

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Consciousness: Extraordinary Challenges for Contemporary Science edited by John H. Buchanan and Christopher M. Aanstoos. Process Century Press, 2020. 248 pp. \$20.00 (paperback). ISBN-13: 9781940447438.

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This slender volume is the twentieth member of a series entitled “Toward Ecological Civilization,” organized under the leadership of distinguished process philosopher and process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. It grew directly from the 10th Whitehead International Conference, held in Claremont, California, June 2015, and more particularly from a single conference track (out of the more than 80 making up the program) devoted specifically to various kinds of “extraordinary experiences” (especially parapsychological and transpersonal experiences) that directly challenge the materialist/physicalist worldview which arose in the 17th century and still dominates the contemporary scientific, educational, and cultural mainstream. The central premises of the series as a whole, the 2015 conference, and the present volume are that postmodern civilization faces life-threatening crises rooted in that impoverished physicalist worldview, that we desperately need a more commodious, life-affirming, and ecologically sound alternative to it, and that Whitehead’s metaphysical vision can help take us in the needed direction. Like Stanley Krippner in the book’s brief Foreword, I am strongly sympathetic to these views.

A helpful Introduction by the editors expands somewhat on this

general background and then briefly sketches the chapter-by-chapter content of the book.

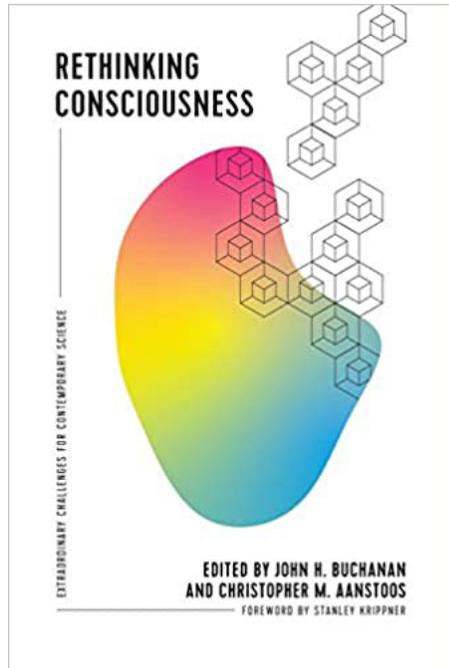
In Chapter 1—“Denigration of the Subject in Late Modern Thought”—John B. Cobb, Jr., himself incisively surveys the history and consequences of the progressive concentration of science on the material or “objective” side of Descartes’s conceptual bifurcation of the natural world. Particularly in the wake of Darwin’s work on evolution, Aristotle’s final causes—purpose and teleology—largely disappear in favor of efficient or mechanical causation, while consciousness itself becomes epiphenomenal and ineffectual, or identified with physical processes in the brain. We, like all other animals, are really nothing but complicated machines. The computational theory of the mind (CTM) arises from the ashes of Watson’s radical behaviorism and remains ascendant today in psychology and neuroscience. Psychiatry revolves increasingly around cells, molecules, and pills. We “objectify” everything. In the economic realm, Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” which had been firmly anchored to a shared sense of community, becomes detached from any such ethical constraints with the result that other humans, animals, and the resources of the planet in general become increasingly subject to greedy and reckless exploitation for commercial gain.

The word “materialism,” which initially denoted just the metaphysical position, acquires its other meaning of a lifestyle devoted to self-aggrandizing consumption. One cumulative result of these pernicious socioeconomic trends—global warming—now threatens our very existence, and this leaves aside additional ever-present threats such as possibilities of nuclear holocaust and further global pandemics. Yet for all its perils Cobb also sees this postmodern period as a time of great opportunity, in which we can potentially save ourselves and the planet by carrying forward a separate tradition, represented in the work of people such as William James and Alfred North Whitehead, which puts the conscious experience of effective human agents at the center of its scientific and philosophical concerns. A contest is under way between these radically divergent worldviews, and our collective fate may well be determined by which side prevails. The story of this contest remains to be told in much fuller detail, but Cobb’s picture is surely more or less correct in outline.

Next comes a typically strong chapter by eminent process philosopher David Ray Griffin on “Parapsychology and Whiteheadian Panexperientialism,” which briefly summarizes themes he has written about more extensively before (Griffin, 1997, 1998). The scientific controversies over parapsychology arise from apparent conflict with materialism in its two historically primary forms—an early version combining a mechanistic conception of nature with human souls and a God, and the more modern version dating from late nineteenth century which is mechanistic, materialistic, and atheistic throughout. Whitehead, however, building especially upon the late work of William James, elaborated a richer metaphysical vision which seems able to accommodate most parapsychological phenomena and yet also appears compatible with fundamental developments in modern physics such as relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Griffin provides an outline of relevant parts of that vision, emphasizing Whitehead’s restoration of final causation and his introduction of the concept of non-sensate “prehension” between “occasions of experience” (the fundamental units of his metaphysical system), which allows for action at a distance and hence potentially accounts for both receptive and expressive forms of psi. He then surveys some of the main lines of evidence which have persuaded him of the reality of telepathy and clairvoyance, including both spontaneous cases (of which there are thousands), and laboratory experiments such as the Maimonides dream studies, remote viewing, and Ganzfeld research. Given the strength of this evidence, he wonders, why is parapsychology still so often viewed as “pseudoscience” and not more widely accepted by the scientific community?

After addressing and dismissing some of the usual claims of supposed a priori incompatibility between psi phenomena and established science, he focuses on the one form of psi—true precognition—that he believes really deserves such treatment. He is well aware of the substantial body of apparent evidence for precognition, but insists that this purported psi phenomenon, unlike its siblings, is *logically impossible*: Its ostensible causes do not yet exist and hence cannot cause anything. Moreover, even if they did exist they would be subject to the destructive argument against retrocausation by Braude (1991, pp. 256-277). Precognition also seems to imply determinism and the negation of free will, both of which Griffin rejects. Ostensible evidence

for precognition therefore *must* be—and in fact often easily *can* be—explained in alternative ways, of which he provides several examples. Finally, surmising further that precognition is our primary obstacle to scientific acceptability, he urges parapsychologists to strike it from the list of accredited psi phenomena. I believe we should decline to accept this recommendation, partly because some of the evidence seems too strong to dismiss in the suggested ways, and also because Griffin has not exhausted the possibilities of



accommodating true precognition theoretically without sacrificing free will (see Kelly et al., 2015, Ch. 13, pp. 455, 465, Ch. 14, pp. 526-530; Rosenberg, 2021). Apart from this specific disagreement, however, I strongly support Griffin's more fundamental contention as to the continuing value of Whitehead for parapsychological and transpersonal theorizing.

The next chapter is by veteran parapsychologist John Palmer, who had previously engaged directly with Griffin in a very constructive dialogue concerning Whitehead and parapsychology (Griffin, 1993; Palmer, 1993; Griffin, 1994). Surprisingly, none of that material appears or is even referenced here; instead, Palmer now contributes a wide-ranging commentary on parapsychological research and theory that appears intended mainly for newcomers to the field. Considering first the existing experimental evidence for the reality of psi, he properly dismisses the possibility of individually perfect or conclusive experiments, and turns instead to meta-analyses of the Ganzfeld, Remote Viewing, RNG PK, and DMILS paradigms, all highly significant. He next advocates for process-oriented vs. proof-oriented research and for engaging critics

in the effort to explain how apparent instances of psi occur. A notable recent trend is the turn toward “implicit psi” paradigms such as the Bem experiments, Decision Augmentation Theory (DAT), studies of experimenter psi, and the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), which may provide direct evidence in support of the transpersonal worldview if its chief architect Roger Nelson can be ruled out as the primary source of the observed effects. Turning next to postmortem survival, he first sketches the present stalemate between survival and living-agent psi interpretations of mediumistic communications and suggests that progress might result from shifting emphasis toward study of unusual skills such as those that sometimes appear in rebirth cases.

He next examines a pro-survival argument set forth in Chapter 6 of *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al., 2007), based on NDES occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest, and without dwelling excessively here upon the details I think Palmer underestimates the force of that argument in several ways: First, he gives too much credit to the various proposed “normal” physiological explanations. Second, he underestimates the strength of individual cases like those of Pam Reynolds and Eben Alexander; his expressed doubts about the severity of the latter’s impairment, for example, have been decisively undermined by a subsequent review of his 600+-page medical record by three physicians (Khanna et al., 2018). These cases come straight from the heartland of contemporary biomedical science, and it appears virtually certain that we will encounter more and even better ones as resuscitation medicine improves its ability to retrieve patients from the borderland of death. Finally, Palmer also misreads the specific purpose of our argument, which was aimed not at providing direct evidence for survival, but at showing that consciousness can operate intensely in the absence of physiological conditions believed by virtually all contemporary neuroscientists to be necessary for conscious experience of any sort. Such cases conflict with the conventional “production” interpretation of brain/mind correlations, and directly support the alternative “filter” or “transmission” or “permission” interpretation formulated by William James, F. W. H. Myers, Henri Bergson, and others, and this in turn removes the key *logical* obstacle to the possibility of postmortem survival—the “immovable object” of Gardner Murphy (1961; see

also Kelly, 2021). In the final section of his chapter Palmer turns to existing theories of psi, classifying these under two main headings—psychological and physical—but chooses to discuss only theories of the latter type, briefly touching upon Dean Radin’s double-slit work, the “Observational Theories” of psi, and some quantum theories of consciousness. The world described by Quantum Theory definitely seems more psi-friendly than the world described by classical physics, even if we cannot at present work out all the relevant details.

The following Chapter 4, by James Carpenter, is by far the longest in the book. Titled “Parapsychology Needs a Theory—and It Has One”, it picks up on the other side of Palmer’s theory classification by providing an overview of his “First Sight Theory” (FST), a leading example of a well-developed *psychological* theory of psi. Spontaneous phenomena can certainly be impressive, but they are also notoriously infrequent, fugitive, and unpredictable. Carpenter’s strategy is to pursue order and understanding primarily in the context of experimental studies of psi, of which he provides a brief history culminating initially in crystallization of that tradition in the form of the carefully controlled card-guessing and dice-tumbling methods developed by J. B. Rhine and his co-workers at Duke. Several further generations of experimental work of various kinds have produced large amounts of additional evidence for psi, and yet the field remains academically marginal and grossly underfunded. What we most need, Carpenter believes, is a theory that can explain in particular the *amount* and *direction* of scoring in psi experiments. FST seeks to achieve this by integrating psi research with large amounts of modern mainstream work on the “cognitive unconscious,” which includes topics such as subliminal perception, priming, “blindsight,” and perception without awareness. This literature provides numerous examples of such processes, plus well-developed methods for studying them, and psi processes appear to work in analogous fashion. FST postulates that psi, far from being rare and fugitive, operates constantly in the background, entering moment-by-moment into the construction of all everyday experience, combining its effects with those of unconscious intentions, ordinary sensory, mnemonic, affective processes, and all the rest.

This generalization of the mainstream conception of a cognitive unconscious to include psi renders psi primary and in effect embeds

the human individual in a far wider spatiotemporal environment. In his chapter and especially his book, Carpenter is able to show in remarkable depth and detail how thus situating the paranormal in the context of other preconscious receptive and expressive processes allows us to understand numerous existing experimental psi findings in a way that makes excellent psychological sense. He essentially normalizes the paranormal in a fashion that mainstream cognitive neuroscientists ought to admire. For further information see Stanford (2015), who provides a thoughtful analysis of similarities and differences between FST and his own earlier but closely related psychological theory of Psi-Mediated Instrumental Response (PMIR). Let me also comment here that both PMIR and FST share with mainstream cognitive neuroscience a picture of the human psyche as consisting essentially of an emergent everyday consciousness supported by massively parallel unconscious neural computation (formerly described as “unconscious cerebration”), and nothing else. I believe that picture to be too limited and will return to this subject in the concluding section of this review.

Chapter 5 by co-editor John Buchanan, titled “First Sight: A Whiteheadian Perspective,” seeks simultaneously to ground FST in Whitehead’s metaphysics and to construe evidence for psi as supporting it. In Part One, “Whitehead and Transpersonal Anomalies,” he alludes to his own teenage encounters with powerful transpersonal experiences induced by psychedelics, briefly describes how Whitehead’s metaphysics helped him come to terms with these, and goes on to provide another sketch of relevant aspects of Whitehead’s system, making contact along the way with Stan Grof’s description of psychedelics as nonspecific amplifiers of normally unconscious contents and processes. In Part Two, “First Sight and Process Vision,” he bears down on some basic similarities between the two theories. Most fundamentally, Whitehead’s concept of prehension provides at least in abstract form the theoretical opening for psi that FST itself assumes but does not attempt to explain. Both theories are also strongly experience-centered, and they provide strikingly similar accounts of the formation of individual units of conscious experience.

I agree that there are strong affinities between the two theories, but there are important differences, too. In particular, the role of prehension in Whitehead’s process of experience-formation

(“conrescence”) is limited in ways alien to FST, in that access to past occasions is limited to the backward light cone, and access to future occasions is specifically denied, as noted above in relation to Griffin’s chapter. I should perhaps add that Whitehead has always seemed to me to share in considerable degree the 2-level picture of the human psyche mentioned above (consisting just of everyday consciousness plus its unconscious supports), which for me makes it difficult to understand transpersonal and mystical experiences, as well as extreme forms of creative genius, in the context of his metaphysics. The chapter ends with an appeal for overcoming the longstanding mutual distancing between parapsychology and transpersonal psychology, plus a prediction that when the physicalist paradigm finally collapses, as it surely will, it will be supplanted by “something much like a Whiteheadian understanding of reality” (p. 111). With these sentiments I heartily agree.

Next comes Chapter 6, “Revision and Re-enchantment of Psychology,” by Stanislav Grof. Stan Grof of course is one of the principal founders and theoreticians of transpersonal psychology, and this chapter—which he contributed following the conference—eloquently summarizes the main contours and conclusions of his lengthy career focused primarily on the healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness that he terms “holotropic” or tending toward wholeness, whether occurring spontaneously or deliberately induced using technologies such as LSD and other psychedelics or more recently his own “holotropic breathwork.” Viewing these subjects primarily through the lens of his training in various forms of psychoanalytic theory and practice, he begins by sketching the cross-cultural history of shamanic and mystical experiences suggesting the existence of a larger Self rooted in a conscious ultimate reality of some unfathomable sort.

He then explicitly rejects the prevailing physicalist metaphysics, rejects its associated production model of the brain-mind relation in favor of the filter/transmission model (p. 120), and outlines his own revised “cartography” of an expanded human psyche including perinatal, transpersonal, imaginal, archetypal, and cosmic components. He ends by testifying to the importance of spirituality in human life, distinguishing this carefully from religion (pp. 125–129), and by strongly advocating for intensified scientific study of transpersonal and mystical

experiences. I find much to admire in this summary of Grof's life work and must acknowledge that I am sympathetic to many of his basic ideas, despite his relying almost exclusively upon clinical observations to justify them. It is noteworthy, moreover—and I will return to this in the concluding section of this review—that in presenting his own conceptual framework he makes no reference whatsoever to that of Whitehead.

Chapter 7, "Amplified Subject" by Leonard Gibson, echoes and expands upon Grof's views, specifically in the context of holotropic states of consciousness induced by psychedelics. After briefly reviewing some cultural history of the subject, he discusses the phenomenology and neuroscience of psychedelics at some length, embracing along the way the Huxley/Bergson picture of the brain as reducing Mind-at-Large to the relative trickle of information needed to cope with everyday needs, and celebrates the healing potential of psychedelic experiences. He then proceeds to his main theme, which is to provide rich descriptions of the manner in which psychedelic experience can provide insight into, and perhaps directly confirm, elements of Whitehead's metaphysics. He does this under four main headings: the unreality of "time"; the felt immanence of the past in the present; transience, or the perpetual perishing and formation of occasions of experience as analogous to death and rebirth; and "enjoyment of value," or discovery of previously unsuspected harmony among superficially conflicting elements of experience.

Gibson's reference point throughout seems that of a person focused primarily on the value of psychedelics in therapeutic and personal-growth contexts, and he clearly anticipates the impending renaissance in their FDA-approved use for such purposes (see Pollan, 2018). It is now abundantly clear that psychedelics have also opened a pathway to experimental study of the phenomenology and neuroscience of mystical experiences, and like Stan Grof I hope this kind of work, already under way in various places, will flourish in coming years.

Chapter 8 by Robert McDermott, titled "David Ray Griffin on Steiner and Whitehead," consists of a mostly appreciative commentary on a paper that Griffin had presented 30 years earlier (!) at a conference centered on the theoretical and applied work of Whitehead's contemporary Rudolf Steiner. Griffin's original

presentation had meticulously analyzed the work of Steiner and Whitehead in terms of commonalities and contrasts between them, advantages of Whitehead, and advantages of Steiner. It happens that McDermott is to Steiner roughly as Griffin is to Whitehead, and in that capacity he now summarizes and comments upon Griffin's analysis. In brief, both thinkers saw reconciliation of science and spirituality as the most pressing task of modern civilization, and both sought to develop philosophies more inclusive than the prevailing physicalism, which they both rejected. Both developed philosophies centered on experience, affirmed freedom but rejected dualism, accepted universal interconnectedness and the reality of psi phenomena, and accepted the reality of evolution.

Both also advanced concepts of God as a final cause both influencing and influenced by the world process, and both belong to the general category of evolutionary panentheists. Whitehead was perhaps more focused on truth, and Steiner more on human transformation, but both were interested in both. Steiner devoted a much greater share of his own work to methods of personal growth and transformation, and to transformation of the culture at large, but from Griffin's point of view—which in these respects I share—Steiner was too strongly tied to “occultism,” and altogether too confident in his ability to predict the future. These factors have probably contributed to Steiner's declining influence, and indeed this faltering trajectory seems to me ultimately to provide an important cautionary tale: Specifically, although it is certainly not too soon to begin thinking about how to bring an improved worldview effectively to bear on our current cultural crisis, in doing so we would clearly be well-advised to take care that we have genuine consensus on the theory side, and to remain anchored as firmly as possible in real science. I thank McDermott for bringing this practical applications issue into the foreground, and before moving on let me also express, on behalf of our entire field, gratitude for his overseeing production of William James's collected papers on psychical research (James, 1986).

Chapter 9 by co-editor Christopher Aanstoos, titled “A Phenomenology of the Ecological Self,” approaches the cultural crisis framed by John Cobb in Chapter 1 from a very different direction. Rather than enlisting exceptional experiences in an effort to overthrow the

prevailing physicalism on scientific grounds, he takes that overthrow as already accomplished, driven mainly by the impending ecocatastrophe itself, and seeks instead—treating Whitehead and sundry modern phenomenologists as having already created the needed alternative worldview—to explore how we as individual humans can adapt ourselves to that real natural order in more productive ways. Others may find this useful, but I must confess to a constitutional inability to extract much meaning from most phenomenological discourse, including this, and think the exercise premature in any case as explained more fully below. In sum, this chapter seems to me to do little to advance the central purposes of the book.

The final chapter, “All Tangled Up: Life in a Quantum World” by Larry Dossey, was submitted after the conference but has the feel of an after-dinner conference wrap-up talk—breezy, entertaining, and hopeful. He begins by briefly echoing John Cobb’s assessment of how physicalism has underwritten the destructive modern plundering of our planet, but goes on to portray quantum holism, with nonlocality and entanglement as its key features, as forcing revision of that worldview in a direction more favorable to the well-being of our precious planet and all of its passengers. It is becoming more apparent that the world is quantum through and through, with effects originally identified at the subatomic level now regularly being found at larger and larger scales including our own.

Psi phenomena may be an example of this, as argued for example by Dean Radin in *Entangled Minds*, and related possibilities can perhaps be found in things such as swarming behaviors and group intelligence in various insects, fishes, birds, and mammals. There are even indications from within physics itself that consciousness is a fundamental constituent of reality and not a byproduct of physiological processes in mammalian brains. In sum, classical physics certainly captures much of reality at scales near our own, but it can no longer pretend to dictate the ultimate nature of things (Dossey, 2014). Note that Dossey, like Stan Grof, makes no reference whatsoever to Whitehead in articulating his own alternative to the prevailing physicalist metaphysics.

Having now described and commented upon its chapters individually, let me conclude with a more general evaluation of the book as a whole. As noted at the outset, I resonate strongly with its

basic premises. Our world is definitely a mess, and much of the blame can surely be traced directly or indirectly to the physicalist worldview. We desperately need an expanded science-based vision of reality that is capable of accommodating a wider range of human experience and fostering improved individual and collective human behavior, and Whitehead's metaphysics seems definitely a significant step in the right direction. I also resonate strongly to the appeals of several chapter authors for better cooperation between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, and for intensified scientific study of mystical experiences as windows into the deeper aspects of reality.

Beyond this, however, I found the book ultimately somewhat disappointing. It contains much of substance and interest, to be sure, but I see little real progress in the intended direction. To begin with, there are signs of haste in the book's production: In addition to superficial things such as numerous typos and the absence of an index, Whitehead's ideas themselves are nowhere presented in sufficient detail to allow newcomers to obtain a reasonably clear sense of the overall character of his system. Furthermore, the several chapters that do sketch his ideas overlap considerably, while others make no contact with Whitehead at all. In sum, the editors could have done much more, in my opinion, to strengthen the organization and integration of their raw material.

The book also reinforced my discomfiting prior sense that many Whitehead enthusiasts, especially those on the transpersonal psychology side, tend to see his metaphysical vision as a finished product—already perfected, complete, and static. But surely the last thing Whitehead himself would have desired is for *Process and Reality* to become some sort of sacred text or scripture. In Chapter 9 of *Irreducible Mind* (Kelly et al., 2007), my co-authors and I had introduced his metaphysics as representing a possible path forward, and David Ray Griffin thanks us here for doing so (pp. 46–47). But in our larger comparative effort that followed, Whitehead's system emerged as just one member of a sizeable family of promising conceptual frameworks or worldviews, ancient and modern, that tend strongly in broadly similar idealist/panentheist directions (Kelly et al., 2015; Kelly & Marshall, 2021). It remains to be seen which if any of these, or perhaps something else of similar type, will ultimately emerge as the best prospect.

One of the great strengths of Whitehead's system, for example, certainly lies in its apparent compatibility with developments in modern physics, but some of the other contenders can specifically lay claim to the same important property. These include, for example, Paul Marshall's "inverted" monadology (Kelly et al., 2015, Ch. 11), deriving from Leibniz who was another major influence on Whitehead, and the conceptual framework being developed by physicist and microelectronics pioneer Federico Faggin (Kelly & Marshall, 2021, Ch. 8). I have difficulties with other aspects of Whitehead's system as well, including not only its attitude toward the future and the possibility of true precognition (as discussed above in relation to Griffin's chapter), but also its privileging of occasions of experience vs. selves as its basic units.

The moral so far is that although it is certainly worthwhile to attempt grounding whatever psychological theories of psi we have in a deeper metaphysical context, as John Buchanan attempts to do for First Sight Theory using Whitehead in Chapter 5, it is by no means certain that Whitehead's system is the optimal choice for that purpose. I must also say here that although FST itself is fine as far as it goes, I doubt its own ultimate adequacy as a *psychological* theory. As indicated in my comments on Chapter 4, Carpenter's FST shares with Stanford's PMIR and current mainstream cognitive science (and to some degree with Whitehead as well), a picture of the human psyche as consisting basically of an emergent everyday consciousness plus unconscious supportive processes, and nothing else. I believe this picture is ultimately too confining, because it leaves out something essential—specifically, F. W. H. Myers's concept of the Subliminal Self, which later becomes "The More" of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*—a more comprehensive consciousness, equipped with "adits and operations" of its own, that expresses itself in shifting fashion as a function of varying conditions in the brain and body.

This is not the place to discuss these issues in depth, but only in this way, I believe, can we adequately accommodate phenomena such as psychological automatisms and secondary centers of consciousness, extreme forms of creativity, and mystical experiences. All of these involve characteristic properties of increased speed, complexity, precision, and vivacity of mental operations as the normal brain-based constraints on the operations of an underlying greater consciousness are reduced,

resulting, in Myers's terms, in "the abeyance of the supraliminal"; Kelly et al. 2007, 2015). Note that this expanded conception of our human psychological organization is also much closer to the central ideas of transpersonal psychology, as articulated by Stan Grof in the present volume, and to the world's wisdom traditions in general.

In sum, it is certainly not surprising that the present volume leans so strongly on Whitehead's system, given its provenance, but that seems to me ultimately a limitation, because Whitehead's system itself still needs to be carefully and knowledgeably updated in light of more recent developments in physics, and if possible integrated more closely with other related currents in postmodern thought, as attempted for example by Eastman (2020). There are many striking convergences between Whitehead's views and the other conceptual frameworks canvassed in our own recent books, and this gives me real hope that a non-physicalist metaphysics capable of grounding an expanded psychological theory of the Myers/James type is within reach, but the present volume ultimately does little to move us further in that direction.

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