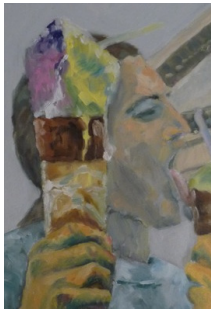


Possibility, Novelty, and Creativity

ABSTRACT: This is a work in progress. I am trying to develop an account of possibility that is consistent with the changing world of our experience. Possibility is often viewed as something that has the same form as actuality, minus existence. Or it is taken that what a possibility is, is a (re)combination of the elements of actuality. Neither of these views of possibility can countenance radical novelty. Using Bergson and Whitehead, I begin to construct an account of possibility compatible with genuine novelty.



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The Problem

Genuine novelty is the introduction and creation of new things, relations, and affections in the world. Human experience constantly confronts us with novelty in surprising, intimate ways (spotting new freckles, a great cup of hot chocolate, budding flowers) and in more time-extended, sweeping ways (the invention of the automobile, the Little Ice Age, the development of *Homo sapiens*). Yet things are the same; the novel always contains what has

already been as a component, but with some modification.

When doing metaphysics, I want to take this aspect of human experience seriously. I do not want to make the world of human experience secondary to some ineffable realm. Because our experience is an aspect of the real world, an account of novelty must acknowledge that the novel things that emerge in the course of events are *genuine*. That is, they are metaphysically significant and ontologically real. I want to construct a metaphysic that accommodates

pervasive change and novelty, one that accommodates radical novelty.

This is, however, a drastic change from much contemporary metaphysical work.¹ The way change is dealt with metaphysically often renders our most intimate interactions and feelings an unimportant component of reality, if it is considered at all. Thus, the reworking of many fundamental notions is required in order to make sense of the ideas of change and novelty.

One of these notions is possibility. Commonly held notions of possibility, such as an existence-less form (a possible object – a plaid apple, for example), or possibility as a rearrangement of the elements of actuality (taking what actually exists and putting it in new combinations – horse + horn = unicorn), drain all significance from the notion of novelty.

In this paper, I attempt to revise our notion of possibility using Bergson and Whitehead's ideas by creating a picture that does not entail possible objects, but allows for a creative actuality and radical novelty. This modified view of possibility will provide a basis for understanding higher, more complex and coordinated forms of novelty.

Possible as Less than the Actual

A common view of possibility takes the possible to be less than the actual. That is, the possible has the same detailed form as the actual, but is lacking a crucial element of concreteness – existence. These existence-less forms are *possibilia*, or possible objects.² For example, if it is possible for me to get my hair cut a certain way, that

possible haircut remains in its peculiar state of ideal being until I do in fact get my hair cut that way. Then the possibility becomes an actuality.

There is a passage from the possible to the actual; everything actual was preceded by possibility. Existence sweeps forward and fills in forms. Because possibility is less than actuality, it is in some sense prior to actuality, and thus the capability exists, in principle, to know and examine possibilities long before they become actualities. Because novel features of new events are, in principle, knowable beforehand, the features are not novel-in-themselves.

If this is the case, what is novelty? Novelty in actuality could only be the actualization itself. If the form precedes its realization, what is novel about the realization other than the fact that it is now actual? Nothing is wrong with including the newness of existence as an aspect of novelty, but merely adding existence to a form does not capture the idea of genuine novelty. Both the strange stick figure I drew this morning and the invention of the digital camera would, in this view, be novel in the same way: they both now exist, and the fact of existence is the only aspect of novelty. If all novel things are novel in the same way, there is nothing really novel about them; the novelty of uniqueness immediately grows stale. If possibility is really less than the actual and simply filled in with existence, novelty is a sterile concept.

Something more is meant by novelty, however. The novelty of something is more than its mere existence; it is also fresh. There is the air of 'nothing has been quite like this' – it is the novelty

1. I am referring to roughly the last fifty or sixty years in the analytic tradition, including philosophers such as W.V.O. Quine, Saul Kripke, Roderick Chisholm, David Lewis, and so on, though issues concerning novelty and change have been around for much longer.

2. This characterization of possibility applies to talk about possible worlds. Possible worlds and the *possibilia* inhabiting them are existence-less forms. Even David Lewis's extreme realism about possible worlds fits in rather well here; in this



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of vibrancy.³ Bare existence does not capture this. The concreteness of this particular *occurrence* (existence) in the world must be appealed to, but to get to that point, this understanding of possibility must be rejected.

The Combinatorial View of Possibility

Combinatorialism is a theory of possibility that views the possible as less than the actual, but does not view possibilities as ideally preexistent. It takes the possible to be a rearrangement of what is actual.⁴ If what is actual (real) in the world can be combined or recombined in some way – any way – that recombination is a possibility. There can be novel combinations—combinations that have not ever had an instantiation. Novel combinations add more than mere existence; through the newness of arrangement they add a quality of ‘nothing is quite like this.’

In fact, every moment and alteration of objects and events heralds a novel combination. A particular handbag is the first and only handbag that is that particular combination of elements which is just like it is. Novel combinations abound in the world. Thus a combinatorial view of possibility seems to give us a doctrine of *pervasive genuine novelty*, or radical novelty.

Though leading toward explaining radical novelty, there are some shortfalls in combinatorialism. Because possibility is defined in terms of actuality, it is not possible for new actuality to exist. Indeed, in this view, actuality takes on many of the characteristics of

Parmenidean *being*: what is actual now is what was actual before and what will be actual later. Only arrangement changes.

This denies full actuality to things-in-combination, like desks and apples, which constitute the entirety of our experienced lives. Thus possibility is still less than actuality, and the critiques of ideally preexistent possibility (predictability, immediate staleness, etc.) will apply as well, though perhaps in slightly modified forms.

In addition, an aspect of a strong doctrine of metaphysical novelty (radical novelty) is that new actualities come into existence; ontology itself changes. Combinatorial possibility holds that there is some ontological level that does not change but merely shifts, and this level takes the name actuality. Thus, novelty only appears at the levels in which the elements of actuality are rearranged. Combinatorial possibility gives us a notion of novelty for experience, but at the expense of the reality of our experienced world. This makes novelty superficial. For a deep, radical novelty, we must find a different model of possibility, keeping in mind the insights of the combinatorial view.

Possible as More than the Actual

If possibility were to have ideal form preceding reality, the possible would have existed through all time, awaiting its realization, allowing itself to be foreseen, and thus extinguishing any life in the notion of novelty. Henri Bergson believes

3. Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996): 75.

4. cf. D.M. Armstrong, *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

that speaking of possibility as a form without concrete existence involves a fundamental conflation of two distinct senses of possibility. In one sense, possibility is less than and precedes actuality only in the sense that some event is not-impossible.⁵ Something is not impossible if there is no contradiction in it occurring. This is a negative statement and attributes no definite form to what is possible, but merely gives a condition for realization. Though the combinatorial theory of possibility falls short of accommodating novelty, it gives an insightful image of what we can conceptualize as non-impossibilities.

Possibility as an ideal form, on the other hand, actually presupposes actuality and adds to it; it is actuality in its every detail plus the mental act of recognizing it. As such, it cannot come prior to actuality. By conflating possibility as 'not-impossible' and possibility as 'ideal form or *possibilia*', one can arrive at the conclusion that *possibilia* have all the descriptive characteristics of actuality and can be predicted or known before occurring.

Think for a moment about *Hamlet*. For that exact play to be possible, Shakespeare himself is needed in the exact circumstances under which the play was written. The details are of supreme importance. For *Hamlet* to have taken on the character it did, the person writing it must have thought, felt, and experienced what Shakespeare did; that is, Shakespeare and his society are necessary, as are the conditions for that society, *et cetera*. Every bit of the actuality of *Hamlet* and the actuality it presupposes must be contained within

the ideal form of *Hamlet*. Thus the possibility of *Hamlet*, taken as an ideal possibility, requires the existence of *Hamlet*.⁶ To characterize *Hamlet* in all its detail would be to invent it. If such a characterization existed prior to Shakespeare's writing *Hamlet*, if Shakespeare merely recognized the "*Hamlet-form*", Shakespeare did not really invent *Hamlet*. The novelty of *Hamlet* is lost, as is Shakespeare's creative genius.

Bearing the above in mind, to preserve novelty, we must hold that the possible precedes the actual only if possible is taken to mean not-impossible. Possibility as an ideal form occurs retroactively to actuality. This reworking of the idea of possibility has created space for an account of novelty.

The novel still has conditions, however. The first is that what is novel is, at the time of its actualization, not impossible; that is, the actuality of what does exist cannot conspire against the coming into being of the novel thing. It is necessary for novelty to be not-impossible, but is that sufficient? At first blush, no. In a deeper sense, however, it is; more must be extracted from the notion of not-impossible.

Conditions of Novelty

The notion of radical novelty, if true, entails that novelty is continuously produced throughout the universe. Every new moment of existence is radically novel, an extension of the past, mixed with new and unforeseen flavors. Though it is an incomplete order, there is an order underlying the pulse of the universe. If something radically

5. Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real," in *Key Writings: Henri Bergson*, ed. Kieth Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, 223-232 (New York: Continuum, 2002): 230.

6. Ibid: 230 (including the *Hamlet* example).



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new is, prior to its actualization, something simply not-impossible, what carries forward recognizable order into the future? If every moment of existence contains a radically new element and there are no conditions on this element other than its non-impossibility, what keeps the undeniable pattern of events from swerving wildly and completely?

Something being not-impossible assures a limited accord with the past. On the face of it (taking into account only contemporaneous occasions of actuality), the sudden and rapid degeneration of a hunk of gold into powder does not seem impossible – there are no physical impediments, and so on—but that occurrence fails to take into account the propagation of modes of order throughout successive occasions of existence.

The weight of the past bears on the possibility (non-impossibility) of the future. For this to be the case, a definite transmission of affective force from present existence to future existence is required.⁷ The affective forces of an occasion of existence are those elements that are felt by consequent occasions of existence. The parts of an existence that are transmitted from past to future are the dominant features of the experience of that existence. An experience is comprised of elements that have some effect, or alter the character of, the experiencer. It is components of the experience that are transferred, not the experience itself; it is the power of an element in experience that is transferred. An occasion of existence that is affected by an affective force is different than it would have been otherwise.

The basic character of the future is the character

given by the present, and thus the past. The modifications to this character are a result of the introduction of radically novel elements. However, the modifications must not be excluded by the current characteristics dominant in actuality, including modifications dominant for a stretch of actuality.

There is a major objection to this line of thought; it commits itself to saying that novelty issues from nothingness (*ex nihilo*). This is absurd, even if it is correct that the weight of actuality sets exclusion conditions on novelty. Novelty obviously cannot come from ‘the weight of actuality’; novelty is supposed to introduce foreign elements into actuality, and actuality cannot provide what it does not have. Novelty also cannot derive from a formed possibility, as in exists only after and in virtue of the fullness of actuality. If the actual cannot beget the novel, and if possibility in any strong or ideal sense is a consequent, not an antecedent, of actuality, then novelty must come from nothing.

Novelty, or what is called novelty, seems to require some measure of conformity to the past, but how can we actuality place limits on *nothing*? Even if something could come from nothing, there is no reason why limits or conditions could be placed on such a something – it is generated completely external to actuality and its influence. Thus novelty *ex nihilo* would have no regard for any order, and this is clearly not something that can be said of everything, possibly anything, radical novelty is intended to apply to.

This objection may seem intractable, but it turns on a muddled notion of ‘nothing’. By clarifying the notion of nothing, the seeming impossibility

7. For example, consider a glass resting on a table; throughout successive moments it continues to sit on the table because the table contributes a force to that glass’s experiences, so it does not move downward.

of the emergence of novelty ex nihilo and the influence of actuality on such nothingness will vanish.

Nothing as Everything

Similar to the confusion between two distinct senses of possibility, there is confusion between two distinct senses of nothing. The first, most basic way of using the word ‘nothing’ means ‘the absence of what we are seeking.’ The other sense of ‘nothing’ means, roughly, ‘absolute emptiness.’ We do not experience absolute emptiness, however. There are always limitations and contours. Emptiness, as we experience it, is a substitution of one thing for another (a ‘ring’ for ‘some air’), with the suppression of one end of the substitution. This is the only way we mean emptiness. Absolute emptiness is a universal substitution and suppression of all the elements of our experience. As Henri Bergson put it:

In other words, this so-called representation of absolute emptiness is, in reality, that of universal fullness in a mind which leaps indefinitely from part to part, with the fixed resolution never to consider anything but the emptiness of its dissatisfaction instead of the fullness of things. All of which amounts to saying that the idea of Nothing, when it is not that of a single word, implies as much matter as the idea of All, with, in addition, an operation of thought.⁸

When considering emptiness, we seek nothing and are satisfied by nothing, turning a blind eye

to everything. We think we know what absolute emptiness could be, but ignore the fact that simply through *considering* we consider something, thus ignoring the “fullness of things” which confronts us.⁹ Thus, like the notion of possibility, the notion of nothingness itself contains the whole of actuality with the addition of a particular mode of thought.

These considerations wholly alter the criticism leveled against creation ex nihilo. Creation ex nihilo is really creation ex omnibus; it is creation from everything. The entire universe is conspiring, in its way, to the creation of every fact of existence. But phrasing it creation ex nihilo still bears a purpose. The most salient feature of creation, captured by the word ‘nothing’ is its indeterminacy—its impenetrability to perfect foresight or complete characterization.

‘Nothing’ also captures the reach beyond actuality better than ‘everything.’ That which is indeterminate must lie beyond established fact. Thus the reach is beyond actuality. Novelty is an issue of the universe’s creative process, from which it pulls new affective elements into determination. One cannot ‘see’ or determine precisely from whence novelty springs. Novelty is issued from the infinitude of everything, overwhelming and yet indeterminate, yielding it the name nothing.

We could leave it here, saying that novelty is the result of the universe’s mutual determination of some indeterminacy. But a person could still ask: What is ‘everything’ such that it leaps beyond actuality into indeterminacy? By affirming indeterminacy as an aspect of

8. Bergson, “The Possible and the Real”: 229-30.

9. c.f. Malebranche: “To think of nothing and not to think at all, to perceive nothing and not to perceive at all, are the same thing.”

Nicholas Malebranche, *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God*, trans. Dominick A. Iorio (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980): 67.



everything, it is something, not nothing (which seems merely to indicate the ineffable character of the indeterminate). Leaving a description of the indeterminate as simply, 'that which is not impossible' seems like premature mysticism.

But the indeterminate *is* 'that which is not impossible', provided it is understood the right way. There is only so far one can probe the character of the genuinely indeterminate, 'that which is not impossible.' As a preliminary step, Alfred North Whitehead's doctrine of Eternal Objects can be viewed as a positive partial rendering of creation *ex nihilo*.

The Indeterminate: Eternal Objects

To best describe how eternal objects can be viewed as the indeterminate source of novelty, a better idea is needed of what an eternal object is. Reference to objects involves "reference to a realm of entities which transcend that immediate occasion in that they have analogous or different connections with other occasions of experience."¹⁰ Thus, an object is that which can recur in separate occasions of experience.

What defines an object and gives it its character is the affective tone¹¹ that it contributes to the overall occasion of experience. The more abstract one gets in isolating these contributions of affective tone, the broader the perceived potential connection with other occasions of experience. 'Rug' is more abstract and thus more broadly applicable than 'green rug next to the desk'. This realm of abstracted objects capable of

broad ingression into occasions of experience can be termed the realm of eternal objects, or ideal entities.

This realm can also be characterized as potentialities for actuality. The realm of ideal entities is infinitely large – there is nowhere actuality cannot go, that creativity cannot reach. This infinitude is the indeterminacy. It is the indeterminateness of specific realizations of these ideal entities that keep these possibilities from being ideally pre-existent; that is, no specific arrangement of eternal objects exists prior to actualization. When something happens, it is new. How indeterminacy accomplishes this and how the realm of ideal entities is indeterminate will soon become clearer.

First, ideal entities are indeterminate due to their necessary reference beyond themselves. They are possibilities for actuality, so they necessarily refer to definite actualities. Also, they do not ingress into actuality singly; ideal entities are related to all other ideal entities based on potentiality of joined realization. The relations an ideal entity bears to other ideal entities and to occasions of actuality are parts of its essence, as is the peculiar character of that ideal entity. The way 'red' stands in regard to other ideal entities and to realizations of actuality are part of its essence, as is the affective tone peculiar to it.¹² Because ideal entities are infinite, one can not give an exhaustive account of the essence of 'red.'

There is always the ingression of some hierarchical set of ideal entities into a new occasion of actuality. The sets, and thus the hierarchies, are

10. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925): 227.

11. An affective tone is similar to an affective force, described earlier. The affective tone of an object or an occasion of experience is the set of affective forces it contributes to other occasions of experience.

12. These two aspects seem to be co-determined.

undetermined prior to ingression, e.g. unformed. Formation occurs during actualization, so the realm of ideal entities is indeterminate as to what complex affective tone ingresses into occasions of experience. When Whitehead calls the realm of ideal entities “numberless”¹³, he means both that its membership is infinite, and that it is indeterminate and thus uncountable and able to be referred to only as a whole, that the realm of ideal entities is both a multiplicity and a unity.

The realm of ideal entities could be thought of as a membrane with knots of affective energy. There is no definite structure to the membrane prior to actualization. In actualization, the ideal entities are graded with respect to their relevance and contribution to that occasion, forming the hierarchical structure of the set of ideal entities.¹⁴ Thereby, the realm of ideal entities is a ‘something’ in ‘everything,’ but is ‘nothing’ until its ingression into actuality.

Therefore possibility in the form of ideal entities has genuine ‘universal fullness’ while retaining indeterminacy prior to actualization. It is in the creation of definiteness out of infinitude – in the process of actualization – where novelty can be found.

Novelty: The Issue of Infinitude

During the process of actualization, the weight of the past and its transmission of affective character determines what is not-impossible for the new occasion. This is an initial limitation on what set of ideal entities can ingress into that occasion; there must be some conformity with

the prevailing affective tone. The definite set that ingresses into the new actuality is novel. It is a novel, complex affective tone, and it is one that did not exist prior to its ingression.

This novel tone interacts with the old tone, generating a third, novel tone at the perishing of that occasion of existence. Thus, what is novel is a new affective tone of experience. From this, it follows that every occasion of existence is novel. Each is created in the process whereby new sets of ideal entities merge with the old; radical novelty is every moment of existence. From the infinitude of ideal entities, novelty is produced due to a generation of finitude from the infinite. A novel finite determination is created from what exists in infinitude. Actuality is this finitude; its definiteness generates the individuality requisite for the agglomeration of affective experience.

It has been shown that the notion of possibility, properly construed, can cohere with the doctrine of perpetual radical novelty. The creative advance of nature does not need to be relegated to a lesser order of reality, and this is important for any attempt at a comprehensive and meaningful metaphysic.

13. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968): 167.

14. Gradation of ideal entities refers to the hierarchical ordering of ideal entities based on the contribution they make to the character of an occasion of experience. The more an ideal entity contributes of its character, the higher it sits in the hierarchy. This captures the idea that some ideal entities are a more salient fact in some occasions of experience than in others; some experiences are much more ‘red’ (or ‘bright,’ or ‘joyous’...) than others.

