

# WHITEHEAD'S PROCESS PHILOSOPHY AS *AUFHEBUNG* OF IDEALISM

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**Abstract.** I analyze the relationship that process philosophy has with idealism. I argue that this relationship can be described by the term *Aufhebung*. Namely, Whitehead's philosophy takes up and goes beyond certain characteristics of idealism; these are: the ideal character of the principle, its indifference to time and space, and the particular relationship it has with the human subject. In order to achieve the finality of the text, after making some preliminary considerations, I propose an understanding of idealism, exemplifying this with the philosophies of Plato and Berkeley, respectively; then I analyze process philosophy and conclude by showing its intersections with idealism and in what way this philosophy surpasses it.

**Keywords:** Process Philosophy, Idealism, *Aufhebung*, Principle, God, Creativity.

## 1. SETTING THE STAGE

At the origin of this article is a communication held at the Conference: *Whitehead and Idealism*; the ideas discussed concern the theme of the Conference. There is a logical rule that a conjunction is true when both of its members are true; if by the title of the Conference we mean a conjunction between Whitehead's philosophy and idealism, this would be a suggestion that both ways of thinking have conceptual positions, if not similar, at least compatible. However, as the title of the Conference is formulated in natural language, at the level of contextual meaning a conjunction such as that between Whitehead's thought and idealism can also be interpreted as a contradictory positioning of the two ways of doing philosophy. In short, the theme of the Conference was generous and challenged us to adopt a particular way of interpreting the relationship of the philosophy of the organism with idealism. In the following, I argue in favour of my interpretation of this relationship, namely, that Whitehead's philosophy, especially that of *Process and Reality*, can be read as *Aufhebung*, a sublation, of idealism.

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To propose such an interpretation presupposes a sufficient clarification of the terms with which we work: Whitehead's philosophy, idealism and *Aufhebung*. As far as Whitehead's philosophy is concerned, the reading I propose is limited to considering – from a work, not only rich, but also varied – the most important, the most difficult, volume: a volume<sup>1</sup> that has managed to generate a real current of thought, the processual one, in various fields: philosophy, theology, economics, etc. As far as idealism is concerned, I will specify the origin of the term and I will provide a characterization of this current of thought on the basis of three features that I believe cannot be missing. As I will return to these two terms of conjunction and to the relationship they maintain, in these preliminary clarifications extra attention must be paid to the meaning of the term *Aufhebung* because it serves as a label that indicates the nature of the relationship between Whitehead's philosophy and idealism. The German term has a semantic load in natural language that is difficult to find in any other term in modern languages; based on this polysemy, the term could be taken over in philosophy and even transformed into a technical one. This takeover and relatively frequent use of it made it necessary to accept the best possible variant in English and French, *sublation*. *Aufhebung* is one of Hegel's favorite terms in describing the dialectical evolution of the Spirit; he considers it one of the most important terms in philosophy – which means both the preservation and the elimination of the various moments of evolution – all the more so since it also has these meanings in natural language (Magee, 238). All three main meanings of the term – to raise, to cancel, and to keep – are present in both natural language and Hegel's technical language (Inwood, 283). In Hegel the term *Aufhebung* is used to describe the moments of the evolution of the Spirit; it works as a powerful tool for describing a continuous evolution. In this text the term is not taken in this strong sense; I do not intend to argue that there is a continuity between the philosophy of organism and idealism, but only that we can find the three main meanings of the term as ways in which the relationship between Whitehead's philosophy and idealism is realized.

One might wonder why an analysis of this relationship is necessary since Whitehead himself states that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead, 39) and also argues that “eternal objects, as in God's primordial nature, constitute the Platonic world of ideas”(Whitehead, 46); and to sustain this strong connection with the way Plato thinks is to affirm the relationship with idealism since the philosophy of the Athenian is exemplary for this way of philosophizing. Moreover, I could even add that *PR* could be read entirely as if it were a dialogue with Plato, with the way he thinks; and such a reading would reinforce the idea of Whitehead's dialogue with idealism. For me it is precisely the

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, this is Alfred North Whitehead *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Macmillan Company, 1929; references are to the corrected edition by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne published in New York, The Free Press, 1978.

possibility of such a reading and the fact that Whitehead expresses not only an appreciation for Plato but also the kinship of his ideas with those of the Athenian, that makes it necessary to analyze the relationship between the philosophy of the organism and idealism through the mediation of all three main meanings of *Aufhebung*.

As the purpose of this article is to describe Whitehead's position towards idealism, it is necessary to provide first a description of the latter, then of the former, so that I have the elements to establish what this positioning consists of. In accordance with this purpose and the way of achieving it, this first preliminary section will be followed by one in which a characterization of idealism is proposed, and another in which the philosophy of the organism will be outlined, and I will conclude with a section in which I highlight the intersections and differences between the two sets of philosophical ideas.

## 2. IDEALISM IN NUCE

I make a brief presentation of idealism; I give two examples, one of objective idealism, the other of subjective idealism<sup>2</sup>, namely the thought of Plato and Berkeley, respectively<sup>3</sup>; in each of these two cases I retain only a few aspects, those relevant to the topic that interests me. The term *idealism*, like *materialism* and many others is late; for example, *ontology* is formed at the end of the Middle Ages, as it is *anthropology*, while *axiology* or *epistemology* are contemporary<sup>4</sup>; for the term *idealism*, it seems that it is used for the first time at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Leibniz in a characterization of Plato's philosophy: "the hypotheses of Epicurus and Plato, of the greatest materialists and the greatest idealists" (Leibniz, IV, 560). It is clear that each philosopher uses various terms with meanings specific to his philosophy, to the context of ideas in which these terms appear. It is also clear that abstract terms, such as *idealism*, generate discussion and even dispute about the meaning we attribute to them. But it is equally clear that the interpreters of major philosophical creations need to establish their taxonomies, therefore they need abstract terms; just as it is clear that creators of philosophy also need such abstract terms in an attempt to position and

<sup>2</sup> Both phrases appear in literature, not always with the same meaning; that is why I prefer to introduce here the way in which I use them, the meaning I attribute to them: by *objective idealism* I mean that philosophical theory for which the principle has an ideal character and is different from the subject; by *subjective idealism* I mean that philosophical theory for which the principle has an ideal character and is a subject.

<sup>3</sup> To qualify the philosophy of Plato and Berkeley in these ways is, of course, an option; one that can be discussed, but which, beside the fact that it is in the literature, has enough grounds to be accepted; it should be noted, however, that neither Plato nor Berkeley describes their philosophy as idealism. The latter considers his to be immaterialism.

<sup>4</sup> Even in the twentieth century, *axiology* was used in parallel with the older *thymiology*, and, along with *epistemology*, *criteriology* was also used (especially in Catholic environments).

distinguish their ideas from the wider philosophical environment. As far as I am concerned, as a simple interpreter, I consider that the varieties of idealism<sup>5</sup> are so numerous that establishing a generally accepted semantic nucleus for the term is an almost insurmountable challenge. In my opinion, the following notes enter into this nucleus: the ideal nature of the principle<sup>6</sup>, the indifference of this principle to temporality and spatiality, and a particular connection of the principle with the subject. I say particular because, although this connection is found in all forms of idealism, its character is different from one form of idealism to another; however, this special connection exists and is epistemologically important (it draws attention to the fact that although idealism is mainly an ontological position, its motivation and epistemological positioning are also important).

Regarding Plato's thinking about ideas and copies, there are endless interpretations and controversies. I only note the fact that forms (*eidoi*) are models, principles indifferent to space and time, principles of copies that have a physical character, that presuppose matter (*chora*), i.e., space and time: "a Form is...something eternal and changeless...it is not qualified in time or place...the Form of the Beautiful will explain what it is for something to be beautiful...by its participation in the Beautiful" (Schofield, 6532). The Platonic forms, *eidoi*, are introduced as models, paradigms with an ideal character; Plato does not systematically offer a discussion of them, but introduces into various dialogues considerations about their nature while dealing with a certain Form (White, 362); for example, the Athenian refers to the organization of the city according to the Good itself, understood as a model: "once they've seen the Good itself they must...put the city...in order using it as their model" (Plato, *Republic*, 540a-b). For Plato, knowledge is the anamnesis of the Forms with which the soul became noetically familiar, through direct intuition before embodiment; exemplary in this regard is the demonstration made by Socrates that through the right questions we can remember what we have not learned in this life: "if he [Menon's slave] had not acquired them [the opinions] in his present life, is it not clear that he had them and had learned them at some other time?" (Plato, *Menon*, 86a). Platonic idealism satisfies the three characteristics that I consider *sine quibus non* because the philosopher affirms not only the quality of principle of Forms and their ideal, model character, but also the fact that these models are indifferent to space and time unlike the copies that participate in them; in addition, Forms as a principle maintain a direct connection with souls that are of their level and nature, timeless and aspatial; they know them directly, and through incarnation they also maintain a connection with human individuals; the Forms and the soul as immortal and

<sup>5</sup> Here are some examples: H.B. Acton distinguishes immaterialism, transcendental idealism, absolute idealism, social idealism (Acton, 551–562); T.L.S. Sprigge refers to several varieties of absolute idealism, to panpsychism, transcendental idealism, ontological idealism, personal idealism (Sprigge, 3826–3832); already a century before them, Charles P. Krauth distinguished: subjective idealism, objective idealism, theoretical idealism, absolute idealism; and examples can be multiplied.

<sup>6</sup> Understood as a condition of possibility for any other entities.

unchangeable satisfy the condition of an objective principle – of an ideal nature – in relation to the concrete subject, for example, in relation to the philosopher: they make possible the world and men and at the same time knowledge.

As for Berkeley, he rejects not only materialism (e.g., Democritus, Epicurus), but also dualism (Descartes, Locke): “a little attention will discover to any one the truth and evidence of what is here said, and make it unnecessary to insist on any other proofs against the existence of *material substance*” (Berkeley, 206); upon rigorous analysis, Berkeley also finds himself at odds with idealism in its Platonic form: “all our ideas...are visibly inactive – there is nothing of power or agency included in them” (Berkeley, 207). What Berkeley proposes to us is to consider our perceptions as the only reality of objects: “as several of these [our ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing” (Berkeley, 193–194). Hence the formula *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived): “their *esse* [of unthinking things] is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds” (Berkeley, 195) and if *to be* means *to be perceived*, then there must also be a perceiving spirit, hence the addition *esse est percipere* (to be is to perceive): “this perceiving, active being is what I call mind, spirit, soul, or myself” (Berkeley, 194). Berkeley justifies the continuity of objects by the fact that they are permanently perceived by the supreme Spirit, God: “the ideas... are not produced by, or dependent on the wills of man; there is therefore some other Spirit that causes them... One, Eternal Infinitely Wise, Good and Perfect” (Berkeley, 275). At least the latter has the character of principle, it is indifferent to space and time, and it is the guarantee of the direct or mediated relationship of each spirit with ideas, since ideas represent only perceptions of that Spirit. These are *in nuce*, the ontological and epistemological positions of Berkeley's subjective idealism: the principle is of an ideal nature, indifferent to time and space and in-forming all human minds.

### 3. WHITEHEAD'S PROCESS PHILOSOPHY

Whitehead considers *Process and Reality* as a contribution to cosmology; in reality, the ideas that Whitehead proposes to us articulate in a complex and original manner themes of metaphysics and epistemology, not just cosmology; what is characteristic of the way in which these themes are treated is the fact that the reality described by them functions as an organic whole; the philosopher describes his theory as: “[a] doctrine of organism...the attempt to describe the world as a process of generation of individual actual entities (Whitehead, 60)”; as can be seen, Whitehead highlights the fundamental characteristic of any organism: that of being in motion, of being in process; it can be said that there is essentially a logical connection between the organic character of his philosophy and the processual one; moreover, it is precisely this connection that has allowed interpreters to treat Whitehead's philosophy as one of process, because this term better describes what

the philosophy of the organism is in its structure, in the way we can understand it. One of the most authoritative interpreters draws our attention to the fact that our claims about process philosophy must be cautious as the ideas of successive interpreters are added to the difficulty of the work (Cobb, 10); with this in mind, I restrict my presentation to those ideas of Whitehead that are relevant to the present theme: the sublation of idealism by process philosophy.

Two terms are fundamental to both the author's philosophy and our theme; these are *creativity*, understood as "that ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality" (Whitehead, 31), and *God*, considered as "the actual entity in virtue of which the entire multiplicity... arises first conceptually and is transmuted into the physical world" (Whitehead, 164). *Creativity* and *God* are presumably related terms, which have a necessary connection, they represent the two faces of reality as an organism: "in the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed 'creativity' and God is its primordial, non-temporal accident" (Whitehead, 7). Within this link, "one side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate" (Whitehead, 7). Creativity manifests itself in processual form while divinity functions as a principle of limitation responsible for generating facts; the process and the fact are the two faces of the same organism; this connection is present in specific forms during each of the four phases through which the actuality of the universe is realized. These phases are: firstly, that of "conceptual origination, deficient in actuality" (Whitehead, 350); secondly the "temporal phase of physical origination with its multiplicity...full actuality...[and] deficiency in the solidarity of individuals" (Whitehead, 350); thirdly, that "of perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly...immediacy is reconciled with objective immortality" (Whitehead, 350–351), the unity of the whole and the individual identity being preserved; and the fourthly that in which the fulfilled actuality of the divinity passes into the temporal world, and this includes the divinity as an experience of its own: "the fourth phase is a love of God of the world...the love in the world passes into the love of heaven and flew back again into the world" (Whitehead, 351). In the context of this actualization of the universe through the relationship between God and the world, the philosopher writes: "God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands" (Whitehead, 371). In the description of the actualization of the universe, of the processes of creativity, a third term, *World*, intervenes: "God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity... into conrescent unity" (Whitehead, 348).

For the philosophy of the organism, creativity is that which generates and actualizes the entire universe, which can be regarded as God and as the World. Whitehead's divinity is dipolar, it has a primordial nature that is devoid of actuality, i.e., it is potential; primordial nature has a conceptual character and represents a condition of possibility for the consequent nature; only the latter actualizes itself in such a way that God becomes self-aware. The consequent nature of God is

temporal, it is a physical experience through which the conceptual nature of divinity is fulfilled (Whitehead, 345). It ensures in the world the order and solidarity of the actual occasions that act through a combination of the initial goals set at the level of the primordial nature of divinity and the goals of the actual occasions of the past and present at the consequent nature level. Through the multitude of actual occasions which obtain in him objective immortality, God actualizes himself, and his consequent nature is everlasting (Whitehead, 349). By projecting the primordial nature into the consequent one, divinity becomes immanent in the world, but the emphasis falls on its conceptual nature. If we look at the same organic unity of the universe in process as World, the emphasis falls on consequent nature: "for God the conceptual is prior to the physical, for the World the physical poles are prior to the conceptual poles" (Whitehead, 348). Creativity leads to unity of these oppositions that suppose each other: "either of them, God and the World, is the instrument of novelty for the other" (Whitehead, 349). Whitehead concludes his argument about the relationship between God and the World against the background of Creativity with the statement already quoted that: "God is the great companion – the fellow sufferer" (Whitehead, 351); the phases through which the philosopher describes the actualization of the divinity and the World lead to a formulation of divinity that is at least compatible with that of theism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We have the data to test the hypothesis of this text, namely the fact that the philosophy of the organism maintains with idealism a relationship of taking over and overcoming, one in which the three main meanings of *Aufhebung* are expressed: to raise, to cancel and to keep. As far as idealism is concerned, three features cannot be missing: the ideal character of the principle, its indifference to time and space, and a special connection with the subject. In Plato we find all these features satisfied: the principle is represented by Forms that are ideal models for the realities of the physical world, for copies; the Forms are timeless and aspatial, unchanging, and just like them is the soul; the relationship between Forms and individual subjects is achieved through the copies' participation in the Forms, and through embodiment of souls. We also find these three features realized in Berkeley: the metaphysical principle is of an ideal nature, God; it does not have time and space; the relationship of the principle with individual minds is realized by the fact that God ensures the continuity of things when they are not perceived by human minds and he also puts ideas into them.

Against these characteristics of idealism, we can establish what its *Aufhebung* consists of in Whitehead's philosophy; for the English philosopher, God is a metaphysical principle, but only his primordial nature is ideal, conceptual, comparable to Platonic Forms and Berkeley's God; the consequent nature of God is a physical

one, full of actual occasions. According to this characterization of the principle, its primordial nature is neither temporal nor spatial; on the other hand, its consequent nature is both temporal and spatial. In this respect only the primordial nature of the divinity is comparable to the metaphysical principle of Plato and Berkeley; as for the break with idealism concerning the consequent nature, it is as obvious as in the case of its break with the ideal character of the principle. As far as the connection of the metaphysical principle with the human subject is concerned, on an ontological level, the primordial nature of the divinity conditions the consequent nature similarly to the way things proceed in Plato and Berkeley; but, from an epistemological point of view, there is a break with the idealism of the two because in his primordial nature God cannot even know himself, the consequent nature being the one that conditions the self-knowledge of the metaphysical principle; it is practically a reversal of the relationship that Plato and Berkeley formulate.

From these brief remarks we can see how *Aufhebung* behaves as canceling, while keeping some traits of idealism. It is worth mentioning the fact that creativity, as the generic principle of process cosmology, raises the varied features of the universal organism. Thus, all three main meanings of *Aufhebung* are used by Whitehead in the construction of his philosophy that involves taking over and overcoming idealism.

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