

REARTICULATING BEING REVISED*

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I

THIS ESSAY'S TITLE GIVES RISE TO THE QUESTION, *why* rearticulate being? What is wrong with the articulations found throughout the history of philosophy? It is often noted, by philosophers concerned with being, that problems arise for the articulation of being in English from the fact that the infinitive "to be" often cannot—without enormous awkwardness—be used to translate such counterpart infinitives as the ancient Greek *einai*, the Latin *esse*, and the German *Sein*. Hence, to translate two distinct terms from those other languages—*einai* and *(to) on*, *esse* and *ens*, *Sein* and *Seiendes*—English must often make do with the single term "being."

I do not deny that this can be a source of problems for those who attempt to articulate being in English: the term "being" is indeed ambiguous. As a first step toward disambiguating it—and a first step in my rearticulation of being—I introduce the technical term "be-er." This term is comparable to such terms as "runner," "swimmer," "writer," and "philosopher." Important to emphasize is that just as running is not a runner, and does not run—runners are what run, and running is one thing they are doing when they run—being is not a be-er, and does not be—be-ers are what be, and what they

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are doing when they be is being.¹ According to the structural-systematic philosophy (SSP), systematic philosophies require theories of be-ers—the SSP calls such theories “ontologies”—but they also require theories of being – which may be termed, as they are in Lorenz B. Puntel’s *Being and Nothing* (forthcoming from Bloomsbury Press) “einaillgies.”

Well worth noting is that, virtually throughout the history of philosophy, the status of theories of be-ers is far clearer than is the status of theories of being. According to the most widely accepted theory of be-ers, throughout the tradition and at present, to be a be-er is to be a thing or object or substance, somehow having properties and standing in relations to other things or objects or substances. According to some alternative theories of be-ers, including the SSP’s, to be a be-er is instead to be a fact. According to at least some who follow Whitehead, to be a be-er is to be a process. According to yet others, to be a be-er is to be a trope. Philosophers disagree about which theory of be-ers is best, but it is at least relatively clear what they are disagreeing about.

¹ As is clarified in what follows, according to this address, being is the *only* thing be-ers do when they be—they be in various ways, but do not do anything other than be. The “according to this address” of the preceding sentence requires clarification. This address is situated within the theoretical framework of the structural-systematic philosophy (SSP), which is presented extensively but far from completely in Lorenz B. Puntel, *Structure and Being* (henceforth, *SB*) (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); Lorenz B. Puntel, *Being and God* (henceforth, *BG*) (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011); and Alan White, *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything* (henceforth, *TAPTOE*) (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Lorenz B. Puntel, *Being and Nothing* (henceforth, *BN*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury). As indicated in part II of this essay, the SSP makes no claims to finality, although it does claim to be the best systematic philosophy currently available. Similarly, this essay presents its rearticulation of being as improving on other available articulations, including those in the books listed above of Lorenz B. Puntel, but not as in any way perfect or ultimate.

With theories of being, on the other hand, there is so little clarity about what a theory of being that is not a theory of be-ers could or should be that the majority of philosophers—including virtually all analytic philosophers—do not recognize developing theories of being as a genuine task for philosophy.

One of the few analytic philosophers to recognize that developing a theory of being even might be a genuine task for philosophy is Peter van Inwagen. In the coda to the third edition of his book *Metaphysics*, he writes the following:

Is there some feature that belongs to all things, that is a feature of everything? This question is of interest because, if there is such a “universal” feature of things, it will be exactly the things having that feature that the World “contains.” And it may seem obvious that there must be such a feature, so obvious in fact as to be a triviality. Suppose a certain philosopher—our friend Alice, perhaps—were to make the following speech:

Obviously there is such a feature, for being is a feature of everything. Who could deny it, for who could deny that everything there is is?²

Two points are worth noting here. First, there is Alice’s move from the thesis that “everything there is *is*” to the thesis that “*being* is a feature of everything”; the move is from the conjugated verb “is” to the substantive term “being.” Second, there is tacit reliance—typical in analytic philosophy—on a thing-ontology: to be a be-er is to be a thing with features, and *being*, having replaced *is*, emerges as a candidate for being a “feature” of everything that is.

² Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 2008), 278.

Alice's slippage from the word "is" to the word "being" provides an appropriate occasion for introducing a central thesis of this address. That thesis is that a central task of any adequate philosophical theory of being is to clarify what is or can be articulated by conjugated forms of the verb "to be." A related thesis is this: when one moves, as does van Inwagen in the passage just quoted, from a conjugated verb to the substantive "being," then—no matter whether that substantive is understood as gerund, verbal noun, translation of an infinitive, or anything else—one moves away from what needs to be at the heart of any adequate philosophical theory of being, because what most needs philosophical clarification is neither what is or can be articulated by the word "being," taken in isolation, nor whatever is or can be articulated by the infinitive "to be." Instead, again, what most needs philosophical clarification is what is or at least can be articulated by conjugated forms of the verb.

Counterparts to van Inwagen's focus, in treating being, on substantives rather than on conjugated verbs are found regularly throughout the history of philosophy³ and into the present. Although Heidegger appears never quite to have seen this, I suggest that that move is at the heart of what he calls the "oblivion" or "forgetfulness" of being, which I

³ Having noted that Aristotle introduces the question of being (*Metaphysics* 5.7.1017a22, 24) as a question focused on the infinitive—a form of the verb, although not a conjugated one—but instead focuses (1028b4) on substantives (*on, ousia*), Herbert W. Schneider comments as follows: "Few have recovered Aristotle's initial concern with the verb 'to be' but have taken for granted that the primary problem is to find out 'what' it means to be a being (being as a noun)." Herbert W. Schneider, *Ways of Being: Elements of Analytic Ontology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), viii. Schneider does not, however, develop a theory of being; he instead distinguishes among ways of being (see *ibid.*, 18–19). Schneider's text recognizes that "the world of beings could not be as if it were one of them"—that is, in this address's terms, that being is not a be-er—but asserts that "the world as a whole" is "unintelligible" (*ibid.*, 100).

term “neglect” or “avoidance” of being. But this gives rise to a new question: if there are issues of being that are important philosophically—issues that are perhaps even central to any adequate comprehensive philosophy—and if these issues are obscured by a focus on substantives rather than on conjugated verbs, why do philosophical accounts focus so overwhelmingly on substantives? Why the consistency of the avoidance or neglect of the conjugated forms of the verb?

A central part of the explanation of such avoidance is the following of a practice emphatically rejected by the SSP. After describing this practice in somewhat technical terms, I introduce examples to clarify. The practice is that of taking one’s semantic and ontological bearings by sentences that have semantically significant subject-terms (these include, but are not limited to, subject-predicate sentences). This practice is the more problematic when, as is usual, such sentences are linked to compositional semantics, that is, semantics according to which, roughly speaking, the meanings of sentences are functions of the meanings of their subsentential components.

Consider the sentences “Tigers are animals” and “Tigers are” (the latter understood as roughly synonymous with “Tigers exist” and “There are tigers”). One common compositional semantics links the subject-term “tigers” with the concept *tiger*, and—for the first sentence—the predicate term “animals” with the concept *animal*. Roughly speaking, to understand the sentence “Tigers are animals,” one must understand the concepts *tiger* and *animal*. So far, perhaps, so good; but what about the word “are”? Etienne Gilson’s book *Being and Some Philosophers* argues that, because there is no

comparable linkage between the sentences' word "are" and any concept, philosophers tend to neglect the "are" and, in neglecting the "are," they neglect being.⁴

Gilson's book *Thomism* addresses this problem by noting initially that "being is the first of all concepts," because being is coarticulated in every sentence of the form "S is" or "S is p," and because any indicative sentence can be rewritten into a sentence with such a form (so, for example, "She runs" can be rewritten either as "She *is* running" or "She *is* a runner").⁵ That is: being is the first of all concepts because it can be coarticulated in a version of any indicative sentence. Yet although this makes being "the first of all concepts," being is also, according to Gilson, "the most universal and abstract [concept], the richest in extension and the poorest in comprehension." It is "richest in extension" because, in van Inwagen's terms, whatever is *is* or, in this address's terms, the being of any be-er can be articulated in a sentence including a conjugated form of the verb "to be." But the concept *being* is also, for Gilson, "poorest in comprehension" because sentences of the form "S is" can appear to say nothing specific about the be-er that is said by the sentence to be; to say something specific, one must say not that S is, but instead that S is p, and the specificity can appear to be articulated by the "p," not by the "is." Because of this poorness in comprehension, Gilson voices the suspicion that we would need "an intuition of [being]" or an "intellectual intuition of being as being" in order to get at it at all, yet he notes that such an intuition would be inarticulable and thus would remain

⁴ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952). See, for example, p. 5.

⁵ Etienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, 6th ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002), 172.

inconceivable. "But," the book continues, "reason dislikes what is inconceivable, and because this is true of [being], philosophy *does all it can to avoid it*."⁶

Because this avoidance or neglect of being is so pervasive and so important, I introduce one additional example, again from Peter van Inwagen. In a text published in 2009, van Inwagen attempts to show that being is something philosophers need not and indeed *cannot* talk about by introducing a fictional Martian language with the following characteristics:

There are in Martian no substantives in any way semantically related to '*être*' or '*esse*' or '*existere*' or '*to on*' or '*einai*' or '*Sein*' or 'be' or 'am' or 'is'. (In particular, Martian lacks the nouns 'being' and 'existence'. ...) There is, moreover, no such verb in Martian as 'to exist' and no adjectives like 'existent' or 'extant'. Finally, the Martians do not even have the phrases 'there is' and 'there are'.⁷

Despite these characteristics, according to van Inwagen, "[i]t seems plausible to suppose" that there is not "anything we can say or think that the Martians cannot say or think."⁸ If all of this were so, then all our talk of being, including particularly philosophical talk of being, that could not be translated into Martian would be talk that was literally empty: when we used it, we wouldn't say or think anything. And yet van Inwagen's text contains a footnote indicating that Martian includes translations of the following sentences: "(i)

⁶ Ibid., 174 (emphasis added).

⁷ Peter van Inwagen, "Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 472–506, at 478.

⁸ Ibid., 479; see 479 n. 12.

Everything that is is, (ii) Everything is, (iii) Something is, and (iv) The attribute *being* is.”⁹

Each of these sentences, as containing the word “is,” articulates being; van Inwagen’s failure to notice this— perhaps a consequence of the assumption that a theory of being would have to focus on what was articulated by a substantive¹⁰—is a particularly striking example of neglect or avoidance of being.

I have introduced some examples in support of my thesis that philosophy is pervaded by a neglect or avoidance of being, and I have given some reasons for attempting to counter or indeed prevent this neglect or avoidance. Given the title of this essay, the following thesis presumably comes as no surprise: the neglect or avoidance of being can be most effectively countered and perhaps prevented by rearticulating being. One aspect of this address’s rearticulation of being is introduced above: this is the replacement of the word “being,” when used as roughly synonymous with the word “entity,” with the word “be-er.”

A second aspect of this address’s rearticulation of being is my using “being” most importantly not as a stand-alone term—whether verbal noun, gerund, translation of the infinitive of some other language, or anything else—but instead as a component of a present-continuous verb. This present-continuous verb could be found in ordinary English in children’s responses to such parental admonitions as “Be good!” or “Be quiet!”

⁹ Ibid., 479 n. 13.

¹⁰ *TAPTOE* notes that “it would be open to Martian philosophers to introduce counterparts” to such terms as “being” and “be-er” into their philosophical languages (158).

Children might respond, wholly grammatically and perhaps emphatically, if perhaps often falsely, "We're *being* good!" or "We're *being* quiet."

Second, to make explicit the involvement of being in *every* present-continuous verb, this address frequently relies on "be" as the sole present-tense conjugated form of its verb "to be." In this vocabulary, it be the case, right now, that you—the reader of this sentence—be reading, or, if you are listening to the podcast of this address – that you, the listener, be listening.

So far, I have introduced changes in the vocabulary I use to articulate being. I now turn to a change in sentence structure. I have already indicated why such a change is needed: in part following Gilson, I earlier identified as a, or perhaps the, central obstacle to adequate philosophical articulation of being, the fact that in sentences with semantically significant subject-terms, being is at most *coarticulated*. If, to counter or prevent the avoidance or neglect of being, we need to articulate being itself, simply as such, without coarticulating anything that could appear to be other than or different from or somehow outside of being, then we need a sentence without a semantically significant subject-term. Fortunately for me, and indeed I think for all who deem being worthy of philosophical articulation, English provides us with sentences without semantically significant subject-terms. Examples of such sentences are "It's raining" and "It's morning." Additional such sentences are "It's being" and "It be being." According to my version of the SSP, which I take and argue to be superior to the version of Lorenz B. Puntel, such sentences can express propositions that are identical to actual facts, and when they do

they are true.¹¹ Note what this means: the problems arising from attempts to link the word “being” or the words “is” or “are” to concepts simply vanish. Because the “It” of such sentences as “It be raining” and “It be being” is not a pronoun having an antecedent,¹² the only semantically significant constituents of these sentences are their present-continuous verbs. But that means that the sentence “It be being” does not merely coarticulate being; instead, it *explicitly and exclusively* articulates being, and it does so—according to my version of the SSP—by expressing a proposition that is identical to a fact. Moreover, whenever it is asserted, and indeed even when it is not asserted, this sentence is true. One can say “It be raining” when it’s not raining, or “It be morning” when it’s not morning, but one cannot say “It be being” without its being the case that it’s being.¹³

Because they explicitly and exclusively articulate being, and rely on nothing like Gilson’s intellectual intuitions of inconceivabilities, the sentences “It’s being” and “It be being” enormously enhance our resources for articulating being. But being as articulated in these sentences may appear to be, in Gilson’s terms, “universal and abstract.” The articulation of being is, however, straightforwardly and transparently concretized via those sentences’ expansion into the operators “It is being such that” and “It be being such that,” which can govern any and every sentence that expresses a proposition. An example: “It be being such that it be Alan Whiting such that it be addressing the MSA”—a sentence

¹¹ My versions of the SSP’s semantics and ontology are presented most concisely in *TAPTOE*’s sec. 2.5, and its truth theory, in its chap. 3. The more extensive presentations in *SB* are easily located with the aid of its table of contents.

¹² On the status of such uses of “it,” see *TAPTOE*, 145–50.

¹³ Because, as indicated below, being includes its absolutely necessary dimension, it can never fail to be the case that it’s being (or that it be being), whether or not there be utterers of sentences.

true as of the time of its utterance on the afternoon of April 11, 2014. Vitally important to emphasize is that this complex sentence is, throughout, an articulation of being. This can be made explicit as follows: It *be being* such that (more specifically) it *be Alan Whiting* such that (yet more specifically) it *be addressing the MSA*. To put this in more colloquial terms: it is not the case that I *am* or *exist* and also, *in addition to* or *other than* my being, I am Alan White and am addressing the MSA; instead, my addressing the MSA is a *specific mode* of my being, as is my being Alan White, my breathing, my being awake, and so forth. For just this reason, sentences beginning with the operator “It’s being such that” or “It be being such that” *explicitly* articulate the primacy and ubiquity of being: *unless* I be being, I’m not being more specifically, but *as long as* I be being, whatever else be true about me be a mode in which I be being, more specifically.

The philosophical importance of being as, for all actual be-ers, primary and ubiquitous, is clarified by more detailed comparison of being with running (running being simply one of a vast number of possible comparative items). Human be-ers are capable of running or (in slightly different terms) have the capacity to run. The human be-er who runs is activating that capacity—that human be-er *be* running or, more loosely, be at work running, be engaged in running—whereas the human be-er who sits generally retains the capacity to run while not activating it, while not engaged in running. In contrast, every human be-er who actually be *cannot avoid* being or, again more loosely, engaging in or being at work being; any human be-er *not* being, *not* engaging in being, would be a merely *possible* human be-er—like Barack Obama’s first grandchild, who does not yet be as I complete this text and who may never be—or perhaps a human be-er who,

although having been, be no longer.¹⁴ Thus, whereas running is an ontological capacity because human be-ers (along with be-ers of many other kinds) can but need not be running, being is not a capacity, because human be-ers, along with all other be-ers, have *any* capacities, activated or not, only if and when they be. This, then, is the most central way that the being of be-ers differs from all of their other engagements: being is the engagement or being-at-work¹⁵ or—better—mode of being that is not an ontological capacity, that is, not a capacity for being.

The primacy of being among the engagements of be-ers is further illuminated by the phenomenon of cryopreservation. Some organisms—including human embryos and adult members of a few species of vertebrates (chiefly amphibians)—can continue to be, and to be the organisms—the be-ers—that they are, when they are frozen. When they are frozen, all their metabolic processes cease. Hence, when frozen, they do not activate their capacities for aging or even for living, in anything like the usual sense of living, although they are not dead. They are not dead because they retain the capacity to live; that capacity is reactivated as they cease to be frozen. Even as frozen, then, they continue to be, to engage in being.¹⁶

¹⁴ The “perhaps” is included in the sentence to which this note is attached because the question whether, when human be-ers die, they cease to be is one that systematic philosophy must address; see *SB*, 4.5.3.4.3.

¹⁵ Classifying being as a mode of being-at-work or of engagement is meant to increase clarity, but it is potentially misleading. Strictly speaking, all of what this essay calls beings-at-work or engagements are modes of being.

¹⁶ Whether adult human beings or indeed all organisms have the capacity of cryopreservation is an empirical question that, as of February 2024, remains unanswered.

An additional step leads, in a manner different from those introduced above, from the being of be-ers to being as such. No organism, for example, has the capacity to bring itself into being, because before the organism is, the organism has no capacities. And yet, the coming into being of the organism reveals that it was possible that the organism come into being. The coming into being of the organism therefore reveals the capacity of being to be manifest, to manifest or configure itself, as that organism. The birth of the organism is being's reconfiguration of itself so as to include that organism; it is the emergence of the organism into and hence within being. For this reason, the emergence into and within being of the organism that grows into what ordinary English calls a salamander is also articulable by the SSP as being engaging in salamandering: It be being such that it be salamandering.

As just suggested, the sentence "It be being such that it be salamandering" can express either of two propositions, both of which are true whenever the sentence is true. According to one, in the case of any actual salamandering, being is engaging in salamandering. According to the other, the salamandering is engaging in being. The latter proposition can be clarified in terms used above: to be an actual be-er is to be being that be-er. For organisms, to die is to cease to be being organisms; any organism, having ceased to be being an organism, no longer is (or: no longer be).¹⁷

¹⁷ As a human be-er, I could attempt to cease to engage in being, and if I made that attempt and were successful, I would thereby have ended both my engagement in being and the engagement of being in being me. Shakespeare's Hamlet, although fictional, is perhaps the most famous character to have recognized that there is no guarantee that this attempt can be successful.

Having introduced, explained, and defended my rearticulations of being, I turn to a distinct but related issue that can confuse the articulation of being; this issue arises from uses of such terms as “nothing,” “nothingness,” and “nonbeing.” In his keynote address to the MSA,¹⁸ Lorenz B. Puntel, not relying explicitly on the theoretical framework of the SSP, described *nothing* as a “non-concept.” Drawing on resources from the SSP, I approach the issue of nothingness somewhat differently.

Talk of nothingness can confuse the articulation of being because it can make it appear that, despite my contentions above, being is not ubiquitous. One might say (mimicking Heidegger), yes, there *are* be-ers, there are be-ers and nothing more—but what about that nothing? Because of that nothing, being can’t be the whole story—being can’t be ubiquitous.

The SSP deals with such issues, most directly, by introducing pseudo-propositions. As indicated above, the SSP’s semantics is one that relies not on concepts, but instead on propositions. Loosely speaking, according to the SSP a sentence is true if it expresses a proposition identical to a fact in the actual world, and false if it expresses a proposition identical to a fact in a possible but nonactual world. Hence, the sentence “It’s Alan Whiting” is true as of the writing of this address, and the sentence “It’s Sherlock Holmesing,” presented without further qualification, is false. But what about—to use an ordinary-language example—the sentence “Fred drew a round square”? According to the SSP, this sentence does not express a proposition. It instead expresses a pseudo-propo-

¹⁸ Lorenz B. Puntel, “Is Leibniz’s Question ‘Why Is There Anything Rather than Nothing?’ a Meaningful One?” keynote address, Metaphysical Society of America (11 April 2014), <http://www.metaphysicalsociety.org/2014/Papers/puntel.pdf>.

sition, and pseudo-propositions are not identical to facts in any world, actual or possible. Such sentences are therefore necessarily false. As indicated in *Structure and Being*, the sentence "Fred drew a round square" can be analyzed into the sentences "What Fred drew was round" and "What Fred drew was a square."¹⁹ Each of these sentences expresses a proposition, but the conjunction "What Fred drew was round and was a square," although grammatically correct, does not.

The sentence "It be being such that it be absolutely nonbeing" is similar, but somewhat more complicated. Its status is clarified by consideration of the more ordinary-sounding "There is nothing," understood as expressing the pseudo-proposition *There is absolute nothingness* or *There is absolute nonbeing*. What makes these items pseudo-propositions is the fact that sentences of the form "There is such-and-such" express propositions only if the such-and-such somehow is. Any such-and-such, however, that in any way is, is not absolute nothingness, not absolute nonbeing.

The line of thought developed in the preceding paragraph can be put more technically as follows. The theoretical operator formulable as "It be being the case that," which can implicitly or explicitly govern any indicative sentence, and each of its modal variants—"It be being absolutely necessarily the case that," "It be being contingently actually the case that," and "It be being contingently non-actually the case that"—situates its arguments within being. All propositions are arguments of such operators, hence so too are the sentences expressing them. Pseudo-propositions, however, are not arguments of these operators, but grammatically correct sentences can express pseudo-propositions;

¹⁹ *SB*, 239 n. 48.

those that do are necessarily false. The sentence “It be being such that it be absolute-nothinging” expresses a pseudoproposition because the “It be being such that,” applicable (in one of its forms) to every sentence expressing a proposition, situates that proposition within being, and absolute-nothinging can in no way be, hence cannot be situated within being.

A bit more on this topic may be in order. The word “nothing” is a useful one to have in ordinary English (or, more technically, in everyday theoretical frameworks). To the question “What are you doing?”, “Nothing” can be an appropriate and informative answer. It can implicitly express the proposition, *I’m not doing anything that would prevent my doing something with you*. But it can never truly articulate an utter absence of being, because the one who utters the sentence *be*, of course, doing the uttering, as well as breathing, holding their body in some position or other, registering their surroundings to some degree, and so forth.

Presumably because of the familiarity and usefulness of everyday uses of the word “nothing,” the contention that there is something wrong with what such sentences as “There might be nothing” are supposed to express can appear to be some sort of misleading word play. In fact, however, as Lorenz B. Puntel’s remarks in his keynote address about Lawrence Krauss’s book *A Universe From Nothing*²⁰ indicate,²¹ misleading word play arises instead from uses of the word “nothing” to mean the utter absence of

²⁰ Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: The Free Press, 2012).

²¹ That book is considered in somewhat greater detail in *TAPTOE*, sec. 8.3.3.1.3.

being, accompanied by assertions (whether implicit or explicit) that “nothing,” so understood, could be.

Recognition that nothingness, as the utter absence of being, cannot be opens the way to an immensely important expansion of the SSP’s theory of being, because—as explained in greater detail in Puntel’s keynote address—if contingent being were exhaustive of being—if all being were contingent being—then it would be possible that being cease. But being’s cessation would be possible only if it were possible for nonbeing to be, and that is not possible. Therefore, being is not exhausted by—is not exhaustively—contingent being, and so includes necessary being as well.²² Examination of the absolutely necessary dimension of being is a task for the SSP, but not one for this address.²³

II

As indicated both in the call for papers for this conference at which the initial version of this essay was presented and by the title of the collection of addresses of past presidents of this society coedited by Brian Henning,²⁴ *being* is, for this society, a recurring topic. According to passages from Richard Bernstein’s 1988 presidential

²² More technically, the line of argument summarized in the paragraph to which this note is appended rejects the theses that “It be being” and “It be being such that” could be replaced by “It be contingently being” and “It be contingently being such that.” Because contingent being is not exhaustive of being, the likes of “It be necessarily being” and “It be necessarily being such that” are also required by the SSP’s theory of being.

²³ The SSP’s theory of the absolutely necessary dimension of being is developed in significant but far from complete detail in *SB*, 441–60; *BG*, 212– 82; and *TAPTOE*, 168–80).

²⁴ *Being in America: Sixty Years of the Metaphysical Society*, ed. Brian G. Henning and David Kovacs (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

address,²⁵ quoted in the address by Henning,²⁶ over the years this society has addressed this and other topics pluralistically. A glance at this year's program shows that the society continues to be pluralistic. But, as Henning emphasized, Bernstein noted that pluralisms are of various forms. In this address, I want to contribute to making the MSA's pluralism what Bernstein termed an "engaged" pluralism, that is, a pluralism that

demands an openness to what is different and other, a willingness to risk one's prejudgments, seeking for common ground without any guarantees that it will be found. It demands—and it is a strenuous demand—that one tries to be responsive to the claims of the other. Such an engaged pluralism does not mean giving up the search for truth and objectivity.²⁷

Engaging the posted versions of some of the papers presented at the session when the initial version of this essay was presented, I will introduce some ground that might become at least more common among us, but there is also the possibility that I will contribute to continuing a tradition for this society identified in 1974 in Ernan McMullin's presidential address,²⁸ that is, preserving our status as "a diverse group, . . . at loggerheads on most issues, in agreement perhaps only on one: that the reach of rational inquiry [is] not simply to be measured by the modes of verification of natural science nor by the

²⁵ Richard Bernstein, "Metaphysics, Critique, and Utopia," *The Review of Metaphysics* 42, no. 3 (December 1988): 255–73.

²⁶ Brian G. Henning, "In Defense of Speculative, Systematic Metaphysics," presentation to the Metaphysical Society of America, (11 April 2014), <http://www.metaphysicalsociety.org/2014/Papers/Henning-Draft2014-01-06.pdf>.

²⁷ Bernstein, "Metaphysics, Critique, and Utopia," 271.

²⁸ Ernan McMullin, "Two Faces of Science," *The Review of Metaphysics* 27, no. 4 (June 1974), 655–76, at 655–66.

constructive resources of the *Principia Mathematica*." If I put us at loggerheads, instead of providing common ground, so be it: better, I suggest, for us to be at loggerheads than for us to succumb to Bernstein's "'flabby' pluralism, which simply accepts the variety of perspectives, 'vocabularies,' paradigms, language games, etc.'"²⁹

What follows divides into four parts. In the first, I respond briefly to the posted versions of the papers presented by Brian Henning and Christina Schneider.³⁰ In the second, I introduce the rearticulation of being announced in the title of this address. In the third, I briefly respond to the posted versions of the papers presented by Robert Neville³¹ and Oliva Blanchette.³² I close, in the fourth, with concluding remarks.

I begin to practice engaged pluralism by returning to Brian Henning's paper. I wholeheartedly agree with its endorsement of what it calls "speculative, systematic metaphysics," although I prefer the term "systematic philosophy." I wholeheartedly agree as well with its contention, drawn from Peirce, that work on systematic philosophy is "fallibilistic, progressive, and open-ended." From that it follows that what Bernstein called our "search for truth and objectivity" is not a search for some final or perfect truth or objectivity, but instead an attempt to determine whether, among our plural approaches,

²⁹ Bernstein, "Metaphysics, Critique, and Utopia," 269.

³⁰ Christina Schneider, "Today's Metaphysics between Scylla and Charybdis: Between Redundancy and Esoterics," Metaphysical Society of America presentation (11 April 2014), <http://www.metaphysicalsociety.org/2014/Papers/Schneider.pdf>.

³¹ Robert C. Neville, "Being as Determinate and its Ground," Metaphysical Society of America presentation (11 April 2014).

³² Oliva Blanchette, "Questions of Being and the Question of Being," Metaphysical Society of America presentation (11 April 2014), <http://www.metaphysicalsociety.org/2014/Papers/Blanchette.pdf>.

one is, or some are, better than others. If we don't attempt to determine that, then our work together cannot be progressive, nor can our pluralism be engaged.

I part from Henning's paper in rejecting its thesis³³ that "Whitehead and Peirce have come closest in living up to the ideal of speculative philosophy," that is, in my terms, to the ideal of producing a systematic philosophy that, although not providing the last word on anything, can qualify as the best currently available systematic philosophy. In rejecting that thesis, I take myself to agree with this morning's first speaker, Christina Schneider, who identified, as systematic philosophers who have at least attempted to avoid her Scylla of redundancy and her Charybdis of esoterics, both Whitehead and Lorenz B. Puntel.

Schneider did not mention Peirce, but that is perhaps appropriate given that, as Henning notes, "Peirce was never able to provide more than a sketch" of a speculative, systematic metaphysics. "That distinction," he tells us, "goes to . . . Alfred North Whitehead." But also, Schneider suggested, to Puntel. Assuming that this is the case, the possibility opens for an engagement between what Whitehead calls "the philosophy of organism" and what Puntel calls the SSP.

An MSA presidential address—or a revised version of it—is not, of course, the place for a full-scale comparison of the philosophy of organism with the SSP. But it can be the place for an initial skirmish. Important background to that skirmish, however, is provided by my noting a point of perhaps minor disagreement with Schneider's use of the phrase "Puntel's structural-systematic philosophy." To be sure, the SSP is Puntel's in one

³³ Qualified as "to [the author's] knowledge."

important sense: it originated as his conception. But according to the SSP itself, there is a no less important sense in which, following its presentation particularly in—to name the English version—*Structure and Being*, it ceased to be Puntel's in any restrictive or exclusive sense. It became, instead, available to readers of that book (in any of its versions). *Structure and Being* presents the SSP both incompletely and as subject to improvement—in Henning's term, as ameliorable—but it articulates the SSP with sufficient clarity and in sufficient detail to enable other philosophers both to add to it and to improve it. For just those reasons, my book *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything* describes itself as contributing to the structural-systematic research program in philosophy.³⁴ *Structure and Being* is a partial presentation of the SSP, but so too is *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything*.³⁵

This, I suggest, is a point of immense importance. Both Schneider and Henning suggest that the kind of philosophy they advocate is more similar to the natural sciences than philosophy is usually taken to be, and therefore, presumably, more worthy of respect than work in philosophy is at least often taken to be.³⁶ That work on the SSP can be genuinely collaborative—thus far, primarily, in collaborative work done by Puntel and myself—is both powerful evidence that work on the SSP *is* work within a genuine research program, and an additional way in which that work is importantly similar to work in the natural sciences.

³⁴ *TAPTOE*, 2.

³⁵ So too is *BG*.

³⁶ See, for example, the passages introduced in the opening sections of Carlo Cellucci's "Rethinking Philosophy," *Philosophia* 42 (2014): 271–88.

I turn now to the skirmish between Whitehead's philosophy of organism and the SSP. These programs agree that ordinary language is insufficient for systematic philosophy, and that one problematic feature of at least many ordinary languages, including English, is their reliance on sentences of the subject-predicate form. The following are some characteristic passages from Whitehead's book *Process and Reality*: "The subject-predicate form of expression" is one of the "prevalent habits of thought, which are repudiated [in *Process and Reality*], insofar as concerns their influence on philosophy";³⁷ "The philosophy of organism . . . differs [from 'Spinoza's scheme of thought'] by the abandonment of the subject-predicate forms of thought, so far as concerns the presupposition that this form is a direct embodiment of the most ultimate characterization of fact";³⁸ "The evil produced by the Aristotelian 'primary substance' is exactly the habit of metaphysical emphasis upon the 'subject-predicate' form of proposition."³⁹

Whereas the SSP relies on propositions that do not have the subject-predicate form—it relies instead on propositions having the form "It's such-and-suching," like the familiar "It's raining" and "It's morning," and the unfamiliar "It's Alan Whiting"—the philosophy of organism, at least as presented by Whitehead, introduces no alternative to the subject-predicate structure, and therefore relies on that structure, as for example in the following passage:

³⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1927; New York: The Free Press, 1978), xiii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

The proposition is the possibility of *that* predicate applying in that assigned way to *those* logical subjects. ... The logical subjects are . . . in fact actual entities which are definite in their realized mutual relatedness. Thus the proposition is in fact true, or false.⁴⁰

An additional issue relating to Whiteheadian reliance on the subject-predicate structure is introduced by the following passage from an address published in 1937:

We must end with my first love—Symbolic Logic. When in the distant future the subject has expanded, so as to examine patterns depending on connections other than those of space, number, and quantity—when this expansion has occurred, I suggest that Symbolic Logic, that is to say, the symbolic examination of pattern with the use of real variables, will become the foundation of aesthetics. From that stage it will proceed to conquer ethics and theology.⁴¹

The symbolic logic to which Whitehead refers is, of course, predicate logic, which—in its standard interpretation—symbolizes the subject-predicate structure that the book *Process and Reality* professes to reject.⁴²

From passages just introduced, two problems emerge concerning what Brian Henning introduced as the philosophy of organism's criteria of coherence and adequacy.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴¹ Alfred North Whitehead, "Remarks," *The Philosophical Review* 46, no. 2 (March 1937): 178–86, at 186. This passage might indicate that Whitehead relies far more heavily on "the constructive resources of the *Principia Mathematica*" than, according to McMullin, most MSA members have tended to.

⁴² On first-order predicate logic and the subject-predicate structure, see *SB*, 193–95. Concerning the possibility of nonstandard semantics for first-order predicate logic, see *SB*, 218–22.

It is not clear how a systematic philosophy that both rejects and relies on the subject-predicate structure can be coherent, and it is not clear how one that relies on propositional structures it itself identifies as inadequate can attain a high degree of adequacy. That the SSP uses subject-predicate sentences only as convenient abbreviations for sentences of the form "It's such-and-suching," and that it rejects versions of formal logic that, like Whitehead's, depend on the subject-predicate form provide, I suggest, significant reasons for deeming it, in those respects (which are the only ones I consider in this essay), to surpass the philosophy of organism as presented by Whitehead in both adequacy and coherence.⁴³

III

Situating the SSP's theory of being, even minimally and preliminarily, in relation to the accounts presented by Robert Neville and Oliva Blanchette requires introduction of some additional aspects of the SSP; all are defended in *Structure and Being*, *Being and God*, and *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything*; I make no attempt to defend them here.

(1) Although the inclusion of being as a topic for investigation by the SSP is indicated at the outset, for example in *SB*'s identification of its subject matter as the universal or most general structures of the unrestricted universe of discourse,⁴⁴ the SSP's

⁴³ Intelligibility is a criterion relied on by the SSP; for arguments that Whitehead's texts fall far from satisfying that criterion, see Wilbur M. Urban, "Elements of Unintelligibility in Whitehead's Metaphysics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 23 (November 1930): 617–37.

⁴⁴ *SB*, 26.

theory of being is presented only following, and in explicit relation to, what may here be termed presentations of central aspects of its theory of the actual world.

(2) As indicated in Lorenz B. Puntel's keynote address, and by my introduction of the SSP's modal operators, modalities are centrally important to the SSP's theory of being; application of modalities establishes that being is bidimensional, including both the dimension of absolutely necessary being and the dimension of contingent being.

(3) Further explication of the absolutely necessary dimension of being, in explicit relation to the contingent dimension of being, shows it to be appropriate to designate the absolutely necessary dimension of being as God.

I turn now to Neville and Blanchette. Each of their accounts bears a certain similarity to the SSP's thesis that being is bidimensional, but there are important dissimilarities as well. The most important are (1) that it is not clear that either Neville or Blanchette articulates what this address, following *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything*, calls the ubiquity of being, and (2) that neither includes considerations of modality.

Neville writes of "the ground" of "being as determinate." Could the latter phrase be accurately put, in the terminology of this essay, "be-ers as determinate"? That is not clear to me, although I do take Neville to hold that to be a be-er is to be determinate. But Neville's ground of being as determinate, although said to be indeterminate, is determined in his paper first as ground, then as context, then as ontological context of mutual relevance, and finally as an act that creates the determinate things together in their internal and external relations. The paper's seemingly paradoxical determination of the

indeterminate as (among others) ground is perhaps clarified by its later contention that “the ontological creative act . . . is not itself a determinate thing.” This contention, along with various other passages in the paper, indicates that for Neville, to be what this address calls a be-er is to be a thing. For the SSP, of course, to be is to be a fact. This reveals a centrally important difference between Neville’s theoretical framework and the theoretical framework of the SSP; an engaged pluralism would have to assess the SSP’s arguments for its thesis that its ontology of facts provides its theoretical framework with greater coherence and intelligibility than is provided by any theoretical framework relying on a thing- or substance-ontology. Be that as it may, however, if Neville’s thesis is that what he calls the ground of being is not what this address would call a be-er, that is somewhat similar to the SSP’s thesis that being is not a be-er. Here, perhaps, is common ground, but even if it is, the theoretical frameworks within which the common ground is found remain decisively different.

Another locus of ground that may be common is found in the SSP’s agreement with Neville that further determination of what it calls the absolutely necessary dimension of being requires examination of the contingently actual dimension of being—which is to say, in Neville’s terms, that it requires a cosmology. But, as just indicated, the SSP presents its theory of being only following, and relying on, both its presentation of its abstract theoretical framework and its presentation of its theory of the contingently actual dimension of being, both of which it defends as the best that are currently available. It then situates its theory of the absolutely necessary dimension of being within that framework and links it to that specific theory.

This address can leave open the possibility that if one follows Neville in abstracting from specifics concerning determinate be-ers, and if one does not introduce modalities, one can develop only a highly abstract account of what the SSP terms the absolutely necessary dimension of being and what Neville terms the ground of determinate being or perhaps of determinate be-ers. But according to the SSP, immensely greater intelligibility and coherence are attained if, in developing a theory of being, one embeds it within an already extensively developed systematic theory.

Blanchette agrees with the SSP, against the position articulated in Neville's paper, that the most important philosophical questions of being are most fruitfully addressed not prior to or independently of studies of be-ers of various sorts, but instead only following extensive investigation concerning such be-ers. Whereas Blanchette appears to leave such investigations to non-philosophical sciences, however, the SSP includes them within systematic philosophy. In addition, Blanchette appears to side with Neville in relying on a thing- or substance-ontology (for example, he refers to the human being as "the primary instance of substance as one"); an engaged pluralism would, again, require countering the SSP's arguments for the superiority of its ontology of facts.

Finally, also like Neville, Blanchette includes some formulations that appear either to reject or not to recognize what this address terms the ubiquity of being; one such formulation is its reference to "the first and most universal cause of being." Of this cause, it must be asked whether it is supposed to be within or beyond being. According to the SSP, if it is supposed to be within being, then it cannot be the cause of all being, because

then it would be the unintelligible and indeed impossible cause of itself. If beyond being, it could not be the cause of all being, because it would not be.

I urge members of the MSA—although not of course only members of the MSA—to examine the SSP, and to raise questions about it and objections to it. It makes no claims to be perfect and therefore welcomes engaged pluralism. Indeed, in explicitly recognizing that there are multiple actual and possible theoretical frameworks for systematic philosophies, and in insisting that it is a viable systematic philosophy only if it can show that its own theoretical framework is better than any other currently available, it includes engaged pluralism as one of its own central components.

In concluding, I want to point to what I hope might become at least more common ground among us. Currently, at least many MSA members agree—and few if any in the analytic mainstream agree⁴⁵—that somehow, being is an important philosophical issue. In accepting being as an important philosophical issue, these MSA members are following a tradition tracing back to before Socrates. That tradition is perhaps motivated by the simple-sounding recognition that whatever is *is*, which triggers recognition that this “is” that is somehow shared by *whatever* is requires investigation. I have presented reasons for holding that because of the linguistic resources available to philosophers in this tradition,

⁴⁵ Mark Johnston’s *Saving God* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011) presumably does not qualify as a work in mainstream analytic philosophy, although others of that author’s works clearly do. Be that as it may, *Saving God* does speak at length of “Being” and “Existence,” apparently taking the two terms to be synonymous, and not explaining its capitalizations. (For the SSP’s distinction between being and existing, see, for example, *TAPTOE*, 161–63.) *Saving God* maintains (for example, 114), in opposition to the position presented in van Inwagen’s “Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment,” 477, that Being/Existence is an activity, although it does not explicitly counter van Inwagen.

they have wound up, again and again, doing one of following two things: either (1) investigating be-ers while neglecting being; or (2) attempting to articulate being rather than be-ers, but in doing so speaking of something—or, at times, nothing—that is supposed to be somehow beyond being, and yet *to be*.

The one thinker in this tradition who, in focusing on being, most resolutely avoids both of these options is Heidegger; but Heidegger fails to develop adequate linguistic resources for articulating being and hence flounders in unintelligibility.⁴⁶

In this address, I have argued that even relatively ordinary English provides linguistic resources that make possible articulations of being that are far superior to those found in the tradition. I have indicated how being is importantly clarified by the introduction of the technical term “be-er,” to be used in place of being *in all cases where that preserves meaning*, and recognition that, even in ordinary English, “It’s being” is a fully acceptable sentence, and “It’s being such that” can be introduced as an operator. I have used that technical term, that sentence, and that operator within the theoretical framework of my version of the SSP, but they could be adopted by philosophers who, on other issues, might be at loggerheads with the SSP. What I suggest as ground that might become common to more of us is recognition that the use of the term “be-er,” along with the availability, in ordinary English, of the present-continuous tense—all instances of which include conjugated forms of the verb “to be”—in combination with the availability, in ordinary English, of such present-continuous sentences as “It’s raining” and “It’s morning,” provide resources for philosophical articulations of being that are unmatched

⁴⁶ For an immensely detailed examination of Heidegger on being, see *BG*, chap. 2.

by the resources provided by any other currently available language. I invite others to use these resources or, if they don't, to explain to me why they don't and hence why I shouldn't. This too is required by any genuinely engaged pluralism.

As of the time of composition of this revised version of "Rearticulating Being," the only person to have engaged at all in the engaged pluralism the essay invites is Lorenz B. Puntel. He first formulated four of what he took to be unassailable objections to my rearticulation of being. I responded, explaining why none of those objections hits its mark,⁴⁷ and he has never responded to that response. Instead, he formulated a fifth putatively unassailable objection. Again, I explained why that fifth objection failed to hit its mark,⁴⁸ and he has never responded to that response. It appears, then, that others who heard the presentation of the version of this essay that was my presidential address to the MSA, and all who have read the version published in *Review of Metaphysics*, remain engaged in a flabby pluralism. As for Puntel, I sent him a highly similar, earlier version of this revision, and he has not responded concerning it.

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⁴⁷ See <https://sites.williams.edu/awhite/files/2019/08/Four-putatively-unassailable-objections-to-my-rearticulation-of-being-and-my-responses-to-those-objections-1.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://sites.williams.edu/awhite/files/2019/08/A-fifth-objection-to-my-rearticulation-of-being-with-my-response.pdf>