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Whitehead's Account of the Sixth Day

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The account of the sixth day should be written, He gave them speech and they became souls.

Alfred North Whitehead¹

This sentence, concluding the chapter "Expression" in Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*, is typical of the kind which made him what has been characterized as one of the most often quoted, and the least often read, among twentieth-century philosophers. If you quote such a sentence, it may give your text a poetic touch, as if a breath of fresh air entered the closed room of your argumentation. Somebody else is authorizing you to make present, in a suggestive nutshell, what you never would dare write, or even think, in your own name. But usually, you would not be able to defend the quote: you just felt the need to transmit it, to transmit the refreshing effect it produced on you when you read it, most of the time as already quoted by somebody else. If asked, maybe you would protect yourself behind the protest that it is only a beautiful metaphor for your own serious, responsible ideas.

My point here will be that there is never ever any metaphor in such Whiteheadian sentences, and that the poetic touch, the experience of fresh air, owes nothing to free inspiration and everything to hard technical construction. The verbs "to give" and "to become," as well as the nouns "speech" and "souls," may well produce the impression of immediate understanding, their particular articulation

1. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 41.

then producing the poetic touch. But they are first of all technical Whiteheadian terms, the very conceptual role of which entails the imaginative jump produced by their articulation. And, as with all Whiteheadian concepts, their meaning cannot be elucidated right away, just as an animal cannot be approached right away: in both cases, you need some slowing down and learning what they demand and how they behave.

I will thus propose such an approach to Whitehead's account of the sixth day. A rather involved approach, since each step will try to slow down the on rush of predictable interpretations. I will try to have the reader feel what it takes to approach Whitehead, which is also how he challenges our habits of thought.

There is a first point, however, which I wish to make utterly and directly clear. Correcting the biblical account of the sixth day, Whitehead accepts that we humans, gifted with speech, may be thought of as "creatures"; but the "He" who gave us speech is not to be identified with God as the author, master, and creator, or even as the One who would have been able to give us the capacity for speech as something ready-made. In *Modes of Thought*, we deal with modes of thought indeed, that is, for Whitehead, with the way important experiences have found historical expression: "History is the record of the expressions of feelings peculiar to humanity."² The peculiar feeling that is expressed by any account of the sixth day is our feeling of ourselves as creatures among creatures, but also as separated in some peculiar way from our fellow creatures. God may or may not be involved, but the historical record delivers one word to characterize this peculiarity, which Whitehead accepts: this is the word "soul." We will thus have to understand the difference between the Whiteheadian and Christian souls: our souls were not given, we "became" souls.

Yet as soon as we free Whitehead's sentence from ready-made religious interpretations, we risk falling into another trap, today a much more powerful one. And here begins the hard work, against the readiness of many in the human sciences to endorse forgetting about a "substantial" soul, and to confirm instead that human subjectivity and culture can indeed be defined as conditioned by language.

Something very important has happened as a result of this substitution. To be created as well as to be given refers to a problem of existence, while to be conditioned refers to a problem of explanation, that is, of knowledge. More precisely, it refers to an "objective" knowledge, deducing what exists, including our claims to "have a soul," from conditions that will explain away those claims.

2. Ibid., p. 27.

The power of this trap is such that before addressing the singularity of Whitehead's answer to the question of the sixth day, I need to comment on what may appear as a rather strange, if usual today, conflation of knowledge and existence—knowledge deciding what exists (here, the power of language) and what does not (our souls). In order to avoid the heavy generalities distinguishing epistemology and ontology, I will instead address the distinction between “necessary conditions” and “necessary and sufficient” conditions.

I choose such an approach because it is a quite technical distinction, devoid of any suggestive poetic touch, while for Whitehead, as a mathematician (as for any mathematician), it was nevertheless a crucial one, even a dramatic one. Indeed, the fate of a mathematical demonstration, its scope, its success or failure, depends on it. Mathematics is a case where the very existence of a mathematical being as well constructed depends on its definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

But this distinction was also a dramatic one for Christian theology, when the salvation of the Christian soul is concerned. Divine grace, for most theologians before Augustine, was necessary, but not sufficient, for salvation: salvation would need man's first move, which grace would amplify and stabilize—or, at least, it needed man's own acceptance of the divine offer. For Augustine, however, acceptance is also produced by grace, which thus acquired the status of a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.

In a certain way, in both mathematics and Augustinian theology, we deal with becoming: becoming a mathematical being, or becoming able to escape damnation. But in both cases, becoming is conflated with being gifted with a sufficient condition. Since becoming relates to the question of “what is it to exist?” and sufficient condition to “what is it we can define?” we may speak in both cases of a realized conflation of existence and knowledge.

Now, outside mathematical thought and theology, no condition is ever sufficient: the power of any condition always implies other conditions. This is why the claim that something explains some other thing usually entails the distinction between what is felt to need explanation and what we feel allowed to take for granted. This was dramatized by Leibniz, the thinker of the principle of sufficient reason, who wrote that the whole universe is expressed by the least, most insignificant, most self-explanatory of our actions as well as by the fateful choice of Adam eating the fateful apple. The universe is the only necessary and sufficient condition. For finite knowledge there will always be a gap between what comes into existence and what we can define.

Leibniz's solution sends the conflation of existence and knowledge up to God's infinity. But it gives no room to a positive distinction, instead verifying that as soon as we think in terms of "conditions," we are led to think of the difference between "necessary" and "necessary and sufficient" as a "gap," as what remains when everything we could explain has been explained. Such a gap may be explained away as a matter of contingency, or as the result of the finite character of our knowledge. But the same gap may also be dramatized as designating what has the power to transcend conditioning or reduction, what can and should be purified from everything that can be explained away in terms of something else. You may think here about existential freedom as defined against all social conditioning.

These conflicting interpretations provide the setting for the very question that turned Whitehead into a speculative philosopher; the radical, proudly exhibited, incoherence that he saw as plaguing modern thought. Such a conflict pervades all domains where some kind of "objective explanation"—be it neuronal, linguistic, cultural, political, or social, or economic—may parade as a "nearly sufficient" condition, arousing vigorous protests in the name of what would escape, or transcend, so-called objective explanations.

Here indeed we have to slow down, because we have to resist general ideas about scientific knowledge and what would eventually transcend it. The example of scientific experimental demonstration certainly played a role in the power claimed by objective explanation. However, experimental objectivity is not something you can generalize. It is not related to the satisfaction of a general right of reason but to an event, "experimental success." For an experiment to be a success, an operation of disentanglement must be achieved, as distinguished from a unilateral arbitrary methodological cut. This possibility of disentanglement from the entangled world we are given is the condition for a framing that will enact a distinction between some so-called general conditions, which may be taken for granted, and what will be the matter of experimental demonstration, when it becomes possible to demonstrate how something changes as a function of something else. In other words, only in the case of experimental success is an entangled world, lacking a necessary and sufficient condition, actively disentangled and framed in such a way that one of its aspects acquires the power to verify what will then be called an objective definition—that is, the definition of the specific closed, functionally articulated set of conditions that "objectively" explains what is observed.

If the specificity of modern thought consists in its having necessary conditions parading as nearly sufficient ones, there is absolutely

no surprise in the way the event of experimental success was explained away by general antagonistic interpretations. From the scientists' point of view, the event that they depend upon may be forgotten in favor of the explanation it made possible. From the critical point of view, be it that of Kant or that of modern sociology of science, there is no event: be it transcendently or socially conditioned, human understanding is the only true author of the objective explanation, while reality remains mute.

But listen now to how Whitehead celebrates, in *Science and the Modern World*, the growth of modern science, and the faith in the order of nature without which it would not have been possible:

There is no parting from your own shadow. To experience this faith is . . . to know that detached details merely in order to be themselves demand that they should find themselves in a system of things; to know that this system includes the harmony of logical rationality and the harmony of aesthetic achievement; to know that, while the harmony of logic lies upon the universe as an iron necessity, the aesthetic harmony stands before it as a living ideal moulding the general flux in its broken progress towards finer, subtler issues.³

Here is what I would call a Whiteheadian dramatization of the event of experimental success. Such a success indeed exhibits the iron logical necessity ruling a well-framed system of things—but it also means an aesthetic achievement, since, in order to become possible, the successful framing of a “detail” requires the living ideal of the working scientist. Whitehead's dramatization thus asks those who have faith in the power either of knowledge to discover the order of nature, or of human ideals to obtain their satisfaction, not to part from their own shadow—that is, not to part from what each faith requires in order to be fulfilled, and cannot provide by itself. As soon as we take into account the passionate knower—for whom what matters is the aesthetic achievement of having detached details become themselves—not some anonymous “knowing subject,” there may be no conflation of knowledge and existence but a double dramatization, of both the knower and the known. Furthermore, Whitehead's dramatization also puts into a rather crude light the generalization that led, for instance, to the claims of a neurophysiologist objectively explaining the human so-called soul by some blind but functional interplay among neurons. In this case we see neither the harmony of logic, nor the aesthetic harmony. Rather, we may well conclude that if this scientist's claims are taken seriously it

3. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Free Press, 1967), p. 18.

is because they confirm the general ambition to have *what does not feel* objectively explaining, somehow, *what does feel*. More generally, it seems nowadays that if you can refer to language, to culture, to biological selection, to states of the central nervous system, to society, to the market, you will be able to claim the heritage of Galileo or Newton.

There may be many explanations for this strange generalization, as is always the case with history; but if we take history to be, as Whitehead proposes, “the record of the expressions of feelings peculiar to humanity,” it may be preferable not to criticize such a generalization (for instance, as a matter of misplaced belief, or of the misplaced authority of physics). We may rather wonder about the peculiar feeling recorded by the celebration of experimental success as exemplifying the very fulfillment of the aspiration of human rationality. I would propose that such a celebration has to do not so much with the many questions that nature or mankind may inspire, but rather with the possibility of explaining away such questions, leaving a rather depopulated scene organized around the conflict between objective explanation and what would transcend it.

My proposition entails that at the center of this scene stand a much older question, the question, “who is responsible for what?” What would have been generalized would indeed be the possibility, when we deal with experimental facts, to claim that scientists are not responsible for their interpretation, that such an interpretation was indeed demanded by the fact itself. The proliferation of nearly sufficient conditions would then feature a rather strange soul, whose first question is about responsibility, and who demands that there is an objective nature to bear the full responsibility for the way its order is characterized.

Here, with the overwhelming importance of the question “who is responsible for what?” we may come back to the sixth-day account—the day, the Bible tells us, when Adam and Eve were created, as the ones who would be responsible for the sin of eating the apple and for the subsequent fate of humanity. The tale is that on the sixth day, when God gave souls to Adam and Eve, He also gave them the freedom to sin, and the responsibility to choose between obedience and disobedience. The easy modern acceptance of any so-called objective explanation, which would explain away this freedom and responsibility, does not so much amount to a rejection of this tale as to the claim that only science, not the Bible, may assign responsibility. In other words, the modern account of the sixth day would be “He created the scientist”—triumphantly demonstrating the power of scientific objectivity, explaining away gregarious beliefs, identifying superstitious mankind as part of the previous day’s creation.

I am now able to address the singularity of Whitehead's answer to the question of the sixth day—that is, his proposition that we think of ourselves as creatures indeed, but not as creatures gifted with a soul: as creatures that, being given speech, *became* souls. Whitehead's contrast between “to be given” and “to become” is intended to lead us away from the modern meeting place crowded with the obsessive question of what is responsible for what. Whitehead tried to change the problem.

In order to introduce the meaning and scope of this change, I will adduce Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* For Deleuze and Guattari, both Blaise Pascal and Sören Kierkegaard (who meditated about the Christian soul) and Jean Paul Sartre (who did not need God) belong to one and the same plane, characterized by a negative movement that enacts transcendent values against the conditioning by immediate interests. I personally would add to Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Sartre figures such as Jacques Monod and Richard Dawkins for whom science is salvation, the only route we have against the way natural selection has shaped us. Here are Deleuze and Guattari:

The problem would change if it were another plane of immanence. It is not that the person who does not believe God exists would gain the upper hand, since he would still belong to the old plane as negative movement. But, on the new plane, it is possible that the problem now concerns the one who believes in the world, and not even in the existence of the world but in its possibilities of movements and intensities, so as once again to give birth to new modes of existence, closer to animals and rocks. It may be that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our most difficult task. . . . This is the empiricist conversion (we have so many reasons not to believe in the human world; we have lost the world, worse than a fiancée or a God). The problem has indeed changed.⁴

Empiricist conversion—believing in this world, in this life—may mean many things. Since my point of entry here is the account of the sixth day, I will concentrate on the reclaiming of the many questions and aspirations that were expelled from the scene, as it was depopulated both by the biblical account and by modern so-called objectivity. Because it all began with the Bible, when the very interesting differences related to the five first days—that is to say, the respective modes of existence of the rocks and of the animals—were overshadowed by the importance of the sixth day, when He created

4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 74–75.

mankind in His own image, giving to Adam governance over everything that had been created before. Without details. In bulk.

If indeed the problem has changed—or, in Whiteheadian terms, if indeed we belong to another epoch—it is not so astonishing that speculative philosophy, as the first victim of modern thought, deprived of authority by both science and critique, may be with us again. Not as the bearer of some new truth, but as experimenting in order to find out how to escape the previous accounts of the sixth day. What is required is not to criticize them, which is easy enough, but to forge a new expression for the feelings of a creature whose soul does not demand any longer to know first who is responsible.

To give you a taste of the risk required by this most strange and adventurous task of trying to believe in this world and in this life, our life, I would ask that you again listen to Whitehead, and feel the contrast between this dramatization and the previous one, what we knew when we entertained the faith that there was a nature the logical necessity of which we could identify:

We require to understand how the unity of the universe requires its multiplicity. We require to understand how infinitude requires the finite. We require to understand how each immediately present existence requires its past, antecedent to itself; and requires its future, an essential factor in its own existence. . . . And we require to understand how mere matter of fact refuses to be deprived of its relevance to potentialities beyond its own actuality of realization. . . . The discussion of present fact apart from reference to the past, to concurrent present, and to future, and from reference to the preservation or destruction of forms of creation is to rob the universe of essential importance. In the absence of perspective there is triviality.⁵

We no longer know, but we require to understand. Understanding is not knowing. Knowing is about closed facts, facts we are able to define. As long as the supposedly closed order of nature was concerned, we knew, or did not, or hesitated, or discussed. The problem changes when it is no longer a matter of definition (the importance being then that it be the right one), but a matter of understanding. Understanding entails for Whitehead an experience of transformative disclosure, not the possibility of a definition, valid or invalid.

As a consequence, do not ask me to define understanding; instead, understand it from the experience of disclosure elicited by Whitehead's "And we require to understand how mere matter of fact refuses to be deprived of its relevance to potentialities beyond its own actuality of realization." This requirement also concerns rocks

5. Whitehead, *Modes* (above, n. 1), pp. 83–84.

and animals. We do not require the proof that their modes of existence cannot be reduced to mere matters of fact, we require the capacity never to reduce anything to a mere matter of fact, or matter of proof—to become able to feel its relevance to unrealized potentialities. This is the very cry of the Whiteheadian soul, the soul we became on the sixth day. At the end of the chapter on “Understanding” in *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead indeed writes: “As we lose this sense of disclosure, we are shedding that mode of functioning which is the soul.”⁶

“In the absence of perspective there is triviality.” Even when physicists approach the so-called great problem of the origins of the universe, the possibility of triviality is present. When Stephen Weinberg famously remarked that the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless, he witnessed the problem of a comprehension that produces triviality. And it is then of no use to add some God behind the Big Bang, tuning the first instants in order to accommodate the possibility of mankind, and of no use to speculate about the means needed to provide for the immortality of mankind when the universe will be populated by black holes only. What is the point, really, in the grandiose dream of mankind surviving in the guise of a giant cosmic computer recording and computing data, data, data, which is the dream of some contemporary physicists? The deadly touch of triviality marks whatever connection we may seek to establish between the universe as defined by contemporary physics and the way the question of the universe matters for us as souls requiring understanding. I could, but will not, write the same about other grandiose hypotheses, such as an Intelligent Design being superimposed on Darwinian evolution. It is of no use since it does not save the adventure of life from triviality but turns it into the manifestation of a design, which still deprives living beings of their relevance to potentialities beyond their own actuality of realization.

How, then, should we *understand* the Whiteheadian version of the sixth day?

We already know the kind of temptation we should resist. We should beware of any claim linking this understanding with the heroic discovery of the pointless character of what mattered for mankind before us—for instance, the Freudian epic story of the successive discovery that Man does not inhabit the center of the world, is not the crowning piece of the animal kingdom, and is not even, by the grace of Freud himself, master of his own consciousness. But we should be wary also of any heroic affirmation of the human free

6. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

soul: I am not a rock, a root, or an animal; I am not my past, I am not asking for any particular future, I am my decision, now. The Whiteheadian answer would be: your own future and past, you may well trivialize, if it does help you to affirm that your present matters, but what do you understand about rocks or roots, little man!

However, to go further, we meet a typical Whiteheadian difficulty. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead's "technical" book, we get no technical approach to the question of the soul. Instead, we get a most definitive rejection of any substantial definition of the soul as an enduring entity: "The problem of the enduring soul with its permanent characteristics is exactly the irrelevant answer to the problem life presents. That problem is, How can there be originality? And the answer explains how the soul need be no more original than a stone."⁷ For Whitehead, endurance is never an attribute, always an achievement: throughout its adventures, something—I will come back to the characterization of this "something"—succeeds in maintaining some thread of conformity between past and present. Such an achievement is certainly required for us to become souls, it is a necessary condition if you wish, but now the problem has changed. The question associated with the soul, "how can there be originality?" demands a positive answer. The distinction between "to be given" and "to become" will not be framed any longer in terms of conditions, be they sufficient or not.

But in *Process and Reality*, the word "soul" is never positively used outside comments on quotations from Hume. There is only one technical, rather offhand, remark, but it is quite an extraordinary one: In his own philosophy, Whitehead writes "'the soul' as it appears in Hume, and 'the mind' as it appears in Locke and Hume are replaced by the phrases 'the actual entity', and 'the actual occasion', these phrases being synonymous."⁸ Since I will not be able to present Whitehead's God here, let me just emphasize that this "synonymous" remark is very important from that point of view. Indeed, in Whitehead's philosophy, the only actual entity that is not an actual occasion is God. Thus, the whole theological tradition about mankind being created in the image of God—and more precisely, of God conceived as starting from whatever image we produce about ourselves—is repudiated in just four words. In Whitehead's metaphysics, God is the only actual entity that cannot be characterized in terms related to what Hume and Locke call "mind" or "soul."

7. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 104.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

We are very far, however, from an account of the sixth day. Actual entities are indeed the metaphysical concept for what Whitehead defines as *res verae*, the true things, the only things that may be said, in metaphysical terms, to really exist. And it can be said that one of the metaphysical functions of actual entities is to state that, whatever did happen on the sixth day, it does not require a new kind of metaphysical definition of what it means to "exist."

Indeed, the strong singularity of Whitehead's definition of what exists is that it avoids any possible conflation of the categories of existence and the kind of differences we would wish to explain—for instance, the difference between what we call an electron, a rock, a rabbit, and ourselves. Actual entities are indeed meant to produce disconnection between two versions of what it is "to explain." Whatever truly exists, whatever is a *res vera*, will be described as explaining itself, *causa sui*; while whatever we are able to explain is not a *res vera*.

The point is not to wonder about the legitimacy of Whitehead's speculative definition of what truly exists, as if *Process and Reality* unfolded some kind of ultimate perspective. A perspective is certainly produced, but it cannot be separated from an experience of disclosure; and this experience does not concern actual entities as such, but the very possibility of changing the problem, to escape the oppositions our modern definitions induce. For Whitehead there can be no ultimate, or right, perspective, because perspective cannot be separated from importance. As soon as we define a perspective as a settled position of knowledge about something out there, we get "the dead abstraction of mere fact from the living importance of things felt. The concrete truth is the variation of interest."⁹ What matters for Whitehead is to induce such a variation of interest—"a" variation, never "the" variation that would get you to the right, final, perspective.

Process and Reality was written by a creature of the sixth day, who aimed at a change in our "modes of thought," enabling us to resist all perspectives that involve shedding that mode of functioning which is our soul. But you never resist in general. You may resist as a poet, as a teacher, as an activist for animal rights. Whitehead's mode of resistance was that of a philosopher, directly working with the powerful abstractions that dominate our modes of thought, not trying to bypass or denounce them, but endeavoring to produce a variation in the interest they induce. More precisely, Whitehead's mode of resistance implied fully experimenting with a demand for coherence and accepting its consequences, including the most adventurous

9. Whitehead, *Modes* (above, n. 1), p. 11.

ones. Such a demand has as one of its consequences that we resist the idea that it is for mankind, and mankind only, that the distinction between “to be given” and “to become” is relevant; that we resist the perspective that mankind is the only point in a pointless universe; and also that we resist being the ones who would distribute what is pointless—the mode of existence of a rock, for instance—and what is not: ourselves and maybe some selected animals. The distinction between “to be given” and “to become” must then concern whatever exists—that is, for Whitehead, whatever comes into being, that which he names “actual entities.”

Here I may finally quote Whitehead’s metaphysical definition of “becoming”: “In the becoming of an actual entity, the potential unity of many entities in disjunctive diversity acquires the real unity of an actual entity.”¹⁰ What is initially given is always a “many,” a disjunction the unity of which is potential, that is, must be produced. Becoming thus means acquiring real unity, not to be confused with the unfolding of some kind of unity that would be potentially there. The functioning of the actual entity in its process of unification, of becoming one, is the crucial theme of the hundreds of pages of *Process and Reality*, and the stake of those pages is to produce the concept of a subject deciding for itself how it will be explained by what was given for its becoming—that is, how it will both feel it and become the subject of this feeling. As the “principle of process” states, “*how an actual entity becomes constitutes what an actual entity is.*”¹¹ And when the many that are what is felt, the feeling, and the feeler have come together into a real unity, the actual entity that now “is” no longer feels, no longer is a subject: it has attained what Whitehead calls “objective immortality,” and is added to the many that will have to be felt by other subsequent entities. The many have become one, and are increased by one.

Do not ask how Whitehead demonstrates that unification cannot be reduced to something that would explain away becoming. Such a demonstration would mean that we situate ourselves before the sixth day, or even before the first one, starting with the hypothesis of a world devoid of becoming and wondering if such a world is not sufficient to define ours. This is sheer incoherence, since what we define as devoid of becoming presupposes becoming, that is, “us” becoming able to form such a definition. Again, “there is no parting from your own shadow.” Becoming is not to be demonstrated, it is a matter of sheer disclosure.

10. Whitehead, *Process* (above, n. 7), p. 22.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

In contrast, the question of “*how* an entity becomes” is the one for which a demand for coherence may be positively put to work. Becoming is not to be demonstrated, but it must be characterized in such a way that it does not blindly solve all questions, as something that would transcend all reasons. If Whitehead needed so many pages, it is because he had accepted what he called the “ontological principle,” which states that “there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere,”¹² thereby accepting the old rationalist claim that everything has a reason, just adding that “actual entities are the only *reasons*.”¹³ Again, there must be no conflation. No reason as we may *define* reasons, no reason as a matter of knowledge, may ever parade as the reason for the existence of anything.

We may now come back to the problem of the six days of creation, wondering about the difference between a rock or a root and a writer in the process of writing—a writer stating, for instance, his reasons for affirming that we have intentions or freedom while the rock has none of that, or that the rock obeys the laws of nature while we do not. We know now that this writer is not talking in metaphysical terms, because the reasons, however we define them, that we give for those differences are not actual entities. As soon as we deal with rocks, roots, or the writer, we deal with what Whitehead calls “societies,” and our characterizations of their contrasts are all “social explanations.” They are social because they address societies, but they are also social because the very problem of the relevant characterization is a social problem, as determined by settled perspectives on ourselves as well as on rocks and roots.

Whatever we are able to characterize—rocks, roots, or ourselves as we feel endowed with a continuing life of our own—are never actual entities, because the temporality of actual entities is atomic, “the many become one, and are increased by one.”¹⁴ They cannot endure, even for a fraction of a second. Whatever endures is a society of actual entities and not a *res vera*. Thus whatever endures is never a reason, even for its own endurance. “Actual entities are the only reasons.” Societies depend on the fact that some actual entities accept in their own becoming to conform to a common feature that other entities they have to feel, also accepted, also conformed to. For each of them, to be part of a society is to ratify in a positive manner, as part of their self-definition, a way of feeling that was provided by their social environment. No particular society endures because of a

12. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

power of its own; it endures just as long as the corresponding thread of conformity is not broken by actual entities.

It would be a sad mistake to conclude that since societies are not *res vera*, Whitehead, one way or another, downgrades them as if they were illusions only. Endurance is, for better or worse, an achievement, the achievement of a feature that goes on mattering. The point with societies not being *res vera* is that nothing is endowed with the right to go on mattering. Whenever we address something, be it ourselves or whatever we are able to empirically describe and characterize, Whitehead asks that we refrain from giving to the words we use the power to produce justifications for what matters, transcending the empirical fact that it so matters. The relevance of all justifications is correlated with a mode of endurance, and will be lost if the conformity they depend upon is lost. No settled perspective may claim authority. Weighty predicates, claiming both the power to describe and the power to explain, such as intention, freedom, or obedience to the laws of nature, produce poor descriptions and transform what happens to be the case into what has to be the case. "The concrete truth is variation of interest," and Whiteheadian societies, which designate the whole of our knowledge as a form of sociology, demand that any interesting definition be put at risk—that what matters be relevance, not the power to define and deduce.

As far as a society is stable, Whitehead's concepts do not make a great difference where functional descriptions are concerned. Physics provides a relevant sociology for societies characterized by the kind of conformity that experimental success depends upon. The interesting difference arises because with Whiteheadian societies you need no special explanation for what escapes continuity, or for what challenges the very relevance of continuity. It happens in physics, but is quite dramatically the case with "that mode of functioning which is the soul." There is nothing mystical when writers claim that, in the process of writing something that matters, they are not just hesitating, that the situation cannot be described in terms of possible choices and of an "I" as an enduring being, who would hesitate between them. Indeed, the decisions that must be produced are also decisions about who they are. It is a perfectly relevant characterization of an adventure whose mode of existence Whitehead's concepts are meant not to oppose to other modes—even to those of what we call an electron, and certainly not to those which that appear to be dominated by the search for reasons against any idea that something could be said to be *causa sui*.

We are creatures of the sixth day, and what makes us rather particular is that we are asking for reasons. The very fact that actual en-

tities, as the only reasons from a metaphysical point of view, may matter for us, may elicit disclosure, is in itself a witness that reasons matter in our very life. The efficacy of metaphysics is thus not to deconstruct our reasons, but to divorce them from the obsession with judgment assigning responsibility. The diverging ways in which reasons matter may well entail polemics, but insofar as we are dealing with the account of the sixth day, we should state only that reasons then came to matter.

Whitehead's version of Deleuze and Guattari's empiricist conversion would thus emphasize that empiricism is not against reason, but asks us to feel how intensely reasons matter. We share with other living beings the high feat of being able to digest food—but we do not usually attribute worth to the fact that we manage to digest, or even manage to walk on two feet without falling down, whatever the importance of such successes for our survival. "The life of a human being receives its worth, its importance, from the way in which unrealized ideals shape its purposes and tinge its actions. The distinction between men and animals is in one sense only a difference in degree. But the extent of the degree makes all the difference. The Rubicon has been crossed."¹⁵

For Whitehead, the experiences that came to matter on the sixth day are those which may be associated with the intense feeling of alternative, unrealized possibilities: what we could have done and did not do, what we could have chosen and decided not to. "Men are the children of the Universe with foolish enterprises and irrational hopes. A tree sticks to its business of mere survival, and so does an oyster with some minor divergencies. In this way, the life aim at survival is modified into the human aim at survival for diversified, worthwhile experience."¹⁶

We may be tempted to stop here. Speech, as a social (in Whitehead's meaning of the term) characterization of the sixth day, would not be "responsible," since the only causes are actual entities. But the feeling of unrealized ideals that created the contrast between sticking to our habitual business, whatever it is, and entertaining strange ideas about what might be possible—foolish enterprises such as explaining the world, irrational hopes such as understanding it—would mark the way our experience is framed by its linguistic environment. This may lead rather directly to what may be called an "anti-intellectualist stance." We are prisoners of illusions induced by language, by the capacity of language to abstract possibilities in the

15. Whitehead, *Modes* (above, n. 1), p. 27.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

concrete flux of situations, and to confront them with other abstract possibilities, what could have happened and did not. Such a stance may be favored by the academic “linguistic turn” that, since Wittgenstein, has sought to cure us, leading us back to the business of being alive that we are told we should stick to. Back to the fifth day! More seriously, it is also cultivated by wisdom traditions like Buddhism.

However, in making language the social condition for the feeling of “unrealized possibilities,” we have just missed the problem of the soul. This problem is not that of the “human soul,” explaining the importance of unrealized ideals; more generally, the problem is not humanity, as it crossed the Rubicon; instead, the metaphysical problem is what this Rubicon, which we happened to cross, metaphysically requires. We require to understand, not to be led back to the maze of language.

When we make language our creator, enticing the important feeling that our acts and choices not only decide what will be, but also make untrue what could have been and never will be, we explain away this importance and stick again to the usual business of finding an explanation for human experience. And in so doing we also downgrade this human experience, describing it in terms of intellects dominated by linguistic abstractions, in contrast to the tree or the oyster sticking to the concrete business of survival. What we have forgotten is that if there are societies dominated by abstractions it is the ones we name trees and oysters, rather than ourselves. Sticking to their business of survival is sticking to abstractions, making a definite and rather stable difference between what this business defines as relevant and what does not matter. Instead, explaining away the sense of unrealized possibility in terms of linguistic artifacts, experimenting with the contrast between our statements and what we feel, dreaming of escaping the prison of our judgments, are all adventures of souls—what we became when we were given speech, not what was given to us by speech.

Again, there is no parting from our own shadow. Even when we wander in the dreary landscape of modern abstractions, we are still witnesses testifying for what Whitehead called, in *Science and the Modern World*, the “power of wandering”: “Mankind has wandered from the trees to the plains, from the plains to the seacoast, from climate to climate, from continent to continent, and from habit of life to habit of life. When man ceases to wander, he will cease to ascend in the scale of being.”¹⁷

17. Whitehead, *Science* (above, n. 3), p. 207.

When humans cease to wander, they will cease to require to understand. Metaphysical understanding has thus to avoid giving language the power to make us wander, or entertain the feeling for "unrealized possibilities," even if this feeling came to crucially matter on the sixth day, when we were given speech. To be given, since we can name what was given, refers to a social environment, a real potentiality for becoming—in this case, for becoming a soul—but it will not explain "how there can be originality," how we became able to entertain possibility as such, that is, also able to tell tales about what could have been but never will be. Here is the metaphysical requirement imposed by the Rubicon we crossed: language must require, indeed presuppose, the feeling of those tales that may be told; it must not create them. Human experience must testify to the existence of such tales, not explain them.

These tales, to be distinguished from any verbal statement and from any conscious experience, are what Whitehead called "propositions." Propositions are members of the short metaphysical list of what can be said to exist, what is required by the description of actual entities as such. In other words: while what we call space, time or matter, what we recognize as an objective explanation, are all socially constructed, depending on the endurance of societies, propositions are not. The coming into existence of new propositions may need, and does need, a social environment, but it will not be explained in social terms. The event of this coming into existence marks the opening of a full range of new diverging possibilities for becoming, and as such generally signifies a break in continuity, what can be called a social upheaval. "The concrete truth is the variation of interest."

Propositions are thus Whitehead's metaphysical answer to the demand that we not part from our own shadows, from the disclosure that what we say or think may matter. Even the author of the most radical deconstructivist critique cannot but hope that his or her statement will break continuity, make a difference, at least if he or she is not just sticking to the mere business of academic survival, thereby "shedding that mode of functioning which is the soul." But the efficacy of propositions is not restricted to us, as creatures of the sixth day. As metaphysical existents, propositions are needed in order to give irreducible reasons not only for the experience of words inducing disclosure, a world felt in a different manner, but also for the disruption, or variation of interest, that a rabbit or a dog may experience; and finally, for the possibility of the kind of disruption of social continuity that we may observe when even oysters or trees seem to forget about survival. "When a non-conformal proposition

is admitted into feeling . . . a novelty has emerged into creation. The novelty may promote or destroy order; it may be good or bad. But it is new, a new type of individual, and not merely a new intensity of individual feeling."¹⁸

Consequently, propositions should not be confused with linguistic sentences. Instead they turn what linguists took as their object into a full Whiteheadian sociological field. Sentences have no identity of their own. If I address somebody with "how are you?" or "the salt, please," we may speak of a stable society enacting a conformal proposition that is already part of the social environment. But uttering a sentence may also be a social adventure, when I do not quite know at the beginning how it will end, when I am not the same at the beginning as at the end. A text also has no identity of its own, for its composition or reading may provide an opportunity for seemingly innocuous sentences to suddenly collide, to introduce unanticipated new possibilities. And some utterances, be they written or verbal, may be felt as "epoch-making," when the extent of the difference they make between past and present belongs to a future retaining some memory of its own novelty.

The kind of sentences usually selected as exemplary by philosophers and linguists, like "the cat is on the mat" or "the session is closed," may have impact if the cat was considered lost, or the session was in full turmoil, but they are usually selected for their social conformity—that is, for occulting or taming the efficacy of propositions. "The interest in logic, dominating overintellectualized philosophers, has obscured the main function of propositions in the nature of things. They are not primarily for belief. . . . The primary mode of realization of a proposition in an actual entity is not by judgement, but by entertainment. . . . Horror, relief, purpose, are primary feelings involving the entertainment of propositions."¹⁹

For Whitehead—here commenting on a "thought"—we may describe a proposition's efficacy as "a tremendous mode of excitement. Like a stone thrown into a pond it disturbs the whole surface of our being. But this image is inadequate. For we should conceive the ripples as effective in the creation of the plunge of the stone into the water. The ripples release the thought, and the thought augments and distorts the ripples."²⁰ Any new proposition, as it impacts, has a disruptive power that may have the consequence of the rabbit's run-

18. Whitehead, *Process* (above, n. 7), p. 209.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 186–188.

20. Whitehead, *Modes* (above, n. 1), p. 36.

ning away, suddenly aware of what we would call "a wolf!" In dealing with a thought, we may feel that the meaning does not belong to the proposition, but to the full event rippling down. But this is true even when the object of a nonverbal perception seems fully to explain a rabbitlike reaction. To ask for the meaning of a proposition is to confuse the creation of the stone-plus-ripples event with a deduction of the ripples from the stone's impact, or with a stone's free-fall motion, which may indeed be defined by a set of differential equations.

If, on the sixth day, being given speech, we became souls, it is thus not because we entertain propositions: so does a rabbit, or an oyster, or a living cell—even if, in the case of an oyster or a cell, our imagination is limited, and we find it difficult to feel like an oyster or a cell. We became souls because of the difference that language makes in the rippling consequences of a proposition's impact. Being given language means that when a proposition is entertained it is given a social environment such that its impact may be amplified into many divergent, entangled consequences, activating that mode of functioning which is the soul.

The "crossing of the Rubicon" that Whitehead attributes to mankind cannot be equated with a defining break, the precise identification of which would allow a definition of all the differences we care for, all that matter for us. It rather causes us to wander and wonder. Just think about the historical, epoch-making, crossing of the Rubicon: how do we identify the differences it made for Caesar, for his soldiers, for the Roman Senate, and still makes now even for those who have never heard about this river and the special role it played in Roman laws and traditions? Such a crossing was not a break, since it entailed the continuity of the Roman historical, political environment. For Caesar's horse it was probably an experience of wetness like many others. But it started a number of diverging social adventures that we cannot begin to enumerate, it gave their relevance to a novel, open set of propositions, including Whitehead's use of it, my own comment about this use, and your own associations elicited by this comment. All this is still rippling down, and will go on rippling as long as "Crossing the Rubicon" impinges on our experience.

However, as Whitehead loved to repeat, "we should not exaggerate." In this case we should not exaggerate our difference from a rabbit. Sometimes we feel the ripple, sometimes we do not, as when we hear "the salt, please" and do not feel that it was meant to interrupt us, to express indifference to or annoyance against the so very interesting things we were talking about. Soul is a mode of func-

tioning that occasionally happens, not the ultimate truth of our experience.

But we could then ask, and it will be my last question, whether Whitehead himself did not exaggerate when he chose to give the same name, "soul," both to that mode of functioning that speech enhanced, and to actual occasions (remember his reading of Hume, substituting the actual occasion for the Humean soul). Would this mean that, for Whitehead, in being given speech, we also became able to escape our own social, historical, epochal adventure, and reach toward a metaphysical truth that transcends any epoch?

The question should rather be: why did Whitehead use such a "human" term as "soul" to characterize actual occasions? And this question can then extend to many other speculative names he used (including "God"). I would propose that the answer is that philosophy aims at "sheer disclosure,"²¹ and not at an intellectual intuition transcending any epoch. Whitehead designed his naming strategy in order to arouse a "sense of disclosure" whose aim was to "change the problem," to pay attention and believe in this world, not to judge it in terms of generalities. But he knew that no one is able to drain the pond upon which new propositions impact. Whatever the propositions, it is this epochal pond, the modern dense entanglement of settled perspectives and preoccupations, that they will impact. The naming strategy, then, has for its aim to produce thoughts the primary value of which should be to induce the experience of both the ripples and the pond, to induce a mode of excitement disclosing the possibility of affirming both what modern habits of thought denied, and what they took for granted.

Whitehead's speculative philosophy makes full use of language not as an expression of claims, to be evaluated, accepted or rejected as such, but rather as providing a social environment for the speculative reception of propositions. Speculative language should be able to induce not the reaction of the rabbit becoming aware that this grey shade is what we call a wolf, that is, a convinced "it matters!" but a speculative adventure entailing questions such as "how does it matter?" "does it really matter?" "what if I accepted that it does not matter?" "how did it come to matter?"—unrealized ideals then shaping our experiences. Such questions, which turn what is socially given, the empirical fact that something matters, into a potential for many diverging adventures, are the ones we cannot explain because they are presupposed by any particular explanation.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

It is thus because philosophers cannot part from their own shadows that Whitehead, as a philosopher, gave the same name, "soul," to that speculative mode of functioning we may become, occasionally, since we have been given speech, and to those speculative actual occasions the very reason of which is to affirm that what is given is always a potential for becoming. The mode of excitement that Whitehead's philosophy is designed to induce is not how it feels to become a soul in general, but how it feels to become a soul that *requires to understand*.

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And a very deep gratitude to Donna Haraway, who pointed out that in the Biblical account of the sixth day, God created not only humans but also "the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind." This was quite a busy day indeed, and Whitehead's account is quite a partial one, perhaps expressing the feeling that we "humans" deserved our own special creation day. Furthermore, it is striking that, while Adam and Eve were created as individuals, the beasts, cattle, and creeping creatures are defined by their "kind," as if a general definition was sufficient where they are concerned. This is not an "erudite only" remark at all, but an enlightening one, luring attention to an important point left aside in this text, that is, the challenge of bridging the Rubicon that we claim to have crossed. We need propositions that would reconsider the long and many-faceted history of our cohabitation with the other creatures of this busy sixth day, and would activate the importance of new modes of thinking and feeling the togetherness of our lives.