

Introduction

COMPANIONSHIP IS AT THE heart of philosophical work that strives to discover the truth of what it means to be human. Companions break and consume bread together, and in this communally enjoyed nourishment, they can participate in fulfilled desires for intimacy with others. That intimacy brings with it a greater knowledge of the self, and more importantly of how the self is constantly thrown beyond itself, related to that which lies beyond. For Augustine, such self-understanding only happens when in communication with God—that limitless mystery of love at the root of all our desires and relationships. Philosophers and theologians—and poets and artists too—form a community that spans millennia, of persons earnestly attuned to finding and expressing the meaning of existence. These responses to being—to the “passion of being” that William Desmond refers to in the title of one of his more recent works¹—appreciate that communities of inquiry are possible only because of a divinely bestowed gift. To paraphrase a scriptural verse, we are called to know and love the world, because through that world the divine has first made something of itself known, through the love that humans experience in various manifestations.²

Humans have the capacity to wonder, and thus to be *porous*³ to the way that creation moves in and through us, as we respond to its manifestations of divine mystery. Any contemporary thinker can look back to a predecessor, and find in him or her an approach to being and to the divine mystery that resonates and inspires. William Desmond argues that such an earlier explorer can become a companion in thought. The fourth chapter of this volume discusses how Desmond thinks of both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as such companions. Here it is worthwhile to signal further the

1. Desmond, *Gift of Beauty*.

2. 1 John 4:19.

3. This term runs throughout Desmond's work and will be discussed throughout this volume.

significance of Augustine and Desmond's relationship in thought as that of companions, thereby discussing the significance of the title and major themes of this book.

Desmond has written of what he calls a "companioning approach" that a thinker can take, whereby

a particular thinker is a source of inspiration and challenge, not always explicitly acknowledged as such, but of influence perhaps at a more intimate level, providing something like a secret touchstone, in relation to intellectual and spiritual excellence.⁴

He identifies Augustine in particular as such a companion, and the present work traces out some of the ways in which that companionship has impressed its intimate delineations within Desmond's metaxological philosophy.⁵ His significant gift to possible present and future companions is his metaxological approach to metaphysics, which simultaneously opens up pathways between various modes of thought, by delving into the ways that humans find themselves in the world and at the same time thrown beyond it. The thinker of the *metaxu* is alert to the hyperbolic modes of thought, finding whispers of divine intimacy in the dimensions of human life. This opens up possibilities for philosophers to engage in multifarious ways with other disciplines. Where the modern and contemporary tendency in philosophy has been to segregate areas of inquiry, Desmond's thought makes the case that each is porous to the others. As a philosopher he can speak to theologians, artists, poets, ethicists, and political scientists—and thereby find more possibilities for companionship. Similarly, Augustine has much to say not only to his fellow theologians and pastors, but also to philosophers, and those who seek truth, beauty, and goodness in all its forms. Both Augustine and Desmond appreciate that when philosophy and theology are porous to one another, findings are both rich and immense.

In Desmond's work, one can discern Augustinian ways of questioning—prayerful, perplexed, passionate, and personally engaged.⁶ Even when not developing a specifically Augustinian question or concept, Desmond's manner of philosophizing follows what he identifies as the Augustinian

4. Desmond, "Superiority Beyond Interiority."

5. Metaxological philosophy considers being in its various dimensions as "between." This is discussed throughout this book, and in particular in chapter 3. It is also discussed further below in this introduction.

6. Arguably, one sees this in particular in *God and the Between*, where Desmond's Cantos set a prayerful space for philosophy.

pathway—from exterior to interior, from inferior to superior. Thereby, Augustine's recognition that we are never alone but constantly in relation to God, self, others, and the cosmos, permeates metaxological considerations. Desmond also occasionally recalls Augustine's claim in the *Soliloquies* that all he wants to know are God and the soul—"nothing more." Both God and soul are infinite sources for inquiry. Augustine knows that he will need help to get anywhere at all in exploring these. This will be aid from God, but also from those who have provoked him to think, in various communities. Thus, Augustine relies on Monica and Alypius, Cicero and Plato, Ambrose, those whom he serves as a pastor and bishop, and those with whom he carries out correspondence. At the same time, he is in conversation with those before him who have transmitted the Word of God through Church and history. In the company of others, Augustine can carry out his inquiries; and he can see more than he could have if working alone. Like Augustine, Desmond acknowledges those with whom he looks ahead. While both Augustine and Desmond gaze in the same direction, Desmond explicitly and implicitly develops Augustine's perspective on that vista. The following chapters develop another standpoint, which is that Augustine can be viewed through a metaxological lens. Thereby, taking a companioning approach both with and between Augustine and Desmond, we can see further, but also in more depth and detail, what it means to think and pray in the *between*.

Metaxological philosophy studies the *metaxu*, which Desmond translates as the *between* or the *middle*. Desmond takes the term from Plato's *Symposium*, where it refers to *eros*. The one who embarks on metaxological philosophy is driven by fruitful restlessness that characterizes all of Augustine's work. Such inquiry can only find rest in God, which is to say in *agape*, or *caritas*; however, such rest is by no means stationary. Human existence is lived between various forces, or potencies, each of which influences all the others. Metaxological inquiry seeks to explore and express what it means to be in the middle; but also how metaphysics is *per se* metaxological. That is, if being is characterized by the porosity that humans find in their everyday lives, how can philosophers—or indeed, any thinkers—articulate this?

One way to answer this question is to compare the metaxological with other ways of thinking that Desmond develops, discusses, and incorporates. He speaks of the univocal, equivocal, and dialectical approaches to being; each of these is important, but insufficient for disclosing the fullness of being. According to the univocal, thinkers strive to find and develop how being speaks in one way, or one voice. If this were our only means to

approach reality, we would be forced eventually into silence. As it is, the univocal is only one way of being and being known, important to metaxological philosophy not least because it explains the sense of oneness that humans can experience *with* being. Such unification grounds what Desmond calls the *idiocy of being*, which is a felt elemental oneness that cannot quite be put into words, but which nonetheless strives to say how it feels to be. Negatively, the univocal can be subverted to say that being only speaks in one way; nothing else becomes permissible, and the result is tyranny for thought and action.

Equivocity brings us to another way in which being speaks so that we can articulate it. While the univocal stresses sameness, equivocity pertains to difference that cannot be pinned down by one (univocal) way of saying what is. Positively, equivocity draws our attention to the plurality of being—its plurivocity; it underscores that being cannot be restrained, because it is always changing, constantly becoming. Being is always in surplus; it is beyond the possibility of complete mediation. Without another mode of enquiry to supplement its discoveries, the equivocal can tear thought from being—making it seem as though meaning is an illusion and nothing can be known.

Dialectic enters as a third way to philosophize, which mediates the univocal and the equivocal, such that they do not settle into shallow oneness or dissipate into fragmentary plurality. Dialectic in this sense was brought to perfection by Hegel. An expert in Hegel's thought, Desmond draws attention to how deficient such dialectic is when it becomes a closed system rather than an open whole. Dialectic stresses mediation, such that the subject overcomes the other, subsuming other into self so that there is no surplus. All is rationalized, and much is explained away. The problems with dialectic may now be apparent; rather than maintaining the strengths of the univocal and equivocal—letting them speak—the dialectical reduces all to one story, or picture, of being—where everything is a piece of a complete whole, and nothing lies beyond.

Beyond the closed dialectic of Hegel's modernity is the metaxological, which Desmond thinks of as an open dialectic. The metaxological is speech, or discourse, about the middle named by *metaxu*. As such, the metaxological distinguishes *between* all, without thereby obliterating any, of the various ways in which being speaks. The metaxological stresses that there is a community of beings in which all forms of human being-together are grounded. Hence, metaxological philosophy listens to the univocal.

At the same time, it seeks out where differences lie, and accentuates those equivocalities. This then makes space for the self-mediating possibilities of dialectic, bringing them to the point of *Aufhebung*, or sublation. That is to say, dialectic goes so far and no further. Finding that point of unmediated surplus brings the metaxological into its own, with implications for metaphysics and at the same time for every way in which we live our lives.

All of these ideas are present in the following chapters, especially for how they can be deepened via resources in one of Desmond's main influences: Augustine. Throughout his work, Desmond is in dialog with various thinkers—philosophers, theologians, poets—and some of these he refers to as companions in thought. In this respect, Augustine is a significant figure for developing metaxological philosophy. That is to say, Desmond identifies Augustine as someone who has influenced his philosophical approaches, by being a companion in thought. The chapters of this book go into specific detail about what such companionship entails. For now, identifying some key themes and points of reference will orientate what follows.

Firstly, the way Augustine contemplates *between* thought and prayer, and also between metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and politics, is, to use Desmond's term, a very *metaxological* approach. Augustine is a synthetic thinker. Knowledge is connected and never arbitrary. Ultimately, it indicates the existence of a personal relationship to the divine. Augustine is driven to find the personal implications of what is true. When he discovers such impacts, he makes known his findings, to whichever audience he finds most appropriate. These are aspects that Desmond shares with him. Secondly, Desmond identifies repeatedly the importance of the Augustinian journey, from exterior to interior and inferior to superior. Tracing this pathway through Desmond's thought at key points reveals something more about how we think, pray, and live in communities. A final point for now: there are moments while reading either Augustine or Desmond when thought and prayerful contemplation merge into one another; each shares in a space that Desmond calls a "Sabbath for Thought." Philosophy is porous to religion, so that thinking about *what* is takes us to *Who* is. Thus, both thinkers are significant to developing a key theme in Judaeo-Christian thought: that metaphysics is ultimately a study of relationship to God. As such, it makes ethical and political demands. The beauty of such calling resonates in every human, restless, heart.

The chapters in this book bring together the thoughts of over a decade. Part 1, "Creation and Reflection: Augustine, Desmond, and Cosmos,"

examines how Augustine's view of creation might further inform Desmond's metaxological appreciation of the cosmos. The first chapter, "An Archaeological Ethics: Augustine, Desmond, and Digging Back to the Agapeic Origin," argues that Augustine's *Confessions* helps to understand how metaphysical investigation of the goodness of being is tied up with the question of how to be good. When we find the origin of the universe, we find ourselves; but this is the beginning rather than the end of our relationship with divine transcendence. This chapter notes that contemplating ourselves in relationship with God through creation means moving away from that tendency in modern philosophical deism, whereby the universe is thought of as a "block creation." Chapter 2 picks up on that point, to develop a very Augustinian answer. Namely, both Augustine and Desmond refuse to consider creation mechanistically, as something made and then abandoned. Instead of thinking it as a block wherein all possibilities are from the moment of creation, fully contained and no longer in need of relationship with God, both thinkers maintain that the cosmos is in dynamic and constant relationship with the Creator. Only then can we make sense of good and evil in the world, in terms of the development of relationship with what is divine, here, and also beyond.

Part 2 turns to themes to do with "Becoming Porous" by exploring "The Aesthetics of Prayerful Contemplation." Chapter 3 begins by discussing the importance of recognizing that to be *porous* to the divine in the cosmos is to see how important it is that we are not self-sufficient. Like *Eros* in the *Symposium*, we are both impoverished and gifted. Considering this, metaxological thinkers can adopt Augustine's sense that to pray is to be both gifted and beggarly. Augustine muses that when we pray, we do not tell God anything he does not already know about us; instead, we actively pursue a relationship with him that depends on expressing just how much we need God for everything. *Agape* thus presents as the source for every form of *erotic* longing and serving. Chapter 4 then discusses the companionship that Desmond claims he has with both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, it develops a theme prevalent in Desmond's thought, of the mask in relationship to doubling. Essentially, "Thinking Transcendence, Transgressing the Mask: Desmond Pondering Augustine and Thomas Aquinas" draws on some of the insights about prayer in the previous chapter. It goes further to link the idea of being a gifted beggar with analogy and surplus. Augustine, Thomas, and Desmond all strive to articulate the overabundance of God, and how one can relate to such richness. Masks

become important points of mediation between us and God, so as to dwell in relation to divine resource. Finally, chapter 5 attempts more explicitly to develop what is at stake in the communities that we form in the *metaxu*. Entitled “On Speaking the Amen: Augustinian Soliloquy and Shakespearean Porosity in the *Metaxu*,” this chapter examines how Desmond speaks about *Macbeth* as a play that examines the potential dangers of equivocity. At the same time, it brings together Augustine’s specific understanding and invention of the term *soliloquy* to argue that *Macbeth* violates the relationship between self and others. This leads to his incapacity to know either God or self. With metaxological thought at its foundation, this chapter demonstrates, through reading one of *Macbeth*’s soliloquies, that Shakespearean tragedy can be considered an inverted Augustinian journey.

With part 2 ending on a plea for well-ordered forms of community, part 3 develops some ways to think through what such communities entail. Entitled “Citizenship in the Between: Building the Porous City,” the final part explores both the implications and the challenges of living out Augustine’s ethical and political vision. Chapter 6, “Love and Friendship in the *Metaxu*: Becoming Agapeic in Community,” examines the universal agapeic call and the special role of friendship for those in the City of God. Taking issue with the notion that Augustine thinks of the City of Man and the City of God as completely separate, discussion here points toward intermingling between the cities—and thus to the intermediations that are so important to metaxological philosophy. Augustine thinks that all humans are related at a biological level (we are all descended from Adam) and that our kinship is fulfilled in agapeic love. Placing this alongside Desmond’s exploration of the various forms of community (especially communities of agapeic service) elucidates some of ethical and political implications of metaxological philosophy. Finally, chapter 7 recognizes the challenges faced by those who strive to live out the promise of agapeic love. It takes up the Augustinian tension whereby Christians are both to love every person as one loves oneself and to have intimate friendships whereby the beloved is another self. This seemingly contradictory demand—to love everyone, and then only a select few, as one loves oneself—is interpreted in light of Desmond’s distinction between the cosmopolis and the ghetto, which can be synthesised in what he calls the *intimate universal*. Nonetheless, there are challenges to those striving for the universal while living in communities where *agape* is intimately experienced. The altercation between Augustine and Jerome brings these to light. Their correspondence offers a rare insight into the

INTRODUCTION

limitations for *agape* between Christians who disagree with one another, and who can only communicate (due to distance) in the written word. The boundaries and possibilities for what Desmond calls *agapeic* communities of service thereby come to light. Considering these offers challenges to contemporary scholars who might strive to become companions in thought.

This volume consolidates the work of a decade. It would not exist at all were it not for many companions in thought, at each step of the way. First among these is William Desmond, whose generosity at every point has been essential—from suggesting the book, to providing me with background material and suggestions, to writing the foreword, and most especially for his guidance and friendship over the years. With him I likewise thank Maria Desmond. Various chapters are indebted to editors, conference organizers, and colleagues, particularly as four of the chapters here collected and re-edited have been published previously. Among these I acknowledge in particular Thomas A. F. Kelly (now deceased), Martin Moors, Frederiek Depoortere and Jacques Haers, Gregory Grimes, Christopher Ben Simpson, Brendan Sammon, Dennis Vanden Auweele, John Hymers, Miles Smit, James McGuirk, and Sydney Palmer C'de Baca. I thank my colleagues at the Institute of Philosophy at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and also those at University of Notre Dame Australia, who have made it possible for me to take the sabbatical that meant I could finally complete this project. I also thank librarians at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, University of Notre Dame Australia, and at the Veech Library at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. I thank too my parents, siblings, grandparents (in particular my maternal grandmother, Berenice Fenn, who passed away last year), and extended family for all of their love and support. Finally, I thank my husband, Jo, and our children, for their patience and love on this pilgrim journey.