

Critical remarks to the *subjectivist principle* in Whitehead's metaphysics

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Whitehead's organismic philosophy is in their basic approach a subjectivist philosophy. This assessment is supported by Whitehead's remarks in his late work *Modes of Thought* (see MT 148-169). Whitehead's approach in the development of his cosmology seems nevertheless to be largely objectivist. So it is necessary to ascertain whether he proceeds in accordance with his own methodological principles, particularly the so-called subjectivist principle.

Whitehead's interest in subjectivity is understandable: The objective natural sciences do not compass the richness of life: joy, purposes, creativity, aesthetics, values (see MT 154, 60-62, 135). Thus, the objective science is not capable of giving a valid picture of the whole world. Therefore the task of philosophical speculation (see MT 162) is to conceive the events in the universe so that not only the legitimacy of the natural sciences rests understandable, namely to find mere rules of the succession of events (see MT 154), but that such an understanding also remains consistent with our direct persuasions (see MT 162), which according to Whitehead provide the basic facts (see MT 52) on which the philosophical epistemology should be planted. This way, the cosmology has to design a philosophical concept of the world, which encompasses everything that could ever be experienced. So what is the philosophical concept of the world?

In *Modes of Thought* Whitehead stressed that "the world is for me nothing else than how the functionings of my body present it for my experience." (MT 163 f.) This is a difficult assertion. But with the help of the conception of the *subjectivist principle* which Whitehead developed in *Process and Reality* it can be clarified. There, Whitehead writes: "We perceive other things which are in the world of actualities in the same sense as we are. So our emotions are directed towards other things, including of course our bodily organs." (PR 158) It is clear what Whitehead wants to point out: If we want to reflect philosophically on what encompasses the concept of the world, we can not only rely on high abstractions of thought, we rather need to comprise from the beginning the emotions respectively the feelings qua mode of prehension. Therefore, Whitehead directly comes to speak on the emotions and the body.

In the German language a distinction is made which is very helpful for the understanding of Whitehead's concern, namely the difference between "Körper" and "Leib". On the one hand, "Leib" denominates those aspects of the concrete existence of human beings that are subject to our arbitrary access, which are insofar immediately available and with whom we can structure autonomously our experiences. The "Körper" on the other hand comprises all of our biological existence, which is not subject to our availability, but which can be used as means for our purposes. In this sense, the "Körper" is every thing which is describable in a purely objective way: bones, vegetative functions and altogether the biochemical foundations of what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have called kinaesthetics.

Let us now envision a second time Whitehead's difficult assertion to analyze it: "the world for me is nothing else than how the functionings of my body present it for my experience." - First of all, Whitehead distinguishes between the world and the body. At least implicitly he seems to claim that the body is not part of the world, but that the body presents the world. This has to be interpreted in

the way that the world is represented through the body, which then itself has to be not the world or a part of the world. What, is this so, that the body should exist outside the world? Or is the world something which the body is a part of, although this part represents the world for me as a whole, without being represented itself? But how did I know then from my own body? Finally, not my experience is my body, but my experience is something that is represented through my body to me. What Whitehead has to suppose can only be one thing, namely that the structure of the functions of prehension - the functionings – which are present with all its modes of prehension in the whole body, represent the structure of what we call "world".

Thus, Whitehead implicitly makes exactly the same distinction that can be made in the German language: The world is for me, what is accessible through the aspects of my body which are immediately available to me, i.e. through my "Leib". So in Whitehead's argument, the world on the one hand, as the objective or real side, and the experience on the other hand, as the subjective and thus ideal side, are not separated. Obviously, my experience as well as my "Leib" are both immanent to the world. At this point, for the argument of Whitehead, "Leib" stands for the functionings of prehension in all its possible modes, i.e. the feeling in which there are always given aspects of the totality, the totality to which the concept of world applies. But this "Leib" is always prehended as a "Körper" respectively prehended in necessary relations of means and aims with the "Körper" in the world.

Whitehead specifically speaks of "my experience": The world can not exist unless there is reference to a "me" or a "my" in an act of experiencing: "My unity - which is Descartes' "I am" - is my process of shaping this welter of material into a consistent pattern of feelings. The individual enjoyment is what I am in my role of a natural activity, as I shape the activities of the environment into a new creation, which is myself at this moment[.]" (MT 166) At this point Whitehead represents accurately Descartes' systematic idea. What Whitehead expressed so clearly at the same time is: Something, whatever it may be, in this case we speak of experience, can only be considered as "mine", if an "I" can attribute it to itself. Only in the actuality of self-attribution of experience there is world. And self-attribution also requires reflexivity: "this doctrine fully accepts Descartes' discovery that subjective experiencing is the primary metaphysical situation which is presented to metaphysics for analysis." (PR 160)

World is according to Whitehead basically in correlation to an experiencing subject. The actual making of experience, that can not be denied (see MT 162), is, as we have seen, nothing else than the experience through the "Leib". The "Leib" is the medium of reflexivity as the principle of self-attribution: The "Leib" interconnects the "I" and the "world" in actual feeling and is at the same time as "Körper" part of the same world that is experienced.

Then, however, the principal structures that arise from the actuality of subjectivity are at the same time the structures of the world. Thus, these properly subjective structures are experienced as objective structures. World is only experienced provided an "I" which can attribute these experiences to itself. This is Whitehead's basic allegation fully explained: The world is *how* it presented by the functioning of my "Leib". Meaning nothing else than: The structures of subjectivity are effective, whenever they are bodily realized. All that can be understood as the world - „the world around – the world of fact, the world of possibility, the world as valued, the world as purposed“ (MT 50) - therefore always incorporates structural traces of subjectivity: "the world for me is nothing else than how the functionings of my body present it for my experience." Whitehead calls this basic insight the *subjectivist principle*.

However, there arise - and this what I will try to point out in the following - some critical conclusions regarding some of Whitehead's assertions. The first conclusion which starts all criticism is: The structures of the world which result from the structures of the subjectivity can in the *ordo cognoscendi* of philosophy by a highly developed form of subjectivity that is capable of this scientific, analytic and philosophical speculation. This also conforms with Descartes' discovery, which is fully accepted by Whitehead. "He [i.e. Descartes] thus laid down the principle, that those substances which are the subjects enjoying conscious experiences provide the primary data for philosophy, namely, themselves as in the enjoyment of such experience." (PR 159) We must understand this highest form of subjectivity respectively experience to understand experience in all its possible forms and all hypothetically proposed evolutionary levels which could lead to the high form.

The subjectivist principle is the starting point of metaphysics. However, Whitehead says, the subjectivity which he claims as a metaphysical basis by claiming the subjectivist principle has to be explained, namely within the metaphysic which is constituted by the subjectivist principle itself. Indeed he overlooks that the knowledge of the subject itself is a constitutive moment of subjectivity (which is indeed exactly Descartes' discovery that is fully accepted by Whitehead). Due to this reason, he thinks that he can treat the consciousness in the self-consciousness of subjectivity as a mere epiphenomenon. Whitehead says: "Every actual entity has the capacity for knowledge, and there is a gradation in the intensity of various items of knowledge, but, in general, knowledge seems to be negligible apart from a peculiar complexity in the constitution of some actual occasions." (PR 161) But this claim following Whitehead and the subjectivist principle cannot be metaphysical truth, because it is a hypothetical generalization of an objective empirical observation. The metaphysical validity of this empirical generalization would first have to be proved in light of the metaphysical subjectivist principle. Whitehead, on the contrary, just proclaims this. His theory of consciousness is built on this metaphysically unproven empirical generalization. Whitehead commits a *petition principii*: That which he wants to explain, he already sets ahead. On the other hand, a metaphysical explanation should run the other way round: Starting from a metaphysical analysis of knowledge as the articulation of the subjectivist principle, and then making a statement in what way restricted forms of knowledge can appear, and why they have to appear. Something can be understood as a restricted form of subjectivity (and in *this sense* in general as an actual entity), if it appears like functioning as a subject, even if it is none in the absence of self-consciousness.

Criticism is also to put forward on Whitehead's dealing with the concept of emotion. He again introduces an objectivist statement - and thus in turn, on the contrary to the subjectivist principle; namely Whitehead claims: "The primitive form of physical experience is emotionally - blind emotion - he received felt elsewhere in another occasion and conformally Appropriated as a subjective passion. In the language appropriate to the higher stages of experience, the primitive element is sympathy, that is, feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another." (PR 162) How could Whitehead know this? We know of emotions in general and of sympathy in particular only by way of our subjective experiencing. Insofar Whitehead seems to conform with his methodical demands at this point. But how does he know of a *blind* emotion, when exactly this should not be a high level abstraction. Here Whitehead commits a fallacy of misplaced concreteness. What he considers to be essential or primitive, is in truth an abstraction of what the legitimate metaphysical starting point offers. Sympathy certainly is nothing primitive, but not only includes perceived empathy, it also contains conscious appreciation, thus judging, an in this self-reference and reference to values - all these are actions of what was called a highly developed form of subjectivity earlier in my speech following

Whitehead. Such actions of subjects or better of subjectivity are nothing less but objective operations, they are in fact always actions of objectification, they are constitutive of objectivity at all. Whitehead could have learned exactly this by a closer reading of Descartes where the *realitas objectiva* just has a function which is enforced upon it by constitutive subjective actions. Whitehead's objectivist contention contradicts his assertion in the same chapter of the subjectivist principle.

In the context of his discussion of emotions, he in the same section again says, purely objectivistic: "This experience is primitive 'vector feeling,' that is to say, from a feeling beyond which is determinate in pointing to a beyond which is to be determined." (PR 163) Such a purely objectivistic statement could only be justified as an abstraction from the structure of the objectifying subjective actions, it cannot range at the same metaphysical level beside the subjectivist principle, it is rather a logically subordinate assertion - Whitehead again introduces a speculative assertion which is a subreptive empirical hypothesis. What he actually may have noticed, because he says in the following: "It must be remembered, however, that emotion in human experience, or even in animal experience, is not bare emotion. It is interpreted emotion [...]." (PR 163) However, his statement regarding the animal experience is again an empirical hypothesis, which can certainly not be adopted as a metaphysical principle, but we will trespass this. His conclusion is even more questionable! Because we know of emotions at all and what emotions can be, exclusively from our conscious emotional experience which is accompanied by conceptual efforts to justify our concepts of emotions. The use of the term "emotion" transferred to other contexts is purely metaphorical, and can only be more or less understandable - which Whitehead himself admits generally speaking of all his *termini technici*: "they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap." (PR 4) That can not hide the fact that Whitehead really claims a metaphysical draft with a philosophical pretension of knowledge. So, nevertheless he uses his metaphors in an ontologically determined manner, and eventually even to explain how something like imagination and metaphors can be - and here, as one says in the German language, the cat returns to its own tail and bites. Whitehead should have been able to see that primitive emotions, etc., are characteristically restricted forms of subjectivity; he should have been able to see this, if he would have been proceeding consequently from the subjectivist principle as metaphysical starting point.

Perhaps in the assumption to circumnavigate such difficulties he, as is well-known, introduces the much broader concept of feeling. "This word 'feeling' is a mere technical term, but it has been chosen to suggest that functioning through which the concrescent Actuality the appropriate date so as to make it its own." (PR 164) "Here 'feeling' is the term used for the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity of the actual entity in question." (PR 40) Now, this should surely also be understood on the basis of metaphysics proclaimed by Whitehead, namely to start from the point of the subjectivist principle. What is supposed to be feeling? The question must be: How do we as subjects appropriate something which is 'given' to us, be that 'given' in our own activity or absolutely coming up against us? - Isn't it only by doing something with it, or by being active ourselves: activity in the field of imagination respectively activity of imagining. Incidentally, the reduction to imagination is nothing else than the simplification of the argument, in which Whitehead refers to Hume: "It [i.e. the philosophy of organism] therefore accepts Hume's doctrine that nothing is to be received into the philosophical scheme which is not Discoverable as an element in subjective experience." (PR 166) Feeling, the horizon of the subjectivist principle, cannot be understood in any other way than as a subjective action, or, spoken in a greater systematic approach to Descartes, as the action of judging.

This crops up even clearer in the examination of Whitehead's concept of decision – after all, the quality of feeling in the concrescence of an actual entity depends on the respective decision, whether it is admitted as a positive or negative prehension: "The distinction between the various stages of concrescence consists in the various modes of ingression of the eternal objects involved. The inherent decision, whereby there is a supervening of stages in an actual entity, is always the determinants of a process whereby completion of integration is arrived at - at least, such 'formal' completion as is proper to a single actual entity. [...] The limitation whereby there is a relegation perspective of eternal objects to the background is the characteristic of decision." (PR 163 f.) Decision itself is here described as a process, namely due to the ingression of eternal objects, which are somehow determining. The eternal objects determine the subjective form in the various phases of the concrescence. The eternal object is dative in the initial phase and thus it must be understood as relational (when determining is understood in sense of activity): It determines the character of the objective respectively to objectifying datum *and* the subjective form of the new actual occasion. With this, the activity which traces back to the concept of decision – Whitehead could see this if he remained consequently in the frame of the subjectivist principle – is treated purely objectivistic. Whitehead actually operates with the notion of a passive decision - but what should that be, a passive decision? A decision that is not taken by a "me", this means that takes the decision *actively* and by *himself*, is not at all a decision. Whitehead violates the subjectivist principle with his notion of a passive decision and forfeits in a fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

In a similar way more fundamental notions of Whitehead's theory prehensions should be subjected to a radical criticism, such as the notions of attention, admission, exclusion, anticipation, comparison, identification. Such criticism can put forward courageously, because Whitehead's innovative conceptual benefits would gain more clarity and in consequence a better applicability to various forms of discourse and knowledge, because Whitehead undeniably donates valuable functional explanation of the different modes of relation and connection. Very clearly is its high conceptual strength and originality in the development of research fields, especially in later works which follow *Process and Reality*. In my own various philosophical reflections - if I may make this footnote - which is mainly related to problems of the philosophy of culture, I repeatedly reread with a profit Whitehead's latest book *Modes of Thought*.

But we remain on the issue and thus put forward the criticism on Whitehead. The basic methodological problem has already sufficiently and clearly emerged: Whitehead treats subjectivity as if it was objectivity. Precisely such an approach, however, is excluded by the admission of the subjectivist principle. Because the treatment of subjects as if they were objects reduces the difference between subjects and objects ultimately to a position in a objective causal process. Even a conceptual feeling is an objective ingression of an eternal object, a purely causal process which objectivistically conceived. That Whitehead speaks in terms of a theory of subjectivity, but conceives objectivistic, also badges in the following allegation that is taken from his remarks to the subjectivist principle: "The conformal stage merely transforms the objective content into subjective feelings." (PR 165) Again, the actual subject is specified as purely passive: It is subjected to a purely objective process; if it is understood like that it is precisely not conceived as a process of objectification. This is not thinking according to the subjectivist principle.

It would certainly be a worthwhile philosophical work and would greatly contribute to the clarification of the process philosophy if the term "subjective" would be read vigorously at all points in Whitehead. Then it would be visible that Whitehead has useful intuitions and very precise observa-

tions of the fundamental, subjective "Lebensvollzüge", how it is pronounced in German language. Unfortunately, Whitehead is constantly caught up in the contradiction between what he does or what he wants to do, namely to conceive a metaphysic applying the subjectivist principle, and what he in fact says, by depicting his objectivist conceptions.

Let us once again clarify the meaning of "subjective" in systematical connection to Descartes and his philosophical method, since Whitehead refers explicitly and repeatedly to Descartes precisely in this regard, both in *Process and Reality* as well as in *Modes of Thought*, that is to say just in the two books, where most notices and reflections on the methodology of process studies are to be found. For what Whitehead fully accepts with Hume and Descartes, is the admission of the methodological reduction to imagination respectively the activity of the imagining, which itself can only be given or thought of in the imagination, but which has to be thought of just as generating itself in the imagination as imagining. In this sense let us regain consciousness of Whitehead saying: "Finally, the reformed subjectivist principle must be repeated: that apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness." (PR 167) "The subjectivist principle is that the whole universe consists of elements disclosed in the analysis of the experiences of subjects. [...] It follows that the philosophy of organism entirely accepts the subjectivist bias of modern philosophy." (PR 166)

After this fundamental criticism, how could Whitehead's philosophy be continued within the meaning of a transcontinental exploration? My proposal is this: To reconcile Whitehead's philosophical concerns in a transcontinental reunion with Kant's methodological rigor. What Whitehead *de facto* does, when he comes forth with the subjectivist principle and builds up his philosophy: He comes to grips with his conceptions in the comparison of our subjective ability to make experiences with possible forms of data, which build up the objective content of actual experiencing. He makes a reduction to the subjective conditions as the basis of his philosophy, the conditions under which we hold strategies of representation and thinking (Christoph Hubig). We are making experiences by means of these strategies, when we are undergoing our adventures of ideas (ides in the sense of Hume). Now the methodical procedure, which appears in this way, is fairly close to the procedure of obtaining the transcendental concepts of reflection which Kant portrays in his great *Critique of Pure Reason* (KRV A 260 / B 316). Insofar, Whitehead's metaphysical terms, with which he describes actual entities - and this would be my general thesis for a transcontinental exploration of the metaphysics of Whitehead - could be reconstructed in the sense of the concepts of reflection of the Kantian transcendental philosophy. But this work would turn out to be a very lengthy process.