



## A Tour of John Heron's 'Feeling and Personhood'

*Feeling and Personhood: Psychology in Another Key,*  
John Heron. Sage Publications Ltd, 1992.

By John Gray

### Contents

Introduction to the Tour	Page 5
A: Introduction to Heron's ideas	Page 7
B: Personhood: or, Mainly Chapter 3	Page 9
C: The Ego: or, Mainly Chapter 4	Page 15
D: The Psyche in Action: or, Mainly Chapter 2	Page 21
E: Meeting the World: or, Mainly Chapter 8	Page 29
F: Implications for Living and for Learning: or, Mainly Chapters 11-14	Page 35
G: Glossary	Page 41

## Acknowledgments

I am particularly grateful to John Heron for his clear, comprehensive and corrective comments on earlier drafts of this Tour; and to Sage Publications for their permission to reproduce quotations and other material from *Feeling and Personhood*.

I am also grateful to those who have commented on earlier drafts or have otherwise given help and support, especially Yvonne Duggleby, Heather Tweddle, Bryce Taylor, Bronwen Gray, David Gray, Andrew Woodgate, Penny Sharland and John Price.

I alone am responsible for any shortcomings my Tour may have as an adequate introduction to the original text.

John Gray  
January 2005

## A: An Introduction to Heron's Ideas

*Feeling and Personhood* presents us with a 'theory of the person'. What Heron means by this is a theory which tries to explain the nature and essence of being human: where our emotions, thoughts and actions come from, and how we interact with other humans and with the world. Heron hopes that by being aware of this theory we might gain useful insights into how we live – and transform - our lives.

In a wider context, Heron argues that the journey of the soul is to recover itself by experiencing its non-separate distinctiveness within the wider cosmic unity. In other words, the soul journeys from a false sense of separation from the cosmos to being a distinct person who participates in the unity of the cosmos. *Feeling and Personhood* strives to give a credible philosophical and psychological basis to this journey.

Underlying *Feeling and Personhood* is Heron's spiritual belief that Reality is at the same time both One and Many. The Many are individual centres of consciousness, including persons, within an embracing unitive cosmic presence - the One. In Heron's reality, there is no separation between any conscious centre and its setting in that unitive cosmic presence.

The One-Many reality is a key underpinning of all Heron's ideas in *Feeling and Personhood*. Here's a collection of phrases that Heron uses to describe this reality:

Reality, I believe, is both One and Many. The Many are a real Many, a genuine Multiplicity within Mind.....differentiated centres of consciousness within a cosmic presence. 'Personhood' is one such centre, a particular focus of development within the field of universal consciousness.....In Reality, there is no separation between any conscious centre and its setting in universal mind, and since it is part of this unified field, it can participate in all other centres too (*Feeling and Personhood*, page 10).

This participation in other centres of the unified field gives a definition of another of Heron's key concepts, namely *feeling* – our perceiving and connecting at a deep level with other centres of consciousness (such as people, trees etc) within the universe.

Collectively and individually, we often lose sight of the One-Many reality. There is an extraordinarily powerful illusion in place: that the human mind is isolated and alienated. This illusion prevents us truly from being in touch with ourselves, with other centres of consciousness, and with the One – that unitive presence that includes and transcends all of the Many. This illusion springs from the subject-object split born of our use of language, psychological wounding in childhood, and deep tensions inherent in the human condition. These causes and the impact of this illusion are explored further in Chapter 4 of *Feeling and Personhood* on the Ego, and in Section C of this Tour.

Dismantling the illusion means that personal consciousness discovers its true heritage: that it is both distinct within, and at one with, a universal presence.

Many of the book's practical exercises, and of course Heron's theory of the person itself, strive to dissolve the apparent split between One and Many.

As Heron points out however, words themselves can create and reinforce a split between one of the Many and others of the Many and the One – in this example, a split between the subject (you, the reader) and the object (the thing being described).

This split is referred to on page 9 as a 'subject-object' split, and re-emerges several times as the ideas within *Feeling and Personhood* are developed. To transcend this split, Heron calls for us to perceive the unitive world and describe it in unitive discourse.

In such a world, subject and object are distinct but are interconnected and non-separable. Heron uses the phrases 'post-linguistic outlook' (to see the world in this way) and 'post-linguistic discourse' (to so describe the world). As you gain confidence with Heron's ideas, you can then turn, for example, to Chapter 3 and the causes of the closed ego, and Chapter 8 and the section on 'post-linguistic propositional knowledge', to see the connection of this subject-object split to his ideas.

Heron is arguing for a new use of language, and indeed uses language in a new way within the book. Heron argues that language can fall foul of the subject-object split, but also that language can be used to transcend it. He is not describing the indescribable, but rather using language to describe a unitive world. If we use language in the old 'split' way, then we may indeed find it difficult to grasp Heron's new way of using language to reveal a new kind of meaning.

The exercises at the end of Chapters 2 to 9 are designed to help you get beyond language to understand more deeply what Heron is describing. Many of them use a process other than sitting down and talking about things, and, as such, offer an experiential way of testing the ideas that Heron proposes. Pages 6 to 9 of *Feeling and Personhood* provide guidance to help these exercises go well.

Heron's theory of the person is just that, a theory, not a certainty – although his experience leads him to claim that it is a lived belief that can act as a basis of self-management and social interaction. Even though it is a theory, Heron writes in very definite terms, without using words such as 'may be' or 'possibly'. If you get tired of this style of writing, Heron invites you to slip in a few 'may be's or 'appears to', to lighten up the language a bit.

In its theory of the person, *Feeling and Personhood* makes extensive use of metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech which, at best, only partly resembles the thing it is referring to (such as a ferocious person being referred to as a tiger). *Feeling and Personhood's* main metaphors - the up-hierarchy, the spiral and the cycle - should be taken only as an attempt to describe in words what can only be experienced, not as an actual representation of internal divisions or processes. As he says at the start of Chapter 2, key concepts are distinguished and separated within *Feeling and Personhood* solely in order for us to appreciate better how they are interwoven in psychological reality.

## B: Personhood: or Mainly Chapter 3

### States of Personhood

For Heron, 'personhood' is the capacity for *feeling*. Feeling is the resonance we have with the unity of the world; it enables us to participate in it, 'feel' its qualities, and be attuned to it while also feeling our distinctness of being within this unity. From this capacity of personhood emerge all the many ways of behaving, learning and development. Being a person – that is, developing your personhood – is therefore an achievement of education and self-development, acquired through learning how to live more fully and awarely.

Within Chapter 3 of *Feeling and Personhood*, Heron identifies eight different states of personhood. Whilst some broad generalisations can be made about these states as stages of development, people make some very idiosyncratic journeys among the states, both in the long term and on a daily basis.

One generalisation is that the first four states (i.e. the bottom four) are prepersonal and occur developmentally before the top four. Table 3.1 (*Feeling and Personhood*, page 53, given below) illustrates the eight states and Heron's brief definitions of them, and is intended to be read from the bottom upwards.

Table 3.1 Eight Sates of Personhood

Charismatic person	The psyche is a continuously transfigured, living presence
Self-transfiguring person	The psyche realizes its psychic and spiritual potentials
Self-creating person	The psyche is autonomous in healing and actualising itself
Creative person	The psyche is autonomous in external behaviour
Conventional person	The socialized psyche adopts cultural roles and rules
Compulsive person	The wounded psyche has defensive splits and repressions
Spontaneous person	The uninhibited psyche expresses its innate impulses
Primal person	Primordial fusion of the psyche and its foetal world.

The *primal* person contains all the potentials of personhood that later appear. Despite being pre-birth, the primal state is still vulnerable to trauma or hurt during pregnancy and birth.

The *spontaneous* person is the small child with a free flow of wants, needs, interests and impulses, and an underdeveloped prepersonal participative awareness.

Oppression and trauma of both primal and spontaneous persons can lead the psyche to split off and repress aspects of itself which have been oppressed. The distress caused by this oppression is also repressed and drives subsequent *compulsive* behaviour. Identifying with the invading influence produces oppressive compulsive behaviour; identifying with ineffectual responses to it produces compulsive behaviour of the victim, impotent rescuer or impotent rebel. These responses are unhelpful and maladaptive from the point of view of a valid expression of personhood. Compulsiveness is further emphasised when a distress-driven response pattern is repetitively projected on to many different situations, inviting more distress of the same kind. A self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing prison is created from which there seems to be no escape. Heron imagines a time when children may develop without experiencing psychological wounding, but, for the present time, the above oppression/repression/oppression cycle is the common experience of humanity, with the consequences more or less visible in our lives.

Becoming a *conventional* person involves the learning of social roles and socially acceptable norms of behaviour, beliefs and values to enable the person to survive both in the family and in the wider culture. The conventional person thus constructed overlaps with the compulsive person in that some of the acquired social norms will institutionalise some culturally common compulsive behaviours (such as victimhood, non-assertiveness, or repressing one's emotions). Seen more positively, some conventional behaviours are adaptive forms of enabling social cohesion and order. In any event, this socialisation of the person, whilst apparently negative and conforming, is, in fact, essential to obtaining a framework from which we can later establish our capacity for autonomous thought and action.

As a reminder, these are *states* not stages; we all have the capacity to move between all the states at different times, in and out, to and fro, from day to day, and hour to hour.

A *creative* person has begun to develop the ability to work out their own personal beliefs, norms and values, and to act in accordance with them in one or more spheres of life. Such people are to some extent self-directed and autonomous, as opposed to the other-directedness of the conventional person. They are beginning literally to think themselves out of the boundaries that beset the conventional person. They may still often return without awareness into compulsive behaviour, but when they are able to suspend the compulsiveness and conventionality of their ego, intention is liberated and (using the language of chapter 2 of *Feeling and Personhood*) the participative modes of reflection, intuition and feeling begin to be engaged (see Section D of this Tour).

The *self-creative person* has formed and is implementing a commitment to take in hand consciously their compulsive behaviour, seeking to uncover and resolve the hidden distress that drives it. This is not about removing the self's many compulsive aspects, but about reducing their tendency to control the person in blind or destructive ways. Heron does not imagine that we can clean up the whole of our pathology. For a self-creative person, the ego is more regularly and more sustainedly open (see Section C of this Tour), and the person has greater and more consistent access to the participatory modes of feeling, intuition, reflection and intention (see Section D). Such a person also has to hand a greater range of creative behaviour and seeks to avoid unaware lapses from authentic into inauthentic activity. They have permission from themselves to be and to demonstrate what Heron calls a 'multiplicity of aspects' - different ways of being, of perceiving and of acting.

Some deep tensions still remain to be dealt with, particularly the subject-object split inherent in the use of language (see Section C).

A *self-transfiguring* person embarks on the realisation of their subtle energies, psychic capacities and spiritual potentials. They are busy with transformations of ordinary perception and action, living in the now and engaged in ritual, meditation, prayer or worship. They are working with the deep tensions within the human condition (see Section C). They are open to extrasensory development and to accessing other realities. Heron establishes this awareness as an essential element in acknowledging the One-Many reality. In this state, the person is embarking on the transpersonal phase of human development, integrated with a creative, expressive life in the world.

A state yet to be consistently attained (in Heron's view) by anyone who has yet lived on this earth is that of the *charismatic* person. Such people have become transformed into a continuous dynamic grace and presence. They are continuously transfigured, embarking on a new adventure of cosmic integration. Heron envisages them to operate within a field of existence differentiated into innumerable other beings, networks and levels; they combine the roles of mystic, spiritual scientist and creative agent in a unified world. Embarking on greater cosmic integration, however, means a charismatic person does not see themselves at the end of development: they are still learning.

This then is a brief summary of Heron's eight states of personhood. As already pointed out, he does not see them as a linear progression, and people who are self-creating and self-transfiguring can at times be compulsive or conventional.

Heron goes on in Chapter 3 to look at the implications of integration of the personality through these various states of personhood and outlines a possible model of progression through the states. If you feel that one state as described fits your current development (for example as a creative person), ways forward are outlined.

### **The Capacity for Unique Personhood**

Heron makes it clear that we all have the potential to achieve any of these states of personhood. This in-born potential is what Heron refers to as the entelechy of unique personhood. The entelechy, or inborn potential, unfolds through all the different states – including the compulsive person, which in current human experience is a genuine and profound source of growth towards the self-creative person. This entelechy, which has also been identified by other theorists in this field, embodies four prompts for our development:

- It requires us only to invite it into our awareness and to pay attention to it.
- It guides us at different times to identify more with our individual distinctness or more with the wider interconnected universe and at different times to be more vital in our living or more mindful in our learning.
- It promotes many different cycles of human development and growth over a long time scale.
- It can also manifest itself over a short time scale for prompting more immediate change processes.

## The Person as One-Many

The One-Many reality, outlined on page 7 of this Tour, is echoed in the one-many structure of personhood. ('Personhood', you may recall, is defined in terms of our capacity for feeling, out of which all our states of development emerge.) There is one unique, distinct potential person, who has within them all sorts of different subpersons. These subpersons, or different ways of being, are the familiar persons identified in Chapter 3, i.e. the spontaneous person, the compulsive person, the conventional person, the creating person, the self-creating person and the self-transfiguring person.

At a certain period in life a person may be running these subpersons concurrently. What Heron means by 'concurrently' is not that they are all on stage at the same time, but that we move in and out of these subpersons during the days, weeks and months. We bring ourselves on bit by bit, as Heron reassures us, in an improvisatory piecemeal kind of way, now working at this, now sorting out that, slipping back here, and moving on with swift advance there.

Heron goes on to show that particular roles can be identified within the subpersons of spontaneous, conventional, self-creating etc persons in an ascending series of categories from the compulsive to the self-transfiguring. Thus the compulsive person 'lurches' between the distressed positions of oppressor, victim, rescuer and rebel; the self-transfiguring person's subsubpersons could include the oracle or mystic, the seer, the healer, the cosmic joker, and the one lost in the dark night of the soul.

In his exploration of the One-Many reality, Heron here repeats his reference at the end of Chapter 3 to skandhas<sup>1</sup>, which affirms that through some principle of affinity, each person is born carrying the unresolved behaviour patterns of other persons who have lived in earlier epochs. If this is true, then we are all members one of another - past, present and future.

Heron finishes Chapter 3 by speculating on the link between the entelechy we all have and the connections with others who have lived and died before us. Note that his notion of entelechy networks is his preferred alternative to traditional reincarnation theory. Even without these thrilling speculations, Heron's eight states of personhood and his description of our internal potential to make a new state a reality within us provide a dazzling affirmation that we are – and can become even more so – the person we are called and created to be.

We can now see that entelechy as the principle of personhood that orchestrates and integrates the manifold of persons, subpersons and roles within subpersons. The entelechy appears as different kinds of guiding spokespersons – at different times encouraging us (in the language of the three polarities outlined in Section D below) to be individuating, now participating, now proposing grounding, now reorganising, now electing living, now learning.

The first section of Chapter 9 sets out a variety of metaphors to help us experience and identify the One-Many reality. These metaphors range from 'the infinitely large (the infinitude without) and the infinitely small (the infinitude within)', to ourselves as beings of the world both participating in and springing from the underlying being of God. These metaphors are further explored in the exercises for Chapter 9.

---

<sup>1</sup> Skandhas means 'groups' or 'aggregates'. It is based in the Buddhist tradition but Heron uses it to designate psychically inherited behavioural tendencies without any association with reincarnation doctrine.

## **The Transpersonal**

*Transpersonal* is a word that appears frequently in *Feeling and Personhood*. To embark on the transpersonal phase of human development is to consistently attain the seventh state of personhood as set out in Chapter 3, that of self-transfiguring. Remember that we may at different times manifest different states of personhood, so it is possible to be self-transfiguring on a sporadic ad hoc basis and not feel downcast if this is not a permanent state.

Transpersonal means personhood becomes *transparent* with psychic and spiritual energies, manifest in a full range of creative activities in the world; and becomes *transformed* from being identified with egoic separateness from other people and the world to celebrating distinctness of being within unitive awareness. In such transparency and transformation, persons enter their true estate, embarking on the start of their charismatic consummation.

Pages 61 to 63 of *Feeling and Personhood* set this out in more detail, within the context of states of personhood.