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Process Thought and Bridge Building: A Response to Stephen K. White

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Abstract: Stephen White focuses his attention on what he calls "depth" experiences and the role that cultivating such experiences could have in public life in a democracy. Depth experiences are those transformative experiences that lead people to question the values that they had previously assumed and to alter their sense of purpose. These moments come in "positive" and "negative" forms, White says: some are felt as experiences of abundance, integrity, or meaningfulness which White calls experiences of fullness, and others are felt as experiences of absence, alienation, loss, and limitation, which White calls experiences of dearth. My aim here is not to capture White's proposal in all of its richness but only to provide a constructive, "bridge-building" response to it from a process perspective. This response makes three points: two noting important areas of agreement between his approach and a process approach to political theory, and the third noting an important tension.

First: constructive post-modernism

Let me begin by putting into context Professor White's project (that is, both today's paper and the trajectory of his work in general). My map will be simple—without, I hope, misrepresenting. Imagine process thought and postmodern thought as two intellectual traditions. Process thinkers trace their intellectual lineage along lines of inheritance that run from Alfred North Whitehead, to Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, and their students. Postmodern thinkers trace their intellectual lineage along lines of inheritance that run from Nietzsche, to Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and their students. When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, in the early 1990s, these two lineages were not much in conversation. In fact, the process attempt to provide cosmological support for the ideals of civilization and the postmodern attempt to overcome metaphysics seemed to be goals that were not simply different, but actually opposed to each other.

To the best of my knowledge, the first explicit overture from process thought to postmodernism (or “bridge to nowhere”?) was begun by David Ray Griffin.¹ Griffin argues that process thought actually *is* a form of postmodern thought. It is a form of postmodern thought, he argues, in that process thinkers clearly reject the central views of modernism. In a rigorous and careful account, Griffin shows how the process thinkers reject what he calls naturalism, that is, the epistemological and ontological commitments that undergird the positivist view that makes technological science the paradigm of rationality.² But his argument is not that the process tradition has the *same* goals as the postmodern thinkers mentioned above. Griffin distinguishes between two forms of postmodernism: “deconstructive postmodernism” and “constructive postmodernism.” Deconstructive postmodernism, he says in the introduction to each book in the series, “overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview; it seeks to overcome the modern worldview by eliminating the possibility of worldviews as such, rather than by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and concepts” (see Griffin, x). Constructing a worldview through a revision of modern premises and concepts is the task of constructive postmodernism. One might say, then, that Griffin does not collapse the two intellectual movements, but he does take a step from the process camp towards the postmodern constellation.

Stephen White's paper and his larger project can now be better understood as taking a step from the postmodern camp towards the process tradition—or, at least, as taking a step towards that common task of constructive postmodernism. White writes from within the postmodern tradition, but he has argued elsewhere not only that this tradition has done a poor job thinking about constructive political questions, but that

no adequate approach to ethics or politics could possibly come out of a position like Heidegger's or the post-structuralists'. What is missing in that form of political thinking, White says, is a means of adjudicating rival claims in the political sphere. In other words, the pluralistic reality of politics always raises the idea of the legitimacy of one's norms. As he has written, politics "must be conceived as somehow built up out of courses of interaction in which claims are raised and agents are held responsible to normative expectations. And this complex of interaction . . . cannot possibly be scrubbed free of the associated concepts of rightness, justice, or legitimacy" (White, *Political* 49).

White's work is thus postmodern in that he shares with those thinkers skepticism towards metanarratives or master narratives. But his postmodernism nevertheless can, like process thought, equally be called *constructive* since, like Griffin, White does not want to jettison but rather reinvestigate the experiences of a fullness or a dearth of meaning, the human condition, and the world that presences.

Second: the return of ontology

Characteristic of the linguistic turn in 20th philosophy, both in Anglophone and Continental philosophy, was the metaphor that language acts as a screen between the subject and her experience of the world. In that metaphor, language "mediates" everything we know and subjects do not have direct access to the world. We are insulated from reality by our language, according to that view, and metaphysics loses its place as the central task of philosophy. Given their commitment to constructive postmodernism, however, both process thinkers and White see human values as grounded in our experiences of the world, and there is a return to ontological questions about what the world is like. Our moral and political values are not just words or texts or language; those values are experienced.

White writes, in a nice phrase in his paper here, of "the ethical-political promise [that depth experience] carries." Our affirmations are not simply the assertions of a will to power, projected outward onto the world either from the individual or from the culture from our subjectivity. Instead, the basic source of the self is some understanding of the world, some reality to which one responds as to a call. Against those postmoderns who say that there are no facts, only interpretations, White responds: "depth experience is not simply phenomenological putty into which we impress our will. Rather it moves us." This turn to the ontological is something process thinkers share.

Moreover, not only do process thinkers and White agree that values are located in our experiences of the world, but they also agree that the

world is best understood as in a process of presencing or becoming. The world is experienced as the source from which everything springs and then passes away. White therefore recommends the cultivation of experiences of fullness so that one can fold one's meaning into a felt resonance between one's life and the irrepressible movement, the ebb and flow of all life. Though it would not be accurate to describe him as a process philosopher, White clearly finds temporal language a good vocabulary for his analysis of the way the world is experienced. As he writes elsewhere: "Presencing [of things is] utterly plural, unstable, motile, and unhierarchical" and the "'a-priori' of any possible economy of presence" is the "event-like distributing of presence-absence" (White, *Political* 45, 44). Process thinkers share White's opposition to an ontology that grounds one's identity as secure and that denies difference and change. Given this ontological understanding of the world, the two sides are close.

Third: strong vs. Weak ontology

Now to my third and last point, the tension between White's project and process thought. Although White is unlike deconstructive postmodern thinkers in his willingness to talk about the character of the world in general, he distinguishes between what he calls a "strong" ontology (which, in his judgment, overreaches) and a "weak" ontology (which he recommends—see White, *Sustaining*). Given this distinction, the connections he explores between one's political self-understanding and one's understanding of the character of the world may be fundamentally different from those developed by process thinkers.

A strong ontology is found in those traditional metaphysical views that seek to provide a certain or uncontested foundation for our identities and our values. Here (as he puts it elsewhere), one claims that one's values are "laid down in nature" and "the world simply *is* that way" (White, *Political* 29, 28). Here (as he puts it in this article), one's ontology provides a "grounding certainty" and the conviction that one's own depth experiences reveal "a truth that applies to all" or a "universal truth." A weak ontology, by contrast, does not claim that our values are "powered by any sort of transcendent spark." I suspect that a great deal of process thought seems to White (and many others) like a "strong" ontology and that therefore—despite their dual membership in the constructive postmodernism club, and despite their shared predilection for the language of becoming, pluralism, and flux—there are postmodernists who will not want to embrace it. Given a justifiable skepticism towards claims that are alleged to be true for everyone, always, and everywhere, some postmodern thinkers seek to reject all forms of metaphysics. There is the tension.

If we want to build bridges between these two traditions, if we want to put the process approach in conversation with the Continental thinkers with whom White engages, then it seems to me that there are two ways process thinkers might make their case: the first would be to focus on the aspects of process thought that register as a “weak” ontology. How might process thought count as “weak”? To begin, all process thinkers reject *traditional* (or “classical”) metaphysics, and they would agree with White’s concern that to ground one’s identity in an unchanging reality (an unmoved God or a Platonic Idea) is an example of a strong ontology that is as ethically dangerous as it is ontologically suspect. Moreover, process thinkers also reject the “strong” idea that metaphysical claims provide us with certainty. This worry about claiming infallibility for one’s politics pervades White’s paper, but on this issue he would find an ally in every process thinker since Whitehead. The best account I know of how process thought rejects the quest for existential or cognitive certainty and rejects the idea that metaphysical arguments are meant to compel assent is in William Meyer’s masterful and pellucid *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*. So, if a “weak” ontology is an approach that allows for ultimate commitments that simultaneously acknowledge their own historical, fallible, contestable character, then process thought—including process thought that seeks to ground political norms in metaphysical truths—can be seen as “weak.”

But there are elements of process tradition (especially in what is sometimes called the rationalist tradition in process thought that includes Hartshorne, Ogden, Gamwell, and Meyer, and which has been prominent at the University of Chicago) that are “strong.” How might one make the case for a “strong” ontology to a postmodern audience? I will close my response by saying a word in defense of two “strong” ideas. First, “universal truths.” The goal of metaphysics is to make generalizations that are completely unrestricted, that are true “always and everywhere.” So, despite the insistence of process thinkers on the fallibility of our claims, the goal of metaphysics as it is practiced by process thinkers is accurately to describe the way that the world in general is. Therefore, if one succeeds at making a true claim about the human condition, about human experience in general or reality as such, then this is by definition “a truth that applies to all.” However, process thinkers take seriously the distinction between the *scope* of one’s ontological claims (which seek to be universal) and how one holds that claim (which, for process thinkers, is always: fallibly). Given that distinction, one can, so to speak, make strong claims weakly. Making this distinction may alleviate some postmodern anxiety about a “strong” ontology.

My second comment in defense of a “strong” ontology concerns transcendental arguments, perhaps a quintessential element of a “strong” approach. In this paper, White invites us to reflect upon and bring to explicit consciousness the guiding and perhaps unexamined assumptions

of our practical life. This is a project that process philosophers share. White writes that when we look at our depth experiences, there are features of our practical life—our mortality, temporality, finitude—that should guide us, putting a drag on our will to sovereignty and encouraging our dispositions of generosity. Amen. The question is whether mortality, temporality, and finitude are examples of what White has called “planted evidence”—that is, evidence that has been planted in our experience by Western modernity—or whether these are instead “strong” features of the human condition as such. Is the claim that I am merely a finite part of the whole of the world something that is true only sometimes or only in the modern West? Or is it rather true in the strong sense, always and everywhere true? If the latter, then it seems that these are ineliminable or transcendental features of all human practices—and therefore they are also eliminable or transcendental features of all political practice. I should like to think that even these claims about our world, as metaphysically strong as they are, can be held in a way that is humble and open to revision in the responsible way that properly defines the political sphere.

Endnotes

1. I am referring here to the book series edited by Griffin entitled *Constructive Postmodern Thought*, published by the State University of New York Press. Begun in 1988 and continuing to the present, the series includes over thirty volumes so far.
2. Naturalismsm refers to a version of naturalism that endorses a sensationalist epistemology, atheism, and a materialist ontology.

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