

**Abstract**

This article strives to continue the lure of Whitehead's call: that "Philosophy cannot exclude anything". Thus speculative philosophy extends William James's radical empiricism. Its task is to locate itself on the ground of experience in its multifariousness, and to preserve what experience makes important. But importance can never be reduced to a matter of fact. To make a situation important consists in intensifying the sense of the possible that it holds in itself and that insists in it, through struggles and claims for another way of making it exist.

# The Insistence of Possibles: Towards a Speculative Pragmatism

## DIDIER DEBAISE

Didier Debaise is a permanent researcher at the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) and the Director of the Centre of Philosophy at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), where he teaches contemporary philosophy. He is the co-founder, with Isabelle Stengers, of the Groupe d'Études Constructivistes (GECO). His main areas of research are contemporary forms of speculative philosophy, theories of events, and links between American pragmatism and French contemporary philosophy. He is director of a collection at Les presses du réel, member of the editorial board of the journals *Multitudes and Inflexions*. He wrote two books on Whitehead's philosophy (*Un empirisme spéculatif* and *Le vocabulaire de Whitehead*), edited volumes on pragmatism (*Vie et experimentation*), on the history of contemporary metaphysics (*Philosophie des possessions*), and he wrote numerous papers on Bergson, Tarde, Souriau, Simondon, and Deleuze. He has just published a new book entitled *L'appât des possibles* which will shortly appear in English (*Nature as event*, Duke University Press, 2017).

## ISABELLE STENGERS

Isabelle Stengers, Professor of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, has written numerous books, among which the following have been published in English translation: *In Catastrophic Times* (2015), *Women who Make a Fuss* (2014) with Vinciane Despret, *Cosmopolitics I and II* (2010 and 2011), *Thinking with Whitehead* (2011), *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* (2011) with Philippe Pignarre, *The Invention of Modern Science* (2000), *Power and Invention: Situating Science* (1997), *A History of Chemistry* (1996) with Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, *A Critique of Psychoanalytical Reason* (1992) with Léon Chertok, and *Order out of Chaos* (1984) with Ilya Prigogine. Starting with the defense of the passionate adventure of physics against its enrolment as model of rationality and objectivity, she has developed the concept of an ecology of practices affirming a speculative constructivism in relation with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Alfred North Whitehead and William James, and the anthropology of Bruno Latour.

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*. Toronto: Macmillan. 1966 [1938]. p. 2.

2. Danowski, Deborah and De Castro, Eduardo Viveiros. "L'Arrêt du monde". In *De l'univers clos au monde infini*. Emilie Hache (ed.). Paris: Editions Dehors. 2014.

3. This was the title of the symposium which we organised at Cerisy in summer 2013, and which resulted in the publication *Gestes spéculatifs*. Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers (eds.). Dijon: Les presses du réel. 2015.

4. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Inc. 1929. p. 338.

5. See also on this subject Latour, Bruno. *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: Une anthropologie des Modernes*. Paris: La Découverte. 2012.

6. Souriau, Étienne. *The Different Modes of Existence* [1943]. Univocal. 2009. p. 131. (Paris; Presses Universitaires de France. 2009. pp. 110-111).

7. James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism* Dover Publications. 2003 [1912].

8. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Modes of Thought*. New York, NY: Macmillan Company. 1938.

**SPECULATIVE THINKING**, as we seek to inherit it, is expressed for the first time, with the greatest accuracy, in Alfred North Whitehead's exhortation "Philosophy can exclude nothing".<sup>1</sup> A strange proposition, which, while appearing to be a description of philosophical activity in general, or of a kind of heuristic prudence, in effect denotes a deliberately polemical, violent position. The case is simple: modern philosophy has become bogged down in the forms of a purification, of a reverting to principles, of a criticism of what is merely appearance, seduction or alienation, which it believed was its own way of claiming to compete on at least equal, if not superior, ground with that of the experimental sciences. It believed, as in a belief one holds to in the face of all odds, that this was the condition of every possible experience, of all knowledge, of all political constitution. How ironic to note today, in the guise of new speculative proposals, clearly quite different from the one we will be invoking here, the same lure towards purification and sovereignty, the same formalist fascinations of all kinds, the same relation to demiurgic decision as those which laid down the motorways of modern thought. If speculative thinking today is undoubtedly gaining a new lease of life, it is important not to confuse Whitehead's plea with formalist sacralisation, identifying speculation with purely formal and abstract decision-making, which governs an important part of philosophy today. How could we believe for one single moment that a break has occurred, when all underlying gestures fit so clearly into the context of continuity, and form a kind of new hyper-modernism? Perhaps,

as has been shown, inter alia by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski, they are the last spasms of a reaction to catastrophes ahead.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it seems to us essential to put forward a certain number of propositions, which do not in any way claim to describe, and in so doing, to pin down, a shifting scenario, but rather to highlight what could in our view make necessary that which we have called elsewhere "speculative gestures".<sup>3</sup> A proposition has no descriptive vocation, much less a normative one, but comes under what Whitehead called "Lure for Feelings", a way of giving rise to possibles.

### The Pragmatic Constraint

Let us return to Whitehead's exhortation. If he states this as a requirement, determining a possible trajectory of speculative thinking, this is because there might be new dangers or temptations taking hold of philosophy, which he intends to resist. In a nutshell, we would express this danger as an immoderate taste for false problems, for drastic alternatives, for a kind of lazy thinking or stupidity arising "naturally" in every situation: belief or truth, experience or representation, facts or values, subjective or objective, etc. These alternatives, which appear so innocently theoretical, are in fact unstoppable war machines, spinning in a vacuum and producing a desertification of all modes of existence: reducing thinking to mere representations, fictions to imaginary realities, values to subjective projections onto nature. One might counter that philosophy has never ceased displaying

dualities of this kind, bifurcations, yet rarely are they so celebrated, dramatised, highlighted at all levels of experience as during the modern period. To all these alternatives, like any false problem, questions of a pragmatic nature should be addressed: what might their aim be? What are their effects? What is it on this occasion that we are attempting to disqualify?

To exclude nothing means therefore resisting the terms of the alternatives that so inexorably seem to foist themselves upon us, leading to false choices. We are hence dealing with problems of a new kind, and Whitehead expresses this in a form, which, at first glance, appears cryptic. “Philosophy cannot neglect the multifariousness of the world—the fairies dance, and Christ is nailed to the cross.”<sup>4</sup> So speculative thinking calls on us to explore modes of existence in their own setting, in their mode of success, in their immanent demands.<sup>5</sup> Faced with the drying up of modes of existence, Étienne Souriau makes a similar plea when he declares, as a true research programme, as a new philosophical input:

*At present, we must identify and study those different planes, those different modes of existence, without which there would be no existence at all—no more than there would be pure Art without statues, pictures, symphonies, and poems. For art is all the arts. And existence is each of the modes of existence. Each mode is an art of existing unto itself.*<sup>6</sup>

Does this mean that speculative thinking is condemned to being a kind of neutral collection of a multiplicity of modes of existence that make up our experiences? Should we welcome them all indiscriminately? Does the plurality of modes of existence require *preservation* as discussed for living species in danger of disappearing? Should speculative thinking become so general that it could include everything, the multifarious modes of existence and the alternatives locking them into the major forms? This is certainly one of the temptations to be found

in a considerable part of contemporary speculative thinking. But Whitehead’s position, affirming that nothing must be excluded, does not for all that state that everything must be taken into consideration: it stipulates that we must reject the right to disqualify. Experience must create constraint. It is experience upon which philosophers must confer the power to make them think. This position places Whitehead’s speculative thinking in the extension of what William James called “radical empiricism” (*pace* all those who take school distinctions too seriously): “To be radical, empiricism must not admit in its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced”.<sup>7</sup> The two parts of the proposition form a crucial double constraint. Firstly, to exclude nothing, to factor in the multiplicity of the dimensions, which make up an experience here and now, not taking anything away for a priori reasons, whatever disqualifications might apply to it. Then, not to allow a principle of judgement outside the situation, which would domesticate this multiplicity in terms of categories or requirements alien to it. Any thought is, from this viewpoint, absolutely located, embedded in the situation from which it emerges and which gives it meaning. It is a matter, we might say with Gilles Deleuze, of thinking through and by the *milieu*, of thinking, with everything an experience implies, enfolds within itself, and with no principle of critical sorting at work, tending to purify, isolate, make of it a self-sufficient “case”. Nothing of what is real is self-sufficient. There is no such thing as an isolated fact: “Connectedness is of the essence of all things and all types. It is of the essence of types that they be connected. Abstraction from connectedness involves the omission of the essential factor in the fact considered.”<sup>8</sup> Hence any experience, however factual, is saturated with interpretations, ideas and multiple links.

Whitehead’s exhortation therefore concurs with James’s radical empiricism in rejecting classical empiricism as epistemology dealing with conditions of knowledge in general. For Whitehead the tragedy

9. *Ibid.*

10. “The lightweight dove, flying through the air, senses resistance, and might imagine that it would fly even better in a vacuum, with no air resistance. This is precisely how Plato came to leave the world of the senses since this world opposes too many various obstacles, and ventured out beyond, on the wings of ideas, in the vacuum of pure ideas.” Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. 1791 [German].

11. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, *op.cit.*

12. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, *op.cit.*

13. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1925.

14. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, *op.cit.*

15. See Despret, Vinciane. “En finir avec l’innocence. Dialogue avec Isabelle Stengers et Donna Haraway”. In Elisa Dorlin and Eva Rodriguez (eds.). *Penser avec Donna Haraway*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. 2012.

16. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, *op.cit.*

17. See Debaise, Didier. *Un empirisme spéculatif. Lecture de Procès et réalité d’A.N. Whitehead*. Paris: Vrin. 2006.

of modern philosophy has been to replace the question “what do we know?” by the all-powerful, off-ground question, “what are we entitled to know?”<sup>9</sup> The position Whitehead offers philosophy divests it of all sovereignty. It is itself located, and placed in relation to a task corresponding to no entitlement. If speculative thinking has been accused by Immanuel Kant of committing the same error as a dove imagining that it would fly better without the friction of air,<sup>10</sup> Whitehead’s speculative thinking aims at maximising friction with experience, refusing the right every specialised thought grants itself: to explain, while eliminating anything that cannot be framed by the explanation.

### Making Important

The very challenge of eliminating nothing runs through the early pages of *Process and Reality* (1929). Here the need to introduce into contemporary philosophical thinking the requirements of speculation is stated thus: “This course of lectures is designed as an essay in Speculative Philosophy. Its first task must be to define ‘speculative philosophy’ and to defend it as a method productive of important knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> The crucial point is to be found at the end of this proposition: to produce important knowledge. It is surprising that the translators of *Process and Reality* suggested translating the English word “importance” with “de grande portée” [= far-reaching; translator’s note], and that, when the same word appears in the last sentence of the book, it is replaced by “emprise” [= sway, power: translator’s note]. This is all the more surprising since the appeal “this is important” is to

be found throughout Whitehead’s work. “The notion of importance is like nature itself: Expel it with a pitch-fork, and it ever returns”, he wrote.<sup>12</sup> The translator’s difficulty no doubt stems from the fact that the use of this word indicates the strong link between Whitehead’s speculative thinking and the pragmatism of James, a pragmatism all too often reduced to a philosophy of utility, a businessman’s philosophy drawing no distinction between philosophy’s striving for the truth and blinkered common sense.

Yet we should not underestimate the link between Whitehead and James. For Whitehead, it is James who ushers in a new period of philosophy just as Descartes inaugurated the modern period. Like Descartes in 1637, in his *Discours de la Méthode*, James, in his 1904 *Does Consciousness Exist?*, “clears the stage of all paraphernalia; or rather he entirely alters its lighting.”<sup>13</sup> But the new broom sweeping clean is nothing if it does not convey the urgency of new questions. Rarely was the fact that ideas have practical consequences evoked with such force as by James, that the possibilities they introduce into an experience are that which verifies them. Thus, in *The Dilemma of Determinism*, James turns the calm way his colleagues can call themselves determinists into a matter of astonishment, without for a moment concerning themselves with the literally unbearable consequences of this doctrine which reduces to illusion everything of importance to us: even regret becomes irrational. James’s colleagues are in this sense worse than the Kantian dove, being convinced that the more they distance themselves from the fabric of our lives,

the more faithful they are to *the only thing important to them*, the definition of a thinkable world in the light of what they call rationality.

It would not be exaggerated to see in Whitehead's philosophy a far-ranging attempt to preserve what an experience *makes important*. This is an eminently ethical, political matter: how to fit together the multiplicity of zones of importance, human and non-human, in a given situation? Thus he writes, in the form of a maxim: "Our action is moral if we have thereby safe-guarded the importance of experience so far as it depends on that concrete instance in the world's history."<sup>14</sup> This means that morality implies what Donna Haraway calls "*response-ability*", the capacity to be accountable for an action or an idea to those for whom the action or idea will have consequences. And the immoral idea par excellence then becomes the one that claims to be innocent, destroying nothing more than illusions. Morality, in Whitehead's sense, therefore requires being open to the consequences. Whatever the reasons justifying it may be, no idea is innocent. This does not mean that it is guilty: it is the sense of non-innocence which is the first and the last word of any morality.<sup>15</sup>

But the philosophies of James and of Whitehead are also speculative insofar as they are committed, as they aim at making an impact, intervening in a landscape devastated by disqualifications and by chasing after illusions. James, in order to resist determinism, dramatised its consequences outside of the protected, non-specific area of epistemology. He stated and felt the vital nature of faith in our capacity to make a difference, even if we can never have guarantees as to the consequences of the difference we will have made. Whitehead made the blatant incoherence of the "bifurcation of nature"—between an "objective" nature, a nature existing without us, and an "apparent" nature, with its sounds, tastes, values, produced by human subjectivity—*important*. In both cases, what loses hold is the Kantian grip dissecting the experience

into what belongs to the subject (knowing) and to the object (knowable). But what also loses hold is the anthropocentrism. For the sense of importance cannot be a human privilege in the face of an indifferent world. This means we need to fully grasp the radical nature of Whitehead's idea stating that "The sense of importance is embedded in the very being of animal experience."<sup>16</sup>

If Whitehead draws more obviously speculative consequences regarding the demands made by the irreducibility of importance to whatever may be more general than James does, this is because he places himself "after" James, systematically ordering what James has assembled. That is also to say, constructing a "speculative reality" such that importance and values are its crucial characteristics, ones which human experience is not responsible for but only intensifies, and sometimes in an exaggerated manner. Like Jamesian emotion, such characteristics can never be attributable either to the subject or to the object. The question of knowing whether a performance is moving or whether it is I who, being moved, perceive it as such, will always be the wrong question because of its general nature. The critic might find this important, albeit at his own risk.

### **Intensifying the Sense of the Possibles**

Whitehead's plea can therefore be understood as dwelling on the plurality of modes of importance, which are part of the self-same reality in which we participate. This is at least the way in which we endeavour to inherit it. But importance can never be reduced to a *de facto* or given situation: it implies attachment to something in a disappearing world, dwelling on possible becomings, pressing for, insisting on, all those "might haves" or "could bes" implicit in situations.<sup>17</sup> Making a situation, past or present, be of importance, means intensifying the sense of possibles it harbours, as expressed by the struggles and claims to another way of making it exist. This is why speculative thinking is so readily

18. With Donna Haraway we would like to highlight the strong link between the “speculative” type of science-fiction pioneered by Ursula Le Guin in the early 1970s and the so-called second-wave feminism. For this feminism, science-fiction was an experimental field of thought which resists the reasons justifying why the world had to be the one we know and not a different one, that is, resisting the great modern narratives of progress and development. On this subject see also Russ, Johanna. *To Write Like a Woman. Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1995; and Hache, Emilie. “The Future Men Don’t See”. In Debaise and Isabelle Stengers. *Gestes spéculatif, op.cit.*

19. We can never be too prudent when faced with the risk of confusion between the sense of the possible and the reference to the probable, which must be distinguished as different in nature. By definition the probable has to do with a transposition or a rearrangement of what has already taken place or what is ongoing, as shown by the calculation of probabilities. The probable belongs to a logic of conformity: that which was important in the past, making it possible to characterise it, will preserve this importance in the future. The possible, however, makes important the possible eruption of other way of feeling, thinking, acting, which can only be envisaged in the form of an insistence, undermining the authority of the present as regards the definition of the future.

20. James, William. *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. 1907

21. Stengers, Isabelle. *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2010. pp. 12-13. See also Stengers, Isabelle. *La Vierge et le neutrino*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil. 2006. Chapter I among other passages.

22. Deleuze, Gilles “Qu’est-ce que l’acte de création ?” In *Deux régimes de fous*. Paris: Minuit. 2003. pp. 295-296.

23. The thought of living in the ruins was coined by Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2015.

found in stories and tales, which, like science fiction, explore other possible trajectories.<sup>18</sup>

We, however, believe that critical thinking does not support this kind of intensification. It confers upon the meaning of the possible the quasi-messianic grandeur of an expectation requiring fidelity, but more particularly rooting out imposture, condemning that which is not a legitimate pointer to what lies ahead. In Whitehead’s words, the sense of the possible to be activated always lies in the interstices of a situation, however incapable this situation may be of validating it. It means sensing the virtualities present within this situation, despite the weight of the judgements transforming its lack of guarantee into a matter of fact, tantamount to condemnation.

It would appear as if our only choice today is between increased generality of the notion of the possible (messianic plea, utopian construction, political decisionism, non-situated possibles) leading to its loss of all effectiveness, and an across-the-board entrepreneurship of opportunities in a market selecting winners and losers. But these choices are part of a psycho-social symptomatic. Another way of characterising our epoch is to say that it is literally devoured by the exacerbated sense of a possible imperative—as if reality was of importance only from the viewpoint of what it makes possible. We could say with Whitehead that the possible, banished in the name of modern rationality based on facts claiming to impose themselves in the mode of authoritative statement, has returned like a bolt, unleashed by its official banishment. And that, as Karl Marx stated as early as 1847 in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, it has invaded, redefined everything and turned everything upside down. What we need to activate today is a thinking that commits to a possible, by means of resisting the probable<sup>19</sup>—fighting any interpretation subscribing to the irresistible nature of unbounded capitalism as if that were our immutable destiny, even the conduit conveying the message of progress and emancipation, whereas in fact it denotes the desertification of our worlds and our inability to think that what we care about might have a future.

Speculative commitment therefore has little to do with what Kant denounced, i.e. abstract thinking, founding the world on one’s own theoretical principles or judging it in the light of one’s projections. It is all the more necessary to highlight this point since we find the same characteristics in the formalist trends of speculative thinking today. Perhaps we should recall at this point that etymologically the *speculator* was the one who observes, watches, cultivates the signs of a change in the situation, opening themselves to what, in this situation, might be of

importance. Not dwelling on the critical question James had made into an undecidable—is this remarkable because I pay attention to it or am I being drawn to it by its remarkable nature?—this “speculator” knows that the question exposes them, but that there is no answer to it other than the *speculator’s* capacity to distinguish between a utopian chimera and virtuality. And in any case they will have to raise the pragmatic question par excellence: does the possible whose insistence I sense add or detract from the situation?<sup>20</sup> They will have to accept that the way they answer is part of the situation, and that they will have to make themselves response-able, answerable for its consequences.

It is in this sense that, as early as 1997, one of us had engaged with the adjective “speculative”. After the clash between scientists and critical thinkers that was labelled “wars of the sciences”, she proffered the diagnosis of a dead-end situation: critical, demystifying thinking, was “right” but this being “right” extended the desert, ratified capitalist appropriation, was an insult to that to which practitioners are attached, to what binds them. But diagnosing this dead-end is by no means performing an autopsy. It is, in Nietzsche’s sense, making perceptible the becomings eluding it. She wrote:

*The diagnosis of becoming is not the starting point of a strategy but rather a speculative operation, a thought experiment. [It does not have] any role other than that of creating possibles, that is, of making visible the directives, evidences, and rejections that those possibles must question before they themselves can become perceptible. [It is] first and foremost a struggle against probabilities, a struggle wherein the actors must define themselves against probabilities. In other words, it is a question of creating words that are meaningful only when they bring about their own reinvention, words whose greatest ambition would be to become elements of histories that, without them, might have been slightly different.<sup>21</sup>*

This is the aim we have since associated with “speculative gestures”, “idiotic” gestures, in the sense of the Deleuzian idiot who slows down when others speed up, not because he thinks they are mistaken but because he knows/feels that “there is something more urgent”, more urgent than to be right, or rather not to be duped, which, as James pointed out, is the main fear of the moderns.<sup>22</sup> Only probabilities, which mobilise the past to provide categories for the future, provide the power to be right. Speculative gestures, plural by definition, have the truth of the relative, the truth of an always situated. One does not decide to perform a speculative gesture, one risks it in so far as one feels “bound” by a situation, bound to respond to virtualities made perceptible only by the way in which one is bound.

To feel bound and to present oneself as such is the mark of minority thinking in a double sense: in not dreaming of thinking on behalf of others and in not seeking to follow at any price the postulates of one’s own inspiration. The situation which binds us and makes us think is that which unsettles or enrages any majority thinking. In one way or another, whether or not the worst is avoided, we know that the children of this century and of centuries to come will have to live in the ruins of a world where everything the moderns have taken for granted will have become precarious.<sup>23</sup> Living in the ruins does not necessarily mean the triumph of a “free-for-all”, of “every man for himself and devil take the hindmost”, but it makes it crucial to drop any nostalgia for an era already over and done with. Perhaps this life in the ruins calls for the apparent unnatural marriage of the speculative, open to the insistence of the possibles, and of the pragmatic, as the art of response-ability.

---

Originally published as Didier Bebaise and Isabelle Stengers, “L’insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme spéculatif”, *Multitudes*, 2016/4 (n° 65), p. 82-89.

Translated by Angela Brewer

---