

**Book reviews**

**THE EDINBURGH CRITICAL EDITION OF THE COMPLETE  
WORKS OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD**

**Series editors: George R. Lucas, Jr., Notre Dame University and Brian G. Henning**

[Gonzaga University. *Vol. 1. The Harvard Lectures of Alfred North Whitehead, 1924–1925. Philosophical Presuppositions of Science*. Edited by Paul A. Bogaard and Jason Bell. Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2017, ISBN 978 1 4744 0184 5 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 4744 0185 2 (webready PDF), ISBN 978 1 4744 0468 6 (epub).]

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Edinburgh University Press has recently commenced work on a truly formidable project: the publication of a critical edition of the complete works of Alfred North Whitehead. According to the series editors, this critical edition will bring together for the first time, in a series of critically edited volumes, the complete, collected published works and previously unpublished lectures, papers, and correspondence of Alfred North Whitehead. The editors hope that the projected six volumes of unpublished material will illuminate many factors influencing the development of Whitehead's initial and later thought, as well as elucidate, in considerably greater detail than ever before, many of the principal concepts later set out in his body of published philosophical reflection.

The present book is the first in the series, with the others expected to follow. The volume contains a general introduction to the series, a description of its editorial principles, an introduction to the Harvard lectures of Whitehead, and the text of those Harvard lectures (in the form of student notes). The General Introduction begins with a very short biography of Whitehead with an accent on some not-so-well-known facts concerning his years in London and his

move to the USA until his death in 1947. A short list of his works at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is given also. What is perhaps new for readers is the surprising conclusion that his works *A Treatise on Universal Algebra* (1898), 'On mathematical concepts of the material world' (1906), *An Introduction to Mathematics* (1911), *The Organization of Thought* (1917), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919) and *The Concept of Nature* (1920) "cemented Whitehead's reputation as one of the leading figures in the early development of analytic philosophy, alongside Russell, G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein." (p. viii).

The choice of Whitehead's Harvard lectures seems to be a natural point of departure, since they mark Whitehead's transition to philosophy after so many years of devotion to science and mathematics. The volume comprises notes from two parallel lecture courses given at Emerson Hall and Radcliffe College and covered more or less the same material, as well as notes from four sessions of a "Seminary in Metaphysics" which was held in the same year. The existence of lecture notes taken by William Ernest Hocking and Louise R. Heath had been known for

some time, and had been partly published elsewhere. What is new for this edition are the extensive notes of Winthrop Pickard Bell. These three sets of notes nicely complement each other: Bell was trying to record virtually everything said, while Hocking was striving to understand it. It seems that the Radcliffe College lectures, documented by Heath, were more easy-going (the audience was smaller, and it seems that Whitehead was not trying to keep the same pace there).

The lecture course “Philosophical Presuppositions of Science” spanned two semesters, and its two parts have more or less the same structure: the first starts with some conceptual clarifications concerning quantum mechanics and relativity theory, while the second provides a basic introduction to mathematics and mathematical logic. After this, Whitehead strove to formulate a complete metaphysical framework that would be sufficient for these disciplines and knowledge in general. This was a truly toilsome task. Quantum mechanics was still in development (some crucial insights appeared in 1925), philosophers still wrestled with Einstein's relativity theory, and mathematical logic, as set in the mammoth three-volume *Principia Mathematica* by Russell and Whitehead was (and still is) a true challenge for students. Moreover, Whitehead was struggling to develop a truly new (and utterly unusual) conceptual apparatus which would mark the deviation of his thought from some well-established ways of thinking (in his own words, he was still “feeling his way into metaphysics”). The only published material which he conceived as relevant to this task were his own recent books, to which he constantly referred: *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919), *The Concept of Nature* (1920), and *The Principle of Relativity, with Applications to Physical Science* (1922), all published by Cambridge University Press. In retrospect, these lectures can be seen as the first steps on the road which would eventually lead the mature presentation of these ideas in *Process and Reality* (1929).

What is the general metaphysical outlook that emerges from these lectures? For a start, we can note the fact that already in Aristotle's thought are exemplified two different approaches: 1. the logical approach, which is founded on subject/predicate analysis and takes the exemplification of quality by substance at a moment of time as basic; 2. the metaphysical approach that takes “becoming” or “process” as fundamental (p. 421–422). Through the

history of philosophy the first approach dominates, but it is incapable of modeling the all-pervading phenomena of time and change. Indeed, if you start with points of space, moments of time, and external relations between them, then “the point has lost its space, or a moment its time” (p. 308). Thus everything falls apart into a sheer multiplicity of atomic facts, from which it is completely impossible to build wholes. Hence science collapses, unable to answer the question “How can one fact be relevant to another?” (p. 4). Once again, Whitehead lucidly points to the fact that if you start with a host of independent entities, which are complete and existent in and by themselves, you cannot recover their constitutive relations; if the future is not relevant to the present, then induction is impossible (p. 80). If our awareness merely constitutes a “private image” of things, then knowledge is impossible (p. 81). Therefore the traditional metaphysics of substance does not pass the “test of self-consistency of an ontology”: it does not provide the much needed elbow-room for epistemology (p. 360).

As is well known, Whitehead has chosen the second approach, whose basic tenet is the claim that “There are no completely autonomous entities” (p. 3), i.e. that the “togetherness of things is fundamental” (p. 5). This implies that the very idea of a “static plurality of self-sufficient reals” is “nonsense” (p. 91). The independently existing entity is just “an abstraction” (p. 92), sanctioned by the fact that a group of certain actual features “is not being much affected by other things in respect to the properties that interest you” (p. 157). This point of view emphasizes the importance of internal relations—it is not just that the “relationships of a real entity modify its essence” (p. 216), but the very concept of existence becomes relative: “it's nonsense to say that either A or B is absolutely real”; the only way of being real is being real for something else (p. 5). Therefore, it is better to view reality as a process of realization, as a gradual establishment of “reactive significance between entities,” or even better, as the “becoming of a certain mutuality” (p. 448). This means that, given any particular entity E, the questions “What is E in itself?” and “How is E related to what is beyond itself?” are distinguishable, yet not entirely separable (p. 88). Thus internal relations have finally “knocked out” independent substances (p. 234), and process philosophy is born. As stressed by Whitehead, its specificity stems from the “intimate belief in inherent rationality of things” (p. 4), i.e. in the systematicity of their inter-relations.

That is why it can be viewed as a way to put philosophy back on its feet after Kant's "Copernican revolution," by asking not how knowledge of things is possible, but "How is any entity possible in view of its relation to other things?" (p. 412) or "What is there in the Nature of Things which leads that there is or can be any 'Science'...?" (p. 3). According to Whitehead, the extended answers to these questions are provided by the whole system of spatio-temporal relations linking events into an organic unity.

I hope that the synopsis above proves that this volume is an indispensable asset for any Whitehead scholar. The book shall also prove important for people interested in the history of the philosophy of science and the history of philosophy generally,

since it tracks many unexpected parallels between Whitehead's specific outlook and the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant, Russell and Wittgenstein, Husserl and Bergson. Last but not least, it documents a significant turning point in the philosophical development of one of the most important thinkers of 20th century.

When finally completed, the *Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Complete Works of Alfred North Whitehead* will encompass the entire collected works of the author, published and unpublished. Perhaps the most useful and exciting aspect of this project to many scholars will be the creation of a fully searchable electronic archive of these primary source materials (p. x).