing.

Can we live with this coming to nothing? The simple answer is: no. Our ruses of escape are testament enough to this. We distract ourselves with “meaning.” Perhaps we should live the shattering more deeply. We do come to nothing. We are as nothing: a double ambiguous conjunction of being and nothing. We are but are as nothing, and experience our nothingness as the frailty of our finitude, as the perplexity of being that resists being dispelled, as the mystery of being that remains despite our best conceptual maneuvers. The truth brings us to despair of truth, and of ourselves, and of the good. Nihilism, the truth of nihilism brings us to despair of God.

Despair may destroy; despair may also bring one to a bottom, to a crisis, hence to a turning point. What can happen then? The idol of autonomy can be broken open. The shattered idol shows us nothing, shows us our own nothingness. Coming to nothing may be the reopening in us of the porosity of being. The event of being shattered is not in itself decisive; it is more the moment of truth in which we must decide. It is critical in this exact sense: it brings on a crisis. We are brought before judgment. The ordeal is an *oordeel*, a judgment, as much on us as our being called to judgment. Equally so, the crisis is a *krinein*, it asks for a discrimination. And what then, on this sharp edge that cuts (us) to the quick? We can give the doubleness of our “being as nothing” over to nothing. Or we can live the tension of our “being as nothing” differently. The ghost of God haunts the despair of nothing.

Nihilism? Surely this is your wonted tendency to exaggeration, dramatic and postured. Tosh. Nihilism? – a posture, once à la mode, now passé for the advanced intellectuals who have gone way beyond it to the weightless delights of unencumbered irony. While for those who reckon less on these advances, surely we live in an age of comfort and air-conditioning, and niceness. Nihilism? Come now!

Yes, there is something to such a protest. And yet . . . at the bland heart of having a nice day horror can nest – and the niceness of it all, if finally without ultimate point, hints more a horror than an honest confession of horror that it all comes to nothing. Niceness can be a profane parody of the agape of being, but it grins with emptiness, if that agape is gone. And that indeed is nihilism – the faking of the festivity of this agape. Let us have a nice day, but let us not sleep too deep in the comfort of this shadowless light.

For the various projects of will to power hide failure, not on the obvious level of pragmatic successes, but at a subtler level of metaphysical basics, that is to say, estrangements from the primal ethos. Pragmatic successes may hugely crowd the foreground of our everyday absorptions but they crowd out the hollowness – in the background – of our hold

on metaphysical basics. Can one carry on as if calculated contentment with the necessary pragmatic compromises were enough, as if it were in bad taste to be passionately earnest about this ultimate issue? Pragmatic compromises are essential and necessary, but gird them round with prudent rationalizations and we may reveal less our fear of truth as perhaps alarm at what might be required of us, were we truthful. Perhaps the archaic disquiet, in being startled by traces of the divine, attuned more to the primal ethos, was a more noble disquiet. (Once upon a time the atheist had to go in hiding; being godless enforced esotericism. Who now among the savants is the inquisitor – the pious or the impious? Is it the pious who now must dissemble, become differently esoteric? Query too exoterically posed, perhaps.)

Suppose coming to nothing, “being as nothing,” constituted a kind of ontological ordeal. Suppose in this there is both a deepening and a sifting: deepening, since we are thrown back on ourselves; sifting, in that we may be purged of impediments blocking our release to what is beyond us. Self-knowing may come to know that self is not enough, and ask if there is an other beyond self, intimated either in the inward otherness of the *passio essendi*, or in the transcendent as other (be it inner or outer, it does not matter). Suppose the return to zero intensifies the tension in the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence, and at a certain pitch of stress, the idol of autonomy crumbles. The antinomy need not be resolved simplistically relative to one side or the other. Rather, in breakdown there may be offered a breakthrough; and not of transcendence as simply *in opposition* to autonomy, but of transcendence as communicating a quite other exigence, calling on the release of our seeking beyond autonomy.

Seen so, this ordeal does not offer a secular *nunc dimittis* which dispenses us to turn away from perplexity about ultimacy. Faced with the blank front of pointlessness, the ordeal returns us to a zero point. World, or self, or others do not vanish, but finding their immanent point forsaken, the point of it all must be sought again by us. Can return to zero resurrect a new perplexity, intensified by loss? Can it hollow out a purer space in which we can seek anew concerning the divine? Can it prepare for a resurrected patience to ultimate transcendence, a new porosity to God?