

Geographies against bifurcation

Adam Searle 

University of Nottingham, UK

Simon Vanderstraeten 

Université de Liège, Belgium

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–6

© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20438206251335314

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg

Abstract

Geographers have much to learn from speculative philosophy, which can provide us with theoretical tools to broaden our modes of analysis and understandings of research subjects. Following Alfred North Whitehead's radical proposal for altering how we prescribe meaning to 'experience', Tom Roberts introduces areas of thought within 'more-than-human geography' and its overlaps with new materialisms where Whiteheadian analysis offers an experiential rupture. We concur with Roberts' proposal, and, through conversing this thesis with the work of Isabelle Stengers and Didier Debaise, suggest that Whitehead offers unique conceptual tools for resisting geography's 'bifurcation'. This intervention, we hold, has never been timelier given the ecological collapse of increasingly weird worlds.

Keywords

Bifurcation, experience, more-than-human, speculation, weird geographies, whitehead

'Exclude nothing': Speculative gestures and human exceptionalism

For Alfred North Whitehead, 'The chief danger to philosophy is narrowness in the selection of evidence' (1929: 337). Indeed, the central principle of philosophy, for Whitehead, should be to 'exclude nothing' (1938: 2). More-than-human geography – a heterogeneous critical tradition broadly seeking to reorient empirical, conceptual, and methodological attention to the world in 'less anthropocentric terms' (Roberts, 2024: 1) – shares a similar objective, broadening the scope of *who* and *what* counts as subjects. More-than-human geography is underpinned by 'a common desire to move off from the nature–society, human–animal, subject–object, and thought–matter binaries that characterise humanist approaches' (Lorimer and Hodgetts, 2024:

77). In this commentary, we argue that Whitehead offers more-than-human geographers something *more* than moving beyond dualisms of Modern thought, in that his speculative approach explicitly challenges the 'bifurcation of nature'. To conclude, we note that Whitehead offers 'much more than an intellectual exercise' (Roberts, 2024: 16); his approach is critically equipped for the myriad socio-environmental crises we currently inhabit. Certainly, 'Whitehead can accompany us in the ruins' (Stengers, 2023: 180).

More-than-human geographers, of course, aren't alone in the desire to collapse Modern binaries.

Corresponding author:

Adam Searle, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

Email: adam.searle@nottingham.ac.uk

Some have argued that humanism shouldn't be prefixed with 'more-than-' but disposed of altogether; as articulated in Kathryn Yusoff's (2021: 672) call for 'the inhumanities' as 'an epistemological site' for 'dismantling the humanist subject and the white supremacy that characterized its geographic project of the differentiation of subjects and earth' (see Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, on 'counterhumanism'). Whilst alternative subject formulations beyond humanism have radical potential for geography, Whitehead would reject either purely humanist or anti-humanist approaches, as both further risk nature's bifurcation (see Halewood, 2017). Through decentring human exceptionalism and rethinking 'more-than-human' lifeworlds, a critical moment remains for examining the political economic forces of colonialism, heteronormative masculinity, and racial capitalism that 'render some "less-than-human"', a concern which 'has always been at the heart of more-than-humanism' (Lorimer, 2022: 74; Philo, 2017). It is, then, with 'the human' that we sceptically remain and challenge.

As Tom Roberts (2024: 6) notes, the objective of speculative philosophy is 'to produce *better* metaphysical frameworks that *improve* our understanding of the world and our place in it'. One does not engage metaphysics 'out of a taste for abstractions—it's quite the opposite—one engages metaphysics for a taste of the real'; speculation is not just concerned with describing the world better, but producing metaphysical frameworks to apprehend the world's multiplicity and grant access to other fragments of reality, with consequential worldly engagements which could be considered more 'meaningful' (Montebello, 2016: 194). Whitehead's philosophy provides opportunities to imagine experience and nature otherwise, creating a conceptual arsenal for scholars to 'fight against "ready-made" models, and above all not to despair' (Stengers, 2011: 11). Contemporary geographical scholarship is gleaning conceptual, empirical, and methodological insight from critical overlaps with speculative philosophy (e.g. McCormack, 2012; Roberts, 2014; Williams and Keating, 2022). Didier Debaise (2017b) notes that speculative philosophy should be primarily considered a method, as Whitehead intended when he

introduced the notion in *Process and Reality* (1929). A speculative method intensifies all possibilities in a given situation. Speculative philosophy, then, could be considered the contrary gesture of abstraction, it aims to lead from abstraction to empirical situations and not the other way around (Debaise and Stengers, 2016; see McCormack, 2012). Speculative gestures, then, can act as 'lures', 'luring attention toward "something that matters"' (Stengers, 2008: 96; see Debaise and Stengers, 2015).

Resisting geography's bifurcation

Roberts (2024: 4) notes that the 'primary motivation for Whitehead's speculative endeavours, particularly his creative re-thinking of experience in more-than-human terms' is a critical response to 'a pernicious "bifurcation" associated with the metaphysics of Modernity'. Bifurcation is a central component to Whitehead's designation of Modern thought. *The Concept of Nature* (1920) – Whitehead's first 'philosophical' text his transition from mathematics – gives significant focus to nature's bifurcation, the successive operations of construction of a binary between 'a real nature and an apparent nature, nature in itself and nature as it is perceived' (Debaise, 2017b: 70). For Isabelle Stengers (2023: 35), bifurcation 'generates modes of abstraction' which problematically 'plague' Modern thought (Stengers, 2008). The issue here is not with abstraction itself, as abstractions can either thicken (through speculation) or thin (through bifurcation) their target (Debaise and Stengers, 2022; see also James, 1977). Bifurcating abstractions, left unattended and uncared for, acquire the power to masquerade as reality. The 'solution' of speculation is not about avoiding abstractions, then, but rather producing better ones; taking caring care of abstractions that should multiply, enrich, and bring complexity to our shared, precarious, and plural worlds. Here, we examine the implications of this framing for understanding the bifurcation of nature within geography, or 'geography's bifurcation'.

Importantly, bifurcation should not be conflated with Cartesian dualism. Despite the prevalence of

this interpretation, this ontological gesture risks reducing bifurcation's analytical importance (Debaise, 2017a). Debaise (2017a: 7–8) invites readers to question 'the *modus operandi* of the division' of nature into primary and secondary qualities, 'not its consequences, as expressed in a dualist vision of nature'. Bifurcation is located at multiple historical junctures, and analysing its occurrence is crucial for resisting to it. Whitehead's (1938) own genealogical approach references Hume, Newton and Kant. Geographers could explore bifurcation in Immanuel Kant's geographical lectures from 1775, or the 19th-century publications of Alexander von Humboldt, both instrumental in formalising geography as a 'spatial science' (Hartshorne, 1958). Speculative approaches require us to estrange ourselves from the evidentiary assumptions that come with treating space as the primary object of geography. This move established a familiar hierarchy, one that elevates 'space' above all else and casts beings – living or nonliving – as little more than its appendages. In this framing, space is abstracted, severed from its inhabitants, and presented as fundamentally indifferent to them. Thus, stars, lines, foxes, railways, ideas, or bacteria are deemed 'spatial' only insofar as they occupy a pre-existing, frictionless container called space. Space itself ends up both powerless (it generates nothing and cannot be generated by anything) and omnipotent (it contains everything and reserves the act of spatialisation solely for itself). After all, 'geography' originally names 'earth writing' (see Springer, 2017) – provoking engagements with a thick, inhabited, multidimensional milieu. We must therefore ask: what is lost and what is gained when the writing of the earth becomes the science of space?

Further analysis into geography's bifurcation could be traced alongside the establishment of 'learned institutions' like the Royal Geographical Society, the appointment of academic posts for defined 'geographers', and the later establishment of geography Schools or Departments. Even the 20th-century organisation of distinct 'human geography' programmes and research agendas – shaped by radical and critical thought from Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism – should

be considered bifurcating gestures, resulting in the dualistic division of our discipline of which a growing number of environmental and more-than-human geographers are critical (Lehman and Johnson, 2022). If we are to develop speculative methods for critiquing Modern thought and its affection for human exceptionalism, then, we must understand bifurcation as an ongoing and contemporary process (Debaise, 2017a). Indeed, Modern science 'systematically produces bifurcation in everything it touches', as 'it opposes the objectivity of facts to the subjectivity of opinions' (Stengers, 2023: 45).

More-than-human geography is uniquely placed to challenge bifurcation's production within our own discipline; after all, geography's nature is shaped by the natures it studies (Castree, 2005). Fundamentally, in proposing a 'Whiteheadian intervention' into more-than-human geographies, Roberts (2024) invites geographers to question prevailing notions of human exceptionalism endemic to the metaphysical ideology of Modernity through shifting focus *from agency to experience*, taking seriously the potentials of speculative philosophy to widen the selection of geographical evidence. Roberts stresses that this speculative approach 'can help us think in ways that go beyond the unhelpful bifurcations of modern thought'. For Roberts, shifting our analysis from nonhuman agency to experience (on an ontological, rather than phenomenological, basis) elucidates new realms of analysis for Whiteheadian geographies. The emphasis on experience is key here, particularly when revisiting Whitehead's 'subjectivist principle' outlined in *Process and Reality*, which is bluntly summarised as: 'apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness' (1929: 167). This principle aims to 'give sense to the multiplicity of manners of having an experience, a veritable panexperientialism' (Debaise, 2017a: 42).

How, though, can 'experience' simultaneously exclude nothing and retain analytical coherence for resisting geography's bifurcation? Debaise (2017a: 77) suggests 'universal mannerism' as a possible solution, stating that a 'pluralist universe' is 'constituted by a myriad of centres of experience each of which is equally important, equally active, of which the human

anthropological experience represents one form but is never able to claim to be either their foundation or model'. Universal mannerism therefore helps relocate the subjects of geography outside of its classical division towards Whiteheadian 'societies', defined as 'everything that has experience and everything that is experienced' (Debaise, 2017b: 125). A society can therefore be as diverse as a cell, a rock, a galaxy, or a human organ. While the discussion of 'society' is beyond the scope of this essay, it must be posit nonetheless as it leads to the following consequence: the distinction between human/more-than-human geography falls short of significance as it fades behind a broader, Whiteheadian, speculative geography. Nina Williams and Tom Keating, along with 20 contributors, attest the promise of this mode of thought within their commendable collection *Speculative Geographies* (2022). Resisting the grip of bifurcation, speculative geography would therefore let its subjects come to the fore from the experiences at play in a given ecology, rather than assuming pre-constructed entities.

To speculate is to resist bifurcation, in that it invites 'the intensification of experience to its maximal point' (Whitehead, 1938: 86). Resting geography's bifurcation through speculative gestures goes further than collapsing dualisms, which could be considered the critical objective of more-than-human geography. To be sure, a Whiteheadian intervention into geographical practice achieves this aim, and collapses the nature–society, human–non-human, subject–object and thought–matter binaries which characterise Modern geographical thought. But it also allows us to challenge the bifurcation of humanist/more-than-human approaches altogether, in which 'a plurality of possible worlds is formed in the course of the battle' (Debaise, 2017a: 85).

Whitehead for weirding worlds

Since Whitehead's writing, the effects of plantation capitalism and its regime of ecocide have taken their toll, particularly for bodies demarcated as less-than-human by racial hegemony. The experience of nature is caught in this tension, that of bifurcation and its resistance, and that of unequally experienced ecological change (Debaise, 2017a). The overlapping socioecological crises of climate catastrophe, mass extinction, and industrialised biodiversity loss force

us to reckon with what Whitehead called 'common sense' produced by Modern science. Indeed, the modes of abstraction developed and debated over centuries to understand the 'primary qualities' of nature cannot comprehend its increasing weirdness (Turnbull et al., 2022), which demands new ways of relating to, representing, and experiencing nature in all its weirding multiplicities. 'Whoever speaks of ruins now speaks of an apprenticeship in the art of attention in a world that no longer conforms to the roles assigned to it' (Stengers, 2023: 175). In this light – one that demands our critical engagement – Stengers (2023: 175) urges us to wrest 'common sense' back from the stranglehold of bifurcation. She asks us to cultivate a 'sense that the common situation is problematic not only for humans but also for the ensemble of what participates in this life in the ruins'. Crucially, she adds, 'no signification or convention can be counted on or taken for granted' (Stengers, 2023: 175).

Rightfully so, Roberts (2024) positions Whitehead as a unique thinker who offers tools for responding to ecological collapse. In its promise to 'exclude nothing', speculative thought can resist the bifurcation of nature at a critical moment, where global weirding is shifting the nature of nature beyond all recognition from the gaze of Modern abstraction. Contrary to the thin conception of space produced by bifurcation, a speculative geography seeks to restore to the myriad beings on earth their own power of spatialisation centred around multifarious experiences. Earthly beings do not merely occupy an abstract, anonymous, spatial container; they actively constitute it. Just as Bruno Latour (2005) reframed the social by asking 'how is it done?', we must ask 'how is space enacted and experienced?', and, in doing so, recognise the manifold powers of spatialisation at work.

This reframing shifts the stage away from a pre-conceived spatial container – universal, atemporal, and indifferent – that systematically impoverishes powers of being toward a dynamic, plural, and contested field of composition. It resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) notion of the *ritournelle* or refrain, which replaces static space with emergent territories that are experienced through bodily interaction. Moreover, bifurcated abstractions tacitly underpin a political order that

merely arranges ready-made entities upon a standardised surface – denying living and nonliving bodies all power to institute places. In the context of emergent environmental crises, then, the question ‘how should we share space?’ is misplaced if it presumes a vacant void to be divided. As made clear through Roberts’ compelling provocation, Whiteheadian speculation reinvigorates geographical conceptual apparatuses for engaging more-than-human worlds at this critical juncture. It offers an alternative to the question ‘what is there and how is it experienced?’ by allowing the ‘what is experienced and how?’ to define the ‘where’.

Acknowledgements

Our foremost thanks go to Tom Roberts for a fascinating and original contribution to Whiteheadian scholarship. We are grateful to the editorial team at *Dialogues in Human Geography* for inviting this commentary, and in particular Anindita Datta for welcome assistance. Our ideas for this piece have been influenced by many conversations on the philosophy of speculative gestures and the work of Alfred North Whitehead by supportive colleagues at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, the University of Nottingham, and the Université de Liège.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Adam Searle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5319-895X>
Simon Vanderstraeten  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1535-9058>

References

- Castree N (2005) *Nature*. London: Routledge.
- Debaise D (2017a) *Nature as Event*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Debaise D (2017b) *Speculative Empiricism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Debaise D and Stengers I (2015) *Gestes Spéculatifs*. Paris: Les Presses du Réel.
- Debaise D and Stengers I (2016) L’insistance des possibles. *Multitudes* 65: 82–89.
- Debaise D and Stengers I (2022) An ecology of trust? Consenting to a pluralist universe. *The Sociological Review* 70(2): 402–415.
- Deleuze G and Guattari F (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Halewood M (2017) The inhumanity of symbolism. In: Faber R, Bell JA and Petek J (eds) *Rethinking Whitehead’s Symbolism: Thought, Language, Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hartshorne R (1958) The concept of geography as a science of space, from Kant and Humboldt to Hettner. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 48(2): 97–108.
- James W (1977) *A Pluralistic Universe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lehman J and Johnson E (2022) Environmental geography and the inheritance of western technoscience. *Progress in Environmental Geography* 1(1-4): 23–32.
- Lorimer J (2022) Is this the humanism we have been looking for? *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12(1): 74–78.
- Lorimer J and Hodgetts T (2024) *More-than-Human*. London: Routledge.
- McCormack D (2012) Geography and abstraction. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(6): 715–734.
- Montebello P (2016) *Métaphysiques Cosmomorphes: La Fin du Monde Humain*. Paris: Les Presses du Réel.
- Philo C (2017) Less-than-human geographies. *Political Geography* 60: 256–258.
- Roberts T (2014) From things to events: Whitehead and the materiality of process. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(6): 968–983.
- Roberts T (2024) Matter, affect, life: A Whiteheadian intervention into ‘more-than-human’ geographies. *Dialogues in Human Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206241255446>.
- Springer S (2017) Earth Writing. *GeoHumanities* 3(1): 1–19.
- Stengers I (2008) A constructivist reading of *process and reality*. *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(4): 91–110.

- Stengers I (2011) *Thinking with Whitehead*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stengers I (2023) *Making Sense in Common*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Turnbull J, Platt B and Searle A (2022) For a new weird geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 46(5): 1207–1231.
- Whitehead AN (1920) *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whitehead AN (1929) *Process and Reality*. New York: Macmillan.
- Whitehead AN (1938) *Modes of Thought*. New York: Macmillan.
- Williams N and Keating T (2022) *Speculative Geographies*. London: Palgrave.
- Wynter S and McKittrick K (2015) Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations. In: McKittrick K (ed) *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. London: Duke University Press, 9–89.
- Yusoff K (2021) The inhumanities. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111(3): 663–676.