

The self-evidence of civilisation

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In my paper I want to show that Whitehead's philosophical thinking is not completed with *Process and Reality*. On the contrary I would like to point out, that his metaphysics comes fully into view in his later works, especially in *Adventures of Ideas* and in *Modes of Thought*. I would like to demonstrate this in his work *Modes of Thought*. In my opinion, Whitehead's opus magnum *Process and Reality* is first of all a philosophy of nature – however *Modes of Thought* demonstrates the relevance of Whiteheadian process – thought for the philosophy of culture and the understanding of the notion of civilisation. In my opinion, one could misunderstand Whitehead's late work completely if one would assume that it represents solely a summary of Whitehead's main opus *Process and Reality*. In *Modes of Thought* Whitehead explains to a greater degree what according to him the function and task of philosophy should be. According to Whitehead, the function of reason exists – as we know – to promote the art of life. The human civilization is in Whitehead's view the highest product of art of life. As Whitehead clearly states in *Modes of Thought*, the function of reason in his view consists of the fact that it is to serve the civilization, the process of the civilization. In this sense Whitehead describes the pragmatic function of philosophy in *Modes of Thought*, which he already defined in *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) as follows: "The purpose...is to co-ordinate the current expressions of human experience, in common speech, in social institutions, in actions, in the principles of the various special sciences, elucidating harmony and exposing discrepancies." (AI 286) While *Process and Reality* dedicates itself to the coordination of the modes of expression available in various specialized studies, in *Modes of Thought* Whitehead focuses particularly on the latter task of philosophy, the one of discrepancy and contradictions in the human self-evidence. In the center of Whitehead's criticism are the abstraction conditions of modern natural science. "Science", according to Whitehead in *Modes of Thought*, "can find no individual enjoyment in nature: Science can find no aim in nature: Science can find no creativity in nature; it finds mere rules of succession. These negations are true aim of natural science. They are inherent in its methodology." (MT 154) The abstraction conditions criticism of the methodology of modern natural science, which is only implicitly present in *Process and Reality*, becomes completely explicit in *Modes of*

Thought. The particular position of Whitehead's last important work does not base itself, however, merely on the fact that Whitehead refers here particularly critically to scientific abstractions of his time. As will be demonstrated in that what follows, Whitehead approaches his subject-matter completely different from a methodological perspective in *Modes of Thought* as opposed to in *Process and Reality* and his other works. As well known, Whitehead's main work *Process and Reality* presents itself as a large-scale attempt to interpret, in the framework of a systematic cosmology, the unit of nature and history through a synthesis of those theoretical conditions, upon which, in his view, nature and humanities are based. In *Modes of Thought*, however, Whitehead is not concerned with ontological foundations, but with a predominantly phenomenological analysis of the structure of those data and experience conditions, upon which, in Whitehead's view, all scientific and civilizing understanding is based. Therefore the content condition, understood philosophically, does not stand here in the foreground, but rather it is the relationship, in which the aforementioned understanding and recognition by themselves are the natural and historical process, which it forms and of which it is a part. While *Process and Reality* pursues an evolutionary approach, it attempts to think of the human being, perception and thinking in the framework of an ontological foundation speculatively sketched nature. *Modes of Thought*, on the contrary, attempts to develop on the basis of an analysis of human thinking and perception, an analysis of the *How* of thinking, a new *What* of thinking.

The self-evidence of civilization and scientific recognition are such modes, such *How*s of thinking, which, abstractly understood, have the same world as subject of reflection, concretely, however, lead to completely different results. The bifurcation of the world into a value world and a world of pure facts, into a natural world, which is *defined* by natural science, and a cultural world, which can be *understood* by humanities, from this perspective can already be seen as a product of specific ways of thinking and their methodical restrictions and be displayed as such a product historically. To see the difference between natural sciences and humanities only in that the natural sciences have to do with objective conditions without any internal meaning, but humanities, however, have to do with meaningful cultural conditions, has to seem as wrong and naive, especially in view of such incontestable historicity of all thinking and its methods.

The topicality of the approach pursued here constitutes the very circumstance that Whitehead works out the historicity of our thinking ways and thinking patterns in *Modes of Thought*. Because if one is inclined today to summarize all humanities from the science of history to the aesthetics under the fashion term of cultural sciences, then

it is not only a pragmatic summary, but also a judgment over the quality of the herewith excluded nature: namely that mental principles, historicity and aesthetic value perception do not play any constitutive role in this nature. Such a way of thinking, however, clashes as known at the latest in view of the facts that a human being, including his living environment, belongs to nature and therefore in the framework of a certain life continuity with its moral, aesthetic and religious perspective he evolutionary came out of nature; this clashes completely objectively. These contradictions – for instance the problem of the moral responsibility in view of the scientific thought determination, the way it is represented by today’s neurobiology – are however neither part of the cultural, nor the natural reality of human beings, but – so Whitehead’s thesis – rather a result of the way one contemplates on reality. According to Whitehead, the task of philosophy consists thus in overcoming the ditch that opens up between natural and cultural sciences. This implies that in Whitehead’s view philosophy is not understood as one of many cultural sciences; at least as long as one abstractly opposes cultural sciences to natural ones. It seems rather that everything appears to support that, according to Whitehead, philosophy is the main science of all cultural sciences and as such should also be natural science and science theory. The task of philosophy is precisely – here Whitehead agrees with Hegel – it is the criticism of abstractions, in particular those that separate humanities and natural sciences.¹

Apart from the methodical difference, Whitehead doesn’t deviate in *Modes of Thought* not from one fundamental conviction that he already expressed in *Process and Reality*. The refusal of subjectivity interpretation as a substance in favor of a radically procedural view of reality, as well as the underlining of a comprehensive relationality of all being, within whose framework the isolation of reality as expression of misdirected abstraction must be interpreted: these views represent basic constants of Whiteheadian thinking, which continuously pervade *Modes of Thought*. The well-known motto of Whiteheadian philosophy, “Against Bifurcation of Natur” – Against Splitting of Nature –, could indeed be considered for this or any other Whiteheadian work after 1918. Like already noticed, however, in *Modes of Thought* Whitehead doesn’t face the usual splitting of humanities and natural sciences with another ontology, he rather examines the influence which this splitting has on the modern civilization and its self-evidence.

The critical analysis of abstraction conditions of modern natural science occurs in at least three steps in *Modes of Thought*: First of all Whitehead confronts the results of theoretical construction, in accordance with scientific thinking, with the human

¹:»It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy process of society. It is the critic of abstractions.« (SMW 75)

civilizing self-evidence. The contrast of facts and values is located centrally here. Secondly, by examining the kinds of experiences that accurate science relies on Whitehead asks for possible conditions of modern natural science. His provocative key thesis reads as known that „the experiences on which accurate science bases itself across completely superficial” (MT 29): The reason for this blindness of physical science lies in the fact that such science only deals with the half the evidence provided by human experience. It divides the seamless coat – or, to change the metaphor into a happier form, it examines the coat, which is superficial, and neglects the boy, which is fundamental.” (MT 154) In a second step, Whitehead calls to extend the experience basis from which the natural science emanates as accurate science. That is accompanied in *Modes of Thought* with a detailed analysis of the structure of perception. Only such an extension of the basis of experiences, from which sciences emanate, is thirdly able to bring, according to Whitehead, those experience connections into the view, which are constitutive for the human civilization. Upon what the human civilization is based, that is according to Whitehead not the experience of clear and distinct sense-data, but the experience of a totality, which can be seized only vaguely.

1.) *Modes of Thought* is primarily a book about discrepancy and suitability. Whitehead's time diagnosis, which he already expressed in his famous work *Science and Modern World*, that our thinking, aligned with the scientific exactness ideal, moves away increasingly from our civilizing fundamental perception and that the civilizing value world and the order seized by natural science oppose each other increasingly and suddenly, the latter remains an aspect of actuality. The circumstance that the rational bases of modern civilization became unstable, is evident in the difficulties that it causes, to set in today's key science biology inherent Darwinian and Neo-Darwinian views in a relationship to the ethnic-social basic measures of democratic societies or the impossibility to derive normative bases from today's natural science, which could function as corrective for instance in genetic engineering of what is feasible in genetic engineering. Moreover, the fact that today we ask ourselves in Europe what we actually mean as Europeans by the term „Europe“, viz. the question how we could adequately define Europe – one of the central questions in European humanities –, could in such a way be understood from the perspective of *Modes of Thought* as a sign of a crisis, which was triggered by the supremacy of abstractions of modern natural science in European thinking. Because, so Whitehead, „the basis of democracy is the common fact of value experience, as constituting the essential nature of each pulsation of actuality“ (MT 111) In the framework of current natural sciences, however, such a value experience cannot be justified rationally. Because values are true, in Whitehead's view,

alone as final causes in the striving of every living thing. To such a degree that natural science abstracts from all final causes and from all finality in nature, it also abstracts from the experience of value founded in nature. The experience of value is thereby in Whitehead's view also such, in which is taking place substantial unity of all existing. Value experience and experience of unity of all existing belong inseparably together for Whitehead. Because just as Leibniz, Whitehead believed in a universal harmony of all existing, in whose framework each existing thing takes the possibility conditions of its existence from the being of all other. This universal harmony and unity of the universe, on which is based each individual being, represents in his view the basis of the value experience. By abstracting from the element of value in nature, natural science abstracts also from the relatedness of all being. Therefore, in Whitehead's view, the abstraction of the dimension of value in nature goes necessarily together with solipsist conception of the being, in whose framework things exist in an isolated manner from each other.

II.) In epistemological regard, according to Whitehead, such a solipsist conception of existence, according to which things exist independently and in an isolated manner from each other, is based on an absolutization of pure sense perception, which elevates it to a unique source of realization. For that reason Whitehead explores in *Modes of Thought* that form of reduced epistemology, which in his view coined the philosophy from Descartes to Kant. Thereby his criticism takes not only a form, as it is found again and again in dialectic, hermeneutic and phenomenological theories, but unfolds in *Modes of Thought* to a highly up-to-date theory of perception. Whitehead's 1929 writing *Symbolism*² presents for the first time this theory of perception in its basics. In *Modes of Thought* Whitehead takes up the bases of this theory in form of a sharp criticism at sensualistic and empirical philosophies, without, however, advancing to an actual symbol term or for instance to the problematic term of the "symbolic realization" in the sense of Goodman or Cassirer.

Centrally of this work is located rather the meaning, which is attached to different ways of world perception in our self and world understanding, and the question, to what extent these ways of world perception and recognition shape specific ways of world understanding. Naturally: In *Process and Reality* in chapter VII of the second part we encounter the bases of a theory of perception and the therein expressed criticism at empiricism. As opposed to in *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead neither describes in *Process and Reality* the concrete relevance of this theory for the scientific concept

² *Symbolism: Its Meaning and its Effect*, (Babour-Page Lectures at the University of Virginia, New York, 1927), London, 1927.

formation, nor does he bring up for discussion the influence that this concept formation has on the process of civilization.

In this context one equally notices that Whitehead's late work *Modes of Thought* differs in this regard from *Process and Reality* and represents a confrontation in crucial points with the late work of another philosopher, who likewise taught at Harvard: William James. Whitehead and James agree indeed - despite their different theoretical origin - in important points of their thinking. This is valid primarily for their common appreciation of the importance of the religious perception phenomenon, which they both regarded as a simple fact. Moreover, this is valid for their similar criticism at the reduction of experience to the perception of distinct sense-data; a criticism, which James claimed in his "radical empiricism"³ model. For both thinkers the connections as they become introspective in the continuity of subjective self-experience are as substantial data as the distinct sense-data of the outside world. The endeavor of both philosophers is thereby the overcoming of a pure sensualism, as the latter is evident in English empiricism and in particular at Hume, in favor of thinking, which also considers the internal experience of the subject. Like James stressed, however, the introspection is problematic as a method for the production of realizations. Due to heavily seized liquid of its articles and its interlacement with somatic impacts, according to him, rather the entire introspective psychology, - he contributed crucially to its foundation - is as vague "as its article". This leads to the fact that, in his view, the introspection is subject to the same erroneous possibilities like every other scientific observation of outside conditions. Therefore the incontestable vagueness, that comes along with introspectively won realizations, cannot be solely a reason to devalue the method of introspection as unscientific. Likewise is in his view, as well as in the one of Whitehead, the continuity - which is evident in the subjective self-experience and in the consciousness stream - is an obvious fact, which likewise requires an analysis like the outside connections manufactured by the natural science. In view of this continuity and cohesion as it is characteristic of experience, the splitting of experience, into a dichotomy of observed subject and objects of the observation, as they emanate from Cartesianism, appears as wrong. Experience has an essentially synthetic character with this as with the other philosopher, within whose framework subject and object, past and future, are merged with one another. However, both were granted, with this synthetic character of experience, the unified function, in the framework of their theoretical conceptions a completely different significance. While James thought to

³Cf. Schrag; Calvin O., »Zur Struktur der Erfahrung in der Philosophie von Whitehead und James«, in: *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, Bd. 23 (1969), S. 479 - 494.

establish an empirical psychology, which would be based on introspection as a further discipline within natural sciences, Whitehead assumed that an adequate setting of experience, in the context of a speculative metaphysics, makes a revising of conditions going back to Descartes necessary, upon which modern science is based. And while James, in the course of his country's dominant thinking mode – in the course of the American pragmatism and the resulting refusal of all rationalistic thinking pattern – simply wanted to understand continuity of subjective self-experience as an empirical fact; in Whitehead's view, this can only be made transparently when set in connection with that continuity that is as a whole characteristic of the spatiotemporal continuum. The continuity of experience can thus, in Whitehead's view, be made thematic only in the context of a philosophical *system*. Thus *Modes of Thought* not lastly represents a justification of philosophizing in the form of a *system*.

III.) Such a system, that aims to explain the continuity of the experience process, represents without a doubt Whitehead's main work *Process and Reality*. As well known, Whitehead – similar as Leibniz – argues in this work that subjectivity and self-realization represent the essential structure of nature's reality: „Self-realization is the ultimate fact of facts. An actuality is self-realizing, and whatever is self-realizing is an actuality.” (PR 222) Just like Leibniz, Whitehead also states that every individual, every actual entity must be understood as a synthesis of the entire universe. Every actual entity forms itself, according to Whitehead, due to a prehension of the universe, which is given to it as potential for its self-realization. Therefore every organism, independently from its organizational stage, has original experiences in the mode of causal efficacy, within whose framework it experiences its concrete unity with the world. From this mode Whitehead differentiates a perception of the world, which has its origin in the purely conceptual activity of the subject and is only relevant for highly developed organisms. The latter causes a representational immediacy of the world in the sensory perception, simultaneously with the perceptive organism. In symbolic function modes, as i.e. in the language, both perception modes are merged with one another, whereby usually distinct sense-data function as symbols for the vague experiences in the mode of causal efficacy.⁴

Whitehead states thereby in particular in *Modes of Thought* that perceptions are emotionally highly effective in the mode of causal efficacy and full of vital importance, but formally undefined and therefore *vague*, perceived sense-data, however, distinct and clear, but on their own abstract and empty. *Modes of Thought* is essentially a work

⁴Cf. Lachmann, Rolf, »Alfred North Whiteheads naturphilosophische Konzeption der Symbolisierung«, in: *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, Band 54 (2000), S. 197- 217.

about this vagueness and about the function, which it plays within experience. In contrast nearly to the entire tradition Whitehead states that the sensory perception arises from a purely theoretical world relationship and thus is lacking any concrete sense without the massive, vague, emotional experiences in the mode of causal efficacy: „Sense perception is the triumph of abstraction in animal experience.“ (MT 73) Accurate science, which is based in its one-sided nature alone on the interpretation of pure sense-data, therefore abstracts firstly, in Whitehead's view, from the emotional basis of all experience and thus from its immanent value. By ignoring, secondly, the massive experiences, which humans in the mode of causal efficacy make literally on their own body, it negates simultaneously the entire creative mediative connection of all living. This mediative connection has due to its holistic character in Whitehead's view the character of a comprehensive responsibility. The concrete perception of such a responsibility for oneself and others and the insight how self-responsibility and the taking over of responsibility for others are connected presume an insight into this comprehensive mediative connection of the whole. Such an insight, however, can be obtained finally only due to a concrete perception for value. In his view it is illusorily to believe that a civilization whose experience basis is increasingly shrinking to the one of accurate sciences can maintain such a value perception on a long-term basis. Where in favor of an alleged objectivity ideal all value experience is classified as irrational, all aesthetic perception must triumph on a long-term basis. The task of philosophy must therefore be to overcome by a criticism of abstractions the dualism of value building and truth, as it is characteristic on one hand for the drifting apart of civilizing self-evidence, and for accurate science on the other hand: Already in *Process and Reality* Whitehead says: „The task of philosophy is to recover the totality obscured by the selection.“ (PR 15) *Modes of Thought* can be read as explanation of this demand.

Because philosophy, according to Whitehead, following the predominating philosophical stream of its host country, should be indeed pragmatic. But pragmatism is in his view nothing else on as an appeal to »to the wide self-evidence of civilization, and the self-evidence of what we mean by civilization«. In order to state, where such self-evidence is based, another more comprehensive epistemology is required than the one that the accurate science is based on. The epistemology of civilization – that is the message of *Modes of Thought* – is massive, emotional and vague. Like that, it is and remains a philosophy, which allies itself for the value will with that truth, which lies in the vagueness, in Whitehead's view necessarily speculative. In this speculative direction are related philosophy, art, religion and mysticism. But the purpose of philosophy is – according to Whitehead – to rationalize mysticism: not by explaining it

away, but by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations, rationally coordinated.
»Our metaphysical knowledge is slight, superficial, incomplete. Thus errors creep in.
But, such as it is, metaphysical understanding guides imagination and justifies purpose.
Apart from metaphysical presupposition there can be no civilization.« (AI 260)

AI = »Adventures of Ideas«, University Press, Cambridge, 1933

MT = »Modes of Thought«, The Free Press, New York 1968 (1938)

PR = »Process and Reality«, *An Essay in Cosmology*, Corrected Edition, by David Ray Griffin
and Donald W. Sherburne, The Free Press, New York 1978 (1929)