

INTERSUBJECTIVITY, SPECIES-BEING, ACTUAL ENTITIES: SOCIAL ONTOLOGY FROM FICHTE TO WHITEHEAD

ANDERSON WEEKES

Abstract: Whitehead claims there is only one type of individual in the universe—the actual entity—but there are necessarily multiple tokens of this type. This turns out to be paradoxical. Nevertheless, a type of individuality that is *necessarily* plural because, for each token, relations to other tokens are constitutive is something familiar from ordinary language, everyday politics, and, not least, 19th century German social thought. Whitehead’s actual entity generalizes the notion of species-being we find in Fichte, Feuerbach, and Marx. The rationale for the concept of species-being brings to light important social and political implications of Whitehead’s cosmology.

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1. The Paradox of the Actual Entity

One of the distinctive features of Whitehead’s metaphysics is his category of the actual entity. Although Whitehead agrees with Aristotle that “being isn’t a genus,” it’s still the case that concrete, individual being *is* a genus. “Actual entity” is the one generic type of which every individual thing in the world is a specific differentiation (Whitehead 1978, 110). This requirement of Whitehead’s metaphysics is well known. Whitehead famously demands that everything concretely real—including God—be an instance of this one generic type. What is not so well known is how puzzling this demand really is.

At the same time that Whitehead is committed to a one-type ontology for individuals, he is also committed to pluralism. There is only one *type*

of individual, but there are multiple *tokens* of this type. A paradox arises because the multiplicity of tokens is *not* something that exists *per accidens*. Since something is an actual entity only by virtue of standing in certain definite relations to *other* actual entities, there could never be just one actual entity. And this is not an extraneous necessity imposed on the actual entity from without. It is a defining feature of the *type* of thing we are talking about. Either the type “actual entity” is instantiated in multiple, interrelated tokens, or it is not instantiated at all.

The problem is the concept of a token necessarily related—by virtue of its type—to other tokens. If token *x* *by itself* does not have all the properties prescribed by the type *T*, *then x is not a token of type T*. If being related to other entities, say *y* and *z*, is essential for *x* to be considered a token of *T*, then the real token of the type *T* is not the isolated entity *x*, but the several entities *x*, *y*, and *z* *insofar as they are interrelated*.

Now this is a surprising and very illuminating result. It seems that the real token of *T* is not *x*, *y*, or *z*, but the complex entity comprising *x*, *y*, and *z* as proper parts. And in the blink of an eye the mandated pluralism has evaporated from our type. There need not be more than one token of this type. And if there were more than one, it would be *per accidens*.

We know this reasoning can't be right. If this reasoning were correct, then Whitehead would after all be a monist of the Bradlian type. From this logical exercise we can see that Whitehead's metaphysical project is animated by a desire to do justice to a very specific concept of individuality: an individuality that is necessarily plural because, for each token, relations to other tokens are constitutive. The challenge is to understand how this can be the case without the diverse individuals losing their status as full-fledged tokens and becoming mere parts of a single complex token.

One way for ontology to ensure that the tokens are diverse and plural would be to deny that the relations between them are anything more than external. The mutual independence of the tokens would guarantee their plurality. But now we have lost any sense that the plurality is necessary, that it is somehow internally constitutive of every member of the plurality. So we have now fallen into the opposite extreme: from a monism in which relations are constitutive we have veered to a pluralism in which relations are irrelevant.

Whitehead scholars will recognize these two extremes as the Scylla and Charybdis between which Whitehead's ontology tries to chart a *via media*: a system where all relations are internal, making all relations interdependent parts of a single individual, and a system where all

relations are external, making relations and the existence of other individuals irrelevant to the constitution of any given individual.

A good question to ask at this point is: should anyone care about this abstruse problem who is not already a committed Whitehead scholar? The answer to that is *yes*. For—to give just one good reason—it is the very same problem that drives and divides politics and political theory. If I'm right about this, then Whitehead's metaphysics is of far broader and deeper relevance than anyone previously supposed.

2. Modeling the Paradox in Politics and Social Theory

The challenge that Whitehead set himself in his metaphysics was: how to have significant relations without compromising the independence of the relata? Or, conversely: how to have a diversity of independent individuals without compromising the significance of the relations among them? This dilemma may seem abstract, but it is in fact an urgent problem already familiar to everyone, as I will show in this section.

One of the great questions faced by modern political theory—and, indeed, by modern politics—is: under what conditions does freedom exist in society? There are two customary ways of answering this question, and neither of them is satisfactory. According to one answer, freedom is only derivatively a predicate of the state or society. It is primarily a property of the individuals in the society. The society is free if the individuals are free, and the individuals are free to the precise extent that the relations among them are purely *external*. This is the answer that we can extract from such representatives of classical liberalism as Bentham, Mill or Robert Nozick.

According to the other answer, freedom is only derivatively a predicate of individuals. It is primarily a property of the state, community or society. The reason is simple: individuals cannot be truly free on this view unless certain positive relations among them are realized—indeed, unless certain positive relations are guaranteed to be realized—so that the *structure* is the primary locus of freedom. The individuals are free if the society in which they live is free, and the society is free if it is structured in such a way that it guarantees those positive arrangements thought to constitute freedom. This is the answer that we can equally extract from the conservatism of Burke or Hegel, the radicalism of Robespierre or Lenin, or the social liberalism of Thomas Hill Green or John Rawls.

It should be clear that if the *structure* is what guarantees freedom, then in relating the individuals to one another in a certain way, the relations *internally* constitute the individuals as free. But this is just another way of saying that they are not really independent individuals at all. They are the

proper parts of a single encompassing individual, called the society, community or state, which is free if the required relations among its proper parts are somehow guaranteed.

What we have, then, is the same Scylla and Charybdis in political theory that Whitehead faced off with in his metaphysics. In the short space given me here I cannot delve into the reasons neither of these options is satisfactory. Should we happen to agree they both represent undesirable extremes, the question would be how to proceed.

If the obvious *conclusion* is that we need a *via media* between antisocial individualism and anti-individual communitarianism, the obvious *problem* is that this is one of those things that's so much easier said than done. Just when we are trying to avoid it, political discourse seems always to lapse back into one of these two extremes. In light of the many well-known challenges this problem continues to present, I want to stress the following neglected fact: developing a theory of society that avoids these two extremes was the express goal of Whitehead's philosophy. Whether the extraordinary results he achieved working with a *naturalized* concept of society are transferable to the political domain is a question that has not been adequately studied and is obviously of no little relevance. The purpose of this paper is to lay the necessary groundwork for such an investigation, which will require the contributions of more than a few dedicated scholars, and to persuade those capable of contributing to such an investigation that it is, under any conceivable outcome, eminently worth undertaking.

3. Modeling the Paradox in Ordinary Language

We can dispel the fear that we are dealing with an artifact of bad philosophizing if we can model the logic of Whitehead's concept of actual entity with uncontroversial concepts from ordinary language. This is surprisingly easy to do. Consider such obvious examples as: twins, siblings, conspirators, contestants, lovers, friends, duelists, or rivals. You cannot have just one sibling or just one rival. And yet the *type* applies to *each individually*. Each is a full-fledged token of the type even though satisfaction of the type-requirements depends on there being other tokens of the type to which each token is related. The semantics of words like "rival" can be illuminated by contrast with the semantics of two other types of words: words like "person" and words like "panel." A person is a singular thing, and it's irrelevant whether there are other persons. A panel, too, is a singular thing, and it is equally irrelevant whether there are other panels, but a panel is necessarily made up of more than one person, so it is