

LURING PROPOSITIONS.
A.N. WHITEHEAD'S NOTION OF METAPHYSICS,
TRUTH AND PHILOSOPHY AND ITS VALUE FOR
CRITICAL POSTHUMANIST THEORIZING

Isabella SCHLEHAIDER*

Abstract. By understanding metaphysics as historically embedded and situated practice, Whitehead rejects its classical claims to ultimate groundings, certainty and universal truth. More so, for Whitehead, in light of various difficulties, any foundationalist claim is a display of philosophical naiveté. For Whitehead, metaphysics can only ever offer a provisional conceptual framework and must be understood as an infinite, indeed adventurous endeavor. Metaphysical principles can never be more than propositions, in fact metaphors that require constant review, revision or even rejection. This notion of metaphysics as fallible marks Whitehead's defeat of the "god trick" of Modern schemes of thought, "a conquering gaze from nowhere"¹. And this fallibilism is also why, for Whitehead, the relevance of a proposition, its ability to produce "consequential meanings"² or "important knowledge"³ for a specific context, is ultimately more important than its logical value. However, and this is all the more important to emphasize in times of so-called post-truth politics, Whitehead's particular pragmatism is by no means a plea for crude relativism. Without abandoning the commitment to "faithful accounts of a 'real' world"⁴, Whitehead's own speculative propositions attempt to account for both the contingency of all knowledge claims and the pragmatic call "to making a difference"⁵ by widening the scope of experience and thereby luring the world in a different, more livable direction. In what follows, I will show the extent to which Whitehead's notion of metaphysics, theory production and truth can indeed, and in many respects, be considered critical posthumanist. To this end, I will first set out Whitehead's theory of the bifurcation of nature, since it is this assessment that leads him not only to construct a different metaphysics, but also to propose a different notion of metaphysics. By then clarifying Whitehead's understanding of the purpose of philosophy and introducing some key ideas of his Philosophy of Organism, I will show why and in what way thinking with Whitehead and making use of some of his ideas is an asset to critical posthumanist theorizing.

Keywords: A.N. Whitehead, Metaphysics, Truth, Theory Production, Philosophy of Nature, Critical Posthumanism

* Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies (IKW), Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW), Email: i.schlehaider@akbild.ac.at

The Bifurcation of Nature: Presuppositions, Implications and Consequences

Whitehead's metaphysics, as well as his radical revision of the notion of metaphysics and speculative thought, are to be read as a response to his interpretation of Modern schemes of thought⁶ which he describes as plagued by a "radical inconsistency"⁷. For Whitehead, this inconsistency is the result of a mishandling of abstractions which has haunted Modern thought ever since. According to Whitehead, at the beginning of Modern European thought in the 17th century, nature has been split into two incompatible realms of reality: Nature designates, on the one hand, the so-called objective nature accessible only to the natural sciences – the materialistically conceptualized nature of atoms, molecules, cells etc. At the same time, however, nature also denotes what can be subjectively perceived and experienced, the appearing nature with its qualities, valuations and sensations. For Whitehead, this conceptual division of nature, the distinction of primary and secondary qualities, of 'first' and 'second' nature, of the material and the mental, is due to a fundamental, severe, and illicit incoherence and logical fallacy. His expression for this incoherence is "bifurcation of nature" for the question of how to relate these two concepts of nature – the 'objective' and the 'subjective' nature – remains largely unresolved in the philosophical tradition of Western Modernity⁸. Avoiding this inconsistency, sketching a metaphysics beyond the bifurcation of nature, therefore guides most of Whitehead's philosophical endeavor: "What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality."⁹

For Whitehead, this "incoherence"¹⁰ is reflected not only in the concept of nature itself, but in almost every field of Modern knowledge production: From theories of mind, experience or subjectivity to aesthetics, ethics, education, or anthropology. Against this background, the bifurcated nature can be understood as a "historical-discursive constellation": In the form of fundamental, mostly implicit conceptual assumptions, it forms the "implicit metaphysics of Modernity"¹¹, or, following Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious¹², the unconscious metaphysics of Modernity. As this implicit, unconscious metaphysics, the bifurcation of nature fundamentally determines not only the conditions and framework of Modern thought, but also its content and form. Whitehead therefore calls thinking in the mode of a bifurcated nature the "general form of the forms of thought"¹³ of Modernity. The bifurcation, then, can be considered the Modern convention, culture, or habit of thought par excellence. Then and now, as just mentioned, bifurcating nature is manifest in almost every field of knowledge production. However, the most significant and devastating are its 'worldly' consequences. For nature, by separating its secondary from its primary qualities, is reduced to dead, passive matter, to raw material, coming across as "dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaningslessly"¹⁴. Within such a framing, nature is not only conceived as the completely Other, but also deprived of its qualities and values *for its own sake*. Consequently, it is almost induced to reduce nature to mere commodity and exploit it to the utmost. It is against this background that Whitehead's philosophical endeavors are primarily concerned with practical matters and may therefore be considered as "theoretical foundation for a transformative practice"¹⁵. In this respect, the same holds true for Whitehead as for Haraway: "Queering specific normalized categories [like nature,

subjectivity, man etc., my addition] is not for the easy frisson of transgression, but for the hope for livable worlds.”¹⁶

Whitehead identifies the systematic yet implicit roots of the bifurcation of nature in Aristotelian substance metaphysics, itself the result of the hypostatization and universalization of the particular and contingent subject-predicate structure of Western natural languages. The resulting equation of the grammatical-logical with the ontological leads to conceiving of the logical difference between subject and predicate as a fundamental ontological difference between subject and object, thing and property, particular and universal. However, Whitehead’s critique of substance metaphysics is directed less against Aristotle himself than against the reception and ill-considered adoption of substance metaphysics in Modern philosophy and science. Historically, Whitehead sees the bifurcation sealed with the triumph of Newtonian physics, within which the materialistic understanding of matter was universalized and seen as an adequate description of nature as a whole. Scientific materialism thus became the guiding principle and implicit assumption of the Modern conception of nature altogether:

One such assumption underlies the whole philosophy of nature during the modern period. It is embodied in the conception which is supposed to express the most concrete aspect of nature. [...] The answer is couched in terms of stuff, or matter, or material [...] which has the property of simple location in space and time [...].¹⁷

The misconception of matter as “simply-located”¹⁸ is again due to the presupposition of the substance-quality scheme which Whitehead criticizes as an ill-considered abstraction. The idea of a simple location implies that matter passively conforms to the Newtonian laws, which according to Whitehead is not only refuted by Modern physics itself, from thermodynamics to the theory of relativity and quantum physics¹⁹, but abstracts from the complex and manifold relations and the becoming of entities²⁰: “We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy [and science, I.S.] can only introduce us to solitary substances [...]”²¹ Against the ontology of enduring things, Whitehead constructs a metaphysics in which everything that exists *becomes*. He therefore puts dynamic *processes* rather than static things at the core of his metaphysical inquiry. Being, for him, is relational becoming and hence the world a performative web of processes of relating. Entities, in this manner, don’t precede their relations or, to use Whitehead’s term, their ‘prehensions’, but *emerge* in a complex process of formation through and from their “intra-actions”, as Karen Barad puts it²². For Whitehead then, the ‘fundamental particles’, which he names ‘actual entities’ or ‘actual occasions’, are to be understood as events and processes, as occurrences rather than as continuous things.²³ In other words, for Whitehead, as for Haraway, „[r]eality is an active verb, and the nouns all seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus. Through their reaching into each other, through their ‘prehensions’ or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relatings. ‘Prehensions’ have consequences. The world is a knot in motion.”²⁴

However, Whitehead’s rejection of the mechanistic conception of matter is not only due to the immanent development of the physics of his time and due to a logical fallacy. The most problematic aspect for him is how the Newtonian understanding of matter is assessed, namely the universalization of the materialistic notion of nature, occurring in the course of its triumph within physics and its transference to (de facto) all

other regions of experience. From a philosophical point of view, however, this universalization is untenable, since its basis in experience is so limited within Newtonian physics that it cannot still claim validity outside its narrow scope. For thereby Newton's matter-particles are not conceived as what they are, namely as a result of an abstraction,²⁵ but as the most concrete components of nature itself, as concrete reality. Whitehead, on the other hand, tirelessly reiterates that the materialistic understanding of nature presents an abstraction that can only be claimed for a certain segment, namely that of solid bodies or inanimate nature in the Newtonian sense. He calls this mistake of considering an abstraction as (a matter of) concrete experience the "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness"²⁶. This logical fallacy poses a far reaching and serious problem, for it eliminates important fields of experience from the metaphysical context by simply "explaining them away" by considering everything that can't be explained in mathematical and mechanistic terms as being localized in the (human) mind alone. As a consequence, they are deprived of 'reality' and value. Yet on the other hand, Whitehead insists that "[p]hilosophy can exclude nothing"²⁷, or else it has failed and is useless: "Philosophy destroys its usefulness when it indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away."²⁸ By explaining things away the bifurcation of primary and secondary qualities, mind and matter, nature and culture, subject and object, knower and known, words and world, human and non-human is reinstalled over and over again. Whitehead's 'protest' against the bifurcating nature is thus based on an empiricist argument, for experience is simply misconceived within bifurcation-theories, simply excluding essential fields of experience, based on a logical fallacy; but it is equally based on ethical and political considerations, to the extent that scientific materialism, with its notion of 'mere', worthless matter, informs the mentality and culture of Modernity across the board, and thus reaching far beyond the scope of the sciences.²⁹ In other words, Whitehead problematizes the materialistic notion of matter for it is based on the unacknowledged metaphysics and anthropocentrism of the bifurcation of nature.

Since, for Whitehead, the bifurcated nature is responsible for maintaining the infinite number of hierarchical dualisms and their 'worldly' consequences, "what philosophy stands in need of is a conceptual revolution"³⁰. Such a revolution would not only enable us to radically reconceptualize the relationship between subject and object, knower and known, concepts and world, but above all to build 'livable worlds'.

The Purpose of Philosophy or The Critic of Abstractions

Whitehead's thinking is specifically directed towards philosophy within the discursive frame of the bifurcation, which describes the historical condition of Modern thought and, as the 'implicit metaphysics of Modernity', shapes conventions of thought and prescribes basic assumptions. His engagement with the canon of Modern philosophy takes place in the context of his theory of bifurcation, and against this background, as he argues in *Science and the Modern World* (1925), it even marks the "ruin" of philosophy. According to Whitehead, the problem of the bifurcation is specifically one that belongs to the realm of philosophy. For criticizing abstractions and generalizations such as those inherent to the bifurcation is one of the special competences and primary tasks of philosophy as a discipline and intellectual tradition:

You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society; It is the critic of abstractions. A civilisation which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress. An active school of philosophy is quite as important for the locomotion of ideas, as is an active school of railway engineers for the locomotion of fuel.³¹

For Whitehead, philosophy's initial responsibility is to provide a critique of the dominant abstractions of a given place and time; therein also lies its meaning and relevance for society. Just as a society needs engineers to take on the transportation system, a philosophical practice is needed that engages with the abstractions that are currently in play – „Philosophy is the criticism of abstractions which govern special modes of thought.”³² Striking into this notch, Whitehead deplores the so often misunderstood purpose of philosophy: „The explanatory purpose of philosophy is often misunderstood. Its business is to explain the emergence of the more abstract things from the more concrete things. It is a complete mistake to ask how concrete particular fact can be built up out of universals. The answer is, ‚In no way’. The true philosophic question is, How can concrete fact exhibit entities abstract from itself and yet participated in by its own nature?”³³ Whitehead follows the radical empiricist position of William James when he insists that „[p]hilosophy can exclude nothing”³⁴ that is actually experienced. It is thus its obligation to critically review the necessary abstractions of the empirical sciences, drawing on the richness and diversity of experience – from common sense to artistic, unconscious, and spiritual experiences. Along these lines, philosophy examines how abstractions correspond to the ever-changing experience, how they are generated, and relates the various concepts coming from different fields to each other. Without a critical review, these generalizations and relating of concepts coming from different fields take place implicitly and unconsciously, which is why the task of philosophy is so crucial: „The importance of philosophy lies in its sustained effort to make such [implicit, I.S.] schemes [of thought, I.S.] explicit, and thereby capable of criticism and improvement.”³⁵ For Whitehead, then, it is less the explicit than the implicit assumptions that most fundamentally shape an era's way of reasoning. For criticism, therefore, identifying the implicit, unquestioned (metaphysical) presuppositions is a priority.³⁶ As such, Whitehead's thought repeatedly revolves around the implicit presuppositions of Modern thought. Since bifurcation, by withholding the process of abstraction, derives from the false handling of abstractions, for Whitehead it owes also and above all to the failure of Modern philosophy.³⁷ It has not only failed to address the “fallacy of all fallacies”³⁸, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, but has furthermore substantiated and justified this incoherence. By retreating to the realm of the mind and the subjective, for which it rightly rejects the mechanistic description as inadequate, philosophy at the same time implicitly accepts the materialistic account as being adequate for describing nature, cementing the bifurcation of reality into two spheres. Thus, scientific materialism remains unquestioned. By indulging “in brilliant feats of explaining away”³⁹, Modern philosophy itself falls prey to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness over and over again. Philosophy is therefore not only

participating in the bifurcation of nature, being fooled by the materialistic worldview itself and largely accepting the exclusion of qualities from nature, but at the same time substantiates it categorically by retreating into the subjective. Thus, according to Whitehead, the bifurcation of nature is a disaster not only with regard to its 'worldly consequences', but, since failing its purpose, also for philosophy. However, it has equally failed by dwelling on sterile, isolated details or by obsessing over historical studies. To put it bluntly, by being boring and uninspired while creating "a timid, shut in, unenterprising state of mind".⁴⁰ Philosophers therefore "must learn to be intellectually bold again"⁴¹, must dare to speculate again. There are two related reasons, then, why Whitehead finds it necessary to engage in metaphysics and speculation in the first place: In a pragmatist vein, it is on the one hand due to the devastating consequences of the bifurcation of nature, and on the other hand, to the fact that philosophy has become largely irrelevant, turning to itself and, like the empirical sciences themselves, splitting into more and more highly specialized subdisciplines. But he does so not without at the same time radically reconceptualizing the notions of metaphysics and speculation.

A Different Metaphysics, A Different Notion of Metaphysics

Like poststructuralist and critical posthumanist theory⁴², Whitehead rejects the classical claims and notions of metaphysics, linking it to foundation, certainty and universal truth. By conceiving of metaphysics as historically embedded and consequently situated practice, he argues for a grounding of philosophy in practice and hence for a situated, pragmatic metaphysics.⁴³ He sees, however, not only the need for a different metaphysics, but also for a different *understanding* of metaphysics which differs vastly from its traditional notion.⁴⁴ After all, for Whitehead, the traditional claims of metaphysics are a display of philosophical naiveté: „In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly.”⁴⁵ For the accomplished mathematician Whitehead, who together with his former student co-authored the still highly influential three-volume *Principia Mathematica*(1910–1913) on the foundations of mathematics, “[p]hilosophy has been misled by the example of mathematics”⁴⁶. Contrary to mathematics with its deductive and inductive way of reasoning, philosophy should never aim for proof: „[...] [I]n philosophical writings proof should be at a minimum. The whole effort should be to display the self-evidence of basic truths.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the desire for exactitude in philosophy not only fails the purpose of philosophy (as described above) but itself is a delusion. For in light of various difficulties – methodical and practical problems with the ‚derivation’ of first principles, the „elliptical” character of language⁴⁸ and the limitations of empirical experience –, only an „asymptotic approach” to metaphysical principles is possible: “Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably.”⁴⁹ In other words, speculatively generated, metaphysical premises can never be definitively formulated; metaphysics can’t be brought to an end. Hence, the desire to speculate, the ‘Adventures of Ideas’, as Whitehead named one of his works, should be an essential part of thinking and theorizing. The proximity to Haraway and her call to be ‘inventive’ when it comes to theoretical construction is evident.⁵⁰ The limitations of metaphysics, however, must not lead to discarding systematicity and method altogether: “Speculative boldness must be balanced by complete humility before logic, and before

fact. It is a disease of philosophy when it is neither bold nor humble, but merely a reflection of the temperamental presuppositions of exceptional personalities.”⁵¹ Speculative thought, therefore, for Whitehead, conjoins with the classical claim to be coherent, systematic, and consistent: “Speculative Philosophy can be defined 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. Here ‚interpretation’ means that each element shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme.”⁵² Nonetheless, because of the difficulties just mentioned, metaphysical principles can never be more than hypotheses, indeed ‘metaphors’ – „they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap”⁵³. In a pragmatist vein, metaphysical principles are legitimate only as long as they are verified within experience. They are huge scientific hypotheses that need to be put to the test within experienced reality and the conceptual framework over and over again, and, if necessary, be rejected or revised. Speculative philosophy, therefore, has to be conducted by the „method of the ‚working hypothesis”⁵⁴ and metaphysics must not present a final, but a hypothetical conceptual system. As speculative assumptions, metaphysical principles and propositions can only be attained at the end, they must be the *aim* and not the premise or starting point of any metaphysical inquiry. In the context of such a radical reconceptualization of speculative-metaphysical thought, claims to ultimate groundings, truth and certainty can no longer be entertained.⁵⁵ For Whitehead, thus, the purpose of philosophical speculation is not, as just mentioned, to proof anything, but “to display the self-evidence of basic truths, concerning the nature of things and their connection”,⁵⁶ even though it is ultimately impossible to achieve such a goal, alone due to the problems posed by language. Whether a metaphysical premise, a theoretical concept, a term, an idea is or will have been able to generate evidence, can again only be verified within experience. This causes a further shift in the understanding and the status of metaphysical concepts or speculative philosophy: As mentioned in the previous section, their purpose and function lie solely in systematically capturing the diversity of experiences and relating the different fields of experience to one and another.⁵⁷ As hypotheses, they in turn prescribe the methodological approach and thereby serve the purpose of guiding the metaphysical research.⁵⁸

With this pragmatic-empiricist claim, according to which the elucidation of immediate experience and the relating of the various spheres of experience “is the sole justification for any thought”⁵⁹, another methodological demand is connected: Philosophical speculation has to start from experience and return to experience after the metaphysical generalization⁶⁰ „imaginative generalization”. The “true method of discovery” of philosophy therefore resembles a trajectory:

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.⁶¹

The possibility that speculative hypotheses may be refuted and therefore abandoned or reframed must always be open.⁶² Altogether, for Whitehead, metaphysics is not or never should be the intention for a closed system of irrefutable truths “but, rather, an open-

ended, fallibilistic pursuit of ever-more-adequate accounts of reality”⁶³. As such, “[metaphysics] is as much in process as the realities it seeks to grasp”⁶⁴; and metaphysical principles never can be more than conjectures, indeed, ‘metaphors’ after all. Accordingly, Whitehead’s own metaphysics doesn’t seek to sketch a finally adequate account of “what *is*”, but suggests “*one possible*” depiction⁶⁵. Without abandoning the idea of an ever-more-adequate account of the ‘real’ world –, “what we must consider first in a philosophy is whether it opens a *new perspective* upon the world and our place in it”⁶⁶, whether a theory generates interest, tells a *different story* and thus allows for new insights. It is thus much more important for a theory to be *relevant*, or, in Whitehead’s words, to be a “lure for feeling”⁶⁷, to lure a feeling, than to be true.⁶⁸ In this manner, Whitehead shares Haraway’s claim that ideas and theories should be able to produce „consequential meanings”⁶⁹ or, as Whitehead puts it, „important knowledge”⁷⁰ for a given context and “[t]hus, both also share – in a pragmatist vein – the hope for a possible transformation of modern systems of knowledge.”⁷¹ It is all about holding “a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.”⁷² Hence, for Haraway and Whitehead, metaphysics, speculation, and theory production are not ends in themselves, but are guided, again in a pragmatist manner, by “the hope for livable worlds”⁷³.

The described hypothetical and, as one may say, therefore fictional nature of concepts also dramatically changes the role of theory. Whitehead approaches theory as the construction of fictions, whereby the philosopher proposes *one possible* account of the world, a potentially captivating and adequate one. Rather than disclosing truth, “the primary function of theories is as a lure for feeling, thereby providing immediacy of enjoyment and purpose”⁷⁴. This notion of theory is why “in the real world it is more important that a proposition be interesting than it be true. The importance of truth is that it adds to interest”⁷⁵. Taking this track demands reemphasizing the role of imagination and of boldness in constructing concepts.⁷⁶

Conclusion: Luring the World into a Different Direction

Whitehead evaluates theory by its potential to produce wider and richer varieties of experience. With this aesthetic approach to theory, philosophy and theory succeed when they deploy the tools to create concepts that lure us into an expanded vision of the reality that surrounds us and into an enhanced concern for the world we inhabit. At best, theory is able to direct our concern to a shift in perspective, and thus to guide us not only towards a transformation of Modern systems of knowledge but of social life in general. In this respect, theory is able to provide a way of generating action by widening our perspectives of possible activity and alternatives to the present.⁷⁷ Accordingly, Whitehead, with his own metaphysical suggestions, hopes to lure the world into a different direction, “committed”, as Haraway puts forward, “to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of the Same”⁷⁸. Theorizing should not least be about imagining otherwise and realigning worlds. Whitehead’s aesthetic understanding of theory production is not about asserting eternal truths, albeit committed to “faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world”⁷⁹, but about telling stories that create connections and solidarity. Thinking with Whitehead

and taking a closer look at some of his ideas and concepts is indeed, as I have tried to show in this paper, an asset to critical posthumanist theorizing.

Refereces

- ¹ Haraway, D., “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988): 575-599, 581.
- ² Haraway, D., *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (London: Routledge, 1997), 273.
- ³ Whitehead, A. N., *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 3.
- ⁴ Haraway, D., (1988), 579.
- ⁵ Haraway, D., (1997), 273.
- ⁶ Cf. Stengers, I., *Thinking with Whitehead. A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011 [2002]); Sehgal, M., *Eine situierte Metaphysik. Empirismus und Spekulation bei William James und Alfred North Whitehead* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2016).
- ⁷ Whitehead, A. N., *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The New American Library, 1948 [1925]), 77.
- ⁸ In assessing Whitehead’s interpretation of the history of ideas, I join Melanie Sehgal in pointing out that his own conflation of historical and systematic analysis, as it is also brought to bear in his theory of bifurcation, needs to be considered. Whitehead’s ‘Modernity’ is to be regarded as a historical and systematic construct that fulfills a specific function within his thought. His generalizing proceeding – and the corresponding generalized use of the term Modernity – may seem questionable from a philosophical as well as historical point of view, but can be legitimized with Sehgal through Whitehead’s conflation of historical and systematic considerations. For it is precisely and only in this interweaving that the fundamental incoherence that characterizes Modern thought according to Whitehead becomes apparent: Modern basic principles are incompatible or, as in the case of the concept of nature, characterized by an intrinsic inconsistency. Thus, Whitehead also employs a particular way of reading practice: his starting and insertion point in the evaluation of the history of ideas is always the problem of the bifurcation of nature and thus that of (mostly) implicit presuppositions (cf. Sehgal 2016, 15). By doing so, he contextualizes himself and thus rejects the myth of the possibility of unembedded reading and philosophizing: „The besetting sin of philosophers is that, being merely men, they endeavor to survey the universe from the standpoint of gods.” (1974, 132)
- ⁹ Whitehead, A. N., *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 30.
- ¹⁰ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 6.
- ¹¹ Sehgal, M., (2016), 15, my translation.
- ¹² Jameson, F., *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- ¹³ Whitehead, A. N., *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967 [1933]), 12.
- ¹⁴ Whitehead, A. N., (1948 [1925]), 56.
- ¹⁵ Holzhey, H., “Das Postulat eines neuen Naturbegriffs: Zur Kritik an der aristotelischen Naturphilosophie bei Leibniz und Whitehead.”, in *Natur, Subjektivität, Gott: Zur Prozessphilosophie Alfred N. Whiteheads*, ed. H. Holzhey, A. Rust and R. Wiehl (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1990) 18-41, 18, my translation.
- ¹⁶ Haraway, H., “A Game of Cat’s Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies”, *Configurations, Special Issue: Located Knowledges: Intersections*, 2 (1994): 59-71, 60.
- ¹⁷ Whitehead, A. N., (1948 [1925]), 50.
- ¹⁸ Whitehead, A. N., (1948 [1925]), 59.

¹⁹ Scientific materialism is “entirely unsuited to the scientific situation at which we have now arrived” (Whitehead 1948, 17).

²⁰ The doctrine of the simple location connects with the idea of an absolute space and an absolute time: Matter is merely characterized by being at a certain time (now) in a certain place in space (here), thus to exist independently. The assumption of matter being simply located implies a primal disconnectedness of the ‘pieces of matter’ for only the external relations between the matter-particles are considered relevant, meaning the matter-particles are of no importance to one another, are irrelevant to one another.

²¹ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 49-50.

²² Barad introduces the neologism “intra-action” to point out (in contrast to the notion of interaction, which presupposes the existence of independent entities) that entities do not precede their relations or ‘intra-actions’, but rather come into existence through them. Like ‘intra-action’, ‘entanglement’ refers to the fact that there are no independent entities, no *relata*, but only relations: „To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.” (Barad 2007, ix) The category of relation thus becomes, just as for Whitehead, the one that is ontologically (and epistemologically) primary. Cf. Barad, K., *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²³ Accordingly, actual entities can’t be objects of experience as such. What is experienced, what the specialized sciences deal with, are – in Whitehead’s words – ‘societies’, that is associations of actual entities forming and repeating a pattern. But, as Melanie Sehgal points out, “because actual entities are never experienced as such – i.e. in a representationalist mode of a detached observer – the concept of actual entities is necessarily a speculative one.” (Sehgal 2014, 194).

²⁴ Haraway, D., *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 6.

²⁵ For Hegel, too, matter is “something utterly abstract: you can’t see it, you can’t feel it, etc.” (Hegel quoted from Rohmer 2000, 64, my translation). Rohmer, S., *Whiteheads Synthese von Kreativität und Rationalität* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2000).

²⁶ Whitehead, A. N., (1948 [1925]), 52.

²⁷ Whitehead, A. N., *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968 [1938]), 2.

²⁸ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 17.

²⁹ „Such a displacement of scientific materialism, if it ever takes place, cannot fail to have important consequences in every field of thought.” (Whitehead 1948, 38-39)

³⁰ Basile, P., *Whitehead’s Metaphysics of Power. Reconstructing Modern Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), viii.

³¹ Whitehead, A. N., (1948 [1925]), 59.

³² Whitehead, A. N., (1967 [1933]), 222.

³³ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 20.

³⁴ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 2.

³⁵ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), xiv.

³⁶ „When you are criticising the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them. With these assumptions a certain limited number of types of philosophic systems are possible, and this group of systems constitutes the philosophy of the epoch.” (Whitehead 1948, 49-50)

³⁷ It must be stressed that Whitehead does not try to criticize science altogether, since, as mentioned above, he does not criticize Newtonian physics as such, but solely its interpretation, its illegitimate generalization.

³⁸ Wiehl, R., “Whiteheads Kosmologie der Gefühle zwischen Ontologie und Anthropologie.” in *Whiteheads Metaphysik der Kreativität. Internationales Whitehead-Symposium Bad Homburg 1983*, ed. F. Rapp and R. Wiehl (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1986), 141-169, 157, my translation.

³⁹ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 17.

⁴⁰ This is also why Whitehead argues against certain branches of Analytic Philosophy and Logical Positivism. In a letter to his former student Henry S. Leonard, he writes: “Logical Positivism [...] will produce a timid, shut in, unenterprising state of mind, engaged in the elaboration of details. I always test these general rules by trying to imagine the sterilizing effect of such a state of mind, if prevalent at any time in the last ten thousand years.” (quoted from Henning 2015, 440)

⁴¹ Basile, P., (2017), 13.

⁴² The importance of a decisively *critical* posthumanism derives from the great variety of matters negotiated under the label of posthumanism which are linked to vastly differing discursive strategies, objectives and political aspirations. In view of this broad applicability and reactionary appropriation by, for example, transhumanism, Haraway distances herself from the term posthumanism (cf. Haraway 2006 and 2008). For her, figurations or, as Haraway also calls them, “chimerical visions” (Haraway 2008: 4) such as the “companion species”, are less suitable for appropriation (cf. Haraway 2003). Given her way of thinking, writing and conceptualizing, I would still consider Haraway a critical posthumanist. Cf. Schlehaider, I., *Tausend Subjekte. Der radikal pluralistische Subjektbegriff im kritischen Posthumanismus und bei A. N. Whitehead* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2021).

⁴³ Cf. Sehgal, M., (2016). Whitehead hereby places himself within the tradition of Pragmatism. According to Marc Rölli (with reference to Richard Bernstein), the “pragmatic ethos” comprises the following components: “*The anti-foundationalism*[...], the *radical contingency*[...] of an always open future, an affirmation of *pluralism*, the concept of *practice* that reflects the collective contexts of life, as well as a scientific attitude that is open to *experimentation*.” (Rölli, M., “Die nicht-anthropologische Philosophie des radikalen Pragmatismus”, *Sic et Non. zeitschrift für philosophie und kultur. im netz*, 12 (2010), 1-12, 3, my translation.)

⁴⁴ Similarly, Whitehead undertakes a fundamental reconceptualization of speculation and system, historically closely associated with metaphysics (compare, for example, Kann 2010, Sölch 2010). A detailed discussion of such a redefinition and reassessment would go beyond the scope of this paper. Melanie Sehgal provides a lengthy and detailed exposition of Whitehead’s notion of metaphysics in her comprehensive study (2016). Kann, C., “Renewing Speculation: The Systematic Aim of Whitehead’s Philosophic Cosmology”, in *Beyond Metaphysics? Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead’s Late Thought*, ed. R. Faber, B. G. Henning and C. Combs (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010), 27-45. Sölch, D., “Beyond Metaphysics? – A Historiographical Approach to Whitehead’s Speculative Philosophy”, in *Beyond Metaphysics? Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead’s Late Thought*, ed. R. Faber, B. G. Henning and C. Combs (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010), 45-61.

⁴⁵ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), xiv.

⁴⁶ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 8.

⁴⁷ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 48.

⁴⁸ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 13. In this sense, Whitehead’s understanding of language is non-representational. Language does not serve to reflect reality, but has the function of establishing relations in a certain way: “[N]o language can be anything but elliptical, requiring a leap of the imagination to understand its meaning in its relevance to immediate experience. The position of metaphysics in the development of culture cannot be understood without remembering that no verbal statement is the adequate expression of a proposition.” (Whitehead 1978, 13; also compare

Sehgal 2016, 367)

⁴⁹ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 4.

⁵⁰ To go beyond the negative standpoint, which is often part of (classical) critical thinking (especially in the tradition of Critical Theory), in order not to fall prey to political impuissance on the one hand and to open up political, ethical as well as theoretical alternatives and perspectives on the other hand, is an important concern of both Haraway (e.g. 2016) and Braidotti (e.g. Braidotti, R., *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); Braidotti, R., “Posthuman relational subjectivity and the politics of affirmation”, in: Peg Rawes (Hg), *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity*, ed. P. Rawes (New York: Routledge, 2013), 21-40).

⁵¹ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 17.

⁵² Whitehead, A. N., (1967 [1933]), 222.

⁵³ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 4.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, A. N., (1967 [1933]), 222.

⁵⁵ With his concept of truth, Whitehead, like critical posthumanisms, radically rejects the „god trick” of Modern schemes of thought, “a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581). The assumption that reality or ‘truth’ can be represented objectively and neutral is, from a critical posthumanist point of view, the product of a very specific perspective which is itself historically and socially situated, but which (systematically) denies and hides this fact. Still, neither Whitehead nor critical posthumanisms put the case for an easy relativism. They do not postulate, to speak with Deleuze and Guattari, „a relativity of truth but, on the contrary, a truth of the relative” (Deleuze, G./Guattari, F., *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1991]), 130).

⁵⁶ Whitehead, A. N., (1968 [1938]), 48. Philosophy itself therefore cannot be proven: „[Philosophy] makes the content of the human mind manageable; it adds meaning to fragmentary details; it discloses disjunctions and conjunctions, consistencies and inconsistencies. Philosophy is the criticism of abstractions which govern special modes of thought. It follows that philosophy, in any proper sense of the term, cannot be proved. For proof is based upon abstraction. Philosophy is either self-evident, or it is not philosophy.” (Whitehead 1968, 48f.)

⁵⁷ „The purpose of this working hypothesis for philosophy is to coordinate the current expressions of human experience, in common speech, in social institutions, in actions, in the principles of the various special sciences, elucidating harmony and exposing discrepancies. No systematic thought has made progress apart from some adequately general working hypothesis, adapted to its special topic.” (Whitehead 1967, 222)

⁵⁸ Cf. Whitehead, A. N., (1967 [1933]), 222.

⁵⁹ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 4.

⁶⁰ Whitehead calls this method „imaginative generalization”, „imaginative rationalization”, „imaginative construction” (1978, 5), or also „descriptive generalization” (1967, 234). These formulations again resemble Haraway’s demand to be ‘inventive’ with regard to the theoretical construction.

⁶¹ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 5.

⁶² “At any one stage there could even be a plurality of systems with equal systematic elegance and comparable explanatory power.” (Basile 2017, 19)

⁶³ Henning, B. G., “Recovering the Adventures of Ideas: In Defense of Metaphysics as Revisable, Systematic, Speculative Philosophy”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29 (2015): 437-456, 437.

⁶⁴ Basile, P., (2017), 19.

⁶⁵ Sehgal, M., “Diffractive Propositions: Reading Alfred North Whitehead with Donna Haraway and Karen Barad”, *Parallax. Special Issue: Diffracted Worlds – Diffractive Readings: Onto-Epistemologies and the Critical Humanities*, (2014), 188-201, 198.

⁶⁶ Basile, P., (2017), 24, my emphasis.

⁶⁷ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 184.

⁶⁸ Cf. also Sehgal, M., (2014) and Shaviro, S., *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2009).

⁶⁹ Haraway, D., (1997), 273.

⁷⁰ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 3.

⁷¹ Sehgal, M., (2014), 164.

⁷² Haraway, D., (1988): 579.

⁷³ Haraway, H., (1994): 60.

⁷⁴ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 184.

⁷⁵ Whitehead, A. N., (1978 [1929]), 259.

⁷⁶ In *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead remarks regarding the conceptual difficulties and the challenges of creating a non-bifurcatory terminology: “We are thus, in expounding an alternative doctrine, driven to the use of either strange terms or of familiar words with unusual meanings.” (1920, 134) Thus, Whitehead’s choice of terminology alone, which is characterized by alienation and sometimes strangely appearing neologisms, pursues the purpose of ‘queering’ (specialized) habits of thought (cf. Sehgal 2016, 386) as well as avoiding anthropocentrism.

⁷⁷ In this way, also the classical antithesis between theory and practice is irritated and complicated.

⁷⁸ Haraway, D., (1997), 273.

⁷⁹ Haraway, D., (1988), 579.