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In this large two-volume book, James Hart offers the reader an insightful and comprehensive treatment of the perplexing manner in which we, each of us, are aware of our own selves. The book is comprehensive in two senses: in regard to the topics treated, and in regard to the authorities invoked.

The subject is of interest to everyone. Part of our human being is to be able to be aware of ourselves. This feature might seem to be a bland universal, something we all have in common; and yet, as Hart frequently puts it, each of us is “uniquely unique” to ourselves. None of us could be someone else, no one else could be “me,” nor can we even imagine ourselves truly being someone else, and such inescapable singularity shows up to us, with its own kind of insistence, in our self-awareness. The formal and universal coincides with an extreme individuality, in each and every one of us. This self-awareness is not a mere curiosity: it is related to our ability to use language, to engage in moral exchanges, friendships, and enmities, to have a sense of the whole of things, and to experience ourselves as obliged in minor matters as well as decisive ones. It is also implicated in our reverence and response toward the divine. Our self-awareness is involved in our ability to succeed or fail in being truthful. How can we find the right philosophical words to express this way of being? How can we formulate this modality of being and presentation? Hart addresses this issue in all its amplitude, and draws on an extraordinary, almost encyclopedic range of writers in doing so.

The unusual length of the book should be addressed at the start. There are fifteen chapters in the two volumes, and each discusses a distinct topic. The chapters average out to about 80 pages. Each could be considered a booklet in itself. It seems to me that the work is best read that way, as a series of treatises that are somewhat self-contained and hence manageable, each with its own internal configuration and cited authors. The book is something like a *Gesamtausgabe* and not just a single work. Taking a chapter at a time allows the reader to better notice and appreciate the many successful phrases in Hart’s writing, which might get lost in the book as a whole.

The first volume is a phenomenology of self-awareness. The term “meontology” in the title signifies the fact that we do not show up to ourselves simply as one of the entities in the world; we are not “just one of those things.” The volume
discusses the cognitional aspect of self-awareness, but it also treats the counterpart singularity we experience in loving and being loved, the paradoxes of our self as being both a part of the world and yet on its margin, the uniqueness of the phenomenon of our own death (in parallel with our birth), and the question of life afterward. The second volume deals with Existenz, a German term that Hart leaves untranslated. He reminds us that we are not mere lookers-on. Even in our theorizing and our philosophical detachment, as well as in everything else we do and face, we cannot avoid being an issue for ourselves, and we cannot avoid responding. But to what and to whom do we respond, and how? The challenge here for the writer is to avoid sentimentality and facile rhetoric. The formal, analytical intelligence that marks the first volume in its treatment of appearances and personal identity is maintained in the second, as Hart discusses how “I myself” am involved in not just knowing of my death but also needing to assent to it, and how “I” stand in regard to what we experience as conscience, vocation, and the truth of theology. We can’t just *know* such things; we cannot avoid being involved in them as first-person subjects. The most intimate awareness is not just a mathematical-like pattern but also an inclination, and Hart attempts to find the words to express it on its own terms.

Before addressing the content of Hart’s work, I wish to indicate the vast extent of sources he uses. Most writers are partisan; we cite authors that belong to our own tradition or circle. Hart is extraordinarily ecumenical and well-informed. He works primarily with the phenomenology that was developed by Husserl, and so we are not surprised to encounter Brentano, Heidegger, Scheler, Edith Stein, Conrad-Martius, Jaspers, Ingarden, Jankélévitch, Levinas, Siewerth, Sartre, Ricoeur, and Derrida, as well as contemporaries such as Bernet, Bieri, Kern, Marbach, Marion, Melle, Prufer, and Zahavi, but we also find considerable attention given to Chisholm, Gendlin, Nagel, Klawonn, Shoemaker, and Slade, as well as references to T.H. Green, Bradley, McTaggart, H.D. and C.S. Lewis, William James, Wittgenstein, Tillich, Peter Strawson, Geach, Findlay, Bouwsma, Allaire, Cavell, Davidson, Parfit, Putnam, Nussbaum, Plantinga, Loux, and Darwall. Hart has been especially influenced by Michel Henry, Hector-Neri Castañeda, and Bernard Lonergan, S.J. Other continental authors that appear are Arendt, Helmut Kuhn, Bakhtin, Lavelle, Weil, Balthasar, Nabert, Besançon, and Henrich. Classical authors include Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Scotus, Ruysbroec, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Literary figures such as Traherne, Hopkins, Dickinson, Tolstoy, Hofmannsthal, and Rilke are cited. I list all these names to show in a concrete way that Hart does not treat the issue of self-awareness only within the vocabulary and problematic of a single school. His book could serve as a reference work for someone who wished to explore this topic and
wanted to know how it has been treated in philosophical and theological traditions other than his own.

But the substance of the book concerns the philosophical treatment of human self-awareness. Chapter 1 establishes the kind of discourse that will be used in the rest of the work. It uses Husserl's transcendental reduction, in which we clarify how we can speak intelligibly about appearances. The major foil is the philosophy often associated with modern naturalistic science, which is discussed in regard to two problematic doctrines. First, appearances are detached from things. Hobbes puts it this way: just as reflected, mirrored images are spatially separated from what causes them, so appearances “in us” are separated from what appears to us through them; they exist in our brain or our sensibility but not in things. Husserl's philosophy puts appearances back in the things themselves. That is one way of saying what he means by intentionality. Second, the philosophy of modern science assumes the conceivability of possible worlds. Hart compares this issue with Husserl's eidetic reduction, in which we imagine variations in the attributes of things until we come to features we cannot “think away” without destroying the thing in question; such features come to light in this procedure as essential to the thing. Hart observes that in Husserlian imaginative variation we assume that there is a single self still embedded in the one single world, while in the possible-world project we assume that there could be a self that departed in thought from any given world and was able to survey them all. The ineluctability of both self and world is diluted and the argument moves into false abstraction; the meanings reached in possible-world approaches are purely conceptual and “completely independent of modes of givenness” (I, 29). Later in the volume Hart claims that possible-world speculation leads to “the death of phenomenological philosophy” because it disqualifies the ultimate actuality of the first-person situation in the world in which we live (I, 532).

Another foil used by Hart is medieval thought, which, he correctly says, introduces two problems. First, it makes intentionality or appearing exclusively the achievement of the things that appear (the contribution of the subject is downgraded), and, second, it implies “that things now exist ‘in the mind,’ as representations, species, or likenesses” (I, 35). Hart draws still another contrast with Buddhist thought, in which the self and world are dissolved in another way than in science; the comparison is made only briefly (I, 5), but it is treated repeatedly and at greater length later in the book. The point in Hart’s argument is that we need to adjust our language in order to speak appropriately about appearances and about the one (the person) who is the dative for the appearances. The rest of the book will presume that the reader has gotten the knack of talking about the way things show up. Once this new perspective or attitude clicks into place, we become able to transpose any words from our natural language into philosophical discourse.
We are not confined only to certain axiomatic definitions, as though we were developing a new science of the same kind as those we wish to think about. Hart’s first chapter is an essential prolegomenon to his work.

Having established the principles of his philosophical vocabulary, Hart devotes chapter 2 to his initial statement about self-awareness. He begins with the more manageable issue of linguistic indexicals (“this,” “now”) and first-person terms (“I”). He brings out the peculiarities of the use of “I” as being “immediately deictic” and without “a distinction between sense/meaning and reference” for the user (I, 67–8). Such usage is both ineliminable from speech and infallible in reference. Many authors are used in this chapter, but Castañeda and Husserl are the main interlocutors and sources, and themes from Buddhism are introduced. Hart claims that any linguistic indexical usage relies on a “prior lived acquaintance of oneself” (I, 77). In this he differs from Castañeda, who sees linguistic use as bringing about such self-awareness (I, 115). Hart says that the term “I” enables me to be “present to myself as myself” (I, 77), but being present “as myself” presumes that “myself” was already previously given in a prelinguistic way. Hart insists, “There is no presence of something to me unless I am already self-present,” and he adds that “this self-presence is not of something to me” (I, 110; my italics). Because this self-awareness is prelinguistic, it is very hard to target: “Teasing out its peculiar ‘kind of being’ or non-being is a difficult matter” (I, 104).

Even in this chapter, however, Hart shows that the “myself” given in such awareness and linguistic indication is not yet the bottom of what we are and sense ourselves to be; it rests on a still deeper pattern of protention and retention, an “odd kind of flow” or “temporal sourcing” that Husserl articulates in his study of the consciousness of inner time (I, 105; II, 135). This is a formal “movement” deeper than memory and anticipation and different from psychological processes and states, which are all enabled by it. As the term “I” cannot be used without prior self-awareness, so can the latter not occur without this deeper stratum, but the strata are my own and me all the way down. They are the preconditions for other forms of ownership on the more complex levels of experience, where we say that something is “mine.”

The first two chapters set the stage for the rest of the book. They provide its perspective, vocabulary, and target. Heidegger relates Dasein to conscience and being-toward-death, but Hart amplifies the constituent facets of human self-awareness, adding those of love, afterlife, vocation, and theology, all as formally implied by the way we each experience “myself” as such. Our experience of such things “resembles my awareness of my unique ipseity” (II, 8).

I wish to mention two topics on which I disagree in part with Hart’s argument. The first deals with human agency. In the second volume, while examining the claims that Existenz makes on us, he shows that there is a primitive self-love and self-trust on the level of “primal passive synthesis” (II, 331); it is a precondition for
higher-level actions and relationships. He relates this elementary self-trust to our love of life and fear of annihilation, to Kant’s and Fichte’s teaching on self respect, Scheler’s and Gilligan’s thoughts about shame, and Darwall’s ideas about the role of other persons in establishing obligations (II, 332–60). Hart is well aware of the difficulties of taking language suited to higher-level, intersubjective forms of trust and love and adapting it for service on this elementary and elusive level. He also observes that events in life can cause disruptions on this stratum of awareness, and says that some forms of self-assertion that would normally be accounted as wrong, such as taking one’s own life, may be seen as ways in which the person “ineluctably affirms and esteems his singular individuality” and “is affirming himself as above the mess in which he has become immersed” (II, 332; also II, 112–3). I would claim that one ought not to formalize human agency to this degree, and that the way we affirm ourselves needs always to be measured by the nature and ends of human being; the deepest level of our identity is a given precondition for choices and not an object of our choice.

A second point on which I differ deals with theology. Hart makes use of a term that I have adopted, “the Christian distinction,” which signifies the contrast that is drawn in Christian faith between the world and God, who is understood as the one who creates the world freely, without need, and from no preexistent material. Hart extends this concept beyond Christian faith into other religions and philosophies (he comments extensively on Plotinus in this context), and he reformulates the term as “the theological distinction” (II, 369, 434, 504). He shows how the sense of such an absolute is related to our existential “vocation,” and how such a calling is involved in our primary self-awareness. Incisive contrasts are drawn, such as the difference between how people are related to us in our identity and the way God is related to it: my parents may have wanted a boy or a girl or a baby with certain features, but “my parents could not . . . have wanted me”; but God can be thought to have chosen me before I came to be (II, 383). My difference with Hart’s exposition lies in my claim that the Christian distinction depends not just on the doctrines of creation and the relation of the world and ourselves to God, but also on Christian belief in the Incarnation, in which God becomes man and hence part of what he has created, without becoming diminished in his divinity. In the Incarnation God acts as both God and man, in words and actions that are both redemptive and exemplary. The possibility of such Incarnation, I think, reveals something distinctive about divine transcendence and differentiates Christian faith from other religious and philosophical beliefs.

I mention in closing—and with gratitude—that the book is dedicated to Thomas Prufer and me, and I might also mention that in its ample size the work can be taken as a counterpart to Prufer’s slim masterpiece Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy. The two works differ in form but are comparably rich in substance.