AESTHETICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

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Alfred North Whitehead published no book or article strictly on aesthetics. Nonetheless, in his philosophical writings he mentions several times that aesthetic experience is the key to his metaphysics. In fundamental places of his philosophical system, moreover, he uses expressions like 'aesthetic experience', 'aesthetic fact', 'aesthetic unity', and 'aesthetic order'. These expressions do not, however, refer to human conscious experience alone, but to all entities of the universe. That has led some scholars to the conviction that these terms are used in a purely technical sense and therefore do not refer to the sphere of aesthetics. The author of the current article seeks to demonstrate that these terms do refer to the sphere of aesthetics. The argument set out here consists in three steps. In the first, the author presents Whitehead's philosophical method of imaginative generalization. In the second step, the author presents the fundamental ontological unit (the actual occasion) of Whitehead's philosophy, and points out that Whitehead describes it using aesthetic terms that are employed in a broad sense. In the third step the author presents Whitehead's view of aesthetic understanding. At the end of the article, it is demonstrated that although Whitehead did not develop his analysis of aesthetic understanding into a consistent theory, it forms the background to all his metaphysical books.

Die Ästhetik in der Philosophie Alfred North Whiteheads
Alfred North Whitehead hat sich weder in einem Buch noch eigenen Aufsatz gesondert mit Ästhetik beschäftigt. Nichtsdestotrotz erwähnt er in seinen philosophischen Texten mehrmals, dass die ästhetische Erfahrung der Schlüssel zu seiner Metaphysik sei. An Stellen, die für sein philosophisches System grundlegend sind, verwendet er zudem Ausdrücke wie „ästhetische Erfahrung", „ästhetische Tatsache", „ästhetische Einheit" oder „ästhetische Ordnung". Sie verweisen nicht nur auf die bewusste menschliche Erfahrung, sondern auf alle Entitäten des Universums. Dadurch gelangten einige Forscher zur Überzeugung, dass die Verwendung der genannten Ausdrücke rein technisch ist und sie sich also nicht auf das Gebiet der Ästhetik beziehen. Der Autor dieser Studie versucht hingegen zu zeigen, dass diese Ausdrücke sehr wohl auf das Gebiet der Ästhetik Bezug haben. Die Argumentation ist dreigeteilt: Erstens wird Whiteheads Methode der imaginativen Generalisierung vorgestellt. Zweitens wird das grundlegende ontologische Element (das wirkliche Ereignis) von Whiteheads Philosophie vorgestellt und darauf aufmerksam gemacht, dass Whitehead bei seiner Beschreibung ästhetische Begriffe in ihrer weiten Bedeutung verwendet. Drittens wird Whiteheads Auffassung des ästhetischen Verstehens vorgestellt. Schließlich wird gezeigt, dass die Analyse des ästhetischen Verstehens, obwohl Whitehead sie zu keiner konsistenten Theorie ausgearbeitet hat, den Hintergrund aller seiner Bücher zur Metaphysik bildet.

Alfred North Whitehead several times reiterated the view that aesthetic value and aesthetic experience could be the 'key to the metaphysical synthesis of existence'.[1]

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1   Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (1920; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 5: 'We are thinking "homogeneously" about nature when we are thinking about it without thinking about thought or about sense-awareness, and we are thinking

Nonetheless, he devoted no book or article to investigating the aesthetic experience, aesthetic attitude, or the aesthetic object.[2] Hence, one can understand the rather marginal scholarly interest in this part of his work since then. In the literature one notes two different approaches to Whitehead's aesthetics. The first is represented by the now classic work by Donald W. Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic.*[3] Sherburne notes that Whitehead himself uses numerous aesthetic terms in his metaphysical works,[4] but he considers these too general,

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"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.' (Italics added.) Similarly, in Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (1926; New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 104–5: 'The metaphysical doctrine, here expounded, finds the foundations of the world in the aesthetic experience, rather than as with Kant in the cognitive and conceptive experience. All order is therefore aesthetic order, and the moral order is merely certain aspects of aesthetic order.'

[2]   In his whole large philosophical *oeuvre* Whitehead systematically devotes himself to the question of aesthetics only in two shorter, though highly interesting, chapters, 'Beauty' and 'Truth and Beauty', in *Adventures of Ideas*, and in the four-page discussion of the difference between logical and aesthetic understanding, in *Modes of Thought*. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1933; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), 324–51, and Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 84–87. Apart from that, we find in his metaphysical works only sporadic remarks about aesthetic experience, aesthetic facts, aesthetic synthesis, aesthetic unity, and aesthetic order. He does not, however, explain the terms in these remarks, but, by contrast, uses them to clarify other terms.

[3]   Donald W. Sherburne, *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1961).

[4]   We can usefully divide Whitehead's philosophical works into two basic groups. The first group of articles, generally called 'philosophy of nature', is linked with his work as Lecturer in Applied Mathematics and Mechanics at University College London and as Professor of Applied Mathematics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London. In this period, he was mainly concerned with the relationship between the natural sciences and our everyday sense experience. He developed an original system of philosophical inquiry, which would from today's point of view be closest to what is called the philosophy of science. The following books by Whitehead may be included in this period (listed by date of first edition): *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919); *Concept of Nature* (1920); *The Principle of Relativity with Applications to Physical Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) and most of the essays from the following collections: *The Organisation of Thought: Educational and Scientific* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917) and *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (1927; London: Benn, 1966). In the second period, Whitehead was concerned to construct a comprehensive metaphysical system, which he called 'speculative philosophy'. In this period, which is linked with his being Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, he endeavoured to create the most suitable possible general philosophical scheme. The following books by Whitehead may be included in this period (listed by date of first edition): *Science and the Modern World* (1925; New York:

referring to his genetic (not morphological) analysis of actual occasion, and therefore disregards them.[5] Instead of investigating Whitehead's claims concerning aesthetics he proposes first to create Whitehead's aesthetics. For this reason, in the first part he thoroughly presents the conceptual scheme of Whitehead's metaphysics and in the second investigates the use of this scheme to formulate the basic aesthetic questions, such as the ontological nature of the aesthetic object, the nature of the aesthetic experience and artistic creation, the question of artistic truth and the function of art. In sum, it is fair to say that Sherburne has refused to link the Whiteheadian aesthetic theory, which he creates in the second part of the book, with the way Whitehead himself in his metaphysical works characterizes 'aesthetic experience', 'aesthetic fact', 'aesthetic synthesis', 'aesthetic understanding', or 'aesthetic order'.

The second approach is represented in the recent publication by Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria*.[6] Unlike Sherburne, Shaviro is convinced that Whitehead's own aesthetic terms refer to aesthetics, that Whiteheadian aesthetics need not be first created, because it already exists, and one need only unify the pertinent remarks dispersed throughout Whitehead's works. Shaviro demonstrates that the fragmentarily used terms from aesthetics deeply penetrate Whitehead's metaphysical system and he persuasively links them with Whitehead's conception of beauty. Whitehead's metaphysics is, according to him, the 'aesthetics of existence'[7] and the core of his philosophy is aesthetic.

I believe that Shaviro's interpretational approach is justified, that Whitehead's philosophy does indeed have a truly aesthetic core. But I also consider Sherburne's attempt to develop a narrower definition of the basic aesthetic terms to be legitimate and useful. Whitehead's aesthetics, integrated into his philosophy, tells us much that is important about the nature of reality, but in order to be

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Macmillan, 1964); *Religion in the Making* (1926); *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* (1927; New York: Fordham University Press, 1985); *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929; New York: Free Press, 1978); *The Function of Reason* (1929; Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), and *Modes of Thought* (1938). In the books devoted to the philosophy of nature, aesthetics stands beyond the horizon of Whitehead's interest (as is evident also in note 1 of my essay), but in the books on metaphysics we encounter references to aesthetics or terms from aesthetics in key places.

[5]   Sherburne, *Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, 32. This approach is perhaps justifiable. Whitehead uses terms from aesthetics even in contexts that are usually not connected to aesthetics. He links them not only with human conscious experience but also with inorganic entities or elementary physical particles. It may well seem therefore that these traditional terms from aesthetics are stripped of their original meanings and are used in the purely technical senses of Whitehead's philosophy.

[6]   Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

[7]   Ibid., 152.

equally informative for the special area of aesthetics it requires interpretational development. In order to be able to grasp Whitehead's aesthetics properly, it is, in my opinion, desirable to link together the two existing approaches.[8] In this article I shall try and defend the proposed approach with an analysis of Whitehead's method of speculative philosophy and its application in metaphysics. First of all, I shall present the method of imaginative generalization, which Whitehead considers to be the only suitable method for constructing speculative philosophy. This method originates in a particular area of human experience. In the second part of the article, I seek to demonstrate that in Whitehead's philosophy this is the area of aesthetic experience. In the third part of the article I aim to show that, because of the transformations that they went through as part of the method of imaginative generalization, the aesthetic terms that Whitehead uses have a broader meaning, do not take into account the particular nature of the aesthetic sphere, and therefore require further interpretation for their application to aesthetics.

I

Whitehead defined speculative philosophy in his largest philosophical work, *Process and Reality*, as follows:

> Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed or thought, shall have a character of particular instance of the general scheme.[9]

The question arises of what the method of a speculative philosophy thus conceived should be. From the start Whitehead states that neither induction nor deduction is a suitable method. He emphasizes that the method of speculative philosophy should, unlike induction, accept the limitations of our understanding, because we have to reconcile ourselves to our being part of the world that we

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8   That there is a need for such a linking is testified to also by some of the untenable positions of the two scholars. Whitehead's dynamic conception of beauty in *Adventures of Ideas* is, for example, in direct contradiction to Sherburne's claim that the experience of beauty is passive. See Sherburne, *Whiteheadian Aesthetic*, 118. If, by contrast, Shaviro in the final chapter of his book claims that Whitehead's aesthetics of beauty is an alternative to the aesthetics of the sublime, which is at present dominant, he is certainly not talking here only about Whitehead's implicit aesthetics. In order successfully to demonstrate his claims, he would have to go beyond the realm of implicit aesthetics towards explicit aesthetics, which, however, he does not do in his book. See Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 152–56.

9   Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 3.

are endeavouring to describe. We cannot simply step out of our context and begin disinterestedly to describe the relations and characteristics of the world around us. The starting point of a metaphysical investigation will always be immediate and fragmentary experience within this world; it will never be experience that we could simply begin to describe and then compose it into a definitive whole. The usual way of observing is based on registering facts that are relevant to us in the given situation. Some relations come to the fore, whereas others recede into the background without being registered directly. If we can never step outside the world that is the object of our description, we can never be sure that the subsequent observations will not contradict the previous ones from which we derived our system. That which earlier may have seemed an indisputable hard fact, may later turn out to be a mere abstraction that acquired obviousness only because of frequent repetition.[10] Whitehead consistently objects to the existence of uninterpreted, indisputable, bare fact – to the fundamental assumption of induction.[11] He is also similarly distrustful of deduction. The fact that deduction proceeds from individual and separate axioms that are in themselves valid and self-evident is contrary to his convictions. The separateness and self-sufficiency of these principles already constitute an abstraction from the experience in which we find individual interlinked facts. The deductive axiomatic method begins at the level of high abstractions which

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[10] Whitehead calls this failure to notice the degree of abstraction in the facts of our observation 'the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness'. An example of this fallacy, for Whitehead, would be beholding the structure of reality from the perspective of a strict distinction between substance and quality, which stems from the conviction that first the object 'is' and then, once existing, has certain properties, for example, colours. Colours, and also other properties, would then have nothing in common with the 'being' of objects. This conviction is supported also by the rules of the syntax of most Indo-European languages. We say that an object has a red colour or is red, and not that it is its own redness. Whitehead does not claim that we should in everyday life do away with all these conventions; he only points out that these conventions are not what concrete things 'really are'. (We do not first perceive some kind of 'tableness' and only then, secondarily, the colour of the table. Rather, we perceive a table of that colour). He is instead claiming they have their origin in a certain theory, that is, in abstraction. As such they should then be open to retrospective theoretical testing. The problem arises when we blindly assume that these bits of 'evidence' no longer require further verification and we build our supposedly consistent theory on them. See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 74–78.

[11] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 4–5: 'The metaphysical first principles can never fail of exemplification. We can never catch the actual world taking a holiday from their sway. Thus, for the discovery of metaphysics, the method of pinning down thought to the strict systematization of detailed discrimination, already effected by antecedent observation, breaks down. This collapse of the method of rigid empiricism is not confined to metaphysics. It occurs whenever we seek the larger generalities. In natural science this rigid method is the Baconian method of induction, a method which, if consistently pursued, would have left science where it found it.'

would first need to be demonstrated. The greatest problem with this method is that it does not demonstrate its axioms and understands them as being self--evident. As induction derives its conceptual scheme from mere empirical fact, so deduction attaches its empirical facts to a ready-made scheme.[12]

The construction of the conceptual scheme that is required by the asserted speculative philosophy appears to Whitehead to be a process in which the rational and the empirical aspects regulated each other. With the first step we are starting from a certain area of human experience.[13] In this initial area we distinguish between the individual factors that, with the second step, we subject to imaginative development. In this way we obtain a rough conceptual apparatus enabling us to capture new facts in our field of experience. If we develop the conceptual scheme of speculative philosophy, we cannot be satisfied with making this scheme precise within the original area from which we started. We must expand it to any fact that enters our experience. We must go beyond the boundary of the original area and, on that basis, look at other kinds of experience. Otherwise physics would remain physics, psychology psychology, and aesthetics aesthetics, and they would not become the starting point of speculative philosophy. This next step also assumes a certain doubting of the obviousness with which the objects of the world around us appear to us. This is a process during which the objects of our world begin to show themselves to us in a new way. This process is not, however, random, because it is determined by the characteristics of the original area of experience from which we started. It is a matter of systematically observing experience from a new angle.[14] Whitehead compares the proposed method to the flight of an aeroplane: the area from which we start is the runway; the imaginative development of the original insights is the flight; and the return to our investigation of the original area is the landing, but now from the perspective of the conceptual scheme which we

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[12] Ibid., 8: 'Philosophy has been haunted by the unfortunate notion that its method is dogmatically to indicate premises which are severally clear, distinct, and certain; and to erect upon those premises a deductive system of thought. But the accurate expression of the final generalities is the goal of discussion, and not its origin. Philosophy has been misled by the example of mathematics; and even in mathematics the statement of the ultimate logical principles is beset with difficulties, as yet insuperable.'

[13] As possible fields for the construction of speculative philosophy to start from, Whitehead explicitly mentions physics, physiology, psychology, aesthetics, ethics, sociology, and language. See ibid., 5.

[14] The process of looking at reality from a new angle, as described by Whitehead, manifests, in my opinion, a close similarity to Bullough's conception of aesthetic distance. See Edward Bullough, '"Psychical Distance" as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle', *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912): 87–118. Demonstrating this analogy would require a more careful analysis and presentation of the two conceptions, but that would be too much of a digression from the main task of the current article.

acquired on the basis of imaginative development. Whitehead saw the advantage of this method in the fact that imaginative thinking can help us to grasp factors of our experience which we would otherwise, in everyday experience, not distinguish, but we can imaginatively behold them: 'Such thought supplies the differences which direct observation lacks.'[15]

This is what Whitehead calls the method of imaginative generalization and, what is of fundamental importance to our topic, he related it also to the means of expression used in philosophy, language. He was convinced that philosophy, to be able to express new insights, must in a certain way change ordinary language and also the language of traditional philosophical terminology, without completely severing the bonds to ordinary language, since that would make it incomprehensible.[16] According to Whitehead language somehow has to be extended in order to express new meanings. He does not, however, explicitly describe how to achieve this. He only hints at his ideas by comparing the task of the philosopher in this respect to the activity of the artist: 'Of course, all terms of speech are too special and refer explicitly to higher stages of experience. For this reason, philosophy is analogous to imaginative art. It suggests meaning beyond its mere statement.'[17] This quotation should not be taken as a mere ornament of Whitehead's philosophical vocabulary. In many key places of his philosophical works, Whitehead refers to art and also to the metaphorical nature of speculative philosophy, which requires the development of meaning beyond the merely literal sense.[18] Whitehead's philosophical method, particularly its metaphorical way of presenting reality, must therefore be considered the first aesthetic aspect of his philosophy.

II

Though emphasizing the aesthetic aspect in the asserted metaphorical nature of philosophical language in the method of imaginative generalization is important, it does not yet allow one to link Whitehead's implicit aesthetics with the places in which he explicitly used the attribute 'aesthetic' to thematize his own philosophical viewpoints. The possibility of linking the two areas is offered by a comment later expressed in his 'Remarks':

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15   Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 5.
16   Whitehead calls the excessive faith of philosophical investigation in already established language 'the Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary'. See Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 235–36.
17   Ibid., 159–60.
18   See, for example, Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 4, and Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 237–38.

> Philosophical thought has to start from some limited section of our experience – from epistemology, or from natural science, or from theology, or from mathematics. Also the investigation always retains the taint of its starting point. Every starting point has its merits, and its selection must depend upon the individual philosopher. My own belief is that at present the most fruitful, because the most neglected, starting point is that section of value-theory which we term aesthetics. Our enjoyments of the values of human art, or of natural beauty, our horror at the obvious vulgarities and defacements which force themselves upon us – all these modes of experience are sufficiently abstracted to be relatively obvious. And yet they disclose the very meaning of things.[19]

The comment reflects Whitehead's conviction that every philosophical investigation will retain its character in keeping with its initial area, and also points to the area from which Whitehead started when building his metaphysical system. If this interpretation is correct, Whitehead's philosophy should manifest a clear aesthetic character. The use of the terms 'aesthetic experience', 'aesthetic fact', 'aesthetic synthesis', 'aesthetic understanding', and 'aesthetic order' must be understood as a sign of that character. If we link this character with the reflections presented so far on the philosophical method of imaginative generalization, Whitehead's philosophical project will reveal itself as an attempt at a metaphorical view of all the facts that enter our experience on the basis of the conceptual scheme that has its origin, its metaphorical core, in one of the areas of experience – namely, the aesthetic experience.

In searching for the aesthetic metaphorical core of his philosophy we must first turn our attention to Whitehead's categoreal scheme. In *Process and Reality* the scheme comprises four basic groups: the Category of the Ultimate, Categories of Existence, Categories of Explanation, and Categoreal Obligations. The Category of the Ultimate forms a sort of basic principle of his philosophical scheme. In it we could therefore identify the metaphorical core of his philosophy. 'In all philosophic theory,' Whitehead states, 'there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents is devoid of actuality. In the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed "creativity".'[20]

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[19] Alfred North Whitehead, 'Remarks', *Philosophical Review* 46 (1937): 184–85. This article was originally Whitehead's contribution to a symposium of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association devoted to Whitehead's philosophy. Apart from Whitehead, the philosophers John Dewey, Andrew Ushenko, and Gregory Vlastos gave papers at the symposium. 'Remarks' is Whitehead's commentary on their papers. The same article (but without the introductory acknowledgements to the participants) was later published as 'Analysis of Meaning' in *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 122–31.

[20] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7.

Creativity as the Category of the Ultimate does not enter into the basic explanatory scheme of Whitehead's philosophy. It does, however, enter into the other categories as the organizational principle and determines their character. According to Whitehead the Category of the Ultimate consists of three concepts: apart from the concept of 'creativity' there is also the 'one' and the 'many'. The concept of the one is understood here in the sense of the singularity of any entity. The concept of the many is understood as the disjunctive diversity of many entities. This disjunctive diversity is then called 'multiplicity'. Multiplicity is a term of the outer limit, expressing not the diversity of the parts within a single whole, but a radical diversity, which has no unity. For that reason, however, it raises a need to search for the unification of this radical diversity. Creativity is this unifying activity. It is creativity from the viewpoint of the new emerging entity, which is fully actual only in the process of the unification of other entities given in disjunction. By achieving its unification a given entity loses its actuality and becomes a member of the multiplicity, which, by its entrance, will change at least a bit. In this way it calls forth the need for a new unification by means of a new actual entity. The one, in the sense of uniqueness, is the term at the other extreme in Whitehead's philosophy. Creativity is therefore a process that leads from multiplicity as a cluster of unrelated entities to their unique organization in a new entity. As Whitehead remarks:

> The ultimate metaphysical principle is the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction. The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the 'many' which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive 'many' which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes. The many become one and is increased by one.[21]

This complex process, described in the Category of the Ultimate, is, I believe, key to Whitehead's metaphysics. It is fair to say that the other categories of the scheme intensify this fundamental insight and make it more precise. The basic building block of his whole philosophical system is the actual occasion or the actual entity.[22] The actual occasion is the smallest complete ontological unit of his system. It is mainly the process that has its beginning in multiplicity and

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21   Ibid., 21.
22   Whitehead uses both terms synonymously, but each in a different context when he wants to emphasize a different basic feature of this fundamental philosophical unit. He uses the term 'actual entity' in passages where he wants to emphasize its ontological primacy, but uses the term 'actual occasion' to emphasize its processuality. Mainly in the early writings, however, we also encounter the term 'creature' in the same sense. By this term Whitehead is clearly referring to his category of the 'ultimate'.

aims towards its own complete formation, to the creation of a new fully determined unit. After it is fully formed, the actual occasion loses the character of a process, and is now something whose inner constitution can no longer be changed. As a now fully formed entity it becomes part of a multiplicity that changes, though just slightly, with its entry. As part of the multiplicity it is then material for the becoming of a new actual entity. In this complex process of the actual occasion, Whitehead distinguishes two complementary and inseparable motions. One is the actual creative process of unification, the self-formation of the actual entity, which Whitehead calls 'concrescence'. The other is the process of transition, which he describes as the entry of an already creatively formed actual occasion into a forming actual occasion. From his description it is clear that one motion requires the other. The process of concrescence is possible only by means of drawing the already closed actual entities into the forming actual occasion. This drawing-in is a process of transition. The actual process of transition is possible, however, only from the perspective of the unification of the emerging actual occasion, from the perspective of the process of concrescence. From the perspective of Whitehead's philosophical system it makes no sense to ask which comes first. One kind of process assumes the other and the two cannot be separated.

We could continue in our description of the actual occasion and describe its basic characteristics. In that way we would eventually be required to present all its eight categories of existence. In Whitehead's philosophical scheme these categories serve mainly to make precise and to elaborate the description of two inseparable processes, concrescence and transition, that is, to make precise the main idea of the description of his category of the ultimate. But let us return instead to investigating the aesthetic character of Whitehead's philosophical system. If the complex process of creativity is the core of his philosophy, one must ask what determines the direction of this process. The organization of multiplicity into a unique whole, after all, does not presuppose only the passive inclusion of the elements of multiplicity but also the exclusion of certain elements from the process of concrescence. In Whitehead's philosophy how is the principle that determines this inclusion or exclusion defined?

In *Religion in the Making* Whitehead provides the following explanation: '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 entity.'[23] The quotation confirms that the principle that determines the inclusion and the

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[23]   Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 113.

exclusion of already constituted actual entities into the just constituting actual entity is aesthetic. The aesthetic unity of the given actual entity is the principle. Against such an interpretation, one might object that the quoted passage comes from Whitehead's early metaphysical period, when his philosophical vocabulary was just emerging. By contrast, in the later works he used a different term for the guiding principle of the development of the actual event – namely, the 'subjective aim'. But he understood this new term aesthetically as well. In *Process and Reality* Whitehead expressly states:

> The subjective aim is seeking width with its contrasts, within the unity of a general design. An intense experience is aesthetic fact, and its categoreal conditions are to be generalized from aesthetic laws in particular arts. The categoreal conditions, appealed to above, can be summarized thus:
> (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.[24]

By 'consequent' he means here the newly emerging actual occasion and by 'ground', he means the occasion that immediately preceded it. The subjective aim as the direction of the development of the actual occasion attempts to achieve 'width with its contrasts, within the unity of a general design' – 'contrast under identity'. Whitehead, in his late works, at his peak, therefore explicitly considered this to be the aesthetic principle.

III

The foregoing interpretation confirms the correctness of Shaviro's conclusion that the aesthetic principle deeply penetrates Whitehead's conception of the universe. What Whitehead means by 'aesthetic experience' remains unanswered, because in his philosophical system the term 'actual occasion' relates not only to human experience but also to inanimate entities; it forms the basis of his whole metaphysics. In *Modes of Thought* Whitehead sets out six different levels of actual occasion according to the degree of complexity of their creative process: first, the actual occasions that constitute the life of the human organism; second,

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[24]   Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 279–80. It is also interesting that Whitehead earlier uses an almost identical passage in *Religion in the Making*, 115. For Whitehead, who is well known for rarely returning in his works to what he has already stated, this bit of repetition is evidence of the importance that he attributed to this formulation.

the actual occasions of other animals; third, the actual occasions of plant life; fourth, the actual occasions of individual cells; fifth, the actual occasions of inanimate objects; and sixth, the actual occasions of physical entities like atoms, protons, and electrons.[25] All these kinds of actual occasions manifest the creative process; all are actual facts and consequently also facts of the aesthetic experience.

The expansion of the aesthetic experience raises the question of the relationship between the aesthetic experience invoked by Whitehead and the concepts of the aesthetic experience developed in the aesthetic tradition. Neither Shaviro nor Sherburne explicitly asks what the connection is between Whitehead's notion of aesthetic experience, which features at the centre of his speculative philosophy, and the concept of human aesthetic experience, which needs to be distinguished from extra-aesthetic experience. Shaviro concentrates on the former area, Sherburne on the latter. As early as 1941, however, Bertram Morris, at the end of his contribution to *The Library of Living Philosophers* volume on Whitehead, 'The Art-Process and the Aesthetic Fact in Whitehead's Philosophy', in which he carefully inquires into the analogy between Whitehead's description of the becoming of the actual occasion and the process of artistic creation, puts the question directly to Whitehead:

> At the first stage we must ask primarily for clarification. The aesthetic situation is ordinarily considered to be one which intrinsically involves consciousness, where the qualitative facts are such as to be unintelligible save in terms of some form of direct and immediate conscious experience. The problem is complicated in Whitehead's philosophy, for he continually speaks in a language which ordinarily connotes conscious activity – e.g. the mental, conceptual purpose, feeling etc. – and then we are brought up short by his occasional statements that these do not involve consciousness.[26]

At this time, Whitehead was eighty and was suffering from a long-term illness. Instead of the usual commentary on the articles contained in the volume he therefore added 'only' two essays, which conclude his philosophical work: 'Mathematics and the Good' and 'Immortality'. Morris's question remained unanswered. I shall now, in my conclusion, try to indicate a possible answer on the basis of the analysis undertaken in this article.

Whitehead's expansion of the concept of aesthetic experience does not mean that he assumed consciousness also in inorganic entities. On the basis of

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25   Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 214–15.
26   Bertram Morris, 'The Art-Process and the Aesthetic Fact in Whitehead's Philosophy', in *The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 3, *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1941), 463–86. It is customary in this philosophical series that the author to whom a particular volume is devoted comments, in the same volume, on the articles included in it.

the reflections at the end of the first section of this essay, it would be fair to say that Whitehead endeavoured metaphorically to 'extend' expressions usually connected with consciousness beyond their usual meaning. He was convinced that aesthetics as a philosophical starting point of metaphysics remained neglected, though it offers a fundamentally new point of departure for the formulation of any kind of philosophical system. He explained its contribution in *Modes of Thought* by comparing logical and aesthetic understanding.[27] The logic proceeds from separate, highly abstracted details towards a structure of increasingly higher wholes. Its starting point is the highly abstract assumption of separate entities. The movement of the aesthetic experience, by contrast, proceeds in the opposite direction. The aesthetic understanding is as concrete as our limits allow it: 'We are overwhelmed by the beauty of the building, by the delight of the picture, by the exquisite balance of the sentence.' Within aesthetic understanding 'the whole precedes the details'.[28] We proceed to their observation and differentiation as the cause of the whole effect only subsequently. In aesthetic experience we reveal the individual parts exclusively by means of the whole. The aesthetic experience is concrete in the sense that it does not ignore experiencing the quality of the whole. That experiencing of the quality of the whole determines the process of excluding from, and including in, the emerging actual occasion. But, whereas the actual occasions of lower levels are not capable of a thorough differentiation of details (they exclude details from the process of self-creation, and develop without great changes on the basis of this vaguely felt quality of the whole), the occasions of higher levels and mainly the occasions of the human organism can aim towards differentiation of subtle details, whereby the breadth of the contrasts increases and more complex unifying activity is exacted.

When presenting Whitehead's philosophical method I pointed to, as part of his critique of the inductive and the deductive approach, his distrust of the notion that the whole can be understood on the basis of clearly separate parts. This assumption manifests itself most clearly in Whitehead's concept of aesthetic experience. Consequently he is justified in concluding:

> By reason of the greater concreteness of the aesthetic experience, it is a wider topic than that of the logical experience. Indeed, when the topic of aesthetics has been sufficiently explored, it is doubtful whether there will be anything left over for discussion. But this doubt is unjustified. For the essence of great experience is penetration into the unknown, the unexperienced.[29]

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[27]   Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 84–87. This is one of the few places where Whitehead uses a term from aesthetics exclusively in connection with human experience.

[28]   Ibid., 85.

[29]   Ibid., 86.

The analysis and interpretation of the method of the construction of speculative philosophy confirmed that Whitehead's conception of aesthetics penetrates to the very core of his metaphysics. From this perspective it is fair to say that all his metaphysical works are devoted to the question of aesthetics. Aesthetics in this context, however, is not aesthetics in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, it remains primarily an interpretational guideline for gaining insight into the nature of the universe in which we live. To make it usable for traditional aesthetics, it requires interpretational development, to which Whitehead's speculative philosophy still intensely draws us.[30]

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[30] Apart from the works of Donald W. Sherburne, the following scholars have attempted to use Whitehead's philosophy for aesthetic inquiry: John B. Cobb, 'Toward Clarity in Aesthetics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 18 (1957): 169–89; William Dean, 'Whitehead's Other Aesthetic', *Process Studies* 13 (1983): 104–12; John C. Gilmour, 'Art and the Expression of Meaning', *Process Studies* 13 (1983): 71–87; Robert C. Mesle, 'Aesthetic Value and Relational Power: An Essay on Personhood', *Process Studies* 13 (1983): 59–70; Richard M. Millard, 'Whitehead's Aesthetic Perspective', *Educational Theory* 11 (1961): 255–68.

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