
Whitehead's Unique Approach to the Topic of Consciousness

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Granting the reader a foretaste of his "cosmological scheme," Whitehead announces at the end of Part I of *Process and Reality* that

one implicit assumption of the philosophical tradition is repudiated. The assumption is that the basic elements of experience are to be described in terms of one, or all, of the three ingredients, consciousness, thought, sense-perception. The last term is used in the sense of "conscious perception in the mode of presentational immediacy." (PR 36)

Just as sense perception here means conscious sense perception, thought means conscious thought.¹ Thought and sense perception name two of the three traditionally recognized parts of conscious mental activity: sensitive, intellectual, and affective. Whitehead's list is significant for what it leaves out. By expressly repudiating the relevance of sense perception and thought, he implies that he is interested in the remaining type of mental activity, which is feeling. By repudiating the relevance of consciousness he implies that his focus will be feelings of a nonconscious variety.

Whitehead presents most of his philosophical ideas in the form of a critique of the modern philosophical tradition. In the main his critique presupposes an interpretation of the modern tradition that is not controversial. It is undeniable that modern philosophy was preoccupied with thought and sense perception, assumed that they were the fundamental modalities of consciousness, and usually assumed that consciousness exhausted mental activity. Whitehead, who proposed *Critique of Pure Feeling* as an alternate

title for his own philosophical endeavor (PR 113), faults modern philosophy on all these counts.

Whitehead thinks that the overvaluation of consciousness is what generates many of the most famous problems of modern philosophy. According to Whitehead's analysis, consciousness by its very nature tends to obscure the reality of process. But many salient phenomena are process-dependent. Emphasizing consciousness therefore makes them impossible to understand. This includes such notorious philosophical vexations as time, causality, the reality of the external world, and finally consciousness itself.

Just as documenting the unhappy consequences of overvaluing consciousness is the main thrust of Whitehead's critique of modern philosophy, its devaluation and displacement are central to his own approach. So the first important thing to stress about Whitehead's theory of consciousness is that all in all it accords consciousness relatively little importance. This will come as a surprise to those who associate Whitehead's name with an implausible metaphysics of panpsychism that attributes consciousness to just about everything. It also makes a volume devoted to the exploration of consciousness from a Whiteheadian process perspective seem paradox. But Whitehead never suggested consciousness was unworthy of philosophical consideration—any more than he attributed it to everything—and some of his most fertile ideas emerge from his detailed analysis of consciousness and the highly specialized conditions under which something so sophisticated and comparatively rare could take its place in nature as the fruition of physical processes (PR 157–199, 219–280).

Understanding consciousness as the fruition of physical processes is a goal Whitehead shares with a great many contemporary researchers. Nevertheless, conventional wisdom finds little ground for comparison between Whitehead and mainstream research. What sets Whitehead apart can be summed up in terms of starting points and heuristic goals. In the common topic "emergence of consciousness from nature" mainstream research hopes to use what it knows about nature to learn something about consciousness, while Whitehead hopes to use what everyone knows about consciousness to learn something about nature. Because (for reasons discussed later in this chapter) the tendency for mainstream research is still to construe nature mechanistically, its order of proceeding indicates a similar interpretation of consciousness. In this way a naturalistic explanation of consciousness comes to be narrowly identified with a mechanistic explanation of consciousness. Algorithmic predictability assumes the role of a legitimate desideratum of psychology, to which Cognitive Science, like Behaviorism before it, is a tailored response. We wish to stress that the legitimacy of such a heuristic goal is not self-evident, but dependent on the legitimacy of the starting point it presupposes. In what follows we shall question the legitimacy of this starting

point on the Whiteheadian grounds that *it overrates the epistemological value of consciousness*. Whitehead's starting point, by contrast, is not a particular representation of nature vouchsafed by consciousness, but rather what everyone implicitly knows that consciousness is by virtue of being conscious. The value of this self-understanding of ordinary consciousness is much debated and often denigrated as "folk psychology." By no coincidence Whitehead takes his start from these very features of conscious experience that a mechanistic explanation of consciousness rules out. From this starting point, the heuristic goal becomes an interpretation of nature that does not preclude the emergence and existence of consciousness as we actually know it, moment by moment, in ourselves. As Bergson's close psychological description of experience brought out, one of the things we implicitly know about consciousness is that it has an organic rather than aggregational or mechanical coherence. Whitehead takes this to be the critical clue. Accordingly, with embodied experience as its starting point and the thing to be ultimately explained, Whitehead's order of proceeding invites an organic interpretation of nature that makes it possible to understand how nonconscious nature could give rise to a consciousness that experiences itself as an organic unity.

In light of these observations it can be said that indirectly consciousness does acquire considerable importance for Whitehead. Because it offers a singularly important clue to the nature of the nature that produced it, it has exceptional heuristic value for metaphysics. This contrasts sharply with the unqualified methodological and epistemological importance consciousness enjoys in mainstream research, where it is assumed that consciousness will tell us what we want to know about nature—not indirectly, by an inference from what consciousness is to the nature that was able to produce it, but directly, by taking cognizance of what consciousness delivers up under well-designed experimental constraints as its objective content. To this disparity in their respective ways of valuing consciousness corresponds a disparity in their understandings of physical process. We will now examine these disparities in greater detail. We will examine first the default assumptions of the mainstream position, and then contrast Whitehead with the mainstream, noting first the respects in which consciousness for Whitehead is less important than for traditional approaches, and then the respects in which it becomes more important.

Conventional Wisdom and the Mystery of Consciousness

As Michael Katzko observes in his contribution to this volume, it is assumed in the mainstream—almost universally—that we know more or less what a physical process is, and this is the starting point taken for granted in the

and its veiled connection with an “essentialist” or “logicist” theory of individuation is examined by Weekes (2007, 64–80).

25. For an account of the original *raison d'être* of this very useful concept (and of *intensionality* in general) see Kneale 1962, 601–618.

26. The example is from Thomas Nagel's famous article (Nagel 1979, 164–180), but see Whitehead: “he [Leibniz] approached the problem of cosmology from the subjective side, whereas Lucretius and Newton approach it from the objective point of view. They implicitly ask the question, What does the world of atoms look like to an intellect surveying it? [. . .] But Leibniz answered another question. He explained what it must be like to be an atom” (AI 132).

27. To keep the record straight, it is important to underline that the space-time continuum is, so to speak, the surface effect of a deeper matrix of solidarity, which Whitehead calls the “extensive continuum.”

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