

Ideas and Actual Entities: A Dialogue Between Locke and Whitehead

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This paper aims to show how the philosophy of the organism of Whitehead, particularly in his work *Process and Reality*, can be seen as a metaphysical transmutation of Locke's philosophy of knowledge.

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Introduction

This paper aims to show how Whitehead's philosophy of organism can be seen as a metaphysical transmutation of Locke's philosophy of knowledge. Beyond analysing the relationship between "actual entities" and "ideas", as well as Whitehead's significance to the Lockean concept of "power", we will see the speculative implications of the three types of identity defined by Locke (the identity of things, living beings, and persons).

Early in the Preface to *Process and Reality*, Whitehead (1978) underlined the importance of Locke's thinking to his system. "The writer who must fully anticipate the main positions of the philosophy of organism is John Locke in his *Essay*, especially in his later books" (p. V).

Knowing that the expression "philosophy of organism" translates Whitehead's philosophical project, why is the theory of knowledge presented in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)* so crucial to the philosophy of process? In another passage of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead (1978) insisted on the importance of Locke's *Essay*. According to him, the organism's philosophy "does start with a generalization of Locke's account of mental operations" (p. 19).

As we shall see, the way Locke thinks about the articulation of ideas anticipates many of Whitehead's philosophical intuitions. "The philosophy of organism, in its scheme for a type of actual entities, adopts the view that Locke's account of mental substances embodies" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 19).

The debt of organism's philosophy to Locke's thought is not about the epistemological assumptions of the modern philosopher, but rather about the adequacy of his theory of ideas to the understanding of our real experience. Rather than confining itself to a philosophy of knowledge, it should instead probe the metaphysical structure of reality, showing that experience is not so much an adequate instrument of knowledge but rather the expression of the constitution of reality. Whitehead (1978) even suggested an alternative title to Locke's mentioned work.

He [Locke] should have widened the title of his book into "An Essay Concerning Experience" [instead of "Human Understanding"]. His true topic is the analysis of the types of experience enjoyed by an actual entity. But this complete

experience is nothing other than what the actual entity is in itself, for itself. I will adopt the pre-Kantian phraseology, and say that the experience enjoyed by an actual entity is that entity *formaliter*. [...] The actual entity is composite and analysable; and its “ideas” express how, and in what sense, other things are components in its own constitution. Thus the form of its constitution is to be found by an analysis of the Lockean ideas. Locke talks of “understanding” and “perception”. He should have started with a more general neutral term to express the synthetic concrescence whereby the many things of the universe become the one actual entity. Accordingly I have adopted the term “prehension”, to express the activity whereby an actual entity effects its own concretion of other things. (pp. 51-52)

Let us look at this text to the extent that we can surprise not only Whitehead’s central metaphysical arguments but also Locke’s influence on them. If it is a fact that *Essay* can be viewed as a global theory of experience, it is also true that it is thought of as a tool. It is through it that the human being obtains any knowledge of the world and himself. This does not mean, in Locke’s philosophy, that everything derives from experience, as a hasty reading of the author might suggest. If all knowledge, whatever its nature, has its ultimate source in experience, the faculties provide experience are prior to it, such as understanding, memory, or imagination.

Whitehead’s perspective is different. Experience is not an instrument of world observation. If so, we would be restricted to a gnoseological plane in which one could speak of subjects who would have an outward constitution of experience. As Whitehead says in the quoted text, “[I] say that the experience enjoyed by an actual entity is that entity *formaliter*”. It means that the experience felt by an “actual entity” is not a predicate outside it but is instead the very nature of the “actual entity”. The latter is nothing more than a given experience. In a famous statement of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead (1978) tells us “that apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness” (p. 167). Indeed, the subjects designated as “actual entities” or “actual occasions” are themselves experiences, drops of experience.

“Actual entities”—also termed “actual occasions”—are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. [...]. The final facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 18)

The decisive influence of William James’s thinking on this thesis is known. Indeed, the rationalistic and metaphysical scheme of *Process and Reality* is by no means incompatible with James’s radical empiricism. For William James, the fundamental units of the cosmos are not atoms, but rather experiences. This is the crucial thesis of radical empiricism, which is embodied in the idea that at the root of everything that happens, we find a flow of experiences that, under certain conditions, can be transmuted into a stream of consciousness. The flow of consciousness is, one might say, the human experience of the flow of experience that constitutes reality. James tells us:

The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the “pure” experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*. (James, 1912, p. 23)

However, what does it mean this thesis shared by James and Whitehead that the ultimate reality is the experience itself? The latter—experience—has two components: one subjective and one objective. We generally restrict the notion of experience to its physical aspect, as we focus on the content of experience, what is experienced. However, the most interesting part of the experience is its subjective dimension that interprets not so much *what* is experienced as *how* it is experienced. We usually consider that this subjectivity can only be conscious. This is not Whitehead’s thesis. For him, there is a myriad of experiences whose subjective aspect is

not conscious. Consciousness is the result of a very complex process, as it implies a mental unfolding of the subject in relation to his or her own experience.

On this point, Whitehead's position is much closer to Leibniz's than Locke's. As is well known, the German philosopher distinguishes in the "monad", the level of perception from that of apperception. Only the latter implies a degree of reflective awareness. Although Locke makes an analytical distinction between perception and understanding, all perceptions eventually translate into a conscious mental experience.

An excellent way to explain what is at stake in an unconscious experience is to borrow a concept from Thomas Nagel's philosophy. According to this American philosopher, "there is something it is like to *be* that organism", or, to put it another way, "if there is something that is like being that organism—something that is like *for* the organism. We may call this the subjective character of experience" (Nagel, 1979, p. 166).

It may be objected that Nagel is trying to define "consciousness" and that, as we have seen, Whitehead's project is much broader. In response, we would say that Nagel's proposal arises after postulating the existence of multiple degrees of consciousness, the vast majority of which are beyond human consciousness. This possible divergence is, therefore, merely a terminological matter. Whitehead tells us of unconscious experiences, while Nagel refers to the existence of an almost infinite myriad of degrees of consciousness extrinsic to the type of human consciousness. What strikes us as relevant is this idea that the whole organism implies "something that is like being this organism". For Whitehead, all actual entities have this strand, which means that something to be real requires the presence of this subjective dimension. As Whitehead points out, in the quoted text, "In the phraseology of these lectures, they are its feelings", there is nothing that exists that has no feelings.

If the thesis on consciousness is much closer to Leibniz's, why does Whitehead insist on the importance of Locke to his thought? There are several reasons, but in this topic, the Lockean influence is that the 17th century philosopher discovered how ideas articulate, allowing Whitehead to discover how current entities intertwine, not only constituting different degrees of concreteness, but also different degrees of nexus.

Of course, Whitehead does not like the term Locke chose to translate the different degrees of perception, namely, "idea". It was a common expression in the modern thinking of Descartes and David Hume, although the former preferred the notion of *cogitations* and the Scottish philosopher privileged the concept of "impressions", which, according to him, was a prior reality to that of "idea". The term is taken up by Berkeley, showing that our experience only shows us the existence of singular ideas in the perceiver's mind (chair, horses, and so on) and that only abstract mental processes can erroneously transform them into "material substances". However, the term has fallen completely out of favour under the influence of classical German idealism, which, as Hegel argues, grasps Idea as the intrinsic unity of concept and reality, i.e., the organic concept, or, if you prefer, the intelligible structure of an organism.

Locke (1975) defined "idea" as "whatsoever is the object of understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is, which the mind can be employ'd about in thinking" (p. 47).

When the subject perceives an object, there is something in his mind that represents that object and that something is, in his terminology, an idea. According to the author, experience has two sources: On the one hand, the external sensations and on the other, the inner sense (which produces ideas of reflection). From these two sources, they spring two kinds of ideas or representations, the simple and the complex. Simple ideas can be discrete, involving a single sensation (colour, sound, etc.) or several (such as the idea of movement or space).

The simple ideas of reflection translate the internal representations of consciousness. By combining the external sense with the internal, we can build ideas, such as time and pleasure. The most interesting in Locke's thesis is the conception that it is possible to constitute complex ideas, such as those of substance, those of relation, and those of mode. Thus, for example, the substance is not something given, but rather the result of mental construction. In the case of substances, the mind combines simple ideas into the complex idea of independent beings, such as bodies, planets, plants, and God; it also combines simple ideas to produce mental representations, i.e., ideas of dependent entities, designated as modes, such as mathematical, moral (justice, among others), and symbolic ideas (language, culture, politics, and so on). These ideas or complex representations derive from the faculties of human understanding, such as the power of combining ideas, the power to relate two ideas together, immediately and intuitively, without merging them (what Locke calls relationship ideas; for example, stating that the idea of a circle is not the same as that of the square), and the power of abstracting them, using the demonstrative power to constitute abstract ideas and the memory that allows storing our ideas.

Ideas are not objects in themselves, but rather mental representations of objects, which imply a triadic notion of knowledge, namely "object", "idea", and "cognitive subject". At this point, it anticipates Kantian transcendental philosophy, while raising several speculative problems, such as: What is an object beyond the idea? Or how to substantiate the distinction Locke borrowed from his friend Robert Boyle, the famous chemist, between primary (e.g., extension and solidity) and secondary (e.g., colour and taste) qualities? Whitehead could not accept this distinction between primary and secondary qualities because, at its root, it lays the differentiation between a physical world and the world of inner experience.

Locke conceives the *sensa* as purely mental additions to the facts of physical nature. Both philosophers [Locke and Descartes] conceive the physical world as in *essential* independence of the mental world, though the two worlds have ill-defined *accidental* relationships. According to the philosophy of organism, physical and mental operations are inextricably intertwined. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 325)

What are the main elements of the strong influence of Locke's thinking on Whitehead? In the author's view, there are three of them, and they are related to the following concepts of *Process and Reality*: (1) prehensions; (2) power and ontological principle; and (3) enduring personality.

Let us look briefly at each of these concepts, as they capture the core of process philosophy.

Ideas and Prehensions

The Lockean ideas are identical in the Whiteheadian system to prehensions. The author tells us: "Prehensions' are a generalization from Descartes' mental 'cogitations', and from Locke's 'ideas', to express the most concrete mode of analysis applicable to every grade of individual actuality" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 11).

According to Whitehead (1978), the actual entities, although constituting, in their categorical scheme, are the "last", i.e., the ultimate reality, they are susceptible to analysis. Through it, we can discern the interconnections between different actual entities, namely their feelings; the concept of prehension is the expression of how each actual entity captures the others. "Actual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other" (p. 20). And with an intuition close to that of Leibniz, Whitehead tells us that, at the limit, each actual entity expresses the totality of all actual entities. "An actual entity has a perfectly definite bond with each item in the universe" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 41).

The term “prehension” derives from a common word, namely, “apprehension”. What Whitehead does is drop the prefix “a” to universalize the experience in question. If we kept the word “apprehension” tout court, we would risk confusing it with conscious cognition. If an actual entity is a “drop of experience”, one can legitimately question what is experienced. The answer is the other actual entities. This is the process inherent to “prehension”. It should be noted in our interpretation that there are, on the one hand, no “actual entities” and, on the other, prehensions, but each actual entity is itself prehension of other actual entities. In this act of grasping, we can discern, as Locke had argued and accumulated experiences of perception, intellection, and memory. Indeed, analyzing the different modes of articulation of ideas, namely, combination, intuition, abstraction, memory, among others, offers us the internal logic of prehensions. They are always the expression of experience, even when memory activity is concerned. In an easy example, the recollection of our past is possible because we “grasp” events in the course of our experience process, but the act of remembrance is also a new experience or prehension.

The way Locke thinks about the combination of ideas will be the paradigm upon which Whitehead’s philosophy of organism will transcend the main dichotomies of our thinking. It is not a question of radically dissolving them—for example, by saying that abstraction and particularity are the same—but rather to see the relative character of each of the terms of the relationship and discovering the common plane on which these oppositions are built. “The answer given by the organic philosophy is the doctrine of prehensions, involved in concrescent integrations, and terminating in the definite, complex unity of feeling” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 56).

The implications in the mind-body relationship are obvious. Each of the poles can be seen as the extreme expression of the same reality, the same unity of experience.

The philosophy of organism abolishes the detached mind. Mental activity is one of the modes of feeling belonging to all actual entities in some degree, but only amounting to conscious intellectuality in some actual entities. This higher grade of mental activity is the intellectual self-analysis of the entity in an earlier stage of incompleteness, effected by intellectual feelings produced in a later stage of concrescence. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 56)

What is always at stake is the idea of a unity of experience as the common ground from whom the objective and subjective can be thought.

Power and Substance

Let us now look at the Lockean concept of power. This notion occupies a central place in Whiteheadian cosmology, allowing it to formulate the “ontological principle”. It enables an understanding of how we mentally construct the idea of substance and how it can be transmuted into an actual entity while laying the groundwork for a new understanding of causality. Whitehead (1978) told us about the relationship between power and the ontological principle:

The “ontological principle” broadens and extends a general principle laid down by John Locke in his *Essay* [2.23.7 N299], when he asserts that “power” is “a great part of our complex ideas of substances”. The notion of “substance” is transformed into that of “actual entity”; and the notion of “power” is transformed into the principle that the reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities [...] The ontological principle can be summarized as: no actual entity, then no reason. (pp. 18-19)

Locke’s theory of substance is particularly crucial in that, in our view, it avoids two still common errors. The first is to suppose that there exists time-dodging stuff that upholds all the properties of a being; the second mistake is to support the idea that several qualities exist by themselves. Simon Blackburn (1999) ironically

underlined that this would mean that the Cheshire cat could leave his smile around while away (p. 65), which is a metaphorically beautiful notion but without any reality.

How can we understand, then, the notion that what is at stake in the complex idea of substance is “powers”? At first, Locke shows us that the traditional idea of substance is just the expression of our ignorance. We capture a myriad of characteristics that sometimes occur together. To explain this phenomenon, we postulate, in the absence of a better term, the idea of permanent support of them. According to Locke (1975), if we follow this procedure, we can only imitate this “Indian”:

who, saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked, what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was, a great tortoise: but being pressed again to know what gave support to the broad-back'd tortoise replied, something, he knew not what. (p. 296)

The substance is thus, in a first sense, “I know not what”. But we will have a more sophisticated idea of substance if we view it as “powers”. These powers are, according to Locke, “dipolar” in the sense that we can detect both active and passive powers. So, by way of example, “the power of drawing iron is one of the ideas of the complex one of that substance we call a load-stone, and a power to be drawn is a part of the complex one we call iron” (Locke, 1975, p. 299).

What we call iron, rather than a number of qualities, is rather the active and passive power of interacting with other substances. Whitehead wonders if these powers of acting and being acted upon are but the very structure of perception itself, or even better, the power of “grasping” and being “grasped”. In turn, the Lockean notion of power clarifies what Whitehead calls the ontological principle. What is at stake is the universal solidarity of the actual entities with each other. “This general principle will be termed the ‘ontological principle’. It is the principle that everything is positively somewhere in actuality, and in potency everywhere” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 40).

Each actual entity is simultaneously the power to act upon another and the power to be the effect of another’s action. According to Whitehead, this circularity or reciprocity between the different actual entities cannot be broken, for example, by appealing to causes outside it. *Only one experience can give rise to another experience*, which naturally questions the materialistic and reductionist views that try to explain an experience for something that is not. So, both Locke and Whitehead can make the following words of Plato their own:

I suggest that anything has real being that is so constituted as to possess any sort of power either to affect anything else or to be affected, in however small a degree, by the most insignificant agent, though it be only once. I am proposing as a mark to distinguish real things that they are nothing but power. (*Sophist* 247e)

Personal Identity and Enduring Personality

At the end of this paper, we would like to show the importance of Locke’s thinking to Whitehead’s notion of “enduring personality”. “The enduring personality is the historic route of living occasions which are severally dominant in the body at successive instants” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 119). Without wishing to enter here into a discussion of the notion of “eternal objects”, I think it is possible to show the relevance of Locke’s philosophy to this notion. Just as Whitehead tells us about the complementarity between “self-identity” and “self-diversity”, Locke (1975) analysed the problem of the same personality in the chapter “Of Identity and Diversity” (p. 328). Whitehead (1978) told us: “An entity is actual, when it has significance for itself. By this it is meant that an actual entity functions in respect to its own determination. Thus an actual entity combines

self-identity with self-diversity” (p. 25).

For Locke, in turn, in the identity of a personality, we are not dealing with the identity of the same thing, as, for example, when we say that a diamond loses its nature by the addition or reduction of atoms. Nor should we reduce the enduring personality to the same functional structure when we say that a particular organism is the same if the internal structure remains the same—not the external; otherwise we may confuse a clock with a living being—and can thus say it is true that a tree is the same from birth to death, even though all its cells have been replaced throughout its life. The enduring personality must be seen as a persistence of oneself, not beyond time, but rather within one’s own temporal experience, as a subjective experience of time. “Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions [that we know that we do so]: and by this everyone is to himself, that which he calls self” (Locke, 1975, p. 335).

Whitehead (1978) said something similar: “[...] A living nexus, though non-social in virtue of its ‘life’, may support a thread of personal order along some historical route of its members. Such an enduring entity is a ‘living person’” (p. 107).

It is important to underline that for Whitehead, Lockean identity theory is revolutionary, not so much in the specific delimitation of singular realities, but in the way in which he thinks of the combination of ideas, namely in the way in which Locke deals with the identity of this complex idea, which he calls “substance” or “actual entities”.

For we are wont to consider the substances we meet with, each of them, as an entire thing by itself, having all its qualities in itself, and independent of other things. [...] if we look a little nearer into the state of animals, we shall find that their dependence, as to life, motion, and the most considerable qualities to be observed in them, is so wholly on extrinsecal causes and qualities of other bodies that make no part of them, that they cannot subsist a moment without them [...] We are then quite out of the way, when we think that things contain *within themselves* the qualities that appear to us in them; and we in vain search for that constitution within the body of a fly, or an elephant, upon which depend those qualities and powers we observe in them. For which, perhaps, to understand them aright, we ought to look not only beyond this our earth and atmosphere, but even beyond the sun or remotest star our eyes have yet discovered. (Locke, 1975, pp. 585-587)

The cosmology, intrinsic to the philosophy of organism, finds here its most perfect exposition, centered on the idea of the infinite intersection between everything that exists.

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