

William Desmond
Catholic University of Louvain

EQUIVOCAL BEING : THE MATHESIS OF NATURE AND THE POIESIS OF NATURING

Modern science has provided us with a powerful mathematization of nature. But do we, can we dwell in nature as a mathematical construction? One might make the case that the very power of this *mathesis* of nature is just in its abstraction from the plenitude of nature as sensuously given. Its truth is defined by the power of its abstraction from this plenitude, but just that truth, precisely as true, is false to the full plenitude of being, as exceeding every abstraction. This issue is large, and I am aware that my remarks here cannot do justice to its complexity.¹ I want to suggest (a sense of nature as exceeding *mathesis*. Using the old nomenclature that distinguishes *natura naturans* (nature naturing) and *natura naturata* (nature natured), I want to suggest that while we can have a *mathesis* of nature natured, relative to of nature naturing we need a mindfulness of what we might call the *poiesis* of being. We need to renew a sense of the aesthetic presencing of nature naturing in order to be true to the fullness of what emerges into appearance.

It might seem a truism to say that nature is given to us as *aesthetic appearing*, where "aesthetic" refers to sensible being and manifestation in the widest sense. The question is how do we interpret this aesthetic appearing. When I say that nature is given to us as an aesthetic show, I mean that it shows itself to us in

1. The present remarks are taken from a larger work in progress *Metaphysics and Transcendence: Being and the Between* which aims to rethink the many senses of being, the univocal, the equivocal, the dialectical and what I call the metaxological sense. Their full meaning demands reference to that work which builds on previous works, especially *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness: An Essay on Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), and *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). For a succinct statement of what I mean by the between, see my essay "Being Between" in the volume of *CLIO* devoted to my work (vol. 20, no. 2, Summer 1991, pp. 305-331).

an efflorescence of sensible manifestation. The suggestion is that we dwell, as mindfully embodied beings, in this aesthetic show with an ontological intimacy that is not captured by any subsequent logical or mathematical univocalizing of being, such as we find in modern science. Being presents itself as a process of becoming that is never completely captured in the static determinations that comprise the ideal of univocal intelligibility that mathematics epitomizes. There is a doubleness or pluralization to this becoming that demands of the mind its own dynamic doubling. Mind has to begin to think other than in static and one-dimensional categories. It must do this because of the doubleness of what is coming to appearance.

It will help if I briefly contrast the univocal and equivocal approaches. These two senses of being do not exhaust the question, but for present purpose an understanding of their difference is necessary². A univocal approach to nature, such as a mathematization would pursue, tries to reduce plurality to unity, diversity, to uniformity, imprecision to clear cut definiteness. It tries to dispell any sense of astonishment or wonder or enigma, for it claims that an absolutely definite or determinate order is the real truth of being. Ambiguity is to be conquered, indeed eradicated.

By contrast, a mindfulness of the equivocal finds itself encountering diversities that resist reduction to uniformity, ambiguities that seem to evade complete dissipation. There arises a sense of wonder and astonishment that can perhaps be deepened but never absolutely dispelled. Perplexity before being is not reduced to a problem-solving mentality that would master all questions through clear and distinct concepts. Even after our best efforts to make determinate sense of things, an excess of indeterminate perplexity persists. Unlike the univocal approach that would reduce being to a final sameness, the acknowledgement of the equivocal is willing to recognize an otherness to being that may always resist our every reduction.

One form of this rich otherness appears when we consider nature as aesthetic presencing or show. We get a sense of the

2. We also need the dialectical and the metaxological senses of being, as mentioned in the previous footnote.

aesthetics of being when we think of the nature of nature as a naturing, that is, as a process of becoming. Notice here that the word nature contains reference to origin in *natus*: a being born, a coming to light as being, out of a source that in itself is hidden. What is born in becoming, nature, and the things of nature, are not simple identities, even when they are singular unities. The aesthetics of becoming are equivocal in this sense: Being is given as excess, as prodigal profusion of coming to be. And while this coming to be does issue in determinate beings, the energy of coming to be is not itself exhausted by any one determinate being or set of such beings. It exceeds every univocalization which would completely define it in terms of determinate being. Nothing can be congealed absolutely in the universal impermanence. Becoming is the loosening up of all rigid determinacies. It is not absolutely indefinite, for determinate identities do come to stability within the universal impermanence. Yet these provisional stabilities in time give way to a new creative formlessness and the forming of further and different stabilities of being. Nothing absolute is, yet things are, and hence the things that become, both are and yet are not absolutely. There is a constitutive ambiguity or doubleness that, as coming to be and passing away, is inscribed ontologically on their being as becoming.

Both the coming to be and the passing away themselves are beyond complete univocal determination. They each reveal not just a determinacy but a process of coming to determination and a process of passing beyond determinacy. The process of transition from determinacy to determinacy cannot be itself another determinacy. For becoming to be becoming, there is an indeterminacy at work in the between, the interstices between fixed determinations. This indeterminacy of passing between determinations is as much constitutive of the process of becoming, as are the articulated determinations that come to be and pass away. To do justice to the ontological fullness of becoming, we must affirm this constitutive doubleness: it is not merely indefinite, not merely determinate, but indeterminate and determinate, and the passage between indeterminacy and determination. This double takes us beyond the univocal sense of being, so beloved of the mathematical mind. This is not to deny the proper place of the univocal, with respect to the articulation of the determinate as determinate.

Of course, the role of the indeterminate has been variously interpreted. If we still insist without qualification on the univocal, we might assert that the *process* of determination must be another determination, and conclude to the illusory nature of the process as process. Process of becoming would be merely the illusory form of stasis; it would reduce to a set of still snapshots of univocal determination that are the points of immobility underlying the appearance of process. Then we try to think the indeterminate in terms of another kind of determinacy, perhaps by means of the eternal determinations of Platonic *eide*, or by means of a mathematical determination of time for which the lived process of irreversible time hardly counts, and certainly not as regards ultimate intelligibility. By contrast, the equivocal sense of being, expressed in our mindfulness of the constitutive ambiguity of appearances, forces us to resist the temptation to jettison or dilute or explain away the suggestion of indetermination in the process of coming to be.

For the mindfulness that is attuned to the equivocal, nothing is ever absolutely the same. The ambiguous twofoldness of becoming both is and yet is not. On occasion, we might even be tempted to regard this as a kind of metaphysical *duplicity* in which what is not insinuates itself as its opposite, namely, as what is. There is a passage between what is and what is not, such that what is not becomes what is, and what is becomes what is not. This looks like a process of equivocation in which nothing remains what it is, not even what is not. We are reminded of Macbeth's exclamation about the ambiguous nature of time itself: "Nothing is but what is not". (Indeed Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the play about the equivocal.) Becoming seems deceptive, shifty, a proteus that refuses to yield its one name; it slides out of the grasp without surrendering its secret identity. The transience of becoming is erratic, in the strong sense of giving us over to errancy. Becoming is an equivocal error, not the truth of being. The truth of being as becoming is error.

I suggest that we do not have to think exclusively of the doubleness of equivocal being in such ontologically *negative* terms. This is not to deny the emergence of error with the equivocal. But there is an affirmative way of looking at the equivocal. We can see in the indeterminate the promise of creative determination,

not the illusory slipping from ontological stasis to ontological stasis, through gaps of nothing that are merely covered over by the rapidity of the slipping. These seeming gaps are themselves the spaces of ontological possibility wherein the promise of the original power of being is stabilized. Coming to be is coming to concrete determination of the actuality of the power to be. There is an openness to this process of transition from indetermination to determination, and this openness is not to be closed with a fixing, immobilizing determination. Determinate being itself is to be understood as energized even in its integrity. The integrity of a being is the singular working of the creative power of the indeterminate. Its determinate being is a tense equilibrium of original power, poised briefly on time's wave. This poise of the integral determinate being is entirely energetic, entirely dynamic.

Thus there is no absolute univocal stasis. Nothing stays, nor can be stayed; nothing is settled for ever. Yet in the universal impermanence there are the determinate poises of the dynamic. The universe of becoming is hence one of promise, promise that itself is ambiguous, since it contains the future as one of passing out of being, just as this present poise of being came to be from a past, antecedent not-being. The ambiguity of the happening of becoming is the way it mingles creation and destruction, life and death, the surge into articulated being, the surcease and ebbing withdrawal of the flood of life.

We might say that being as becoming is both one and many, held together and diversified, not one or the other, but a differentiation of unities into multiplicities and the gathering of multiplicities back into some togetherness. This is already to state the matter in terms sufficiently articulate as to begin to transcend equivocity. Initially, the constitutive ambiguity is not encountered with this articulated response. As an aesthetic show of being, it is met in an over-determined way. The happening of becoming takes form in a matrix of ambiguity. There is an excess to this matrix which marks it as a source of origination, and as a coming towards us of a fullness that can be overpowering, overwhelming. The matrix of ambiguity is origination as diversification. Nor is there any separation of "fact" and "value" in this matrix. The response of the equivocal mind is thus closer to the original agapeic astonishment through which the human being finds itself opened to the worthiness of being.

For this reason there is a kind of *promiscuity* to the equivocal that will be dismissed by the logicist mind as "confusion", that is, as mixing things up together. But things are mixed up, things are mixed. They are mingled together, confused, and this, in the etymologically correct sense (*con-fusio*): the promiscuity of the equivocal is the confusion of becoming. Things fuse together; they flow into each other. Becoming is ontological confusion in that sense, fluid, porous, mixing and commingling. Being is confusing. Logically one may not like this, if one insists that being and intelligibility must be determinate. But who gives logic the license to dictate to being to be other than it is? Logic may not like the confusion of being but that may be logic's fault, not being's. Logic may have to think the confusion a little less petulantly, less self-insistent on the putative clarity and distinctness of its categorial schema.

The point is not to exult in confusion but to recognize that there is a *poiesis* of intermediate being, prior to all univocal logicism and every mathematization of nature. This *poiesis* is not to be confined to any artistic expression we might devise. The very happening of becoming is an ambiguous *poiesis*, an origination process that articulates sensible and sensuous being, and not in any manner that neutralizes matter into an indifferent *res extensa*, or reduces it analytically to primitive primary qualities. The material world is the maternal aesthetic appearance of being (*materia* and *mater* are cognate); it is a mother that natures. This mothering nature gives birth to beings as charged with the power of being that is originally and finally in excess of all finite determination. There is an aesthetic intimacy to what I call the metaxological community of being that appears with equivocal becoming.³

We might illustrate this in terms of the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities, so central to classical modern science. This view is the product of an aesthetic and dianoetic univocalizing of nature, but it is abstracted from the aesthetic equivocality of being as sensuously appearing. This aesthetic equivocality, I suggest, is truer than this

3. On the metaxological, see *Philosophy and its Others*, and *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*. On its relation to Hegel's dialectic, see *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult and Comedy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

doctrine to the manifestation of concrete thereness, since in the flow of appearing primary and secondary qualities promiscuously mix. Perhaps for us human beings the central manifestation of this mixing lies in the way we live nature in the intimacy of our bodies. Our bodies are not possessed by univocal souls in solitary self-possession of some material unit. Quite to the contrary, our bodies are lived as equivocally mingled with the aesthetic body of nature. This mingling is never univocal but is an intimate, inarticulate, immediate mediation which marks us as incarnate inhabitants of the between. From the outset we are beyond ourselves in the space between our own self-being and other-being. In this between our incarnate self moves and has its being. There is an immediate equivocality between ourselves and nature, itself felt as the flesh of externality, itself originally experienced in our bond with the mother's body. This immediate equivocality shows us as surges of being in the between, wherein other-being touches us in the flesh, even as we incarnately touch the flesh of other-being.⁴

The thereness of this flesh of nature is not marked by primary or secondary qualities; it is a charged presence redolent of a meaning we cannot now fix, given at first its overpowering presence. Since its sheer being - there is charged with enigmatic presence, we initially live a complicity with thereness, both in the flesh of our bodies and in the body of the world as present to us like flesh. There is this primary aesthetic intimacy, wherein a process of interchange and hence immediate mediation is always going on from the beginning. This initial equivocal intimacy is prior to any estrangement produced by the stabilization of self and world into distinct units. This primal intimacy with being is *intimated* in agapeic astonishment.

In this primal intimacy there are no sensations such as are described by empiricism. There are givens, yes, but givenness is not an aggregate of discrete univocal *sensa*, void of value. For the latter, we have to *distance* ourselves from the first intimacy, and *reconstruct* appearing as devoid of the charge of its value as simply being. Primary and secondary qualities are abstractions produced by that distancing. They have proved useful abstractions for definite calculative purposes, but when they are posited as the element-

4. See *Philosophy and its Others*, chapter 2.

al truth concerning the givenness of being, they are instead falsifications of the gift of the primal intimacy. They are not primitive immediates but mediated results, constructed abstractions of a certain aesthetic and dianoetic univocity.

Their usefulness becomes philosophically questionable when they generate a *reflective equivocity*, predicated on dualistic presuppositions. The Cartesian rationalism that separates the thinking thing into its own spiritual univocity and reduces the happening of givenness to a lifeless *res extensa*, the empiricist view that separates aesthetic givenness into hard, objective, primary qualities and soft, subjective, secondary qualities; both these views are linked to this dualistic opposition of self-being and other-being. As participants of the between, self and other have been congealed into a separation without essential mediation, a separation beyond each singly, or beyond both as merely antithetical. This rationalistic and empiricist equivocation is not that of the primal aesthetic intimacy. It is the equivocal complement of the dianoetic univocity that turns away from or tries to conquer this primal intimacy. Dread of being overwhelmed by, or absorbed back into, the primal equivocity of aesthetic happening forces each, as univocalizing, to erect the self and nature's otherness into dualistic opposites, which thenceforth are thought of in terms of a constructed equivocity.

The mediation of this unbridgeable difference has been the desideratum and despair of all philosophizing flowing from these sources. The desideratum is understandable, for this constructed equivocal dualism is the loss of the happening of the between as the community of interchange and interaction. The despair is understandable but, in fact, unrelievable on the terms that produce it. The terms that produce it are defined by the very loss of the primal intimacy that later they try to remedy, but remedy in terms of the loss itself. The despair cannot be redeemed thus, the loss is irreparable. Instead we need a different mindfulness that reminds us of the primal intimacy and ontological rapport with the aesthetic givenness of being in its ambiguous becoming.

It there are mediations of mind that reminds us of this rapport and this *poiesis* of being, the aesthetic mindfulness of the artist is an impor-

tant instance.⁵ Art is a determination of mindfulness that is non-objectifying relative to the happening of the between. Of course, there is determinacy with art, for the artist produces determinate works that have a pitch of singularity that is extraordinary. Yet these singularities remain alive with an excess that cannot be determinately objectified. The creative work of the overdetermined origin continues to shimmer in these singular concretions. Creation shimmers in these concretions.

The artist's mindfulness displays fidelity to phenomenological happening in its originary richness. It does not articulate this by dividing so-called primary and secondary qualities, neutral sense data and subjectivistic emotions projected onto the neutral thereness. Rather the values celebrated are intimate to sensuous appearing itself. Sensuous appearing is itself worthy simply to be celebrated for itself, appreciated in the marvel of its coming to manifestation. There is here possible a recovery of agapeic astonishment before the aesthetic equivocity of becoming: this stuns us into mindfulness of charged and expressive presence. We may even find a renewal of our rapport with the primal "It is good" which celebrates the giving of creation. The neutralization of creation into an indifferent, objective "It" is overcome in terms of its originary abundance. Dualistic opposition is suspended. There is consent and appreciation and admiration at the original excess that comes to flower in the primal intimacy with creation.

The equivocal aesthetic of becoming returns us to a sense of nature wherein the *dynamism of naturing* is preserved. Once again the old distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is not without its point. If we grant this distinction, nature itself is double; it is equivocal between its overdetermined dynamism as naturing, and its determination as natured into particular beings and objective happening. Nature is equivocal as diversifying the original indetermination into a prodigal plurality of beings. If the determinate being is a finite happening of the original energy of being, the finite happening shimmers with the dynamic naturing, that yet exceeds every one its own natured finitizations. Nor is it possible to separate absolutely the naturing from the natured. The univocal sense of

⁵ Again see *Philosophy and Its Others*, chapter 2. Also *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness*, chapters 3 and 6.

being does tend to separate these two. But the naturing exceeds every finite objectification and hence retreats beyond univocalization.

There is a difference, a doubling, but not a dualism, between the naturing and the natured. A sense for the equivocal makes us mindful of the doubling as more than a provisional failure of univocity, but as a constitutive ambiguity in the happening of being in the between. When Heraclitus said nature loves to hide, I think he pointed us to this constitutive ambiguity. This ambiguity is intolerable to the heirs of Descartes and modern science who would be the masters and possessors of nature. Such mastery is sovereignty over the determinacy of nature natured, but impotence before the indeterminacy of nature naturing. Such mastery is not the sovereign of the whole, but the *dominus* of what is given in determinate objectivity, and even here the fullness of giving escapes this dominating objectification.

It is the artist, let us say a Cezanne or a Monet, who is the inheritor of nature naturing. He is not the master, but the servant of the sensuous appearing of excess in the singular event or thing itself. The appearing retracts into its own reserve before all objectifying. The marvel of a great art work is that the infinite reserve is manifested, intimated in the singular sensuous presence offered in the work. There is no reductive objectification of the reserve, the excess. The beyond is there, and yet not there; or it is there as beyond, beyond as there. Such artistry undergoes the pathos of the equivocal, but in suffering the equivocal, in letting the ambiguity reveal itself, something unsurpassable is shown, shows itself in the ambiguity. This revelation of aesthetic showing cannot be exhausted by any set of finite determinate concepts. The constitutive plurivocity of being is intimated in the sensuous showing of ambiguity itself. It is intimated in the pathos and consent - the appreciation that marvels and admires - that places us close again to the primal intimacy of being.

If it is objected that I extraneously bring in the aesthetic, my whole point has been missed. The whole point is that being is equivocally given to mindfulness as aesthetic manifestation. I cannot give the full argument here, and can only suggest that it is not possible finally to suppress the aesthetics of being, even in the

most thoroughgoing *mathesis* of nature. Let me offer some final comments on the effect of such an attempted suppression.

I do think that in classical modern science there develops a diminished appreciation of the aesthetic show of being, a loss of naturing as the *poiesis* of becoming, an attenuation of the poetry of being. Nature is natured and claimed to be captured in the determinations of mathematical equations. Consider some of Kepler's descriptions of the mathematics of nature. I understand them to be are still in between: they are uttered with still living memory of the divine poetry of being, yet are anticipatory of a mathematics of the natured which makes *poiesis* redundant. Thus Kepler does not just calculate. He sings. "Geometry is unique and eternal, a reflection of the mind of God. That men are able to participate in it is one of the reasons why man is an image of God". He also says: "... all Nature and the graceful sky are symbolized in the art of geometry.... Now as God the maker play'd He taught the game to Nature whom he created in His image; taught her the self-same game which He played to her".

By comparison, with Galileo we sense that the *poiesis* of naturing is already dimmed: "...the book of nature is written in the mathematical language....without its help it is impossible to comprehend a single word of it. "We do not sense the play of God. The language of nature "is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and all other geometric figures, without which is it humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders around in a dark labyrinth". Outside of calculation, there is no singing. Beyond or outside geometry, there is not the poetry of being but only our lostness in a labyrinth.

It will not be long before the lost sense of the *poiesis* of naturing leads to a contraction and final occlusion of the creative *poiesis* of God. Then God becomes the universal geometer, the cybernetic fabricator, as in Leibniz's cosmic computer. The absolutization of this mathematical univocity leads eventually to the dissolution of God as the universal geometrical maker: the clock-making divinity of the clock-work world is made *redundant* with respect to the working of the made clock. The original dispenser

of intelligibility is made dispensable with respect to determinate intelligibility, now taken as self-sufficient. There may be metallic precision in this universal mechanism, but it is inherently a dead universe. A world of death takes the place of the premodern living, animated cosmos. The living God dies into the geometry he supposedly made. The universal geometer dissolves into the universal geometry, and we are left with mathematical structure without ultimate ground or source.

Of course, the stress on geometry is not modern simply. The real problem is rather the absolutization of the "geometrical" the apotheosis of what Pascal call the *esprit geometrique* into *the* one and only privileged way to make true intelligible sense of things. One remembers the Pythagorean idea that musical and mathematical structures are analagous, each being a harmony of being. In modernity, though not yet in Kepler, there is a loss of the music in the mathematics. There is a devaluation of being. This follows the excision of the good from being, proximately in the exclusion of the good in terms of final causes, but more deeply in the inability to think any other sense of the good, that is, in the failure to envisage an *archeology* of the good, as well as a teleology. Modern nihilism can be linked to a failure or inability to think the *origin* as good. This, in turn, is reflected in the lost sense of the *inherent value* of nature as an aesthetic appearing. If the *arche* is the good, then being is good and it is good to be. In such a light we can recover the inherent value of aesthetic being. By contrast, modern mathematicized science reduces archeology to efficient causality, itself modeled on mechanism with mathematical structure. The inherent value of being is rendered invisible by this reduction.

I am not endorsing Pythagoreanism without qualification, I am recommending the fact that the Pythagoreans were *plurivocal*.⁶ we need *both* mathematics and music to understand the intelligibility and to hear the beauty of the cosmos; aesthetic, ethical, religious and mathematical voices sound together. In modern science there is an attempted reduction of these plural voices to a dominating mathematical univocity. We have only to think of Plato with respect

6. In *Philosophy and its Others* I speak about and try to develop what I call a plurivocal philosophizing.

to the good and geometry. In Plato, certainly in the *Timaeus*, geometry is ingredient in the intelligible structures of matter. The geometrical structures of intelligibility are fashioned in matter itself by the Demiurge and his helpers. But the geometry of matter cannot be separated from the good of the cosmos. If we cannot understand being as related to the good, all the geometry is finally pointless. Indeed, the major issue about the being of the cosmos is just its relation to the good. Otherwise the whole is purposeless, without point, valueless, as is any explanation that rests with this pointlessness. We cannot live in the dead palace of majestic mathematics. We need the resurrection of the *poiesis* of naturing. We need to rethink the glory of creation.