

# Alfred North Whitehead: Ideas and Influence

## By Matthew David Segall

On September 25, 1924, after a successful career in Cambridge and London as a mathematical logician, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) taught his first philosophy class at Harvard University. The echo of William James' voice still resounded in Emerson Hall, beckoning Whitehead's groundbreaking conceptualizations. Four years later, he traveled back across the Atlantic to the University of Edinburgh to deliver the stunningly original Gifford Lectures that became *Process and Reality* (1929). Whatever might be said about other major works of philosophy published in the first half of the twentieth century, Whitehead's *Process and Reality* stands apart like a strange and beautiful flower in some isolated primeval glade. While on his own admission still a "footnote to Plato" and thus continuous with the European philosophical tradition, his book functions to goad readers into a daring speculative departure from long-held habits of thought.

Henry Nelson Wieman admitted at the time that not many would read Whitehead work in his or in any generation. "But," he continued, "its influence will radiate through concentric circles of popularization until the common man will think and work in the light of it, not knowing whence the light came."<sup>1</sup> Despite Wieman's prophecy, already by the 1930s most logicians and phenomenologists had turned their backs on speculative cosmology and given up on the idea of any grand philosophical synthesis between science and religion. There were technical problems to be solved, nationalist wars to be won, and global economies to be expanded. By the time the Second World War ended, academic philosophy in both its analytic and continental modes had decisively abandoned the task of imaginative generalization that Whitehead had set for it. Specialists were left unrestrained by common sense, and, lacking the generic notions that might aid in the composition of a cosmological vision, the late modern world became increasingly incomprehensible to specialists and commoners alike.

According to Johanna Seibt, author of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Process Philosophy," Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism remains to this day "the most comprehensive, systematic, and detailed proposal" for replacing the orthodox substance ontology dominant in Western philosophy since Parmenides. Seibt goes on to say that the depth and complexity of Whitehead's work "does not make for easy access."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Nelson Wieman, "A Philosophy of Religion," *The Journal of Religion* 10 (1930), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Seibt, Johanna, "Process Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/process-philosophy/>>.

## Ideas

The main obstacle in the comprehension of Whitehead's radical philosophy is the commitment of Western philosophy since Parmenides to the idea that Eternal Being takes ontological priority over the mere appearances of Creative Becoming. Whitehead does not deny eternity but nonetheless insists that process "is [the] fundamental fact in our experience": "We are in the present; the present is always shifting; it is derived from the past; it is shaping the future; it is passing into the future. This is process, and in the universe it is an inexorable fact."<sup>3</sup>

Eternal Being may be a valid *idea*: indeed, many readers are surprised to learn that this "process philosopher" posits "eternal objects" among his ultimate categories of existence. But Creative Becoming is an inescapable *reality*. Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism is thus not a reversal of the priority of Being over Becoming but rather an attempt at *coniunctio* or integration of opposites. Thinking these opposites more coherently required Whitehead to transmute a logical contradiction into an aesthetic contrast.

Both Fact and Form, change and permanence, are necessary ingredients in any actual world. But Whitehead is not done surprising us. It may at first seem as though it were the Forms that abided eternally, while Facts come and go. But in the Philosophy of Organism, "the doctrine of internal relations makes it impossible to attribute 'change' to any actual entity. Every actual entity is what it is, and is with its definite status in the universe, determined by its internal relations to other actual entities." "Change," on the other hand, "is the description of the adventures of eternal objects in the evolving universe of actual things."<sup>4</sup> The actual entities are the facts. They do not change or move, but simply arise and perish with epochal decisiveness. They are living occurrences and not frozen instants, but still, once they achieve concrescent satisfaction, their holistic mode of existence is determined and cannot be undone. The eternal objects, then, are the possibilities haloing and informing the facts. The continuum of possibility is infinite, thus "there are no novel eternal objects."<sup>5</sup> And yet, being infinite, there is no shortage of alternative eternal objects by which novel actual entities can characterize their relations with one another. The meanings of Whitehead's two elementary categories, actual entities and eternal objects, presuppose one another. "The eternal objects are the pure potentials of the universe; and the actual entities differ from each other in their realization of potentials."<sup>6</sup>

But why does Whitehead grant "a certain extreme finality" to these two categories of entity? Why not just one kind of thing? Why actualities and eternalities? This question can be approached from the other direction by asking what the world might look like if there were only eternal objects, or only actual entities.

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<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 52-53.

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 58-59.

<sup>5</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 149-150.

In the former case, if only eternal objects were real, absolutely everything would be possible but nothing in particular could ever actually occur. There also wouldn't be any way to distinguish between eternal objects themselves, since they would infinitely interpenetrate, their individuality dissolved into their relational essences. There would be no perspective from which to prehend relevance, no situation relative to which some finite constellation of them might become important.

In the latter case, if there were only actualities, there would be nothing held in reserve, and so nothing new to experience. Every entity would be suffocated by its neighbor, having been left no elbow room for self-creation or atmosphere of alternative possibilities to inhale. The universe would be locked in a groove, unable to swerve out of rote repetition of the past.

Whitehead distinguishes these two categories of existence because the polarity between eternal and actual is precisely what throws the world into process. This polarity grants Creativity the power both to relate and to individuate. Creativity is Whitehead's truly ultimate category, the universal of universals only describable in terms of the process of concrescence whereby many become one and are increased by one. This process is iterative and cumulative, allowing for a cosmogenesis of ongoing self-differentiation into ever more inclusive relational wholeness.<sup>7</sup> In Whitehead's terms, "each creative act is the universe incarnating itself as one, and there is nothing above it by way of final condition."<sup>8</sup>

What the Western tradition should have meant by its notions of substance, from Whitehead's point of view (drawing on scattered insights in Plato and Locke), is simply *power*, where "power is the compulsion of composition," of a "drive towards aesthetic worth for its own sake."<sup>9</sup> Rather than the classical idea of a substance requiring nothing but itself in order to exist, Whitehead emphasizes the way "each task of creation is a social effort, employing the whole universe."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the co-creative composition of each concrescent creature results from *decision*. Decision is always the actualization of a complex individual value from out of the infinite continuum of possibilities: "definition is the soul of actuality...the final cause which animates [, and, once attained,] halts its process."<sup>11</sup> Once aesthetic satisfaction has been achieved, the entity perishes, becoming a unique immortal contribution to the ongoing social effort of the universe.

The other side of the main obstacle in the comprehension of Whitehead's organic categorial scheme is his own sharp divergence from antecedent philosophical approaches to knowledge and reality. Because of its obsession with the clear and distinct ideas and

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the asymmetrical many-to-one function generalized in Whitehead's ontology of concrescence, see James Bradley, "The Speculative Generalization of the Function: A Key to Whitehead," *Inflexions* No. 2 "Nexus" (December 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 245.

<sup>9</sup> Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 223.

sensations appearing in consciousness, modern European philosophy had become “enmeshed in the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”<sup>12</sup> Causality—and with it any necessary connection between the human mind and its representations of a physical world—had been explained away as a psychological habit (Hume) or, at best, a transcendental category (Kant) appended to sensory data. Whitehead instead affirms an analogy between causation, perception, emotion, and conscious memory. The very basis of experience and existence alike becomes the causal inheritance of “vector feelings”: “feeling from a beyond which is determinate and pointing to a beyond which is to be determined.”<sup>13</sup> Even our conscious rational knowledge and understanding is reimagined as a complex “form of feeling.”<sup>14</sup> The conscious mind and its clear and distinct sensory perceptions arise in the final percipient occasion as the fruit and flowers of an intricately networked route of amplification and enhancement of originally vague visceral feeling-tones inherited from the environment by the adaptive cellular organization of our living bodies. In Whitehead’s words:

“...the predominant basis of perception is perception of the various bodily organs, as passing on their experiences by channels of transmission and of enhancement. It is the accepted doctrine in physical science that a living body is to be interpreted according to what is known of other sections of the physical universe. This is a sound axiom; but it is double-edged. For it carries with it the converse deduction that other sections of the universe are to be interpreted in accordance with what we know of the human body. ... The human body is thus achieving on a scale of concentrated efficiency a type of social organization, which with every gradation of efficiency constitutes the orderliness whereby a cosmic epoch shelters in itself intensity of satisfaction.”<sup>15</sup>

Avoiding Whitehead’s “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”<sup>16</sup> requires remembering the embodied experiential basis of all scientific knowledge.<sup>17</sup> More, it requires rooting human consciousness and experience more generally back in the soil of the world-process. Whitehead challenges natural philosophy to accept that the cosmos itself is composed not just of quantities of mass-energy but of qualitative feeling-tones: the causal nexus of nature is thus understood to be an evolving field of vector-feelings. The late David Ray Griffin coined the term “panexperientialism” to capture this aspect of Whitehead’s philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18. Whitehead adds his own footnotes citing his first published articulated of “misplaced concreteness” in *Science and the Modern World*, Ch. III.

<sup>13</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> See Adam Frank, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson’s *The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2024) for a Whiteheadian approach to avoiding misplaced concreteness in the natural sciences.

<sup>18</sup> David Ray Griffin, *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 78.

## Influence

In his banquet address delivered during the 2015 International Whitehead Conference in Claremont, California, Griffin admitted that the twenty-first century “is still very far from being a Whiteheadian century.”<sup>19</sup> Still, he offered dozens of examples of various academic disciplines from physics, biology, and psychology to philosophy and theology moving in a process-relational direction. Founded in 1973 by Griffin and John Cobb, Jr., the Center for Process Studies (CPS) recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. CPS has hosted over 150 interdisciplinary conferences and continues its international reputation as the main hub of process-relational research. Cobb studied with Charles Hartshorne at the University of Chicago, graduating with his PhD in 1952, while Hartshorne had served as Whitehead’s research assistant while at Harvard from 1925-1928, thus forming a direct lineage from Whitehead to CPS. Hartshorne, Cobb, and Griffin were committed to transdisciplinary thinking, with especially Cobb—and perhaps his most prominent contemporary student, process theologian Catherine Keller—showing a deep concern for and focus on social and ecological issues. Nonetheless, they are all known primarily as process theologians, meaning that until more recently the main context for thinking with Whitehead has been theological.

W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson also studied with Whitehead at Harvard but seemed less able to admit any positive influence in their autobiographies.<sup>20</sup> Whitehead’s notation and precision of argument in *Principia Mathematica* (coauthored with Bertrand Russell) can be counted as a major impetus in the birth of at least the Anglo-American school of analytic philosophy.<sup>21</sup> But his late turn toward grand metaphysical synthesis meant analytic philosophers spent most of the last century ignoring him. While contemporary analytic philosophers like Godehard Brüntrup<sup>22</sup>, Tobias Müller<sup>23</sup>, and Peter Simons<sup>24</sup> evince a possible recuperation may be in the making, the overall trend remains one of increasingly conspicuous disinterest.

Whitehead’s reception history has been somewhat more promising in non-analytic circles. In the 1930s, Jean Wahl published several works on Whitehead’s thought and went on to

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<sup>19</sup> David Ray Griffin, “The ‘Whitehead Century’ Revisited,” in *Process Studies* 44.2 (2015), 256.

<sup>20</sup> Quine, W. V. *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine, Volume 18 of The Library of Living Philosophers*, edited by Hahn and Schilpp (New York: Open Court, 1986); Davidson, Donald. *The Philosophy of David Donaldson, Volume 27 of The Library of Living Philosophers* (New York: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> In their preface, Russell and Whitehead admit that “in all questions of logical analysis, our chief debt is to Frege” (Russell, B. and Whitehead, A.N., *Principia Mathematica* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910-13; 2nd ed. 1925], viii).

<sup>22</sup> Brüntrup, Godehard & Jaskolla, Ludwig (eds.). *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Tobias Müller, *Realität im Prozess. Alfred North Whiteheads Philosophie im Dialog mit den Wissenschaften*, (hrsg. mit Bernhard Dörr), (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Simons, P. Metaphysical Systematics: A Lesson from Whitehead. *Erkenntnis* 48, 377–393 (1998).  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005421309919>

introduce a whole generation of French philosophers to the Philosophy of Organism, including most prominently Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>25</sup> Jan Van Der Veken argues that Merleau-Ponty's late turn toward an ontology of the flesh is best understood as a response to his close study of Whitehead's work.<sup>26</sup> Despite his claim that Whitehead's circle of influence constitutes "a secret society," Deleuze draws extensively on his work across multiple books.<sup>27</sup> In her masterful *Thinking With Whitehead* (2011), Isabelle Stengers clarifies that this alleged secrecy stems from Whitehead's tender desire to avoid polemic while still "[forging] a conceptual language that forces those who acquire a taste for it to think."<sup>28</sup> She adds that, from a European perspective, the American Whiteheadian palette seems astonishingly disparate—"enriched by practitioners from the most diverse horizons [uniting] political struggle and spirituality with the sciences of education...in a singularly lovely and tenacious way."<sup>29</sup> Through his friendship with Stengers, Whitehead's ideas left their mark on Bruno Latour, whose Gifford Lectures later published as *Facing Gaia* (2017) draw extensively on Whitehead's critique of the bifurcation of nature to defend a new vision of a living Earth.<sup>30</sup>

The stakes of the recovery of Whiteheadian modes of thought were powerfully illustrated in a panel discussion at Stanford University in 2005 between Stengers, Donna Haraway, and Richard Rorty.<sup>31</sup> Rorty studied with Hartshorne as a graduate student and showed an early appreciation for Whitehead's philosophy.<sup>32</sup> But after his Wittgensteinian turn, he came to reject speculative metaphysics as little more than bad poetry. Rorty replied to a suggestion by Stengers—that oysters may be more dominated by their habits of abstraction than humans—by denying the possibility of referring to any supposedly concrete experience in a way that wouldn't just entail a contest of new words against old words. In effect, Rorty argued that abstraction is a byproduct of human language: "on this Wittgensteinian view that I'm trying to peddle, there isn't a thing outside of language that we encounter, and then as a result of encountering it, do something to use new words."<sup>33</sup> Haraway then offered a

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<sup>25</sup> Silva e Silva, Fernando. 2019. "OS LEITORES FRANCESES DE WHITEHEAD". *Das Questões* 7 (1):31-40. <https://doi.org/10.26512/dasquestoes.v7i1.28788>.

<sup>26</sup> Van Der Veken, J. Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead on the Concept of Nature. *Interchange* 31, 319–334 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026764822238>

<sup>27</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. By Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, transl. by Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, transl. by Catherine Porter (Medford, MA: Polity, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> "Whitehead's Account of the Sixth Day," a panel discussion at the Stanford Humanities Center with Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, published March 30, 2007. Available online: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/whiteheads-account-of-the-sixth-day/id385665061?i=1000085438278>

<sup>32</sup> See Rorty's MA thesis, "Whitehead's Use of the Concept of Potentiality." University of Chicago (1952).

<sup>33</sup> "Whitehead's Account of the Sixth Day," a panel discussion at the Stanford Humanities Center with Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, published March 30, 2007 (Timestamp: 2:01:00).

Whiteheadian response to Rorty's linguistic reductionism by drawing on her experience in dog training: "there is an abstraction luring our becoming with each other...that is not fundamentally linguistic...because one of the key partners, who is a co-player...is not a linguistic critter."<sup>34</sup> As Stengers and Haraway tried to convey to Rorty, Whitehead affords us concepts for thinking beyond the enclosures of linguistic analysis, a radically novel account of "propositional feelings"<sup>35</sup> that inform but reach far beyond the syntax of sentences into the sinews of the world.<sup>36</sup> Whitehead accepts that "the body is the basis of our emotional and purposive experience," and adds the important corollary that "the body is part of nature": "Thus we finally construe the world in terms of the type of activities disclosed in our intimate experience."<sup>37</sup> It follows that he strongly objects "to the notion that no pattern can be directly discerned unless it is symbolized."<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, non-linguistic propositional feelings and prehensions of patterned contrasts reopen lines of affective communication with the nonhuman world that so much modern and postmodern philosophy have left us deaf to. It may be that industrial civilization's current ecological dead-end stems precisely from its inability to hear the cries of the rest of the living world.

While perhaps not yet Griffin's "Whiteheadian century," the last few decades have seen an unmistakable resurgence of interest in Whitehead's thought. As Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek put it in their recent anthology, the return to Whitehead "has unfolded with such speed and from so many directions...that the full measure of [his] relevance...has yet to be measured."<sup>39</sup> This short article has offered only a sketch of his key concepts and their reach, whose full import remains for future adventurers of ideas to realize.

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<sup>34</sup> "Whitehead's Account of the Sixth Day," a panel discussion at the Stanford Humanities Center between Richard Rorty, Isabelle Stengers, and Donna Haraway, published March 30, 2007 (Timestamp: 2:02:42).

<sup>35</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 189, 215.

<sup>36</sup> As Whitehead says, "It is merely credulous to accept verbal phrases as adequate statements of propositions. The distinction between verbal phrases and complete propositions is one of the reasons why the logicians' rigid alternative, 'true or false,' is so largely irrelevant for the pursuit of knowledge" (*Process and Reality*, 11).

<sup>37</sup> Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> In the same letter, written to Henry Leonard January 10, 1936, Whitehead expressed "violent opposition" to the logical positivist "habit of dismissing questions as unmeaning" because they are "unable to be expressed in existing symbolism." He had Ludwig Wittgenstein in mind, who he added "annoys me intensely." A transcript of the letter is reproduced by Ronald Preston Phipps, "The Background and Historic Significance of Alfred North Whitehead's Letter to His Personal Assistant Henry S. Leonard: The Relation Between Science and Philosophy" in *Process Studies Supplement*, Iss. 17 (2011).

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek, *The Lure of Whitehead* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1.

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