

Whitehead and Latour

Their challenges to Modernity

Dr Bernadette Brady

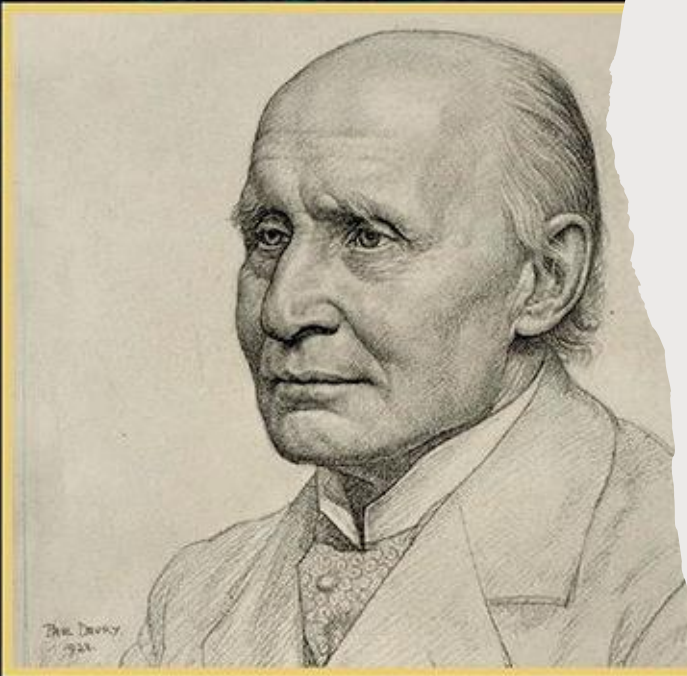


THE EDINBURGH CRITICAL EDITION OF
THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

The Harvard Lectures Alfred North Whitehead

1925–1927

General Metaphysical Problems



EDITED BY BRIAN G. HENNING, JOSEPH PETEK, GEORGE

Both Whitehead's cosmology and Latour's cosmology share a focus on interconnectedness, the rejection of dualisms, and a rethinking of agency. Both challenge the role of modernity.

Their Shared Ground

- Despite their differences, Whitehead and Latour both:
- Reject dualisms such as subject/object and nature/culture.
- Emphasize relationality and interconnectedness.
- Expand the notion of agency beyond humans to include non-human entities.



Philosophical Starting Points

- **Whitehead:**
 - Begins from a metaphysical framework.
 - Seeks to describe the fundamental nature of reality, proposing that all entities are processes of becoming ("actual occasions").
 - His cosmology is abstract and universal, aiming to create a systematic metaphysical schema.
- **Latour:**
 - Begins from empirical studies of science and technology.
 - Rejects grand metaphysical systems, focusing instead on the contingent, historical, and material interactions of actors in networks.
 - His work is descriptive and pragmatic, aiming to critique and reform the thinking about modernity and its constructs.

How they differ



Nature of Entities and Agency

•Whitehead:

- Treats entities (actual occasions) as metaphysical units that integrate both subjective experience and objective reality.
- He views creativity as a fundamental principle driving the universe, with every entity contributing to the cosmos' unfolding. (Similar to the Stoics).

•Latour:

- Focuses on **actors** (both human and non-human) within networks. These actors have agency, but it is relational and arises from their interactions (so more materialistic), not an intrinsic property.
- He rejects Whitehead's notion of a universal creative principle, instead emphasizing the contingent and context-dependent emergence of agency.

How they differ



God and Transcendence

•Whitehead:

- Includes God as a key part of his cosmology. God functions as a lure for creativity, mediating between the realm of pure potentiality (eternal objects) and the actual world.
- His view of God is processual and relational, but still metaphysical.

•Latour:

- Rejects the concept of God or any transcendent entity in his cosmology. His framework is thoroughly immanent, focusing on the interactions of actors without recourse to overarching metaphysical principles.
- Latour's cosmology is secular, rooted in a critique of the **sacred versus profane dichotomy inherent in modernity.**

How they differ



Critique of Modernity

•Whitehead:

- Critiques modernity's mechanistic worldview but does so from a metaphysical perspective, advocating for a broader, organismic understanding of reality.
- Does not directly address modernity as a sociopolitical construct.

•Latour:

- Directly critiques the concept of modernity itself, arguing in *We Have Never Been Modern* that the supposed divide between nature and culture is an illusion upheld by the "Modern Constitution."
- He focuses on the sociopolitical implications of this divide and calls for a rethinking of modernity.

How they differ

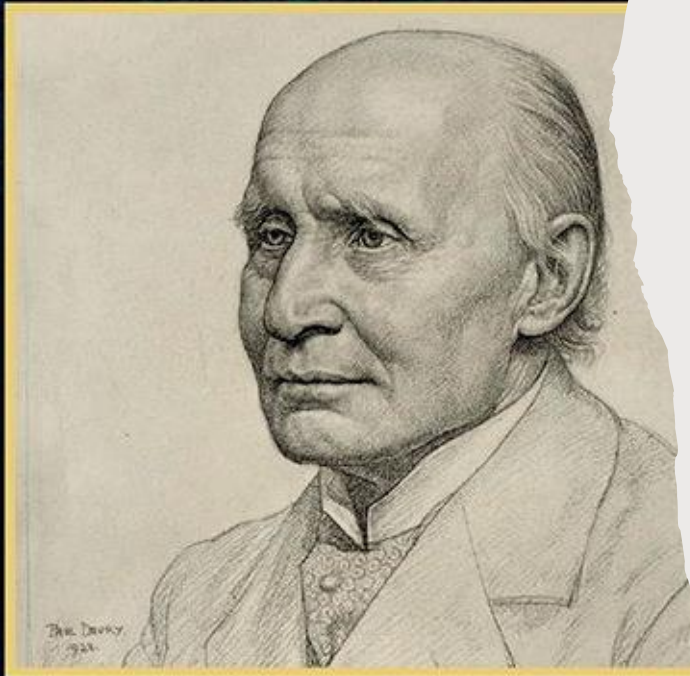


THE EDINBURGH CRITICAL EDITION OF
THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

The Harvard Lectures
**Alfred North
Whitehead**

1925–1927

General Metaphysical Problems



EDITED BY BRIAN G. HENNING, JOSEPH PETEK, GEORGE

Whitehead's cosmology is a metaphysical system that seeks universal truths about the processual nature of reality, including creativity and God.

Latour's cosmology, in contrast, is contingent (based on interactions) and grounded in sociological analysis, aiming to reveal and challenge the ways in which modernity constructs and denies hybrids (blending of facts and people).

While Whitehead seeks a harmonious synthesis, Latour deconstructs the boundaries and power dynamics of modernity's frameworks.

