

Self-Enjoyment and Concern

Steven Shaviro

shaviro@shaviro.com

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In “Nature Alive,” the eighth chapter of his last book, *Modes of Thought*, Alfred North Whitehead writes that “the notion of life implies a certain absoluteness of self-enjoyment. . . [t]he occasion of experience is absolute in respect to its immediate self-enjoyment” (1938/1968, 150-151). In other words, life is a process of pure auto-affection. It involves a “self-enjoyment” that is both “immediate” and “absolute.” Self-enjoyment is “immediate” in that it happens pre-reflexively, in the moment itself. I enjoy my life as I am living it; my enjoyment of the very experience of living is precisely what it means to be alive. “The enjoyment belongs to the process and is not a characteristic of any static result” (152). Also, self-enjoyment is “absolute” in that it unfolds entirely in itself and for itself, without conditions. A living occasion is “absolute” in the etymological sense of this word: it is unbound, set free, released from all relation. Every moment of life is an autonomous “self-creation” (151). A living occasion must “be understood without reference to any other concurrent occasions” (151).

Just a few pages later, however, Whitehead says something quite different. He writes that “each occasion is an activity of concern, in the Quaker sense of that term. . . The occasion is concerned, in the way of feeling and aim, with things that in their own essence lie beyond it” (167). Now, for the Quakers, *concern* implies a weight upon the spirit. When something concerns me, I cannot ignore it or walk away from it. It presses upon my being, and compels me to respond. Concern, therefore, is an involuntary experience of being affected by others. It opens me, in spite of myself, to the outside. It compromises my autonomy, leading me towards something beyond myself. Concern is relational, rather than absolute, and hetero-affective rather than auto-affective.

The distinction between self-enjoyment and concern is fundamental. Yet at the same time, these two conditions are closely bound together. You can't have one without the other. Concern is itself a kind of enjoyment, and it arises out of the very process of immediate self-enjoyment. For it is precisely when "engaged in its own immediate self-realization" that an occasion finds itself most vitally "concerned with the universe" that lies beyond it (167). Life in its self-enjoyment "passes into a future. . . There is no nature apart from transition, and there is no transition apart from temporal duration" (152). Even the most immediate self-enjoyment has the thickness of what Whitehead calls the "specious present" (89); and in this "temporal thickness" it reaches out beyond itself (1929/1978, 169). In the midst of my self-enjoyment, I spend or expend myself. Conversely, concern or other-directedness is itself a necessary precondition for even the most intransitive self-enjoyment. For the absolute self-affirmation of the living occasion arises out of "a complex process of appropriating into a unity of existence the many data presented as relevant by the physical processes of nature" (1938/1968, 151). The cat is concerned with the mouse, and its "appropriation" of the mouse is the basis of its immediate self-enjoyment.

Concern and self-enjoyment are so closely connected because they are both movements, or pulsations, of *emotion*. On the most basic level, Whitehead says, "life is the enjoyment of emotion, derived from the past and aimed at the future. It is the enjoyment of emotion which was then, which is now, and which will be then" (1938/1968, 167). The emotion felt by a living being always comes from somewhere else; and it is always going somewhere else. "It issues from, and it issues towards. It is received, it is enjoyed, and it is passed along, from moment to moment" (167). Emotion arises out of the very "process of appropriation" (151); it is enjoyed in the immediacy of the specious present, only to be "passed along" in the very next instant. Life is a passage through time, whose midpoint is the self-enjoyment of the immediate present, and whose extremes are the concern that I feel for the past, and the concern through which I give myself to the future. An occasion is self-constituted and self-reflexive, in that it does not refer to, and is not concerned with, "any other concurrent occasions." But it *does* refer to, and it *is* concerned with, the occasions that precede it and that follow it. Such is the "vector character" of all experience (167).

The contrast between self-enjoyment and concern is not, in itself, anything new in Whitehead's metaphysics. The term *concern*, always qualified as being meant "in the Quaker sense," does not appear in *Process and Reality*. But when it is

first invoked in *Adventures of Ideas*, it is associated with concepts that are familiar from the earlier book. Whitehead uses *concern* to denote the “affective tone” that is an essential feature of any “subject-object relation” (1933/1967, 176), or of any act of perception or prehension whatsoever (180). “No prehension, even of bare *sensa*, can be divested of its affective tone, that is to say, of its character as a ‘concern’ in the Quaker sense” (180). No occasion ever prehends another occasion neutrally and impassively; the emotion it feels for the other thing, in the very process of prehending it, *is* its concern.

For its part, the term *self-enjoyment* is only used sparingly in *Process and Reality*. But its few uses are significant. Whitehead writes of the “self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many” (1929/1978, 145); that is to say, the very process by which “the many become one, and are increased by one” (21) is already itself an instance of self-enjoyment. Later, he writes of the way that “an actual entity considered in relation to the privacy of things... is a moment in the genesis of self-enjoyment” (289). Self-enjoyment in this sense is thereby caught up in “the antithesis between publicity and privacy” which “obtrudes itself at every stage” in Whitehead’s cosmology (289). “There are elements only to be understood by reference to what is beyond the fact in question; and there are elements expressive of the immediate, private, personal, individuality of the fact in question” (289). The privacy of self-enjoyment, and the publicity of what will come to be called concern, are both dimensions of every single occasion. *Modes of Thought*, therefore, is not really saying anything new about the antithesis between self-enjoyment and concern – except that it expresses the distinction far more clearly and emphatically than was the case in Whitehead’s earlier texts.

What changes, then, in Whitehead’s later thought? I would like to suggest that the difference between *Process and Reality*, on the one hand, and *Modes of Thought*, on the other, is precisely a difference of emphasis: which is to say that it is a rhetorical difference. But this does not mean that the difference is insignificant, or merely apparent. The very fact that language, for Whitehead, “is not the essence of thought” (1938/1968, 35), and that “each phraseology leads to a crop of misunderstandings” (1933/1967, 176), means that linguistic variations need to be handled with the utmost care. To my mind, the *specificity* of Whitehead’s late writing lies, not in any actual change of doctrine, but precisely in a difference of phraseology, or tone, or literary style. *Adventures of Ideas* (1933/1967), *Modes of Thought* (1938/1968), and “Immortality” (1951) express Whitehead’s metaphysics with a

different rhetoric, and in a different *manner*. And that makes all the difference.

Gilles Deleuze credits Whitehead, like the Stoics and Leibniz before him, with inventing a *mannerism* in philosophy, a way of thinking “that is opposed to the essentialism first of Aristotle and then of Descartes” (1993, 53). A philosophy of processes and events explores manners of being rather than states of being, “modes of thought” rather than any supposed essence of thought, and contingent interactions rather than unchanging substances. It focuses, you might say, on adverbs instead of nouns. It is as concerned with the *way* that one says things, as it is with the ostensible content of what is being said. Even if the facts, or data, have not themselves changed, the manner in which we entertain those facts or data may well change. It all comes down to the *aim* of the living occasion in question, which Whitehead defines as the manner in which one particular “‘way of enjoyment’ is selected from the boundless wealth of alternatives” (1938/1968, 152). A mannerist philosophy has to do with the multiplicity and mutability of our ways of enjoyment, as these are manifested even in the course of what an essentialist thinker would regard as the “same” situation.

Now, Whitehead concludes *Process and Reality* with a grand vision of “God and the World,” in the course of which he works through “a group of antitheses,” expressing the “apparent self-contradictions” that characterize our experience in its entirety (1929/1978, 348). These antitheses consist of “opposed elements” that nonetheless “stand to each other in mutual requirement” (348). Such is the case with God and the World themselves, as ultimate terms in Whitehead’s cosmology. But it is also the case, on a smaller scale, with self-enjoyment and concern, as I have been describing them. In such an antithesis, each of the terms would seem to exclude the other. And yet, Whitehead requires us to think them together; and further, he requires us to think them without having recourse to the subterfuges of dialectical negation and sublation, on the one hand, and without abandoning them as insurpassable aporias or blocks to thought, on the other.

How is it possible, then, to resolve such antinomies? The answer comes from Whitehead’s understanding of process. God and the World, the two ultimate terms of each antithesis, must be maintained in a “unity” together (1929/1978, 348), even as they “move conversely to each other in respect to their process” (349). This means that the relation between the conversely-moving processes will alter in terms of strength, or degrees of difference, from one moment to the next. In any concrete situation, the opposed processes may either “inhibit or contrast” one another, and this to varying degrees (348). Whitehead therefore asks an evaluative

question: are we faced with a situation of “diversities in opposition,” producing inhibition, or of “diversities in contrast,” forming an affectively compelling pattern (348)? The resolution of the antithesis comes about when the latter alternative is chosen; or better, when, through a creative act, the former is transformed into the latter. This is accomplished – not theoretically but practically – through “a shift of meaning which converts the opposition into a contrast” (348).

The injunction to convert oppositions into contrasts is a leitmotif of Isabelle Stengers’ reading of Whitehead (2002). I would like to extend Stengers’ argument, by suggesting that this injunction is the founding impulse behind Whitehead’s later writings. *Adventures of Ideas, Modes of Thought*, and “Immortality” begin precisely at the point where *Process and Reality* ends: with the conversion of seemingly intractable conceptual oppositions into what *Adventures* describes as an aesthetic design of “patterned contrasts” (1933/1967, 252). In *Adventures*, after recapitulating, with subtle modifications, the argument of *Process and Reality* (Part III, “Philosophical”), Whitehead goes on to an entirely new discussion of the complex relationship between Truth and Beauty (Part IV, “Civilization”). Aesthetic questions only hinted at in the earlier work now become a central speculative focus. Whitehead states that “Beauty is a wider, and more fundamental, notion than Truth” (265). He asserts that “Beauty is . . . the one aim which by its very nature is self-justifying” (266), so that “any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence” (265). With regard to humanity in general, he proposes that “the human body is an instrument for the production of art in the life of the human soul” (271). And, most outrageously and hyperbolically of all, Whitehead insists that “the teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (265). Such assertions pose a challenge to our twenty-first-century sensibilities. In our condition of late (or post-) modernity, we tend to be deeply suspicious of the claims of aesthetics, and to subordinate aesthetics to ethics. Even within the aesthetic realm, we value the sublime over the beautiful. What are we to make of the rampant and unapologetic aestheticism of the late Whitehead?

I think that this question can only be answered by working through Whitehead’s own examples of beauty. The polarity between self-enjoyment and concern in *Modes of Thought* is, quite precisely, a patterned contrast: which is to say that it is beautiful, and productive of beauty. But what does it mean to read the economy of self-enjoyment and concern aesthetically, rather than ethically? The obvious comparison to be made here is that between Whitehead and Emmanuel Levinas.

Totality and Infinity contains an extended analysis of enjoyment, or what Levinas calls the structure of “living from. . .” (1969, 109ff.). Levinas equates enjoyment with a primordial sensibility, and with an openness to the world. He describes enjoyment as a process of *nourishment*: “the transmutation of the other into the same. . . an energy that is other. . . becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (111). Despite the vast differences in vocabulary and rhetoric, this analysis has much in common with Whitehead’s description of self-enjoyment. Through a process of appropriation, “the many data” encountered in the world are combined “into a unity of existence” that *is* the living entity (1938/1968, 150). Levinas and Whitehead alike insist that our experience is, in the first instance, a physical, corporeal, and embodied one, nourished by its environment yet existing for itself. They both emphasize the *satisfaction* of the sheer fact of being alive. And they both find, in this satisfaction, a pre-cognitive and pre-reflexive mode of subjectivity, an “I” that does not have the form of the Cartesian *cogito*.

But everything changes when Levinas moves on to the encounter with radical exteriority, with the Other, with the Face. The approach of the Other “puts the I in question” (Levinas 1969, 195). It ruptures the primordial economy of sensibility and enjoyment. The Other, in its infinite demand, cannot be transmuted into the same. It cannot be grasped in the register of satisfaction. The insatiability of its desire cannot be appeased. For Levinas, therefore, something like “concern in the Quaker sense” is absolute and irreducible. Ethical transcendence, with the infinite responsibility that it entails, interrupts, overrides, and suspends the naive self-enjoyment of aesthetic immanence. The Levinasian passage from enjoyment to concern is traumatic and irreversible. The terms of this passage are incommensurable with one another; they cannot be described, much less aestheticized, in the form of a patterned contrast.

The call of the Other in Levinas’ philosophy is its own ground, and its own justification. In the state of a merely aesthetic sensibility, I may be simply ignorant of this call, “entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach” (Levinas 1969, 134). But once I have heard the call of the Other, I cannot escape it or ignore it. For I encounter it as something that precedes me, that escapes my experience even while determining it. To refuse this call is still to acknowledge its authority, albeit in a backhanded and reactive way. This is why, for Levinas, ethics precedes ontology, and aesthetics is only granted a secondary, derivative place. Beyond all enjoyment, I am always already responsible to, and guilty before, the Other – even

when I deny this, or claim to have no cognizance of it.

Nonetheless, I want to suggest that we can, and should, resist this apotheosis of the Other, and this prioritization of ethics – and that Whitehead gives us the grounds, and the tools, to do so. Everything in Whitehead cries out against the *unilateral* thrust of Levinas' thought, its insistence upon one grand moment of rupture. For Whitehead, precisely because “there is no nature apart from transition” – because transition is happening all the time – there can also be no grandiose drama of my encounter with the Other, such as Levinas describes. That is to say, there is no trauma in which my sensibility is breached, no convulsive moment of violence, or awakening call to responsibility, in which my enjoyment is once and for all interrupted. Rather, the poles of self-enjoyment and concern are always reciprocally at work within one another. Indeed, this is precisely why they form a patterned contrast – and not an opposition of incommensurable terms. Every living occasion is already, in its very nature, a “conjunction of transcendence and immanence” (Whitehead 1938/1968, 167). Levinas' subordination of immanence to transcendence is one-sided and reductive; it is the very sort of “overstatement” which, as Whitehead says, is always “the chief error in philosophy” (1929/1978, 7). We can no more rest content with Levinas' philosophy than we could with its opposite, a philosophy of pure immanence and positivity.

One can express this difference in several ways. There is the same radical difference between Whitehead's God and Levinas' God. Whitehead affirms multiplicity, while Levinas dualizes it by turning everything into this single encounter (though this leaves him with additional problems, regarding "the third" and community or sociality, that he has difficulty resolving) The nature of time dissymmetry is different in the two thinkers – they approach the unknowability and openness of the future in strikingly different ways. The future, as absolute Other, is for Levinas undifferentiated.

This brings us into the territory that has recently been opened up by that group of philosophers who have come to be known as the Speculative Realists: most notably, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant. These thinkers are all concerned with affirming the actuality of the world apart from human thought. The chief object of their critique is what Meillassoux calls “correlationalism,” and Harman “the philosophy of human access.” This is the theory that “affirms the indissoluble primacy of the relation between thought and its correlate over the metaphysical hypostatization or representalist reification of either term of the relation” (Brassier 2007, 18). For Meillassoux, “correlation-

ism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another,” so that it is claimed instead that “we never grasp and object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its relation to the subject” (2008, 5). Kant’s “Copernican revolution” in philosophy is the paradigm case of correlationism. Kant’s thought is entirely anthropocentric; it leaves us with what Harman calls “a single lonely rift between people and everything else.” Even “the distinction between phenomena and noumena” is then “something endured by humans alone” (Harman 2007, 172). The Speculative Realists argue that, to this day, philosophy has not escaped this trap. Both Anglo-American language philosophy, and Continental or phenomenological philosophy, continue to privilege human access, or the correlation between thought and its object, as the crucial, and indeed the *only* question, that philosophy may address. The Speculative Realists urge us to reject “this equation of being and thought,” which “leaves us stranded in a human–world coupling” that is sterile and untenable (Harman 2007, 173).

Now, Levinas, as much as Husserl and Heidegger, is susceptible to the Speculative Realist critique; but, importantly, Whitehead is not. As Harman puts it, “the question of whether phenomenology deals with realities or only with human access determines whether philosophy can range freely over the whole of the world, or whether it will remain restricted to self-reflexive remarks about human language and cognition” (2005, 42). This is precisely what separates “Whitehead from Husserl,” among others. Husserl and other phenomenologists, and even Heidegger and his followers, continue to take correlationalism for granted (Brassier 2007, 19; Harman 2007, 173). For Levinas, only human subjects can encounter the infinitude of the Other, and feel the responsibility that is enjoined upon them. This is radically different from the way in which, in Whitehead’s thought, prehension, appropriation, self-enjoyment, and concern, are the experiences of all entities, and not merely of human agents. For “life lies below this grade of mentality” (1938/1968, 167).

Whitehead’s solution to the demands of realism differs sharply from that of the Speculative Realists, however. Where the latter reject Kant’s “Copernican revolution” altogether, Whitehead separates Kant’s emphasis upon conditions rather than essences from his anthropomorphism and his “excess of subjectivity.” Whitehead thus rejects correlationism and anthropocentrism precisely by extending Kant’s analyses of conditions of possibility, and of the generative role of time, to all entities in the universe, rather than confining them to the privileged realm of human beings, or of rational minds. In Whitehead’s account, *everything* is a “subject”

of a sort: rocks and trees and specks of dust and the aurora borealis, no less than human beings and great apes.

In a remarkable passage, both brilliant and utterly wrongheaded, Harman objects that Whitehead's vision of an infinite network of relations is deficient, for two reasons (2005, 82). In the first place, because it is "too reminiscent of a house of mirrors," in which any entity "turns out to be nothing more than its perceptions of *other* entities. These entities, in turn, are made up of still further perceptions," and so on, *ad infinitum*. In the second place, Harman claims, quite remarkably, that "no relational theory such as Whitehead's is able to give a sufficient explanation of change," precisely because all entities are composed only of prehensions of other entities. Harman's own metaphysics calls for the existence of things as independent substances that never truly interrelate, but only communicate "vicariously," on their surfaces. Thus every entity contains a reserve of unrealized potentialities that are never exhausted by its encounters with other entities. Harman willfully embraces what Whitehead denounces as a fallacy, according to which "the universe is shivered into a multitude of disconnected substantial things. . . . But substantial thing cannot call unto substantial thing" (Whitehead 1933/1967, 133). For Harman, this strange picture is precisely what rescues the independence of entities from totalizing reduction to the same, or to being correlates of the human mind. Harman moves in precisely the opposite direction from Levinas, obliterating anything like concern, and affirming the self-enjoyment of entities unreservedly.

Whitehead's "patterned contrast" between these alternatives is what defines his philosophy; it works the razor's edge between novelty on the one hand, and contextual recombination of the already-existent on the other. I want to argue that this is precisely the position in which aesthetics must be primary. Whitehead thereby places ethics as derivative of aesthetics, which is precisely the most difficult, but also the most necessary, component of his thought for us today.

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