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From a Philosophical Point of View: Selected Studies

(review)

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## Reviews

MORTON WHITE

**From a Philosophical Point of View: Selected Studies**

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. 355 pp.

If he had been born half a century earlier, in 1867 instead of 1917, one suspects that Morton White would have passed a stimulating career among the cohort of pragmatist philosophers at the turn of the century. He would have dedicated himself, in his informal but always astute manner, to extending the insights of his contemporaries William James and John Dewey, who in turn would have welcomed White's clarifying interventions. Later historians would perhaps have viewed White as the philosopher who made pragmatism a respectable "philosophy of culture," an empirical worldview encompassing ethics, jurisprudence, history, and natural science. In reality, however, the inclinations that would have found White a natural home in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to confront the rather different philosophical climate of the middle decades of the twentieth century. The encounter between White's philosophical inclinations and the moment in the history of philosophy in which they were brought to bear has profoundly marked White's philosophy. This tension is revealed in his selected essays, which are drawn from over sixty years of scholarship and speculation in fields as diverse as ethics, semantics, and the history of ideas.

Whereas White's three philosophical heroes—John Stuart Mill, William James, and John Dewey—accepted that the concepts of morality, pedagogy, and jurisprudence were as empirical as those of the natural sciences, the mid-century philosophers with whom White came of age drastically reduced the scope of holistic empiricism. Two of White's most important contemporary influences, W. V. Quine and Alfred Tarski, echoed the pragmatists in their rejection of philosophical dogma, specifically the purportedly "analytic" status of the truths of logic and pure mathematics. Famously, these two logicians claimed that logical statements derived their meaning from experience in much the same way as the theoretical statements of physical science. Crucially, however, their empiricism stopped at the boundaries of experimental science. Values, legal norms, and historical judgements were not included among the system of posits which, as Quine put it, worked a manageable

structure into the flux of experience. In the 1940s and 1950s, the young White was therefore faced with a conundrum. Although he shared the revolutionary fervour that accompanied the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, he could not accept the scientism of his fellow analytic philosophers. For White, the rise of analysis in twentieth-century philosophy was important insofar as it carried forward the empiricist project of removing the pernicious influence of rationalism on philosophy, and placed in its stead an open-ended and experimental understanding of cultural phenomena. His task was clear: he had to enlighten analytic philosophy by inspiring the logicians and linguists to look up from their schemata to the empiricist culture they were helping to build.

In practice, this has meant that White has participated in the technical debates of the analytic tradition whilst simultaneously seizing opportune moments to plea with analysts to use their “honest and sharp instruments” to explore humanist issues of “value, history, democracy, human rights, and liberal education” (p. 16). The essays in *From a Philosophical Point of View (FPPV)* reflect this dichotomy. “On the Church-Frege Solution of the Paradox of Analysis” (1948) and “The Analytic and the Synthetic: An Untenable Dualism” (1950) are Quinean meditations on meaning and reference. They are seminal texts of the post-World War II debates on analyticity. On the other hand, the exhortations collected in the first part of the book are admirable attempts to foster greater cultural and political awareness on the part of Anglo-American philosophers. In his writings of the 1950s, White pulled no punches, describing the early, ham-fisted attempts of analysts in the field of aesthetics as “monstrosities which are rightly ignored by all who have any feeling for the arts and literature” (p. 15). But White could also cajole. His favourite strategy was to point his fellow analysts to the history of the empiricist tradition, in which Locke and Mill could be seen applying empiricist tenets to political and social issues as well as to epistemology.

White’s strategic interest in history soon became a professional concern. His early monograph, *The Origin of Dewey’s Instrumentalism* (1943), was already an exercise in the historical reconstruction of philosophical ideas. As the historical studies gathered in *FPPV* testify, after World War II White evolved into an accomplished historian of ideas. Most of the historical essays in *FPPV* take the form of preliminary sketches, summaries, or tangential explorations of themes that have appeared in books such as *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (1949) and *The Intellectual Versus the City* (1962, co-authored with Lucia White). For intellectual historians (in whose ranks the present reviewer is included), White’s premier contribution to the history of American intellectual culture is undoubtedly *Social Thought in America*. White claimed that a generation of intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century converged upon explanations of human thought and action that emphasized the historical origins and organic social unity of cultural phenomena. Hence, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. rejected formalist jurisprudence in the name of a conception of law that emphasized what we would now

call its social construction, whilst John Dewey scorned British empiricism and logic in favour of a naturalistic approach to the theory of knowledge.

Although it has been challenged over the years and, in some cases, superseded by newer historical scholarship, White's portrait of the antiformalist generation has served as a point of departure for subsequent studies of American intellectual culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, *FPPV* will contain many essays of interest to the intellectual historian, notably "The Revolt Against Formalism in American Social Thought of the Twentieth Century" (1947)—a dry run of the argument of *Social Thought in America*. Equally, historians will find much to agree with in the chapters on the philosophy of history. "A Plea for an Analytic Philosophy of History" (1953) argues persuasively for both the necessity of the study of historical knowledge by philosophers, and for the primacy within such a study of the problem of historical narrative. Elsewhere, the issue of historical relativism is discussed with subtlety. Yet, from the perspective of the current state of play in both the history of ideas and the philosophy of history, there is a major problem with the several essays on these topics in *FPPV*: they were published during, or remain rooted in, postwar debates that have become largely obsolete. Whilst one can appreciate White's recommendation that the analysis of narratives should be the focus of philosophy of history, one looks in vain for a discussion of Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, who have each in their own unique ways assessed the role of narrative in historical knowledge. Likewise, White makes no mention of the revolution in intellectual history that followed the rise of social history in the 1970s. Stung by the accusation that they had reduced socially constructed ideas to abstract and implicitly exclusive categories such as "American thought," historians of ideas have learned to study ideas in their specific disciplinary, racial, or social setting. Historians have been further compelled to place ideas firmly within the fold of specific, goal-oriented social actions by the methodological approaches of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. The upshot of these changes is that intellectual history has been transformed into an archive-based branch of social and cultural history. Whilst White's approach is in many respects in-keeping with this turn, the kind of grand narratives found in *FPPV* and works such as *Science and Sentiment in America* (1972) are no longer deemed tenable by practising historians.

In the light of such criticisms, it seems fair to restate the point that White's interest in history was, and is, very much that of an analytic philosopher seeking to show his colleagues that analysis belongs to a distinguished and varied intellectual tradition, and that it can fruitfully be applied to "the major institutions of civilization" (p. 2). White was drawn to history by the broader goal—imposed on him by the nature of Anglo-American philosophy at mid-century—of enlightening analytic philosophy. If this is true, however, then the question remains as to how successful White has been in fulfilling this task. The testimony of *FPPV* is ambiguous. Philosophers will continue to argue over the issue of whether White was successful in his

attempts to show that ethical beliefs should be included in a post-Quinean naturalized epistemology. This was, for White, the philosophical proving ground of his claim that analysis should be applied to the full variety of human experience. But on the question of whether White has been able to articulate a truly “*philosophical* point of view”—one that transcends Quine’s “logical point of view” by demonstrating that an holistic pragmatism regarding beliefs holds across the manifold aspects of human understanding—it seems clear that White has been unable to offer a coherent perspective. Many of the studies in *FFPV* stand up well individually, but their common perspective is not obvious. Thus, for example, one of the major sections of the book is called “Analyticity, Morality, Causality, and Liberty”—topics that do not, despite the best efforts of the author, hang together very well. More revealing is the difference in outlook between the White of the 1950s and that of more recent times. His early pleas with analytic philosophers to address broad social issues, just as Mill and Dewey once had, have been replaced by what seems a forced, post hoc, attempt to claim that analytic philosophers had been practising the “philosophy of culture” all along. “[W]hile I was once disappointed by the failure of first-rate minds of the twentieth century to address problems of general concern,” White observes, tellingly, in his introduction to the volume, “I have since come to exult in the fact that Isaiah Berlin, Nelson Goodman, Herbert Hart, and John Rawls worked so beneficently in the philosophy of history, the philosophy of art, legal philosophy, and the philosophy of politics—that is to say, in the philosophy of culture” (p. 1). With the possible exception of Berlin, however, none of the philosophers whom White has come to exult has had much of an impact on public (as opposed to academic) debates regarding the major social or cultural issues of our time. They were dons and academicians rather than public moralists. One wonders if the young White, inspired by the example of Dewey, would have accepted that the philosophy of culture, as it now stands, is philosophy enough.

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**Reverence for the Relations of Life: Re-imagining Pragmatism via Josiah Royce’s Interactions with Peirce, James, and Dewey.**

South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. ix + 479 pp., with Bibliography and indices.

Frank Oppenheim is a scholar’s scholar. In a time when the patience for scholarship has in large part been put to flight by the need to publish quickly and widely, Oppenheim has taken the time to produce a fascinating and