

THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATING *PROCESS AND REALITY*

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Alfred North Whitehead's great philosophical work published in 1929, *Process and Reality* is the last metaphysical and cosmological system to be found in the history of Western philosophy.

Whitehead's attempt to build up a philosophical system is both an outdated undertaking and a thoroughly novel endeavour, based on the latest science of his time. Whitehead was seen with suspicion by his peers that rejected system philosophies and their limited principles. But Whitehead's system follows from a methodology designed by Whitehead himself, which is designated 'generalization' in *Process and Reality*. Whiteheadian generalization is only consistent with an open system and it aims at describing reality in its entirety, as it may include things that are trivial, irrelevant and even false. Openness and generalization involve the discovery of an ever-vaster reality. Classical systems must stick to a reduced fraction of reality. Whitehead's system opens to discovery and the inclusion of new principles and new categories that can only result from this creative receptiveness. It is not an affirmation of known truths, but an explorative journey that follows the path of ontological revelation.

«Metaphysical categories are not dogmatic statements of the obvious; they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities»¹.

According to Whitehead, every system must be coherent. But coherence is not lack of logical contradiction. Insufficient coherence leads to blithe disregard of a significant part of reality. Classical philosophical systems leave out a considerable part of the real. And this is actually a necessary requirement for them to be established.

Whitehead's system, on the contrary, aims at wholeness and seeks larger and larger generalities. In his system «fundamental ideas [...] presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless» (PR 3 [5]). The system does not validate rigid premises that need to be justified. Whitehead's speculative scheme endeavours to attain an ever-vaster reality, so as to include what is exceptional, under limitation and even unstated.

Thus, for the discovery of metaphysics, the method of pinning down thought to the strict systematization of detailed discrimination, already effected by antecedent observation, breaks down. [...] 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 generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. The reason for the success of this method of imaginative rationalization is that, when the method of

¹ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, corrected edition, The Free Press, New York 1985, p.8 (Id., *Process and Reality*, Macmillan and Cambridge University Press, New York and Cambridge 1929, p.12). From now on, the quotations from this volume will be indicated in the body of the text by the acronym 'PR', followed by the correspondent number of page of the corrected edition and, in square brackets, by the page number of the 1929 edition.

difference fails, factors which are constantly present may be observed under the influence of imaginative thought (PR 4-5 [7]).

Process and Reality thus proposes «a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted» (PR 3 [4]). The system aims at including all reality, an ever-vaster reality as the speculative endeavour develops. But *Process and Reality* also presents a cosmological theory. Whitehead's cosmological system is thus ultimately a re-introduction and reaffirmation of metaphysics.

Thus, in translating *Process and Reality* one cannot ignore the systematic, cosmological and metaphysical nature of Whitehead's *magnum opus*. One should be aware of Whitehead's attempt to build up an open metaphysical system, as well as of the complexity of the whole philosophical edifice. Great limitations in the expression of thought through language also arise; «it is a mistake to think of words as primarily the vehicle of thoughts» (PR 182 [287]).

One should not forget that Whitehead's main concern is metaphysics. Metaphysics requires language for the expression of generalities. Whitehead's philosophy endeavours to adapt language, so that it can attain general ideas. Propositions refer to a certain general, systematic character. But they need a systematic foundation to become definite and gain determination (PR 11 [17]).

Words have to be bent and shaped to new meanings that can express novel generalities.

Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably. Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap (PR 4 [6]).

The process of translating Whitehead's texts should have recourse to this «stretching of words». There is an underlying process of transference that has to deal with the original force of words; and sometimes it has to continue the stretching of words to fully mirror the ontological idea expressed in the translating process. Original words may sometimes be taken as designations that both reflect the ordinary meaning of the original words and the elements that have been 'stretched' to convey the new meaning and find a new generality. Rendering these words into a different language in order to convey the meaning expressed in the original language is a fundamental procedure for philosophical translation. However, it is not an easy one.

On the other hand, Whitehead's thinking should not be approached in a sequential order. His thought is like a spiral. It grows and grows and includes an ever-vaster reality in a circular movement that encompasses the growing facts of existence. Whitehead experiments with the same words and ideas in different contexts; he sets an apparently known idea or word against different environments so that he can extract different *nuances* from them. That is why sometimes the same word has to be translated into different expressions.

When we try to express an idea in our mother tongue, we often stumble over the words. In our everyday life we use words to convey our thoughts

and meanings. This is usually considered a social activity, because the words are used so as to express their common meanings. These words are well defined, and their content is mostly neutral. They represent social language, they can be readily used and they transmit stability and social understanding amongst those who speak them. In this way, our ideas are safely formed and conveyed to other people. It seems it exists a one-to-one correspondence between our thoughts and the words we use to express them.

However, expressing our vague, undetermined thoughts can be an altogether different experience. When our thoughts wander through the metaphysical realm we often find ourselves trying to formulate hazy, hesitant, unformed expressions of our thinking process. Some of our thoughts are yet undefined, but they are there, trying to express themselves; others, however, seem to exist already in their fullness although we cannot find the appropriate words to express them. They seem to evade any kind of representation or conveyance.

We wonder if these thoughts can ever be put into words; their subtlety and fugitive illusiveness are very hard to express, and, if they ever come to be expressed, they will take a dubious form that will mask the original thought, losing its subtlety in virtue of its very expression. This is perhaps why 'stretching words' is Whitehead's main recourse to find new meanings that convey ever-vaster and novel generalities.

Expressing our thoughts requires thus stable and clear-cut words, with established meanings, although they may be the tentative expression of subtle and fugitive thoughts, which they never actually succeed in expressing. When we come to translation, preciseness and stability of words are even more important. One must seize the exact words that convey the original meaning and mirror the formation of the primary thought that has already been put into words. Choosing new words in a different language always recreates those words in some way. Translation is not a process of repetition or replication. It always creates something more, because it has to stick to the original meaning and this effort to create rigour is itself something that is in some way added to the primary thought. There is a need for the meanings of the new words to coincide with the content of the primary expressions. But this coincidence may not result from a one-to-one correlation of words or from a precise correspondence with their dictionary equivalents. A competent translator should be able to convey the same meanings that resonated through the original text. But these meanings should emerge through a kind of novelty that preserves the primary text and also re-invents it in a new language and in a new frame of mind.

Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, published in 1929, which is perhaps the greatest philosophical work of the 20th century, is hard to read and difficult to apprehend. It is pervaded with neologisms and common words that are used with different and sometimes altered meanings. Furthermore, Whitehead's critics have always been keen to point out his deficiencies of language. Both the British (Cambridge) and the American (Macmillan) first editions of *Process and Reality* came out with many typos and errors. These texts were not coincidental; one could find more than three hundred discrepancies. Whitehead was hardly interested in reviewing his work for publication.

Many flaws could be found in *Process and Reality* including lack of punctuation, lack of conciseness, misplaced conclusions and very long sentences that made the text unclear and hard to read.

In 1978, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne published a corrected edition of *Process and Reality*. The text was amended and became more readable. From a broad perspective, Whitehead's original text was not compromised. However, some changes seem fairly arguable, especially the transfer of paragraphs from one section to another. A nearly exhaustive index was added.

It was this corrected edition that was translated by Maria Regina Brioschi, although unfortunately the index was not included. This may have been a deliberate choice for the index is not included in the original work, and it was an addition introduced by the 1978 edition. However, its inclusion would allow for a more immediate search of many Whiteheadian terms and would have facilitated their localization in the Italian text. Readers would be more readily aware of the complexity of Whitehead's work and also of the intricacy of the tasks involved in editing the corrected edition.

Processo e Realtà is a bilingual edition of *Process and Reality*. The choice of a bilingual edition was a very wise one. The proximity of the original text to the translation enhances intelligibility and clarity. It also facilitates the interpretive work of the Italian readers. For those fortunate enough to be fluent in both English and Italian, the Italian translation can even clarify the original English text.

In her short introduction, Brioschi considers that Whitehead introduced a true linguistic revolution, which can only be fully evaluated by a lexical analysis. His original language reflects an organic and processual description of reality. She underlines that he adopts a mathematical language in part IV of *Process and Reality* and uses the word 'vector' reflecting the terminology of physics. She also points out Whitehead has abundant recourse to Latin, drawing from it key-concepts such as 'concrecence' and 'prehension'. And that he uses old words in new senses giving them new meanings and thus creating neologisms out of existing words.

Words like 'feeling' meaning a positive prehension (not an emotion) and 'actual' that he opposes to 'potential' also have Latin as a main reference. Brioschi also emphasizes that Whitehead uses nominalization in order to obtain a processual and relational effect. Words like 'origination', 'temporalization', 'ingression', etc., are included in that group and also come from a Latin frame. She thus opts for a translation as close as possible to the original text.

In translating *Process and Reality*, Brioschi resorted mostly to proper Italian words thus avoiding some of Whitehead's neologisms. For example, 'categorical' was translated for 'categoriale'.

Some proper English words are used with somewhat turned meanings. Amongst them is 'prehension', whose philosophical meaning is clearly stretched, and 'concrecence', a term used normally in biology; they were translated as 'prensione' and 'concrecenza'. These words are not difficult to translate into a Romance language but their «new» English meanings profit from the Latin etymologies and so do the translated Italian words. The same applies to words like 'origination', which is rooted in a verb and is formed through its transformation into a noun.

Brioschi's word choices are as close as they possibly can to Whitehead's terminology. And most of those choices are the best choices she could have made. However, we would like to question the choice of one or two words. 'Feeling' was translated as 'sentimento'. In her introduction, Maria Regina Brioschi enhances the importance of the term 'feeling' underlining its particular meaning, which does not coincide with its most obvious signification, that of 'emotion'. She describes it as a positive prehension, as it is referenced in *Process and Reality* (23 [35]). She adds that it could be a synonymous of 'experience'. Thus, maybe the nominalization of the verb 'sentire', 'il sentire', could have been a better choice for translating 'feeling'. It would have been closer to Whitehead's usage of the word, especially if we consider the Latin etymology and it would have conveyed Whitehead's meaning much more easily and clearly. 'Sentimento' in Romance languages is always a very strong word and it certainly enhances its primary meaning, which is coincidental with emotion. In English the word 'feeling' is more comprehensive and less dramatic.

Another word, 'adversion' which was translated as 'attrazione' is also a translating choice we would like to comment on. 'Adversion' is a neologism construed by Whitehead from the Latin particle 'ad', designating the idea of approaching, or going towards something, or drawing something towards oneself. Whitehead opposed 'adversion' to 'aversion', meaning disinclination, or valuing down something. Whitehead purposely did not use the word 'attraction', probably because he thought the word was too strong. Valuing up or down something may be more of an inclination, a propensity, or a tendency than a definite attraction, which implies a strong liking, or interest in something or someone.

But overall Maria Regina Brioschi's word choices clearly carry on the linguistic revolution she refers to, reflecting a new philosophical system that Whitehead succeeded in building up, which aimed at generalization as a new holistic methodology. Whitehead realized ordinary language was not adequate to express his philosophical endeavours. But at the same time Whitehead considered language is an unlimited source of new meanings. Never mind if current words are used to express different and altered meanings, never mind if those words are extracted from Latin etymologies although they cannot be found in any available dictionary.

As I wrote elsewhere:

Whitehead's prose is rich and immensely original; it has a peculiar lucidity that is only perceived after a long acquaintance with it. Whitehead's philosophy is a new mode of thought; also, his way of writing is the very illustration of this novel mode of thought [...]².

(T)he most remarkable thing about translating *Process and Reality* is the very possibility of doing so. Whitehead through his Latinized neologisms comes very close to his philosophical endeavour of generalization, i.e. of constructing an ever-vaster open system. But the meanings of his philosophical and cosmological insights are often difficult to cap-

² M.T. Teixeira, *Whitehead, Processo e Realidade*, in M. Weber & R. Desmet, *Chromatikon VI. Annales de la philosophie en procès - Yearbook of Philosophy in Process*, Les éditions Chromatika, Louvain-la-Neuve 2010, pp.240-1.

ture. His words are almost ineffable; they try to express unutterable truths. And they often touch the realm of mystical wisdom. Whitehead forces words to translate the indefinable reality, and its overwhelming vagueness and inscrutability. The translating process is a primary one: it expresses something that is trying to express itself. Conveyance into another language of such indefiniteness in process of expression is a creative reiteration of an almost unattainable process of transference of meaning. Whitehead's translators should thus be prepared to immerse into a long adventurous journey of ideas that is truly ontological. For a «thought is a tremendous mode of excitement. Like a stone thrown into a pond, it disturbs the whole surface of our being»³.

Maria Regina Brioschi certainly made a brilliant work out of translating *Process and Reality*, thus contributing significantly to the advance of Whiteheadian scholarship and the interpretation effort of *Process and Reality*.

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³ M.T. Teixeira, *Translation, Language and Cognition* in Łukasz Lamza and Jakub Dziadkowiec, *Recent Advances in the Creation of a Process-Based Worldview: Human Life in Process*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, p. 161. The final quotation is taken from A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, The Free Press, New York 1968, p.36.