The method of interpretation as discovery

Ákos, Herth[1]

[1] University of Pécs, Doctoral School of Philosophy

Abstract

The study explores the interpretative method as a means of discovery, focusing on Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of language and experience. Whitehead's metaphysical framework suggests that all events in nature are expressions, where human language serves as a heightened phase of this expressive process. The research examines the role of propositions, consciousness, and the symbolic nature of language in shaping human thought. Additionally, it draws parallels with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and highlights the transformative nature of interpretation. By framing philosophy as an experimental practice, the study argues that conceptual thinking is not merely about defining meaning but actively transforming experience.

Experience and language

For Whitehead, the effect of concepts is not manifested in an activating belief, as in the case of James, but in a specific feeling, even for theoretic abstractions such as those with which metaphysics works. The function of human language is therefore to draw our attention to events in the world and to connect us with them through the feeling that it evokes. Through concepts, life calls us into itself, and the reality that comes alive before our eyes reaches a higher level of expression in the experience that arises within us, through linguistic understanding and conceptual thinking. What does it means?

According to the philosophy of organism, all events in nature are, without exception, a kind of expression, the myriad properties of beings expressing the inexhaustible richness of reality. Experience, and in it all that we perceive as nature outside of us, is as much part of an expressive process as the words and statements that make up human language. There is a mere difference of degree between the two: human language is a more complex phase of this process, but words and things are in fact one and the same. It is through them that nature speaks. Whitehead refers to this process of expression as symbolism. Human

language is merely a case of symbolism. The language in which man expresses his world and the way in which the beings of nature manifest themselves, whether in behaviour or in physical appearance, can be traced back to a common language, which is nothing other than experience. The a priori contrast concept of experience as nature and human subjectivity precedes the bifurcative influence of interpretation in the consideration of reflections on reality, thus allowing for the revision of evidence that is empirically embedded in our thinking.

> "Such a reformulation of the concept of nature includes for Whitehead not least the dissolution of the opposition nature/subjectivity or else nature/experience: instead of excluding the subject and experience from nature and thus opening the door to bifurcation, for Whitehead subjectivity is a fundamental feature of the whole of reality." (Schlehaider, 2023, p. 181).

In this view, Whitehead is closely related to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a prominent representative of French phenomenology. Fabrice Bothereau writes: "According to Merleau-Ponty, the language of the world and of nature are the same: it's experience. And that's the reason why Merleau-Ponty advances this word of logos; it unifies world and nature, through the universal phenomenon of experience. Experience is the universal logos which "speaks" to everything, including us. " (Bothereau, 2009). Merleau-Ponty's and Whitehead's understanding of language point in very close directions.

In Whitehead's philosophy of language, human language is based on the category of proposition, which can be understood as a condition of possibility and a fundamental component of the specific character of human mentality, which is consciousness, and consciousness can be defined briefly as the contrast of affirmation-negation (our synthetic judgments of proposition and denial). According to this, consciousness derives from the recognition (feeling) that our actual experience can have as a component an element that is either part of our actual experience but could not be part of it, or vice versa, that could be present but is not present. We can therefore compare the actual determinacy with the potential, and through this, what is or is not currently given - and thus given as a lack - to our perception, makes sense in comparison with the potential reality.

Thus, human mentality stands out from the broader spectrum of experience and, according to the Whiteheadian view, from the spectrum of reality as a whole in its capacity to make negative judgments: "The negative judgment is the peak of

mentality"[1] (PR 1978. 5) Ella Csikós captures Whitehead's conception of consciousness in the sense that, in Whiteheadian philosophy, consciousness is a relational concept that informs us about "the relation between an experiential fact and a supposition or proposition or proposition about it..."[2] (Csikós, 2008). Thus, consciousness realises the possibility of error in experience when a mismatch between fact and hypothesis is discovered.

What follows from this is the insight, perhaps first associated with Lacan in continental philosophy, that the way in which language is structured is more deeply embedded in the fabric of the events that constitute reality than the consciousness that essentially determines human thought. Consciousness presupposes propositional feeling, not the other way around. For psychoanalysis, the notion of the unconscious succeeds in revealing the broader horizon made accessible by Whitehead's sterilised sense of the concept of experience, which has undergone a metaphysical revision. Whitehead's metaphysics aims in this way to genealogy the modes of organisation observable in consciousness and human language, tracing thought back to the sole concrete constituent of reality: the actual entity. There are two primary points to note. The actual entity is an occasion (actual occasion) with a temporal and timeless aspect, but its occurrence takes place in a fraction of an instant. Its happening is the coming into being, but as it comes into being, it also passes away. On the other hand, it is a process of actual experience. It is through the actual being that a subject experiences his world. Whitehead's concept of experience thus not only extends the modern conception of subjectivity into the realm of non-human, trans-human subjectivity (all that can be understood as an experiential perspective on the world), but also radically reinterprets our conception of subjectivity by assuming that the world is organised in its material, objective nature on the basis of the subjective dimension of experience.

This subjectivity is mind-independent, i.e. it reveals a mode of organisation that is more fundamental than the mind, but which can be discovered in it, since the mind itself is built from it. There is no dialectical relationship between the ways of organising human thought and the ways of organising the occasions that can be discovered in nature, since an inherently indivisible blending between them is assumed by Whitehead: "traditional philosophical thought is judged to

---

[1] Whitehead, A.N., Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology. Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28. NY, 1978, The Free Press. (PR)

[2] Csikós, E. Élő Gondolkodás. A Folyamatfilozófia Klasszikusai: Hegel és Whitehead, Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2008, 133. The original text: „egy tapasztalati tény és egy róla alkotott feltételezés, illetve állítás, propozíció közötti viszonyról…"

overemphasise the so-called pure thinking of man (which he says there is no such thing), the separation, the "distinction", the idealism that is conceived of in a condensed way. For him, it is not the simplicity of the so-called pure consciousness that is the measure or the ideal; more decisive is the complexity and complexity of the totality of experience..." (Csikós, 2008)[3]. The human mind is not an exception but an example of the functioning of the world - the realisation of this in Whitehead's oeuvre is a key component in my reading, which I record as the fact of togetherness or solidarity. I add Mesle's beautiful lines to my reflection:

> "One helpful consequence of the view that we are part of the world rather than separate from it is that, by looking at our own existence, we can learn something about the rules that apply to everything that exists. We are examples of those rules, not exceptions to them. The world is like us because we are like the world, part of the world, reflecting the same basic principles and rules as the world. We cannot understand ourselves without understanding the world of which we are a part; nor can we finally understand the world without understanding ourselves as part of it." (Mesle, 2008, p. 24).

In addition to this, Whitehead also assumes that in the process of perception, we encounter the things themselves. Things in themselves, in their objective reality. Their objective reality, however, is not predetermined. It is not a state of definite and unambiguous actuality, but a dynamic happening of potentially present ambiguity (meaning-ness): its coming into being, the *process of becoming*. The unfolding of given (the given-above) and interrelated meanings. Our imagination meets the objective reality of things before our intellect. Our imagination encounters an intelligibility that develops in an indeterminate but consistent medium (or at least with an openness to, or compatibility with, consistent interpretation), which speaks to us in the language of potentiality. This language is the effect.

At this point, the activity is not yet concentrated in the operation of definition, but in the deepening of the effect, and so we are not yet dealing here with definitions and clearly distinct formations of meaning, but with possibilities of meaning, from which unknown and unusual outlines and new beginnings of meaning

---

[3] Csikós, E. ibid. 133. „a hagyományos filozófiai gondolkodást úgy ítéli meg, hogy az túlhangsúlyozza az emberből az ún. tiszta gondolkodást (ilyen szerinte nincs is), az elkülönülést, a „disztinktséget", a kilúgozottan felfogott idealitást. Az ő számára nem az ún. tiszta tudat egyszerűsége a mérce vagy az eszmény; perdöntőbb ennél a *tapasztalat teljességének* bonyolultsága, összetettsége…"

emerge. We usually express the given forms of meaning at hand by understanding them, but in the case of the possibilities of meaning, understanding occurs only in parallel with the process of expression. At the beginning of expression, we can only rely on a seductive feeling, from which the unknown forms of expression can develop and understanding can be realised.

Speaking in the language of effect is a speculative praxis of experimentation with language. As Stengers writes: "For Whitehead, philosophy demands experimentation with language, knowing that any ready-made use of words means failure" (Stengers, 2009). Elsewhere: "Philosophy is an experimental practice like physics, but it experiments on language, that is, it devises concepts that will have no meaning unless they succeed in bringing to existence those dimensions of experience that usual statements can ignore, since these statements are inseparable from specialised thought." (Stengers, 2011, p. 248). For Whitehead, a concept, when applied to a metaphysical purpose, makes sense in its relevance to direct (or immediate) experience. "But no language can be anything but elliptical, requiring a leap of the imagination to understand its meaning in its relevance to immediate experience." (PR 1978. 13).

The concept is then not merely a ready-made definition or a carrier of an available, well- or ill-defined meaning, but also an operational, particular component in the process of interpretation. In this way, interpretation takes on a peculiarly extended meaning and acquires a function of great significance in experience, dynamising what is 'given' to us from actual experience: "But we should not be mistaken: if Whitehead can bestow such a fundamental importance on interpretation, it is because the nature of interpretation itself has changed. It neither refers here to a relativism of any kind nor to an endless recursivity of the always multiple perspectives we can have of our experiences. Instead, it becomes extended in an unprecedented way" (Debaise, 2009). As an agent of operation, the concept performs its function in the transformation of experience (the dynamisation of the given experience). Thus, interpretation becomes "extended in an unprecedented way." As Stengers observes, the concrete operations of speculative thought can be traced less to epistemology than to alchemy: "Testing, not judging. The relation between thinking and testing has its origin in alchemy and does not refer to a knowing subject, but to a concrete operation." (Stengers, 2009, p. 28). For the concrete action precedes the knowing subject, I add. More precisely, the knowing subject derives from the concrete operation - this insight is the key to understanding Whitehead's turn.

The metaphysical use of language thus differs from the ordinary use of natural language mainly in that concepts perform concrete operations. These operations, in turn, cannot be divorced from the particular circumstances of the interpreter's practice but are embedded in and derive their meaning from the particular situation of interpretation. In the light of the foregoing, operations thus fulfil their ultimate function in the transformation of experience. Concepts are the instruments of transformation. A technical question arises, however: How do we get concepts not only to have meaning but also to perform operations? And to capture their meaning less in a definition and more in a purpose, a function, and a relevance correlated with the function performed? Whitehead suggests: "The only possible procedure is to start from verbal expressions which, when taken by themselves with the current meaning of their words, are ill-defined and ambiguous" (PR 1978. 13).

The interpreter is then forced to rely on the "imaginative leap". Whitehead's poetic expression needs explanation, and we have reached a central point in our examination of the constructive enterprise of Whiteheadian metaphysics.

Imaginative rationalisation and the leaping imagination

For Whitehead, metaphysics is first and foremost a speculative philosophical enterprise, which means that it offers propositions of interpretation along the lines of ideas and principles based on knowledge, observations and facts about reality that are constructed by the particular operation of human reason, abstract thought. The point of departure is, therefore, the insight of direct experience, from which the initial data is derived, which provides an insight into the objective reality of experience. The initial data is given merely as a potential for determination, containing the sense-initiatives, their glancing, interrelated multiplicity, which awaits the abstract faculty of human thought to organise the multiplicity of initial facts into contexts and synthesise them into knowledge. The initial data is thus still pure potentiality, actualised by conceptual thinking. This does not mean, however, that the initial data does not contain meaning and is not full of meaning prior to conceptual interpretation. Inherent in things themselves is the organisation of meaning that not only precedes human meaning, but that human meaning - the way in which one deciphers the meaning inherent in things - actually derives from them, as an advanced phase of the expression of nature (or reality), if Whitehead's turn is taken seriously enough.

The task of metaphysics is the descriptive analysis of reality as seen by experience along the broadest possible generalities: this process is interpretation. The

metaphysician works with a coherent set of generalities and abstractions that can be applied to all areas of experience, with the proviso that there are no uninterpretable elements. Then, the interpretation is considered adequate. The test of applicability and adequacy is the empirical side of the enterprise, and the interconnectedness of ideas meets the requirements of rationalism, in so far as it forms a coherent and logical whole.

"Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of 'interpretation' I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. Thus, the philosophical scheme should be coherent, logical, and, with respect to its interpretation, applicable and adequate. Here 'applicable' means that some items of experience are thus interpretable, and 'adequate' means that there are no items incapable of such interpretation " (PR 1978. 3).

It is important to stress that interpretation applies to all areas of experience. Whitehead breaks with the empiricist tradition's concept of experience, which is reduced either to sensory experience and the extensive perception of the external world or to the objective (or at least as far as possible independent of subjectivity) data of natural scientific cognition, alien to the experiential horizon of human experience. Whitehead's concept of experience stands the test of the bifurcation of nature; that is, it expresses at once the external and the internal, the objective and the subjective, the public (secular) and the private (personal) experience of man. The objective reality of experience is not achieved by being free of subjective elements, but on the contrary, by being able to highlight these subjective elements as being essential to the understanding of the knowledge of natural scientific investigations. It points to the inherent coherence between the two poles, the physical-material and the mental-conscious. By coherence, we should understand not only that the two poles belong together and are interconnected through different interrelationships but also that the two cannot be separated and cannot be understood in isolation without each other. It states the fact of their interdependence. In the concrete reality of experience, it is a process that cannot be broken down into two poles, in which the two poles are still inseparably united. The two poles belong to the fabric of the investigation, in which we abstract from this concrete process, i.e. make it the object of analysis. Immediately, reality is a process: what happens and what I experience. Nothing else. The body and the mind, physical things and the ideas about them are all abstractions,

derivatives of a detachment from the process, which above all announce that we have taken a step back from the immediacy of experience.

"'Coherence,' as here employed, means that the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless. This requirement does not mean that they are definable in terms of each other; it means that what is indefinable in one such notion cannot be abstracted from its relevance to the other notions. It is the ideal of speculative philosophy that its fundamental notions shall not seem capable of abstraction from each other. In other words, it is presupposed that no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe and that it is the business of speculative philosophy to exhibit this truth. This character is its coherence." (PR 1978. 3)

Ideas cannot achieve coherence without a living context. By living, I mean that the concepts in use make sense in the context of the circumstances in which they are interpreted. They not only mean something but also perform concrete operations. The systematic background that is assumed is not only a logical or grammatical construction but also an observable rule-based operation. Concepts, as agents performing operations, are embedded in a common, particular operation. It is in this operation that they perform their specific functions, which they acquire in their mutual relevance. What is 'indefinable in one such notion' is nothing other than the concept's function in interpretation. Indefinable because it is only from the function as a whole, through an understanding of the role it plays in the whole, that it is possible to understand what the function of a given concept is, that is to say, the only way to know what these functions are is to follow the path of interpretation and, in conjunction with it, the path of the transformation of experience. Soelch gives the following definition:

"Coherence means a basic inventory of concepts whose fundamental notions form a non-hierarchical web and which cannot be understood in isolation. Each single term presupposes a systematic background that assigns to it a specific meaning as part of the system. Like in a puzzle, where the function of each single puzzle piece can only be deciphered in view of the complete picture, the meaning of each single notion results from its role as part of the whole." (Soelch, 2011, p. 21). This systematic background provides the conditions of possibility for operation, thanks to which the transformation of experience (the aim of operation) can be achieved.

The only way to do this is to transform not only what we describe, i.e. the data of the description (the object contained in the data and the way we describe it), but

also the subject who does the describing: "Deduction will never replace discovery, for the latter implies, each time, a becoming that transforms both the person doing the describing and what is described." (Stengers, 2011, p. 249). The function of concepts can only be understood by those who take part in the discovery and who take it upon themselves to be not only visitors but also explorers. It is not possible to find out from the data, from the results of the discovery, what process the discoverer has followed in the course of the experiment. The way the concepts helped the process progress can only be seen through the eyes of the discovering subject. The data, whether it is a scientific result, a system that underpins a worldview, or merely a text describing an experience, has an effect, and that effect is directed through the eyes of the subject who is attracted to the effect.

The description of experience and the transformation of experience take place in the same process: interpretation from this point of view is a constructive process of constructing schemes in the direction of the fullest possible generality. Constructive, that is to say, we assume that the schemes applicable to experience are not yet available to us, together with the fact that the process of experience is not subordinated to the constitutive operation of the transcendental subject. The birthplace of experience is an active world, which, contrary to the schemes, is not created by us, on the contrary, we are born from the effect of the world as contingent subjects resulting from the particular act of effect: "Secondly, that the true method of philosophical construction is to frame a scheme of ideas, the best that one can, and unflinchingly to explore the interpretation of experience in terms of that scheme." (PR 1978. Preface XIV) This is why Whitehead calls the method both descriptive generalisation and imaginative generalisation (a method of imaginative rationalisation). It is both a descriptive procedure, which presupposes a solid experience of the world, and an interpretative journey, an expedition into the unknown - relying on the wings of the imagination.

> "The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalisation, and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. The reason for the success of this method of imaginative rationalisation is that when the method of difference fails, factors which are constantly present may yet be observed under the influence of imaginative thought. Such thought supplies the differences which direct observation lacks. It can even play with inconsistency; and can thus throw light on the consistent, and persistent, elements in experience by comparison with what in imagination is inconsistent with them." (PR 1978. 5).

Observation is transformed "in the thin air of imaginative generalisation", in conceptual constructions that arise "under the influence of imaginative thought" and can be applied to experiences that are overlooked by the terms of natural language.

> "Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles. The weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way. Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; however, such elements of language can be stabilised as technicalities, and they remain metaphors that are mutely appealing for an imaginative leap." (PR 1978. 4).

Generalisation becomes increasingly difficult the wider the spectrum of experience we embrace. From this point of view, metaphysics takes on the greatest task since it aims to conquer the most comprehensive perspective that imagination can offer. Mesle's introductory interpretation is as follows:

> "If the observed facts and careful reasoning support your effort, you have made a step toward the larger general principles of thought. Your revised principle is now more *adequate* than it was before, and it can be used as a *descriptive generalisation*. But, of course, this task becomes more and more difficult as the principles apply to more and more fields. When you get around to those principles that describe the basic features of any existing thing at all, the task requires a combination of creative, imaginative, and disciplined thought that few people possess." (Mesle, 2008, p. 17).

The coherence between the different domains of experience, which translates the heterogeneous, diverse patterns that are primarily observable and that result from the method of difference into a common language as an interpretative medium, is based on a systematic structure of clearly defined schemes. The general scheme, which is the abstraction resulting from the rationalisation of the vision conceived in the interpreter, is what Whitehead calls the speculative scheme. It is the speculative scheme that frames the metaphilosophical context of the particular process of interpretation, the reflections that inform us about the interpreter's intentions and the cultural and scientific conditions of interpretation. What is the interpreter's intention with the method of interpretation? What is the problem to which he or she is addressing? What is the solution? The systematic explication of the speculative scheme is also achieved by means of schemes, which are introduced as categorical schemes. The categorical schemes introduce the system-defined existents of reality (existential categories) into the interpretation, summarise in 27 explanatory categories the fact-statements to which, as

explanatory causes, the set of operations in the process of interpretation can be traced, and record in 9 categories of obligations the conditions that determine the operation between the components of the system. The categorical schemes provide the structure of the Whiteheadian construct.

To summarise the above. The Whiteheadian notion of interpretation presupposes a methodological perspectivism that derives its force from the insight that reality cannot be known without the methodological inclusion of one or more interpretive aspects, even though this interpretive procedure does not reject the idea of mind-independent reality and, in fact, takes it as its basis. Whiteheadian thought balances between two opposing ideas. Their aim is to show the coherence between the two views and to expose the fallacy of our cultural beliefs (our belief that the two views are mutually exclusive) that arise from fallacies. Raud Rein's own process-philosophical method puts it this way:

"I have also tried to show how this position by no means entails the rejection of a mind-independent reality; the only thing it does not accept is the imposition on nature of mind-made structures and hierarchies. Reality is mind-independent in spite of its slices appearing to us always and only in a particular, perspective-bound and gaze-dependent form." (Raud, 2021, p. 54).

Process and Reality thus aims to develop a language suitable for metaphysical purposes because we do not yet have the language to formulate the general metaphysical principles to which a metaphysical enterprise inherently aspires. For Whitehead, metaphysics is essentially 'an adventure of experimentation. ' The practical tests to which we subject our principles are an essential part of interpretation. Stengers often stresses testing, not judging. And the test of propositions applies no less to the interpreter himself than to the conceptual tools of metaphysics. Are we capable of approaching interpretation in such a way that, in addition to/rather than expressing our prior views, we give the concepts a chance to speak to us, to lure us in unexpected directions, to surprise us? On the other hand, the concepts must also stand the test: they must interpret the totality of data that comes from the insight of direct experience in a coherent, logical context. No metaphysical system can really hope to fully meet these practical tests. But this merely means that metaphysics is a dynamic process that constantly tests the interpreter.

Interpretation constitutes concepts. And concepts constitute one or more interpreting subjects or, more generally, one or more philosophers. Ways of thinking, perspectives, stimuli for thinking. Like the philosopher, his/her concepts

also form a multiplicity of meanings. This process of formation, which is not a temporary means of transition to the achievement of the goal of philosophy as an event (the creation of a thinker with autonomous thoughts), but conversely, by virtue of its entry into the concrete activity of formation, necessarily gives rise to a contingent thinker, and to his concepts to an actual, contextualised sense as an instrument of carrying out the process of thinking. However, the formation does not end, and speculative philosophy revolves around the cognition, or rather the experience, of this non-ending. When the experience of the unfinished is approached by the multitude of thoughts that constitute the thinker, it becomes clear that more has happened in the process than the philosopher has vaguely thought through the language that holds a mirror to itself. The thinking, the use of concepts, and the unravelling and understanding of the meaning inherent in their use will cover a broader spectrum than the language in use can currently define for us. That's why we keep going. That is why we do not stop and find the ultimate truth.

The philosopher is able to use concepts in a way that gives them a meaning beyond context. When he/she says a concept, he/she is not merely touching its meaning in the context, because by touching it, he/she is not only giving it meaning, but also linking it to other meanings that emerge from other contexts. For the philosopher, to utter a concept is to become more than oneself because one behaves as more than one can actually know or understand by the concept. He/she uses the concept in such a way that it contains not only the other meanings that he/she has already discovered in the contexts he/she has already travelled through, but also the possibility of a new meaning that has yet to be revealed. By saying it, he/she not only takes on the weight of a meaning greater than himself/herself but also moves in a direction not yet explored. The direction is determined by the function of the concept. By thinking about the concept in different ways, we are moving around the concept itself, but also beyond that to the feeling (the effect of the concept) that the concept evokes in us. It is through experiencing the effect that we understand the role of the concept in our current use and the function of the concept in the future process of our formation. Thinking is the becoming of the thinker. It is the becoming, which means that it is a process of formation that has both a physical and a mental aspect. In this way, the thinker is not merely an abstract formation obtained through the synthesis of thoughts but also a concrete being, an existence that can never be fully defined and covered by what takes place in language. The thinker is also the unspoken and unspeakable tendency that is implicitly present behind language. An ineffably present direction that carries out the process of becoming. This

unspeakable direction expresses the fact that language is used by an organic being who uses expression to satisfy his ambition to achieve certain ends.

The breathing philosopher

Paul Stenner defines his hybrid world-interpretation practice, resulting from the intersection of Whitehead's and James's philosophies, as a mosaic philosophy, which he calls deep empiricism (Stenner, 2011), in conjunction with the late term of James, who, in identifying his own philosophy, added to and went beyond the definitions associated with the notion of pragmatism, and placed the idea of radical empiricism at the forefront of his thinking.[4] His influence on Whitehead is well known and has been acknowledged in many of Whitehead's writings. However, Stenner also argues that the philosophy of organism can be understood as a way of interpreting reality that is a renewing continuation of James's late legacy, radical empiricism.

Stenner traces the two ways of thinking (the system of *Process and Reality* and the practice of interpreting reality that emerges from the essays in Radical Empiricism) to the Jamesian operation of merging the concepts of entity and function in metaphysical position, which James performed in his examination of consciousness in his essay *Does Consciousness Exist?*.[5] On this basis, the existence of consciousness as a definable being or entity is called into question, as the title suggests. James is convinced that consciousness exists only as a function in reality. This function is active knowing, that is, the ability to orient oneself in the world, to adapt and to solve problems. The Jamesian definition of consciousness as a function becomes a Whiteheadian view of the merging of the concepts of entity and function. In terms of the basic being of Whitehead's system, actual entities are introduced into metaphysical discourse as entities that gain their existence as entities (their being as superject) by acquiring the function in reality (as a world-making process) that they take possession of in the process of individuation. To be an entity in the world, from a Whiteheadian perspective, is to operate as a function in reality. Whithead defines actual beings as experiential happenings, and James's radical empiricist investigation begins with an analysis of pure experience as a substitute for things, as an object of investigation. The thrust of

---

[4] James says that the doctrine of radical empiricism outlines his own Weltanschauung. James William, A World of Pure Experience, 41 (In Essays in Radical Empiricism. New York. Longmans, Green, and Co. 1912. 39-92.)

[5] James William, Does 'Consciousness' Exist?, 3. (In: Essays in Radical Empiricism. New York. Longmans, Green, and Co. 1912. 1-39.) „Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function."

my interpretation is in line with Stenner's in that it assumes a kinship and a connection between James and Whitehead that is not merely noteworthy but can be recorded as a key element that essentially determines interpretation. My approach, however, differs from Stenner's in that, instead of a comparative immersion in the two systems, it merely draws attention to a metaphilosophical reflection by James at the end of his famous essay on consciousness:

"Let the case be what it may in others, I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognise emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinised, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The 'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects is the 'I breathe' which actually does accompany them. There are other internal facts besides breathing (intracephalic muscular adjustments, etc., of which I have said a word in my larger Psychology), and these increase the assets of 'consciousness,' so far as the latter is subject to immediate perception; but breath, which was ever the original of 'spirit,' breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. That entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are." (James, 1912b, pp. 36-37).

The process of interpretation is an abstract journey that, given James's reflection, does not seem to happen merely in our heads; rather, it permeates our whole body and flows out into the world. Thinking is a stream of thought, and as Ádám Lovász writes in his book, "The stream of thought is not the individual activity of a given subject, but an anonymous stream that manifests itself through his body. In James's ontology, there is no distinction between thinking and breathing; the two are synonymous concepts."[6] I draw particular attention to James's thoughts because they shed light on an attitude that I assume Whitehead also has. According to him, when we speak of the being of a thinker, we are not merely speaking of the 'colour-changing' of an abstraction in the mind, which is modified by changing its opinions, but also of the body of an organic being, which is became by thoughts. Thoughts perform transformative operations not only in the mind of the thinker but also in his body. What we think speculatively can act as effectual

---

[6] Lovász Ádám, Az érzet deterritorializációja. A kiterjesztett észlelés filozófiája, Budapest, Gondolat Kiadó, 2018, 44. / „A gondolatfolyam nem egy adott szubjektumnak a saját, egyéni tevékenysége, hanem anonim folyás, amely a testén keresztül nyilatkozik meg. James ontológiájában nincsen különbség a gondolkodás és a lélegzetvétel között, a kettő egymással szinonim fogalom."

operations in the body (the directly accessible fabric of reality) if we begin to use language as a force that attracts feeling. It is through our feelings that concepts are embedded in our bodies. And they acquire function in our body, in the immanent activity of our body. On this basis, the process of interpretation holds for us not only the transformation of experience and the discovery of the world but also an ever more subtle and profound way of understanding the interaction with our bodies and the world, both practical and speculative.

References

Bothereau, F. (2009). Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty: The decentralisation of phenomenology. *ResearchGate.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273145779_Whitehead_Merleau-Ponty_The_Decentralization_of_phenomenology

Csikós, E. (2008). *Élő gondolkodás: A folyamatfilozófia klasszikusai: Hegel és Whitehead.* L'Harmattan Kiadó.

Debaise, D. (2009). The emergence of a speculative empiricism: Whitehead reading Bergson. In K. Robinson (Ed.), *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic connections* (pp. 77–86). Palgrave Macmillan.

James, W. (1912a). A world of pure experience. In *Essays in radical empiricism* (pp. 39–92). Longmans, Green, and Co.

James, W. (1912b). Does 'consciousness' exist? In *Essays in radical empiricism* (pp. 1–39). Longmans, Green, and Co.

Lovász, Á. (2018). *Az érzet deterritorializációja: A kiterjesztett észlelés filozófiája.* Gondolat Kiadó.

Mesle, C. R. (2008). *Process-relational philosophy: An introduction to Alfred North Whitehead.* Templeton Foundation Press.

Raud, R. (2021). *Being in flux: A post-anthropocentric ontology of the self.* Polity Press.

Schlehaider, I. (2023). 'Apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness'—Nature and subjectivity in Alfred North Whitehead. *Histories, 3*, 176–188. https://doi.org/10.3390/histories3020012

Soelch, D. (2011). From consistency to coherence: Whitehead's transformation of James's epistemic conservatism. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy.* https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/870

Stenner, P. (2011). James and Whitehead: Assemblage and systematisation of a deeply empiricist mosaic philosophy. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy.* https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/874

Stengers, I. (2009). Thinking with Deleuze and Whitehead: A double test. In K. Robinson (Ed.), *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic connections*. Palgrave Macmillan. (pp. 28-45)

Stengers, I. (2011). *Thinking with Whitehead: A free and wild creation of concepts* (M. Chase, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1978). *Process and reality: An essay in cosmology.* The Free Press.