

On Whitehead's Understanding of the History of Philosophy

Like other great philosophers, Whitehead has his own understanding of the history of philosophy in which he stands and how his work at once corrects and fulfills that history. The general scheme of his understanding may be interpreted as follows:

. Beginning with the Greeks (i.e., Plato and Aristotle), there is the concentration on sense perception, especially visual perception, as the primary mode of human experience. Of course, Greek philosophy was subtle and multiform and by no means "inflexibly consistent" (*PRc*: 158 [240]; *S*: 133). Indeed, despite its pronounced orientation to sense perception, Greek thought never lost the "inflexibly objectivist" conviction of common sense that "we perceive other things which are in the world of actualities in the same sense as we are" (158 [240]; *S*: 131). Even so, the Greeks are responsible for the tendency of the entire philosophical tradition to suppose that what is most clearly and distinctly given in conscious sense perception is what is metaphysically fundamental. And this explains why they are also responsible for the whole substance-quality metaphysics of the Western tradition, for "exclusive reliance on sense-perception promotes a false metaphysics" (*AI*: 281).

With Descartes, who was himself dominated by medieval philosophy's more inflexibly consistent Platonic-Aristotelian outlook than were Plato and Aristotle themselves, the mistakes of the Greeks (grounded in the primal error of taking sense perception to be fundamental) became still more pronounced, even as philosophy was given a subjectivist bias. To be sure, Descartes, and even more so Locke, retains the traditional insistence on our experience of an objective world (hence his theory of *realitas objectiva* and Locke's theory of "ideas of particular existents"). But the way is already prepared for Hume's demonstration of the utter inadequacy of the philosophical tradition—and, naturally, for Kant's effort to rehabilitate the tradition while retaining its guiding preferences for sense perception over perception of causal efficacy and for conception over perception. With Kant and the idealists, the mistake is still made of supposing the most distinctively human elements in experience to be the most important metaphysically.

With Whitehead, on the contrary, there is an attempt to return behind the whole of modern philosophy via Locke and Descartes to Plato, and beyond Plato to an analysis of experience that Plato's own preference for sense perception obscured. Thus, in its own way, Whitehead's understanding of the history of philosophy, like Heidegger's, entails the allegation of a fateful "forgetting"—not, to be sure, of "being," but of "actuality," which forgetting is itself grounded in an infatuation with what is peculiarly human, namely, sense perception. As a "dismantling" of this tradition, then, Whitehead's philosophy is precisely the attempt to return to the origins and thus to penetrate back into the ground of metaphysics (cf. *PRc*: 145 f. [220 f.], where Whitehead speaks of "those who wish to confront their metaphysical constructions by a recourse to the facts").

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Here are some representative quotations confirming this interpretation of Whitehead's understanding:

"The dominance of Aristotelian logic from the late classical period onwards has imposed on metaphysical thought the categories naturally derivative from its phraseology. This dominance of his logic does not seem to have been characteristic of Aristotle's own metaphysical speculations" (*PRc*: 30 [45]; *S*: 141).

"The baseless metaphysical doctrine of 'undifferentiated endurance' is a subordinate derivative from the misapprehension of the proper character of the extensive scheme.

"In our perception of the contemporary world via presentational immediacy, nexus of actual entities are objectified for the percipient under the perspective of their characters of extensive continuity. . . . Thus the immediate percept assures the character of the quiet undifferentiated endurance of the material stone, perceived by means of its quality of colour. This basic notion dominates language, and haunts both science and philosophy. . . .

"The simple notion of an enduring substance sustaining persistent qualities, either essentially or accidentally, expresses a useful abstract [or: abstract useful?] for many purposes of life. But whenever we try to use it as a

fundamental statement of the nature of things, it proves itself mistaken. It arose from a mistake and has never succeeded in any of its applications. But it has had one success: it has entrenched itself in language, in Aristotelian logic, and in metaphysics. For its employment in language and in logic, there is—as stated above—a sound pragmatic defence. But in metaphysics, the concept is sheer error. This error does not consist in the employment of the word 'substance'; but in the employment of the notion of an actual entity which is characterized by essential qualities, and remains numerically one amidst the changes of accidental relations and of accidental qualities. The contrary doctrine is that an actual entity never changes, and that it is the outcome of whatever can be ascribed to it in the way of quality or relationship" (77 ff. [119-122]; S: 164 f., 167).

"The current accounts of perception are the stronghold of modern metaphysical difficulties. They have their origin in the same misunderstanding which led to the incubus of the substance-quality categories. The Greeks looked at a stone, and perceived that it was grey. The Greeks were ignorant of modern physics; but modern philosophers discuss perception in terms of categories derived from the Greeks.

"The Greeks started from perception in its most elaborate and sophisticated form, namely, visual perception. In visual perception, crude perception is most completely made over by the originative phases in experience, phases which are especially prominent in human experience" (117 [179]; S: 100 f.).

"It is evident that 'perception in the mode of causal efficacy' is not that sort of perception which has received chief attention in the philosophical tradition. Philosophers have disdained the information about the universe obtained through their visceral feelings and have concentrated on visual feelings" (121 [184]; S: 100).

"The exclusive dominance of the substance-quality metaphysics was enormously promoted by the logical bias of the medieval period, It was retarded by the study of Plato and Aristotle. These authors included the strains of thought which issued in this doctrine, but included them inconsistently mingled with other notions. The substance-quality

metaphysics triumphed with exclusive dominance in Descartes' doctrines" (137 [209]; S: 141).

"Philosophy has always proceeded on the sound principle that its generalization must be based upon the primary elements in actual experience as starting points. Greek philosophy had recourse to the common forms of language to suggest its generalizations. It found the typical statement, 'That stone is grey'; and it evolved the generalization that the actual world can be conceived as a collection of primary substances qualified by universal qualities. Of course, this was not the only generalization evolved: Greek philosophy was subtle and multiform, also it was not inflexibly consistent. But this general notion was always influencing thought, explicitly or implicitly" (158 [240]; S: 133).

"Traditional philosophy in its account of conscious perception has exclusively fixed attention on its pure conceptual side; and thereby has made difficulties for itself in the theory of knowledge. Locke, with his naive good sense, assumes that perception involves more than this conceptual side; though he fails to grasp the inconsistency of this assumption with the extreme subjectivist sensationalist doctrine. Physical feelings form the non-conceptual elements in our awareness of nature" (243 [371 f.]; S: 153).

"When Descartes, Locke, and Hume undertake the analysis of experience, they utilize those elements in their own experience which lie clear and distinct, fit for the exactitude of intellectual discourse. It is tacitly assumed, except by Plato, that the more fundamental factors will ever lend themselves for discrimination with peculiar clarity. This assumption is here directly challenged" (*AI*: 225).

"It was the defect of the Greek analysis of generation that it conceived it in terms of the bare incoming of novel abstract form. This ancient analysis failed to grasp the real operation of the antecedent particulars imposing themselves on the novel particular in process of creation. Thus the geometry exemplified in fact was disjoined from their account of the generation of fact [or: was disjoined in their account from the generation of fact?]" (242).

"Plato, Descartes, Locke, prepared the way for Hume; and Kant followed upon Hume. The point of this discussion is to show an alternative line of thought which evades Hume's deduction from philosophical tradition, and at the same time preserves the general trend of thought received from his three great predecessors" (244).

"The real actual things 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" (262).

"Unfortunately the superior dominance in consciousness of the contrast 'Appearance and Reality' has led metaphysicians from the Greeks onwards to make their start from the more superficial characteristic. This error has warped modern philosophy to a greater extent than ancient or medieval philosophy. The warping has taken the form of a consistent reliance ~~v~~^u upon sensationalist perception as the basis of all experiential activity. It has had the effect of decisively separating 'mind' from 'nature,' a modern separation which found its first exemplification in Cartesian dualism. But it must be remembered that this modern development was only the consistent carrying out of principles already present in the older European philosophy. It required two thousand years for the full implication of those principles to dawn upon men's minds in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries after Christ" (268 f.).

"The justification of this procedure of modern epistemology is twofold, and both of its branches are based upon mistakes. The mistakes go back to the Greek philosophers. What is modern is the exclusive reliance upon them" (289).