

## PROPOSING LIFE

### REVIEW OF *THE LURE OF WHITEHEAD*

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Nicholas Gaskill and A.J. Nocek (eds). *The Lure of Whitehead*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 496 pages.

“In the real world,” Alfred North Whitehead insisted on more than one occasion, “it is often more important for a proposition to be interesting than for it to be true.” And as improbable as it might have seemed only a few years ago, today Whitehead has again become interesting. After nearly seven decades of relative neglect, the propositions offered by this quietly Victorian British mathematician who became an American metaphysician have again come to matter. Which immediately leads us to ask: Why? Or, with a bit more subtlety, as Nicholas Gaskill and A.J. Nocek ask in their Introduction, “Why, after such a long period of neglect, is Whitehead suddenly generating so much enthusiasm? What problems and concerns have called his propositions out of obscurity and put them to work in novel contexts?” For Gaskill and Nocek, the problems and concerns of our day begin within the philosophical: “a dissatisfaction with the epistemological and anthropocentric limitations of ‘critique’; an effort to engage the unique efficacies of nonhuman forces; and an approach to conceptual construction that avoids both the correspondence model of truth and the free-for-all of relativism.” Yet the renewed interest in Whitehead has not remained so strictly philosophical. As Gaskill and Nocek rightly recognize, Whitehead “has attracted the attention not only of a variety of philosophers, but also of sociologists, new-media theorists, artists, and literary critics, all of whom have found it useful for addressing problems particular to their fields. As a result, one is now just as likely to see Whitehead invoked in discussions of artificial life or digital art as in theoretical debates about consciousness or subjectivity.” And as the essays gather together in *The Lure of Whitehead* indicate, the problems particular to each of these fields are quite diverse. With this diversity, we end up, in *The Lure of Whitehead*, with quite a few Whiteheads, and it is the great achievement of the collection, and Gaskill and Nocek as editors, to

risk leaving Whitehead in disarray, allowing his ideas and propositions to become catalysts for a future that is not yet known, in fields and in ways that do not always stay strictly philosophical.

This diversity, though, makes the *The Lure of Whitehead* nearly impossible to summarize. At the most basic level, following the Introduction, which itself includes a very helpful overview of Whitehead's philosophical work, the essays are gathered together under three headings: Speculation Beyond the Bifurcation, The Metaphysics of Creativity, and Process Ecology. But as these vaguely technical headings indicate, the groupings are rather loosely organized so that maybe the only place to begin is at the beginning.

So the collection begins with Isabelle Stengers' previously published "A Constructivist Reading of *Process and Reality*." Given Stengers' importance for this renewed interest in Whitehead - her 2002 *Penser avec Whitehead* (translated into English in 2011 as *Thinking With Whitehead*) is the most consistently cited work in *The Lure of Whitehead* - it is fitting that she begins this collection. And in its own way "A Constructivist Reading of *Process and Reality*" highlights many of the problems and concepts taken up in the essays that follow: the bifurcation of nature, care, and novelty are taken up again and again in these essays. But here, as a beginning and of equal importance, we can note that Stengers articulates Whitehead's speculative philosophy as a constructivist experimental practice. Rather than being satisfied with the too easy denunciations made possible by the claim "it is only a construction," Stengers proposes taking seriously and positively the hard, constructive work that constitutes any technical experiment. Knowledge-production, Stengers insists, is a constructive practice that always arises in relation to a specific problem, satisfying, or failing to satisfy, the specific demands of that problem. The objectivity of experimental sciences is, in this sense, an achievement, the successful construction of an "experimental situation that allow[s] what was questioned to make an actual, decidable difference." The concern of any experimental construction, then, is adequacy to a problem. Unlike with experimental sciences, in philosophical experimentation language and our abstractions are both the apparatus of experimentation as well as the problem that gives rise to the experiment. For Stengers, therefore, the practice of Whiteheadian philosophy is the redesigning of abstractions, the wild and free creation of concepts, as the subtitle to *Penser avec Whitehead* has it, for the purposes of sheer disclosure, the disclosure of that which can come to matter. "The aim of the abstractions that Whitehead designed," Stengers specifies, "is not to produce new definitions of what we consensually perceive and name, but to induce empirically felt variations in the way our experience matters." Or, as Whitehead says in *Modes of Thought*: "Have a care, here is something that matters!" Stengers' Whiteheadian constructivism is not a simple

critique of abstractions but is rather a practice of taking our abstractions seriously, of handling them with great care in order to experience something that matters.

In one of the best essays of the collection, "Another Regard," Erin Manning attempts to open up the possibilities for an experience of something that matters by way of reading Whitehead's conceptualization of *concern* as a kind of regard. Specifically, Whiteheadian concern is a way to think the regard which animates the anthropologist Dawn Prince-Hughes' encounter with gorillas in her *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*: "The gorillas regarded me." Regard, in this sense, is not observation at a distance, a mode of address that maintains an absolute gulf between two individual subjects, or a subject and an object, but is the way in which two or more subjects or a subject and an object come to be within an event of encounter. When understood in this sense, concern, Manning argues, is not an intersubjective term, but is rather that which activates an event. As Whitehead says in *Adventures of Ideas*, "The occasion as subject has a 'concern' for the object. And the 'concern' at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed towards it." In this regard, the gorilla and the anthropologist enact an affective attunement within the unfolding of the event, they come and become together within a concern that they are activated by. Conceptually, then, regard is a way to consider time and materiality as the relational unfolding of the event of an encounter.

To further unfold the experience of this concern, of this regard, Manning turns to counterpoint, a choreography of movement and time, a technicity, as she calls it, of movement, which is also "a collective movement of time-shaping." "Counterpoint," Manning argues, "is not the activity of an individual body - it is the activity of a relational field through which movement moves. Movement-moving is intensively distributed - always beyond its simple location, as Whitehead would say." With this, affective attunement can be felt as a bodily movement, such that the event within which bodies move is "a field of relations that does not mimic a body, but creates *bodying* in a shifting co-composition of experiential spacetimes." With a wonderful deployment of Whitehead's own conceptual experimentation, Manning argues that "reason... is another word for the force of thought that is immanent to the event," so that in the nature of the event of *bodying* and the event of nature, "nature thinks," "nature *creates* thought - a thinking *in* the event." And with this, Manning proposes that concepts are not simply lures, but are "counterpoint-machines: they create a field of action that provokes a coincidence of attributes to produce the excess of an ordered interplay." Bodies become as nature at play, thinking itself into a concern for what matters. In this play of what matters, Manning argues, everything is in play: in the

event of anthropologist and gorilla, “the quality of air, the sound of breath on metal, on fur, on skin, the feel of paws on earth, on cement, the heaviness of limbs at play, the grumbings of stomachs, the pull of muscles, the rustlings of fallen leaves.” To have a care, to be entered into the moment of concern, of regard, then, is to have an “ecological sensibility to life-living.... An ecology of practices. A mode of existence. An activist philosophy.”

Manning’s essay is a rich opening of concern, made even more so as it is crossed and further complicated by a consideration of autism and autistic perception. Like the *The Lure of Whitehead* itself, it’s hard to know how to say enough in regards to her essay. Rather than continue to try, I will simply use this invocation of a sensibility to turn to James Williams’ essay, “Whitehead’s Curse?” Focusing on Whitehead’s less read works on education, Williams proposes not an ecological sensibility, but the development of a sense of vision, a divination, as he calls it, that is “an ability to sense what is not directly at stake in an activity and not directly at hand. It is a cultivated capacity to imagine and feel the dynamic and emotional promise and threats around an activity.” A cultivation of imagination that is, Williams argues with a quick turn to Derrida, infectious; as Whitehead says in *Aims of Education*: “Imagination is a contagious disease.” Yet this disease is itself a contamination that makes possible an attunement to the rhythms of history and the adventure of education. And it is the adventure of education that Williams’ is after, an adventure that Whitehead designates as a certain Romance that is, yes, animated by imagination, but also guided by principles. Although the teaching of facts is important, Williams argues that for Whitehead it is equally important for students to learn principles. In a somewhat sobering reminder of the work of the teacher, Whitehead argues in the *Aims of Education* that “whatever be the detail with which you cram your students, the chance of his (*sic*) meeting in after-life exactly that detail is almost infinitesimal.” Beyond simple facts principles, as “contracted habits of mind”, are learned and practiced ways the mind will react to the new facts that students will necessarily encounter after they have left the classroom. As Williams argues, “principles formed through habitual contraction prepare us for the unforeseen, for the event.”

But, Williams argues, Whitehead is not simply interested in these future events. In a radical gesture, he is also concerned for the singularity of the event of the encounter between a teacher and a student. On the one hand, this means that Whitehead has little patience for “doctrines of equal capacities” among students. Rather, each student is singular and cannot be reduced to a particular case of a general type. This also means, though, that assessment cannot be reduced to a general type, applicable to each student regardless of their own singular learning. As Williams summarizes this,

Whitehead's "deep thesis is that there is no *deep and lasting* learning where teaching lacks romantic adventure, tailored to individual pupils. It is also that there is no such teaching where assessment destroys the ambition and practice of singular attention to the thrill of discovery in practice. Finally, it is that each event plays a part in this dynamic struggle and unfolding." And so the aim of education is not the accumulation of a set of facts to be tested and continually assessed, but a being lured into a certain habit of mind for the future, a habit of romance, adventure, and imagination.

In "Whitehead's Involution of an Outside Chance" Peter Canning is also concerned by a certain habit of mind. Unlike Williams, though, Canning's concern is to develop practices for living within our habits while not becoming resigned to habitual living. "Evolution," Canning suggests, "seems to have designed our cognition to recognize and predict habitual behavior, even as we ourselves generate unpredictable behavior." We live by our habits, anticipating the habitual practices of others for our survival, but life itself is a movement into an unpredictable future, a future that cannot be known. We are, as Canning says, in the odd predicament of "anticipating the unforeseeable." For Canning, this concern for habit as the context of a living future arises within a clinical setting, so that on his reading "Whitehead's challenge to the age of science is, at its deepest stratum, where 'it hath no bottom,' more clinical than critical." Which is an astounding claim; in its own way maybe the most radical claim in *The Lure of Whitehead*. Given that Whitehead was strongly inspired by William James there have been attempts to read him in a psychological context; most importantly here we can point to the work being led by Michel Weber and the Whitehead Psychology Nexus. But Canning's claim seems to go beyond these attempts, suggesting that Whitehead's experimental practice is fundamentally clinical, even prior to its being philosophical. As Canning says of Whitehead's critique of the scientism that dominates the modern age: "The claim to reduce the characteristic powers of life to an accidental result of the physical laws governing it elements is not simply an error; it is a symptom of the *mental* illness that affects human nature generally.... The delusion of scientism goes by the name of 'mechanism,' and is grounded in the notion of 'universal law.'" And it is the nature of this clinical practice to experience the life of the living outside the law bound structures of mechanism which reduce that life to an epiphenomenal accident.

With Whitehead, Canning argues that within a clinical practice of life "what is relevant to the *meaning* of life is to *take the point of view of life itself*." Although life is oriented towards a past that it remembers and a future that it anticipates, from the point of view of life the future is invented. And it is only the living that feels that living and living into the future are important.

If the future is open to possibility we must at this point abandon Whitehead, Canning argues, for “Whitehead is unable to assign a definite ontological status to pure possibility.” Here, a turn is made to Spinoza as a return to the foundations of metaphysics, and in particular the positing of the idea as already real and material. “[The idea] *is* the power. Pure or abstract possibility, Platonic Form, is ontologically insufficient, an unrealized idea, whereas Spinoza is able to dismiss the notion of possibility altogether.” And yet, a place remains for possibility, just not where we, or Whitehead, have traditionally thought it. So it is rather that “if real possibility is Spinoza’s material idea - Whitehead’s ‘real potentiality’ - then to say it evolves by chance is to say it is the creatable or discoverable power of immanent mind.” Which is to say “Life itself is the creator of possibility - including its own.”

Within this call for taking up the point of life Canning insists, in a number of places, that life and the living must be distinguished from the algorithms of law and machines, from its algorithmic simulation. Drawing a sharp line between technology and life, Canning posits that “a true science of life must be able to distinguish between *being* a machine and *building* a machine, between *being controlled by* a program and *designing* a program.” Cutting across this claim the essays by Luciana Parisi and A.J. Nocek trouble any such easy distinctions between technology and life, between law and chance.

In her breathtakingly innovative contribution “Cutting Away from Smooth Space: Alfred North Whitehead’s Extensive Continuum in Parametric Software,” Parisi begins with extension, first addressed by Whitehead in one of his very early essays “La theorie relationiste de l’espace.” Working with the abstractions of ontological computer science and formal ontology, the decision to begin with extension allows a propositioning of Whitehead’s mereotopological conceptualization of the extensive continuum with conceptualizations of space being produced within practices of parametric design. Of concern for Parisi is the algorithmic production of space and the chaotic opening of possibility that is now being actualized in computer programming. This concern offers not only a new understanding of computational practices and productions but also a novel articulation of Whitehead’s figuring of actuality and potentiality, infinity and determination, extension and relation.

To focus here primarily on the latter, Parisi begins with a reminder that Whitehead himself begins with prehensions, his technical term for the ways in feelings are felt by any and all actual occasions. Whitehead begins, in other words, not with objects or subjects, but with the conceptual and physical relations of feeling that give rise to objects and subjects. The process of prehension, Parisi continues, is a process of determination, what Whitehead calls the process of concrescence. Actualities become

through a process of determination amidst an infinite field of conceptual and material objects, enacting a decision to feel in this way and not that, to feel oneself as this rather than that. With this, Parisi argues that Whitehead introduces two ontologies of infinity: an infinity of past actual objects, and the infinity of discrete eternal objects. Now Whitehead's theory of eternal objects is notoriously difficult; but very generally, for Parisi eternal objects, as pure possibilities, are discrete infinities. "They do not define," Parisi argues, "the external relation between actual entities in terms of infinitesimally smaller point of conjunction... Eternal objects are not temporal forms of relations, but are permanent and infinite quantities... They are *relata* in the uniform schema of relational essences, where each eternal object is located within all of its possible relationships." This is, of course incredibly technical. The upshot, though, is that any actuality, as the achievement of a process of determination amidst an infinity of prior actual objects and the infinite possibility of eternal objects, is always infected with infinity. An infinity that now, as constitutive of determinate actuality, becomes the ground of relation between actualities. "Relations are," Parisi proposes, "spatio-temporal actualities, and define events as an irreversible disjunction within the order of actualities and a unilateral conjunction of eternal objects. From this standpoint, the extensive continuum of actualities that determines their material ground of sequential connection and recursive calculations splits itself into thousands of quantities, the asymmetrical reassemblage of which becomes a nexus of actualities or a space-event. The extensive continuum is, to say it with Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenic." Or, to say it with Whitehead, creativity is a becoming of actuality where the many become one and are increased by one. To return, then, to Parisi's immediate matter of concern, computational algorithms can be thought of as actual objects of prehension, selecting data within the formal systems of their operation while also always being infected by external data that cannot be computed. Which is also to say that "the mereotopological schema of eternal objects and actual entities proposed by Whitehead affords metaphysical support to what in information theory is increasingly becoming unavoidable: the presence of the randomness at the heart of formalism." An unleashing, in other words, of possibility.

In his essay "Imaginative Chemistry: Synthetic Ecologies and the Construction of Life," A.J. Nocek takes up, again, within the most recent research in Artificial Life, and often against its own assumptions, the question of life itself. But in a way similar to Whitehead's radical empiricism, an empiricism of saying yes to experience, Nocek argues that "an ontology of life must be fundamentally more and not less, inclusive, capable of accounting for the diversity of actual and potential life, both organic and inorganic." And it is last - the life of inorganic matter, or what he also designates with

Deleuze and Guattari as “a life proper to matter” - that is Nocek’s main concern. Drawing on Whitehead’s determination of life as “a bid for freedom,” Nocek proposes an ecological and anarchic sense of life: life is “the indeterminacy insisting within order,” lurking, as Whitehead says, within the interstices of the cell, as a “pure feeling of ‘anarchic’ disorder within every occasion of experience.” “Life,” then, “is more of an ecological question than a biological one.”

Within artificial life research life is often understood as a product, a living that is distinct from as arising from the non-living. But with Whitehead, and Deleuze and Guattari and a host of others, Nocek proposes that life is a process. “Metaphysically,” Nocek argues, “all such divisions [between the living and the non-living] abstract from a more primary, impersonal vitality.... *a life* is what gives rise to *lives*.” With this it becomes possible to risk the claim that artificial life has already, in some sense, been achieved with practices of wet-life synthesis; to risk saying that “the productivity of matter exploited within the scientist’s test tube might be celebrated in non-reductive terms, in terms that resist the tendency to see absolute divisions in nature, the living and the non-living, and affirm, instead, the conditions for chemical experimentation to facilitate the vitality of matter.” Which is to say, a testimony to non-organic life. This, of course, is a risk that will raise a host of new questions and new problems. But these are problems to experiment from and with, and not to simply dismiss; they are problems of life. And with this, life becomes what Nocek names a “real abstraction,” generative of an experience within the laboratory that can achieve a certain resonance with experience outside the laboratory. Which is to conclude, with Nocek, that “to say that wet-life synthesis testifies to non-organic life is to say that we have posed the Whiteheadian problem for ourselves: to experience experiments on the chemical universe nomadically through imaginative construction.”

But of course, this is not a conclusion at all. This has simply been to trace out one possible path through this collection. Certainly a more philosophical path could be made through this work as well as other less-philosophical paths. And clearly Nathan Brown’s “The Technics of Prehension: On the Photography of Nicholas Baier,” Roland Faber’s “Multiplicity and Mysticism: Toward A New Mystagogy of Becoming,” and Didier Debaise’s “Possessive Subjects: A Speculative Interpretation of Nonhumans” all deserve much more than a mention. But for now, and by way of a real conclusion, I want to return to the question of Why? Although the philosophical answer suggested in the Introduction is certainly right, I am not sure it is enough. Here, then, it might be possible to salvage some value from Graham Harman’s otherwise rather disappointing contribution, “Whitehead and Schools X, Y, and Z.” As the conclusion of his own essay, Harman accuses Whitehead of producing an impossible world, a world of pure



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impossibility, of suffocating relationality. “If everything,” Harman says, “were completely determined by its prehensions of all other entities in the world, all entities ought to be thoroughly exhausted by their current relations. They would harbor no residue crying out for the right to assert itself beyond the current state of the world; there would be no cause for rebellion or uprising among things.” Although the conditional fails here as an interpretation of Whitehead, Harman does seem to be pointing to a historical condition beyond the merely philosophical out of which the current revival of Whitehead is taking place. For our world is becoming a world of suffocating relationality, a relationality that often goes simply by the name globalization. Our world is a world being relationally suffocated by the threat of nuclear annihilation, ecological collapse, the parasitic spread of capitalist empire. In this world we do at times seem at a loss to assert anything beyond our suffocating, choosing in our electoral possibility the chaos of collapse as the only possible future. Yet each of the essays gathered here, in their own way, is interested in being interesting, attempting to care, to feel again possibilities that might matter in our shared future. Here, and for a moment, Whitehead might offer a possibility for instigating practices of novelty, for making space in these globalizations to insist on the primacy of care and creativity as the possibility of life.

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