
Book Review

Demian Wheeler and David E. Conner (eds.), *Conceiving an Alternative: Philosophical Resources for an Ecological Civilization* (Anoka: Process Century Press, 2019), 313 pp., \$18.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1940447407.

This edited volume collects papers from a 2015 conference on Alfred North Whitehead and ecological civilization. Especially given the multiple philosophical voices today that want to move beyond language-submerged approaches, to retrieve realism, and even to 'go metaphysical', I agree with the book's editors that Whitehead's realist metaphysics offers tremendous resources for those seeking to develop a coherent ecological worldview. Contributing editor Demian Wheeler lists them:

Whitehead's realization that entities are dependent on their environments and constituted by their relationships; his emphasis on the deep interconnectedness of things; his rejection of a reductive materialism and a substance metaphysics in favor of a philosophy of organism and an ontology of events; his conviction that feeling, subjectivity, mind, purpose, and value exist in the natural world; his suspicions of supernatural interventions; his insistence on the inseparability of the physical and the mental in experience; and, most importantly, his overcoming of anthropocentrism and the pernicious dualisms that alienate humans from the rest of nature. (p. 116)

Some of the chapters in the book are still the length of conference presentations, and others have been expanded to thirty or more pages. Some of the chapters do not discuss ecological questions and others do not discuss Whitehead. Nevertheless, all of them are engaged with a critical reclamation of Whitehead, process philosophy, or religious naturalism.

Some contributors argue that Whitehead or another process thinker helps us develop an ecological worldview. For example, Anna Case-Winters recommends Whitehead's philosophy for a Christian theology that is earth-centered, and Jerome Stone endorses a Whitehead-inspired but non-theistic form of religious naturalism. Eric Steinhart develops a serial polytheism from ideas in Charles Hartshorne, and Karl Peters connects Epicurean ethics to a dynamic relational naturalism drawn from Henry Nelson Wieman. And several contributors are not shy about critiquing Whitehead. Robert Cummings Neville argues that Whitehead's work needs to be supplemented with semiotic and Chinese philosophy. George Allan uses Suzanne Langer to fix Whitehead's tendency to reify abstractions. J. Thomas Howe compares Whitehead to Walter Pater and to Plato on the idea of living 'for beauty'. Pete A.Y. Gunter contrasts Whitehead with Henri Bergson and Plotinus on the idea that

possibilities as not eternal but emergent. Patrick Shade argues that Whitehead's appreciation of the interdependence of individual moral agents with their larger social and natural environments should have a transformative effect on virtue ethics. Leemon McHenry illuminates how Whitehead's account of value in the world falls short of the appreciation of intrinsic worth that one sees in deep ecology.

The most important and sustained philosophical issue in the book concerns the increasingly popular theory of emergence. Emergence theory stems from the observation that, just as water molecules have fire-extinguishing properties not possessed by their constituent elements of hydrogen and oxygen, a composite whole can be more than the sum of its parts. The hope is that this theory can provide a non-dualist account of how organic wholes come to possess mental properties without invoking an immaterial realm. Because Whitehead argued that mental properties are not developments that only appeared recently with the advent of organic life but rather primordial features of all entities, emergence theory seems to conflict with his panpsychism (or pan-experientialism). Lawrence Cahoon gives an insightful account of how process philosophy and emergence theory arose as cousins in the revolutionary 1900–1930 period in European philosophy of nature that sought to undo both dualism and mechanism, and he explains why Aristotle remains a congenial philosopher for these movements despite that fact that they defined themselves in opposition to his substance metaphysics. Donald Crosby provides the most forceful argument for emergence and against panpsychism, arguing that Whitehead's generalization from human mental experience to all entities is clearly anthropocentric and therefore undermines a fully ecological worldview. For Crosby, when the simplest purposive life emerged on earth, its responsiveness to its environment was (like the fire-extinguishing properties of water) a novel development, not something that had already existed in its constituent parts. Demian Wheeler endorses Crosby's stance, arguing that a less speculative and more genuinely naturalistic form of process philosophy can be found in the empiricist wing of process thinkers that runs from Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Loomer, and Bernard Meland to William Dean, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Nancy Frankenberry.

In contrast, David Corner provides the most forceful argument against emergence and for panpsychism, arguing that emergence theorists assume that before the emergence of mind, the material world was dead and devoid of value. Moreover, he argues, to say that when non-mental parts come together, mental properties 'emerge' or that they 'supervene' on matter is not an explanation but still a gesture at mystery. Emergence theory gives no reason to abandon Whitehead's view that valuation and sentience are features of everything that exists, a view that is both more useful for an ecological civilization and more in line with contemporary understandings of what matter is.

This unsettled dispute should become a productive one. It is hard to deny that the world is stratified into layers of increasing complexity, from subatomic particles to atoms to molecules to cells to organisms to self-consciousness minds, and emergence theory gives an account of these strata that is fully naturalistic. But the emergence camp will not win the dispute with the argument that 'feeling need not be present in rocks' (p. 123), since Whitehead never claimed that rocks feel, nor with the argument that '[h]uman self-consciousness is the product not of a primordially mental cosmos, but of an evolutionary one' (p. 124), since Whitehead never denies that human minds are the product of evolution. These are cheap shots. Rather, the dispute will require us

to focus on two important questions: what it means to speak of particles, atoms, and molecules responding to their environments (which connects this dispute to the 'new materialism' that sees agency in matter) and whether there are specific molecular forms that can become self-reproductive (what we might call an autopoietic naturalism). Given Whitehead's intimate knowledge of the physics of his day, it is gratifying to see his process metaphysics contributing to a coherent ecological worldview when the need is so pressing.

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