Sense Perception in Current Process Thought:
A Workshop Report

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“Sense perception in current process thought” was the topic of a workshop organized by the “Whitehead Psychology Nexus” (for more information see below) at Fontarèches in spring 2003. This and earlier Fontarèches meetings can be characterized by just a few elements: non-dogmatism, interdisciplinarity and overlapping approaches. Although the convergence point is Whitehead’s philosophy, this is intended in the sense of an “eschaton” rather than a “telos”. The vivid discussions, occurring in a very thoughtful, yet relaxed, atmosphere in the small village of Fontarèches in Southern France, have amply testified for the promising paths and synergies that can emerge in such an environment.

This year, the core intention was to examine relations between Whitehead’s theory of perception and contemporary psychology. The individual contributions can be sorted into the three areas of philosophy, cognitive science, and mental health/psychoanalysis. Unsurprisingly, the question of temporality was addressed – explicitly or implicitly – in most of the papers. (Full abstracts and further details concerning the Fontarèches meetings are available at http://www.isp.ucl.ac.be/staff/weber/.)

Philosophical Approaches

Jean-Claude Dumoncel (Université de Caen, France) discussed the way in which Whitehead treats perception from a broad philosophical perspective. Perception can lead to tragedies of two kinds, he claimed: human tragedy, which follows from not knowing what one does, and natural tragedy, which results from the ineluctable passage of time. Bergson has shown, however, that both kinds of tragedy are rooted in the same relationship between action and perception. Whitehead, following a Bergsonian line of thought, distinguishes two modes of perception: causal efficacy and presentational immediacy. In order to understand the significance of this doctrine, Dumoncel analyzed its development using a philosophical chiasmus between Whitehead’s two types of perception and Anscombe’s two types of object. This chiastic scheme can be utilized to
Weber and Weekes develop a theory of intentionality, a notion advanced by Brentano back in 1874 and, as Dumoncel states, clarified by Chisholm in 1957. Dumoncel finally applied his own work in modal logic to analyze residual difficulties.

Franz Riffert (University of Salzburg, Austria) discussed a number of options to contextualize the problem of perception in contemporary process thought. First of all, he set into historical context the relations between science and philosophy in terms of subordination, mutual neglect, and mutual interaction. Whitehead’s own position was then introduced and the role of perception in Whitehead’s corpus was thoroughly analyzed. Particular emphasis was laid on empirical support for the perceptive mode of causal efficacy. Riffert argued persuasively that physiognomic perception (Neisser), subliminal perception (Marcel), and the microgenetic approach to percept genesis (Werner/Smith) all provide significant support for Whitehead’s categories.

Michel Weber (Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium) concentrated on two main questions: (i) Given Whitehead’s starting point – a phenomenological analysis of sense perception spurred on by the rejection of dualism – how was he led to the concept of symbolic reference? (ii) Given this concept, why (i.e., by which constraints) was he pushed into ontological territory? Weber’s arguments tied together issues of two complexes of Whiteheadian thinking: (A) the bifurcation of nature and the “withness” of the body; presentational immediacy, causal efficacy and symbolic reference; and (B) potentiality (general and real), extensive continuum and the primordial nature of god; genetic and coordinate analyses (i.e., with respect to processes of “concrescence” and transition).

Michael Katzko (University of Nijmegen, Netherlands) sharpened the focus by discussing “subjective forms” and the problem of introspection in psychology. In order to specify the nature of a science of psychology as developed from the perspective of a philosophy of organism, he proposed to discuss the interplay between phenomena and theory by examining how the field of psychology has dealt with what Whitehead calls the subjective form of an actual occasion. He argued that some subjective forms have been reified into structurally discrete model components, while others have been confounded with the notion of data of experience or have been conceptualised as distinct entities in their own right. This uneven handling of subjective forms intersects with a second major problem: the paradoxical role which notions such as “introspection”, “subjectivity”, or “self-reported data” have played in psychological methodology and in the definition of psychology’s accepted subject matter. In short, these notions have been denied as legitimate subject matter although being accepted as a primary source of data methodologically.

Timothy L.S. Sprigge (University of Edinburgh, UK) offered a beautiful meditation on Whitehead and the notion of space. According to Whitehead, nothing is real unless it is experienced. Sprigge emphasized
that “actual occasions”, the ultimate units of experience, exist in a public extensive continuum, thus in space – since this is (along with time) the most familiar form of the extensive continuum. Thereby, Whitehead contradicts the rather common view that subjective experience is non-spatial. But how is an actual occasion in space? Although each actual occasion has its own kind of spatiality, it feels itself to be at the centre of things with a surrounding environment. Since it cannot be true of each actual occasion that it is at the centre of things, how does something experiential, with its false sense of its own centrality, manage to belong to a space in which it is by no means at the centre of things? The conclusion of this monistic criticism of Whitehead’s conception of space might be that spatiality makes sense only from a pluralistic perspective.

Bruce Duncan MacQueen (Department of Comparative Literature, University of Silesia at Katowice, Poland) provided a sharp historical perspective on Being and Becoming in Greek philosophy from Heraclitus to Plato. MacQueen argued that the understanding of “genesis” (coming-to-be) and “phthisis” (passing-away) is crippled by a long history of (mis)interpretations of the key concepts and texts. Although Aristotle ascribed “substantial” meanings to many basic categories, it is an interesting philological observation that the Greeks, even in ordinary, non-philosophical language, often used the verb “to become” where modern languages use “to be”. MacQueen’s main thesis was that both Heraclitus and Plato had a rich conception of sense perception and its relation to cognition as well as to objective reality. Stripping this conception off the baggage of traditional misinterpretation, it is surprisingly close to the process idea of a “mental representation” as it is used in current neuropsychology and neurolinguistics.

Cognitive Approaches

Options of process thinking in cognitive science were addressed by Harald Atmanspacher (Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, Freiburg, Germany), who introduced the concept of “acategorial” mental states. Raising the problem of the acquisition and the creative development of mental representations, he claimed that a crucial distinction has to be made between categorial representations, in which the state of the mental system is stable, and acategorial representations, a structurally unstable type of representation which is neither categorial nor non-categorial. A refined terminology for the description of categorial and acategorial mental states and their (in)stability properties was introduced within the framework of the theory of dynamical systems, where the process of categorisation can be formalized as a mapping from a set of initial conditions onto an asymptotically stable structure. These concepts were furthermore illustrated by selected empirical observations in
neuropsychology and neurophysiology. In conclusion, personality disorders and particular features of creativity were discussed as introspective examples for a concrete phenomenology of acategorial states.

Jason W. Brown (Department of Neurology, New York University Medical School, USA) focused on Whitehead’s theory of time in relation to the microgenetic concept of the present. Brown introduced a concept of the “now” consistent with his own microgenetic theory of mind/brain states. The state transition from past to present, from mind to world, was shown to correspond to the actualization of a perceptual object out of affective, experiential and conceptual precursors. Specifically, a theory of subjective time experience depends on a process account of the relation of percept formation to stages in memory. On this account, the phenomenal present is laid down by a phase transition over growth planes in the evolution of the forebrain. Rather than being a moment between past and future, the present has duration: it is epochal, recurrent, and overlapping.

The question of temporality bounced back in the contributions by Aleksandra Blachnio and Ludmilla Zajac (Casimir the Great University, Bydgoszcz, Poland) on the issue of self-authoring personalities. According to Obuchowski, the recent development of civilization (globalization, cultural and ethical relativism, cultural anemia), has led to the formation of a new self-authoring personality showing special creative adaptation to the anticipated future. Based on a statistical investigation using questionnaires, Blachnio studied how the self-authoring personality is related to future orientation. It turned out that high scores in parameters of self-authoring personality are correlated with a positive attitude toward the future and with the tendency to actualize well-planned goals. In Zajac’s contribution, special attention was devoted to the way in which a self-authoring personality adjusts him- or herself to probable future states – not only in terms of anticipations, but also in terms of self-creativity. According to Zajac, the psychological (existential) present of the self-author is meshed with the future in at least two ways: through the individual’s concept of the future as a mental act in the present, and through the activity undertaken in the present to realize the concept of the future.

Mental Health and Psychoanalysis

Richard Carvalho (Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and Chair of the London Bi-Logic Group, UK) elaborated ideas introduced by Ignacio Matte Blanco (1908–1995) to revise psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud, unconscious activities can be understood with the help of five basic characteristics: condensation, displacement, the absence of contradiction or negation, the absence of time or space, and the lack of distinction between fantasy and reality, or inside and outside. Noticing that these characteristics can be interpreted from the perspective of
Dedekind’s infinite set theory, Blanco developed, under the influence of the Principia Mathematica by Russell and Whitehead, a novel framework for the underlying logic of psychotic phenomena. Carvalho claimed that the distinctive virtue of this framework lies in essentially dispensing with the idea of “the unconscious” as a substantive. He suggested considering all mental phenomena as products of two simultaneously operating modes: the symmetrical (where the terms in a given proposition can be reversed) and the asymmetrical (where they cannot). The asymmetrical mode corresponds to traditional logic, the symmetrical to domains like psychosis or emotion where traditional logic does not hold. Where all terms are convertible, for example, nothing can be denied or contradicted. This also entails consequences for our usual understanding of a preferred direction of time. In a bi-modal and bi-logical conception of the psyche, all events are simultaneously viewed as indivisible in the light of symmetrical relations, and as consisting of discrete elements in the light of asymmetrical logic. Any particular experience at any particular time will be somewhere along a continuum between one extreme and the other. The greater the preponderance of symmetry, the more unconscious the experience will be.

The contribution by Marta Moritz (Casimir the Great University, Bydgoszcz, Poland) addressed aspects of neuroticism in terms of an individual’s relation to tensed time. In order to maintain an orientation toward the future, one must first come to terms with what has already happened. Moritz remarked that obtaining control over past experiences, which is of fundamental importance in the process of growth, is rarely an easy task. In the case of personalities trapped in their (vision of their) past, this fixation ultimately pushes them into neurosis. This is manifested in the impairment of the personality’s programming system, which is based on emotional attitudes, knowledge, and self-assigned tasks. These alterations make it impossible for the neurotic individual to develop a coherent vision of the future as anything other than an endless repetition of the past, or to adapt to changing circumstances.

Clive Sherlock (Cambridge Adaptation Centre, and Clare Hall, Cambridge University, UK) introduced core Buddhist puzzles into the debate by discussing the issue of “thoughts without a thinker”. Sensing and thinking are usually assumed to have a subject, the “person” who is thought to do the sensing and thinking. Process philosophy, on the contrary, argues that everything is impermanent and there is no fixed subject to sensing and thinking. Sherlock attempted to bring together two fundamental aspects of human existence: impermanence and the sense we all have of an enduring “subject” we call a person, a self, an I, or an ego. He outlined a process-oriented approach to understand depression, anxiety and stress, which does not assume an enduring self or subject.
Maria Pachalska (Department of Medical Rehabilitation, Rehabilitation Center, Cracow, Poland) addressed the notion of happiness in the context of process psychology. Psychology has operationalized the concepts of mental health, adjustment and maladjustment, fulfillment and illness, neurosis, psychosis and so on, using them as substitutes for happiness and unhappiness. Pachalska proposed that a processual worldview can serve to critically reintroduce the classical concept of happiness in psychology, and especially in psychotherapy. As basic theoretical and practical difficulties she mentioned: (i) determining whether happiness is a feeling, a mood, or an innate or relational state of being, something that emerges from within or is conferred from outside; (ii) determining if happiness can be defined through negation or through a distinction between true and false happiness; (iii) determining how potential conflicts between the happiness of an individual and a group can be reconciled. According to results of a statistical investigation, happiness should not be regarded as something that one possesses or can possess, but something to which one aspires. In the spirit of Whitehead, then, we realize that the point of activity is not in what is attained, but in what is pursued.

The Whitehead Psychology Nexus

The Whitehead Psychology Nexus (WPN) was founded in 2001 and coordinated since then by Franz Riffert (Salzburg) and Michel Weber (Louvain-la-Neuve). It offers an international open forum dedicated to the cross-examination of Alfred North Whitehead’s “organic” or “process” philosophy and the various facets of contemporary psychological research and debate. It seeks to encourage psychology from a Whiteheadian perspective and Whiteheadian scholarship informed by psychology. At present, its activities (assisted by Anderson Weekes, New York) can be distinguished at three main levels.


Secondly, the Nexus is involved in the organization of international conferences at various sites: the 5th international Whitehead conference
in Korea (May 24–29, 2004), and conferences at the Université de Paris I (Panthéon Sorbonne) that will explore some form of dialogue between the perspectives of Whitehead and James in 2004, and between the perspectives of Whitehead and Merleau-Ponty in 2005. The perspectives of Whitehead and Husserl will be cross-elucidated at the Université de Paris IV (Paris-Sorbonne), probably in 2007. The Nexus will also co-sponsor the symposium “The Importance of Process: System and Adventure” at the University of Salzburg in 2006.

Thirdly, yearly meetings, co-organized by J. Brown, M. Pachalska and M. Weber, have been taking place in Fontarèches (France) since 2002, when the first of these meetings developed a variety of paths towards “new contrasts”, as reflected in the upcoming WPN volume. The second Fontarèches meeting (April 22–23, 2003), which has been abstracted above, was focused on relationships between Whitehead’s theory of perception and contemporary psychology; the third one will interrogate “social praxis and psychotherapeutical practice” (April 14–15, 2004).