

A Thousand Subjectivities. Rethinking Subjectivity with Félix Guattari and Alfred North Whitehead

Melanie Sehgal (Viadrina European University) (Sehgal@europa-uni.de)

Sharing Concerns: Félix Guattari and Alfred N. Whitehead

In *The Three Ecologies* Félix Guattari proposes a radical reconsideration of modern understandings of subjectivity within what he calls an ethico-political or an ecosophical articulation. For Guattari, rethinking our modes of subjectification in the late 20th century, practically and theoretically, is of critical necessity vis-à-vis the profound techno-scientific transformations that our planet is undergoing and their repercussions on the ways in which ,we' relate to ,nature', to one another and to ourselves. Guattari thus calls for a threefold ecology – a redefined ecology of ,nature', an ecology of being together in and as a social body, and a mental ecology reworking the subject's relation with itself. Guattari's words couldn't be more explicit:

If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface. (...) It is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority – be it social, animal, vegetable or Cosmic – that is compromised in this way, in a sort of general movement of implosion and regressive infantilization. (19)

Whereas the relation of Guattari's thought to Foucault, Marx, Reich and of course Lacan and Deleuze has been explored and is traceable in his texts, I would like to read Guattari in conjunction with a body of work that in its systematicity and technicality might seem far away from Guattari's writing: the speculative philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. I would like to do so, because it is striking to what extent Guattari and Whitehead agree not only in their diagnosis of modern thought but also in its practical and theoretical implications that mainly concern the notion of subjectivity. Both side step fundamental assumptions of modern thought.

In *The Three Ecologies*, when spelling out the implications of his ecosophical perspective on our conception of subjectivity, Guattari writes:

The subject is not a straightforward matter; it is not sufficient to think in order to be, as Descartes declares, since all sorts of other ways of existing have already established themselves outside consciousness, while any mode of thought that desperately tries to gain a hold on itself merely turns round and round like a mad spinning top, without ever attaching itself to the real Territories of existence; which for their part, drift in relation to each other like tectonic plates under continents. Rather than speak of the 'subject', we should perhaps speak of *components of subjectification*, each working more or less on its own. This would lead us, necessarily, to re-examine the relation between concepts of the individual and subjectivity, and, above all to make a clear distinction between the two. Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a 'terminal' for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc. Therefore, interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict. (24f)

Guattari's programmatic formulation of processes of subjectification decidedly goes against the grain of the notions of subjectivity as we have inherited them from the modern philosophical canon. His critique of these conceptions of subjectivity can be distinguished into four components: Firstly, Guattari denies the equation, so prominent, if mostly merely implicitly presupposed, of subjectivity and consciousness. In this vein, he secondly questions the equation between the subject and the individual. Thirdly, for Guattari, the subject is not a starting point, it does not constitute what is given and forms the precondition of experience, rather, in a sort of inversion of modern conceptions, it is the *terminus*, the outcome of a process of subjectification that itself has 'vector'-like qualities. The fourth point is implied in the third as well as in Guattari's emphasis on the fact that the three ecologies cannot be thought of in separation of one another: It concerns the way in which the concept of subjectivity is spelled out in relation to 'nature' and 'the other'.

It is striking to what extent not only would Whitehead have agreed to this diagnosis and necessity but also to what extent the orientation in which to search for new ways of thinking about subjectivity and their precise formulation and even vocabulary overlaps. Whitehead emphasises precisely the same aspects as Guattari in his disagreement with modern notions of subjectivity: the critique of the equation of subjectivity and consciousness as well as of subjectivity and individuality, a conception of the subject not as starting point but rather endpoint of processes of subjectification as well as the necessity to not only rethink subjectivity per se, but to rethink the notions of subjectivity in relation to the concept of nature as the other. The outcome in Whitehead's case is a radically non-anthropocentric concept of subjectivity, a metaphysics of a thousand subjectivities. In sketching out Guattari's and Whitehead's revision of subjectivity – towards a thought of subjectification and a thousand subjectivities –, I would like to trace the way in which Guattari's, and in this reading also Whitehead's, threefold reconsideration of ecology at the same time implies a reconsideration of critique, of modes of critical thinking, as critique itself has historically and systematically implied a strong and often very modern notion of subjectivity.

Nature and Subjectivity or Modern Habits of Thought

Guattari's text is written from the midst of the political struggles of the 80ies and everyday day life in the psychiatric clinic of La Borde. His world seems far apart from Whitehead's, the mathematician who, late in his life, found himself working on a new metaphysics, even a cosmology. Yet, I think what they shared is a reading of and a concern for the world that they inherited and inhabited, a concern that makes their convergences in thought, despite appearances, somewhat less surprising. Guattari's three ecologies can be read as an answer to Whitehead's diagnosis of the modern constellation, a somewhat more practical, less technical answer than Whitehead himself gave, which was the construction of a new metaphysics and cosmology. *Process and Reality* can, as Isabelle Stengers has pointed out, be read as an answer to a certain reading of the modern constellation that for Whitehead was structured by what he called 'the bifurcation of nature'. It is thus a 'situated metaphysics'.¹

¹ Melanie Sehgal: "A Situated Metaphysics. Things, History and Pragmatic Speculation in A. N. Whitehead". In: *The Allure of Things*. Roland Faber, Andrew Goffey (Hg), London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

For Whitehead modernity was marked by a fundamental incoherence, a “radical inconsistency [that] accounts for much that is half-hearted and wavering in our civilization” (SMW 76). He locates this inconsistency at the heart of modern thought in the concept of nature. Nature ‘bifurcates’ within the modern framework, because there is on the one hand nature as it is the object of scientific query – molecules, atoms that function mechanistically – but this nature is never perceived as such. On the other hand there is nature as it is perceived, with its qualities and values. As a consequence, for modernity it is the human subject that endows ‘bare nature’ with qualities (such as warmth, colour) and value.² Whitehead’s primary concern is not with the technicality of correct reasoning though he points out that at the basis of this constellation there is a logical fallacy, taking an abstraction (the Newtonian conception of matter) for the concrete itself. Whitehead’s problem with the bifurcation is first and foremost empiricist and ethical. His objection to the bifurcation theories is an empiricist one, because they are inconsistent with experience. Everything that doesn’t fit into the materialist scheme is in consequence explained away, it is denied the status of existence proper, defaced as merely illusory, merely subjective. The problem thus lies with the worldly consequences of this bifurcation, this way of thinking about nature, because for Whitehead – as a pragmatist – concepts do not mirror the world, but have consequences *in* it. Concepts form habits, of thought as well as of action, they affect how those who use them act in and relate to the world they are part of. And for Whitehead the bifurcation theories have disastrous consequences, consequences that seem not less but only more virulent today. Whitehead is concerned with the way that scientific materialism has shaped the mentality of the modern world, the way in which scientific thinking has become part of the cultural imaginary, far beyond the realm of the sciences themselves. The bifurcation of nature describes a cultural situation, a discourse, or what Whitehead terms ‘civilization’, a kind of metaphysics, that remains implicit but nevertheless dominant and powerful in a certain epoch. I think that Whitehead’s conception of a bifurcated nature offers a plausible reading of the ecological crises that Guattari so forcefully described.³ Within this frame, nature becomes not only wholly ‘other’, but is deprived of qualities and values *for its own sake*, to use a phrasing that frequently occurs in Whitehead’s writing, thus enabling and legitimizing all kinds of exploitation and impoverished modes of relating.

Read through this historical as well as systematic perspective, the bifurcation of nature marks a defeat for philosophy according to Whitehead. It marks a defeat, because philosophy no longer accomplishes its task: taking care of the abstractions that circulate in an epoch, a culture.⁴ In Whitehead’s reading, modern philosophy rightly rejects the materialist doctrine as adequate description of the mind, the subjective, but it implicitly accepts it as adequate description of nature because it retreats from the realm of nature altogether (thus instantiating the two cultures). In that way scientific materialism with its notion of bare facts, bare matter, remains unquestioned, it is simply *supplemented* by the

² “What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind. Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream” (CN 30).

³ Both think about ecology without appealing to a conservational scheme, that would presuppose the distinction between a realm culture and a realm nature that need to be separated in order to preserve the latter.

⁴ “You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions. [...] An active school of philosophy is quite as important for the locomotion of ideas, as is an active school of railways engineers for the locomotion of fuel” (SMW 59).

realm of subjectivity. Rather than pointing out the logical fallacy – mistaking an abstraction, the Newtonian conception of matter, for reality itself, for what is most concrete – and insisting on the fact that “something important had been left out“ (SMW 77) in the materialist scheme as the romantic poets did, the canon of modern philosophy ‘indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away’. Modern theories of subjectivity then, for Whitehead, rest on these prior assumptions of a bifurcated nature. If Whitehead reads the philosophies from Descartes, to Hume, Locke and Kant as an implicit response to the bifurcation theories, it is not surprising that as a response, *because* it is implicit, it remains deeply steeped in this configuration.

Actual Entities or A Thousand Subjectivities

Whitehead derives a task from this reading of the modern constellation – to construct a metaphysics in which nature doesn’t bifurcate, a metaphysics that therefore not only implies a radical reworking of the way we think about nature but also about how we conceptualize subjectivity. At the core of this project there is one concept, that Whitehead constructs in order to avoid the fallacy of misplaced concreteness that marks modern thought with its idea of the most concrete as simply located, as mere matter, and its distinction in two kinds of fundamentally different entities: the concept of ‘actual entity’. ‘Actual entity’ is Whitehead’s term for all that exists in the full sense of what it means to exist. Actual entities designate *the concrete*. The ambition of this concept is a monist one – to be able to account for all kinds of existence –, but it is also a pluralistic one: to be able to account for the diversity of existence.⁵ The most important feature of an actual entity is its temporality: it becomes (and perishes), in an *atomic* temporality that Whitehead describes as processes of synthesis, of ‘concrecence’. In describing actual entities Whitehead heavily draws on concepts that have been forged – by Kant, Locke, Descartes – in order to describe subjectivity. Whitehead uses these terms, because within these lines of thought he finds a vocabulary that was constructed precisely to describe processes of ‘coming together’, of synthesis. But he makes slight modifications – he suspends the implicit presupposition in these theories of the bifurcation of nature. Therefore, actual entities *are* subjects for Whitehead, but they are not *human* subjects. Actual entities echo the Leibnizian monads in the sense that they are situated on a metaphysical level that spans the realms of nature and culture, the human and the non-human, the living and the inanimate. *Everything* is constituted by actual entities – they are “the final real things of which the world is made up” of (PR 18). Actual entities are processes that he describes as processes of feeling, feeling the manifold data – and for Whitehead, as for Leibniz, this data comprises the world in its entirety – and turns it into the unity of its individual ‘satisfaction’. They are constituted by mutual intra-actions (to borrow a term from Karen Barad) that Whitehead calls ‘prehensions’, dropping the various prefixes like apprehension, comprehension that would bind these processes again implicitly to the human realm of perception and conception. Each actual entity constitutes itself through a ‘decision’, incorporating and eliminating what matters into its very constitution. Actual entities express their perspective on the universe, according to what matters to them, and once constituted, it becomes ‘immortal’, it becomes the data for new prehensions of new actual entities.⁶

⁵ “Actual entities [...] are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. They differ among themselves [...] But, though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level. The final facts are, all alike, actual entities” (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p.18).

⁶ “The many become one, and are increased by one” (PR 3).

Thus, even if Whitehead uses terms from psychology, like 'feeling' or 'prehension' in order to describe actual entities, the concept is decidedly not limited to human subjectivity. 'Feeling,' Whitehead insists, 'is a mere technical term.'⁷ There is no anthropocentrism in this. To the contrary, it is a metaphysical and speculative generalization, which is Whitehead's way of countering the 'human exceptionalism' in modern thinking that distinguishes between entities that feel, on the one hand, and entities that are 'merely matter,' on the other. This radically changes the understanding of nature, but of course it also radically the notion of subjectivity. In fact, for Whitehead actual entities *are* subjects, or rather: 'subject-superjects', but subjectivity no longer only belongs to the human realm (what we are used to call subjects for Whitehead are societies, nexus of actual entities that form patterns of cohesion). Against modern habits of thought that let nature bifurcate, the ambition of the terms actual entity and 'feeling' is at the same time a *monist and a pluralist* one: to be a concept that can, in its generality, account for *all kinds* of existence. Looked at from the perspective of the bifurcation thesis, the technicality and strangeness of Whitehead's concepts finds an explanation: they seem weird, especially so to a philosophically trained mind, because they do not follow modern habits of thought and its bifurcations. From there a re-reading of the modern philosophical canon becomes possible, a reading that (with the particular kind of liberty that Whitehead takes in his readings of the history of philosophy) suspends assumptions that are basic to the philosophies of Kant or Locke.

For a longer version of this paper, I will explore the repercussions of this metaphysical notion of subjectivity for theories of the subject in the modern tradition, more precisely I will construe Whitehead's theory of the subject-superject as answering to the requirements formulated by Guattari, for a new theory of the subject, thus answering to the four aspects that according to Guattari such a theory would have to meet with: circumventing the implicit equations of subjectivity and consciousness (1) as well as of subjectivity and individuality (2), developing a concept of the subject that doesn't take the subject for granted, as a starting point and precondition but conceives of it as outcome and terminus of processes of subjectification (3) and lastly to reconsider the notion of subjectivity in relation to the concept of nature as the other.

But modern theories of the subject are, of course, not only *about* human subjectivity, they also imply a methodology, an epistemology. By looking at these theories through Whitehead's bifurcation thesis however, it can become clear that this methodology itself implies certain assumptions, first and foremost what Whitehead terms "the substance-quality doctrine of actuality" (PR 156). Thus fundamental assumptions of modern thought, that govern theory up until today, already qua its own practice, become questionable. Suspending these assumptions engages thought less in questions concerning the limitations of subjective knowledge but opens it up towards an experimental and speculative adventure of a thousand subjectivities. Via this re-reading of the modern canon (mainly Kant and Locke) it can become visible that rather than doing away with subjectivity, a way Whitehead's affirmation of metaphysics might and has (specially in recent 'speculative turns') been construed, Whitehead formulates a 'reformed subjectivist principle' of which the notion of actual entity is a key component. My hypothesis is that such a radically non-anthropocentric notion of subjectivity that no longer posits the subject as other to nature, can also account for modes of subjectification that do not follow the norms the 'I think, therefore I am' have accustomed

⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p.164.

us to, modes of subjectification that Guattari as well as Whitehead were so concerned about. And it can also open up new perspectives on the practice of critique, reconsidering *who* it is that practices critique and *how*.