



The Ontological I & Other Essays

Donovan Irvén

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“Know Thyself!” is the theme most central to the task of this book. These essays came about from the author being a student of philosophy and, as a student, learning how to philosophize. The title essay of this volume is the longest. It consists of six parts, or Studies, and deals primarily with a theory of personal identity that is ethically grounded. In some ways, it argues that ethics is the first philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas, Albert Camus, and Luce Irigaray are the primary influences on this essay, but the work of Paul Ricoeur cannot be ignored as important to the overall understanding of the work. The general thesis is that Otherness forms the ground of my identity, to the extent that I am Other to myself, and that this aspect of my own Otherness is precisely the ground on which self-consciousness becomes possible. Ethical implications spring from the very roots of this thesis and are acknowledged throughout the essay as being of central importance to any plausible theory of the human person. The brief “Interlude” is a meditation and exercise in free writing based on the work of Nietzsche. It uses Nietzsche’s Untimely Meditations as a foil for a series of aphorisms that are themselves the subject of a subsequent analysis. This literary exercise forms a key example of the philosopher struggling to know himself before the public eye and through the medium of his own philosophical writings. The second longest essay of the current work follows the “Interlude.” The essay “The Freedom of Action” deals primarily with an argument for how the Self, as detailed in “The Ontological I,” is both free and morally responsible. It builds on the themes of the title essay while elaborating at length on the functions of consciousness and perception in free actions that take place in a deterministic world. “The Subject in Rebellion” is the oldest essay presented here, and expands greatly on the roles that negation and rebellion play in personal identity, and thereby in moral responsibility as well. It deals with themes introduced in the Fourth, Fifth, and Concluding Studies of “The Ontological I” while focusing much more tightly on the specific roles of objectification and rebellion against objectification in the formation of a personal identity. The film Black Swan is the subject of philosophical analysis in “Nihilism and Archetype.” This short essay was originally published on the author's blog and serves as a bridge between the strictly academic aspects of this volume and the pop culture in which each person struggles to form an idea of themselves among the others with whom that culture is shared, amongst whom it is “popular” culture. It explores the formation of identity and the consequences of self-deception and dissociation that occur in the film. The final essay presented here, “The Free Spirit Parallax,” deals primarily with the philosophical writings of Nietzsche on the topic of the “Free Spirit.” Commentaries on Nietzsche’s theories that attempt to systematize and objectify Nietzsche’s thought are countered. Drawn from Nietzsche’s text is the idea that struggle is central to freedom, and that is it only through a struggle against our own internal contradictions that we ourselves may become free. Each essay deals with personal identity, and as such, each is concerned with the Self, the Soul, or the Will. Sometimes, these terms are interchangeable (often “I,” “Self,” or “Soul” are used interchangeably). In other instances, context demands strict definitions (in these instances I use more specific terms, such as “agent” or “subject”) but in all cases, the most general sense of these terms is just this: the living human person as they are capable of functioning autonomously in the world, i.e. a conscious person, aware of themselves as such. Thus we get the title of the volume The Ontological I, the I that is capable of ontology, of thinking and questioning in regards to that being’s own being.

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