

INTRODUCTION



This book is fundamentally about what it is, and what it is like, to be a person. Each of us is a person, and my attempt in this book is to describe the world in the terms in which that world exists for a person, that is, to describe the world in the terms in which it actually matters for each of us. All of our sciences study the world in some way, but the terms of these sciences are not the terms of our living experience: the particles of the physicist exist in a context of the complex technology of modern instruments of measurement coupled with highly complex theories, but they are not functioning elements of anyone's living experience; the statistical analyses of the sociologist may be helpful in accurately predicting patterns of social behavior, but no one lives as "an average white American teenager." Whatever value these sciences offer—and no doubt they offer great value—none of them is, or purports to be, an analysis of the world *as it is lived* by us, none of them is a description of the inherently *human* world. This book is an attempt to be just that: it is an attempt to describe reality *as we live it*, an attempt to establish the terms in which a human life is meaningful.

What makes a life meaningful? We find meaning in our lives through our aspirations and accomplishments, through the others we admire and care for, through our myriad daily practices, and through our hobbies, careers, and entertainments, our religious practices, and so on. It is these, the matters of everyday life, with which we shall be concerned here. Our study will be about aspirations, occupations, and most especially our relationships with other people. It is in these domains that we shall find the matters of deepest significance in the life of the person. The ultimate focus of this book will be on our dealings with other people in the context of developing a meaningful life, but to get there we will first engage in a substantial discussion of the nature of *things*.

It is primarily in and through things that we live. Our world is populated with things. We often explicitly notice the many individual objects

around us, such as the package left at the neighbor's doorstep, the cat that comes up to greet me, or the new jacket you are wearing, but even when we do not explicitly notice them, as, for example, when I open a door or wipe my boots on a mat while being absorbed in a conversation, all of our ongoing activities are conducted through interaction with things. These "worldly" and public things are typically things that I experience as "not me" and "not mine." We also deal with things in an importantly different way, however. We typically depend on defining ourselves through those things that we call our own, whether our dwelling places, our clothes, or our favorite personal possessions. We also depend on a special relationship we have to those things that we make, and through which we express ourselves. In these latter cases, we do not experience things as "not me" or "not mine" but, quite the contrary, it is in and through them that we have our very experience of "me" and "mine." Our study of what it is to be a person and of what the terms of meaningfulness are in a human life will especially take us into this domain of things that we "enown": as we consider what it is to be one's "own" self, we will especially be led to consider questions of our ownership of things, and also to consider our involvement with things as media for creative self-expression. We will see that things are not primarily meaningful in our world as detached, impersonal objects but that, most importantly, it is through an engagement with and immersion of our own identity in things that the aspirations, occupations, and relationships that are most important to us are established.

It is through our study of things that we shall be able to pose the question: "What is a person?" and, more specifically, "What is another person?" We shall see that the other person is a unique kind of reality that offers to us the possibility for creative growth and development beyond the limited horizons that we are able to supply to ourselves. In studying the role of others in the formation of personal identity, we shall first consider the distinctive role of the family. Here we shall consider the crucially formative role those particular individuals who make up the family play in initiating the individual person into the experience of shared human life. We shall then contrast the distinctive character of family experience with the form of experience that will be our central concern in the remainder of the book: erotic relationships. Unlike family experiences, in which one has one's others "given" to one, and in which one is defined as a "member," erotic relationships are freely adopted, and one functions in them as a free individual. Through discussing these dimensions of our experience, we shall see that, contrary to many familiar descriptions that denigrate sexuality, erotic life is in fact the dynamic center of the meaningfulness of developed human life; erotic life is the real sphere of human *freedom*, that is, of creativity and

responsibility. It is the ultimate “point” of our study to develop from this description of the erotic domain an understanding of ethics, that is, an understanding of how and why matters of justice and responsibility are essential to the life of a person. What we shall see, in short, is that human reality is *essentially* shared, that this shared reality is rooted in creativity, and that this shared space of creativity inherently brings with it norms of care, justice, honesty, and openness. We shall find that in the human world ethics and reality are in a kind of reciprocity, reality inherently calling us to ethical responsibility, and ethics fundamentally calling us to grasp reality as a norm.

In developing this line of thought, this book, *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, stands as a companion to my earlier book, *Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life*. In that earlier work I used the insights of contemporary European philosophy to develop an interpretation and analysis of the nature of mental health. That work studied in more detail than this one the child’s experience of family life and the impact this has on the (healthy or unhealthy) form of our adult engagement with the world. This work complements and extends the argument of *Human Experience*, especially through its focus on sexuality, and the emergence of the experience of individuality in adolescent life. Also, whereas *Human Experience* revolved more or less around what I would call an “epistemological” orientation, in that it asked after the processes and practices by which we come to form our meaningful experience (“knowledge”) of the world, this work revolves more around the axis of metaphysics, attempting to characterize accurately the nature of reality and moving from there into matters of ethics, attempting to characterize accurately the nature of values as those emerge within our experience. These themes of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics—and, to be sure, the central themes of the development of personal identity and of meaningfulness in human life—are among the oldest, deepest, and most difficult (and, indeed, most important) matters of philosophical investigation. My goal in this book, though, like my goal in *Human Experience*, is to present these matters in a way that is accessible to a nonspecialist reader and that, without sacrificing rigor, presents these matters in a way that is clear and that clearly demonstrates their relevance to the most pressing matters of everyday life.

Though this book, like *Human Experience*, is an original work of philosophy, it again draws heavily on the insights of many great philosophers both of our contemporary world and of our distant past. Most manifestly, this is a work of philosophy within the tradition of continental European philosophy as that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The central ideas in this work about the nature of persons, of artistic creation, of things, and of justice are highly dependent on the insights especially of

German philosophers Martin Heidegger, G. W. F. Hegel, and Friedrich Schiller, and of French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida. Though this book will not directly address any of these thinkers, it is nonetheless my hope that it will, like *Human Experience*, also serve as a useful text for introducing students or other interested readers to some of the central themes and concepts of these great thinkers. Though I shall not be discussing these philosophers directly in the upcoming chapters, I can offer a few words of orientation to the interested reader regarding how I understand my work to be related to the works of other thinkers in our philosophical tradition.

I have said that this work operates within the arena of contemporary continental philosophy, and this is quite true; even more deeply, though, this work is indebted to the philosophical insights of the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle. It is Aristotle who brilliantly articulated the insight that “all men by nature desire to know” (*Metaphysics* A.1). In this remark, Aristotle identifies the nature of things and the nature of humanity to be inherently and intimately united, and it will be the articulation of this insight that will ultimately be the central idea of this book. Aristotle’s notion of *phusis*—that is, reality as self-emergent—and his notion of the human as the animal with *logos* (the ability to “take account”) are also ideas very much at the foundation of the work in this book. Indeed, there is good reason to construe each of Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty as themselves fundamentally carrying on and developing creatively this same Aristotelian tradition in philosophy, and, in part, my own conjoining of Aristotelian insights with the ideas of later European thinkers is an attempt to highlight an inherent continuity between Aristotelian and contemporary European philosophy. Further, in his great philosophical insights, Aristotle is himself, to my mind, carrying on some of the deepest threads of the Platonic philosophy and, ultimately, it is this Platonic philosophy with which I understand myself to be engaged. This book can be understood as my attempt to grapple with the insights of Plato’s *Apology*, *Crito*, *Symposium*, and *Ion* in particular, and to think along with them in trying to apprehend better the nature of the human being in relation to other people, to justice, to art, and to reality in general. In particular, I draw from the *Apology* and *Crito* the notion that a commitment to justice is the attitude in which human nature matures, and I draw from the *Symposium* and *Ion* the notion that it is in the domains of erotic attraction and artistic creation that human growth is primarily accomplished.

My development of all the themes of human nature, justice, and sexuality draws heavily upon the insights into the interpersonal dimensions of personal life found in Heidegger’s discussion of “being-with” in *Being and Time*, in Hegel’s discussion of the dialectic of recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Sartre’s discussion of “Concrete Relations with

Others” in *Being and Nothingness*, and in Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of sexuality and language in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. My discussion of the *thing* has been powerfully shaped by the work of Heidegger, who studies the thing as object, equipment, and artwork, and my central focus on the foundational role of artistic expression in human development has strong resonance with the ideas in his “Origin of the Work of Art,” as well as those in Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. My discussion of art and language also is significantly influenced by Jacques Derrida’s many writings on the nature of language, especially the theme of “iterability,” found, for example, in his essay “Signature, Event, Context.” My discussion of the thing as property has been most powerfully shaped by the work of Hegel and also by the work of twentieth-century psychologists; indeed, students of continental philosophy in general would be wise to pay greater attention to the work of figures such as D. W. Winnicott, Salvador Minuchin, and R. D. Laing, among others. My discussion of the nature of our own body and its relation to these different aspects of the thing has been most powerfully shaped by the work of Merleau-Ponty. My writing is also strongly influenced by a number of other writers, the most important of whom for this work are John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sigmund Freud, R. G. Collingwood, John Dewey, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Though I almost never make specific reference to their works, the role of their insights will be manifest to the attuned reader on every page.

The book itself is organized to take the reader from something like “first principles,” that is, the general terms in which all experience in general is to be understood, to the intricacies of the specific, developed forms of experience that make human life meaningful: we shall move in our argument from a discussion of the most basic form of sense to a discussion of the fullest development of freedom. The first chapter of the book is roughly methodological, the second is loosely metaphysics, the third epistemology, and the fourth ethics. Each of these fields, in its articulation, invokes the others, with the result that ultimately no strict delimitation of these spheres is possible. This inseparability of the domains of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics also means, as the fifth chapter will conclude, that being, by its nature, is to be known, and its reality is rooted in the ought, that knowledge must recognize its role in the constitution of reality, and that ethics must recognize that our duty is fulfilled in philosophy.

More specifically, chapter 1, “Initiations,” argues that a notion of form is essential to a theory of human experience, that form is always experienced as an emergent or epiphanic reality, and that such epiphanies of form must be realized bodily. This chapter especially investigates our experience of music as exemplary for revealing the different dimensions

of our experience of meaningful form. Chapter 2, "Ambiguity," develops a metaphysics of embodiment that is oriented by the need to explain the phenomenon of the epiphany of form. The body is shown to be an ambiguous structure that is always simultaneously itself and a propulsion beyond itself. This dynamic ambiguity of the body will serve as a paradigm for understanding the nature of things in general. Chapter 3, "Learning and Insight," develops a theory of knowledge that is consistent with the metaphysics of bodily ambiguity. In particular, it focuses on the need to explain the phenomenon of learning, that is, the process by which we transform our relationship to things from one of alienation to one of integration, and the phenomenon of insight that is the culmination of this process. We will see that learning about the nature of the world and learning about the nature of oneself are paired experiences and, further, that this learning takes place in an essentially intersubjective context. We will here note the distinctive and essential educative role played by our family experience (the topic that *Human Experience* investigated in detail) and also the essential role of artistic expression in our education and development. Chapter 4, "Responsibility," shows that the concept of the "person" is essential to understanding the kind of being that is a body and that can have insight and participate in the learning discussed in chapter 3. It studies the way that experiencing oneself as a person is something accomplished most fundamentally in the context of erotic relations with other persons. This chapter's central study of the nature of erotic life reveals that the natural development of our sexuality impels us to experiences of self-transformation that implicate us in experiences of responsibility regarding ourselves and other persons. We will see why it is essential to our development that we realize our individuality through the possession of property, but also why this experience of ownership naturally implicates us in relations of social responsibility and, ultimately, a politics of multiculturalism. Chapter 5, "Art and Philosophy," concludes the book by showing that the issues of self-transformation and responsibility explored in chapter 4 only exist and can only be dealt with in the sphere of human life that is made possible through communication, which rests upon our expressive, that is, artistic, capacities. Thus our expressive life is at the heart of our human experience, and the chapter explores the developmental, systematic way in which this is so. Philosophy, finally, is understood as the attempt to live up to the responsibilities of the human sphere, specifically understood as a creative sphere.

In this book I am looking for the *roots*, the dynamic sources, of our reality. I am looking for what the Greeks would call the *archai*. This is a book about growth, about the dynamic, self-transforming character of our life, the life that develops from these roots. It is a book about affirming the *reality* of the things we care about, and it is an antireductionist

book, that is, it is an argument against those sorts of philosophy that try to explain away the everyday terms in which we experience our own world. The topics of study, especially in the later chapters, will be familiar issues of normal life. My philosophical project is to find the proper context for understanding them: precisely finding their roots. In my view, most of our problems come from a failure to understand the roots of what we experience. I will not try to solve all of our problems, but in trying to determine the roots of our experience I am trying to contribute to this project.

Kant argued that there is a priori scaffolding of experience, such that the meaning of our experience is always structured in terms of cause and effect, substance and accident, reality, negation, universality, and so on. Heidegger identified the form of our experience as projection, attunement, discourse, being-with, being-alongside, and so on. In what follows, I do not consider myself to be challenging these insights of Kant and Heidegger but to be thinking with them to a point of greater determinacy. Under the designation “the bodily a priori” or the designation “inexhaustibles,” I will find such things as rhythm, things, understanding, family, law, property, dignity, learning, insight, tragedy, gods, marriage, betrayal, truth, responsibility, dance, marks, persons, humanity, and more. This is another way of saying that I will be arguing that the terms of our everyday experience are not optional. Let us turn now to the study of these elements of everyday life.