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Editorial

Gabriel Bianchi, Lennart Posch and Paul Stenner*

Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue on the relevance of the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead to Human Affairs

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This Special Issue touches on the relevance of the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead to researchers contributing to the range of social science and humanities disciplines that are the main focus of *Human Affairs*. The Special Issue follows upon the 13th International Whitehead Conference which was held in the Munich School of Philosophy in July 2023. The stated mission of the journal *Human Affairs* is to 'create a space for interdisciplinary dialogue among academics who are conducting innovative theoretical, interpretative, critical and/or historical research' and to 'foster collaboration among diverse disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, encompassing various social and cultural contexts'. Whitehead's mode of thought is of broad relevance to this mission. This is because it was his ambition to articulate a set of concepts of sufficiently broad generality to encompass the subject matter of any and every discipline and indeed any and every form of experience. This bold ambition is rare amongst philosophers today, many of whom would consider it a residue of old-fashioned pretensions to metaphysics that have long since been abandoned. So called 'analytic philosophers', for example, have restricted the scope of philosophy to a kind of para-scientific handmaid, whilst others follow the inspiration of the later Wittgenstein and insist on attending to local matters of language practice. But today there is a growing appetite for more wide-reaching thought, and Whitehead is rapidly being rediscovered.

The gradual rediscovery of Whitehead (see Haitos and Maaßen 2020; Hampe and Maaßen 1991a, 1991b; Koutroufinis 2019; Stengers 2014; Stenner 2008; Stenner and Weber 2018) is doubtless related to the growing recognition of the need to move

*Corresponding author: **Paul Stenner**, Department of Psychology, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, England, E-mail: paul.stenner@open.ac.uk

Gabriel Bianchi, Institute for Research in Social Communication, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Lennart Posch, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Institute for Philosophy, Düsseldorf, Germany; and Robert-Schumann Hochschule Düsseldorf, Institute for Music and Media, Düsseldorf, Germany

beyond disciplinary silos by encouraging interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of research. Whitehead (1920, p. 1), after all, offered a rather concise characterisation of philosophy of science as ‘the study of the relations between the different departments of knowledge’. But it is also because Whitehead offers a sophisticated alternative to familiar yet unsatisfying methodological, epistemological and ontological positions, including tensions between positivism and constructionism, critical realism and postmodernism, materialism and idealism, etc.

Despite the renaissance hinted at above, Whitehead’s process philosophy (also called ‘philosophy of organism’) is still poorly understood and largely unknown. For this reason we have included as the first main paper a broad overview of Whitehead and his philosophy. The aim is that this will provide some of the background needed for appreciating the other four articles (see below).

1 Overview of the Special Issue

Following the introductory paper by Paul Stenner are four contributions. The contributions of Lennart Posch and Felipe Kong share something interesting in common. Both take as their main focus a concept which is of great importance within Whitehead’s philosophy but without being one of the eight categories of existence catalogued and explicated in *Process and Reality* (1929/1985) (see Stenner’s paper). Posch examines the concept of *projection* and Kong examines the concept of *rhythm*. Both of these concepts are of great importance to any intellectual endeavour aiming to move across and beyond disciplinary specialisms. One might therefore think of them as *transdisciplinary* concepts, characterised by a capacity for what Kong (following Felix Guattari) calls *transversality*. As Posch makes clear, Whitehead has a quite distinctive way of crafting concepts. Sometimes he invents completely new words to stress the processual nature of a phenomenon (as with his concept of *concrecence* and *prehension*). But he also has a habit of taking concepts that have a quite clear meaning in the anthropological sphere (like ‘feeling’, ‘decision’ and ‘proposition’) and giving them a far broader, ontological, meaning. This, as both authors make clear, is the case with ‘rhythm’ and with ‘projection’.

Lennart Posch’s paper provides an overview of Whitehead’s concept of projection and its use within his mature philosophy. This concept is rarely discussed and yet Lennart Posch makes a strong case that it plays a crucial role in allowing Whitehead to show the continuities between very diverse forms of order, connecting microscopic levels of being with the symbolic intricacies of human perception and culture. Posch argues that Whitehead’s process philosophy can be very useful for transdisciplinary scientists that grapple with complex entanglements of connections and correlations, because it offers a radically relational outlook that helps to

highlight continuities without losing the sense for details and the singularity of each situation.

Whitehead's technical and often counter-intuitive use of established notions is discussed as a result of his method of speculative generalization. Posch points out that Whitehead's concept of projection follows his methodological premise, that the introduction of imaginative and novel terminology is necessary to facilitate new insights. The concept of projection is, just like the concept of society for example, speculatively generalized and acquires a new meaning that allows for universal applicability.

Within Whitehead's metaphysical scheme, projection is shown to be a specific type of those ontologically fundamental relationships that he calls *prehensions*. All objects or events that exist, generically termed *actual entities*, are analysable in terms of a complex web of prehensions, that can serve different functions. A projection is a relation that lifts something from the past into the present and enhances the perceptibility of the projected quality, item or event. Referring to Whitehead's discussion of the three modes of perception (causal efficacy, presentational immediacy and symbolic reference) its function is summed up as: "[Projection] is what presentational immediacy does." (Page xxx in the journal – Posch's paper).

The universality of those three modes of perception allows a tracing of the concept of projection across and throughout different ontological strata. Whitehead delineates in a chapter called "The Order of Nature" (Process and Reality, 1929/1985, 83ff.) different hierarchies of being that constitute the emerging complexity of reality. The level of human societies is a late development on the basis of ontologically more fundamental relational patterns, but the function of projection can be found in more primitive structures as well. Accordingly, Posch proposes that there are different nuances of projection that can be situated within these different levels of existence – geometrical projection, sense projection and symbolic projection. These different modes of projection share a common functionality but differ in the specific type of data that become subject to the presentational emphasis. The multiperspectivity of projection not only elucidates the comprehensive outlook of Whitehead's thinking but also provokes the critical implementation of this processually informed concept in various research areas.

As **Felipe Kong** explains, a concept of rhythm is developed quite systematically by Whitehead in his 1919 work, *Enquiry into the Principles of Natural Knowledge*. It is this concept of rhythm that allows Whitehead both to distinguish and to specify the continuities between those regions of nature that are 'alive' and those – like geological formations or gasses – that are lifeless. With his knowledge of physics and chemistry, Whitehead was well aware that lifeless nature is not for that reason static: all nature is characterised by more or less coordinated activity. From a quantum perspective, both a single molecule and a lump of granite can be accurately grasped

as rhythmic compositions of forces embedded in broader rhythmic compositions. But compared to living compositions, the rhythms forming non-living assemblages are comparatively simple and predictable. The molecule and the granite are not capable of building their own rhythm into their composition and are better conceived as a kind of averaged aggregate of rhythms received and transmitted. Something that lives, by contrast, does indeed build its own rhythms into its own composition. Life, according to Whitehead during this period of his writing, is characterised by its capacity both for sensitivity to its own rhythms and to preservation of its own expressions of rhythm. This is what allows him to assert that life is 'rhythm as such' (Whitehead 1919, 197). But the important thing to note here is that Whitehead is using the concept of rhythm to do two things simultaneously: to *distinguish* alive from non-living nature and to express the *continuity* between these two groupings. Rock rhythm, as it were, is comparatively uniform and repetitive, but it is still rhythm. The rhythms of the lichen growing alive upon it, by comparison, admit more nuance of novelty into the balance of sameness and difference that is its living rhythm. This is why Whitehead refuses any naïve identification of life with survival. If survival is one's aim then one is better off with predictable rock rhythms. The cost of the lichen's sensitivity to its own self-generated rhythms is the higher degree of fragility associated with mortality.

As Kong's contribution illustrates, things become still more complex and interesting when considering the role of rhythm in forms of human psychological and sociological process like education. Human life, Kong affirms, is 'essentially periodic', structured as it is into day and night, work and play, terms and holidays, seasons and festivals, birth, infancy, childhood, adulthood and death, etc. Each of these rhythmical changes has an element of repetition or sameness (another term, another exam, another spring, another birthday, etc.) combined with an element of difference (one year older and wiser, etc.). Any system of education which neglects these rhythms, natural and cultural alike, is for Whitehead deeply problematic.

Lynn De Jonghe's contribution applies ideas from Whitehead and from Mary Parker Follett (a significant management theorist and friend of Whitehead) to the problem of educating teachers and students in critical thinking. Education in critical thinking, as De Jonghe points out, has suffered in societies within which debates on sensitive topics have become polarised and difficult to broach. Perhaps with the USA leading the way, there has been a negative cultural drift towards an 'onslaught against careful thought' where 'debate' can descend to repetition of assertions with increased volume of emotion. In contexts dominated more by the politics of outrage than the discourse of reason, it becomes valuable to teach genuine critical thinking. The solution proposed by De Jonghe is to approach critical thinking in potentially conflictual situations as an 'integrative process' that moves beyond winning, losing, or compromising and seeks to resolve disagreements. As is fitting to a philosophy

that gives priority to actual occasions of experience, this paper begins with a contextualised depiction of concrete educational events that happened in North America and structured around the problem of whether wolves living in the Rocky Mountains area should be removed from the endangered species list.

Helpful for readers who want to understand the historical “metaprocess” of the process of critical thinking, this paper also offers a well-informed historical overview of the diverse approaches to critical thinking that have advanced in different disciplines. With roots in Dewey, the field today is divided into four groupings of studies based on analysis of individual mental activity, ordinary language, cognitive psychology and social critique.

Critical thinking, as is widely understood, should be an open process not a closed practice of rule following. Whitehead and Follett, however, would ask us to go even further. Winning a debate, or even preparing for a debate, is not the same as working through life issues. Critical thinking should help resolve problems as they occur in the process of our daily experience. But, as De Jonge argues, critical thinking cannot be effective independently of power structures. Are so-called democratic nations really ready for citizens who think critically? Is there really an appetite for those who refuse easy answers and demand higher standards from those who lead them and make their laws? Are modern societies truly willing to hear genuinely diverse voices when confronting difficult challenges?

Finally, **Naoki Arimura's** paper traces the possible influence of Victorian philosophy of science on Whitehead's stance on the role of hypothesis in scientific research. He meticulously tracks down Whitehead's few references to the Victorian philosophers John Herschel, William Whewell and John Stuart Mill and shows that he was clearly aware of the 19th century tradition of empiricist philosophy. Arimura then proceeds with a clear presentation of Whitehead's speculative method and its development by not only referring to the prominent exposition of his speculative philosophy in *Process and Reality*, but by re-constructing his reasoning throughout his oeuvre and consulting the early Harvard lectures that lead up to his worked-out metaphysical scheme. In these lectures Whitehead repeatedly explains the vital role of hypothesizing for any intellectual activity and argues that the significance of hypotheses 'is not limited to scientific inquiry'. Poetry for example can as well be considered as a unique form of hypothesis-making that opens up new perspectives and leads to surprising discoveries. Since 1924 Whitehead maintained this position on the scope and importance of hypotheses for his own methodology.

Following this very precise account, Arimura investigates the role of hypotheses in the aforementioned Victorian philosophers particularly in William Whewell and his relationship to John Stuart Mill. He underlines Whewell's emphasis on the significance of hypotheses for scientific discoveries and contrasts his hypothetico-deductive position with Mill's theory of induction, though contemporary research

questions this delineation as Arimura points out. Whitehead thought of both Whewell and Mill as old empiricists in the Baconian tradition, a curious interpretation considering the more contemporary debates on their positions. He criticised their rejection of metaphysical thinking and naïve reliance on the veracity of language and uses them as a foil for his own affirmatively speculative position.

In the last section Arimura examines the influence of these thinkers through Whitehead's reading of Charles Darwin. Darwin's theory of hypothesis was clearly influenced by Whewell and Whitehead refers to Darwin in his discussion on the importance of hypothesis-making. He therefore concludes that, although Whitehead dismissed Whewell's philosophy due to his particular interpretation, he was at least indirectly influenced by him, since he relied on Darwin in the construction of his speculative method, who himself was directly influenced by Whewell's epistemology.

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