2

"No Block Creation"

Good and Evil in William Desmond's Augustinian Philosophy of Elemental Order

An elemental appreciation of creation entails acknowledging that the fundamental human experiences of goodness and of evil cannot ever fit precisely into a predominantly rationalistic philosophical or theological system. This chapter explores this claim, thereby developing a theme opened up in the previous chapter. Specifically, it will examine the implications of thinking of creation as a closed whole, instead of as a dynamic fullness constantly in communication with divine transcendence. Discussion here develops specifically through examining the idea of being elemental, as it is to be found in the work of William Desmond, and in turn influenced by Augustine's interrelated notions of creation, freedom and redemption.[1] Drawing from Augustine's understanding of intimations of divine transcendence within the world,[2] Desmond asserts the good of the "to be" of

1. In this work, I will mainly refer to William Desmond's *God and the Between*. I will also draw upon his works *Being*, *Ethics*, and *Philosophy and Its Others*. I will mainly take examples for Augustine from his *Confessions*. For further studies of the Augustinian resonances within Desmond's work, see Pickstock, "What Shines Between"; and the previous chapter.

2. Augustine's idea of intimacy, specifically that God is *interior intimo meo*, or more intimate to me than I am to myself, can be directly related to Desmond's understanding of the "idiocy of being" (see for instance *God and the Between*, 36.) While I do not discuss idiocy or porosity explicitly here, both are influenced by this Augustinian notion of intimacy. For a more developed articulation of Augustinian notions of porosity, read through *God and the Between*, and see chapter 3 of the present volume.

creation, without at the same time dismissing human familiarity with the existence of evil. His view of creation as a continual elemental unfolding, rather than a simply given "block," is in this respect crucial, because it allows for personal orientation, from within a deeply fissured cosmos, toward a divine origin.

Each of the main points of the following discussion is developed in relationship to experiences of the elemental (or, in the first case, of to an image of the diametrically opposed (philosophically) modern conception of our relationship to God). In this way, I hope to emphasize that persons, qua elemental creatures, cannot engage with the world solely within the constraints of narrowly defined reason. Instead, the person as a whole—imaginatively and actively—is implicated in good and evil as these are manifestly present in creation. I begin with an image of creation that serves as a counterexample to the model of creation under consideration here: that creation is a clock, left to us by a now absent clockmaker. This mechanistic image cannot do justice to the intricacies of the created order. I then discuss the idea of a "block creation," as Desmond calls it, and challenge this specifically with the attributes of elemental creation. Thirdly, attention shifts to the significance of those moments in which we feel an absence rather than a presence of goodness in our lives. Finally, the experience of the other as radically evil is examined as a key point in elemental appreciation of the real possibility of being good in the face of what cannot be rationally known in its entirety. As I conclude, for Desmond, moments in which evil, presented to us in the face and actions of the "malign(ed) other," can provoke only one response appropriate to the agapeic origin[3] of creation. Only forgiveness can be true to our source, and the ultimate meaning of anything and everything that takes place in the realm in which we find ourselves, the *metaxu*. That this response is ethical, and thus lived, is significant in that it underlines again the elemental realities of good and evil, inseparable from us as we intermediate with others, world, and ultimately God. Furthermore, true forgiveness extends beyond simple reasonability. Forgiveness refuses to explain away evil, instead defying the latter through a specific and personal elemental act of transcendent goodness.

3. The main senses of the *agapeic* within Desmond's work that I allude to throughout this contribution are developed in various ways throughout his works. In *God and the Between*, see especially chapter 7, but also page 59. For a discussion of the importance of the idea of agapeic origin in Desmond's work, see Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics*, 107–10.

God as Clockmaker: The Mechanistic Model of Creation

In order to appreciate the significance of thinking the world as elemental, it is helpful first to consider an opposing model. For this, we can turn to Desmond's *God and the Between*, where, when discussing univocal ways of thinking about God, he offers two related images that signal the dangers inherent in thinking about our relationship to God through creation only in terms of mathematical intelligibility. Modernity comes to the point, he argues, where God's relationship to what he has made is nothing more than that of a clockmaker to a clock (the world as a whole) or a watchmaker to a set of watches (where the watches are individual humans). In (post-) modernity, Desmond argues, the result of our striving to become in charge of nature is that we are left with a world devoid of goodness. Power has replaced goodness, and God, when deemed simply the most powerful of all that has power, becomes defined only in terms of having the absolute power to bring into effect.[4] Humans begin to think of God as though he is a clockmaker, says Desmond, and the inevitable result is that they think of the world as a machine. Everything about such a machine is based on power and efficiency. This is not an organic way of thinking about the world. In place of the equivocal modes of being in the world, where "life" and "love" are impossible to pin down and yet always inform a worldview, we have only "mathematical univocalizations."[5] Unlike an organic life form, a machine can be dismantled and examined—interrogated, even—not in terms of goodness, but for its efficiency. Machines can, that is, be judged according to external criteria.[6] We are not dealing with a world that is good in itself. In synch with this worldview, Diderot comes to characterize humans as "walking watches" and we then think of God as an engineer working on the larger clock that is the world, with mechanised and precise "eternal geometry."[7] In such a vision, God's connections to world and humans are necessarily far removed from us. In the moment of making, the clockmaker was everything to the clock. Now, though, he is irrelevant, his presence an empty echo of a past long gone.

What more might be said of the Maker of creation, if creation is held to be like a clock and we like watches, left to be found and analyzed? To

4. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 63.
5. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 63.
6. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 63.
7. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 63.

be sure, these devices might be intriguing, and we could conceivably even admire the intellectual prowess and technical abilities of the one who could make them. However, when God's act of creation is seen only as a moment in the past, which has little to do with our everyday lives here and now, the result is either overt or pseudo atheism. Like Sartre the atheist, one is compelled to reject a tyrant whose very existence would divest us of all freedom. Sartre's image of God as artisan entails that nothing that the creator makes can act out of true freedom. All must be determined, because someone who makes an object always does so with a fixed nature in mind. Divine desire, inflexible from the beginning, cannot abide anything other to itself.[8] An alternate picture of creation as rationalistic and mechanistic can be found in someone like Leibniz, who wants a completely rational God. Desmond observes that such hyper-rationalism leads to its opposite: the irrationality of a world in which evil is explicable, as part of a best possible world. Here, Desmond argues, we are bereft both of freedom and of "the overdeterminacy that releases it."[9] The origin cannot speak to us out of this overdeterminacy, and so we are incapable of being open to the free givenness of being. No longer able to know that being is a gift, we become incapable of "mindfulness"; instead, reason "sleepwalks," having built up "constructions."[10] The latter explain everything, and at the same time nothing. Such constructions can be completely understood, but they leave out the very essence of being in a cosmos that sustains and communicates the goodness of being and the transcendent beneficence of a divine benefactor.[11] According to Desmond, *counterfeit doubles* of God are prevalent in (post-)modern thought.[12] Each offers something that looks like it could be divine transcendence, but which is essentially valueless and fraudulent. Leibniz the theist cannot offer a God of agapeic love, which would guarantee that the other can always be free, even to the point of coming to be evil.

Such insipid renderings of the nature of created goodness—its parts simply move, and so it *works*—have many problems. Perhaps the most striking is that they can in no way account for the elementally experienced

8. Desmond refers to Sartre's idea of creation as found in Sartre, *Existentialism*. See in particular Desmond, *God and the Between*, 65.

9. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 68.

10. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 68.

11. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 68.

12. See Desmond, *Hegel's God*, 9, for a discussion of Desmond's definition of "counterfeit double."

presence of evil within the world. When evil fits too neatly into a systematic account, the result can be even more dissatisfying than when it is overlooked entirely. The image whereby the world is a clock, in which we are mere cogs, or else watches mechanically going through the motions, is the picture of a universe forsaken. Perhaps it was loved when it was made, and it may even be still held in something like divine regard. But this is a God with a distant gaze and a seeming lack of interest in being involved in any way in the world that he has started up.[13] Desmond does not rule out that this counterfeit of God might need to "intervene" now and again, so that the machine-like universe keeps operating as it should.[14] However, such interventions are hardly to be understood as coming from the hand of a loving God who assures and tends directly to the freedom, development and growth of his creatures. The clock has been set, and it ticks away; it is predictable and predetermined. Here there is no space for prayer, and no possible reason for the mysterious workings of grace.

Desmond's response to the univocal picture of creation given in the rational world view can be understood via his sense of such overdeterminacy and freedom, each of which issue from an agapeic source in whose work we can participate. As Desmond says, we can actually *cooperate* in creation, becoming co-creators, by reiterating what is already present in the overdetermined source of what is. In order to approach these terms, I will now discuss Desmond's elemental appreciation of creation, which iterates views of freedom and creation very much influenced by Augustine.

Elemental Intimations of the Divine

Desmond's philosophy of the between invites one to find clues of the meaning of being, beginning with where we are, in the created order. Looking around us, in the *metaxu*,[15] between and at the same time involved in the truth that can be found there, it is fitting to say that creation is actually not completely determined. It is, instead, overdetermined. Everything that we experience offers viewpoints toward something more. Thus, at any given moment of personal involvement in creation, one is immersed in meanings of which one is both aware and unaware. No event is ever exhausted in its

13. See Desmond, *God and the Between*, 255.

14. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 255.

15. *Metaxu* is Desmond's term for the "middle" or the "between." See the introduction to the present volume.

implications, for: "[i]n creation beings are not completely constituted from the outset. They are in process of becoming themselves. So they are not completely coincident with themselves."[16] Taking together the values inherent in the goodness of creation in its constant becoming, one can derive insight into the array of ways in which divine presence is uttered throughout creation. Overdetermination, that is, entails not thinking of creation as a "block," made and let alone with no possibility to strive beyond.[17] As William Desmond says in *Ethics and the Between*,

> . . . this is no block creation. There is a pluralism to creation, reflected in the pluralism of original powers marking different beings. The good of beings is shown in the ontological integrity, out of which a being's powers emerge into expression, and shown in the harmony of wholeness it seeks to attain in fulfilling these its powers.[18]

Creation may well display some kinds of uniform attributes, but it is by no means static.

We are, then, by nature of an elemental order that is constantly rearranging itself, as its finite members shift into and out of being as humans know it in the world. For Desmond, creation constantly announces an order of goodness; this is also the case for Augustine, who emphatically echoes Saint Paul's claim that anyone who cannot find signs of God when wondering at and meditating upon creation is "without excuse."[19] Here it is particularly helpful to describe some of the main attributes of the elemental in relationship to the elemental philosophy present in the thought of Augustine. In this way we can come closer to elucidating what precisely is at stake in Desmond's elemental, metaxological[20] vision of creation. Specifically, Augustine sustains the value of all that is created, while at the same time doing justice to the confusing nature of that same world's chiaroscuro of being. To speak in Desmond's terms, Augustine does so by emphasizing the relationship of divine transcendence to the world, in its agapeic, overdetermined intermediations. I will here call upon both Augustine and

16. Desmond, *Being*, 279.

17. See Desmond, *God and the Between*, 168.

18. Desmond, *Ethics*, 164.

19. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.8. Augustine is quoting Romans 1:20. References to the *Confessions* throughout this volume refer to the Boulding translation unless stated otherwise.

20. See the introduction to the present volume, and also Desmond, *Being*, xii.

Desmond to describe what is at stake in being elemental. While focus in this section is on the ways in which the elemental specifically conveys the goodness of being, it serves as a precursor to discussion in the next, final section, which deals with how freedom within elemental creation is the key to understanding experiences of darkness, of despair, and even of radical evil within the *metaxu*. This same freedom is vital to the possibility of forgiveness, which can be gainfully compared with Augustine's appreciation of the reality of redemption.

Augustine's approach to the elements is metaxological in that it begins precisely in the *between*, within the world in which we already live. We too are caught up in that world, and can, like him and with Desmond, find that our relationship to divine transcendence is essentially of an elemental order. The elemental can be thought in two ways. First, it can be understood literally in terms of earth, air, fire and water. Secondly, one can think of the elemental as the involvement of the whole person in creation. In the latter instances, one is taken up into an experience of the world that can never be exhausted in its known intelligibility. That is, the elemental constantly surprises and always exceeds us. These modes announce themselves emphatically at certain unexpected moments, which abruptly pull us up to face the reality that we are predisposed to respond to the primordial goodness of Creator and creation.

To know the first way of approaching the elemental, we can turn to Augustine's discussion in Book X of his *Confessions*, where he speaks of his experience of earth, air, fire and water, each in terms of its particular and idiosyncratic aspects. He calls upon each in turn: the earth, "the sea and the great deep and the teeming live creatures that crawl," "the gusty winds, and every breeze with all its flying creatures" and "the sky . . . sun, moon, stars." They are so compelling in their majesty that he "puts [his] question" to them, begging "Tell me of my God . . . You are not he, but tell me something of him." Each in its own way points him beyond. These elements, who stand "around the portals of [his] flesh," "[lift] up their mighty voices and [cry] 'He made us.'"[21] Augustine hears each reply in its own voice, with what he says is their unique mark of the beauty, which the creator is still bestowing. But in order for him to hear that response, he must foster proper receptiveness. This, his "attentive spirit," is his openness to the otherness of creation, which has everything to tell him about himself, about what it is to be of the created order. Similar attentiveness is at work throughout Desmond's work.

21. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.9–10.

For instance, in *God and the Between*, among other descriptions he relates how we constantly use our senses, and how touch in particular brings us into contact with the cosmos as it transmits life and love.[22] Elsewhere in the same work he muses on how the world communicates itself to us through the ways that we experience its equivocal immediacy. This has aesthetic dimensions: we are erotically drawn toward the beauty of the world, not only through "sexual eros" but via such experiences as breathing in the air of a summer morning, living in unison with the "aesthetic show of creation."[23]

The metaxological sensibilities that Augustine and Desmond both express derive from their shared capacity to learn from the dynamism and diversity of the elements. Such ways of being and expression also convey that a person continues to learn from and grow together with the ways of creation. All that is created, says Desmond, is constantly "coming to be."[24] Likewise, in Augustine's descriptions, each of the elements is engaged in some kind of activity. For Desmond, creation is perpetually in transition, and yet, far from disorienting and displacing us, its elemental movement "is transition as vector of transcendence. Creation as universal impermanence, as it were, reaches beyond its open wholeness to its own transcendent ground."[25] Thus, creation is dynamic, rather than static; and this dynamism indicates the nature of its transcendent ground as actively participating in everything as it comes to be. Elemental creation offers resources through which to know our relationship to transcendent being. Like us, the elements are filled with movement and life. Like us too, each element in its unique way of being, in its constant and astonishing unfolding of selfhood, expresses something of the goodness of creation.

However, there is another aspect of the elemental which is quintessentially human, not shared by the elements. Unlike us, the elements do not experience perplexity; and they cannot practice the same mindful cooperation with creation to which persons are intimately called. Humans, that is, have the capacity to rise above finite concerns, to appreciate and enrich intermediations of divine transcendence within the world. The second way of appreciating what it means to be elemental can bring the latter points more clearly to the fore. It is not imperative that the second way of being elemental explicitly include one of the four primary elements. Instead,

22. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 17.
23. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 75.
24. See especially Desmond, *God and the Between*, 248–50.
25. Desmond, *Being*, 293.

being elemental in this sense means complete involvement in the world's ways of signifying transcendence: moments of elemental awareness can be fleeting. They are, though, no less startling for that, and they tend to awaken perplexity and wonder at the constant incarnations of goodness within creation. Desmond considers:

> Most often these communications are godsends that come quietly. The agapeics of the divine arrive unobtrusively in the most hidden of elemental things: a mustard seed, a smile, a song, a glint of sun, a drink of pure water, a child holding one's hand, the comfort of fire on a bitter day, the uninsistent aid of an agapeic servant.[26]

In themselves, each of these is seemingly insignificant, even appearing as nothing. Unless we attend to what each has to say about the transcendent source, they are indeed cast into a realm of nothingness. However, each has the capacity to remind that we are enmeshed in a world in which everything that exists has excessive, overdetermined meaning, derived from its source, which is overabundant and good. Each is, in fact, a concrete member of the community of creation of which we are members. Like other creatures, we are created.

What we find in creation and the ways that it affects and moves us indicates not a univocal God who sets the world in stone and leaves it alone, but instead a creator who makes in ways that enmesh creatures entirely in their made milieu, if the same creatures be willing to do so. In other words, if we not only look at but become completely involved in the world, we can find what is transcendent to, and yet somehow intimated within, the dynamic order in which we live. The significance of the elemental, then, is that it can bring us closer to knowing its source—which means also our own source. It makes no sense by such a reckoning to insist on a model of creation that has little or nothing to do with us or with God. In Desmond's terms again, we are not living in or dealing philosophically with a "block creation," made once and then ignored. Augustine, too, expresses joy and astonishment at the varieties of praise that creation offers to its transcendent source. Every creature is to him a sign of the worthiness of what has been made, but also of God, the Creator's love. Nonetheless, both Augustine and Desmond describe and account for moments when goodness is not so readily apparent. It is to these that we now turn, so as to find the

26. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 338.

space in which forgiveness and redemption prove to be our cooperation in the primordial work of goodness in creation and in our lives.

Agapeic Love, Human Freedom, and the Elemental Problem of Evil

The overdeterminacy of creation makes itself felt not only in affirmative moments of elemental experience. In experiences of a more negative ilk, one can begin to discern how the elemental speaks of the nature of evil and the appropriate human response to its instantiations in the world. Augustine's *Confessions* offers a vast range of examples of the strange ways in which evil insinuates itself in our lives, and by that fact whispers about an agapeic source. Throughout that work, without quite understanding why, Augustine feels physically and emotionally overcome with a sense of disorientation. Whether he is wantonly and without reason throwing pears to pigs;[27] yearning for the grace of conversion of the will;[28] weeping at the loss of his mother;[29] or declaring that his transformative love for the Lord has come too late,[30] Augustine expresses heartfelt longing that no univocal, rational system can explain away. What Desmond in turn calls "being at a loss" Augustine accounts for in theological terms as a result of original sin. Desmond speaks in philosophical terms about *creatio ex nihilo*. To be sure, this formulation has theological ancestry and ties. Nonetheless, considering it in terms of being and of non-being, brings to light that it is also squarely within the main area of metaphysical discourse.

This way of thinking creation cannot be confined to univocal discourse, but instead calls for terms of elemental intercommunication. Within a vibrant picture of the elemental, one cannot deny those moments of lack, felt when something of the nothingness out of which creation has been made creeps into moments of our everyday lives. Desmond describes explicitly, saying:

> we must consider a more radical sense of indeterminate nothing. Something of it is 'manifest' in our encounter with radical evil. It is intimated in the mortality of beings, beings marked by the

27. Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.9.

28. Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.19.

29. Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.33. For the significance of weeping throughout the *Confessions*, see previous chapter, note 26.

30. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.38.

> extraordinary singularity of their 'once.' We are touched by it when we despair: everything seems to 'come to nothing' and we ourselves 'are as nothing.' Beyond all determinate intelligibility, we experience a radical 'being at a loss.'[31]

These moments recall us to ourselves with an eeriness suggesting that the overdetermined cosmos tells not only of an agapeic source, but also of that origin's relationship to what has been made. We are reminded that without God, there is simply nothing, and that absolute reliance of all of existence on such absolute surplus is truly lived in various strange ways. Taken by surprise, we are forced to find ways to explain these unexpected inklings which threaten to be absolutely meaningless. When finite meaning is cast within the framework of an overarching intelligibility that allows us to make sense of these moments, they do not lose their peculiarity. Rather, that jarring feeling is thereby done justice, opening up ways of knowing how we experience the nothing, rather than resorting to the rationalistic option of declaring that evil is simply part of the way that the whole system works; or else that it, like everything that we encounter, makes no sense whatsoever.

Here too recourse to Augustine is helpful. Specifically his philosophy of creation opens up an overdeterminate universe of freedom, such that the Creator is both distinct from and yet intimately involved in creation. While upholding the goodness of Creator and creation, Augustine acknowledges the constant seeming presence of privation of that goodness in our everyday lives. One need not launch into an excursus about Augustine's theory of evil as privation to derive a point vital to understanding the elemental. Precisely, for Augustine, good's privation must always be put in its place. It is as nothing; next to goodness, evil even in the most radical form must turn away, blinded by the hyper-intelligibility through which all that is made constantly comes to be. The problem of theodicy, re-phrased by Desmond, is pertinent here. He asks: if God is agapeic, then how is he not somehow "complicit" in evil? After all, he lets it happen. Is he, then, holding himself back from stopping evil?[32] Such a view, though, would undermine the radical—"hyperbolic"—sense of freedom granted by agapeic love.[33]

31. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 244.

32. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 256.

33. See Christopher Ben Simpson's gloss on the consistency in Desmond's argument for an agapeic God *and* the existence of evil in creation: ". . . there is a conceptual consistency between the existence of an agapeic origin and the existence of evil, for a creation

Let us refer momentarily to Augustine before returning to this point within Desmond's philosophy. Namely, for Augustine, human freedom, together with the freedom of the whole created order, issues from the continual speaking of the Creator. With the words "Let there be . . . ," present in the beginning of *Genesis*, God sets into motion an entire world with the capacity to turn toward him or else to turn away.[34] This beginning is continuous for Augustine, and personal conversion is the most intense cooperation with creation. To convert is to be re-created and re-formed;[35] it is to turn away from sin in order to move with, rather than against, the currents of divine love that stream through the world. Again, this is no block creation. It has not happened once and for all, but is still uttered, for as long as creation is in existence, coming to be. This letting be of beings on the part of the Creator is, of course, no *laissez faire* attitude in the crudest sense of the term. Instead, when God lets beings be, he does not determine their existence; he allows them to unfold.

As Desmond later indicates, God lets being be other; he does not reduce otherness to manifestations of selfhood. This is an Augustinian understanding of creation, and it can be found in the following:

> In originating creatures, God communicates but reserves power to allow their power to be. God's power is *absolute* relative to the coming to be, but it is *cooperative* relative to the becoming of created beings . . . In the reserve of divine patience, the gift of freedom sometimes means allowing by doing nothing, sometimes secret rejoicing with the creature, sometimes anonymous coaxing, sometimes persuading silently. The reserve of the divine cannot be separated from the finesse: intimate companionship with the mortal creature, devotion to its good, courtesy to its singular integrity. God is esteem for the gift, honoring the promise that we are come to redeem.[36]

The elemental conveys such intimacy. It enables us not to rationalize away God's presence to us, but instead to wonder at it, even perhaps especially in those moments when evil insinuates its presence into our lives. Being at a

---

without the possibility of evil is not the result of agapeic creation, not truly other to the creator, not released, free." Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics*, 110.

34. See Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," 173.

35. For a more detailed discussion of the idea of reformation, especially in Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, see Ladner, "Saint Augustine and the Difference," 153–283; and Harrison, "Measure, Number, and Weight."

36. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 257.

loss can tempt us to deny the very existence of superabundant goodness. It is then, though, that nothingness begins to feed upon itself. The only antidote to the meaninglessness that such experience of nothingness implies is in turning to the surplus of meaning that constantly runs through our very pores, and yet remains in its entirety beyond our grasp.

What then can we make of evil, intimated to us radically and otherwise in our elemental ways of being in the world? How does the vision of an overdeterminate creation constantly issuing from an agapeic source account for its presence? Such a picture, in sharp contrast to the theistic picture of the abandoned clock, constantly exceeds any determinate statements we might make about it. The world slips away from any attempt at conceptual reach, as our mindfulness strives to catch up with moments of intense elemental awareness. This way of being asks that we view the seeming presence of evil with a spirit that goes beyond any bare concept. Specifically, it calls not only toward a way of rational knowing, but also of being and of acting. Any recognition of evil demands the seemingly paradoxical personal acknowledgement that goodness is the source. Without goodness, evil would be unrecognizable.

That is, radical evil, acknowledged for what it is, calls us to forgive, in this way allowing us to move with, rather than against, the source of our elemental awakenings and unquenchable perplexities. Such forgiveness is the most hyperbolic and at the same time most fundamental way we can find to *cooperate* in creation. It is the most intense and intimate ethical concretion of being good. And ethics, as Desmond constantly reminds, cannot be truly thought unless it relies upon the "it is good" of creation. Perhaps it is not too much to say that for Desmond—and here too he proves very Augustinian—it is only when we find ourselves at a loss that we can discover the profundity of divine promise. While radical evil cannot fit into any systematic picture of creation, its excess can indicate the inadequacy of the finite human terms through which we strive to understand the existence of radical and seemingly absolutely senseless evil. Desmond's suggestion—framed in terms of a *perhaps*—is that "Only God as absolute can suggest to us that perhaps, perhaps, what is damned for us, I mean absolutely lost, is given reprieve or another chance. Who among us can say?"[37]

What we can say, through our comportment toward the world and through that world to God, can strive toward acknowledging the possibility of that other chance. In his earlier work *Philosophy and its Others*,

37. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 257.

Desmond suggests that the limits of the ethical—where being ethical passes over into being religious—are to be found at the moment where we cannot understand the radical, seemingly evil, other, and yet find within ourselves the resources to forgive.[38] In *God and the Between*, he is more explicit about the potencies of forgiveness, especially in relationship to our elementally circumscribed cooperation with the divine source of everything that exists. Desmond states that when we say "It is nothing," to the one we forgive, we nullify what would otherwise be only evil. We replace "guilt and indebtedness"[39] with an assuredness in the primal divine gift of being itself. When we release an evil so that we make it into nothing, at the same time we open up a space of freedom. Gratitude is now possible, and obligation and the law are seen in light of something greater.[40] We know them, as it were, at "zero point."[41] We sense and find their origin, in a moment that does not need to happen, but that, when it does come to pass, enables us to see freedom for what it is, in relation to being.[42] Forgiveness, then, one might say, is a kind of relief, a respite within the complexity of elementally inspired hyper-awareness and perplexity. It is a glimpse of the peace for which Augustine hunts, even as it courts him, in his restless striving. That final peace, in the presence of divine transcendence, is anticipated in every moment of elemental experience. Our elemental experiences of good and of evil already indicate that this peace will be anything but monotonous. Forgiveness derives from the same source as the elemental. By entering into attentive awareness of what the elemental has to tell us, of the goodness of the "to be" and its transcendent source, forgiveness becomes possible. The finitude of created things in moments of forgiveness reveals that creation is no "block," but constantly in the process of emergence. Our cooperation, in the "vector of transcendence" where we, with creation, come to be, is the undergoing of personal redemption, the promise of which is constantly present in the primordial goodness of creation.

38. See especially Desmond, *Philosophy and Its Others*, 201–5.
39. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 287.
40. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 287.
41. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 30.
42. Desmond, *God and the Between*, 287.