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**“The Sea of Post-Kantian Process Philosophy in Whitehead and Deleuze: Toward a
Descendental Aesthetic Ontology”
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My paper is certainly not the first time Whitehead and Deleuze have been read together. Bringing them into conversation makes sense given Deleuze’s enthusiasm for Whitehead’s process-relational and aesthetically-oriented philosophy. This paper focuses in particular on their creative responses to Kant’s transcendental mode of thought. I read their resonant responses as examples of what I’ve termed a descendental aesthetic ontology. This is a return to metaphysics, but not as a side-stepping of Kant’s transcendentalism¹, nor as simply an empiricist reaction against it. As Deleuze reminds us, Whitehead’s is a deeper and more radical empiricism, which

is by no means a reaction against concepts, nor a simple appeal to lived experience On the contrary, it undertakes the most insane creation of concepts ever seen or heard. Empiricism is a mysticism and a mathematicism of concepts, but precisely one which treats the concept as an object of encounter Only an empiricist could say concepts are indeed things, but things in their free and wild state, beyond “anthropological predicates.”²

Any contemporary philosopher daring or foolish enough to venture out into the open ocean of speculative metaphysics in search of the Real must eventually face the challenge of Kant’s critical method, which according to Kant inaugurated a second Copernican Revolution in

¹ Despite his "recurrence to pre-Kantian modes of thought" comment in the preface to *Process and Reality*, Whitehead actually engages quite deeply with Kant's philosophy.

² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xx.

philosophy placing the knowing subject back at the center of things. Kant serves for all modern and postmodern thinkers as the guardian of the threshold between knowledge and reality. By pushing human consciousness to the outer and inner edges of its incarnate experience, Kant's method forces us to discover and admit our own self-constituted cognitive limitations. Kant stands along the pathway of wisdom before the entrance to an ancient bridge warning us of that bridge's instability, doubting the security of the connection it purports to establish between the shoreline of the sensible or physical world upon which we stand and the intelligible or metaphysical realm that is supposed to lie somewhere beyond the oceanic horizon. "These two territories," Kant tells us,

do not immediately come into contact; and hence, one cannot cross from one to the other simply by putting one foot in front of the other. Rather, there exists a gulf between the two, over which philosophy must build a bridge in order to reach the opposite bank.³

The bridge is unstable because the design for its construction remains a matter of unending controversy. Ever since Plato drew his famous line in the sand dividing empirical opinion from true knowledge,⁴ this bridge has remained a metaphysical battlefield upon which countless conceptual architects have vied for the rights to its proper plan. Kant warns all who would dare to complete the bridge and venture across the abyssal gulf beneath it about the metaphysical dangers that they will encounter. Worse, he also denies us our present footing.⁵ Kant explains this catch-22 in the first sentence of the Preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

³ Kant, *Opus Postumum*, 39.

⁴ *Republic*, 509d–511e. All references to Plato are from *Complete Works*, edited by Cooper.

⁵ Kant, *Prolegomena*, 5.

Human reason has the peculiar fate...that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.⁶

By freely striving Reason can come to know its own limits. These limits, Kant argues, are precisely what determine the modes of sensibility and understanding by which we necessarily experience our own subjectivity as well as all possible objects in Nature. Even if it cannot know itself (as the soul) or know the in-itself (as Nature or as God), Kant grants that Reason can understand the physical world, at least in its apparently inorganic or mechanical aspects. In its organic or living aspect, however, Reason cannot help but detect at least a hint of a striving akin to its own in plants and animals, and cannot help but recognize the equivalent of its own freedom regnant in the actions of other human beings, thus preventing it from determining such beings according to the objectifying categories of the understanding. Reason necessarily intuits the wink of purposefulness, of “divine Eros” in Whitehead’s terms, staring back at it from behind the eyes of every other living being. While conscious freedom *may* be unique to human beings, Whitehead places it on the same continuum with the creativity pervasive throughout Nature. Human freedom is a potentization of natural creativity.

Whitehead argues that “the general principle of empiricism depends upon the doctrine that there is a principle of concretion which is not discoverable by abstract reason.”⁷ Whitehead had little patience for modern scientific materialism’s high altitude view of Nature as a collection of objects mechanically governed by externally imposed laws. Instead, he sought to return the philosopher to concrete aesthetic encounters with particular expressions of Nature (to our

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 99.

⁷ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 179.

feelings or “prehensions” of natural entities). It is here that Nature’s natality or creativity shines through the superficial appearance of objective finitude. Our sensory experience, attended to in earnest, reveals its sources to be infinite, even sublime. It is only after the mechanical understanding has manufactured for us a finite, conceptually ordered world that this infinity is obscured and covered over.

Kant, like Descartes and Plato before him, argued that appearances obey the laws of our understanding but in themselves amount to nothing; something Real transcends the realm of appearance. Thus, for Kant, aesthetics is only ever transcendental or phenomenological and can never become ontological. Unlike Descartes and Plato, Kant denied the philosopher cognitive access to the realm of transcendent ideas. We can at least *think* these ideas, but we cannot *know* them. We can only know what the sense-bound understanding allows us to determine objectively. Knowledge of anything else, of organisms or of souls, is either a miracle or a mirage. Ancient philosophers, Kant tells us, proudly ventured out upon “the broad and stormy ocean” of metaphysics only to find themselves “ceaselessly [deceived]” and “[entwined] in adventures from which [they could] never escape and yet also never bring to an end.”⁸ Kant accepts that metaphysical speculation is as important to a philosophic life as the physiological activities of breathing and eating are for the life of the body. But he also reminds us that, should our thinking venture beyond itself in an attempt to produce knowledge of the cosmos, the human soul, or God, it will soon find itself entangled in contradictions, perplexed by unceasing questions, and frustrated by its inability to discover the logical errors that have led it astray.

⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 339.

We reach for the other side, but the bridge sways wildly and crumbles beneath our feet. Even as our eyes remain transfixed by the hint of numinous glories hidden just out of sight, we fall into the abyss and our claim to higher knowledge is dissolved into an ocean of ignorance. And if we avoid drowning in that abyss, our human nature will only demand of us that we swim to the shore to try again. As Descartes put it in his second meditation, it is “just as if [we] had fallen all of a sudden into very deep water, [and are] so greatly disconcerted as to be unable either to plant [our] feet firmly on the bottom or sustain [ourselves] by swimming on the surface.”⁹

Despite the difficulty of the ordeal, there is another way forward for radically empiricist philosophers after Kant. “A chain of facts is like a barrier reef,” Whitehead says. “On one side there is wreckage, and beyond it harborage and safety.”¹⁰ How is philosophy to turn back into the winds of aesthesis, tacking closely to the empirical facts, while still aiming to drop anchor in deeper metaphysical waters?

Deleuze, like Whitehead, follows Leibniz in beginning philosophy, not with the crystalline clarity of conceptual essences, but with the confused sway of sympathetic perceptions (i.e., with causal efficacy rather than presentational immediacy). Another aesthetically-oriented philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, agreed with Leibniz that the perceived world “teaches us an ontology that it alone can reveal to us.”¹¹ Perception is thereby treated as “an original world,”¹²

⁹ Descartes (Meditations on First Philosophy, Med. II)

¹⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 223.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 40.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 40.

rather than a derivative copy. “All the bodies of the universe are in sympathy with each other,” writes Leibniz,

and though our senses are in response to all of them, it is impossible for our soul to pay attention to every particular impression. This is why our confused sensations result from a really infinite variety of perceptions. This is somewhat like the confused murmur heard by those who approach the seashore, which comes from the accumulation of innumerable breaking waves.¹³

Given the primarily aesthetic basis of our relation to reality, Deleuze forgoes the pretense of an apodictic method seeking certain knowledge and instead articulates a *pedagogical* method attentive to the fact that “learning is, after all, an infinite task.” For Deleuze, “it is from ‘learning,’ not from knowledge, that the transcendental conditions of thought must be drawn.”¹⁴ His pedagogical method is not based on Descartes’ methodical doubt, nor on Kant’s fixed table of logical categories, the *a priori* conditions for all possible knowledge of objects, but rather on an experimental set of aesthetic categories that provide *genetic* conditions for our sympathetic becoming-with new objects, or better, new organisms. Significantly, this reframing places human knowing on the same continuum with all organisms: humans know by relationally becoming-with other organisms.¹⁵ In a descendental aesthetic ontology, knowledge is only possible through relationship, and relationship always transforms the relata.

Deleuze mentions Whitehead’s categoreal scheme as an example of a new transcendental aesthetic (or a descendental aesthetic, in my terms) where, unlike representational categories, it is not only *possible* experience that is conditioned, but *actual* experience. It is a critique of feeling,

¹³ Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers*, 325.

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 166.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

rather than of concepts. He calls Whitehead's categories "phantastical," in that they express novel creations of the imagination never before encountered by philosophers.¹⁶ For Whitehead, because each experient (whether human or nonhuman) is a perspective on the world *and* an element in the world, the categories of an experientially adequate metaphysical scheme must elucidate the "paradox of the connectedness of things:—the many things, the one world without and within."¹⁷ In other words, while Whitehead accepts modern philosophy's focus on the self-created perspective of the subject—that, in some sense, *the world is within the subject* (as in Kant's transcendental idealism)—he holds this insight in imaginative polar tension with the common sense presupposition that *the subject is within and emerges from the world*. This refusal to remove subjective experience from the world of actual entities, as if it were sequestered in a transcendental domain accessible by humans alone, is what distinguishes Whitehead's descendent panexperientialism and Deleuze's transcendental empiricism from Kant's transcendental phenomenalism.

Contrary to Kant, the mind is not the only problem solver; it is not the intelligent observer and manipulator of a stupid and passive Nature. The form-generating forces driving Nature's evolutionary "education of the senses" are just as creative and problematically arrayed as are the imaginative forces shaping the historical education of the human mind. As Deleuze argues,

problematic Ideas are precisely the ultimate elements of nature and the subliminal objects of little perceptions. As a result, "learning" always takes place in and through the

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 284–85

¹⁷ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 228.

unconscious, thereby establishing the bond of a profound complicity between nature and mind.¹⁸

Mind is a more complexly folded Nature. The proper maintenance of their conscious complicity depends upon what Deleuze calls the “education of the senses,” by which he means the raising of each of the human soul’s powers to its limit so that through their mutual intra-action the imagination is quickened into creating novel perceptions of difference in itself, perceptions more radical than the stale preformed conceptions of identity normally produced by the understanding. The path of the learner is “amorous” (we learn by heart), but also potentially fatal,¹⁹ since the creation of difference—though free from the anxieties of method, free of having to know with certainty—for precisely this reason always risks the creation of nonsense, or worse, the descent into madness. But in the end, the philosopher must take these risks, since as with learning to swim, the only way to gain wisdom concerning the metaphysical abyss is to dive into it and open ourselves to the transformations it requires of our body and our language.²⁰

Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism does not privilege the thinking or willing faculties, as does Kant’s transcendental idealism. While thought concerns itself with the domains or levels of virtuality (what Whitehead refers to as the hierarchy of eternal objects), it is the faculty of imagination that

[grasps] the process of actualization [and] crosses domains, orders, and levels, knocking down the partitions coextensive with the world, guiding our bodies and inspiring our

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 165.

¹⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 23.

²⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 192.

souls, grasping the unity of mind and nature.²¹

Imagination, continues Deleuze, is “a larval consciousness which moves endlessly from science to dream and back again.”²² Unlike in Kant’s mode of thought, Deleuze’s faculty of imagination is no mere conveyor belt transporting fixed categories back and forth along the schematic supply line between reflection and sensation. Faced with the sublime elemental forces of the universe, the imagination becomes unable to perform its domesticated role in service to the *a priori* concepts of the understanding. It is upon confronting the unprethinkability of these elemental forces that “imagination finds itself blocked before its own limit: the immense ocean, the infinite heavens, all that overturns it, it discovers its own impotence, it starts to stutter.”²³ But, continues Deleuze, imagination’s sublime wounding is not without consolation:

At the moment that imagination finds that it is impotent, no longer able to serve the understanding, it makes us discover in ourselves a still more beautiful faculty which is like the faculty of the infinite. So much so that at the moment we feel our imagination and suffer with it, since it has become impotent, a new faculty is awakened in us, the faculty of the supersensible.²⁴

Brought to the edge of sanity, the soul’s cognitive powers are thus transfigured, opening up a new way forward across the gulf between physics and metaphysics in the aftermath of Kant’s critiques. We must tread lightly, however. “The recourse to metaphysics,” writes Whitehead, “is like throwing a match into the powder magazine. It blows up the whole arena.”²⁵

²¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 220.

²² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 220.

²³ Deleuze, “Kant seminar.”

²⁴ Deleuze, “Kant Seminar,” par. 14 (4/4/1978). Instead of an entirely new faculty awakening, I would say that imagination itself comes to operate at a higher potency.

²⁵ Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 29.

Deleuze agrees: his pedagogical metaphysics quickens the philosophical imagination's powers into "a harmony such that each transmits its violence to the other by powder fuse."²⁶ Rather than converging on a common sense, as Kant demanded of imagination, Deleuze's education of the senses approaches the point of "para-sense," where "thinking, speaking, imagining, feeling, etc." overcome themselves in a continual process of learning generative of new modes of thought and perception, modes capable of incarnating paradoxical Ideas as transformative symbols, or talismans.²⁷

For Whitehead as for Deleuze, "the ultimate realities are the events in their process of origination."²⁸ Whitehead calls this process of origination *concrecence*. Concrecence refers to the process of "growing together" whereby "the many become one and are increased by one."²⁹ Each individual concrecing event, according to Whitehead, "is a passage between two . . . termini, namely, its components in their ideal disjunctive diversity passing into these same components in their [real] concrete togetherness."³⁰ Similarly, Deleuze describes the incarnation of a problematic Idea as an event that unfolds in two directions at once, along a *real* and an *ideal* axis: "At the intersection of these lines," writes Deleuze, "where a powder fuse forms the link between the Idea and the actual—the 'temporally eternal' is formed."³¹ Whitehead's event ontology, wherein eternal objects intersect with or ingress into actual

²⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 193.

²⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 194.

²⁸ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 236.

²⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.

³⁰ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 236.

³¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 189.

occasions in the process of concrescence, can be read in terms of Deleuze's account of the incarnation of Ideas, whereby concrescence becomes a fleeting solution achieved through the condensation of the fragmentary multiplicity of past actualities and future possibilities into a precipitated drop of unified experience. The problematically condensed occasion of experience is fleeting and cannot long endure in its unity since, according to Whitehead's categoreal scheme, all entities necessarily find themselves caught in a process of perpetual perishing, leading "the solution to explode like something abrupt, brutal and revolutionary."³² Upon perishing, the subjective immediacy of each experiential unity becomes objectively immortal, transitioning into exploded debris whose emotional intensity is gathered up again by the occasions to follow it.

For Deleuze, Ideas are not *simply located* inside the head or privately produced within the transcendental factory walls of the mind. Ideas are not merely represented inside an individual conscious mind, they are detonated in the imaginal depths of the world itself.³³ Exploding Ideas seed symbolic vibrations that reverberate throughout the "extensive continuum" (in Whitehead's terms, or the "plane of immanence" in Deleuze's), and when and if they unfold into human consciousness, they reveal a profound complicity between mind and Nature.

It follows that Ideas, for Whitehead as for Deleuze, "are by no means essences," but rather "belong on the side of events, affections, or accidents."³⁴ As Steven Shaviro writes of Whitehead's "eternal objects," they ingress into events as "alternatives, contingencies, situations

³² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 190.

³³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 190.

³⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 187.

that could have been otherwise.”³⁵ Ideas, that is, are tied “to the evaluation of what is important and what is not, to the distribution of singular and regular, distinctive and ordinary.”³⁶ “The sense of importance,” writes Whitehead, “is embedded in the very being of animal experience. As it sinks in dominance, experience trivializes and verges toward nothingness.”³⁷ The Western philosophical tradition’s obsession with pinning down general essences instead of open-endedly investigating particular experiences—its emphasis on asking “what is . . . ?” instead of “how much?,” “how so?,” “in which cases?” in its pursuit of Ideas—has fostered some insight but also much confusion.³⁸ “Ideas emanate from imperatives of adventure,” writes Deleuze, not from the banality of encyclopedic classification.³⁹ The mistaken identification of Ideas with static essences has led to the inability of modern philosophy to grasp rationality’s utter dependence upon “the goings-on of nature,” and to the forgetfulness of “the thought of ourselves as process immersed in process beyond ourselves.”⁴⁰ The dominant view since the Enlightenment has been to affirm the natural origins of the human mind. But the “Nature” to which this Enlightenment

³⁵ Shaviri, *Without Criteria*, 40. “Ideas” in Deleuze’s sense should be understood as *actualized* or *ingressed* eternal objects. While Whitehead’s category “eternal object” (especially when considered in abstraction from the rest of his categorial scheme) may bear some resemblance to the Aristotelian category of “essence,” equating the two would be a misreading. “Eternal objects” must be considered in the context of the whole cosmological scheme, most importantly Whitehead’s “ontological principle” and category of the “actual occasion.” “Eternal objects” are meaningless without “actual occasions.” There are no eternal essences independent of actual experiences. The two depend upon one another for their conceptual meaning and their ontological importance.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 189.

³⁷ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 9.

³⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 188–90.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 197.

⁴⁰ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 8.

mentality seeks to reduce itself is only an abstraction constructed by a mechanomorphic mind.⁴¹ The mechanical model of Nature made in our mind has been mistaken for the living processes of Nature that gave birth to mind in the first place.

Despite the shared conceptual emphasis of much of Deleuze and Whitehead's philosophical work, Deleuze may at times fall prey to Whitehead's "fallacy of discarding method." Though Whitehead was also critical of tradition-bound and narrow-minded methodologies (as is evidenced by his corresponding "dogmatic fallacy"), he distances himself from philosophers like Nietzsche and Bergson (perhaps Deleuze's two most important influences) because they tend to assume that intellectual analysis is "intrinsically tied to erroneous fictions" in that it can only proceed according to some one discarded dogmatic method.⁴² "Philosophers boast that they uphold no system," writes Whitehead. "They are then prey to the delusive clarities of detached expressions which it is the very purpose of their science to surmount."⁴³ "We must be systematic," Whitehead writes elsewhere, "but we should keep our systems open [and remain] sensitive to their limitations."⁴⁴

⁴¹ The Enlightenment's scientific and materialistic mentality thereby falls victim to Whitehead's "fallacy of misplaced concreteness."

⁴² Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 222.

⁴³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 222.

⁴⁴ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 6.