

## Creativity In The Cosmos: A Philosophical Appreciation Of Whitehead's Philosophy Adam Blatner, M.D.

There are some philosophers who have spoken about creativity, and considering some of their contributions may serve to remind you that you're involved in an enterprise, in exploring the nature and potentials of creativity, that is relatively novel and quite significant. My hope is to encourage and inspire you. I'll be noting especially the contributions of Alfred North Whitehead, a philosopher for whom creativity was a most important theme, as well as some of those who have carried his work forward. Whitehead was a prodigious thinker and philosopher who lived from 1861 to 1947, and whose philosophical contributions have been influential in the ongoing shaping of our world-view.

Creativity was an ultimate category in Whitehead's thought—he was most sensitive to its prevalence as a factor in evolution—biological and cultural. Indeed, he felt that God—and his concept transcended the particulars of the God of the Bible—is operating creatively every moment, in the Now, as—and I find this phrase particularly evocative—as the “Creative Advance.” I imagine all the creative efforts of all beings, trying to work out this, develop that, the jazz musician, the child at play, the mockingbird exploring ever-new variations.

Whitehead's writings began with rigorous logic—he was a mathematician, earlier on, and the senior co-author with Bertrand Russell of the notable *Principia Mathematica*, published in the second decade of the last century, and which continues to be a definitive text in the deeper theory of mathematics, recognizing that what we're talking about are the permutations of types of categories. But then, Professor Whitehead found himself contemplating the biggest questions – what are the real implications of the developments in science? What should education be about? Are there different ways to think? and especially, How does it all work?

So, his work is many-faceted, but the aspect of Whitehead's work most relevant to us here is how he envisioned the central role of creativity in the way the universe functions, and it is worthwhile to pause and savor the basis and implications of this idea.

First, though, the reason to dip into this contemplation: Speaking psychologically, creativity emerges more easily when people open their minds to intuition, inspiration, impulse, imagery, and ideas that arise from what some call the right brain, others the creative subconscious. But where does that source get its ideas? The expectation that there is a source out there can aid in the overall process. It's a matter of expectation—a kind of faith, if you will—that there are sources that can and will come to us if we open to them. So the following presentation, which dips into theology and other aspects of philosophy that you may or may not choose to buy into, is meant to support the emergence of useful philosophical maps and ideas about the meaning of life, what it's all about. Such general schemas can really help maintain morale and the creative flow.

While addressing many subjects, Whitehead is best known for his creative approach to metaphysics— and metaphysics is that branch of philosophy that asks, what is reality, anyway. The most common view is that reality consists of just a bunch of stuff bouncing around randomly in a meaningless universe—the billiard-ball model that came to dominate the materialistic and reductionistic world view of science in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But developments in our understandings of relativity, the nature of the atom, the mysteries of quantum physics, have continued to challenge this overly-simplistic and ultimately meaningless view of reality.

Whitehead turned our view of reality on its figurative side: We tend to look at things as things, matter, stuff in space, stuff that incidentally keeps happening. Whitehead made not stuff the primary focus, but time, the keeping happening of eventfulness that gives the impression that there's stuff. Modern sub-atomic physics has continued to support this shift, but our general worldview suffers from cultural lag, because it is a bit more subtle and a bit counter-intuitive. Still, when you look at things as events happening, unfolding, becoming, this perspective generates a number of associated questions, mainly having to do with how all this works. A meticulous explication of this process—and why Whitehead's later work is called “process philosophy”—would be very lengthy, very dry, and way beyond the scope of our talk, which will focus on implications. He wrote about it in several books, the most detailed and intellectually abstract and difficult titled *Process and Reality*. Basically, Whitehead carries forth and extends the insight of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who observed that we never step in the same stream twice. A number of other philosophers have also given a fair amount of focus to the unfolding-ness, the continual becoming-ness of the world, such as Henri Bergson, who also wrote about creativity as a fundamental category, and William James, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and so forth.

Summarizing and possibly even over-simplifying, if we focus on events, we notice at the level of people, animals, cells, possibly every level of system, perhaps even atoms, each event (what Whitehead called an “actual occasion”) consists of a taking in of nearby or perceived influences and a moment of re-synthesis of these influences that are then expressed—and this is a creative process. This is because the world is constantly changing, sometimes more subtly, sometimes more dramatically, so what is picked up about the environment—and direct memories of the past are included here, taking into consideration having responded before a certain way and the consequences of that response, so there's a potentiality for considering a different, new, perhaps creative response. At the core of this event there are two influences that are most subtle—one is the gradient of value for each unfolding event, and the other is the freedom and inclination to create, to explore novelty.

The implications of thinking that creativity may be a fundamental category, perhaps even one that is an aspect of the Divine, if one considers divinity at all, leads to a very forward-looking and relevant broader philosophy.

## **My Background and Bias**

In keeping with an unfolding postmodernist ethos, it is only fair that I disclose my background and bias, because every intellectual position also functions consciously or unconsciously as a political statement, supporting a certain worldview. The idea that there are dispassionate analyses has not stood up well to careful analysis of the analysis—also known as deconstruction.

Anyway, my bias is that of believing that creativity is a good thing, can be misused and done well, but for the most part, our world needs more of it. As a psychiatrist, I find people are excessively inhibited and submissive to authority—if not their parents, then their peers or the subtle tyranny of the media and the perception of fashion. Critical thinking—given lip service in our schools but hardly really taught—questions, challenges these influences. And creativity as a deep value lends both conceptual and technical tools and also an attitude to the pursuit of a more constructive and critical way of approaching the postmodern condition. Indeed, making creativity a core value is one of the major effective ways to cope with the many subtle stresses that can demoralize and alienate people in a rapidly changing world.

In addition to being a psychiatrist who thinks about the predicament of people today, young and old, and how that predicament is in part a product of an outmoded worldview—and I'm referring especially to a worldview that believes that there are answers and that the answers have already been thought of by authorities in the past— I am also an amateur philosopher. I confess that thinking about the big picture was one of the reasons I specialized in psychiatry—it seemed to me to be the only medical specialty that required a continuing stretching of consciousness, a holistic perspective, a desire to penetrate not only the mysteries of the individual's psyche, but also that of the culture, and consciousness, and life itself.

The second thing that led to me being here today is that I happily fell into a sub-specialty area, an alternative approach to psychotherapy that was an alternative to psychoanalysis, namely therapeutic role playing, also known as psycho-drama. It turns out that the inventor of this method, Dr. J. L. Moreno, first and foremost was into the idea that, as Whitehead also thought halfway across the world—and the two never knew about each other—creativity was an ultimate category, a key feature of Divine action, important, essential, even. What we should be doing in therapy is helping people be creative with their living—a far more vital and multi-dimensional approach than Freudianism.

Moreno was into promoting improvisation as a major way to promote creativity, and promoting playfulness as a way to make the context safe so that people could dare to improvise. Simulations—just as astronauts or pilots in training use, and many other fields are finding useful for, as one might say in the computer field, “beta-testing” their new programs. Improvised, interactive role playing, using drama, was the natural laboratory, a relatively fail-safe context, for psycho-social explorations. Well, I could go on for hours on this—but the key point is that I had been primed to be interested in creativity, so when I found a book titled *Creativity and God*, I discovered Whitehead, and also made contact with one of the major exponents of Whitehead's philosophy, who just happened to live in the same town, here in Austin—and his name was Professor Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). More about this fellow soon, but suffice it to say that through him I discovered this exciting and too-little-known school of philosophy that just happens to support our appreciation of creativity.

## **The Background**

Professor Hartshorne pointed out to me that a philosophical work is often better understood when viewed as a stance against some opposite worldview that was pervasive at the time. In the case of creativity, let's look at the situation today: As I mentioned, science came to dominate the intellectual world-view, and it operated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by looking at the world as if it were a machine, one that, if we could understand the building blocks, we would be able to figure out the overall workings of the whole. This is called reductionism.

Second, a division was drawn between that which is living and that which is viewed according to the instruments at the time as non-living, and also that with mind—seen as reflective human-like consciousness—and those without—animals being viewed as only having complex nervous reflexes. That's called materialism. Mind was an epi-phenomenon, an add-on, and had no significant part to play in this scheme. This scientific approach had its utility for a while, but in many ways has been superseded by a number of other developments, from systems theory to holism. Still, its philosophical orientation supports a quasi-political attitude of skepticism that is in part in rebellion to the domination of traditional religion and its alliance with state policy—the totalitarian problem of pre-late-18th century Europe. So scientism was carrying forward the politically liberal force of the Enlightenment.

The problem is that intellectual trends can swing too far, can overdo it. The resulting world-view led to the growing sense of alienation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a de-mythologized, existentially barren world as caricaturized by Samuel Becket's 1960s play, *Waiting for Godot*. Whitehead's and Hartshorne's writings spoke on one hand to this flat emptiness, and on the other hand, spoke against its only vivid alternative—the classical Judaeo-Christian tradition whose theology was most problematic, and was frankly quite vulnerable to the rational intellectual critique of mainstream philosophy. A third complex was the academic philosophical tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century—a mixed bag, often excessively obscure, but with flashes of what to Whitehead and Hartshorne sufficed as good ideas.

So with these fields in the background, our Process Philosophers sought to present a way to present a more dynamic view of the cosmos that also offered some foundation for faith and love, meaning, belonging, and purpose. Now let's consider also whether this can serve the recent emergence of creativity as a fashionable commodity.

## **Promoting Creativity**

In the last few decades, creativity has become hot, associated with entrepreneurial capitalism, the proliferation of invention in the realms associated with computers and other electronic communications, program tasks, and so forth. Creative breakthroughs in technology have become a service that made us competitive internationally—and now which is being in part outsourced. We are being encouraged to continue to be more creative. So in some aspects of mass media, in some businesses, creativity is a great thing. Second, the research on creativity continues to expand. The term wasn't used much in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even less in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly, the precursors to an ethos that valued creativity was beginning back then, but there have also been continuing drags on the process.

For most folks, two forces operate to stifle creativity. First, there is a continuing valuing of authority, a belief the experts know, and an extension beyond mere respect to unquestioning obedience. Much of our religious heritage depends on this. The answer-oriented approach to information instruction, reinforced again by standardized testing, further communicates the sense that maturation is achieved through the accumulation of data, enough to pass a test, get a good grade, be advanced—and incidentally, forget the information that was never particularly relevant other than as a means to a grade. Yet, as Marshal McLuhan noted, the medium is the message, and in this case, the message has been—security lies in knowing the right answer.

Note that there's no just making up an answer, or trying out something provisionally, and working towards an effective response—possibly something new and more valid than what had been taken in the past as “the answer.” This kind of creativity-oriented thinking is not served.

Please do not let lip service, the claim that we are teaching critical thinking, the claim that we are promoting creativity, or the statement of intent to do so more richly, substitute for your critical thinking about how lip service may not correspond to what is actually being delivered. It happens all the time in religion, that values are promoted, while those who attend regularly in their private lives both sin a lot and more, rationalize a lot—also known as hypocrisy. So lip service shouldn't fool you. The question is, what are our schools really teaching? Are young people learning the right kinds of attitudes, and skills, that prepare them to more aggressively wrestle with the challenges?

Another major cultural force that is interestingly anti-creativity is the saturation of distractions. Neil Postman wrote a prescient book 20 years ago titled “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” and its concerns now are doubled and more with the vividly hypnotic power of computer graphics, plus video games, the prevalence of television, the multiplying of special interest magazines and websites, the pervasiveness and addictiveness of pornography, sexuality, shopping, materialism, vicarious experience through the media, and so forth. A friend also noted that the cell phone and instant messaging is allowing people to continually be on call. Connectivity has a downside—for the increased illusion of community, one also pays with a degree of shallowness and impulsivity rather than thoughtful composition. In other words, this professional complained, when is there time to think?

### **Keep on Truckin'**

Another interesting inhibition to creativity is the excitement and tendency to over-do the most recent creative breakthrough, the latest catchy idea, the most compelling meme. Meme is a recent and useful term—I'll confess to being a pragmatist, I guess, not out of ideology, but it's just my tendency—to ask, is this idea useful or not?—and the idea that there are words, phrases, concepts, technologies that catch on and seem compelling enough to want to tell others, share them, celebrate them—and that one of the memes that we are becoming aware of is that of self-reflexivity, looking at the way we think, use language, coin words, slip on pitfalls of clever non-rational fallacies, and go on to even think about the way we think about thinking!

The pitfall I'm talking about is to be so ego-invested or cause-invested that we formalize a new idea, rigidify it, codify it, and resist the tendency to continued revision or challenge. Those who were reveling in rebellion on one thing become the old establishment trying to hold back the next generation's challenges. In other words, just because you were creative yesterday and it worked for you, that's no reason to become complacent or self-righteous or to think you really know, when really you should be open to continued revolutions, evolutions, revisions, challenges.

Nor should you buy everything that's new because it's new! Much of that is really not adequately thought out, or tested, and in the flow of history, many if not most new ideas turn out to be blind alleys. Many others need a lot of work to evolve towards something useful. Keeping a middle ground of creative engagement, then, is not easy. There are many cultural, group, and individual tendencies to abandon its inner ethos.

## **A Religious Perspective**

Back to Whitehead: One of the spin-offs of his work runs through a significant revision in theology. In analyzing process, the way things happen, Whitehead deduced God. That is to say that in pondering the nature of the creative process and the source of value, he positioned that source in a beyond-human, transpersonal dimension, one that fit many of the qualities people generally associate with Divinity. It wasn't much of a Bible-type-God, which limited its acceptability to some folks, but on the other hand, there are many people who are having increasing trouble with fundamentalist religion and are seeking more to find a type of spirituality that can also be compatible with the best in rational science and philosophy— and there are those who have taken Whitehead's work—such as Hartshorne, John Cobb, David Griffin, and others—and continued to develop a more contemporary way to think about religion and spirituality.

I'd like to see these ideas popularized more, because they resolve a number of the problems that arise from the traditional theories, the traditional theologies I should say. That could go in a rich discussion direction, but I'll pull back from there, invite you to go to my website and read some of my papers and respond, email, if you like, for questions, comments, suggestions, dialogue.

Even theology should be thought of as a creative process, and some might say that sincere intellectual exploration is of aesthetic pleasure to God or Goddess, too! One of Whitehead's books, *Religion in the Making*, written in the late 1920s, suggested that we recognize that religion is evolving just as science is evolving, albeit somewhat more slowly. I find that in the last few decades, though, while not being much affiliated with mainstream church hierarchies, there are innovative thinkers—some identified with a particular religion or denomination, and many in an emerging and growing category of people that hardly existed before—who are clearly spiritual, some even mystical—but not affiliated with any particular religion!

The point here is that there are many innovative and exciting philosophers, cultural critics, religious thinkers, who are integrating the valuing of creativity, conscious exploration of evolutionary directions, and the weaving together of the ultimate categories of meaning—our visions of the nature and activity, purposes and accessibility of God—with our daily work.

## **Meaning**

Including the Divine can deepen and extend the mythic tone and texture of meaning-making, but even if one is too turned-off to religious or God-talk, the appreciation of a broader philosophical function of creativity can be enjoyed.

People in our postmodern era are struggling to construct meanings for themselves. In an era of increased mobility, the feeling of belonging must be re-created, rather than derived from one's stable neighborhood; there aren't that many stable neighborhoods. How then to generate community, when the variety and number of side interests often come to be closer to the answer of "who I really am" (i.e., identity) than what I really feel and think. Related to where I belong is another aspect of meaning—what is my purpose? What should I be working on? Even if I'm working on this or that job to tide me over, what in the larger picture should I be doing?

Sometimes psychotherapy founders on the problem of existential angst, the "so what, what's it all about anyway" complex. I don't think one can analyze this away, because it reflects a very accurate recognition at a certain level of consciousness: As old values systems or beliefs break down, what is discovered is a plateau—a sort of Becket's "Waiting For Godot" world of emptiness. At least it's not riddled with superstitions (or is it?). There is another level above this, one which recognizes the construction (a creative activity) of a transpersonal philosophy of life. There is a possible symbol system that can be meaningful—a sort of God saying, "The World Needs You" frame of reference.

What I'm getting at is that as you explore creativity, recognize that you are dealing with a dynamic category that is also participating in our culture's re-creating its own world-view so that it can meet the deep needs of people in an era characterized by nothing so much as change itself.

## **Access to Inspiration**

Our culture tends to be overly materialistic, and it tends to view the products of mind as if they were products of the skull-encompassed brain. But what if the brain is not so much a computer and transmitter but rather an antenna? What if all that neural structure picks up the deeper wisdom that is operating on another dimension? There are serious scholars who are weaving together new advances in physics with a variety of unusual consciousness states and suggesting this idea. It's not important at this point that you accept it, but it's worth stretching your mind a bit to at least consider it.

Mozart reported that he often didn't compose his music so much as hear it and just write down what he heard. The muses were imagined to be trans-personal, beyond the personal. Inspiration literally means that the spirit comes in and through. One of the more important contributions of Whitehead and Hartshorne is their emphasis that mind—perhaps imagined in the lower animals as mere experience, or some kind of interiority—is nevertheless inextricable from matter.

Our worldview has become habituated to thinking that only people have minds or feelings, but research continues to expand our awareness and sensitivity. True, there are certain kinds of self-reflective, more contemplative modes of thought among people—though not half enough, if you look at the mob scenes and complacent couch potatoes that are so pervasive in the world.

The point, though, is that it may be presumptuous and species-centric to think that the foundations of consciousness emerge only at some point with the emergence of humanity—poof! Rather, serious thinkers can sense some functioning of what became more complex mind going all the way back.

Looking at events as occasions for creativity, a speck of something mind-like operates even there. And moving towards the sublime, may we not consider that the Greater Wholeness, what seems like an infinitely impersonal universe, is only a material projection of a deeper process that does partake of the realm of mind. What this is leading to is an attitude of expectation, of openness to inspiration.

There was that movie several years back about the baseball park—the mythic idea being, “if you build it, they will come.” A variation is that if you expect the best from others or yourself, you’ll tend to get it, and the whole deal of not only positive thinking, but of expectation. What if you imagine there to be muses, guardian angels, divine inspiration, available to you, eager to give you what you need—though, as the Rolling Stones sang 30 years ago, perhaps (smile) not always what you want.

What I’m suggesting is that imagining a greater mind-field full of inspirations, potentialities, ideas, imagery, intuitions, not only available, but actually flowing through your mind all the time. In fact, speaking from the point of neurophysiology, a great deal of brain activity is inhibitory, filtering out these dream-like imaginings. When the filtering is in its turn interfered with, by means of fever, dementia, other sources of delirium, certain psychedelic chemicals, there’s an opening to a wealth of flow of images. These drugs don’t generate illusions and hallucinations so much as allow them to come through without filtering, without that ongoing censorship that the uptight mind offers.

What creativity studies support is a slight loosening of the censoring process, of the domination of the concept- and language- functions, and especially the inner demand that we think only what we are supposed to think. But your dreams operate out of the box, and inspirations also often share that quality. Whitehead’s philosophy allows you to recognize this not merely as a technical phenomenon, but a philosophical one. It notes that through our minds we can participate in a semi-mystical way with the sources of inspiration, the richness of transpersonal sources of creativity.

Jung also suggested this: For Freud, the unconscious was a kind of repository for the disowned, all those thoughts and feelings we didn’t want to think or feel. But for Jung, allowing that Freud was a right, to a point, the unconscious also was much greater, and capable of inspiration, creativity, humor, art, all kinds of things that Freud hadn’t envisioned. He called this source the realm of archetypes, but it poses a metaphysical question—what is that realm about? Whitehead and Hartshorne helped by suggesting that it isn’t that weird or intellectually vacuous to consider that this is what the Divine Action does, among other things: Inspire creativity, encourage co-creativity.

## Play: A Vehicle for Creativity

One of my special interests is the promotion of a capacity for imaginativeness and playfulness, as described in my book, *The Art of Play*. It needs to be integrated into adulthood, not just relegated to childhood. It's an important foundation for creativity. We should recognize that improvisational drama is an extension of the make-believe play of childhood, and as I offered in my other workshop on *Creating Your Living*, one can apply ideas and dramatic devices drawn from psychodrama in making your own everyday life multi-dimensional. As an extension of this idea, we should recognize that the early writers of sacred texts were creating these, attempting to capture inspiration and imagination in poetic and mythic forms.

We can dare to imagine the ultimate categories as a form of imaginative play and poetry—it need not be disrespectful. Think of it rather as stretching gently past our more familiar and sometimes outworn traditional categories. See, for example, my related article on *Creative Mythmaking*: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/psyntbk/creatmythmk.htm>

### Summary:

And so we return to what you're doing at this conference: You're pioneering a new field that partakes not only of technical or commercial applications, but expresses a new sensibility in the evolution of humanity: We are invited to imagine that perhaps we can participate more consciously in choosing how we do evolve, moving the process from genes to memes, and in so doing, perhaps speed it up significantly.

Certainly, our world needs a speeding up. It's a bit as if our collective mentality is closer to children in kindergarten—but, alas, these kids are playing with real, loaded guns! We'll need creativity as applied to our own consciousness-raising, applied to politics, family planning, and scores of ethical questions that remain ambiguous. (For an interesting listing of problems we have yet to work out: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/psyntbk/ethicissues.htm> )

I hope this dip into philosophy has served to remind you of the deeper and broader significance of your work. I want to invite you to play with me more, by reading some of the papers on my website—going on and browsing and reading others, too— and responding, emailing me with your ideas, suggestions, additions, corrections, arguments. The Web offers an opportunity for serious dialogue, should anyone take the time to compose thoughtful responses.

Website: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/>      Email to    [adam@blatner.com](mailto:adam@blatner.com)

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