Alfred North Whitehead
Lowe, Victor

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72713
CHAPTER X

The Atypical English Philosopher

i/ Whitehead at his first professional meeting of American philosophers.

ii/ The Sixth International Congress of Philosophy. The paper “Time.” Alexander’s injunction to take time seriously. Whitehead, Bradley, and Russell. Replacement of change by supersession. Transitional character of this paper.

iii/ Philosophy as a short subject. North’s book of instruments.

iv/ Lectures at University of Illinois. Their reception.

v/ Invitation to give Barbour-Page Lectures at University of Virginia. Choice of subject, Symbolism. Attendance.


vii/ Definition of symbolism. Direct experience of an external world. Two forms of such experience. Perception of causal efficacy the more fundamental. Answer to Hume’s denial of it. Sensation of touch.

viii/ Rehabilitation of idea of a cause. Appeal to naive experience. Need for pragmatic check on correctness of perception. What the pragmatists failed to notice.

x/Evelyn’s contribution to Symbolism. The pathos which haunts the world.

xi/ Answer to critics of Symbolism. Instinct in the inorganic world.

xii/ Value of Symbolism among Whitehead’s books. Its conclusion.
believe that the first professional meeting of philosophers that Whitehead attended in America was the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association’s Eastern Division,* held for three days in the last week of 1925. The host institution was Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. Whitehead had been asked to present the initial paper in a symposium on Time, on December 30. He was now the outstanding newcomer among American philosophers, and this occasion was eagerly awaited. The other symposiasts were Professors W. P. Montague and W. H. Sheldon. Whitehead did not publish his paper; I must rely on a report of the symposium, written soon afterward by J. H. Randall, Jr. ¹

There was no real symposium, as the three papers were quite independent of each other, and none of the men seemed to have read the others’ papers beforehand. What Whitehead had written for this session was too long for the allotted time; he had to curtail it. His paper, Randall said,

consisted of a series of distinctions and definitions made with the mathematician’s rigor to serve as the concepts for an understanding of physical events.²

These words will suggest to my reader how the majority of American professional philosophers reacted to this transplanted mathematician. Whitehead’s audience made little immediate response to his novel ideas; they let themselves be floored by them. Few of his hearers were ready to start thinking in terms of actual occasions rather than changing substances, and few were ready to accept or to challenge the epochal theory of time, first presented in *Science and the Modern World* and now sketched again.

In the discussion which followed, Whitehead accused the other two speakers of considering the future as it will be when it is a dead past, instead of recognizing genuine novelty and becoming.³ He had not

---

¹This comprised rather more than half of the Association’s membership.
much used those positive words in his English writings, but he had prepared the way for them in his doctrine of the passage of nature. Scientifically minded philosophers habitually ignore that side of nature, and think it a virtue to think tenselessly.

*Science and the Modern World* had been out for a little more than two months. Many of the philosophers at this Eastern Division meeting wanted to buttonhole Whitehead and ask him questions about passages in it. He tried to avoid this; he wanted to meet the younger men and to find out what lines of thought they were pursuing.

Much more important was the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy, held at Harvard in September 1926. For this congress Whitehead wrote a paper, “Time,” subsequently published in its *Proceedings.* Its extreme condensation makes it unusually difficult; only a few Whitehead scholars have given it the attention it deserves.

The paper starts out by noting Alexander’s injunction to take time seriously. Then we should not try to think of the complete totality of all existence, nor of a plurality of existents, each of which is complete in itself without any essential transition to or dependence on the others. Neither the philosophers who want a monism like Bradley’s nor those who embrace an atomistic pluralism like Russell’s are taking time seriously. Whitehead does not name either man, but in his lectures at Harvard he often proscribed their doctrines. I believe that these two were the philosophers of Whitehead’s time who were his natural adversaries as he developed his own philosophy. You could almost say that he cut his metaphysical teeth on their works. You cannot really say it, because when he was a young man he had some metaphysical convictions and discussed metaphysical questions in meetings of the “Apostles.”

Whitehead always disagreed with most of Bradley’s *Logic* and with his *Appearance and Reality,* and completely repudiated the idea that time is a self-contradictory feature of appearance. But he came to find valuable ideas in Bradley’s later work. Not so in the case of Russell. Although Bertie was the greatest logician since Aristotle, in matters on-

---

*Whitehead wrote to Samuel Alexander, urging him to come, but he did not.*
†Reprinted in *IS.*
‡Bradley and Russell were philosophical opponents, but they respected each other.
tological he was, Whitehead thought—and would sometimes say to his Harvard students—completely mistaken.

Among earlier philosophers, Whitehead concentrated his attention on a very few. He had discussed Descartes and Locke in *Science and the Modern World*, but had not finished with them (as he had finished with Berkeley). In the opening section of “Time” he claims that Descartes on substances must be corrected, and he appeals to Locke for support. The correction is radical:

If time be taken seriously, no concrete entity can change. It can only be superseded. . . .

Thus in the place of Descartes’s substance with “endurance” as one of its principal attributes, we must put the notion of an “occasion” with “supersession” as part of its real essence. By Locke, the phrase “perpetually perishing” is used in the same sense as “supersession” here.4

Time is a complex concept. For Whitehead, it arises from the application of three fundamental notions to occasions: supersession, prehension, and incompleteness.

Anyone who compares this paper with *Science and the Modern World* and *Process and Reality* will be struck by its transitional character. For example, in the later book the term *supersession* is not used, but the idea is fundamental and is often driven home with other words. The “events” of the 1925 Lowell Lectures are replaced by “(actual) occasions.” The concept of prehension is plainly on its way to becoming one of the eight “categories of existence” in *Process and Reality*. The description of an occasion as “dipolar” (physical and mental) appears for the first time. So do the terms *objective immortality* and *presentational immediacy*.

After the great success of *Science and the Modern World* and the mixed reception of his Lowell Lectures on Religion, Whitehead felt that his next book should be addressed purely to philosophers. He wrote about this in a letter to North on May 16, 1926. The passage will cause anyone who has looked at *Process and Reality* to gasp:

I want to follow it [SMW] up with something purely addressed to philosophers—*short* and *clear*, if I can make it so! But I reckon that it will take me about two years to get that ready. My view is that a lot of modern philosophy is much too controversial—hunting rabbits

iii

After the great success of *Science and the Modern World* and the mixed reception of his Lowell Lectures on Religion, Whitehead felt that his next book should be addressed purely to philosophers. He wrote about this in a letter to North on May 16, 1926. The passage will cause anyone who has looked at *Process and Reality* to gasp:

I want to follow it [SMW] up with something purely addressed to philosophers—*short* and *clear*, if I can make it so! But I reckon that it will take me about two years to get that ready. My view is that a lot of modern philosophy is much too controversial—hunting rabbits
which bolt into the wrong burrows. There cannot be much in the
subject. What there is to be said, ought to be put shortly—If one
could only see how to do it. You see that I am rather echoing back to
you, your own views as to the book on design. After all, philosophy
is only the statement of the general design of things in general. It must
be a short subject.

Father and son had been corresponding about the book North was
planning. Its title, when it was finally published in 1934, was *Instruments
and Accurate Mechanism: Underlying Principles*. He dedicated it to his
father.

In mentioning to North the excessively controversial character of
modern philosophy, Whitehead probably had their old friend Russell in
mind. Bertie was always hunting rabbits which bolted into the wrong
burrows.

I do not know, and I doubt whether anyone will ever know, whether
Whitehead began a short statement of “the general design of things in
general,” and if he did, how far he carried it before he started work on
his Gifford Lectures. The notion of the brevity of philosophy makes
sense only if we bear in mind his original subject, mathematics, in every
branch of which a properly axiomatized general theory spawns innu-
merable branchings and endless developments. Mathematics is not a
short subject, because it includes both general theories and the endless
developments from them. So too with philosophy. What Whitehead
was saying was that philosophical discussion must be based on a general
theory, and that this theory should be as short and clear as possible.

As in most of his private letters, Whitehead had the recipient much in
his mind. In this instance he emphasized the importance of North’s
work by comparing it with what he himself was trying to do.

Harvard’s spring vacation in 1926 made it possible for Whitehead to
accept invitations from McGill University, the University of Michi-
gan, and the University of Illinois. At McGill he read a paper to the
Philosophical Society. He did the same at Ann Arbor. Neither paper
was ever published; they might have been one and the same paper.

The stay at Illinois lasted six days, in which Whitehead gave five
lectures. These also were never published, but I can tell more about this
visit, thanks to the late Sterling Lamprecht, who was then a member of
the Philosophy Department there. The lectures were adumbrations of
the ideas of *Process and Reality*. Few people understood them, but that
did not cut down the attendance. On the contrary, as I have noted, larger rooms were needed for the second and third occasions. The notion that important new ideas would be broached by the author of *Science and the Modern World* had taken hold. Going to these lectures was the thing to do. Lamprecht later wrote to me:

> it was a *bon mot* in Urbana at the time that the philosophers did not understand the lectures but hoped that the mathematicians did, and that the mathematicians did not understand the lectures but hoped the philosophers did. People sometimes said frankly that they did not understand what ANW said but were charmed by his smile.⁵

He appears to have been the beneficiary of a quite naive conception of the frontiers of knowledge, entertained by both students and faculty at what was then a quite ordinary Midwestern university.

Whitehead was much more interested in talking to students than to the faculty. The Lamprechts and the Whiteheads were dined in a new fraternity house, and given a tour of it afterward. The only books in evidence were textbooks. Evelyn asked, “But where are the books you like to read?”⁶ She saw that there can be no intellectual culture if the young read only what they are told they must read if they want the degrees to which all obedient students are entitled. A nation in which this happens is lucky if it escapes totalitarianism.

V

In April 1927 Whitehead delivered three lectures on the Barbour-Page Foundation (now called the Page-Barbour Foundation) at the University of Virginia. These lectures were given annually. He was pleased when the invitation reached him the preceding fall. It came from the Chairman of the University Committee on Public Occasions, Professor John J. Luck. But Evelyn had just suffered an attack of pleurisy and pneumonia; her worried husband mislaid Professor Luck’s letter.⁷ Belatedly he sent a very apologetic acceptance on December 10, 1926.⁸ In it he proposed to lecture on “Symbolic Expression: Its Function for the Individual and for Society.” Whitehead explained that he had not yet touched upon this subject in his publications, and hardly at all in his regular lectures at Harvard. Barbour-Page lecturers were required to choose subjects that were new to them. This requirement had an obvious reason; but it could result in the presentation of material that was too novel for a college audience. That was what happened in Whitehead’s case (and, later, in T. S. Eliot’s).⁹ There was a large au-
dience for the first lecture. On the night of the third one, Professor Luck was frantically calling faculty members to beg their attendance, but only about a dozen came.¹⁰

vi

The Macmillan Company published these lectures almost verbatim in November 1927, under the title *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect.* Whitehead devoted over two hundred words to his Dedication, which was to the State of Virginia. It was written on his arrival in Virginia, “a great experience for an Englishman.” In references to Sir Walter Raleigh, the dedication sought to evoke the spirit of romance. I think Whitehead was both saying what he supposed to be appropriate, and giving free rein to his usual feelings about his wife. This long dedication is one of the few passages from his pen that we could do without.

The Preface, slightly shorter, is consequential in two respects. In the first place, it tells the reader that some portions of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* will help him to understand the lectures. North remembered that when he was young his father urged him to study the classic British philosophers; they were the most important philosophers. In the Preface to *Process and Reality* Whitehead will say that the main positions in his philosophy were anticipated in the later books of Locke’s *Essay.* Secondly, the acknowledgment of the debt to Santayana’s *Scepticism and Animal Faith* has great significance for Whitehead’s assessment of Hume’s theory of knowledge, both in these lectures and in the later Gifford Lectures. At Virginia he said that Santayana had shown “by every manner of beautiful illustration” that on Hume’s premises there is no escape from what Santayana called “solipsism of the present moment.”¹¹

vii

Whitehead’s definition of symbolism¹² is so broad that he can consider most of our perceptions symbolic. But his purpose in the first two lectures was to make an analysis of experience that would exhibit the elements in it which are not symbolic, but are directly recognized. In his first lecture he maintained that we enjoy direct experience of an external world.¹³ He was not limiting “experience” to what we are conscious of, but including experience asleep or half-awake, drunk or sober; con-
sciousness is a special feature which to some degree lights up some part of our experience.

He distinguished two quite different kinds of direct perception. Perception of contemporary things as displayed by sense-data, he called “presentational immediacy.” It is what people usually mean by sense-perception. Its data can be clear, distinct, and vivid. The second kind of direct perception he called “perception of causal efficacy.” In it we feel the action of the past (both within and outside ourselves) in shaping our present experience. Its data are vague and primitive. Mistakes in identification and all other errors in perception occur in symbolic reference from the one kind of perception to the other.*

Whitehead as a mathematician tends to consider the elements of a duality as on a par with each other; but here he views perception of causal efficacy as the more fundamental. There is no need to seek a reason for its relative neglect in his books on the philosophy of natural science; scientific observations are perceptions of sense-data. Those perceptions are of data that are strictly present. When we look at a nebula in the night sky, we are not looking backward through the time it took the light to reach us. That is an astronomer’s interpretation of what we see as there now.

Whitehead attacks Hume’s denial that there is any perception of causal efficacy by simply asking for the meaning of “by” in his observation that if the idea of substance is perceived by the eyes it must be a color, if by the ears a sound, if by the palate a taste. Was Hume not assuming that what he called “impressions” are given by the causal efficacy of eyes, ears, and palate? And his argument must begin again over the perception of those sense-organs.  

The prime example of perception of causal efficacy is what Whitehead in later books called our sense of the withness of the body. This is an integral part of every human experience.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Whitehead’s doctrine of causal perception is only a way of insisting that touch is more fundamental than any other kind of sensation. That was not his intention. He listed these examples of what is given in presentational immediacy: “colours, sounds, tastes, touches, and bodily feelings.”

*Perceptions of both kinds promote, and are promoted by, analysis of their data in terms of concepts.
Whitehead rehabilitated the idea of a cause after Hume's destructive analysis of the causal relation between events, by looking afresh at what is given to us in any experience-event. We always feel that to some extent the experience came from some thing or things outside of and prior to itself.* His doctrines of the two modes of direct perception and symbolic reference do not express or rest on points of scientific evidence. They appeal to naive experience. And they show Whitehead's desire to be a Realist in his conception of empirical knowledge. He made a good case for two kinds of direct realism (which some have preferred to call naive realism); in holding that symbolic reference between them is ubiquitous, he gave representative perception its due.

Any instance of symbolic reference may be unfortunate, or downright mistaken; Whitehead was never in a hurry to state unqualified conclusions.

In the case of perceived organisms external to the human body, the spatial discrimination involved in the human perception of their pure causal efficacy is so feeble, that practically there is no check on this symbolic transference apart from the indirect check of pragmatic consequences.\(^1^7\)

As pragmatists (most notably Dewey and C. I. Lewis) insisted, the correctness of a sense-perception is to be tested by those further sense-perceptions which occur when we act upon the assumption that the perception is truthful. In Whitehead's terms, the effective distinction of perceptual truth from perceptual error requires the perceiver's thought to move from a given perception in the mode of presentational immediacy to future ones. The empirical character of the object perceived is filled out—as pragmatists seldom noticed—by the imaginable content of non-futural hypothetical sense-perceptions: by what the perceiver believes he, or someone like him, would observe from other places or would have observed at other times.

One of the causes of the poor attendance at Whitehead's third Barbour-Page lecture was surely the outré character of the new theory of perception he had advanced. As a twentieth-century English phi-

---

*I call that "causation," and reserve "causality" for the grouping of objects or of events as causes and effects.
Atypical English Philosopher

losopher, he was atypical. But when a student picks up Symbolism today, he is likely to stop after the second chapter because the epistemological analysis is over. He would then miss much that was essential to Whitehead. The arguments of the first two chapters are dependent on the third, "Uses of Symbolism," not for their validity but for their setting and import. The evidence from which the epistemology grew had a much wider base than inspection of given experience. Whitehead had reflected on human societies in a way that was like Edmund Burke on prejudice, or use and wont.¹⁸

Whitehead saw the character of human individuals, and the complex character of a part of society (say, Virginia in 1927), and the specific character of a home, or a tree, as the outcome of an inescapable inheritance transmitted from the past, and of sporadic or deliberate deviations from that inheritance. Such a view will be obvious to anyone who dispassionately considers the institutions, buildings, and customs in his environment. Whitehead described them beautifully in his 1926 article, "The Education of an Englishman." But anyone can see the truth in his point of view merely by observing the comparatively insignificant effect which the presented sense-data of the moment have in determining the various judgments, mental processes, and reactions of different men; the cumulative effect of personal and social history is what counts most.

On re-reading Symbolism, I am struck by the extent to which Whitehead's illustrations in his first two chapters could have come from conversation with Evelyn. The thought is his: the theorizing, the arguments, and especially the generalizations; the particulars could easily have come from her. I am not suggesting that anyone but Whitehead did the writing.

The writing is never bland. After the war of 1914–18, how could it be? The contrast he had exhibited between causal efficacy—"the hand of the settled past in the formation of the present"¹⁹—and the displays of presentational immediacy reaches its climax when he reminds us of the inscription on old sundials in "religious" houses: "The hours perish and are laid to account."²⁰

Whitehead remarks that this contrast "is at the root of the pathos which haunts the world." A world without pathos would be unreal to sensitive human beings. The word haunts is one that he uses often, in
later books as well as in Symbolism. It is very appropriate when the experience that he wants his constructive philosophy to satisfy is more a personal craving than an indubitable given that we all share.

xi

Some critics of Symbolism complained that Whitehead put out generalities instead of logical analyses like those that distinguished the books he wrote in England. They forgot that the subject matter is very different. Whitehead in the third Barbour-Page lecture is like, but better than, the older Whitehead of Lucien Price’s Dialogues. A person who plans to read Whitehead’s works in their chronological order does not have to wait for Part I of Adventures of Ideas to see his sociological side.

There is nothing wrong with general propositions as such. As an example of the originality of Whitehead’s generalities, ponder this: after defining pure instinct as the response of an organism to the pure causal efficacy of its external world, without any functioning of presentational immediacy (and so without any symbolism), he says,

The most successful examples of community life exist when pure instinct reigns supreme. These examples occur only in the inorganic world, among societies of active molecules forming rocks, planets, solar systems, star clusters.21

Who, except a philosopher who had been an applied mathematician instead of a learned scholar, would think of this?

xii

Whether or not you have read Whitehead’s major philosophical books, Symbolism is worth study. What he says in his first two chapters is fundamental for his philosophy. To the criticism in Science and the Modern World of the assumption of “simple location” he adds an emphatic application to time: “There is nothing which ‘simply happens.’ ”22 The pure succession of time is an abstraction from the conformation of our present experience to our prior experience.

Whereas I have reservations about some parts of Whitehead’s major philosophical books, I have none about the first two chapters of Symbolism. And all of that book shows Whitehead’s many-sidedness. When what he says is something that others have said, you feel that he takes it seriously, so that it becomes a real part of his thought. One example is
his remark that “the symbolic elements in life have a tendency to run wild, like the vegetation in a tropical forest.”

In his last chapter Whitehead wrote,

My main thesis is that a social system is kept together by the blind force of instinctive actions, and of instinctive emotions clustered around habits and prejudices.

For him this was not a dogma, but a tentative generalization.

The last paragraph of the book begins:

It is the first step in sociological wisdom, to recognize that the major advances in civilization are processes which all but wreck the societies in which they occur;—like unto an arrow in the hand of a child.

Then this atypical philosopher shows us how English he is:

The art of free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.