THE URIZEN OF WHITEHEADIAN PROCESS THOUGHT

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Abstract:
In order to assess the future status and applicability of process modes of thought, three steps are suggested: first, a systematic account of *Process and Reality*'s conception of philosophical speculation; second, its application to the targeted question; third a complementary specification with the help of Whitehead's insistence on duty and reverence.

Keywords : A. N. Whitehead, W. Blake, Philosophy, Process, *Process and Reality*, Coherence, Consistency, Applicability, Philosophical life

> *Eternals! I hear your call gladly.*
> *Dictate swift winged words, and fear not*
> *To unfold your dark visions of torment.*

William Blake, The Book of Urizen [1794], Preludium

For a fully-fledged Whiteheadian process thinker, the future status and applicability of process modes of thought is unknown in principle. And we should gladly rejoice at this state of affairs because the very meaning of our lives depends upon this existential elbow-room. We live in an open universe that only partially allows us to foresee events, all the more so if they belong to the highest level of complexity known to us: our common—intersubjective—existence.

Of course, we could take advantage of our knowledge of the past history of Whiteheadian scholarship and of a sharp (and preferably dispassionate) assessment of its current state to anticipate its likely *immediate* outcome. Such speculation will not be proposed here. We would indeed need to carefully peruse the history of Whiteheadian studies and its contemporary context before being able to frame the most applicable imaginative generalization and such a study does not seem appropriate for the present context. For one thing, we would need far more space than it is allowed; for another, by doing so we would wager on the bare efficacy of the actors whereas what we need is to trust their creativity and, most of all, their vision. (While the efficacy of the past pushes experience in the furrow of habit, the creativity of the present, lured by some escha-tological commitment, re-creates it moment by moment.)[1]

Alternatively, we could speculate on the rhythmic development of the world of ideas in the West. There are obviously conceptual rhythms that frame the history of ideas and Whitehead himself would have insisted that there always will be novel conceptual epochs to come. The well-known contrast between pluralistic empiricism and dualistic rationalism (see for instance the opening chapter of James' *Pluralistic Universe*) is a bit too broad to allow the development of an applicable picture in the context of our present discussion. If we consider the last centuries of human thought, the following dialectical movement—displaying a shift of epicentre from Italy to Germany and later to the Anglo-Saxon world (the latter constituting a far more diffuse entity because of its world-wide cultural hegemony)—can nevertheless be identified. Whereas the Renaissance lauded the perfection of static proportions, Baroque art and thought, heir to the Counter-Reformation of 1630–1750, stressed movement, change and growth.

The reaction of the *Aufklärung* was swift: secularization—with its requirements of rationality, optimism and progress—spread its dogmatic wings over the entire social landscape (remember Foucault's *grand renfermement*). With Romanticism, the emphasis returned to feeling, becoming and opacity (or inexhaustibleness), sometimes even irrationality. Then the positivism of A. Comte and later of the *Wiener Kreis* (soon to be exported to the USA) constituted a new *Kehre*, promptly counter-balanced by the first process publications of F. Nietzsche and É. Boutroux, but also of C.S. Peirce, W. James and A.N. Whitehead (not to forget their conceptual relation, H. Bergson).

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[1] On the heuristics of the creative advance, see our third section in *Whitehead's Pancreativism. The Basics*. Foreword by Nicholas Rescher, Frankfurt / Paris, Ontos Verlag, 2006.

The conclusion could be: process thinkers can be optimistic because their mode of thought has not yet developed all its potentialities or become generally recognized, even thoughscience is nowadays totally processual. But they should not be dazzled either: "in its turn every philosophy will suffer a deposition."[2]

A more suitable, if not promising, analysis follows the path suggested by *Process and Reality*'s (1929/1978; hereafter *PR*) seminal definition of speculative philosophy. It could help to understand the next historical move and its conditions of possibility. Before following the path, we need however to trace it through the sometimes wild conceptual territory Whitehead has left us to explore.

Hence the following three steps: first, a systematic account of *Process and Reality*'s conception of philosophical speculation; second, its application to the question of the future status and applicability of process thought; third, a complementary specification with the help of Whitehead's insistence on duty and reverence.

1. Process and Reality's Definition of Speculative Philosophy

The marrow of Whitehead's understanding of the meaning and significance of (speculative) philosophy is expressed in the first two pages of his *magnum opus*. Unfortunately, *Process and Reality*'s first section is not as straightforward as one could expect from such a prolegomenal statement and the basic criteria used—coherence, consistency, applicability, adequacy and necessity—seem at first reading somewhat fuzzy.

The reader who has taken the time to tame Whitehead's vision can however avoid the Charybdis of relativism and the Scylla of dogmatism in his or her interpretation. The twofold leading idea is not extravagant at all: on the one hand, each criterion has a proper weight or *raison d'être* in the argument; on the other, only their togetherness makes sense. We will not go all over again the long argument required to establish this thesis since it has been unfolded elsewhere;[3] only a short reminder of its conclusions will suffice here. The main concern should be not to explain away the richness of the picture proposed to us.

On the one hand, we need to distinguish the rational requirements of coherence and consistency from the empirical requirements of applicability and adequacy.

The requirement of "logical consistency" amounts to "the exemplification of general logical notions in specific instances, and the principles of inference" (*PR* 3). It obviously refers to Aristotle's sophistication of the substantialistic logic of common-sense, stabilized so to speak by Boole's *Investigation of the Laws of Thought* (1854) in terms of the principle of identity, the principle of contradiction and the excluded middle. In plain language, contradiction amongst categories is to be avoided.

The requirement of "coherence" seeks to establish a categoreal democracy in which each category has some genuine weight (independence) and makes sense only in its togetherness with the others (interdependence). In other words, each category has to bring something specific to the discussion without breaking its semantic ties with other categories. Each has to mirror in its own way the presence of the others. The chief culprit that Whitehead constantly denounces is Descartes and his totally incoherent substance dualism or bi-substantialism.

The requirement of "applicability" corresponds to the request for *some* real interpretative power. There is, in other words, no need to build fully coherent and totally consistent systems if they have no concrete explanatory power whatsoever.

The requirement of "adequacy" asks that "everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme" (*PR* 3). It obviously constitutes an ideal, a *focus imaginarius*, but it is by no means an innocuous one: radical empiricism shows through it.

On the other hand, we need to articulate the four criteria—first, respectively at the rational and the empirical level; second, at their *necessary* conjunctive level.

First, Whitehead makes clear that coherence is far more important than consistency: contradictions (unlike paradoxes) are quite easy to fix; lack of coherence, however, definitively cripples a system. "Entia non sunt diminuenda sine necessitate," as Roberto Poli claims after Hedwig Conrad Martius. For its part, applicability requires some empirical cash value, while the unreachable adequacy is the horizon towards which applicability strives.

Second, one has to recognize that what matters most is the lure towards adequation,[4] not the

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[2] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, and New York, Macmillan, 1929. Reprint: New York, Macmillan Free Press, 1969. *Corrected edition*: Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York and London, The Free Press. A division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. and Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1978, p. 7.

[3] M. Weber, *Whitehead's Pancreativism, op. cit.*

[4] Whitehead does not speak of greater adequacy, only of adequation—hence the *focus imaginarius* effect involved in his use of the criterion.

one towards full consistent coherence. As Jean Wahl (1888–1974), among others, saw clearly: the point of British neo-realism is to understand each thing, not *all* things; lack of consistency is preferable to lack of applicability.[5]

But this still does not bring together the four criteria. In Whiteheadian parlance, the unity (or the fouring) of the four is *necessity*. In a sort of Kantian move (equally reminiscent of the *Timaeus*), we have to understand necessity as the seal or categoreal keystone that brings together the two rational and the two empirical criteria. It does so through a peculiar wager on the rationality of the concrete *and* on human beings' capacity to reach it. There is most definitely fitness—no perfect match—of our cognitive tools to reality, from the biological and the cultural standpoints alike. This animal faith of sorts furthermore binds everyone together as a human community dwelling in a welcoming cosmos.

There are two levels in our claim: factual and existential. First, the fitness of our categories is the result of a threefold process of atunement: phylo-genetic (Spencer: the categories that are *a priori* for the individual are *a posteriori* for the species), onto-genetic (Piaget: cognitive categories are developed through sensorimotor and pre-operational stages) and koino-genetic (Bateson: the convergence of individual consciousness is achieved through learning).

Second, each and every one of us is invited to consciously subscribe to this *genetic* necessity. This constitutes the philosophical commitment *par excellence*, but it is by no means restricted to the philosopher, professional or otherwise. To summarize: the simple single-foldness of the four is to be found at the level of the existential commitment of the individual who ratifies through her actions the togetherness of the many and thereby goes beyond it. In ancient parlance, purged of any dualistic trend, we have to fully acknowledge both our terrestrial roots and our celestial destiny.

Now there is a very simple concept to name this community in the act: common sense or *sensus communis*, in which theory and practice, the rational and the empirical, *necessarily* converge. Granted, we need a refined version of common sense in order to avoid the negative connotations of the term. Arendt has provided interesting insights here around the notions of intersubjectivity and interobjectivity,[6] as did Husserl with his concept of "Urdoxa"[7] and Merleau-Ponty with the "perceptive faith"[8] that characterizes our belonging to the world: not only are we sure that what we perceive is real, but a momentary suspension of perception does not nullify that certainty. A

similar, more recent attempt actually took place in Whiteheadian studies with Griffin's *hard-core common-sense notions*,[9] that qualify the universal and primordial beliefs that human beings do not question *in practice*: their fundamental freedom, the causal efficacy of their actions, the existence of a real world, of values and of a temporal drift. What is *fundamentally* (necessarily) reasonable is what does not endanger the Urdoxastic vital—so to speak carnal—link we maintain with the perceived world.

In sum, the concept of necessity that Whitehead activates in the first Part of *Process and Reality* embodies the fundamental conjunction of the theoretical and the practical sides of life.

2. Developmental Typology

What can we learn from this typology to provide an answer to the debated question—the future status and applicability of process modes of thought? To operationalize the interpretational grid we have just skimmed through, it seems advisable to introduce two further distinctions: between insiders and outsiders of a discipline—in our case, between Whiteheadians and non-Whiteheadians—and between conviction and persuasion. The former names the straightforward difference existing between Whiteheadian scholars and "specialists" who are neither familiar with the "philosophy of organism" nor likely to get acquainted with it unless some good reason is provided; the latter is the by-product of centuries of rhetorical meditations.

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[5] "L'Anglais veut comprendre chaque chose et non toutes choses; il préfère la contradiction dans l'ensemble de la théorie à la méconnaissance d'un caractère de fait particulier" (Jean Wahl, *Les Philosophies pluralistes d'Angleterre et d'Amérique* [Thèse principale], Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine, 1920, p. 87). See for instance what Whitehead says of religion and dogma in *Religion in the Making* (1926), chapter II.

[6] "A three-fold commonness" (Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. One-volume edition, San Diego / New York / London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 50).

[7] The Urdoxastic theme is present throughout Husserl's thinking, from the published work to the *Nachlaß*: in §104 of the first volume of the *Ideen* (1913), in his "pre-Copernician" essay ("Die Urarche Erde bewegt sich nicht" [1934], in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of E. Husserl*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 307-325), and in the *Introduction* of *Erfahrung und Urteil* (1939/1954).

[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible. Suivi de Notes de travail*. Texte établi par Claude Lefort, accompagné d'un avertissement et d'une postface, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Idées, 1964, pp. 17ff.

[9] David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1989, esp. pp. 90-91.

To convince someone of something, the speaker needs to talk to the intelligence of his/her audience; to persuade, she needs to mobilize their will. To be convinced is not to be persuaded: I can know for sure that smoking tobacco is lethal in the (more or less) long term but as long as I don't act accordingly, this knowledge is useless. To be persuaded is not to be convinced either: I can refrain from smoking for reasons totally foreign to the scientific ones usually broadcasted (say to keep my soul clean and prevent unfortunate metempsychosis) or even for no reason whatsoever—simply because such decision has been spontaneously taken and that it worked so to speak *ex opere operato* (remember the *will to believe*). What does it say about the stakes of rationality? First, the bi-directionality of this argument (the fact that it works both ways) is appropriate only if the idea of a universal reason is obliterated by a healthy relativism. There are no "right" reasons to stop smoking; everyone can have a different one, which can be convincing and perhaps even persuading to others. Of course, science is not a fairy tale and its claim to objectivity is well established by internal perfection and external confirmation (as Einstein would say), but science does not address the core of our experience. This brings us to the second point: the fundamental rational—not experiential—opacity of the common world.

Now that we are equipped with these complementary concepts, we can rephrase the question of this special issue: under what categoreal conditions will scholars not only be convinced but also persuaded of the virtues (rather than the vices) of Whiteheadian process thought? In order to keep our discussion focussed, we will add an additional filter inspired by the current way in which debates are conducted (or prevented) in academia. That filter is not dogmatic but heuristic; it constitutes less a bold claim than an obvious simplification that allows to obtain promptly a provisional synthesis.

Let us start with our hypothetical universal fact (or filter): specialists (almost) never seriously talk to scholars who do not happen to share the very same expertise—unless these fall under the category of "students" and in that case they are equally likely to talk *at* them. Exceptions put aside (and they are all the more remarkable), debates are usually taking place among the happy few who share the same concern about one field of expertise and do not really need to expose endlessly their presuppositions and the meaning and significance of their concepts. In short: expert knowledge is never put at risk by a truly open discussion.

Besides the equally obvious power games that take place within a given domain, what strikes the internal observer is the emphasis on *rational* conviction. *Rational* points here at the nature of the arguments that tend to focus on issues of coherence and consistency. *Empirical* conviction would animate another theatre, as we will shortly see.

Specialists have that faculty of enjoying only the philosophical writings of their elected single philosopher. Philosophy is clearly a very personal matter and one can see the affection that can bind, through the ages, the reader and the author. But hagiography should be avoided at all costs, for the simple reason that it is the sure sign of the imminence of inert ideas. Within the Whiteheadian field itself, the accent tends to fall more on bare conceptual matters than on empirical ones. Hence a first conclusion: what the specialist can achieve among his/her peers is to see his/her interpretation recognized as consistent and/or coherent. But such consensual discussions have absolutely no impact whatsoever on the outsiders: in the very same way that Whiteheadians are not likely to entertain the reconstruction of the late Heidegger's puzzle with his own categories (e.g. *Raum*, *Eingeräumtes*, *Freigegebenes*, *Grenze*, *Wesen*, *Begriff*), Heideggerians have no interest, say, in the togetherness of "Many," "One" and "Creativity." Nobody denies that the concept "horismos," that is of horizon or boundary, can be activated in both cases, but such cross-elucidatory path seems a waste of time and, if not, it would be foolhardy to proceed without first devoting some serious thoughts to the conditions of possibility of such a dialogue (something, by the way, that is precisely allowed by the intricate levels of meaning that are systematized in Whitehead's definition of speculative philosophy). To further exemplify: this rationally convincing type of work has been done by the journal *Process Studies* that has no doubt firmly established excellent standards in Whiteheadian scholarship and thereby created a "process community" but, like all other specialised journals, it has done so by *securing* the field.

If we now turn our glance on the empirical side of Whitehead's definition, the converse situation is expected. On the one hand, internal debates are often too entangled in conceptual issues to really worry about their pragmatic cash-value, that are taken for granted. On the other hand, external debates are the place where an advantage in applicability can make all the difference. In the case of Whiteheadian scholarship, quantum physicists constitute perhaps the best example of such an interest expressed from the standpoint of the applicability of Whitehead's categories (most

recently: Shimony, Stapp, Malin, Hättich, Epperson and others). In other words, whereas insiders are expected to be convinced mainly by rational fiddlings, outsiders are likely to be convinced only by the manifestation of a significant differential in applicability. To repeat: we do not deny that this heuristic sketch is in part an imaginative simplification—what matters are the pragmatic consequences that could be drawn from it.

So far we have two general cases: insiders and outsiders are convinced by different reasons—but when are they persuaded? Quenching one's intelligence is one thing, acting accordingly is another. What makes the difference between conviction and persuasion? When does philosophical reflection become compelling? When does it necessarily impact behaviour? Could it be simply when there is a total correlation between the life of the philosopher and his/her rational *and* empirical concerns? Here is for instance what Flanagan claims:

> Simply put, the attraction of James the philosopher is that he is to me the best example I know of a person doing philosophy; there is no hiding the person behind the work, no way of discussing the work without the person, no way to make believe that there is a way to do philosophy that is not personal.[10]

The heuristic hypothesis inspired by the reading of Whitehead's definition of speculative philosophy is thus the following: persuasion strikes when rational and empirical conviction merge, an event that takes place under the spell so to speak of an individual who is precisely embodying that synthesis.

To conclude our exercise of applied typology: we argue that insiders and outsiders are likely to be convinced of the relevance of some form of Whiteheadian process thought for different reasons. But this still does not say much about their persuasion. Living philosophy needs to be a *lived* philosophy. Whiteheadians will not only convince their fellows philosophers and scientists but persuade them of the value of their categories when they will be themselves living philosophical—spiritual if you like—examples. Socrates would have talked about the call of authenticity, Whitehead provides two concepts to specify this in a perhaps more pedestrian manner: duty and reverence.

changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.[11]

This claim, which occurs in the specific context of a philosophy of education lecture, has a direct relevance to our discussion. First because it points at the "religious" dimension of education that mirrors the spiritual dimension of existence. Second, because it is easy to see at work in these lines the conditions of possibility of the "creative advance" itself. To argue that the core concept of the late Whitehead is the "creative advance of nature" is an inspiring move that discloses three fundamental characteristics of all processes—creativity, efficacy and vision.

All actualities (according to their grade) are *creative* in so far as they embody new contrasts and intensities in a new extensive region (in the technical sense of *Process and Reality*'s Part IV). By definition, the extensive region occupied by the new actuality was never occupied by any actuality and will never be occupied again by some other actuality; furthermore, the exact same contrasts were not possible before and will not be possible after the given concrescence; the intensity of its experience, in so far as it is eminently private, is sepulchral, incomparable.

Actualities are *efficacious* through their structural (objective and superjective) world-loyalty. Every actuality springs from the efficacy of its past (or prehended "actual world") and, in its turn, occasions a certain type of future. The comparison of embodied intensities is only possible in this structural context, i.e., *ex post*.

Actualities are *visionary* through the instantiation of a trend towards higher intensities of experience. The sole interplay of creativity and efficacy does not guarantee any creative advance at all, only the ruthlessness of existence. Creativity is indeed totally wild while efficacy imposes a blind necessity upon the creative outbursts. It has been often remarked that Whitehead was a Victorian gentleman whose supreme optimism had been directly inspired by the techno-scientific utopia of his peers (cf. Francis Bacon and Thomas Henry Huxley, perhaps tamed by Samuel Butler), which is itself inseparable from the *Zeit-*

3. Duty and Reverence in the Light of the Creative Advance

According to Whitehead,

> Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have

[10] Owen Flanagan, "Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It", in Ruth Anna Putnam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 47.
[11] Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, New York and London, The MacMillan Company and Williams and Norgate, 1929. Reprint: New York, The Free Press, 1967, p. 17.

geist of nineteenth-century Romanticism, of Darwinian evolutionism, and of a blind faith in the accelerating industrial revolution and in the civilizing importance of British colonialism.

In sum, from the perspective of human beings, creativity is indeed the crux of the creative advance, but it is by no means the entire story: efficacy involves duty and vision involves reverence. Ignoring duty and reverence would be equivalent to act as if we were stuck at Piaget's preoperational stage (roughly ages 2-7, when motor skills are coordinated but without any significant mental actions on objects)—or even perhaps at the sensorimotor stage (roughly ages 0-2). The thirst for creativity would be unquenchable and its likely outcome probably full of sound and fury.

4. Conclusion—Creativity and Philosophical Commitment

The strong processual context advocated by Whitehead asks us to become worthy of the creative advance, which involves preciously cultivating duty and reverence. The individual who achieves this worthiness will be persuasive. The future of Whiteheadian scholarship depends indeed upon creative individuals who are able to take upon themselves the living ideal of philosophy and to be thus a vibrant example for their community and beyond. But isolated individuals, whatever their creativity, cannot achieve much without institutional support (and when they do, this gives only a meagre idea of what they could have done with proper support). Last but not least, without vision, the creative individual can benefit from whatever structural support, his/her output will only be the result of chance backed by necessity. In this year 2008, a Whiteheadian scholarly tri-une archetype comes to mind: John Cobb, Claremont's *Center for Process Studies* and a certain Christian vision for the common good. In Whitehead's words:

> Morality of outlook is inseparably conjoined with generality of outlook. The antithesis between the general good and the individual interest can be abolished only when the individual is such that its interest is the general good, thus exemplifying the loss of the minor intensities in order to find them again with finer composition in a wider sweep of interest.[12]

Right-wing philosophy, that roots itself in a standpoint that seeks to promote only the interests of one half of one per cent of the population, is a tragic oxymoron—full stop.

Now, neither creativity nor vision can be taught. Vision can be shared or suggested by interplay of scholarship and commitment—not learned. Creativity is a universal gift that has to be activated by the individual who decidedly takes the risk of adventure. When Whitehead speaks of adventure he obviously thinks more of a successful Victorian exploration than to the tragedy of the elusive authenticity of existence and it is thus advisable to temper his fundamental optimism with the help of William James, who has indeed shown unambiguously that the philosophical quest is intrinsically risky (remember Plato's "beautiful risk"). Efficacy is the easiest bit in so far as it involves only (!) material and intellectual resources that can be pragmatically made use of.

Who else than a prophetic process poet could provide the right banner for our speculations? In Blake's *œuvre*, *Urizen* refers both to the *horizon* of our civilization and to *your reason* as it shapes our common destiny.[13]

When reason is bifurcative, reductive, when it most desires "joy without pain" and a "solid without fluctuation" (*The Book of Urizen, 1794*, Chapter 2), it is a closed horizon that is in the making and a doomed future that torments if not threatens all forms of life. Persuasion is in vain. When reason is holistic, the open horizon of the creative advance can again animate our very existence and, through duty and reverence, announce liberation. This must be the reason why education—the art of the utilisation of knowledge—has to be, in Whitehead's lexicon, religious.

According to process philosophers, "[t]he problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become."[14] The same holds for schools of thought.

[12] *Process and Reality* 15.
[13] Cf. Peter Ackroyd, *Blake : A Biography*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
[14] William James, *Principles of Psychology* [1890]. Authorized Edition in two volumes. Volume Two, New York / London, Henry Holt & Co. / The MacMillan Company, 1890, Vol. I, p. 288, debating Schopenhauer.