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WHITEHEAD ON PERISHING¹

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the problem of cessation in Whitehead's philosophy. By focusing on his *Process and Reality*, but also on his other works, different temporal, mereological and other aspects of perishing are analyzed, with special attention to the annihilation of subjective directness. The article also focuses on the complementary character of creation and cessation, by taking into consideration the various (subjective, objective, superjective or divine) layers of cessation. By relying upon the critical reception of Whitehead, the article formulates certain dilemmas with regard to the status of ceased events or entities, and also in relation to the general possibility and the discreet character of perishing.

KEYWORDS

Whitehead, metaphysics, annihilation, perishing, becoming, time, mereology, actual being

Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics is a novelty in the conceptual history of cessation in many ways. While during the history of Western metaphysics cessation mostly appeared only in the shadow of cessation, in Whitehead's philosophy perishing receives special attention, and its conceptualization is relatively autonomous with regard to other analyses. Even when perishing becomes the center of focus together with becoming of something, perishing keeps its *sui generis* processuality. We are convinced that this is a result of very conscious decision, namely, that Whitehead wants to present perishing as a constitutive part of our image about reality. Many years after the publication of his metaphysical magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead described his work in the following way:

The notion of the prehension of the past means that the past is an element which perishes and thereby remains an element in the state beyond, and thus is objectified. [...] If you get a general notion of what is meant by perishing, you will

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have accomplished an apprehension of what you mean by memory and causality, what you mean when you feel that what we are is of infinite importance, because as we perish we are immortal. That is the one key thought around which the whole development of *Process and Reality* is woven. (Whitehead 1947: 89)

Thus, the concept of perishing is decisive from a problem-centered perspective, but we think that its historical aspects are also of great importance. Even though he mentions some other historical predecessors in the context of the concept of perishing, we are sure that he also keeps in mind the classical Aristotelian investigations about the topic (including his most relevant work *On Generation and Corruption*). The debate with Aristotle's theory of substance runs through *Process and Reality*, during which Whitehead tries to get rid of the conceptual frames imposed by primary substance (while he seems to keep the concept of secondary substance), first and foremost because he thinks that it refers to a static being that is enduring in undifferentiated way as a mere receptive entity – and it is obvious that perishing can only have a very reduced role in such a context. His objection also has to do with the insight that substance is an isolated, purely self-identical entity, deprived of connections (which makes it impossible to grasp the microphysical layer of reality). However, Whitehead, even though *mutatis mutandis*, tries to keep some important aspects of Aristotle's doctrine about corruption (see Losoncz 2020): he does not want to define cessation as becoming nothingness, and it is also important for him that becoming and perishing are two sides of the same coin (that is to say, the cessation of an entity implies the creation of something else). Still, this does not change the fact that the conceptual framework itself changes radically in comparison to that of Aristotle's: Whitehead is unwilling to interpret perishing as the perishing of primary substance, and neither does he want to oppose cessation (and creation) to movement and its various variants (alteration, growth/diminution, spatial change). In Aristotle's philosophy "generation and destruction are the two sides of a single transformation of substance into substance" (Ross 2005: 102), but Whitehead refuses the very concept of (primary) substance. What perishes according to Whitehead then, and what comes into being, what is created in parallel to that process?

The insight quoted by Whitehead already contains the most essential aspects of his doctrine about perishing: there is perishing, however, there is also a persisting, objectified element that can be considered immortal. What is this about? According to Whitehead, a given entity loses its subjectivity at a certain moment, but it is available for further future subjects as an object – this is what he calls objective immortality. It is certainly not eternity, but everlastingness, or, to put it differently, persistence that is integrated to the multiplicities of processes. At first glance, it might seem that what perishes is in fact the actual being (as opposed to eternal objects) – the actual being that is not an unchanged subject, but an entity exposed to variable experiences, a complex and atomistic "final fact", that is both a subject and an object (superject). There is nothing "behind" actual beings, they are all in the same plane, and

by being associated with other beings they make nexuses and concrescences. The following formulation might be somewhat surprising: “actual entities perish, but do not change; they are what they are” (Whitehead 1978: 35). How is perishing possible, if it does not involve change? How could an actual being remain self-identical while at the very same moment it ceases to exist? This is the moment where Whitehead’s doctrine about perishing demonstrates its subtlety the most. First of all, let us make certain that change is related to a more abstract layer that presupposes difference and comparison between various events. With regard to our interpretation of perishing, the following insight might be of help: “actual entities perpetually perish subjectively, but are immortal objectively. Actuality in perishing acquires objectivity, while it loses subjective immediacy. It loses the final causation which is its internal principle of unrest, and it acquires efficient causation whereby it is a ground of obligation characterizing the creativity” (Whitehead 1978: 29). Here, subjectivity refers to the directness of becoming, to a creative transformation, to becoming definite – thus, by suggesting that subjectivity might perish, Whitehead in fact states that with perishing it is becoming itself that perishes. Once again, the thesis according to which cessation and creation are sides of the same coin is conceptually strengthened. We find accurate the analogy with fire: “time is the fire in which we burn”, as Daniel Schwartz put it, meaning that “fire provides energy (heat) for becoming but also consumes (perishing)” (Bluedorn 2002: 32). We can notice a similar asymmetry with regard to subjectivity and objectivity: what was subjective, loses its intensity through perishing, it becomes objective, but it is available as form and as *datum* for future subjectivities, that is to say, for becoming – as memory and as causality. In this context, subject and object are not opposed to each other as robust entities, but they are aspects, phases of the very same process (see Rescher 1996: 59). Taken altogether, we can say that it is becoming that can cease to exist, not being itself. “All dynamism, all flux, all creativity” (Ford 1984: 194) disappears, subjectivity as an entity for itself realizes itself, reaches its goal – what remains is the already realized, finished subject. It is more precise to say that actual being perishes, not actual being. We have to understand this in a double way: both becoming and actuality as activity disappears – only a mediated, derived activity remains available. By relying upon Proust and Deleuze, we might say that an entity functioning like this “is real, though not actual” (see Deleuze 1968: 269) – it is virtual. It can have an effect on actuality, but it still withdraws itself from the control of actuality. In a hyperbolizing paragraph, Whitehead reminds us of Plato’s *Ti-maeus* with respect to the role of actual beings within the streaming world: “but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is” (Whitehead 1978: 82). Thus, as if being and becoming/perishing belonged to different spheres – just as the becoming or processual directness appears, in its momentariness it already sacrifices itself and its validity, “its birth is its end” (Whitehead 1978: 80). With this it becomes obvious that cessation is not

an exceptional, extraordinary event that “leaves deep wounds behind itself”, but a self-evident, usual occasion that is incessantly going on.

Even though in a changed form, actual being is still available for future events as a past actuality, that is to say, with a potentiality having value beyond itself (the special, timeless persistence and immortality of value is emphasized in Whitehead’s late work about immortality (Whitehead 1951)). Absolute past exists for future and other entities, it is publicly available and thus, it remains relevant in an everlasting way. It is justified to speak of “the immanence of immortal past in every new occasion” (Nobo 1986: 145). Every ceased entity A remains operative as a ghost (this is Whitehead’s expression) in a later subjectivity B, with the help of causality, understood as pragmatic memory – A still has effects through B and participates in it, while B “remembers” A, that is to say, prehends and feels it (and what is definitely annihilated, is in fact prehended negatively). The heritage and afterlife of the past thus always appears within a specified perspective (and, as a matter of fact, every prehension can refer only to past events). Things are immortal in their consequentiality, but they are mortal with regard to their vitality. B prehends A, but the contrary is not true: A does notprehend B. This explains the irreversibility of time: if A ceased to exist in its creativity, B cannot bring it back, and a further C distantiates itself from the original state even more. The successive states necessarily differ from the previous ones, they transcend each other, the newer causes and effects are being accumulated – and this cannot be changed. Whitehead emphasizes that the canalization of succession is a mere abstraction in comparison to this originary and always concrete irreversibility. One might ask whether this could be in a different way. A more venturesome metaphysical approach might suggest that “it is clearly, but contingently, true that in our world some things are unambiguously in the past of others” (Christian 1963: 96). Thus, according to this thought experiment, we can imagine worlds in which the irreversibility of time is not prevalent. At a certain point, Whitehead seems to take into consideration the possibility of having novelty without any loss (Whitehead 1978: 340), but still, without any doubt, he sketches the image of our world by keeping in mind the fact of cessation.

The concepts of becoming and perishing presuppose a certain concept of multiplicity – and Whitehead’s pluralism fulfills this condition. As we stated, he refuses to conceive cessation as mere annihilation – cessation is for him much more a transformation within multiplicity. “There are always entities beyond entities, because nonentity is no boundary” (Whitehead 1978: 66). Things do not swim into the world, they emanate from an immanent creativity. On the other hand, we can also claim that when things are being transformed from their directness into the non-being of their directness, that is to say, when they perish, “that does not mean that they are nothing. They remain ‘stubborn fact’” (Dunham 2010: 140) – as Jeremy Dunham puts it (“stubborn facts” is the expression of Whitehead himself). Things do not emanate from nothingness, neither they fall back into a kind of nothingness. It is worth comparing the Whiteheadian critique of nothingness with the Bergsonian critique of the same notion (see

for instance Romano 2006). It seems that they both think that this is a derived, abstract concept that dissipates insofar as we focus on the pleroma of becoming. The continuity of the past in the presence can be extrapolated to the future without further ado: “thus perishing is the initiation of becoming. How the past perishes is how the future becomes” (Whitehead 1967a: 238), and we can say the same about nexus, namely, that “it enjoys an objective immortality in the future beyond itself” (Whitehead 1978: 230). What is really important is not the present immortality of the past, but the fact that it is a guarantee for the virtual openness of the future – the fact that past persists *as* past, makes possible the heterogenous future that can be different from it. This is not the transcendental past “that has never happened”, which motive has been varied a lot in French philosophy, from Lévinas to Deleuze and Richir, but a very precise and concrete past that is the past of something that really happened, and that lives on organically as a vector.

Beside Plato, it is Locke who is often referred to by Whitehead, as far as cessation is considered, namely, the formulation which links cessation to time. “There is great merit in Newton’s immovable receptacles. But for Newton they are eternal. Locke’s notion of time hits the mark better: time is ‘perpetually perishing’. In the organic philosophy an actual entity has ‘perished’ when it is complete. The pragmatic use of the actual entity, constituting its static life, lies in the future. The creature perishes and is immortal” (Whitehead 1978: 81–82). He also writes that “the ancient doctrine that ‘no one crosses the same river twice’ is extended. No thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice. This is what Locke ought to have meant by his doctrine of time as a ‘perpetual perishing’” (Whitehead 1978: 29) Here, we are once again facing the fact that becoming and perishing complement each other. We know it very well that Whiteheadian philosophy aims to emphasize the durational character of time, its event-based and self-organizing nature, its continuity without any coordinates given in advance – the form of time cannot exist without the content of time. According to this, cessation is a singular, irreversible occasion that is inevitable already by the nature of time itself. It is not only actual becoming that perishes, but time as well as its very medium and as an experiential dimension. However, as we will see, on a higher level, cessation can be eliminated with the help of timelessness.

It is obvious that the concept of objective immortality is somehow related to that of God. It seems that a cosmic divine memory reserves the ceased creatures (and God himself cannot perish, neither can eternal objects). Things are immortal, at least with regard to their consequences – the divinological dimension of reality is the guarantee for this, the dimension that cannot disappear in any sense. However, a more careful interpretation should make distinctions at this point, by separating lines of facts that do not necessarily belong to each other. One might say that “a past occasion is immortal by the way in which it is objectified in the present occasion. No appeal to God here is necessary” (Ford 1984: 195). Immortality as causality is thus not the same as cessation surpassed by God. Lewis L. Ford suggests that in fact, we have to do

with two layers of immortality: one is of causal-temporal character, and it has to counter-balance the cessation of subjectivity, while the other happens with the result of divine intervention, and it is a counterpoint of cessation related to superjective being. Therefore, there is a difference between past persisting as mere past, and past as felt by divine nature, remaining as the past of memory. We could state that God is interested only in maintaining realized beings – these reach their adequate intensity in him. Ford also suggests that Whitehead's terminology is confusing, and he should better speak only of "superjective immortality" and "everlastingness". The difference is very simple: while creatures that are persisting within the frames of a temporality loaded with subjectivity fade away gradually, and they are being objectified on a more and more derived level and more and more in a fragmental way (a certain kind of elimination is inevitable), immortality understood in a proper way is timeless. God's nature "is that of a tender care that nothing be lost. [...] [He] uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage" (Whitehead 1978: 346). Thus, God is saving the world, he receives creatures into his directness, and in this respect "there is no loss". Therefore, this is a consequential nature of a higher order. "The problems of the fluency of God and of the everlastingness of passing experience are solved by the same factor in the universe. This factor is the temporal world" – as we can read it in *Process and Reality* (Whitehead 1978: 347). Thus, the doctrine about immortality reaches its peak in the coincidence of opposites, in a certain kind of supreme harmony. Just as there is immortality understood in a proper way, there is also realization understood in a proper way – everlastingness and temporality merge in a final unity, by reconciling permanentism and transientism in a magnificent synthesis.

We can say that objective immortality has little to do with what religions commonly refer to as immortality – because it lacks precisely the aspect of personal directness and subjectivity. However, it seems that – according to Whitehead – at a higher level even subjectivity can be saved with the help of a special retention without any loss (without any negativity) that maintains directness as directness. This is a special kind of realization "implants timelessness on what in its essence is passing. The perfect moment is fadeless in the lapse of time. Time has then lost its character of 'perpetual perishing'; it becomes the 'moving image of eternity'" (Whitehead 1978: 338) – as Whitehead claims by referring to the well-known Platonic formula. Still, in spite of the Platonic reference, it is clear that Whitehead's motivation is entirely different than Plato's: he wants to avoid the division between eternity and perishing, or, more precisely, he tries to convince us that what is always already an everlastingness can integrate actual being into itself (see Dunham 2010: 139). What is more, in the last sentence of *Process and Reality*, he writes about "the ever-present, unfading importance of our immediate actions, which perish and yet live for evermore" (Whitehead 1978: 351). According to this perspective, God appears as being immanent to the world, and vice versa, and thus, subjective directness can be saved.

As we emphasized, with regard to the common temporal coordinates, Whitehead does not believe in "subjective immortality". In this respect, he is inclined

to extend his skepticism, or even pessimism to the entire cosmos. He states in *The Function of Reason* that in nature “static survival seems to be the general rule, accompanied by a slow decay” (Whitehead 1968: 29). In *Process and Reality* this kind of constant perishing is described with even darker tones: “the ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil. It lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a ‘perpetual perishing.’ Objectification involves elimination” (Whitehead 1978: 340). One might wonder if Whitehead expresses himself imprecisely, given that, according to his philosophy, only the directness of presence ceases to exist, but the past cannot perish – it is objectively immortal. Only one perspective is lost, not the actual being in its entirety. The “ultimate evil” is probably not supposed to be a moral category, Whitehead only wants to demonstrate that there is an irreducible experience of loss. The past is present only as an abstraction, in a partially extended way, that is to say, these elements “impose upon vivid immediacy the obligation that it fade into night. ‘He giveth his beloved-sleep’” (Whitehead 1978: 341). We can find this type of tragic expression at many points in the Whiteheadian opus, sometimes with regard to the existential-human dimension or to the fall of civilizations or cosmic epochs, but in certain cases even as extended to the entire reality. Thus, for instance, “human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience” (Whitehead 1967b: 192) – as we can read in *Science and the Modern World*. However, besides the dark tones, there is always a consolatory voice: “The world is at once a passing shadow and a final fact. The shadow is passing into the fact, so as to be constitutive of it; and yet the fact is prior to the shadow. There is a kingdom of heaven prior to the actual passage of actual things, and there is the same kingdom finding its completion through the accomplishment of this passage” (Whitehead 1996: 85). At this point it is suggested what we can see again in 20th century French philosophy: the transcendental, virtual past is preexistent in relation to presence and its disintegration, and, what is more, it is the absolute precondition of what we have at the moment. The perishing of presence even strengthens the timeless robustness of the “kingdom of heaven”. If there is something that ceases to exist, it is even easier to separate what still persists.

Many questions could be formulated with regard to the Whiteheadian doctrine on perishing. First of all, the most essential problem is that it seems that although Whitehead pays much attention to cessation, the reality conceptualized by him saves everything from being annihilated, either through objective immortality, or on the level of divine everlastingness, that is to say, ultimately everything persists, with regard to subjective directness or to the subject as being. Is there anything that can really cease to exist? There is another question with respect to the temporal aspect of the philosophy of cessation: how can we think of the continuous perishing of actual becomings if Whitehead in fact suggests that nothing can change, only from one moment to the other – that is to say, how is the continuity of perishing possible, if the single events of perishing are thought of in a discrete-discontinuous way? Furthermore, one

might ask the elementary question that if Whitehead – in spite of everything stated above – holds that what exists can also perish within the processes of reality, what is the exact status of the perished entity? “Where” and “when” can we find it, and is it a static entity or it can change somehow?

Well, it seems that the becoming of the Whiteheadian actual being is never concretized and “satisfied” enough (that is to say, it is never undetermined enough) so that it could endure any kind of change – it can only perish at once (see Harman 2014: 239). This explains the discreet character of perishing, which is not necessarily in contradiction with the fact that the event of perishing happens inexorably, continuously. Even though it sounds weird, according to this philosophy, “discontinuous unbecoming” and “discreet processes” are possible. As if Whitehead suggested that these actual becomings are momentary, namely, they are not extensive, atomistic entities that could be further divided (in this way, Whitehead distantiates himself a little bit from the one-sidedly mereological debates on cessation). These aspects involve all those difficulties that have to do with Whiteheadian conclusions about becoming, but we will not discuss them in details, because it was already done by others (see for instance Chappell 1963). As for the general possibility of cessation, it is worth comparatively examining Whitehead’s philosophy. For instance, we can compare him with his contemporary, namely, F. H. Bradley, in order to see how does it look like when a philosophy really excludes perishing, when it suggests that in the universe as a monistic Whole becoming or perishing are not possible (“for Bradley, there is no becoming and perishing”, see Leemon 1992: 57). If we counter-balance Whiteheadian philosophy with such a theory, we can realize that the philosophy of organization still gives spaces to perishing, even if in a limited way. It admits that cessation happens at least at a certain level of reality, in a certain perspective. Even though he introduces a Whole that might relativize perishing, Whiteheadian philosophy is a “monism as pluralism”, that is to say, it does not deny perishing in general, as a *sui generis* process that deserves its place. Still, if we keep in mind the perspectival character of every single perishing, we also have to come to the conclusion that the objectively immortal creatures “are at the mercy of new occasions, which will take them into account, but will be free to determine how they will do so” (Stengers 2014: 209). To put it differently, the objective immortality of A is different when it is prehended by B or when it is prehended by C. With the help of these perspectives, different pasts are constituted, and every one of them is selected and eliminated in its own way. Past can be differently creative and affective from the viewpoint of presence and future, and in principle this means, that it is being differentiated from the inside, that it is “reflectively reproduced” and self-repeated. “The process is itself the actuality and requires no antecedent static cabinet. Also, the processes of the past, in their perishing, are themselves energizing as the complex origin of each novel occasion” – as Whitehead puts it (as cited by Williams, internet). However, Whitehead’s complex metaphysics makes possible other interpretations as well. If we remind ourselves of the question regarding the whereness of ceased creatures, we can

offer a different answer by keeping in mind Whitehead's partial eternalism: "for Whitehead, the 'where' should be understood four-dimensionally, and the answer is that past occasions are in the past portion of the extensive continuum, just where they occurred. This means that Whitehead is a full-fledged realist with respect to the past" (Cobb Jr. 2008: 71). To put it simply, the event of becoming is still there, it is "eternally present" (as Sprigge suggests it related to Whitehead: Sprigge 1972: 228) where it always is.² Here, immortality is ultimately identified with temporal stasis, namely, a perdurantist-eternalist approach qualifies every event (including every past event, and perhaps every future event) as real by its own right. However, one might ask what status can be attributed to perishing within such an approach. Regardless of our perspective, these interpretations "leave us with a mystery on our hands – namely, the mystery of how something past can still be effective in the present. We may say that this is simply part of a general mystery of time" (Christian 1963: 99). Whitehead's philosophy is too complex to be satisfied with a problem taken out of its context, or with a one-sided answer to it. We always have to take into consideration the whole system, the entire philosophy of organism, by keeping in mind as many perspectives as possible. If we look at it this way, perishing can get the place it deserves.

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2 Thus, we can interpret Deleuze (who emphasizes loss and destruction) and Whitehead (from whom "nothing perishes") as opposed to each other (Robinson 2014: 223).

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Vajthed o nestajanju

Apstrakt

Članak se bavi pojmom nestajanja u Vajthetodovoj filozofiji. Fokusirajući se na njegovo delo *Proces i stvarnost*, ali i na neke druge radove, analiziraćemo različite temporalne, mereološke i druge aspekte prestanka, sa posebnim osvrtom na anihilaciju subjektivne usmerenosti. Takođe, posvećujemo posebnu pažnju komplementarnom karakteru stvaranja i nestajanja, uzimajući u obzir različite (subjektivne, objektivne, superjektivne ili božanske) slojeve prestanka. Oslanjajući se na kritičku recepciju Vajtheda, pokušaćemo da formulišemo neke dileme u pogledu statusa prekinutih događaja ili entiteta, sa osvrtom na opštu nužnost i diskretni karakter nestajanja.

Ključne reči: Vajthed, nestajanje, nastajanje, vreme, mereologija, aktualno biće.