

**"Provocative Expression: Transitions In and From Metaphysics in Whitehead's
Later Work"
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In the very late essay, "Mathematics and the Good", Whitehead writes:

"We cannot understand the flux which constitutes our human experience unless we realize that it is raised above the futility of infinitude by various successive types of modes of emphasis which generate the active energy of a finite assemblage. The superstitious awe of infinitude has been the bane of philosophy. The infinite has no properties. All value has the gift of finitude which is the necessary condition for activity. Also activity means the origination of patterns of assemblage, and mathematics is the study of pattern. Here we find the essential clue which relates mathematics to the study of the good, and the study of the bad." (MG 674)

Packed into this densely beautiful passage are several things: a rather cogent framing of Whitehead's decisively axiological metaphysics of creative advance; a complaint about one or two of the things that have kept metaphysics from having its full payoff in human culture; an expression of Whitehead's abidingly deep Platonism that is embraced (unlike many other Platonic gestures in the history of philosophy) alongside an embrace of flux, passage, and finitude; and a moral intuition that thinking about pattern is a fundamental and fundamentally ethical activity, which activity links mathematical and metaphysical cogitations in a common cultural urgency.

Given that this essay is one of the last things Whitehead wrote, we could rather mundanely conclude that Whitehead in fact never did move "beyond metaphysics" in the sense of not doing it any more, or no longer caring about "that" kind of cogitative effort. But our goal here today is not to carbon date the evidence of Whitehead's metaphysical activity, but to explore the "late" activities of philosophizing he engaged in, in order to obtain some insight into what metaphysics as well as its "beyond" might mean for our cogitative efforts these days. In understanding the continuingly metaphysical character of certain aspects of *Modes of Thought* and *Adventures of Ideas*, I think it would be helpful to use this provocative passage from the very late "Mathematics and the Good" to "assemble" and evaluate the continuingly systematic project of Whitehead's later works as well as to mark its urgent current value. To this end I will try to unpack this passage and use its innards as a loose template for a consideration of the characterization of process as "provoking" in AI and as informing the ontological dimensions of doctrine of "expression" in MT. This will lead not only to my endorsement and application of the axiological demand expressed in "Mathematics and the Good," but also to an underscoring of how the late works shed light on key categorial elements in a manner that extends their properly 'systematic' status into the late work. Finally, the notions of 'provocation' and 'expression' will be used to frame a model of moral urgency respectful of Whitehead's twilight intuitions about pattern but revved up for purposes of the ethical demands of contemporary life.

In using the late essay to explore the nature of earlier themes, I might be accused of buying into an interpretive strategy that privileges later statements over earlier ones in establishing what should be taken to be “definitive” as to Whitehead’s meaning. Let me assure that this is not my goal.¹ I am seizing on certain limited expressions for limited purposes of exploring the central relevance of certain notions as having had an importance that is consistent across all phases of Whitehead’s systematic period, if a bit more insistent in the later ones. My only suspicion regarding the “lateness” of these constructions is this: that in Whitehead’s own mind, as evidenced in the somewhat aphoristic style of the late works, his system seems to have often boiled down to the kinds of things he says about value importance in the mode of “provocation,” “expression,” and “emphatic generation” (as I will refer to the upshot of the MG passage). Leaving behind categoreal constructions in the later work, Whitehead seems to allow these entertainments of the modes of actuality functioning as what had earlier been mainly called “satisfactions” to serve as the provocations of his own thinking in his final works. This is not a claim that his late thoughts are more systematically “definitive” but that they seem to be self-influenced (“emphatically generated”) by, and thereby derive certain “properties” and character from, the way intensive satisfactions work in the categoreal scheme per se. So I am not claiming that late constructions are more “definitive”, but that they may be expressing certain definitive dimensions of the system by deriving their “definiteness” from certain emphatic roles that creative “emphasis” plays in the earlier categoreal work. Let’s unpack these claims so as to achieve some of the goals of my essay.

The passage from MG informs us, if we unravel its counterfactual tone, that existence has “properties” and “value” in virtue of the fact that it is the scene of successions of finite activities which originate the assemblage into pattern constituting the nature of ‘value’ or ‘properties’ per se. But the counterfactual tone—casting this insistence amidst and as a denial of the futility of the infinite about which philosophy has manifest an unhealthy obsession—is interesting and worth tarrying over in a bit of an introductory digression. It shows Whitehead to be diagnostically oriented about the nature of thinking (it’s being infected by contagions that it tends not to see in itself) even as he is doing the business of description of what he considers to be actual metaphysical matters of fact. Definiteness of properties and value are a function of (expressions of) patterning activity even though and even for the thinker who conceives them officially to be somehow the spawn of an infinite that has (though it cannot) all the properties that might be disseminated to the seeming teeming finite multitude. While of course this diagnostic casting of the matter is all part and parcel of the ongoing examination of the history of thought that Whitehead’s whole work was struggling with², in his attempt to unseat habits of thought riddled with various forms of the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (SMW, MT), it suggests to me, in this late essay, a sense of frustration on Whitehead’s part—a frustration with the persistence of ‘simply located thoughts’ despite the enormity of the evidence against them in the world of physics and

¹ I leave such hermeneutical issues to the efforts of those who, like Lewis Ford, work to guide us through the thickets of the developmental aspects of Whitehead’s thought as well as his odd editorial strategies. Ford’s *Emergence of Whitehead’s Metaphysics* remains to my mind the hallmark of such efforts, regardless of what one might critique in its internal hermeneutical objectives.

² This consistency of analysis of intellectual history across all of whitehead’s work should signal that metaphysics too has probably a certain persistence, in the same form of revisiting that characterizes the analysis of intellectual habits.

culture in his own day.³ The infinite so endemic to thought is nonetheless “futile” and we fail to abandon it despite its discernibly being the “bane” of our efforts. Whitehead could assert himself here as a new Copernican/Kantian revolutionary, showing that the failure of the ambitions of metaphysics is due not to our misconstrual of the world but of the misdirection of our ambitions beyond the form of our own experience. Our experience is shot through with the insistence of finitude and yet we try to apply these finite value assemblages to the business of painting a picture of the in-finite, which is an existential reduction worthy of the label, “futility”.⁴

The value of this digression is that it underscores the urgency of getting our focus fixed where it needs to be fixed, both in terms of how the later work tells some truths about Whitehead’s system that need emphasizing, and in terms of positioning us to claim that thought today is in fact still in need of a kick in the pants, a kick in the direction of rendering our experience in the frame of an urgency to rival the organic needs of our experiential situation. But more of that later.

“Activity means the origination of patterns of assemblage” Whitehead writes in the passage we began with, and “finitude is the necessary condition for activity”. This is a simple reframing of what had been labeled as the “subjective aim at intensity” that is directive of creativity in entities in *Process and Reality*. We are told in MG that these activities are “generated by” “successive types of modes of emphasis”. I find this late framing revealing, for it describes the subjective processes of finite actualities as “generated by” not a divine lure but by an insistent creative process itself. Now, I don’t want to assert and certainly not defend any radical distinction between a divine lure and the insistence of creative process, but that is a story for another day. I do want to seize on this construction of “successive types of modes of emphasis” as evocative of the activities we most intimately associate with the subjective individuality of entities themselves. My point here will be to revisit some earlier arguments of mine concerning what should be our view of what the subjective individuality of entities means, and to claim that such individuality must be conceived “ecstatically”.

In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead’s discussion of the subject-object relation is largely cashed out in terms of differences in perspective as to what we are focusing on in considering the transitional relations among entities in process. He writes: “The subject-object relation can be conceived as Recipient and Provoker, where the fact provoked is an affective tone about the status of the provoker in the provoked experience. Also the total provoked occasion is a totality involving many such examples of provocation” (AI 176). In a contrast with the view (well rooted, I admit, in certain aspects of Whitehead’s own discussion in PR) that “subjects” per se (as plucked out analytically in philosophical discourse) are the only places we should look for the kind of agency of becoming that Whitehead is building as his philosophy of organism, this description strongly incorporates “objects” (philosophically understood) as a significant consideration in the *activity* that is the epochal becoming in this metaphysics. The

³ There are several marks of frustration in the MG essay, including the exasperation of the claim that “the exactness is a fake” in the way that people tend to use mathematical thinking in analysis [get citation].

⁴ It would be a tremendous service to unpack the organic metaphysics of the futile quest for the infinite in philosophizing—to describe processively the contours of the misdescribing and then *aufhebung* the whole thing. It is my insufficiently educated opinion that those working to fuse the work of Whitehead and Deleuze are doing this work for us (among many other important matters), and I hope to be able to join them at some point.

fundamentally real “facts” in this system are provoked emotional reactions about objects that are insinuating themselves (“intervening” in concrescence, to pick up some language from *Process and Reality*) in such manner as to *bring about* the concrescence in question as “subject”. The subject is not *having* emotional *reactions to* an object but is a subject in virtue of the provocation of reacting incorporation of objects in the coming to be of an entity which would not come to be unless those provocative objects were working in it. Since being a subject is nothing but being actively self-creative, then in terms of the MG passage that is acting as our touchstone “the active energy of a finite assemblage” is being “generated” by objects. Continuing with our MG language, “objects” are to be seen as functioning as such in virtue of “successive types of modes of emphasis .” What all of this comes together to mean is that the energy of generating entities by objective provocation and the generative activity of entities as subjective self-creators is the *same* energy. Emphatic generation is self-creation (though neither dimension of this identity is limited to what we consider it as from the perspective of the either dimension—more on the undermining of standard forms of identity claims later).

It has long been my view that the way to understand the ‘identity’ of these energies is to carefully restrict our consideration of the ontology of entities to terms concerning the “intensity” that is sought in and achieved by concrescence. Strictly speaking, there is in “actuality” as Whitehead describes it nothing but intensities arising successively in the “vibratory” events that are the atomic and yet completely relational “fundamentally real things” (paraphrasing PR) in the cosmos. It is quite clear and completely uncontroversial that the central office of “subjective aim” in the PR system is about the achievement of “intensity”, since subjective aim is introduced in the Category of Subjective Intensity (PR 27). What has been less clear in the general characterization of Whitehead’s model of actuality is that the central conceptual role of ‘intensity’ means thinking about atomic individuality (as well as ‘identity’) in a radically ‘ecstatic’ way. It is my view that the ideas Whitehead chooses to emphasize in the late work—being so much about ‘emphatic generation’ ontologically--endorse an ecstatic reading of intensive actuality.

To begin with, we must remember the basic fact that the Category of Subjective Intensity describes the seeking of intensity in the present and in “the relevant future,” and the ‘relevant future’ is defined as those events felt with anticipatory intensity in the present occasion in virtue of the “real potentiality for them to be derived from itself” (PR 27). So subjective aim is concerned with the transcendent role of the subject (as object) in the future, and this transcendent (proto-ecstatic) aim is felt in the present qua subject. So the agency of the entity as rather unproblematically associated with the felt lure of subjective aim is directed at the future entity in its self-imposition on actualities in becoming in the future. Feelings are directed at the feeler/subject, the subject does not underlie the feelings, as we are reminded in PR. Subjectivity is bound up with superjectivity, and there is no meaningfully referring to a subject absent a reference to its superjection. A superject is nothing more than the satisfied entity whose present agency is closed up so as to be appearing in subsequent agencies, and a satisfied entity is nothing but a certain intensity of feeling. A satisfaction/superject is some mode of active feeling together of diverse feelings under conditions of contrast productive of the overall intensity that has become possible just here and just now in the creative universe.

If we couple the fact that subjectivity looks forward in being a present energy with the fact that much of the causal story of Whitehead's system (including the later works) is bound up with defending and articulating the feelings of "derivation" from the past characterizing experience, we can render the notion of subjective aim somewhat bi-directional. There is subjective activity in any given present just because there is superjection into that present by entities in the "past" temporal cone of that present; there is subjective activity in any given present in part because there is directedness to superjection. One entity's superjective intensity is a piece of another entity's derivation from past entities. Since subjective activity is intensive patterning, and superjection is the imposition of intensive pattern, and since that pattern of feelings is aimed at the subject and not from it we can conclude that intensive pattern is everywhere ontologically energetic in the same—i.e. identical—manner (in the special sense of identity that emerges in Whitehead, as we will note later). Taking the language of AI in hand, intensity is "provocation"—intensity is how the past is provoking a present that is aimed at provoking a future. Lest we think that this characterization leaves out some ontologically separate status for the "Recipient" in the AI construction, we can recall that the Recipient in that passage is described as "an affective tone about the status of the provoker in the provoked" and that "the total provoked occasion is a totality involving many such examples of provocation". A threshold of provocation is reached and a novel instance of intensive unification becomes possible (in the sense of generating feelings of that possibility) and so becomes actual qua the subjective aim at the subject that will be provocateur in turn. Intensity is a conspiracy of provocation because intensities (energies of assemblage) are showing up to be felt into unison in a new occasion. But since any given unison of feeling is an assembly of intensities of myriad Provokers, it is never an independent unity from its contributor intensities. Thus, what we seen in process is vibratory repetition of intensities of contrast from occasion to occasion to occasion, alone making possible the discernment of any given subject amidst these transitions.⁵

Here's where our MG paragraph comes back into usefulness: "We cannot understand the flux which constitutes our human experience unless we realize that it is raised above the futility of infinitude by various successive types of modes of emphasis which generate the active energy of a finite assemblage." Flux would reduce to or be indiscernible from a characterless infinite except for "various successive types of modes of emphasis" (provocative intensities occurring across a series of entities). Neither experience nor the consideration of it (the description of actualities) would be possible unless intensities were expressed across series' (some of which answer to the categorical labels of nexus or society or personal orders, and so forth) of what can be delineated as entities with characters. Before we return to the notion of "expression" just introduced, let us note that to "generate the active energy of a finite assemblage" can concretely mean nothing but an intensity superject showing up in another intensive subject to provoke the intensities that will define—via superjection—that subject. There are no energies spoken of here besides intensities of feeling. "All value has the gift of finitude which is the necessary condition for activity. Also activity means the origination of patterns of assemblage." MG reminds us that the agency of intensive actuality is nothing but "the origination of patterns of assemblage". Origination of pattern is generation by provocation and aim at being provoker of related

⁵ Again I find myself eager to locate my reflections amidst the work being done on Whitehead and Deleuze, whose *Difference and Repetition* is a bone fide process ontology of the sort advocated here. Some of these scholars were in fact participants in the last WRP conference which I was sadly unable to attend.

patterns futurally, but these two are of a piece since future provocation is in fact generation as well as being vibratorily generational (i.e. intensively repetitive). It would be to fall into the fallacy of misplaced concreteness that MT seeks so insistently (and consistently with the system as born in the early *Science and the Modern World*) to think of atomic actuality as if we could think of single occasions only even as we identify them as 'individual' or as identical with themselves across successive actualities in which they are immanent. To be individual is to be intensively ecstatic—spread out across a generating past and a generated future, and to think about such value-individuality (i.e. to not be sucked into the futility of the infinite) is to consider successions of value-emphasis involved in such generative, energetic, creative process.⁶ As laid out in *Modes of Thought*: "Process and individuality require each other. In separation all meaning evaporates. The form of process (or, in other words, the appetition) derives its character from the individuals involved, and the characters of the individuals can only be understood in terms of the process in which they are implicated" (MT 97).

The theme of "derivation" permeates nearly every chapter of *Modes of Thought* as Whitehead unwraps a model of thinking that is also a model of processive actuality, and vice versa. The insistence of feelings of derivation, and their troublesome exclusion from official philosophical conception is appealed to again and again as part of Whitehead's systematic undermining of the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness that the book attempts. Beginning the book with a chapter on "Importance", Whitehead signals that the quality of self-insinuation is the feature of actuality that should seize our focus first. In the "Forms of Process" chapter from which the quotation above is taken, Whitehead continues the emphasis on forms of emphasis designated by the axiological notion of "importance" in a manner that illustrates my claims about individual actuality as intensive ecstasis. Playing out the Provoker/Recipient relation in the modified terms of "datum" and "issue", Whitehead writes:

Too much attention has been directed to the mere datum and the mere issue. The essence of existence lies in the transition from datum to issue. This is the process of self-determination. We must not conceive of a dead datum with passive form [despite the fact that Whitehead himself spoke of just such a dead datum in *Process and Reality*]. The datum is impressing itself upon this process, conditioning its forms. We must not dwell mainly on the issue. The immediacy of existence is then past and over. The vividness of life lies in the transition, with its forms aiming at the issue. Actuality in its essence is aim at self-formation. (MT 96; L5, S6)⁷

⁶ I am tempted to extend Whiteheadian diagnostic of the embrace of the futile infinite as a fear of intensive ecstasis, but that gets us into the existentialist analysis that needs to be married to Whitehead's realist sensibilities, another subject for another day.

⁷ This passage marks some ontological inconsistencies in Whitehead's system that need working out. While immediacy of becoming is in PR marked as the essential plane of actuality, here immediacy is stripped of the sense of vividness and value that is located in it in PR. Describing the self-creative aspect of actual entities, the 23rd Category of Explanation states: "(xxiii) That this self-functioning is the real internal constitution of an actual entity. It is the 'immediacy' of the actual entity. An actual entity is called the 'subject' of its own immediacy" (PR 25). Whitehead is struggling with the same paradoxes of a robust doctrine of immediacy that John Dewey encountered (in works like *Experience and Nature*, *Art as Experience*, the essay "Qualitative Thought", etc: the appeal of a rich description of an event theory of activity alongside an essentially relational/communicative model of being. It is no

Reorganizing this, we understand that “the process of self-determination” “lies in the transition from datum to issue”. ‘Objects’ are not passive elements of pattern in the completely immediate activity of actuality, but are actively *self-imposing* in the becoming of subjects, which means they are still the intensive superjects that ‘subjects’ are. It is my view that what Whitehead is doing with the notions of “process” and “transition” in *Modes of Thought* (he links them in the next paragraph, thereby mitigating any sense that ‘transition’ could or should be construed as just one of two species of process)⁸ is the work of the term “ecstasis” as I am using it to highlight the intensive activity that patterns and patterning across successive occasions are all about. Patterns across successive events are the repeating intensities of actualities deriving from intensities and precipitating transcendent derivations of intensities incorporative of prior ones, and so on.

In the chapter on “Expression” in MT Whitehead sets up the metaphysics of entities “impressing themselves” in the “Forms of Process” chapter in terms of the general notion of “expression” as a way of construing the transitions that make up organized nature. He defines “expression”: “Something is to be diffused throughout the environment which will make a difference.” Anticipating the insistence about finitude met in the MG quote from which we began, he claims that expression “is the activity of finitude impressing itself on its environment. Thus it has its origin in the finite; and it represents the immanence of the finite in the multitude of its fellows beyond itself....There is an active entity which fashions its own perspective, implanted on the world around” (MT 20-21). Several interesting things leap from this passage: The subject of the discussion is “finitude” per se and not a strong notion of individuals—this may indeed hint at the rightness of the intensively vibratory and repetitive model of individuality on which I want to insist. Process qua transition is about the continuum as individuated, not about discrete ontological facts. Finitude is “active” and manifests its activity as “impressing itself” or as “immanent” in transcendent facts. The active entity is a “perspective” (also the focus of a MT chapter) which is multiply located in the entities of “the world around”. The “perspective” of any entity is defined in the chapter devoted to the topic of “Perspective” as “What the universe is for that entity, either in the way of accomplishment or in the way of potentiality” (MT 66). In the midst of this definition of perspective Whitehead once again goes on to emphasize the fact that entities must be identified with their self-impositions in facts transcendent of themselves, what he describes in the subsequent to the extract from the “Expression” chapter recently cited as “the impulse to diffuse” which is the “most fundamental evidence of our presupposition of the world without” (MT 21). The ecstatic intensive reading of individual actuality would render it fair to say that actuality itself is best captured in the expressive notion of “the impulse to diffuse”. The energy of becoming being in fact the impulse to diffuse, there is simply no room for a notion of atomistic individuality that could answer to the “beads on a string” misconception often attributed to Whitehead and his conception of succession (usually by rejecting critics), and that there is no room for a modified “simple location” notion of individuality creeping into a properly processive ontology.

surprise that in the work where Whitehead turns most explicitly to issues of communication (“The account of the sixth day should be written: ‘He gave them speech, and they became souls’” [MT 41]), he opts definitively for the relational doctrine of individual actuality over the strictly immediatist one, though both are completely present in PR.

⁸ As argued by Jorge Nobo in *Whitehead’s Metaphysics of Extension and Solidarity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).

If atoms are relational as atomic, they are ontologically ecstatic via repetitive, insinuating intensities of pattern. Provocative impulses to diffuse—expressions—are all there is. Whitehead flirts with such a concession (though he perhaps lacks the language to conceive of ‘ecstasy’) when he admits that his metaphysical vision of relationship voids the standard notions of generality and of individuality upon which standard practices of rationality depend. After claiming that “process and individuality require each other”, he poses a challenge:

A difficult problem arises from this doctrine. How can the notion of any generality of reasoning be justified? For if the process depends on the individuals, then with different individuals the form of process differs. Accordingly, what has been said of one process cannot be said of another process [unconditionally]. The same difficulty applies to the notion of the identity of an individual conceived as involved in different processes. Our doctrine seems to have destroyed the very basis of rationality.

The point is that every individual thing infects any process in which it is involved, and thus any process cannot be considered in abstraction from particular things involved. Also the converse holds. Hence the absolute generality of logic and of mathematics vanish. Also induction loses any security. For in other circumstances, there will be other results. (MT 98-99)

Rather than rejecting the doctrine with such surprising results for rationality, Whitehead revises rationality. All meaningful thinking becomes, as with Hume, a matter of analogy; but unlike Hume Whitehead concludes that we need a robust speculative doctrine that explains the possibility of analogy given the actuality of thinking. Like Kant again, Whitehead changes the question rather than embracing scepticism. There is too much at stake to conclude that rationality must abort its goals just because absoluteness has been denied not only to rationality but also to the nature of things.

In framing mathematical and logical generalization and rationalization as subject to the influences of a radical doctrine of finitude, Whitehead embraces a rather unusual Platonism. He acknowledges that he is embracing the aspect of Plato that looks to “life and motion” to rescue the forms from “a meaningless void” (MT 97, which sounds a lot like the “futility of infinitude”), and enlists the Platonic intuition into the central role of mathematical pattern (especially ‘number’) in understanding to underscore the potentials for advance that have been grasped at in the life and motion of human history and culture (MT 74-85). At the conclusion of his discussion of the role of mathematical conception in enlarging and intensifying the possibilities for selective emphasis that are definitive of and formative for consciousness, and of a description of some fundamental contrasts that should be fundamental to our approaches to analysis,⁹ Whitehead recurs to some general statements about the nature of existence: “Finally, there are two ultimate types of existence implicated in the creative process, the eternal forms with their dual existence in potential appetite and in realized fact, and realized fact with its dual ways of existence as the past in the present and as the immediacy of the present. Also the immediacy of the present harbours an appetite towards the unrealized future. How

⁹ The three pairs of contrasts are, “Clarity and Vagueness,” “Order and Disorder” (both of these pairs are, it should be noted, quite integral to several dimensions of the discussion of intensity in *Process and Reality*), and “The Good and the Bad” (MT 75).

the thinker deals with these four modes of existence determines the shape of philosophy, and the influence of thought upon the practice of life” (MT 85). What intrigues me is that both eternal objects and actual entities have parallel “dual existences” which defy ordinary logics of identity, and these dual existences (for the total of four modes of existence he refers to above) have as the axis of their ‘duality’ the contrast (such as it is) between fact and appetite. I say “such as it is” because as we have seen this axis of duality is no duality at all if we steer carefully along the contours of a discourse of ecstatic intensity and emphatic generation, though the application of such discourse to the domain of eternal objects is a long and untold story. Appetition is the becoming factual of successor appetitions, and such appetitions are the “activities” concerning “patterns of assemblage” as per our MG passage.

Patterning appetite presents the fundamental challenge to us as thinkers, and in turn will shape the manner in which thought influences “the practice of life”. It is of course also the main question posed in moral experience which, according to the Category of Subjective Intensity, is concerned primarily with the determination of the “relevant future” into which intensity will insinuate itself.¹⁰ This entails being able to imagine the perspectives which will constitute the emergent subjects of our objective provocations, or in other words the ecstatic repetitions of our intensive satisfactions as they will meet and unite with other repetitions of forms of emphasis in the genetic environment of me and my future. For these repetitions of intensity in the future I am described as “derivatively responsible” in *Process and Reality* (PR 222). In fact, in PR Whitehead uses the description of moral experiences to make a rather emphatic point that links up quite nicely with the discussion of high-order human experience in the midst of the living systems of nature in *Modes of Thought*. Writing of the notion that subjects emerge from feeling rather than underlying them, he writes: “In our relatively high grade human existence, this doctrine of feelings and their subject is best illustrated by our notion of moral responsibility. The subject is responsible for being what it is in virtue of its feelings. It is also derivatively responsible for the consequences of its existence because they flow from its feelings” (PR 222). I think it’s fairly remarkable that the “best illustration” of the emergence of subjects *from* feelings (which is emergence into transcendent creativity as Provoker of successor entities) is said to be the experience of moral responsibility, despite there being no official moral philosophy associated with Whitehead’s system. It is clear from the dominant concerns of AI and MT, however, that domain of moral affairs (considered in its experiential contours) becomes something of a preoccupation, though still without generating an official philosophical ethics.

In thinking about “the influence of thought upon the practice of life”, we come to the final concern of the present essay and may turn to framing a model of moral urgency that builds on the notions of “provocation” and “expression” that we have been discussing in metaphysical terms. Whitehead does quite a bit himself in MT to explore certain modes of ethical import that “expression” engenders, along with the attendant notion “importance.” Much of what Whitehead discusses concerns the manner in which conscious experience emerges as a mode of selective emphasis engendering wildly new and transcendently creative patterns of value possibility, as well as the dark associate engendered along with these potentials, which is the *elimination* from consideration (the selective de-emphasizing)

¹⁰ For a fuller treatment of intensity and morality, see my *Intensity: An Essay in Whiteheadian Ontology*, Chapter Five.

of vast swaths of existence whose importance might in fact be, well, “important” in some other perspective in our relevant future, a relevant future that will be co-engendered by both our selective emphases and the ignored importances that will nonetheless be transmitted to future entities by other factors in our environment. While these kinds of considerations are central to a complete consideration of the ethical contributions of the late work, I would like to move in a slightly different direction and talk about moral strategy for our times.

First, the strategy I am interested in is one of “moral urgency”. Why urgency? Because both in terms of the cultural realities demanding our response and in terms of the metaphysics of intensive ecstasis, moral affairs demand “urgency” if our concern is moral action rather than simply reflection on the conditions or specifics of normativity. The kind of urgency I would like to frame can be modeled analogically on the understanding of actuality advanced earlier. Present occasions as subject are generated or provoked by the insinuations of other actualities, and aim at their superjectivity which is about transcendent provocation through ecstatic generative presence in other actualities. Taking our cue from this, we can crystallize two critical questions that must be posed to build a strategy of moral urgency: What are the conditions in our experience that most effectively “provoke” us into “expressive” activity? And what are the self-expressive possibilities resident in our subjectivity that might move us in the direction of acting on our moral intuitions about situations that we judge to be moral demands on our attention? Let us take each of these in turn.

The consideration of the “conditions” in our experience that have “provocative” status is multi-dimensional. All of these dimensions in some manner or another incorporate significant elements of “pattern” as it functions axiologically in us. First, by “conditions” we mean those aspects of valuational habit that have become so deeply embedded in our bodily presence in our environment as to make possible or constrain the kinds of aesthetic foci that may rise to prominence in conscious experience. The patterns constituting our physical habitus—bodily integrity, lifestyle protocols determinative of where we are and when, and in what configuration/pattern relative to the rest of the relevant things in our environment, how we spend our work and leisure time, and so forth—are undeniable factors in the receptivity to provocation that configures us morally.¹¹ Second, by “conditions” we also mean the mental habits of attentive discrimination whereby consciousness in us issues in modes of selective emphasis in our receptive functions, carried out successively across occasions of our experience, making for finite meaning in the flux. Here we need an examination of patterns of fixation and indifference as well as the more subtle or ordinary forms of noticing and regard that we typically engage in. In terms of the things that provoke us given a variety of the foregoing conditions, we need similar sorts of personal interrogations: what are the kinds of objects that tend to get my attention and even more importantly tend to move me to action? How are these provocative objects supported by the physical and mental conditions of receptivity that typify me as agent? Considerations of conditions and objects that have provocative status in me merge in the crucial question: How might I leverage insight into these typically provocative energies in the interest of directing me to act? This would entail looking at instances in which I have been reflexively or purposively moved to act and conducting an in depth evaluation of the

¹¹ This presence of the bodily life in, and continuity with, the physical environment is a persistent theme in the consideration of humans in nature in *Modes of Thought*.

intensive patterns of value implicit in their very discernibility in their instigation of my exercise of agency.

Considering the potentials for self-expression, or generative agency in the provocation of other agents and the objects they will encounter, that constitute my subjectivity is a vast undertaking. On one level it is nothing less than an attempt to imagine the full gamut of intensive transcendent effects that I will have in virtue of my intentional as well as reflexive activities. Doubtless we must undertake this kind of imagination in pieces, and here we get some direction for our efforts: One task will be to prioritize the pieces of this picture in terms of their magnitude and transformative impact. This will entail being good at imagining and effecting priorities among patterns of value and behavior. But on another level, the potentials for self-expression demand a more limited consideration of the modes of communication, relationality, and purposeful undertaking that typically constitute the trajectory of my day-to-day existence. In this investigation I will need help, for my self-expression may be best read back to me from the experiences of others around me who are the sometime recipients of my provocations. The discernment of personality is an inherently social undertaking, since provocative expressions of personality have their ontological status in the social sphere of agencies transcendent to me, and to some extent only those agents can tell me fully what it feels like to prehend my feelings as they are transmitted (or transitioned) into others. Finally, the examination of my provocative agency will require the examination of the objective products of my undertakings: what is my physical and mental footprint on my surroundings? What kinds of things and agencies have I coaxed into being or extinguished with my patterns of assemblage?

Beyond these many questions, however, I have one more. I wonder if the model of provocative agency and of expressive self-imposition in this system frame Whiteheadian ethics as inherently directed towards activism? Is it not the case that existence is described as fundamentally “activist” in the organic, relational metaphysics especially as emerging in the later works? Is process itself possibly a call to activism in being a description of the urgency of becoming itself? By ‘activism’ I am not mainly meaning the thronging of streets in angry protest, though that is one of the morphological possibilities of the broader activism I mean, and though I think that the philosophy of affective emphasis is one of the better options for understanding the passion that fuels revolutionary zeal. ‘Activism’ as I see it here is simply an intensified and self-consciously pursued posture of emphatic commitment that is attuned to the special contours and vulnerabilities of intensive values one deems insufficiently advanced or defended in culture at large. If one argues, as I would, that there are objectively identifiable urgencies in our moral environment, including but by no means limited to global warming, widespread poverty and social destabilization, the radicalization of ideology, violence against and sexual exploitation of women and children, the global financial crisis, etc., and we do in fact grant that we are derivatively (at least) responsible for the effects of our ‘feelings’ or ‘prehensions’ of these and other situations, we could then further argue that the proportional response to these co-admissions is not just to ‘act’ but to ‘act provocatively’ in some manner determined by our answers to the foregoing litany of self-interrogations and with conscious determination. Moreover, we might argue that it is demanded that we express ourselves somehow, beyond the expression that is identical to our provocative activity itself. This is where *Modes of Thought* is so valuable for its description of the nature and role of language and other

modes of expression as radically fundamental to our being as agents. Current spaces for communication (what has come to be known as the 'netroots community' in the US) multiply the opportunities for deliberate expression through online venues as well as providing cyber-channels for insinuating oneself in the spaces of communication in the non-virtual world (newspapers, public hearings, house meetings, etc.). We need not all become bloggers (and god help us all if we did!), but we all may need to deliberately insert our voices into the functionings of the environment/community that we underwrite at any rate and which underwrite our activities in turn. As with the language of 'ecstasis' here again is another axis along which process thought might do well to borrow a page from existentialism and the call to authentic self-imposition qua "choice". In a time of hoped-for change, the transition-focused processes of provocative agency imply that we must, indeed, "be the change we seek." In a time of much apathy and equal if not greater conditions of distress, it may be that the only moral stance that can be defended is the assertive, activist one, a mode of provocative expression which alone may effect deep enough change, as well as be open or available to mutual critique that keeps our moral intuitions honest. Merely private moral determinations are hardly "moral" in the important sense, as well as being insulated from challenges that light up their patterns of value for more keen "disclosure."¹²

It has been my privilege for the past three months to be teaching a course on "Process and Sustainability," wherein Whitehead has been brought into unison of application with the classical pragmatists to build a deepened understanding of the systems implicated in our unsustainable as well as our sustainable behaviors. The novelty of this course for me, beyond the topic, was that it was a "service-learning" course, wherein all of the students were obligated to engage in 30 hours of community service at a venue that was selected for its relevance to the subject matter at hand. My students were allocated to diverse organizations: The Norwood Food Coop, an organic food cooperative serving the urban environment of the Bronx through partnership with an upstate organic grower; the Bronx River Alliance (which is a steward organization seeking to remediate damage to as well as enhance urban enjoyment of the river that runs through Fordham's borough; the Fordham-Bedford Housing Corporation (which works to refashion dwelling spaces in an impoverished urban area using green materials, renewable energy, the retrofitting of inefficient mechanisms for heating and cooling in multi-unit dwellings, and more); and the Mosholu Preservation Corporation (a multi-dimensional activism group for our area wherein students have been tasked to work on planning for the expansion of bicycle and pedestrian pathways along or near defunct rail lines in the Bronx). One of the central texts that we used for the understanding of cultural and natural systems and the disclosure of the sustainability contours of the service assignments, after reading some 'systems thinking' papers devoted to sustainability per se,¹³ was in fact *Modes of Thought*. It is interesting for our purposes here that despite their fierce dedication to the activist dimensions of their service commitments and the pragmatic shape of the understandings thereby facilitated (ideas being bound up in meaning with their actual lived consequences), students found themselves demanding the bona fide system-theory of

¹² To borrow a fundamental characterization of "understanding" in MT (p 49).

¹³ See the website of the Sustainability Institute, in particular the papers of Donella Meadows: <http://www.sustainer.org/>.

Whitehead as a necessary supplement to the philosophy of experience manifest in Dewey's late works.¹⁴ My pedagogy was guided by a provocative aim, which was to trigger in students—if their modes of receptivity were properly primed, which they turned out to be—a thirst for depth of understanding as a condition for well-directed practical engagement. I am led to think--by the relevance of Whitehead's constructions to our activist course focus, by the redoubled commitment of the students to their activism upon reading our sources, and by the students' own demand for system once their appetitions were provoked by *Modes of Thought* and their devious Whiteheadian professor—that the late work is both system and the activist beyond of system in our times.¹⁵ It has certainly endorsed my view that there is in fact, to return to one of Whitehead's concerns evoked earlier, a rich payoff for metaphysics in human culture if it is engaged provocatively.

I hope that the foregoing has been a worthy provocation and look forward to the group's expressions of interest, outrage, or considered indifference!

¹⁴ The group read two substantial chapters from *Experience and Nature*: "Existence as Precarious and Stable" and "Nature, Life and Body-Mind" some of the closest-to-metaphysical essays Dewey ever produced.

¹⁵ Partly as a result of the relentless focus on sustainability in our course, some of the students are now involved in proposing applications for the Clinton Global Initiative University, a conference to take place next February and designed to train and educate students in their commitment to the foci of their applications.