Understanding Whitehead

Lowe, Victor

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Chapter 5

Introduction to Part II

I

Our problem in Part II is the unity of Whitehead’s thought. A somewhat analogous but simpler problem occurs in the case of William James, whose first and biggest book was a psychological treatise, and who was academically a physiologist and then a psychologist before he became officially a philosopher. His bibliography, however, includes philosophical titles from his thirty-first year onward, and in his forties he was teaching philosophy. In the definitive biography, Ralph Barton Perry showed that there never was a time when James did not entertain philosophic as well as scientific questions, and concluded, “If he was ever a philosopher, he was always a philosopher.”

The case of Whitehead is rather different. There came first a period of more than twenty years of mathematical and logical investigations, then a shorter period in which he concerned himself with the technical and philosophical foundations of physics, and a final period explicitly devoted to philosophy.

1 The Thought and Character of William James (New York, 1935), I, 228, 449 f.
Not until he is in his mid-fifties does his bibliography show a philosophical title. During far the greater part of his life he not only was regarded as a mathematician and not as a philosopher, but so regarded himself. The two decades before 1918 were a time of lively debate among English-speaking philosophers on epistemological and metaphysical issues. Whitehead’s collaborator in mathematical logic, Bertrand Russell, was one of the leading participants in those debates. In all probability Whitehead was little more than an interested spectator. This appears not only from the absence of publications but from Russell’s remark that before 1918 Whitehead had no definite opinions in philosophy.²

Discussion of questions currently being argued by philosophers, however, is not the only way in which a human mind may show itself to be that of a philosopher. In what ways and how far Whitehead’s “nonphilosophical” works may have a philosophic character, and what ways of thinking come later, is a real question. More generally: What, in any one book of Whitehead’s, shows that it was aimed at different objectives but written by the same man who wrote his other books? The question is not to be taken to imply that a sufficiently penetrating study of Whitehead’s intellectual creations will reveal an “organic development.” The more definite metaphor of a spiral (also used by some commentators) is likewise not justified ab initio, and as a conclusion is probably too strong. (“Linear” is too simple a word. All these metaphors are dangerous.)

In this Part, I sit down to consider Whitehead’s writings seriatim and to note the ways in which each in its purpose and his treatment of its topics compares with its predecessors and successors. The origins of the problems he dealt with and

² Letter of Lord Russell to the present author, July 24, 1960. Exception must of course be made concerning opinions in the philosophy of space and time, and topics closely related thereto, on which Whitehead published papers before 1918 (see Chap. 8, below). I read Russell’s remark (see p. 199, below) as referring to the justification of induction and similar problems under debate by philosophers. Possibly 1918 is, even so, too late a date; that question I leave to future biographers.
the probable success of his solutions will naturally enter into the discussion. Since I cannot assume that the reader is acquainted with Whitehead's early writings, they must be described, and a good deal of exposition given to the less familiar ones. This will ensure the performance of a useful service whether or no my conclusions are accepted.

II

The limitations of this study must be carefully noted. The topic is Whitehead's published work, not his life. Some day, I trust, a scholar or (better) group of scholars by writing a biography will cast further light on Whitehead's work. At present the contrast with the case of William James, who left a copious supply of letters and other biographical material, is sharp. And our expectations for the future had better not be great. Whitehead was famous for not writing letters. His unpublished manuscripts were destroyed at his death (as his widow informed me through Professor W. V. Quine) in accordance with his own request. His general answer to questions about how he came to think as he did was that only his published works were of public interest. Though I sympathize with this desire for privacy, it is evident that the sheer greatness of this man—to mention no other consideration—makes his life a worthy subject for a valuable book. That a biography will not some day be attempted (provided civilization continues) is unbelievable. But these pages are no part of such an attempt.

Neither do they add up to a history of Whitehead's intellectual experience. I was not in his study, still less inside his brain, when he developed his ideas or moved from one problem to another. In accepting this limitation which affects anyone

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8 Bertrand Russell, Portraits from Memory (London, 1956), p. 96. Although some allowance for exaggeration in Russell's amusing description of this trait may well be made, I do not doubt its truth in substance.
who writes about another's work, I do not suggest that because of it, or for some historiographic reason, it is bad to try to rethink the subject's thoughts. On the contrary, this is an ultimate desideratum. But the foundation must be adequate to what is asserted. My foundation, like that of everyone who has commented on Whitehead, is practically limited to his published writings. I shall try to maintain a corresponding caution in my assertions, though I may not always succeed.

Whitehead's prefaces are particularly valuable for the plainness with which they say just what he is undertaking. At the same time, they occasion an all too familiar way of misconceiving the large transitions in Whitehead's intellectual adventures. His statements of his problems are almost always such as no other man would write. Because most of us were brought up on other men, nothing is more natural for us than to find Whitehead's statement of his problem off center; subsequently we discover that when he takes up a larger problem in a later book he is correcting himself, "driven" by logical necessity to see matters as we always saw them. Thus his later utterances are "explained" as the result of a process of thought which we know he must have gone through, though he understandably failed to say so. This type of distortion, from which no commentator is exempt, I should wish above all others to avoid. Possibly the circumstance that I first came to the field of philosophy from a reading of Science and the Modern World, rather than from the field to Whitehead's books, will slightly lessen the ever-present danger of slipping into extraneous conceptual frameworks when trying to interpret Whitehead.

The various kinds of documents which give a scholar some basis for shrewd inferences about what his subject did not plainly say in print, though scarce, are not altogether absent. In the present effort to understand Whitehead's works, bits of published information about the man will be used—sparingly, and only when they are clear, credible, and to the best of my knowledge uncontroverted. Apart from a few brief letters from Lord Russell, the only private materials used are
the clearest among my notes of occasional conversations about his published work which I myself had with Whitehead between 1932 and 1946.

III

The grouping of Whitehead's works into the three periods mentioned at the beginning of this chapter has long since become commonplace. And for good reason: it is immediately suggested by the stated objectives of his books. (The dates I assign to these periods are uncertain, since the years meant are not publication dates, but the years in which he probably began a new type of investigation.) I hope in the end to show what the writings of his first and second periods provide for those of the second and third. This is not a simple question, to be answered by the word "premises," or by "presuppositions"—with or without the vague qualification "in principle," used by Rudolf Metz.¹ One strong impression I got as I talked with Whitehead was that he never paid any special attention to being consistent with his former self. Critics, he once said, assume that when a man sits down to write a book he has all his previous books spread out before him; for his part, he had merely tried to handle to the best of his ability the topic before him at the time. All his prefaces bear out this remark. There is no published evidence that he ever envisaged an integrated sequence of investigations, philosophically exhaustive—in the manner of Comte, Spencer, or the young Bertrand Russell. Whitehead wrote no synthesis of his life's work, and I do not wish what I shall set down in the next five chapters to be called a synthesis of it. The word is too strong. Nevertheless, after the reader has made all the reservations suggested in this chapter, I think he will discover in the earlier works philosophic elements which are

rather more substantial than he would have anticipated before attending to the development of Whitehead's philosophy.

The reception of my earlier study of the present subject has confirmed my belief in the value of surveying Whitehead's work as a whole. In returning to the topic I have seen how unguardedly I wrote about it twenty years ago. I am also increasingly aware of how much we students of Whitehead have still to find out. In saying this I am not thinking only of our paucity of biographical facts. I am thinking primarily of the impossibility of exhausting the significance which any one of his major books has in its own right, except by reading it again and again.

Not being a mathematician, I am not competent to master all of Whitehead's works. The discussion of the mathematical ones is perforce not detailed, and must not be considered authoritative. My purpose is centered upon what they show about Whitehead's interests and ways of thinking, and the philosophical significance of his mathematical creations.