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Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything: Contributions to the Structural-Systematic Philosophy.

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White's *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything* (TAPTOE) complements the recent release of Lorenz Puntel's *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Structural Systematic Philosophy* (2008) and *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion* (2012), for both of which White was both collaborator and translator. On the one hand, TAPTOE can be read as a primer offering a "clear and concise introduction" to the structural systematic philosophy (SSP). On the other hand, it supplements and advances themes mentioned in Puntel's texts that require further elaboration and concretization, such as human freedom and beauty. In both aspects White presents to the reader a lucid, compelling theory of being that overcomes the shortcomings of other available frameworks.

Given its apparent audacity, it is almost impossible not to begin—as reviews so often do—by mentioning the title. Even though White has authored a book about Hegel titled *Absolute Knowledge* (1983), one would be pressed to make comparisons beyond the most generic: the intricate conjoining of logic and ontology or, intriguingly, the "incomparable superiority" (to quote Puntel) of Christianity. Rather, the hallmarks of the SSP stand in notable contrast to Hegel both in its commendable aspiration for "maximal clarity" or, despite the title, its self-restraint in recognizing that it offers only "the *best currently available* systematic philosophy" (10) and not a final, totalizing philosophy. Thus, SSP is holistic rather than imperialistic, elucidating the "unrestricted universe of discourse" as a point where varying and sometimes incompatible theoretical frameworks fit together yet without interfering with the investigations of restricted universes of discourse undertaken by physicists, chemists, historians, etc. Not only does such a program remedy the regrettable disciplinary fragmentation of philosophy into specializations, but, more broadly, it gives an account of technical, scientific discourses without estranging everyday, common discourse. The colloquial "the sun rises", and the scientific "the earth revolves around the sun" are both true within their respective theoretical frameworks. The SSP's metaframework of the absolutely unrestricted domain of being can account for true sentences in differing theoretical frameworks even while weighing them according to their objectives. Whereas everyday theoretical frameworks are ranked in terms of everyday convenience and efficiency, scientific ones strive for relatively maximal coherence and intelligibility (26). Because the SSP offers "criteria for comparing and ordering theoretical frameworks" according to their internal and external coherence and intelligibility, it does not fall prey to relativism.

The structural-systematic philosophy is a theory of everything because it thematizes the unrestricted universe of discourse, not a restricted universe of discourse (as does for example physics). Rejecting theoretical frameworks that relate their semantics and ontologies to subject-

predicate sentences, it takes its semantic and ontological bearings instead from sentences of the form “It’s such-and-suching”—the structure found in, for example, “It’s raining” and “It’s morning”—which *TAPTOE* terms ‘sentencings.’ This forms the basis of White’s theory of truth. Alluding to Tarski’s 1933 definition, “a true sentence is one that says that the state of affairs is so and so, and the state of affairs indeed is so and so,” White argues against deflationist accounts of truth in favor of a significantly revised—or better stated, a significantly reframed—version of correspondence theory. This reframing begins semantically by emphasizing the importance of the operator in truth claims, which is most apparent in the schema, “It is the case that...” By displacing and deprioritizing the grammatical subject in favor of the non-referential pronoun, this little phrase makes evident that true sentences, which express what White calls true “propositionings,” are true because those propositionings are identical to what is ontologically and actually the case, or what White calls “factings.” The fundamental conviction driving White’s reframing of correspondence theory can be found in the deceptively simple and succinct claim: “true propositionings are identical to actual factings” (57; 146). Arguably, the tightest arguments in the book concern the identity of the semantic and ontological structures following from their reconstrual in the SSP. While not all these arguments can be pursued here, one can still appreciate the implications of White’s reframing of correspondence theory. “The SSP’s truth theory retains the central insight behind the correspondence theory, that is, that whatever is true (sentence, belief, proposition, etc.) must stand in a determinate relation to what actually is (to the ontological dimension), but it denies that the relation is adequately articulable as one of correspondence between items whose ontological statuses are or are understood to be utterly distinct (for example, between beliefs understood as purely mental and thus as non-physical and worldly facts understood as physical and thus as non-mental)” (44-45). In short, *TAPTOE* seeks to overcome subject/predicate frameworks that have long determined correspondence theories. At least in part this explains White’s neologisms like “propositioning” and “facting” for with these he seeks to avoid that “propositionings” are somehow internal and mental while “factings” are somehow extrinsic and extra-mental, as if language and being could somehow be compartmentalized and separated. Not only does the confluence of “propositionings” and “factings” in White’s theory of truth avoid problems arising from subject/predicate frameworks of correspondence theory, but it relies on an ontology that departs from what White calls “thing or substance ontologies.”

The history of philosophy from ancient Greece to modernity has inclined toward substance ontological frameworks in which subjects are deemed to refer to substances possessing an essential nature to which accidental properties are predicated but which are not determinative of a substance’s nature. While this framework, which White also calls a “whatness framework,” proves effective for describing the discursive and everyday enterprise of classifying and orienting things with respect to other things, it lacks theoretical intelligibility. In clarity typical of his style, White gives the example of a table: “According to thing ontologies, things have properties and stand in relations, but to have properties and stand in relations they must have an ontological status that is different from the statuses of properties and relations...The only way it [a table] could become accessible and hence intelligible as a thing would be by means of abstraction from the properties and relations that it has as a table, but the greater the abstraction, the less is left. Indeed, if the abstraction is complete, if no

table-attributes remain, then there is no content whatsoever. The concepts thing, substance, and object, as components of thing, substance or object ontologies, are therefore unintelligible in that it is impossible to determine or articulate what things or substances or objects as such could be” (31). While there have been historical instances of those who critiqued this framework, they usually did so at the expense of a theory of being; only recently have there been attempts to critique this framework by proposing alternate theoretical frameworks for theorizing being.

One of White’s most striking claims is that throughout the history of metaphysics being has often been neglected by those who have written extensively about it. This dilemma stems from a tendency to favor “...compositional semantics and ontologies strongly linked to semantically significant grammatical subjects and predicates” (143). Whether understood nominatively qua ‘a being’ (i.e., entitatively) or verbally qua ‘to be’ (i.e., existentially), the notion of being in each of these instances is determined by its relation to an agent or subject. The sentence forms that articulate these conceptions of being—“S is P” and “S is,” respectively—reflect a privileging of the subject. Alternatively, White proposes a theory of being based on simple-present or present-continuous forms of ‘to be’ (‘am, is, are’) as made explicit by the universally applicable operator “It is being such that”, as in “It’s being such that It’s being-a-table.” One might be inclined to identify this theory of being as an extension of the verbal-existential conception of being, perhaps even associating it with an ‘existentialist,’ Neo-Thomist metaphysics like that proposed by Gilson, who White engages in the last chapter of the book. However, this mistakenly interprets the “It is being such that” within the subject-predicate framework, taking the ‘is’ as extrinsically augmenting the ‘it,’ when they should—as already indicated in the theory of truth above—be taken together with the ‘is’ intrinsic to the ‘it,’ both indicating the totality of being. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the impersonal pronoun intimates the absolutely unrestricted domain of being as a whole independent of the subject-predicate framework so that this ‘it’ functions by, “expressing action or a condition of things simply, without referent to any agent” (149). Thus, for all their metaphysical insight, Aristotle, Aquinas, and even Heidegger, who in many ways initiated the critique of thing or substance ontologies, failed to give a thorough and intelligible framework for a theory of being so understood.

As much as the SSP and *TAPTOE* offer a new and unique theory of being, it resonates deeply with certain aspects and crucial developments in the history of metaphysics. Although White does not mention the doctrine of the transcendentals, it is an unmistakable influence throughout the book. With treatments of truth, goodness, beauty, and being, *TAPTOE* discusses all but one of the traditional transcendentals, namely unity, and even this could be indirectly included under White’s theory of absolute necessity. It is also not incidental that truth provides a suitably modern entry point into *TAPTOE*’s theory of being. Commenting on the metamorphosis of this tradition from its medieval beginnings in Aquinas to the dawn of modernity in Suarez, Jan Aertsen states regarding the gradual primacy of the truth: “Truth concerns the relation between being and knowing and implies a view of man’s attitude toward reality. It is just in reflections on ‘truth’ that the complex process of the transformation of the medieval doctrine of the transcendentals to modern transcendental philosophy becomes apparent.” (*Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 692). Regrettably this history has yet to be fully written, but what remained largely undeveloped throughout this entire tradition is that truth as a relational transcendental could be thought apart from

the subject-predicate framework. Heidegger initiated such a move in *Being and Time* when he interpreted Aquinas' transcendental conception of *verum* in terms of the soul's *quodammodo est omnia* (in a certain sense all things) as the beginning of overcoming any "vicious subjectivizing" (*schlechten Subjektivierung*) (§ 4). Along similar lines Puntel and White, though quite critical of Heidegger and drawing upon analytic philosophy, have sought to amplify this move through the identification of truth and being—an identification made evident (in the sense of 'clear' and 'intelligible') by attending to the intricate intersection of language, logic, and being.

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