

## Whitehead's French Readers

### Os Leitores Franceses de Whitehead

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**ABSTRACT:** Despite his long career in England and the important lectures taught and works published in the US, Alfred North Whitehead does not seem to have ever been truly incorporated in anglophone philosophy, at least not until recently. On the other hand, the philosopher found very early on avid readers in France, Jean Wahl being the most pivotal among them. In 1920, Wahl, defying what was then in fashion in the philosophical circles, already touched upon anglophone pluralist thought in his main dissertation, *Les Philosophies pluralistes d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*. In this early work, Whitehead's name appears only once. Later, in the 1930s, however, the English philosopher is the main theme of the long study *La philosophie spéculative de Whitehead*, published in 1931, and he also figures prominently in Wahl's work *Vers le concret*, 1932. After World War II, Wahl will be one of the most important philosophical figures in France and through his teachings a whole generation will be introduced to Whitehead's thought. Two well-known students of his were Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze. To Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead represents an important addition to his metaphysical speculations, playing a relevant role in his courses in the Collège de France about Nature, taught between 1956 and 1960. In Deleuze's case, Whitehead is a sort of philosophical role model whose thought appears in his works since the 1960s all the way to the end of the century, although he very rarely cites the English philosopher directly. In this work, firstly I explore Wahl's reading of Whitehead's work and his role as an intermediary for its reception in France. Secondly, I show broadly how Whitehead appears in Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's works.

**KEYWORDS:** A. N. Whitehead; Jean Wahl; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Gilles Deleuze.

**RESUMO:** Alfred North Whitehead, apesar de sua longa carreira na Inglaterra e a série de importantes publicações que seguiram sua mudança aos Estados-Unidos, não parece ter se integrado fortemente à filosofia anglófona. Talvez isso tenha ocorrido por causa da forte cisão nesta entre uma certa "tradição analítica", oposta a uma outra "continental", cisão essa que não dá conta da particularidade da obra do filósofo. Na França, Whitehead encontrou um leitor entusiasta na pessoa de Jean Wahl. Este, já em 1920, abordava o pensamento pluralista anglófono em sua tese principal *Les Philosophies pluralistes d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*, nadando na contracorrente da maioria de seus colegas da época. Nessa obra, o nome de Whitehead aparece uma única vez, mas na década de 1930 o filósofo inglês é matéria de um longo estudo intitulado *La philosophie spéculative de Whitehead*, publicado em 1931, e é também um dos objetos principais da obra *Vers le concret*, de 1932, ao lado de William James e Gabriel Marcel. Após a Segunda Guerra, retornando de seu exílio nos EUA, Wahl assumirá um importante papel como autor referência e professor de toda uma geração de filósofos. É sobretudo pela via de seus ensinamentos que Whitehead ganhará lugar nas obras de Maurice Merleau-Ponty e Gilles Deleuze. No caso do primeiro, Whitehead representa uma adição notável no debate metafísico de Merleau-Ponty, figurando em papel relevante em seus cursos no Collège de France sobre a Natureza, ministrados entre 1956 e 1960. No caso de Deleuze, Whitehead é uma espécie de modelo de filósofo cujo pensamento aparece em suas obras desde

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os anos 1960 até o final do século, mas sempre com poucas menções diretas. Neste trabalho, exploro primeiramente a leitura de Wahl da obra de Whitehead e o papel de intermediador que ele desempenha para sua recepção na França. Em segundo lugar, exponho em linhas gerais como Whitehead figura nas obras de Merleau-Ponty e Deleuze.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Alfred N. Whitehead; Jean Wahl; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Gilles Deleuze.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite his long career in England and the important lectures taught and works published in the US, Alfred North Whitehead does not seem to have ever been truly incorporated in anglophone philosophy, at least not until very recently. Graham Harman speculates that this may be due to the fact that “[w]hile philosophy for a century and more has been polarized between the Anglo-American analytic and Continental European traditions, Whitehead falls helplessly into a crack between the two” (HARMAN, 2018, p. vi). This difficulty in placing Whitehead on one side or the other often leads to misunderstandings as to the content or purpose of his works. According to Harman, “his legacy was kept alive mainly among American process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne [...] and John Cobb” (HARMAN, 2018, p. vi-vii). Aside from theology, he believes that “[t]he opening of new continental doors for Whitehead commenced with some positive references by Gilles Deleuze” (HARMAN, 2018, p. vii). Harman is referring in this passage to *The fold*, published in 1988.

Although Deleuze's praise of Whitehead in the late 80's is relevant, the English philosopher actually found very early on some avid readers in France (although, to be true, not many), Jean Wahl being the most pivotal among them. In 1920, Wahl, defying what was then in fashion in the philosophical circles, already touched upon anglophone pluralist thought in his main dissertation, *Les Philosophies pluralistes d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*. In this early work, Whitehead's name appears only once. Later, in the 1930s, however, the English philosopher is the main theme of the long study *La philosophie spéculative de Whitehead*, published in 1931, and he also figures prominently in Wahl's work *Vers le concret*, 1932, alongside William James and Gabriel Marcel. After World War II, Wahl will be one of the most important philosophical figures in France and through his teachings a whole generation will be introduced to Whitehead's thought. Two well-known French philosophers who were in a way or another influenced by Wahl are Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, the former was a recurrent discussion partner and also briefly his colleague at the Sorbonne, while the latter was his student and a great admirer of his writings.

To Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead represents an important addition to his metaphysical speculations, playing a relevant role in his courses about nature in the Collège de France, taught between 1956 and 1960, by giving him a basis upon which to shift from epistemological issues to ontological ones and to address the limitations he identified in modern physical science. In Deleuze's case, Whitehead is a sort of philosophical role model whose thought appears in his works since the 1960s all the way to the end of the century, although he very rarely brings up the English philosopher explicitly. In this paper, firstly I explore Wahl's reading of Whitehead's work – emphasizing his drive towards the concrete and his interest in empiricism – and his important role as an intermediary for its reception in France. Secondly, I show broadly how Whitehead appears in Deleuze's and Merleau-Ponty's works. My goal is not to exhaust this connection, or their connection to Wahl, but only to indicate a few ways we may enter their work looking for such relations.

## JEAN WAHL AND WHITEHEAD

Jean Wahl was born in 1888 and died in 1974. As most Jewish intellectuals of the time, he was forced to exile during World War II, staying in the US between 1941 and '45 after escaping from the Drancy internment camp. Other than that, he was a well-known and respected professor at the Sorbonne between '36 and '67.

In his doctoral work, *The pluralist philosophies of England and America*, Wahl presents us with “an important part of contemporary philosophy, mostly kept apart from the official programs despite the efforts of Bergson, Lalande, and Émile Boutroux, which gains here great prominence and is not only shown but also put in perspective” (GIREL, 2004, p. 7). His dissertation talks about monism and pluralism, bringing up different authors, both philosophers and writers, of the anglophone tradition, like Bradley and Whitman, Henry James and Royce, but the most important author of the book is William James. This emphasis on James' philosophy is a very early indicator of what Wahl's interests will be later in his career. As Mathias Girel summarizes, the movement described by Wahl's work has lost none of its relevance today: “The possibility of a form of ‘enlarged’ empiricism attentive to both scientific work and the qualitative aspects of experience, the critique of the reductive forms of naturalism, the conquest of new philosophical territories such as sensation, the body, perceived space, the event, are questions that remain unanswered” (GIREL, 2004, p. 6).

Wahl was one of the first to introduce the French to these sorts of questions. In fact, as Bernardo dos Santos says, Wahl was a sort of “militant of the empiricist revolution of

metaphysics” (SANTOS, 2017, p. 43) and Whitehead is his ally in this quest. The title of his 1932 book, *Towards the concrete*, shows that 12 years after his dissertation his research continues to try and establish a certain kind of empiricism that does not neglect metaphysical speculation. The book is made up of three separate studies, one on William James, another one on Whitehead and a third one on Gabriel Marcel. As Girel points out, “the history of philosophy, as Wahl understands it, often consists in making a minor voice speak against an established tradition, but also, just as often, in making speak what opposes an established tradition inside it” (GIREL, 2004, p. 20). Therefore, Wahl takes up Whitehead “as a symbol of contemporary philosophy and as a representative of an American philosophy that has not enclosed itself neither in a reductive form of naturalism or in the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle” (GIREL, 2004, p. 26). Wahl was also probably the first in France to pay attention to the relation between Whitehead’s critique of modernity and the transformation of the idea of nature and the new developments in the science of physics.

Whitehead’s works are an enormous help to Wahl’s intentions of moving towards the concrete and “putting thought back in nature [...], but it is necessary then to solve a tension”, Girel alerts us, “it is necessary to think simultaneously the transcendence of the object for thought and the immanence of thought in things” (GIREL, 2004, p. 13). Therefore, this shifts the problem of transcendence. The question “is no longer that of 'perfection' nor of the absolute other of thought, but actually the one concerning the way that an experience, a fact, an event, may lead to, ‘prehend’ another, and sometimes maybe even envelop in itself the entirety of nature” (GIREL, 2004, p. 13). Wahl understands very early the sort of change that Whitehead requires of philosophy in order to put the world back in it, making it impossible to pick and choose, to explain away certain phenomena. To Wahl, “this overflowing, this encroaching of events onto one another, determines a new meaning of immanence and transcendence, by which ‘as all events in the universe, we are prehendend and we prehend’” (GIREL, 2004, p. 17). This conception of the nature of all beings, now understood as events, and of transcendence not as something beyond and truer than actuality, but as something embedded in events and their relations, is “what approaches, in Wahl' eyes, Whitehead to a wider movement 'towards the concrete' in philosophy” (GIREL, 2004, p. 17).

Whitehead's idea that “philosophy is about explaining what is abstract and not what is concrete, about describing the genesis of cosmological categories” fits perfectly with Wahl's project of reconstructing metaphysics from an empiricist standpoint. That is why Wahl says that “nowhere is a concrete vision clearer than in Whitehead's work”, which would make him

the best representative of “a concrete empirical philosophy” (WAHL *apud* GIREL, 2004, p. 16). Finally, his praise for Whitehead's philosophical system has nothing to do with a possible totality it may offer, quite the opposite; Wahl's interest stems from the openness that can be found in this English philosopher's works, a stance that tries to commensurate empiricism and metaphysical speculation from the ground up, where the actual world is not an instantiation of metaphysical categories or entities.

### DELEUZE (AND GUATTARI) AND WHITEHEAD

In 1968, in the last part of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze brings up – for the first and only time in the book – Whitehead. Not sparing compliments, he says that Process and Reality “is one of the greatest books of modern philosophy” (DELEUZE, 1968, p. 364). It may seem that the English philosopher's name shows up too suddenly, but it seems less strange if we understand that, to Deleuze, Whitehead's thought is associated with that of Jean Wahl. The footnote to this passage mentions a few of Whitehead's works but also Wahl's *Towards the concrete*. Much earlier in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze brings up Wahl on a footnote saying that all his work “is a deep meditation on difference; on the possibilities of empiricism to express its poetic, free, and wild nature; about the irreducibility of difference to the simple negative; about the non hegelian relations of affirmation and negation” (DELEUZE, 1968, p. 81n). This “free and wild” empiricism, supported by a different, new metaphysics, is also what Wahl identified as one of the qualities of Whitehead's philosophy, as shown in the previous section. A few years later, in *Dialogues* (1977), Deleuze talks about Wahl once again, who is, to him, “besides Sartre [...], France's most important philosopher. He did not only introduce us to English and American thought, he knew how to make us think very new things in French” (DELEUZE; PARNET, 1977, p. 72). The previous points indicate that, at least as far as a metaphysical or speculative empiricism is concerned, we could talk about a philosophical lineage going from Whitehead to Deleuze through Wahl (SANTOS, 2017, p. 30 and 35).

Despite the fact that Deleuze already mentions Whitehead in 1968, he will become a sort of ghost in Deleuze's works, a presence that can be perceived through a certain philosophical problem or the use of a familiar term, but that will rarely be fully visible. In an interview with Arnaud Villani in 1981, for instance, Deleuze points out that “the conclusion of *A thousand plateaus* is, in my mind, a table of categories (although incomplete, insufficient). Not in Kant's way, but in Whitehead's way” (VILLANI, 1999, p. 130). *A thousand plateaus*

was written with Félix Guattari<sup>2</sup> and published in 1980 and contains, despite what Deleuze's previous assertion could indicate, no mention of Whitehead. However, if one is looking for it, certain whiteheadian concepts are identifiable throughout its pages – for example, how prehension is employed in the *Geology of morals* –, and it could even be argued that a more evanescent whiteheadian disposition can be found there, but these connections are all up to the reader to make. A little while later, in a letter written in 1982 to Joseph Voefray, Deleuze indicates, in fact, despite his laudatory remarks in 1968, that he is only beginning to know Whitehead's works better (DELEUZE, 2015, p. 91).

20 years after *Difference and repetition*, in the history of philosophy Deleuze tells in *The Fold*, published in 1988, Whitehead finally appears as an important and explicit subject of inquiry. There, he represents the continuity of the question concerning the event, until then only asked by the Stoics and Leibniz. To the French philosopher, Whitehead is the leader of a school, “a bit of a secret school” (DELEUZE, 1988, p. 103), and it is he that “takes up once again the radical critique” (DELEUZE, 1988, p. 103) of modern philosophical thought. Although Deleuze does not seem to have neither a vast nor precise technical knowledge on Whitehead<sup>3</sup>, as Didier Debaise points out (2006, p. 34; 2018, p. 54-55), their philosophies are in resonance, if not due to a few bibliographical and thematic confluences that we could highlight, certainly because “what is an event?” is an essentially deleuzean question” (DEBAISE, 2006, p. 34). This search for the nature of the event is characteristic of both their philosophies and, hence, very similar questions animate them: “how is there always something new? How are novelty and change possible? How can we explain a future that is different from, and not simply predetermined by, a past?” (DEBAISE, 2006, p. 23). To Deleuze, Whitehead is, among other authors both in philosophy and in fiction, a philosopher of the chaosmos, who shows that “every prehension is already a prehension of another prehension, either to capture it or to exclude it: the prehension is by nature open, open to the world” (DELEUZE, 1988, p. 110), which means that finally everything is in relation and in process.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth briefly mentioning, since *A thousand plateaus* was brought up, that Guattari, even more so than Deleuze, almost does not make explicit references to Whitehead in his work, however, as Melanie Sehgal points out, “Guattari's three ecologies may be read as an answer to Whitehead's diagnostic about the modern constellation (SEHGAL, 2013, p. 2), that is, an answer to the question of the bifurcation of nature”. “It is surprising”, Sehgal says, “how much Guattari and Whitehead agree not only in their diagnostic about modern thought, but also in its practical and theoretical implications which mainly concern the notion of subjectivity” (SEHGAL, 2013, p.1).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth pointing out, as further evidence of Deleuze's debt to Wahl's work, that his misunderstandings of Whitehead's philosophy also seem to stem from his reading of Wahl. For instance, as Debaise points out, he conflates actual entities and events, mostly ignoring the concept of societies, as Wahl does in *Towards the concrete*.

Despite Whitehead's spectral presence in Deleuze's work, or maybe because of it, I believe we must acknowledge, as Steven Shaviro states, that "Deleuze wrote less about Whitehead than he did about the other figures in his philosophical counter-canon: Lucretius, the Stoics, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Foucault. But Whitehead is arguably as important to Deleuze as any of these other thinkers" (p. 1). We must not easily give in, however, to the many points of convergence and conclude from the previous points that Deleuze inherits Whitehead's thought wholesale or, worse, that he reproduces the English philosopher's philosophy renaming some of the concepts and does not give him credit.

There are crucial differences that must make us hesitate when we approach these philosophers. As Isabelle Stengers indicates, the main difference between them lies in how "Deleuze and Whitehead define philosophy. Deleuze refers to creation, Whitehead, for his part, to the experimental sciences [...]. A contrast, therefore, between creation and experimentation with language" (STENGERS, 2000, p. 325). While the French thinker insists upon pushing philosophy to its limits, crossing onto the non-philosophical and even the chaotic, Whitehead believes speculative philosophy has no limits, it may, and it should strive to, one day encompass all forms of experience, "what, regarding lines of flight, impossibles, the affirmation of pure difference, may seem like a true imprisonment" (STENGERS, 2000, p. 327). That is, there is a whole different conception of what is inside and outside the scope of philosophy. In Whitehead's speculative scheme, there is "no crack that is not integrated, ratified, celebrated. And retranslated in such a way that, very oddly, what presented itself as a radical disagreement [...] becomes an interesting contrast, noteworthy, important" (STENGERS, 2000, p. 327).

## **MERLEAU-PONTY AND WHITEHEAD**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is well-known as the greatest name in French phenomenology together with Sartre. His works, engaging with his contemporaries and with the history of philosophy, attempted to rethink sensibility and perception as more than something beneath or inferior to rationality. From 1956 to 1960, he taught 3 courses on the subject of Nature in the Collège de France. He died suddenly in 1961, leaving much of his later thought incomplete. As William Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken point out, "Merleau-Ponty's last writings take the earlier phenomenological critique to be not radical enough" (HAMRICK; VAN DER VEKEN, p. 2). The courses on nature present this new, more radical critique of classical and modern modes of thought, especially concerning Cartesian dualism, but also Kant's *Critiques* and further. The philosopher's main concern is opposing a certain form of ontology that "evacuates

human beings from being active participants within nature and reduces them to onlookers disconnected from it” (HAMRICK; VAN DER VEKEN, p.3). His course begins with a study on the many senses of nature throughout history in the works of philosophers and scientists such as Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, Kant, Schelling, Newton, Laplace, Einstein and others. To him, Nature is “the primordial, that is, what has not been constructed nor instituted; the idea of an eternity of nature (eternal return), a solidity, comes from this” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995, p. 20).

It seems natural that Merleau-Ponty develops an interest in Whitehead's work, since “[b]oth thinkers argued against the representation of nature in modern philosophy, and their search converged in the direction of a convincing alternative” (HAMRICK; VAN DER VEKEN, p. 5). In the course notes, Whitehead's name appears after Merleau-Ponty has finished telling his history of the concept of nature spanning from the Greeks until modern science. As he analyzes modern physics' conception of space and time, Merleau-Ponty raises several issues which Whitehead will help address through his “new vision of Nature” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1995, p. 152). His knowledge of Whitehead's works at the time was limited to *The concept of Nature, Science and the modern world*, and *Nature and life*. He also cites Jean Wahl's *Vers le concret* a few times in the chapter concerning Whitehead's philosophy of nature, indicating that that is probably how he came about the English philosopher's ideas.

Merleau-Ponty's interest in Whitehead's writings has very little to do with their own philosophical worth. His concern lies in how he rejects the Galilean-Cartesian view of Nature which is based on an intellectualist, mathematical worldview. Other than that “he felt some consonance with Whiteheadian themes such as ‘brute facts,’ ‘the passage of nature,’ the rejection of ‘vacuous actuality,’ and the ‘fallacy of simple location’” (HAMRICK; VAN DER VEKEN, p. 4), but he does not take up Whitehead's intricate vocabulary, he only employs his arguments against the modern notions of space and time. Once the argument is stated, Whitehead's name disappears from the courses, as it does not come back in the next semester. This happens probably because the second course does not directly tackle physics like the first one – focusing instead on biology which is why names such as Lorenz and Uexküll will appear – and the material for the third course available to us is mostly an assortment of drafts.

Finally, what Merleau-Ponty seems to have found in Whitehead's work is “a comparable view of nature as process (passage), activity, passivity, and auto-productivity” (HAMRICK; VAN DER VEKEN, p. 4), but he seems to have barely any interest in his metaphysical musings, preferring his own attempt at it. After all, their conceptions of Nature

are finally incompatible, and their projects, despite sharing some minor goals, are fundamentally different.

## FINAL REMARKS

I hope to have shown throughout this paper that differently from the near silence with which Whitehead was met in the USA and the UK, French philosophers have since much earlier on showed interest in his works and have disseminated his ideas, albeit in a limited circle.

Jean Wahl saw in Whitehead an ally in conceiving a new metaphysics that would not neglect empiricist contributions – trying to overcome dichotomies such as rationalism/empiricism and idealism/realism or materialism –, which would allow philosophy to move further “towards the concrete”. Deleuze saw in Whitehead a very intricate systematic thinker that offered a post-Leibnizian metaphysics in which every entity prehended one another and encapsulated a certain perspective of the universe. To him, the English philosopher's thought offered an unique answer to the question “what is the event?”. Merleau-Ponty found in Whitehead a detailed analysis of and an answer to the problem of the bifurcation of nature which serves as foundation to the separation between human and nature or world. He is less concerned with Whitehead's concepts and methods and more interested in how he can help him address the limitations of modern physics and its concepts of space and time.

In future works, I intend to further elaborate on how each of these thinkers engaged with Whitehead's works. Furthermore, a detailed depiction of the role pragmatism – of the Jamesian/Whiteheadian variety – in the francophone philosophical scene remains to be offered.

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