

Spring 1991

# Review of "The Darkness and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects Upon His Fortunate Career and Those Who Made It Possible"

Donald Wayne Viney  
*Pittsburg State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty)

---

## Recommended Citation

Viney, Donald Wayne, "Review of "The Darkness and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects Upon His Fortunate Career and Those Who Made It Possible"" (1991). *Faculty Submissions*. 57.  
[https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil\\_faculty/57](https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty/57)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Submissions by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mmccune@pittstate.edu](mailto:mmccune@pittstate.edu).

The following review was originally published in *The Midwest Quarterly* 32/3 (Spring 1991): 366-368.

Charles Hartshorne. *The Darkness and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects Upon His Fortunate Career and Those Who Made It Possible* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

Donald Wayne Viney  
Pittsburg State University

The publication of Charles Hartshorne's (born 1897) autobiographical reflections, *The Darkness and the Light*, is welcome, especially for those who appreciate his importance to contemporary philosophy. His career spans nearly seven decades and includes hundreds of scholarly articles and nineteen books covering the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, theology, and the scientific study of bird song. The prestigious Library of Living Philosophers is soon to devote a volume to his work. Also of note is that the journal *Process Studies*, now in its eighteenth year, is directed in part to the critical study of Hartshorne's work. Not without reason does the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1979) call Hartshorne "the leading metaphysician" (article on Idealism).

The main outlines of Hartshorne's career have been known since 1970 when Eugene Peters' classic study, *Hartshorne & Neoclassical Metaphysics* (University of Nebraska) appeared. The present volume, which he characterizes as "a celebration of life" (xv), adds details, including portraits of his family, friends, and colleagues. The charming anecdotes sprinkled throughout the book illustrate what he calls his "strange flair for preserving foibles and witticisms" (71) and make for delightful reading. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the [367] chapter titled "Recollections of Famous Philosophers and Other Important Persons" (the only part of the book to have previously appeared in print). Reading this book is reminiscent of listening to Hartshorne free associate on the particulars of his life; those who have never met the man may now make his acquaintance vicariously and better appreciate his reputation for entertaining conversation.

*The Darkness and the Light* contains almost as much philosophy as autobiography. There are discussions of the mind/body problem (393f), human motivation (135, 142), personal identity (314), abortion and infanticide (56f), the nature of dreams (338f), and memory (2f). The interconnection between Hartshorne's life and thought is well expressed in the book's title. He takes the phrase "the darkness and the light" from a poem by Wordsworth which conveys the idea that nature is unified by bonds of mutual feeling among the creatures, the elements, and God. This is an unrefined statement of Hartshorne's metaphysics. Also, he speaks of his *fortunate* career and those who made it *possible*. A theme iterated throughout is that life is a

gamble (206) and that success (or failure) is as much due to good (or bad) self-management as to good (or bad) luck (260). The idea that chance is only a name for our ignorance or that there must always be a precise reason for what happens is, he says, “only ignorance posing as knowledge” (35).

Hartshorne happily accepts that the reality of chance implies that the doctrine of predestination is false. For instance, he recounts an episode in which his death was prevented by a man named Jabot applying the Heimlich maneuver. Says Hartshorne, “I have no use for the notion that God cares about *me* yet not about the ones for whom there is no Jabot in the moment of need” (139-140). In contrast to Einstein who believed that God does not “play dice,” Hartshorne believes in a God who takes chances (328). Hartshorne says, “The details of what happens in the world are *unintended, even by God*. Of few things am I more confident than this negative statement” (96). He is puzzled by the fact that only a minority of people seem to be satisfied with his “rationalized philosophical religion” (279). Perhaps this puzzlement stems from overestimating the extent to which people think clearly about their religious beliefs.

Those with an interest in identifying the origins of Hartshorne’s philosophical ideas will be only partly satisfied by this book. His liberal attitude in theology is prefigured in his mother’s gentle piety (37) and his father’s modernism (187). However, we are left in the dark concerning the erosion of his belief in an afterlife (149), and very little light is shed on the genesis of ideas which uniquely characterize his theism (e.g. his version of the ontological argument [368] and his doctrine of the dipolar nature of God). On the other hand, we learn of a dream in which he hits upon the thought “To know is to value” (26); and there is a near mystical experience while crossing the Atlantic in which he struggles toward the concept of a finite God (126); and he reports his discovery of the phenomenological truth that the world is directly *given* or felt in emotional terms (148). Each of these ideas is later refined and woven into the fabric of his panpsychist (or psychicalist) metaphysics.

Hartshorne amply documents that he is a “man of thought and feeling rather than action” (125). Readers may, however, get the impression that he too-often reminds them of this fact. Hartshorne’s sense of his own importance sometimes verges on conceit (202, 249), an aspect of his personality to which, fortunately, he is not oblivious (308, 363) and which is qualified by a profound respect for mathematicians, physicists, geneticists, logicians, and musicians (15). A fair question is to what extent his self-judgment is warranted. His maternal aunt told him when he was a boy that he was not a genius. He says that he “was not impressed with [her] equipment for judging the matter at that early stage” (16). Could she have anticipated his career and his contributions to philosophy, psychology, theology, and ornithology, she might have changed her mind.