

**Philosophy in Review/Comptes rendus philosophiques, Volume XXVII, No.6,
December, 2007, pp.444-447.**

Review of *Whitehead's Pancreativism: The Basics*

Michel Weber, with forward by Nicholas Rescher

Frankfurt, Paris, Ebikon, Lancaster, New Brunswick: Ontos Verlag

In his introduction to *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre called upon his readers to imagine a culture in which to begin with, the natural sciences had been destroyed by an anti-science movement, and then, reacting against this movement, people had attempted to reconstruct science from surviving fragments. In this imaginary world adults argue over the respective merits of different theories, and children learn by heart the surviving portions of the period table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid, but 'nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in the proper sense at all.' The contexts needed to make sense of scientific arguments have been lost, perhaps irretrievably. This imaginary world is used by MacIntyre to suggest that in the actual world we inhabit moral philosophy and morality itself are in the same state of grave disorder as natural science in this imaginary world. Reading Michel Weber's book *Whitehead's Pancreativism* makes one aware that it is not only moral philosophy that is in a grave state of disorder, but philosophy itself, and it is not only morality but our entire culture which is affected by this. Analytic philosophy and other anti-philosophy movements have so destroyed the background beliefs and contexts assumed by philosophers in the past that while there are still philosophy departments in universities producing works that are widely read, there is no real understanding of what philosophy is. Weber's book provides not only a sense of what has been lost, but also provides some of the background knowledge required to revive philosophy.

The book is an interpretation of Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy. It focuses on Whitehead's *magnum opus*, *Process and Reality*, attempting to understand this work as a whole, including its two most difficult sections, Part III, "The Theory of Prehensions" and Part IV, "The Theory of Extension". Without understanding the work as a whole it might be possible to appropriate Whitehead's insights to different agendas, but the "rule of such interpretations", Weber suggests, is to "*murder to dissect*" (p.xiii). The consequence of such murder is that "Whitehead has *not* been recognized so far as one of the most potent historical figures of Western science and philosophy" (p.xii). A major component of the work is to show what it means to interpret Whitehead's legacy as whole and how to achieve this in a way that reveals its broader significance. As Weber wrote: "It is the purpose of this monograph to propose a set of highly efficient hermeneutical tools to get the reader started" (p.xi). Using these tools, the book proposes an interpretation that reinterprets the significance of Whitehead's thought to the history of civilization. It is this component of the work which evokes the sense that only now are we beginning to recover from a cultural disaster, the effective collapse of philosophy in the early decades of the twentieth century, and this is the most accessible and convincing part of the book.

Weber's hermeneutical tools are designed to reveal Whitehead's uniqueness. They avoid the "retroactive illusion" in which we see in a past event nothing but the preparation for the present, and the "teleological prospective" illusion in which we see the present as merely a preparation for the future, each of these preventing us seeing the present as a "complete act in itself" (p.xiii); but at the same time, they reveal the achievement of an author or a work as a "complete act in itself" by seeing it against

the background of the entire history of thought from which it emerged, and in relation its legacy for the future. Contextualization and exegesis are inseparable, requiring us to have a holistic interpretation of this background, but without this obliterating the creative advance of the author.

Weber first situates Whitehead in relation to the extraordinary developments within science, mathematics and logic from which his work emerged. These include major advances in mathematics and symbolic logic, the development of evolutionary theory, Maxwell's field theory, relativity theory and quantum theory. Responding to these, Whitehead focussed first on logic, then on the epistemology of science, and finally on metaphysics. There were both continuities and discontinuities in his philosophical development, requiring that each stage be understood holistically. Using Nicholas Rescher's history of process philosophy as a foil to elaborate his own approach to characterizing the history of philosophy in general and the history of process philosophy in particular, Weber then situates Whitehead's work in a far broader context than late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought, showing what distinguishes Whitehead's philosophy not only from the figures associated with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, but also from Greek and medieval philosophy. Revealing the central assumptions of earlier thinkers that were rejected Bergson and James, Weber shows how Whitehead built on their work to create a radically new synthesis of ideas. This broader perspective also reveals the inter-related concerns of science, philosophy and religion, and the necessity of recognizing this inter-relation to understand Whitehead's goals and achievements.

With this background in place, Weber begins his exposition of Whitehead's work, starting with an account Whitehead's goal and method. This is the most defensible aspect of Whitehead's whole philosophy, its superiority highlighted by the trivialization of philosophy by analytic philosophers, the failure of Husserl's project to develop philosophy as a rigorous, presuppositionless, descriptive science of experience, and the political failure of critical philosophy. Contrasting Whitehead's view of philosophy with recent schools of thought, Weber notes that "Whitehead's organic processism is not the product of a pure intellectual quest; it reflects the existential demand for meaning" (p.83). As is well known, Whitehead characterized speculative philosophy as "the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted." Weber explicates the meaning of all the terms used in this characterization, and in doing so situates this vision in relation to the whole tradition of philosophy.

Weber then proceeds to the more difficult part, the exposition of *Process and Reality* focussing on Parts III and IV, although at the same time drawing on all Whitehead's works to provide a background to this. He argues that the core idea which unites Whitehead's entire philosophy is the notion of "creative advance". The radical nature of this concept has already indicated through his discussion of earlier philosophy. The Greeks understood the world as a cosmos, where Whitehead was conceiving the world as a "chaosmos", a partially ordered world. In the Greek world change exhausts itself in kinesis and morphogenesis; hylogenesis is unthinkable and there could only be trans-formation, not real creation of the new. Cosmic growth is unthinkable. Rejecting this assumption (along with Bergson and James), Whitehead argued that nature is never complete; there is a never ending creative re-creation of the world which cannot be understood as a synthesis of pre-existing building blocks. As Weber put it: "In Greece everything changes and nothing becomes; with Whitehead, everything becomes and nothing changes" (p.20 & p.143). "Creativity"

became the “*Ur*-category” giving “meaning to God, the eternal objects, and the World” (p.189). Innovative process occurs at the edges of the continuum. Weber’s argument is that it is only through appreciating this radical innovation that it becomes possible to understand why Whitehead embraced a form of atomism of “actual occasions” to characterize this creative advance, and shows how Whitehead gave a place to subjective, objective and relative time and revealed the inter-relationship between creative becoming associated with subjective experience, objects and the extensive continuum.

This part of the book is densely argued; but it is also where Weber is most original in his exposition, and most rewarding. Having provided a far fuller background to Whitehead’s philosophy than anyone else, he is able to present a more convincing interpretation and defence of Whitehead’s philosophy than anyone else. The difficulty of exposition is unavoidable, as what is called for is an immersion in Whitehead’s categories and thereby a transformation of the reader. While being predominantly an exposition and defence of Whitehead’s mature philosophy, Weber is also critical of aspects of this philosophy. He argues against Whitehead that there can be no reason for novelty and that Whitehead was wrong “to give causes to reasons” (p.169). He also argues that there must be new “eternal objects”. Allowing this alters the idea of “God” which can no longer be conceived as a single actual entity (p.170f.). Weber attributes these defects in Whitehead’s work to his “vicarage atmosphere” (p.174). However, these revisions amount to an attempt to think through Whitehead’s idea of philosophy and his philosophy more rigorously and more coherently, rather than being fundamental criticisms.

While Weber offers much insight into Whitehead’s philosophy, specifically into the nature and rationale for Whitehead’s atomism, he does not answer all objections that might be made to this. Most importantly he has not explicated Whitehead’s treatment of societies of actual occasions, showing how relations between actual occasions can generate the high grade actual occasions associated with human consciousness. However, this book is only the first volume of a two volume work. The second, complementary volume will focus “on the correlated issues of the spectrum of consciousness and the scale of existents (*scalae naturae*)” (p.238). We can only hope that this sequel will be as illuminating and convincing as the present work.

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