

Stengers on Whitehead: A Short Introduction to the Bifurcation of Nature

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1. Introduction

Speculative metaphysics have recently re-entered conversations among the philosophical avant-garde, and in this revival the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead is receiving greatly deserved attention. The extent to which Whitehead has been overlooked by philosophers in analytic and continental traditions—save for a handful of American theologians and small groups of dedicated Deleuzians, actor-network theorists, and science studies scholars—is now being redressed in exciting ways. Indeed, few philosophers in the twentieth century have been serious about thinking “beyond the human condition,” as Deleuze would say, many even going so far as to stay that the task is impossible. However, as Stengers notes in her introduction to *Thinking with Whitehead*, this situation is changing, and Whitehead’s influence can now be visibly seen amongst “ecologists, feminists, educators, [and] theologians” (p. 11). They, now joined by a tenuously labeled group of thinkers known as the speculative realists, have much to learn from Whitehead, whose insights these divergent groups are discovering for the first time; this being particularly true of the continental tradition with whom Stengers is explicitly engaging in her text.

While the often diverse and subtle influence of Whitehead on these thinkers makes it hard to claim that there are many card-carrying “Whiteheadians” in the academy today there is a sense in which *not* being a “Whiteheadian” in the generic sense is a better way to practice the mode of speculative philosophy which Whitehead advocated. That is to say a speculative philosophy capable of “transform[ing] the landscape of questions” (p. 7), in a situated and particular way, is a better way *to think with* Whitehead than to dogmatically stick to his theories and texts as though they stood as some ultimate truth to which all manner of foreign situations need only be applied. Thus new applications and engagements with Whitehead, like Stengers’ ambitious book, can be seen as both welcome additions to Whiteheadian scholarship, and, more importantly, as key maneuvers that carry forward Whitehead’s speculative method. This paper introduces Whitehead as a thinker within this new context, and in terms of Stengers’ helpful account of Whitehead’s philosophy. In particular Whitehead’s critique of the bifurcation of nature (as first articulated in his work *The Concept of Nature*) is explored, as a platform from which Whitehead’s later work can be better understood.

2. Thinking with Whitehead

In one sense, then, Stengers’ book signals a return to Whitehead in the midst of a newly emerging epoch in human history marked by globalization, climate change, mass species extinction, and the emergence of the anthropocene. Yet this

return to metaphysics is also a catching-up-with a thinker far ahead of his time. We are not yet (for the most part) thinkers of a Whiteheadian type. This despite the fact that the philosophy set forth by Whitehead is now almost a hundred years old (an adventure that we might say began in earnest in Boston in 1924). But Whitehead's is a philosophy that has aged well; in fact it seems a true statement that we are not yet living in the full wake of Whitehead's philosophy; the event has happened but we are still only scarcely aware of its aftershocks, and there are still too few people catching the crest of this speculative wave, unaware of the vast bohemian landscape revealed from its height. In this double sense we are both ahead of Whitehead in time whilst still behind him in thought.

Surely, Whitehead is a philosopher of multiplicities and the generator of dozens of complex, interlocking concepts too technical in detail to cover in a short introduction; however, we can point to some definite strengths in Whitehead the person, which will help us to better approach his overall project. Whitehead's strength lies in his rather integral mixture of different personalities: a poet coming to the defense of qualities, values, and feeling; a cosmologist driven by the mathematical pursuit of elegance and coherence; and a philosopher driven by tentativeness, technical precision, and a deep appreciation for critical thinking. These three personalities—the poet, cosmologist, and philosopher—are often forcefully divided in science, philosophy, and the arts, and this strange blend of qualities make for a different kind of thinker than many of the philosophers Whitehead engages (Descartes, Locke, and Hume among them).

Further, the strangeness and strength of Whitehead's philosophy lies in its non-Kantian philosophical base;¹ we might even go so far as to say, with some provisions, that Whitehead's is a bizarrely nonmodern philosophy written in the mode of the most modern of intellectual types—the mathematician. Part of Whitehead's unexpected philosophical maneuvering may stem from the fact that he is not a philosopher by training, and, as Stengers notes, “he seems to be unaware that there is a ‘before Kant,’ when philosophers considered themselves free to speculate about God, the world, and the human soul, and an ‘after Kant,’ in which, except for a few old-fashioned naïfs, they have learned the lesson of human finitude” (p. 8).

This relationship to Kant (or absence of one) generates a schizoid relationship to modernity; as though Whitehead's speculative philosophy were situated both “before” modernity and “after” it simultaneously (and we are obliged to say that “after” in this context must refer to something other-than the “posts” of twentieth century philosophy—e.g., post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-humanism; just as “before” cannot literally mean before the fact of modernity, but rather refers to some speculative re-invention of an alternate history and future). Thus rather than charting a course *through* Kant and emerging on the other side, landing in what Quentin Meillassoux has recently termed “the great outdoors,” Whitehead takes us back to the moments just prior to the Kantian synthesis of transcendental

¹ To my mind the most interesting questions being taken up within the context of Whitehead's philosophy today center precisely around the ways in which Whitehead can or cannot be thought “after” the Kantian turn to critical philosophy. Readers are encouraged to explore Steven Shaviro's *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* for an extensive engagement with this question.

apperception and takes us on a different journey; not through Kant and the German Idealists, but through John Locke and the British Empiricists, towards the creation of what Bruno Latour calls a “systematic attempt at finding a metaphysical alternative to modernism” (p. xiv). Central to this project is Whitehead’s critique of the bifurcation of nature—a forward assault on the division between primary and secondary qualities, first from a within a new philosophy of nature, and later from a full-blown metaphysical system. This critique forms the basis of a new speculative philosophy where the problems of mind and body, nature and culture, quality and quantity can, and must be, re-thought in the spirit of a truly radical empiricism.

3. The Bifurcation of Nature

Whitehead’s radical empiricism is certainly a “free and wild creation of concepts” in and of itself; in fact the creation has been so far-ranging that Whitehead almost requires his own lexicon of new terms and concepts to be understood—actual occasions, events, societies, concrescence, creativity, and prehension being only a few of the most obvious. Each of these terms will serve to generate an alternative to the bifurcation of nature, which we can now describe in more detail. Latour tells us: “Bifurcation is what happens whenever we think the world is divided into two sets of things: one which is composed of the fundamental constituents of the universe—invisible to the eyes, known to science, yet real and valueless—and the other which is constituted of what the mind has to add to the basic building blocks of the world in order to make sense of them” (p. xii). For Whitehead, the bifurcation of nature forms a formidable impasse in how we approach fundamental philosophical questions—e.g., the nature of mind, experience, value, and, in particular, the ontological nature of the *organism* which, for Whitehead, would become the central concept in his metaphysics.

The production of two different types of entities—the ontology favored by the moderns—requires, according to Stengers and Whitehead, not just a re-thinking of these two qualities in terms of some greater as-yet-seen synthesis of subjects and objects, but a re-casting of the cosmological field of activity entirely.² Stengers writes: “Thus, the solution does not entail submission to the problematic statement, but the invention of the field in which the problem finds its solution” (pp. 16 – 17). In Whitehead, then, we find not two types of entities—not subjects conforming to objects nor objects conforming to subjects—but one type of entity, the actual entity, which holds as its central identifying analogy the concept of the organism. It is within this serious ontological engagement with the concept of the organism—a creature whose very being calls into question the modern assumption underpinning the bifurcation of nature—that an alternative metaphysics can be built. Not idealism or materialism, but an organic realism evolutionary in character. In the words of Latour: “if nature really is bifurcated, no living organism would be possible, since being an organism means being the sort of thing whose primary and secondary qualities—if they did exist—are endlessly blurred. Since we are organisms surrounded by many other organisms, nature has *not* bifurcated” (p. xiii).

It is no coincidence that Stengers opens her discussion on the bifurcation of nature with the question of these other organisms that surround us. If nature is what

² A diagram depicting the bifurcation of nature is described in Figure 1.

“we” are aware of in perception, as Whitehead suggests, then who (or what) exactly is included in this “we”? Stengers suggests that starting from this anonymous “we” is “too indeterminate” (p. 32) since surely this “we” would have to include not just humans, but also chimpanzees, dogs, rabbits, bees, ticks, ants, and spiders (to which we could add thousands of other examples). There is thus a substantial amount of ethological speculation (p. 32), which opens up at the heart of Whitehead’s alternative to modernity. But these ethological speculations are not limited to what kinds of “nature” appear in the awareness of nonhuman beings, but also questions what kinds of worlds open within the context of human awareness itself.

For Whitehead there’s something important at stake in the framing of human experience in terms of the bifurcation of nature that Stengers wants us to pay attention to; namely, the bifurcation of nature requires a certain kind of sacrifice on behalf of human experience that we may not wish to accept. Stengers describes this sacrifice, which is implied in the acceptance of the modern ontology, as a work of mourning. Stengers writes: “The work of mourning to which readers are going to be obliged is already announced to them. They will be asked to limit legitimate statements about experience to those that designate a ‘pure’ perceptual experience” (p. 32). As Whitehead says, “the mind is cut out altogether” (p. 34) when we attempt to determine, ontologically, what belongs to the content of nature and what belongs only to the content of our minds. Whitehead suggests something different altogether: “For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much a part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon” (TCN, p. 29).

Maintaining the reality of the red glow of the sunset, revealed to us in our psychic life, alongside the reality of the molecules and electric waves revealed by the sciences, is the goal of Whitehead’s philosophy of organism. Whitehead’s solution to this problem lies not in epistemology, as one might expect, but in ontology. The theory of perception and mind, which Whitehead offers us in place of the bifurcation of nature, is *selective* rather than *additive*. Stengers writes: “If the ‘mind’ is to be responsible for something, it is in terms of selection and simplification, not of addition” (p. 48). The speculative view is thus one of immersion amidst great multiplicities of qualitative difference and distinct individual contrast between diverse beings; valuation occurs at the level of selection between modes of structured experience. This is to say that valuation is an aesthetic operation occurring at the level of causal interaction; an operation Whitehead simply calls “prehension.” From this view, if one wishes to maintain the qualitative-quantitative binary, it would be more accurate to say that the latter is an abstraction from the former, rather than the former a psychic addition to the latter. In this way qualities are still relational properties between sets of beings, but emerge as selections-from rather than as additions-to, and are in an important sense “really out there.”

4. The Philosophy of Organism

We can say, then, that the Whiteheadian system is a form of constructivism, but it is constructivism by creative subtraction rather than psychic addition. When Whitehead sets up the problem of perception in this way the fundamental questions change in unexpected ways, as Stengers notes: “The point is therefore to state the

terms of the problem in a way that resists the pretensions of solution included in the usual modes of formulation” (p. 33); in other words, the problem stated must be formulated as an emergent property ingredient in the event itself, and not as a pre-established harmony of terms that define in advance the scope, range, and capacities of the phenomena in question (i.e., the question is not an addition-to to the event, but rather a participant in its unfolding). Whitehead’s method, then, is grounded in a new ontology of the question, a mind space that thinks the beings mobilized in a situation contemporaneously with the beings enacting the mobilization through the construction of the problem. Whitehead’s approach is thus “an art of problems, and of the creation of their possible solutions” (p. 35) wherein the real danger is the formulation of poorly stated problems (i.e., the problem of the relation between primary and secondary qualities).

Whitehead reformulates the problem stated by the materialist through the bifurcation of nature by distinguishing amongst ingressions between different kinds of objects ingredient in what Whitehead calls an “event.” For Whitehead, it is the concrete particularity of a situation within which events need to be understood, and not through an appeal to universal categories. The relations of a given event are arranged between “sense objects” (e.g., sound, color, or fragrance); “scientific objects” (e.g., molecules and electromagnetic waves); and “perceptual objects” which are particular unifications of sense and scientific objects—your lover next to you, that swaying tree over there, Jupiter setting over the Pacific ocean. In *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead suggests that sense-objects are not attributes or properties belonging to other types of objects, nor are attributes ever purely existing qualities that have being apart from some concrete situation. Rather, the sense object is “conveyed” (p. 86) (i.e., mediated) by the ethological capacity of the organism, a sort of captured surplus or exchange occurring between two entities. These conveyances form law-like patterns of behavior, or, more simply, reliable “habits” of interaction (p. 88).

Thus the move is to protect the domain of ontological valuation (which our knowledge of ethology requires that we do), but not at the expense of the sciences and scientific objects. Stengers writes: “If nature were made up only of sense objects, ghostly contacts, floating odors, sounds, luminous shimmerings, the scientific enterprise would not have been possible” (pp. 96-97). Since we know that the scientific enterprise *is* possible, the move is to multiply the domain of the real in a manner logically consistent with what is revealed to us (and to other beings) in sense experience in addition to the results gleaned from the experimental sciences. Whitehead and Stengers thus reject the bifurcation both in the direction of valuing values over scientific objects and in the direction of valuing scientific objects over values; either term without the other amounts to an unacceptable inconsistency, and for this reason there’s actually no conflict between the two modes of objects once the bifurcation of nature is abandoned. The view that Stengers and Whitehead upheld is thus one of a multiplication of beings rather than a reduction of them. Stengers writes:

To affirm “sense,” “perceptual,” and “scientific” objects at the same time is to refuse any principle of sorting. I know it is this bird that is singing: what I am aware of not only declares itself as a succession of sounds but as a “song,” and this song is produced by a living being, not by a material body vibrating, and this being also inhabits this world in which I am; I perceive it *qua* declaring that I am not alone in it. I am a part of the bird’s song, as it is a part of mine. The poet who celebrates the bird’s song, and the world this song celebrates, are not wrong. And ethologists testify against the bifurcation of nature when they trust their experience and seek to exhibit the meaning of the song of the bird, a call to its female or a territorial announcement: “*this is my tree.*” (p. 83)

The philosophy of organism, which finds its first rudimentary articulations in *The Concept of Nature*, thus supply us with many of the terms which Whitehead will use (and re-formulate) throughout much of his career, and they offer a compelling alternative to the bifurcation of nature. Going forward through Stengers careful text the terms and concepts will vary and evolve, but Whitehead’s motto will remain largely the same: seek simplicity, and distrust it.

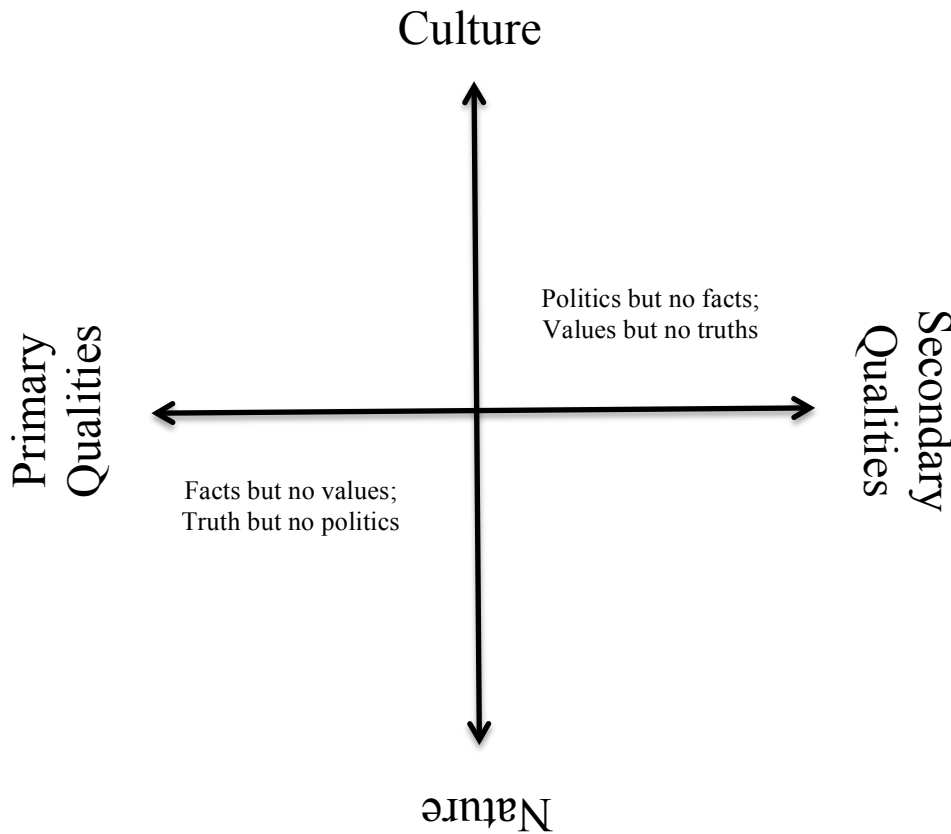


Figure 1 – The Modern Cosmogram.