

Book reviews

Brian G. Henning, Joseph Petek, and George Lucas (eds.) *The Harvard Lectures of Alfred North Whitehead, 1925–1927: General Metaphysical Problems of Science*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

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This is the second volume of the Edinburgh critical edition of the complete works of Alfred North Whitehead. It was published in 2021 and was preceded by the first volume (“Philosophical Presuppositions of Science”), published in 2017 under the editorship of Paul A. Bogaard and Jason Bell. As with the previous one, this is a beautifully crafted book, encompassing student notes from the lectures that Whitehead delivered in Harvard, along with his “seminaries” and guest lectures. Many different sets of notes were compiled and meticulously compared in order to provide the fullest and most comprehensible narrative. This is a formidable task, because almost all of the student notes turn out to be incomplete, containing occasional slips and insertions. Moreover, the editors provide extensive references that cover the historical and conceptual context of the lectures and facilitate the understanding of the provided material.

You can gather from the notes themselves that listening to Whitehead’s lectures was not a pleasant experience. The lectures of Whitehead did not follow a clearly delineated plan but followed the twists and turns of his thinking, which was soon to culminate in his *magnum opus* “Process and Reality” (1929). Whitehead was not lecturing; he was struggling to construct a completely new metaphysical system that diverges in some key respects from some of the most deeply entrenched patterns of thought in European culture. He discussed not just typical philosophical topics, e.g. Aristotle’s categories, Descartes’ *cogito*, or Kant’s views on the *a priori*, but also topics in physics and cosmology, geometry and even set theory. According to the recollections of one of the students that was taking extensive notes covering a significant part of Whitehead’s lectures,

(It was) not that his lectures were organized – he rambled, (repeated) and seemed to pay little heed to his subject, (least of) all to the formidable mathematical machinery of *Principia*. One day, referring to his treatment of some (abstruse) subject, one of the students said ‘I’m glad Whitehead said that over four times; the first three times, I didn’t get it.’ His panpsychism (he told me once that he didn’t object to being called a panpsychist) made him confuse the physical and the psychical. One day in his lecture he jumped from or skidded from something physical into a statement about value. ... Before the next lecture someone – it may have been I, I have forgotten – asked him about it. In the next lecture he said, calmly – ‘last time when I used the word ‘value’, I should have said ‘intensity’” (Appendix III, Diary entry of George Conger on Whitehead, p. 435).

This sublation of the fundamental divisions that form the core of traditional philosophy marked his path towards the metaphysical outlook that he used to identify as the “philosophy of organism” and now forms the backbone of process philosophy.

A really invaluable feature of the text is that it lets us get a glimpse of Whitehead’s philosophical method at work, and in particular of the way he viewed his relationship with the philosophers of the past. I think it was succinctly captured by the following dictum: “You never disagree with a philosopher unless you almost agree with him – otherwise you neglect him” (p. 200). Let us see where the most notable disagreements rest:

(1) Aristotle: Whitehead expressly professed that one of his goals is “to force metaphysics thor-

oughly from subject-predicate complex” (p. 207), i.e. to destroy Aristotle’s subject-predicate analysis of propositions by substituting predicates with relations. In my view here Whitehead is much closer to common sense than Aristotle: according to him, statements like “Jones is mortal” cannot be analyzed as assigning a predicate (“is mortal”) to a subject (“Jones”). They say something about the universe: that there is a moment of time where Jones is no longer part of it. The superiority of Whitehead’s analysis becomes evident in more complicated cases like “Even Caesar is mortal”: here what is characterized is the relationship between Caesarity and mortality, not Caesar (p. 202, 362, 364);

(2) Descartes: The lectures can be seen as a running commentary on the relationship of the received doctrines of Descartes and the still developing ideas of Whitehead. Descartes was credited with the proper realization of the true role of space and time in metaphysics; what Whitehead added was the realization that they have a common core that was marked by the concept of a “community of extensiveness” (p. 150). Moreover, the “medieval notion of substance”, along with the correlative notion of endurance, were dismantled in Whitehead’s event-based metaphysics, which recognizes only one form of sameness: “sameness of universals which apply” (p. 361). Last but not least, the starting point for Whitehead, the “complete all-embracing community, as from the limited stand-point here, now” was seen as a structural substitute for the *cogito* (p. 12);

(3) Kant: First and foremost, Whitehead was busy dismantling Kant’s doctrine of the *a priori*, as associated with the definitional marks of universality and necessity. For Whitehead, the so-called *a priori* statements are always made “with regard to what this occasion is, i.e. with regard to that community of occasions which are implicated in unity of immediate occasion” (p. 8). Consequently, time and space are not forms of the pure intuition, but of the “prehension perception” which expose the “general fact of the internality of physical relationships” (p. 263). The doctrine of “internality” implies that those relationships are not imposed by cognition on a chaotic material of sense-perception but are discerned in the “physical given in the world as perceptively organized” (p. 32, 166).

On the basis of his criticism of the philosophy of the past Whitehead was gradually building a novel way of thinking that he identified as a “Communitistic Point of View” (p. 145). It emphasized the fact that “[e]very entity is social” (p. 120), that “[t]here’s

nothing in isolation” (p. 160). The metaphysical credo of Whitehead was spelled out in the form of six fundamental metaphysical principles that can be seen as operative for the construction of his process metaphysics (p. 213, *passim*): 1. Principle of solidarity (“Every actual entity requires all other entities, actual or ideal, in order to exist”); 2. Principle of creative individuality (“Every actual entity is a process which in its own result”); 3. Principle of efficient causation (“Every actual entity contributes to the character of processes which are actual entities superseding itself”); 4. The ontological principle (“Every creature is a creative character”); 5. Principle of aesthetic individuality (“Every actual entity is an end in itself for itself”); 6. Principle of ideal comparison (“Every creature involves in its own constitution an ideal reference to ideal creatures”). Every singular entity is a mirror in which the whole of the world can be seen.

Another topic that looms large through the lectures is the relationship between experience and imagination. The “most concrete” according to Whitehead is the “joint” of experient and imaginal (p. 17), of the physical and the mental side of actual occasions. That is why “[u]ltimately the most concrete occasion is dipolar. ... One pole is the primary, purely synthetic side of the actual occasion. Call that pole the physical – describe in purely synthetic terms, coming together, physical perceptivity. The other is the secondary, supervening, analytical side – the mental occasion” (p. 197). Just as the physical is inseparable from the mental, imaginative philosophy is inseparable from empirical science: “Philosophy acts as critic of current abstractions. It has passed to higher generalities and gained vision of alternative potential incompatible generalizations. ... Philosophy filtering through a civilization should give it an imaginative tinge. Philosophy is one way of preserving a freshness and novelty of imagination” (p.175). The “imaginative tinge” lets you make the “imaginative leap” that leads to the “adventurous truth” which “works out as far as you can see, but which probably leaves some rough edges” (p. 292).

I hope that these short remarks provide sufficient reasons to claim that this volume is destined to be an invaluable tool, not just for the exponents of the process-philosophical tradition, but also for students of the history of philosophy. It provides not just answers to some vexing interpretative issues, but something more important: questions that can cast you on the open-ended journey that Whitehead was most fond of: his beloved “adventures of ideas”.