

Who One Is

189

JAMES G. HART

WHO ONE IS  
BOOK 1: MEONTOLOGY OF THE "I": A TRANSCENDENTAL  
PHENOMENOLOGY

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James G. Hart

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Book 1

Meontology of the “I”: A Transcendental Phenomenology

 Springer

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*This work is dedicated to the  
philosophical dyad at  
The Catholic University of America,  
in Washington, DC*

*Thomas Prufer (†1993)  
and Robert Sokolowski.*

# Preface

The first volume of this work is a transcendental phenomenological wrestle with what is referred to with the first-person singular pronoun. Its central concern is to sort out the sense in which *who* one is, is not identical with *what* one is. The second volume shows how transcendental phenomenology is of necessity also “existential.” There we develop the claim that the “I,” as it is uncovered in transcendental phenomenology, i.e., both as the personal I as well as the transcendental I, has a core sense. This sense, which we, following Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers, will call *Existenz*, is awakened by what Husserl calls the “absolute Ought” or the *unum necessarium*. The demands of this, to which each can be awakened, not only enrich the sense of the personal I but challenge the apparent hegemony of the transcendental I and the seeming philosophical self-sufficiency of the I of the transcendental phenomenologist.

Both volumes are written *secundum sententias Edmundi*. This is to say, they are “Husserlian” both in the sense that the indebtedness to Edmund Husserl is evident on every page, even when the discussions have to do with past and present thinkers who have never heard of him, but also in the sense that both volumes attempt to think along with Husserl in places where, as far as I can see, he had not addressed the problems explicitly.

What alone is novel in these two volumes is the way familiar themes and discussions are juxtaposed and related. Nevertheless, as every avid reader of philosophy knows, the contemplative delight that is found in the acquisition, explication and propounding of insights and displays of the world which already are the work of others at the very least approximates that of the original thinkers. This is one reason we have schools of thought and philosophical movements.

Both volumes enrich the positions sketched in *The Person and the Common Life* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992) but they also provide a correction. In that work I did not appreciate sufficiently the theme of the uniqueness of the self or ipseity, the central theme of both of these volumes. On the other hand, that earlier work attends to the themes of intersubjectivity, community, and *polis* which this work had to neglect. In the earlier volume I developed the notion of the first-person nominative plural, “we,” as a performative achievement (comparable to a “quasi-indexical”) that appresents and represents Others and therefore builds on the apperception of the Others’ first-person nominative singular self-reference. This achievement of “we,”

the fulfillment of personal life and the basis for a proper notion of community, is deepened and appears to be even more remarkable when one gains a better insight into the uniqueness of each individual.

Another caution bordering on a regret is that this work's emphasis on spirit pushes the themes of nature, human nature, ecology, and natural processes into the background. Perhaps on some other occasion we might be able to attempt to do justice to this imbalance. It is hard to say which dimension, nature or spirit, is today under greater assault by our cultural, economic, and political theories and practices.

The transcendental phenomenology of the first volume is called a "meontology." Because ontology has to do with being, and *meon* refers to non-being, we might appear to have a contradiction. Yet this venerable term signifies for us some of the problems of the distinctive mode of reference of "I" as well as the distinctive mode of self-presence which "I" presupposes. The transcendental sense of "I," as the agent and dative of manifestation (terms of Robert Sokolowski which this work appropriates), is presupposed by all senses of being. There is an incongruity in thinking of this, as that to which and by which all that appears, itself appearing as a being or an object, and therefore we have found reason to follow Husserl's meontological suggestions in this matter. Further, the reference of "I," but also the empathic presencing and address of Others in the second-and third person, just like all demonstratives, can be a non-ascriptive form of reference, i.e., a reference free of any seeing-as or taking-as which always involves property ascription. In both volumes this becomes a theme of special interest in the consideration that love's intentionality is beyond the qualities or properties of the beloved.

In the transcendental phenomenological meontology "who one is" refers basically to the "myself" which the indexical "I" presupposes and refers to. With transcendental phenomenological reflection this sense of "I" reveals itself as a uniquely unique, propertyless, unworldly, unbegun, unending, non-temporal, non-spatial, non-reflectively self-aware, and therefore not a posited being. If I am asked in this ultimate foundational framework, Who are you? I always know and can never not know the answer, even if I have become amnesiac. Yet, in response to, Who are you?, I, in this ultimate framework, cannot say anything except "I," and even this token expression betrays a commonality among all speakers that distorts the unique uniqueness. Of course, in the transcendental ultimate framework important things may be said about "the transcendental I" in terms of what it is, i.e., the sense in which it is a substance and the sense in which it bears properties. Similarly, in the everyday perspective of the natural attitude, when a person asks of someone, Who are you?, she typically has other, often pragmatic or ethical, contexts in mind. And so do I when, e.g., I translate the perhaps anguished "Who am I?" by "What sort of person am I?"

"What sort of person am I?" raises questions with which Book 2 will chiefly deal. Yet in the first Book we must also wrestle with the sense in which "person" is a "sortal" term, as the phrase "sort of person" suggests. In Book 2 we study how this question may be construed ethically and thus have to do with a different sense of identity, namely one's personal-moral identity, in contrast to that of the

transcendental I. This moral identity is not given from the start but rather requires a unique self-determination and normative self-constitution. Here the theme of vocation emerges in conjunction with love. The speculative resolution of this work is that the moral-personal ideal sense of Who is linked to the transcendental Who through a notion of entelechy or vocation. The person strives to embody the “myself” or I-ness that one both ineluctably is and which, however, points to who one is not and who one ought to be. At the conclusion of Book 2 we will address speculatively the philosophical-theological issues at stake here.

In Book 1 we have primarily to do with the transcendental-ontological sense of Who one is. Prior to self-reference there is a non-reflective self-awareness of “myself.” This is named, in the spirit of Duns Scotus and Gerard Manley Hopkins, an “individual essence” or “haecceity” because “Who one is” is “essentially” distinct from Others in a non-proprietary way. One is an individual through oneself being a “myself,” and not because of individuating factors apart from oneself; one is uniquely oneself *per se* and not *per accidens*. This sense of oneself coincides with the transcendental I as an I-pole which likewise is bereft of properties.

Of course, this sense of oneself is not the whole of oneself because each is a person, and persons have of necessity properties and forms of individuation by reason of their insertion in nature, society, and culture. As Husserl has pointed out there are paradoxes in this double-aspect we have of being transcendental I’s and persons in the world with others. We will spell out some of these paradoxes in accord with the theme of the “transcendental person.” For example, we look at how one is both the transcendental observer and something observed, a person, in the world with Others; how one is both a part//piece of the world, and that to which and for which the world appears; how one is non-temporal and in time; how one is not in space and in space; how one is part of the causal, bodily world-nexus and free and transcendent to this. Special attention is given to the paradox of death, how it appears in the natural attitude in the second- and third-person in contrast to the first-person. Of special interest is that death, which, along with birth, seems, *in the first-person* transcendental analysis, to lack for essential reasons phenomenological evidence – whereas in the second- and third-person its evidence is compelling. We will look at this matter from various angles. The final chapter of Book 1 discusses various possible meanings of the “afterlife” in the light of transcendental-phenomenological considerations.

# Acknowledgments

My reading of the general lines of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and my take on the spirit of Husserl are indebted to the philosophical dyad at Catholic University in Washington, DC, Thomas Prufer and Robert Sokolowski. Thomas Prufer, even in his passing, remains the constant mentor. I continue to sense him, as it were, looking over my shoulder. Robert Sokolowski is an adopted mentor and an exemplar of the philosophical wonder and patience which permits essential distinctions to emerge. For these reasons I have dedicated this work to them.

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Readers will soon see that I owe to the Danish philosopher, Erich Klawonn, some of the key insights and arguments around which especially the first volume revolves. Dan Zahavi's work introduced me to Klawonn and here I also thank Zahavi for always being helpful, in his writings and conversations, in clarifying many matters in the philosophers we have commonly studied.

It will be likewise evident to readers how much I owe, among the earlier generations of phenomenologists, to Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, Dietrich Von Hildebrand, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, J.-P. Sartre, J. Ortega y Gasset, E. Levinas, Eugene Gendlin, and, especially, Michel Henry, whose thought, although scarcely mentioned, has been an impetus throughout this work. Very important also are my debts to Maurice Blondel, Louis Lavelle, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Vladimir Jankélévitch, H.D. Lewis, and Robert Spaemann, all of whom thought and wrote outside of the explicit phenomenological movement, but whose common passion for evident distinctions made such a border artificial.

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James G. Hart  
Bloomington, Indiana and Manitoulin Island, Ontario  
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