A PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE: THE SCOPE OF HOLISTIC PRAGMATISM

AUTHOR: MORTON GABRIEL WHITE

ISBN13: 9780691096568
First Published: 2002
Edition Format: Hardcover
Book Language: English
Number of Pages: 216

BOOK DESCRIPTION

In this book, one of America's leading philosophers offers a sweeping reconsideration of the philosophy of culture in the twentieth century. Morton White argues that the discipline is much more important than is often recognized, and that his version of holistic pragmatism can accommodate its breadth. Going beyond Quine's dictum that philosophy of science is philosophy enough, White suggests that it should contain the word "culture" in place of "science". He defends the holistic view that scientific belief is tested by experience but that such testing is rightly applied to systems or conjunctions of beliefs, not isolated beliefs.

He adds, however, that we test ethical systems by appealing to feelings of moral obligation as well as to sensory experiences. In the course of his lucidly written analysis, White treats central issues in the philosophy of science, of religion, of art, of history, of law, of politics, and of morality. While doing so he examines the views of Quine, Tarski, Goodman, and Rawls, and shows how they are related to the approaches of Peirce, James, Duhem, Russell, Dewey, Carnap, and the later Wittgenstein.

He also discusses the ideas of the legal philosophers Holmes and Hart from a holistic standpoint. White demonstrates how his version of pragmatism bridges the traditional gulf between analytic and synthetic truth as well as that between moral and scientific belief. Indeed, the high point of the book is a brilliant presentation of his view of ethics, based on the idea that our scientific theories face the tribunal of observation whereas our ethical views face the joint tribunal of observation and moral feeling.

Scholars and students of the history of ideas and of philosophy will welcome A Philosophy of Culture as the highly finished product of more than sixty years of philosophical reflection by an important thinker.
Morton White (born 29 April 1917) is an American philosopher and historian of ideas. He is both a central figure in the philosophical movement of Holistic Pragmatism and a noted historian of American philosophical thought. He was a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard from 1953 to 1970, and since then has been at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ where he is current Morton White (born 29 April 1917) is an American philosopher and historian of ideas.

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White attended City College of New York as an undergraduate before doing his postgraduate studies at Columbia University, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1942 and was influenced by John Dewey. In 1949 he published Social Thought in America, a critical history of liberal social philosophy as represented by the ideas of Dewey, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Thorstein Veblen, Charles A. Beard, and James Harvey Robinson.

When the book was republished in 1957 he added a preface in which he softened some of his criticisms, and he added an epilogue in which he attacked the religious liberalism of Reinhold Niebuhr and the conservatism of Walter Lippmann. "Time and recent events", he wrote, "have brought the liberal outlook under a very different kind of attack- an attack with which I have no sympathy- and I fear that my own critical observations might wrongly be associated with arguments, positions, and purposes quite foreign to my own". In his 1956 work, Toward Reunion in Philosophy, White attempted to reconcile the pragmatic and analytic traditions in American philosophy.

At Harvard, White was a colleague of Willard Van Orman Quine, and the philosophical views of the two are closely related, particularly in their rejection of a sharp distinction between a priori and empirical statements. But White rejects Quine's view that "Philosophy of science is philosophy enough". Using the framework of Holistic Pragmatism, White argues that philosophical inquiry can just as well be applied to cultural institutions beyond science, such as law and art.