

## **There is no meaning to “creativity” apart from its “creatures”**

Whitehead, *Process and Reality*: 225

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### **Defining Creativity:**

My aim today is to outline Whitehead’s notion of “creativity” and the role that it plays within his philosophy. I hope that this might offer some counterweight to the unthinkingly adulatory meaning that it is often assumed to have. Typing the term “creativity” into *The Guardian* newspaper’s website yields over 12,000 results. On one day these can range from statements relating to “cinematic freedom and creativity”, “a creativity-driven educational model” and “Britain as a potential powerhouse of creativity” (all these come from the edition from February 28<sup>th</sup> 2013). My simple question is, given the wide range of fields within which this term is now used, do we really know what we are talking about when we invoke the notion of creativity? The animus for this question comes from what is perhaps the most surprising element of Whitehead’s deployment of the word “creativity”, namely that he coined this very term. This bears repeating. Prior to his use of the word “creativity” in *Religion in the Making* in 1926 (Whitehead, 1927 [1926]: 77), this word was not extant in the English language. “Creativity” is a term of Whitehead’s own devising. In 1925, in *Science and the Modern World* (Whitehead, 1932 [1925] ), and a year or so before his first use of “creativity”, he instead used the term ‘*creativity*’ (Whitehead, 1932 [1925]: 140. Emphasis in original). But it is only really in 1929 in *Process and Reality* (Whitehead, 1978 [1929] hereafter *PR*) that he fully adopts the term “creativity” as best expressing the mode,

character and ubiquity of the role of novelty within existence. And it is this notion of novelty which is key.

'Creativity' is the principle of novelty. An actual occasion is a novel entity diverse from any entity in the 'many' which it unifies. Thus 'creativity' introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The 'creative advance' is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates. PR 21

Rather than engage fully with the substance of this quotation, I want to emphasize the importance of the term "novelty" here. One of Whitehead's abiding concerns was to develop a scheme of thought which would be able to encompass and account for new things, ideas, entities and processes being generated within existence. His background in mathematics and mathematical physics made him acutely aware that Western science and philosophy lacked the requisite conceptual tools to accurately describe the processes implicit in concepts such as those of evolution, energy, and the 'wave-theory of matter' (Whitehead, 1933: 200)

To his mind, modern science and philosophy were still wedded to and based upon stubborn conceptions of objects and subjects. They found it hard, if not impossible, to allow for new things, for novelty. As a result, discussions of process and novelty amounted to little more than wishful additions to a rigid conceptual framework. They lacked rigour and applicability. 'The result is to reduce modern physics to a sort of mystic chant over an unintelligible universe' (Whitehead, 1938: 185). Whitehead, therefore, set himself the daunting task of elaborating a scheme which could genuinely describe how new things come to be. This is the role he assigns to creativity.

So, to start with I am going to look at what Whitehead meant by this term. As is often the case, Whitehead does not offer an explicit definition of his technical terms. It is only

late on in *Process and Reality* that he comments on the etymology of the word when he states:

'In the abstract language here adopted for metaphysical statement, 'passing on' becomes "creativity," in the dictionary sense of the verb *creare*, "to bring forth, beget, produce"' (PR 213).

I must admit that I was not aware of the verb "*creare*" in English, but I think the sense is clear. Creativity is to do with something being produced, brought forth, moving on. There is no celebration here. It is, for Whitehead, a fundamental characteristic of existence that it is not static; that objects are not fixed, that subjects are not given once and for all. So he needs to account for this lack of stasis; one important strand in this argument is the concept of creativity.

The word "creativity" is a noun and, as such, should seem to refer to some kind of a thing, even if it is an abstract thing. What kind of thing? We are comfortable with the use of other abstract nouns such as "hope", "despair" or "fear". Is creativity simply another abstract noun? I would, tentatively, say "no" – and for two reasons.

The first is that most, if not all abstract nouns, seem to refer to qualities, characteristics, or things, which are ultimately derived from human experience: joy, peace, childhood, for example. Whitehead clearly does not want to premise creativity on human experience; it is, for him, fundamental to all existence. This is one of the first mistakes that seems to have been made in the adoption and promulgation of Whitehead's term. It has been **reduced** in scope and made a characteristic of human endeavour. There might be some who would be willing to grant creativity to some other species, chimpanzees, dolphins, crows, but this version of creativity would be derived from an under-theorised human model of creativity.

**(An aside – Would it make sense if someone talked of the "creativity of nature"?)**

However, this point is not a strictly philosophical one even if it does give a first indication of my argument that I am not sure we know what we are talking about when we use the term “creativity”.

The second point that I want to make is more philosophical and will focus on certain sections of *Process and Reality*. The second chapter of this work is titled ‘The Categorical Scheme’ and in it Whitehead sets out the Categories that he will elaborate throughout the rest of the text. Deleuze once commented on this section as follows: ‘I only remember being rocked by the great surge of bizarre categories at the beginning of *Process and Reality*....What a book!’ (Deleuze, from a letter cited by Villani 1996, 245. My translation). I think that we too should be rocked, surprised, shocked, by the strangeness of these categories and the role of creativity.

The first of these categories is called ‘The Category of the Ultimate’. And it is within this Category of the Ultimate that creativity finds its place. In fact, so ultimate is creativity that it cannot be fully identified:

‘Creativity is without a character of its own...It is that ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality. It cannot be characterized, because all characters are more special than itself.’ (PR 31)

Or, to put it another way, there are only instances of creativity, rather than creativity in itself. Creativity is not an ethereal resource which can simply be tapped in to by gifted humans. It is not an infinite realm of inspiration. Whitehead goes on: ‘creativity is always found under conditions, and described as conditioned’ (PR 31). I will, hopefully return to this point later on. For the moment, some might be thinking that Whitehead has introduced his notion of creativity by some kind of philosophical sleight of hand. And he has not justified his argument. That is, perhaps, because he is making a slightly different argument to the one that we were expecting:

'In all philosophic theory there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents...In the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed 'creativity' (PR 7)

This seems to be an example of one of the moments when Whitehead resorts to the terminology of medieval scholastic philosophy; when he talks of an "ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents". An accident is distinct from an essence. Accidents are variable qualities as opposed to the fixed qualities which comprise an essence. For example, if we were to agree that a stone had an essence, then whether it were grey or white, or hot or cold would be its accidents (its accidental qualities). What is interest in this, for Whitehead and for us, is that he describes creativity as actual in virtue of its accidents. That is, it only exists in the manifestations of creativity in the world; it does not have an existence separate from this. Whitehead differentiates this position from that of other monist philosophies such as Spinoza and absolute idealism (probably Hegel, though Whitehead never read him). Whitehead claims that in 'such monistic schemes, the ultimate is illegitimately allowed a final, "eminent", reality, beyond that ascribed to any of its accidents' (PR 7). Whitehead, is against making such unwarranted ("illegitimate") claims which posit an ultimate substance or entity which is beyond, before or beneath reality in order to shore up their philosophical system. But this means that Whitehead cannot grant any such reality to creativity, and yet he still wants it to be ultimate. What does this mean?

How can he accomplish this?

Whitehead responds by suggesting that, maybe, we are asking the wrong kind of questions:

'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."' (PR 20)

We should not ask “how can we be creative?” or “how do we maximize creativity?” or “how can we tap into creativity?” Creativity, according to Whitehead *is* a universal, in his very specific sense of the word, but this is not to imply that facts, things or people can be placed within or draw upon creativity. Rather, it is the other way around. We need to explain how the abstract emerges from the concrete. This is the core of Whitehead’s philosophy. Obviously, Whitehead is using the terms abstract and concrete here in a very specific way. Although I do not have time to go into these fully – it might be worth remembering that Whitehead is always at pains to account for both the process and the reality. He also wants to account for both becoming and being (in the sense of hard material things about us).

*‘how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is... Its “being” is constituted by its “becoming”. This is the “principle of process”* (PR, 23. Emphasis in original).

That is to say –there has been a tendency in modern western thought to consider matter and emotion, fact and value, quality and quantity to be separate, opposed even. Whitehead considers this separation to be incoherent and unwarranted (he refers to it as the Bifurcation of Nature) – and this incoherence is manifest throughout a vast array of disciplines, from physics’ inability to conceive light as at once a waveform and also as made of particles (photons) to some sociologists refusal to consider the body as a really material thing.

This incoherence arose from an unfortunate and botched welding of specific scientific and philosophical positions of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, there have been a number of bodes (Kant, for example) which have attempted to stop the philosophical leaks. But, Whitehead argues, we cannot make things right by continuing to work on the same problem. We need to accept the error and where it puts us but try to avoid it. To put it simply, we do not have to put fact and value, matter and emotion, quality and quantity back together again, as they were never separate.

Thinking the manner and matter of existence together is one of the most important demands that Whitehead makes of us. A hot stone and a cold stone are not different because there is some secret core of an implacable stone lying in wait to sometimes take on the quality of being hot, sometimes that of being cold, whilst somehow, mysteriously, remaining the same underneath. Instead, the mutual feeling of hotness by the component parts that make up that society which we call “this hot stone” are in contrast to the mutual feeling of coldness by the component parts of another society which we call “this cold stone”. To put it another way, one stone feels itself hotly and the other feels itself coldly.

As Whitehead puts it: ‘Each fact is more than its forms, and each form “participates” throughout the world of facts’ (PR 20).

### **Conclusion**

And now, finally, I can get to the title of my piece –

For, as I said before, facts are not simple inert “things”, for Whitehead. They are closely entwined with creativity. In fact, they are all that we can witness of creativity. It is, perhaps, time to recall that Whitehead coined the term “Creativity” and that this will imply that that which enacts creativity will have a specific name and role. And indeed they do – they are Whitehead’s “creatures”:

‘the individual fact is a creature, and creativity is the ultimate behind all forms, inexplicable by forms, and conditioned by its creatures.’ (PR 20)

And:

‘ [the] function of creatures, [is] that they constitute the shifting character of creativity’ (PR 32)

Creatures condition creativity. Yet creativity is also “the ultimate behind all forms”. It now seems even more distant from us than it might have at the start. But, again, it must be stressed that creativity does not have its own realm or reality or substance. I

could be bold and say that it does not exist. It is an ultimate but an ultimate which only exists in specific instances in the creatures. However, creativity is not reducible to, or exhausted by, these creatures - even though they condition it.

This might give the impression that creativity occupies the role of a supplementary category which either subtends or rises above actual instances of existence. However, Whitehead avoids this reading by making a distinction between absolute and real potentiality:

Thus we have always to consider two meanings of potentiality: (a) the "general" potentiality, which is the bundle of possibilities, mutually consistent or alternative...and (b) the "real" potentiality, which is conditioned by the data provided by the actual world. (PR, 65)

"General" potentiality functions as an abstract condition which provides a metaphysical positioning and consistency to Whitehead's argument. "Real" potentiality refers to Whitehead's insistence that creativity is only to be found through and in those occasions of becoming which populate the world. This distinction between "general" and "real" potentiality is an incisive one which has important consequences for the relevance of Whitehead to social theory. If his thought were a mere celebration of the abstract notion of general potentiality as indicative of a universe comprised of infinite becomings, thereby suggesting that only the flux and flow of existence comprise the reality of existence, then his work might offer no more than another rendition of the worst excesses of post-modernist theory. The insistence on the importance of "real" potentiality helps Whitehead to escape such a charge. Real potentiality describes the limited expressions of potentiality which inhere in the world at a given time. As Marx puts it, people 'Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1977, 300). Real potentiality accounts for both the facticity of the historical and, hence, the contemporary world, but it gives no extra-mural or covering explanation as to why this world rather than another has arisen. Moreover, real potentiality indicates that such a



world, and the people within it, is not, and are not, inert or passive objects. But creativity is not, for Whitehead, some kind of free-floating spirit or energy to be tapped into by blessed or gifted individuals. Whitehead insists that creativity is in no way to be limited to human activity or consciousness and that a wider understanding of creativity, based on the relativity of the potential and the actual, must be recognized.

You could refuse to do this and choose instead, as have most philosophers and indeed scientists, to conceive of self-identical objects and subjects as comprising the basic elements of reality. 'The universe is...a creative advance into novelty. The alternative to this doctrine is a static morphological universe' (PR 222). Or you can follow Whitehead when he says:

'We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only introduce us to solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience' (PR 50)

Science, philosophy and sociology seem to be presented with continual new things but unable to account for them. Whitehead argues that change, novelty and process are integral both to existence and to our experience of existence. Therefore we need a philosophy to account for this.

As has been seen, Whitehead needed a host of technical terms and conceptual interruptions in order to develop his philosophy where the process *is* the reality. The concept of creativity plays a crucial role in this. In fact, this *is* the role of the concept of creativity; it enable us to think novelty. So, it is crucial that we do not forget just how **unorthodox** creativity is. We should certainly not think of it as the property or progeny of humans. We may exemplify moments of creativity insofar as we are creatures but this does not make creativity or all acts of creation good.

'A new actuality may appear in the wrong society, amid which its claims to efficacy act mainly as inhibitions. Then a weary task is set for the creative function, by an epoch of new creations to remove the inhibition. Insistence

on birth at the wrong season is the trick of evil. In other words, the novel fact may throw back, inhibit, delay.' (PR, 223)

In this passage, Whitehead clarifies that the "creative function" is implicit in all productions of novelty. More importantly, he points out that novelty in and of itself is not a "good thing". The irruption of a novel entity at a particular place at a particular time might not always be a case for celebration. The medical term "neoplasm" which literally means "new formation/creation" is, perhaps, indicative of this point. Malignant neoplasms are what constitute cancer.

We live in a world of real potentiality. New things appear and pass; we might deem some of them good and some of them bad, yet they are all moments of novelty. Whitehead, in order to be able to account for such novelty, invented and invoked the concept of creativity which is, and must be, a **neutral term**. The concept of creativity is indicative of general (not real) potentiality; it is not something we ever directly encounter. It cares not what is produced, it cannot be said to always or immediately be good, but it does enable us to think of production, of novelty.

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