



Between Thought, Religion, and Contemporaneity: the hyperboles of being and the equivocal communication of the sacred

Entre o Pensamento, a Religião e a Contemporaneidade: as hipérboles do ser
e a comunicação equívoca do sagrado

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Abstract

The contemporary philosophical thought regards itself as postmetaphysical, post-religious, postmodern, and post-philosophical. It advocates for metaphysics without metaphysics, ethics without ethics, and religion without religion. This paper aims at exploring the possibilities of thinking through the place and role of God, religion, and mystique in the philosophical discourse of contemporaneity, having William Desmond's thought as a reference. According to Desmond's thought, there's an intimate, idiotic, porosity in the call to truth. Thought is communication openness for its own originating source. This means that thought is situated at the knowledge threshold, and it may open up to a reverence attitude in the face of the mystery of being. Through metaphysical metaphors, intermediate names going beyond the univocal determination of metaphysical constructs from the past, Desmond aims at thinking through something which is present amidst finitude, indicating a foremost transcendence going beyond our experience: an upper transcendence essentially asymmetrical to our own transcendence. Such metaphors or hyperboles safeguard the enigma involved in the issue of God and the religious being. This enigma or mystery isn't something negative, but openness for a fuller and overdetermined agapic origin.

Keywords: Metaxology. Religion. Postmodern. Agape. Mystique.

Resumo

O pensamento filosófico contemporâneo se compreende como pós-metafísico, pós-religioso, pós-moderno e pós-filosófico. Ele advoga uma metafísica sem metafísica, uma ética sem ética e uma religião sem religião. O objetivo deste artigo é explorar as possibilidades de refletir sobre o lugar e o papel de Deus, da religião e da mística no discurso filosófico da contemporaneidade, tendo como referência o pensamento de William Desmond. Para o pensamento desmondiano, existe uma porosidade íntima, idiótica, no chamado à verdade. O pensamento é uma abertura comunicativa para a sua própria fonte originadora. Isso significa que o pensamento se encontra no limiar do saber, podendo abrir-se para uma posição de reverência diante do mistério do ser. Através de metáforas metafísicas, nomes intermediários para além da determinação unívoca das construções metafísicas do passado, Desmond busca refletir sobre algo presente em meio à finitude, que indica uma transcendência primeira que vai além da nossa experiência: uma transcendência superior essencialmente assimétrica à nossa própria transcendência. Tais metáforas ou hipérboles asseguram o enigma envolvido na questão de Deus e do ser religioso. Tal enigma ou mistério não é algo negativo, mas uma abertura para uma origem agápica mais plena e supradeterminada.

Palavras-chave: Metaxologia. Religião. Pós-moderno. Ágape. Mística.

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Introducing the problematics

Religion is regarded in contemporaneity as a human construct which may always be deconstructible. This is a postmetaphysical religion, conceived as heterological, in the sense that there's a structural identity between religion and obligation (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 11). In other words, religion is an obligation to singularity, seen as more important than any universal construction. Thus, religion is the “*re-ligare*” of the singular individual to the absolute, which can't be conceived in terms of the ontology's universal, and it finds in the Hegelian absolute its most elaborate formulation. According to Derrida, God's name is the name we want and love without questioning: without seeing (*sans voir*), without having (*sans avoir*), and without knowing (*sans savoir*). God is the impossible Other we passionately wish; it's the “*toute autre*” (completely Other) (DERRIDA, 1999, p. 68).

The entity forged by Hellenism (and, subsequently, the God of Christian theology) aimed to meet the strict needs of Greek ontology, from Parmenides to Plato, which were disturbed by time, by motion, and by change (CAPUTO, 1997, p. 336). The general criticism made to metaphysical religion is that it's an abstract speculation, which goes beyond the boundaries of human thought and it turns us away from the genuine religious experience (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 120).

The religion without religion advocated by contemporary thought is a religion without metaphysics, which doesn't need anything more than the ethical dimension. Any reference to the supreme being or to the object of religious devotion, God, should refer us to the supreme ethical value: love. Thus, the love religion has no religion and no God.

The post-metaphysical religion is a criticism to the Hegelian-style rational system, which, by privileging certain abstract propositions, prevented an authentic faith experience. The metaphysical religion raises religious knowledge to an

absolute level and inscribes God on the onto-theo-logical horizon. God is conceived as the highest being and the foremost cause. The metaphysical religion privileges the abstract universality and it aims to achieve a rigorous thinking status. The religion without religion in contemporaneity advocates for a deep religiosity with or without theology, with or without religion. In other words, with or without any particular claim to religious knowledge.

William Desmond shows to be dissatisfied with the contemporary deconstruction. For him, the metaphysical tradition doesn't begin nor end at a rational argument. He aims to think at the intermediate space between thought and what is other with regard to thought (DESMOND, 1990, p. 3). By conceiving philosophy as metaxological, Desmond sees religion as a way of being and thinking different from the philosophical discourse and, at the same time, constitutive of philosophy itself. The metaxology opens a new horizon for interlocution which goes beyond deconstructionism and it refuses the mere transformation of religious discourse into an ethics without ethics.

As Desmond's thought is full of neologisms and having in mind he's an author little known in the Brazilian philosophical scenario, I will present below a brief overview of metaxology as way of thinking through the religious being in a philosophical manner.

1 William Desmond's thought

Desmond tries to find a pathway between the two extremes observed in the contemporary philosophy scenario, which is identified by him as the Hegelin and Wittgensteinian options (DESMOND, 1990, p. 3-4). The latter emphasizes that human sense is marked by fragmentation or plurality in different ways, which can't be reduced to a unified essence. The Hegelian option tries to establish a dialectic balance between unity and plurality; yet, there's a propensity to subordinate

difference to identity, although this doesn't involve a mere identity, but a dialectic univocity. The Hegelian option regards the plurality of sense configurations as being interconnected by the dialectic need, which has its culmination in philosophy. Philosophy is, according to Hegel, the ultimate expression of absolute spirit; art and religion also belong to the absolute spirit, but, although presenting an absolute content, they lack the absolute form. In short, the dialectic option dialectically reduces plurality to identity, whereas for the Wittgensteinian option the possibility of any unit becomes a problem (DESMOND, 1990, p. 3).

Desmond refuses deconstructionism by stating that the rhetoric of the subject's death and the philosophy end poses an anemic diet to us. He proposes a re-reading of the classics of our thinking tradition, in order to find openings which are always new and that illuminate our contemporary challenges, above all with regard to philosophy and to the religious being. Desmond develops the "metaxological sense of being" in contrast to the univocal, equivocal, and dialectic senses. The four senses of being have proven to be extremely complex. The univocal sense is currently associated to modern science and its pretense to total determination of being through the mathematization and quantification of things. The equivocal sense is more identified to Wittgenstein and language games. The dialectic sense has Hegel as its main interlocutor. The being has an excess which resists to any attempt to a complete and determined conceptualization of Western metaphysics, whose more ambitious flight is found in Hegel's absolute spirit. Aristotle (2002, 1003b5) expressed in a very concise way the excess of being by stating: *to on legatai pollachos* [the being is spoken in many ways]. This doesn't mean that the effort to think of being in a more determined way isn't a valid exercise. However, the "excess" of being presents itself in a variety of ways and only by discerning these different facets we're able to have a greater clarity of thinking with regard to the issue of being. Such clarity is named by Desmond "metaphysical mindfulness".

Metaphysical mindfulness presents a progression and maturation which begin with a moment of unmediated identity, in which nothing is seen as being actually different from the self: this is the univocal sense of being. Univocal mindfulness has a comprehensive approach in which only identity is perceived. The ontological sense of such univocity may be found in the metaphysics influenced by Parmenides. The logical sense of univocity permeates all heirs of Aristotle, with the statement that being intelligible is being fully determined.

However, metaphysical mindfulness can't fail to recognize the immediate presence of otherness, with which it's constantly confronted. Such confrontation leads univocal mindfulness to an increasing perception of an otherness which resists to the totalizing identity of the self. Metaphysical mindfulness becomes perplexed and, at the same time, frustrated by the apparent equivocality of being, which emerges as an unmediated difference, where identity and otherness are regarded as opposed to each other. In the equivocal sense of being, metaphysical mindfulness is named equivocal mindfulness.

The dualistic opposition of the equivocal sense of being is regarded as justification for an atomistic understanding of being. Equivocal mindfulness points to tension zones and ambiguity in being and thinking which don't allow a simple reduction to univocal unity. However, if we remain in this equivocality, the supposed pluralism which we may support won't constitute, indeed, a community, but something fragmented.

Metaphysical mindfulness, in turn, will try to solve the differences between identity and otherness through the mediation of the dialectic sense of being. Dialectics recognizes the transcendent dynamism of thought and its relentless overcoming of limits, whether they're the being's fixation to univocal thought or the unmediated differences, diluted, of equivocal thought. The dialectic sense is aware of the impossibility of avoiding the ultimate issues if we want to remain faithful to

the dynamism inherent to thought itself. This was one of the most brilliant of Hegel's insights.

However, the mediation of difference becomes predominantly a mediation of the self. If metaphysical mindfulness remains in the dialectic sense of being, thought risks becoming closed on itself and the dialectic process becomes a closed way of self-mediation. Such closure occasionally results in a dialectic univocity and metaphysical mindfulness has to venture once more and rethink the issue of being. This leads to an intermediating attitude which Desmond names "metaxological sense of being". This new mediation way is, indeed, a plural intermediation which can't be exhausted whether by the mediation of the self or by the mediation of the other. In other words, the metaxological sense is an intermediation which involves the mediation between the plurality of self-mediated wholes. The multiplicity of identity instances is situated side by side, so that the identity recognizes not only the otherness of those who are other with regard to it, but it also recognizes itself in its own exemplification of otherness. It's precisely this dynamic interaction that leads the metaphysical mindfulness to go beyond an intoxicating determination of the mediation of the self, to an intermediation where metaphysical mindfulness is a participant among a plurality of participants in the community of being.

The metaxological term derives from the Greek *metaxu*, which means half, intermediate, between; the metaxological sense of being concerns the *metaxu logos*, that is, a discourse of between, of middle. In contrast to Hegel, a system, according to Desmond, should always be open to recognize the ways of being and thinking which resist to a complete dialectic conceptualization or univocity of being (SOUZA, 2011, p. 207). However, Desmond wants to distance himself from a mere caricature of Hegel and, despite criticizing this author, he aims to avoid what he names *clichés*, derived from Marx, Heidegger, or Derrida, exploiting the possibility of an open dialectic interaction between art, religion, and philosophy. Desmond stands against some attitudes observed in the post-Hegelian thought on the metaphysical tradition without, necessarily, accepting Hegel's view of speculative

philosophy. Desmond defines himself as being situated, in a general way, between Hegel and his critics. According to him, philosophy doesn't come to an end with Hegel and the old metaphysical issues present themselves as perplexities which are always new for thinking the present.

Unlike Hegel, for whom pure being, without any determination, is, indeed, the same as nothing, Desmond states that there's a foremost perplexity, foundational, which starts its own philosophical thinking. According to Desmond, the philosophical mindfulness doesn't begin nor end with/or in an argument. Being is perplexity, admiration, and without this primitive perplexity there wouldn't be the philosophical mindfulness itself. Being is admiration, and this statement can't be understood as a further argument. We're, so to speak, thrown in this admiration.

2 Desmond and the religious being

Philosophy is the fully-aware practice of the manifested thereness of Being. This means that it should always open a space for its others and for the sources which rather originate "astonishment" and marvel, to which our mindfulness is indebted. What we witness through the swerve of modernity is a certain eclipse of this originating source.

We refer to the mystery when we don't understand something. Mystery refers to the limit of knowledge, conceived by the Western tradition since Plato as a rational determination of things through the noetic movement. In this sense, mystery is regarded as something negative, as an epistemic empty. Metaxology leads us to think through beyond the logical-rational determination of thinking, by advocating a kind of knowledge poverty. However, such poverty is rich and promising, as it refers us to the overdetermination of Being itself.

From this perspective, mystery can't be regarded as the opposite of truth, as just the truth of determination isn't entirely faithful to the broader character of

truth itself. We don't have a full knowledge of gods, as Plato long ago recognized. There's an ontological trust involved in the constitution of truth.

As seen above, Desmond aims to develop a quadriatic thought as a response to Hegel's triadic dialectics. Univocity accentuates identity. In contrast, equivocality tends to difference. The dialectic is an effort to mediate between identity and difference. In modernity, the Hegelian sense of dialectics influenced the subsequent dialectic thought emphasizing the self-mediation of thought. The metaxological sense is the space for the possibility of a plurivocal intermediation going beyond self-mediation. This is the promise of overdetermination, which leads us to the threshold of mystery. The excessive nature of being goes beyond thought itself, beyond ourselves. Equivocality isn't a void which must be filled by univocity, but a mystery which will never be fully dissipated. The mindful being in the intermediate space of thought is the recognition that the being is spoken in many ways.

Beyond the determination of thought we find the poverty of our knowledge. This refers us back to the context of the mystery which isn't the opposite of truth, but something different from the fixed determination. The actual being real is a being-between, which reveals our participation in truth, although we don't have a full knowledge of truth. In the intermediate space of being "we know that we don't know" and the recognition of our ignorance is wisdom. Knowledge isn't only determination, but it opens our mindfulness for the "astonishment" which leads us to an otherness that we don't know from the very beginning. We seek because this search brings along the promise of enigmatic recognition, without which even the search for truth wouldn't be possible. There's an enigmatic communication of what we seek.

The true being involves a certain faithfulness to what is at the dawn of our mindfulness and posed as other with regard to our own self-determination. We haven't built any of this at the starting point. This is something prior to

construction and beyond deconstruction. Both need it as a precondition. At this dawn, there's something intimate or idiotic, a kind of ontological confidence in the true being itself. We find, here, an intimate loyalty and the true being may be spoken in many ways.

The modern swerve accentuates the self-determination of thought. Metaxology articulates the other ways of being, bringing them to the true meaning of its own overdetermination promise: the indetermination of univocity and equivocality, the determination of thinking, the dialectic self-determination, and the metaxological overdetermination. Overdetermination is a kind of (in)determination which allows all determination, as the true being refers us to an inevitable degree of mystery. Univocity conceives the true being as a proposition derived from a univocal utterance. The equivocal sense, in turn, has to be recognized not only by the ambiguity sense, but by the double movement of showing and concealing. This requires a subtlety of thought. In the univocal sense, the truth is bound to a strict sense of geometry, whereas the equivocal sense, as its dialectics of showing and concealing, requires a subtlety spirit. Evidently, equivocality presents a certain irremediable skepticism: our failure to obtain the truth or even the confession that we'll never be able to be sure. Whereas skepticism is the negative result of equivocality, recognizing the limits of our knowledge, is not. The call to truth is something intimate to what we are. There's an intimate porosity to the call to truth.

The dialectic sense nourishes the seeds of mediation, which is already intimate to the equivocality of the true being. The truth is, at the same time, immanent and transcendent. The Hegelian response to the problem of truth is an inclusive univocity. The truth is the whole, states Hegel. However, the true being, according to Desmond, is more than the whole. Metaxology tries to do justice to overdetermination going beyond indetermination, determination, and self-determination. There's an overdetermined otherness in the *milieu* of the being which plurivocally communicates.

3 Religious being, porosity, and the hyperboles of being

Desmond names hyperboles of being the events amidst immanence which can't be fully determined in an immanent way. In the intermediate space of between amidst immanence, they show porosities able to communicate more than themselves, understood in terms of immanence. These're events which open up for a sense of utmost transcendence amidst the immanence of between. This involves figures or other thinking ways, which can't be communicated in a determined manner.

The hyperbole is a figurative meaning pointing to an excess observed in the being. This is something which exceeds our own intentionality. This mode of hyperbolic reflection distances from the priority given in the modernity to transcendental ego, as a constitutive unity of phenomena. The Desmondian metaphor exceeds the phenomenon by developing a mode of post-dialectical, post-modern, thinking through the understanding of philosophy as metaxological. Desmond thematizes the overdetermined nature of being in opposition to the self-determination of thought which found in the Hegelian dialectics its highest exemplification.

In Hegel, we find a phenomenology of spirit. Absolute knowledge doesn't go beyond the totality dialectically constituted; knowledge doesn't go beyond itself. According to Desmond, the starting point is given by the recognition of philosophy's poverty, when thought knows it needs to go beyond itself. Thought is communication openness to its own originating source. This means that thought is on the threshold of knowledge, and it may open up to a reverence position in the face of the mystery of being.

According to Desmond, if God can't be univocally determined, we can only refer to it in an indirect way, i.e. through metaphysical metaphors, intermediate names, going beyond the univocal determination of metaphysical constructs from

the past (DESMOND, 1990, p. 207). Such metaphors or hyperboles ensure the enigma involved in the issue of God (DESMOND, 1990, p. 113).

Desmond presents four hyperbolic metaphors of being, which situate thought beyond the self-mediated determination of thinking. The first hyperbole refers to the idiotics of being. This is not the rejection of intelligibility, but the rejection of going beyond, to a dimension which is on the threshold of mystery.

The second hyperbole refers to the aesthetic appearance. It's necessary that the cosmos is an icon whose utmost reference is an aesthetic God. In other words, the icon is pores and it points to the equivocal communication of the sacred.

The third metaphor leads us to think through the erotic nature of the human being, which is intimately hyperbolic, as it's self-surpassing. There's a foremost porosity in excess to our own self-mediation. This is something hyperbolic to the *conatus essendi*. Medieval philosophy uses the term soul to express this unique character of the human being. The soul puts us in touch with the porosity of being. Desmond explores the double paternity of eros in the myth of Diotima: *penia* and *poros*. There's porosity in eros itself. The human being, as an openness going beyond itself, presents this porosity in its own self. In eros itself there's a first agape.

The fourth hyperbole refers to the agapic communication of the excessive generosity of being. This excess allows the existence of all things and it goes beyond all determination. Our being is given in the intermediation of being and, therefore, the human being will never be able to solve the ambiguity of truth with regard to itself.

According to Desmond, knowledge emerges from the very fact that there's being rather than nothing. Thus, the very orderly world externality is the basis of our epistemic confidence of things (DESMOND, 1995, p. 8). The world expresses an intrinsic valuation which can't be determined by the *self*. For this conception,

there's a need for an infinite value conception, which becomes porosity for a deep openness to the being, which transcends the determination of thought and its willpower.

The problem of God in modernity may be described in terms of the antinomy between autonomy and transcendence. By absolutizing autonomy, modern age relativized transcendence (DESMOND, 2003, p. 92). God was seen as a mere projection of our own powers. The autonomous reason is the origin of all intelligibility. Thus, an *ethos* of indifference with regard to God was created. The *self* becomes the epistemic arbiter of the knowledge world. The spirit is seen as the rational origin of the world which unfolds. By absolutizing the autonomy of reason, a relativized transcendence remained, and it survives only as a projection of our own willpower.

The modern dualism between fact and value divorced being from its intrinsic goodness (DESMOND, 1995, p. 72-103), giving expression to the double process of objectification of being and the subjectification of value (DESMOND, 2003, p. 21-22). The world becomes a universal mechanism in which everything must have a value for the *self* (DESMOND, 1987, p. 158). According to Desmond, the modern *ethos* is the subjectivized reconfiguration of a foremost *ethos* and it meant a univocal determination of the metaxological space of being. It's necessary that philosophy opens up again to a reflection on the foremost *ethos* and that, in the specific case of religion, it means seeking the truth about the divine mystery to go beyond the self-determination of the sacred otherness. The Desmondian philosophy seeks a genuine openness of thought to the utmost transcendence (DESMOND, 2008, p. 43-44).

What is hyperbolic for the Desmondian thought is the very human openness to the other and to transcendence (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 132). Contemporary thought turns God into a merely hyperbolic sign of the human possibilities (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 133). Desmond, on the contrary, seeks to think through

something which is amidst finitude, indicating something which goes beyond our experience, something transcendent: a superior transcendence essentially asymmetrical to our own transcendence.

Final remarks

The Desmondian reflection on religion and on God is the effort of thinking philosophically through a religious matrix, which involves contemplation and meditation on the utmost and transcendent otherness. To think metaxologically of the mystery and the intrinsic value of being involves a mystique which goes beyond the given thought. This implies philosophy's poverty, which, instead of being some demerit for thought, becomes communication pores with something that goes beyond the determination of thinking.

Through the intermediate space of the middle, we may indirectly talk of God as a transcendent other. This means speaking through images and representations, something which involves a certain dialectics between the original and the image in our way of thinking: no univocal image can completely encompass the original (DESMOND, 1990, p. 111, 136). We have to accept it as an enigma. God is the utmost transcendence, which goes beyond all names and images (DESMOND, 1990, p. 157). The indirect way of referring to God presents an impossibility, as he'll always be different from all our attempts to think about Him

However, naming is, at the same time, necessary and impossible. Therefore, we can only speak of God metaphorically. The metaphysical metaphors proposed by Desmond are philosophical categories or images without images (DESMOND, 1995, p. 504). This is an articulation way which is beyond the univocal determination of thought (DESMOND, 1995, p. 310). Images are intermediate names which, somehow, articulate what is beyond the univocal determination. According to Simpson (2009, p. 96), a metaphysical metaphor, in the sense that

Desmond uses the term to refer to God, “is a concrete saying of the perplexity which preserves the reference to something beyond, to an otherness, and it concerns the enigma of what is utmost”.

Along with the metaphysical metaphors, Desmond uses the concept of hyperbole to refer to thought. Even having the requirement of immanence, the hyperbolic thought leads us to think of the transcendent. He refers to something in the experience which suggests something beyond experience. The hyperbolic thought concerns how our understanding of finite reality compels our thought to something more than what is merely finite. This is achieved through the external transcendence of things, named foremost transcendence; through the inner transcendence of the subject or second transcendence; and, finally, the upper transcendence going beyond the metaxological space of being, named third transcendence (DESMOND, 1990, p. 343).

According to Desmond, the metaxological understanding sees God in terms of upper transcendence. This is an otherness characterized as fullness. It always keeps being in itself and for itself an enigma for us. As original transcendence, it isn't merely beyond, but it originates genuine otherness. It's an overdetermined and excessive transcendence: the absolute original, which exceeds the determined intelligibility (DESMOND, 1995, p. 502).

Desmond establishes the difference between the erotic origin, associated to the Hegelian dialectics, and the agapic origin of being. Unlike the first, the second doesn't need to produce itself in its origination, as it's always itself.

Philosophy should, then, sing philosophical songs in the face of the mystery of being itself, going beyond the given thought. According to Desmond (1990, p. 233), this “contemplative attitude represents our highest freedom, the freedom to be mindful of what is the ultimate value”.

Thought has the requirement to be hyperbolic in the sense that something in experience suggests something beyond experience. This is something asymmetrical to finitude amidst finitude and it leads thought to something which exceeds the determined categorization of thinking. Thus, Desmond's philosophy is a night watch or mystical mode through the signs of absolute otherness amidst finitude. The otherness of the absolute can never be limited by thought, which mediates only along with itself. In this tension, we have to find other ways to meaningfully speak of God.

According to Desmond, univocity conceived God as a univocal and static eternity, absolute in its immutability, going beyond time and becoming. This conception influenced the whole Western metaphysical tradition (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 122). However, this conception was responsible for making God redundant with the advent of modernity, as it was negatively defined as opposed to the world and the *cogito* (DESMOND, 1995, p. 240).

The metaxological conception affirms the possibility of a knowledge on God as agapic origin, with no pretense to absolute knowledge (DESMOND, 1995, p. 506). According to Desmond (1995, p. 8), the knowledge on God emerges from the very fact that there's being rather than nothing. The mystique of thought proposed by Desmond aims to safeguard the irreducible perplexities, which are within the limits of thought itself (DESMOND, 2000, p. 242). By taking thought beyond the limits of determination, metaxology represents a viable alternative to the contemporary deconstruction (SIMPSON, 2009, p. 3-4). By refusing "religion without religion", Desmond recognizes the religious being as a different mode of thought participating in the metaxological community of being.

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