

CHAPTER 8

Philosophy

Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.

(MT, 168)

It is the ideal of speculative philosophy that its fundamental notions shall not seem capable of abstraction from each other. In other words, it is pre-supposed that no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe, and that it is the business of speculative philosophy to exhibit this truth.

(PR, 3)

In this general position the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate.

(PR, 7)

Philosophy is the ascent to the generalities with the view of understanding their possibilities of combination. The discovery of new generalities thus adds to the fruitfulness of those already known. It lifts into view new possibilities of combination.

(AI, 235)

The use of philosophy is to maintain an active novelty of fundamental ideas illuminating the social system. It reverses the slow descent of accepted thought towards the inactive commonplace. If you like to phrase it so, philosophy is mystical. For mysticism is direct insight into depths as yet unspoken. But the purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism: not by explaining it away, but by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations, rationally coördinated. Philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.

(MT, 174)

This is a book about Whitehead's thought or philosophy, from philosophy of mathematics to metaphysics, from political philosophy to divinity. The whole book is an answer to the question what Whitehead's philosophy or thought is about. However, this chapter on philosophy in the context of the Tree of Knowledge, that is, the modes of knowing and understanding in Whitehead's thought, can still address a specific question, namely: What is philosophy? What kind of knowledge and understanding does it present to us besides, say, the sciences or the arts? And Whitehead is clear, right from the first sentences of his magnum opus *Process and Reality* on, that philosophy produces "important knowledge" and that its understanding of the world is inclusive of *all* (kinds of) experiences and comprehensive of *all* of its components (PR, 3)—beyond which there is nothing (PR, 167).

I have chosen introductory epigraphs to this chapter that comprise the main elements I want to touch on in the following considerations. If you read them, they will tell you the main ideas of the function and importance of philosophy as its own mode of knowledge and understanding in Whitehead's thought. While Whitehead has written, on several occasions, about the method and definition of philosophy as a field of knowledge and as a human activity, its main characteristics and intentions are enshrined in these quotations: that it is *speculative*, being engaged in all-relationality and a "criticism of abstractions" (MT, 48); that it is about an *organicism of processuality*, venturing beyond western limitations of philosophical categories and horizons; that it trades in vast *universalities*, and that its universalizations generate not stagnation but *novelty*; that its boldness in imagining novel universalities makes it the prime instrument of *social renewal*, renders it *mystical* and *akin to poetry*, and makes it the "sense-organ" for *goodness*, that is, the harmonic of the all-relationality of reality.

What is philosophy? In a book with the same title (1992), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari answer with an outrageous poststructuralist proposal, and they relate their endeavor to Whitehead. Philosophy, they say, is the creation of concepts. This doesn't not sound revolutionary, but in three ways it is; and in all three of them, it is related to Whitehead. *First*, philosophy is a *distinct activity* from the sciences and the

arts (not everyone in the age of the postmodern “death of philosophy” would claim that). *Second*, philosophy is about *the critique of abstractions*, that is, it is about the most concrete reality and universally so (not everyone would like to even claim such a potential of addressing “reality” by attacking modes of abstraction in a postmodern age of relativism). And third, philosophy fuses the *event character of thinking with that of becoming* and the *conceptual character of reality with that of thinking* (not something that many would pursue in an age of the inability to grasp reality beyond projections).

All three directions of Deleuze and Guattari’s answer are consciously adopting Whitehead’s language and imaginative categorization. *First*, as philosophy is not about the *percepts* of science and the *affects* of the arts, it renders *concepts* different from either, but also connects them, as both percepts and affects are otherwise “unknowable” without concepts. Hence, philosophic concepts are both empirical and imaginative (PR, 3–5). *Second*, Whitehead’s *misplaced concreteness* (PR, 93), the confusion of abstractions with concrete reality, informs the limitations of using the sciences (PR, 10) and the arts (AI, 270) as guiding paradigms for reaching “reality.” *Third*, it is precisely the *event-character of concepts* (PR, 7–8) and the *conceptual character of events* with their conceptual feelings (PR, 26–27) by which Whitehead’s inherent polarity of events and the concreteness of prehensions and occasions, nexuses (PR, 20) and relations (AI, 157), is established. While the difference between Deleuze’s and Guattari’s understanding of their adoption of Whitehead and Whitehead’s own understanding of these questions does not concern us here—and I have written for decades now about these relationships—some of the major characteristics of Whitehead’s philosophy come forth in these resonances, bridging epochs, generations, cultures, and philosophical outlooks, if not universes of discourse: that life encompasses system; that events of relationality encompass patterns of relationship; and that the feelings of events encompass, and do not divorce us from, reality.

What, then, is philosophy? It is the *understanding of reality in its appearances* (AI, 281) in a process of *regaining reality’s obscured totality* (PR, 15). All philosophy is, as a field of knowledge and as a human activity of the civilization of consciousness and society, and perhaps even the cosmos, *the adventure of obtaining a coherent and creative adjustment* of these Seven Platonic Concepts (AI, 275): “The Ideas, The Physical Elements, The Psyche, The Eros, The Harmony, The Mathematical Relations, The Receptacle” (AI, 147) (Chapter 26).

Maybe the best answer to the *What* of philosophy, before and after all technical differentiates and necessary complexities, lies in the *How* (PR, 23): the “subjective form” of philosophizing, the intuitive *feeling* of its process (PR, 19). For Whitehead this *How* is wonder: *philosophy begins in wonder* (MT, 168)! Despite the thousands of years gaping between one of the earliest explorations of this wonder in Aristotle, this confession—as presented in the first epigraph of this chapter—is, above all, testing the *existential mood* in which Whitehead was thinking: It is *not*, as all critical philosophy assumed, Cartesian *doubt* (PR, 74), the insecurity of bottomless disconnection from

a “friendly Universe” (AI, 289), the disenchantments of the religious wars of the seventeenth century (AI, 166), and the uncertainties of the shifting sand of the scientific revolution and the mechanical, mindless materialism (SMW, 36) in the wake of it, or Nietzsche’s death of God, that figures as Whitehead’s spiritual companion that made him think, *but* the reverence of (SMW, 196), and the curiosity for, the secrets of nature (SMW, 43), the wonder of its beauty (SMW, 85) and depth (SMW, 18), its chaotic uncontrollability (PR, 95) and awesome expanse (RM, 160)—*that* was the first love of Whitehead. And despite all rigorous thinking, this wonder never disappeared to inform all of his thought (MT, 168). In fact, Beauty and Adventure became Wonder’s trusted companions, and, as the “end” of philosophy shows its peak when it steers the wonder toward new insight, but also to new wonder (MT, 127), philosophy leaves us with the mystery of the unthought, that which still and always awaits discovery (MT, 174).

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THERE IS NO SPECULATION IN THOSE EYES

From mathematics and science to aesthetics and the arts, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, Whitehead’s philosophy sees itself as a relational mediation between them, and it views them as modes of the understanding, and as an expression, of *universal togetherness* (Part I). It wants to communicate between several dualisms, built up during the appearance of modern philosophy and Newtonian sciences: that between empiricism and rationalism and that between a realm of nature and one of humanity. While Kant wanted to unite these streams of modern philosophic thought between Descartes and Hume, and between Locke, Leibniz, and Spinoza (PR, part 2), it still perpetuated the Cartesian dualism of extension and mind (PR, xiii). The realms of nature (*First Critique*) and of ethics (*Second Critique*), in Kant, were but incompletely brought together in aesthetics (*Third Critique*), while Whitehead saw *this* unification as the *primal* departure from modern dualisms (SMW, 156) (Chapter 7).

While Whitehead consistently holds to the philosophical reconstruction of the sciences from *Science and the Modern World* (ch. 9) to *Adventures of Ideas* (AI, ch. 15) as well as the social reconstruction of the sciences (SMW, chs. 3–4) and ethics (AI, chs. 3–5), his poetic rendering of the cosmic process of relationality (SMW, ch. 5) prioritizes *aesthetic* experience over the merely *intellectual* nature of philosophical universalization (MT, 174)—concretion over abstraction, concrescence over intellection (RM, 105). Against Kant, Whitehead reclaims the *aesthetic basis of perception* as relational process of nature in the human mind, and not as a projective procedure of the isolated mind being impressed on the wholly external nature (PR, 190). Hence, Whitehead reverses Kant’s subordination of the continuity of experience with the

world of extension (spacetime) to the categories of the mind and declares, instead, the *Transcendental Aesthetic* of Kant's *First Critique*, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), to be the *main topic* of his philosophy of organism—"to construct a critique of pure feeling." It would replace all Three Kantian Critiques of theoretical, practical, and aesthetical reasoning by *beginning* with the experiential togetherness of everything that exists. It begins with a "datum [that] includes its own interconnections," and understands the process of feeling as "responsive conformity of feeling" of actualities and their potentiality (real and ideal), transforming itself into "a complex unity of realization" (PR, 113).

While Whitehead reverts the "causal" disconnections in Hume's empiricism and Kant's "transcendental idealism" (SY, 31), for which causality is only a projection of the "mind" onto nature (SY, 38)—which Whitehead analyzes as the erroneous assumption that the mode of presentational immediacy be the original and only mode of perception (Chapter 3)—Whitehead expands the aesthetic basis for becoming and knowing to the *aesthetic* nature of causal efficacy in the process of prehension (SY, 39) instead of following the metaphysical error of Aristotelian substantialism, which cannot allow relations to be as concrete as substances, but instead isolates their assumed particularity (in essence and in concrete things) from one another and the human mind (PR, 158). Substantialism assumes the presence of particular beings in the mind as mere passive givenness (SY, 50), only representative of their own (subjective) entertainment of qualities, and of qualities only in terms of universals—Whitehead calls these the errors of the *sensationalist* and the *subjectivist* principles in modern philosophy, respectively (PR, 157).

Whitehead reverses Kant's assumption that knowledge is the conceptualization or particularization or conceptual partition of mere flux of sensations, that is, knowledge as subjective grasp of *mere* objects, and understands the process of being and knowing to *begin* with objects or data *that transmit their own subjective form or mood of existence or feeling* to subjects that originate in them, conform to them, and creatively transform them into their own subjectivity (PR, 156), and beyond that, a "satisfaction" of becoming that transmit this new subjective form as "object" of new subject-superjects (PR, 222). In other words, the world of relational events of experience cannot be reduced to passive objects and illusionary or hallucinating subjects, isolated from each other and from the nexus of a world of experiences, either as isolated particulars or as mere bundles of universals or abstract categories of the mind (Chapter 16). Knowledge is always *embodied* (Chapter 14).

Kant's divorce of mind and body into mental (transcendental) categories and sense-objects followed Hume's empiricist reconstruction (AI, 190); but while accepting the *reality* of causality (SY, 37)—as important basis for the scientific knowledge on what constitutes the empirical data perceived—by having lost the Humean integrity of atoms (AI, 126), consisting of matter *and* form impressing themselves on sense-organs (PR, 155), physical reality made a new career as mere material *without* form

(AI, 225). It is this progressing dualism from Hume's atomistic empiricism (SY, 31) to Kant's transcendental idealism (SY, 37) that furthered scientism and positivism (AI, 125–28): the assumption that any knowledge of the physical world is atomistic, unknowable-in-itself (*ignotum x*), and bare of any inherent “in-formation” (subjective form) and “mentality” (conceptual feelings); mere stuff (without secondary qualities), analyzable into mere abstract universals (positivist sentences) and based on clear abstract concepts (presentational immediacy)—all of which represent the *subjectivist* and *sensualist* anemia, erasing actuality and formation from experience. Whitehead contests and reverses these assumptions with his “reformed subjectivist principle” (PR, 157), which means that physical contact and its scientific knowledge always presupposes an *aesthetic* process of embodied transmission of feelings (AI, 194–95) as the basis of all cognition and the knowledge of nature and mind alike (Chapters 7, 27). If this also indicates the limitation of the scientific method and of scientific knowledge to primary qualities (or quantities), devoid of qualities and intensities of feeling (Chapter 6), the philosophical insight, now, is that this limitation is *not* the boundary of experience and reality and, hence, is *no boundary* for philosophical knowledge and understanding, which is born from the experiences of the togetherness of events (Chapter 1) in the body (Chapter 10).

This aesthetic reversal from universals to actualities (PR, 158), from abstract knowledge to the primordial depth of feeling (PR, 160–61), and from clear ideas (PR, 162) to vague impulses (PR, 163), does, now, also become the basis for understanding Whitehead's self-definition of philosophy as *speculative*, as in the second of the epigraphs of this chapter (PR, 3): The truth that speculative philosophy wants to express is that no entity or event can be conceptualized in complete abstraction from the system of the universe in its totality (PR, 25, 36, 275). The methodological implications are profound since, now, any reduction of this relationality to either sides of a dualism, such as that of nature and mind, or particulars and universals, or physical and conceptual realities, is excluded, as is also any attempt of reducing knowledge to either empiricism or rationalism. Instead, Whitehead's definition of “speculative philosophy” unites all of these elements by proposing to be an “interpretation” of *all* kinds of “experiences” as elements in *one* conceptual system that exhibits these *five* characteristics: that it is, on its *rational* side, logical and coherent; on its *empirical* side, applicable and adequate; and in its fundamental *relational* side, universal, that is, necessary (PR, 3–4).

This methodological and epistemological proposal on the meaning of speculative philosophy appears, in the wider context, to embrace the resonant characteristics of the three theories of truth, all of which Whitehead engages. *Coherence* theory covers the rational side of logic and coherence; *correspondence* theory covers the empirical side of applicability and adequacy (PR, 190). The *pragmatic* side, which for Whitehead is not simply the “use” but the “success” of the necessary act of symbolization of any

proposition and theory (PR, 181), expresses the “necessity in universality,” which is the inclusive horizon of all possible and actual relationality (PR, 4).

In the internal structure of the relationship of these elements of Whitehead’s epistemological procedure, it is the wider and more concrete, that is, closer to the fullness of experience or less abstract, horizon that encompasses and determines the limitations and meanings of the narrower element. So, surprisingly, *logic* is the narrowest characterization (and after the *Principia Mathematica* reduced to a mere instrument of simple reasoning), as it is encompassed by *coherence*, which, as we will see later (Part III), is not what one might think it is, namely, not a lifeless structural petrification, but a vivid and moving whole of relations (AI, 227). On the empirical side, *applicability* is embraced by *adequacy* since the latter is universal while the former is fragmentary or selective (PR, 3). Yet, again surprisingly, or not really surprising if one follows Whitehead’s intuition of the experimental character of processual relationality (Part I): in the cross-reference of the rational and empirical side of this proposal, *coherence is embraced by adequacy* since the *empirical* check of facticity for any interpretation remains epistemologically and methodologically (PR, 13), as well as ontologically, *primary* (PR, 6). And, finally, all of this epistemological fourfold is embraced by a *universality* that presents them as expression of the *texture of the relationality in process of the whole of the universe* (PR, 4). It is in this sense that, as Deleuze remarks, Whitehead’s epistemological and methodological *scheme* of philosophy is *empiricist and pluralist* (Chapter 10)—this will become more obvious in the next section.

For now, we should not fail to recognize the *poetic* investment of the term “speculative” in *Process and Reality*, as it relates to philosophy. In fact, Whitehead introduces this term in *The Concept of Nature* in order to convey a metaphoric, suggestive leap of imagination regarding the performance of philosophy or the process of thinking (PR, 4). In the sense of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (ca. 1600), Whitehead uses of the word in this context: “There is no speculation in those eyes” (CN, 6)—meaning: to “see through” symbolization, such as the language used or the abstractions they involve, to the processes *themselves* (PR, 79, 89–90; AI, 139); to “see” the *life* of things (PR, 92; AI, 181, 266). In more technical terms, Whitehead characterizes this ability of speculation as the recognition of the subjective form as mediating a nexus of experiences beyond the sensualist and subjectivist reductionism already mentioned. This fundamental relationality of experiences is another version of the “reformed subjectivist principle” (PR, 157) as embodied knowledge (Chapter 27). So, speculation is not, as the current use insinuates, unfounded imagination or care-free brain storming, but the ability to *conform* our interpretations to the feeling the concrete nexuses of experiences in the universal horizon of all “knowable” experiences and ingredients of experiences, but also by *venturing* into the “unknowable” novelty and future of the process of the transformation of this texture of connectivity (Chapters 11, 13). Hence, speculation,