

Chapter 6

Consequences

Whitehead's "free and savage creation of concepts" (Stengers 2002*b*) goes well beyond anything that I have discussed in this book. I have scarcely considered, for instance, Whitehead's important theory of propositions (cf. especially 1929/1978, 184-207), and of the ways that these serve as "lures for feeling" (25, 85ff., 184ff.), linking the potential to the actual. Nor have I gone into his extensive reflections upon "hybrid prehensions," those perceptions and feelings that have both "physical" (material, causal) and "conceptual" (mental, potential, or hypothetical) aspects, and that are crucial, in turn, to his accounts of "symbolic reference" (168-183), language, and the emergence of consciousness. Moreover, I have not said nearly enough about the crucial distinction between "actual entities" or "actual occasions," the ultimate atomistic components of the universe in Whitehead's metaphysics, and the aggregations of these entities that Whitehead calls "societies," which include ourselves, and all the things that we come upon in the course of everyday experience. I have also not considered Whitehead's mathematics, or the question of how his thought relates to modern physics (relativity and quantum mechanics). All of these are matters for further research and elucidation.

My aim in *Without Criteria* has been a limited and specific one. I began this book counterfactually, with the "philosophical fantasy" of a situation in which Whitehead, rather than Heidegger, "had set the agenda for postmodern thought." I have therefore focused upon those aspects of Whitehead's metaphysics that might especially *make a difference* in how we understand the world today. To this end, I have considered Whitehead's formulations regarding aesthetics and beauty, events and becoming, affect, causality, innovation and creativity, the nature of life and the conditions of biological science, and our "envisagement" of the ultimate. I have also traced the Enlightenment roots of Whitehead's thought: most notably, its engagement with Kant's critical project, and its participation in the modernist

endeavor to *secularize* the elements of experience and thought. And I have linked crucial aspects of Whitehead's metaphysics to related movements in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. But in doing all this, I have barely opened the discussion that might ensue from taking Whitehead's ideas seriously.

Indeed, there can be no end to such discussions. For Whitehead's thought is capacious, open, and continually inventive; it does not reach (and, in principle, it can never reach) any sort of completion or self-reflexive closure. Whitehead continually reminds us that no metaphysical formulation is definitive. "In its turn every philosophy will suffer a deposition," he says, including his own (1929/1978, 7). It is a commonplace to say that "philosophy begins in wonder"; but Whitehead less commonly insists that, "at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains" (1938/1968, 168). Wonder is not dissipated by philosophical speculation, because explaining things *adequately*, as Whitehead's philosophy strives to do,¹ means giving all phenomena and all experiences their due, and never explaining any of them away. "Philosophy destroys its usefulness when it indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away" (1929/1978, 17). Against all reductionism, Whitehead insists that "we may not pick and choose. For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electrical waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon" (1920/2004, 29). The phenomenologist only considers the red glow of the sunset; the physicist only considers the mechanics of electromagnetic radiation. But Whitehead insists upon a metaphysics that embraces both. For "philosophy can exclude nothing" (1938/1968, 2).

This is not just a matter of philosophical method. Philosophical speculation has no

¹Whitehead's technical use of the term *adequacy* is far removed from the common philosophical meaning of this term as a representational correspondence between ideas and things. Rather, Whitehead defines the "adequacy" of a "philosophic scheme" as meaning "that the texture of observed experience, as illustrating the philosophic scheme, is such that all related experience must exhibit the same texture" (1929/1978, 4). As Didier Debaise glosses this passage, "the scheme must be 'adequate' not to observed experience, which would return us to the idea of correspondence to a state of things or to an event, but rather to *related experiences*. The relationship is transversal: adequacy becomes *a relation among portions of experiences*" (Debaise 2006, 29-30; translation mine). There are continual relays, or resonances, between the experience of constructing the "philosophic scheme," and other, concurrent experiences; the aim of philosophy is to extend these relays and resonances as far as possible, so that everything experienced may be comprehended within them. "Adequacy" has to do with extension, rather than with correspondence. It is never given in advance, or once and for all; rather, it continually needs to be constructed, in the ongoing process of philosophical speculation.

finality, because the world within which (as well as about which) the philosopher speculates has no finality. Whitehead's thought has important *consequences*, but it does not offer us any firm conclusions. Everything within it is subject to revision. A thought that aims at adequacy cannot be ahistorical, and it cannot remain static. For "no actuality is a static fact. The historic character of the universe belongs to its essence" (1938/1968, 90). Indeed, adequacy is a goal that we will never fully reach. The best we can do is to make "an asymptotic approach" to it (1929/1978, 4), in the form of an "approximation" (13). Even at the end of his very last lecture, "Immortality," Whitehead is still warning us against "the absurd trust in the adequacy of our knowledge." For "the exactness" that rational discourse lays claim to "is a fake" (1951*b*, 699-700). There will always be new data to consider, and new contexts to take into account. "When anything is placed in another situation, it changes. . . . In fact, there is not a sentence, or a word, with a meaning which is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered" (699).

This might seem to be just a commonplace of twentieth-century (and now twenty-first-century) thought. Surely the battle against essentialism, and against context-independent theories of meaning, was won long ago. Whitehead's diagnosis of the fallacies of "misplaced concreteness" (1929/1978, 7) and "simple location" (137), his rejection of "subject-predicate forms of thought" (7), and his insistence upon the limitations of perception in the mode of "presentational immediacy" (61ff. and *passim*) run parallel to the critiques proffered in various ways by Heidegger and by Wittgenstein, and more recently by Derrida and by Rorty – not to mention already in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche, who mocked traditional philosophers' "hatred of the very idea of becoming," and worried that "we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar" (1968, 16, 19). All these thinkers reject essentialism, substantialism, positivism, and the notion of simple presence. They greatly differ, however, in terms of *style* and *manner*: which is to say, in their language, in the logical forms they use, and in the ways that they make their arguments. This means that they differ, above all, in terms of the *consequences* that can be drawn from their critiques. The arguments of these thinkers may run parallel in terms of logic, but *pragmatically* they are quite distinct.

For Whitehead, the insistence upon ever-changing "circumstances" and contexts does not mean that philosophical discussion must end up in a hopeless aporia, as the deconstructionists maintain. Nor does it imply that philosophy is nothing more than a polite but ultimately inconsequential "conversation," and that the only "point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going," as Richard Rorty

suggests (1981, 377). Of course every metaphysical discourse is subject to what we now call deconstruction; for as Whitehead categorically states, “if we consider any scheme of philosophic categories as one complex assertion, and apply to it the logician’s alternative, true or false, the answer must be that the scheme is false” (1929/1978, 8). This is unavoidable, since “metaphysical categories are not dogmatic statements of the obvious.” Rather, at best, “they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities” (8). But the inevitable failure of these “tentative formulations” to pass logical muster tells us more about the limited pertinence of merely logical criteria, than it does about the weakness of metaphysical speculation *per se*. Whitehead started his career as a logician; it is from his deep knowledge of the subject that he is able to “dismiss deductive logic as a major instrument for metaphysical discussion,” and assert that “logic presupposes metaphysics,” rather than the reverse (1938/1968, 107).

Whitehead insists that thought is stimulated, rather than paralyzed, when it is pushed to its limit, and when its “tentative formulations” break down under the pressure of changed circumstances, or simply in the face of additional evidence. Such is the point at which new concepts, and new categories, need to be invented. Philosophical speculation then becomes an urgent necessity, and not just a source of edifying conversation.² We live in a world, as Whitehead says, in which “the very meaning of life is in doubt” (1938/1968, 148). If this was already true in Whitehead’s own time, it is even more urgently the case today, as we stand on the threshold of radically new technologies for manipulating life at the biochemical

²In her article “Beyond Conversation” (2002a), Isabelle Stengers considers Whitehead’s efforts towards “the fabrication of peace-making propositions” (245) through which oppositions can be transformed into contrasts. She insists that this project necessarily involves “the challenge of not accepting the facile charms of academic conversation” (248). Rather, what is at stake is a philosophical construction or fabrication, “an ecological production of actual togetherness, where ‘ecological’ means that the aim is not toward a unity beyond differences, which would reduce those differences through a goodwill reference to abstract principles of togetherness, but toward a creation of concrete, interlocked, asymmetrical, and always partial graspings” (248-249). Rorty’s “edifying conversation” is premised upon the notion that nothing, beyond such a “goodwill reference to abstract principles of togetherness,” is really at stake in philosophical discussions. For Whitehead, however, philosophical disputes are intrinsically important, because they focus our attention upon the often unnoticed background contexts and assumptions that frame our existence in the world. These contexts and assumptions need explicit consideration, because “there are no brute, self-contained matters of fact, capable of being understood apart from interpretation as an element in a system” (1929/1978, 14). This is why it is so crucial that, in the course of systematizing and generalizing, we must incorporate antagonistic perspectives without explaining any of them away, and also without reconciling them in a spurious sublation or higher unity.

level. The meaning of life is radically in doubt, more than ever before; philosophy has the crucial task of constructing this meaning – or better, many such meanings.

Whitehead presents us with a highly systematized philosophy, and he seeks after “the most general systematization of civilized thought” (1929/1978, 17). But he also insists that, before any work of systematization can even begin, the “primary stage” of philosophy is a process of “*assemblage*” (1938/1968, 2). Philosophical speculation collects the most heterogeneous materials, and puts them together in the most unexpected configurations. It is something like the practice of collage in modernist painting; or better – to use an analogy not from Whitehead’s time, but from our own – it is like a DJ’s practice of sampling and remixing. By extracting “patterned contrasts” (1929/1978, 115) from its assemblages, philosophy works toward “the entertainment of notions of large, adequate generality” (1938/1968, 3). For in the broadest sense, “metaphysics is nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice” (1929/1978, 13).

These generalities are not given to us in advance; they need to be fabricated or discovered in the course of philosophical speculation. That is why assemblage is so important. Or, as Whitehead describes the process with a different metaphor, “the true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (1929/1978, 5). These repeated flights and landings allow for the addition of new elements into the assemblage, and for the continual expansion of meanings and contexts. Philosophical assemblage is itself a particular sort of practice: one that is of limited duration, and that is always partial and incomplete. Its value lies in the way that it helps us to renew other practices, those of the seemingly more precise “special sciences,” by allowing us to “challenge the half-truths constituting the scientific first principles” (10), and to put them into broader perspective.

Deleuze and Guattari, no less than Whitehead, practice the art of philosophical assemblage.³ And Whitehead’s sense of philosophy as “providing generic notions

³*Assemblage* is the usual English translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s term *agencement* (1987, 503ff. and passim). An *agencement* is defined as a conjunction “of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another,” and also “of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (88). Manuel Delanda generalizes these formulations into what he calls *assemblage theory*, emphasizing multiple, heterogeneous, and changeable “relations of exteriority” (2006, 10ff. and passim). Whitehead’s use of the term *assemblage* is far less

which add lucidity to our apprehension of the facts of experience” (1929/1978, 10) is not far from Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of philosophy as “the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts” (1994, 2). In both cases, the aim is not a totalization, a definitive tracing of limits, or a Final Theory of Everything. It is rather an expansion of possibilities, an invention of new methods and new perspectives, an active “entertainment” of things, feelings, ideas, and propositions that were previously unavailable to us. The point of making generalizations, or of inventing concepts, is not to prove a thesis, but to expand and stimulate thought. Both Whitehead and Deleuze and Guattari seek to discover new facets of experience: to work out the notions, and trace the relations, that allow us to encounter aspects of the world, and things within the world, to which we have never paid attention before – or even which have never come into existence before. As Whitehead says, philosophy “make[s] it easier to conceive the infinite variety of specific instances which rest unrealized in the womb of nature” (1929/1978, 17). Regarded in this way, philosophy is turned toward the potential (or what Deleuze calls the virtual), and concerned with the process of actualizing this potential. As Whitehead says, “a new idea introduces a new alternative” (11). It offers us a new way of approaching and understanding experience. In doing this, it is itself a new experience; and it also makes additional new experiences possible. Philosophy is then what Whitehead calls an “experimental adventure” (9), or an “adventure of ideas” (1933/1967). And even, or especially, in the grimmest of times, there is good reason to pursue this adventure.

If philosophy is an adventure, involving the creation of new concepts, this is because every aspect of life and thought already is (and always must be) creative. Whitehead insists that creation is not a rarity; nor is it something that happened only once, at the beginning of time. Rather, the process of creation is essential to the world as a whole; it is a generic feature of existence as such. Of course, there are always different degrees of creativity; a living organism is more creative, and generates considerably more novelty, than a stone. But even a stone is not a stolid, motionless entity. It is rather “a society of separate molecules in violent agitation” (1929/1978, 78). And these molecules, or the atoms and subatomic particles composing them, are themselves eventful, which is to say creative. For Whitehead, “‘creativity’ is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact”

systematic; indeed, he uses it precisely for that stage in philosophical speculation that precedes systematization. Nonetheless, my association of Whitehead’s *assemblage* with Deleuze and Guattari’s *agencement/assemblage* is justified in that both involve the construction of relations among heterogeneous terms, that remain heterogeneous to one another even within these relations.

(21); it applies to every actual occasion, without exception. Indeed, each actual occasion is creative in its very nature. For each new occasion is “a novel entity diverse from any entity in the ‘many’ which it unifies,” and out of which it emerges (21). The “creative advance into novelty” is thereby “the ultimate metaphysical ground” of everything (349).

It is worth reflecting upon how strange and untimely Whitehead’s attitude is. In the course of the past century, we have learned to distrust any sort of foundationalism, and hence any talk of universals, ultimates, or grounds. We find nothing more disreputable than unfettered metaphysical speculation. Positivist and anti-positivist thinkers alike proclaim the end of Western metaphysics.⁴ There would seem to be only three alternatives open to us today. Either we accept scientific reductionism, with its claim to derive everything from the hard facts of quantum physics and evolutionary biology. Or we “annul *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant 1996, 31), embracing some variety of religious fundamentalism, New Age spirituality, or business-management self-help ideology that gives meaning to our otherwise rudderless lives. Or else we suppose that nothing can really be known, that every claim to knowledge is a delusion, and that “reality” is just an arbitrary linguistic construction. In this latter case, it scarcely matters whether we celebrate the vertiginous freedom of postmodern indetermination, as some of Derrida’s epigones do, or whether, to the contrary, we deplore the “extermination of the real” (Baudrillard) and the “decline of symbolic efficacy” (Žižek). All these approaches share the same basic assumption: that in our highly technologized, thoroughly disenchanted world, metaphysical speculation is no longer possible. It is replaced either by positivist reductionism, by blind faith, or by infinite relativism. In all three cases, metaphysics is over – even if we are ironically condemned, as Derrida suggests, to live out the indefinite postponement of this closure, and never to be done with what is nonetheless already finished.

Whitehead remains cheerfully indifferent to all these alternatives. Instead, he frankly and fully embraces the project of “speculative philosophy” (1929/1978, 3-17). What’s more, his speculations issue in a metaphysics that rejects the reductionism of physical science, and yet remains thoroughly and robustly realist. How can this be? It’s not that Whitehead is naive, sheltered, or detached; he is fully in-

⁴The overcoming of metaphysics is the one project that is shared by modernist thinkers as antagonistic to one another as Carnap and Heidegger. The greatest continuity in Wittgenstein’s career is that, in both his early and his late thought, he seeks to provide a therapy to cure us of metaphysics, which he conceives as a sort of disease. And the rejection of metaphysics is still the major concern of postmodern thinkers as otherwise different as Derrida and Rorty.

volved in the great convulsions of early-twentieth-century life, and he recognizes the same uncertainties and instabilities as do his contemporaries. In particular, he is acutely aware of the dilemmas that led to the “linguistic turn” of so much twentieth-century philosophy. He knows that “deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably” of any attempt to get at “metaphysical first principles” (4). Language “breaks down precisely at the task of expressing in explicit form the larger generalities – the very generalities which metaphysics seeks to express.” In consequence, no linguistic proposition can ever “refer to the universe in all its detail.” But “a proposition can embody partial truth,” and to that extent it can still be useful (11). This is why Whitehead rejects Wittgenstein’s famous claim that “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (2001, 5.6, 56). Language, as a limited tool, is an empirical part of the world to which it refers, rather than a transcendental condition of that world. And there are other ways, besides the linguistic one, of prehending the world, or more precisely entities in the world.

Whitehead therefore sees the perilous situation of his times as an opportunity, rather than a crisis. Where others feel shock and paralysis when they encounter the modern world, Whitehead finds openness and potentiality. And where others fear that they are staring into the abyss, he simply sees creativity at work. Whitehead does not deny the radical contingency that is inherent to language, and that has become a hallmark of all aspects of modern life. But he suggests that this contingency, this condition of groundlessness, is not a reason to despair. Rather, it should itself be taken as a sort of metaphysical ground. Evanescence, becoming, incessant novelty, and “perpetual perishing” do not make reference and grounding impossible. Rather, these experiences are themselves our fundamental points of reference.

In this way, Whitehead fulfills David Cantwell Smith’s demand for a metaphysics “that is grounded, simpliciter, without being grounded in α , for any α ” (1996, 370; cf. 83). Creativity is an “ultimate principle” and a universal ground, only because – and precisely because – it is featureless and neutral, entirely “without a character of its own” (Whitehead 1929/1978, 21, 31). Being grounded in creativity may be opposed both to being entirely ungrounded, and to being grounded in anything in particular. As an “ultimate notion of the highest generality” (31), creativity is the one thing that can adequately respond to the absolute singularity – the contingency, novelty, and irreplaceability – of every actual occasion of experience. The atomistic components of the world are each entirely unique, which is why they can only be characterized by means of a concept that, for its part, is altogether bland

and generic. And there can be no intermediate instances between these extremes. To posit a mediation between the “ultimate” and its “accidental embodiments” (7) would be in fact to establish some sort of privileged α , a substance or a category upon which things would be grounded, and in relation to which they could be differentially ranked.

In the absence of a mediating term, no such overall ranking is possible. There is no criterion that can serve as the stable and objective basis for a system of judgments. This is why the only form of valuation, or “graded envisagement” (1929/1978, 189, citing 1925/1967, 176), that Whitehead accepts is an aesthetic one. For aesthetic judgments are singular, unrepeatable, and ungeneralizable. They may be *exemplary*, as Kant suggests; but they cannot provide an actual rule to be followed (Kant 1987, 175. 186-187). Or as Whitehead puts it, “there is not just one ideal ‘order’ which all actual entities should attain and fail to attain. In each case there is an ideal peculiar to each particular actual entity. . . . The notion of one ideal arises from the disastrous overmoralization of thought under the influence of fanaticism, or pedantry” (1929/1978, 84). Whitehead always opposes the actual to the ideal; but just as actualities are all different, so must the ideals be as well. This is why the only ideals are aesthetic ones. As we have seen, in Whitehead’s metaphysics every actual occasion evaluates the world aesthetically, according to the imperatives of “Subjective Harmony” and “Subjective Intensity” (27). Even God only makes singular, aesthetic evaluations, rather than categorical or legislative judgments. His sole goals are the aesthetic ones of intensity (105) and “conceptual harmonization” (346). For Whitehead, the aim of the world – which is to say, the “subjective aim” of every entity within the world, God included – is Beauty, rather than Goodness or Truth (and also rather than Nietzschean will-to-power, or Darwinian self-replication). “Any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence” (1933/1967, 265). Whitehead thus proposes an aesthetics of existence, rather than an ethics; even more, he proposes an aesthetics of the Beautiful, rather than one of the Sublime.

Doubtless this is the aspect of Whitehead’s philosophy that we find it hardest to accept today. We tend to be suspicious of aesthetic ideals, and we feel called rather to heed the demands of ethics. What’s more, Whitehead’s own aesthetics of beauty and harmony, with its emphasis upon “subjective forms. . . severally and jointly interwoven in patterned contrasts” (1933/1967, 252), has an oddly retrograde, Victorian cast to it, and seems out of touch with the strenuous art of his

modernist contemporaries and their successors.⁵ Who today would dare to assert that “the teleology of the Universe is dedicated to the production of Beauty” (265)? In sharp contrast to Whitehead, most aesthetic theorists and innovative artists of the twentieth century tend to disparage the very idea of beauty. Modernism shows a marked preference, instead, for the sublime. There are good reasons for this. The sublime is about immensity, excess, and disproportion, while the beautiful is about harmony and proportion. The sublime is concerned with questioning the limits of representation and form, while the beautiful is entirely contained within, and satisfied with, those limits. The sublime is disruptive, transformative, and potentially redemptive, while the beautiful is staid, conservative, and recuperative. As Kant himself puts it, “in presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation” (1987, 115). All this makes the sublime seem profoundly modern.⁶ The beautiful, on the other hand, seems complacent, conventional, and old-fashioned.

I cannot say that the situation is made any better by a certain recent recuperation of the ideal of beauty (Beckley and Shapiro 1998; Brand 2000). The context of this “return” to beauty is an exceedingly disagreeable one. On the one hand, beauty today has become a mere adjunct of advertising and product design – just as “innovation” has become a managerial buzzword, and creativity has become “a value *in itself*” for the corporate sector (Thrift 2005, 133). There’s scarcely a

⁵Whitehead himself seems to value mostly nineteenth-century art. He devotes an entire chapter of *Science and the Modern World* to the “Romantic Reaction” against mechanism and positivism (1925/1967, 75-94). He especially cherishes, and identifies with, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who combines a deep “absorption...in scientific ideas” with a rejection of the “abstract materialism of science” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (84-86). But Whitehead offers no comparable discussion of aesthetic modernism in relation to the new physics with which it was contemporaneous. Despite his close contact with Gertrude Stein, he has nothing to say about her work, or that of any other of his own artistic contemporaries.

This is probably why Charles Olson, the twentieth-century poet with the deepest affinities to Whitehead, disparages Whitehead’s aesthetics, even while enthusiastically adopting his metaphysics: “he’s just the greatest, if you read only his philosophy. If you read him on anything else, especially culture andor [sic] beauty, you realize that old saw, a man can’t do everything!” (Olson 1997, 302). My thanks go to Barrett Watten for pointing me to this citation, and more generally to the subject of Olson’s interest in Whitehead.

⁶Or even postmodern, at least under certain understandings of postmodernism: most notably, the one proposed by Jean-François Lyotard (1991 and 1993). I discuss the modernist preference for the sublime over the beautiful, and propose a Nietzschean “reversal of perspective” that would instead privilege beauty over sublimity, in my article “Beauty Lies in the Eye” (Shaviri 2002).

commodity out there that doesn't proclaim its beauty as a selling point, together with its novelty and the degree of creativity that ostensibly went into developing it. Free-market economists like Virginia Postrel (2004) celebrate this state of affairs as the apogee of consumer choice; in the marketplace, she says, we freely express our individual preferences by paying for "aesthetics," or "look and feel."⁷

On the other hand, and at the same time, beauty is exalted as an eternal value, an essential attribute of great art, something that miraculously transcends, and nullifies, all social and political (let alone merely commercial) considerations. Neoconservative art critics like Hilton Kramer (1985) and Roger Kimball (2004) seek to rehabilitate beauty, as part of their campaign to purge American culture of diversity, progressivism, and dissent. Beauty in this sense is proclaimed to be absolutely opposed to the marketplace – though it gets marketed nonetheless, in the form of the high prices commanded by art "masterpieces," as well as in the way it serves as a marker of discernment and taste, which is to say of the differentiations of social class (Bourdieu 2007).

In such circumstances, it is hard to disagree with Fredric Jameson, when he says that "all beauty today is meretricious and the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological manoeuvre and not a creative resource" (1998, 135). For Jameson, the modernist sublime encompassed "art's vocation to reach the Absolute" (84), its endeavor to put forth "truth claims" which are not those of the dominant order (86), and its quest for what Roland Barthes calls bliss, or *jouissance* (Barthes 1975). These ambitions are abjured, Jameson says, by a post- or anti-modernist contemporary art practice that is concerned with beauty – in the form of decoration and design – instead of truth, that seeks "pleasure and gratification" instead of *jouissance* (Jameson 1998, 86), and that has been entirely "assimilated into commodity production" (134). Beauty may have had a "subversive role" in the late nineteenth century, when it was "deployed... as a political weapon" against the "complacent materialist" pretensions of "a society marred by nascent commodification" (134). But this can no longer be the case today, when "the image is the commodity," without appeal or remainder (135).

If I am to insist upon Whitehead's aestheticism, then I must do so in a manner that takes these developments into account – rather than ignoring them or explaining them away. Whitehead's interest in the beautiful, to the exclusion of the sublime, and his claim that "Beauty is a wider, and more fundamental, notion than

⁷A reflection upon this situation is the starting-point for my next book, currently in preparation: *The Age of Aesthetics*.

Truth” (1933/1967, 265) must be maintained, not in spite of the current capitalist recuperation of the idea of beauty, but precisely *on account of* it – or at least in recognition of it. Now, philosophical concepts like “beauty” and “creativity” are for Whitehead entirely generic notions. That is to say, they apply univocally and indifferently to all entities and to all forms of existence. They do not have any privileged relation to, or any special role to play within, the capitalist mode of production. They are equally valid and important for feudal society, or tribal hunter-gatherer society; or for that matter, for a “society” of bees, or of bacteria, or even one of stones or of neutrinos. No particular political and economic arrangement – indeed, no “society” in Whitehead’s expansive use of this term – can claim privileged access to something that is a characteristic of being in general, in all its instances. Whitehead’s metaphysics cannot be partisan or politically one-sided, because it is not even especially human-centered in the first place. “No entity can be divorced from the notion of creativity. An entity is at least a particular form capable of infusing its own particularity into creativity. An actual entity, or a phase of an actual entity, is more than that; but, at least, it is that” (1929/1978, 213).

This means that Whitehead’s metaphysics cannot be *applied to* particular social and political circumstances. It does not command us, and it does not make ethical demands upon us. It does not make judgments of legitimacy. It certainly does not give us warrant to congratulate ourselves over the crucial role that creativity plays in postmodern marketing, much less to celebrate capitalism for unleashing its continual waves of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1962, 81ff.). But also, and by the same logic, Whitehead’s metaphysics does not give us any grounds to condemn capitalism – as I would want to do – for purveying a denatured beauty, or for promoting an inauthentic and sadly limited version of creativity. I can only make such a condemnation on my own account, and from my own perspective. For it is only in the singular “decision” of a particular actual entity that “fact is confronted with alternatives” (1929/1978, 189, citing 1925/1967, 176), or reality is criticized on the basis of “ideal possibilities” (1933/1967, 210). And it is only rarely, in vanishingly few instances of such decision, that “the explicitness of negation, which is the peculiar characteristic of consciousness,” comes to the foreground (1929/1978, 273-274).

The critique in which I would like to engage is therefore a matter of *appetition*, rather than one of metaphysical authorization, or of an ethical imperative. There is no appeal beyond the “aversions and adversions” (1929/1978, 32) that are felt in every immediate instance of experience. Whitehead defines “appetition” as the

condition of “immediate matter of fact including in itself a principle of unrest, involving realization of what is not and may be” (32). That is to say, appetite is rooted in “stubborn fact,” even as it seeks to alter or transform that fact. Appetition is always circumstantial and exceptional, for it is only the striving, or the projection, of one particular entity.⁸ Each actual occasion is an endeavor to change the world, in the very process of constituting itself. And each actual occasion does in fact change the world, at least to the extent of adding itself to the world, as something new. This is why appetite must be conceived in terms of an aesthetic of existence, rather than subjected to an ethics of obligation and lack. Appetition is dedicated to creating the “appearance” that “results from the fusion of the ideal with the actual: – The light that never was, on sea or land” (1933/1967, 211).

In contrast to these aesthetic processes of comparison, idealization, and transformation, Whitehead’s “generalities,” or generic notions, are not subject to negation or exception. They cannot serve as ideals, or as normative criteria. What they *can* do is provide us with a conceptual background, or with a “system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (1929/1978, 3). That is to say, Whitehead’s generic notions can assist us to discern, more fully and more precisely, the shape of the actuality within which we find ourselves. And this actuality also includes the virtuality – the potential for change and difference – that lurks within it, or that haunts it. For every actual entity “really experiences a future which must be actual, although the completed actualities of that future are undetermined” (215). In this way, we can go on to evaluate our actual situation, to praise it or condemn it, to negatively prehend it and seek to change it: not on general metaphysical grounds, but in view of this objective indetermination, and on the more urgent and more immediate grounds provided by our prehensions, our feelings, and our appetitions.

I can put this in more specific terms. Whitehead himself does not offer us any concepts of directly political import. He has nothing in particular to say about

⁸This is even the case when the particular entity in question is God. God’s “primordial appetite,” Whitehead says, is the “basis of all order” (1929/1978, 347), because it involves “the complete conceptual valuation of all eternal objects” (32). This means that God’s appetite is a desire, or a craving, towards the actualization of *all* potentialities, even impossible ones. But this craving can only be expressed and satisfied in the immediacy of finite actual occasions. Just one potentiality is made actual at a time. “God is completed by the individual, fluent satisfactions of finite fact” (347), in the “immediacy of the concrescent subject... constituted by its living aim at its own self-constitution” (244). The “consequent nature of God” is the sum of all these actualizations, as they are preserved in their “objective immortality”; but for this very reason, God is never finished, never total or complete.

capitalism; his politics, though moderately left of center, were certainly not Marxist.⁹ He does not contribute in any way to a politico-aesthetic judgment such as the one Jameson makes about the role of the appeal to beauty in late capitalism. But Whitehead *does* provide a “categorical scheme” (18) within which such a judgment can usefully be framed and articulated. Of course, Jameson himself does not actually invoke this scheme. But it is nevertheless noteworthy that Jameson’s critique turns upon the question of whether the contemporary invocation of beauty can be mobilized as a “creative resource.” Creativity remains a central concern for Jameson, in spite of the way that business and marketing have hijacked the term.

More generally, Whitehead’s generic formulations and aesthetic insights might lead us to question the link between creativity and the figure of the entrepreneur – a link so ubiquitous, and so seemingly self-evident, in our society today that even artists (as Andy Warhol foresaw) are now best known as the promoters of their own “brands.” These formulations and insights might also help us to take a new look at the way that beauty is commodified and packaged in the postmodern world. The creative process is entirely generic and common, and yet the fruits of this process are appropriated, privatized, and sold under artificially produced conditions of scarcity. At the same time, all the singular actual occasions of creativity are homogenized, through their reduction to the quantitative measure of money as a universal equivalent. These operations are abusive, precisely because they seek to rarify, monopolize, and capitalize upon the generic conditions of all existence.

The marketed and branded cultural product that we are so familiar with today is a particular sort of object. It is a “society” that results from specific positive and negative prehensions, bound together by a specific sort of “subjective aim.” We can analyze the product of commodity culture in terms of what it takes up and adapts to its own ends; and also in terms of what it refuses and excludes. Whitehead’s aesthetics may seem at odds with much of twentieth-century modernism. But such an aesthetics is strikingly relevant to the culture of the present day, which locates creativity almost entirely in practices of sampling, appropriation, and recombination. After all, Whitehead’s great topic is precisely the manner in which something radically new can emerge out of the prehension of already-existing elements. Innovation is all a matter of “‘subjective form,’ which is *how* [a partic-

⁹In some brief “Autobiographical Notes,” written late in his life, Whitehead says: “My political opinions were, and are, on the Liberal side, as against the Conservatives. I am now writing in terms of English party divisions. The Liberal Party has now (1941) practically vanished; and in England my vote would be given for the moderate side of the Labour Party” (1951a).

ular] subject prehends [its] datum” (1929/1978, 23). Whitehead’s aesthetics, with its intensive focus upon this *how*, takes on a special urgency in a culture, such as ours, that is poised on the razor’s edge between the corporate ownership, and interminable recycling, of “intellectual property,” on the one hand, and the pirating, reworking, and transformation of such alleged “property,” often in violation of copyright laws, on the other.

Whitehead warns us that “the chief error in philosophy is overstatement. The aim at generalization is sound, but the estimate of success is exaggerated” (1929/1978, 7). So I do not wish to exaggerate my own claims here. The instances that I have cited do not add up to a focused critique of capitalism, even in the cultural sphere; and I do not mean to suggest that Whitehead ever offers us any such thing.¹⁰ His concerns are as distant from Adorno’s as they are from Heidegger’s. But at the very least, Whitehead’s aestheticism is radical enough that it nudges and cajoles us away from the complacencies and satisfactions of commodity culture. For “progress is founded upon the experience of discordant feelings. The social value of liberty lies in its production of discords” (1933/1967, 257). Whitehead values the experience of “aesthetic destruction” (256) as a corrective to insipid harmonies and perfections.¹¹ Art in particular is important, Whitehead says, because of the way that it offers us an “intensity” that is “divorced from” the “dire necessity” or “compulsion which was its origin” (272). In view of this displacement, “Art can be described as a psychopathic response of the race to the stresses of its existence”

¹⁰Aside from Anne Pomeroy’s book on *Marx and Whitehead* (2004), little work has been done on putting the two thinkers, and their traditions, into contact. (A short bibliography on “Process Thought and Marxism” is available at <http://www.ctr4process.org/publications/Biblio/Thematic/Marxism.html>). I myself am wary of bringing Whitehead and Marx together, either in terms of how they conceive process and change, or in terms of how they view the relation of philosophical speculation to practice. The divergences in method, in focus of attention, and in the aims they seek to accomplish, are just too great. However, one way of seeing these divergences in terms of “patterned contrast” rather than opposition might be to look at particular conjunctions and resonances, rather than broader comparisons. For instance, Whitehead’s generic sense of creativity might usefully be juxtaposed with recent post-Marxist reconceptualizations of class and labor. These would include Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s recent speculations on affective labor and on the common, and their claim that the creativity that drives the economy today is ubiquitous, and comes from everywhere and everyone (2001); Paolo Virno’s closely related speculations on the multitude and general intellect (2004); and even, much further afield, Alain Badiou’s insistence upon the paradoxically “generic identity of the working class” (2006).

¹¹Whitehead’s praise of “aesthetic destruction” might usefully be compared with Morse Peckham’s insistence upon “cultural vandalism” as an important prelude to “emergent innovation” and “cultural transcendence” (1979, 274ff.).

(272). And this “psychopathic function of Art” is a necessary one, for it shakes us out of the “feeling of slow relapse into general anaesthesia, or into tameness which is its prelude” (263-264). But even in making declarations of this sort, Whitehead never moves from the terrain of the beautiful into that of the sublime. For he continues to define the goal of art – and even of the art of discords – to be not the rupture of appearances and the emergence of a traumatic “Real,” but rather the “purposeful adaptation of Appearance to Reality” (267).

Many of the great thinkers of Western modernity define their goal as a therapeutic one. Spinoza, Nietzsche, Freud, and Wittgenstein all present themselves as diagnosticians and clinicians. They examine symptoms, discern the conditions of our metaphysical malaise, and propose remedies to free us from our enslavement to “passive emotions” (Spinoza), to *ressentiment* (Nietzsche), to traumatic recollections (Freud), or to the “bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein). Therapy in this sense is the modern, secularized and demystified, form of ethics. To my mind, one of the striking things about Whitehead is that he does not make any such therapeutic or ethical claims. He does not say that his metaphysics will cure me, or that it will make me a better person. At best, philosophy and art may awaken me from my torpor, and allow me to subsume the painful experience of a “clash in affective tones” (260) within a wider sense of purpose. Such broadening “increases the dimensions of the experient subject, adds to its ambit” (266). But this is still a rather modest and limited result. At best, philosophy and poetry “seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization” (1938/1968, 174). Now, Whitehead displays none of Nietzsche’s or Freud’s justified suspicion regarding the value of “good sense,” or of what we call “civilization.” But even from the perspective of Whitehead’s entirely laudatory use of these terms, he is still only making a deliberately muted and minor claim. We are far from any “exaggerated” promises of a Great Health, of self-transcendence, or of cathartic transformation.

Even in his hyperbolic evocation of “God and the World,” in the fifth and final Part of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead does not offer us any prospect to match the “intellectual love of God” exalted by Spinoza in the fifth and final Part of the *Ethics*. Whitehead’s God, in sharp contrast to Spinoza’s, does not know the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Rather, Whitehead’s God is “the poet of the world.” This means that he knows the world, not in terms of its first causes, but only through its effects, and only in retrospect. God “saves” the world precisely to the extent, but only to the extent, that he aestheticizes and memorializes it. He

remembers the world in each and every detail, incorporating all these memories into an overarching “conceptual harmonization” (1929/1978, 346). But if God remembers every experience of every last entity, he does not produce and provide these experiences and memories themselves. That is something that is left for us to do, contingently and unpredictably. Where Spinoza’s book ends with the “spiritual contentment” that arises from the comprehension of “eternal necessity,” Whitehead’s book rather ends by justifying, and throwing us back upon, our “insistent craving” for novelty and adventure (351). That is what it means to write an aesthetics, rather than an ethics.

I can end this book only by attesting to the aesthetic power and splendor of Whitehead’s words, by bearing witness to how they have affected me. Whitehead’s language is to a great extent “without qualities.” The opening sentence of *Process and Reality* characterizes the book as a “course of lectures” (1929/1978, 3); and Whitehead largely conforms to the prosaic, or even pedantic, implications of this description. He descends from an extreme dryness and abstraction only in order to analyze such humdrum phrases as “Socrates is mortal” (11-12; 264-265) and “United Fruit Company” (1933/1967, 182-183). His vocabulary is filled with “technical terms,” which he uses despite the “danger” that these terms may either suggest irrelevant associations derived from their common meanings, or else (if they are neologisms) appear insipid, because they are “entirely neutral, devoid of all suggestiveness” (1929/1978, 32-33). This manner of writing is a strategic necessity for Whitehead; it is the only way that he can make statements that are precisely formulated, and yet as widely applicable and broadly generic as possible. The result is that I read Whitehead slowly and cautiously, attempting to parse out the details of his argument. But in doing so, I continually read over, or fail to notice, the aphoristic compressions and other “remarkable points” that pepper Whitehead’s discourse, and that break out, again and again, from the continuities of his reasoning. It is only when I look at the text with a certain inattentiveness, or when somebody else points out a phrase to me, that I am stopped short – as I finally notice and recognize the brilliance of something that I had already read through a good number of times. It is in this way that Whitehead’s own text remains perpetually creative, as it renews the “zest for existence” (351) that so much in our lives tends to annul.

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