NEW WAYS
OF
ONTOMETRY
NEW WAYS OF
ONTOMETRY

NICOLAI HARTMANN

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
PREDRAG CICOVACKI

TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS
NEW BRUNSWICK (U.S.A.) AND LONDON (U.K.)
Contents

Introduction

1  The End of the Old Ontology

2  The Categories of Being

3  A New Concept of Reality

4  The New Ontology and the New Anthropology

5  The Stratified Structures of the World

6  Old Mistakes and New Critique

7  Modification of the Fundamental Categories

8  The Strata Laws of the Real World

9  Dependence and Autonomy in the Hierarchy of Strata

10  Objections and Prospects

11  The Stratification of the Human Being

12  Determination and Freedom

13  A New Approach to the Problem of Knowledge

Appendix

Index
**Introduction**

**A Forgotten Giant – Nicolai Hartmann**

When the name Nicolai Hartmann is mentioned, several images come immediately to my mind. One is of a young philosophy professor packing to go to the front line in WWI and deciding (after long deliberation, of course) that the only book he will take with him is Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The second is that of a famous professor at the University of Berlin who, on the eve of WWII and despite enormous pressure, refuses to begin his seminar on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* with the obligatory “Heil Hitler!” The third image is of a secluded intellectual who, in the period from March to September of 1945, trapped in a besieged and disintegrating Berlin, writes his final book, *Ästhetik*. In this work of nearly five hundred pages—probably Hartmann’s least appreciated and, perhaps, most brilliant book—there is not one reference to war and devastation, but there are many allusions to the incomparable beauty of Shakespeare’s dramas and the divine sublimity of Bach’s music.¹

Hartmann was one of the most prolific philosophical writers of the twentieth century. Although his minor works should by themselves be sufficient to guarantee their author a place in the philosopher’s Pantheon, a list of his major works is truly impressive: *Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntnis* (1921; 4th ed., 1949), *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* (vol. I: 1923; vol. II: 1929), *Ethik* (1925; 3rd ed., 1949), *Das Problem des geistigen Sein* (1933; 2nd ed., 1949), *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie* (1935; 3rd ed., 1948), *Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* (1938; 2nd ed., 1948), *Der Aufbau der realen Welt* (1940; 2nd ed., 1949), *Die Philosophie der Natur* (1950), *Teleologisches Denken* (1951), and *Ästhetik* (1953). Hartmann’s main works received instant attention, and most of them saw their second, third, or fourth editions merely ten to twenty years after their initial publications.²

Paradoxically, for an extended period of time, these books have been out of print. Who, then, was Hartmann and how could it be that he, who was once considered one of the most original philosophers of his time, is now so completely forgotten?

Nicolai Hartmann was born on February 20, 1882, in Riga. After finishing gymnasium in St. Petersburg, he studied philosophy in Marburg, where he defended his doctoral dissertation in 1907 and his habilitation in 1909. Even though he began fairly early to deviate from the Marburg school of Neo-Kantians, he succeeded his Neo-Kantian teacher Paul G. Natorp’s chair in philosophy in 1922. (Hans-Georg Gadamer was among his first students in Marburg; Martin Heidegger soon became his younger colleague and Hannah Arendt studied alongside, although not directly with Hartmann, from 1924 until 1926.) In 1925 Hartmann moved to the University of Cologne (where he befriended Max Scheler); in 1931 he relocated to the University of
Berlin. After WWII, Hartmann was cleared by the Allies to resume his teaching career. From 1946 until his death, he taught at the University of Göttingen. Hartmann died in Göttingen, on October 10, 1950, at the age of sixty eight.

It should perhaps not be too surprising that Hartmann is barely known in the English-speaking world. Only two of his numerous works have been translated into English. The first was *Ethics*, eight hundred pages long and perhaps the most ambitious treatise on ethics ever written. The second and the last was a short book which summarizes his main ontological ideas, *New Ways of Ontology*. Even those who can read Hartmann in German need enormous patience to thoroughly examine his works, for many of them are five or six hundred pages long. Hartmann was most deeply influenced by Aristotle and Kant, and that influence is visible throughout his opus. Although his clear and systematic style of writing is closer to Aristotle, the novelty and complexity of his ideas is sometimes so great that in the end some of his works resemble more closely Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* than any of Aristotle’s treatises. Hartmann never hid his admiration for Aristotle and Kant, as well as Plato and Hegel, but he was by no means merely an interpreter of their ideas. His criticism of these thinkers—and of the entire history of Western philosophy—is deep and profound, and scholars interested in these philosophers would benefit greatly from a careful study of Hartmann’s works.

While reviewing the translation of Hartmann’s *New Ways of Ontology*, John Ladd wrote in 1954: “Considering the immensity of his philosophical output, this [fact that only two of his works had been translated into English], seems somewhat of a scandal.” More than fifty years later, the scandal still remains.

**The Goal and Method of Philosophy**

_A narrowing of the field of vision is the inveterate vice of philosophy. The defect in all “isms”—whether rationalism, empiricism, sensualism, materialism, psychologism or logicism—is narrowness in the mapping out of the problem. Everywhere the manifoldness of the phenomena is misjudged and varieties are erroneously treated as all alike._

—Hartmann, *Ethics* I, 106

“No one begins his thinking with his own thoughts.” We find ourselves in a certain age that poses its problems to us in its own peculiar way. In important problems, those which (in Kant’s words) human reason can neither resolve nor avoid, we recognize the problems with which all previous generations of philosophers have had to deal. Like his great predecessors, and unlike most of his contemporaries, Hartmann took metaphysics to be the heart and soul of philosophy. All truly philosophical problems are, at their bottom heart, metaphysical, and the goal of philosophy consists of offering a systematic and critical analysis of such problems. A modern turn against metaphysics is, according to Hartmann, a tragic misunderstanding of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant did not intend to turn away from metaphysics as such, but only against a specific way of doing metaphysics. Speculative metaphysics needs to be criticized, for it uncritically oversteps the boundaries of human reason. Kant wanted to establish metaphysics as a science, but he could not succeed because he did not realize the main fault of traditional metaphysics: its initial distortion and subsequent neglect of the most fundamental problem of philosophy, the original ontological problem, the problem of being as being.

In his work, Hartmann sets as his central philosophical goal the development of
critical ontology, based on careful analysis and examination of the manifestations of being. By analysis he does not have in mind any reductivist dissolution into elementary parts, or any isolation of simple parts from a complex and problematic whole. Philosophical analysis is not an examination of words and concepts, but a rigorous scrutiny of the relevant phenomena. The goal of analysis is clarification, as far as rational clarification can go.

Two distinct, although equally indispensable, aspects of philosophical analysis characterize Hartmann’s philosophical method: phenomenology and aporetics. Inspired by Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler’s pioneering efforts, Hartmann turns to phenomenology in an attempt to approach philosophical problems without an already accepted philosophical point; prior standpoints and theoretical commitments limit our understanding of problems and bias us toward looking in a certain predetermined direction for a solution. We should approach philosophical problems from a neutral standpoint—insofar as that is possible. Philosophical positions and theories may emerge at the end of our search, but they cannot be assumed at its outset. Philosophy is essentially a project, not a product; it is not philosophia prima, but philosophia ultima.

Aporetics is an equally essential aspect of the philosophical method. Although practiced by Socrates and Plato, Hartmann credits Aristotle for developing “this natural, the only basic procedure in philosophy.” The virtue of Aristotle’s forgotten procedure consists in approaching philosophical problems by analyzing the given facts and by trying to uncover the inner logic of the problems in question. Grasping the inner logic of philosophical problems allows us to ignore their accidental features and historical attachments, and to understand what in such problems is essentially and eternally puzzling. Hartmann translates the Greek word aporia as Weglösigkeit, as encountering obstacles on one’s way and getting lost en route. Although such obstacles may result from our ignorance and confusion, they also—no less importantly—emerge from the nature of the path, from reality itself: “being itself is disharmonious, and conflict is the form of being.”

The aporia of cognition is one such eternally puzzling philosophical problem. An analysis of the basic phenomena leads to this aporia. The phenomena reveal that a subject and an object of cognition are transcendent to each other, and yet the act of cognition is precisely the act of establishing the unity of their relation. The subject and the object stand against each other, separated from one another, and their ontological status is by no means determined by their cognitive relationship. An object as such is indifferent toward any subject, that is, toward being known by any subject. And even the subject is not limited to this relationship, for cognition is only one of the possible ways in which any subject relates to the world. Nevertheless, their being subjects and objects of cognition means that there is an important relation between them. Hartmann describes their relation as Erfassung, which means reaching out and comprehending. The aporia of cognition consists precisely in the paradoxical nature of that relation; is the cognitive relation of the subject and the object something accidental and inessential to their separated existences, or does it abdicate their transcendence? Hartmann devotes his first major philosophical work, Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntnis, to this aporia.

The most distinctive virtue of Aristotle’s aporetics consists of “discussing
problems without trying to solve them at any cost.” This is not an innocent remark, for Hartmann argues that the strictly metaphysical aspect of philosophical problems is beyond the limit of the solvable. This metaphysical aspect of philosophical problems is unavoidable, and thus the goal of philosophy cannot be to solve its problems “no matter what.” Its goal must instead be to establish “the minimum of metaphysics necessary for the proper considerations of philosophical problems.”

Hartmann recognized that, pace Kant, metaphysics can never be realized as a science, because it is too deeply steeped in the irrational. If philosophy can, nevertheless, be developed into a rigorous and respectable discipline, a radical confrontation with its own past must be undertaken.

**Ontology Old and New**

From the standpoint of ontology, it is not at all important, in terms of posing the question, whether or not there is such a thing as a “ground” of the world, whether or not this ground has an intelligible form, or even whether or not the construction of the world has some meaningful end toward which its whole process is oriented. The character of being as such is not significantly altered by the answers to such questions. These distinctions only come into play when considering broader aspects of differentiation. Clearly, decisive consequences for metaphysics arise from the initial handling of the question of being. But this understanding cannot be taken the other way around. We cannot know anything about the world or its “ground” before we get into the question of being. Neither can theories regarding the objects of being be verified. For by its very essence, the problem of being would appear to be rooted in such questions. It inheres in phenomena, not in hypotheses.

—Hartmann, *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie*, 41

Hartmann divides the mistakes of the old ontology into those related to its method and those concerning its content. The methodological fallacy is not described by one word but three: apriorism, deductivism, and constructivism. A common mistake behind all three methodological approaches is their attempt to develop a complete systematic account of the categories of being—not only of the ideal, but of real being as well—by “logico-rational” means, and not by analyzing those different specific ways in which being manifests itself. The same mistaken attempt to reconstruct the structure of the entire world from a small number of self-evident premises infects the entire Western tradition. Aristotle, according to Hartmann, tried to do this starting with the principle of excluded middle, while Leibniz believed that the task could be accomplished by means of the principle of sufficient reason.

This methodological mistake is not accidental. It is closely related to what Hartmann calls mistakes with respect to the content, or—more precisely—to some uncritically grounded assumptions of the old ontology. The most deeply rooted among them is Parmenides’ postulation of the ultimate parallelism of being and thinking. Although this assumption was expressed in many ways, and developed in different directions, its most important implication is that the laws of logic are to be treated as the laws of being. The corollary is that the entire sphere of being must be intelligible, comprehensible, and meaningful.

In his work, Hartmann rejects the dogmatic thesis of the complete identity of the principles of being and the principles of thinking because this purely speculative assertion transcends the limits of possible experience. Moreover, he is convinced that the thesis presupposes more unity in the world than we have a warrant for asserting: granting this thesis, how could we account for the irreconcilable heterogeneity obviously existing in the world? The idealist approach to this question, which
reduces principles of being to principles of thinking, is repudiated by Hartmann because such a standpoint perverts the natural assumption that knowledge of the structure of objects is prior to knowledge of the structure of our thinking about objects. Finally, Hartmann criticizes even more sharply the contemporary standpoint according to which the principles of being are merely linguistic, that is, nothing but the functions of language. While the dogmatic view postulates more unity than we can justify, the linguistic turn dodges the crucial question concerning the relation between being and reality; it satisfies itself with internally coherent “language games” and does not even attempt to uncover the structure of the real world, which both science and philosophy must aim to disclose.

Parmenides’ assumption of the complete unity of being and thinking is also responsible, according to Hartmann, for a deeply ingrained tendency toward monism in Western thinking. Monism “involves a prejudice in favor of simplicity,” which sets philosophers on a perpetual search for the ultimate—or absolute, or unconditioned—ground (Urgrund) or cause (Ursache) of all reality. This search also misled philosophers into what Hartmann singles out as the worst mistake of the old ontology: its tendency to replace being with the specific categories of being:

The old theory of being is based upon the thesis that the universal, crystallized in the essentia as substantial form and comprehensible as concept, is the determining and formative core of things. Besides the world of things, in which man, too, is encased, there is a world of essences which, timeless and immaterial, forms a kingdom of perfection and higher being.

Since Hartmann consistently opposes the uncritically accepted thesis of the identity of the principles of being and thinking, he attacks the view that identifies being in terms of universals, essences, or substances. As he denies that being as such must be definable, understandable, and rational, he repudiates the traditional divisions of being and becoming, of the separation of existence and essence, as well as the old view that the real and the ideal exclude each other. He is also critical of materialism and idealism, claiming that their basic principles of efficient causality and teleology are equally one-sided and exaggerated. Hartmann’s surgical knife cuts left and right and does not seem to spare any vestige of the old ontology. What, then, remains to serve as the basis of his new ontology?

The cardinal sin of the old ontology consists of its perpetual attempts to define being through its various contents and manifestations. Regardless of whether this is done in terms of essence, substance, matter, form, immovable, unchangeable, indivisible, individual, whole, or any other way, Hartmann finds all of these ways to be mistaken. He is firmly convinced that being itself cannot be defined, since it is the most general category we can think and ask about. As the most general category, being is indefinable and partially irrational. This does not imply, however, that it is entirely irrational and indeterminable, for it can be determined indirectly, through its various manifestations. If this is indeed the case, the proper method of ontology consists in careful and systematic categorial analysis of various manifestations of being.

Hartmann bases his new ontology on three kinds of ontic manifestations: moments of being (Seinsmomenten), which deal with the relationship of Dasein (that something is existent and present) and Sosein (how it is; its being in a certain way); ways of being (Seinsweisen), which concerns the relationship between the real and the ideal; and
modes of being (Seinsmodi), dealing with various kinds of modalities. Despite Hartmann’s ability to disentangle numerous modal confusions (e.g., those concerning the mistaken identification of actuality and reality, as opposed to ideality, or those concerning existence and reality), his considerations of the first two types of modifications may represent his most significant contributions to ontology. Therefore, I will focus on them.18

Hartmann’s discussion of Dasein and Sosein represents one of the finest examples of his novel approach to ontology. Unlike his contemporary Heidegger, who limits his preoccupation to the issue of Dasein, Hartmann explores the complex dialectic of Dasein and Sosein.19 His reasoning is motivated by and responds to two old mistakes: one-sidedly relegating essence to the ideal and existence to the real, and treating essence and existence as completely separable. According to Hartmann, Dasein is not identical with the real, since every ideal is also a Dasein. Similarly, Sosein cannot be identified with the ideal, since every thing that is real is also a Sosein. Moreover, the old concept of essence is not the same as the ideal but is rather a combination of the ideal and a Sosein.

After a complex conceptual analysis, Hartmann arrives at the following conclusion: Dasein and Sosein are two moments of the same being. The two terms can be logically differentiated, but Dasein and Sosein cannot be ontologically separated. Despite being deeply interwoven, there is no direct and tautological identity between Dasein and Sosein, even in the same thing. The relation is rather that the Dasein of a certain A is at the same time the Sosein of a certain B, and the Sosein of that existent B is at the same time the Dasein of some C. For instance, the Dasein of a tree is the Sosein of a forest, for without that tree the forest would not be the same. Going further, the Dasein of the forest is the Sosein of, say, a landscape; the Dasein of the landscape is the Sosein of the earth, and so on. At the end of the chain, we come to the last member, the world as a whole, of which we can only say that it is (Dasein) but not how it is (Sosein).20 And here we see the difference of Hartmann’s treatment in comparison to the old cosmology and theology. Without a proper appreciation of the Dasein — Sosein distinction, they perpetually tried to determine the Sosein of the world as a whole by analogy to an individual thing (res), and to elevate the Dasein of the last link into some kind of higher (absolute, unconditional, etc.) being.

Hartmann avoids the temptations of the old cosmology and theology. Nevertheless, he wholeheartedly takes on the problem of the unity of the world as a whole. The existence of such unity is not in doubt. Its structure, however, seems to escape us. One important reason for this is that, in the search for this unity, our rationality seduces us by its desire to see the world as completely homogeneous. Hartmann recognizes the inherent limitations of human rationality and argues that the unity of the world can exist only in multiplicity and heterogeneity.21 Following some of Aristotle’s old classifications, Hartmann tries to explain the unity of world in terms of four layers or strata (Schichten): inorganic, organic, psychic, and spiritual. Each ontic level is sui generis. There are inorganic things, which belong to one layer alone. Nevertheless, the strata are not necessarily separated but freely co-exist and co-determine each other. A plant is a combination of the inorganic and the organic, an animal combines the inorganic and the organic with the psychic, and man is a combination of all four levels.
There are ontological categories characteristic of one stratum (e.g., substantiality and causality are characteristic of the corporeal world, but adaptation and purposiveness are the categories of animate nature), and also categories common to all strata, although varying from one layer to another (for instance, unity and multiplicity, form and matter, identity and difference). The fundamental task of new ontology is to understand these ontological categories and their intercategorial relationships.

In *Der Aufbau der realen Welt* and *New Ways of Ontology*, Hartmann formulates the most important inter-categorial relationships as four categorial laws.

1. **The law of validity:** categories have their being as structures of concrete things and apart from these they have no validity.

2. **The law of coherence:** categories have no isolated existence for themselves, but are determined and united by the whole categorial structure.

3. **The law of hierarchical order:** categories of the lower strata are contained in the higher, but not the other way around.

4. **The law of dependence:** the dependence of categories is asymmetrical, with the higher categories dependent on the lower, though their categorial novelty is thereby not limited.

Whatever unity the world has, in Hartmann’s view it comes from these categorial laws which display the relationship of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the multiplicity of ontological strata. He thereby refuses to derive the unity of the world and the multiplicity of the strata from one single principle. Nor can Hartmann accept the ultimate superiority of any layer. As he puts it, “the world is not ruled either by spirit or by matter. It can be ruled neither from above nor from below.” The world is governed and co-determined by all of its layers. The real world is an intricate, perplexing, multi-layered, and dynamic unity in heterogeneity.

**The Realm of Values**

*Ethical actuality is richer than all human phantasy, than dream and fiction. To live apathetically from moment to moment amid the abundance, is nothing short of sin. The narrowness of a man’s participating sense of value makes him poor. It is because of his prejudice, his blindness, that he does not see the abundance, in the midst of which he stands. The ethos of openness to all values is the tendency to do inward justice to life, to win from it its greatness. Its passion springs from reverence for the unbounded abundance of the things that are of worth, it is knowledge filled with gratitude; and, where knowledge fails, it is the presentiment that the values of existence are inexhaustible. Whoever lives in this attitude, by him every restriction of experience is recognized as superficiality, dullness, barrenness, a waste of life… a moral ingratitude. —Hartmann, Ethics II, 210*

Human beings are the simplest and most convincing proof that reality is both layered and united. Man is part of not only the spatially extended inorganic and organic strata of reality, but also of its nontechnical psychic and spiritual layers. He is endowed with consciousness, as well as spirit. Varying some insights of Hegel and Wilhelm Dilthey, in *Das Problem des geistigen Sein* Hartmann distinguishes a personal from an objective spirit, which presents itself as a supra-personal being manifested in institutions, legal order, culture, religion, science, speech, and so on. Such manifestations of the living and historically bounded supra-personal spirit he calls “objectified spirit.” Hartmann avoids the prejudices of both supra-individual substantialism and of extreme individualism by arguing in favor of the reciprocity of
the objective and the personal spirit. Paraphrasing Kant, he maintains that without a personal spirit, an objective spirit would be irresponsible and blind, while without an objective spirit, a personal spirit would be empty and devoid of content.

The spiritual aspect of man is primarily understood through his relations to values. Hartmann argues that values are essences, in the phenomenological sense of this word. Unlike the structures of mathematics and logic, values are not empty formal essences. Following Scheler, he maintains that values are material essences, each with its own qualitative uniqueness, to be discerned by a priori insight. For Hartmann, values possess the character of absoluteness, of principles, and they are not only independent of things that are estimated as valuable, they are actually their prerequisite. In opposition to all forms of empiricism and pragmatism, he claims that things can be valuable only through a relation to values themselves. Values are equally independent of persons, who cannot make or create values, nor do values change as a result of our insights. More precisely, the relativity of values with regard to our subjective experience of them affects only the content, but not the structure of values. Like objects of cognition, values are in a realm of their own (indifferent to whether or not they are recognized, appreciated, or actualized), yet this realm is not that of the real but of the ideal being. Values have their own ideal self-existence, and our knowledge of them is genuine knowledge of being, for values are the categories of the ideal sphere of being.

Hartmann’s view of the ideal existence of values resembles Platonic ideas, but it is important not to overlook the differences between the two approaches. Platonic ideas are supposed to be the categories of existence, and as such apply to the real world. Insofar as the categories of values are likewise the categories of existence, in a consistently Platonic world, truly real beings and ideal values would coincide: the real overlaps with the ideal. Hartmann deviates from this view for two reasons. First, ontology is “stronger” than axiology. Second, the Platonic stand diminishes the autonomy of values, by equating values with existing beings and by detaching values from man’s free action. Let us briefly explain both of these points.

Unlike most traditional philosophers, Hartmann opposes the view that the real world is relative to man, in the sense that human beings are the highest and final purpose of the world order, and that all forms and relationships in the world must be ordered toward man. In Hartmann’s view, just the opposite is the case. Even as a spiritual being, man cannot be understood without the world in which he finds himself, and it is necessary to define his essence from this point of view. Man is directed toward the world, for everything in him is relative to the world and can be understood as an adaptation to the general all-comprehensive situation in which he must survive.

Although ontology is more basic than axiology, and man must be understood in relation to the pre-existing world, man’s spirituality represents a categorical novelty, not fully conditioned by any of the lower strata of reality. Man is a person, which is the highest level of existing organization that we know. Values—especially moral values—characterize a person only insofar as he is free. Unlike the categories of real being, values do not determine, but recommend. This is why values are the categories of ideal being, and why freedom is so important for man as a value-oriented being. Freedom means at least partial exemption from the laws governing the lower strata, and thereby
the possibility to choose among the multiplicity of values. By being a person, by choosing and acting as a person, man mediates between the real and the ideal spheres of being.

Man mediates between these two realms not only in his own life and personality, but in others as well. Personal love, for example, is oriented toward the empirical aspect of the individual in his uniqueness, but envisages at the same time the highest ideal possibilities that are already present in this individual as an essential tendency, a tendency striving toward actuality. Personal love thereby discovers the ideal in the real, and by active encouragement of this ideal, one person helps the other to grow and work toward the actualization of this individual ideal. These are some of the reasons why Hartmann regards personal love so highly: personal love “gives an ultimate meaning to life; it is already fulfillment in germ, an utmost value of selfhood, a bestowal of import on human existence—useless, like every genuine self-subsistent value, but a splendor shed upon our path.”

As the domain of the real is multi-layered and complex, so is the sphere of the ideal. As a matter of fact, Hartmann creates an impression that the sphere of the ideal being may be even more intricate, diverse, and richer. Just the list of the values he analyzes is impressive enough. In Ästhetik, Hartmann focuses on the beautiful, tragic, comic, charming, and sublime. In Ethik, his list is much longer: the good, the noble, richness of experience, the pure, justice, wisdom, courage, self-control, the sense of shame, brotherly love and love of the remote, truthfulness and uprightness, trustworthiness and fidelity, modesty and humility, radiant virtue, personality and personal love, and many others. Hartmann’s pioneering work guides us through the “starry heavens of values” (Sternhimmel von Werten) and offers in-depth analysis of their characteristics and mutual relations.

Although values can be systematically analyzed, they cannot be arranged on one single scale of worth, for which Scheler and countless others have searched in vain. In what is definitely one of his far-reaching insights, Hartmann argues in favor of a double scale: the highest values are at the same time the weakest, while the strongest values are the lowest:

One may easily be convinced that in general the reverse relation holds between the height and strength. To sin against a lower value is in general more grievous than to sin against a higher; but the fulfillment of a higher is morally more valuable than that of a lower. Murder is held to be the most grievous crime, but respect for another’s life is not on that account the highest moral state—not to be compared with friendship, love, trustworthiness…. The violation … of the higher values has indeed the character of a moral defect, but has nothing degrading in it, while the realization of these values can have something exalting in it, something liberating, indeed inspiring.

Hartmann’s most original treatment of the human relation to the diverse realm of values is found in his view that there are four equally fundamental and mutually irreducible moral values: the good, the noble, richness of experience, and the pure. Although the good, like being, cannot be defined, it can be characterized by the striving toward the highest, and by attempts to convert values into ends. The noble deals with the pursuit of one value to the exclusion of all others. Richness of experience is the value of personal many-sidedness—including some things that cannot be estimated as good—and is radically opposed to the one-sidedness of the noble. Purity is founded on single-mindedness and opposed to the richness of
experience. It resembles the noble and they sometimes overlap, but there are differences between them as well. Unlike the noble, purity is predicated upon obliviousness of the conflict and opposition inherent in the good and noble character.25

Not only are these four fundamental moral values mutually inconsistent, but Hartmann even maintains that this entire realm of values is characterized by ineradicable antinomies. The phenomenology of human life detects such antinomies everywhere, and in connection with such antinomies, man reveals his character in a twofold way: through awareness (or the lack thereof) of the intricacies, richness, and depth of the realm of values, and through the ways in which he tackles these ever-renewing and multiplying value-aporias of life. Life itself presents the greatest challenge for man as a spiritual and value-oriented being.26

Hartmann believes that modern man is not responding well to this challenge. The narrowness of the value-horizon and the blindness, especially toward the higher values, impoverishes the life of modern man and prevents him from living a fully human life. Despite all of his relentlessness and impressionability, it is as if modern man passes by, sleep-walking through life, oblivious to its complexity and depth. He displays the same indifference with regard to not just moral but also aesthetic values. Nothing inspires him, nothing touches his inner being. In the end, he has only an ironical and weary smile for every ideal. He makes virtue out of moral degradation.

Philosophy cannot change this sad state of affairs directly, but it must undertake the task of drawing into the circle of philosophical reflection the whole universe of values. Following in the footsteps of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Hartmann considers it his task, and the task of philosophy, to awaken our moral and aesthetic sense, to convey to modern man a new sense of wonder, amazement, and reverence for the cosmos rich in values. Philosophy “signifies a new kind of love for the task in hand, a new devotion, a new reverence for what is great. For to it the world which [such an attitude] will open is once more great, as a whole and in its smallest part, and is filled with treasure, unexhausted and inexhaustible.”27

Hartmann’s Contribution to Philosophy

Only that for which the times are ripe, only that which has matured in the living ethos of man, only that which through moral necessity and yearning has become ripe for utterance, has effective strength. The champion of ideas is himself only at second hand a discoverer. Before him the living sense of values, obscure and half conscious, eternally seeking and groping, was moving forward; and what the champion finds always had life and energy here in the depths.

—Hartmann, Ethics I, 91

Although we have only scratched the surface of Hartmann’s abundant and elaborate philosophical opus, some of the virtues of his philosophizing should be pretty apparent. His thinking displays the astonishing consistency of his philosophical orientation. Hartmann succeeds in developing a clear-cut conception of what philosophy is about and subsequently engages all his energies in trying to realize his guiding vision. Although he infrequently uses the word synthesis and prefers to talk about analysis, in an age of fragmentation of knowledge, Hartmann is engaged in building a magnificent and comprehensive synthesis, the focal point of which is the analysis of the real and the ideal being, or, even more precisely, ontology and axiology.28

Even more impressive than Hartmann’s grand vision is his remarkable sensitivity
toward the details. In one work after another, and regardless of whether he discusses ontological, ethical, or aesthetic phenomena, he displays an almost unthinkable subtlety of discrimination in complex examples. He always avoids oversimplifications, just as he resists the temptation of premature conclusions. Hartmann is never afraid of pursuing seemingly opposite or excluding lines of thought to their rational limits. In a true Socratic and Kantian fashion, he frequently emphasizes the limitations of human knowledge and rationality, and yet he pursues a rational inquiry with more enthusiasm, persistence, and stubbornness than those who are not aware of such insurmountable boundaries.

Hartmann’s philosophical thinking displays an exemplary familiarity with the history of Western philosophy, as well as with contemporary works. Like all great philosophers, he possesses an uncanny ability to recognize and extract the essential points from various philosophical positions and problems. Hartmann is in continuous dialogue with his tradition, which for him is a living and growing thing, and to which he attempts to make his own contribution. In an age obsessed with an end of philosophy, Hartmann goes in the opposite direction by trying to restore its dignity. The philosophy of the past is not to be abandoned; rather, it must be reinvigorated by setting higher and more rigorous standards for itself.

Following Hartmann’s demands and expectations is, no doubt, a tall order. And yet his philosophical path is rarely followed, not so much because of his demanding standards, but more because of the direction in which he believes philosophy must go. Even our summary look at his philosophy reveals that Hartmann’s philosophical thinking goes against virtually any major trend of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. Even stronger, his philosophical orientation stands in a sharp contrast to the central orientation of modern (and post-modern) thinking. Modernity is totally preoccupied with the subject, and attempts to develop its understanding of the real world and the realm of values from the point of view of the subject. Beginning with Descartes, the dominant orientation of philosophy—indeed, of Western culture in general—is that the concept of being is secondary to the concept of the mind; object is secondary to subject. The concept of being is treated as derived and constructed, constituted in the very process of the subject’s cognition.

Hartmann is deeply suspicious of this orientation. He points out that cognition itself is an ontic relation, and that our natural orientation is primarily directed not toward subjects but toward objects. The natural orientation toward objects comes before the reflective attitude, \textit{intentio recta} before \textit{intentio obliqua}. This is why Hartmann insists that our primary focus should be on the nature and phenomenological manifestations of being, not on epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, logicism, historicism, or hermeneutics. Thus, both Hartmann’s ontology and axiology demand a radical redirection of the modern approach. His ontology is an attempt to restore the fundamental role and significance of being, independent of any subject and any subjective contribution. His axiology is based on the premise that values are not invented, nor are they relative to the subject, his culture, psychological and cognitive makeup, language, or any other subjective constraint. Just as the real being is independent of the subject, so is the ideal being, with its wide spectrum of values. Even Husserl’s phenomenology, with its motto of “returning to things
themselves,” does not succeed in removing itself from focusing almost exclusively on the analysis of the subject’s act of thinking and evaluating. Hartmann treats both the motto and the name of phenomenology literally, and makes a radical break with the entire philosophical and cultural orientation of modernity.29

Without doubt, we can raise this or that objection against various aspects of Hartmann’s radical philosophical reorientation. We can, for example, question why there are only four strata of reality and whether their mutual relationship is not more complex than Hartmann makes it seem. We can also wonder whether he sometimes does not “detect” aporias and antinomies even where they do not really exist. Or we can suspect that Hartmann invokes the presence of the irrational too quickly in his analysis of many metaphysical problems. More radically, we can ask whether the problem of being as being is really legitimate, considering that we can know nothing of it independently of human consciousness: is Hartmann’s reorientation toward the independently existing realms of the real and the ideal being even possible?30

We can also be critical of some other elements of Hartmann’s overall philosophical approach. For instance, it is not clear what, if anything, he makes of the traditional understanding of philosophy as a love of wisdom and a way of life. Nor is it clear why he never attempts to develop a systematic anthropology. Nor does he, despite his insistence on the problem of being as being, have anything to say about the highest being. Why is it that he touches on this problem only in connection with his discussion of the sublime?31

In a similar manner, we may be puzzled by the fact that Hartmann never fully develops his views on the central triangular structure of Western thinking: the real, the ideal, and the rational. Perhaps of all major philosophers, only Leibniz argues in favor of something that comes close to a complete overlap of the real, the rational, and the ideal. Hartmann is critical of this approach, as he is critical of Plato’s attempt to bring into a too close relationship the real and the ideal, Kant’s similar mistake with regard to the rational and the ideal, and Hegel’s untenable claim of the identity of the real and the rational.32 Following Scheler, Hartmann relies heavily on intuitive a priori insights, the kind of cognition which involves feelings and is not entirely rational, but because of that is all the closer to “things themselves” and further away from conceptualization and dogmatic interpretation. Such intuitive a priori insights are indispensable for our grasp of values, yet Hartmann fails to provide any systematic account of this fundamental capacity. He opposes the exaggerated intellectualism that has become pervasive in all disciplines of philosophy, but misses an opportunity to fully elaborate how the intuitive and discursive, a priori and a posteriori, work together and lead us to the proper comprehension and interpretation of the real and the ideal being. Hartmann never sufficiently articulates the internal relations within the quadrangle—the real, the ideal, the rational, the intuitive—on which his philosophy so heavily relies.

Let us also consider here one issue which may lie at the heart of all the reasons for which Hartmann is excluded from the present philosophical dialogue, and which, perhaps more than anything else, can explain why he is a forgotten philosopher in our time. I wonder, namely, whether Hartmann himself may not be partially responsible for this estrangement, and whether a reformulation of his central view—without violating his central insights—may not help to reintegrate him into the mainstream of
the philosophical development and lead to a proper appreciation of his enormously significant work.

The major concern which many contemporary philosophers would have about Hartmann’s philosophy could be expressed through the following question: does he not overreact to the subjectivist turn of modernity?

Let us address this crucial question in detail. If not earlier, then certainly with Kant’s Copernican Revolution, the concept of being is treated as something derived and reflected, not as original and primary. Kant’s successors find the consideration of being as being to be even more problematic; for them there is no being without a subject, his thinking, and his knowing. While Kant still retains some regard for ontology and transforms it into a “transcendental analytic,” his successors—from German idealists to Neo-Kantians—more overtly depose ontology in favor of epistemology.33

Hartmann seems to reverse Kant’s Copernican Revolution. He seems to change the modern priority of subject over object back to the ancient and scholastic supremacy of object over subject. Yet we know that Hartmann is uncompromisingly critical of that tradition as well. How, then, is he positioned with respect to these two traditions? To clarify this issue, consider the following two models:

**Model 1:** The ancient and scholastic view of the priority of object over subject. Being and thinking are not *ontological* equals. Being is treated as having its own firmly established identity and unity, independent of and indifferent to whether it is known. To be is to be a definite kind of thing. If our thinking is to disclose what being is, it must adjust itself to its properties.

**Model 2:** The modern view of the epistemological prevalence of subject over object. Being and thinking are not *epistemological* equals. Thinking has priority over being, insofar as it is more easily accessible than being. In order to be known, being must “adjust” to the structures of thinking. To be is to be an object of possible knowledge; it is to be knowable as a certain kind of thing.

In his desire to distance himself from the Marburg school of Neo-Kantians and idealism in general, Hartmann frequently makes statements that seem to suggest that he would endorse Model 1, but certainly not Model 2. A closer look at some of his central doctrines, however, should make us suspicious as to whether either of these two models adequately expresses his unique position. Recall, for instance, Hartmann’s discussion of *Sosein* and *Dasein*. The whole conception is an attempt to avoid the old doctrine of essences and outline a *relational* structure of being. What is the *Sosein* of the world as a whole? We cannot say precisely because we do not have anything else, outside the world and more comprehensive than it, in comparison to which we can determine what the *Sosein* of the world may be. If Hartmann were to deny it, he would have to return to the very kind of substantial or essential determination of being that he wanted to escape in the first place.

That Hartmann’s view does not conform to the first model is even clearer when we remember his doctrine of the four strata. Being and thinking do not stand in opposition because thinking belongs to one stratum of being. The strata are different, but they are intimately related by complex networks of dependences and conditioning. The main task of new ontology is to reveal and analyze these interdependences and interconnections. In this new ontology, being is the common sphere in which subject and object stand not opposed to, but in interaction with each other. As Hartmann himself used to say, being is the neutral category including subject and object,
indifferent toward both old realism and modern idealism.\textsuperscript{34}

To see which options are still open to Hartmann and what lies beyond the opposition of realism to idealism, recall that the Copernican turn consists not of one but of two steps. The first minimizes or even denies the ontological priority of the object over the subject, of being over thinking. The second step establishes a new paradigm by affirming the epistemological priority of the subject over the object, of consciousness and reason over being. We are accustomed to taking both steps together, without pausing to see whether the first needs to be followed by the second. A closer look shows that the first step does not necessarily lead to the second, for it allows for a possibility of an interactive cooperation between the subject and the object. Could it be that Hartmann’s view is best captured by this interactive model of the subject-object relationship? The answer may depend on how we understand the relation of interaction. A preliminary consideration reveals three elementary points that should be kept in mind.

1. Interactive relations are reciprocal; this is what distinguishes them from one-directional relations such as actions or reactions. This reciprocity can take many forms, depending on the elements involved. We can distinguish, for instance, between interdependence, interchange, intercourse, interlinking, interfusing, interplaying, and so on.

2. Interactions are dynamic, not static, relations. Their conditions, parameters, or even objectives can change with different circumstances and over a period of time, without thereby interrupting the interactive quality of the relations themselves.

3. Interactions need not be symmetrical relations because they can take place between quite heterogeneous elements; homogeneity is not a prerequisite for interaction. We can thus observe interactions between the inorganic and the organic, between the organic and the psychic, or between the psychic and the spiritual, as well as interactions within those different layers of reality.

Although some considerations of his new ontology suggest this third, interactive model, Hartmann explicitly rejects such an interpretation of the subject–object relation in cognition. (The only realm in which he may accept it is the realm of aesthetic experience.) He never tires of arguing that being is “overwhelmingly indifferent” to what we think of it. We may attempt to know what being is and even be successful to a certain extent. Nevertheless, Hartmann would insist that knowledge does not modify or condition being. Knowledge does not create its objects. Known objects are more than mere objects of cognition. Beyond what is known \textit{(objectum)} there is the unknown \textit{(trans-objective)}, and the point of knowledge is precisely to treat objects as things that have being in and by themselves.\textsuperscript{35}

I am not, however, persuaded by Hartmann’s rejection of the interactive or, as he used to say, correlative, nature of the cognitive relation. I can fully grant to Hartmann that there is a significant difference between an object of cognition and being; not all that is, exists \textit{qua} object. Nor does all being appear; the amount of being may be infinitely larger than that of what appears and is known by us. Nevertheless, this element of natural realism does not show that when something appears and is known
by us, the cognitive relation cannot be interactive and correlative.

One of the reasons why Hartmann does not take the interactive model seriously is because he seems to have a too rigid approach to cognition. In his mind only two options can be entertained: either cognition consists in making (creating) objects, or it consists in grasping them unmodified. But certainly there is plenty of logical space in between these two positions; our choices are not limited to these two options.

Let us mention some examples to clarify this. Both objects and subjects bring their respective powers and constraints to the cognitive encounter. All objects have relative degrees of plasticity and complexity. A simple curved line is more plastic than an equally simple straight line, and can accordingly be perceived in more ways than a straight line. A geometrical figure is more complex than a straight line, and a larger number of its components will create more resistance to our attempts to grasp them.

Subjects similarly bring their own characteristics, and these range from the richness of their personal and collective background knowledge, to the fluidity or rigidity of subjects’ goals, intentions, and expectations. Our cognitions do not consist in mere reactions to what happens in a detached world, nor are they sufficient conditions of world-making. They are the results of our interactions with reality, interactions in which we do not, strictly speaking, directly and exclusively respond to objects; what we respond to and interact with are the relations that they have with other objects and with us. Cognitions are not mere reflections of a predetermined reality but paths traced through this reality.36

Another reason for Hartmann’s resistance to the interaction model may come from the traditional isolation of cognition from other forms of human experience. When he discusses various forms of our experience, such as acting, aesthetic experiences, and touching (as opposed to seeing), Hartmann himself emphasizes their multiple interactive aspects. In considering non-cognitive experiences, he has no problem claiming that “every man’s initiative is conditioned by a situation, but also shapes that situation,” or that “as things are involved in human activity, so is human existence involved in the happenings of things.”37 Could it not be that his “new ways of ontology” are best understood as the ways of interaction? Could it not provide a promising approach to integrate the “new ways of ontology” into the current philosophical dialogue?

This line of thought, which could not be addressed here any further because it demands a larger and more comprehensive study, is just a modest attempt to understand why Hartmann’s work was not seriously received and further developed. Hartmann himself must have thought a great deal about such questions, not only in connection with this one but also with every other creative philosophical endeavor. What follows are some of his reflections that may help us close this discussion of why, and for how long, Hartmann will remain a forgotten philosopher:

Every age carries in itself dark seeds of ideas. A new consciousness of values is always ripening. But the ground is not always ready for the champion of ideas. And where the ground is ready for an idea, the champion is not always at hand. Perhaps we stand today under the banner of dimly discerned values, which are entirely different from those now accepted and taught among us. Morally no age entirely comprehends itself. The real ethical life is a life deeper than consciousness.

There is also, of course, the reverse phenomenon: the champion of ideas who is not understood, who comes at an unfavorable time, and who dies in solitude with his truth. He does not disprove, he confirms what we have