

manner in things.

And this ambiguity within things rebores  
it upon us and the ambiguity within  
reception that enabled it. The draw of the

John Russon  
magnetic force it impresses upon  
to perceive it -- contains the ambiguity  
the thing itself. The <sup>changed</sup> pressure to perceive  
thing -- the chargedness in our bodies  
called forth by the rhythm of things -- is  
much the pressure to perceive the interior  
things as it is the pressure to become  
involved in their unique, singular isolate  
ings draw us to perceive them beyond their  
irregularities in their togetherness. This is the  
law of understanding, of com-prehension,  
our perceptual itself, then, has the double character

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that is, in the things of this world, in  
being drawn beyond them to their common  
depths, to the double-sense that  
expands to the duplicity of the reality of

Persons, Things, and  
the Nature of Erotic Life  
And, indeed, inasmuch as this  
duplicity in things is itself enabled by  
drawing up of the field ~~my~~ that comes on

or detachment, our perceptual life is in  
the magnetic force of this detachment  
itself, that is, we are drawn to self-perception  
in our ~~perceptual life~~ <sup>experience</sup> we ~~for~~ live the life

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# Bearing Witness to Epiphany

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

# Bearing Witness to Epiphany

## Persons, Things, and the Nature of Erotic Life

John Russon

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This work is dedicated to Kirsten Elisabeth Jacobson,  
whose constant companionship and partnership  
in philosophical exploration made this writing possible.

But it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent, for  
such people are rare.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

The reality of the world in which the children eventually must live as adults is one in which every loyalty involves something of an opposite nature which might be called a disloyalty, and the child who has had the chance to reach to all these things in the course of growth is in the best position to take a place in such a world. Eventually, if one goes back, one can see that these disloyalties, as I am calling them, are an essential feature of living, and they stem from the fact that it is disloyal to everything that is not oneself if one is to be oneself. The most aggressive and therefore the most dangerous words in the languages of the world are to be found in the assertion *I AM*. It has to be admitted, however, that only those who have reached a stage at which they can make this assertion are really qualified as adult members of society.

—D. W. Winnicott, “The Child in the Family Group,”  
in *Home Is Where We Start From*

Learn, in life, art; in the artwork, learn life.  
If you see the one right, you see the other also.

—Friedrich Hölderlin, “To Himself,” from *Odes and Epigrams*



# CONTENTS



Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
PART 1 THE EPIPHANY OF THE REAL	9
Chapter 1	
Initiations: On Method	11
Rhythm	12
The Music of Everyday Life	16
Wonder	23
The Bodily a Priori	25
Chapter 2	
Ambiguity: On Metaphysics	29
The Body	29
Perception	33
Attitude	36
Marks	39
Others	42
Our World	44
Chapter 3	
Learning and Insight: On Epistemology	45
Insight	46
Learning as Growth	50
Humanity and Tragedy	53
Humanity and Learning	59
Humanity and Art	64
Imperatives	66
Witnessing	69

PART 2 BEARING WITNESS	71
Chapter 4 Responsibility: On Ethics	73
Sexuality	73
Sexuality and Responsibility	75
The Growth of Interpersonal Responsibility	82
The Ethical Field	85
Honesty and Betrayal	88
Universality and Property	95
Property and Honesty	105
Property and Creation	109
Art, Philosophy, and the Imperative to the World	110
Chapter 5 Art and Philosophy	113
Polytemporality and Self-Transformation	113
Art in Human Development	120
Property and Self-Transformation	127
Reality	127
Honesty	130
Justice	132
Bibliography	137
Index	149

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# 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