The philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead is surely one of the most unique and wide ranging of the twentieth century. A philosopher of such scope is necessarily the subject of any number of criticisms, anthologies, and blog entries. Without ignoring such large bodies of evidence, it sometimes becomes necessary to return to the writer’s own texts and to bracket the existing research so as to consider the philosopher’s insights with fresh eyes. It is necessary to be economical here since Whitehead’s contributions are too large to be covered in one essay. Further, since Whitehead has variously attempted broad ranging projects in science, metaphysics, morality, aesthetics, and theology, it has become fashionable to appropriate Whitehead to do the work of a variety of contradictory tasks (the work of a “process theology,” on the one hand, and a “secular occasionalism,” on the other, for example). Such views tilt Whitehead’s philosophy towards different pre-philosophical goals and, insofar as each appropriation is geared towards solving different problems in different domains, we might call each of them successful in their own right. However, Whitehead’s widespread appeal seems to have made it more and more difficult to represent Whitehead as Whitehead. For these reasons, this essay aims only to articulate some of Whitehead’s key concepts fully and clearly, rather than to espouse particular critiques about them or to deploy them to accomplish specific goals. In recent years, Isabelle Stengers has produced a wide-ranging survey of Whitehead’s ideas in her work *Thinking With Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. If that work is an overview to Whitehead’s thinking, this short essay might be thought of as “an overview to the overview,” a very simplified introduction to Whitehead for those who are
interested, but may not have the time read Whitehead’s lengthy works or Stengers’ excellent 500+ page masterpiece.

By emphasizing five basic aspects of Whitehead’s philosophy we can make significant progress in understanding Whitehead’s worldview. The five areas we will study include: first, an understanding of the spirit of Whiteheadian speculative philosophy, the tone of which is perhaps more important to carry forward than any specific argument Whitehead makes. Second, we must understand Whitehead’s connection to William James wherein we can view Whitehead’s philosophy as a kind of radical empiricism—an integral philosophy that eschews idealism and materialism alike. Third, Whitehead’s notions of the “actual occasion,” “societies,” and “prehensions,” form the basic units and relations of his cosmology and therefore are treated together in one section. Fourth, The “ontological principle”—the logical outcome of actual occasions and their relations—is curated alongside Whitehead’s struggle to overcome what he calls “the bifurcation of nature,” a fundamental substance dualism that undermines our ability to think a truly radical empiricism. Fifth, we finish with an account of Whitehead’s philosophical ultimate, which he simply calls “creativity.” Rendering Whitehead’s account of creativity will result in a strange Platonism that collapses the universal/particular distinction and generates a “secular theology” wherein God is a consequence—a creature among creatures—of cosmic creativity.

Each of the five aspects is integral such that speaking of one will necessarily involve speaking about the others. However, the reader need not take them in all at once, but she is advised to read them in order, being that they represent increasing levels of depth in Whitehead’s thinking. Though the task at hand is complex and diverse in nature, it will strive to affirm the sense within which, ultimately, Whitehead’s goal may be said to give the reader an encounter with a thoroughly cosmic sensibility. It may not be clear at the outset, but all of Whitehead’s ideas can, ultimately, be reduced to a single guiding motif: the cosmos is affective—both causally and experientially—and is best thought of us as something like a living ecology of interacting entities within which thoughts and feelings are equally participant as are jelly fish, God, and supernovas. We can begin to explore this motif by understanding the tone and character of Whitehead’s thinking.
I. The Spirit of Speculative Philosophy

The spirit of Whitehead’s philosophy is the essential starting point in understanding the aim of Whitehead’s work. The introduction to Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, for example, contains several passages regarding the meaning of “speculative philosophy,” and the meaning of speculative philosophy is just as important as anything Whitehead says in particular. With characteristic enthusiasm Whitehead notes, “The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (PR, p. 5). The process of taking off and landing is a recurring theme for Whitehead, and is indicative of his relationship to scientific cosmology and philosophy in general. The speculative vision is well captured by this image, and in this sense encompasses a *feeling* for the exploratory vision, rather than a dogmatic assertion about the metaphysical structure of things.

The ongoing tension between taking flight and landing is found throughout Whitehead’s writing where we find him struggling with the value of metaphysical speculation. For example, Whitehead humorously notes, “The recourse to metaphysics is like throwing a match into the powder magazine. It blows up the whole arena” (CN, p. 29). But Whitehead’s reserve towards metaphysics is countered by his equally resistant approach to “the dangers of unimaginative empiricism” (SMW, p. 47) wherein he posits, “Let us grant that the pursuit of mathematics is a divine madness of the human spirit, a refuge from the goading urgency of contingent happenings” (SMW, p. 20). Philosophy and cosmology, then, form two tensions in Whitehead’s thought; the one taking speculative leaps of flight into “the dark universe beyond” (MT, p.56) and the other, more empirical approach, emphasizing the importance of stubborn facts (a reality that resists the imagination’s attempt to form it). The goal of Whitehead’s speculative scheme is to canalize these tensions in order to discover “the obvious solidarity of the world” (PR, p. 7), but does so within the spirit of a rationalism that “never shakes off its status of an experimental adventure” (PR, p. 9). Here we must bear in mind that, despite an apparent addiction to technical language, we are dealing primarily with a philosopher of
feeling working at the edge of thought, rather than a pedant trying to hypnotize us with strange and ambiguous language.

In truth, we might think of three personalities operating within all of Whitehead’s work. The first two of these personalities—a cosmologist and a philosopher—are engaged in an ongoing struggle. Between these two, the tension between empiricism and the adventure of speculation can be read as unavoidable, resulting in the inevitable creation of new concepts and abstractions. As Whitehead notes, “You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions” (SMW, p. 59). We can thus see Whitehead as embodying both the spirit of cosmology and the temper of post-Kantian, critical philosophy. But the cosmologist and the philosopher are influenced by a third personality, one guided by an aesthetic principal who believes that, “Philosophy is the endeavor to find a conventional phraseology for the vivid suggestiveness of the poet” (PR, p. 50). There are thus three important personalities running through all of Whitehead’s work: the cosmologist, the philosopher, and the poet—each operating integrally to produce his unique, cosmic spirit.

I would characterize this spirit as one that is ultimately tentative, generous, and creative. Tentative in that Whitehead is perennially weary that “the chief error in philosophy is overstatement” (PR, p. 7) or what he calls “misplaced concreteness.” Here Whitehead notes, “We must be systematic but we should keep our systems open. In other words, we should be sensitive to their limitations” (MT, p. 6). Whitehead can be viewed as primarily a generous thinker in the sense that openness is a recurring sentiment wherein, “there is always a vague beyond, waiting for penetration in respect to its details” (MT, p. 6). Finally, Whitehead is creative in that the work of philosophy, according to Whitehead, should always be “adequate” and “applicable” to the needs of a specific, historical moment (PR, p. 3). On this last point Whitehead has already tipped his hat to the philosophical tradition known as American Pragmatism and thus leads us nicely into the next of our five points.

2. Whitehead and Radical Empiricism
Lets start with Whitehead’s connection to William James. Whitehead and James weave the work of a single philosophy; where the former advances technical details and a systematic understanding, the latter brings forth with poetic clarity the feeling of a speculative cosmology. We find references to James scattered throughout Whitehead’s writings, but the primary way in which Whitehead relates to James is in their approach to experience as such, or what James calls “radical empiricism.” For James, the fundamental units of the cosmos are not atoms, causal mechanisms, or systems but rather experience itself such that, “Radical empiricism is the idea that the world’s essentials are all found in the flux of intuited or perceived experience; this concept transmuted the stream of consciousness of James’s psychology into the pure experience of his metaphysics” (WJ, p. 324). In Jamesian cosmology experience is the deepest common element of all things, itself a consequence of what is perhaps James’s most groundbreaking insight: the flow of human conscious experience is the anthropomorphically canalized version of the metaphysical flow of experience as such. A short way of saying this is that: where there are things, there is also always the experience of things. Or as Bruno Latour, another (distant) student of James notes:

Radical empiricism wants to put experience (and not the severely amputated experience found among the first empiricists) at the centre of philosophy by posing a question that is both very ancient and very new: if relations (prepositions in particular) are given to us in experience, where then are they leading us?” (ST, p. 306)

James’s notion of experience is thus not related exclusively to human experience, but is rather a feature of a things relation to any other thing. James is heavily influenced here by the pansemiotics of C.S. Pierce, for whom the whole cosmos is the interpenetrating action of signs and sign interpreters.

So what is the connection with Whitehead? Again, Latour notes the connection, “Now the originality of James, which was clearly recognized by Whitehead, was to attack this situation—but not (as had been done for two centuries) in the name of subjective values, transcendence, or spiritual domains, but quite simply in the name of experience
itself “(ST, p. 306). We can thus see Whitehead’s process philosophy, or what Whitehead calls “the philosophy of organism,” as an attempt to systematize the Jamesian notion of experience. In other words, we might say that Whitehead seeks to formalize and answer the following question raised by Jamesian radical empiricism: what must the cosmos be like such that experience is its central activity? Whitehead’s first step in this process will be to re-think the modern cosmological worldview from a post-Newtonian perspective.

Whitehead, a mathematician by training, was well aware, and in many cases at the forefront of, the advances being made in the sciences of his day. In this capacity Whitehead realized that one of the primary obstacles to re-thinking cosmology after the collapse of Newtonian physics—in the wake of Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity—lied in our conceptions of space and time. Recall that for Newton space and time were both empty containers within which physical events occurred, and that space and time were universal insofar as they formed a static backdrop to the ongoing activity of phenomena (we can call this Newtonian view “the absolute theory of time and space” (CN, p. 37). Whitehead describes this (incorrect) modernist account of space stating, “There are bits of matter, enduring self-identically in space that is otherwise empty. Each bit of matter occupies a definite limited region…The essential relationship between bits of matter is purely spatial. Space itself is eternally unchanging…” (MT, p. 131). In Whitehead’s post-Newtonian view the cosmological image becomes quite different in that space and time are (1) not describable apart from another and (2) are not describable apart from the characteristics of the specific entities being studied; thus “The notion of empty space, the mere vehicle of spatial interconnections, has been eliminated from recent science. The whole spatial universe is a field of force, or in other words, a field of incessant activity” (MT, p. 136).

The shift from objects-in-empty-space, to space-time-as-the-incessant-force-of-entities-themselves, is the basis for many 20th century advances in cosmology and Whitehead was careful to include these in his philosophy (Whitehead also generated an

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1 James scholar Gerald Meyers notes, “If we examine the eight essays that represent James’s radical empiricism, we cannot detect any effort to work out in technical detail the vague blueprint of pure experience” (WJ, p. 316). Whitehead thus takes on the task of working out in technical detail the implications of radical empiricism.
alternative theory to Einstein’s general relativity, but this theory was never accepted by the scientific community). For Whitehead, then, the universe is not composed of hard, lifeless atoms bumping into one another in the smooth vacuum of empty space—but this is not the radical insight we should praise Whitehead for since this much was already accepted by mainstream science and cosmology. Rather, Whitehead’s central insight takes him a step further than most postmodern or scientific cosmologies into strange new territories. When properly grasped, the Whiteheadian cosmos is more like a society of life-like, interacting entities called “actual occasions,” wherein, “We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” (p. 50). The “bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion” first noted as a human psychological experience by James thus crystallizes into a mature cosmological chrysanthemum in Whitehead’s philosophy. Here the notion of cosmos-as-society is not a metaphorical description, for Whitehead, but rather a cosmological description wherein human societies find themselves contending with a larger, cosmic society composed of stars, planets, black holes, bacteria, forests, coral reefs, comets, and volcanoes.

3. Actual Occasions, Societies, and Prehensions

Let's center the actual occasion for a moment then (Whitehead also uses the synonym “actual entity” to describe the same thing). The actual occasion is for Whitehead the most concrete actuality in the cosmos, “The final facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (PR, p. 18); these “drops of experience” also indicate a throwback to James who referred to the units of experience variously as “drops,” “buds,” or “steps” (WJ, p. 329). Here one will also notice that the actual occasion has a temporal identity rather than an exclusively spatial one. This distinction is not incidental such that, “In other words, the actual entity, in virtue of being what it is, is also where it is. It is somewhere because it is some actual thing with its correlated actual world” (p. 59). For the radical empiricist, the cosmos is the ever-budding condensation of novel dewdrops of experience—actual occasions. The whole cosmos is process in the sense that everything is made up of interdependent actual occasions that are in a constant flux of emerging, collecting, and perishing. “Each atom is a system of all things” (PR, p. 36) wherein, “There is no possibility of a detached, self-
contained local existence” (MT, p. 138), but this cosmos is also atomistic in that actual occasions represent real entities, each irreducible to one another and to smaller entities. In this sense, there is a strong tension between Whitehead’s use of the word “process” and his description of the discrete nature of actual occasions; on the one hand each occasion does enjoy its own distinctiveness, but also suffers from an immanent perishing immediately proceeding its genesis.

Actual occasions have certain definite qualities and properties that are alike to every actual occasion. All actual occasions, argues Whitehead, have “physical” and “mental” poles that are integrally present within each actual occasion (PR, p. 26). Integral in this context means that the physical/mental distinction should not be construed as the dualism between different kinds of substances. Rather, Whitehead’s aim is to show that the physical and mental poles are both ingredient in the reality of an actual occasion simultaneously as the tensions of a single, experiential stratum. Marshall McLuhan is often touted as the philosopher who espoused that “the medium is the message,” however, the true heir of this phrase is surely Whitehead whom recognized that the form of an entity is simultaneously the experience and deployment of that entity. Again, James had already noted as much suggesting that, “Instead of portraying the universe as consisting of two kinds of ‘stuff,’ one mental and the other physical, the metaphysics of radical empiricism viewed mind and body as different arrangements of one kind of stuff—pure experience—which in itself is neither mental nor physical” (WJ, p. 308). By “mental” Whitehead means that experience is a fundamental property of all entities, even if only at the level of causal interactions between basic molecules. Whitehead writes, “Whatever exists, is capable of knowledge in respect to the finitude of its connections with the rest of things.” (MT, p. 42).

The dipolar nature of the actual occasion has led Whiteheadian scholar David Ray Griffin to refer to Whitehead’s process philosophy as a kind of “panexperientialism,” (a term I think preferable to “panpsychism”) arguing that experience is a distributed phenomenon in the cosmos rather than a particular property inherent only to certain beings (i.e., human beings). Here the distribution of experience to all things shouldn’t be confused as a collapsing of the varieties of experience possible in the world to only those

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2 CF. Griffin’s Unsnarling the World-Knot
exhibited by *human* consciousness. Nor should it be viewed in the reverse: as a projection of the human possibilities of experience onto nonhuman things. On this note, Whitehead makes several distinctions between “prehension” and “apprehension” and between “perception” and “cognition” such that, “The word *perceive* is, in our common usage, shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word *apprehension*, even with the adjective *cognitive* omitted. I will use the word *prehension* for *uncognitive apprehension*: by this I mean *apprehension* which may or may not be cognitive” (p. 69). In this way, the experience of all actual occasions are not self-similar, but rather form a distributed and heterogeneous array of interlocking experiences issuing forth from different mediums of actuality at different grades and levels of experience, some cognitive in nature, others not.

Though actual occasions are the fundamental units, the cosmos, for Whitehead, is not exclusively the arena of tiny molecules. In addition to the temporal, dipolar, and interdependent qualities of actual occasions, Whitehead also holds a notion of differentiation and complexification between occasions that Whitehead calls a “nexus” or “society.” A *nexus* may be an aggregate of actual occasions without some enduring character (e.g., a pile of slate rock, a box full of tangled wires, or the bricks of a house) while a *society* has some mode of organization which influences the character of that particular aggregate (e.g., coral reefs, human bodies, or solar systems). As Whitehead writes, “The point of a ‘society,’ as the term is here used, is that it is more than a set of entities to which the same class-name applies: that is to say, it involves more than a merely mathematical conception of ‘order’” (PR, p. 89) wherein “The notion of ‘defining characteristic’ is allied to the Aristotelian notion of ‘substantial form’” (p. PR, 89).

Actual occasions, societies, and nexus may be poorly understood again because of Whitehead’s often-obscure language and use of neologisms, but the notion of society is actually quite simple. Any organized group of occasions that endures through time and shares in a common and novel form of organization can be called a society of actual occasions.

A further point on the ontology of societies and occasions is also worth making. Societies do not represent any kind of ontological break in the cosmic fabric and this point needs addressing as well. Societies are the grouping together of multiple actual
occasions that, whilst more complex than individual actual occasions, still share many of
the same properties as individual occasions. Both societies and occasions form new
centers of experience; societies in fact form multiple, graded centers of experience. Thus
actual occasions group together into societies to form different kinds of entities—stars,
bonobos, mycelia—but these societies are different only in degree, rather than in kind,
from individual actual occasions. The enduring character of societies and aggregates can
easily be lost sight of with so much emphasis on complex, interdependent processes. We
should not be fooled here since, though it is undoubtedly true that Whitehead spends the
majority of his time focusing on process, relations, and what he calls “events” there are
nevertheless entities that endure beyond their specific, contingent instantiations in his
ontology. I quote Whitehead at length to highlight this point:

An object is an entity of a different type from an event. For example, the event
which is the life of the nature with the Great Pyramid yesterday and today is
divisible into two parts, namely the Great Pyramid yesterday and the Great
Pyramid today. But the recognizable object which is also called the Great
Pyramid is the same object today as it was yesterday. (CP, pp. 70 – 71).
The Great Pyramid in the above quote is an excellent case study in how to understand
Whitehead’s notion of the “objects” and “events,” both of which constitute earlier
conceptions of what become “societies” in Process and Reality. Further, this quotation is
worth sharing since one of the common misconceptions about Whitehead is that he
reduces everything to a system of relations.\(^3\) However, the above quotation indicates the
following: (1) Objects are something deeper than events; (2) We only access objects
through their manifestations as events; (3) Space and time are ingredient in events, but
objects themselves seem to recede from both events and space/time. Thus while
Whitehead certainly spends the majority of time speaking about process and relations, he

\(^3\) Cf. Graham Harman’s The Quadruple Object. To be sure, there is nothing in Whitehead comparable to
Harman’s notion of “withdrawal.” Harman argues that Whitehead (and Latour) cannot be salvaged from
their ontological relationalism without such a concept, though given the complexities of Whitehead’s
ontology of societies and prehensions it seems the argument might be better framed in terms of a critique of
a metaphysics of presence—which Whitehead cannot escape—rather than a critique of relationism, which
Whitehead can be salvaged from.
is at least aware of the problematic this poses for the integrity of individual things enduring from moment to moment.

With the concept of “society” detailed, we can then begin to understand Whitehead’s ontology as a kind of “organic realism.” Owing to the self-organizing character of societies, Whitehead views the society organically insofar as the primary atoms of the cosmos, for Whitehead, are felt as different modes of experience which can be described as “organic unities” of “electrons, protons, molecules, and living bodies” (SMW, p. 73). In other words, societies have organismic characteristics insofar as they are self-organizing, form enduring wholes, and emerge and perish over time. This applies to living and non-living entities alike such that thunderstorms, solar systems, and amoebas could all be called “societies.” Here we run into one of the meanings behind Whitehead’s own phrase “the philosophy of organism” which is a “cell-theory of actuality” (PR, p. 219). This view of actual occasions and societies—where each actual occasion or society is (a) ingredient, to some extent, in every other actual occasion and (b) are different only in degree rather than in kind from one another—means these relationships are primarily organic, affective, and contingent in nature. The Whiteheadian cosmos is thus not only a society of interlocking experiences, but also an ecology of organismic entities engaging one another in cosmic episodes of evolution and destruction. How are we to visualize the relationships between occasions and societies in the vast ecology of the cosmos? Whitehead’s account of this is told through his simple phrase “prehension.”

“Prehension,” is the technical term Whitehead employs to describe the affective, causal relations between actual occasions. “With the purpose of obtaining a one-substance cosmology,” writes Whitehead, “prehensions’ are a generalization from Descartes’ mental ‘cogitations,’ and from Locke’s ‘ideas,’ to express the most concrete mode of analysis applicable to every grade of individual actuality” (PR, p. 19). Thus just as each actual occasion has a “mental” and “physical pole” each of these poles enact “conceptual” and “physical” prehensions, respectively (PR, p. 23). The physical pole corresponds to the causal activity between two actual occasions, while the conceptual pole (which is not reducible to a cognitive or conscious pole in every case) relates to what Whitehead refers to as “eternal objects.” The conceptual-physical distinction, again,
should be read as an *analytical* distinction rather than an *ontological* one being that all prehensions are simultaneously what one would call “conceptual” and “physical.” In other words, each entity enacts a worldspace congruent and equivalent to its causal relationality with all other entities; the causal and experiential domains are one and the same for Whitehead.

As I noted in the introduction, the spirit of Whitehead’s philosophy is constantly negotiating the tension between the empirical, local contingencies of a particular experience and the rational, mathematical universalities of scientific cosmology. This tension is reiterated in the dipolar character of an actual occasion’s prehension where each occasion is awake to a conceptual or mental sphere of experience (i.e., mathematical rules or rational insight), in addition to a localized, empirical one (we will return to Whitehead’s treatment of the universals implied by mathematics and the particulars required by empiricism below). We can thus approach prehension in the following way. Each society of actual occasions—be it a hydrogen atom, sun flower, or chimpanzee—prehends or abstracts a certain set of variables from a surrounding reality that is always more rich than what can be prehended by any one entity. The surrounding landscape of activity is not other-than the actual occasion in question but is rather a constitutive feature of that actual occasion itself. In this way, the prehended landscape is not itself separate from the actual occasion doing the prehending—the occasion and the prehension are unified in what Whitehead calls “concrescence.” The act of concrescence is the achievement of the three moments present in all actual occasions. These three moments consist in (1) the *subject* prehending, (2) the *datum* prehended, and (3) the *subjective form* by which the datum is prehended (PR, p. 23). Each of these three moments is a part of every actual occasion itself.

Though a specific actual occasion is related to all other actual occasions, not all actual occasions are, or can be, prehended by one another simultaneously, or “In other words, we can know anything in some of its perspectives. But the totality of perspectives involves an infinitude beyond finite knowledge” (MT, p. 42). Prehension, according to Whitehead, is distinguishable, on the one hand, between mental and conceptual prehensions (as we have already noted), but also between “positive” and “negative” prehensions, on the other. The former of these terms (positive prehension) is equivalent
to an actual occasion’s “feeling” for other occasions, while the latter (negative prehension) refers to the process by which occasions can “eliminate from feeling” the experience of other occasions (PR, p.23). Let’s treat the process of prehension with an example.

Positive prehensions are those datums that are actively within the awareness of a specific entity, while negative prehensions are those modes of awareness unavailable to a particular entity or are blocked by a particular set of circumstances. Take the interactions between the sun, a jasmine flower, and a human. For both jasmine and human the sun is a factor, or datum, in experience. Clearly, the relationship between jasmine and sun is different from the relationship between humans and sun. For example, jasmine flowers can translate sunlight directly into energy for photosynthesis, humans cannot. Jasmine thus prehends sunlight in a different way than humans do, even as both interacts with the same sun. Between jasmine and human there are more ways to prehend sunlight than what is available to either (cave-dwelling earthworms would have yet a different relationship to solar rays, for instance). In this sense there is always more sun than what is prehended by any one particular entity—the sun itself is not reducible to any particular relationship to the sun. There is negative and positive prehension occurring insofar as humans are unable to participate with the sun in ways that jasmine cannot, and vice versa. Thus while humans are unable to photosynthesize solar energy, they might, for example, be able to relate to the sun as a psychological symbol of clarity or insight in a way not possible for blooming jasmine flowers. We find with Whitehead something like a cosmological version of Jacob Von Uexkull’s notion of “Umwelt,” though here the Umwelt is not limited only to living beings, but to all beings in general. Prehension is a complex and interdependent process; a consequence of what Whitehead calls “the ontological principle.”

4. The Ontological Principle and the Bifurcation of Nature

The ontological principle states that there can be no outside, no externality, to the overall cosmological scheme. There is no ‘out there’ that reaches into the cosmos from beyond and thus affirms the radical interdependency of actual occasions as they emerge,
complexify, or perish. Whitehead writes, “The ontological principle can be summarized as: no actual entity, then no reason” (p. 19) and that, “All real togetherness is togetherness in the formal constitution of actuality. So if there be a relevance of what in the temporal world is unrealized, the relevance must be expressed as a fact of togetherness in the formal constitution of a non-temporal actuality” (PR, p. 32). One could say with confidence, then, that the ontological principle affirms both the solidarity of the cosmos alongside its contingent, unfolding specificity. At first glance it would seem that this definition of the ontological principle affirms only one half of the tension Whitehead consciously navigates; read in this way it would mean that the airplane only stays in its hangar, never taking leaps into the speculative imagination that is central to Whitehead’s philosophy. However, the ontological principle only *seems* to contradict itself, there is a formal twist to the ontological principle we have only briefly referenced vis-à-vis eternal objects.

The eternal objects, while a reference to the thesis of platonic, universal forms, can nevertheless not be thought of within a traditional, platonic scheme (despite Whitehead’s fondness for Plato). Rather, eternal objects represent “pure potentials” such that “they cannot be conceived by themselves, in the absence of the empirical, temporal entities they inform. Eternal objects, therefore, are neither *a priori* logical structures, nor Platonic essences, nor constitutive rational ideas” (WD, p. 18). For Whitehead, the distinction between the “universal” and the “particular” must be re-thought for the same reason that the actual occasion cannot be thought of as exclusively “mental” or “physical” in nature. Whitehead believes that a substance dualism (“the bifurcation of nature”) lurks beneath the modern imagination that undermines both our ability to conceive of experience as fundamental to existence and our ability to adequately think the relation between universals and particulars. Whitehead writes, “The antithetical terms ‘universals’ and ‘particulars’ are the usual words employed to denote respectively entities which nearly, though not quite, correspond to the entities here termed ‘eternal objects,’ and ‘actual entities’” (PR, p. 48), and further that, “The ontological principle, and the wider doctrine of universal relativity, on which the present metaphysical discussion is founded, blur the sharp distinction between what is universal and what is particular” (PR, p. 48). It would seem then that Whitehead’s attempt to think the speculative and the
empirical; the conceptual and the physical; the universal and the particular, is resolved by the ontological principle rather than contradicted by it. On the blurring between the universal and the particular Whitehead writes:

An actual entity cannot be described, even inadequately, by universals; because other actual entities do enter into the description of any one actual entity. Thus every so-called ‘universal’ is particular in the sense of being what it is, diverse from everything else; and every so-called ‘particular’ is universal in the sense of entering into the constitution of other actual entities (PR, p. 48).

In this way the universal and the particular dissolve into one another in the same way that the conceptual and physical do. Eternal objects are not “elsewhere” but always instantiated in a particular context. Whitehead thus offers us a systematized, radical empiricism of actual occasions and societies engaged in interlocking modes of physical and conceptual prehensions of feeling where the human, cognitive mode of apprehension is a derivative mode of the overall metaphysical flow of experience and causal interpenetration. The Whiteheadian aeroplane thus rises from the solid ground of stubborn fact and takes flight into the imaginative skies of speculative philosophy, both in terms of philosophical method and cosmological reality. The Whiteheadian system is in this way a performance of its own worldview.

5. Creativity

Finally we reach a consideration of Whitehead’s philosophical ultimate. Whitehead gives us a contradictory list of terms that he argues are synonymous with his arche-concept creativity. For Whitehead the terms ‘creativity,’ ‘many,’ ‘one,’ ‘thing,’ ‘being,’ and ‘entity’ are equivalent. Just as an actual entity is a prehension and a prehension is an actual entity, so the many are one, and the thing, is a creative being.

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4 Steven Shaviro offers the following helpful examples of eternal objects: “This means that eternal objects include sensory qualities, like colors (blueness or greenness) and tactile sensations (softness or roughness), conceptual abstractions like shapes (a helix, or a dodecahedron) and numbers (seven, or the square root of minus two), moral qualities (like bravery or cowardice), physical fundamentals (like gravitational attraction or electric charge), and much more besides” (WD, p. 18)
Brought together in the act of concrescence, as the famous saying goes, “The many become one, and are increased by one” (PR, p. 21). Thus what things, beings, multiplicities, and unities all have in common is their convergent, creative capacities expressed by their ongoing concrescence—their emergence and perishing—in the affective landscapes of multiple, actual worlds. Thus “‘Creativity’ is the principle of novelty,” where, “The ‘creative advance’ is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation it originates” (PR, p. 21). We might say then that the primordial character and trajectory of the cosmos is not determined (in either a theological or naturalistic sense), nor is it chaotic; rather, the appropriate adjective to describe cosmic processes, according to Whitehead, is creativity, where, “Each task of creation is a social effort, employing the whole universe” (PR, p. 223).

For Whitehead, the creative struggle is an ontological one between order and chaos; permanence and flux; memory and novelty. Each of these pairs is roughly analogous; order, memory, and permanence, line up on one side of the ledger; and chaos, flux, and novelty line up on the other (of course there is no real ledger, all elements are ingredient in every actual entity). We see again here the same struggles between empiricism and rationality, or contingency and universality that have followed us through our whole consideration of Whitehead’s thought. However, when writing about creativity we find Whitehead increasingly existential; he writes, “The world is thus faced by the paradox that, at least in its higher actualities, it craves novelty and yet is haunted by terror at the loss of the past, with its familiarities and its loved ones. It seeks escape from time in its character of ‘perpetual perishing’” (PR, p. 340). The existential Whitehead thus confronts the terror of existence in a way many might not expect, a terror which is only magnified by an equally strange, cosmic feeling—a pervasive haunting present in all things, “But, just as physical feelings are haunted by the vague insistence of causality” writes Whitehead, “so the higher intellectual feelings are haunted by the vague insistence of another order, where there is no unrest, no travel, no shipwreck: ‘There shall be no more sea’” (PR, p. 340). Here Whitehead’s philosophy takes on a different character where the past becomes an unmovable factor in a present that is always transforming at a loss. Whitehead writes, “In the temporal world, it is the empirical fact that process entails loss” (PR, p. 340). Here again memory, order, and loss haunt the human experience of the
cosmos. The ontological possibility of order—of memory—is, for example, why the human form can maintain its shape (and be instantiated again and again) in a cosmos of process and flux or, in Whitehead’s words, “It is by reason of the body, with its miracle of order, that the treasures of the past environment are poured into the living occasion” (PR, p. 339). It is in this darker moment of Whitehead’s thought—where he awakens to the cosmological reality of memory, perishing, and the haunting character of causality—that he begins to discuss his theology most forcefully. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that when Whitehead feels a cosmological angst that he also contemplates God most strongly. However, to merely psychologize Whitehead’s God in this way would miss the mark since, even when thinking theologically, Whitehead still surprises and eludes the predictable critiques. To be sure, Whitehead opens his treatise on God with a disclaimer, “There is nothing here in the nature of proof” (PR, p. 343) and that, “In the first place, God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification” (PR, p. 343). In other words, Whitehead’s God is not argued for by way of any empirical evidence, nor is this God designed to break with any of the cosmological principles Whitehead has already set forth. Rather, just as Whitehead reforms platonic forms into instantiated eternal objects, Whitehead’s God is a creature among creatures where God is, “not before all creation, but with all creation” (PR, p. 343). Clearly, Whitehead’s God is not the God of transcendental monotheism wherein, “The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caeser” (PR, p. 342), but what is this strange creature, then? There is good reason to suppose, given Whitehead’s lack of an attempt to marshal any proof of God or to give God an special powers over Being, that these reasons make him a good target for theists and atheists alike since he does little to satisfy either camp. But despite his capacity to disappoint, we must nevertheless try to stay with Whitehead’s own words in order to complete our survey of his ideas. Here we must be careful not to excite the secular atheists who find great excitement in a process philosophy without God (and would raise a hammer at even the slightest mention of religion), just as we must not entertain the theologians who become drunk with excitement at the first hint of a famous mathematician that might share their beliefs. No, we shall try and stay with Whitehead’s
own ideas rather than play into the party lines. But if we have so far defined Whitehead’s God in the negative—as what God is not—does Whitehead offer anything in the way of a positive account of God’s nature? Yes and no. Whitehead again emphasizes his reluctance to commit in this respect, stating “The image—and it is but an image—the image under which this operative God’s nature is best conceived, is that of a tender care that nothing be lost” (PR, p. 346). Thus God is Whitehead’s “image” for what we might call a cosmic function wherein order, permanence, and stasis incarnate through the process of concrescence within the world of novelty, flux, and permanence (PR. p. 348). But there is even more to story, for read in this way we might be tempted to call Whitehead a panentheist—one who believes that God is immanent to the world but is not exhausted by the world—but this is only a half truth. Since, for Whitehead, “It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God” (PR, p. 348).

Thus we are left with a very strange state of affairs—a God that escapes the world and a World that escapes God. If we were take Whitehead sincerely on this point we would be left with a world where the sacred and the secular implode into one another—through an act of mutual escape—wherein the project of defining sacred-secular boundaries becomes hugely complicated and entangled. Thus we might say that Whitehead’s speculative theology is a boundary moment—a penumbra—where we are confronted with a world that doesn’t know it is God and a God that doesn’t know it is World; where both are accidents of a more primordial creativity unable to grasp itself fully in the mask of the mundane or the divine. Bruno Latour may be our most able guide to navigate such strange waters and in this sense we might consider the Whiteheadian God to be a chief example of what Latour calls a “factish”—a divinity that has been constructed but is for this reason real. In such a strange turn of events, God is the factish of the World, and the World the factish of God.

**Concluding Remarks**

Without appealing to the enormous of amount of existing Whitehead scholarship, and without engaging in technical battles over specific points made by scholars who have engaged metaphysical projects in the wake of Whitehead’s process philosophy, this short
paper has tried to read Whitehead as Whitehead. Hopefully this will give the interested reader a helpful overview into the spirit and thought of Whitehead’s philosophy. There are still many riches to explore in Whitehead’s thought, and many important critiques to be raised. Perhaps this short introductory essay can increase the quality of engagement with Whitehead’s work from either critical or supportive perspectives.

Abbreviations for Citations:
MT – Alfred N. Whitehead, Modes of Thought (1968).