

For the World, Not of the World

Isabelle Stengers. *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*.

Translated by Michael Chase. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 531.

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The work of Alfred North Whitehead has been undergoing something of a resurgence over the last decade, and Isabelle Stengers' *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* has played a not inconsiderable role in bringing his work into wider circulation. Originally written as *Penser avec Whitehead: Une libre et sauvage création de concepts* in 2002, this 2011 English translation makes Stengers' account of Whitehead available for an even wider readership. In the process of this renewed engagement with Whitehead, the at-times latent or implicit presence of his thought in the work of writers of the history and philosophy of science, as well as science and technology studies, has also become more apparent, thereby making for a doubly compelling reason to revisit the importance and influence of his work.

Stengers' motivation in thinking with Whitehead is in part to go beyond standard philosophical designations such as nature and mind that bifurcate our thinking into stagnant abstractions. The revision of our modes of abstraction--Whitehead's core pursuit--is then taken up by Stengers in order to consider how to develop more vivid

abstractions. In undertaking this trajectory she moves through Whitehead's central philosophical (rather than earlier mathematical) texts, including *Concept of Nature* through to *Process and Reality* and *Modes of Thought*. While on the one hand this approach could be seen as a genealogical tracing from early work to more developed later work, this is far from a linear account of Whitehead's work, since there is always an anticipatory way in which the move beyond the bifurcation of nature in *Concept of Nature*, for instance, will turn up again as a transformed approach to perceptive experience in *Process and Reality*. Concepts are at once anticipatory and revisited, addressing questions that may have been left open or not realized until later work made them apparent. And as we find out when it comes to reading Whitehead (as well as Stengers), the circling round of ideas means it may also be helpful to navigate these texts with an index,¹ since ideas are not staked out in advance and demonstrated in a clear progression, but rather are worked through and transformed through the very process of writing about them. These are both authors in the process of becoming with ideas.

For Whitehead and Stengers, revisiting speculation--and metaphysics--is a way to develop ideas that had been banished from modern philosophy, and to attempt to take a leap from "the solid ground of our self-evidence"² in order to account for "every element of our experience."³ In moving beyond an approach to philosophy that might judge, denounce or criticize on the basis of an assumed solid ground, Stengers *qua* Whitehead considers the contours of a philosophical project that might open up and transform ideas, and so shift away from a modern project of closing down in order to

¹ Stengers, Isabelle, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011), 241

² *Ibid.*, 233.

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1929), 3.

make pronouncements of knowledge, fact, truth and the other usual suspects of logical thought that Stengers seeks to rethink. There are many critical aspects of Whitehead's work that Stengers works through in order to advance this approach to speculative philosophy--many more than could be addressed here. But among the central concepts is the notion of revising subjects and objects--or in other words, inverting Kant--so that "subjective data" is not a process of translating into "the appearance of the objective world"; but rather through Whitehead's notion of the "philosophy of the organism," an account might be developed that addresses "how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction." Rather than abandoning subject and object, these terms are reversed, and the subject becomes a "superject," emerging from the world, and constituted through feeling. An object, by extension, is a "component in feeling."⁴

Within this trajectory of speculative philosophy, subjects and objects as well as experience, perception and empiricism are recast to describe not fixed categories or entities that may individually interact, but rather potentialities and actualities that are in process, undergoing realization, and differently inherited. Kant, as well as Hume and Descartes are reworked, so that bodies, for instance, are seen not to belong to fixed subjects, but rather selves proceed as actual entities in the making "from my possession of the world."⁵ The prehension of actual entities is then a way of articulating ways of being "for a world," and not "of a world."⁶ So too might categories constitute a world, rather than "a reality independent of the process that produces this proposition." Lest readers see this as a simple rehashing of old versions of constructivism, however, a reality is articulated instead through "the proposition

⁴ Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead*, 296; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 88.

⁵ Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead*, 301; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 81.

⁶ Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead*, 213.

and its effect.”⁷ Here, ways of being for worlds become apparent as having direct relevance for research engaged with history and philosophy of science or science and technology studies that might deal with the “fact” of an electron, or the modes of capture performed through measurement. But also, the relevance of speculative philosophy is underscored in the ways in which it enables encounters with the transformation and making of experience, rather than a project searching after fixed definitions or *a priori* truths--or their deconstruction.

An important and persistent part of Stengers’ thinking with Whitehead is working through Whitehead’s concept of God, which is the spinning axis of his metaphysical system. Stengers notes that God is a figure within Whitehead’s work that causes many readers to turn away or dismiss him, so she is especially careful to draw out what is actually provocative and productive about this unusual God. She notes that Whitehead was distinctly opposed to a monotheistic or dogmatic God that provided ultimate justification for judgments, and that he saw this approach to religion as the diminishment of understanding capacities of divine functioning.⁸ God is not the “supreme author of the play,” but rather is a principle of limitation and concretion that attests to intensification and solidarity. This is what makes a speculative adventure “cosmological,” rather than a “free-for-all.”⁹ The “function” of God is then to affirm the ways in which entities are “‘for the world’ as the conditions and creature of creativity.”¹⁰ It is within this endurance of worlds, as well as potential for creative advance, that the project of speculative philosophy unfolds.

⁷ Ibid., 252.

⁸ Ibid., 225.

⁹ Ibid., 374.

¹⁰ Ibid., 486.

In this way, Stengers draws out the contribution that Whitehead's speculative philosophy makes not just to overcoming the bifurcation of mind and nature, but also by mobilizing the speculative project as an adventure of ideas. Speculation may not provide a normative script against which criticism, judgment, or an appeal to logical empirical fact can make their claims, but it instead asks the critical question of what is required in order to have a foothold in any particular way, or in other words: "*from what wager does your success proceed?*"¹¹ These are "polite questions that one creature may address to another creature"¹¹ that do not make the point of tearing down ideas and accomplishments in order to query them, but instead ask what has been committed to make these adherences hold, what might the consequences of these commitments be, and what other capabilities remain as-of-yet unexplored?

Although not discussed explicitly for the first 514 pages of her text, Stengers develops a notion of ethics within her final concluding discussion of Whitehead to consider "what designates the field of speculative ambition." Ethics here is distinct from usual approaches to morality and instead gains traction through its connection to ethos-- where Whiteheadian habits, aesthetics and presence describe an approach to ethics that take into account how "a social identity" might "accept, or does not accept, the test constituted by the encounter with other, divergent identities."¹² Rather than ethics in search of awakening, this is an ethics constituted through infection, or through a persuasion that might transform the dreams and ideas of others.¹³ And while ethics appears in a rather cursory way at the end of this study, its implicit pairing with ethos is present in multiple discussions, not least of which is in relation to etho-ecology and the ways in which organisms take their environments into account. The endurance of

¹¹ Ibid., 518.

¹² Ibid., 515.

¹³ Ibid., 516-517.

an organism in an environment has less to do with the conquering of its habitat, and more to do with the “patience” of the environment that enables an organism to endure in this particular way. Patience, as it turns out, may shift to impatience, and an impatient environment is one that may no longer ensure the endurance of particular organisms. This is another way of recasting what might be seen as environmental ethics, while also describing how values and attainments take hold, endure and transform, not simply as the exertion of an agent of free will acting on its environment, or even as an environment deterministically encoding what inhabitations are possible, but rather as the realization of modes of togetherness that may perish.

In taking up the revisions that Whitehead’s work poses, Stengers does much more than sketch out a history of ideas or summary of concepts, but instead undertakes a distinct approach of *thinking with* Whitehead. This is a strategy that involves a thinker thinking through what another has thought, while also *being thought* through the (re)construction of these ideas, which have consequences and that work back on the writer-reader. Stengers has then sought out and created a circumstance in which to be rethought, or to become a “gear” within a Whiteheadian philosophical system.¹⁴ This approach is more than a passing literary style, moreover, since how a writer-reader might take up and so transform ideas is at the core of how Stengers understands Whitehead’s project of speculative philosophy. By reading texts, philosophers transform them, mutate and make something new from them. This is an example of an adventure, a “free and wild creation of concepts” that demonstrates what *thinking with* entails. Stengers’ engagement with Whitehead’s ideas works through speculative philosophy while moving across physics, biology, religion, art, academic knowledge

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

politics and ecological inhabitations. In these encounters, she revisits the formulation of problems to consider how these might be issues not of what we know, but of how the process of encountering problems puts worlds in motion. The relevance of recasting our modes of abstraction then becomes apparent in multiple registers, since as Whitehead has noted, “As we think, we live.”¹⁵

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¹⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, (New York: The Free Press, 1966 [1938]), 63