



STEVEN SHAVIRO

WITHOUT CRITERIA

Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics



2

Actual Entities and Eternal Objects

In a short chapter of *The Fold* that constitutes his only extended discussion of Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze praises Whitehead for asking the question, “What Is an Event?” (Deleuze 1993, 76). Whitehead’s work marks only the third time—after the Stoics and Leibniz—that events move to the center of philosophical thought. Whitehead marks an important turning point in the history of philosophy because he affirms that, in fact, everything is an event. The world, he says, is made of events, and nothing but events: happenings rather than things, verbs rather than nouns, processes rather than substances. As Deleuze summarizes it, “an event does not just mean that ‘a man has been run over.’ The Great Pyramid is an event, and its duration for a period of one hour, thirty minutes, five minutes . . . , a passage of Nature, of God, or a view of God” (ibid., 76). Becoming is the deepest dimension of Being.¹

Even a seemingly solid and permanent object is an event; or, better, a multiplicity and a series of events. In his early metaphysical book *The Concept of Nature* (1920/2004), Whitehead gives the example of Cleopatra’s Needle on the Victoria Embankment in London (165ff.). Now, we know, of course, that this monument is not just “there.” It has a history. Its granite was sculpted by human hands, sometime around 1450 BCE. It was moved from Heliopolis to Alexandria in 12 BCE, and again from Alexandria to London in 1877–1878 CE. And some day, no doubt, it will be destroyed, or

1. My discussion of the affinities between Whitehead and Deleuze, both in this chapter and throughout *Without Criteria*, is deeply indebted to a number of recent studies comparing the two thinkers: most notably those by Keith Robinson (2006), James Williams (2005, 77–100), and Michael Halewood (2005).

otherwise cease to exist. But for Whitehead, there is much more to it than that. Cleopatra's Needle isn't just a solid, impassive object upon which certain grand historical events—being sculpted, being moved—have occasionally supervened. Rather, it is eventful at every moment. From second to second, even as it stands seemingly motionless, Cleopatra's Needle is actively *happening*. It never remains the same. “A physicist who looks on that part of the life of nature as a dance of electrons, will tell you that daily it has lost some molecules and gained others, and even the plain man can see that it gets dirtier and is occasionally washed” (ibid., 167). At every instant, the mere standing-in-place of Cleopatra's Needle is an event: a renewal, a novelty, a fresh creation.

That is what Whitehead means, when he says that events—which he also calls “actual entities” or “actual occasions”—are the ultimate components of reality. However, I am being a little sloppy here. In *Process and Reality* (1929/1978), Whitehead strictly distinguishes between *occasions* and *events*, and between *entities* and *societies*. He “use[s] the term ‘event’ in the more general sense of a nexus of actual occasions, inter-related in some determinate fashion in one extensive quantum. An actual occasion is the limiting type of an event with only one member” (73). At the limit, an event may be just one particular occasion, a single incident of becoming. But more generally, it is a group of such incidents, a multiplicity of becomings: what Whitehead calls a *nexus*. A nexus is “a particular fact of togetherness among actual entities” (20); that is to say, it is a mathematical set of occasions, contiguous in space and time, or otherwise adhering to one another. When the elements of a nexus are united, not just by contiguity, but also by a “defining characteristic” that is common to all of them, and that they have all “inherited” from one another, or acquired by a common process, then Whitehead calls it a society (34). A society is “self-sustaining; in other words . . . it is its own reason. . . . The real actual things that endure,” and that we encounter in everyday experience, “are all societies” (1933/1967, 203–204). Whitehead sometimes also calls them *enduring objects* (1929/1978, 35, 109). Cleopatra's Needle is a society, or an enduring object; for that matter, so am I myself (1929/1978, 161).

To summarize, an “occasion” is the process by which anything becomes, and an “event”—applying to a nexus or a society—is an extensive set, or a temporal series, of such occasions. This contrast between individual becomings,

and the progressive summation of such becomings, is crucial to Whitehead's metaphysics. An actual occasion is something like what Deleuze calls a *singularity*: a point of inflection or of discontinuous transformation. No actual occasion comes into being *ex nihilo*; rather, it inherits its "data" from past occasions. Yet each actual occasion is also self-creating, or *causa sui*, by virtue of the novel way in which it treats these preexisting data or prior occasions. Hence, no occasion is the same as any other; each occasion introduces something new into the world. This means that each occasion, taken in itself, is a *quantum*: a discrete, indivisible unit of becoming. But this also means that occasions are strictly limited in scope. Once an occasion happens, it is already over, already dead. Once it has reached its final "satisfaction," it no longer has any vital power. "An actual occasion . . . never changes," Whitehead says; "it only becomes and perishes" (1933/1967, 204). And a perished occasion subsists only as a "datum": a sort of raw material, which any subsequent occasion may take up in its own turn, in order to transform it in a new process of self-creation.

In contrast to the immediate becoming and perishing of actual occasions, change always involves a comparison. It can be understood as a passage *between* occasions, or as the "route of inheritance" (Whitehead 1929/1978, 279) from one incident of becoming to another. Therefore change is the mark of an event, understood in Whitehead's broader sense. "The fundamental meaning of the notion of 'change' is the difference between actual occasions comprised in some determinate event" (*ibid.*, 73; cf. 80). This has an important consequence: it means that becoming is punctual and atomistic, and always needs to be repeated or renewed. There is "no continuity of becoming," Whitehead says, but only "a becoming of continuity" (35).²

2. Robinson (2007) argues that one major difference between Whitehead and Deleuze is precisely that "Deleuze is committed to a continuity of becoming but Whitehead is committed to the idea of a becoming of continuity." The problem for both thinkers is how to resolve the conflicting claims of unity and multiplicity, or how to achieve what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 20) call "the magic formula we all seek—PLURALISM=MONISM." Deleuze, following Spinoza and Bergson, opts for radical continuity, and hence leans toward monism more than Whitehead, whose quantum theory of events puts more of an emphasis on irreducible plurality.

Becoming is not continuous, because each occasion, each act of becoming, is unique: a “production of novelty” that is also a new form of “concrete togetherness” (21), or what Whitehead calls a *concrecence*. Something new has been added to the universe; it marks a radical break with whatever was there before. For its part, continuity always has to *become*, precisely because it is never given in advance. The continuity implied by the existence of an enduring object—like Cleopatra’s Needle, or like myself—is something that always needs to be actively produced. Nothing comes into being once and for all; and nothing just sustains itself in being, as if by inertia or its own inner force. Rather, an object can only endure insofar as it renews itself, or creates itself afresh, over and over again.³

At every moment, then, the continuing existence of Cleopatra’s Needle is a new event. You can’t bump into the same obelisk twice. All the more so, in that the same logic holds for me myself, as well as for my perception of the Needle. At any given instant, my encounter with the Needle is itself an event (Whitehead 1920/2004, 169). This encounter might take the form of my surprise at seeing the Needle for the first time; of my close scrutiny of its aesthetic features; of my barely conscious recognition of it as I walk negligently by; of the pain in my forehead, as I knock against it, without looking; of my vague

In any case, the advantage of Whitehead’s “event epochalism,” or atomism on the level of actual occasions, is—as George R. Lucas explains—that it allows him “to avoid the skeptical implications of an apparent ‘paradox of becoming’ common to Bergson and James. The paradox is that an undifferentiated continuity of becoming, since it neither begins nor ends, cannot itself be conceived of as determinate or concrete, nor can it meaningfully be said to give rise to a plurality of distinct existents” (Lucas 1990, 113).

For an attempt to revise Whitehead in the direction of a (more Bergsonian or Deleuzian) sense of the continuity of becoming, see Sha Xin Wei (2005).

3. This implies that Whitehead rejects Spinoza’s basic principle of *conatus*, the claim that “each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being,” and that this striving is “the actual essence of the thing itself” (de Spinoza 1991, 108: *Ethics*, Part III, propositions 6 and 7). For Whitehead, things strive not to persist in their own being, but rather to become other than they were, to make some alteration in the “data” that they receive. An entity’s “satisfaction” consists not in persisting in its own being, but in achieving difference and novelty, in introducing something new into the world.

memory of having seen it years ago; or even, if I have never been to London, of my reading about it in Whitehead's book. Each of these encounters is a fresh event; and each of the selves to which it happens is also a fresh event. Perceiving the Needle is not something that happens to me as an already-constituted subject, but rather something that constitutes me anew as a subject. That is to say, whereas for Kant, and most post-Kantian thought, "the world emerges from the subject," in Whitehead's philosophy the process is inverted, so that "the subject emerges from the world—a 'superject' rather than a 'subject'" (Whitehead 1929/1978, 88). This superject is the remnant that the occasion leaves behind. I am not an entity that projects toward the world, or that phenomenologically "intends" the world, but rather one that is only born in the very course of its encounter with the world ("subject"), and that gets precipitated out of this encounter, like a salt precipitated out of a solution ("superject").⁴

For Whitehead, there is no *ontological* difference between what we generally call physical objects and what we generally call mental or subjective acts. Whitehead is in accord with William James in rejecting "the radical dualism of thought and thing" (James 1996, 28), and insisting rather that "thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are" (37). The sheer material existence of Cleopatra's Needle is an event; and so is my perception of the Needle. Whitehead thus insists upon what Deleuze calls the "univocity" of Being: that "Being is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said," even when "that of which it is said differs" (Deleuze 1994, 36). Of course, my perception of the Needle is not the same thing as the Needle itself,

4. More needs to be said about the resonances between Whitehead's account of concrecence and the subject-superject, and Gilbert Simondon's (2005) notion of individuation. Simondon draws extensively on the example of a crystal being precipitated out of a solution, which I have borrowed as a metaphor here. In addition, Simondon's account of perception as *disparation*, a process whereby "individuation creates a relational system that 'holds together' what prior to its occurrence was incompatible" (Toscano 2006, 139), has close affinities with Whitehead's (1929/1978, 228) claim that "what are ordinarily termed 'relations' are abstractions from contrasts," and his description of the processes whereby entities strive toward a heightened "intensity of contrast" (*ibid.*, 279), and ultimately toward the conversion of oppositions into contrasts (*ibid.*, 348).