

"COVETOUS OF TRUTH"

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BEVERLEY C. SOUTHGATE

“COVETOUS OF TRUTH”
THE LIFE AND WORK OF THOMAS WHITE, 1593–1676

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The Life and Work of Thomas White, 1593–1676

BEVERLEY C. SOUTHGATE

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For Victoria, Benjamin, and Susannah

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PREFACE

Thomas White, in the quatercentenary of his birth, is due for historical rehabilitation. English Catholic priest, philosopher, theologian, and scientist, he was a renowned and notorious figure in his own day; and, though long forgotten, his work exemplifies aspects of major current concern to historians of ideas: in particular, the significance of the newly-revived sceptical philosophy; the complexity of the transition from scholasticism to the new philosophy; and the whole role of "minor", non-canonical figures in the history of thought.

White's writings embrace theology, politics, and natural philosophy, or science¹; and in all these three areas, his work, after centuries of comparative neglect, has slowly been resurfacing. His theological significance received intermittent recognition through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries; but more recently his great importance as leader of a whole "Blackloist" faction of English Catholics has become increasingly clear. Condemned by co-religionists in his own time as a dangerous heretic, he has been assessed by modern scholars as an anticipator of twentieth-century trends in Catholic theology, and even as "probably, after John Henry Newman, the most original thinker as yet produced by modern English Catholicism."²

Blackloism implied not only a theological, but also a political position; and that position was clarified and publicised by White in his single political treatise, *The Grounds of Obedience and Government*, published in the mid-1650s. His provocative stance was widely misunderstood and misinterpreted, and was soon anyway rendered untenable by the restoration of the monarchy. But, as the *credo* of an influential English Catholic faction during the Commonwealth, this notorious work has been noticed by historians of political theory as clearly meriting further attention.

In the history of science, too, White has been emerging as a man whose natural philosophy illustrates important contemporary trends, and in particular the transition from scholasticism to modernity. His significance in this context has become clearer following the rediscovery, translation, and publication of Thomas Hobbes' critique of his cosmological treatise *De Mundo*; and he is now appearing, and is presented here, as a creative synthesiser of traditional

Aristotelianism with Copernicanism and the new mechanical philosophy.

Despite an increasing number of references to White in scholarly works, no comprehensive treatment of him has yet appeared; and this volume is presented as a first attempt to fill that gap. As a 'philosopher' in the full seventeenth-century sense of that word, White's ideas range widely, and it is of course impossible to do justice to the totality in one short book. It is hoped, however, that this monograph will serve as an introduction to his life and thought, and as a stimulant to further research on a man whose work beautifully exemplifies some of the complexities of a fascinating period in intellectual history.

White himself once described humans as being naturally "covetous of truth",³ and those words seem to make a fitting epigraph for his own intellectual biography. At a time when the old truths of scholasticism were being challenged by the new philosophy, and when the validity of any claim to knowledge was coming under challenge from rampant scepticism, White continued throughout a long life to assert the possibility and prime importance of striving for that certain truth, upon which he believed salvation ultimately depended. This overriding concern permeates his many works.

I am particularly indebted to Professor Piyo Rattansi, who first introduced me to Thomas White as a possible research-topic, and to Professor Richard Popkin, whose work on the history of scepticism provided the focus in terms of which to interpret White's diverse thought as a coherent whole. My research has been facilitated by sabbatical leave granted by the University of Hertfordshire; and I am especially grateful to those members of my family who for some years generously accepted White as a demanding rival for attention.

ABBREVIATIONS

- BC* Robert Pugh, *Blacklo's Cabal discovered in Severall of their Letters* (1680)
- BL* British Library
- CRS* Catholic Record Society
- CSM* J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, transl., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1985)
- DM* Thomas White, *De Mundo Dialogi Tres* (Paris, 1642)
- ES* Thomas White, *An Exclusion of Scepticks from all Title to Dispute* (London, 1665)
- OB* Old Brotherhood Archives
- PI* Thomas White, *Peripateticall Institutions* (London, 1656)
- TT* Kenelm, Digby, *Two Treatises* (Paris, 1644)
- WA* Westminster Archives

In general, booktitles in the notes have been abbreviated in an easily recognisable form after their first reference.