

## Creativity, fragility and concern: glimpses of ethics in Whitehead's late Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to put some light on Whitehead's notion of "*concern*". This notion, introduced in his late works, gives a new ethical tonality to his philosophy, but this ethical character of the notion is hard to grasp, given that the term does not work so much by conceptual denotation than it does by some vague connotation. This article suggests a way we may put this notion in the general perspective of Whitehead's scheme in order to understand this ethical value of concern. It starts by an account of Steven Shaviro's paper on the notion of concern, which relates it to the interconnectedness of actual entities in order to explain how concern means a kind of *affection*. Then it confronts this notion of concern to one other aspect of Whitehead's system: creativity. Once the part of creativity in the scheme is considered, the notion of concern appears to be marked by an element of fragility, which may help understand how concern does not only mean affection but also, more specifically, *obligation to others*.

**KEYWORDS:** Concern – Creativity – Fragility - Obligation

### INTRODUCTION

In his article "Self-enjoyment and concern: on Whitehead and Levinas," Steven Shaviro has shown how Whitehead's notion of concern, which he explicitly borrowed from the Quakers, allowed him to introduce an ethical element of regard for the other's sake in his description of one actual entity's satisfaction. Concern is introduced as an element of hetero-affection, inseparable from the auto-affective self-enjoyment of one entity (Shaviro, 2010, 249). According to Shaviro, "concern is not the result of some sublime epiphany," (Shaviro, 2010, 255), it does not imply a transcendent call of the Other, which would break the course of our self-centred everyday experience, such as is asserted by Levinas. On the opposite, "attention to others is itself a kind of enjoyment, and it is included within, rather than opposed to, an overall self-enjoyment" (Shaviro, 2010, 256-257).

So Shaviro's claim that self-enjoyment and concern "form a patterned aesthetic contrast and not an irreducible ethical opposition" (Shaviro, 2010, 256) allows him to consider that Whitehead's description of experience, although being primarily aesthetical, is not for all that deprived of an ethical tone, as regard for the other's sake is proved to be inherent to Whitehead's account of experience. But Shaviro, while insisting on this element of hetero-affection that is concern, does not so much focus, in his article, on the ethical meaning of this affection. In fact, Whitehead himself did not expand on this aspect of concern. When this term was introduced in the description of the object-subject relation in *Adventures of Ideas*, it was only meant to

underline the emotional tone of this relation: “no prehension, even of bare sensa, can be divested of its affective tone, that is to say, of its character of a ‘concern’ in the Quaker sense.” (AI, 232) There is no connotation here of care for the other’s sake, but only the denotation of a mere affective tone, which does not need to be more than some shapeless emotion, a vague sympathy implying no positive solicitude.

And yet, the ethical character of concern seems to have been in Whitehead’s mind. In this respect, Shaviro makes an important remark: “*Adventures of Ideas, Modes of Thought*, and “Immortality” express Whitehead’s metaphysics with a different rhetoric, and in a different manner. And, that makes all the difference” (Shaviro, 2010, 251). Shaviro’s point is that in his late works, Whitehead endeavours to frame his philosophy in a different manner. The minute conceptual architecture of *Process and Reality* is unstiffened in those works, Whitehead’s phraseology becomes less technical, so that its terms bear a less definite meaning. Such vagueness allows for a wider scope of interpretation: by being less exact, one word allows the reader to consider complex contrasts at once, while a more analytical description would imply the dissection of this contrast, and the loss of its vital unity. This seems to be the case for the term *concern* “in the Quaker sense” (MT, 167), a term which makes its first appearance in Whitehead’s later works. And Shaviro’s endeavour in his article has been to express one aspect of the contrast, that is, the inseparability of auto-affection and hetero-affection.

But in fact, the first appearance of “concern” does not occur in the metaphysical description of the object-subject relation quoted by Shaviro. It occurs in the “sociological” part of *Adventures of Ideas*, where it is meant to describe the moral ideals of the Roman Catholics:

During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries the Church of Rome – to use a Quaker phrase – had a ‘concern’ for the races, groaning under European exploitation, which far surpassed that of the combined Protestant churches... It is impossible to doubt that their example kept alive a sensitiveness of the European conscience respecting the obligations of men to men (AI, 28).

The ethical tone of concern is here sensible: “concern” means here obligation to others. And it seems highly possible that in using this term again in his metaphysical description of the object-subject relation, Whitehead intended to introduce this element of obligation in it. For (as already quoted by Shaviro) Whitehead’s opinion was that “there is not a sentence, or a word, with a meaning which is independent of the circumstances under which it is uttered.” (Imm

699) In this respect, the first use of “concern” as “a Quaker phrase” in the sociological part of *Adventures of Ideas* seems to be an important circumstance, which impacts the later use of this term in the philosophical part of the book.

Thus “concern” may imply at once (1) an element of hetero-affection; (2) the emotional tone of this affection; (3) an ethical element of regard for the other’s sake. In this respect, this ethical element of regard would be indeed included in the satisfaction of any entity, inseparable from self-enjoyment.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the element of regard, of solicitude, in Whitehead’s notion of concern. While Shaviro focused on hetero-affection, my purpose is to specify the particular tonality of this hetero-affection. As we will see, there is an element of worry in any entity’s satisfaction. And my purpose is to show that this element of worry impacts the way in which one entity is affected by others, so that in concern, there is an element of solicitude, and the seed of obligation to others.

## **2 CONCERN AND ENVIRONMENT**

Let us start from Shaviro’s main point, that concern and enjoyment are the terms of a “patterned aesthetic contrast”. We cannot separate one from the other, for they are but two aspect of the same thing: that is, they suppose each other as inseparable ingredients of one entity’s satisfaction. This means that the other *as other* is immanent to the self: in concern, otherness and selfness are merged together. But we may ask for some specification: *in what way* is the other as such regarded as immanent to the self? We are thus brought back to the description of the object-subject relation in Whitehead’s cosmological scheme.

Relatively to one entity of reference, one other entity may be past, future or contemporary. The first thing to observe is that, *in any case*, there is always a relation of mutual immanence between the entity of reference and other entities. This is what Whitehead calls “concern”, which “at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject.” (AI 236) Now, past entities and non-past entities have a different status, for in the latter case, immanence is indirect: the object is not actually prehended, for it is not yet actualised, it is not part of the actual world of the subject. But it enters, nonetheless, in the constitution of the subject. So there are three different figures of the immanence of the other:

(1) *Past*: Any new entity prehends the entities belonging to its past, or actual world. In fact, the arising of an entity *is* the process of unification of the actual world into a new prehensive synthesis. So it is obvious that past entities are immanent to the entity of reference, as this entity is constituted by the complex feeling of all these entities. This complex feeling constitutes a patterned contrast: *the entity synthesises the ordered relations between the elements of its past.*

(2) *Future*: The entity of reference is itself “transcended by the creative urge,” (AI 249) and so its satisfaction includes the necessity of a relevant future. So future occasions, although non-existent, are, as it were, expected, for “what is objective in the present is the necessity of a future of actual occasions, *and the necessity that these future occasions conform to the conditions inherent in the essence of the present occasion.*” (AI 251, my italics)

(3) *Present*: The causal efficacy of the past is obviously felt by the entity of reference, as this entity arose from its creative impulse. And this past being felt as dominated by some “uniform type of coordination” (that is, by the type of order which is now expressed by the entity of reference), this entity “will experience its past as ‘anticipating’ the prolongation of that type of order into the future beyond that past.” (AI 252) So contemporary entities are indirectly felt, *in the sense that the entity of reference projects the type of order which dominates its past into its relevant environment.*

So we can see that one entity is not emotionally affected by its past only. Of course, it is obvious that the past is immanent to the entity, as it is directly prehended by it. But the non-past environment is also immanent to the entity, and what allows this is the feeling of a common “type of order.” For, as we have just seen, the entity synthesises the ordered relations which define its past. So it feels its own relevancy to its past as expressed by a common type of order. And it is also this common type of order which connects the entity to its non-past environment: contemporary entities are indirectly felt as the prolongation of the order expressed by the entity’s past; and future entities are expected to inherit this order from the entity of reference itself.

What matters here is that in being immanent to the entity of reference, one other entity is never felt in isolation as one thing distinctly shaped in the background. It is felt as one portion of the pattern which constitutes the ordered environment of the entity. This environment is the “general substratum for that type of order” (AI, 252). So of course, on one hand, the other does not lose its otherness in concern: it is felt *as other*, and in this respect, it stands out as one

particular entity in this general environment. But on the other hand, in being immanent to the entity of reference, the other is merged, as it were, in the more general feeling of an ordered environment.

So in being concerned by the others, one entity is not only affected by each other entity in particular: it is affected generally by its whole environment, and each element of the environment is felt as one portion of the general pattern.

This will help us understanding how concern implies an ethical element of solicitude. For on one hand, any entity feels itself and its environment at once, as expressing one common type of order. But on the other hand, any entity also feels the creative impulse which pushes reality forwards: it feels the impulse of its past towards itself and its contemporary environment, and it feels its own impulse towards its future. But if reality goes on forwards, it may pass to new types of order, making the entity and its environment obsolete. So once we introduce creativity in our description, we may highlight the fragility of one entity's perspective on its environment, and here we may find the seed of worry.

### **3 CREATIVITY AND FRAGILITY**

So let us now consider the part of creativity in the description of an actual entity. Any entity is in becoming, and it feels the creative impulse which drives it forwards. An entity becomes, perishes, and leaves the way for future entities. The perishing of the entity is understood as a transition from its subjective actuality to its objective immortality in the future: "the self-enjoyment of an occasion of experience is initiated by an enjoyment of the past alive in itself and is terminated by an enjoyment of itself as alive in the future" (AI, 249). The entity expects a future which will be relevant to itself, and to its own conditions of existence: the future is expected to conform to the same type of order than the entity itself.

This explains why a human being, for instance, feels its own life not as a series of instantaneous states of mind successively perishing, but as the continuity of one enduring consciousness. In such a case, the apprehension of the future is marked by a feeling of safety: the future will be, in some respects, as I expect it; that is, I will keep on being myself as the process goes on forwards. The order that I presuppose for my existence will keep on being expressed in the future (AI, 250-251).

But in the same time, the type of order presupposed by one entity bears no necessity. It is what it is only because *this* entity arose out of *this* actual world. So the perpetuation of this type of order is not at all guaranteed in the future of the process.

In fact, it is highly unlikely, in the long term, that the process will keep on exhibiting the same type of order. For the creative impulse which drives any entity forwards is an impulse towards novelty. It may lead to anything, for it is absolutely undefined. “Creativity is without a character of its own” (PR, 31), we cannot find in it any factor which may help us find any final feature limiting its possibilities. In fact, “creativity is always found under conditions, and described as conditioned” (PR, 31): we are always facing creativity under certain conditions, proper to the actual world we are referring to. This does not allow us to assert anything about which form creativity may take in a distant future, and so as reality goes on forwards, creativity may lead to any new type of order. So any entity, once it has perished and is only objectively surviving as an element of the past, may become less and less relevant, and play less and less relevant a part in future reality.

So any entity appears to feel its own perspective as contingent and likely to expire in the future. Things may occur as expected, but they also may not. Here we face an element of *fragility* in any entity, which is expressed in a feeling of *insecurity*. (We can already observe that it is the whole perspective of the entity which is exhibited as fragile: what may expire is the very type of order which is presupposed at once by the entity itself and by the whole environment it is concerned with).

#### **4 FRAGILITY AND ANXIETY**

Fragility does not mean a mere risk of destruction. First, fragility means, in fact, doom: reality *will* pass to new types of order, and so any entity *will* become irrelevant in a distant future. For indeed on one hand, any entity is immanent to the whole universe: it supposes the whole of its past, and once it is perished, it is forever immortal as a factor in future reality. But on the other hand, we have just seen that the meaning of the objective immortality of any entity is subject to *quasi*-obsolescence, given that creativity will always take new forms as new entities arise and lead to new creative conditions. The course of creativity is inexorable.

Secondly, what matters is not so much the event of destruction than what destruction implies. In expecting the expiration of the type of order it presupposes for its existence, one entity is not only facing the event of its own suppression as a relevant element in the future. It is facing what

is supposed by its suppression: the coming of an unthinkable reality in which it will be nothing, and which is nothing to itself. One might relate here to Paul Tillich's analysis of anxiety in *The Courage to Be*: anxiety confronts me with the insisting necessity of my own future non-being; that is, not only of my own destruction, but also of the unknowable of the after-death. (Tillich 36-38)

So to understand more precisely how fragility impacts one entity's satisfaction, we need to insist on the fact that in feeling its own fragility, one entity feels, as it were, the negative presence of a future state of reality unknowable to it, in which it will not be relevant anymore.

In this respect, it is worth noting that Whitehead's philosophy insists on the limited scope of any perspective on reality. Such is the case, in particular, for the perspective expressed by a philosophic system. In some respect, a philosophic system is nothing more than a set of symbols, meant to express a certain perspective on the universe. The system is supposed to exhibit the type of order expressed by one alleged actual occasion of experience. The more general the system is, the more occasions of experience it may apply to. But in any case, the system always expresses *one* type of order, so its relevancy is limited: other types of order are to be found in other regions of reality. And so, as the process of reality goes on forwards, "every philosophy will suffer a deposition." (PR 7)

Such idea is sensible in Whitehead's own definition of speculative philosophy: on one hand the system must be "coherent, logical, necessary." (PR 3) That is, it must account minutely for the structure of reality, so that it may apply to any occasion of experience. But on the other hand, Whitehead also makes an important specification:

The philosophic scheme should be 'necessary', in the sense of bearing in itself its own warrant of universality throughout all experience, *provided that we confine ourselves to that which communicates with immediate matter of fact*. But what does not so communicate is unknowable, and the unknowable is unknown." (PR, 4, my italics)

Indeed, any entity communicates in some way with the whole universe. But gradually as you increase the distance between two things, communication grows dimmer and dimmer, until it practically means separation. So, if the necessity of the scheme is conditioned by communication, it must appear as having a limited scope of relevancy to reality, this being the scope of communication between the immediate matter of fact and the surrounding elements of reality.

Of course, the extension of this scope is vague, it has no definite extension. For in order to define its extension, one should extend the scope of communication, until the unknowable becomes knowable. In fact, this is exactly the purpose of speculative philosophy: to enlarge our scope of comprehension. But this would only push the limit back further: the unknowable would still lay at a distant horizon we can just make out, but never identify exactly.

So, if we take one philosophic system to be the symbolic expression of one entity's perspective on its universe, the limited scope of relevancy of any system appears as reflecting the limited scope of relevancy of any entity's perspective. Of course, one entity supposes the whole of reality for its existence, but its practical relevancy is limited to its surroundings. Beyond the indefinite scope of its relevancy, this entity has so dim a part in the universe that it has practically no part in it at all.

If we now consider that reality is in perpetual becoming, this limited scope of relevancy of any entity means obsolescence. As reality goes on forwards, it will slowly pass beyond the limits of relevancy of any given entity, so that at one point, any entity "will suffer a deposition" as a relevant factor in its future.

Such idea is particularly sensible at the end of *Religion in the Making*:

[The universe] is thus passing with a slowness, inconceivable in our measures of time, to new creative conditions, amid which the physical world, as we at present know it, will be represented by a ripple barely to be distinguished from nonentity (RM, 160).

We are dealing here with the passing to a future cosmic epoch: in this case, the very metaphysical structure of reality cannot be foreseen. All we can do is assume that the process of reality will still be going on, although in a way we cannot imagine. It is thus sensible here that any entity feels at once its actual relevancy to its environment, and its irrelevancy to come, when reality will pass to new conditions.

Such feeling of the radical strangeness of future reality impacts the feeling of the entity's objective immortality. For on one hand, objective immortality is indeed immediately felt: the entity "embodies its own necessity for objective immortality beyond its own immediacy of self-formation." (AI 248) But on the other hand, as the process of reality goes on once the entity has

perished, communication between the entity and its future will grow dimmer and dimmer, and so will do the relevancy of this entity as a factor in its distant future<sup>1</sup>.

For instance, the life of one human being may indeed have deep consequences in a limited scope, say a few thousand years for some rare individuals such as Plato or Jesus of Nazareth. But this influence will by need fade away. Plato will bear no particular significance as a philosopher after the end of the human kind. His immortality will have grown dimmer, as he will only survive as one physical element merged in the whole necessary past. In the same way, we are infinitely indebted to whatever was before the Big Bang, for our very existence arose from this unknown past. But this debt bears no form: whatever was in this past, it is nothing more now than a vague ‘whatever’. And we too at some point will all be merged into a ‘whatever’: our existence will bear no more specific meaning.

So, it appears that what we have called the fragility of any entity, inducing a feeling of insecurity, implies a deeper feeling of anxiety, to quote Tillich’s phrase. Any entity feels that it will become practically irrelevant at some point in a distant future that is totally unknowable to it.<sup>2</sup> This deeper element of doom and anxiety gives its gravity to one entity’s feeling of insecurity, and will thus give concern its tone of *obligation* to others.

## **5. CONCERN AS SOLICITUDE AND OBLIGATION**

As we have seen it in the first place, the association of auto-affection and hetero-affection in one entity’s satisfaction means that the entity feels itself and other entities at once, as merged into a common patterned environment, defined by a certain type of order. Now, we have also seen that one entity feels at once its actual relevancy to this environment, and the passing of reality to new types of order, and so to new patterns in which it will not be relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Here I must acknowledge one objection to my thesis made by Michel Weber: objective immortality is not the only perspective offered to one entity. Whitehead’s notion of God allows us to conciliate objective immortality and everlasting immediacy (PR 350-351), so my notion of “anxiety” is somehow weakened by Whitehead’s theological speculations.

This would call for further discussions, in order to confront my thesis to this religious perspective. However, for the time being, I will only remark that according to Whitehead himself, the elucidation of religious emotion leads us to a particular mode of thinking: it bears nothing “in the nature of proof” (PR 343). Thus, we may say that in this article, the argument takes sides: it regards the realm of actual experience only, and all theological hypotheses are left aside. This implies some amount of irreligion, so it may indeed find contradictors.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, what I call here “anxiety” may be inhibited in the entity’s satisfaction: one typical example, in the field of philosophical thought, is the “Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary” (MT 235-236), by which a philosophical school inhibits the very fact of its own abstractions, limitations, and so of its own deposition to come. On the opposite, the acknowledgment of such a fact shows a form of *courage* – and thus we are brought back to the two concepts studied by Tillich, anxiety and courage.

anymore. So, the feeling of safety and relevancy which relates the entity to its actual environment is inseparable from a feeling of fragility and anxiety, when the entity relates itself to its future.

It is sensible here that the environment is directly involved in one entity's feeling of fragility and anxiety. The entity's feeling of its own irrelevancy to come means that its whole environment, with its proper type of order, will be overcome. The entity feels itself and any other entity as mere ingredients of this common pattern, and so the fragility of this common pattern concerns at once the entity of reference and its environment.

In this respect, it is clear that the limit between selfness and otherness is blurry. Anxiety is not only self-centred, it applies to the whole pattern the entity relates itself to. For in referring to a certain type of order, the entity is referring to a complex social environment. I experience myself as one occasion in a larger society – for instance, the immediate *cogito* refers itself to the enduring *res cogitans* (or to the mind-body complex, or even to a larger group, as in herd-instinct). So, in every day experiences like one's fear of death, or of the end of one's civilization, or of the end of the world, we can see how the anxiety felt by one entity is not precisely self-centred, but concerns the larger social environment the entity, as it were, identifies itself to.

But we must also remind that in this so called identification of the self with the environment, the other keeps its otherness. It is not only assimilated as an ingredient of the monadic self. It is immanent to the self *as other*. In feeling my environment, I feel all the other entities which sustain my existence. Indeed, the other is partly assimilated, as it is put in perspective. In this respect, it is dependent on the aesthetic decision of the self. But although it is immanent to the self, its otherness is not suppressed.

So the anxiety felt by the entity applies to its larger environment, but not only as to its own monadic expression: the entity is also concerned by its environment as by something else. In feeling the fading away of things, the entity is not only self-centredly anxious; it is concerned by the fragility of *other* things. Here we find the element of solicitude in concern. In being concerned by the other, I am feeling the fragility of the other in that it is, too, involved in a process which goes beyond the scope of its relevancy, and so I sympathise with its fragility.

Now, we are also to remind that according to Whitehead, ideas act as lures for action. What is felt by an entity plays a part in its final decision, which defines its own impulse forwards. So, sympathy for the other is not merely passive: it plays its part as a lure, that is, as

the seed of action for the other's sake: being fragile, the other calls for care. And here concern takes its tonality of *obligation*.

Of course, this feeling of obligation is dependent, for its expression, on the aesthetic decision of the entity, which may accentuate or inhibit the importance of the other in the entity's perspective. If the importance of one element is accentuated, my solicitude towards it is highlighted, and I will feel obligated to it. But the otherness of the other may also be inhibited, and so my final decision may be self-centred, as in some ethical solipsism or egocentrism. In this case, there will be no feeling of obligation, the affection will be self-centred, and the other will be felt as a mere projection of myself.

In this respect, Shaviro rightly opposes Whitehead to Levinas: how is Levinas to explain cases of disregard for others? If the Other is supposed to make an irreducible demand on me, how come I may ignore its call without feeling any guilt? In fact, as Shaviro puts it, once I heard this call, I cannot escape it or ignore it", and "even if I reject the call of the Other, by that very act I am still acknowledging it in a backhanded sort of way" (Shaviro, 2010, 255). On the other hand, Whitehead's notion of concern allows for the mere indifference we experience in everyday life: concern for the other depends on the entity's aesthetic decision, which may inhibit this aspect. In such case, concern is not only rejected yet still somehow acknowledged: it is not even consciously felt. For indeed, the ethical feeling of obligation takes root in the very structure of experience, but it may nonetheless be inhibited in the final decision of one entity.

We may observe one more thing: the fact that my concern for the other is inseparable from a concern for my whole general environment calls for some specification about this feeling of obligation. Concern does not have to relate me to one particular thing in my environment. It may also apply to the general environment as such. In this case, it is the importance of the general pattern which is accentuated in the aesthetic decision: concern takes a more comprehensive meaning. Here the feeling of obligation is not the result of the call of one individual other: it is a more *social obligation*, where the entity is concerned by the whole social environment which sustains its existence, and to which it (as it were) identifies itself. The common good of the society is felt as strongly as the entity's own good, but it is felt *as such*, as the common good of a more general entity. Here we find the seed of political responsibility, one instance being the strong patriotism of the Romans, as exemplified by the legend of Marcus Curtius. But such feeling is also an essential ingredient of religious emotion, for religion,

according to Whitehead, “[merges the] individual claim with that of the objective universe,” in a general feeling of “world-loyalty” (RM 60).

## **CONCLUSION**

Whitehead’s philosophy is grounded on two inseparable core-notions: process and organism. Process points to the creative character of reality, and organism to its interconnectedness. Shaviro’s analysis of concern was mostly focused on the interconnected side of Whitehead’s system. This paper was meant to focus more on the creative side.

By considering the part of creativity in the description of an entity, we may highlight its fragility, and a feeling of insecurity and anxiety which enters in its constitution. Such feeling impacts at once the way the entity enjoys itself, and the way it is concerned by its environment. It gives concern its tone of solicitude and obligation to others. Of course, such feeling of obligation may be inhibited in the final decision, but the point is that it takes root in the very constitution of any occasion of experience.

Now I must end this paper with a slight apology: in this article, I have been playing the game of conceptual speculation and minute description, while this is exactly what Whitehead seems to have tried to avoid. The rhetorical turn in his late works allowed him to speak vaguely of “concern in the Quaker sense,” allowing for a vague, indefinite interpretation of the term, instead of going into metaphysical details and imposing a minute abstract description to conceptual imagination. So entertaining as it is, the kind of endeavour exhibited by this paper may be just what we should not take too seriously.

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