

Comments on Joseph A. Bracken’s “Emergent Monism and Final Causality: A Field-Oriented Approach”

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Morphogenesis, field, event, occasion, society, emergence, finality, metaphor, Whitehead, Polanyi.

Bracken synthesizes Polanyi’s notion of morphogenetic field and Whitehead’s notion of societies of actual occasions. These comments emphasize the implications of the metaphors involved in these notions. The metaphor of plants growing in a field lies beyond the concept of a morphogenetic field, and the metaphor of a society of interacting persons lies behind the concept of a society of actual occasions. I suggest that one of the implications of this metaphor is that there is not, as Bracken argues, a problem of continuity in Whitehead’s metaphysics of events.

Father Bracken presents his paper as a synthesis — “a conscious hybrid” — “not fully consistent with either Polanyi’s or Whitehead’s metaphysical system.” The new position he creates seems to me to give us excellent intellectual tools for thinking about emergence. He argues for thinking of Whitehead’s actual occasions as events that take place in morphogenetic fields. This is an interesting notion that does not depend for its validity upon its faithfulness to the thought of either Polanyi or Whitehead. I have two groups of responses. The first consists of some reflections on morphogenetic fields, the second of reflections on Whitehead’s notion of societies of actual occasions.

At Play in the Morphogenetic Field

A *literal* field is spatial, a bounded area of land, often fenced-in. Inside the boundaries or fence, plants grow, animals graze, or people play. A *morphogenetic field* is not literally spatial, but a metaphorical *conceptual* space. Because of the meaning of the Greek word *genesis*, I imagine these primarily as *growing fields*, only secondarily as *playing fields*. Forms, rather than plants, grow in morphogenetic fields. Both growing fields and playing fields have intrinsic characteristics, as well as boundaries. These constrain and facilitate patterns of growth as well as patterns of play. For example, football fields and baseball fields constrain and facilitate different patterns of play.

Bracken argues that morphogenetic fields are common features in two processes of emergence: the emergence of new ideas and the emergence of new life forms. He asks: “if heuristic fields are clearly operative within the human mind seeking understanding of the world around it, why should there not be morphogenetic fields likewise operative within Nature?” Part of this isomorphism between the process of knowing and the process of becoming in the natural world is that both processes take place in morphogenetic fields.

Bracken quotes a sentence from Walter Gulick’s criticism of this notion. Gulick argues that contemporary complexity theory “shows how emergent, stable patterns may spontaneously develop in large,

multi-faceted systems; the existence of mysterious preexisting principles need not be postulated.” It seems to me that Gulick affirms the notion of morphogenetic fields, but gives them another name. The name Gulick uses is “multi-faceted systems.” He presents “contemporary complexity theory” as representing “emergent, stable patterns” (forms) “developing spontaneously” (growing) *in* “multi-faceted systems” (morphogenetic fields). The operative word here is so small as to be easily overlooked – *in*. By saying that these stable patterns or forms develop *in* systems, Gulick is using the same kind of container metaphor as Polanyi and Bracken do by when they represent forms growing *in* fields. As containers in which emergent patterns or forms grow, multi-faceted systems have to be imagined as embodying “preexisting principles,” whether “mysterious” or not. Otherwise they would not be systems.

I have some reservations about Sheldrake’s conception of morphogenetic fields. Bracken appears to approve of Sheldrake’s characterization of morphogenetic fields as *spatial* structures. I say “appears,” because shortly after he quotes Sheldrake, he says that a morphogenetic field “can only be prehended conceptually as a pattern or structure of existence and activity.” I disagree that morphogenetic fields are “spatial structures,” arguing that they are non-spatial concepts, only metaphorically “spatial.” I also have reservations about Sheldrake’s “morphogenetic germs.” These cause the field itself to develop. I imagine the field as the place in which forms grow, not as that which grows.

Bracken worries that the ghost of Aristotelian final causality haunts Sheldrake’s – and even Polanyi’s – conception of morphogenetic fields. I have to confess that I find this ghost to be more like Casper, the friendly ghost, than some evil demon that must be exorcised from every reasonable discussion. The would-be exorcists fall into one or both of two categories. One consists of those who want God to be dead, or if not dead, impotent. They do not want any divine intentions messing up the natural order of things. The other category might be an endangered species. It consists of those who, like Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner, want to outlaw all kinds of “mentalistic” language. They ridicule any talk of intentions, whether human or divine. Neither Polanyi nor Whitehead will ever be popular with either category of frustrated exorcists. They both write about mental states without the slightest hint of guilt or shame, and they both write about God. Nor will Bracken’s hybrid synthesis satisfy them, because he also uses the language of thought and intention, and writes about a Trinitarian God who can make things happen. I don’t think this should worry him. Those of us who are interested in exploring the mysteries of God and the human mind have no need or desire to get rid of final causality, even though we might not try to explain quite as much with it as Aristotle did.

The Non-Problem of Continuity in Whitehead’s Societies

Bracken argues that Whitehead’s notion of persons and things as societies of actual occasions generates a problem of continuity between successive sets of actual occasions. He writes:

My argument has been that Whiteheadian societies, since they for the most part correspond to the relatively stable persons and things of common sense experience, must be more than just aggregates of analogously constituted actual occasions. For, as such, these aggregates would come into and go out of existence as rapidly as their constituent actual occasions, and no metaphysical ground for their ongoing existence and activity would be guaranteed.

I think Bracken is mistaken in seeing a problem of continuity in Whitehead’s characterization of people and

things as societies of actual occasions. I think the source of this mistake is a failure to recognize just how far Whitehead is willing to take his metaphor.

There is what Douglas Hofstadter calls a *strange loop* in Whitehead's metaphor. Not only does Whitehead imagine people as societies of actual occasions; he also imagines actual occasions as people. This is built into his metaphor: the members of literal societies are people; the members of Whitehead's metaphorical societies are actual occasions; actual occasions are metaphorical people.

There are many passages in Bracken's paper in which he reports on or elaborates upon Whitehead's attribution of characteristics of persons to actual occasions. I have selected the following from a much longer list:

- Actual occasions *constitute themselves* and are *subjects*—"momentary self-constituting subjects of experience."
- They can *succeed or fail*—"ultimate components of inanimate things, namely, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, can be evaluated in terms of success or failure in maintaining a balance between order and novelty proper to their own niche and function within the overall cosmic process."
- They *grasp the past* and *make decisions*—"a Whiteheadian actual occasion prehends innumerable past actual occasions and integrates them into the unity of its own self-constitution in virtue of an immanent 'decision.'"
- They *distinguish* between self and society—"even as the occasion intuitively recognizes that this same common element of form for the society as a whole is somehow distinct from itself and its own individualized pattern of self-constitution."
- They *interact*—"only by their interrelated activity vis-a-vis one another do they achieve a "common element of form" and become a society instead of a purely coincidental aggregate of actual occasions which could dissolve in the next moment."
- They form themselves into *complex societies*, made up of *subsocieties*—" what Whitehead meant by 'structured societies,' that is, more complex societies composed of subsocieties of actual occasions."
- They are *free*—"as self-constituting subjects of experience, these other actual occasions are 'free' to incorporate the new pattern of existence and activity into their own process of concrescence."
- They receive *Divine revelations*—"Divine initial aims according to Whitehead are derived from the ongoing integration of the primordial and consequent natures within God and are communicated to individual actual occasions so as to guide their individual processes of concrescence."

In spite of all of these statements in which he recognizes the person-like attributes of actual occasions, Bracken holds that there is a problem of continuity in Whitehead's conception of societies of actual occasions. I contend that actual occasions themselves provide the metaphysical ground for continuity. Just like persons, in their present activity, they pull together the past and the future.

A paragraph from *Science and the Modern World* (1941 [1925]: 106-7) illustrates this time-binding capacity of an actual occasion, which Whitehead here refers to as an *event* :

An event has contemporaries. This means that an event mirrors within itself the modes of its contemporaries as a display of immediate achievement. An event has a past. This means that an event mirrors within itself the modes of its predecessors, as memories which are fused into its own content. An event has a future. This means that an event mirrors within itself such aspects as the future throws back on to the present, or, in other words, as the present has determined concerning the future. Thus an event has anticipation:

‘The prophetic soul

Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.’

These conclusions are essential for any form of realism. For there is in the world for our cognisance, memory of the past, immediacy of realisation, and indication of things to come.

Whitehead emphasizes that actual occasions have pasts and futures as well as contemporaries. They incorporate their pasts as memories and their futures as anticipations. In saying this, Whitehead is simply working out the implications of his metaphor. Does Bracken see a problem of continuity in Whitehead’s notion of societies of actual occasions because, in spite of all of the passages I quoted, he imagines actual occasions as having only contemporaries? Or, is it because he does not believe that the memories and anticipations of actual occasions provide an adequate metaphysical ground for continuity between successive societies of actual occasions?

Regardless of how Bracken answers those questions, his argument for thinking of actual occasions as events that take place in morphogenetic fields does not rest entirely upon there being a problem of continuity in the way Whitehead describes societies of actual occasions. I regard the position Bracken takes as a new one. He has used the thought of Polanyi and Whitehead as points of departure into new and different territory. I believe the journey he is taking is, and will continue to be, fruitful.

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