

A Partial History of My Work on Being with Lorenz B. Puntel

Readers of one or more of Puntel's books *Structure and Being (SB)*, *Being and God (BG)*, and *Being and Nothing (BN)* (once it appears) and one or more of my *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything (TAPTOE)* and "Rearticulating Being" will presumably wonder why being is articulated differently in each of the first three and yet differently in my two pieces. This text addresses that wonder.

(1) *Structure and Being*

I first emailed Lorenz B. Puntel in August 2003. I had announced a tutorial on truth theories in analytic philosophy for the upcoming Fall semester, and because this was a new area for me, I read widely. I had read several of Puntel's articles, and it seemed clear to me that they all presupposed a shared systematic vision; I wanted to understand that vision.

Puntel didn't respond until September, letting me know that he had been traveling in Eastern Europe and had had no internet connection. Once he did respond, a spirited correspondence ensued. He told me in November that he would complete *Struktur und Sein*, his first book on a systematic philosophy he had been working on since the late 1970s, the following summer; this systematic philosophy was later dubbed the "structural-systematic philosophy" (SSP). I offered to translate the book into English, and he eagerly accepted that offer.

He would send me drafts of sections of the book, and I would create English versions, making sure to be as clear as I could (if the German was not clear to me, I would write something in English that was clear to me, and in most cases either Puntel would change the German to match my version or we would further discuss the matter). The book took much longer to complete than he had anticipated; the German version appeared in 2006, the English in 2008. Although both had been completed at essentially the same time, it took me longer to find a publisher for the English version.

As we were working on *Structure and Being*, I always translated both *Sein* and *Seiende(s)* as "being," and we never discussed possible alternatives. In retrospect, this surprises me, but it did not surprise me at the time.

A brief note on beauty, relevant because it reveals a pattern repeated later. I first read *SB's* treatment of beauty while I was in Germany, meeting daily with Puntel. I found it quite weak, and told him that I wanted to discuss it. He said there were more important things for us to discuss, and that he would discuss it the following month when he visited a former student who was an expert on aesthetics. I asked him about that discussion after I'd returned home, and he said that she hadn't understood the section. The pattern revealed here is Puntel's unwillingness to discuss with me points on which we

significantly disagree.

(2) *Being and God*

I was not involved with the composition of *Sein und Gott* in the way that I had been with that of *Struktur und Sein*. Puntel had concluded that *Being and God* should use "Being" for *Sein* and "being" for *Seiende(s)*. I used those terms; we did not discuss this matter.

(3) *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything (TAPTOE)*

After I had submitted a version of *TAPTOE* to Bloomsbury, who had agreed to publish it, I received permission to make additional changes over a period of around one month. My chief changes:

(1) I removed all uses of "Being";

(2) I introduced "be-er" as a technical term, explaining it as a fully intelligible counterpart of (e.g.) "swimmer" and "runner." Whatever swims is a swimmer, whatever runs is a runner, and whatever is (or "be") is a be-er.

(3) I introduced the sentences "It's being" and "It be being" and the sentence operators "It's being such that..." and "It be being such that..." to facilitate my articulations of being.

Puntel's immediate response—given verbally, unfortunately, not by email—was enthusiastic: he granted that the English present-continuous tense provides a way of articulating being superior to any that could be made in German or in any other language that he knew of.

(4) The Oslo Address and the Portuguese Translation of *TAPTOE*

In 2016, Puntel had accepted an invitation to participate in several sessions in Oslo devoted to the SSP. As had been his practice for some time, he sent me his English draft of the address he planned to give, requesting that I polish the language. Given his earlier response to my rearticulation of being, I was surprised that he had not used "be-er" or "It's being" or "It's being such that..." but instead had reverted to "Being" and "being." Despite his 2023 email claim to the contrary, I drafted a more polished version using "Being" and "being," but also asked whether he would like to consider a version using "be-er," "It's being," and "It's being such that..." He responded that he would never use those formulations, and gave some reasons why he would not (of these, more below).

Surprised by the vehemence of his response, I became concerned about the in-

progress Portuguese translation of *TAPTOE*, which Puntel had arranged (he is fluent in Portuguese, having been born in Brazil and having lived there until he attended high school in France). I told him I wanted to contact the translator, and requested an email address. He told me that the text was already being printed, so no changes could be made, and he did not provide me with the requested contact information. But I got the email address from Bloomsbury; I contacted the translator, and was told that the text was *not* yet being printed, so changes *could* still be made. The translator sent me a copy of a draft he had sent to Puntel, with changes Puntel wanted him to make.

At this point, a more detailed note on grammar is appropriate. German, unlike English, has no present-continuous tense, and so, for example, must use "*Es regnet*" for "It rains," whether what is being said is that it sometimes rains or that it is raining when the sentence is uttered. Portuguese has a present-continuous tense, but it also, like Spanish, has two words appropriately translated into English as "being." Spanish has *ser* and *estar*. Conjugated forms of *ser* are generally used when one is speaking of relatively permanent phenomena, and ones of *estar*, when one is speaking of relatively temporary phenomena. Unfortunately, for philosophical purposes, the present-continuous tense uses conjugated forms of *estar*. The same is true of Portuguese.

In his original version, the translator had used the Portuguese present-continuous tense to translate my present-continuous English formulations; Puntel had instructed him to remove all of those formulations, and instead to use "Being" and "being." To my great relief, the translator agreed to revert to the present-continuous formulations. When Puntel learned that I had persuaded the translator to do this, he was furious, and we ceased corresponding for several months.

(5) *Being and Nothing*

I was not at all involved in the composition of *Sein und Nichts* (English: *Being and Nothing*). This book says virtually nothing about my work, mentioning it only in a single footnote, which reads, "A notable attempt to present sentences to be transformed in the indicated manner" —i.e., from subject-predicate sentences to sentences of the form "It's such-and-suching" —comprehensively and consequently is undertaken by the translator of *Structure and Being*, Alan White, in his highly original book *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything*, 2014, which opens new linguistic and philosophical possibilities." Puntel's book says nothing about those linguistic and philosophical possibilities. As with the Oslo address, Puntel refused to use "be-er" or "It's being" or "It's being such that." Of the formulations used in *Being and Nothing*, more below.

(6) Our Correspondence Concerning my Rearticulation of Being

As indicated above, the first reaction Puntel expressed to me concerning my rearticulation of being was positive, and he made objections only somewhat over a year after that. He first sent me what he described as four unassailable objections to my

rearticulation. I responded, explaining why none of the objections was successful,¹ and Puntel never responded to that response. Instead, he sent a fifth putatively unassailable objection. Again, I responded, and again, he never responded to that response.² In neither case did he fault any of my responses in any way, nor did he restate any of his objections in the attempt to counter my responses to them. Nor has he ever raised any additional objections.

For *Being and Nothing*, the English translation of *Sein und Nichts*, Puntel at one point suggested using the sentences “It’s Being” and “It’s being,” asserting that both were taken from ordinary English and that the meanings of both were transparent. I objected that neither was ordinary English, and that the meaning of neither was transparent. Without responding to my objections, he changed the formulations to “It Beings” and “It beings,” not claiming that either was ordinary English, but continuing to describe both as having transparent meanings. He never responded to my objections that the meanings were *not* transparent, and that it was not clear when it would be appropriate to use either one, or to use one rather than the other. He did at one point add a footnote indicating that these formulations were his, not mine, but I cannot find that footnote in the text that was submitted to Bloomsbury.

In the course of our correspondence, I sent him a message explaining and defending my uses of “It’s being,” “It be being,” “It’s being such that...,” and “It be being such that.” I explained that these phrases indicated currently ongoing phenomena, such that the phenomena—as with being or with mathematical structures—could be constant. He objected that constant on-goingness was self-contradictory, and did not respond to my contention that in my philosophical language, no contradictions were involved. He also responded that he found my explanation and defense of my usages “unconvincing, to say the least,” but offered no specifics concerning just what he found unconvincing.

A final note on beauty: Puntel briefly considers the topic in *Being and Nothing*, and has a footnote citing the relevant passages in *SB*, but makes no mention of *TAPTOE*. I pointed out that he had written, in his Preface to *TAPTOE*, that he took its treatment of beauty to increase the coherence and intelligibility of the SSP. I wrote that I took this to be an acknowledgment that *TAPTOE*’s treatment of the topic was superior to *SB*’s; he rejected that, saying that there need not be a competition. But the two accounts are clearly incompatible, and he has never explained how *TAPTOE*’s could increase the SSP’s coherence and intelligibility *without* being superior to *SB*’s.

¹ See <https://sites.williams.edu/awhite/files/2024/03/Lorenz-Puntels-first-four-putatively-unassailable-objections-to-my-rearticulation-of-being-and-my-responses-to-those-objections.pdf>

² See <https://sites.williams.edu/awhite/files/2024/03/Lorenz-Puntels-fifth-putatively-unassailable-objection-to-my-rearticulation-of-being-and-my-response-to-that-objection.pdf>

(7) Concluding Remarks

In the most common view, which is currently held by Lorenz B. Puntel, the resources for articulating being provided by the English language are inferior to those provided by ancient Greek, Latin, and German. The reason for this is that whereas each of the latter three languages has, for being, both an infinitive that can be used as the subject of sentences—the ancient Greek *einai*, the Latin *esse*, and the German *Sein*—and a second term that can be translated “entity” —the ancient Greek (*to*) *on*, the Latin *ens*, and the German *Seiende(s)*—because the English infinitive “to be” cannot be used as the subject of sentences, English has only the single term “being.” Lorenz B. Puntel attempts to overcome this limitation by using the capitalized word “*Being*” for *einai-esse-Sein*, and the lower-case word “being” for *on-ens-Seiende(s)*. He thereby aims to make English as capable of articulating being as are ancient Greek, Latin, and German. But he thereby ignores the fact—which I take to be crucial—that although philosophers have, throughout the history of philosophy, used one or another of those three languages (among many others), none has produced anything close to an adequate theory of being. Moreover, the twentieth-century philosopher who most strongly emphasized the issue of being—Martin Heidegger—appears to have concluded that the two terms “*Sein*” and “*Seiende(s)*” are inadequate with respect to articulating being, because, in his later works, he first introduces the terms “*Seyn*” and “*Sein*,” the latter covered by an “x,” and then begins to focus not on any term relatable to *Sein*, but instead on *Ereignis*.

Given that no adequate theory of being has been formulated in ancient Greek, Latin, or German, making English as good as those languages at formulating being does not appear to be promising, particularly given Heidegger’s move away from “*Sein*” in his later works. Fortunately, however, English has a resource for articulating being that is, in my view (also, as indicated above, a view once shared by Lorenz B. Puntel), superior to the resources provided by those other three languages. This is the present-continuous tense, used in such ordinary-language locutions as “It’s raining” and “It’s morning.” For sake of clarity, I often use the term “be” instead of the term “is,” yielding “It be raining” and “It be morning,” both sentences articulating what is ongoing at the time of their utterances. These sentences are wholly comparable to “We be jammin’,” which a native speaker of Jamaican English confirmed to me is indeed used in that language. Formulations using the present-continuous tense—whether with “is” or with “be” —are particularly valuable for the structural-systematic philosophy, which rejects the semantics of sentences with the subject-predicate structure.

German has only a simple present tense, as in “*Es regnet*,” “it rains.” Other factors—generally context—indicate whether or not it is raining at the time of the sentence’s utterance, but in no case can the sentence add a conjugated form of the verb “to be,” as do the English sentences “It’s raining” and “It be raining.”

A first advantage of the present-continuous tense is that it makes possible the exclusive articulation of being, in the sentences “It’s being” and “It be being,” which,

according to my version of the SSP, are always true (they would not be true only if “It be absolute-nothinging” were true, but the latter sentence can never be true). A second advantage is that it makes possible the construction and use of the sentence operators “It’s being such that...” and “It be being such that....” These facilitate the articulation of the ubiquity of being, because these sentence operators can govern any indicative sentence that expresses a proposition (as, for example, in “It be being such that—more specifically—it be raining”).

An additional downside of the articulations of being provided by ancient Greek, Latin, and German is that both words for being in each of these languages, like their English counterparts “Being” and “being,” can be preceded by definite articles and can be subjects of sentences. This encourages the misunderstanding of being as primarily nominal rather than as exclusively verbal. The English formulations “It’s being,” “It be being,” “It’s being such that,” and “It be being such that” avoid this entirely, instead articulating being as strictly verbal.

The case for this rearticulation of being is made in Chapter 8 of *TAPTOE* and in the essays “Rearticulating Being” and “Rearticulating Being Revised.” Interested readers should consult those sources for additional details. Chapter 8 of *TAPTOE* is available in two podcasts at sites.williams.edu/awhite/podcasts, and there will soon be a podcast there of “Rearticulating Being Revised.”

In my view, the central weakness of *Being and Nothing* is its use of the sentences “It Beings” and “It beings,” which it makes no attempt to clarify. Unclarified, these sentences are unintelligible. Hence, no matter how valuable *Being and Nothing’s* critiques of treatments of being—or failures to treat being—by other philosophers may be, the book provides nothing remotely resembling an adequate theory of being (or, as Puntel would have it, of Being).

(8) Postscript Added February-March 2024

I sent a copy of earlier versions—only slightly different from those above—of sections (1)-(7) to Lorenz B. Puntel on 19 February 2024. In email messages he sent me after that, he said nothing about anything said in any of those sections. I take that to constitute his tacit admission that everything I say in those sections is true. I may be wrong about that—his silence may not constitute a tacit admission—but that is of no importance, because everything I say above *is* true, regardless of what he may think of any of it. Nevertheless, I deem it worth emphasizing that he did not deny either (1) that he once endorsed my rearticulation of being, or (2) my contention that, because of its reliance on the unexplained and, as unexplained, unintelligible formulations “It Beings” and “It beings,” *Being and Nothing* presents nothing even remotely resembling an adequate theory of being (or of Being).

One thing I had admired immensely about Puntel from the beginning of our work

together was his commitment to intelligibility. I am therefore the more perplexed at his relying on unintelligible formulations of being in what will presumably be his final work—which could have been the capstone of his career. This must indicate, I believe, a significant reduction of his mental capacities. I simply cannot come up with any other explanation.

Further evidence of such a reduction I take to be supplied by what may well turn out to be our final exchange of significantly contentual messages. On 8 March 2024, I received, with the subject heading “Final Step,” the message from Puntel quoted just below. I have reset in boldface all indicative sentences and phrases that are false.

I have suffered immensely over many years from your repeated attempts to put pressure on me, accusing me of having lied etc. and now of not keeping up with my word. This was your tactic to torture me for many, many years. Example: You have threatened many times to stop the translation, the corrections etc if I would not accept what you wanted to impose on me.... What is such a threat other than a pure blackmail? To be sure one of the worst blackmails. Do you know what you were saying, affirming, denying...? There is a complete documentation/ documentary of everything you said over many years: these are the emails. **This is a sad, very sad history.** None of that was true. **The history of our relationship has been simply a Horrorgeschichte, a hell on earth.**

But now the absolute end of this story has finally come. From now on I will under no circumstances accept your statements, tolerate your blackmails, or your brutal way of dealing with me. From now on I will no longer need or want your “help” with the “work” and I will not accept it. Everything that needs to be done for the publication of the book (indices, etc.) will be done in Germany. I will ask Alex Bell to send all the “material” (once the final pagination has been decided) to me in Germany.

And now the SCHLUSSKAPITEL [concluding chapter].

Two days ago I was in the process of transferring US\$2500 to you when Christina [(Puntel' s wife)] pointed out to me that **there was a “black hole” in your last email. She was right. You created what is typical for you, namely allegations about my alleged unreliability in the past, what you took to be evident again in this case.** This is a big offence that I will NEVER, NEVER forget and accept. You wrote:

“It now appears that you are not going to transfer any more money to me. If that is so, that confirms the wisdom of my insistence that you pay me in advance for the translation. That insistence was prompted by your having shown me in the past that you are not always a man of your word. If you indeed transfer no more funds,

that will be an additional case in which you have not kept your word, because you promised to pay me for finding a publisher for the translation, and I did that. I would also have done the index and the proofreading if you had not abruptly stopped corresponding with me”.

You are a liar, a Betrüger (swindler). You completely OMITTED to quote what I have written, namely: I had indicated under what conditions the second half of \$k2500 would be transferred; and I quoted the exact text of the agreement you had reached with Christina concerning this matter. I quote here again this text, because **you now MALICIOUSLY and in FALSIFYING intention not even mentioned it.** The agreement said:

“The sum \$5k should be divided into two halves. The first half would be transferred to you NOW: the second half would be transferred to you after you have effectively found a publisher AND HAVE SUBMITTED TO HIM A READY-TO-PRINT TEXT THAT HAS ALSO BEEN ACCEPTED.”

So your claim that it is enough for you to find a publisher IS WRONG.

And also your claim that I would still owe you \$2500 is also completely WRONG. I have explained this in detail, **what you COMPLETELY ignored.** I had asked you to CORRECT your false statement and also this you have completely ignored. **This shows HOW PERVERSE your attitude is. And such an attitude was for you a kind of general rule you followed and applied.** This now will have the most severe consequences.

I shall send you (as of Monday) the sum \$2500 (but not additionally \$500). So, the money will be in your hands. BUT: I give you the opportunity to CORRECT your false statement by presenting a FORMAL APOLOGY FOR **HAVING ATTEMPTED TO MAKE DEMANDS BASED ON A FALSE BASE.** If you do not meet this demand, the money will be in your hands, but according to my WILL WILL NOT BE IN YOUR POSSESSION.

In this case I ask you to have the honesty to transfer the money to a Christian Charity Institution. But I don't want to know whether you'll do that or not. This is a question solely for your conscience.

This is now a final point. My relation with you comes to an end in a significant respect. From now on I will reject any CLOSER contact with you, whether personal or academic. I will maintain a relationship with you that is polite according to the standards of well-educated persons. But neither more nor less.

On Monday 11 April, after the banks would have closed in Germany, I sent Puntel the message quoted below (with a few alterations to increase clarity), with the subject

heading "This need not be the final step, because the central points in your recent message are demonstrably false." I used the long and informative subject heading because I thought it might be the only part Puntel would read.

On the one hand, I'm tempted simply to end this relationship that has become so unpleasant for both of us. On the other hand, I don't want to end it without responding to [your most recent] message. I've now drawn the conclusion that it is better that I send this reply.

It saddens me immensely to learn that you now think of our collaboration over more than 20 years as a *Horrorgeschichte* for you. I think it has not been, and I hope that this message will persuade you of this.

You wrote, among other things, the following: "You have threatened many times to stop the translation, the corrections etc if I would not accept what you wanted to impose on me "

This is demonstrably false, as is shown by the following two points:

(1) Until I started working on *Being and Nothing*, around one year ago, I had not worked on *anything* with you for *many* years. The only thing I tried to persuade you to do in *Being and Nothing* was to add an explanation of your articulation of being—nothing else. And I made no attempt to impose that on you. Earlier, as we were working on *Structure and Being* and *Being and God*, there were no points of significant disagreement, so there was nothing I attempted or even wanted to impose on you. When you asked me to revise your Oslo address, I did so, using "Being" and "being," as you had. I offered to do a second version that would use "be-er," "It's being," and "It's being such that," so that you could use whichever of the two versions you preferred, but you said that you would never use those formulations. I then dropped the matter. Again, there was no attempted imposition.

(2) I have never threatened to stop work on anything, neither a translation nor any correction. And I never *have* stopped working on anything. As you note, we have an email history of our interactions. If you examine that history, you will find no email message I ever sent to you that includes any threat of any kind, or any attempt to impose anything whatsoever on you.

After sending the message saying that you owed me \$2500—the message you falsely describe as my last message—I sent a second, with the subject heading "Correction," in which I noted that you did not owe me the full \$2500 because I had not done the index. In your most recent message, you simply ignore that message of mine.

I hope what I say above will have persuaded you that our collaboration has in fact not been anything like the kind of *Horrorgeschichte* you described in your message. If you are not persuaded, I hope that you will show this message to Christina, because I have no doubt that she will be persuaded of that, and my hope would be that she would at least attempt to persuade you.

As of the drafting of this document, Puntel has not responded to the message quoted just above. I suspect that he has not read it. That his message to which it is a response contains so many false assertions continues to astonish me. I do not know whether this is due to moral corruption, mental deterioration, or some combination of those two, perhaps with some additional factor that has not occurred to me. I might well attribute it solely to mental deterioration if he had not failed to keep his word to me already before his mental faculties began to decline. About half way through our work on *Struktur und Sein* and *Structure and Being*, I told him in an email message that I thought I had done enough on the books that I should be credited as co-author. He agreed. He later changed his mind, and clearly did so while I was in Germany. As I was leaving, he said, "We must always remain friends." He then told me by email that I would not be listed as co-author of *Struktur und Sein*, and that if I insisted on being listed as co-author of *Structure and Being*, he would not allow that book to be published. This was the only threat that arose during our long history of collaboration. I thought it was more important that the book be published than that I be listed as co-author, so I dropped the matter.

Perhaps worth adding: in his address to the meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America at Williams College, he includes comments on Lawrence Krauss's *A Universe From Nothing*. He does not note that I treat that book in *TAPTOE*. I think he must have forgotten that, as he appears to have forgotten that *TAPTOE* includes a treatment of beauty that he once acknowledged—in print—to be superior to *SB*'s. I take this forgetfulness to be a consequence of the decline in his mental faculties.