

The Hartman Dissertation: A “Portal” to Hartman’s Axiology

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Introduction

In 1946, Robert S. Hartman – when Hartman was thirty-six years old -- completed his doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University. The document has languished in obscurity – the fate of most doctoral dissertations – across the years, only to be investigated by the most vigilant of Hartman scholars – often as part of other dissertation projects destined to also languish in obscurity. John Austin and George Parrish are to be much more than congratulated for their recently published, critical edition of the material (Muskegon, Michigan: Research Concepts, 2003). Not only have Austin and Parrish made more readily available an important piece of Hartman scholarship, they have also provided a literal portal or window to the larger corpus of Hartman’s work. If Hartman’s seminal *The Structure of Value* is daunting to the average reader, especially with all of its emphasis on logic and mathematics, the dissertation is straightforward, clear, and precise by comparison. By reading the dissertation, even the uninitiated can gain a sense of Hartman’s intellect, the force of his conviction about establishing a value orientation, and understand the diverse range of his philosophical, religious, and political concerns. By reading the dissertation, the way is paved to take on *The Structure of Value* and all of its beautiful complexity. The dissertation is something of a “first step” – a kind of beginning to crawl -- which allows *The Structure of Value* to become a more confident, strident walking; together they become a base for a continuing journey of discovery that may allow later Hartman scholarship to run.

The Dissertation was entitled “Can Field Theory Be Applied To Ethics?” In choosing this title, two assumptions can be made. First, Hartman was moving in his divergent intellect along lines that had become common for him. He had never been satisfied with a one-dimensional specificity of philosophical pursuit that focused on some minor obscurity of old texts; he worried little about how many angels could be crowded onto the head of a pin. He had always been aware of a much broader – what he would call later – “phenomenal field.” His focus on field theory represented an intelligent infatuation with an emerging arena of concern in the mid-1940s that was capturing a great deal of both scholarly and pedestrian attention. Hartman was synthesizing two areas of knowledge – philosophy and mathematics/physics; he would construct similar syntheses with art, literature, religion, politics, and music. Even more – and this is a critical point for me – he was always searching for *metaphors of refined discussion*, mediums for the message he was trying to encapsulate to some extent.

Next, with his emphasis on field theory, he was attempting to ground philosophical conversation in scientific and mathematical exactitude and precision. He was totally convinced that philosophy/value inquiry/axiology that was not so grounded floated too freely and too easily became unattached. The role of field theory in the dissertation is largely replaced by transfinite math in *The Structure of Value*. It may be that “replaced” is too strong of a word; the movement from field theory to transfinite math may better be seen as a maturing from one point to a next. The field of mathematics grew in those directions, so Hartman’s use of the field of mathematics was likely to grow as well. He was fascinated by Einstein, the entire concept of quantum, the logical inquiries of individuals such as Godel. Very early on, he was making statements that would become major movements in *The Structure of Value*: “theories are useful in suggesting new ideas and new lines of investigations for the experimenter – hard facts are the only proper round for conclusion.(D, p.15)” At times, I think that he actually felt – or hoped – that he would find a connection between the “theoretical” of axiology and the “hard facts” of mathematics and physics.

Two Views of Field Theory

I think it is possible to conceive of field theory in two primary ways. First, it is possible to see field theory as one, historical component of a prominent tendency across the course of human thinking to want to explain everything, the desire to finally wrap all of knowledge into a comprehensive scheme that arrived at absolute and total integration. This process of explaining everything in an ultimate *Gestalt* goes back in human history at least as far as Pythagoras. The Pythagoreans were convinced that somewhere in the backdrop that united music and mathematics that there was a key to the logic and rational operation of the universe; they believed that they were on their way to unpacking, understanding, and probably being able to manipulate Heraclitus’ “logos principle” in a manner that could give final and decisive insight into the “nature” of things. The better part of three thousand years later, people would still believe that there was some elusive “something” that made everything “tick” like the works of some great, cosmic clock.

Michio Kaku, a theoretical physicist at City College, New York, says of those looking for this kind of explain-everything, unified field theory: “there is the pursuit of an equation an inch long that will allow us to read the mind of God.” James Maxwell first used the terminology “unified field theory” in the middle 1800s in his work on electromagnetism. Max Plank introduced the idea of quantum theory in 1900, and then Einstein carried the explain-everything momentum on into the twentieth century by seeking to show that electromagnetism and gravity were ultimately manifestations of the same, general phenomenon. In spite of the uncertainty elements conveyed by the work of Walter Heisenberg and Einstein’s contrary comment that “God doesn’t play dice,” a recent *Scientific American* article still was entitled “A Unified Physics By 2050.” Of course, Empedocles had “explained it all” with his four elements, and Ptolemy had “explained it all” in his cosmology. The words have changed, but the desire to “explain it all” persists; today we simply talk about string theory, superstring theory, the presence of hadrons (three quark figures that “behave” in certain ways in particle accelerators) and tachyons (particles that move faster than light). We even talk about “M-Theory” that unites all of the different string theories to an eleventh “dimension.” Ironically enough,

the “M” stands for “mystery,” the very reality that the theory is attempting to claim (or trap).

Hartman would have been intrigued by all of this explain-everything discussion. He would have read about it, studied it thoroughly, been totally conversant about it, and perhaps used it to extend his base of metaphors. I cannot help but believe, however, with the final emphasis that he gives to uniqueness in his late work and the explanation that the intrinsic dimension of existence is a non-denumerable (and not-articulable) infinity of possibility/potential/energy, that he would have felt that “Mystery” would ever be totally exhausted by any scheme of explanation. (More about this concept of a “base of metaphors” below.)

A second way to see field theory is to understand it as a “medium” for a message, a base from which important discussion can take place. In essence, field theory may simply provide a new way of talking about reality. In this second assessment, field theory becomes a helpful and useful metaphor. There is a difference between seeking an explanation for all things that achieves absolute integration, and seeking mechanisms of explaining that provoke discussion, dialogue, and inquiry. In the midst of this discussion, dialogue, and inquiry, more precision of articulation may occur, albeit fully within the range of clearly understanding that no absolute truths that are absolutely demonstrable have been gained. In this second assessment, field theory becomes a helpful way of talking about reality, not a way of demonstrably proving anything.

Absolute truths and absolutely demonstrable proofs would depend on having every piece of relevant information, and it would be impossible to know when that final piece came into place that guaranteed absoluteness. If Ptolemy could be asked about the universe today – if the church that legislated the Ptolemaic concept as divine truth could be asked about the universe today, one might wonder if they might embrace a relativity and situationalism that they would have denied with harsh prejudice at earlier times. Certainly, we still inhabit a world that is capable of keeping Giordano Bruno’s concepts of an infinite universe on the Index of forbidden writings until the middle of the twentieth century. Certainly, there are still people today like the ancient Pythagoreans who were so insistent that the world had to be rational that, when members of their group discovered *irrational* numbers like π (3.14150. . . .) that made calculations of circularity possible and ϕ (1.61803) that became the mysterious and curious “Golden Ration” that shows up in the segments of pentagrams/stars and the logarithmic spirals of seashells and elephant tusks, that they removed these people from their sect, built their graves to indicate that they were dead, and kept their findings secret. Robert Hartman did not live in a world of religious or mathematical denial. He knew what he did not know and could not know. He praised metaphor as the highest form of “valuation consciousness” (to use his dissertation language). Without question, field theory for him was a compelling mechanism of conversation, not an explanation of everything.

If this point is not abundantly clear, recall Hartman’s praise for Anselm. Under no circumstances did he think that Anselm had given a demonstrable proof for the existence of God. That would be impossible. He did, however, feel that Anselm had made a profound contribution to philosophy and theology by constructing a *theologic* – not a *theology*; Anselm had given a meaningful way to *talk about* God in a fundamentally rational – not *absolutely* rational – manner. I have always felt that this is the high

meaning of Hartman's axiology; he gives us a fundamental way of talking about goodness and valuing.

There are three prevailing views of mathematics that can be considered. A "Platonic View" insists that mathematics is universal and timeless, the form of the universe that awaits human discovery. It is radically outside the mind of humans. IBM mathematician Clifford expresses this view by saying: "I do not know if God is a mathematician, but mathematics is the loom upon which God weaves the fabric of the universe." (Mario Livio, *The Golden Ratio*, New York: Broadway Books, 2002, p. 243) In this view, all theories of irrationality and incompleteness are simply waiting for higher levels of proofs that will show how they fit into the explanation.

A "Modified Platonic View" sees mathematics, not as some sort of universal, timeless, independent – almost mystic – Platonic "Form." Instead, mathematical structure is embedded in concrete reality where its patterns can be constantly found in physics. This constancy is so complete that any being on any planet would understand immediately 3.14150. . . . or 1.61803, although the words *pi* or *phi* might never be used. In fact, supportive of this view is the fact that deep-space transmissions that have intended to demonstrate rational life on the Earth to other rational beings in outer space have featured mathematical calculations.

A final view, which may be termed an "Inventionist View" or a "Constructionist View," are formulations and models based on the most adequate experiences available and impacted by the technology available at any time to assist those experiences. The formulations have plausibility and credibility to the degree that they can accurately predict. However, to imply that absolute predictability has been achieved is, again, ludicrous since absolute predictability can only be the result of absolute information. The question continues to rise: how is absolute information ever possible?

Therefore, we construct models that advance conversation and formulations that enhance precision. The danger comes in the possibility that the conversation stops and becomes dogma or presents itself as "Truth." So, mathematics is historical (Livio, p. 250). "Mathematics is the symbolic counterpart of the universe we perceive" (*Ibid*, p. 252). Symbols have highest value for Hartman and are representative of the highest engagement of human consciousness with the world; symbols are metaphors, symbols are "axioms of the phenomenal field."

So, resoundingly, Hartman found field theory to be a useful "model," a beneficial "formulation." Field theory gave him a platform of metaphors – highly talked about in the mid-1940s – from which he could mount a new elucidation of ethics. The following statement of Hartman, rising from the beginning of the dissertation, finds parallel after parallel in *The Structure of Value* and stood at the core of most of the lectures and writings he did before his death: "A science is a living body of men, problems, institutions; it is not the rules set down once and for all, but rather the ever continuing effort of inquiry" (D, p. 11). He was fond of W. H. Werkmeister's *Philosophy of Science* and especially the quote: "The ordering power of the concept [the symbol, the metaphor] is derived from an act of the will, the act of *intentional reference*" (D, p.13, WHW, p. 102). The visceral power of human intent – inquiring, elucidating, building references of concept, symbol, and metaphor – in an attempt to further articulate the phenomenal field is the power of "valuation consciousness" and the force of values and valuations.

Using the Metaphor of Field Theory

If the above remarks clarify the way in which Hartman used field theory in application *to* ethics, the following remarks go the additional step of using field theory *in* ethics. If the above remarks draw out a general orientation of a new metaphor applied *to* an ancient field of inquiry, the following remarks give a further sense of what it means to allow field theory to be a paradigm for what takes place *in* the phenomenal field of ethics. To get the proverbial cart before the horse and answer the question of what takes place *in* the phenomenal field of ethics, we encounter the purity of one of Hartman's most essential understandings: "Ethics becomes the discipline of the "fitting" [as opposed to any hint of Darwin's "fittest"]. Goodness is fit-ness and fit-ness in terms of purpose. Things are good when they are fitted for the purpose they are meant. Goodness means fit-ness whether we consider the goodness of humans or the goodness of things. Anything is good when fitted for the purpose held in mind and bad when not so fitted." He is actually quoting E. L. Carbot's *Everyday Ethics* (New York, 1906) at this point, a source that ultimately is refined into his own statement that "goodness is concept fulfillment." The influence of Carbot is not overwhelmingly evident in *The Structure of Value* and may have been part of the complaint sometimes housed against Hartman that he could respect insights from "popular" sources as easily as he could from the traditional "masters" of academic philosophy.

So, again with the cart before the horse, the outcome of dealing with the phenomenal field theory of ethics – I am being a bit redundant here for emphasis – is to arrive (recall Heidegger's *Das Anwesen des Anwesenden*) at that which is "fitting," to achieve "fit-ness," to create and experience "goodness." This outcome will require an immersion into and engagement with a "living body of men, problems, and institution," not a rationalistic and logical clinging to dogmatic, comforting rules that have been set down. How interesting that in the most modern and most pragmatic field of organizational hiring and placement that the most eloquent conversations surround the idea of finding "fit." How existential to say that life is at its most authentic when "fit" is achieved.

With the outcome of dealing with the phenomenal field of ethics already in mind, attention can be turned to what takes place *in* this field as it is being dealt with. Here the metaphor of field theory is especially helpful. Now, we can also see the sense in Hartman's choice of the quote from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts* (p. 288) that serves as a preamble to the Dissertation: "Philosophy has [always proposed answers to] every question, but no adequate consideration has been given [to the question concerning] what sphere it is within which [questioning approaches answering]. (Paraphrasing and underling here are my own based on my own rendering from the original of the Kierkegaard quote. I believe Hartman would concur with the hermeneutic I am applying to his frontpiece.). Thus, it is field theory that helps us articulate what takes place *in* the phenomenal field of ethics where the interplay of questioning and answering takes place. Only keep in mind that the interplay never stops, that the "answering" is always penultimate, and that almost every penultimate "answer" is but the prelude to the plays next act, the starter's block for the next question.

The most significant characteristic of the "field" for Hartman is tension. Tension is a powerful word for the "energy" that is encountered in the field, and it is a quantum

energy of the synergy that rises when *Gestalt* occurs and the whole is greater than the sum of the part, when the whole can never be fully articulated in logic, reason, mental construct, or language, when what he will later call the intrinsic asserts itself. This is Ockham's experience of first intention/in-tension. I love what Hartman says about "intentional references" that give something of a momentary "form" to the phenomenal field. I love the way that Ockham uses the word *intention* and I then create an interplay with the work *in-tension*. Intention and in-tension are at the core of the goal and experience of the "purpose" that corresponds to "fit" and "goodness." ***Tension*** is the force of "anti-entropy" in the phenomenal field. We are most alive, most authentic, when we stand in the midst of and lovingly, passionately embrace tension as an opportunity, a gift. When we enter the "struggle" of dealing with tension, and when we add the "struggle" of our own tension, our own energy, the phenomenal field grows exponentially – it grows even more exponentially when other human beings become involved – and we are most alive.

Hartman may be influenced by the work of Nicolai Hartmann at this point. Nicolai Hartmann would have seen this "tension-struggle" as *aporetics*, the "unraveling" of problems or circumstances. You might not be able to absolutely "solve" a problem or circumstance, but you could stand in its midst and participate in "unraveling." The concept of "tension-struggle" shows up in any number of places: Michelangelo talks about the moment when the stone becomes David and he must free David from the stone; the "freeing" is a unique kind of "unraveling"; Mihaly Csikszentmihaly has written eloquently about the phenomenon of "flow"; those old-hippy Beach Boys keep singing and keep reminding us of "good, good, good, good vibrations."

In field theory – and here Hartman gets the paradigm he uses most prolifically in the Dissertation, tension is the result of polarity. "By a field is understood a state of energy tension between two poles' (D, p. 67). In fact, tension is magnified over and over again by the realization of multiple polarities. (The concept of polarity and tension can be easily demonstrated by the two poles of a magnet, and the way iron filings dropped near the magnet will give a visual outline of the field that exists between the two poles.) It is not necessary to go into great detail about all of the polarities that Hartman describes in the Dissertation; large portions of the documents do this in a way that does not need to be repeated. However, an annotated list of the various polarities – Nicolai Hartmann's "strands" -- that create the "tension-struggle" of the phenomenal field of ethics will give an idea of the complex value forces at work – no, I would rather say *at play* – in life:

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| 1. Fields that really exist in space-time | 1. Fields that exist in thought alone |
| 2. Real (physical dimensions of reality) | 2. Ideal (non-physical dimensions of reality) |
| 3. The personal, ethical field (the value system of a person) | 3. The cultural, ethical field (the value system of a community, an organization, etc.) |
| 4. Absolute ethics | 4. Situational ethics |

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| 5. Ethics (a global set of precepts that may generally function over time; for example, The Ten Commandments probably are not bad, basic rules to live by in most situations) | 5. Morality (the individual act in the unique situations in which the global finds concrete, real actualization) |
| 6. The situational “state” that is | 6. The situational “state” that is to be |
| 7. Past/Present | 7. Future |
| 8. The ideal-real field of ethics (that demands no situational actualization) | 8. The ideal-real field of morality (that demands actualization) |
| 9. Entropic consciousness | 9. Always ripening consciousness |
| 10. Towards ontology (the subject as an objective entity among other objective entities) | 10. Towards axiology (the subject as a unique person) |
| 11. The energy of the “Is” | 11.. The energy of “Ought-to-Be” |
| 12. Ready made frames of reference | 12. Becoming structures/potential frames of reference |
| 13. Nicolai Hartmann’s “universals” -- essences, numbers, “facts” | 13. Nicolai Hartmann’s localized in time and space “particulars” |

All of these polarities are active in the ethical phenomenal field, or what Hartman calls in the Dissertations “ethical space-time,” which is opposed to mere “social space-time.” Within the field, as there is authentic human activity, there is an escalation of energy that occurs: first, there is “situational energy,” the energy that rises from the basic dynamics of the situation itself; second, there is “moral energy,” the energy that struggles for the best, most fitting application and actualization of the global ethical; and third, there is “axiological value consciousness,” that serves as the very highest level of concentration, commitment, and consideration that can be given to a circumstance. As one stands in the midst of the “struggle-tension” of the ethical field, the metaphor of the high-wire artist comes to mind. Karl Wallenda, the greatest of the high-wire artists, always contended that “life” occurred “on the wire.” For Hartman, life – in this sense – always occurs/arrives/happens in the midst of the polarities of the ethical field.

The Character of the Struggle

The next question that Hartman explores in the Dissertation is the character or nature of life *in* the ethical field. What, ideally, actually happens when a person lives authentically *in* the ethical field at his/her optimum? The most basic, simple answer to

this question is that the person *makes better*. Hartman's answer, of course, is much more philosophical eloquent.

Hartman makes a clear distinction between "ethical" and "unethical" activity. An activity is ethical if it allows for "development" (D, p. 6) and unethical if it promotes "decay." The field must be "set" (D., p. 19) or "framed" – Nicolai Hartmann's "unraveled" – in a way that advocates development and diminishes the potential for decay. Here we see a further prefiguring of the idea of goodness as concept fulfillment and the ever-prevailing need to replace leaner concepts with richer concepts. He even says that the unique "faculty" (his words) of the human organism that is usually referred to as "soul" or "spirit" – in contrast to mind, emotion, or personality – primarily carries out this framing. I would add that the basic power of that which is referred to as "soul" or "spirit" is the power of valuing, evaluative judgment, the outcome of axiological consciousness. In this sense, axiology is a spiritual domain. "Spiritual" here is not to be confused with cultural expression of religion. Rather, Hartman is talking about a process in which the *élan vital*/vital energy described by Henri Bergson (D., p. 30) finally becomes manifested in the life of the "mystic." Then, quickly he says that the "mystic" is not an unattached agent of contemplation, but a fully engaged agent of enhancing change who pours out "evaluation consciousness" (good judgment/good decision/good choice/good action) on the ethical field.

The "person" will grow into the "mystic" the more his value consciousness expands over space and time, thus transforming physical space and time into ethical space and time – namely time into durational possibility and space into situational actuality. In doing so, the "person" transforms reality into value.

The concept of reality as value, reality transformed into value, is difficult, at first, to comprehend. However, if reality is not seen as a static entity, but rather as possibility then it becomes organic, dynamic, moving, unraveling. It becomes a force or energy, and Hartman contends that value is force in the ethical field. "Being" as a noun becomes "being" as a force, a happening, an event.

At this point in the Dissertation there are several foreshadowings of Hartman's critical emphasis on systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic value, here seen as different dimensions of force/energy that can be experienced in the ethical field or as different ways of configuring, intentional referencing, forming, and talking about the phenomenal field. He is again close to the formidable influence of Nicolai Hartmann and his discussion of three modalities of existence: necessity – comparable to Robert Hartman's systemic dimension of value; reality – comparable to the extrinsic dimension of value; and, possibility – comparable to the intrinsic dimension of value. While clearly the use of these three dimensions is a notable way of formulating existence, there is also the implicit movement from lower to higher forms of value in the movement from systemic to extrinsic to intrinsic.

In the Dissertation, Hartman "powers" that allow human beings to deal with life situations. The most basic power is *instinct* which Hartman describes as an almost animal-like power that focuses on one situation and makes a person almost a static part of a situation. On a next level is *intelligence* that can be applied to an unlimited number of

situations and even creatively interact with those situations. On the highest level is *intuition*, which Hartman describes as power “applied to the situation at hand as if that situation were the only situation of the individual, this is to say with complete concentration” (D, p. 24). Could there be a more vivid description of intrinsic valuation?

In a further expression, Hartman says that *instinct* only fits a person for one situation. The person will be as much a victim of that one-dimensional situation as an agent of change. There is no choice on the level of instinct; that-which-is – we can say *systemically* – is simply what it is. Beyond instinct, *intelligence* fits a person for a set of unlimited choices that lead from one situation to another and does involve moral choices. Yet, beyond intelligence is *axiological value consciousness* that can transform the entire social field into an ethical field in which the continuous “struggle-tension” is experienced in its epitome. Later (D, p. 45), when he comes to his emphasis on Bergson, he talks about the movement from *intellection* (systemic), to *will* (extrinsic), to *élan vital/vital energy* (intrinsic). Finally (D, p. 59), he describes a “*scale of ethicality*” that moves from the average person (systemic), to the artist (extrinsic), to the “mystic” (intrinsic).

The mystic is the truly ethical man, for his material is the highest level of evolution at the present time, the social. Other creative men shape society indirectly through their works. The mystic shapes it through direct action. He is the artist of society – his material is not matter but man. He shapes souls.

“Shaping” is yet another word for “unraveling,” “intentional referencing,” “making better.” “Shaping” is the work of axiological value consciousness interacting with the space-time world. On an extrinsic level, Michelangelo is carving a rock with his sculptor tools. On an intrinsic level, in his “shaping,” he is freeing David from the stone.

Conclusion

So, the Dissertation shows us precisely what Robert Hartman was about in his passion as a human being. Living was mission for him, and his life was about transformation of human existence. Nothing could be proved, but maybe a great number of strands could be unraveled. There was really no interest in explaining everything, but there was compelling interest in making better, advancing development, and diminishing decay. He knew personally about standing in the midst of the erratic energies of a phenomenal field that had all kinds of polarities and believing that he could insert the force of valuation. He had seen Hitler figure out how to *organize* evil, and he was intent on trying to determine how better to *organize* goodness.

But, he had to articulate his mission and intent in ways that might communicate with a modern society in which reason and logic dominated. What better “vehicle” in the mid-1940s than field theory? What better “vehicle” in the mid-1960s than transfinite mathematics? From the Dissertation to *The Structure of Value* he simply builds a new metaphorical base. The Dissertation allows us to see fundamental intent and purpose without what for many people can be the confusion of higher mathematics. Indeed, the Dissertation is a useful and beneficial “front piece,” and the idea of its serving as a

“window” or “portal” to the more intricate and sometimes almost exotic expressions of Hartman’s later work makes its new accessibility indispensable.

Hartman’s consummate image of humanity in the Dissertation is that of an authentic person who stands in the midst of a phenomenal field that is filled with all kinds of polarities, all kinds of energy. In this circumstance, the authentic person shapes, refines, unravels, articulates. The authentic person engages in “struggle-tension.” The authentic person moves through instinct to intelligence to intuition, from merely existing to artistry with tasks and processes to containing all of life in axiological value consciousness.

In John Davis’ *Value and Valuation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972. p. 161), Fritz-Joachim von Rintelen writes in tribute to Robert Hartman:

The meaning of human existence and its innermost task is found in the active, spiritual-intellectual completion of life’s events. In these events, out of an existential attitude, comprehensive, partially transtemporal fundamental values – namely, intrinsic values (*Eigenwerte*) – must be concretely realized in different forms and in individual intensities, in degrees of fulfillment with respect to depth and height. The extrinsic or utility values must be directed toward the intrinsic values. Everything depends on the question of whether such spiritual fullness of meaning (*Sinngehalte*) can still find a genuine echo in this age and within each one of us. One may well say: “Tell me your value goals and I will tell you who you are.” The same can be said of every age.