

Fifteen

SELF-ENJOYMENT AND CONCERN: ON WHITEHEAD AND LEVINAS

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1. Introduction

In “Nature Alive,” the eighth chapter of his last book, *Modes of Thought*, Alfred North Whitehead writes that “the notion of life implies a certain absoluteness of self-enjoyment... [t]he occasion of experience is absolute in respect to its immediate self-enjoyment” (MT 150-151). In other words, life is a process of pure auto-affectation. It involves a “self-enjoyment” that is both “immediate” and “absolute.” Self-enjoyment is “immediate” in that it happens pre-reflexively in the moment itself. I enjoy my life as I am living it; my enjoyment of the very experience of living is precisely what it means to be alive. “The enjoyment belongs to the process and is not a characteristic of any static result” (152). Also, self-enjoyment is “absolute” in that it unfolds entirely in itself and for itself, without conditions. A living occasion is “absolute” in the etymological sense of this word: it is unbound, set free, released from all relation. Every moment of life is an autonomous “self-creation” (151). A living occasion must “be understood without reference to any other concurrent occasions” (151).

Just a few pages later, however, Whitehead says something quite different. He writes that “each occasion is an activity of concern, in the Quaker sense of that term... The occasion is concerned, in the way of feeling and aim, with things that in their own essence lie beyond it” (MT 167). Now, for the Quakers, *concern* implies a weight upon the spirit. When something concerns me, I cannot ignore it or walk away from it. It presses upon my being and compels me to respond. Concern, therefore, is an involuntary experience of being affected by others. It opens me, in spite of myself, to the outside. It compromises my autonomy, leading me towards something beyond myself. Concern is relational, rather than absolute, and hetero-affective, rather than auto-affective.

The distinction between self-enjoyment and concern is fundamental. Yet, at the same time, these two conditions are closely bound together. You cannot have one without the other. Concern is itself a kind of enjoyment, and it arises out of the very process of immediate self-enjoyment. For it is precisely when “engaged in its own immediate self-realization” that an occasion finds itself most vitally “concerned with the universe” that lies beyond it (MT

167). Life in its self-enjoyment “passes into a future There is no nature apart from transition, and there is no transition apart from temporal duration” (152). Even the most immediate self-enjoyment has the thickness of what Whitehead (following William James) calls the “specious present” (89) and in this “temporal thickness” it reaches out beyond itself (PR 169). It may not have anything to do with “any other concurrent occasions,” but it is deeply involved with the antecedent occasions from which it has inherited, and with the succeeding occasions to which it makes itself available.

Thus, self-enjoyment fills the specious present, but it is transformed into concern, insofar as that present moment is carried away along the arrow of time. In the midst of my self-enjoyment, I am projected towards the future, and, thereby, I spend or expend myself. Conversely, concern or other-directedness is itself a necessary precondition for even the most intransitive self-enjoyment. For no present moment may be divorced from the pastness out of which, or against which, it emerges. The absolute self-affirmation of the living occasion arises out of “a complex process of appropriating into a unity of existence the many data presented as relevant by the physical processes of nature” (MT 151). This process of appropriation is not always benign—Whitehead reminds us that “life is robbery” (PR 105)—but without it, there would be no “creative advance.”

Concern and self-enjoyment are so closely connected because both are movements (or pulsations) of *emotion*. On the most basic level, Whitehead says, “life is the enjoyment of emotion, derived from the past and aimed at the future. It is the enjoyment of emotion which was then, which is now, and which will be then” (MT 167). The emotion felt by a living being always comes from somewhere else, and it is always going somewhere else. “It issues from, and it issues towards. It is received, it is enjoyed, and it is passed along, from moment to moment” (167). Emotion arises out of the very “process of appropriation” (151); it is enjoyed in the immediacy of the specious present, only to be “passed along” in the very next instant. Life is a passage through time, whose midpoint is the self-enjoyment of the immediate present and whose extremes are the concern that I feel for the past and the concern that I give myself about the future. An occasion is self-constituted and self-reflexive in that it does not refer to, and is not concerned with, “any other concurrent occasions.” But it *does* refer to, and it *is* concerned with, the occasions that precede it and that follow it. Such is the “vector character” of all experience (167).

2. A different manner

The contrast between self-enjoyment and concern is not, in itself, anything new in Whitehead’s metaphysics. The term *concern*, always qualified as being meant “in the Quaker sense,” does not appear in *Process and Reality*. But

when it is first invoked in *Adventures of Ideas*, it is associated with concepts that are familiar from the earlier book. Whitehead uses *concern* to denote the “affective tone” that is an essential feature of any “subject-object relation” (AI 176) or of any act of perception or prehension whatsoever (180). “No prehension, even of bare sensa, can be divested of its affective tone, that is to say, of its character as a ‘concern’ in the Quaker sense” (180). No occasion ever prehends another occasion neutrally and impassively; the emotion it feels for the other thing, in the very process of prehending it, *is* its concern.

For its part, the term *self-enjoyment* is only used sparingly in *Process and Reality*. But, its few uses are significant. Whitehead writes of the “self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many” (PR 145); that is to say, the very process by which “the many become one, and are increased by one” (21) is already itself an instance of self-enjoyment. Later, he writes of the way that “an actual entity considered in relation to the privacy of things...is a moment in the genesis of self-enjoyment” (289). Self-enjoyment, in this sense, is thereby caught up in “the antithesis between publicity and privacy” that “obtrudes itself at every stage” in Whitehead’s cosmology (289). “There are elements only to be understood by reference to what is beyond the fact in question, and there are elements expressive of the immediate, private, personal, individuality of the fact in question” (289). The privacy of self-enjoyment and the publicity of what will come to be called concern are both dimensions of every single occasion. *Modes of Thought*, therefore, is not really saying anything new about the antithesis between self-enjoyment and concern—except that it expresses the distinction far more clearly and emphatically than was the case in Whitehead’s earlier texts.

What changes, then, in Whitehead’s later thought? I would like to suggest that the difference between *Process and Reality*, on the one hand, and *Modes of Thought*, on the other, is precisely a difference of emphasis, which is to say that it is a rhetorical difference. But, this does not mean that the difference is insignificant or merely apparent. The very fact that language, for Whitehead, “is not the essence of thought” (MT 35) and that “each phraseology leads to a crop of misunderstandings” (AI 176) means that linguistic variations need to be handled with the utmost care. To my mind, the *specificity* of Whitehead’s late writing lies not in any actual change of doctrine but precisely in a difference of phraseology, tone, or literary style. *Adventures of Ideas*, *Modes of Thought*, and “Immortality” express Whitehead’s metaphysics with a different rhetoric, and in a different *manner*. And, that makes all the difference.

Gilles Deleuze credits Whitehead, like the Stoics and Leibniz before him, with inventing a *mannerism* in philosophy, a way of thinking “that is opposed to the essentialism first of Aristotle and then of Descartes” (Deleuze 1993, 53). A philosophy of processes and events explores manners of being rather than states of being, “modes of thought” rather than any supposed es-

sence of thought, and contingent interactions rather than unchanging substances. It focuses, you might say, on adverbs instead of nouns. It is as concerned with the *way* that one says things, as it is with the ostensible content of what is being said. Even if the facts, or data, have not themselves changed, the manner in which we entertain those facts or data may well change. “In fact, there is not a sentence, or a word, with a meaning which is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered” (Imm 699). It all comes down to the *aim* of the living occasion in question, which Whitehead defines as the manner in which one particular “‘way of enjoyment’ is selected from the boundless wealth of alternatives” (MT 152). A mannerist philosophy has to do with the multiplicity and mutability of our ways of enjoyment, as these are manifested even in the course of what an essentialist thinker would regard as the “same” situation.

3. Opposed elements in mutual requirement

Whitehead concludes *Process and Reality* with a grand vision of “God and the World.” In the course of this, he works through “a group of antitheses,” expressing the “apparent self-contradictions” that characterize experience in its entirety (PR 348). These antitheses consist of “opposed elements” that nonetheless “stand to each other in mutual requirement” (348). Such is the case with God and the World themselves, as ultimate terms in Whitehead’s cosmology. But, it is also the case, on a smaller scale, with self-enjoyment and concern as I have been describing them. In such an antithesis, each of the terms would seem to exclude the other. And yet, Whitehead requires us to think them together, and, further, he requires us to think them without having recourse to the subterfuges of dialectical negation and sublation, on the one hand, and without abandoning them as unsurpassable aporias or blocks to thought, on the other.

How is it possible, then, to resolve such antinomies? (I use the word “antinomies” advisedly, in order to recall Kant’s Antinomies, which also have to be resolved without recourse to dialectical subterfuge). The answer comes from Whitehead’s understanding of process. God and the World, the two ultimate terms of each antithesis, must be maintained in a “unity” (PR 348), even as they “move conversely to each other in respect to their process” (349). This means that the relation between the conversely-moving processes will alter in terms of strength, or degrees of difference, from one moment to the next. In any concrete situation, the opposed processes may either “inhibit or contrast” one another to varying degrees (348). Whitehead, therefore, asks an evaluative question: are we faced with a situation of “diversities in opposition,” producing inhibition or of “diversities in contrast” forming an affectively compelling pattern (348)? The resolution of the antithesis comes about when the latter alternative is chosen or, better, when, through a creative act,

the former is transformed into the latter. This is accomplished—not theoretically but practically—through “a shift of meaning which converts the opposition into a contrast” (348).

The injunction to convert oppositions into contrasts is a leitmotif of Isabelle Stengers’s great reading of Whitehead (2002). I would like to extend Stengers’s argument by suggesting that this injunction is the founding impulse behind Whitehead’s later writings. *Adventures of Ideas, Modes of Thought*, and “Immortality” begin precisely at the point where *Process and Reality* ends: with the conversion of seemingly intractable conceptual oppositions into what *Adventures* describes as an aesthetic design of “patterned contrasts” (AI 252). In *Adventures*, after recapitulating, with subtle modifications, the argument of *Process and Reality* (Part III, “Philosophical”), Whitehead goes on to an entirely new discussion of the complex relationship between Truth and Beauty (Part IV, “Civilization”). Aesthetic questions only hinted at in the earlier work now become a central speculative focus. Whitehead states that “Beauty is a wider, and more fundamental, notion than Truth” (AI 265). He asserts that “Beauty is . . . the one aim which by its very nature is self-justifying” (266), so that “any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence” (265). With regard to humanity in general, he proposes that “consciousness itself is the product of art” and that “the human body is an instrument for the production of art in the life of the human soul” (271). And, most outrageously and hyperbolically of all, Whitehead insists that “the teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (265).

Such assertions pose a challenge to our twenty-first-century sensibilities. In our current condition of late (or post-) modernity, we tend to be deeply suspicious of the claims of aesthetics. We are still frightened by the specter of what Walter Benjamin, writing at the very same time that Whitehead was completing *Modes of Thought*, denounced as the fascist “aestheticizing of politics” (Benjamin 2003, 270). Today, even if we do not reject aesthetics altogether, we do not assign a teleology to it. We tend, at best, to subordinate aesthetics to ethics and to politics. And, even within the aesthetic realm, we value the sublime over the beautiful. What are we to make, then, of the rampant and unapologetic aestheticism of the late Whitehead? I think that this question can only be answered by working through Whitehead’s own specific accounts of the aesthetics of “patterned contrasts.” The polarity between self-enjoyment and concern in *Modes of Thought* is, quite precisely, such a patterned contrast: which is to say that it is beautiful, and productive of beauty. But what does it mean to read the economy of self-enjoyment and concern aesthetically, rather than ethically?

4. A comparison to Levinas

I can best approach this question by comparing Whitehead with Emmanuel Levinas, whose thought has been so crucial for the “ethical turn” in recent humanistic studies. Levinas’ first major work *Totality and Infinity* precedes its discussion of ethics with an extended analysis of enjoyment, or of what Levinas calls “living from . . .” (Levinas 1969, 110-114). Levinas equates enjoyment with a primordial sensibility, and with an openness to the world. He describes it as a process of *nourishment*: “the transmutation of the other into the same . . . an energy that is other . . . becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (111). Through this movement, “enjoyment is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution” (118). Despite the vast differences in vocabulary and rhetoric, this analysis has much in common with Whitehead’s description of self-enjoyment arising out of a process of appropriation. Both Whitehead and Levinas insist that our experience is in the first instance physical, corporeal, and embodied. They both say that, while nourishment initially comes from elsewhere, its consumption is entirely immanent and self-directed. In Levinas’ words, “The act nourishes itself with its own activity” (Levinas 1969, 111). In Whitehead’s words, “what was received as alien, has been recreated as private” (PR 213). Whitehead and Levinas both emphasize the *satisfaction* that comes with the sheer fact of being alive. “Life loved is the very enjoyment of life, contentment The primordial positivity of enjoyment, perfectly innocent, is opposed to nothing, and in this sense suffices to itself from the first” (Levinas 1969, 145). Whitehead and Levinas both find, in this experience of sufficiency and satisfaction, a pre-cognitive, pre-reflexive mode of subjectivity: an “I” that does not take the form of the Cartesian *cogito*.

But, everything changes when Levinas moves on to his great subject: the encounter with radical exteriority, with the Other, or with the Face. The appearance of the Other “introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term” (Levinas 1969, 193). The face of the Other, confronting me, “puts the I in question” (195), for it absolutely “resists possession, resists my grasp” (197). It is an otherness that I cannot take as innocent nourishment. I cannot transmute it into more of myself, more of the same, for “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge” (198). The encounter with the Other makes an ethical demand upon me, one that marks me even if I refuse it. This encounter is a kind of primordial trauma; it suspends and overwhelms the innocence of “living from . . .,” the economy of sensibility, enjoyment, and satisfaction. The naive self-presence of primordial sensibility is dissolved and replaced with a new sort of subjectivity that is always already in default and obligated to an “idea of infinity” that “exceeds my powers” (196).

The call of the Other in Levinas' philosophy is its own authority. Once I have heard this call, I cannot escape it or ignore it. No matter how I respond to it, I still remain under its sway. Even if I reject the call of the Other, by that very act I am still acknowledging it in a backhanded sort of way. The ethical dimension of the call pulls me beyond mere satisfaction, beyond any logic of decision and self-enjoyment. For Levinas, ethics precedes ontology, and it absolutely overrides aesthetics. I am always already responsible to, and always already guilty before, the Other—even when I deny, or have no cognizance of, being in such state. There is no counterpart or equivalent in Whitehead's thought for a movement that is so overwhelming and so unidirectional. For Levinas, something like "concern in the Quaker sense" is irreducible. I cannot shake it off. It unequivocally trumps self-enjoyment. The imperious demands of ethical transcendence interrupt, exceed, and cancel the simple pleasures of aesthetic immanence. For Levinas, the passage from enjoyment to concern and responsibility is an irreversible one. It cannot be described or aestheticized, as Whitehead would wish to do, as a patterned contrast.

Is it possible to resist such a movement of transcendence? What is at stake here is not refutation and argument, but a basic *orientation* of thought. Everything in Whitehead cries out against the unilateral thrust of Levinas' vision. Levinas conceives a single grand transition: something that does not happen in time, so much as it determines and instantiates a new sort of time. The apotheosis of the Other ruptures linear, homogeneous clockwork time, and installs instead an "infinite" or "messianic" time: a "discontinuous" time of "death and resurrection" (Levinas 1969, 284-285). For Levinas, in striking contrast to Bergson, "there is no continuity in being" (284). Continuity is false because the appearance of the face ruptures it once and for all. This epiphany points to a radical anteriority: an instance that precedes and that can never be contained within the extended present time of lived duration.

Now, Whitehead also rejects Bergsonian continuity, but he does so in a very different manner and for very different reasons. "There is a becoming of continuity," he writes, "but no continuity of becoming" (PR 35). That is to say, continuity is never given in advance. "The ultimate metaphysical truth is atomism," but out of the basic atomic constituents of reality "there is a creation of continuity" (35). Both continuity in space, which Whitehead calls the *extensive continuum* (61-82), and continuity in time (Bergsonian duration) must actively be *constructed*, in the course of the "creative activity belonging to the essence of each occasion" (MT 151). In other words, continuity is approximated through a series of discrete, punctual "becomings" and "transitions." Transition is the very basis of continuity meaning that the experience of transformation is not unique but common. Concern is not the result of some sublime epiphany; rather, it is an everyday experience. For Whitehead, even death and resurrection are commonplace occurrences. Everything is subject to a rule of "perpetual perishing": "no thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice" (PR 29). If this is so, then there

can be no single, specially privileged moment of transition, and no radical alterity such as Levinas demands. Time is irreversible and irreparable, but there is no traumatic moment in which my sensibility would be breached and my primordial enjoyment definitively interrupted.

Whitehead, therefore, rejects any grand narrative of a passage from self-enjoyment to concern or from the aesthetic to the ethical. Just as every actual occasion has both a physical pole and a mental (or conceptual) pole, so too every actual occasion evinces both self-enjoyment and concern. Indeed, this is precisely why these terms form a patterned aesthetic contrast and not an irreducible ethical opposition. Whitehead refuses to choose between concern and self-enjoyment, just as he refuses to “pick and choose” between “the red glow of the sunset” and “the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon” (CN 29). If Whitehead is on the side of aesthetics as opposed to ethics and on the side of immanence as opposed to transcendence, this is not because he would reject either ethics or transcendence. Rather, he finds an immanent place for transcendence and an aesthetic place for ethics. He insists that every occasion is already, by its very nature, a “conjunction of transcendence and immanence” (MT 167). Indeed, “every actual entity, in virtue of its novelty, transcends its universe, God included” (PR 94). But, this transcendence is just the other side of an immanent, actual fact. An object is transcendent as a process of decision or “as a capacity for determination,” but it is immanent as an already realized fact or “as a realized determinant” of other objects (239).

Similarly, Whitehead gives an aestheticized account of ethics. He never provides a Kantian, categorical basis for moral duty, nor does he ever mount a Nietzschean attack upon conventional morality. Instead, he insists that fact and value cannot be cleanly separated. They are always intimately entwined since value is intrinsic to existence: “everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole” (MT 111). Revaluation is a basic feature of experience, since every actual occasion involves a new “valuation up” or “valuation down” of previously given elements (PR 241). But this revaluation also implies a continuing obligation: “we have no right to deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe” (MT 111). Even amidst a Nietzschean “revaluation of all values,” there cannot be, and there should not be, any “overcoming” of concern. In this sense, there is always something of an ethical relation to others. Self-determination never occurs in a vacuum.

But, if concern is inherent to every actual occasion, it is not preeminent in the way that Levinas demands. For concern still hinges upon an “autonomous valuation” (PR 248), which is the occasion’s own ungrounded, aesthetic judgment regarding the *importance* of what it encounters. Whitehead insists upon “the concept of actuality as something that matters, by reason of its own self-enjoyment, which includes enjoyment of others and transitions towards the future” (MT 118). In this formulation, attention to others is itself a kind of enjoyment, and it is included within, rather than opposed to, an overall self-

enjoyment. In this way, valuation is not the response to an inexorable demand made by the Other. It is, rather, a “sense of importance” (118) arising from an autonomous, self-generated *decision* about what matters. For “the phrase ‘intrinsic importance’ means ‘importance for itself’” (118). Thus “each unit exists in its own right. It upholds value intensity for itself” first of all—although this also “involves sharing value intensity with the universe” (111).

5. Conclusion

For Levinas, responsibility produces value. For Whitehead, it is the process of valuation that first generates any sense of responsibility. For Levinas, ethics suspends spontaneous action: when I am confronted with the face of the Other, all I can do is *respond* to its call. For Whitehead, to the contrary, ethics can only be the result of a spontaneous aesthetic *decision*. Ethics is not the ground or basis of value. Rather, it is only out of the actual process of valuation or of determining importance that “the conception of morals arises” in the first place (MT 111). This process is performed without guarantees, and without subordination by every actual occasion. Whitehead beautifully says that “the basis of democracy is the common fact of value experience” (111). Such a “common fact” itself comes first. It cannot be derived from, or subordinated to, an encounter with the Other.

From a Whiteheadian point of view, Levinas’ subordination of immanence to transcendence and of self-enjoyment to concern is one-sided and reductive—just as a philosophy of pure immanence and positivity would also be one-sided and reductive. Levinas’ claim for the priority of ethics is one more example of the “overstatement” that Whitehead sees as the “chief error” of so much Western philosophy: “the aim at generalization is sound, but the estimate of success is exaggerated” (PR 7). Concern is important, but it cannot be separated from self-enjoyment, much less elevated above it. Whitehead insists that “at the base of our existence is the sense of ‘worth’...the sense of existence for its own sake, of existence which is its own justification, of existence with its own character” (MT 109). This means that valuation is singular, self-affirming, and aesthetic, first of all. Aesthetics cannot be superseded by ethics. “The essence of power is the drive towards aesthetic worth for its own sake. All power is a derivative from this fact of composition attaining worth for itself. There is no other fact” (119).