



# process perspectives

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...A RELATIONAL  
WORLDVIEW FOR  
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## Conference Report: "Beyond Metaphysics?"

by Clinton Combs

This past December 4th through 6th, 2008, an international group of scholars gathered in Claremont, California, for the Whitehead Research Project's second international conference, co-sponsored by the Society for the Study of Process Philosophies. The organizers of the conference, "Beyond Metaphysics? Transcontinental Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead's Late Thought," asked participants to consider whether *Process and Reality* substantially completed Whitehead's metaphysics, only to be exemplified and summarized in his later works (principally *Adventures of Ideas* and *Modes of Thought*) or whether, perhaps, some more significant change occurred in his thinking, such that the phenomenological *Modes of Thought* might actually come closer to representing Whitehead's true and mature metaphysics.

The conference began with a pair of lectures that served to lay out two options. Arguing for the affirmative of the conference's proposal, Vincent Colapietro (Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania) argued that the works following *Process and Reality* represent, not merely a continuation, but, in his words, a "renewal" of speculative philosophy. Such a renewal suggests that *Process and Reality* was not entirely satisfying to Whitehead and that his later works came closer. Conversely, Christoph Kann (University of Düsseldorf, Germany) argued that Whitehead's later works serve only to supplement, present examples, and clarify the systematic work of *Process and Reality*; and make no major additions or modifications to the system developed in *Process and Reality*.

Joachim Klose (Educational Society, Dresden, Germany) presented a paper that centered around Whitehead's notion of time and its relation to quantum mechanics. Within this



jude jones

specialized context, Klose concurred with Kann that Whitehead's later works do not alter his basic metaphysical system. Helmut Maassen (European Society for Process Thought, Geldern, Germany), whose comments centered around the notion of contingency, also concluded that Whitehead was consistent throughout his work from *Process and Reality* to *Modes of Thought*.

Conference organizer Roland Faber (Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, California) wasted no time in questioning the either/or type of thinking that the contrasted pairing of Colapietro and Kann may have suggested. Faber challenged the very notion of Whitehead as a system builder, suggesting, rather, that Whitehead sought metaphysical expression and distrusted it. In Faber's reading, Whitehead continually presents paradoxical contrasts that serve to deconstruct the very metaphysical claims of which they are a part. Faber argued that such paradoxical contrasts took Whitehead beyond metaphysics. Although they differ in the manner by which it does so (systematically or beyond system), both Faber and Colapietro agree that Whitehead's later works represent something of a renewal.

Jeremy Dunham (University of the West of England, United Kingdom), like Faber, also emphasized the side of Whitehead that is contrary to system building. Dunham's presentation portrayed Whitehead's metaphysics as one that does not express fixed

[...continued on page 3]

### inside this issue:

Beyond Metaphysics Conference	1
Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices	5
Lecture / Seminar Reports	7
New Books	16
Interconnections	17
Calendar	20

natural laws, but rather one that describes the evolving temporal habits found in nature. Dunham reminded attendees that Whitehead did not excessively value rigid systematic thinking. Recalling a September 11, 1945 entry from Lucien Price's *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, Dunham emphasized that Whitehead held a preference for vagueness and an aversion to thought that is overly organized and too definite. Whitehead's reasoning was that it is only the vague notions that are able to take into account the "unpredictable, the limitless possibilities of things." In relation to this point, Dunham stressed the open and evolutionary tone of Whitehead's later works as contrasted with *Process and Reality*, which is often interpreted as a more rigid project.

Isabella Palin (University of Leuven, Belgium) took yet a different approach. Palin noted a difference in style that sets Whitehead's later works apart from *Process and Reality*. Palin argued that Whitehead's system remains largely unaltered in his later works, but suggested that a stylistic shift (as opposed to a systematic one) occurred in response to some new problems that were troubling Whitehead. Such problems related to morality, civilization, and value.

Jude Jones (Fordham University, New York), Michael Halewood (University of London, Great Britain), and Brian Henning (Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington) all addressed the issue of value in Whitehead's later works, with Henning arguing for an "Ethics of Creativity" derived from Beauty. Steve Shaviro (Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan) also addressed Whitehead's treatment of value but, in contrast to the others, highlighted what he saw as Whitehead's prioritizing of aesthetics at the expense of ethics. Philip Clayton (Claremont Graduate University and Claremont School of Theology) weighed in on this debate noting that, while the focus on Beauty is hard to deny in *Adventures of Ideas*, it is only half the story. The ethical half can be seen clearly in relation to two overtly ethical references that Whitehead makes to the Quakers and the role they played in shaping the United States.

Stascha Rohmer (Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany, and Madrid, Spain) further developed the connection between value and civilization. Rohmer

argued that *Modes of Thought* is more than a summary of *Process and Reality*. It is, in fact, the place where Whitehead most clearly argues for the relevance of process thinking and the value of such thinking to civilization. Additionally, Rohmer noted a phenomenological turn that occurs in *Modes of Thought*. Although Rohmer did not express it in quite these terms, his comments suggest that if *Process and Reality* gives us the detailed biology of the parts of the organisms, described by Whitehead's philosophy of organism, then *Modes of Thought* gives us our lived experience that is built up out of those parts and is contextualized by the civilization of which we are part.

In 1931 (two years after the publication of *Process and Reality* and four years before the publication of *Nature and Life* -- later published as Part III of *Modes of Thought*) Gödel's first incompleteness theorem showed that the formal derivation of mathematics that Whitehead and Russell undertook in *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913) could not contain within it the dynamic life of mathematics. Such a formal system, Gödel showed, could not be both consistent and complete. These

criteria of consistency and completeness played a guiding role not only in *Principia Mathematica*, but also in *Process and Reality* (PR 3). In reaction to Gödel, it is possible that Whitehead also came to conclude that the formalism of *Process and Reality* was similarly incapable of completely and consistently containing the notion of life itself. Such a realization would go a long way towards explaining the phenomenological turn that occurs in *Modes of Thought*, specifically, Whitehead's realization that first philosophy must begin with lived experience. If this is correct, then Whitehead's phenomenology is his true first philosophy in that it must occur, in his words, "before the work of systematization commences" (MT 2). To answer the question of the conference, this writer and conference panelist believes that *Modes of Thought* does not go beyond metaphysics. To the contrary, phenomenology must come before metaphysics. 🙏

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## Conference Reflection: "Beyond Metaphysics"

by Daniel Pettus

The Whitehead Research Project welcomed the Holiday spirit with its second International conference entitled, "Beyond Metaphysics? Transcontinental Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead's Late Thought." A provocative title, to say the least, that drew scholars from Europe and America to explore Whitehead's work post *Process and Reality*. The energy levels were high leading up to the conference, the opening night, and they remained until all was said and done. Luckily, "metaphysics?" remained a worthy subject to study, according to the participants' interpretation of Whitehead, meaning everyone left assured they were still employable.

According to the Whitehead Research Project's conference website, "the theme [of the conference] will bring participants to explore the question of whether Whitehead's system is completed

with *Process and Reality*, or if instead his metaphysics only comes fully into view in his later works (esp. *Adventures of Ideas* and *Modes of Thought*). One could, for instance, argue that *Modes of Thought* captures his true metaphysics. The goal is to recognize the differentiation of Whitehead's thought post *Process and Reality* and to learn to measure it on its own terms."

To work in reverse order of the conference proceedings, an approach Whitehead's ghost would appreciate, I'll quote Deena Lin, one of the final panelists who challenged the conference participants. She writes: "Having listened to all of the presentations thus far, and to risk being too negative right from the get-go in my comments, I can't help but observe the lack of emphasis on the situatedness of our presenters. That is, I must ask the question are we not situated primarily as philosophers, social theorists,

[...continued on page 4]

and theologians in different ways, with different sensitivities and awarenesses that guide our focus and inevitably influence where we will go with our ideas? Not to over-generalize, I am not saying that everyone has been this way, so I apologize if you feel misrepresented, but where I'm going with this is to show that the variety of positions that each of you have has made this conference what it is, and in quite an organic manner, this has brought about what Whitehead was trying to explain with his philosophy of organism, or what some have called his metaphysics of experience."

Lin continued the intensity of the conference with her own version when she wrote: The title itself: "Beyond Metaphysics?" demarcates Whitehead's *Process and Reality* from his later works, and pushes us to grapple with a divide that Dr. Faber has defined as the paradox of Whitehead's metaphysics, and in an even further articulation he has described it as a breeding ground for creativity."

If there are two words that summarize the conference and The Whitehead Research Project, which attempts to continue the legacy of John B. Cobb Jr. and the Center for Process Studies only in different directions, they would have to echo Lin's remarks, which echo the man himself (Whitehead), novelty and creativity.

A perfect example of this comes from the participant Michael Halewood. First, a story then a direct quote from his paper: after the triple panel on Saturday, during the question and answer period Halewood, addressing Dennis Soelch, asked (paraphrased) "Does Plato exist...to clarify the question, do you think there was a literal Plato that existed?" This was and remains a serious question. Maybe not to all who study philosophy, but at least in the community that comprised the conference it was taken seriously.

Those who study Whitehead are serious, intelligent, and creative academics that prefer, if I may generalize with Lin, to be called people. Halewood, emphasizes this (along with a multiplicity of other things, of course) when he writes, "Purpose becomes simply that there is something beyond ourselves as we are now. There is a future and a past and there are other things. This is the value of matter and the matter of value. Such would seem to be the essence of Whitehead's philosophy and it is from these



vincent colapietro



stascha rohmer and steve shaviro

tentative premises that social theory might re-start its approach to a world considered as fact in value and value in fact (Michael Halewood, "On Value and Values in later Whitehead (Or – Where did all the eternal objects go?).")

The 2008 "Beyond Metaphysics?" conference was a valuable moment in the history of Whiteheadian studies. Cobb articulated this in his remarks given during the final panel. He expressed his long-time interest in the perspective Europeans brought to the table when it comes to the study of Whitehead. Seen in this light the conference became a moment to see Cobb and Faber's dream become a living and breathing reality. You could feel the intensity as everyone hung onto the words that left each participant's mouth.

And this just may be all you can do when it comes to experiencing what Whitehead meant by novelty and creativity. Hanging on to newness while allowing newness the freedom to refresh itself and in turn everything(one) it encounters is a dangerous place to be: it's scary! However, when the dust settles and you walk out of the conference auditorium only to notice the way in which the wind blows through the trees, admiring the beautiful smiles on everyone's faces, it is nearly impossible to deny that Whitehead was on to something very important, something many people at the conference have committed their entire lives to discovering.

"Beyond Metaphysics?" I sure hope not, especially when something so vast is meant to direct our attention to the little things that are in turn big things that sometimes become confused as the same thing and you pause to relish in the fact of thing-ness and the value it possess for the entire world. ☺

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