

On Knowledge of So-called Higher Things

According to Whitehead's analysis, "those elements of our experience which stand out clearly and distinctly in our consciousness are not its basic facts; they are the derivative modifications which arise in the process." Hence "the order of dawning, clearly and distinctly, in consciousness is not the order of metaphysical priority" (*PR*: 245 f.).

Taken by themselves, these statements might suggest that Whitehead is simply making one more appeal to the familiar distinction between *ordo cognoscendi* and *ordo essendi*. But this would be mistaken, since it would put the emphasis elsewhere than he himself intends it by his use of the adverbial qualifiers, "clearly and distinctly." The distinction as he makes it is *within* knowledge (or experience), not *between* it and being. And his point is that there is a difference between the order of knowledge (or experience), insofar as it is taken to include vague, nonthematic, notional, or heuristic knowledge (or experience), and the order of our knowledge, insofar as it is taken to include only what is "clear and distinct." Indeed, Whitehead holds, the difference here is that between two opposite directions, what is first in the one being last in the other, and vice versa. Thus he says, "rationalization is the reverse of abstraction, so far as abstraction can be reversed within the area of consciousness. . . . [R]ationalization is the partial fulfilment of the ideal to recover concrete reality within the disjunction of abstraction. This disjunction is the appearance which has been introduced as price of finite conscious discrimination" (*MT*: 170 f.). He makes the same point in connection with a clarification of the meaning of "philosophy": "Philosophy is the self-correction by consciousness of its own initial excess of subjectivity. . . . The task of philosophy is to recover the totality obscured by the selection. It replaces in rational experience what has been submerged in the higher sensitive experience and has been sunk yet deeper by the initial operations of consciousness itself" (*PR*: 22). Presupposed here is that "the growth of consciousness is the uprise of abstractions. It is the growth of emphasis. The totality is characterized by a selection from its details" (*MT*: 168). In short, "we are conscious of more than clarity" (*MT*: 148), and "the primitive stage of discrimination is not primarily qualitative. It is the

vague grasp of reality, dissecting it into a threefold scheme, namely, The Whole, That Other, and This-Myself" (MT: 150).

If this interpretation of Whitehead is correct, then one may say that he casts a whole new light on the question of our knowledge of so-called higher things. It turns out, on his view, that the "higher things" are, in reality, the "lower things," in the sense that they are the presuppositions of all emergence of higher, more complex, differentiated forms, and this both metaphysically and epistemologically.

It would be interesting to ask whether this may not have at least something to do with the appeal that the metaphor of "depth" has, over against that of "height," to persons who, living in a "critical age," have had to become more self-conscious about the necessary conditions of the possibility of our clear and distinctly conscious knowledge. I mean, is the "turn to the subject" merely coincidental with the evident appeal of the metaphor of "depth"?

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