

WHITEHEAD AND IDEALISM

FOREWORD

Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), a mathematician by training, flourished as a philosopher between the two World Wars. His main philosophical works appeared between 1919 and 1938. Prior to becoming a philosopher, Whitehead made a name for himself as an algebraist and mathematical logician, co-author with Bertrand Russell of the famous *Principia Mathematica* (1910–1913). As a philosopher, he worked in two countries, UK and USA, and in two universities, the University of London (1911–1924), and Harvard University (1924–1937). During his British period, Whitehead acquired recognition as an original philosopher of physics, and as a proponent of his own theory of relativity. He was considered a realist, a “new realist” in the wake of Moore and Russell, and more precisely a “neorealist”, associated with T.P. Nunn, Samuel Alexander, J. Laird, and others. However, his overall interests, respect for science, logico-mathematical tools, and formal techniques place him also in the circle of Cambridge early analytic philosophers, where the other neorealists do not belong. Thus, in his London years, Whitehead was both a neorealist, and an analytic philosopher.

Early Cambridge analytic philosophy emerged, as it is well known, in the context of a rejection of idealism, brilliantly represented in England, at the turn of the 20th century, by F.H. Bradley (1846–1894) and J.M.E. McTaggart (1866–1925). Whitehead’s becoming a metaphysician, in his American period, was a disappointment to many of his fellow analytic philosophers who had hopes that he would continue as an analytic philosopher of science. In C.D. Broad’s terms, instead of pursuing “critical philosophy”, Whitehead turned to “speculative philosophy”, thus superseding Cambridge-style analytic philosophy and opposing logical positivism, the new wave of analytic philosophy. Despite this speculative turn, Whitehead continued to be perceived as a realist, indeed a major realist metaphysician, like Samuel Alexander before him, or John Laird. In his Harvard years, Whitehead was both a realist, and a speculative philosopher. It seems thus that, while his realism undoubtedly evolved, it persisted as a core feature of Whitehead’s philosophical outlook.

During the heyday of post-WWII analytic philosophy, idealism became almost extinct. With very few noteworthy exceptions (e.g. T.L.S. Sprigge [1932–2007] and J. Foster [1941–2009]), nobody defended idealism of any sort in the English-speaking world. Positive interest in idealism from a young researcher could lead to academic marginalization. This anti-idealist climate also shaped the exegesis of Whitehead’s philosophy, even after the metaphysical turn in analytic

philosophy. Whitehead remained a respectable philosopher and a legitimate research interest only insofar as one could connect him to mathematical logic, philosophy of science, analytic philosophy, or at least realism. But, as every reader of *Process and Reality* knows, although he acknowledged “obligations to the English and American realists” (*Process and Reality* xii), particularly to Nunn, Whitehead intended his own metaphysics to be “a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism onto a realistic basis” (xiii). When Whitehead writes that, despite the sharp disagreement with Bradley, “the final outcome is after all not so greatly different” (xiii), he seems to imply that the philosophy of organism is akin to absolute idealism of the Bradleyan kind; clearly, if his was realistic, while Bradley’s was idealistic, the two metaphysical systems would be greatly different.

But Bradley is not the only idealist philosopher Whitehead was indebted to. As a Cambridge man, he had personal contacts with Sorley, McTaggart, and Ward, all of them idealists. Through McTaggart and, later, through Lord Haldane, he received the influence of Hegel, as he himself testified. Sorley was perhaps the first who introduced him to Lotze, whose *Logic* he studied in the 1880s. One of his first sources of information on Kant was a book from 1877 by Edward Caird, the Scottish absolute idealist, also author of a book on Hegel, which Whitehead might have read. Kant, Lotze, Bradley, and the Cambridge idealists stand out as formative influences on Whitehead, the undergraduate student and junior scholar. It was their philosophies which first stimulated and shaped his philosophical thoughts.

This philosophical heredity prompts an investigation of Whitehead’s metaphysics in relation to idealism, both as a metaphysical stance *per se*, and as a historical trend in Western philosophy. The kind of absolute idealism Whitehead had in view, the nature of the “realistic basis”, and the character of the “transformation” it underwent in Whitehead’s hands need to be freshly examined. We are living in a time when there is no prejudice in favour of idealism, like in the 19th century, and, hopefully, the prejudice against idealism, this enemy dead and buried for a long time, which dominated the 20th century, has lost its dogmatic rigidity. After all, panpsychism is once again a respectable theory in the philosophy of mind. Perhaps the time is ripe to resume and deepen the assessment of Whitehead’s relation to idealism and to the idealist tradition in philosophy, in a more objective manner.

This idea suggested the topic “Whitehead and Idealism” for the second Bucharest Online International Whitehead Conference, organized in October 2024, under the patronage of the “Constantin Rădulescu-Motru” Institute of Philosophy and Psychology of the Romanian Academy. The papers included in the following thematic section were originally delivered as lectures at that Conference. Let us hope they will contribute to a more adequate understanding of the nature of Whitehead’s speculative vision, and to raise awareness about the relevance of historical and comparative research for the proper understanding of his metaphysics.

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