

The Whitehead Psychology Nexus: Retrospect and Prospect

by Michel Weber

The WPN is an international open forum dedicated to the cross-examination of A. N. Whitehead's "process" philosophy and the various facets of the contemporary field of psychological research and debate. It seeks to encourage psychology in a Whiteheadian atmosphere and Whiteheadian scholarship informed by psychology. The *raison d'être* of this new learned society will be clear from the following brief introduction, which sketches its history, its current organization, and its past and forthcoming activities in three areas: publications, annual research workshops, and international conferences (further details are available at <http://www.isp.ucl.ac.be/staff/weber/>.)

The Silver Anniversary Conference (Claremont, 1998) featured exciting overtures to the field of psychology. In this setting the present writer and Franz Riffert (Salzburg) met, albeit briefly, finding common inspiration in the conceptual adventures promised by these overtures. Since the following two years did not bring signs of the anticipated developments to our European horizons, I approached Riffert in October 2000 about the possibility of a renewed effort to federate scholarship in this interdisciplinary domain. We straightaway conceived the idea for an international volume of invited papers that would "search for new contrasts" between psychology-at-large and Whiteheadian philosophy. The WPN was born and baptized with the symbol of the scarab as an emblem, which I asked Marc Laurent to design for us. By the following year most of the invited papers were in preparation, and Riffert negotiated an excellent publishing agreement with Peter Lang in Vienna. Before the end of 2001 the possibility of annual research meetings was secured with the generous offer of Jason Brown (New York) to welcome us in Fontarèches (France). In December of that year I launched the second volume of WPN studies on consciousness studies. In March 2002, Anderson Weekes (New York) was invited to join us as secretary and his influence on the development of the nexus since then has been significant. December 2003 will see the launch of the WPNS III project.

Since its inception, the WPN has been officially coordinated by Riffert and myself. The Nexus' structure is purposely minimalist in order to allow as much freedom of becoming as possible. If the WPN courts the possibility of vari-

ous intellectual abuses by insisting on vagueness of structure, we must remember that a certain nobility was conferred upon that term in its rehabilitation by James and Whitehead and that the risk of such abuses is the cost of being "worthy of the event," as Deleuze would put it.

Presently, the Nexus' scientific activities are taking place in three areas: the WPN Studies, the annual meetings in Fontarèches, and international conferences. First, the Nexus

publishes the WPN Studies and promotes research on the interdisciplinary themes envisioned for its publications. The inaugural volume, edited by Riffert and Weber, is in press and scheduled to appear this year under the title of *Searching for New Contrasts: Whiteheadian Contributions to Contemporary Challenges in Neurophysiology, Psychology, Psychotherapy, and the Philosophy of Mind* (Vienna: P. Lang). In conceiving this volume, the editors sought to gather two types of provocative communications by prominent international scholars: on the one hand, discussions of the present state of affairs in psychology; and, on the other, critical studies of the relevance of the imaginative generalizations of Whitehead for psychology and/or of the impact of contemporary

psychology on Whitehead's system of thought. The common denominator of all these inquiries is the process worldview understood in its widest sense, not a strict use of PR's technicalities (although this was encouraged). The volume is extensively indexed for subjects and includes a complete index of names and bibliography of works cited. Its critical apparatus should prove to be a handy companion for further research.

The second volume, entitled *Primary Glimmerings: Consciousness Studies from a Whiteheadian Process Perspective* and edited by Weber and Weekes, is slated for submission to Oxford University Press in December of this year. Various innovative trends in consciousness studies seem to be moving in a Whiteheadian direction and are, right now, poised at the verge of a novel confluence. For example, research in evolutionary epistemology, embodied cognition, autopoiesis, dynamic systems, biosemiotics, and ecopsychology all bear an organic ring that opens, at last, the possibility of moving beyond the bifurcation of nature. The volume directly addresses the question of the status of these



recent trends.

The third volume, *The Roar of Awakening: A Whiteheadian Dialogue between Western Psychotherapies and Eastern Worldviews*, to be edited by Weber and Wenyu Xie, is about to be launched. Its primary goal will be to describe the contemporary state of affairs in Western psychotherapy, and to do so in a Whiteheadian spirit: with genuine openness to the relative ways in which creativity, beauty, truth and peace manifest themselves in various cultural traditions. It chooses to explore afresh a path of cross-elucidation that was born with the field of history of religion: what have we—and can we—learn from a dialogue with Eastern religious worldviews?

Weekes anticipates a volume devoted to Whitehead and Gestalt theory, while Riffert plans a volume on Perception and Education. Among specific themes appropriate to the Gestalt volume, a few can be noted. (i) Aron Gurwitsch argued that the ideas of Husserl, James, the Gestaltists, and Piaget were animated by similar concerns and could be brought to converge in a holistic understanding of experience. How would Whitehead fit into this picture? (ii) Whitehead's critique of Hume is original. Apparently independently, Maurice Mandelbaum, who claims Kahler among his principal inspirations, developed the same critique. This convergence invites exploration. (iii) Whitehead diagnosed our modern alienation in much the same way Husserl did in his *Krisis*. How does Whitehead's project of reconciliation compare to that of Kahler or Mandelbaum? (iv) Merleau-Ponty's last pages on Koffka and Goldstein are side by side with his account of Whitehead's philosophy of nature. It would be valuable to define how the French thinker understood this proximity.

Secondly, yearly meetings, co-organized, with the help of Pauline Nivens, by Jason Brown, Maria Pachalska (Cracow), and myself, have been taking place in Fontarèches since 2002. The first meeting developed a variety of paths towards "new contrasts." The second meeting addressed the cross-examination of Whitehead's theory of perception and contemporary psychology. The third meeting (April 14-15 2004) will interrogate "social praxis and psychotherapeutical practice." Scholars who would like to participate are asked to contact one of the organizers without delay.

Thirdly, the Nexus is involved in the organization of international conferences at various sites: the 5th International Whitehead Conference (Korea, May 2004), as well as conferences at the Université de Paris I that will explore some form of dialogue between the perspectives of Whitehead and James in October 2004 and between the perspectives of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty in 2005. The perspectives of Whitehead and Husserl will be cross-elucidated at the Université de Paris IV, probably in 2007. The WPN will also co-sponsor the symposium "The Importance of Process: System and Adventure" at the University of Salzburg in 2006.

Introducing Philip Clayton: An Interview

by J.R. Hustwit

Q: How would you define "process thought"?

Process thought *could* be defined as any form of metaphysics that makes process — organized change over time — fundamental to its metaphysical vision. But it's best to begin with what process philosophy has come to mean in common parlance and then to note divergences in one's own usage of the term. In America and Europe today, but also for example in many discussions in Asia, "process thought" is most closely identified with the work of Alfred North Whitehead.

Of course, there are also many other thinkers who qualify as process philosophers and theologians. Still, by beginning with the core principles of Whitehead's philosophy, one can more easily specify *in virtue of which particular features* one identifies other scholars as process thinkers. I follow this method not in order to *exclude* other forms of process metaphysics but so that I can more clearly recognize and appropriate resources from other traditions in my own metaphysical work. Perhaps we can come back to what some of these traditions and resources are.

Q: How prominently does Whitehead figure in your projects?

In philosophy and theology circles I am known as a neo-Whiteheadian thinker but not, I think, as an orthodox Whiteheadian. In both of my latest two books — *God and Contemporary Science* and *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* — I have defended a dipolar notion of God derived from Whitehead's metaphysics. In the latter book, I argued that this notion of God is the most adequate for dealing with the crisis in the concept of God in modern thought. The science book tries to show how a dipolar concept of God can help solve the problem of divine action, which has been one of theism's major struggles since the dawn of modern science.

In my work as a systematic theologian, I have found Whitehead useful for addressing many of the traditional doctrines of Christian theology. In various writings on christology (the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God), pneumatology (the doctrine of Spirit), ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), and eschatology (the doctrine of "last things"), I have drawn on Whitehead in essential ways. Within the religion-science debate, I have sought to bring home the importance of metaphysics in general and the value of Whitehead's metaphysics in particular—an interest I share