

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND WHITEHEAD

Robert E. Doud

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) was a British mathematician and philosopher who initially worked on questions of mathematical logic and the philosophy of science. In the second decade of the twentieth century he co-authored the three volumes of the influential *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell. After moving to Harvard in 1924 he developed a more comprehensive metaphysical system known as ‘process philosophy’. This regards change and dynamism as the basic constituent elements of reality, rather than static substances (‘things’) as in most traditional philosophical systems. Whitehead invents many new and obscure words and terms as he constructs his cosmology, but these are the new wineskins that he needs for his heady vintage of ideas.

My method in writing this is to take several themes from Ignatius and Ignatian literature and to consider or develop them using Whitehead’s categories. I hope that writing in Whitehead’s terms can offer something important to the discussion of Ignatian discernment and Jesuit spirituality. And I also hope to enhance the appreciation of Whitehead by applying his concepts to correlative ideas in the spirituality of St Ignatius. I am consoled by the thought that, even if I am presumptuous or inaccurate in my writing on themes intimate to Jesuit spirituality, I am still exposing ways in which God is experienced and in which the path to God may be discerned.

I write out of a framework, based on Whitehead, in which our decisions in life are taken to shape themselves cumulatively into a commitment. My paradigm of commitment is not one in which we necessarily need to make a vow early in life and lock ourselves into obedience within a religious community. Rather, for me, our emerging self-discovery comes about through a sifting process in which we half create, and half discover, our direction. Such a paradigm fits both laity

The Way, 48/3 (July 2009), 47–60

and religious, and is consistent with the suggestions of humanistic psychology. Drawing inspiration from both Ignatius and Whitehead, I hope to show how prayer and discernment are constants in this emergent process.

Another assumption I am making here is that discernment is not a method or set of methods that are the private reserve of Jesuits or other religious, or of church authorities. Discernment as a process goes on in the Church all the time. People are constantly deciding things, venturing forth into life and, in diverse circumstances, making discoveries about themselves under the Spirit's guidance. This guidance comes constantly to all kinds of people, sometimes through the events or conditions of their lives, sometimes as direct inspiration. Nevertheless, the methodical approach of the Society of Jesus is a gift within the Church, opening up the path to a way of life that is precious in God's sight and effective in serving the needs of the Church.

Most religious superiors and spiritual directors today are amenable, at least in part, to the attitudes expressed here. In the United States, religious and theologians have been educated in a philosophical context based on process and relationships. Whiteheadian cosmology and psychology are attuned to these philosophies of process in the wider sense, and the Roman Catholic mentality and sensibility are not immune to their influence. Indeed, a Catholic theology that lacked responsiveness to these advances in thought and consciousness would be greatly impoverished.

In this article I use italics when introducing technical terms from Whitehead and from St Ignatius, when referring to the those terms as such, and occasionally when reminding myself that certain familiar words are used technically here, especially as they are used in Whitehead's sense. For instance, in Whitehead, *creativity*, *satisfaction*, *decision*, *anticipation* and *living person* are technical terms. These words usually have to do with humans and human experience, but for Whitehead they become metaphysical principles. They designate functions or properties of natural objects of all kinds, rather than just the attributes of human beings.

Whitehead's Cosmology

Whitehead's philosophy is essentially a cosmology—that is, a philosophy of the universe and of nature. In it the basic unit of reality,

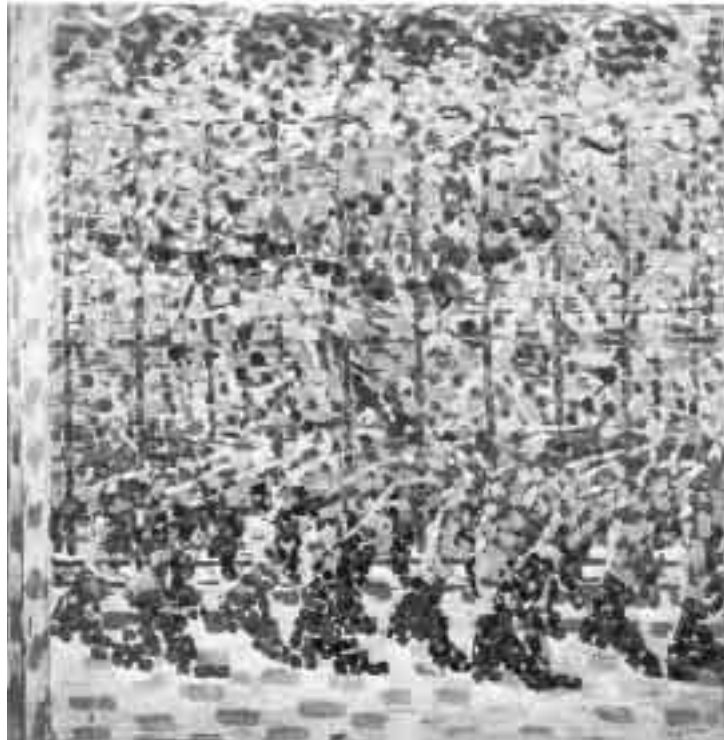
which combines the subjective and the objective, is called the *actual entity*. In the terms of twentieth-century particle physics, the actual entity is like a particle-event that is so brief as to lack duration. Each actual entity is immediately succeeded by others, but characteristics may be passed on from earlier ones to later. Everything that exists either is an actual entity, or is made up of actual entities. Although actual entities are only momentary in duration, Whitehead considers God to be a single actual entity that does not pass away. Other Whiteheadian philosophers think that God must be a series of actual entities, in their terms, a *living person* or a *historic route*. So considered, it is easier to explain how God interacts with the world that is made up entirely of momentary actual entities.

The actual entity, also called the *actual occasion*, is the basis of objective reality: it is an iota of experience, mentality, subjectivity, decision and emotion as well. The process by which each actual entity constitutes itself is called *concrescence* by Whitehead. We may have trouble, at first, thinking of an event of such brevity; and then we must add to that the idea that it occurs in four distinguishable phases! Even so, Whitehead says that concrescence indeed occurs in four genetic or developmental phases, called *datum*, *process*, *satisfaction* and *decision* (which Whitehead also calls *anticipation*).

The actual entity is the basis of objective reality

In the *datum* phase the actual entity receives a myriad of previous actual entities into its constitution. *Prehension* is the word that designates the relationships each actual entity has to each previous actual entity as it enters its constitution. In the *process* phase, the actual entity arranges or organizes its prehended data. In the *satisfaction* phase the actual entity experiences a pulse of subjective self-enjoyment. In the decision phase, the actual entity cuts off its relationships and stands on its own as a completed unit of process. When discussing *anticipation*, Whitehead says that the actual entity also anticipates how it will be prehended by future actual entities. Hence, the actual entity is both an objective unit of actuality and a subject that experiences its world.

The human body, at any particular moment, is made up of myriads of actual entities. Somewhere in the brain is the *dominant occasion*, or dominant actual entity, which centralises and organizes our experience. The *dominant occasion* enjoys consciousness and generally directs the activities of the entire organism. We must remember, too, that God is



Girl Running, by Giacomo Balla

prehended by every actual entity, and that each of the actual entities in our brain and body receives God and receives divine influence.

Gathering Ignatian Themes

The *Spiritual Exercises* is the key to Jesuit spirituality, the book that guides Jesuits in their life of prayer, service and active contemplation. But it is not meant for Jesuits alone; theirs is a spirituality that belongs to the whole Church. We non-Jesuits may make a claim upon this golden book of St Ignatius, though we should bear in mind that the *Spiritual Exercises* was never intended to be applied in a mechanical, one-size-fits-all fashion. A great part of its genius is its versatility and adaptability, including its receptiveness to interpretation in other terms, such as those of Whitehead.

Finding God in All Things

One of Ignatius' most important principles is that of 'finding God in all things', and this idea also pervades the thought of Whitehead. In Whitehead, the sum total or *nexus* of all the actual entities that immediately precede any particular actual entity is called its *actual world*. Each of the myriad actual entities comprising an actual world itself contains God, in that it takes account of, or *prehends*, the divine actual entity as part of its real internal constitution. Hence, God is in all things; the appreciation of this fact is part of all prayer. All previous events and experiences are prehended in the present moment just in so far as they themselves prehended the divine actual entity in their own present moments.

Feeling

This idea of prehension in Whitehead can be understood in terms of what Ignatius calls *sentir*, or feeling. In Whitehead's cosmology there is never a bare object or datum that is devoid of all subjectivity or affection. Every actual entity is a subject as well as an object, leaving no bifurcation between these two correlative poles of every experience. The actual entity *feels*, senses and takes into account each of the other actual entities in its *actual world*, as well as the actual world itself, in its unity, as the horizon of its own self-enjoyment and actualisation. In the reality of *prehension* knowledge and feeling, cognition and affection, are essentially one.

Experience

Another important Ignatian theme is that of *experience*. We experience grace and can use such experience as a compass in living towards God. Grace is a matter of relationship to God, to one's fellow humans, to the Church and to the created world. The experience of the individual, properly discerned, is the best guide that he or she has in living ever more deeply with God. An actual entity is a moment of experience: human identity in any and every given moment of existence and experience constitutes an actual entity. God is present in every actual entity. Hence, every actual entity is an experience of God.

The Examen

The daily examination of conscience is a characteristic practice of Ignatian spirituality. We sift through what seems to be going right and what seems to be going wrong in our life for that day. We ask ourselves how we might be responsible for, or how we might set straight, things that are going wrong. In Whitehead's terms, we wonder about and try to track the organization of our *prehensions*, our relationships with other actual entities. We try to bring to light or to consciousness the reasons for our feeling the way we do and for our acting as we act. In its *anticipation* phase, any actual entity seeks to make improvements in the actual entities that will succeed it. Every actual entity therefore has an aspect of the *examen* built into it.

Discernment and Commitment

The *Spiritual Exercises* is divided into four Weeks that constitute four stages in the spiritual life. It is also aimed practically at helping exercitants or retreatants to take a decision to follow the will of God, and to make the personal sacrifices involved in committing themselves to this vocation. Just as this decision, or *election*, lies at the heart of the spirituality of St Ignatius, decision is central to the cosmology of Whitehead. And the way in which Whitehead understands *decision* can give us insights into Ignatian election and its consequences.

Decision

The *decision* in Whitehead is both a subjective self-determination and an objective aspect of the constitution of an actual entity. Every particle of reality is constituted by its own decision to be whatever it is. The notion of *juzgar* (judging) in St Ignatius can be related to the decision phase of concrescence in Whitehead. Every *actual entity* involves some sort of decision. Some decisions are more important than others. If a *living person* feels, within the span of many *dominant occasions*, a movement towards a specific decision, then that decision, made by a person who is truly praying, is felt as one that is coming from God. Such a decision, or *election*, is felt as a gift of God to the individual, and it is a self-determination on the part of the human will at the same time. That is, if this decision is well discerned, it is a human act of choosing God's will, an act of obedience.

The More and the Lure

In Whitehead the decision phase of the actual entity draws or attracts us into the future. The *initial aim* is the *lure* supplied by God, that serves as a final cause enticing the effort of self-constitution in the process of concrescence. A *lure* is something that provides an element of instigation or purposeful orientation. Every actual entity receives its own proper lure or unique initial aim from God, as an instigation towards its full and free development and satisfaction.

Ignatius used the phrase 'God ever greater'. For him God is always *luring* me to a greater gift of myself to be given back to God, who offers Godself to me in the reality of grace. God becomes a *more*, an ever greater reality in my life, and expects ever greater things of me as God empowers me with grace. In effect, my capacity for God and for grace is always increasing, even as God seems to me to be an ever greater reality. As the *more*, the divine actual entity and the initial aims that it affords become a *lure* which attracts me ever more strongly. God's grace is 'enough for me', but it calls me forward on a path on which no achievement of mine is ever enough.

Spiritual Liberty

My basic will is to do the will of God. My *subjective aim* is to conform to the freeing and directing *initial aim* offered to me by God. Liberty here is understood as freedom from distraction, temptation and disruptive self-interest, as I try to make my decision in peaceful surrender to the will of God. Spiritual liberty is a great gift, not to be presumed at any stage of my vocation's growth. I should pray for it and treasure it.

After I have been involved in a work or ministry for a while, it may be extremely difficult to let go of it when I am assigned or invited to another ministry. My ideal is to be able to say honestly before God that the determining factor in my decision is God's will. Changes with which I am confronted must be weighed in light of the *more* that God demands of me.

Obedience

Thought and practice regarding the Ignatian notion of obedience has changed over the centuries. Today's Ignatian spirituality does not favour the militaristic, unquestioning understanding or sensibility that it might sometimes have involved in the past. Today's obedience,

speaking ideally, is a faithful listening to God's voice and attention to the divine *lures*, in one's own life, in the community, in the Church, and in the world in which we live. Indeed, obedience in today's Church can sometimes entail faithful dissent and prophetic objection to 'business as usual'. Obedience today is a relational grace and virtue, that is, it depends on relational interactions and tested patterns of mutual trust, rather than on individual conformity to rules.

Discernment of Spirits

Originally, the expression *discernment of spirits* had to do with distinguishing the works and promptings of the Holy Spirit from those of evil spirits. Today, it has to do with finding the right vocational path and reading the indications that God is giving to point it out to me. In Whitehead's terms, the series of dominant actual occasions that comprises my soul, also known as my *living person*, is the *historic route* of actual entities that comprise my existence. Each actual entity enjoys a stage in the process of concrescence that is called decision. So, each *living person* or *historic route* is also made up of a series of decisions that I have made under divine influence. There is a historical pattern to my attempt to follow the will of God faithfully. With prayerful attention, I can discern this pattern and use it as an indication of what my future decisions should be. I experience as well the *lure* of God in my present moment of existence. My *living person* can discern a consistent pattern of lures that attract me to God along the path of my *historic route*.

The Two Standards

In the *Spiritual Exercises* the standard or banner of Christ and the standard or banner of Satan stand opposed (Exx 136–148). Prayerful discernment allows us to distinguish between them, and to choose to stand under the banner of Christ. In the mind of the discernor a powerful contrast is set up between the two standards. However, it may be difficult to discern initially which data belong under which standard. Some data that seem to belong under the standard of Christ may ultimately turn out to be a distraction or temptation in disguise taking me in the wrong direction.

Whitehead's doctrine of *contrasts* helps the discernor to understand how the mind works in terms of antitheses. In the process phase of concrescence, *contrasts* are set up between our ideals, called eternal objects, and concrete data organized in *nexuses*. These data are large

sets or groups of actual entities. Studying the contrasts in my life will help me to determine what direction my choices should take. All of the data prehended as good are organized under the standard of Christ. Data that are prehended as evil, distracting or compromising are organized under the standard of Satan. There is satisfaction in doing the sorting out, and in facing what has to be faced in the battle with evil. Evil is usually deceptive, and often appears initially as good. And things that would be good for somebody else in a different set of conditions may not be good for me in my own circumstances, and must be discerned as such.

Consolation and Desolation

When we are organizing prehensions under the Standard of Christ, we may experience *subjective forms* or affections that are consoling—that give us a conscious sense of the love of God. Discernment is needed because some of these satisfactions may seem to be coming from God when they are not. Prayer over time, some sifting out, and spiritual direction are usually necessary in order to determine whether a consolation comes from God.

Consolation is basically an inner motion, whereas *desolation*, the feeling of separation from God, is a motion coming from outside into the interior. In Whitehead's terms, consolation comes as part of an *initial aim* supplied by God for the direction and enrichment of the recipient soul. This statement requires qualification, however, since the divine actual entity—God—also comes in from outside as part of the *actual world*. Consolation can come from prehensions in the process phase of concrescence: to the Whiteheadian, consolations are not contained in the raw data that swarm in from the actual world. Rather, they are due to the *subjective forms* that those data receive during the process phase, as directed by the *subjective aim*. In so far as God permits desolation, it must have some involvement from the initial aim as well. Our felt knowledge of our relationship to God is both mediated through the world in the dynamic of prehension, and immediately infused in initial aims that are received directly from God. God, and other influences from the exterior world, can bring consolation, and some of this consolation is righteous and beneficial. God gives the soul direction by sending consolations when the soul is on the right track.

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Consolation Without Previous Cause

Consolation without previous cause is a grace that has no cause except God who gives the satisfaction. In Whiteheadian terms it is the felt immediacy of the divine actual entity in the constitution of a human dominant actual entity. God's aim for that entity is to be felt explicitly as God-given by the actual entity. The feeling of God's presence and contribution is the most important aspect of the *satisfaction* of that actual entity. Initially it is not certain that this consolation, which is at least somewhat inconsistent with other data that are prehended, comes from God. I become sure through a prayerful discernment process: I may receive a grace such as a light directing me to a certain path or consoling me as I consider a certain path. A choice I have made or may be about to make is confirmed by the consolation without previous cause. The firm decision involved is based on the satisfaction or consolation enjoyed and the confirmation of its divine source, rather than on the data prehended and evaluated during deliberation.

Identifying One's Gifts

In his prayers and other writings, St Ignatius often refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and other gifts. Having certain gifts from God is in itself an indication of what one should be doing to use those gifts fully and properly. A poet or a scientist ought to be encouraged to be a better poet or scientist. If one has a gift for consoling the sick, one ought, with some probability, to be in a ministry that profits from those skills or natural traits and inclinations. There is a community aspect to learning and discovering just what gifts one has, and the channels open to us to develop our gifts.

Grace of State

This is not so much an Ignatian principle as it is a general principle in theology, though one that is vital in Ignatian spirituality. As responsibilities increase and demands upon the individual increase as well, there is a temptation to balk at accepting ever more demanding duties. I must remain convinced that God's grace is enough for me, and that, beyond the scope of what I can control, God's providence is working for my success. Much will be demanded of me as I try to live out my vocation faithfully. And, I remind myself, success will come on God's terms, not my own. The human ego tends to look for recognition

and confirmation from others whom we deem to be important, but knowing that God's grace is supporting my efforts is more important. It is helpful also to trust that God gives graces of state to religious superiors, spiritual directors and colleagues in their various ministries.

Company or Society

The Jesuit brotherhood, for Jesuits, and the Church at large, for all Christians, are part of the *actual world* that nurtures and supports us on our journey—the horizon against which our lives have meaning and importance. Our being is relational and ecclesial. This requires enormous trust on the part of an individual living in community. It requires trust in God, as well as trust in the conviction that God is working in my life through my membership in the community. This trust is a gift that must not be overlooked. Trust in the Church and thinking with the Church (Exx 352–370) are values with which we must come to terms.

Needs of the Society or Needs of the Church

Authority and obedience are gifts given to the Society or Company of Jesus, and to the Church and other organizations. They are necessary in order to assign missions and to sort out other gifts, discovering which should be most used when an individual has other gifts as well. Prayer and patience are needed on both sides—that of the superior and that of the religious subject. It is possible that a superior, or others in the community, will discern an individual's particular gifts and how they might best be used before the individual is brought by grace to the same realisation. Parallel considerations apply to the laity in their families, businesses, parishes and other relational settings. In Whitehead's relational philosophy interactions with others and with the environment are crucial to decisions of self-determination.

The Cross

Spirituality that does not take account of the cross is incomplete and immature. There are things we must do that are difficult or odious. Physical and mental afflictions are part of the lives of each of us, and of our dear and close ones in this world. Living compatibly with difficult or abrasive people is sometimes required of us. We must all learn to absorb setbacks and accept the negativity that is sometimes part of our surroundings, rather than amplifying it and passing it on. Deliberately

seeking diminishing and humiliating experiences (Exx 146) is a very rare ascetical phenomenon in today's Church. St Luke's Gospel tells us that every day we must pick up our cross and carry it. And a relational cosmology such as Whitehead's allows us to find creative ways in which we can help each other carry our crosses.

Joy

Joy is part of the Ignatian charism. We are bearers of the good news, the gospel. Our burden is easy and our yoke is light. Tribulation is always balanced by joy. We are asked to endure no pain that is not to be resolved into greater enjoyment. This joy is a gift from God and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God is already breaking into this world in an eschatological sense. It is our afflictions which are passing away, not our joy, not our consolation, not the peace and blessings that come from the Spirit. Our faith in these realities brings its own kind of joy. To a Whiteheadian, every moment has its joy in the satisfaction phase of the actual entity. There is a pulse of intrinsic enjoyment as the myriad factors of prehension unite in an instantaneous experience of resolution.

In Whitehead, decision and satisfaction are not inessential or accidental realities; an actual entity cannot exist without them. They go together as integral aspects of the self-determination of the most basic particle of reality. The satisfaction of an actual entity, whatever else it is, is the enjoyment of having decisively self-constituted, and, in some cases, it is enjoyment at having conformed itself to its initial aims. It may also be enjoyment at the sheer presence of the divine actual entity within its own constitution. It entails enjoyment at having reached the decision that completes its moment of actualisation. Decision and satisfaction, in the Whiteheadian sense, work together, as do the election and consolation in the Ignatian sense. In deciding, a person self-constitutes as a free respondent to uniquely given *aims* and *lures*.

Commitment as a Metaphysical Reality

The sequence of decisions at the hearts of the dominant actual entities along the *historic route* of the *living person* comprises a metaphysical reality. These cumulative and progressively self-interpreting and self-actualising decisions are what we call here a *commitment*. A *commitment* is a series of

decisions that reinforce one another in the gradual and emergent realisation of a certain set of values. A commitment, so conceived, is to a *living person*, in the Whiteheadian sense, just as a *decision* is to a *dominant occasion*.

The Ignatian *election*, then, can probably best be analyzed in Whitehead's terms not as a single decision made by a single actual entity during concrescence, but rather as a series or sequence of mutually reinforcing decisions over a span of many moments of experience.

The election is not a single decision, but a chain of decisions, that is, the Ignatian election is a *commitment*, in the terms of this current discussion. No two of these decisions are exactly alike, but they are all consistent and mutually interpreting. Just as decision-making is a function of every actual entity, so commitment-building is a function of a *living person*, of a growing span of decisions—a commitment—that goes on throughout a lifetime.

If decision and commitment are treated here, in Whiteheadian fashion, as metaphysical categories and realities, then *hope* also becomes a metaphysical principle. Hope enters in when we take account of *anticipation* as a phase or aspect of concrescence alongside satisfaction and decision. Part of the constitution of every actual entity is the hope that its momentary achievement, and the values that inspire it, may be launched or projected into the future. In Whitehead, the moral realities of satisfaction, decision and anticipation become metaphysical realities in the process of concrescence. They are functional and genetic parts of the self-actualisation of every actual entity.



Alfred North Whitehead

The process perspective on gospel living would allow God to surprise us by opening paths of diverse twists and turns as we lead our lives. Not all that God asks or offers may be amenable to careful praying and continuous discernment. The Spirit also operates by surprise and serendipity. The Spirit sometimes works by letting us make mistakes, and then helping us find our way out of them. Trying to harness the Spirit into humanly devised methods of discernment and the rules of religious congregations may work in some circumstances, but certainly not in all. This needs to be taken into account by the discernment process as it is understood and practised today.

Sorting all this out takes courage. I think of St Francis Xavier when I think of courage. I think of St Isaac Jogues and his companions. I think of St Robert Bellarmine, as he led the Church out of the Middle Ages and helped reshape its legal and disciplinary structures. I think of several Jesuits, other religious and many lay folk who have helped me shape my own life. Courage, hope and patience all go together in the tremendous experience of living. I do not know how Whitehead would have dealt with the theme of courage. He certainly had faith in the process, in the future and in the creative advance. He once wrote cryptically that it is the business of the future to be dangerous. St Ignatius gives us a kind of prayer that is courageous, generous, wise and humble. Let us pray with St Ignatius.

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