Paper Title: From Heidegger to Whitehead; Theology, Ontology, and the Critics of Totalization.

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Paper Abstract:

One of the longstanding goals of the Process metaphysical tradition is to overcome the old chasm between naturalism and theology, to integrate the scientific worldview with the insights deriving from the world's great religions. This has been a special preoccupation of Western intellectual history, a history essentially founded upon a collision of the synoptic vision of the Greeks on the one hand and the spiritual legacy of Abraham on the other. From Scholasticism to liberal theology, innumerable philosophical systems have been proposed to achieve the final synthesis of these two worldviews.

On the other hand, there has been an alternate tendency running throughout the history of the West stressing their fundamental irreconcilability. Religious thinkers like Tertullion, Luther, and Pascal have centered upon truths which, in principle, elude all rational and intellectual categories. With the ascendancy of existentialist, neo-orthodox, and, more recently, post-modern religious philosophies, it seems that the systematic aims of natural theology have breathed its last. At least in the minds of many, the polemics of thinkers like Kierkegaard and Levinas have sounded the death knoll for the ancient and venerable goal of a lasting and final unity between religion and science, theology and philosophy.

The purpose of this essay is to argue that the thought of Whitehead can not only withstand the attack of thinkers like Kierkegaard and Levinas, but can integrate and support their deepest insights as well. Focusing particularly on Whitehead's concept of *prehension*, I propose that the reconciliation between these dual tendencies of the West have been achieved. I argue that Heidegger has achieved a similar reconciliation within the context of Continental thought, but ultimately betrayed this delicate synthesis with the anti-humanistic and anti-scientific thrust of his later philosophy. Thus, I argue that it is metaphysical vision of Whitehead which has set the dialogue between religion, science, and philosophy upon a new course.

Biography:

I am a recent Ph.D. in philosophy (May of 2003 at the University at Buffalo), and possess a B.A. in philosophy and religious studies. My dissertation is in the field of Continental thought, and roughly falls under the sub-categories of phenomenology and existentialism. As of late however, I have become an apostate. A number of years ago, I perused the works of a few classic American thinkers and discovered practically all of the same ideas and methods I enjoyed in Continental philosophy. I have always had a special interest in the topics of ontology, comparative religions, and the philosophy of perception- all of which I discovered to be seamlessly integrated in the process metaphysical tradition. I have a number of papers published in the area of

phenomenology and media, but the interface between philosophy and religion remains central to my interests.

Paper Text:

I. Two Critics of Totalization.

There is a tendency among certain thinkers of the West to equate the building of large intellectual systems with a form of metaphysical monism. In this view, the attempt to explain all of existence is no different than the attempt to envision everything as part of a single underlining principle. Both tendencies are labeled by their critics as *totalization*. The scientist who attempts to capture the nature of reality through formulas, the idealist who reduces the whole empirical world to mind, and the pantheist who speaks of the One behind appearances are all prime examples of totalization.

The urge to totalize is far more than a form of hubris, a desire to achieve what is impossible for a finite and embodied creature. It is the attempt, according to its critics, to evade the very role and purpose of human life; whether the latter is conceived as a commitment to the contingent and temporal character of lived experience, or an encounter with that which can never be subsumed within purely intellectual categories.

Two of the greatest critics of totalization are Soren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas. The former, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, states:

> So-called pantheistic systems have frequently been cited and attacked by saying that they cancel freedom and the distinction between good and evil. This is perhaps expressed just as definitely by saying that every such system fantastically volatizes the concept of *existence*. But this should be said not only of pantheistic systems, for it would have been better to show that every system must be pantheistic simply because of its conclusiveness. Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself. No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny dingle-dangle as the existing Herr Professor who is writing the system.[1]

To be human, according to Kierkegaard and his philosophical descendents, is to be suspended over possibilities; to be faced with choices through which we define who we are. The self is a project in continual development, and hence can never be included within a static and closed-off system or unity of any kind. It is precisely this "conclusiveness" of the speculative vision which violates the inconclusive nature of human existence, including the "Herr Professor who is writing the system." The pantheist and the scientist may disagree with each other on many things, but are both parodied by Kierkegaard as the fool who confuses himself with one of his own abstractions, as the bumbling professor who attempts to lift himself up from the boots to become an idea. In short, the otherworldly ascetic and the disinterested theoretician are guilty of the same futile urge: To flee the difficulties and rigors of being a self.

Though the texture of Levinas's concepts would change throughout his career, the key to his thought remains the title of his best known work: *Totality and Infinity*. The

[1] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 43.

traditional philosopher, according to Levinas, seeks to "totalize," to incorporate everything within a single picture of things. "Infinity," by contrast, is the resistance to this attempt afforded primarily by the face of another person, that which eludes our attempts to close off a final overview of reality. In one striking passage, Levinas states that totalization will have been achieved when it has "encompassed the totality of being, encompassing even the animal individual which has lodged this thought."[2] In an essay devoted to Kierkegaard, Levinas compares the totalizer to a painter who, "upon completing his work, were to find himself caught up in the very painting beneath his brush, and transported to a world of his own creation."[3] Despite Levinas's pejorative label for the existentialists as "the philosophers of existence," his own critique is a *repitition*, in true Kierkegaardian fashion, of the existentialist polemic. While the thought of Levinas is still enjoying great popularity, it should be obvious that an overview of his most basic concepts would confirm Merold Westphal's claim that the similarities between Kierkegaard and Levinas are "both extensive and deep."[4]

The religious and theological spirit animating the polemic of Kierkegaard and Levinas cannot be stressed enough. Both philosophers believe in an absolute which stands, by its very nature, outside the scope of human cognition and experience. Central to Kierkegaard's breach of totalization is the Paradox of the Incarnation, the event of God becoming man in history. For Levinas, it is the face of a fellow human being; or more specifically, the ethical obligations thrust upon us by this encounter. Kierkegaard's stark Protestant vision of a self abandoned to the most grueling of decisions (that between faith and offense at the Paradox) is matched by Levinas's extensive influence from the Talmudic and Prophetic traditions. It is precisely here where Levinas claims to perceive the greatest contribution of Kierkegaard's thought: Namely, the idea of a "persecuted truth," a truth which discloses itself to us regardless, or *in spite of*, the defense mechanisms of a mind yearning to maintain its sense of order and complacency.[5]

But it is also here where Levinas departs from Kierkegaard and his inheritors. Levinas's radical recreation of the existentialist position is built not upon the severe boundary or limit-situations of human existence so favored by thinkers like Sartre and Heidegger, but on an intensely moralistic basis.[6] Observing the infatuation of so many European thinkers with states of being like anxiety, dread, and the confrontation with death, Levinas speaks of a need to get "beyond pathos."[7] What lies beyond both pathos as well as the totalizing tendency, according to Levinas, is our concern for other human beings. Levinas summarizes the relationship of his thought to Kierkegaard quite elegantly in *Totality and Infinity*: "It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other."[8]

What I have outlined above are the two main positions against totalization: First, that human existence can never be subsumed within an abstract or ontological whole

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[2] "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite." From *To the Other*, pg. 95.
[3] "Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics." From *Proper Names*, pg. 66.
[4] "The Transparent Shadow; Kierkegaard and Levinas in Dialogue." *From Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* pg. 272.
[5] Levinas, "A Propos of 'Kierkegaard Vivant'" from *Proper Names*, pg. 78.
[6] I borrow the phrase "boundary-situation" or "limit-situation" from the German existentialist Karl Jaspers.
[7] See the first section of Levinas's collected essays on Judaism, *Difficult Freedom*.
[8] Pg. 40.

(represented by Kierkegaard), and second, that our experience of another person is what refuses totalization (represented by Levinas).

II. The Critics of Totalization in History.

The ideas of Kierkegaard and Levinas did not appear in a vacuum. The spiritual and intellectual history of the West has been a sometimes harmonious and sometimes uneasy balance between the attempt to achieve an overarching vision of reality (with ourselves as part of it), and the contemplation of a truth or a fact which refuses such a vision. The paradigm of the former are the metaphysical categories of the Greeks; the latter are the principle events of the revealed religions.

The worldview of the totalizers can be labeled as that of *immanence*; wherein truth lie within reach of human consciousness, awaiting our retrieval of it through either discursive thought or silent meditation. The worldview of the religious anti-totalizers is that of *transcendence*; wherein truth is not all reachable through human efforts. Revelation is the event of eternity breaking into time, and the religious experience is that of faith; a commitment reaching beyond the boundaries of both the intuition and the understanding. The most extreme of the anti-totalizers have insisted that even the very conditions for faith are granted to us, and are not at all achieved through our own initiative.

The worldview of immanence stresses losing our individuality by entering into the universal, the general. We are souls stuck in bodies; the point is to shift our attention away from the fleeting and the finite, and return to our true home in the abstract and the timeless. That of transcendence, by contrast, stresses our separation from the eternal. The goal here is to come to terms with our finitude, both in terms of our mortality as well as the limits of our cognitive powers. We know God through a glass darkly, if at all. The archetypal picture of immanence, of totalization, is Plato's philosopher breaking the chains of his embodiment to commune with the Forms. That of transcendence is Job who, covered in boils and grieving over the deaths of his children, shakes his fists at the heavens in both love and anger.

It is child's play to list the attempts to reconcile them. From Philo of Alexandria's incorporation of Platonism into Judaism, to Augustine and the scholastics of the Middle Ages, endless figures have pronounced their unification. This has most often occurred by interpreting the principles of one through the lens of the other (i.e., Maimonides's use of Aristotle). Even the great mystics of the Abrahamic faiths have expressed their experiences through concepts borrowed largely from the Neoplatonistic and Gnostic traditions.

But the Abrahamic faiths possess a counter-movement to this tendency. From the letters of Paul through the writings of figures like Tertullion and Pascal, there has always been a tendency to set Jerusalem against Athens; to prefer a religion purified from worldly wisdom and the arguments of the philosophers.[9] A common challenge to the scholastic harmonizers is the perceived difference between the personal and willful diety of the Bible and the Qur'an with the bare abstractions of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. But this is only half of the story.

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[9] "What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?" Tertullion, quoted by Julius Weiberg in *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*. Pg. 7.

Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* is credited for launching the Reformation by challenging the Catholic Church on its sale of indulgences. What is less commonly observed in the *Theses* is a gigantic paradigm shift in the consciousness of the Western world. Thesis number sixteen states: "There seems to be the same difference between hell, purgatory, and heaven as between despair, uncertainty, and assurance."[10] Here, in microcosm (or more accurately, in embryo) is the movement from metaphysics to phenomenology, from a preoccupation with cosmology to a gritty psychology of a particular human being undergoing a personal transformation. This is what Whitehead means in speaking of the Reformation as substituting "the individual subject of experience" for "the total drama of all reality."[11]

Faith, according to Luther, concerns not only a particular view of God. Faith begins with a person coming to terms with his or her own experience in a concrete and singular fashion. Despairing over his or her inability to understand the nature of things on their own, the individual then arrives at belief. True faith therefore *requires* a distance between the humanity and the divine. It is based upon neither intellectually derived axioms nor a mystical sense of unity, but a radical decision; a choice undertaken in a void. The scholastic philosophers and mystics either argued their way toward God or experienced him directly. Luther ridiculed both as the "theology of glory" and contrasted them to his own "theology of the cross;" an attack upon intellectual and spiritual totalization if there ever was one.[12] We respond to the most crucial moments in our life, including the decision to believe, without the benefit of a God's eye point of view.

There is a reason why Kierkegaard has been labeled as the "inner mind" of Luther. If Hegelianism consisted of the weaving of gigantic intellectual systems for their own sake there would have been no reaction whatsoever from the likes of Kierkegaard. But Hegel and his followers committed the mortal, even fatal error of pretending to include the human being along with his or her spiritual life into their system. It is against this background that we can appreciate Kierkegaard's most famous analogy; namely, that of the man who constructs "this huge domed palace," only to live "in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters."[13] Existentialism, in both its religious and secular forms, is a continuation of this disdain for the theoretician who erects castles in the mind only to forget the rest of their existence.

But at the core of the existentialist polemic is not merely the view that the self can never be encapsulated within a series of abstractions. I mentioned at the beginning of this essay the infatuation of existentialist thinkers and theologians with human psychological states. No group of thinkers ever insisted so consistently that mood and emotion possess an epistemological function; that anxiety, dread, and elation can serve as vehicles for knowledge at least as much, if not more than, disinterested reason. Once again, Kierkegaard is the principle trailblazer here (though inheriting from a long tradition, including Augustine, Luther, and others).

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[10] *Ninety-Five Theses*, translated by Bertram Lee Woolf and included in Martin Luther; *Selections From His Writings*. Pg. 491.

[11] *Science and the Modern World*, pg. 127. The reader might enjoy Paul Hacker's study of Luther, *The Ego in Faith*. Hacker speaks of Luther's "anthropocentric theology."

[12] See John Dillinberger's introduction to *Martin Luther; Selections From His Writings*, pg. xxi.

[13] *Sickness Unto Death*, pg. 66.

III. Heidegger's Reconciliation.

Heidegger not only enjoyed a seminary training before his turn to philosophy. His influence by religious thinkers is equal only to his influence on important theologians, and both are too extensive to mention here. It is would suffice to allow Heidegger to speak for himself: "Without this theological background, I would never have come into the path of thinking."[14]

Whole libraries now exist in the area of Heidegger scholarship. For the interests of this essay, I want to focus on only one aspect of his thought, and an unorthodox one at that.

Flip through *Being and Time* and read passages at random. If one can brave the formidable language, the bulk of what one will be reading is an articulation of human existence as an activity instead of a thing; a project strewn across its environment and defined, in part, through its worldly engagements and decisions. Scan further and you will encounter some extremely suggestive if technical descriptions of different modes of being. The most striking of these, "authenticity," is an account of the individual as coming sharply to terms with his or her finitude. Now individuated away from the superficialities and conformity of the masses, he or she takes up their past to face the future in anxious (*angst*) and resolved fashion. The opposite of mode of being, "inauthenticity," is a life spent in denial of our mortality; one undifferentiated from the distractions and indolence of the general public, one lost in the immediacy and shallowness of the present. Those well-read in European philosophy, particularly Kierkegaard, will recognize much of this.

Now read *Being and Time* carefully from the beginning. Immediately it becomes evident that Heidegger's overall project is not existential but ontological in character. Its over-riding goal, unchanged throughout his philosophical career, is to re-awaken a long forgotten theme: That of the meaning of Being. Since we are the beings who inquire about Being, we must be, in some dim and unconscious way, already rooted in it. The whole point of *Being and Time* is to employ a careful phenomenology of human existence in order to shed light upon this fundamental question. It is now clear that the states of being I have described above possess more than epistemological weight: Our chosen styles of existence, authentic or inauthentic, serves to disclose or conceal Being respectively. Here, we may agree with Calvin Schrag that Heidegger "has provided Kierkegaard's human subjectivity with ontological feet on which to walk."[15]

To call Heidegger a truly historical thinker is an understatement. Heidegger had a knack for tracing philosophical themes down throughout the generations; for peeling away the derivative interpretations which have obscured their original meanings and recovering their experiential sources. This is certainly the case with the dual tendencies of the Western tradition I have described above. On the one hand, Heidegger's preoccupation with Being possesses a scholastic and even mystical flavor, and he has been influenced by both.[16] On the other hand, much of his study and analysis of human existence is weaned directly from Kierkegaard, as well as the writings of Paul and

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[14] Quoted by Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, pg. 70.
[15] "Phenomenology, Ontology, and History in the Philosophy of Heidegger," from *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation* (edited by Joseph Kockelmans). Pg. 291.
[16] For more on this, read Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*.

Luther.[17] In his essay for the *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, John Caputo speaks of this shift in Heidegger's interest in the Medieval scholastics and mystics towards that of Luther and early Christianity as his "first turn" (in contrast to the major *kehre* or second "turn" from the early to the later Heidegger).[18] However, a careful reading of Heidegger's work, particularly in the early to middle stages, reveals both philosophical influences not only existing side-by-side, but interwoven into a delicate synthesis. In *Being and Time*, and in middle works like *What is Metaphysics?*, the existentialist picture of the self as a project suspended over its possibilities is combined perfectly with the old contemplative goal of appropriation and communion with a deeper ontological truth. And since Being is an underlining ground of things instead of an-all inclusive abstraction, there is no illusion of a God's eye point of view in Heidegger's vision. Unlike Hegel, the *early* Heidegger, has therefore escaped the charge of totalization- at least how thinkers like Kierkegaard have envisioned it.

But there is the second charge against totalization offered by Levinas: One based upon the appearance of another human being into our experience. What makes the polemic of Levinas a special problem is that it was first directed against Heidegger. Levinas, in fact, is credited as not only the first thinker to introduce Husserl and Heidegger to France, but as creating the first genuine attempt to escape from their philosophical influence. If the history of ontology in general is the history of attempts to totalize, Heidegger is the summation of it all: His infatuation with Being is equaled only to his devaluing of particular beings. The latter is most evident in his later writings, and consists, among other things, of a glaring absence of a personal ethics on the one hand and strong distaste for the objects and methods of the empirical sciences on the other.

In truth, Levinas possessed a faulty interpretation of Heidegger's concept of Being; which is not, after all, some gigantic abstraction or universal. But many of Levinas's charges remain true, particularly in regards to Heidegger's later thought. All that is individualized, contingent, and impure are now completely overlooked for an impersonal and ontological monism.[19] Heidegger conceived both human subjectivity and technology as the symptoms of a shallow and derivative stage in history- which, after all, is not to be interpreted as *human* history, but the gradual concealment and withdrawal of truth in its pristine Greco-Germanic form. Throughout his writings hovers a vulgar mythology and not a little German chauvinism. We no longer witness a mere philosopher thinking but the cryptic pronouncements of a kind of self-styled prophet of Being.[20] Kierkegaard's parody of the supreme totalizer has here come to life; the absolute has even swallowed up the individual serving as its scribe. It seems that Heidegger, his later thought, would depart radically from the delicate reconciliation he had achieved in the early and middle stages of his philosophical career. Even the existential categories discussed above seem to take on a perverted tone when combined with his romanticism, his hatred of science, and his anti-humanism. One is led to think

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[17] See Kisiel's *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*, pages 69-115, and 149-219.
[18] Pg. 272.
[19] Though bridges, paintings of peasant shoes, and Greek temples are okay according to Heidegger. Unlike humans who are neither Greek nor German, they somehow reveal Being.
[20] Compare this to Whitehead's words at the beginning of *Process and Reality*: "how shallow, puny, and imperfect are efforts to sound the depths in the nature of things. In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly."

that his flirting with National Socialism was not simply a poor decision after all, but a something intimately related to his thinking.

IV. Another Critic of Totalization.

In the history of totalization and its critics, Kierkegaard's role in European thought cannot be stressed enough. He is the pivot in which the fetish with abstractions has been replaced with a concern for concrete human experience. In those places where Heidegger has actually achieved his reconciliation, it is an ontological vision built with the contributions of thinkers like Kierkegaard directly in mind. Even Levinas gives credit where it is due, conceding that Heidegger has offered an ontology based on a "facticity of temporal existence" in place of a Platonic understanding of a "reason freed from temporal contingencies," a "reason that is naïve."[21]

It would be convenient if the equivalent of a Kierkegaard can be found in another context; one followed by a similar striving for an ontological vision free from the pitfalls of totalization. The author is happy to report that a long search is unnecessary; we must simply shift our attention from Continental thought to American philosophy. Our Kierkegaard is William James, and our systematic thinker, one who has constructed his system squarely off of James's insights (among many others), is Alfred North Whitehead. The purpose of these last two sections is to discuss both thinkers respectively. Needless to say, this essay has limited aims. My treatment of both philosophers will therefore be brief, specific, and similar to my discussion of Heidegger: Less than orthodox.

Of the many praises showered by Whitehead on James, one lauds his possession of "the clear, incisive genius which could state in a flash the exact point at issue."[22] In regards to the topic of totalization and its critics James has plenty of this genius to offer. In *Pragmatism* for instance, he devotes a whole chapter to the relationship between "the one and the many." On the decision between pluralism and "abstract monism," James states:

> I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant. I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in *ist*.[23]

So far, we have surveyed two basic criticisms of totalization. Kierkegaard's polemic is that of the self which refuses to be muted into the confines of a neutered and undifferentiated whole. Levinas is similar; though the breach of totalization is not our own subjectivity, but the face of another human being.

Throughout a number of his works, James upholds the pluralistic vision against a flat and static ontological unity. In James's hands this has never been a merely metaphysical contest, for James is a phenomenologist on par with Heidegger, Levinas and the best of the Continental representatives of this tradition. James's insistence upon pluralism is an outgrowth of his "radical empiricism." This is not only a painstaking

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[21] "Is Ontology Fundamental?," In *Emmanuel Levinas; Basic Philosophical Writings* pg. 2-3.
[22] *Science of the Modern World*, pg. 133.
[23] Pg. 64.

account of the texture of our conscious life, but its unabashed defense against the idealist and rationalist denial that lived experience coincides with reality. In the context of James's thought, the preference for pluralism against monism entails *both* the individual self in its concreteness (his *The Principles of Psychology* argued for an embodied consciousness nearly half a century before the "existentialist phenomenologists"), as well as the encounter with others. In the face of the irreducibility of the particular and the individual, James advises a clear and resounding "hands off" to Absolutism.[24]

Furthermore, by "monism" and "absolutism," James also understands the striving for philosophical closure in its most general sense. This is, of course, the ultimate aim of all great system builders: A bird's eye view of everything there is to know, a view from nowhere. One of the most important sections of *Pragmatism* is James's discussion of the "All-Knower." Here, the concept of "an *all-enveloping noetic unity* in things" is argued by James to be the latest and most updated version of an ancient philosophical fiction: That of a "universal substance which alone has being in and from itself, and of which all the particulars of experience are but forms to which it gives support."[25] James has joined Kierkegaard and Levinas in yet another crucial way: The equating of idealism with pantheism.

James did not shy away from drawing out a few larger conclusions from these insights. He took the first step in suggesting an ontology not only patterned after the structure of experience, but one directly opposed to a hegemonic unity of all forms. An example of this is his brief theological statement at very end of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Placing himself in opposition to the "one all-inclusive God" of the rationalists and mystics, James preferred a pluralistic and heterogeneous worldview; one replete with freedom, contingency, and only the *possibility* of a final salvation. This is a fundamentally open-ended universe where nothing has been decided from the outset, and to which our actions, decisions, and beliefs actually contribute. As if any more evidence were needed to demonstrate the existential flavor of James's thought, we are explained that the mere chance of a penultimate salvation is enough, since "the existence of chance makes the difference, as Edmund Gurney says, between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope."[26]

V. Whitehead and the Concept of Prehension.

Concerning Whitehead's relationship to James, John B. Cobb, Jr. states:

> Whitehead believes that philosophical movements typically have two key moments. There is the genius who inaugurates the movement, and the systematizer who follows. He seems to depict himself in the latter role in relation to James. He accepts and adopts many of James's key

[24] *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, pg. 275.
[25] Pg. 71-2.
[26] *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pg. 397. Gurney was a psychic researcher and supernaturalist from the end of the 19th century. With this in mind, the quote reveals not only James's existential stress on the future and the possible, but also the extent of the anti-reductivist flavor of his thought- including a distrust of a thoroughgoing and exhaustive naturalism (from the author of *The Principles of Psychology*!). With James, we have come as far from a monist and rationalist like Spinoza as possible.

> insights, and then goes on to develop them in rich and rigorous detail.[27]

Throughout the later writings of Whitehead, we find a speculative vision like none other. Drawing upon the entirety of the metaphysical tradition stemming from Plato, this is a system recast through the fires of James's hatred of totalization as well as his insistence upon beginning with our pre-theoretical conscious life. This is not to mention the discoveries of theoretical physics, the intuitions of the artist and the poet, and the deepest religious sensibilities found throughout the world. Even a brief summary of Whitehead's system would be far beyond the scope of this essay, and I will not attempt it. What I would like to focus on instead are two things. First, I will discuss the concept of *prehension,* the central glue of Whitehead's ontology. And second, I will relate this concept to what I feel is Whitehead's finest achievement: The final reconciliation of the ontological tradition with the most profound insights of anti-totalizers like James.

Like Heidegger, Whitehead has delved deeply into the dual tendencies running through the philosophical and religious history of the West. The two tendencies have typically involved the relationship between numerous factors; including, but not limited to, the absolute and empirical reality, the one and the many, self and other. While the tendency of the metaphysicians and rationalists have been to collapse the latter side of each relation into the former, philosophers like Kierkegaard, Levinas, and James have stood as a bulwark against such reductivism. Stressing the self in its concreteness, a phenomenology of personal encounter, and a healthy pluralism (respectively); the anti-totalizers have thrown into question the possibility of weaning a perspective on reality that is final, conclusive, and free from the constraints and limitations of a worldly existence.

It can be argued, however, that anti-totalization has become its own reductivism. To fetishize the empirical, the pluralistic and the other without permitting the intuition of their contrast is yet another insult to the total record of human experience. They are only half the story, and taken alone will result in the same kind of backlash against themselves which, arguably, they have been against the monists and idealists. There has to be a better strategy; one to integrate the intellectual needs of the scientist with the theologian's sense of transcendence, one to combine our intuition of permanence through change and order through diversity- while violating neither side of the contrast. In short, we need, as Whitehead states at the beginning of *Process and Reality*, a set of concepts "in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted."[28] The key here is *every* "element of our experience," including both the ideals of the contemplative along with the most valuable insights of our anti-totalizers. As Whitehead states in *Science and the Modern World*: "A clash of doctrines is not a disaster- it is an opportunity."[29]

Among the many commonalities between Heidegger and Whitehead are a set of sharp critiques against the metaphysical tradition we have inherited from Aristotle. These include the notion of *substance* as the basic unit of reality; the view of existence as consisting of unchanging things to which are added secondary and inessential qualities.

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[27] *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, pg. 166.
[28] Pg. 191 in Sherburne's *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. Whenever I quote Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, it will be through Sherburne's reorganization of this text.
[29] Pg. 166.

To spell out this error, along with the insolvable problems to which it has led, lies far outside the scope of this essay. What is important for our purposes is Whitehead's own interpretation of the fundamental properties out of which reality is composed- which are not things after all, but *events*. The ultimate "stuff" of reality are activities, not unchanging units or atoms, and there are many of them. Whitehead labels these as "actual occasions." At first glance, Whitehead has remained true to James's pluralism. The story, however, gets more complicated.

Put simply, a prehension is at once a relation between two actual occasions, and what *constitutes* each actual occasion. Whitehead states:

> The philosophy of organism is a cell-theory of actuality. The cell is exhibited as appropriating, for the foundation of its own existence, the various elements of the universe out of which it arises. Each process of appropriation of a particular element is termed a prehension… In Cartesian language, the essence of an actual entity consists solely in the fact that it is a prehending thing (i.e., a substance whose whole essence or nature is to prehend).[30]

Whitehead's ontological categories are generalizations from experience, and the concept of prehension is no different. Writing on my computer, I possess a rough, subliminal awareness of the sounds emitting from my heater, of the children playing outside my window, of the neighbors upstairs. Even the glow and hum of my computer, while directly in front of me, has been pushed to the background of my awareness as I type these words. Yet all of these elements have come together into a single texture; namely, each state of consciousness as I write. Each moment of my subjectivity is a whole that is new and not reducible into its separate components. Likewise, these other components retain their external reality and do not disappear into their new creation. Finally, each moment of my consciousness could have been different- it is not *determined* by these other components. A list of everything in my room will now include the hum of the computer, the sounds of children playing outside, and my psychological state as I type.

There is not enough space here to discuss Whitehead's version of pansychism: The view that reality itself possesses mind-like properties.[31] Nor is it the purpose here even to exhaust Whitehead's theory of prehension in all of its details (positive and negative prehensions, physical and conceptual prehensions…etc.) The point is that everything in existence, according to Whitehead, reflects this very same activity. Reality is largely the process by which the many "actual occasions" contribute something to the forming of another entity. Moreover, each new entity possesses something of its own dynamism and initiative from the beginning; it is not predestined by these disparate influences. This novel entity, in turn, takes its place next to these other occasions. Or as Whitehead states quite succinctly: "The many become one, and are increased by one."[32]

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[30] Whitehead in Sherburne, pg. 8.

[31] Process thinkers do not believe that rocks and trees think. But they believe that there exists no sharp division between matter and mind in the most basic sense of the latter. All of existence is a kind of proto-conscious activity, of which thought and self-awareness are its most complex and latest development.

[32] Pg. 34 in the Sherburne text.

Each individual we encounter possesses its own reality; yet each is formed, though not determined, by their relationship to every other individual. In other words, each actual entity enjoys "a perfectly definite bond with each item in the universe."[33] Whiteheadian cosmology justifies the stubborn persistence of the most minor of facts (a cigarette butt floating in a pool of water) as well as the artist's claim that each of these facts reflects the totality of things.

This is not the place for a discussion of Whitehead's famous dipolar view of God, nor an extended debate over how this view relates to traditional theological categories. Nevertheless, the concept of prehension has allowed a generation of process theologians to express a panentheistic theism (were God contains and yet extends beyond the world) without collapsing into a flat-out monism. Since everything in existence enters into everything else, we are permitted to articulate a view of God as the ground of all things (what Whitehead calls the "primordial" aspect of God), as pervading all things, and yet still provide for all of the diversity, contingency, freedom, and self-determination insisted upon by James. But while the divine is felt throughout reality, God retains something of his transcendence. It is important to understand that with the concept of prehension, nothing gives itself *completely* to anything else. I have already discussed the rich tension between immanence and transcendence throughout the history of Western theology and philosophy. A Whiteheadian can, in the manner of Blake, see infinity in a flower- and at the very the same time speak with St. John of the Cross about the Dark Night of the Soul. I know of no other metaphysical system which can do such justice to both poles of the spiritual life.

VI. Conclusion.

I have stated repeatedly that process metaphysics is perfectly compatible with the best insights of the anti-totalizers. I have already discussed the importance of James in the thought of Whitehead. Since everything in the universe is in process, including ourselves, the Whiteheadian can concur with Kierkegaard on the nature of the self: We are not things but projects. Until we die, we remain pitted anxiously over our possibilities. The rich phenomenology of personal encounter provided by Levinas is also compatible with process thought. In his later thought, Levinas would speak of the self as non-identical to itself, as in a state of "trauma." After disclosing itself to me, the face of the stranger withdraws before I can absorb it into a final and conclusive worldview. It is likewise with the doctrine of prehension: Each individual is invaded and partly constituted by every other, and yet each remains distinct. Thus, the Whiteheadian not only affirms the Levinasian vision but extends it beyond the boundaries of the human; perceiving it, in fact, as the very stuff and paste of existence.

[33] Ibid, Pg. 9.

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