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Stengers's Whitehead and Field Philosophy

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Abstract

In his lucid introduction, Thomas Lamarre, Stengers's translator, considers this book 'a summation of Stengers's work to date', as she 'relays' Whitehead's thought to grapple with contemporary issues in our 'times of collapse'. In this she is continuing the work of her longer *Thinking with Whitehead* that did much to relaunch the somewhat forgotten Whitehead, via Europe and back to readers in the anglosphere. This review article takes Stengers's cue to test its ideas elsewhere, specifically among the Goolarabooloo people in North-West Australia, fairly recently colonised and resisting the modernisation frontier of which Stengers is very critical. To that end, this article finds field philosophy, as in the environmental humanities, a commensurate approach, as it teases out some Indigenous Australian concepts that 'make sense in common' with Stengers's Whitehead.

Keywords

environmental humanities, field philosophy, Indigenous Australian philosophy, Stengers, Whitehead

Isabelle Stengers
Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse (translated and with an introduction by Thomas Lamarre)
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There is a vernacular usage of 'common sense' in English that can take the form of reactionary statements like: 'Marriage is about the union of a man and a woman. It's just common sense.' But, as Brian Massumi says in his back-cover endorsement, this book is about 'moving from common sense to the sense of the common'. So we have to be wary of the vernacular reduction, while also knowing that Stengers does not engage (in this book or her 2011 *Thinking with Whitehead*) with the Scottish common sense realism

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associated with 18th century figures like Thomas Reid. While the Scottish enlightenment had some influence in France (Victor Cousin), the United States, and other countries, it is not Stengers's intention to trace the intellectual history of the idea of common sense, which became a cornerstone of Whitehead's thought.

Rather, she seeks to reinvent it for our age, resurrecting in Whitehead a rather forgotten Anglo-Saxon philosopher who might be surprised, perhaps delighted, in the way she has made him relevant for thinking about contemporary struggles around climate change, science wars, and indigenous movements. In such contexts, there are no common sense givens – her sense of the common has to be 'made', worked for, as Stengers's philosophy strives to keep thought alive as the sciences, the social sciences and other modes of inquiry engage with public issues. Speaking to the present, rather than to intellectual history, Stengers's philosophy coheres and gels as her own, but always with Alfred North Whitehead in the background. As she says, she is taking up her place in a relay, grasping the baton and running with it to places of relevance in today's 'times of collapse'.

It is a complex and challenging book, very tightly written and thus hard to summarise. Such a summary would turn this review article into a betrayal of her thought. If her thought could be summarised adequately, could she have not done it herself in her precise mode of thinking through writing? But in this book every paragraph counts in the way it links with its precedent, as it spans five chapters: 'The Question of Common Sense', 'In the Grip of Bifurcation', 'A Coherence to be Created', 'What Can a Society Do?' and 'A Metamorphic Universe', each with four sub-sections.

Instead of summarising the book's arguments, I would like to put them to work 'in the field', taking up the baton in turn and seeing how they might function in relation to my work in Indigenous Australia (since I find myself beginning to write this review in a caravan in the remote North-West of Australia with the Goolarabooloo people with whom I have worked for a number of decades; Muecke and Roe, 2020). Will these Northern hemisphere concepts have any purchase here? Will they be relevant to me or my collaborators? It is a matter of contrasts, which is the thrust of many of Stengers's critiques: there are many dubious concepts already in place (progress, nature, professionalism, modernity, objectivity, authority . . .) that it may be useful to displace with alternatives for a possible common good.

Here's a list of Stengers's alternative concepts, with definitional snippets to give you an idea of her remarkable thought: *brooding* ('"Brooding" implies not being taken in, not docilely agreeing to disqualify what matters to it'; p. 8); *imagination* ('Our imagination is indebted to fiction, which teaches us that a truth may always conceal another, and yet none of them is "merely relative"'; p. 18); *characters* ('entities maintaining themselves through time'; p. 85); *adventure* ('think[ing] here and now, and not in general [. . .] think[ing] not as defenders of truth, but as participants in an adventure with neither destination nor heroic definition'; p. 18); *attention* ('feeling one's attention attracted *by* something, and acting, which is responding in one mode or another to the question posed by that thing'; p. 152); *civilisation* ('a very special milieu of culture for the adventures proper to human life, within which traditions are not only cultivated but also put to the test'; p. 29); *disclosure* ('a mutation, a manifestation of life, which breaks reiteration of the past, which makes something devoid of importance begin to count'; p. 141); *societies* ('a vertiginous entangling of societies that collectively make up the environment for one

another'; p. 8); *composition* ('mutual sensitivity, which may zigzag with the experience of what, between living beings, is called trust'; p. 149); *abstraction* ('If modes of abstraction deserve vigilance, it is because, in every era, some of them lay claim to supremacy and relegate others to insignificance'; p. 20); *coherence* ('the possibility of thinking that which we know while our modes of abstraction pull it apart'; p. 79); *contact zones* ('a web of analogies whose relevance does not bear on denying what they omit: analogies that enliven attention but do not capture it'; p. 136); *taste* ('a matter not only of enjoyment but also of active discernment, and active discernment requires that one agrees to let oneself be affected'; p. 154); *consensus/palavra* ('[an] agreement [. . .] that is inseparable from a process of composition allowing new possibilities for speaking and feeling to emerge'; p. 61); *relevance* ('a matter of what the experimental sciences call a "crucial" experience, which puts a thesis "on the cross," between success and failure'; p. 157).

Such a definitional exercise may be inimical to Stengers's thought. At one point she says, 'we will not define composition', but then adds that she will 'let it travel where it makes sense' (p. 150), so it is in that spirit I would like to take some of those concepts on a trip with me to the Kimberley region in North-West Australia. That territory has already been invaded by Northern hemisphere concepts, somewhat recently, since colonisation only began in the late 19th century, a hundred years after Sydney. The frontier is still palpable, and Indigenous resistance is active. Indigenous concepts are also still alive, and the earlier 'collapse', the cosmic one caused by colonisation, is active in memory and daily experience. Indigenous peoples such as these have thus been primed for catastrophe of the sort to which Stengers is referring, late capitalism's environmental destruction, and this prior experience is sometimes noted by their scholars (Poelina et al., 2021; Whyte, 2019) as well as Danowski and de Castro (2017), to whom Stengers refers (p. 173). In listening to them, as I grasp Stengers's baton, I am making a bet with myself: I bet there will be a change of my own experience at the intersection of these relationships, something inherent neither with the Goolarabooloo, nor in Whitehead, nor Stengers, nor in the way I did things before.

Field Philosophy

Ethnographers are of course habituated to fieldwork as the site of experience and observation, and the more philosophical among them are vigilant when it comes to the different concepts or 'modes of abstraction' that are in play. But the notion of field philosophy is relatively new, and it seems to exist in two modes, as a sub-field in philosophy proper and as a method in the environmental humanities. In the US, Frodeman (2010) has been a vocal advocate of the former, bringing it to the notice of the general public in an article for the *New York Times*, and defining it thus:

> Field philosophy plays on the difference between lab science and field science. Field scientists, such as geologists and anthropologists, cannot control conditions as a chemist or physicist can in the lab. Each rock outcrop or social group is radically individual in nature [. . .] 'Getting out into the field' means leaving the book-lined study to work with scientists, engineers and decision makers on specific social challenges. Rather than going into the public square in order to collect data for understanding traditional philosophic problems like the old chestnut of 'free

> will,' as experimental philosophers do, field philosophers start out in the world. Rather than seeking to identify general philosophic principles, they begin with the problems of non-philosophers, drawing out specific, underappreciated, philosophic dimensions of societal problems.

This aligns in most ways with Stengers's approach, especially the idea of beginning 'with the problems of non-philosophers'. Lab scientists, she would argue, tend to use the limited context of the laboratory to produce the results they want, or what industry wants. She gives the example of GMO crops: 'the biologists who created GMOs [. . .] knew very well that things might happen in the field that they had not observed in the laboratory, but that did not activate their imagination. They insisted that everything will be worked out, must be worked out, because these sorts of complication are not worthy of stopping progress' (pp. 22–3). Imagination, in Whitehead's phrase, needs to be 'welded to common sense', which means hesitating before bowing down to the abstraction of 'progress', and hesitating before dismissing the concerns and expertise of non-scientists, who are now 'capable of actively taking part in the collective exploration of a problem that was supposedly beyond them' (p. 63).

In my 'field' we have seen the instance of turtles versus methane gas. The state, in conjunction with major corporations led by Woodside Energy, and some sectors of the local community, was pushing for progress in the form of a huge gas plant, starting a battle with NGOs and activist communities that went on for four years from 2009. Woodside, of course, had to produce an Environmental Impact Assessment, but their ecologists were having trouble finding the turtle nests that everyone knew about. They were looking on sandy beaches, because that is where hawksbill turtles 'always' nest. The citizen scientists working in opposition to the gas plant simply asked Goolarabooloo elder Phillip Roe, the inheritor of countless generations of knowledge. He pointed out where the nests were, on a rocky shoreline (Muecke and Roe, 2020: 89). This was imagination welded to common sense, as the citizen scientists made sense in common with the concerns of the Indigenous people and the turtles. The gas plant was never built.

Other examples, with whales, bilbies, sawfish and dolphins, have since encouraged the development of Indigenous science (or 'two-way science') as a new field. The alliance of interests that have generated this field no doubt pays more attention to the abstraction of sustainability than to the 'predatory power' of the progress abstraction. This is why philosophy is needed, as well as the sciences, in this field. Their attention to the different modes of abstraction is absolutely needed if one is not to fall back on available discourses or the positivism of facts. These cannot be produced without the abstractions and values that make them possible in the first place. Bruno Latour, as well as Stengers, has also repeatedly argued that facts and values should not be 'bifurcated', that they are co-produced. So we need Indigenous *philosophy* as well as Indigenous sciences, because I seem to have jumped too quickly at the assumption that the people I am working with are interested in abstractions like 'sustainability'. When asked, they are more likely to talk about their *obligations* to what their elders have taught them, to 'care for Country', and to wait and watch and listen to what Country is telling them. These are *practices of attentiveness*, here elaborated by a Walmatjarri elder, Kankawa Nagarra, of the kind that Stengers, herself a pragmatist, endorses:

> Aboriginal languages, metaphors, and places encapsulate traditional knowledge. These encode concepts that are often difficult to translate. For instance, a Walmatjarri word is *rinyi*, which does not translate into English, so we will call it 'mystery language.' Everyone needs to understand *rinyi*, meaning survival. It means we pay very close attention to the sounds around us. For example, we listen for the cricket who will warn us with a long shrill. We learn very early to be observational to see and 'listen' to what is around you. Listen deeply, always listen to the *rinyi* and engage deeply with your leaders and relationships around you. (Otherwise, you might 'die', so to speak!) Climate change is like *rinyi*. It is a mystery language speaking to your body, your spirit, your heart, the whole of you. *Rinyi* can mean 'save me.' It means, 'I am crying out – I am dying. Save me.' (Knight et al., 2024: 259)

Field Philosophy in the Environmental Humanities

The environmental humanities, which is making productive use of the idea of field philosophy, does not diverge much from the Frodeman version. It stresses non-human agencies, embraces the situatedness of any theory that is mobilised, and refers to the school of thought that we might dub the 'new French pragmatism' that Stengers has had a great part in shaping:

> By allowing ourselves to be influenced and shaped by a field, and thus necessarily by the human and more-than-human agents that compose fieldwork, [we] are not concerned with producing a single vision of what field philosophy should be. We are not concerned with the kind of 'all-terrain theories' that Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Vinciane Despret have each critiqued as theories that run rampant, like a four-wheel drive vehicle, over any and all fields. (Buchanan et al., 2018: 387)

How does that situate us, those of us working in 'the field', but not wanting to carry on with traditional anthropological practices? We have shifted from knowledge extraction to (using Stengers's parlance) making sense in common with people with different kinds of expertise, and some have embraced variants of field philosophy, like multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010), that make the engagement with more-than-human lives a *sine qua non* of the field practice. In this new situation we become researchers of a different kind, persons who no longer have a magical omniscient overview (thanks to some 'all-terrain theory'), but who proceed in Haraway's 'tentacular' manner, what Stengers calls 'a culture of entertaining beings [. . .] without characterizing them otherwise [. . .] A culture where the manner in which we can characterize them is relative to the relation, and to the metamorphosis this relation requires' (pp. 162–3). In other words the 'situation' is always a shifting one, in which even the subjectivity of all involved can 'metamorphose'. How is that making sense, one may ask?

Does this withdrawal from universal principles condemn us to endless parochialisms? Field philosophers might begin by abandoning their (Northern) conceptual baggage, and then encounter concepts that are *disclosed* to them, as the concept of *rinyi* was to me over coffee by Kankawa Nagarra (Olive Knight). Shortly afterwards, I found out she had already published with my colleagues on the topic, making me able to cite her (above). Kankawa was one step ahead of me, so it is not up to me to lead the making of sense in common! Disclosure is key, and Whitehead says that philosophy is like poetry: 'In both

cases,' says Stengers, 'language must call on an experience escaping generalities in order to generate the event of *sheer disclosure*, which is the only way toward welding common sense and imagination' (p. 142, my emphasis).

Positivist social sciences, busy accumulating facts, would scoff at the idea that while they are working in 'the field' an important thing might become disclosed (without causality) in a poetic moment. But when pressed, they might admit that that is what is most valuable to them in their work, as in: 'Hey, professor, what are you doing?' 'Oh, I'm just accumulating facts.' A sad response, but what if she went on to say, 'Actually, yesterday it came to my attention that *continuity* is really a very important thing for these Indigenous people I'm working with.' 'What do you mean?' 'Well, you know how they talk about Indigenous Australians having the oldest continuous living cultures in the world, sixty five thousand years? Well, they keep talking about it. They talk of "passing things on", "holding on" to things, "caring for" the ancestors, the spirits, the totems and the children, and even thinking of their children as future ancestors.'

The concept of continuity has emerged as relevant because the professor has listened to what was being said, and it is a concept that resists the *interruptions* (Muecke and Roe, 2020: xix–xxii; 158–9) to that culture put in place by the modernisation frontier. Stengers and Latour are constantly pointing out how the Moderns are hell-bent on relegating the 'primitive' and 'superstitious' to the rubble of the past, reducing the number of operative concepts they want to work with, as if there were nothing much worth inheriting. But continuity and persistence are indeed concepts for our age, as Kankawa said, referring to climate change above: 'Everyone needs to understand *rinyi*, meaning survival.'

Continuity, importantly, is closely tied to disclosure. In the background that is the anthropology of Indigenous Australia, the concept of the 'secret-sacred' (as they used to gloss it) was very current. Things could not be revealed to children, the opposite gender, outsiders, except at the right time and place. There is a language of withholding: '*Something* there, a powerful thing . . .'; 'I can't tell you the name of that man . . .'. People would have to wait until there was a collective decision on the part of elders to 'bring [something] out'. Continuity is not maintained by full disclosure (the Moderns' myth of 'transparency'), but through the risk of change through disclosure at each point in a chain, something Latour made much of in his ethnography of the Moderns, his *Modes of Existence* project. Each mode has a 'series of small *discontinuities* it is appropriate to *pass* in order to obtain a certain *continuity* of action' (Latour, 2018: 33).

When the concept of *rinyi* emerges as 'mystery language' in conversation with Kankawa, it becomes sense in common and it also fires the imagination. In conversation, the disclosure of an idea is a gift that is taken up differently by those present. And taken up again later. One can indeed (in the old mode of extracting knowledge) *make off* with an understanding of *rinyi* and translate it into cultural capital for another purpose, like writing it into an article for *Theory, Culture & Society*. (Already published by Kankawa, it is hardly an appropriation, and in any case commentary in *TCS* is irrelevant to Walmatjarri people, a bit like football commentary is irrelevant to the players on the field. *Rinyi*, for them, is part of the main game, circulating differently.)

The mysteries of disclosure mean that, as Whitehead said of Nature, there is always something more, in a formulation much appreciated by Stengers: 'We are instinctively willing to believe that by due attention, more can be found in nature than that which is

observed at first sight. But we will not be content with less' (p. 110). This may be of some assistance in dealing with the enigma of the universal vs the particular that I posed earlier. The universals of the European enlightenment have been spread far and wide in conjunction with the powers of capital and technology, crushing local oppositions with arguments about bringing the gift of civilisation. Stengers, after Whitehead, spends time 'brooding' on the concept of civilisation and how it might be reset in precisely this context of relations to Others.

The universal vs the particular is a badly posed opposition, because what becomes *current* for me as I'm learning from Stengers, Whitehead and the field, and maybe 'universal', is *not knowing*, openness to disclosure, in the context of doing field philosophy, that is: philosophy that makes explicit its engagements and negotiations with non-philosophers, including non-humans.[1] Its task is clearly different from analytical philosophies that seek quasi-mathematical certainties. Its task, with its risky but generative possibilities, emerges after it has blown apart the common-sensical givens of the nature/culture opposition, the famous 'bifurcation of nature'.

On this point, let me pose another riddle: Observing a pelican, the field philosopher might ask a naïve question: 'How is it that the pelican and myself are in the same world?' To which the current Western common-sense response is that you are not in the same world at all: 'The pelican is in nature and you are in culture.' The bifurcation of nature is something Europeans worked hard to create, the better to build up physical sciences which could park their universals in the 'laws of nature', that is, among non-humans, seen as without agency. The Goolarabooloo in North-West Australia have, by now, accommodated the strange Western concept of nature, but their response to the question about the pelican remains different. They are not operating with a nature/culture binary, and they have a clear answer to the question: 'That *mayiarda* [pelican] is my *jalnga* [totem]. We share the same life-force.' There is an inalienable continuity between the human and the bird, and it brings about actions of care, responsibility, knowledge and aesthetic activity, ones that are passed down from generation to generation. Their solution to the riddle about the co-existence of human and bird is not parsed by scientific objectivity. It relates to a different kind of knowledge structure, which could also be called scientific because it is *reliable* over a long period of time. 'Totemism,' wrote Rose (2013), in revisiting the concept in Australia, 'is a common property institution for long-term ecological management' (p. 127). And totemism is a branch of animism, which is discussed by Stengers in this book (pp. 162–4). Importantly, Rose does not interpret it as 'belief' or 'symbol' in the manner of earlier anthropologists, but as knowledge held in common.

Far from being some parochial 'belief' in 'remote' North-West Australia, could not the idea of totems link up with another 'universal' – animism, in all its versions around the world, perhaps more than there are versions of Christianity? Indigenous peoples have thus succeeded in making sense in common with other living things over innumerable generations. Ecological thinking, in the form of field philosophy, is carrying out new kinds of collaborative research in their territories, and, in turn, Indigenous scholars are bringing their thinking to metropolitan centres in greater numbers than ever before: 'Everyone needs to understand *rinyi*, meaning survival', a singular concept that Kankawa and I can offer to Isabelle Stengers, as a small gift.

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Note

1. For a discussion of universality in Stengers, see Janicka (2024).

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