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3. Whitehead's Philosophical Synthesis

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3. Whitehead's Philosophical Synthesis

Abstract

In Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) we meet a philosopher who was born an Englishman and died an American, and whose thought combined the major recent philosophical contributions of both countries in a radically new and startling metaphysical synthesis. Unlike both Dewey and Russell, he sees in philosophy neither the individual nor the social creation of meaning, but rather adventurous exploration in the discovery of meaning. His approach, like Russell's, is individualistic and, like Dewey's, total rather than partial or limited. He drew both on the English analytical interest in psychology and sociology, while at the same time maintaining his own concern for the latest scientific developments. But, in contradistinction to the interest of Russell and Dewey in method, his philosophy was continually metaphysical. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead

Disciplines

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This is a part of [Section XXII: Philosophical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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3. Whitehead's Philosophical Synthesis

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* John Dewey, The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910), pp. 1-19. Used with permission.

individual nor the social creation of meaning, but rather adventurous exploration in the discovery of meaning. His approach, like Russell's, is individualistic and, like Dewey's, total rather than partial or limited. He drew both on the English analytical interest in psychology and sociology, while at the same time maintaining his own concern for the latest scientific developments. But, in contradistinction to the interest of Russell and Dewey in method, his philosophy was continually metaphysical.

Whitehead was born into a middle-class background of English teachers and clergymen. He began his education and career at Cambridge University, where he attained considerable fame for his investigations into the bases for mathematics and geometry. So similar were his conclusions to those of his most famous pupil that they were able to collaborate on the Principia Mathematica (1910-1913). But during and after World War I the two men drew apart as their attitudes toward war and philosophy began to differ markedly. Russell, content to remain primarily the analyst, applied his criticism to a wide variety of topics and interests. Whitehead, on the other hand, sought to develop out of the same analysis some basis for a positive metaphysical construction. Russell insisted that the newer logic should have the last word in what we can know, while he was equally insistent that there was much more to know. Whitehead insisted that, necessary as logic was, it should never have the last word, that supplementing it with intuition and imagination man should attempt to encompass all there was to be known. Ignoring the charge of psychologism which Russell leveled at all who were interested in how we know, Whitehead was to develop out of his epistemology a total metaphysics which he preferred to call the philosophy of organism.

In 1910 Whitehead left Cambridge, despite the fact that he had no new academic position. After a year, during which he wrote An Introduction to Mathematics (1911), he went to the University College, London (1911-1924). Here his thought developed in two major directions. First, he was soon drawn into the problems of education for an industrial society. As a result The Aims of Education (1916) made its appearance. Second, his interest in logic and mathematics was brought to focus on the philosophy of science, and resulted in those books which are most respected by scientists: An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge (1919), The Concept of Nature (1920), and The Principle of Relativity (1922).

In 1924, at the retirement age of sixty-three, Whitehead left London and was appointed professor of philosophy at Harvard University, a post which he held until 1936. Here in the United States, under the impact of the thought of such men as William James and John Dewey, and in a society attempting to weld together people of various racial stocks and cultural backgrounds, his thought took on still further dimensions. An interest in broadly sociological and cultural ideas developed, and his metaphysical interests were given free play. One of the results of these interests was the production of some of his books which are held in highest regard

by many philosophers: Science and the Modern World (1925), Religion in the Making (1926), Process and Reality (the Gifford Lecture, published in 1929), Adventures of Ideas (1933), and Modes of Thought (1938). Throughout his long career, which did not end with retirement, he brought together the nineteenth century's interests in change and culture with the twentieth's interest in analysis and precision, for the purpose of a broader and deeper knowing and understanding.

Knowing, for Whitehead, came to be interpreted as an organic relation between subject and object. But his interpretation was to raise seriously the question of the nature of the two terms which were thus related in the process of knowing. Older metaphysics had foundered on this problem because it had insisted that there was a self-identical subject, called the self, and a similarly self-identical object, called a thing. The older philosophies were torn between two interpretations of the knowing relationship, neither of which was satisfactory. If the relationship were internal, as in Hegel, the result was the reduction of the individual to the mere sum of his relations. If the relationship were external, as in Kant, the result was the loss of any bridge between the self and the object such as could afford real knowledge. Such interpretations, argued Whitehead, offered no solution, and further were in agreement neither with the findings of recent physics nor new ideas of relativity. Recent physics had exchanged the Newtonian categories of matter, space, and time for the vastly different categories of energy and space-time continuum. And a more accurate description of the knowing relationship interpreted it as a continuing process rather than a series of discrete experiences. Contemporary relativity (for which he had developed his own theory) made it clear that everything was related to everything else, and not that each knowing experience was relative only to some static and enduring self. The whole knowing process was thus to be seen as an organic one, rather than a mechanical one. And as a result of these conclusions, Whitehead was able to produce a totally new metaphysics based on process rather than changeless entities.

Whitehead maintained continuing interest in language. Ordinary language he sees as both helpful and harmful. It helps in that it passes on to succeeding generations the insights of the past, but it is also harmful because at the same time it is passing on stereotypes which are capable of arresting the future development of thinking. He is therefore not willing to use ordinary language as his final court of appeal, after the manner of G. E. Moore. Rather, and in this Whitehead sides with Russell, man must be free to develop new words for new ideas. But, and here he parts company with Russell, these new words and categories must include not only the a priori mathematical and logical definitions, but the broadest generalizations of science and the contributions of social imagination and intuition as well.

The emphasis on process did not mean for Whitehead that every-

thing was to be dissolved by or in change -- such a conclusion would mean the denial of the very possibility of knowing at all. There are permanent elements within the process which make knowing possible. But their permanence is not to be found in the nature of the stuff, material or spiritual, of which things are made. Rather their permanence is to be found in a continuity of direction or a persistence of aim. This alone is able to produce an individual thing without denying it the property of change which alone makes life possible. Thus Whitehead refers to Newton's idea of nature as "dead," and asserts that a "dead" nature gives no reasons. Since reasons are "aims at value," it is only a living nature which can offer reasons to the knower. Nature is thus viewed as an organism which alone can unite those two major factors of process and permanence which represent the most deep-seated demands of the human being.

In order "to attain the greatest happiness and enjoyment man must, therefore, entertain the highest and most inclusive ideals possible. "No period of history," Whitehead wrote, "has ever been great or ever can be that does not act on some sort of high, idealistic motives, and idealism in our own time has been shoved aside, and we are paying the price for it." Grouped together, these ideals, which include not only the traditional truth, beauty, and goodness, but also the added ideals of peace and adventure, are called God. This God is not the Creator God of the Christian tradition, but rather that factor which represents the lure of the entire universe toward a higher, broader, deeper, and more inclusive vision, a vision which goes beyond science, and which would include both the tragedy and the joy of human existence. It is in adventuring after these ideals that Whitehead sees man as attaining his highest happiness.

The selection chosen from Whitehead's writings, entitled "The Aim of Philosophy," makes but little attempt to explain his new and special vocabulary. Rather, it was a short talk given to philosophy students at Harvard and Radcliffe, in 1935, shortly before his retirement. In it can be caught some of his general attitude toward philosophy and some appreciation of his interpretation of its role in the contemporary search for meaning.

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