

FROM APPREHENSION TO PREHENSION: EXPLORING A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION

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Abstract

Both Aristotle and St. Thomas are acknowledged to have firmly established, at least in a general way, the close link between our experience of the material world and the metaphysical articulation of the said sphere of reality. Their philosophies are recognized to have provided the rational confirmation of the beliefs and convictions of ordinary men who rely mainly on their experiences for their understanding of what is real. On this premise it is plausible to esteem the two as philosophers of the common man. And yet, like all thinkers who generate and nourish philosophical inquiry through reliance on experience, both Aristotle and Aquinas confined experience to conscious experience or what Whitehead has called 'sense-perception'. Whitehead considered this traditional view on the starting point of philosophical analysis as erroneous although he clarified that "the mistake was natural for mediaeval and Greek philosophers: for they had not modern physics before them as a plain warning."

Whitehead therefore initiates an inquiry into the radically new conception of experience. This entirely new view of experience is called by Whitehead "prehension", which is the theme of this paper. As we shall see, it appears to be the implicit thesis of Whitehead that the only way to access the so called 'ultimately primitive experience' is not by means of traditional sense apprehension but only through a non-cognitive act of appropriation.

Introduction

Philosophers would hardly question the general conviction that philosophical thinking is not only stimulated but is also continuously nourished by experience. In this regard, we may refer to the pertinent teaching of Aristotle in view of his major influence as a metaphysical thinker on other great philosophers. When he declared what today has become a popular philosophical tenet namely that, "all men by nature desire to know,"¹ one could not fail to notice that Aristotle initially referred to sense knowledge which is common to both man and animals.² Yet he was obviously concerned to show that, although both man and animals do have sense experience by which they respectively have knowledge of things as individuals,³ only man could attain universal knowledge and understanding by means of art and reasoning. Nonetheless, Aristotle was unequivocal in affirming that "...science and art come to men through experience..."⁴ But still, even if both science and art provide knowledge and understanding in a manner that is superior to sense experience, Aristotle maintained that it is philosophical knowledge that constitutes the highest science or wisdom insofar as it deals with the first causes and most universal principles.⁵

In his treatise on human knowledge, Thomas Aquinas referred to the abovementioned teaching of Aristotle clearly noting that for the Philosopher "...the beginning of our knowledge is from the senses."⁶ Furthermore, we gather from the following text of 84, 7, which is considered as the key passage in St. Thomas's theory of knowledge, an a fortiori affirmation of the indispensable role of sense experience not only in the acquisition of knowledge but also in actual understanding.⁷ In other words, without sense experience not only is it impossible to gain knowledge of material things in this world but it is also not possible to actually use the said acquired knowledge.⁸ For this reason, St. Thomas noted that actual understanding by the human intellect would be impeded if there is an injury or illness to the bodily organs that are used by sense faculties like sight, hearing, imagination, memory, and the like.⁹ Hence, in man's temporal life, the human intellect could not know anything unless there is sense experience.¹⁰

We relied on the teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas regarding the key role of experience in philosophical thinking insofar as both are

acknowledged to have firmly established, at least in a general way, the close link between our experience of the material world and the metaphysical articulation of the said sphere of reality. Their philosophies are recognized to have provided the rational confirmation of the beliefs and convictions of ordinary men who rely mainly on their experiences for their understanding of what is real. On this premise it is plausible to esteem the two as philosophers of the common man. And yet, like all thinkers who generate and nourish philosophical inquiry through reliance on experience, both Aristotle and Aquinas confined experience to conscious experience or what Whitehead has called 'sense-perception'.¹¹ Whitehead considered this traditional view on the starting point of philosophical analysis as erroneous although he clarified that "the mistake was natural for mediaeval and Greek philosophers: for they had not modern physics before them as a plain warning."¹²

The above brief discussion of the common understanding of experience as a conscious phenomenon at its origin, and the initial critical reaction of Whitehead against such view provide the background entry for our inquiry into the radically new conception of experience by process philosophers, in particular, by Whitehead. This entirely new view of experience by process thinkers entails what Whitehead also called a 'special activity' called "prehension" which is the very theme of the inquiry in this paper. As we shall see, it appears to be the implicit thesis of Whitehead that the only way to access the so called 'ultimately primitive experience' is not by means of traditional sense apprehension but only through a non-cognitive act of appropriation.

From Apprehension to Prehension

What is probably the central notion of Whitehead's process metaphysics or what he himself called his own version of a "philosophy of organism"¹³ is the very difficult notion of "prehension."¹⁴ As we shall uncover, all the surface meanings and the nuances of prehension will point to the principal thesis of Whitehead's social metaphysics namely, that the capacity for prehension of actual entities is indicative of their dependence on one another, or, of their social existence. First of all, Whitehead clarified

his usage of this term: "I will use the word prehension for uncognitive apprehension: by this I mean apprehension which may or may not be cognitive."¹⁵ Further clarification is provided in another work when he said that "this term is devoid of suggestion either of consciousness or of representative perception."¹⁶ These clarifications unquestionably show that Whitehead has given up on the traditional or common usage of the terms, "apprehension" and "perception" in their essentially cognitive or conscious character.¹⁷ We could, then, refer to apprehension or perception when we speak of prehension on condition that we do not link it with conscious knowledge.

It is also significant to the understanding of the notion of prehension that we now point out the fact that Whitehead's introduction of this radical notion constitutes also his rejection of Berkeley's subjective idealism¹⁸ synoptically defined by his philosophical slogan, *esse est percipi aut percipere*. If one is familiar with his epistemological theory, one could recall that in reducing the reality of things to their being perceived by the mind, Berkeley absolutized the existence of the mind. Whitehead, however, found this key teaching of Berkeley to be metaphysically problematic and proposed instead a view that represents a realist epistemology.¹⁹ In this connection, he deemed the following obscure passage from 'Francis Bacon's Natural History' to embody a theory of realism that he favored and, at the same time, is supportive of his scientific reading of the realities in nature: "It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception. . . ."²⁰ This text must clearly refer, at least, to all inanimate bodies since they have no sense faculties and so they are incapable of cognitive perception. But to say that they are capable of 'perception' even if they have no senses is to affirm a 'nongognitive perception,' which will be explored by Whitehead into a theory of prehension.

Primitive, Non-Conscious Experience

It is probably one of the radical insights of Whitehead's metaphysics of prehension that there could be experience without consciousness.²¹ In asserting that ". . . an actual entity may, or may not be conscious of some

part of its experience,"²² we encounter a radically different understanding of experience. First of all, it necessarily implies that Whitehead has conceived of experience as having a wider meaning than the notion of consciousness. Just as we are familiar with the common notion of conscious experience, or, what phenomenologists call 'intentional experience', there is a "...primitive form of physical experience..."²³ that "...does not necessarily involve consciousness."²⁴ Although it is a long-established tradition that philosophers do not dissociate consciousness with knowledge, Whitehead did not adhere to this tradition in his construction of his own metaphysical doctrine of experience.²⁵ He did not see consciousness as having a necessary role but only an additional value in the subject-object interplay in experience.²⁶ But, in providing us a distinction between conscious experience and primitive physical experience in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead has not explicitated in definite terms what constitutes experience in itself such that consciousness is not essential to it.²⁷ He has practically hidden the meaning of experience by using a term peculiar to physics and described physical experience as similar to a "vector feeling."²⁸ We have to look for clarification elsewhere.

First of all, Whitehead pointed out in his work, *Symbolism* that "the word 'experience' is one of the most deceitful in philosophy"²⁹ obviously convinced that this notion must be carefully examined since its wider and much richer meaning has long been overlooked. If we turn to his *Adventure of Ideas*, we find some of his less technical reflections on the fundamental meaning of experience. At the outset, he expressed his agreement with modern thinkers like Descartes, Locke, and Hume that the subject-object relation is the fundamental structure of experience.³⁰ But he rejected their position that the knower-known cognitive structure is the prototype of this subject-object relation.³¹ This means that, for him, what is truly primordial when we speak of experience is not cognitive in character but something "emotional."³² But again we should not be misled into thinking that Whitehead was speaking of human emotion. We need to go back at this point of our inquiry to *Process and Reality* for needed textual support. Whitehead noted here that "the primitive form of physical experience is emotional---blind emotion---received as felt elsewhere in another occasion..."³³ In other words, he was convinced that we could refer to a non-conscious 'emotional experience', an experience so primitive and so

elementary that it is universal to all entities of the natural world. This 'primitive form of physical experience' is referred to in his Theory of Feelings, as a "simple physical feeling." And he described this 'simple physical feeling' as "...the most primitive type of an act of perception, devoid of consciousness."³⁴ It appears, then, that Whitehead is calling our attention to a widely unrecognized---perhaps, because it does not enter human consciousness---yet the most fundamental, and so, the most universal of all levels and types of experiences namely, a simple physical feeling which is the most primitive type of physical experience.

Let us briefly turn to a pertinent passage in his other work, *Religion in the Making*, since it helps clarify not only his rejection of the common view of modern philosophers that experience has a fundamentally cognitive structure but also why the theory of prehension must be necessarily linked with a more fundamental experience that Whitehead believed has been ignored by most philosophers:

The phrase 'immediate experience' can have either of two meanings, according as it refers to the physical or to the mental occasion. It may mean a complete concretion of physical relationships in the unity of a blind perceptivity. In this sense 'immediate experience' means an ultimate physical fact. But in a secondary, and more usual, sense it means the consciousness of physical experience. Such consciousness is a mental occasion. It has the character of being an analysis of physical experience by synthesis with the concepts involved in the mentality. Such analysis is incomplete, because it is dependent on the limitations of the concepts.The most complete concrete fact is dipolar, physical and mental.³⁵

In downgrading the common notion of 'immediate experience' i.e. as 'consciousness of physical experience' to a secondary meaning, Whitehead has, in effect, sought to abandon what is generally considered as the starting point of philosophical inquiry. 'Immediate experience' in this sense could be equated with our sense perception of the objects around us. Most epistemological doctrines consider sense perception as the beginning of knowledge or as the initial illustration of the knower-known structure. But since, for Whitehead, consciousness is a mental occasion' and it entails the use of concepts, we may plausibly conclude that this experience is more abstract rather than concrete. Now, if philosophy is

supposed to deal with what is most concretely real, this could only be the 'ultimate physical fact' or an occasion of experience whose concrete reality, as we shall see, does not depend on consciousness or on the mind.

Now, the effort however of Whitehead in *Process and Reality* to illustrate this most primitive and most fundamental type of experience, or what he called in this book, a 'simple physical feeling', remains technical and could not stimulate in us concrete images of ordinary events in our daily experience.³⁶ When Whitehead, for instance, has given the abstract illustration of an actual entity A 'physically feeling' other actual entities like X, Y, and Z, which also 'feel' each other respectively, we have to greatly struggle, just like his more dedicated and more erudite scholars, if we wish to understand this in terms of common experience, or, to see how these elementary and primary entities have a nexus or have a relation to one another, or, how they undergo the process of integration into a unified whole. We should, then, try to look for pertinent or related teachings of Whitehead in his less technical work, *Adventure of Ideas*.

In the same section where he dwelt on the subject-object structure of experience, Whitehead provided us with what appeared to be the essential or general meaning of experience when he spoke of it in the following manner:

The process of experiencing is constituted by the reception of entities, whose being is antecedent to that process into the complex fact which is that process itself. These antecedent entities, thus received as factors into the process of experiencing, are termed 'objects' for that experiential occasion.... Thus the process of experiencing is constituted by the reception of objects into the unity of that complex occasion which is the process itself. The process creates itself, but it does not create the objects which it receives as factors in its own nature.³⁷

If Whitehead has enunciated here the essential meaning of experience, it is evident that the notion of consciousness is not a major factor in his conception of experience. He highlighted, at least, in the above text, the key role of object in the whole process of experiencing. An isolated reading of this passage might give one the impression of a passive notion of experience in view of the unequivocal reference to it as a process of 'reception of entities' or of the object. Before we continue in drawing out

the nuances of this passage in relation to the primitive notion of experience, it is good to turn to an earlier passage where Whitehead disabused our minds concerning this impression on the passivity of the process of experience. According to him, the subject-object structure of experience could have been expressed in terms of "...Recipient and Provoker, where the fact provoked is an affective tone about the status of the provoker in the provoked experience."³⁸ In this relationship, the object plays the role of the Provoker while the subject or what is referred to in the above text as the complex occasion of the process of experience itself is the Recipient. What he found unfortunate, however, in this different illustration of the subject-object structure of experience is that "...the word 'recipient' suggests a passivity which is erroneous."³⁹ This categorical clarification by Whitehead should make us realize that he had not thought of the process of experience in a purely passive manner.

Yet in viewing the 'process of experiencing' as constituted by the 'reception of entities' or 'objects,' it seems to me that the simplification of the subject-object structure of experience in terms of Provoker-Recipient relation would have been satisfactory for Whitehead if not for the clear connotation of passivity in the use of the term 'recipient.' In other words, the Provoker-Recipient relation would have met his radical view of non-cognitive experience, which could not be expressed properly by the knower-known relation because of its parochial meaning. Nonetheless what is noteworthy, if we go back now to the long passage, in his description of the process of experiencing is the unequivocal affirmation of the notion of receptivity. It might be the case that this notion is used in describing the primitive sense of experience in order to point out the major role played by the object as one of the key elements of and as 'received' in the complex process of experience. We can notice at the end of the text that he asserted without equivocation that the objects received are not 'created' by the process itself although the process 'creates' itself. It is obviously crucial to Whitehead's conception of experience that the object, which subsequently forms part of the process of experience, has its own being prior to and independent of the new event of experience. It is for this reason, I believe, that he insisted on the antecedent character of the object if it is to be considered as a component of the process of experience.

It is at least clear in the *Adventure of Ideas* that Whitehead has

introduced the highly complex notion of prehension in connection with his critical discussion of the traditional philosophical conception of experience in terms of the subject-object framework. In his rejection of the knower-known model by which experience in its widest sense could be articulated, he deemed it most appropriate to employ a new conceptual tool namely, the notion of prehension. It is also crucial to our understanding of the notion of prehension that Whitehead did not link it, in particular, to human experience ordinarily considered as conscious and cognitive. And, since prehension is not essentially related with conscious experience, much less with knowledge, it must be the most universal activity affecting at least every reality in nature; it must be the most universal event. Furthermore, this new notion also constitutes his rejection of Berkeley's subjective idealism and of his de-emphasis of the role of the mind in defining the reality of natural entities.

The occasional effort of Whitehead to render his very complex teaching on the notion of prehension less difficult in his *Adventure of Ideas* and in *Science and the Modern World* should not deceive us and lead us into the pitfall of oversimplification of his conception of the said notion. If he has spoken of 'prehensions in nature' as 'events in nature',⁴⁰ or, that the term 'event' could be used instead of the term 'prehension' this does not mean that prehension and event are thoroughly synonymous. This is not to deny, however, that the highly technical notion of prehension could, in a general sense, be considered as referring to events insofar as both partake of the dynamic idea of process. We could add the observation that the reality of event as a concrete process and the reality of the process of prehension are hardly distinguishable so much so that one might confuse the two and view them as identical. In fact, Hartshorne, who is the leading scholar in the promotion of Whitehead's thought, has taken effort to simplify the esoteric teachings of the latter by speaking more of events and concrete experiences rather than of prehensions and of actual entities.

Yet, the total reality of a particular event is still analyzable into more elementary functions, and prehension, as the creative and unifying activity of this event, is one of its elementary functions.⁴¹ We may initially point out that Whitehead, as we have already seen, uses the term 'prehension' to signify a non-cognitive activity of perception or apprehension. If we return now to *Process and Reality* he spoke here of prehension as a particular

"...process of appropriation of a particular element..."⁴² As an activity of appropriating or grasping, prehension necessarily implies that which is grasped or appropriated. That which is appropriated or grasped is referred to in *Process and Reality* as the 'actual entities or the ultimate elements of the universe',⁴³ or, as 'prehensive event' in *Science and the Modern World*.⁴⁴ But this distinction between the act of appropriating and that which is appropriated is relevant since it leads us back to the crucial background of our current discussion of the theory of prehension namely, the subject-object structure of experience. The process of prehension entails, then, the subject-object model in the clarification of experience.

Components of Prehension

In fact, Whitehead categorically referred to this subject-object relation in his exposition of the notion of prehension in both *Process and Reality* and *Adventure of Ideas*. In chapter 2 of Part I of *Process and Reality* where he began to clarify the difficult notions that he regularly employed in explaining his philosophy of organism, he analyzed the notion of prehension into three aspects:

- (a) the 'subject' which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element;
- (b) the 'datum' which is prehended; © the 'subjective form' which is how that subject prehends that datum.⁴⁵

However, Whitehead did not provide any elaboration for this text in the same location where it was cited. We have to go back to *Adventure of Ideas* where the notion of prehension is introduced as a 'formal explanation' of experience in accordance with the subject-object relational structure. Here, the subject of prehension, which is none other than the actual entity, is illustrated as an occasion of experience, or, we may say, a particular concrete event.⁴⁶ And he clearly noted that prehension as an activity is just one of the details or elements constitutive of the whole

occasion of experience. This is an obvious indication that prehension as an activity or as a process of appropriating is distinct from the actual entity, or, occasion of experience that serves as its subject. Yet, in this connection, Whitehead made the interesting insight that the subject is active rather than passive and its active trait is disclosed in its special activity of prehension. But it is already clear to us that an occasion of experience or a particular momentary event is the subject of prehension and, since we could view nature as a manifold of events, dynamic occasions, and developments then we could view nature as the macrocosmic subject of prehensions, "...necessarily transitional from prehension to prehension."⁴⁷

Faithful to his conviction that the subject-object relation is the only appropriate articulation of experience, Whitehead spoke of the object of prehension or the datum of prehension as the second factor to be considered in his conception of prehension. If the subject of prehension is said to be active insofar as it has the special activity of appropriating the object, on the other hand, the object is deemed as the 'provoker' or stimulus of the said special activity of prehension. For this reason, Whitehead considered the subject and object as correlatives⁴⁸ and that, in fact, their progressive union is made possible by the very activity of prehension, which we shall discuss later. But let us presently dwell on what appears to me as Whitehead's realist argument against the subjective idealism of Berkeley. In giving prominence to the role played by the object in the process of prehension, Whitehead stated his opposition to the fundamental teaching of Berkeley that the reality of natural things is completely determined by their being perceived by the mind. It is now relevant to recall the text cited above concerning the 'process of experiencing'. In describing this process as the reception of objects into the subject or the occasion of experience, it is, I think, the intention of Whitehead to declare his realist position without any taint of equivocation that natural entities have a reality of their own, which is not established by their relation to the subject, whether or not this subject is the complex occasion of experience or the perceiving mind of Berkeley. And to stress that the object, or, the datum of prehension has a reality that is not generated by the process of prehension, he prescribed the parameters of 'antecedence' and 'givenness' so that something could be considered as an object of prehension. In other words, if the object or datum of prehension is both antecedent to

and is something 'given' to the occasion of experience, then, these are indications that it is a real element in the process but whose reality is not derived from the process itself.

The third factor in the process of prehension namely, the subjective form refers to how the subject prehends the object or the datum of prehension, could be the most crucial factor in the meaning of prehension in connection with our future goal of doing research on Whitehead's conception of God's consequent nature. But, for the present moment, we need to understand what role this third factor really plays in the process of prehension. In *Process and Reality* we learn "that there are many species of subjective forms, such as emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, aversions, consciousness, etc."⁴⁹ With this wide heterogeneity of these various examples, we seem to be confronted again with another very complex notion, which is, in fact, a constitutive factor in the already very difficult notion of prehension. But these diverse types of subjective form confirm the universality of the phenomenon of the prehensive process. There are diverse types of subjective forms because there are diverse subjects of prehension ranging from the inanimate, non-living entities to the organic realities, up to the level of consciously prehending entities. And we should not forget that Whitehead employed the notion of prehension to clarify experience in the widest sense of the term, especially in its non-cognitive, non-conscious nature. We may initially conclude, then, that there is a subjective form respectively appropriate to a lower entity and to a higher entity.⁵⁰

The observations Whitehead raised in the *Adventure of Ideas* might help minimize the difficulty of articulating the notion of 'subjective form'. He taught here that "subjective form is the character assumed by the subject by reason of some prehended datum."⁵¹ This point could be clarified by an example he provided in connection with the role of subjective form on the continuity of an experience. He gave us the case of a man who is continuously angry due to a hurtful incident in his life. Let us assume that the immediately past occasion of this man is S (let us specify it as "speaking before a big group of businessmen"), which "positively prehends" or "feels" datum L (let us specify datum L as "sudden loss of microphone voice because someone deliberately lowered the volume control"), and eliciting subjective form I (let us specify it as "becoming indignant due to the

deliberate disruption of his speech"). The immediately subsequent occasion, let us call it A (we may describe this new condition of the human individual we are talking about as "angrily reprimanding the technician in the audio-visual control room"), now prehends or feels S, the previous occasion "...with the same subjective form of anger."⁵² This subjective form, i.e. anger might persist even in the succeeding occasions of experience (e.g. occasions T, R, U, V, W, etc.) of this man.

The above illustration of the role of subjective form and, certainly, even of the prehensive process itself, teaches us at least two things. First, the subjective form is an indication of the manner the subject is changed⁵³ upon its prehension of an object or a datum, and this object is normally another occasion of experience or an actual entity. In this sense when Whitehead spoke of the 'subjective form as the character that the prehending subject assumes' upon its appropriation of an object, it is a clear statement that the prehending subject is transformed or re-shaped in a certain manner or in another manner. We shall return to this point later. Second, the subjective form also reflects ---and this is the main theme illustrated by the above-mentioned example ---the continuous actuality of a certain mode of change in the complex occasion of experience. There is no question that the example of human anger easily illustrates what Whitehead meant by subjective form 'as the primary ground for the continuity of nature' for the obvious reason that continuous anger is a very common human experience. Hence, if something actual could be said to be relatively lasting or enduring in man, Whitehead attributed it to the subjective form of the various occasions of experience or events in the life of the said human individual.

Common experience teaches us that anger, as an instance of subjective form, is an emotion that is ordinarily though not exclusively linked with consciousness.⁵⁴ In the above example, the continuing anger of the speaker is sustained by his consciousness of the datum that elicited his anger. It is certainly not to be denied that both emotion and consciousness are two types of subjective form, which are ordinarily associated with occasions of human experience. In our momentary concrete states, we are calm or angry, happy or sad; we are also generally aware in particular moments of activities. But if Whitehead has told us in *Process and Reality* that "...the subjective form of a simple physical feeling does not involve

consciousness. . ."⁵⁵ we are reminded initially of the focus of his inquiry namely, that there is a primordial experience which is non-conscious and non-cognitive and is appropriately articulated by the notion of prehension. It seems plausible then to assume that just as he is more concerned with non-conscious perception so Whitehead was equally focused on subjective forms that have nothing to do with consciousness.

'Primitive Feeling' as Prehensive Activity

Further reading of the teachings of Whitehead on the notion of prehension, together with the foregoing analyses induces us to make the further major observation that the above-mentioned notion serves as his argument for his disinterest in the traditional epistemological theory of abstraction. According to him,

The conventionalized abstractions prevalent in epistemological theory are very far from the concrete facts of experience. The word 'feeling' has the merit of preserving the double significance of subjective form and of the apprehension of an object. It avoids the disjecta membra provided by abstraction.⁵⁶

Let us first point out that Whitehead adopted the term "feeling" according to the meaning developed by F. H. Bradley namely, as the irreducible underlying activity of experience itself.⁵⁷ He was convinced that Bradley's theory of feeling is the fitting explanation of our apprehension of the most concrete and integrated wholeness of immediate experience. He adopted also but reinterpreted Bradley's notion of "inclusive whole," which the latter thinker considered as presupposed by relation rather than as a manifestation of relation. In his reinterpretation, Whitehead deemed this "inclusive whole," as actually referring to the actual connectedness, or better, intrinsic relation, of individual or atomic⁵⁸ occasions of experience.

There is no doubt that Whitehead has greatly admired Bradley for his great insight on the key role of feeling in the non-cognitive apprehension of experience. Since feeling is non-cognitive and non-abstractive, it preserves the unity and richness of an occasion of experience. To feel an occasion of experience is to grasp it as an inclusive whole such that the

subject, the datum or object of prehension, and the subjective form are intact in their complex but integrated unity. On the other hand, the process of abstraction, since it is essentially analytical and reductive, breaks up the rich unity of concrete experience. The constitutive elements of concrete experience are separated in view of the misplaced belief that the essential must be discovered and isolated because it is the core of reality. In this task, the mind has the principal role. We may recall that Whitehead criticized Berkeley's subjective idealism i.e. a doctrine that reduces the reality of natural things to the perception of a unifying mind. He recommended instead the following: "For Berkeley's mind, I substitute a process of prehensive unification."⁵⁹ This very unusual view of Whitehead is tantamount to a blanket indictment of all epistemological theories as failed attempts to clarify experience. All theories of knowledge are myopic insofar as all of them confine experience to human experience and, as a consequence, essentially relate experience to a cognitive faculty especially to intellectual faculties. Perhaps it is inevitable for philosophers to "overintellectualize"⁶⁰ their exposition of experience since, by definition, they seek knowledge.⁶¹ Whitehead belittled, however, the role of knowledge in the reality and structure of experience by treating it as an additional but non-essential factor in a given occasion of experience.⁶²

Going back to his adoption of Bradley's doctrine of Feeling, Whitehead has sometimes used it interchangeably with the term "prehension."⁶³ Yet we may recall that it is also true that he sometimes loosely uses the term 'prehension' by equating it with event.⁶⁴ Now, we find the specific definition of Feeling as 'positive prehension' in both *Process and Reality*⁶⁵ and *Adventure of Ideas*.⁶⁶ In the former work, feeling as positive prehension is distinguished from "negative prehension," which signifies that a datum has no definite contribution to make in the "concrescence" or 'real internal constitution' of a subject of prehension.⁶⁷ If negative prehension indicates the exclusion of an object of prehension, positive prehension, or, feeling refers to the definite positive contribution of an object of prehension in the concrescence or self-transformation of an occasion of experience. It also follows from this that the datum or object of prehension becomes preserved as an integral part of the creative development or expansion of the reality of the prehending occasion of experience.⁶⁸

The above discussion of prehension in terms of 'feeling' could help minimize the difficulty of clarifying the very fundamental yet truly esoteric thesis of Whitehead that there is a primitive experience which precedes the familiar conscious experience associated with traditional philosophical inquiry. This 'feeling' is equally primitive insofar as it is also unaccompanied by any form of vital consciousness or by any sense consciousness. The actual entity as the subject of this feeling is said to 'feel' or to prehend in the sense that it appropriates "...some elements in the universe to be components in the real internal constitution of its subject."⁶⁹ We might as well say then that prehension viewed as an activity of feeling is none other than the appropriation or 'active receptivity' of influencing events, whether small or very small in size, by the actual entity that prehends or 'feels'. But the 'feeling' itself is a constitutive element in the concrescence or novel integration of the actual entity undergoing change.⁷⁰

Feeling as prehensive activity would be easy to understand if it were to be associated with Whitehead's own example of the feeling of anger used above to illustrate the meaning of subjective form which is one of the components of prehension. However, the feeling of anger though a clear illustration of the subjective form of prehension does not exemplify what Whitehead referred to as primitive, non-conscious feelings. If this primitive experience of feeling, which Whitehead referred to as a 'simple physical feeling' and as 'the most primitive type of perception', is the most common event of prehension in the universe we are then confronted with a phenomenon so widespread yet unnoticed and, perhaps, of no serious interest to most philosophers. This is so because, as Whitehead himself acknowledged, philosophers normally deal on the sort of experience that is at least accessible to our knowing faculties. While the feeling of anger is consciously experienced by man, this primitive type of feeling is 'felt' by an atomic reality called actual entity.

Prehension as a primitive feeling is obviously an experience so atomic in size that we do not notice them⁷¹ as they occur in our surroundings and even in us. Whitehead himself recognized that we could never differentiate one simple physical feeling with another physical feeling as they occur because of their atomic size. In our daily lives alone, there is an innumerable succession of unnoticed events or occurrences actually affecting us. These atomic, unnoticed influences are probably mostly

physical and are coming from the equally innumerable elements of nature, but they may also be psychological which may be caused either by natural phenomena or by our interaction with our fellowmen. It should be beyond debate that our bodies have so much more of this so-called 'primitive experiences' by means of 'simple physical feeling' than of influences captured by sense perception or by sense consciousness. If these atomic influences, which are 'primitively felt' by our bodies, would turn out to be beneficial or harmful to us it is the teaching of our ordinary experiences that it is at the later and large stages of their build up or development⁷² in our bodies that we realize or we become aware of any of these atomic influences or prehensions. For instance, the physical, physiological, psychological, and even intellectual growths of any human individual are due to innumerable external and internal influences which are also imperceptibly felt neither by the individual concerned nor even by the people with whom he regularly interacts. It is usually at later stages of growth that we notice the obvious change in the physical transformation of an individual.

What this inquiry tries to demonstrate is the reality of an area of experience which Whitehead has discovered to be located outside sense perception, or, prior to conscious experience. Because of this location, it is inaccessible to sense apprehension or, to sense experience. Whitehead theorized that in this area of 'primitive experience' what takes place is not apprehension but 'prehension', a new notion with which most philosophers and even the celebrated ones are unfamiliar. Yet, our inquiry has shown that although this is a very complex notion it is not completely alien to the teachings and testimonies of our ordinary experience. This we tried to exemplify, in fact, in the immediately preceding paragraph. If this very complex notion has any value for further philosophical research, Whitehead himself has trail-blazed its relevance by applying this notion to the metaphysics of divine nature. In other words, he has developed a metaphysical doctrine of divine prehension especially in the last section of his major work, *Process and Reality*. And his followers, notably Charles Hartshorne, have vigorously explored and reinterpreted the richness of this notion for the benefit both of the philosophical articulation and theological exegesis of God-belief.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Metaphysics," Richard Mc Keon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), I, 1. 980a.

² *Ibid.*, I, 1. 980a25-980b.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 1. 981a15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 1. 981a5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 1. 981b25-30; I, 2. 982a5-982b10.

⁶ *Summa theologiae*, I, 84, 6. Henceforth to be cited as ST.

⁷ "...*impossibile est nostrum intellectum, secundum praesentis vitae statum, quo passibili corpori conjungitur, aliquid intelligere in actu, nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata.*" *Ibid.*, I, 84, 7.

⁸ "*Unde manifestum est quod ad hoc quod intellectus actu intelligat, non solum accipiendo scientiam de novo, sed etiam utendo scientia iam acquisita, requiritur actus imaginationis et ceterarum virtutum.*" *Loc.cit.*.

⁹ "*Videmus enim quod, impedito actu virtutis imaginativae per laesionem organi, ut in phreneticis; et similiter impedito actu memorativae virtutis, ut in lethargicis; impeditur homo ab intelligendi in actu etiam ea quorum scientiam praecepit.*" *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰ "...impossibile est intellectum nostrum, secundum praesentis vitae statum, quo passibili corpori conjungitur, aliquid intelligere in actu, nisi convertendo se ad phantasmata. *Loc.cit.*

¹¹ Whitehead actually accused John Locke of fundamental misconception for the latter's failure to see that there is an experience more primitive than sense-perception. But he also attributed the same misconception to thinkers he referred to as 'medieval and Greek philosophers'. He could have named Aristotle and Aquinas. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960) Part II, chapter 4, section 2, p.173.

¹² *Loc.cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, "Preface," pp. v-vi. See Victor Lowe, "Whitehead's Metaphysical System," *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*. Edited by Delwin Brown, Ralph James, Jr., and Gene Reeves (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc. 1971), p.3.

¹⁴ Whitehead acknowledged that the use of the term "prehension" is awkward. See Alfred North Whitehead, "Science and the Modern World," *Alfred North Whitehead, An Anthology*. Selected by F.S.C. Northrop and Mason W. Gross (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), p. 429. Hereafter to be cited as "Science and the Modern World." Despite the esoteric trait of the Whiteheadian notion of prehension, Hartshorne considered it as "...one of the greatest intellectual discoveries ever made." "Hartshorne: Response to Paul Weiss," *Charles Hartshorne, Existence and Actuality, Conversations with Charles Hartshorne*. Edited by John B. Cobb, Jr. and Franklin I. Gamwell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.426.

¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventure of Ideas* (New York: The New American Library, 1933), p.235.

¹⁷ According to him, "the word *perceive* is, in our common usage, shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word *apprehension*, even with the adjective *cognitive* omitted." "Science and the Modern World," pp.425-26.

¹⁸ See "Science and the Modern World," pp.426-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.425.

²⁰ Cited in "Science and the Modern World," p.425.

²¹ We may recall a text we have already cited elsewhere but is currently relevant: "...consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness." *Process and Reality*, II, i, 6; p.83.

²² *Loc.cit.*

²³ *Process and Reality*, II, vii, 3; p.246.

²⁴ *Loc.cit.*

²⁵ According to him, "...the notion of consciousness ...in my doctrine is not a necessary accompaniment." *Adventure of Ideas*, p.235.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.179.

²⁷ In his study of Whitehead's metaphysics, Lowe thinks that "...consciousness is no basic category for him, because it is so far from being essential to every drop of experience in the cosmos, that it is not even present in every human experience." Victor Lowe, "Whitehead's Metaphysical System," *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, p.6.

²⁸ *Process and Reality*, II, vii, 3; p.247.

²⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p.16.

³⁰ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.177.

³¹ *Loc.cit.*

³² Against the conviction of the said modern thinkers, he held the view that "the basis of experience is emotional." *Ibid.*, p.178.

³³ *Process and Reality*, II, vii, 3; p.246.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III, ii, 1; p.361.

³⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, "Religion in the Making," *Alfred North Whitehead, An Anthology*, pp.511-512.

³⁶ It would have been very helpful to our understanding of his position if Whitehead had given an example which is close to ordinary experience concerning this 'simple physical feeling'. If one considers a related example he has given in *Process and Reality* in the section focused on the Theory of Feelings one may note the difficulty of illustrating this theory:

Our perceptual feelings feel particular existents; that is to say, a physical feeling, belonging to the percipient, feels the nexus between two other actualities, A and B. It feels feelings of A which feel B, and feels feelings of B which feel A. It integrates these feeling, so as to unify their identity of elements. These identical elements form the factor defining the nexus between A and B, a nexus also retaining the particular diversity of A and B in its uniting force. Ibid., III, i, 9; p.351. See a longer but still abstract exemplification in III, i, 6; pp.345-46.

The elaboration by William A. Christian, highly regarded for his interpretation of Whitehead's metaphysical thinking, is hardly helpful since, like Whitehead, his illustration was equally abstract i.e. in terms of feelings A and B, and datum X. See William A. Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp.130-38.

³⁷ *Adventure of Ideas*, pp.180-181.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.178.

³⁹ *Loc.cit.* Hartshorne should have critically noted that Whitehead failed to see that just as there is 'bad' passivity, there is also 'good' passivity.

⁴⁰ In his effort to make the notion of prehension intelligible to his readers, Whitehead was willing to say that "the realities of nature are the **prehensions** in nature, that is to say, the **events** in nature." Whitehead, "Science and the Modern World," p. 429. Bold underscoring is mine.

⁴¹ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.178.

⁴² "Each process of appropriation of a particular element is termed a prehension." *Process and Reality*, III, i, 1; p.335.

⁴³ *Loc.cit.*

⁴⁴ See "Science and the Modern World," p.426.

⁴⁵ *Process and Reality*, I, ii, 2; p.35. In his *Adventure of Ideas*, Whitehead acknowledged his indebtedness to F. H. Bradley (author of *Essays on Truth and Reality, and On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience*) for the threefold factors which are constitutive of the prehensive process:

In accordance with this doctrine of Bradley's, I analyze a feeling (or prehension) into the 'datum,' which is Bradley's 'object for me,' into the 'subjective form,' which is Bradley's 'living emotion,' and into the 'subject,' which is Bradley's 'me.' *Adventure of Ideas*, p.232.

⁴⁶ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.178.

⁴⁷ "Science and the Modern World," p.428.

⁴⁸ Whitehead explained the subject-object structure of the process of prehension in the following manner:

Thus subject and object are relative terms. An occasion is a subject in respect to its special activity concerning an object; and anything is an object in respect to its provocation of some special activity within a subject. Such a mode of activity is termed a 'prehension'. *Adventure of Ideas*, p.178.

⁴⁹ *Process and Reality*, I, ii, 2; p.35.

⁵⁰ Certain passages refer to this distinction of grades or levels of entities and the corresponding subjective form in their prehensive activities:

For the subjective form of a simple physical feeling does not involve consciousness... Process and Reality, III, ii, 1; p.362.

It is evident that aversion and aversion...only have importance in the case of high-grade organisms. They constitute the first step towards intellectual mentality, though in themselves they do not amount to consciousness. Ibid., III, iii, 4; p.388.

The subjective form will only involve consciousness when the 'affirmation-negation' contrast has entered into it. Ibid., III, iv, 3; p.399.

⁵¹ *Adventures of Ideas*, p.233.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.185.

⁵³ This interpretation is supported, I think, by the following text in *Process and Reality*:

But the subjective form is the immediate novelty; it is how that subject is feeling that objective datum. There is no tearing this subjective form

from the novelty of this concrescence. III, i, 10; p.354. concrescence. III, i, 10; p.354.

⁵⁴ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.186.

⁵⁵ *Process and Reality*, III, ii, 1; p.362.

⁵⁶ *Adventure of Ideas*, p.234.

⁵⁷ Whitehead made the following reference to Bradley on the notion of feeling:

Bradley uses the term Feeling to express the primary activity at the basis of experience. It is experience itself in its origin and with the minimum of analysis. The analysis of Feeling can never disclose anything lying beyond the essence of the occasion of experience. Ibid., p.232.

⁵⁸ "As used here the words 'individual' and 'atom' have the same meaning..." *Adventure of Ideas*, p.179.

⁵⁹ "Science and the Modern World," p.426.

⁶⁰ Whitehead attributed the error of Berkeley partly to the "...overintellectualism of philosophers..." *Ibid.*, p.423.

⁶¹ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.179.

⁶² This is Whitehead's view of the role of knowledge in experience: *All knowledge is conscious discrimination of objects experienced. But this conscious discrimination, which is knowledge, is nothing more than an additional factor in the subjective form of the interplay of subject with object. Loc.cit.*

⁶³ For instance, in the later part of his exposition of the main teachings of Bradley regarding the notion of Feeling, to which he agreed in general, Whitehead clearly identified the notion of feeling with the notion of prehension: "In accordance with this doctrine of Bradley's, I analyze a feeling [or prehension] into the 'datum,' which is Bradley's 'object before me,'" *Loc.cit.*

⁶⁴ We may cite the passage describing the exact equation of the terms prehension and event: "But the word *event* just means one of these spatio-temporal unities. Accordingly, it may be used instead of the term 'prehension' as meaning the thing prehended." "Science and the Modern World," p.429.

⁶⁵ *Process and Reality*, I, ii, 2; p.35. Cf. II, I, 1; pp.65-66.

⁶⁶ *Adventure of Ideas*, p.235.

⁶⁷ See *Process and Reality*, I, ii, 2; p.35; also II, I, 1; p.66.

⁶⁸ See *Adventure of Ideas*, p.235.

⁶⁹ *Process and Reality*, III, i, 10, p.353.

⁷⁰ "A feeling is a component in the concrescence of a novel actual entity." *Process and Reality*, III, I, 10, p.355.

⁷¹ According, in fact, to Whitehead, "...perhaps we never consciously discriminate one simple physical feeling in isolation. But all our physical relationships are made up of such simple physical feelings, as their atomic bricks." *Process and Reality*, III, ii, 1, p.362.

⁷² Whitehead's view resonates with our ordinary experience when he said that "...*the subjective form of a simple physical feeling does not involve consciousness, unless acquired in subsequent phases of integration.*" *Loc.cit.*. In the same location, he also said that "consciousness originates in the higher phases of integration and illuminates those phases with the greater clarity and distinctness." *Loc.cit.*

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