I. WHITEHEAD’S THEORY OF PREHENSION

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In the metaphysics of the twentieth century—and there is such a thing—Whitehead occupies a position like that of Leibniz or Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Whatever defects there may be in the philosophy of Whitehead, I regard his theory of “prehension” as one of the finest contributions ever made to epistemology.

The word “prehension” is created by dropping the first syllable from “apprehension”. Prehension is a part or aspect of the more or less complex whole which is an act of awareness. It is the element of pure givenness in this act; experience as the having of an object. An experience for Whitehead is a unitary event or process termed an “actual entity” or “occasion”. Every concrete thing which is given to or prehended by an entity is a prior event or actual entity, or a group of such entities. Contemporary events are not, strictly speaking, prehended, nor are occasions subsequent to the act of prehending. Thus memory and perception are alike in that the object of both is in the past. This assimilation of perception to memory is a highly original element in the doctrine.

The temporally prior entities which are given of course cannot depend for their reality upon being given to this or that particular subject, since the earlier does not depend upon the later. The subject—object relation is external, or mon—constitutive, for the thing given or prehended; on the other hand, it is internal or constitutive for the subject prehending. A particular subject could not conceivably be that subject, that momentary experience, without prehending just the things it does prehend. This is what Whitehead means by “causal efficacy” or “conformation”. The present occasion is just a certain way of prehending its past. Hume is here flatly contradicted. Events are “distinguishable” but yet not “separable”, for granted the later event the earlier ones which it prehends could not have been otherwise. Causal efficacy is thus not a merely mysterious link between earlier and later; it is the fairly obvious truth that there cannot be prehension of X without X, and since prehension cannot be creative of its antecedent objects, they must be furnished to it by the actual past. Finally, not only does the present prehending subject require a certain past, but that past required, not indeed this particular subject, but still, some suitable subject or subjects capable of prehending that particular past. To be prehended by a particular subject is never essential to a thing, but to be prehended by some subject able to do the appropriate prehending is essential. This is a quasi-Berkeleyan element in Whitehead. To be is to be destined to be perceived. Why is this asserted? Because: a) to be present is to be destined to become past, and b) in this philosophy, being past and being object for some subject are held to be indistinguishable. Experience shows us no other equally concrete way of having-as-past besides prehension.
It is amazing how many questions are answered at one blow by accepting the doctrine of prehension. Are there internal relations of events to other events? Yes, for so far as events prehend others, they are constituted by their relations to these others. Are there external relations? Yes, for so far as events are prehended by subsequent events which they do not themselves prehend they must be independent of these; also, so far as events, being mutually contemporary, are without prehensions running either way, there is mutual independence. Is there causal connectedness? Yes, first, because the occurrence of events strictly entails that of those events which they prehend; second, because process is bound to go on, and subsequent events must have enough in common with their predecessors to be suitable prehenders for these, in order to objetify, or “pastify” them (so to speak). Finally, is there any freedom of indeterminacy in reality? Yes, and in all cases, since events never strictly depend upon or imply their precise successors. And here whitehead furnishes perhaps the neatest, strongest argument for freedom ever proposed. The subject prehends not one but many prior actualities. (Otherwise the world would have temporal but not spatial structure).

“the many become one and are increased by one”. A single new actuality contains as its data the previous many actualities; but now could the many unambiguously prescribe their own unification into a new unity? There must be an emergent or creative synthesis, to constitute not merely the how the many are made into a new one. Determinism, I suspect, cannot get around this difficulty. The that is necessary, causally fixed, but not the how.

Thus, Whitehead’s view of givenness not only solves certain epistemological problems; it also gives an answer to Hume’s scepticism about causal connections, and yet it avoids the contrary extreme, absolute idealism’s denial of contingency and freedom. In a single conception it explains the spatio-temporal structure of the world, the possibility of knowledge, and the reality of freedom. It is, in my opinion, one of the supreme intellectual discoveries.

II. WHITEHEAD’S CONCEPTION OF GOD

Whitehead’s theory of divinity was, according to his own statement (in conversation) “vague”, and it seemed likely to him, and should seem so to us, that it can be further clarified. To achieve this we shall probably need to be more aware than he was of two things: the history of natural theology, and the logical structure of the problem and its possible solutions. Many of Whitehead’s critics have not met these requirements. Often they are less aware than Whitehead of these matters. There are, as a matter of logic, two main possibilities for construing the religious idea. Both were more or less elaborated worked out prior to Whitehead. The first is this: we may identify God with the purely absolute, infinite, eternal, unlimited, self-sufficient, impassible the lists can be prolonged, but the terms are really, as intended, mutually equivalent or synonymous. This has been the usual way. It belongs to what I call “Classical Metaphysics”, or the metaphysics which takes Being as the superior form of reality, rather than creative becoming. The other way, which I learned from W. E. Hocking, does not identify God with the absolute or infinite, though it does assert that God has aspects of absoluteness or infinity; it adds, however, that he also has aspects of relativity or finitude.
Those of us who take this view believe, with the late E. S. Brightman, in a "finite-infinite God". We see no contradiction in this, for we are not asserting that God is in all aspects the one or in all aspects the other, but only that in some he is the one, in the remaining aspects, the other. Logic knows no rule against this, unless it can be shown that infinity is not the sort of predicate which could be confined to an aspect. But "Neo-classical metaphysicians" (as I call them) deny this. They think it not only can but must be so confined to make any sense. Neo-classical views of deity are found in Socinianism, the later Schelling, Fechner, Pfleiderer, Varisco, Bergson, Peirce, and others. Whitehead is the most systematic and powerful of the defenders of this view.

To say that God is finite or relative, as well as infinite or absolute, is to imply that his reality includes becoming as well as being. Since Whitehead holds the principle of process, according to which to be is to be either an abstraction form, or an instance of, becoming, either his deity is abstract, or there must be a divine form of becoming. When Whitehead called God the "Principle of Concretion" he was thought by some to have meant that God is a mere abstract principle. However this saying was but an epigram about God, not an adequate account of Whitehead's idea. Like all actual or concrete realities, God is as, and what, he becomes. Like all actuality, he perceives or "prehends" actualities independent of the particular prehensions which he has of them. For this is part of the definition of prehension, and Whitehead does not hesitate to apply the theory of prehension to God. It follows that the aspect of God which consists in prehension of a given set of actualities in the world depends upon those worldly actualities, and not vice versa. God is in this aspect relative to other things, and indeed to all other things, for he prehends all. He is indeed the sole universally prehending individual. In this aspect he is not the least, but the most, relative of all realities. He is effect of all causes, and not merely the cause of all effects. The term Consequent Nature expresses this universal relativity or derivative character of deity. On this point Whitehead is perfectly clear and consistent. God physically prehends the universe, not in eternity, but step by step, as it comes into being. Not even God can prehend events before they occur, for this is contradictory, since as Whitehead put it "there are no events in the future". Nor does God prehend events eternally, for they are not eternally real, and since prehension does not create its objects, even divine prehension of this or that object must wait until the object has been provided.

Of course, however, God for Whitehead is not merely derivative or relative; he is also primordial or absolute. He is cause of all effects, as well as effect of all causes. The phrase, Primordial Nature, refers to this aspect. Every non-divine actuality prehends God, and hence presupposes him. God as presupposed object for an actuality A cannot be the same as or include that aspect of God which prehends A, for this would make the subject of prehension constitutive of its objects, and this is contradictory. Thus God as Primordial, as universal object, cause of all subjects, has to be an abstraction from the full actuality of God as universal subject. As the universally presupposed object, the Primordial Nature is only an aspect of God, not God simpliciter. Thus this aspect is "not conscious", just as the character of a man is not conscious; rather the man is more or less conscious of his character, and of other things.
So far all is clear enough. But Whitehead makes some statements which tend to cloud the picture. He speaks of the Consequent "Nature" as though it were a second essence, parallel to the Primordial Nature. But if the Consequent Nature is taken as an essence, an abstraction, then we need a third term to express the concrete reality of deity. Two abstractions do not make a concrete actuality. I suggest the term "Consequent State", it being understood that this is not a single fixed essence, but a relative term, just as "the present state" of a man is new each moment, as he is given new objects of prehension. The Consequent State is this state, relative to the universe now, or that state, relative to the universe then. Whitehead has no equivalent phrase. The only third aspect of God which he speaks of is the Superjective Nature, and here again the word nature is suggestive of another fixed essence, and that will not do at all. Three abstractions still do not constitute anything concrete. Superjective State might serve.

There are other difficulties with Whitehead’s exposition. He calls God an “actuality”, or “actual entity”. But according to the definition of such an entity it always presupposes prior actualities independent of it; and nothing can be simply independent of God, who orders all things into a world. If God be a single actuality, I see no escape from this difficulty. There must be a state of God upon which a given actuality depends by prehending that state, and another distinct divine state which depends upon A by prehending A. There is no room for such a real plurality of states within a single actuality. Again, the Consequent nature is said to be ever unfinished, in flux beyond any final completion; but the definition of a single actual entity is that it reaches its "satisfaction", its total value, which then is superjectively available for subsequent actualities. Such an entity cannot be endlessly in flux. What Whitehead should have said is the God is a real succession of actual entities, a “personally ordered society” or sequence of divine experiences, each of which objectifies or prehends the world as it then is. Since for Whitehead this is what a person is, his God could be termed personal.