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Edited by

D. W. HARDING

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DENYS THOMPSON

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EVALUATIONS (III)

ALFRED NORTH
WHITEHEAD

DISCUSSION of Dr. Whitehead is an unenviable task: he is both prolific and encyclopædic, and from close at hand it is difficult to decide even what the nature of his importance is. In one and the same book—as for instance in his last, *Adventures of Ideas*¹—he presents speculations on history, sociology, politics, religion, together with metaphysics and physics. Admittedly in some of these he is indisputably expert, while in others he is as frankly amateur: that hardly affords a ground for their separate consideration. Whether rightly or not, they are presented as of a piece and, unless I am mistaken, are widely accepted as such. Even the many variations in tone adopted by Dr. Whitehead—at times strictly analytic, at others he is enthusiastic, tenderly affective, hortatory, while he can rarely resist the temptation to turn an aphorism—these many variations, which might be expected to arouse distrust, tend rather to win him confidence. For the scientist, on non-scientific matters, is as susceptible of emotion as the Welsh miner; while the miner in his turn, who admires the expert, is tolerant of the wildest theories that are soberly expounded. Dr. Whitehead's work therefore must be considered as a whole. And if it were not so, of course, it would hardly come up for consideration here. Certain portions would submit themselves for judgment to fellow-experts, the rest would float off into the Limbo at the back of the moon. But they obstinately refuse to do so.

¹C.U.P., 12/6d.

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That certain of its qualities might be expected to arouse distrust is particularly unfortunate because, as even his admirers would admit, Dr. Whitehead's work is such that it calls for the maximum of forbearance in perusal. He can write extremely well, as I shall insist ; but it is notorious that he does not always do so. And the construction of some of his books—of for instance *Process and Reality*, which in many respects is the most important—is of a kind that it is impossible to read them continuously. Cross-references have to be made, and pairs of passages to be read and re-read in the hope that one member will shed light on the other, at the same time as the other sheds light on it. The point is not that this happens occasionally, for with metaphysics under discussion it is liable to do so even in the best-planned books: but rather that the books seem planned in order that it shall happen. Thereby, the difficulty of choosing texts for an investigation intended to lead to a conclusion about the whole is very much increased. In any case, owing to the number and wide variety of possible texts, it was bound to be great.

It must however be faced, and for primary discussion it is perhaps easiest to take the encyclopædism which has already been mentioned. Whatever our judgment upon it now, it issued from something which, in Dr. Whitehead's earlier work, seemed to promise well. This is best seen by contrast with the work of other mathematicians and physicists who have written on philosophy. Although they do not confine themselves to mathematics and physics—although indeed they attempt to include in their survey as wide a territory as ever Whitehead did—their work does not impress as encyclopædic, but rather the contrary. They are unduly narrow. Whatever problems they approach, they remain predominantly the exponents of a specialized science: they close their eyes to data which would not present themselves to a mathematician or a scientist as such. In some respects this turns to their advantage: for by sufficient limitation of data it is always possible to achieve clarity, and clarity has great persuasive power. However attained, and whether or not worthy of attainment, it tends to be taken as a sign of competence. Further, they are able to add to their attractions that of the appearance of paradox: Professor Eddington's airman who flew with the speed of light, or Mr. Russell's millionaire with an insatiable passion for buying shoes

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and socks, both with remarkable consequences, are examples of what I mean. The paradoxes arise in this way. In mathematics and physics, which deal with abstractions, abstract entities only need be posited to complete a theoretic system. In what is now almost a technical phrase, they 'do the trick.' As often as not, however, they are given the names of things which are not abstract, or not quite so abstract; and deliberately or through oversight are confused with these. The concrete counterparts are then assumed to do the trick, or more surprising tricks, in a concrete world: the airman enjoys eternal youth, the millionaire is able to count his shoes but not his socks, and the audience is suitably impressed. By this time it is thoroughly convinced that its mind is necessarily either in a state of coma, and therefore incapable of criticism; or in that state of amazement and wonder—and therefore equally incapable of criticism—which is appropriate to a performance at Maskelyne and Devant's.

Throughout his work Dr. Whitehead has insisted that this is not true. Common sense, based on common experience, deserves he says to be encouraged and not rebuffed. Above all it should be invited to control the 'results' of the specialized scientist. I quote him at length on the matter. In the Vanuxem Lectures, delivered at Princeton in 1929, he says: 'We have to discriminate between the weight to be given to scientific opinion in the selection of its methods, and its trustworthiness in formulating judgments of the understanding. The slightest scrutiny of the history of natural science shows that current scientific opinion is nearly infallible in the former case, and is invariably wrong in the latter case. The man with a method good for the purposes of his dominant interests, is a pathological case in respect to his wider judgment on the co-ordination of this method with a more complete experience. Priests and scientists, statesmen and men of business, philosophers and mathematicians, are all alike in this respect. We all start by being empiricists. But our empiricism is confined within our immediate interests. The more clearly we grasp the intellectual analysis of a way regulating procedure for the sake of those interests, the more decidedly we reject the inclusion of evidence which refuses to be immediately harmonized with the method before us. Some of the major disasters of mankind have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good

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methodology.' Passages to this effect are by no means rare in Dr. Whitehead's work.

Therefore even in matters which might be considered domestic to physics he makes an appeal to the common experience of mankind: in his attack on the fundamental conceptions of classical physics, for example, he bases himself partly upon this, as well as upon the advances in modern experimental knowledge. When he proceeds to the attack upon formulations which, for the majority of experts, have satisfactorily replaced those of the 17th century, he bases himself almost wholly upon it. In the Einsteinian interpretation of nature, coincidence plays a great part: simultaneity, for example, is said to be the coincident arrival at the same point in space-time of rays each from a different source of light, and measurement to be the coincidence of measures. Of this last Whitehead remarks: 'No one counts coincident inches. Counting is essentially concerned with non-coincident straight segments.' And of the first: 'Light-signals are very important in our lives, but still we cannot but feel that the signal-theory somewhat exaggerates their position. The very meaning of simultaneity is made to depend upon them. There are blind people and dark cloudy nights, and neither blind people nor people in the dark are deficient in a sense of simultaneity. They know quite well what it means to bark both their shins at the same time.' And then, proceeding to a further point, which is easily understood: 'In fact the determination of simultaneity in this way is never made, and if it could be made would not be accurate; for we live in the air and not *in vacuo*.'

But, as was apparent from the quotation, Dr. Whitehead's main concern is not that common sense shall have an influence within physics, as that physics shall not have a warping influence upon common sense. In the 17th century it was allowed to dictate an anti-R.S.P.C.A. attitude, in the 19th it had a share in the establishment of an attitude which was largely anti-R.S.P.C.C. It was qualified, and should have been allowed, to do neither. At the present time, in spite of its discredit in expert circles, classical physics still shares in the government of the ideas of a large number of men; the other share is assumed by remnants of the Christian tradition: hence a 'radical inconsistency' in intellectual matters, 'which accounts for much that is half-hearted

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in our civilization.' Further, that physics or any other science should be allowed a life apart, as it were an enclave of some foreign power within the domain of human reason, is 'an attack on systematic thought': such an attack is 'treason to civilization.' Therefore the list of Dr. Whitehead's works, which is headed by investigations which are purely physical, ends with studies which are almost as purely metaphysical. That is, he does not overlook, as was the practice of his predecessors, the traditional disputes between metaphysics and physics—'scientific faith,' in his own words, 'removing the philosophic mountain'—but endeavours to dig the mountain out of the way. The endeavour is heroic.

Whatever its success it imparts to his work two qualities, the one perhaps not so remarkable as the other, but each sufficient to explain why, as was said above, no views of Dr. Whitehead are quick to 'float off into Limbo.' The first is connected with the aim of his work. For by now he has revealed himself champion of what he calls an 'ultimate rationalism,' of a rationalism that is which, while it admits no limitation of its scope, also allows of none to its responsibilities. A system is to be evolved which will order the evidence, but all the evidence; which will recognize all the specialized disciplines, but allow undue importance to none. Because of the mass of detailed knowledge, human weakness, and then human vanity, have conspired to make comprehensiveness of this sort seem impossible: it is difficult to exaggerate the merit of the man who not only asserts the contrary, but does what he can to prove the assertion by his practice. The second quality is a matter of style. With his persistent candour, and constant appeal to normal experience, Dr. Whitehead frequently succeeds in being irresistibly convincing. I am not referring to his aphorisms, which tend to be quoted in and out of season: an aphorism may be of doubtful value, and Dr. Whitehead's long residence in America (the home, I believe, of the Wayside Pulpit) has not done much to improve his taste. I refer rather to something which can extend to paragraphs and to chapters; which may perhaps be seen even in the short extracts I have made. It is a clarity which, unlike that of other physicists and mathematicians, does not result from a sacrifice of substance; and a forcefulness which depends, on the one hand, on the selection for emphasis of implications which are of

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most consequence for most people, and on the other on direct, at times almost colloquial phrasing. If there is illustration, then again it is such as appeals by familiarity rather than dazzles by paradox. Dr. Whitehead may never be entirely free from a hankering after the cheaper graces ; or from a disposition to make his periods too long, his rhythms too commonplace : but in less superficial qualities of economy and of order some of his passages are models of all that good prose should be.

Comprehensiveness however is not encyclopædism ; or encyclopædism, perhaps, is of two different kinds. There is that of Aristotle and Aquinas, and even of Hegel in the *Encyclopædia of the Sciences* ; there is also that of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and of the *Universal Adviser*. In the one, detail is introduced only for the purpose of illustrating subordination, or at least only after subordination has been made ; in the other, it is introduced largely for its own sake. Dr. Whitehead no doubt always strives after the one ; what he attains is frequently the other—hence the hesitations of the first paragraph of this paper. Further, though he can write in the way just described, often his style is very different indeed. It is crowded with neologisms, jostling with terms so familiar that their connotation is doubtful, and with which the relations of the neologisms are difficult to determine ; in the same sentence the same notion appears, it would seem, both as abstract noun and as adjective, occasionally too as verb and even as adverb ; far from being direct, it has to be read many times before its intention can even be glimpsed. How Dr. Whitehead can acknowledge such a style as tolerable ; how he can accept one encyclopædism for the other, is a problem by no means easy of solution. A hint may perhaps be found in those passages in which he is writing at his best. At times, these are colloquial ; colloquialism frequently has as origin or as companion qualities which are not so pleasant—overhastiness, for example, and insensibility to not too obvious, but not unimportant detail. Take the following sentences from the quotation I gave from the Vanuxem Lectures : ‘ A man with a method good for the purposes of his dominant interests, is a pathological case . . . Priests and scientists, statesmen and men of business, philosophers and mathematicians, are all alike in this respect.’ The main purpose of the context, that suitability of a method for the attainment of

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a limited end is not thereby suitability for the attainment of the end with limitations removed, is quite clear, and as sound as it is clear. But the series of examples quoted is a little startling. It was to be expected that priests, scientists and mathematicians would occur ; but can the philosopher be co-ordinated with them? Or has the man of business a function of equal dignity with that of a statesman? The question answers itself. The statesman, *qua* statesman, is not concerned to rival the man of business or even, except on conditions which he himself has determined, to supplement his activities; rather to define them. And similarly, philosophy and mathematics are not two areas lying apart from each other in the same plane, but rather mathematics, along with science, forms part of the region subject to philosophy. That therefore both statesman and man of business, or both philosopher and mathematician, have interests which can be described as 'immediate' or 'dominating' does not in the least imply that these interests have anything but the merest accident in common ; still less that they share in something obviously harmful. The adjective 'immediate' is indeed misleading as applied to them all: for it suggests limitation in the cases where, by definition of the interests, limitation is impossible. There is overhastiness here, resulting in over-statement: in his anxiety to show that he has an open mind (an anxiety whose merits have been stressed), Whitehead may have laid himself open to the charge that his mind is confused. Confusion, or lack of due order, is the mark of the wrong kind of encyclopædism ; and it rests on insensibility, if not to the fact that distinctions have been made, then to their exact nature and implication.

Sapientis est gubernare, as it says at the beginning of the *Summa*: if Whitehead fails to govern, then his wisdom, which here means his metaphysics, should come up for examination. But that is best postponed as long as possible ; and there is the preliminary consideration that, if weakness in metaphysics may produce confusion, insensibility may be not without responsibility for a weakness in metaphysics. For this science is to a great extent its own history : it largely depends, that is, upon the appreciation of factors which, as they are not expressed in words, are easily overlooked. Appeal must be made to the past ; but at the same time note should be made of the subtle difference between

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the voices of the centuries, even when they utter the same words. No fault can be found with Dr. Whitehead for failing to appeal to the past. When, however, he places one of his doctrines under the simultaneous patronage of Plato, the scholastics, John Locke and Bradley, it becomes extremely doubtful whether he is doing so in the right way. These philosophers have some element in common which is perhaps underrated, but surely their combined patronage of anything cannot be more than merely honorary. Or, if more, then it is probable they are being misrepresented. About Plato in particular Whitehead makes a number of surprising statements: allowing him the title of the 'greatest metaphysician,' he says for instance, that he is also 'the poorest systematic thinker'; and John Locke he calls 'the British analogue to Plato.' 'Then he is a very British Plato,' it seems impossible not to reply. We are here in the domain of specialists and must speak with diffidence: the conclusion, however, seems likely that, as we have already seen him standardize the roles of philosophers, business men and statesmen, so here Whitehead is standardizing the centuries. He may, of course, be reducing them to the right standard; but if so, it is not because of any historical understanding but by divine favour.

The question can be settled by enquiring what the standard is. We need consider only the remote background of his work; which, though his doctrines have developed greatly in his successive books, remains much the same in each. I take for simplicity's sake an early one, *The Concept of Nature*. Here the term 'nature' is used advisedly: it indicates not the whole, but a portion of reality. Accordingly Whitehead repeats that his subject is not reality as such, and that he is not writing metaphysics. This is proper, for no profit could result from the assumption, explicit or otherwise, that the part is what is essential to the whole, or in any way representative of it. Further, he goes on to announce what is in appearance a satisfactory programme: 'for natural philosophy,' he says, 'everything perceived is in nature,' or in other terms, 'all our perceptions are in the same boat, and must be treated in the same principle.' That is, he is clear, it would seem, that not only is he not writing metaphysics, but also that neither is he writing psychology or epistemology. Of a piece with this is the celebrated chapter on 'the bifurcation of nature,' in which the theory of

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secondary qualities or (as he calls them) 'psychic additions to nature' is expressly repudiated. It seems, if I may adopt phrases as colloquial as his, that he is going to cut the epistemological cackle and, first after many who hesitate, get down to business. But this pleasant impression does not last for long. It receives a first shock from the discovery that, if Whitehead disclaims the discussion of metaphysics, he does so not on the ground that metaphysics is a task with wider reference than the one he has in hand, but rather one incompatible with it, indeed destructive of it. 'Recourse to metaphysics,' he says, 'is like throwing a match into a powder-magazine: it blows up the whole arena.' At first this is a puzzle: a discussion of general principles may limit the validity of conclusions drawn from a discussion about principles which are more limited, but (unless 'general' is a word of no meaning) cannot annihilate them. It continues to be puzzling until, from scattered phrases and from further remarks, at first sight equally strange, it becomes clear that by metaphysics Dr. Whitehead does not mean what we had supposed him to mean: for him it is not—or at least, it is not always—the science of reality as a whole, within which physics naturally falls, but rather the science, co-ordinate with physics, which deals with that part of reality which physics neglects. That is, it deals with the mind, and is but psychology under a more impressive name. The puzzle is now solved: for if, in the middle of a treatise on physics psychological principles are introduced, what was a public world of more or less stable objects becomes an assemblage of private and fleeting sense-impressions: the arena is indeed blown up, and the physicist has nowhere to set up his instruments—he has, in fact, no instruments to set up. But there is also another consequence: if metaphysics has identified itself with psychology, it no longer performs its function of guarantor of the independence of the sciences, of that of physics, for example, from psychology. Psychology can now invade the ground of physics with impunity, for there is no longer a means of calling it to order. In spite of the chapter on the bifurcation, in spite of the programme quoted above, this is what happens in *The Concept of Nature*. We do not read long before we find Dr. Whitehead talking of the 'indeterminateness of sense-awareness,' of its 'crude deliverances' which need to be revised. By what standard crude? we are tempted to ask. But