

III. Fundamental Things

This article is the third in a series to sketch a metaphysical framework for past life and other holotropic phenomena that provides a way to understand them scientifically. It presents an alternative to materialism, based on classic themes from both Western and Eastern philosophy. The previous articles in this series advanced two main ideas: (1) Consciousness is a real quality of experience, not merely a byproduct of matter, nor an independent or transcendent entity; (2) The mainstream science picture of reality as material bodies moving through time and space is only a mental abstraction from actual experience. This essay presents an alternative scientific portrait of reality as processes of experiential events, necklaces stringing themselves from drops of self-creativity.

Mainstream science dismisses reports of holotropic phenomena such as past lives, ESP, telepathy, and mystical experience: They do not fit its specification of data, which presumes that material entities are the fundamental real things. The concepts mainstream science has floated about what are fundamental entities have changed since nineteenth century physics from arguably material things, like atoms, to abstract mathematical things, like wave functions or multidimensional strings, but the materialist prejudice persists. It clings to the philosopher David Hume's pronouncement in 1758 that only quantitative or experimental data has scientific value.¹ Ironically, Hume began his acclaimed work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, by saying that knowledge comes from experiences having "force and vivacity."² As his work progressed, however, Hume beguiled himself with the hylotropic spell of materialist science.

The Materialist Model

The materialist model of reality derives from visual sensory experience, which seems to show separate objects ranged against a continuous background. As modern science developed, the objects were deconstructed first into atoms, then nuclear particles, and finally mathematical abstractions. These mathematical abstractions bear little resemblance to the things of our ordinary experience. Even so, mainstream science has

¹ "... let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." Hume, D. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. (Section XII, Part III, end.)

² Ibid, Section II.

given these little bits of abstraction a peculiarly superior reality and regards them as determining what human experience is considered “real.”

Many philosophical problems attend the mainstream science model of reality, but they all have been swept aside by its flood of material technological prosperity. Also swept aside are the spiritual problems spawned by industrial culture. Nor does this model of reality offer any understanding of past life experience or holotropic phenomena generally. It dismisses any idea that our personal past can extend before the time we were born, because in this scenario we only exist while we are material objects in time and space. It maintains that all communication requires a material medium, so that even our personal past in this lifetime is real only as a kind of recording on the physical medium of our brains.

Whitehead’s Alternative Model: Events

Though dominant, the materialist model is not the only one available for science. An alternative metaphysical model focuses on events, rather than material objects, as the fundamental realities. Like the materialist model, it originates in ancient Greek philosophy. But instead of little atoms of material, it characterizes the process of becoming and perishing, which lies at the heart of individual experiential events, as the fundamental reality. Leibniz, who invented calculus independently and at the same time as Newton, spoke to aspects of it. In the twentieth century, Alfred North Whitehead’s cosmology presents it comprehensively.³

Abner Shimony is a physicist especially known for his investigation of *entanglement*, the critical phenomenon in quantum physics whereby ‘particles’ separated by distances that, according to relativity theory, are too great for communication nonetheless communicate.⁴ Shimony applauds Whitehead for offering a model that

³ *Science and the Modern World* provides an accessible introduction for the general reader. *Process and Reality* and *Adventures of Ideas* are Whitehead’s comprehensive works, but they require special familiarity with the history of Western philosophy and science.

⁴ “In the twentieth century, physics has provided us with a fascinating and at first mysterious new perspective on time (and space), in the form of relativity theory. It has also provided us with a new and frequently baffling perspective on the nature of the sub-microscopic world, in the form of quantum physics, and this in turn has spawned a number of tricky questions about the nature of time and causality. In particular, quantum systems show correlations over such distances that it is very difficult to reconcile them with the picture of time painted by relativity and the picture of cause and effect with which we are all familiar from the earliest ages.” Murray, F.C. *Quantum Entanglement and Causality*. University of Bristol, BSc dissertation, 1999. (<http://fergusmurray.members.beeb.net/Causality.htm>)

derives the notion of energy in physics from the complex emotional and purposeful energy of living creatures, instead of the materialist explanation that complex human energy can be reduced to the simple kind of energy that powers machines. Such a model, Shimony says, offers “the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the world” and makes “the unification of physics and psychology somewhat less remote” than does the materialistic model.⁵

A Motion Picture Analogy

Extending the analogy of the moving picture from the previous essay in this series will illustrate Whitehead’s concept of events. That analogy for the succession of temporal moments showed how movement arises from a succession of “still” pictures. To deploy the model a little further, reorient from the film in the projector to the flashes on the screen. Each flash is an independent burst of light, but threads of continuity run through the flashes of frames. That thread of continuity depends materially on the film, but the film’s continuity and coherence ultimately depend on the director’s creativity in marshalling all the moments (frames) that comprise the film.

A singular difference between the film and the director is that the film is organized by the director, but the director is self-organizing. Self-organization is one of the most important scientific understandings to emerge in the latter twentieth century. Ilya Prigogine⁶ won a Nobel Prize in 1977 for work in thermodynamics that led Erich Jantsch to call him “catalyst of the self-organization paradigm.”⁷

Deploying the model further, consider the director as a series of flashes. Next, think of the thread of continuity that runs through the series of flashes that comprise the psycho-mental aspect of the director as the *self* of the director. Then, take the analogy

⁵ “Whitehead ... regards the matter aspect [of the world] as an abridged version of the mind-aspect. ‘The notion of physical energy, which is at the base of physics, must then be conceived as an abstraction from the complex energy, emotional and purposeful, inherent in the subjective form of the final synthesis in which each occasion completes itself’ [Whitehead, A. N. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933] p. 239.] Despite [the] obscurity of Whitehead’s exposition ... it offers ... the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the world

Perhaps the great metaphysical implications of quantum mechanics—namely, nonseparability and the role of potentiality—have made the unification of physics and psychology somewhat less remote. Perhaps we are confronted with structural principles, which are applicable as much to psychological as to physical phenomena.” Shimony, A. *Search for a naturalistic World View, Vol. II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 320-1.

⁶ See Prigogine, I. and Stengers, I. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984.

⁷ Jantsch, Erich. *The Self-Organizing Universe*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980.

one step further and consider yourself as self-organizing series of occasions exhibiting the thread of continuity that lies at the core of your feeling of *self*. Finally, consider yourself as a self-produced movie, playing along and interweaving with myriad other self-produced movies, all together comprising the entire happening of the universe. Contrast this with the materialist science model of the universe as an enormous molded salad made from fruit particles that are so dried out they are only mathematical descriptions of themselves and which slither about in a spatial-temporal gelatin that is purely conceptual. The little particles of materialist reality are opaque. They interact only by slithering against each other. Whiteheadian events are transparent. Looking into any one of them reveals all the other events that have ever taken place in the history of the universe.

Some Aspects of an Event

An event begins as a desire to become that is a *creatio ex nihilo*—creation from nothing. Classical Christian theology endorses *creatio ex nihilo*, but sees it as a Divine capacity only. Whitehead’s use of the concept favors Buddhism, in that self-creation is suggested as the defining capacity of every event. A classic Zen Buddhist question addresses the metaphysical point by asking, “Who were you before you were born?” By establishing self-organizational desire to become as the fundamental actuality of an event, Whitehead’s metaphysic supports the preeminent role of the self in Holotropic Breathwork. Neither expert therapist nor psychological theory can discover the crux of difficulties as surely as the person experiencing them. A good therapist can support and facilitate healing, but the capacity for self-healing is ultimately the capacity for self-creation.

An event begins as a desire to become, but becoming can only be realized by becoming *something*. There are many aspects of the process of becoming, but central to the process are the objects Plato called “ideas,” as discussed in the first essay of this series. Ideas range from the simple things thought of as sense perceptions (such as ‘red’) to very complex things like justice. They are the things desire reaches for to make itself with. Desire’s reaching is a sort of feeling. Whitehead calls it “prehension” (from apprehend, without the prefix ‘ap’). The desire to become reaches out to all ideas in all the ways and in every combination of ways that they have ever happened in the history of

the universe. Simultaneously, the desire reaches out to all the ideas that might ever happen in all the ways that they might happen. (This capacity toprehend possibilities is the source of genuine novelty. Without it future events could do nothing more than reshuffle the past.) While doing all this in an interval too small to have yet become time, the desire to be arranges this myriad of ideas in a way that pleases it most, by bringing some closer in feeling, some further, or even ruling some out. (This may seem like a lot to do in an interval shorter even than fleeting, since even the capacity of computers for executing billions upon billions of actions per second is a very small fraction of what we're expecting of an event. The discoveries of quantum physics, however, assure us that activity on this scale happens all the time, so any fuss over it can be saved for metaphysical nit-picking.) When the arrangement is finally satisfying, the desire to be instantly becomes that satisfaction, making it a felt reality, instead of just a collection of ideas. Having done this, the desire to become immediately perishes, but in perishing the something desire made itself into persists as a reality that offers itself to all subsequent events. It becomes, as Whitehead says, "objectively immortal."

The concept of objective immortality provides a metaphysical support for a scientific perspective that can comprehend the vivid reality of past life experiences, according to the following explanation: A life is a series of events, where each successive event brings into its own identity the previous, objectively immortal, events in the series in a way that reinforces a defining thread of personal identity for the series. I live in the one event that is the present moment in the series of myself. All the previous moments of myself, like earlier frames in a movie have become and perished into objective immortality, but my sense of personal self depends on 'prehending' those moments preferentially over all the other moments that have happened in the universe. Otherwise, I wouldn't know who I was when I woke in the morning. This strength of this preferential prehension is what gives vivacity to my sense of being a person.

Self-identity and Inheritance

Just as I prehend the series of event-moments of my own past, I can prehend series of past event-moments of other lives, because all the events in the history are available to the prehension of a present event. As events that have become objectively immortal, the event-moments of any previous life in the universe are as real as my own.

Thus, they can be felt with a degree of force and vivacity approximating the way I feel myself. A question of psychological interest is why I should feel a particular past life with a force comparing to the way I feel my own. That, however, is not a question to be answered theoretically. It is a question to be answered by personal exploration, which is one of the things Breathwork is all about. My involvement with a past life could be compared to my immersion in an old movie. The old movie is not me now, but my emotional involvement brings it into my life, and all its drama, suspense, or travail becomes mine to work through: it lives in me. Why am I involved with a particular past life? Why do I choose to watch a particular old movie, especially one that I have watched before?

Whitehead uses the term “inheritance” to describe the particular selection an event makes from past events. It is critical to personal coherence that the series of events comprising a particular person exhibits a focused chain of inheritance. Psychologically, self-identity depends on this focus. Self-identity can be flexible enough to support feelings of deep involvement with other person’s lives, even to the extent that other person’s lives become as important to us as our own. Those other lives may be the lives of persons in the present or in the past. If self-identity loosens too much, however, a pathology of codependence may arise, or multiple personality, or even psychosis. Sanity and psychopathology might be understood in terms of this model by analogy to the difference between a well-crafted movie and one that is a haphazard assemblage of frames.

Whitehead’s model provides credibility for the concept of spiritual emergency by affirming the reality of things prehended. The demon labeled clinically as a hallucination is not an illusion. It is a reality a person simply cannot integrate appropriately into experience, but it is felt as a reality because it is a reality. The clinician who dismisses the reality is pulling the rug out from under someone who is already off balance. Helpful and effective therapeutic approaches accept and facilitate exploration of reality as it is perceived. Whitehead’s insistence that all a person’s experiences are real in a fundamentally important way, regardless of whether the person can understand and explain them conventionally, affords the means to put the great varieties of NOSC’s on firm epistemological footing. Whitehead’s metaphysic provides a basis for validating the

felt reality of past life experiences, as well as felt realities such as experiences of animal life, or of any series of events that strings a thread of identity in the universe, short or long, vermin or vertebrate, plant or planetary.