

## Whitehead's philosophy as a pragmatic social cosmology

As recorded by his student C. Morris, English philosopher A. N. Whitehead believed that “the pragmatic movement could be greatly strengthened if it explicitly developed a cosmology. His opinion was that his own cosmology seemed to be the sort of thing that was needed”<sup>1</sup>.

Whether Whitehead may or not be included himself in the pragmatic movement<sup>2</sup>, it appears however that his cosmology is strongly linked to pragmatism, so far as we agree with William James when he says pragmatism is “essentially a social philosophy, a philosophy of ‘co’ in which conjunction make the work”<sup>3</sup>. For Whitehead does emphasise the organic and interactive character of the processes at work in nature. In his philosophy, every being is the product of interactions between the elements of its environment: each actual entity “appropriat[es] for the foundation of its own existence, the various elements of the universe out of which it arises”<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, things we experience such as rocks, plants or animals, are all described as complex social structures: they are “societies” which arise from the “canalization”<sup>5</sup> of a plurality of more simple processes combining with each other as they go on. Order in nature is the product of interactions<sup>6</sup>.

Then Whitehead's cosmology provides to pragmatism a strong metaphysical ground in order to raise the problem of interactions, especially when it deals with human societies. For in Whitehead's philosophy, a society is not an abstract “thing” owing its form to some transcendent principle such as the Hegelian *Volksgesittung* or to the sudden *fiat* of a social contract<sup>7</sup>. It is not a static entity the form of which is given at once, but a complex process of interactions between its members, and between its members on the one hand, and the symbolic system and institutions shared by all on the other hand: “the individual is formative of the society, the society is formative of the individual”<sup>8</sup>.

The purpose of this contribution is then to show that Whitehead's philosophy contains a truly pragmatic cosmology which helps us conceiving social phenomena as the products of interactions. How is a society formed (or “canalized”)? How does its institutions appear and how are they maintained? How does a society evolve or how does it strive against its own evolution? All those political questions find in Whitehead's philosophy a cosmological ground, particularly in his theory of prehensions, which outlines the part of interactions in the making of order in nature<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, Whitehead explicitly relates his metaphysics of interactions with political philosophy, in such works as *Adventures of Ideas* or *Symbolism*, and through his own political engagement. Whitehead rejects the ready-made abstractions of political philosophy, and endeavours to develop a metaphysical scheme which might help us understand social phenomena in accordance with the brute facts of experience. On this account, it seems that Whitehead's philosophy can legitimately be described as a social cosmology suitable for a pragmatic approach of social interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Morris, *The Pragmatic Movement in American Philosophy*, New York: Braziller Press, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> See B. G. Henning, W. T. Myers & J. D. John, *Thinking with Whitehead and the American Pragmatists: Experience & Reality*, Lexington Books, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> W. James, *Essays in Radical Empirism*, New York: Longmans Green, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York: MacMillan, 1978, p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> The word is explicitly borrowed from Bergson: see *Process and Reality*, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> See the chapters “The Order of Nature” and “Organisms and Environment” in *Process and Reality*.

<sup>7</sup> This we can compare with Dewey's “Search for the Public” in *The Public and its Problems*, Athens, Swallow Press, 1954.

<sup>8</sup> *Religion in the Making*, New York, Macmillan and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1926, Lecture III, section II.

<sup>9</sup> *Process and Reality*, part III.