

Afterword: Notes on the Bearable Lightness of Being

Dilip Gaonkar and Keith Topper

In political inquiry, as in intellectual inquiry more generally, advances in understanding come in a variety of shapes and sizes, emerge from disparate routes, and occur through different strategies. As Thomas Kuhn has famously argued, advances sometimes occur through the application of “problem-solving” techniques. These techniques, Kuhn observed, are most commonly employed in fields of scientific inquiry where wide agreement already exists about what counts as a problem and what counts as a solution to some problem.¹ The hope, and in some cases the expectation, is to bring an end to disputes about a particular problem, phenomenon, or state of affairs. By advancing powerful considerations and arguments, by adducing strong empirical evidence, or by devising new instruments and methods of analysis that enhance one’s ability to observe and measure more precisely the phenomenon to be explained, the

¹ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Dilip Gaonkar is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern University. In addition, he is Director of Northwestern University’s Center for Global Culture and Communication and of the Center for Transcultural Studies, a Chicago-based research network of scholars and cultural practitioners.

Keith Topper is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Political Science at Northwestern University. He is the author of *The Disorder of Political Inquiry* (2005), as well as several articles on modern and contemporary political thought and the philosophy of the social sciences. His new book project examines language, rhetoric, and political agency in the history of political thought and contemporary political theory.

problem solver strives simultaneously to command agreement and foreclose, as much as possible, future disagreement.

There is, however, a second way in which intellectual inquiry advances. This approach, which we might term “problem articulation,” aims not to preclude further debate and reflection but to stimulate it, not to have the final word on some issue but to chart and describe a constellation of related phenomena and concerns in a manner that invites others to think deeply and productively, but also heterogeneously, about the picture one provides and the questions one raises. In contrast to those who apply the techniques of problem solving, those who aim to articulate a problem strive to provoke and propel rather than terminate and conclude conversation; they aim not so much to solve a problem as to map a terrain, not to advance infeasible arguments but to illuminate a panorama. Such strategies typically “succeed” by providing a set of tools—concepts, categories, illustrations, metaphors, images, figures, and the like—that can be put to use in a variety of productive ways and in pursuit of discrepant ends.

Stephen White’s own depiction of the genealogy of his project, as well as the lively reactions it has elicited, suggests his project is an exemplary instance of the second type of intervention. Indeed, if one of White’s aims in writing his book, *Sustaining Affirmation*, was to spark broad discussion about the value of a “weak ontological” turn in contemporary political thought, the foregoing essays indicate that he has succeeded spectacularly. His book, or key aspects of it, has prompted both high praise (from William Connolly, George Kateb, Charles Taylor, and Elizabeth Wingrove) and sustained criticism (from Kateb, Jodi Dean, and Charles Larmore). It has provoked reflection on whether the key concept that organizes his investigation—the concept of weak ontology—is at bottom a variant of philosophical anthropology (Kateb and Taylor), a stand-in for something else (Wingrove), or a mode of political affirmation that is perhaps too weak for its own good (Dean, Larmore, Richard Flathman, and, perhaps, Leslie Thiele). It has occasioned meditations on ontology and justice (Connolly), ontology and rights (Flathman), ontology and political liberalism (Larmore), and ontology and narrative (Thiele). Given the extraordinary range of views expressed in the essays gathered here, it is clear that White’s analysis of the problem of affirmation has struck not one but many chords.

The question is: What are we to make of this noise? Are there harmonious tones and textures discernable somewhere beneath, or in the interplay of, these divergent voices? Or is it all, to borrow and redeploy the title of Connolly’s essay, just “white noise”? Perhaps most significantly, we might ask whether there are important lessons to be learned by directing our attention to something other than the voices themselves. Is it possible that critical clues about the meaning and significance of weak ontology might be discovered if we reflect not only on what is said but also on what is unsaid, not just on what is present, but also on what is, sometimes rather conspicuously, absent?

By attending to the striking harmonies and sharp dissonances of this conversation, as well as to the pregnant silences, we hope to extend, enrich, and at times redirect the discussion as it has unfolded in the preceding pages of this issue. In order to better pursue these goals, we will focus on the central concepts that animate White's view of weak ontology, namely, the four "existential realities" that frame human life: the ontological sources of the self, language, finitude, and natality. Through an examination of how these four existential realities are understood and deployed by White and his interlocutors, we hope to identify more clearly the distinctive value and some limitations of the recent ontological turn in political theory. A key question here is whether this ontological turn moves us towards a politics of care, generosity, and recognition or towards one of injury, aggression, and resentment.

Ontological Sources of the Self

As White notes, his interest in ontological sources first emerged from his engagement with Charles Taylor's book, *Sources of the Self*. In that book Taylor invokes the notion of a "source" as a way of describing moral intuitions that "are uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal," yet also largely unarticulated.² Directly challenging moral theories that treat these intuitions as "brute" responses or reactions rooted solely in their survival value (and therefore requiring no further articulation), Taylor argues that the very way in which we reason and deliberate about them reveals a very different view of their meaning and significance. Rather, we understand these moral intuitions as involving "claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings."³ In this respect, "a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human."⁴ By articulating these deep sources of our moral intuitions, Taylor claims, we simultaneously disclose the constitutive ground of those things we most highly prize and generate vital energy for living our lives in accordance with them.

At the same time, however, Taylor holds that the ambition to identify and articulate those sources with crystalline clarity can never be fulfilled. Because the task of articulation requires illumination of background understandings that one can never stand entirely outside of or describe as a whole, the dream of full and undistorted articulation, like the dream of a pure and self-transparent language, is ultimately an unrealizable aspiration rather than a real possibility.⁵ Taylor's conception of the ontological sources of the self foregrounds dramatically the two defining features of "felicitous" weak ontol-

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 4.

³ Taylor 5.

⁴ Taylor 5.

⁵ On the dream of a pure language, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Specter of a Pure Language," *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 3–8.

ogies: “the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable”⁶ and “the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life.”⁷

What the concept of ontological sources fails to provide, however, is adequate traction for understanding the tangled mediations that join agents’ ontological conceptions to moral-political principles and practices. Understandably, White is skeptical of the idea that ontological commitments and political practices are linked through relationships of strict entailment, such that one can chart a direct logical path from ontological sources to political principles. From the promontory of the weak ontologist, this idea and the quest for moral or political certainty are futile and reckless. Such assumptions, White contends, are premised on a “forgetfulness” of the contingencies and indeterminacies that are such conspicuous features of the late modern political landscape.⁸ As we see it, however, the problem is not (as the strong ontologist may maintain) one of filling but of bridging the gap that separates the respective provinces of ontology and politics. Indeed, if this gap is to be traversed in a “felicitous” manner, it may be necessary to supplement the idea of ontological sources with less abstract, middle-level concepts that enable one to specify in greater detail crucial mediating factors such as culture and institutions.

In our view, Taylor’s conception of the “social imaginary”—an idea that Taylor began exploring shortly after the publication of *Sustaining Affirmation* and has developed at length in his recent book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*⁹—is precisely the kind mid-level concept that does this important work. This conception refers broadly to the way a given people imagine their collective social life. Within the folds of a social imaginary, we understand ourselves as agents who negotiate a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing, and appropriateness, and exist among other agents. Conceived in this manner, the social imaginary is something more than an immediate practical understanding of how to do particular things—such as how to buy a newspaper, ride a subway, order a drink, wire money, make small talk, or submit a petition. It also involves a type of understanding or imagination that draws upon and reveals a wider grasp of our history and social existence, and is expressed primarily in the symbolic idioms of rituals, stories, images, legends, and modes of address, rather than in theories.

⁶ Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 8.

⁷ White 8.

⁸ White 8.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14 (Winter 2002): 91–124; and “On Social Imaginary,” available at <www.nyu.edu/classes/calhoun/Theory/Taylor-on-si.htm>.

In this respect, the social imaginary is much closer to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* or what some contemporary philosophers, following Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, call the *background*. It is a complex, unstructured, and not fully articulated "understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world become evident."¹⁰ In short, the social imaginary is a widely shared, "common understanding," one that carries a particular image of moral order. This image provides us with a sense of who we are, how we fit together, how we got to where we are, and what we might expect from each other in carrying out collective practices that are constitutive of our way of life. An adequate understanding of the relationship between ontology and politics requires that greater attention be paid to the distinctive cultural and historical formations that are carried in social imaginaries and to the processes of refraction that occur when ontological figures are filtered through social imaginaries on their way to becoming ethical-political perceptions, principles, judgments, and actions.

Language

According to White, the orientation of the weak ontologist, both existentially and politically, is profoundly shaped by her sustained awareness of the language-bound character of the human condition. However, as White understands, this awareness is hardly confined to those who might be considered weak ontologists. Thomas Hobbes, who is in many respects a quintessential strong ontologist, displays a deep appreciation of how language shapes (or misshapes) human existence.¹¹ Indeed, a hedgehog-like preoccupation with questions of language and rhetoric links Hobbes's early political reflections to his later thought. This observation indicates, however, that the distinction between strong and weak ontology does not inhere solely in the proposition that the latter but not the former possesses a generalized appreciation of the role that language plays in human affairs. Strong ontologists can be as deeply attuned to the role of language in human life as weak ontologists.

Rather, the distinction between strong and weak ontology resides, first, in the way that a particular conception of language shapes the contours of one's moral and political

¹⁰ Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," 107.

¹¹ It goes without saying that Hobbes's work has been interpreted in a variety of distinctive ways and that some of these interpretations might support the view that there are important weak ontological elements in Hobbes's thought. Richard Flathman, for example, pictures Hobbes as a deeply skeptical theorist whose thought was infused with a profound "sense of the limitations on human capacities and powers." See Richard E. Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality, and Chastened Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 23. On this reading, one might contend that Hobbes is not in any unambiguous sense a strong ontologist. On the other hand, the argumentative structure of Book I of *Leviathan*, which begins with a depiction of man as physical system and from this proceeds to deduce a psychology and then a politics, would appear to indicate Hobbes is in many ways a classic strong ontologist.

thought, and, second (and less obviously), in the specific dimensions of language that weak ontologists tend to accent. Unlike weak ontologies, strong ontologies are characterized by an unshakable assumption—an “assumption of certainty,”¹² as White puts it—that passages from ontological to political registers can be charted in a “relatively clear” fashion. On this account, weak and strong ontologies are differentiated by the manner in which figurations of language are joined to moral-political phenomena and judgments, rather than by a claim that the former but not the latter possesses a particularly acute appreciation of the role that language plays in human life.

In addition, weak ontologists tend to emphasize particular dimensions and views of language. While for weak ontologists there is “simply no demonstrable essence of language,”¹³ nonetheless, White’s account tends to accent two dimensions of language. First, in his discussion of Judith Butler’s work, White emphasizes the performative dimension of language, that is, the way in which language operates not just as a “medium” or “instrument” of communication, but as a kind of action. Second, White often evinces a strongly romantic view of language, one that places great stress on its “expressive” dimensions. Instead of conceiving of language primarily as a tool, with its attendant accent on the cognitive and representational aspects of language, White foregrounds the meaning-making and world-disclosing dimensions of language. He construes language as a medium in which human beings engage in a struggle for “meaning.” Moreover, this struggle, while it can and does occur in moments of solitude, characteristically unfolds in what might be termed the dialogic moment, that is, in the face-to-face encounter with another human being.¹⁴ Accordingly, what most deeply engages White is not daily, pragmatically driven communications, but dialogic encounters in which individuals disclose themselves and acknowledge the “other.” It is these sorts of communicative encounters, occurring at the crossroads where expressivism and dialogism meet, that most decisively shape the weak ontologist’s distinctive view of language, which is radically different from the view of language articulated in the work a structural anthropologist like Claude Lévi-Strauss, or a linguist like Noam Chomsky.

An adequate understanding of the ways that language shapes weak ontological views of morality and politics requires a richer account of language than White provides, one

¹² White 7.

¹³ White 9.

¹⁴ In discussing Taylor’s view of “the emergence and varied development of the expressivist constellation” (60), White, following Taylor, often emphasizes the link between expressivism and inwardness. Even here, however, the accent on inwardness cannot be properly equated with solitary experience in many of our typical senses of the word. Indeed, while the epiphanic experience, which Taylor claims is a key feature of both romantic and modern expressivist views, often occurs in the absence of other human beings and “gives a pronounced role to subjective expression” (61), it is not a “radically subjectivized” (61) experience. The great works of modernism, for example, may not place us directly into dialogue with other *persons*, but they do place us into contact with the *world*. In so doing, they point us toward, and permit us to enter into transactions with, “the domain of external moral sources” (61).

that includes but also goes beyond an appreciation of the expressive/dialogic view of language. While the latter must certainly figure prominently in most if not all weak ontological accounts of language, the task of bridging the gap between language and politics, like the task of bridging the gap between ontological sources and politics, may necessitate consideration of alternative models of language.

Although many such models might profitably be examined, two in particular merit our attention. On the one hand, Aristotle develops an account of political life that privileges and conjoins language and politics. Indeed, Aristotle holds that it is not only the case that human beings are distinguished from other animals by virtue of their distinctive linguistic capacities, but it is also true that these same capacities enable humans to live together in specifically political communities. Moreover, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* develops an elaborate, linguistically motivated moral psychology that structures political interactions within a democratic polis. Thus, the deeply held existential concerns about recognition, distinction, and glory that animated Greek political life, as well as the fragility that marked such a life, are directly linked to distinctive oratorical genres and strategies for deploying them. It is in the grains and the timber of public discourse produced under the gaze of a competitive democracy that Aristotle discerns, as only he could, the intimations of a source from which all political passion and interests flow, the "regard of the other."

A second model of language is articulated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. This model conceives of language both as a social-historical phenomenon and as an everyday, practical activity. As such, it is deeply implicated in a broad range of relations of social and political power. Indeed, Bourdieu's model is one that aims specifically to disclose unnoticed or misrecognized relations of power and domination by demonstrating how and why particular languages, dialects, styles of articulation, and linguistic competences come to dominate discourse in specific social settings or institutions, establishing in the process sharp hierarchies of linguistic competence and incompetence, of authorized and unauthorized modes and styles of speech, and of "official" and "unofficial" languages. By investigating the institutional conditions of linguistic authority and the social conditions of communication, Bourdieu's account of language spotlights relations of domination and exclusion that are ignored, or are undetectable by, traditional sociolinguistic, structuralist, semiotic, or speech-act theories of language.

Finitude and Natality

Of the four existential realities that are figured in weak ontological accounts of human being, White attends most closely to "finitude" and the least closely to "natality." But this disparity of treatment may be misleading. Unlike the existential realities already discussed—that is, ontological sources and language—finitude and natality are closely linked to, and in some ways mirrors of, each other.

White does not conceal the fact that the idea of “finitude” has an inescapable theological aura about it, although he rightly insists that finitude could also be cultivated in a nontheistic mode and that doing so may be “crucial.”¹⁵ In contrast to the strong ontological urge “to purity, mastery, and self-certainty,”¹⁶ weak ontologists invoke figurations of finitude as a way of working on and thereby dampening the tendency to think of ourselves as transcendent deities. Although the aspiration to a form of godliness may appear irreproachable, weak ontologists worry that it all-too-often rests upon and sustains a resentfulness toward loss, an intolerance of ambivalence, and a rigid moralism that neatly divides humanity into the greater and the lesser breeds, the civilized and the savage, the saved and the damned. By figuring finitude in ways that incorporate mortality and limitation into the human condition, weak ontologists hope to nourish forms of self-understanding and social intercourse that are distinctly less animated by aggression and resentment, and hence are less prone to generate, on the one hand, “excessive self-beratements of conscience,”¹⁷ and, on the other hand, hostility toward, or unconcern for, all cultures and identities that do not correspond with our own.

In the history of European social thought, the paradigmatic model for reflection on finitude is that of a “fallible man” found in a distinguished tradition that stretches from Erasmus to Ricouer. As against the conception of an omnipotent and omniscient divinity, this tradition views the human being as limited in every critical sphere: cognitive understanding, moral rectitude, and aesthetic imagination. Moreover, precisely because human being is defined by these limitations, this view emphasizes that humans must submit to something higher and infallible. To be sure, such a humble conception of the human condition could produce either a strong or weak ontology. A strong ontology would emerge if one were to assume an attitude of unquestioning submission towards what is revealed in religion or received through tradition. On this view, the true measure of one’s submission would be the zeal with which one defends and proselytizes it. On the other hand, a weak ontology would result if one’s awareness of limitation yielded not only the directive that one submit to the higher authority of “revealed religion” or “received tradition,” but also manifested a certain humility and uncertainty regarding one’s hermeneutic grasp of what is “revealed or received.” Hence, one would resist imposing on others the lessons of one’s religion or tradition.

White posits an elective affinity between weak ontology and the recognition of finitude. His project is to extract from the existential meditations of the four weak ontologists that he engages a robust and vivified sense of finitude. For White, reflection on finitude enables one to link directly in an aesthetic-affective mode deeply held existential concerns and moral-political practices. Indeed, it is White’s view that a sensibility suffused with a vivified sense of finitude is distinctly less likely to cultivate either a strong

¹⁵ White 134.

¹⁶ White 134.

¹⁷ White 103.

ontological ethos of aggression and resentment or an all-too-weak ontological “ethos of overly passive humility.”¹⁸ Rather, it encourages the “activist, contestatory ethos of self-artistry and political commitment”¹⁹ that emerges from Judith Butler’s effort to think finitude through the register of melancholy, as well as the “gratitude” for “the abundance of being”²⁰ that inspires William Connolly’s “ethos of critical responsiveness.”²¹ Thus, in sharp contrast to what one might intuitively expect, White contends that it is precisely the vivification of finitude that nourishes Butler’s and Connolly’s positive ethic.

Throughout the book, White is able to thematize and articulate this vivified sense of the finitude with considerable success. However, George Kateb, whom White criticizes for nudging “finitude into the ontological background,”²² maintains that it is White who has failed to attend adequately to finitude. Indeed, Kateb alleges that White’s treatment of finitude is marred by his failure to clarify the links between finitude and two terms with which it is differentially paired: mortality and natality. Mortality receives little substantive attention in White’s depiction of finitude, which instead focuses on “human limitedness” as its primary defining feature. Kateb’s most central criticism, however, is that White’s preoccupation with finitude so dominates his account that the concept of natality, understood as a “capacity for radical novelty,”²³ does not and can not assume a significant role in it. In Kateb’s conception of democratic individuality, individual infinitude and finitude are *not* polar opposites. Rather, “infinitude is compatible with finitude, with limitation.”²⁴ Even more, finitude and infinitude commingle within us all. The challenge, therefore, is not to decide which term should be granted priority, but to keep both clearly in view and in proper balance. Since it is “much easier to lose sight of infinitude than of finitude,”²⁵ Kateb emphasizes individual infinitude in order to combat the “horrors” of strong group identity.²⁶

In our view, White’s relative inattention to the horizon of mortality that frames the idea of finitude as “limit” may be problematic, albeit in a somewhat different way than Kateb’s account suggests. Ironically, mortality, unlike finitude, is not only a construct but a fact. As an unavoidable fact and temporal horizon of the individual human life, it has been the subject of endless secondary cultural elaboration. Indeed, although all

¹⁸ White 102.

¹⁹ White 103.

²⁰ William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 54.

²¹ White 134.

²² White 37.

²³ White 9.

²⁴ See page 47 of George Kateb’s “The Idea of Individual Infinitude” in this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*.

²⁵ Kateb 47.

²⁶ Kateb 47.

humans die, they encounter their mortality through the mediation of a particular culture and its symbolic constructs: stories, legends, religions, myths, cosmologies, and even scientific theories. Consequently, it is only through encounters with the varied media that collectively constitute particular social imaginaries that human beings are able to attain any understanding of the *meaning* of human mortality (including any understanding of how, if at all, the fact of that mortality might properly orient the moral or political conduct of human agents). Although it would clearly be unfair to hold White responsible for failing to catalogue the diverse ways in which the meanings of mortality are figured in specific social imaginaries, the tendency to focus on mortality as an existential universal while devoting relatively little attention to the ways in which human understandings of that universal are filtered through media of particular social imaginaries may have significant consequences. Most importantly, the tendency to attend only briefly to the rich cultural and symbolic material carried in social imaginaries may impede White's own aspiration to vivify finitude. In fact, if the vivification of finitude requires engagement with these materials, then one cannot without cost neglect them. Here too any effort to bridge the gap between ontological and moral-political reflection may demand a "thicker" account of the role these materials play. This is especially the case if one wishes to explore the "aesthetic-affective" dimensions of weak ontologies, that is, the way in which those ontologies engender particular sensibilities or disclose new modes of feeling.²⁷

Perhaps there is more. What ultimately presses us into the embrace of finitude is not the fact of death and dying in all its political and cultural ramifications, but rather the recognition, prompted by meditations on both birth (natality) and death, of the sheer contingency, the non-necessity of one's existence. Paul Ricoeur captures this doleful ethos of contingency magnificently in the conclusion of *Fallible Man*:

That which I *am to be* is denied in the feeling that it was not necessary that I be such as I am, nor even that I exist, that it was possible for me to have been another and even not to have been. This feeling cannot be stated without absurdity since the imagination of my being-other stands out against the background of the unquestionable presence of this body and of this life that excludes *ipso facto* all other possibilities.... It is this non-necessity of existing that live in the affective mode of sadness.²⁸

Such are the sorrows of those who traverse in the tracks of a weak ontology, be it a Kateb, a Taylor, a Butler, or a Connolly. What remains to be seen is whether those sorrows translate into or predispose one towards a politics of care, generosity, and recognition, or into a politics of injury, aggression, and resentment. If White's cast of characters provides any indication, it clearly gestures in the direction of the former rather than the latter.

²⁷ White 10.

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986) 139.