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On Aesthetic Experience in Philosophical Works of Alfred North Whitehead

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1. Whitehead and Aesthetics

If we study philosophical books by Alfred North Whitehead, we can divide them into two main groups. The first group includes the books in which he developed his concept of philosophy of natural sciences. The second group consists of books on metaphysics.¹ We would not find any books or even articles directly devoted to aesthetics. Does that mean that aesthetic issues were outside of Whitehead's interest?

We could say that aesthetic matters were excluded from the first group of books. In *Concept of Nature* he distinguishes two ways of thinking about nature, homogeneous thinking about nature and heterogeneous thinking about nature. He writes:

“We are thinking ‘homogeneously’ about nature when we are thinking about it without thinking about thought or about sense-awareness, and we are thinking ‘heterogeneously’ about nature when we are thinking about it in conjunction with thinking either about thought or about sense-awareness or about both.

I also take the homogeneity of thought about nature as excluding any relevance to moral and aesthetic values whose apprehension is vivid in proportion to self-conscious activity. The values of nature are perhaps the key to the metaphysical synthesis of existence. But such a synthesis is exactly what I am not attempting. I am concerned exclusively with the generalisations of widest scope which can be effected respecting that which is known to us as direct deliverance of sense-awareness”²

This fragment indicates two important consequences. Firstly, Whitehead excludes self-reflective activity and therefore the whole field of values from his considerations on the principles of natural sciences. He delimits his philosophy of nature in the framework of homogenous thinking about nature.³ Secondly, Whitehead expresses here the conviction that “the values of nature are the key to the metaphysical synthesis of existence”. At this place, he adumbrates that his metaphysical doctrine would be closely allied to considerations of aesthetic problems.

2. Contrast under Identity

The aim of his metaphysical writings is “to frame a coherent logical system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted”⁴. In S. C. Pepper's words we could say, that Whitehead is developing here a hypothesis of unlimited scope. There should not be any item of experience that is not interpretable by this hypothesis.

At the heart of Whitehead's metaphysics lies his concept of actual occasion — or equivalently an epochal occasion, actual entity or creature. This actual occasion is nothing static. It is a process of unifying other elements in the universe. In his early metaphysical book *Religion in the Making* Whitehead writes:

“An epochal occasion is a concretion. It is a mode in which diverse elements come together into real unity. Apart from that concretion, these elements stand in isolation. Thus an actual entity is the outcome of creative synthesis, individual and passing.

The various elements which are thus brought into unity are the other creatures and ideal forms and God. These elements are not a mere unqualified aggregate. In such a case there could only be one creature. In the concretion the creatures are qualified by the ideal forms, and conversely the ideal forms are qualified by the creatures. Thus the epochal occasion, which is emergent, has in its own nature the other creatures under the aspect of these forms, and analogously it includes the forms under the aspect of these creatures. It is thus a definite limited creature, emergent in consequence of the limitations thus mutually imposed on each other by the elements.”⁵

The importance of this passage lies, in my opinion, in emphasizing that *actual occasion* is not a mere aggregation of previously finished actual occasions or of non-temporal entities. All *actual occasions* are qualifications of the past in direction to the future. According to Whitehead, there are no two identical *actual occasions* in the universe. An *actual occasion* therefore implies self-valuation. Each *actual occasion* thus contributes to the creative process of the universe and constitutes a new basis or *ground* for becoming of consequent actual entities. An actual occasion undergoes two types of processes. The first type is a *concretion* or *concrecence* as Whitehead calls it in the later works. This is the process of the self-creation of *actual occasion*. The aim of this process is a self-enactment of that *actual occasion*. In later works, this self-enactment is called *satisfaction*. The second type of the process is *transition*. This is a process from the already enacted, “satisfied” *actual occasion* to the incipience of a new *actual occasion*. In Whitehead's words:

“The creative process is thus to be discerned in that transition by which one occasion, already actual, enters into the birth of another of experienced value. There is not one simple line of transition from occasion to occasion, though there may be a dominant line. The whole world conspires to produce a new creation. It presents to the creative process its opportunities and limitations.

The limitations are the opportunities. The essence of depth of actuality — that is of vivid experience — is definiteness. Now to be definite always means that all the elements of a complex whole contribute to some *one* effect, to the exclusion of others. The creative process is a process of exclusion to the same extent as it is a process of inclusion. In this connection “to exclude” means to relegate to irrelevance in the aesthetic unity, and “to include” means to elicit relevance to that unity.”⁶

We can read here that the exclusion or inclusion of elements from the concrecence of the *actual occasion* in question is determined by the aesthetic unity of this occasion. What is then the condition for the exclusion or inclusion of diverse elements into aesthetic unity of becoming an actual occasion? One page later Whitehead formulates this fundamental principle:

“The birth of a new aesthetic experience depends on the maintenance of two principles by the creative purpose:

1. The novel consequent must be graded in relevance so as to preserve some identity of character with the ground.
2. The novel consequent must be graded in relevance so as to preserve some contrast with the ground in respect to that same identity of character. These two principles are

derived from the doctrine that an actual fact is a fact of aesthetic experience. All aesthetic experience is feeling arising out of the realization of contrast under identity. Thus the consequent must agree with the ground in general type so as to preserve definiteness, but it must contrast with it in respect to contrary instances so as to obtain vividness and quality. In the physical world, this principle of contrast under identity expresses itself in the physical law that vibration enters into the ultimate nature of atomic organisms. Vibration is the recurrence of contrast within identity of type. ”⁷

The concept of aesthetic experience as contrast under identity then lies at the very heart of Whitehead’s metaphysical system, in the concept of the birth and organizing of the actual occasion. It expresses the fundamental doctrine that each actual occasion inherits something from its predecessors and at the same time it introduces novelty. Each actual occasion is creating a new perspective of the universe. Aesthetic experience is thus an introduction of the new without losing of the identity with the past.

Nevertheless, this fundamental concept of aesthetic experience is extremely broad. It not only concerns each human experience, but it concern experience as such. Is there any clue in Whitehead’s writings for the construction of a narrower concept of human aesthetic experience, which we should divide from experience dominantly theoretical or practical? I think that the clue is in the way, how the given actual occasion includes and excludes the diverse elements.

3. Some Implications of Whitehead’s Concept of Beauty

In his later metaphysical book *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead devoted one whole chapter to consideration of the notion of beauty. Beauty is defined here as “the mutual adaptation of several factors in occasion of experience.”⁸ This adaptation presupposes an aim. According to Whitehead, this aim is twofold. In the first place, it is the absence of aesthetic destruction. In this case the *actual occasion*, prehends two or more discordant elements which actively inhibit each other. In the concrescence of this actual occasion, another feeling of mutual destructiveness thus emerges. According to Whitehead, this causes physical pain or mental evil such as sorrow, horror and dislike. This absence of aesthetic destruction is a minor form of beauty. In the second place, it is an attainment of such synthesis of various prehensions of various elements that they introduce new contrasts. Beauty is then defined as harmony of details in respect to the final synthesis. This is then a major form of beauty.

The connection with his fundamental aesthetic principle of contrast under identity is obvious here. The prolonged experience of intense aesthetic destruction such as intense physical pain, sorrow, horror or dislike would cause the failure of self-enactment, or satisfaction of that actual occasion and would therefore lead to the gradual loss of identity with the ground. The positive realisation of contrasts, on the contrary, heightens the mutual relevance of the components and so also heightens their relevance for the future.

If we stop at this place, we would only have a traditional doctrine of beauty as an ideal harmony in the clothes of process philosophy. But Whitehead is far from stopping here. He warns us:

“On further consideration we shall find that always there are imperfect occasions better than occasions which realize some given type of perfection. There are in fact higher and lower perfections, and an imperfection aiming at a higher type stands above lower perfection. The most material and most sensuous enjoyments are yet types of Beauty. Progress is founded upon experience of discordant feeling. The social value of liberty lies in its production of discords. There are perfections beyond perfections. Perfections of diverse types are among themselves discordant. Thus the contribution to Beauty which can be supplied by Discord

— in itself destructive and evil — is the possible quick shift of aim from the tameness of outworn perfection to some other ideal with its freshness still upon it. Thus the value of Discord is a tribute to the merits of Imperfection.”⁹

The narrower concept of aesthetic experience must be, in my opinion, sought just in developing new types of perfection. Based on the quoted passage, I would distinguish in such a process of aesthetic experience three consequent steps:

1. The feeling of disturbance, which precludes the utilisation of already enacted modes of perfection (a sort of temporary withdrawal from the ground).
2. Developing the new system of prehensions in order to relieve the disturbance (creating of the new contrasts).
3. An introduction of the new system of prehensions into the contrast with original ground (promotion of the new contrast under identity).

This narrower concept of aesthetic experience is therefore characterized by the aim which leads to promotion of new modes of organization of experience. At this time I will leave it only as a provisional suggestion open to further elaboration. At the very end of this address I would like to summarize. I Alfred North Whitehead did not write any books on aesthetics. His aesthetics is hidden in the very heart of his metaphysics. His metaphysics is rich in deep aesthetic considerations, luring us into further development.

¹ The first group includes the following major books: A. N. Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1919; A. N. Whitehead, *The concept of Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1920; A. N. Whitehead, *The Principle of Relativity with Application to Physical Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1922.

The second group includes the following major books: A. N. Whitehead, *Science and Modern World*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1925; A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1926; A. N. Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect*. Barbour-Page Lectures, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1927; A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. An Essay in Cosmology. Gifford Lectures, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1929; A. N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1929; A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1933 A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1938.

The first editions of all books are quoted here.

² A. N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 5.

³ It is interesting, that in some passages of the first group books Whitehead exceeded this frame of homogeneous thinking about nature. This is the case of those passages, where he is concerned with *percipient event*, *percipient object* and *rhythms*. These passages are, in my opinion, also aesthetically relevant. Cf. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1919, chapters, V, XVIII and A. N. Whitehead, *The concept of Nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964, chapters V and VII.

⁴ A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. An Essay in Cosmology. Gifford Lectures. *Corrected Edition*, New York, Free Press, 1978, p.3.

⁵ A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p.80-81.

⁶ A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 99 – 100.

⁷ A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 101 – 102. Underlined by M.K.

⁸ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1947, p.324.

⁹ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1947, p.330 - 331.