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James McLachlan
Philosophy and Religion Department
Western Carolina University, USA
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1445-616X>
jmclachla@email.wcu.edu

The First Lady of German Philosophy: Husserl's Rebellious Student Hedwig Conrad-Martius

Review: James G. Hart,
Hedwig Conrad-Martius' Ontological Phenomenology,
ed. Rodney K.B Parker
(Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 284 pages.

James Hart is an important phenomenological scholar and thinker who is the author of several books and many articles on Husserl, Husserl's Utopian Poetics, and the phenomenological movement. This book is Hart's dissertation written at the University of Chicago between 1969 and 1972. The book has an appendix of the opening sections of Conrad-Martius's *Metaphysics of the Earthly* translated by Rodney Parker, who encouraged Hart to publish this dissertation almost 50 years after he had defended it at the University of Chicago.

Hart first encountered Conrad-Martius through his mentor at Catholic University, Thomas Prufer (1929–1993), who was a friend of Hedwig Conrad-Martius. The Prufers spent summers in Munich where Conrad-Martius taught and Prufer attended her lectures as a student. Hart's major professor at Chicago was Mircea Eliade and his interest in myth coincided with Conrad-Martius's work. But Hart's dissertation was directed by Langdon Gilkey. Hart went to study in Munich in 1967, unfortunately, Conrad-Martius had died in 1966 (HCM, viii).

Hedwig Conrad-Martius' Ontological Phenomenology is the only monograph in English on the Munich phenomenologist Hedwig Conrad-Martius. She is usually considered a "marginal thinker" in the phenom-

enological movement and one of the Munich circle of phenomenology. The book is part of Springer's series on "Women in the History of Philosophy and Sciences." The discussion of women in the history of philosophy could give a roader picture of whether Conrad-Martius is a marginal figure or whether her thought should have a broader audience. Historical accident certainly has something to do with her relative obscurity. Being a woman, she had a difficult time getting to her habilitation. This situation only became worse in the Third Reich.

Conrad-Martius was amongst the first generation of women in Germany to earn a doctorate in philosophy and to lecture at a German university (HCM, 1). In her time, she was considered the "first lady" of German philosophy. She was friends with the much more better-known Edith Stein. When she entered the "Göttingen" circle of phenomenologists her teacher Geiger called her the one who sent her, "our most gifted Munich philosopher" (HCM, 2). She joined Alexandre Koyré, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and Jean Hering, who became her close friend. Koyré and Hering would be instrumental in the propagation of phenomenology in France. Besides Husserl, she was influenced by Scheler who lectured in Göttingen from 1910–1914.

For Hart, Conrad-Martius is more than a marginal figure. She provided a kind of poetic eidetic based on the eidetic phenomenological basis of her cosmology. The conclusions of this ontological-phenomenological-cosmological philosophy Hart claims represent "the most robust natural philosophy of the twentieth century." Her work was spurred by Bultmann's demythologization which for Conrad-Martius robbed nature of its transcendent depths and potencies that point toward the New Heaven and New Earth. She had a Christian understanding of the cosmos in which nature is broken and grace heals our broken nature as well as that of nature itself (HCM, 5). Besides phenomenology Conrad Martius closely studied Boehme, Schelling, and von Baader. These thinkers, for whom myth is important, were allies in her struggle against the disenchantment of the world in post-Cartesian cosmologies and the mathematization of nature (HCM, 4).

The book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion which cover the expanse of Conrad-Martius' "Realontology" and finally its relation to "Realmythology." Realontology attempts to bridge the gap between nature's qualitative appearances and its scientific explanation (HCM, 18). Conrad-Martius was fond of Peter Wust's description of the origin of the phenomenological movement that phenomenology was "a longing to go back to the objective, to the holiness or being, to the purity and chastity of things, "zu den Sachen selbst" (HCM, 19). Conrad-Martius argued phenomenology is a science of essences, not facts (HCM, 19). It aims at an objective realm of universal and timeless meaning structures. We cannot talk about anything without an understanding of their essences. There is a danger of a de-essentialization of being and a falling into irrationalism if we assert the priority of "existence" over "essence" (HCM, 38).

The master of the movement, Husserl, was uncomfortable with Conrad-Martius's phenomenology. Hart notes that "Husserl confessed to Ingarden that he was alienated by Conrad-Martius' *'neue Schrift'* (presumably her *Metaphysische Gespräche* (Conrad-Martius 1921)) and says that she was never really [*eigentlich*] his student and had rejected the spirit of philosophy as a strict science."

What separates Conrad-Martius's ontological phenomenology from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is that she holds that transcendental reduction should be directed not just at anything "meant" but only insofar as what is "meant" is a real being. She held that Husserl never considered this phenomenological structure of reality. What was lost in Husserl's transcendental reduction was the possibility of grasping the fundamental structures of the really real as such. So Conrad-Martius moved beyond the transcendental reduction to the realontological reduction, and existentially determined being.

Conrad-Martius swam against the Bultmannian tide of demythologization and in this sense resembles, from a Husserlian phenomenological stance, the history of religions phenomenology of Hart's graduate director Mircea Eliade. Hart's claim that Conrad-Martius provided the most robust natural philosophy of her century is tied to her reading of the importance of myth. In many ways this is what could be seen as Hart's major

thesis, which appears late in the book. “The theme behind Conrad-Martius’ abundant analyses is the Christian understanding of the cosmos... If the theme in general is the Christian understanding of nature, the theme, in particular, is the realontological status of what we today generally regard as ‘mythic’ cosmological notions in the Christian tradition” (HCM, 205). Conrad-Martius opposed the movement to demythologize the Christian story. She moved toward an “eidosis of ‘myth’” and “realontological mythology.” Her work uncovered “objective mythical spaces, times, and personal powers.” Her natural philosophy-realontology provided the conceptual rubric for re-interpreting Christian cosmology. The three storied universe of the ancients and the theme of “heaven.” Thus, Hart writes that Conrad-Martius’ position appears as a re-mythologizing of the cosmos. For her there are three senses of myth: the epistemological, the phenomenological, and the realontological (HCM, 205). As epistemological, “heaven,” for example, the ontological referent is replaced by an existential and symbolic interpretation because the justification for the ontological referent has completely collapsed. Connected to the epistemological sense of myth is the phenomenological. Here myth again is taken as a symbolic language through which the really real is revealed to a culture. This is the subject matter of the history of religions. The realontological sense of myth affirms the objective content of certain essences that are myths in the phenomenological sense. Hart shows that Conrad-Martius is not a fundamentalist who affirms the literal truth of the storied universe of the Bible. But, as with all the aspects of the tradition, there is an objective reference that corresponds to the sense given to heaven in the early Christian tradition. Heaven above was the most high, the ascended Jesus, and the angels. It was the region of power and promise. Consider this example quoted by Hart about the lover and the beloved. “Thus, for the lover the beloved is the center of the world, though he may well be an astrophysicist, i.e., know all about the relativity of planetary systems. When with his beloved he enters a new cosmos with a new spatiality” (HCM, 212). In the discussion of the phenomenology of myth Hart says myths, like the idea of Heaven above, are not only about the three storied universe, but what we value, what gives meaning to the world, to the “place” where we are complete.

Conrad-Martius affirmed that the resurrection of Jesus is so central that its eidosis transcends the epistemological, phenomenological, and mythic. The resurrection makes Christianity radically physical and cosmological (HCM, 207). Human beings are fallen, and the human spirit reveals an estrangement and nostalgia for our primordial situation in our unconscious. Here she provides what Hart calls a radical justification for the phenomenology of religion. Myths as tales of origins, estrangement, and reconciliation are a kind of anamnesis and are utopian. They point to the world-constitution and alienation from that constitution (HCM, 207).

Conrad-Martius is a deeply Christian thinker. She was profoundly interested by theological doctrines of substance and *creation ex-nihilo*. She was convinced that it is not possible to have an adequate notion of substance without *creation ex-nihilo*. She, in turn, held that without an adequate notion of substance there cannot be an adequate notion of creation. The Christian theological project is basic to her phenomenology. Hart notes the Thomistic idea of a relation between God and the world, essential to *creation ex-nihilo* in which God is not related to the world while the world is related to God, is similar to the notion of being in *Advaita Vendanta*. For Conrad-Martius this kind of one-sided relation, like Sankara’s and Thomas’s notion, is essential in grasping the structure of reality. As with Eliade, Conrad-Martius thought myth is important in illuminating this notion of reality. The “Dream of Vishnu” was particularly important to her. It reflects the Sankaran/Thomistic structure of being. In the myth, the world is a dream. It is *maya*, fashioned out of the glowing radiance of Vishnu’s imaginative soul and will be taken back into his soul. The myth was a remarkable cosmological conception for Conrad-Martius. Hart writes: “She felt that perhaps no other world-myth so profoundly expressed both the intoxicating as well as the horrifying vitality of nature. And yet the vitality of the world in this myth is bound to its mere phenomenality (HCM, 176).” Hart notes how closely this relates to T.S. Eliot’s lines in *Burnt Norton* where reality is at the still point of the turning world. She uses this passage from Eliot as the front piece for her *Der Zeit*.

Conrad-Martius' cosmology supports the traditional phases of salvation history. Hart notices striking parallels between Conrad-Martius notion of development with Teilhard de Chardin whose thought, ironically, she opposed (HCM, 194). Like Teilhard she attempts a Christian theory of organic evolution. She does this through an Aristotelian and Augustinian notion of essence as potencies and seeds that are developing through eons of time. She strongly opposed the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the deification of humanity. She saw this as a huge category mistake (HCM, 195).

Hart's book is a fascinating view into a creative, though forgotten, Christian thinker and an important contribution to the history of the phenomenological movement. I am glad that after fifty years it is now a book.



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