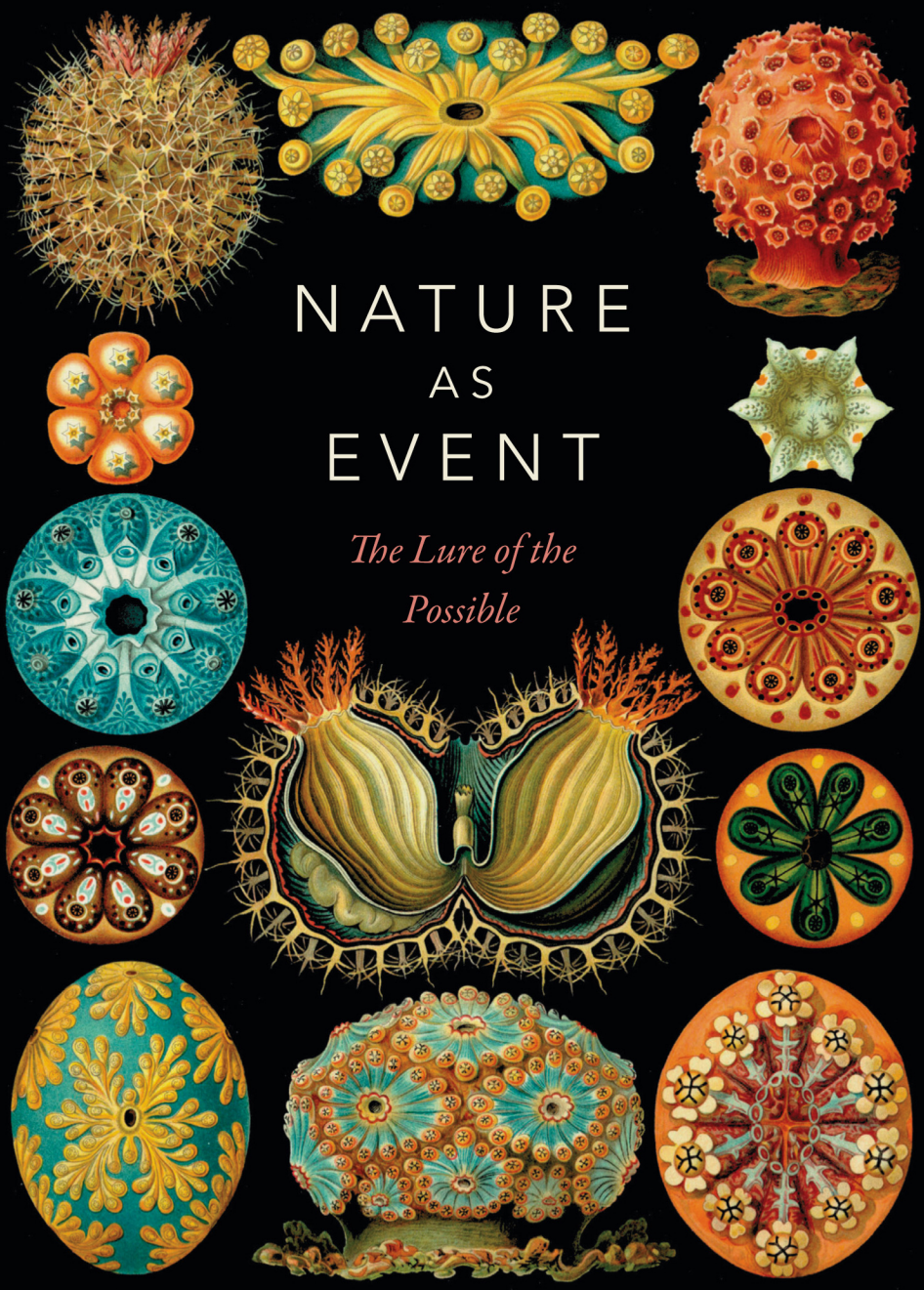

NATURE AS EVENT

The Lure of the Possible

DIDIER DEBAISE

Nature as Event

THOUGHT IN THE ACT

A series edited by

Erin Manning and Brian Massumi

Nature as Event

The Lure of the Possible

DIDIER DEBAISE

Translated by Michael Halewood

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Introduction

Our experience of nature is threatened by a growing tension between, on the one hand, the modern conception of nature that we have inherited, permeating each of our thoughts, and, on the other, current ecological changes.[1] It seems that this tension has today reached a point of no return. The concepts we deploy, the abstractions we construct, our very modes of thought are no longer able to deepen or develop our experience of nature; they only obscure its meaning.

This book aims to outline the conditions for a different way of thinking about nature by rekindling certain propositions that can be found in the philosophy of Whitehead. This return to Whitehead might appear surprising. Although his work on cosmology has been hailed by philosophers as diverse as Bergson, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze, beyond these specific instances his work has remained little known and has had little influence.[2] It is perhaps this position on the margins of the principal movements in contemporary philosophy that explains the renewed interest in Whitehead's thought over recent years. It seems that the reasons for his marginal status are precisely those that now make his work so relevant, as if the strangeness of the questions that animated him, and the speculative and cosmological claims that pervade his work, were inaudible for a time but have today, and against all expectations, become central to current concerns.[3] By developing recent texts on Whitehead's philosophy, I will suggest that

his work provides new tools for thinking the modern invention of nature and also establishes the conditions for going beyond this, moving toward what I would like to call a "universal mannerism."[4]

This book, therefore, has two aims: to show that the modern conception of nature does not express any genuine ontological position (dualist or monist) but is essentially *operative*, and it is the status of these operations that needs to be traced and questioned if we want to understand how a specific representation of nature has come to impose itself upon us. The heart of this operation, its constitutive gesture, its hallmark, is the division of nature into two heterogeneous modes of existence, whose paradigmatic expression is the difference between "primary" and "secondary" qualities. It is from this distinction that all of the divisions between beings, all the oppositions between their attributes and their aspects, are derived: existence and value; real nature and apparent nature; fact and interpretation. The second aim involves introducing the term "universal mannerism" to indicate a way of overcoming the strictures imposed by this operation. I want to argue that being and manner are intermingled and that there are as many modes of existence in nature as there are ways of experiencing, of feeling, of making sense, and of granting importance to things. The sense of value, of importance, and of purpose—which in our modern experience of nature come under the notion of "psychic additions," of projections by humans of something onto nature that it would otherwise lack—are to be found everywhere, from the most elementary forms of life of microorganisms to reflexive consciousness. The speculative question that runs through this book is as follows: how to grant due importance to the multiplicity of ways of being within nature?

CHAPTER ONE

The Cosmology of the Moderns

My primary aim is to take up, while also trying to update, Whitehead's protest against what he calls "the bifurcation of nature." Although this phrase might, at first sight, appear a little puzzling, it designates the collection of experiential, epistemological, and political operations that were present at the origin of the modern conception of nature, a concept whose effects can still be felt today. Before moving on to a full analysis, I will start by providing some context.

The phrase "bifurcation of nature" appears in Whitehead's first truly philosophical book, *The Concept of Nature*, published in 1920. By this time, Whitehead had already produced an important body of work. He was well known for his work in mathematics, especially for co-writing *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell. However, *The Concept of Nature* marked a turning point. This is the first text in which Whitehead sets out the task that will characterize all his later philosophical developments: "The object of the present volume and of its predecessor is to lay the basis of a natural philosophy which is the necessary presupposition of a reorganised speculative physics."[1] It is certainly possible to find ideas in Whitehead's earlier texts that lead up to *The Concept of Nature*, notably in *An Inquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, which appeared in 1919. But it is only in this text from 1920 that Whitehead starts a systematic inquiry into the abstractions of science, one that will later develop and extend to cover

all aspects of experience, most notably in his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*. For the moment, the important point to note is that in this text from 1920 Whitehead presents himself as a scientist, declaring a fundamental crisis in his discipline, namely the natural sciences. Getting beyond this crisis will involve a complete reorientation. This is one of the constant obsessions of his work, and Whitehead clarifies his point in a later text, *Science and the Modern World*: "The progress of science has now reached a turning point. The stable foundations of physics have broken up: also for the first time physiology is asserting itself as an effective body of knowledge, as distinct from a scrap-heap. The old foundations of scientific thought are becoming unintelligible. Time, space, matter, material, ether, electricity, mechanism, organism, configuration, structure, pattern, function, all require reinterpretation."[2]

This situating of bifurcation within the context of modern science does not, however, restrict its importance to one particular field. The whole of modern philosophy is touched by the error of bifurcation. Whitehead says no more about this, and it is up to us to grasp the implications for ourselves, including the shift from modern science to the whole of modern natural philosophy. Nevertheless, two elements can be identified in this brief passage that will help clarify the status of bifurcation. First, importance appears to be relativized. It is not a constant that runs through the history of the experience of nature, setting itself up as some transcendental form, of which different conceptions of nature are merely figures or expressions. Instead, importance is historically situated. It would certainly be wrong to state that there is one moment that represents the absolute genesis of bifurcation, for the historical influences are numerous, and its conceptual conditions are rooted in the distant past. However, in no way does this vitiate the idea that this bifurcation is, in its efficacy, genuinely historically located. Implicitly, it is a matter of an epochal, or historical, theory of nature. Second, Whitehead grants bifurcation a field of application that seems, a priori, to be unlimited, as he states that the modern period is "entirely coloured" by it.[3]

The concept of bifurcation originated in the development of modern science. There is no doubt about this. It was during an analysis of the invention of the modern science, and its particular place in the

history of science, that Whitehead coined the term, to identify its constitutive operation. Nevertheless, even if its origin can be located in experimental practices, the question of bifurcation is not restricted to one specific domain of modern experience: it is the origin of a global transformation at all levels of experience. In other texts, Whitehead talks of a "predominant interest"[4] that operates as both the source and the expression of any cosmology, affecting all dimensions, from the epistemological to aesthetic and moral experiences of nature. It is at this point that he attributes a first function to philosophy, one that will subsequently configure its other functions: "Philosophy, in one of its functions, is the critic of cosmologies. It is its function to harmonise, refashion, and justify divergent intuitions as to the nature of things. It has to insist on the scrutiny of the ultimate ideas, and on the retention of the whole of the evidence in shaping our cosmological scheme."[5]

Thus, these two aspects coincide: locating bifurcation within a particular epoch might seem to reduce its importance by making it "historical," but it enables Whitehead to grant it an unrivalled scope, one which operates at all levels of experience.

The Gesture of Bifurcation

Having clarified the context in which the concept of bifurcation originated, it is now possible to give more detail regarding its constitution and to ask directly: What exactly is the bifurcation of nature? In the very first pages of *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead provides a definition, in the form of a protest: "What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons that are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality that is there for knowledge; although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind."[6]

This passage has been the subject of a series of misreadings and misunderstandings with regard to how bifurcation should be understood. It is necessary to take this passage at face value, in order to develop a better grasp of what is at stake in the challenge that it makes and to inherit