PREFACE

The study of persons and immortality moves from thanatology to eschatology. My interest in thanatology grew out of my lectures in existential phenomenology during the early 1970s. At that time, the limitations of phenomenology prompted me to examine death from the perspective of being’s unconcealment rather than consciousness. Thus, I view death, not as the absence of consciousness, but as the infolding of being’s unconcealment. At human death, being asserts its final primacy by refusing to be for consciousness. Being does not stand outside consciousness, however. The traditional legacy of mind-body dualism is indefensible. Yet, it is reasonable to posit the existence of a mirror image of being’s unconcealment in our post-mortem existence, raising the dialogue to new heights in the afterlife.

In the past twenty-five years of teaching, I have sought to introduce my students to an array of issues in the expanding universe of philosophy, but it has become increasingly difficult to document why we are ethical beings, or should care about our associations. The deconstruction of human nature undermines the traditional base of ethics. So, we need to look elsewhere, namely, to the possibility of entering into relationships as the base of ethics. The existence of an absolute is a hard pill to swallow in the age of emotivism, however, but how else can we sustain a meaningful dialogue in philosophy without foundation?

The first task is to investigate the insufficiencies of the traditional representation of being human. This prepares the way for a fuller account of being ethical. We become persons in three main perspectives, namely, in self, toward others, and in being’s unconcealment. This view of being a person is panentheistic. Panentheism is not the identification of God and nature, but the belief that God is in all things, or that the whole of existence arises because of divine patterns, or laws. That view provides a fulcrum, not only for ethics, but for a defensible afterlife argument. Since our relationships define us, they must continue in the afterlife, if the principle of personal identity is to be safeguarded. Yet, if death is the end of my relationships, how can that be me in the afterlife?

The opening pages of the book invite the reader to join in a simple experiment. Imagine that in one stroke all your support systems are removed and you find yourself completely alone, without friends, spouse, family, or acquaintances. You are no longer part of any culture or belong to any society because all traces of the world have disappeared. To make matters worse, you are afflicted by a sudden acceleration in the loss of memory cells and all remembered experiences are vanishing in turn, leaving an overwhelming sense of anxiety. You search your heart for some sign of a greater good, but that too is gone. As you frantically look about to identify some familiar trace of reality, your central nervous system begins to fail; you cannot see, smell, hear, taste, or sense anything. All is gone. So this is death, you say, and this is what it feels like to die. But you are still conscious of the last strings of remembered experiences, how then is this death? The experience seems more like dying, a condition which although incompatible
with the continuance of life is not irreversible. How, then, is the condition reversed? It is reversed through a process in which my stream of consciousness reconnects with God, the other, and being's unconcealment.

In this imaginary death world all relationships with self, others, and being have ceased. No rational agent or subject of experiences remains. The perspective of the person as a being in relationships provides a key to some of the psychological, ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical questions we have about the nature of persons and the afterlife.

Being human is not an event, but a process. The focal point of the book is to examine the process through the study of those relationships that make us persons. We begin our journey as belonging to the whole, only to enter into specific relationships that individuate us. We become individuals through a dialogical fusion of opposites when our tendency toward relationships meets the particulars of a given locale. The tendency is absolute while the particulars are relative to culture. The person-making process allows us to view certain ways we have of framing the world, and becoming human. The process of becoming human enlists the typology of entering into relationships with good and evil, other human beings, and reality, or being's unconcealment. Since the evidence suggests that the creator enters into personal relationships with us in this world, we expect that the creator will want to maintain us in the afterlife. The creator entering into personal relationships with us is another name for God.

So, the study moves from thanatology into eschatology as an explanation, not only of becoming human, but of continuing the process in the afterlife. The view of death from the perspective of being's unconcealment, as well as recent developments in quantum physics, characterize the afterlife state as a continuation of relationships begun on earth. The "nothing" surrounding the "Big Bang" origin of cosmos plays a focal role in physics, philosophy, and religion.