

## **Beyond Metaphysics? –**

### **A Historiographical Approach to Whitehead's Speculative Philosophy**

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#### I. Introduction

With first of all his claim that the main task of philosophy consists in a criticism of abstractions (SMW 87)<sup>1</sup>, secondly his organic metaphysics, which break with the Aristotelian paradigm of unchangeable substances at the core of reality, and thirdly his unique ability of linking science, metaphysics, education, religion and history so that they illuminate each other, A.N. Whitehead can certainly be called a Philosopher of the New. With regard to both content and methodology his thinking is fruitful and innovative. Hence, many readers are rather surprised to find that Whitehead has framed his cosmology with »reliance on the positive value of the philosophical tradition« (PR xiv) - referring to relevant predecessors from the general point of view of the history of science on the one hand and on the other hand with the more specific intention of developing his concept of an organic, pluralistic universe by adopting, adapting and reinterpreting the ideas of his reference authors.

The constant reflection on its history as a conditioning factor for present research and speculation is a generally acknowledged aspect of philosophy. The significance we ascribe to the study of authors and dogmas in the history of philosophy and science is underlined by the organization of university courses, by an endless list of annual publications and by the assumed authority of the classics quoted in almost every essay or lecture. The reconstruction of ideas and movements in a purely chronological fashion certainly is interesting and valuable in itself, but from a more systematic perspective it has always been more promising to relate the central teachings in philosophy and science with regard to their respective dependencies and references with

the ultimate purpose of being able to overcome restrictions imposed by historical dependency. Accordingly, although Whitehead's well-versed speculative analysis of the manifold interrelations in the development of Western philosophy, science and religion is certainly one of outstanding genius, the project as such can hardly be called exceptional. What is astonishing, however, is the fact that he places the origin of philosophy as a whole in Plato as one single figure within this history.<sup>2</sup> This statement finds its most concise formulation in Whitehead's claim that the »safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato« (PR 39), which has certainly become one of the most widely used and abused phrases about the history of philosophy.

## II. The Footnote-Thesis

At first glance, Whitehead's statement does not seem to be very inventive. In many instances it is a welcome bon mot to be used in philosophical histories or introductions to Plato, which is then quickly discarded as not to be taken literally. Roger Scruton stands for a range of authors when he first quotes the footnote-thesis, and then goes on to say that this is obviously an overstatement. »With less exaggeration it could be said that German philosophy since the Enlightenment has been footnotes to Kant«<sup>3</sup>. But is the footnote-thesis really an exaggeration?

Whitehead states that it is the »safest general characterization« of Western philosophy, which does not only leave room for a variety of specific characterizations – we would certainly take a different point of view whenever we wanted to discuss the Existentialist tradition or the tradition of phenomenological philosophy – but also the possibility of finding alternative general characterizations. Robert S. Brumbaugh neglects this hypothetical character of the thesis, which accepts a number of possible characterizations with varying degrees of safety, by saying that according to Whitehead,

Western philosophy »is«<sup>4</sup> footnotes to Plato. Whitehead's more nuanced view is reflected in Flew's paraphrase that »the whole later development of Western philosophy can be regarded as a series of extended footnotes to Plato«<sup>5</sup>. Flew still holds that this is »of course, an exaggeration«<sup>6</sup>, although he concedes that it is nevertheless »a good exaggeration from which to begin«<sup>7</sup>, since Plato was not only the first to have left a considerable body of writing, but also because it is hardly possible to define the word "philosophy" without historic reference to Plato's works. Thus, somewhat accidentally, Flew approximates Whitehead, though it remains unclear why he still considers the footnote-thesis an obvious overstatement.

In the context of the elucidation of his provocative statement, Whitehead himself starts by explaining that the footnote-thesis is not to be understood as a reference to »the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his [i.e. Plato's] writings« (PR 39). A footnote may well have the character of a digression, inspired by its text but not necessarily in a strict sense thematically connected. In other words, the footnote-thesis does not regard our philosophical tradition as consisting of explicit reactions to a system that might be distilled out of Plato's works, as Kabitoglou seems to have in mind. For him the thesis refers to »an age-long tradition and controversy«<sup>8</sup>. As the different approaches to Plato undertaken by the ensuing philosophical tradition would result in a comparison of more or less doubtful extractions, they are not part of Whitehead's discussion.

More recently, Netz and Noel have embraced the footnote-thesis and agree that – despite its »outrageous«<sup>9</sup> appearance – the phrase is »quite sober-minded«<sup>10</sup>. Although they are among the few to present the entire statement without misquoting, they seem to have overlooked the fact that Whitehead tries to evade the usual dichotomy of Platonic and non-Platonic approaches to philosophy. If the footnote-thesis was to refer to the fact that all later philosophers, at least indirectly via Aristotle, tried to refute or refine Plato's

arguments, it would necessarily presuppose the existence of a system of thought, and would thus miss Whitehead's main intention. In their conclusion Netz/Noel unfortunately fall in line with a number of critics who read the thesis as a devaluation of later philosophical developments and achievements: »And so, in a real sense, all later Western philosophy is but footnotes to Plato,«<sup>11</sup> which is certainly too undifferentiated to come close to the original purpose. However, Netz/Noel demonstrate perfectly that the methodological procedure of tracing a line of thought back to one single thinker also works for »the European scientific tradition«<sup>12</sup> as opposed to the philosophical tradition. Their modified version views the general endeavour of science as »a series of footnotes to Archimedes«<sup>13</sup>, whose way of handling mathematical models and applying it to the physical world made him the father of Newton, Huygens and other great scientists.

The significance of Plato that has led Whitehead to his formulation of the footnote-thesis first of all lies in »the wealth of general ideas« (PR 39) to be found in his writings. The list of those who have found Plato not only a good piece of literature but inspiring and useful for the clarification of their own ideas stretches from Aristotle to the Church Fathers, from Giordano Bruno and Galileo to modern physicists. His writings constitute a reservoir of ideas through Plato's »personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization« (PR 39), but instead of enlarging on the impact of those traditions – we might want to know to what extent Plato is a more suitable candidate for the constitution of philosophy than Heraclitus, Parmenides or Pythagoras – Whitehead goes on to explain the Platonic character of his own system:

»Thus in one sense by stating my belief that the train of thought in these lectures is Platonic, I am doing no more than expressing the hope that it falls within the European tradition.« The footnote-thesis does not characterize the philosophical

tradition as something to be overcome. By reflecting on his own works with regard to the Platonic tradition, Whitehead first of all implies that there is a consistent development from Plato onwards and second that his own philosophy is not a rupture, but a mode of thought which is a genuine part of that tradition. Of course that is not to say that Whitehead completely agrees with Plato in all points; a footnote may certainly function as a qualification of a thesis, may modify an argument or even direct attention to alternative perspectives and contradicting views. Lovejoy takes up this attitude and wants us to understand his major work *The Great Chain of Being* as an illustration of the footnote-thesis, although he, like Kabitoglou, regards it as referring to a controversy of »two conflicting major strains in Plato and in the Platonic tradition«<sup>14</sup>. Now it is always easier to judge in retrospect the similarities and dependencies that make us talk of a specific tradition, but what exactly does Whitehead mean when he considers his own philosophy Platonic? Isn't that a curious sort of marketing, indicating that one does not claim absolute novelty? Whitehead continues: » I mean that if we had to render Plato's general point of view with the least changes made necessary by the intervening two thousand years of human experience in social organization, in aesthetic attainments, in science, and in religion, we should have to set about the construction of a philosophy of organism.« (PR 39)

Besides the reference to a line of tradition, the footnote-thesis very clearly attributes the metaphysical paradigm of organism to Plato. Obviously the description of Plato's writings as a welter of ideas needs to be specified insofar as the idea of being as ultimately process-related, being as becoming, has its origin here. Hence, we can say that the self-reflexive dimension of the footnote-thesis is both historical and systematic. Despite such sporadic remarks as Spinoza having modified Descartes' position »into greater coherence« (PR 6), Whitehead's primary interest, especially in *Process and Reality*, is the connection between individual philosophies and his own. Accordingly,

Whitehead's dealing with positions of the European philosophical tradition, especially with »Descartes, Newton, Locke, Hume, Kant« (PR xi), is explicit and his readers are never in doubt about whose concept is being criticized and revised in a particular passage.

## II. Whitehead's Approach to Tradition

A short passage from *The Function of Reason* will suffice here to illustrate the methodological procedure. Stating that the duality of Body and Mind is an obvious aspect of the world, which no philosophical scheme must ignore, Whitehead takes a closer look at what he conceives as the origin of a bifurcation of nature.

If we follow Descartes and express this duality in terms of the concept of substance, we obtain the notion of bodily substances and of mental substances. The bodily substances have, on this theory, a vacuous existence. They are sheer facts, devoid of all intrinsic values. It is intrinsically impossible to give any reason why they should come into existence, or should endure, or should cease to exist. (FR 29f.)

The criticism targets Descartes' approach by pointing to the lack of coherence between the foundational principles of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, whose self-sufficiency requires God as a *deus ex machina* to mend the metaphysical division. His system »makes a virtue of its incoherence« (PR 6). Moreover, the substances' lack of intrinsic relations makes final and efficient causation equally inexplicable. A self-sufficient »vacuous« substance cannot interact with other substances, if only its qualities are able to establish relationships, such as between perceiving subject and perceived object. The main mistake thus lies in an uncritical conversion of body and mind into ontological categories, where they turn out to be inadequate abstractions failing to elucidate our immediate experience. However, it is Descartes' merit to have drawn our attention to

the necessity of integrating both body and mind as empirical facts into any metaphysical description. Accordingly, we should ask how it is possible to integrate the dualism into a coherent theory and what are the ontological categories we should think of instead. In a similar way, Whitehead deals with other reference authors. Considering that in many instances this is not so much a neutral reconstruction of their respective philosophical systems but rather a hypothetical dialogue – Whitehead asking the questions Hume, Kant or Leibniz *should* have asked – it seems a little exaggerated to speak of an »excessive«<sup>15</sup> piety toward great philosophers.

From what we have seen so far, we might say that Whitehead's use and appreciation of the tradition is threefold: First of all, it serves as a reservoir of important data to be considered in a philosophical cosmology. Thinkers like Descartes obviously say »something that is true« (PR 6), but these 'somethings' need to be brought together to realize their limitations, their errors and undue abstractions. Secondly, through contrasting and modification he develops his organic metaphysics ex negativo from »the express authority [...] of some supreme master of thought« (PR 39). But as »ultimately nothing rests on authority« (PR 39), these uses merge into the third and most important way of handling tradition, namely, to systematize its ideas, submitting them to scrutiny and making sure the result is logical and coherent.

However, this methodological way of dealing with the footnotes of tradition tends to conceal that Whitehead, like basically any other well-read philosopher, is indebted to and influenced by various thinkers, who are not necessarily referred to explicitly. This is not to accuse him of not mentioning all his sources, and there is probably no thinker who could trace all his thoughts back to their origins. It might, however, help to understand the genius of his originality if we could discover who he was inspired by and what exactly he did with the ideas he came across there.

Among the rather obvious influences, there is, of course, the contemporary historian, biologist or philosophical colleague who either shapes Whitehead's views or at least helps him clarify them. This would include his long-time collaborator and intimate friend Russell, whose clarity of thought and expression was undeniably valuable to Whitehead, although the two were never able to agree on ontological matters. It also includes Henry Osborn Taylor, whose extensive study on the Middle Ages *The Medieval Mind* was Whitehead's primary source for the characterization of medieval scholasticism. Published in 1911, the book can still be counted among the most comprehensive classics, but it accounts for the rather one-sided picture of the »too learned« (FR 44) medieval scholar in *The Function of Reason*, which dismisses the ideas of such different thinkers as Anselm of Canterbury, Abelard and Nicolaus of Kues as exceptions which have hardly had any impact on the developments of European thought. For an avid reader with a phenomenal memory like Whitehead the list of contemporary thinkers he concerned himself with is long, ranging from Bergson and Einstein to Keynes, to name only a few.

Those are the examples staring us in the face in their obviousness, since they are the thinkers we come across naturally once in a while, not only when we apply ourselves to understanding Whitehead. But there are also the more subtle echoes of other writers, which allow us to see new facets of his appreciation of the philosophical tradition. We remember that the footnote-thesis is not meant to deny the importance of the philosophical achievements of the past two and a half thousand years, and that Whitehead systematically develops his metaphysics against the background of the European philosophical tradition. Thus, it seems all the more surprising that the footnote-thesis itself – the culmination point of his historical methodology – does not seem to be Whitehead's own invention.



#### IV. Whitehead's Transformation of Emerson

The claim that the philosophical tradition in general can be traced back to Plato as one single figure can indeed already be found in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who actually seems to have been Whitehead's source in that case. Even Kann's detailed study on the footnote-thesis in the general context of Whitehead's perspective on the history of philosophy leaves aside the fact that the footnote-thesis itself is not Whitehead's own genuine invention.<sup>16</sup> To my knowledge, Simon Blackburn has so far been the only one to find Whitehead alongside Emerson in his estimate of Plato's influence, although he simply uses both authors to stress the general acknowledgement of Plato's lasting impact on philosophy.<sup>17</sup> As far as the interpretation of the footnote-thesis is concerned, however, Blackburn is among those who reject the idea that a footnote may well contain a contradiction or modification of its reference text.

A man as keen on protecting his privacy as Whitehead rarely gave an insight into the books he had devoured in his youth, but thanks to Lucien Price we know that Whitehead read »a good deal«<sup>18</sup> of Emerson when he was younger, and we will have to pay some attention to his rather surprising statement that he did not find him very original. In order to judge the similarity with Emerson's homage to Plato in *Representative Men* it makes sense to look at Emerson's words:

Among secular books, Plato only is entitled to Omar's fanatical compliment to the Koran, when he said, »Burn the libraries; for their value is in this book. [...] A discipline it is in logic, arithmetic, taste, symmetry, poetry, language, rhetoric, ontology, morals or practical wisdom. There was never such a range of speculation. Out of Plato come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought. Great havoc makes he among our originalities.« (RM 41)

The footnote-thesis clearly is an echo of Emerson's words. From a philological point of view, the similarity is underlined by the authors' use of tropes. While Whitehead speaks of *footnotes*, Emerson refers to every book as »a quotation« (RM 44) in order to express his understanding of the indebtedness of the philosophical tradition to Plato.<sup>19</sup> Surprisingly enough, Whitehead's controversial thesis itself can now be characterized as a footnote, which rephrases Emerson's dictum of Plato being the first among the representative men. But to what extent does the implicit self-reference of the footnote-thesis influence its content?

The fact that the footnote-thesis itself is a footnote actually underlines the idea of a consistent tradition held together by a systematic point of origin. Even footnotes that refer to other footnotes are made possible by the reference text in the first place. But is there a particular reason why Whitehead, who otherwise never leaves us in any doubt about his sources, does not mention Emerson at all? Possibly the idea expressed by Emerson is so obvious and self-evident to him that he does not even think of mentioning his lines. However, Whitehead does not simply rephrase the footnote-thesis, but quite clearly alters it in such a way that it finally becomes the culmination point of his approach to the philosophical tradition, as an analysis of the different statements will show.

Emerson does not refer to any particular one of Plato's books, it is the entire oeuvre he has in mind, which is a discipline in various branches of intellectual pursuit. The list of disciplines does not appear to be more than a barely systematic, rhapsodic enumeration of fields in which Plato was interested and for whose intellectual study he laid the cornerstones. Plato is like a quarry and each generation, each thinker detaches the boulders fitting his time, which certainly reminds us of Whitehead's image of Plato as an »inexhaustible mine of suggestion« (PR 39). But for all the systems philosophers may build with the various boulders, they will never be able to reach his range of

speculation. Here we have come to the precise reason why Plato is the first in the list of the representative men: It is not the chronology, but his power of thinking all those general ideas which man can ever hope to find. »St. Augustine, Copernicus, Newton, Behmen, Swedenborg, Goethe, are likewise his debtors and must say after him. « (RM 42) Theoretically, and this is at the core of Emerson's book, all men are equal in their power to access the realm of ideas and possibilities, so that »there are no common men« (RM 35). Only few, however, make use of that power and have the ability to express their thoughts as universal truths, and in the greatest of them we no longer see subjective expressions, but all that man thinking can reach. »Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato, – at once the glory and the shame of mankind, since neither Saxon nor Roman have availed to add any idea to his categories.« (RM 42)

Emerson does not give a detailed account of these categories as distinct aspects of a Platonic system and leaves open whether they can be identified with the two »cardinal facts« (RM 49) of Unity or Identity on the one hand and Variety on the other. It seems reasonable to suppose so, and to regard the perfect balance between these two principles as the merit of Plato's philosophy. In contrast to the natural philosophers before Socrates, he does not take the concrete fact of water, air, fire or mind in order to generalize them, but subsumes all concrete fact under the »dogma« (RM 57) – we might say: the speculative principle – of the good. It is the unity above the ideas, – Plato's expression of being – but as the supreme idea it is also the reason for variety, as the material world derives its character from participating in or imitating that unity. All »inventories« (RM 56), that is all concrete fact, find their place in that scheme, which is at the same time Plato's philosophy and the most general statement possible, from which all philosophy comes.

Now for all the praise Plato deserves, he cannot claim to have discovered the absolute truth. For Emerson, there is not a single absolute truth.

If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed; as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought and do not flow with the course of nature. (MN 191)

We cannot even hope to approach a complete scheme of principles with which to cover all reality, because the world is fluxional and eludes any attempt at a final interpretation. Plato is representative since his work is pervaded by the authentic desire to achieve a full understanding of the world and all its aspects. That is speculation, the all-embracing sweep carried by the conviction that things are knowable, because they correspond. Every man can achieve this aim by re-interpreting the broad generality which encompasses everything from his individual position, but Plato's thinking, being authentically his way of rendering this general view, cannot be exceeded.

This is precisely where we come back to Whitehead, whose belief in the progress of metaphysical speculation accounts for the decisive criticism and modification of Emerson's reading of Plato. It is not only Emerson's somewhat lofty tone that Whitehead avoids by his almost humble remarks that metaphysical categories are »tentative formulations« (PR 8) and »the estimate of success is exaggerated« (PR 7), but also Emerson's view that Plato's main achievement consists in a mystic description of the world, if we understand mysticism as the attempt at achieving and communicating the ultimate oneness of the universe. The good is too broad a category to allow for a productive reading of Plato's works as a cosmological scheme. Whitehead concedes that Plato construes the universe as a balanced relation between the imperfect and fluxional physical world on the one hand and the static perfection of a heaven of ideas on the other, but the specific value of Plato's is derived from his basic notions concerning the relationship between science and philosophy. These notions, which are to be found »by reading together the *Theætetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Timæus*, and the fifth

and tenth books of the *Laws*; and then by recurrence to his earlier work, the *Symposium*« (AI 187), are the distillate of Plato's contribution to the enterprise of a philosophical cosmology.

Whitehead, somewhat subjectively, distinguishes seven notions or basic ideas, namely »The Ideas, The Physical Elements, The Psyche, The Eros, The Harmony, The Mathematical Relations, The Receptacle« (AI 188). The static Ideas become efficient by being entertained in the demiurge as the supreme Psyche, whose ordering of the Ideas shapes the character of our world. The apprehension of Ideas is never bare knowledge, but always connected with feeling and a striving for perfection, represented by the Eros. Insofar as the Ideas function as norms and imply a »notion of an excellence« (AI 190), they raise the question of a criterion for perfection, which finds its answer in Harmony as the right proportion between the respective constituents. The Greek discovery of Mathematical Relations carries the notion of Harmony even further by abstracting from any given object and representing the relation in the form of quantities. The Physical Elements, which Whitehead does not enlarge on in that context, are the manifold things which have a spatial and temporal dimension through being within the Receptacle, the latter imposing »a common relationship on all that happens« (AI 192). Here, finally, Whitehead approaches Emerson's reading of Plato by pointing to the significance of one concept that accounts for the interconnectedness – the »community« – of everything that is. In that sense Plato is the initial figure both for modern science and organic metaphysics, because Φύσις understood as that wherein the Physical Elements have a temporal being foreshadows modern space-time, while “Φύσις” translated as process already denotes the idea of a relatedness of events, from which space-time is deduced.

To put it all in a nutshell, Whitehead identifies seven speculative principles in Plato, which utilizes Emerson's observation and renders it more detailed and more

systematic. Thus, Plato must not simply be considered a quarry, but has methodological significance. It is precisely this type of cosmological scheme Whitehead has in mind – a system of abstract notions, under which our empirical observations of the world can be subsumed and understood. »These notions are as important for us now, as they were then at the dawn of the modern world« (AI 188). Our task, the task of philosophy, is to constantly adapt and up-date Plato's notions with regard to scientific, religious and cultural growth, the growth of »experience in social organization, in aesthetic attainments, in science, and in religion« (PR 39).

Is there a difference between those thinkers who serve as a blueprint for Whitehead's cosmological scheme and thinkers like Emerson, whom he systematizes without dwelling further on them? Naturally, »only a selected group can be explicitly mentioned« (PR 39), but those he opted for were certainly not chosen at random. Whitehead himself does not mention any criteria according to which he chose the »supreme master[s] of thought«. A first criterion is obviously the existence of a system with the corresponding terminology, which is a precondition for judging its coherence and logic and which, from Whitehead's point of view, is the only means of proceeding methodologically, in order to be able

to remedy the difficulty of judging individual propositions, by having recourse to a system of ideas, whose mutual relevance shall lend to each other clarity, and which hang together so that the verification of some reflects upon the verification of the others. Also if the system has the character of suggesting methodologies of which it is explanatory, it gains the character of generating ideas coherent with itself and receiving continuous verification.  
(FR 69f.)

Emerson, like his German admirer Nietzsche<sup>20</sup>, neither has such a closed system nor a terminology, and in fact it would contradict his attempt at exhibiting the character of a

protean world, which is forever changing and transforming itself. Whitehead, on the other hand, searches for the all embracing system of general terms, whose coherence is the precondition for every cosmology: the ontological coherence of the constituents of the universe accounts for the coherence of the fundamental terms, since anything that does not have an inner relationship to all the other components of the world is unknowable.

The second criterion for the selection of reference authors is their integration into a complete scheme of thought, which requires an interaction with scientific conceptions and results. This is basically the mode of procedure in *Science and the Modern World*, namely to show the interdependency of metaphysical and scientific theories from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The use of the notion of a cosmology is not always as systematic as we might wish, but in general we can assume that it refers to the systematic development of a holistic view of the world, which Whitehead finds in only a few authors.

In a first conclusion, we can say that Whitehead regards Emerson as being of little originality, because the lack of a systematic method or a taxonomy makes his version of the footnote-thesis seem like a mere bon mot. Whitehead cannot integrate Emerson into his metaphysics as a systematic thinker, but – and that is what the later version of the footnote-thesis makes plain – he structures Emerson's interpretation of Plato's significance, making his thesis more than a footnote and shedding light on the way he deals with those philosophers he doesn't refer to explicitly.

## V. History and Cosmology

Now, in how far does the Whiteheadian use of the footnote-thesis improve our understanding of the general agenda of his main works? Does this historical reflection lead us beyond metaphysics? Although the main focus of *Adventures of Ideas* lies on

the impact of ideas on civilizations, it does certainly not break with the metaphysical programme of *Process and Reality*. Whitehead himself stresses the intimate relationship of his main works *Science and the Modern World*, *Process and Reality* and *Adventures of Ideas* in the preface to the latter: »Each book can be read separately; but they supplement each other's omissions and compressions.« (AI, vii) Moreover, he characterizes all the three books as »an endeavour to express a way of understanding the nature of things« and thus indicates that the occupation with metaphysics in his works does not come to an end with *Process and Reality* – it merely changes in terms of approach, perspective and methodology.

The understanding of history that Whitehead puts forward, namely as a bond between past, present and future, all of them tied together by a common interest in general ideas, already hints at the interrelatedness of metaphysical and historical concepts. The study of history is not solely something for its own sake. As the elucidation of the footnote-thesis indicated, historiographical approaches are to be of systematic value and to provide means of coming to a fuller and more coherent philosophical description of the world. Whenever a generation of philosophers sets itself to developing a cosmology, its specific way of reformulating the Platonic notions is based on and limited by »peculiar circumstances of race and of stage of civilization« (AI, 5). In other words, cosmologies and metaphysics are systems of general ideas which – despite their highly general and abstract character – can never be complete adequations of reality. Perception and language influence and to a certain extent determine our general ideas, which »rarely receive any accurate verbal expression« (AI, 5). What is demonstrated for the idea of freedom, whose scope and significance found different interpretations among antique Romans, medieval kings and enlightened Europeans, also applies for metaphysical systems composed of ideas.



Consequently, Whitehead is fully aware of the fact that the cosmology developed in *Process and Reality* is all but final. From a future perspective it will appear fragmentary and its complex terminology will be considered clumsy and pervaded by undue focus on particular aspects of the world. However, as an *Essay in Cosmology*, it is conscious of those limitations, and one of the chief purposes of the study of the historical adventures of ideas consists in shedding light on our own verbal dependencies by tracing the history of those civilizations that framed our ideas. In that sense, *Adventures of Ideas* is not beyond metaphysics, but sharpens our awareness for historical limitations imposed on our systematic philosophies. This task is not as basal as we might at first be tempted to assume, for Whitehead holds that the profound cosmological outlook in each age is »almost too obvious to need expression, and almost too general to be capable of expression« (AI, 14). Like the air we breathe we have never come across any alternative fundamental framework of thought upon which theories, principles or questions can be based. In order to be able to overcome this invisible obstacle Whitehead aims to reconstruct the tacit agreements that underlie the cosmological schemes of previous ages. Basically, *Adventures of Ideas* can thus be regarded as an attempt at elucidating the basic forms of his own thinking by genealogically analyzing those of previous thinkers. The systematic limitations represented by the implicit metaphysical assumptions or ideas need to be overcome by means of a historical analysis. As Michael Hampe remarks, mature philosophical thought is not only systematic, but considers its own systematicity and its principles from outside.<sup>21</sup> History provides these outside perspectives.

This is, of course, not to suggest that the object of the historiographical study is restricted to the reconstruction of previous cosmological schemes. It allows us to catch more than one glimpse of Whitehead's pragmatic and social tendencies. The questions regarding the limitations of metaphysical speculation cannot be answered by pointing to

the intellectual and scientific capacities of ages and cultures alone. The answer must also comprise the social and political dimensions of past epochs. Once we know about the conditions under which previous civilizations developed those cosmologies that meant an expansion of human insight, we can set ourselves to finding of ways of tackling barriers and limitations of thought. A short but succinct example is Whitehead's criticism of the Roman Empire in its time of decay, which culminates in the remark that the »Western Empire in all its ramifications was a purely defensive institution, in its sociological functionings and in its external behaviour. [...] In no sense, however, we stretch the metaphor, did it discover a New World.« (AI, 102). Whether in the interpretation of individual general ideas or in the formulation of cosmological schemes, the interest is clearly in progress and the advance of metaphysical insight. Accordingly, the lesson to be learned from the historical study is twofold: firstly, to disclose the implicit borders of our philosophies and secondly, to preserve us from the decadence and the lackening of effort that are apt to arise from societies that discourage curiosity. Hence, »[i]t is our business – philosophers, students, and practical men – to re-create and reënact a vision of the world« (AI, 126).

The discussion of the footnote-thesis and its historical origin has led us to a general trait of Whitehead's thinking – the historical approach to systematic speculation. In itself the footnote-thesis is one prominent example of historical recourse for an ulterior systematic purpose, although it remains untypical in so far as it does not reflect explicitly its own origins. Moreover, the footnote-thesis lies at the basis of speculative philosophy in Whitehead's sense, providing the seven Platonic notions as the framework of every complete view of the world. By regarding his own philosophy as part of the Platonic tradition, he frankly refuses to claim that the cosmological interpretation offered in *Process and Reality* is final. As long as we remain within this

tradition, metaphysics can only be work in progress and speculation must remain a process.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To allow for easier reading, reference to quotations from the works of A.N. Whitehead and R.W. Emerson is provided in the text. The titles are abbreviated as follows:

AI = Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956).

PR = Whitehead, Alfred North, *Process and Reality*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

SMW = Whitehead, Alfred North, *Science and the Modern World*, (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

FR = Whitehead, Alfred North, *The Function of Reason*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

MN = Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works, Vol.1; The Method of Nature, Riverside Edition reprinted*, J. Elliot Cabot [ed.], (London: The Waverley Book Company, 1903).

RM = Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works, Vol. 4; Representative Men, Riverside Edition reprinted*, J. Elliot Cabot [ed.], (London: The Waverley Book Company, 1903).

<sup>2</sup> See Christoph Kann, *Fußnoten zu Platon: Philosophiegeschichte bei A.N. Whitehead*, (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Scruton, „Continental Philosophy from Fichte to Sartre“ in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy*, Anthony Kenny [ed.], (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), P. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Robert S. Brumbaugh, „Four Types of Plato Interpretation“ in *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*, Gerald A. Press [ed.], (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Antony Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> E. Douka Kabitoglou, *Plato and the English Romantics*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Reviel Netz and William Noel, *The Archimedes Codex*, (London: Orion Books, 2008), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Lowe, "Whitehead's Philosophical Development", in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. The Library of Living Philosophers III*, Paul Arthur Schilpp [ed.] (La Salle: Open Court, 1951), p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> See Kann, *Fußnoten zu Platon*, especially pp. 25-36.

<sup>17</sup> See Simon Blackburn, *Plato's Republic*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), pp. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Obviously, the philosophical tradition can neither be understood as *footnotes* nor as *quotations* in the proper sense, since that would imply that the ensuing philosophers themselves regarded their own works as explicitly referring to or quoting from Plato.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed study of the striking similarities in Emerson and Nietzsche see George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson – An Elective Affinity*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992). A succinct analysis of the respective ontological conceptions of the two thinkers is provided by Herwig Friedl's „Fate, Power, and History in Emerson and Nietzsche“ in *Emerson Society Quarterly, Vol. 43*, Michael Lopez [ed.], (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> See Michael Hampe, *Alfred North Whitehead*, (München: Beck Verlag, 1998), p. 165.