

Whitehead's Account of Experience

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One of the fundamental characteristics of Whitehead's philosophy is his insistence upon the coherence of his metaphysics. This is not a coherence theory of truth, rather he is insisting that "the fundamental ideas, in terms of which the scheme is developed, presuppose each other so that in isolation they are meaningless."¹ In addition, a metaphysics should be logically consistent and adequate to explain experience.

It is this insistence upon coherence which causes Whitehead to attack the bifurcation of nature, which he finds in the philosophy which has tried to account for both the findings of science and sensory experience. The incoherence of such a bifurcation is exemplified in Locke's theory of primary and secondary qualities. "Namely, there are some attributes of the matter which we do perceive. These are the primary qualities, and there are other things which we perceive, such as colours, which are not attributes, but are perceived by us as if they were such attributes. These are the secondary qualities of matter. Why should we perceive secondary qualities? It seems an extremely unfortunate arrangement that we should perceive a lot of things that are not there."² The extreme perplexity which a defender of secondary qualities must face in this question demonstrates the incoherence of his metaphysical scheme, which arises from the division of nature into two essentially realms. Whitehead is protesting against this "bifurcation of

an illusory experience: 'O Bottom, thou art changed! what do I see on thee?'⁶

Whitehead conceives experience as a much broader ^{concept} concept than mere sense-perception. His conception was the result of his long acquaintance with mathematical logic and theoretical physics combined with his desire to avoid the bifurcation of nature. The world is made up of actual occasions or actual entities. These are "drops of experience, complex and interdependent."⁷ The basis of this experience is emotional.⁸

The following account of Whitehead's account of experience will make use of the abstraction of space-time. It must be remembered that Whitehead did not think of particles of matter being simply $\frac{1}{2}$ located in space and time. Rather, space and time are derivative from the extensive continuum, which is itself derived from the ordering of actual occasions. "The extensive continuum, is that general relational element in experience whereby the actual entities experienced, and that unit experience itself, are united in the solidarity of one common world.... It is not productive of the ordered world but derivative from it."⁹

Consider an individual actual occasion. Some other actual occasions will be contemporaneous with it. One of the fundamental results of Einstein's theory that these contemporaneous actual occasions are casually independent.¹⁰ In addition, some actual occasions are in the past of this actual occasion, and so this actual occasion is casually dependent upon them. It prehends

them. They are the objects of the prehension; it is the subject. The subjective form of the prehension is "the affective tone determining the effectiveness of that prehension in that occasion of experience."¹¹ Again, the subjective form is "how the subject prehends that datum (object).... there are many species of subjective forms, such as emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, consciousness, etc."¹² This actual occasion has a certain duration in time and extension in space. Then it is gone. It is, however, in the past of some number of actual occasions which now are. They prehend it. It is now an object. When an actual occasion is, it "enjoys its decisive moment of absolute self-attainment as emotional unity."¹³ When, as subject, it has perished, it is objectively ~~immortal~~¹⁴ immortal. Creativity is evident in the above account of actual occasions. Creativity is "the pure notion of the activity conditioned by the objective immortality of the actual world - a world which is never the same twice, though always with the stable element of divine ordering."¹⁵

In addition to actual occasions, eternal objects are a fundamental idea for Whitehead. "The fundamental types of entities are actual entities, and eternal objects; and the other types of entities only express how all entities of the two fundamental types are in community with each other, in the actual world."¹⁶ The gradation of eternal objects bears a close resemblance to the hierarchy of logical types of Principia Mathematica. The lowest grade of eternal objects are those which "cannot be analysed into

relationship of components." Such eternal objects are called simple. An example of a simple eternal object is a definite shade of green.¹⁷

Relationships among eternal objects are entirely unselective. For this reason, "a particular determination can be made of the how of some definite relationship of a definite eternal object A to a definite finite number n of other eternal objects, without any determination of the other n objects X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n , except that they have, each of them, the requisite status to play their respective parts in that multiple relationship."¹⁸ Thus finite truth is possible. This is in answer to philosophers, e.g., Bradley, who deny the possibility of finite truth. Although, indeed, everything is related to everything else, finite truth is possible in view of the independence of the eternal objects determinations.

Actual occasions are the particulars of Whitehead's philosophy; eternal objects are the universals. "What an eternal object is in itself - that is to say, its essence - is comprehensible without reference to some one particular occasion of experience. To be abstract is to transcend particular concrete occasions of actual happening. But to transcend an actual occasion does not mean being disconnected from it. On the contrary, I hold that each eternal object has its own proper connection with each other such occasion, which I term its mode of ingression into that occasion. Thus an eternal object is to be comprehended by acquaintance with (i) its particular individuality, (ii) its general relationships to other

eternal objects as apt for realization in actual occasions, and (iii) the general principles which express its ingression in particular actual occasions."¹⁹ The nature of any particular - any actual occasion - is [↑]determined by the universals which apply to it - the eternal objects which ingress into the actual occasion. "The metaphysical status of an eternal object is that of a possibility for an actuality. Every actual occasion is defined as to its character by how these possibilities are actualised for that occasion."²⁰

In the relation of actual occasions to simple eternal objects, I can see no significant deviation from the subject-predicate logic. The many termed relational logic comes into play in complex eternal objects. Given any finite number of simple eternal objects, there is some definite possible relation between them, this relation is itself an eternal object [↑]of the next grade, the lowest complex grade. Eternal objects of successively higher grades are generated in like manner.²¹ No matter how an eternal object ingresses into an actual occasion, it is just itself; otherwise it would be a different eternal object. This is the principle of the "translucency of realization." It is this [↑]principle, combined with the possibility of different modes of an eternal object into the same actual occasion that that forms the basis of the correspondence theory of truth.²²

^TThe prehensions which were explained before - whose objects were actual occasions - are called physical prehensions. In addition, ^{are} there are prehensions whose objects are eternal objects; these are

called conceptual prehensions.²³ Concrescence is the becoming of the actual occasion which is potential for many actual occasions.²⁴ Feelings are prehensions in which the object is operative in "the progressive concrescence of prehensions constituting the unity of the subject."²⁵ Conceptual valuation is the derivation of a purely conceptual feeling, from a physical feeling; the object of the conceptual feeling being "the the eternal object determinant of the definiteness of the actual entity,...,physically felt."²⁶ The primordial nature of God is "the unconditioned conceptual valuation of the entire multiplicity of eternal objects." Creativity is "that ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality."²⁷ Creativity is "the actualization of potentiality, and the process of actualization is an occasion of experiencing. Thus viewed in abstraction objects are passive, but viewed in conjunction they carry the creativity which drives the world. the process of creation is the form of unity of the universe."²⁸

A society is a set of actual occasions which enjoys social order. A set of actual occasions enjoys social order when "(i) there is a common element of form illustrated in the definiteness of each of its included actual entities, and (ii) this common element of form arises in each...~~(member of the set)~~... by reason of the conditions imposed upon it by its prehensions of some ^{members... (of the set)...} members ^{other} by... (of the set)..., and (iii) these prehensions impose that condition of reproduction by reason of their inclusion of positive feelings of that common form."²⁹

Societies are what we are familiar with in ordinary life, the things which have the quality of endurance. Persons, books, tables, etc. are societies. A society has accidental features, which vary with time as well as the essential feature which defines it. "The real actual things [↑] which that endure are all societies. They are not actual occasions. It is the mistake that has thwarted European metaphysics from the time of the Greeks, namely, to confuse societies with the completely real things which are the actual occasions. A society has an essential character, whereby it is the society that it is, and it also has accidental qualities [↑] which vary as circumstances alter. Thus a society as a complete existence and as retaining the same metaphysical status, enjoys a history expressing its changing reactions to changing circumstances. But an actual occasion has no such history. It never changes. It only becomes and perishes. Its perishing is its assumption of a ^{new} metaphysical function in the creative advance of the universe."³⁰

A person maintains his identity through time in that his essential characteristic remains the same through time. This is Whitehead's answer to Hume's dilemma of personal identity. The actual occasions which make up a person at a given time [↑] transmit the essential character of the person on, so that after they have perished, the essential character of the person will still endure. Thus a person undergoes change while remaining the same person.

Societies thus perform a vital function for Whitehead. They give permanence to a world which is constantly perishing and

being created anew. We are societies. Society is a society. Almost everything we are aware of is a society. In addition to generalizing from mathematical logic, theoretical physics, and religion, Whitehead has made broad generalizations from sociology.³¹

Enough of Whitehead's system has been developed here that his account of perception can be understood. For Whitehead, there are two kinds of perception. One is "presentational immediacy" which is sense-perception. The other is "causal efficacy," which is non-sensuous perception.³² Perception is defined in the following manner. Every actual occasion prehends actual occasions in its past. Thus every actual occasion is "concerned with an otherness transcending itself. The occasion is one among others, and including the others which it is among. Consciousness is an emphasis upon a selection of these objects. Thus perception is consciousness analyzed in respect to these objects selected for this emphasis. Consciousness is the acme of emphasis."³³

The role of sense-perception in epistemology has been of extreme importance in modern philosophy. According to Whitehead, their main characteristic - "their enormous emotional significance" - has been missed. "The vicious notion has been introduced of mere receptive entertainment, which for no obvious reason by reflection acquires an affective tone. The true doctrine of sense perception is that the qualitative tones inherent in the bodily functionings are transmuted into the characters of regions. These regions are then perceived as associated with those character-qualities, but

also these same qualities are shared by the subjective form of the prehensions. This is the reason of the definite aesthetic attitude imposed by the sense perception. The pattern of the sensa characterizing the object - that is, those sensa in that pattern of contrast-enters also into the subjective form of the prehension. Thus art is possible."³⁴

But what exactly is this sense perception? We must begin with mentality. [↑] "The basic operations of mentality are 'conceptual prehensions.'"³⁵ Thus eternal objects enter into mentality and hence sense-perception, as would be expected because the example given of a simple eternal object was a definite shade of green. So sense-perception involves the subjective forms of prehensions whose objects are eternal objects. In addition, "a conceptual prehension is a direct vision of some possibility of good or evil - of some possibility as to how actualities may become definite."³⁶ Hence the emotional factor in sense-perception is justified.

Whitehead explains how sense-perception occurs in animals. "Each animal body is an organ of sensation. It is a living society which may include in itself a dominant 'personal' society of occasions. This 'personal' ~~society of occasions~~ society is composed of occasions enjoying the individual experiences of the animals. It is the soul of man. The whole body [↑] is organized, so that a general coordination of mentality is finally poured into the successive occasions of this personal society."³⁷

The animal body has the decisive ^{role} in sense-perception

Normally light is responsible ⁵ ~~efr~~ ^{for} visual sensations, but the right drugs will do as well. In either case, however, the body is essential, [^] in particular the brain. "No doctrine of sense-perception can neglect the teaching of physiology. The decisive factor in sense-perception is the functioning of the brain, and the functioning of the brain is conditioned by the antecedent ~~functionings~~ ^{of} the other parts of the animal body. Given requisite bodily [↑] functionings, the sense-perception results."³⁸

The other kind of perception was causal efficacy. Whitehead thought that the identification of all direct observation with sense-perception, which is so universal in modern philosophy, is a mistake.³⁹ His primary example of non-sensuous perception is our knowledge of ~~the~~ our immediate past, "that portion of our past lying between a tenth of a second and half a second ago. It is gone, and yet it is here. It is our indutitable self, the founation of our presint existence. Yet the present occasion while claming self-identity, while sharing the very nature of the byegone ~~occasion~~ in all its living activities, nevertheless is engaged in [↑] modifying it, in adjusting it to other influences, in completeing it with other values, in deflecting it to other purposes. The present [↑] moment is constituted by the influx of the other into that self-identity which is the continued life of the immediate past within the immediacy of the present. The sense-data must therefore play a double role in perception. In the mode of presentational immediacy, they are projected to exhibit the contemporary world in its spacial ~~relations~~

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 which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which 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. thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture the other is the dream."³

Whitehead thinks there are two basic reasons why the bifurcation theory is so widespread. One is that it is really difficult to create a metaphysics in which the relationship of the entities of theoretical physics to ordinary experience is adequately explained.⁴ The other is ~~the~~ subject-predicate logic of Aristotle, "the unquestioned acceptance ... (of which) ... has led to an ingrained tendency to postulate a substratum for whatever is disclosed in sense-awareness, namely to look below what we are aware of for the substance in the sense of the 'concrete thing!'"⁵ The use of the subject-predicate logic has led philosophy away from the concrete to the abstract, to philosophy's detriment. "All modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. The result always does violence to that immediate experience which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis. We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas, under some disguise or other, orthodox philosophy can only ~~can~~ introduce us to solitary substances, each enjoying

relations. In the mode of causal efficacy, they exhibit the almost instantaneous precedent bodily organs as imposing their characters on the experience in question."⁴¹

In this account of experience, Whitehead believes he has provided a metaphysical scheme which explains both perception and theoretical physics, without any bifurcation of nature. "The physical flux corresponds to the conformal inheritance at the base of each occasion of experience. This inheritance, ~~at~~ in spite of its continuity of subjective form, is nevertheless an inheritance from definite individual occasions.... The notion of physical energy, which is at the base of physics must then be conceived as an abstraction from the complex energy, emotional and purposeful, inherent in the subjective form of the final synthesis in which each occasion completes itself. It is the total vigor of each activity of experience."⁴² This short paper reveals the complexity of Whitehead's thought which resulted from his wide knowledge and desire for a coherent metaphysics.

Notes

- ¹ Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (PR). (New York, 1969), p. 5.
- ² Whitehead, The Concept of Nature (CN). (Cambridge, 1930), p.27.
- ³ CN, p. 30.
- ⁴ CN, p. 44.
- ⁵ CN, p. 18.
- ⁶ PR, p. 64.
- ⁷ PR, p. 23.
- ⁸ Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas (AI). (New York, 1933), p. 226.
- ⁹ PR, pp. 86-89.
- ¹⁰ PR, p. 77.
- ¹¹ ~~PR, pp.~~ AI, pp. 226-227.
- ¹² PR, p.28.
- ¹³ AI, p. 227.
- ¹⁴ PR, p. 75.
- ¹⁵ PR, p. 37.
- ¹⁶ PR, p. 30.
- ¹⁷ Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (SMW). (New York, 1925), p. 150.
- ¹⁸ SMW, p. 148.
- ¹⁹ SMW, p. 143.
- ²⁰ SMW, p. 144.
- ²¹ SMW, p. 150.
- ²² SMW, p. 155.

²³PR, p. 28.

²⁴PR, p. 27.

²⁵PR, p. 28.

²⁶PR, p. 31.

²⁷PR, pp. 36-37.

²⁸AI, pp. 230-231 .

²⁹PR, p. 40.

³⁰AI, p. 262.

³¹Victor Lowe, "The Development of Whitehead's Philosophy,"
in The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp.
(New York, 1951), p. 115.

³²Whitehead, Symbolism (S). (New York, 1951), p. 17.

³³AI, p. 231.

³⁴AI, pp. 276-277.

³⁵PR, p. 38.

³⁶PR, p. 39.

³⁷AI, p. 271.

³⁸AI, p. 274.

³⁹AI, p. 279.

⁴⁰AI, p. 233.

⁴¹S, p. 50.

⁴²AI, p. 239.

