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Metaphysics

Term Paper

" An Inconsistency in Whitehead's Theory of Knowledge "

Introduction

The title of this paper may, if an explanation is not given, sound rather ambitious, so I will without delay report that the inconsistency I will write about is discussed in Dr. John Blyth's " Whitehead's Theory of Knowledge". Dr. Blyth's booklet is the first ^{attempt} to my knowledge, at a critical evaluation of Whitehead's outstanding and most representative work, Process and Reality. The book has as a subtitle, an Essay in Cosmology, and it presents a comprehensive system of general ideas in terms of which Whitehead interprets the whole of experience. ~~and~~ Dr. Blyth's analysis centers on Whitehead's theory of knowledge, since ~~this~~ for Whitehead, as for all other philosophers, this is the critical point around which the whole of his speculative philosophy is evolved.

The inconsistency will be seen to rise from the universal assumptions which are intrinsic to Whitehead's system and not from some standard applied by the critic and which is exterior to the main assumptions and methods of Whitehead's book.

To achieve an adequate understanding of both Whitehead's theory of knowledge and to come to a clear appreciation of the inconsistency which Dr. Blyth points out it will be necessary to explain some of the new vocabulary and the new concepts that Whitehead, dissatisfied with the traditional terminology, which he felt would lead to error, ~~was~~ obliged to coin in order to give adequate expression to his system. These new terms and concepts include : actual entities; feelings, presentational immediacy, concrescence; causal efficacy; extensive continuum; and others which will be

introduced as needed. Following a brief explanation of these terms, in a context in which they will be understood most easily, I will proceed with a statement and discussion of the major inconsistency. It will be concluded that Whitehead's metaphysics suffer from internal incoherence of the major principles with Whitehead assumes as critical points in his theory. It is far beyond the scope of the writer and of this paper to suggest even in what direction revision of the basic principles should proceed in order to rid Whitehead's system of its fatal inconsistency.

An examination and Discussion of the Basic Concepts in Whitehead's System. Whitehead was dissatisfied with the old metaphysical language because he felt that it could not adequately explain the subjectivist principle introduced by Descartes in terms of the substance-quality relationship. In ancient thought, coming to us from Aristotle, through the Scholastics, a substance was that which could exist by itself, that is, independently. It was difficult therefore to explain the experience of a conscious entity in which the subject at least appears to know an object which is an independent substance. In Process and Reality whitehead writes:

The doctrine of the individual independence of real facts is derived from the notion that the subject-predicate form of statement conveys a truth which is metaphysically ultimate. According to this view, an individual substance with its predicates constitutes the ultimate type of actuality. With this metaphysical presupposition, the relations between individual substances constitute metaphysical nuisances: There is no place for them.¹

This difficulty of explaining adequately the relations between objects, when coupled with Hume's sensationalism also makes it impossible to explain causation. Hume insisted that if sensations were the only data of consciousness, then we can never say that we see a stone breaking a window, but that we see the usual sequence of events: the stone hits

against the window and we see the window breaking, but we cannot strictly say that it is the stone which makes the window break; ~~we~~ think in terms of causation because our mind has come to expect a ~~thorough~~ experience that a certain ~~action~~ ^{event} will always follow another series of events, and this, says Hume is what we are accustomed to calling causation.

Another difficulty that Whiteheads sets out to remove is ~~that~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~view~~ ~~of~~ ~~space~~ ~~and~~ ~~time~~ ~~as~~ ~~absolutes~~. This notion reaches its most definite formulation in Newton's physics. In this view time is seen as passing away undifferentiated and unalterably, regardless of any matter or events or change. Space, absolute space is seen by Newton as immovable. Newton Writes:

Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external, and by another name is called "duration".

Absolute space, in its own nature, without relation to anything external, remains always similar and immovable.²

Whitehead calls this the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," that is, time and space have been taken to be concrete, whereas in reality they are abstractions from the real scheme of reality.

The most serious difficulty ~~encountered~~ ^{seen} ~~by~~ Whitehead if we adopt the substance-quality categories and the substantial view of Space and time is that it becomes impossible to really express the essence of any entity. This is so because we define an entity in terms of its likeness to absolutes or in terms of absolutes themselves. But this only tells us how a certain entity is like some other entities, and tells us nothing of its real essence. The substance-quality categories express the abstract essence of an entity but tell us ~~nothing~~ of its real essence. According to Whitehead a statement of the real essence of a particular entity should

include the position of ~~it/where~~ an entity in the extensive scheme of experience, it should tell us where the entity is, its status in the real world. It ~~is~~ exactly this status which an abstract account of the essence of an entity omits and therefore it does not adequately allow us to express the real particular and unique essence of an entity.

Dr. Blyth summarizes the problem that Whitehead is trying to solve in the following quote from his Book:

In the first place he must explain how there can be relations between entities and in particular how there can be a direct perceptive relation. In the same explanation he must also account for the relation of causation. And finally the spatio-temporal continuum must be explained in such a way that the statement of the real essence of an entity will indicate where that entity is.³

In outline, this is how Whitehead proceeds to the solution of these problems.

He accepts the subjectivist principle with the qualification that although ~~although/it is/that/exists~~ there is nothing apart from the perception of real particulars or existents, these particular existents cannot be adequately explained in terms of the substance-quality categories because this renders the relations between actual existents unintelligible. Instead, Whitehead calls the individual existents actual entities, and defines actual entities thus :

Actual entities—also termed 'actual occasions'—are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. They differ among themselves: God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But, though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level. The

5

final facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and independent.⁴

The actual entities are internally related because one entity enters into the nature of another. It does this by 'prehending' another entity.

Whitehead explains the process of prehension as follows:

Prehension reproduces in itself the general characteristics of an actual entity: it is referent to an external world, and in this sense will be said to have a 'vector character'; it involves emotion, and purpose, and valuation, and causation. In fact, any characteristic of an actual entity is reproduced in a prehension.⁵

This concept of 'prehension' of an actual entity in its process of becoming (called concrescence) allows Whitehead to explain causality. This simple affectual perception of an actual entity is also called by Whitehead a perception in the mode of 'causal efficacy'. Perception in the mode of causal efficacy is distinguished from perception in the mode of presentational immediacy, or in other words, sense perceptions. The perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy (prehensions) and perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy, (sense data) are for Whitehead the two elements which constitute the process of perception. Both are equally important. This allows Whitehead to say that we are actually aware of causality and we see one thing causing another when we perceive it in the mode of causal efficacy, or when we take into account its prehensions. This answers Hume's objection that we do not actually see causation in operation. According to Hume and the rest of the philosophers who accept the sensationalist principle, an analysis of ~~percept~~ experience discloses only sense data, or perception in the mode of presentational immediacy. Whitehead disagrees here and insists that analysis of ~~percept~~ experience discloses also the simple causal feelings discussed above, those of perception according to causal efficacy.

Whitehead's 'actual entities' do not exist at random or come into existence independently. An actual entity can also be called an 'event', for this concept helps us to understanding more adequately the process by which an actual entity 'becomes'. This process is called concrescence. But before I go on to explain concrescence it is necessary to insert a note about the universe in which or as part of which the actual entities come to be. This universe is called by Whitehead the Extensive Continuum. According to Whitehead the: ~~Extensive/Continuum/Is/~~

extensive continuum is a complex of entities united by the various allied relationships of whole to part, and of overlapping as to possess common parts, and of contact, and of other relationships derived from these primary relationships. The notion of a continuum involves both the property of indefinite divisibility and the property of unbounded extension.... The extensive continuum expresses the solidarity of all possible standpoints throughout the whole process of the world. This extensive continuum is real, because it expresses a fact derived from the actual world and concerning the contemporary actual world.⁶ All actual entities are related according to the determinations of this continuum; and all possible actual~~ly~~ entities in the future must exemplify these determinations in their relations with the already actual world. The reality of the future is bound with the reality of this continuum. It is the reality of what this potential in its character of real component of what is actual. Such a component must be interpreted in terms of the relatedness of prehensions.⁶

~~The~~ Actual entities or events come about in this potential scheme called the extensive continuum through a process of concrescence. Whitehead describes concrescence in these words:

Concrescence is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity in a determinate relegation of each item of the 'many' to its subordination in the constitution of the novel 'one'.... An instance of concrescence is termed an 'actual entity', or equivalently, an 'actual occasion'.⁷

Whitehead goes on to say that an actual occasion is the unity to be ascribed to a particular instance of concrescence. Once the process of concrescence terminates, and the new actual entity has integrated into itself, from its own unique standpoint in the extensive continuum, all the other actual entities in the continuum, the actual entity itself becomes the object of the concrescence of another actual entity:

Thus a set of all actual occasions is by the nature of things a standpoint for another concrescence which elicits a concrete ~~entity~~ unity from those many actual occasions.⁸

The objects of our experience are not however, these individual actual entities, but groups or sets of actual entities. These groups of related actual entities constituting the objects of our perception Whitehead terms nexus (singular: nexus). Whitehead defines a nexus as:

a set of actual entities in the unity of relatedness constituted by their prehensions of each other, or what is the same thing conversely expressed- constituted by their objectifications in each other.⁹

~~Whitehead~~

Whitehead further states that a nexus can include sets of occasions which are contemporaty with each other, and it can include sets which are relatively past and future.

Having completed a brief and undetailed analysis of the main elements of Whitehead's theory of knowledge we are now ready to examine the critical points in which this theory is seen to be inconsistent because of the incompatibility of some of its general presumptions. A brief summary

8

of Whitehead theory of knowledge is provided for us by Dr. Blyth: ~~11/11/11~~

Of prime importance are the three principles: the subjectivist principle, the principle of relativity, and the ontological principle. According to them actual entities constitute the final facts and reasons of the universe. They are internally related to one another in virtue of their feelings of each other. An actual entity is an organic whole but may be analyzed into its conceptual and physical prehensions. The forms of definiteness of these prehensions are called eternal objects. And finally actual entities are grouped together in nexūs in virtue of their prehensions of each other. Thus all experience in general, and perception in particular, must be explained by Whitehead in terms of eternal objects, prehensions, actual entities, and nexūs, and in accordance with the subjectivist principle, the principle of relativity, and the ontological principle.¹⁰

I will include, before proceeding further with the substance of the criticism a brief statement of these three principles in Whitehead's own words.

The sensationalist principle is that the primary activity in the act of experience is the bare subjective form of reception. This is the doctrine of mere sensation."¹¹

The Principle of Universal relativity directly traverses Aristotle's dictum! "a substance is not present in a subject." On the contrary according to this principle an actual entity is present in other actual entities. 12

The Ontological Principle is the principle that everything is positively somewhere in actuality, and in potency everywhere... that every entity is felt by some actual entity,... that in separation from actual ~~things/entities/~~ entities there is nothing, ~~merely~~ merely nonentity. 13

9
Inconstistencies in Whitehead's Theory of Knowledge

Most of the difficulties with Whitehead's theory of knowledge can be traced to his assumption of the metaphysical first principles stated above. The first difficulty arises in connection with Whitehead's concept of the nexūs. A nexus was defined as a set of actual entities in the unity of relatedness constituted by their prehensions of each other. But this goes contrary to the principle of relativity, for to be prehended an actual entity must be antedecedent in the extensive continuum to ~~each~~ the prehending subject. This then makes it impossible ~~for two~~ to establish a relatedness between ~~two~~ entities constituted by their prehensions of one another, for it is impossible for ~~two~~ entities to be antedecedent to one another.

In defining the truth-relation of sense perception as the relation of correspondence between ~~two elements~~ Appearance and Reality in experience, Whitehead runs into another difficulty, for he is forced to adopt a position which leads to the denial of either the subjectivist principle or the principle of relativity. Reality was described as the form of the past actual world given to an entity (through the process of concrescence) in the mode of causal efficacy, and appearance is what that world comes to be as the result of the activity of the perceiving subject. But reality in the case of sense-perception is the contemporary world. The truth of sense-perceptions therefore depends upon conformation to the real world of contemporary actual entities. Thus if the principle of relativity be adopted, the subjectivist principle must be denied for truth cannot then be explained as the correspondence between two elements in experience. On the other hand, if the subjectivist principle be adopted, the principle of relativity must be denied in order to hold that the contemporary Reality is an element in the experience of a perceiving subject.

Besides these two difficulties there is at least another major one stemming from Whitehead's discussion of the perception of contemporary actual entities in the mode of presentational immediacy. However, I do not feel qualified to explore this difficulty, since an understanding of it would require a study of Whitehead and a knowledge of other concepts which ~~is~~ is really beyond the scope of a paper of this size and of the present qualifications of this writer.

I would like to close this paper by observing that the inconsistencies in Whitehead's system do little to diminish his importance as a pioneer in the elaboration of a philosophy to meet the demands of modern science. Time and space do not allow a list of his many and great contributions to twentieth century thought, but it allows a ^{affirmation} ~~statement that~~ of the appreciation of Whitehead's contribution to metaphysics by minds more esteemed and more qualified to judge real worth than the present writer possesses. I'm sure that it would not disturb Whitehead overmuch to know that someone has found inconsistencies in his system, for he was a man who ~~applied~~ ^{looked for} and ~~expected~~ growth. He was fond of telling his students at Harvard that the greatest achievement of any philosopher is to be refuted in every century ~~after he writes~~ that follows the publication of his writings.