THE WHITEHEADIAN CENTURY: A LOOK AHEAD
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Those involved in the founding of the International Process Network (IPN) in 2001 warrant a place in the history of process thought.1 IPN had a role in the explosion of International Whitehead conferences beginning in 2002 in Beijing, Peoples Republic of China, then Seoul, Korea (2004), Salzburg, Austria (2006), Bangalore, India (2009), Tokyo, Japan (2011), and now this Ninth International Whitehead Conference in Krakow, Poland (2013). At this conference we have participants from Iran, Nigeria, China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Canada, the United States, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. What draws people from such diverse places to study Whitehead and what does it portend?

We may find important answers to these questions in David Ray Griffin’s 2002 article “Being Bold: Anticipating a Whitehead Century,” published in Process Studies;2 John B. Cobb, Jr.’s 2004 paper, titled “Why Whitehead?”,3 given at the Fifth International Whitehead Conference in Seoul, Korea; and Isabelle Stengers’ 2011 book, Thinking with Whitehead;4 and further in Whitehead’s own books, Modes of Thought5 and Process and Reality,6 often cited by Stengers. They present compelling arguments why, in philosophy, this may be the Whiteheadian century. Further, we can see in their work strategies for bringing this about. To say that this will occur “in philosophy” is not to narrow the potential impact of this eventuality for they offer a sense of how a way of thinking and understanding the world may infect both the academic and popular mind and lead to high adventure, transformative change, and the production of new truths.

1The author was the Founding Executive Director of the International Process Network and continues to serve on that Board. The first meeting of the Board portentously occurred on September 11, 2001.


Before beginning, however, I extend fair warning from Isabelle Stengers to those who would enter the territory of Whitehead’s work because it demands “that its readers accept the adventure of the questions that will separate them from every consensus.” By every consensus, she means every modern, postmodern and ancient consensus, for Whitehead, even 75 years after his last book, *Modes of Thought*, was published is still offering something that is radically new and different. With full awareness of this, David Ray Griffin in his 2002 *Process Studies* essay admonished process adherents to “be bold, really bold” in anticipation of a radical shift to process thought by the time this century ends.

Griffin was writing to Whiteheadian scholars who, in many cases, felt beleaguered for standing outside consensus views. An objective survey of the philosophical and scientific communities and the intellectual world in general, he felt would provide little evidence that a turn to Whiteheadian thought was likely. He said we must, nevertheless, anticipate such a turn because of the ability of Whiteheadian thought to resolve philosophical contradictions of our age and offer a cosmology that provides a new basis for intellectual life. He said we think of Whiteheadian thought as an alternative, but we could imagine that it will be mainstream. Whether this occurs would depend on the actions of process thinkers, who should not be paralyzed or silent in the face of current orthodoxy, but should advance those ideas that may be most offensive to this orthodoxy for these ideas are the ones that have the greatest power to resolve problems in current thought.

It might be well to recall at this point that Whitehead himself observed:

> A system of philosophy is never refuted it is only abandoned. The reason is [generally not because of logical contradictions which are usually trivial. Rather it is because after criticism the system suffers from] inadequacy and incoherence. Failure to include some obvious elements of experience in the system is met by boldly denying the facts. . . . After a system has acquired orthodoxy, and is taught with authority, it receives a sharper criticism. Its denials and its incoherencies are found intolerable, and a reaction sets in.⁹

So if this is to be a Whiteheadian century, we should not expect that this way of thinking will triumph by refuting orthodoxy, but rather by advancing ideas that overcome the denials of fact and incoherencies in orthodoxy until that unknown and perhaps sudden moment in the future when current orthodoxy is abandoned in favor of process philosophy.

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⁷Stengers, 7.

⁸Griffin, 3

Griffin held up two aspects of Whiteheadian thought as being particularly significant, the first being its nonreductionistic naturalism and the second being its ability to reconcile opposing points of view on specific contemporary philosophical problems. With regard to the first, by naturalism, Griffin means “the exclusion of appeals to occasional supernatural interruptions of the world’s fundamental causal nexus.”\(^{10}\) This limitation process thought can accept along with the reigning orthodoxy. He also says process thinkers can accept “domain uniformitarianism, the doctrine that all phenomena should be explained in terms of one . . . set of causal categories.”\(^{11}\) What he objects to is the reductionistic categories employed in this orthodoxy, namely the sensationist theory of perception, atheism and materialism, what he calls “naturalism\(_{sam}\),” These, if he were to use Whitehead’s language, are what lead to denials of fact and incoherencies, and for which process thought offers a better alternative.

Naturalism\(_{sam}\), according to Griffin, assumes that its limited causal categories are adequate for physics and chemistry and ultimately adequate for all fields of inquiry including biology and the humanities. That these causal categories have not yet provided explanations in these wider fields is taken to be “merely epistemic, due to the complexity of the world and the finitude of human knowledge.”\(^{12}\) A corollary of this is “ontological reductionism, the doctrine that all the activities of complex organisms are in principle wholly explainable in terms of the interactions of their micro-constituents.”\(^{13}\)

While this is the dominant orthodoxy in the academy, a notable reaction to it involves methodological dualism. In general, this view accepts reductionistic naturalism as providing the real causal explanations for the world, but acknowledges its current inadequacy in dealing with the humanities. In the humanities, therefore, “methodological dualists say that human experience is to be ‘interpreted,’ and not explained.”\(^{14}\) This divides the academy in two, with “reductionistic explanations being the method of the sciences, [and] interpretation (or hermeneutics) the method for the humanities.”\(^{15}\)

Griffin observes that Whitehead also sought domain uniformity, explanation by one set of causal categories, but when he, an accomplished scientist, pushed reductionistic science to the limits, he found it lacking. Whitehead developed a different form of naturalism by “replacing sensationism with nonsensationist theory of perception, atheism with naturalistic panentheism, and materialism with panexperientialism.”\(^{16}\) Each of these replacements demands its own

\(^{10}\)Griffin, 5.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 6.

\(^{12}\)Ibid.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 6-7.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 7.

\(^{15}\)Ibid.
explanatory essay, but I will, with Griffin, simply make note of them here. The result of these replacements, Griffin argues, is that Whitehead provides for an integrated worldview that discloses genuine moral, aesthetic, logical and religious experience as being intrinsic to the evolutionary processes of the universe.

The second issue Griffin covered in his essay was process thought’s ability to reconcile opposing points of view on specific contemporary philosophical problems. He gave two examples. His first example concerned the mind-body problem. Griffin describes three dominant approaches to this problem, the first being materialism, covered above as reductionistic naturalism. Advanced when discoveries showed the mechanistic science of early modernity could provide explanations in biology, botany and astronomy that were previously thought impossible, this position is now on steroids as contemporary discoveries in physics, chemistry, neuroscience and computer science seem to place humankind on the threshold of at last unravelling Schopenhauer’s “world-knot” on materialist terms. The second approach is that covered above as methodological dualism, especially those based on Kantian notions. The third approach is the study of language, analytic philosophy, to determine if this problem can be resolved by providing more adequate language to address the issue. Each of these approaches Griffin says fail to resolve the mind-body problem.

Griffin argues that Whiteheadian thought does resolve the problem through “panexperientialism with organizational duality.”17 Through this Griffin says Whitehead affirms the materialist who insist that there is only one kind of actuality while making experience, rather than matter, the basis of that actuality, and he affirms the dualists by accepting their distinction between mind and body but without adopting their position that the mind is ontologically different from the physical brain. With regard to “organizational duality” Griffin notes Whitehead’s distinction between “compound individuals, which have a higher-level dominant member, and mere aggregational clusters of actualities.”18 He says this explains why humans are structurally different from sticks and stones and why humans and animals with dominant level members are able to exert mental causation.

While my main purpose here is to summarize arguments given by Griffin for why this may become a Whiteheadian century, I take some exception to the term organizational duality. Griffin states that the common refutation of panexperientialism, that “it is absurd to attribute even a slight degree of experience and freedom to rocks and telephones, is avoided by the doctrine of organizational duality, which explains why rocks and telephones as such have no experience and no capacity for self-determination.”19 I believe this overstates the case and is an

16Ibid., 8.

17Ibid., 11.

18Ibid., 10. The source in Whitehead’s work for these distinctions is found in Modes of Thought, 27-28, 157, and 167-68.

19Ibid., 11.
example of being paralyzed or silent in the face of current orthodoxy. Griffin inconsistently offers, in the same essay, the position “all actualities besides having experience, also have a degree of self-determining spontaneity,”20 Each actual entity comes into being through its own unique subjective form, and each completed occasion may enter into the experiences of succeeding events and contribute its intensity to those events as they too come into being through their unique subjective forms. Whitehead states that the “key notion [on which to base a metaphysical cosmology] is that the energetic activity considered in physics is the emotional intensity entertained in life.”21 I feel there must be some enjoyment in being a rock, that Julie Andrews was right when she sang “The hills are alive with the sound of music,” and not that I see the hills and I project music on them. With such an understanding Thomas Berry could affirm that the universe is a vast cosmic liturgy celebrating itself in every mode of being, and people through the ages could experience the presence of holy mountains and, in many cases, declare “Earth is alive.”

Griffin also discussed how Whiteheadian thought could resolve problems in evolution. He addressed the problem that punctuated equilibrium in evolution posits for Darwinian gradualism, the idea that the complex forms we see in nature are the result of incremental changes over successive generations each of which change is simple enough to have come into being by chance. Griffin says Whitehead’s notion of eternal objects “existing in the primordial nature of God, provides a basis for understanding how the kinds of leaps suggested by the fossil record would have been possible because such forms could have served as final causes or attractors, luring creatures from one coherent form to another.”22 While having some merit, I fear that this explanation is subject to the objection that Griffin has substituted an enigma for a conundrum. I believe there are better ways to state the contributions Whiteheadian thought can make to evolution including, without limitation, experience, mentality, teleological causation, intensification of experience, self-creation, will, aesthetics, creativity, concresence, passage, and societies of occasions, all of which provide the basis for reformulating the scientific investigations and understandings of evolution.

Griffin also attends to the reality of time. He contrasts the Whiteheadian notion of time as successive occasions of experience, in which each occasion is dependent on antecedent and not contemporary occasions, as contrasted with the entropic version of time. He highlights the difficulty the entropic view has in dealing with the buildup of complexity in the early universe. In contrast, the Whiteheadian view of time as successive experiences encompasses the full development of the universe including both decay and buildup of complex forms throughout its history.

20Ibid., 10.

21Modes of Thought, 168.

22Ibid., 12.
Griffin’s assessment of time is no doubt meta-physics, in other words beyond the power of empirical science to confirm or deny. It is an example, I think, of what E. Maynard Adams meant when he wrote:

Although much of what is taken for granted in our efforts to know and to cope with reality is no doubt subject to empirical confirmation or correction, the most fundamental assumptions and beliefs that constitute the mind of the culture are not. They pertain to the categorial features and structures of experience and thought as well as to the basic constitutive features and structures of whatever the subject matter of our experience and thought may be, including a comprehensive view of the world. *We do not discover these features and structures of things by an empirical investigation of them in the way in which we discover contingent features and structures; rather, the way we empirically investigate and think about any subject matter presupposes commitments about its categorial features and structures. These presuppositions govern the outcome of empirical investigations rather than being the products of such investigations.* This is not to say that our empirical findings may not generate problems that call into question our categorial commitments, but these problems are of a different order from the logical problems among empirical beliefs that force revisions to keep them faithful to reality.\(^{23}\)

That metaphysics precedes science by determining the subjects and manner of its empirical investigations is essential for understanding Griffin’s concluding statement on why this may become a Whiteheadian century. He said that Whitehead boldly developed a “new cosmology—one that by challenging several modern dogmas, would integrate science with our ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions, so that these intuitions . . . would no longer be undermined by the view that science shows them . . . to be illusory.”\(^{24}\) One might say that Whitehead re-presented what is real and thus opened up new fields of inquiry and action essential to the advance of civilization in our time.

John Cobb’s arguments in his paper, “Why Whitehead?”, were, not surprisingly, for those who know him, more practical, even pastoral. Cobb began his paper on this subject, as is not uncommon, by being apologetic for the apparent insignificance of Whitehead to the academic community as a whole. Admittedly I am not a part of that community in the sense of being employed by the academy, but if indeed this is to be a Whiteheadian century, step one is to stop speaking of the “apparent insignificance” of Whitehead. After all, what other 20\(^{th}\) century philosopher has more than a thousand scholars spanning the globe devoted to her or his work, and what other 20\(^{th}\) century philosopher shows up as an unavoidable reference in so many important contemporary articles and books, some by authors who come back to Whitehead

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\(^{24}\)Griffin, 14.
while claiming to have gone beyond him . . . which is actually good, as we will see when we consider Stengers.

Cobb’s argument for the importance of Whitehead begins with the question, “What kind of thinking and understanding does the world need?”25 His answer is “The world urgently needs a convincing synthetic vision—a way of thinking that brings the many fragments of knowledge into a generally coherent unity.”26 Cobb then appeals to religion as the reason for his answer. The root word of religion, religio, he points out, means to bind together. In their periods of greatest importance, the religious traditions sought to offer a comprehensive vision, to bind together, their respective civilizations. Today only Islam, on a grand scale, seeks to do this, but on the basis of an ancient synthesis that is not adequate for the knowledge and claims of contemporary life.

Cobb then goes on to trace the history of the Western tradition, where philosophy split in the early modern period from the teachings of the church and then sought a synthesis based on reason alone. This brought about further splits of mind from matter, the phenomenal from the noumenal, the real from the ideal, and, while not mentioned by Cobb in his paper, the many other dualisms of modernity, human and nature, objective and subjective, faith and reason, fact and value, science and the humanities, the division of the university into disciplines each with their own methodologies and presuppositions, and so on. As a result Western philosophy “as a whole [has become] analytic or phenomenologically descriptive rather than synthetic. Far more effort is devoted to taking apart inherited modes of thought than to offering anything to take their place.”27

Cobb says the effort to achieve synthesis of science, society, morality and spirituality has largely been abandoned in Western thought. To even consider such synthesis puts one out of touch with the dominant currents. Nonetheless, the ecological situation, the dominance of economism and reductionistic science, and the conditions of inequality in the world require, if they are to be addressed, a synthetic vision. Further, he believes the need for such a vision comes from virtually every field, “for starters,” he says, “existential, psychological, sociological, political, cultural, ethical, and spiritual.”28

Cobb then offers the judgment that of all the thinkers of the 20th century, Whitehead comes the closest to offering such a vision. Surprisingly, Cobb views his judgment that Whitehead stands out in this way as less controversial than his judgment that a synthetic vision is needed. The reason, he argues is that when one surveys the literature there simply is no other

25Cobb, 1.

26Ibid., 2

27Ibid., 2-3.

28Ibid., 4.
outstanding contestant for the status of being the leading 20th century thinker offering a synthetic vision.29

In the second half of his paper, Cobb describes hopeful signs in various fields of how Whiteheadian thought is accomplishing its synthetic purpose. The most important, he believes, is the work of integrating science and the world of human values by process physicists, process interpreters of evolutionary biology and process commentators on religion and science and on ecology and human-animal relations. In religion he speaks of how Whiteheadians offer a new basis for catholicism with a small “c” and even for Biblical hermeneutics. He also highlights the work of process thinkers in economics, and he could have spoken of their work in law and political theory. He praises process eco-feminists. And he says the most exciting and promising development is the rapidity with which Whitehead’s influence is spreading in the East, especially China, where it is providing a constructively post-modern alternative for the future.

The arguments of Griffin and Cobb for a Whiteheadian century are powerful, yet Isabelle Stengers’ argument presented in Thinking with Whitehead may be the most powerful of all. She gives me a new and exciting way of understanding the significance of Whitehead.

Her argument is that Whitehead restores zest and adventure, it is the antidote to the nihilism and flatness of spirit in our time. Now this will come as a surprise to those who have scratched their heads at the complexity and, perhaps even for them, the opacity of Whitehead, but I would like to explain as best I can drawing on Stenger’s book and, in part as cited by her, Modes of Thought and Process and Reality.

Stengers observes that Whitehead has turned the common understanding of metaphysics, that of a logical scheme beginning with a set of first principles by which everything can be deductively explained, on its head. For him, she writes, metaphysics is a flight of experience. Whitehead seeks not the mastery of thought but the adventure of reason, the quest for a general theory or set of principles by which everything that we find in experience will be capable of exhibition as examples.30 This is an ideal seeking satisfaction, “the adventure of hope [where] metaphysics—and indeed every science—gains assurance from religion and passes over into religion.”31 This project of building these general principles, which “[must] never fail of exemplification,”32 is never finished because it can omit nothing, nothing in our experience.

29Ibid., 5.

30Stengers, 245.

31Process and Reality, 42.

32Ibid., 4.
Whitehead writes:

Philosophy can exclude nothing. Thus it should never start from systematization. Its primary stage can be termed *assemblage*.\(^3\)

Philosophy illustrates the fact that understanding is not primarily based on inference. Understanding is self-evidence.\(^4\)

In philosophical writings proof should be at a minimum. The whole effort should be to display the self-evidence of basic truths, concerning the nature of things and their connections. . . .

Philosophy is the attempt to manifest the fundamental evidence as to the nature of things. Upon the presupposition of this evidence, all understanding rests. A correctly verbalized philosophy mobilizes this basic experience which all premises presuppose. It makes the content of the human mind manageable; it adds meaning to fragmentary details; it discloses disjunctions, consistencies and inconsistencies. Philosophy is the criticism of abstractions which govern special modes of thought. . . .

. . . The aim of philosophy is sheer disclosure.\(^5\)

The generic aim of process is the attainment of importance, in that species and to that extent which in that instance is possible.\(^6\)

The notion of the unqualified stability of particular laws of nature and of particular moral codes is a primary illusion, which has vitiated much of philosophy. . . .

Morality is the control of process so as to maximize importance. It is the aim at greatness of experience in the various dimensions belonging to it. . . .

. . . Morality is always the aim at that union of harmony, intensity, and vividness which involves the perfection of importance for that occasion. . . . Our own direct immediate insights [into importance for various occasions carry us beyond our codifications].\(^7\)

\(^3\) *Modes of Thought*, 2.

\(^4\) Ibid., 50.

\(^5\) Ibid., 48-49.

\(^6\) Ibid., 12.

\(^7\) Ibid., 13-14.
‘Value’ . . . is the intrinsic reality of an event . . . . Realization is . . . in itself the attainment of value.\textsuperscript{38}

Philosophy destroys its usefulness when it indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away.\textsuperscript{39}

The ultimate metaphysical ground [is] the creative advance into novelty.\textsuperscript{40}

Speculative philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.\textsuperscript{41}

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.\textsuperscript{42}

The primary advantage [of this approach] is that experience is not interrogated with the benumbing repression of common sense.\textsuperscript{43}

In this way, the insistent craving is justified—the insistent craving that zest for existence be refreshed by the ever present, unfading importance of our immediate actions, which perish and yet live for evermore.\textsuperscript{44}

Stengers, therefore, in assessing these and other passages observes

\begin{quote}
[In Whitehead] “reason” no longer corresponds to “any principle of parsimony.” . . . Deduction will never replace discovery, for the latter implies, each time, a becoming that transforms both the person doing the describing and what is described. The scheme does not dictate, but it “calls” . . . .\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Process and Reality}, 17.

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 349.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 351.

\textsuperscript{45}Stengers, 249.
[Whitehead’s flight] is at the same time that of experience and that which transforms experience. . . . [R]eality becomes philosophical and philosophy becomes realization.$^{46}$ . . . “Philosophy is no longer synthetic judgment; it is like a thought synthesizer functioning to make thought travel, make it mobile, make it a force of the Cosmos.”$^{47}$

And Stengers encourages us, as students of Whitehead, to make each reading our own flight of experience and discovery, for Whitehead’s scheme “should give meaning to the production of new truths.”$^{48}$ We “should not have understanding what Whitehead thought as [our] primary goal, but rather experiencing and putting to the test what it means to ‘think with Whitehead’ in our epoch which he did not know. . . . No reading of Whitehead . . . can be ‘neutral.’ All must combine experimentation and putting to the test, thereby prolonging the adventure of an ideal seeking satisfaction.”$^{49}$

Stengers insight is so liberating. There is no Whiteheadian system to master, no need to reconcile the inconsistencies in Whitehead’s work or apologize for them. If we are to be bold, as Griffin admonishes us to be, we should be bold, not in defending an abstract scheme, but in thinking with Whitehead for the production of new truths. We should laud those who come back to Whitehead while going beyond him. This is what we all should do. His adventure cannot be the adventure of any one of us, because each of us must take off in his or her own “aeroplane.”

I intended to end with a set of strategies for making this a Whiteheadian century. Now I realize this is unnecessary, because as we Whiteheadians grasp that we are engaged in a grand adventure, that we have a key to overcoming the nihilism and flatness of our age, a key to unlock the energies and ideas for the next stage of civilization, the strategies appear. We know what to do, but we have not believed it possible.

So I write in closing, cast your apprehensions aside. Let the fantastic voyage begin and expect great things! There are new places to explore, new worlds to discover . . . and to realize.

Be bold! Be very bold!

$^{46}$Ibid., 252,


$^{48}$Ibid.

$^{49}$Ibid., 253.