

## Toward a Metaphysics of Expression

[Working Draft]

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“Philosophy can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles [or ultimate generalities]. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably. Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap” (*PR*, 4).

The renewal of speculative philosophy is a recovery of not only philosophical perspective but also intellectual humility (Can such perspective ever be recovered without the retrieval of such humility?). It is accordingly the opposite of what it might appear to be. Its audacity is as much as anything in its humility. There is, in this endeavor, at least an implicit recovery of humility as an intellectual virtue.<sup>1</sup> The denunciation of our predecessors, not so much their particular doctrines as their animating impulse and overarching ambition, might seem to be the measured judgment of

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<sup>1</sup> In a lecture delivered in 1935 to graduate students at Harvard and Radcliffe, later included as the Epilogue to *Modes of Thoughts*, Whitehead recalled: The group of William James, Josiah Royce, George Santayana, and George Herbert Palmer “is a group of men individually great. But as a group they are greater still. It is a group of adventure, of speculation, of search for new ideas. To be a philosopher is to make some humble approach to the main characteristics of this group of men” (*MT*, 174).

a healthy skepticism. It is, however, anything but this. Such wholesale dismissal is an arrogant judgment of an uncritical skepticism, one unwilling or unable to check its own inhumane presumption. Such skepticism is insufficiently skeptical about its own motives and legitimacy (cf. Peirce).

The renewal of speculative philosophy cannot only be programmatic. It must also be exemplary: it must prove its possibility by exemplifying its power, in a more or less realized expression of its theoretical applicability (*PR* 3, 6). In other words, it must prove its possibility by *realizing* its objectives, by actualizing itself, in however imperfect or incomplete a form.

Moreover, such renewal needs itself to be renewed. My *philosophical thesis* is just this (or, more accurately, it is not only that such renewal needs itself to be renewed but also that this renewal involves a historically motivated return to the phenomenological bases of our most basic notions), whereas my *hermeneutic thesis* is that we can observe in Whitehead's later thought (in some important respects) a more methodologically self-conscious renewal of his speculative project.<sup>2</sup> It can never be accomplished, once and for all; it must be taken up anew, now and again. In concert with other presentations at this conference (e.g., Christoph Kann and especially Stascha Rohmer), then, I want to highlight how works by Whitehead written after *Process and Reality* (1929) – not least of all, *Modes of Thought* (1938) and, to a less extent, *The Function of Reason* (1929) – are best interpreted as integral parts of his *ongoing* renewal of speculative philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> This certainly might seem odd to suggest, since the opening chapter of *PR* is so detailed and developed in comparison to the more or less scattered methodological pronouncements to be gathered from *MT*. Indeed, these pronouncements *are* far less developed and integrated than those encountered in *PR*. Even so, the indispensable work of philosophical assemblage is accorded in *MT* a much more prominent place than it is in earlier works.

In particular, I want to highlight the methodological self-consciousness expressed or articulated in *Modes of Thought* (cf. Kann), taking this self-consciousness to be itself an expression of an awareness of an irreducibly vague background forever eluding an adequately systematic articulation (cf. Charles Taylor). This methodological self-awareness gives voice to a sense of importance – the importance of a vast, vague, unmeasured and indeed immeasurable context in which we are enveloped and implicated. No matter how adequate is any experiment in speculative philosophy, thus any *essay* in systematic expression, especially when judged against the stultifying influence of inherited schemes, and inadequacy is inescapable. Hence, in giving voice to the irreducibly vague notion of importance (and doing so at the very outset of his renewed effort to ground his speculative venture in philosophical assemblage), Whitehead is in effect bearing witness to the vast, vague, and largely incomprehensible context providing the background against which meaningful utterances and (among these) the most precise formulations stand out. He moves decisively toward what James called “the reinstatement of the vague to its proper place” (*PP*, 246; see Gavin 1992), but at the same time Whitehead appears to have pulled back from the full force of the implications of his own later insights. To adapt the language of his philosophy of education for describing the development of his philosophy, we might say that the culminating stage of generalization must always be a return to the inaugurating stage of romance. As such, we at this stage must be attentive to the dangers of the intervening phase of precision, as these emerge and insinuate themselves in the culminating phase.

Indeed, if we take *Modes of Thought* seriously – thus, if we read this work not as a summation of prior achievements but as a renewal of speculative adventure – the stage

of generalization in Whitehead's development is nothing less than one of romance. Moreover, he is in this and other later works attentive to the dangers of adhering too narrowly to ideals of clarity and precision. But, when celebrating in the Epilogue to *MT* the kinship of philosophy to poetry, Whitehead concludes by aligning philosophy with "mathematical pattern" (174) rather than what might be called *phenomenological evocation*. The kinship of philosophy to poetry might be even deeper than Whitehead suggests, the main difference between poetic and philosophic utterance other than where he locates it. Both forms of utterance are, first and foremost, *evocative*: their function is to call us to what has called to the speaker or writer for acknowledgment and expression. In a more expansive treatment of Whitehead's later thought, then, I would aim to show, at the very least: (1) what Whitehead identifies as philosophical assemblage is primarily a phenomenological evocation designed to counteract the systematic occlusions of alternative systems or categorial schemes; (2) a less hesitant reinstatement of the vague than that encountered in Whitehead's later writings is one of the most important trajectories of these writings themselves; (while driving in this direction, they stop short of what Whitehead's own insights require); and (3) a more developed theory of symbolism than anything found anywhere in his works is needed for doing justice to the evocative function of philosophical discourse, especially in its recurrent phase of philosophical assemblage but also in the systematic articulation of the implications of what is arguably *the* defining operation of speculative philosophy – *descriptive generalization* (*PR*, 10). What I have to say today should hence be heard as a preliminary study of this more expansive treatment.

Allow me to return to my substantive (as distinct from my hermeneutic) thesis, though stated somewhat differently. The renewal of speculative thought hence enjoins us to return, time and again, to the disclosures of what we cannot help to identify as primary experience.<sup>3</sup> The return to such experience is, at once, a vital movement *within* speculative philosophy and an irrepressible impulse *beyond* any historical realization of the speculative drive. In a sense, it might even be an uncontrollable impulse beyond speculative philosophy or, more radically, articulate thought itself (cf. *MT*, 174). In philosophy no less than poetry, the limits of expression – at least, a sense of approaching or confronting such limits – might be reached from within the categorial schemes or other expressive ventures generated by a sustained effort in the direction of luminous expression. Our most adequate articulations are perhaps always accompanied by the Jamesian sense of “ever not quite” (or “ever not yet”).

In honest inquirers, this sense is never inert. It is always propulsive, for it propels them back to “the rough ground” of their everyday experience and shared practices (Wittgenstein, I, #107; cf. *PR*). Whereas in the later Wittgenstein the movement back to the rough ground appears to mark a break with speculative thought, in the later Whitehead it clearly signals a renewal of the *project* of such thought. In particular, phenomena of communication or expression are especially relevant here; they need be recovered in their full force and deeper implications, if speculative thought is to be recovered. In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead is rather explicit about this. Plato’s

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<sup>3</sup> In philosophy no less than in poetry, “there is reference to form beyond the direct meanings of words” (*MT*, 174). The function of such reference is, however, is to evoke “direct insight into depths as yet unspoken” or unexpressed. Near the conclusion of the last chapter (or lecture) of *MT*, as distinct from its Epilogue, Whitehead asserts: In these lectures I have not entered upon systematic metaphysical cosmology. The object of the lectures is to indicate [to point out] those elements in our experience in terms of which such a cosmology should be constructed” (*MT*, 168). That is, the entire work might be read primarily as a contribution to philosophical assemblage and (if I am correct) to the phenomenological evocation so central to Indeed, constitutive of) philosophical assemblage.

Receptacle is, upon his interpretation, “the doctrine of the immanence of Law, derived from the mutual immanence of actualities.” Whitehead immediately adds: “It is Plato’s doctrine of the medium of intercommunication” (*AOI*, 134). “The modern cosmologies are all detailed variations of the great types [originally formulated in the classical epoch]. . . . They revolve round the diverse notions of Law, the diverse notions of the communication between [or among] individuals, and the diverse notions of the mediating basis in virtue of which such communication is attained’ (135).

The notions of communication here are already speculative ones, but they are as such derived from the primordial experience of communicative agents, such experience not only with one another but also with whatever they encounter in experience (including what they encounter *as* factors caught up in processes of intercommunication [cf. James] – e.g., the bird fleeing likely sound of a predator).

The history of cosmological speculation serves the cause of speculative thought, not least of all by making available to us in explicit form the pivotal conceptions around which such theoretical adventures inevitably revolve. But the derivative status of these pivotal notions also comes into sharp focus by means of historical narrative, for any searching account of these influential conceptions must encompass their derivation from not only antecedent conceptualizations within this or that specialized discourse but also from the primordial experience of situated actors implicated in shared practices and, therein, entangled in historical affairs. In any event, methodological self-consciousness, as exemplified by Whitehead, encompasses historical self-consciousness. Of all the innumerable topics on which we might focus in our efforts to assemble the requisite materials for a cosmology rooted in well placed concreteness, those systematically denied

or disfigured by the dominant habits of philosophical thought, to the demonstrable disadvantage of those entombed in these intellectual habits, are the ones that we most need to evoke. The force of their evocations need to resounded in our discourses about the cosmos and our status in the universe. The extent to which the philosopher (like the poet) is primarily responding – often simply by way of acknowledged – to the call of the world,<sup>4</sup> the specific ways in which some of the more salient features of the experiential world call for recognition needs as much as anything else to be highlighted here. The acute sensitivity of the poet, nowhere more observable than in the radical receptivity of the poetic temperament to the call of the world as much as the sounds of language (cf. Ponge), has a counterpart in the nuanced receptivity of the speculative philosopher, at least in the Whiteheadian sense.

The renewal of speculative thought confronts anyone committed to this project with both questions regarding the “materials” to be assembled and ones regarding the *form* in which these materials are to be articulated. The work of systematic articulation cannot however be separated from that of philosophical assemblage, just as the work of such assemblage is inherently (thus, inescapably) critical. Such articulation gathers within itself the energies of assemblage and proves its value by formulating, as integral parts of its systematic elaboration, descriptive generalizations having nothing less than evocative power (the power to call our attention to otherwise overlooked dimensions of our world). In brief, systematic elaboration is a continuation of philosophical assemblage: it fails to attain *its* objective if it fails to bring before us the experiential

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<sup>4</sup> Whether or not the call of the world is best interpreted as a *provocation*, as ANW suggests in AOI, is however another question. My own inclination is to argue that the language of provocation is more misleading than illuminating in evoking what is involved here. Indeed, my preference is for the language of evocation, rather than that of provocation.

world in a more luminous light than rival schemes can do. In addition, the assemblage of materials is a piece with the critic of abstractions: it is, indeed, arguably the principal means by which specific examples of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness are exposed as such. The dialectic of phenomenological assemblage and systematic articulation is, accordingly, is a defining feature of speculative philosophy in the Whiteheadian sense. Hence, it deserves additional attention.

“System is,” Whitehead insists, “*important*. It is necessary for the handling, for the utilization, and for the criticism of the thoughts that throng our experience” (*MT*, 2; emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Speculative thought must assume systematic form. That is, it requires an intricately detailed and coherently elaborated form. The very importance of intelligibility, as disclosed in the various modes of human experience,<sup>6</sup> drives toward systematic expression of a self-expansive character, this *drive toward such expression* being possibly revelatory (or disclosive) of what reality, at bottom, *is*.<sup>7</sup> In assuming systematic form, speculative thought is able to discharge its critical function.<sup>8</sup> Whatever its kinship to poetry, such thought must go beyond intimation and allusion. Whitehead is, however, equally insistent that, “before the work of systematization commences, there is *a previous task* – a very necessary task if we are to avoid the narrowness inherent in all finite systems” (*MT*, 2; emphasis added) – i.e., in all historical realizations of the

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<sup>5</sup> The *importance* of system is an example of what Whitehead is exploring in the opening chapter of *Modes of Thought*. But the importance of systematic expression is itself rooted in a more or less dumb (or inarticulate) sense of importance, thus a guiding sense of salience and relevance.

<sup>6</sup> “The chequered history of religion and morality is the main reason for the widespread desire to put them aside in favour of the more stable generalities of science. Unfortunately for this smug endeavor to view the universe as the incarnation of the commonplace, the impact of aesthetic, religious and moral notions is inescapable. They are the disrupting and the energizing forces of civilization. They force mankind upwards and downwards” (*MT*, 19; cf. *PR*).

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this paper, I will be connecting the ultimate notion of importance to the equally basic notion of expression. This is simply an initial instance of this deliberate emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> “Systematization is the criticism of generality, etc.” (*MT*, 3).

speculative impulse, including Whitehead's own monumental achievement. He identifies this task as *assemblage*. Assemblage is primary, systematization derivative and, hence, in a sense secondary.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we seem warranted in claiming that the *importance* of assemblage is primary, that of system derivative and secondary. But the primary stage of systematic philosophy is one to which philosophical inquirers must return, time and again: it is "unending." All that can ever be achieved in our experiments in assemblage is "emphasis on a few large-scale notions, etc." (*MT*, 2). Such emphasis amounts to nothing less than the identification of what is important for *any* philosopher to take into account. This task is a historically situated and (to no slight degree) motivated undertaking, for everything needs to be taken into account.<sup>10</sup> What most needs to be taken into account is, accordingly, what has been unduly overlooked or stressed by the dominant currents of contemporary thought, especially as these bear the debilitating influence of past thought. Being alive *in* the present practically means being alive *to* the present, especially to its inevitably inchoate and largely unacknowledged impulses.

The example of William James is, consequently, worthy of being recalled here. For he is Whitehead's own exemplar of a philosopher attuned to what is historically (but not merely contemporaneously) important. The *importance* of James for Whitehead is as much as anything else James's keen sense of importance for the systematic articulation of that sense. While James's mind was, in Whitehead's judgment, "adequately based on the learning of the past," "the essence of his greatest was his marvellous sensitivity *to* the ideas of the present" (*MT*, 3; emphasis added). James "systematized; but *above all* he

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<sup>9</sup> "Philosophy can exclude nothing. Thus it should never start from systematization. Its primary stage can be termed *assemblage*" (*MT*, 2).

<sup>10</sup> "Philosophy can exclude nothing" (*MT*, 2). But this makes selection and emphasis themselves all the more important (see, e.g., *MT*, 18-19).

assembled” (emphasis added). Indeed, a deep and abiding suspicion animated the work of James, including his own recurrent efforts to cast his painstaking assemblages into systematic form. Whitehead captures this when he notes, James’s “intellectual life was one [protracted] protest against the dismissal [or disfiguration] of experience in *the interest of system*” (ibid; emphasis added). The interest of system is legitimate and indeed inescapable, especially when it is strenuously denounced, but it is in the end subordinate to other intellectual interests, ideally when such interests are explicitly identified and (insofar as this is possible) harmoniously integrated in an ongoing effort to civilize experience. Even the most sensitive, multifaceted attempts to civilize human experience can itself never escape degenerating into a debilitating inheritance. The James to whom Whitehead was so strongly drawn is a thinker whom Whitehead in his later thought both follows (he turns back, with the cultivated naiveté [Dewey LW 1] of the trained artist, to the phenomenological bases of his elaborately detailed formulations) and somewhat betrays. For in this phase of his development we can hear Whitehead’s evocation of not only the primordial experiences in which our theoretical abstractions must be rooted but also the *irreducibly vague* background against which all precise claims assume their arresting forms and fulfill their defining functions. But we also see Whitehead drawing back to some degree from the implications of his own thought.

While *Whitehead in Adventures of ideas* calls our attention to phenomena of communication, he in *Modes of Thought* focuses on expression. Expression provides, in my judgment, a better basis for a heuristically fruitful descriptive generalization (*PR*, 10; cf. Kann).

We are not the only expressive beings in the universe. Whether or not we are the only consciously communicative beings, we are certainly *not* the only diffusely and intelligibly expressive ones.<sup>11</sup> Expression does not necessarily trace its origin to the higher forms of conscious mentality, as do obviously certain forms of responsible utterance or conscientious communication. It is, if only initially, better approached in terms of functionality than intentionality: whatever fulfills the function of expression *is* expressive, regardless of whether or not it is describable in terms of what are ordinarily taken to be *intentional* predicates. Indeed, expression is so pervasive and manifest, in such diverse contexts and myriad forms, that we seem justified in taking expression to be characteristic of nothing less than being (cf. John E. Smith). To be is *either* to possess the capacity to press outward, at the very least leaving some discernible or intelligible trace of having been (for however brief a duration), *or* actually to press outward in such a way is to make a difference of largely indeterminable significance, at least in the immediate present. In brief, being is bound up with expression, so much so that expression, at least in an informal sense, constitutes nothing less than a category.

To the charge that such a claim is anthropomorphic, I am disposed to respond by insisting that all reflection attempting to go beyond the commonplace must inevitably be metaphorical in form and, in addition, nothing *a priori* or otherwise precludes the power or appropriateness of metaphors drawn from the sphere of human activity or experience. Indeed, even reflection simply committed to doing justice to the commonplace – that is,

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<sup>11</sup> “Expression is the diffusion, in the environment, of something initially entertained in the experience of the expressor. No conscious discrimination is necessarily involved; only the impulse to diffuse. The impulse is one of the simplest characteristics of animal nature. It is the most fundamental evidence of our presupposition of the world without” (MT, 21).

aiming at enabling us to see what stares us in the face (cf. Wittgenstein) – must have recourse to metaphor.<sup>12</sup>

Expression presupposes importance (*MT*, 20). Moreover, importance is intertwined with actuality or what might be more aptly called factuality. An unprejudiced account of the empirical world demands recognition of matters of importance no less than matters of fact. In our very assemblage of the matters to be integrated into a system, some of the more salient connections between matters of importance and those of fact are already part of our description. While the identification of what is meant by a matter of fact or, more simply, a fact cannot take the form of a definition (cf. *MT*, 6-8), such identification must, in a single stroke, *mark off* from all other basic notions (or phenomena) this one and *gather together* this one with that from which it is primarily differentiated. Thus, the identification of what is meant by a matter of fact entails a differentiation from a matter of importance wherein the intimate connection – arguably the underlying equivalence – of importance and factuality is brought into sharpest focus. Matters of fact *are*, at bottom, matters of importance, though in certain phases of cultural development the equivalence becomes not only obscured but also denied – denied in such a way that the one is taken to exist in isolation from the other. The tyrannical reign of factuality has unleashed ruthless assaults on importance, assaults cumulatively resulting in the trivialization of the very category (or notion) of importance. Importance has paradoxically ceased to be important, factuality devoid of significance alone is judged to be significant.

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<sup>12</sup> In the opening chapter of *Modes of Thought*, the one devoted to “Importance,” Whitehead calls attention to “a permanent difficulty of philosophic discussion” – “namely, that words need must be stretched beyond their common meanings in the marketplace” (*MT*, 12; cf. *PR*).

In presupposing the basic notion of importance, a highly generalized conception of expression also presupposes the dialectical interplay between matters of importance and those of fact. At an even more basic methodological level, the phenomenological task of assemblage and identification is, in Whitehead's project, a prolegomena to the inescapable task of systematic expression. Too many expositions of Whitehead, however, obscure the methodological or heuristic lessons to be learned from his example, perhaps even more than his explicit methodological pronouncements or his precisely formulated technical conclusions. Hence, my aim here is to exhibit more fully than is typically done Whitehead's exemplarity, especially in reference to the work of philosophy, adequately envisioned and properly animated.

There is nothing idiosyncratic in this endeavor, for it drives in the direction of highlighting some of the most basic emphases in Whitehead's carefully articulated undertakings, not least of all his arresting characterization of philosophical discourse as a critique of abstractions. Whitehead never denies the value and indeed indispensability of abstraction, though the inherent dangers of this ineluctable drive (the drive to frame abstractions but also to elaborate more or less abstractly their implications and intersections) are always near the very center of his concern. The attainment or recovery of concreteness is always the result of a critique – a critique of abstractions. The philosophical critique of abstractions encompasses a metaphysical critique of those abstractions on which the theoretical imagination has fixated, elevating them to the status of nothing less than the paradigms of concreteness. Philosophy cannot help but be the critique of abstractions (though it might be more than such a critique). In order to carry out this critique in a conscientious, thoroughgoing, and systematic manner, this critique

must extend to those designata that especially the most influential philosophers have identified as the exemplars of concreteness.

What presses outward toward whatever envelopes it, in such a way as to call forth a series of responses, is, in effect, an affirmation of importance. The importance of any finite actuality in its insular [actuality] is, however, negligible. The importance of the isolated unit is, in most (if not all) respects, illusory; that of the expanding range of possible expressions is anything but this. The growth of these possibilities is itself indicative of a more rudimentary and pervasive tendency in a truly creative cosmos (one in which disruptive novelty and irrepressible creativity are among its defining features. For Whitehead, at least, the monism of importance needs to be squared with the pluralism of expression.

As I just noted, expression presupposes importance. In turn, intelligence and the work of understanding presuppose the *growth of expression* into reflexive and recursive as well as ever more expansive and encompassing forms. Among other things, this means an explicit and detailed account of expression itself (such as we find in Whitehead's writings). Intelligence might be conceived as the offspring of importance and expression, grown to a degree of maturity beyond anything previously attained. So conceived, intelligence is to be measured not so much in terms of the consolidation (far less the formalization) of its actual achievements as by its drive toward as yet unarticulated possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

The theoretical deployment of intelligence is no less adapted for adventure than the practical use. Each form of intelligence is, at bottom, nothing less than a capacity to

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<sup>13</sup> The "final unity of animal intelligence," alleged exemplified in human beings, "is "the organ of reaction to novel situations, and is the organ introducing the requisite novelty of reaction" (*MT*, 25).

respond to the call of a dramatic situation in which human ingenuity might make a decisive difference – if only by assembling a series of reminders (cf. Wittgenstein, I, #127) by whose light we might inhabit the earth less violently and engage each other more humanely (cf. *AOI*). The dramatic situation into which theoretical reason is thrown, time and again, frequently concerns the pressing need to give eloquent voice to the dumb certainties of everyday life, in opposition to the brilliant feats of explaining *away* such certainties by one or another influential tradition or thinker. While the consciousness of the drama into which theoretical reason is ineluctably thrown depends upon a historical narrative (or narrative understanding) of our actual situation, the response to this situation involves more often than not attending with artistic sensitivity to the pervasive features of our experiential world (it is, other words, closer to lyrical consciousness than narrative understanding). The renewal of speculative thought is rooted in the certainties of primordial experience. The systematic articulation of such certainties proves its worth above all by fulfilling the evocative function of poetic utterance or something intimately akin to such utterance (cf. Colapietro).

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