

Schleiermacher and Whitehead

Open Systems in Dialogue

Edited by
Christine Helmer

in Cooperation with
Marjorie Suchocki, John Quiring, and Katie Goetz



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Open Interpretation

Whitehead and Schleiermacher on Hermeneutics

J. R. HUSTWIT, Claremont Graduate University

One of the happier (and potentially dangerous) traits of a fully systematic body of work, such as those given life by Schleiermacher and Whitehead, is the ease with which one can extend that system to topics originally left unexplored. In this respect, my aim in this essay is largely experimental. Although Whitehead never explicitly formulated a hermeneutical theory, his insights into language, perception, and symbol lend themselves to an interesting project: to lay the foundations of a Whiteheadian hermeneutic. If Whitehead's system were extended to bear upon the field of hermeneutics, which I believe is a very natural application, what would the resulting hermeneutical theory look like? How would this hermeneutic vary from Schleiermacher's theory?

Hermeneutics originally materialized when scholars enlisted philology, grammar, and psychology in service of the interpretation of texts. This new discipline, at its inception, was applied solely to jurisprudence, classical literature, and biblical texts, as these were matters in which the meanings intended by the authors were most crucial and unavailable. This view of the text—as an ambiguous and sometimes opaque cipher for an author's intention—is the foundational presupposition of Romantic hermeneutics. Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose name has become synonymous with Romantic hermeneutics, was responsible for the first truly systematic account of this new science.

This paper is divided into two parts. First, I seek to weave Whitehead's remarks on language and symbol into a coherent hermeneutical position. I will first discuss the structure of an actual occasion, as it is the location of all subjective understanding. Then, I will argue that Whitehead's system makes interpretation a pervasive aspect of the universe—a metaphysi-

cal, and consequently universal relation that exists between and within all occasions of experience. To conclude the first part, I will employ Whiteheadian concepts to provide a metaphysical description of the process of interpretation.

In the second part of the paper, I will discuss points of contact, both agreement and disagreement, between a Whiteheadian and a Schleiermacherian hermeneutic. I will focus on the issue of authorial intention. Although Whitehead would agree with Schleiermacher that the authorial intention is a crucial determinant of meaning, Whiteheadian thought also demands reference to the reader's own deployment of concepts. The resulting account locates meaning in the vacillation and interplay between the authorial occasion and the reader occasion.

I. THE STRUCTURE OF A SUBJECT

In order to make any headway in understanding language and meaning in a Whiteheadian context, it is necessary to explain Whitehead's own doctrine of the actual occasion and some technical terms associated with this doctrine. Whitehead rejects a substance metaphysic. He argues that the "final real things of which the world is made up" are "actual occasions or actual entities."¹ The term "actual occasions" reflects a break from orthodox metaphysical thought. According to Whitehead, the world is not made up of substances that endure through time. Instead, an individual enduring thing is not a "substance" in the formal sense of a fully actual or finally real thing, but a serially or temporally ordered society of actual occasions, understood to be experiential events, and hence called "occasions of experience." Atoms, molecules, and human souls are all, by virtue of their individuality, strings of temporally ordered and causally related actual occasions. Any account of how human thought and understanding takes place must be couched in terms of the internal workings of and relations between the serially ordered actual occasions that constitute a person's mind.

The process by which an actual occasion moves from indeterminacy and potentiality to actuality is the process of *concrecence*. This process of determination occurs by means of *prehensions*, which are an individual occasion's feelings of data. A prehension has three aspects: its datum or content, its subjective form, and the occasion that is prehending it. For example, if

¹ PR 18.

a particular fact is felt, a complete description of that feeling will include its content (the datum), its subjective form (the emotive weight associated with the datum), and its prehending subject (the actual occasion feeling the datum with that subjective form). Whitehead explains that

in a process of concrescence, there is a succession of phases in which new prehensions arise by integration of prehensions in antecedent phases. In these integrations 'feelings' contribute their 'subjective forms' and their 'data' to the formation of novel integral prehensions [T]he process continues till all prehensions are components in the one determinate integral satisfaction.²

An actual occasion, which in the case of our hermeneutical inquiry is a moment of human experience, develops by means of several stages of prehensions, or feelings (these terms will be used interchangeably).³ The occasion begins by feeling the entirety of the past world and, based on this initial prehension, then selects and integrates aspects of those initial data in a process of continual refinement until it reaches a determinate satisfaction. Whitehead divides this process of concrescence into four stages, each of which contains a unique type of prehension. These four types of prehension will be crucial to a Whiteheadian description of human interpretation.

Every occasion of experience is dipolar. In the process of concrescence, an occasion is determined by both the external world and its own subjectivity. The initial determining of an occasion by the environment is known as the *physical pole*. The subsequent development of the occasion according to its own subjectivity is known as the *mental pole*.

The first phase in the process of concrescence makes up the physical pole, and is known as the *conformal phase*. In this phase, the subject feels all other actual entities.⁴ The current actual occasion receives data from past actual occasions, which have already reached satisfaction and are positively prehended.⁵ These physical prehensions, which make up the occasion's initial phase, causally determine the possibilities for the development of the subject. The physical feelings in the first phase are both the source of all potentiality for, and the limiting factor of, the concrescing subject.

² PR 26.

³ Although I will use the terms interchangeably, there are two varieties of prehensions: negative and positive. Only the latter are feelings.

⁴ PR 23.

⁵ For a more detailed account of negative and positive prehension, see section II. 1 below.

After the initial data are prehended in the physical pole, the occasion begins to concreate in accordance with its *subjective aim*, or process of self-determination.⁶ The remaining three phases of concreation that are influenced by an occasion's subjective aim take place in the mental pole.

The second phase of concreation is the conceptual phase. Whitehead explains that "[f]rom each physical feeling there is the derivation of a purely conceptual feeling, whose datum is the eternal object exemplified in the definiteness of the actual entity."⁷ The concreting occasion selects or picks out *eternal objects* (Whitehead's term for universals)⁸ from the actual entities felt in the initial physical pole. This is a *conceptual feeling*. For example, suppose a book were physically prehended by a concreting occasion of human experience.⁹ That occasion, in the conceptual phase, might pick out the particular shade of blue found on the cover of the book, the rectangular shape, the ability to open and close, or its musty smell. Any of these would be a conceptual feeling.

The third phase of concreation integrates the conceptual feelings from the previous phase with the physical feelings of the first phase. These sorts of prehensions are *propositional feelings*, the data of which are "propositions." Whitehead defines a proposition as "[a]n eternal object realized in respect to its pure potentiality as related to determinate logical subjects."¹⁰ Propositional feelings combine an eternal object (the proposition's predicate) with a past actuality (the logical subject of the proposition). In terms of our example, the shade of blue found on the cover of the prehended book might be combined with the actuality of a stray dog that lies some-

⁶ It is important to note that all or at least most of the self-determination occurs at an unconscious level. For Whitehead, subjectivity is not to be equated with self-consciousness, but rather (at least partly) includes an unconscious *telos* at work in the occasion. For this reason, atomic and molecular occasions of experience possess self-determination, but not self-consciousness.

⁷ PR 248.

⁸ One of Whitehead's metaphysical principles states that only actualities can be causally efficacious. Universals, understood as less-than-actual by Aristotle or Plato, would be unable to have any effect upon the world. Whitehead's eternal objects are distinguished from universals in that they are all located in the mind of God. Since God is an actuality, the eternal objects are able to be causally efficacious.

⁹ Macroscopic examples of *nexus* such as books, computers, or animal bodies are actually made up of millions or billions of actual occasions that are each individually prehended. To speak of prehending a book is actually to speak of prehending millions of actual occasions that make up a book.

¹⁰ PR 214.

where in the prehending subject's causal past. The resulting propositional feeling's datum would be "dog X as blue."

Whereas propositional feelings occur in moderately complex occasions of experience (i. e., living cells), the final or intellectual phase of concrescence takes place only in high-grade occasions of experience (i. e., human beings). Only the occasions sophisticated enough to attain the intellectual phase are capable of consciousness, which is one subjective form of an intellectual feeling.¹¹ The datum of an intellectual feeling is "the generic contrast between a nexus of actual entities and a proposition with its logical subjects members of the nexus."¹² This final complex level of integration of feeling combines and compares a propositional feeling with the actuality of the subject of that propositional feeling. In the present example, an occasion that had reached this level of concrescence would compare the propositional feeling "dog X as blue" with the actual dog X. The subject would then probably perceive that dog X is predominately black, and not blue at all. The proposition "dog X as blue" would be judged to be false, and consequently prehended in an intellectual feeling with the subjective forms of "disbelief" and "consciousness," among others.

The prehensions in the four phases of concrescence describe the human experience as it develops from occasion to occasion. Prehensions oscillate between efficient causation, which occurs between occasions, and final causation, which occurs within an occasion during concrescence. Upon reaching satisfaction, or full determination, an occasion of experience achieves *objective immortality* insofar as it is now an object for all future occasions toprehend, and consequently continually influences the future.

These phases of concrescence have striking ramifications for a Whiteheadian account of interpretation. According to Whitehead's model, the vast majority of human experience is unconscious. Even when we are most aware, "there is a small focal region of clear illumination, and a large penumbral region of experience which tells of intense experience in dim apprehension."¹³ Whitehead's account of human experience stresses unconscious experiences, rather than consciousness, as primary. Unlike Schleiermacher, who conceives of hermeneutics as a task originating in discursive thought, a Whiteheadian account of interpretation will attribute the bulk

¹¹ See section III. 3. for a discussion of subjective form.

¹² PR 266.

¹³ PR 267.

of interpretation to unconscious determination.¹⁴ Whiteheadian hermeneutics will be biased towards the descriptive rather than prescriptive, as the majority of information that informs the conscious entertainment of a text by a reader will have been determined preconsciously. This is not to deny the practical side of hermeneutics; conscious interpretation does occur. The need for the prescriptive aspect of hermeneutics never vanishes, but is secondary.

II. EXPERIENCE AS Pervasively Interpretative

Heidegger and Gadamer redefined the hermeneutical task as a discipline that is properly ontological in nature. Heidegger's characterization of human existence as *Geworfenheit*, or being-thrown-into-the-world describes being as necessarily being in the midst of a world one did not create.¹⁵ Humans find themselves immersed and penetrated by the world, unable to untangle themselves from it. Likewise, Gadamer's category of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, or consciousness exposed to the effects of history, establishes the interpreting subject as a thoroughly historical being.¹⁶ Any act of understanding is contingent upon the prejudices¹⁷ and traditions of the reader's cultural moment. This ontological turn in hermeneutics transformed the discipline into a universal enterprise since pre-understanding, tradition, and prejudice were inescapable and the notion of experience unmediated by interpretation was considered a myth of modernity. Though he proposes a radically different ontology, Whitehead will side with Gadamer and Heidegger on this point: the interpreting subject is both thrown into the world and historically conditioned. For Whitehead, however, it is the thoroughly relational character of the world that necessitates hermeneutics as a universal enterprise.

¹⁴ Although this interpretative integration is unconscious, it is still teleological insofar as it is driven by the subjectivity of the concreting occasion.

¹⁵ MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 220-4.

¹⁶ HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weisenheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 300-2.

¹⁷ Gadamer's concept of prejudice is distinct from its pejorative popular usage. Gadamerian prejudice is much broader and includes a wide variety of presuppositions and attitudes, both good and bad—not just those that might be considered inappropriate or bigoted.

Whitehead points out that if a poet is composing a verse about trees, he may take a walk in a forest for inspiration. For her, the trees are symbols for words.¹⁸ Concrete actuality is primary and only later gives rise to language. As soon as the poet's verse is read, the symbolism is reversed, and her lyrics, in the process of interpretation, become symbols for trees. Whitehead describes the use of language as "double symbolic reference:—from things to words on the part of the speaker, and from words back to things on the part of the listener."¹⁹ In Whitehead's example, a tree is prehended by a poet. The poet interprets the tree as pointing to some formulation of language, and she then externalizes verse in writing. This verse is then read, and the reader realizes the poetic language as a symbol for an actuality. The words evoke a prehensive feeling in the reader, which may or may not be similar to the poet's original prehension of the actual tree. Hermeneutics is primarily concerned with the latter half of this process—the reader's flow of understanding.

If one considers this process while focusing on the role of the communicated message, the message, whether a single fact, or complex collection of propositions, seems to flow from the world to the author, back into the world, and to the reader. In this case, the beauty of a tree was prehended by an author, transmitted to a reader via language, and back into the world, as the experience of the tree's beauty is one of the prehensions that constitutes the reader as an object for future occasions. The causal connections found in this particular example characterize Whitehead's entire cosmology. The world is made up of a tangled web of relational bonds, which connect every actuality to every other past actuality. This pervasive interconnectedness is known as the *principle of relativity*.²⁰

The principle of relativity gives rise to a complication for an interpreting subject. Because every actuality is also a subject, which refines and selects the data of its own experience, there is always an unavoidable distortion of the message at two moments in its flow through the world: during the process of concrescence and at the moment of expression. In terms of human subjects that communicate with each other, this distortion most commonly occurs first during thought, and then when the thought is externalized in language.

¹⁸ S 12.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ PR 22.

This double distortion rules out the possibility of an exact correspondence between an author's expression and a reader's understanding at the ontological level.²¹ Interpretation is doubly necessary to make intersubjective relationality possible. This insight is reinforced by Lyman Lundeen's work. In his *Risk and Rhetoric in Religion*,²² Lundeen demonstrates that analogy is the basis of perception; interpretation is the only means by which information is transmitted between and within occasions.

1. Perspective

In the mental pole, the process of concrescence conceals and selectively emphasizes much of the initial data that enter into the physical pole of an actual occasion. Whitehead argues that "the selective character of the individual obscures the external totality from which it originates" and that it "has attained its individual depth of being by a selective emphasis limited to its own purposes."²³ The aggregate of all past actual entities is known as the *initial data*. The vast amount of information in these initial data undoubtedly contains contradictory facts and propositions. Those bits of data that are contradictory or incompatible with the concrescing occasion are not felt, but are negatively prehended.²⁴ Although the data still have some (vanishingly small) impact upon the concrescing occasion, their content is ignored. After the strictly contradictory elements of the world have been negatively prehended, the many positively prehended initial data are converted into one complex objective datum in the conformal phase. Because the process of concrescence, in terms of information, is essentially a process of discrimination, selection, and integration, the occasion refines a huge amount of data into a relatively small amount of data. Even then, many of the data that *do* get through are ignored or at least obscured in the subsequent phases of the mental pole.

The selection in the mental pole is not without purpose or benefit. In reference to the concrescence of an actual occasion, Whitehead remarks, "intellectual coördination is more readily achieved when the primary facts are selected so as to dismiss the baffling aspects of things into intellectual sub-

²¹ Despite the impossibility of *exact* correspondence, frequently this distortion is vanishingly small, and near-perfect understanding occurs, which can be considered perfect for all practical purposes.

²² LYMAN T. LUNDEEN, *Risk and Rhetoric in Religion: Whitehead's Theory of Language and the Discourse of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

²³ PR 15.

²⁴ PR 83, 231-2.

ordination."²⁵ The drive towards coherence in the coordination of data in the phases of the mental pole prompts the concreting occasion to obscure and ignore the problematic facts, and emphasizes those that are amenable to the subjective aim. These problematic facts are not strictly contradictory; all contradictory data were negatively prehended in the conformal phase. These problematic facts participate in contrasts that, if brought into consciousness, would be too intense for the concreting occasion to integrate.

This process of selection allows for individuality and coherence in the world. Selectivity, however, comes at a cost, one dimension of which is the loss of exactitude. The world cannot be prehended identically by any two subjects, and no actualities will prehend the world absolutely, without some selection of data.²⁶ No two occasions will feel the world in the same way.

Every actual entity (except for the divine actuality) feels only a portion of the data in its universe because of negative prehension and selection. Consequently, no finite actuality is capable of an absolute perspective. The selection of data both in the transition from initial data to objective datum in the physical pole and in the phases of the mental pole establish perspectivalism and epistemic relativism as pervasive features of the universe.

Roughly put, epistemic relativism is the doctrine that human thought is contingent upon a variety of subjective factors, such as culture, location, and perspective. The degree to which human thought is conditioned is a matter of a much larger debate. This controversy is best conveyed by the two oversimplified characterizations that represent the opposite poles of the debate. The first position argues that human thought is independent of any external determination and capable of perceiving the world objectively. The opposite position argues that both thought and perception are wholly determined by history, culture, and other factors. According to the latter position, claims to either objectivity or unmediated reality are untenable.

Whitehead clearly rejects both of these caricatured positions. Mild relativism, or acknowledgment of finite perspective, is a necessary feature of Whiteheadian metaphysics. Finitude frequently leads to distortion and error if a subject, by means of Whitehead's *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*, mistakes the feelings in its partial perspective to have absolute signifi-

²⁵ AI 47.

²⁶ PR 210.

cance.²⁷ Nevertheless, it still makes sense to speak of objectivity. Before the occasion's subjectivity manipulates the data, the world is objectively given to every occasion as the objective datum in the physical pole. As long as the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is avoided, epistemic relativism of the extreme variety is not a worry in the Whiteheadian system.

2. The Imprecision of Language

The second point of distortion and imprecision comes when an author expresses a prehensive feeling by putting it into language. As Anna Case-Winters has explained, language, for Whitehead, is persistently inadequate to the task of describing reality. Even when "honed to a greater precision, it is not the case that there will be some kind of direct correspondence between reality and the linguistic representations of it."²⁸ Whitehead calls this *the fallacy of a complete dictionary*: language is always capable of greater specificity, and will consistently fall short of a complete description of reality.²⁹ For this reason, cases in which a person seeks to understand the intention behind an expression, such as in most everyday conversation, are precluded from an interpretation-free understanding. Because the language a person uses to express herself will never coincide with her actual sentiments, even the simplest bits of communication require some degree of interpretation.

Language not only suffers from chronic imprecision, but also suppresses the relational character of facts and propositions. In Whitehead's account of the harmful presuppositions of much philosophy, he criticizes those who "presuppose that language does enunciate well-defined propositions."³⁰ This is not the case at all because "[l]anguage is thoroughly indeterminate, by reason of the fact that every occurrence presupposes some systematic type of environment."³¹ The purpose of language is to express and communicate prehensive feelings, usually propositional feelings, to other subjects. Prehensive feelings arise in an environment in which they are related to every other feeling in the author, as well as the entire past actual world.

²⁷ The fallacy of misplaced concreteness occurs when one takes an abstraction for a fully concrete reality. Whitehead frequently attributed this fallacy to those who argue for a substance metaphysic. See PR 7-8.

²⁸ See ANNA CASE-WINTERS, "System and Dynamism in Whitehead's Thought: The Category of the Ultimate and the Concept of God," 142 in this volume.

²⁹ MT 173.

³⁰ PR 12.

³¹ Ibid.

The prehensions that lie behind expression have their meaning in a complex tangle of relations to other prehensions and actualities. The act of expression, however, cuts a feeling out of its context of relatedness to concrete fact. It abstracts the feeling from its original relational environment and presents it in sterile isolation for the reader to consider. Whitehead warns that "single words, each with its dictionary meaning, and single sentences, each bounded by full stops, suggest the possibility of complete abstraction from any environment."³² To assume that any unit of language (or expression) accurately represents a prehensive feeling is to commit another Whiteheadian fallacy—that of *simple location*. Simple location is the mistake of assuming that an entity "does not require for its explanation any reference to other regions of space-time."³³ The actual significance of any feeling involves its connection to everything else; the proper locus of meaning is in the life of an experiencing subject.

David Ray Griffin has highlighted this problem with language by emphasizing the distinction between verbal statements and propositions.³⁴ He uses the sentence "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" to illustrate the fact that one verbal expression could represent multiple propositions. This sentence could potentially refer to a would-be emperor of Rome crossing a river. It might also, I would add, describe a criminal named Caesar betraying his organization, which is nicknamed "the Rubicon." It could also be used metaphorically to describe a person making an irreversible decision. This statement, divorced from the actuality of its referents, lacks the relational connections to its surrounding world that enable one to interpret its meaning correctly.

The isolating character of language, when considered in light of the principle of relativity, raises a perplexing question. If every actual occasion is related to every other actual occasion, then how can the act of expression excise meaning from its relational character? Are there not causal chains connecting the text to both author and reader? One might suggest that the actual occasions that make up the medium of expression could provide the concrete relatedness required for meaning, and save us from simple location. The problem with this suggestion lies with the sophistication of the medium's occasions. The actual occasions that make up paper and ink or

³² MT 66.

³³ SMW 49.

³⁴ DAVID RAY GRIFFIN, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 324-6.

vibrating air molecules are not as sophisticated as human occasions of experience. The actual text is not capable of achieving the complex contrasts and syntheses of feeling that are constitutive of human thought.³⁵ This discrepancy in sophistication means that human experience loses much of its richness when contained in a non-human occasion. For this reason, language relies on symbols for the passing along of complex propositions and concepts.³⁶

As an author uses language, the prehensive feelings expressed (propositional or otherwise) are necessarily ambiguated and distorted. Likewise, the very process of concrescence tends to obscure and distort the totality of the world as a subject coordinates data into patterns of coherence. These two moments of distortion entail that communication is doubly reliant upon interpretation. Readers must take into account both the indeterminacy of the means of expression, and the particularity of their own perspectives.

3. Analogy and Experience

In his study of Whitehead's philosophy of language, Lundeen supports the notion that interpretation is a pervasive characteristic of the universe. He argues that the causal relationships between actualities are by nature interpretative. Specifically, Lundeen argues that analogy is "fundamental in the coordination of societies and enduring entities, so it plays a crucial role."³⁷ He continues to define analogy as a "similarity which is qualified by differences which are real, but which can be excluded as of negligible relevance in respect to a specific interest or context of significance."³⁸ In an analogy, two elements that are in fact not identical are compared with special attention paid to their similarities, so that the significance of their differences is marginalized. The expression "John was as hungry as a bear" is a striking example. John, who is human, has many differences from a bear—body hair, tooth size, cognitive capacity, metabolism, and so on. Upon awakening from hibernation, bears are notoriously ravenous, and so is John. For the purposes of the analogy, the two elements are judged to be similar with

³⁵ Although this observation—that texts cannot think—seems uninteresting, the notion of a significant gap dividing occasions that can use language, and those that cannot raises interesting questions, i. e., "Exactly how homogenous is Whitehead's panexperientialism?" See section III. 3. below.

³⁶ See section III. 2.

³⁷ LUNDEEN, *Risk and Rhetoric in Religion*, 171.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50n.

regard to their appetites. The differences between John and a bear are not significant in relation to the meaning of the analogy. Such is the function of analogy: to intensify similarity while dampening difference.

The Whiteheadian metaphysical category that Lundeen points out as most analogical is that of *transmutation*. This species of feeling is "a transmutation of simple physical feelings of many actualities into one physical feeling of a nexus as one."³⁹ Suppose, for example, a human prehends a puddle of water. Every actual occasion of every molecule of water is slightly different from the next; each prehends differing initial data, and each reaches a unique satisfaction according to its unique subjective aim. Yet, all these molecules are presented to an individual as a unity. We do not prehend the billions of molecules as billions of individuals. Instead, we perceive them as a relatively undifferentiated unity. The same is true for most of our experience. We experience the world as groupings, or nexūs, of actual occasions: a table, an apple, air, a person, a tree. Without transmutation, we would experience a vast multitude of unique actual occasions. This is the power of analogy; it explains the tendency of a subject to experience the world by emphasizing similarities over differences relative to a specific criterion. Lundeen argues that this is why

Analogy is not a temporary or secondary linguistic expedient to be used only until it can be replaced with straightforward statements requiring no qualification. Experience is qualified by pervasive analogies, and its most adequate expression requires the type of qualification associated with interpretive models and illuminating metaphors.⁴⁰

The universe is riddled with persistent analogies at many levels of experience. Existence at its most fundamental and simple level involves prehension and experience. Every level of existence participates in interpretation on some level by virtue of the selection of concrescence and ambiguity of language. Lundeen's example of analogy and Whitehead's category of transmutation are two examples of the many ways that the relations between occasions of experience are essentially interpretative. For this reason, hermeneutics, as an account of how interpretation occurs, takes on radical significance in a Whiteheadian metaphysic. Hermeneutics is properly defined as a metaphysical investigation into the relations between and

³⁹ PR 251.

⁴⁰ LUNDEEN, *Risk and Rhetoric in Religion*, 184.

within occasions. Whitehead states that “[t]here is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real.”⁴¹ Whitehead’s ontological principle requires that only actual entities can be given as a reason for things.⁴² They are the only finally real things. Because the universe is made up exclusively of actual entities, and each entity interprets, a Whiteheadian hermeneutic is universal in scope.

III. A METAPHYSICAL ACCOUNT OF INTERPRETATION

How does a reader perform interpretation? How does one move from expressions in the world to a determinate prehensive feeling? This is the primary question that hermeneutics seeks to answer. Whitehead’s theory of symbolism provides the means by which subjects make the translation between language and prehensive feeling.

I. Perception as Symbol

An understanding of Whitehead’s doctrine of three modes of perception—the pure modes of *presentational immediacy*, *causal efficacy*, and the impure mode of *symbolic reference*—is crucial to a Whiteheadian account of interpretation. At the phenomenological level, these modes establish a subject’s constant reliance on symbol and interpretation.

Perception in the mode of presentational immediacy is “our perception of the contemporary world by means of the senses.”⁴³ It is the immediate experience of, for example, visually perceiving spatial fields of color, without any reflection or interpretation of the sense data. Although presentational immediacy is prominent in conscious experience, the most fundamental mode of perception is perception in the mode of causal efficacy. Perception in this mode is an actual occasion’s physical prehension of the world in its physical pole. The most common example is the power of memory. As a subject, we have access to memories, yet these memories are not presented to us through sensory phenomena.

Imagine the example of a dog running towards you while barking. In terms of presentational immediacy, a black shape in your field of vision is getting larger, and a noise is getting louder. In terms of causal efficacy, you

41 PR 18.

42 PR 19.

43 PR 311.

are prehending other causally efficacious actualities. Symbolic reference is the transition between one mode and the other. It is the recognition of increasing loudness and growing black shapes as representing a causally efficacious actuality: an approaching dog.

This movement from sign (presentational immediacy) to referent (causal efficacy) is "so habitual in human experience that great care is needed to distinguish the two modes."⁴⁴ Phenomenologically, human conscious experience does not begin with causal efficacy—which occurs in the conformal phase before consciousness arises. We do not feel the raw efficient causation of other occasions. Nor does it begin with blotchy fields of color and uninterpreted sounds. Rather, we see and hear *things*. The interpretative act by which we infer the existence of causally efficacious actuality from sensory experience is accomplished by perception in the mode of symbolic reference. Perception in this mode is largely automatic. It constitutes the given character of experience prior to conscious reflection.

2. Language as Symbol

Language, both written and spoken, operates as symbolic reference. As Whitehead points out, "[s]poken language is merely a series of squeaks."⁴⁵ When prehended (either visually or audibly), words and sentences do not actually convey their meaning in the prehension. There is nothing inherent in the actual occasions making up the ink formations in the written word "dog" that convey the idea of an animal. A word is a "symbol, and its meaning is constituted by the ideas, images, and emotions, which it raises in the mind of the hearer."⁴⁶ Sensory phenomena point to a more concrete actuality in symbolic perception. In the case of language, bits of sound or ink blots point to the world.

For Whitehead, as for Schleiermacher, the process of understanding is an act of interpreting symbols. Lundeen argues that some common ground must exist as the basis of a symbol-meaning relationship.⁴⁷ He points out that most symbols in sense perception contain a "high degree of causal conformity" and that, as a result, interpretation occurs almost automatically. As symbols become more abstract and complex, as they do in language, however, "this causal relationship is reduced," and consequently, "[t]he

⁴⁴ PR 121.

⁴⁵ PR 264.

⁴⁶ S 2.

⁴⁷ LUNDEEN, *Risk and Rhetoric in Religion*, 157.

ground for symbolic reference becomes somewhat artificial and conventional."⁴⁸

Whereas perception in the mode of symbolic reference relies heavily on natural similarities between symbol and referent, words only resemble their meanings insofar as they have a history of association.⁴⁹ Readers are not isolated and autonomous agents, who freely assign meaning to language in accordance with their will. Rather, they are immersed and penetrated by pre-established norms of interpretation. The reader occasion is constituted by what has come before; it is radically historical in Whitehead's ontology. The past makes up the content of a contemporary occasion. History is the common ground that acts as the basis of the language-meaning relationship. When a reader interprets language, she prehends the symbol to be interpreted as well as past occasions of experience in which that same symbol was associated with particular meanings. Such associations have occurred both in past occasions of her own experience and in the subject's larger environment.

In terms of prehensions, written or spoken symbols are felt as past actualities: ink-stained paper or vibrating air molecules. Conceptual feelings, which are feelings of eternal objects, are combined with those symbols to form propositional feelings. Although Whitehead makes no special designation, I will call the species of propositional feelings that combine an actual human symbolic expression and a conceptual meaning for that symbol a *semantic feeling*. A simple example of a semantic feeling is that of a lexical meaning assigned to a particular word, prehended from past successful interpretations of that symbol. Semantic feelings, however, would include any prehension of a past use of language. These semantic feelings are compared to the actuality of the symbol being interpreted. Meaning is then applied to a symbol in an intellectual feeling. For example, the proposition "the word 'dog' as meaning furry" is a semantic feeling, as is "'dog' as meaning companion" and "'dog' as meaning bloodthirsty." The reader processes these semantic feelings in light of other semantic feelings and selects those which are appropriate for application to the symbol being interpreted. This application occurs by means of an intellectual feeling. Almost

⁴⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁹ One notable exception being the literary device of onomatopoeia (i. e., "splash"), where the pronunciation of a word closely resembles its meaning; the character of the auditory presentational immediacy it represents. In this case, there is a natural similarity.

all cases of interpretation are much more complex than the case of assigning meaning to one word. Real interpretation involves more than single words in isolation. The basic process, however, is the same. Interpretation relies on past applications of meaning to symbols and applies them to contemporary symbols. The power of the past comes to bear on an individual through these semantic feelings.

Intersubjective communication relies on consensus within a community of language users of what a word or phrase means. If a reader applied a definition to a symbol in too much of an unexpected way, the communicability of that symbol would be undermined. Semantic feelings are always felt with the subjective form of appropriateness or suitability. It is important to note that the prescriptive forces of semantic feelings are always subordinated to the occasion's subjective aim; interpretation is not *wholly* determined by the past. The potential for novelty is present in every occasion of experience's application of meaning to symbol. The power of past usage on the interpreting subject is largely persuasive, but is never deterministic. Due to the idiosyncratic subjective aim of a reader, slight and subtle shifts in semantic application frequently occur. This flexibility accounts for the gradual evolution of language over time. Also, innovation in language is presupposed in poetry, and other lyrical genres in which unexpected and surprising applications of meaning contribute to the aesthetic quality of the work.

The reader is constituted by and manipulates the sedimentation of past language use, to borrow Ricoeur's metaphor.⁵⁰ The past not only provides the tools of grammar and usage, but a tradition of other past interpretations. History serves as a rich accumulation of potential meaning. The sedimentary character of linguistic tradition is not rigid—a brittle shale, but rather like thick clay—retaining its own shape and form, but ultimately moldable, especially under gradual pressure over time.

3. Form and Content

As previously mentioned, every prehensive feeling consists of three aspects: its objective content, its subjective form, and the concreting subject that feels the feeling. In terms of these three aspects, hermeneutics can be described as an account of how the first two aspects, objective content

⁵⁰ PAUL RICOEUR, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 52.

and subjective form, are transmitted between subjects (the third aspect) by means of symbolic expression.

The previous section described how the first aspect of feeling, objective content, is determined. Semantic feelings are prehended and applied to a symbol in an intellectual feeling. There is more to meaning than austere dictionary definition. Emotive force and emphasis in expression are conveyed in the second aspect of a prehensive feeling: subjective form. Subjective form is determined alongside objective content in the interpretative process. Whitehead argues that the subjective form of a prehensive feeling has both a qualitative aspect and a quantitative aspect.⁵¹ In addition to the "flavor" of a subjective form, it is also felt in some quantity. A conceptual feeling can be felt with a great deal or small amount of appetite. Likewise, it can be felt with varying amounts of aversion.

When a reader interprets an expression, she is constructing both the definition of an expression and its emotive force. The combination of objective content and subjective form determines the meaning of an expression. In some forms of discourse, however, the objective content is more important than the subjective form. For example, scientific and legal texts usually place minimal importance on the subjective form of the expressed feelings.

The opposite can also be said of poetry, or religious expressions. In these cases, the subjective form arguably plays a much more important role than the content of the prehensive feelings.⁵² The emotive force of what is said or written frequently takes precedent in the mind of the author. Whitehead points out that music, ceremonial clothing, and ceremonial smells are all examples of expressions in which the importance of the objective content of the interpreted feeling is minimal and the subjective form is maximal.⁵³ In addition to assigning content and form to symbols, the interpretative process includes a judging of how much importance is to be placed on content, and how much is to be placed on form.

There are also cases of interpretation in which no content is entertained. All that is evoked is a subjective form. Lyrical poetry, music, and abstract

⁵¹ PR 233.

⁵² It is important to note that Whitehead makes no clean break between discourse in the humanities and scientific discourse. Although the evaluation of form and content will be different in a novel than in a scientific treatise, only one methodology is required to evaluate both types of expressions. Whitehead's panexperientialism makes no distinction-in-kind between conscious actualities and non-conscious actualities. Because all actual occasions are experiential, the familiar hermeneutical distinction between explanation in the natural sciences and understanding in the humanities is weakened, if not collapsed.

⁵³ AI 249.

paintings, for example, do not seem to evoke any propositional content that contains a subject and predicate. Instead, all that is induced in the reader is a vague emotion. For example, consider a poem that employs non-propositional language. The phrase "burning buzzing dizziness," as a stanza in this poem, is nonsensical if one is trying to extract a proposition from these three words. This is predication with no logical subject. Likewise, listening to music does not evoke discursive thought, only emotion. Authors frequently use these sorts of expression to consciously evoke various emotive responses in readers. A subjective form divorced from its objective content would simply be the feeling of an eternal object: a conceptual feeling.⁵⁴ If certain forms of expression evoke form without content, then a consciously held conceptual feeling would arise.

Although not strictly ruled out, the notion of consciously entertaining conceptual feelings would not be a regular occurrence in Whitehead's system. Consciousness arises as a feature of the later phases of concrescence. The subjective form of consciousness appears in conjunction with the "affirmation-negation contrast" of comparing a possibility, as present in a propositional feeling, with an actuality, as present in the physical feeling.⁵⁵ Consciousness is usually associated with intellectual feelings in the fourth phase of concrescence.

It is important to note, however, that boundaries of consciousness in the phases of concrescence are not sharp. Whitehead qualifies his description of consciousness as limited to the intellectual phase by pointing out that upon satisfaction, all subjective form in an occasion is shared. He writes, "all feelings acquire their quota of irradiation in consciousness."⁵⁶ Conscious entertainment is not strictly limited to intellectual feelings; it is only centered there. The unity of the subject diffuses consciousness throughout all other feelings in an occasion upon satisfaction. Abstract forms of expression stretch and push consciousness towards the regions of experience that are normally left in the dark. By partially illuminating raw objectless emotion, abstract and lyrical language⁵⁷ highlights the more primitive aspects of human experience that are cognized by abstracting them from more sophisticated comparative feelings.

⁵⁴ PR 232.

⁵⁵ PR 267.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Perhaps music can be included here as an extreme example of an underdetermined and plurivocal language.

To summarize the way symbolic interpretation functions according to Whitehead's doctrines: language and other external expressions are prehended by a reader. Possible meanings for a symbol are prehended from the past by the reader, who then selects one, or a combination of those meanings, and applies them to that symbol in an intellectual feeling. In every application of meaning, there are two components of every definition that must be evaluated: objective content and subjective form, each of which may have varying significance in the expression.

In a Whiteheadian system, interpretation takes place on all levels of experience. To speak of a Whiteheadian hermeneutic is to discuss a broad theory that includes any relationality between any two occasions of experience. The discussion so far has focused on humans interpreting concrete symbolic expressions of other humans. The scope of a truly Whiteheadian hermeneutic would be much broader. It must account for the interpretative experience of every species of actual entity. Molecules, squirrels, and humans all interpret the data of their experience, albeit not necessarily consciously. Because it only applies to the most sophisticated actual occasions and to their most conspicuous symbolic externalizations, hermeneutics, as traditionally conceived, would be a "macrohermeneutic" in Whitehead's system. Whitehead argues that there is no cognitive difference-in-kind between human and non-human actualities, only a difference of degree.⁵⁸ This uniformity establishes the universality of interpretation. Despite this universality, there seems to be a gap as one moves from non-human animals to humans. Only humans seem to be saddled with the questions of language, tradition, history, and culture. This tension raises an issue for future exploration. To what degree is hermeneutics uniformly applicable to both molecules and human beings?

IV. POINTS OF CONTACT

A hermeneutic derived from Whitehead's metaphysical principles engages many issues with which Schleiermacher also grappled. In this section, I compare Whitehead and Schleiermacher on three key controversies: the relation of thought to language, nominalism, and the importance of authorial intention. Schleiermacher and Whitehead disagree on the first two issues. Despite this disagreement, I claim that they stand together against

⁵⁸ PR 18, 107-9.

the majority of contemporary hermeneutical theories in their endorsement of authorial intention as a viable locus of meaning. Specifically, I argue that Whitehead can revive the importance of authorial intention, which has been largely discredited by contemporary hermeneutical theories. Nevertheless, unlike Schleiermacher, a Whiteheadian hermeneutic compels us to consider meaning as also located in the interaction between reader and author, rather than solely as a function of the author's intention.

1. The Relation of Thought and Language

Whitehead's distinction of thought from language is clear.⁵⁹ Thought and feeling, as experienced, are clearly primary. Language is secondary, and is an abstraction from the contextual and relational characteristics of experience.

According to Whitehead, linguistic concepts are derived from the eternal objects.⁶⁰ These objects are mediated to human subjects externally from God. Although the eternal objects are the basis of linguistic concepts, they are not linguistic in origin. Because eternal objects enjoy permanent existence in the mind of God, they are metaphysically real apart from any human capacity for communication or thought.⁶¹ The eternal objects are the basis of all determinateness—ontological, epistemological, and linguistic. As the source of all differentiation in the world, they precede both thought and language, and place the two on even footing.⁶² Thought and language are two distinct phenomena, neither of which depends on the other. Instead, both rely on the eternal objects, which are causally prior and independent of an agent's subjectivity or capacity for language.

For Whitehead, the application of semantic feelings to symbols, which is an intellectual feeling, only takes place in the final phase of concrescence.⁶³ The more primary modes of experience that occur in the earlier phases of concrescence are free from language. Because the vast majority of experience is non-linguistic, language is predominantly relegated to the external aspects of life—to intersubjective communication.

59 PR 4, 12.

60 PR 24, 158.

61 PR 33-4.

62 This "even footing" is only even in terms of causal priority relative to the eternal objects. Whitehead clearly privileges thought and feeling over language as more concrete, specific, and influential. See PR 4, 12.

63 PR 161-2.

Schleiermacher's view on the relation of thought to language is not simple identity or disjunction, but much more nuanced. Language "determines the progress of the individual in thought."⁶⁴ Language is something that is particular and differently formulated for every individual. Yet for Schleiermacher, thought must be structurally homogenous from individual to individual if understanding is to ever take place.⁶⁵ Christine Helmer has carefully described this interaction between the individual particularity of an agent (the organic pole) and the uniformity of reason (the intellectual pole).⁶⁶ Linguistic concepts enter the individual through the organic pole, which is responsible for all intercourse with the empirical. Because these concepts are

originally gleaned from empirical experience, they are not arbitrary cultural constructs. And because they originate in the organic pole's wedge in reality, they are fundamentally revisable.⁶⁷

It is the dichotomy between the universality of the intellectual pole and the particularity of individual language at the organic pole that necessitates hermeneutics. Specifically, Schleiermacher's scheme of the thought-language relation would look more like a continuum. At the intellectual end is indeterminate or nebulous thought, which employs only the broadest and most general concepts. Schleiermacher's doctrine is that all thought employs concepts, and so must be linguistic through and through. Yet, as thought develops in the individual, it is fixed and increasingly made determinate by linguistic concepts, which refine and differentiate as they are applied to thought. As a thought develops, it increases in linguisticity, understood here as conceptual specificity. Whitehead views language and thought as two non-intersecting activities; the former is a wan substitute for the latter. Schleiermacher's view of the relation is one of interaction between the universality of reason and the particularity of human experience.

2. Nominalism and Conceptual Anchoring

Whitehead's system agrees with most contemporary hermeneutical theories insofar as meaning is largely determined by culture, history, and environ-

⁶⁴ *Hermeneutics*, 9

⁶⁵ *Hermeneutics*, XXI-XXII (Introduction by ANDREW BOWIE).

⁶⁶ See CHRISTINE HELMER, "Novelty and System in Schleiermacher's Thought," 174-5 in this volume.

⁶⁷ In the unpublished version of *ibid.*

ment. Despite this, Whitehead's position breaks from them in a meaningful way. Most hermeneutical philosophers, Schleiermacher included, presuppose some version of nominalism: the doctrine that universals, or the recognizable qualities in objects, do not exist independently of human minds. A nominalist holds that universals are only real insofar as we have created names for them. Any identification of "redness" or "squareness" in objects is a matter of social convention. To speak of universals apart from human perception and language makes no sense.

Whitehead, however, rejects nominalism. His doctrine of the eternal objects asserts that universals are real. The eternal objects are defined as "[a]ny entity whose conceptual recognition does not involve a necessary reference to any definite actual entities of the temporal world."⁶⁸ Anything abstracted from a particular actuality is an eternal object. So, the "roughness" and "rectangularity" of a book, when abstracted from the actual book, are eternal objects, as are the "wittiness" and "economy" of its prose.

An occasion prehends the eternal objects as mediated by past actual entities, whether finite or divine.⁶⁹ Eternal objects make up the content of conceptual feelings, which are the basis for all higher-level prehensions. Consequently, the eternal objects are the sole means by which definiteness occurs in the universe. Any difference between actual occasions ultimately arises from the eternal objects felt in those occasions.

In a Whiteheadian hermeneutic, the application of semantic feelings to symbols may be arbitrary and conventional, but the actual content of the semantic feelings are not. Lexical definitions and other patterns of language use are reducible to eternal objects, which are permanent metaphysical features of the world. The eternal objects act as fixtures or anchors around which language can be oriented. When interpreting language, a reader appeals to her own experience. She prehends semantic feelings in order to potentially apply them to a symbol. Likewise, the meaning any author wishes to express consists of eternal objects available in her experience. Both the author and the reader are drawing from the same, albeit very large, pool of eternal objects in their attempts to create and interpret symbols.⁷⁰ Eternal objects make translation possible, regardless of cultural or historical discrepancies between reader and author.

⁶⁸ PR 44.

⁶⁹ PR 31.

⁷⁰ PR 23, 40.

This anchoring of definitions in eternal objects does not go very far at all towards closing the gap between the meaning intended by an author and the interpretation of a reader. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the translatability of language. It cannot ensure correct interpretation. There is no guarantee that a reader positively prehends the same eternal objects as the author, nor can it guarantee that the reader would apply the same eternal objects to a symbol in the same way as the author. The rejection of nominalism is only significant in that it rules out the possibility of incommensurability between a reader and author. It precludes the possibility that the concepts that make up an author's definition of a symbol are *qualitatively* different than the concepts available to the reader, thus making reasonably accurate interpretation and understanding futile.

Imagine the world as an undifferentiated whole. This whole is experienced according to the way an individual, by means of concepts, differentiates and organizes world-experience. The historical gap between author and reader has left the two with worlds that are aggregated differently. The conceptual scheme that the reader uses to pick out aspects of the world would be qualitatively different in the author. For the reader, the task of assigning meaning to the author's linguistic symbols amounts to fitting square pegs into round holes. Despite the best efforts, the concepts do not match up. Whitehead's doctrine of eternal objects acts as a unifying principle; it guarantees that all parties involved share a common conceptual ground. Although the application of meaning to symbols is a matter of convention in Whitehead's system, the actual conceptual content of potential symbolic meanings are metaphysically determined.

3. Authorial Intention Revived

Schleiermacher defines the discipline of hermeneutics as the "art of understanding particularly the written discourse of another *correctly*."⁷¹ The notion of correctness implies that there is some sort of relationship between a reader's interpretation and another factor that determines whether correctness obtains. The factor that guarantees correct interpretation is the author. Schleiermacher views the individual as the locus for understanding any expression: "every utterance is to be understood via the whole life to which it belongs."⁷² The goal of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is not so

⁷¹ *Hermeneutics*, 3 (my italics).

⁷² *Hermeneutics*, 9.

much to understand a text itself, but its author. Specifically, Schleiermacher seeks to understand a text insofar as it represents a moment in the life of an individual.

This concern with the totality of the author comes through in Schleiermacher's discussion of the *Keimentschluß*, or seed-decision.⁷³ This seed-decision is defined as the authorial intention that unites the expressive life of an individual. All texts written by an author exist as moments in the life of a genius. The *Keimentschluß* is the defining essence that binds all of the disparate intentions, texts, and moments of an author's life into a coherent unity. Schleiermacher's vision of the hermeneutical task is concerned first and foremost with extracting the intentionality behind the text—to truly understand the author in light of the *Keimentschluß*.

Schleiermacher's concern with the relation of a particular expression to the totality of an author's life is very congenial to a Whiteheadian understanding of expression. Whitehead complains that language distorts feeling by cutting away the relational web that surrounds it in the world.⁷⁴ Consideration of a fact isolated from its context in the life of an experiencing subject is bound to lead to misunderstanding. Whitehead also views language as an activity in which prehensive feelings are externally symbolized for the purposes of communicability.⁷⁵ The expression is a symbol, and as a symbol, it points to something else. It points to prehensive feeling in a concreting occasion of experience: an author. Whitehead and Schleiermacher share the view that a proper description of a text is a symbol for something that is constitutive of the life of an author. Whitehead's principle of relativity, however, will eventually drive us to look elsewhere for meaning. But first, let us examine Whitehead's endorsement of authorial intention as a locus of meaning.

For a foil, we can again look to Gadamer, who explicitly rejects authorial intention as a normative guide for hermeneutical inquiry. He argues for this by emphasizing the futility of attempting to reconstruct authorial intention. The radical historicity of the individual precludes the possibility of an accurate reconstruction of the author's mind.⁷⁶ One can never overcome the temporal and cultural gap between the reader and author. No matter how hard a reader tries to understand the cultural context of the au-

73 *Hermeneutics*, 109–11.

74 MT 66.

75 PR 182–3; S 11–13.

76 GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, 166–7.

thor, the reader's reconstructed authorial intention will still be conditioned and affected by the intervening years.

Whitehead, to some degree, would agree with Gadamer on this point. No two occasions of experience share the same actual world.⁷⁷ Consequently, a reader's experience will always be conditioned differently than the authorial experience. Whitehead, however, would also assert that this interpretative gap does not preclude the possibility of correspondence between the author's intention and the reader's interpretation.

Whitehead's rejection of nominalism enables him to assert both the radical historicity of the subject and the viability of authorial intention as a locus of meaning. Whereas Gadamer's interpreting subject would be interpreting a text with a set of concepts that are different-in-kind than the author, the ontological nature of the eternal objects, and their externality to human minds, provides a common source of concepts to both author and reader. An interpretative gap will remain. The disparate actual worlds of reader and author require that the eternal objects constitutive of the author's prehensive intention will be different than those invoked in the reader prior to conscious reflection. Despite this actual difference, the eternal objects entertained by the authorial occasions are still available to the reader occasions.

Also, because the author is a part of the past actual world of the reader, the concepts employed by the author would be prehended in the reader's initial data. Though the mental pole of the authorial occasion does not play much of a role in the concreting reader occasion (it might even be negatively prehended), it would still be an ingredient in the reader. Whitehead's principle of relativity revives the possibility of recovering authorial intention. Contrary to Gadamer, the author is not lost to us forever, but lives on in objective immortality as a *superject*: a causally efficacious element in the lives of all future occasions.⁷⁸

Whitehead and Schleiermacher both argue for a realist account of hermeneutics, one in which it is possible to have real conformation between interpretation and the meaning intended. Whitehead's rejection of the notion that authorial intention is beyond epistemic reach or unimportant deserves closer inspection, for a text's meaning is not only related to its author, but also to each reader.

⁷⁷ PR 22-3.

⁷⁸ PR 45.

4. Beyond the Author

Ronald Farmer, in his work on process biblical hermeneutics, has argued that meaning is not found solely in the author, but in the interactions between author, text, and reader.⁷⁹ Farmer points out that the indeterminacy of language creates the possibility for novel applications of semantic feelings to language in every reader, and that the life of the reader is as viable a ground for meaning as that of the author.

Farmer is right on this point. Whitehead's prescriptive emphasis upon novelty and creative advance would preclude a theory that locates meaning solely in a moment of authorial expression, as Schleiermacher's does. To describe the meaning of a text with reference to its causal past (an author), but not its causal present (the reader), is to commit the fallacy of simple location. Texts, as actualities, must be described in terms of their causal relations, which extend to contemporary audiences⁸⁰ as well as backward in time. Potential meaning is only fully concrete in the life of individuals.

Interpretation is tricky business. On the one hand, language is symbolic for prehensive feelings, which are properly located in the life of an individual. Meaning must be located within the relational context of an occasion of experience. To avoid misplaced concreteness one must, in the act of interpreting a text, refer back to the life of an author. The authorial occasions are the first source of an expression's meaning. The danger of simple location, however, prompts us to consider a text in light of its relation to the reader as well as the author. This reference to contemporary readers introduces novel and surprising applications of semantic feelings.

In the attempt to navigate twin Whiteheadian fallacies, a reader collects meaning in both her own life-context and that of the author. While misplaced concreteness drives one away from the sign (the text) and towards the referent (the author's life), simple location then urges the reader back toward her own construction of meaning. Interpretation has a back-and-forth motion—it relies on mutuality, dependence, and the interplay between the nodes of author and reader, which are meaningful in virtue of their living relation to the rest of the world.

Up until this point, my discussion of interpretation has largely been descriptive. This is appropriate considering that prescriptive statements are

⁷⁹ RONALD L. FARMER, *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 121–2.

⁸⁰ Contemporary is not meant in the technical sense here. Whitehead's system prohibits causal efficacy between two strictly contemporary occasions. See PR 318.

only relevant to conscious agents; Whitehead's system requires the majority of interpretation to occur at the unconscious level. It is still necessary to ask what role conscious discrimination plays in interpretation. The dialectical process of collecting meaning between the poles of reader and author can be illuminated by the method Whitehead endorses for all philosophical endeavors.⁸¹ Anna Case-Winters pointed out that Whitehead saw the philosophical task as one of imagination and construction, controlled and limited by the criteria of logic, applicability, and adequacy to experience.⁸² When interpreting an expression, a reader begins with her own construction: unique applications of semantic feelings to symbols. Yet the reader's own interpretative judgments are subject to checks against reality. They must do justice to the objective data that inform her own experience. These data include the intentions of the author. Whitehead's method calls for a dialectic between imagination and verification. Such a dialectic offers the unique and valuable combination of novelty and enrichment with a firm grounding in reality.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have first aimed to imaginatively construct a hermeneutic according to Whitehead's metaphysical principles. This theory posits interpretation as immanent in every relation between and within actual entities. In terms of Whitehead's metaphysics, human interpretation consists in the application of past prehensions of linguistic usage, or semantic feelings, to contemporary expressions. I have also endeavored to compare my constructed Whiteheadian hermeneutic to Schleiermacher's own. Although Whitehead and Schleiermacher disagree on the issues of the thought-language relation and nominalism, both privilege the author as an authoritative source of an expression's meaning. This agreement, however, must be qualified by noting that Whitehead also privileges the reader's idiosyncratic interpretation as well. The reader must adjudicate between her own construal of an expression, which conforms to the facts of her own experience, and the original feelings expressed by the author, of which the expression is a symbol.

⁸¹ PR 5.

⁸² CASE-WINTERS, "System and Dynamism," 141-1 in this volume.

The dialectical relationship found between the poles of author and reader is a reflection of a much more general characteristic that runs through Whitehead's system. In *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead states that

the Enduring Societies with their rise, culmination, and decay are devices to combine the necessities of Harmony and Freshness. There is the deep underlying Harmony of Nature, as it were a fluid, flexible support; and on its surface, the ripples of social efforts, harmonizing and clashing in their aims at ways of satisfaction.⁸³

Here we find two opposing virtues: harmony and freshness. The former stands for coherence, agreement, and conformity. The latter indicates novelty, dynamism, and surprise. Whitehead maintains that these two are not antithetical, but complementary—and the dialectic between the poles of author and reader in the construction of meaning is an example of this complementarity. Authorial intention serves as a guide that grounds and limits the meaning of an expression, whereas the reader's construal introduces the principle of freshness and relevance into an interpretation.

Assertions of meaning must be considered hypothetical, tentative, and "open" toward their own finality. This allows expressions to take on the character of a "fluid, flexible support" for the complexities of life. Whereas theories that rigidly endorse univocal interpretation frequently shatter when exposed to the pounding tumult of lived experience, systems that exhibit openness—such as those of Schleiermacher and Whitehead—flex and stretch, while remaining adequate to the facts of experience. This plasticity allows the hope that hermeneutical theories, and on a broader level, systematic philosophies and theologies, need not sacrifice originality and innovation while searching for adequacy and consistency.