

An Interview with Richard Flathman

Keith Topper

In his book, *Sustaining Affirmation*, Stephen White charts the contours of a “weak ontological” turn in contemporary moral and political theory. According to White, as we are pressed to deepen and extend our moral and political commitments, we are also inescapably driven to affirm some conception of the most basic and fundamental categories of human being. Yet, White maintains, if the articulation of these categories is to avoid the reifying and self-certain tendencies characteristic of “strong ontologies” like natural law theory, then the very act of affirming them must be conjoined to the cultivation of a sensibility that acknowledges their historical, contestable character. It is this dual recognition—namely, that ongoing moral and political affirmation requires some account of the fundamental existential conditions that define us as human beings and that this account, however conceived, is always essentially contestable—that White defends as the proper starting point for reflection about moral and political life today. Indeed, it is precisely this commitment to weak ontology that White advances as an alternative (or supplement) not just to strong ontology, but also to some variants of “postmodernism or poststructuralism, and political liberalism” (151), both of which, he maintains, are suspicious of “sustained ontological reflection” (152). In your view, is the weak ontological alternative to this trinity of contemporary positions an attractive one? What makes it politically felicitous and / or politically problematic?

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The attraction of White's view is that it combines readiness to make affirmations with avoidance of dogmatism. Assessment of the political value of this combination will be helped by making comparisons with related positions.

The first of these, with "postmodernism," is briefly introduced by White himself. If every opening is a closing, every revealing a concealing, then attempts to develop "some account of the fundamental existential conditions that define us as human beings" will always result in illusion or worse. In arguing that our ontologies should be "weak," White acknowledges the force of this objection, but he insists that we should nevertheless do what we can to take our reflections to the ontological level. I suspect he thinks that some ontological commitments, even if only implicit, are always at work in our thinking and that we should make them as explicit as we can and subject them to critical thinking. This won't satisfy, say, Lyotard, but I have no objection to it.

A second comparison is with Rawls's "method of avoidance" and his attempt to develop a theory of right and of justice that is "political not metaphysical" ("ontological," as White prefers to say). Although I suspect that Rawls is skeptical about metaphysical thinking as such, his stated position is not that it is impossible or futile (he is not a postmodernist) but that it is, at a minimum, politically useless. Disputes concerning metaphysical questions are every bit as intractable as disputes concerning right and justice, so it is no help to refer the latter to the former. It would probably not be going too far to say that he thinks, as Richard Rorty does, that appeal to metaphysics makes reaching agreement about conceptions of right and justice more difficult, more intractable.

I don't fully agree with this view. I agree with White that there is a place—call it political philosophy—for attempts to get beneath quotidian political and moral debates to assumptions, dispositions, and the like, and to reach considerations that may in any case be at work in them and which, if made explicit and subject to critique, may give us an improved perspective on them. I doubt that there will ever be a direct inference from such reflections to the resolution of particular political and moral issues, but a "weak" ontology à la White does not expect such inferences.

I think, however, that much—probably the great preponderance—of political and moral thinking and discourse proceeds without such deep and general commitments. This is clearly the case of most discussions of "policy." When I read the newspaper, listen to the pundits on talk shows, converse with my colleagues and friends, I rarely hear more than a faint echo of ontological thinking. The positions that people take on "policy" questions may implicitly involve such commitments, but there is no reason to think that they play an active role in thinking and discussion. It is not necessary to embrace Rawls's method of avoidance in order to recognize and even welcome the fact that, existentially or empirically, discourse concerning, say, welfare policy, is political not metaphysical. I think this is also true concerning, for example, most thinking and acting concerning authority and rights. Debates about first amendment rights or the

scope of federal versus state authority are carried on in a fluctuating combination of historical, rational, dispositional, and affective thinking and talking and are most often resolved through rhetoric, negotiation, compromise, and horse trading, not by appeal to ontological considerations. Ontological thinking is not impossible, but it is for the most part irrelevant to or at the margins of political and moral interactions.

In your own work, you have written eloquently and extensively about the theory and practice of individual rights. How might a turn to weak ontology alter our thinking about questions of rights, that is, about who should be accorded rights, about how extensive the list of rights should be, and about how rights claims should be justified? Would it, for example, help us to think differently, and perhaps more productively, about questions, for example, of abortion rights?

Ontological thinking might help us to arrive at what might be called a “chastened” conception of rights. It could deflect us from the dogmatism that often attends “natural rights” thinking, thinking that treats rights as trumping all other considerations, thinking that makes rights “indefeasible” and makes considerations of utility irrelevant and other such reifications and sublimations of the concept of rights. Because issues concerning abortion concern the status of concepts such as “the person,” the fetus, and when life begins, it may be particularly tempting to advert to such thinking about abortion. It is clear, however, that appeal to such thinking has in fact had little or no effect on those disputes. For reasons stated above, I find this neither surprising nor regrettable.

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In your remarks on Stephen White’s book, you express some dissatisfaction with his shift from the traditional language of metaphysics to the language of ontology. Indeed, you suggest that “White’s ontology, especially in its insistently ‘weak’ character, is something of a cop-out.”¹ Why do you think that the turn to ontology is a “cop-out,” and, accordingly, why do you believe that it might be beneficial to embrace the traditional language of metaphysics?

I think of metaphysics in Strawsonian terms as proceeding as follows: We know that x is the case, and we ask what must be the case such that x could be the case. This form of inquiry and reflection is possible concerning any x to which we accord existential or empirical standing. It is a rarefied but not an impossible form of inquiry and reflection.

¹ Richard Flathman, paper presented at “The Bearable Lightness of Being: Weak Ontology and the Affirmation of Moral and Political Life” conference, Northwestern University, March 5, 2004.

As I understand Heidegger, he thinks of ontology as inquiry and reflection concerning *Dasein* (Being), and he understands this as human being. White follows him in this. But this seems to be an unduly restricted form of metaphysics. Reflection concerning human being necessarily leads into thinking about the other forms of being with which human being is imbricated. For this reason it seems to me to be more honest and potentially more productive to think in terms of metaphysics rather than ontology.

You have suggested that the account of affirmation in *Sustaining Affirmation* is too tentative, “defensive,” and, self-doubting. In your view, what is unhelpful or misconceived about this self-consciously modest view of affirmation? Conversely, what are some of the advantages of a more robust, self-confident conception of affirmation? Perhaps most importantly, under what conditions does this more robust form of affirmation arouse in one’s audience and interlocutors the kinds of objections and responses that truly advance understanding, and under what conditions might it stifle productive discourse by silencing, ignoring, demonizing, or dismissing those to whom one speaks?

As to the non-dogmatic side of White’s formulations, I would prefer the language of skepticism. There is a long and rich tradition of skeptical thinking, and we can draw upon its “pyrrhonian” or non-dogmatic formulations (as distinct from and opposed to its “Academic” versions). But skepticism is not “weak.” As to affirmation, I am attracted to notions such as William James’s “will to believe.” In order to act, I must form beliefs about the world and about the consequences of my actions. Without beliefs, I cannot lead a “strenuous” life and hence cannot contribute to my own well-being and the well-being of others. But for James, the will to believe is or should always be tempered by the thought that there is “something more,” something that I have not yet comprehended and that might compel me to alter my beliefs and my actions. Thus, there is a constantly fluctuating interplay between affirmation and readiness to revise one’s affirmations. This seems to me to be a more fruitful combination than weak affirmation.