

A STUDY OF THE MEANING OF SYMBOLISM IN THE PROCESS PHILOSOPHY OF ALFRED NORTH  
WHITEHEAD  
With Some Reflections

by  
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for  
my colleagues in the  
study of  
"Imagination and Revelation"

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## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the realities of birth and death (literally) I have tried to put together for you a paper which might contribute to our endeavors to comprehend the functionings of imagination and revelation. In the final feverish moments of preparation (an inflamed and bleeding throat of unknown origin and destiny) the doctor has ordered me not to talk--a severe limitation upon my personality under any conditions.

Therefore you are subjected to the agony of reading my critical review of Whitehead's, Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect, without me present to defend either he or myself for what I have done with him. I have tried to be as faithful to him at every point as I could given the limitations of comprehension of the complexities of his thought. I have prepared for you some diagrams which attempt to explain visually the relationships between his modes and categories. I found this a rigorous activity but I hope you will scrutinize it for possible alterations or reconstructions.

Knowing the limitations upon your time (and mine), I consciously excluded any analysis of Sartre in my paper. This I had anticipated would be one element of our discussion without my having to commit it to paper since we have already read and discussed him this semester. That I leave to your discretion with regard to the availability of time.

My suggestion for the use of this time is that you read the paper and discuss the charts during the first hour. Take a coffee break. Return and discuss my reflections and your reflections during the remaining forty minutes and then go home ten minutes early.

## OUTLINE

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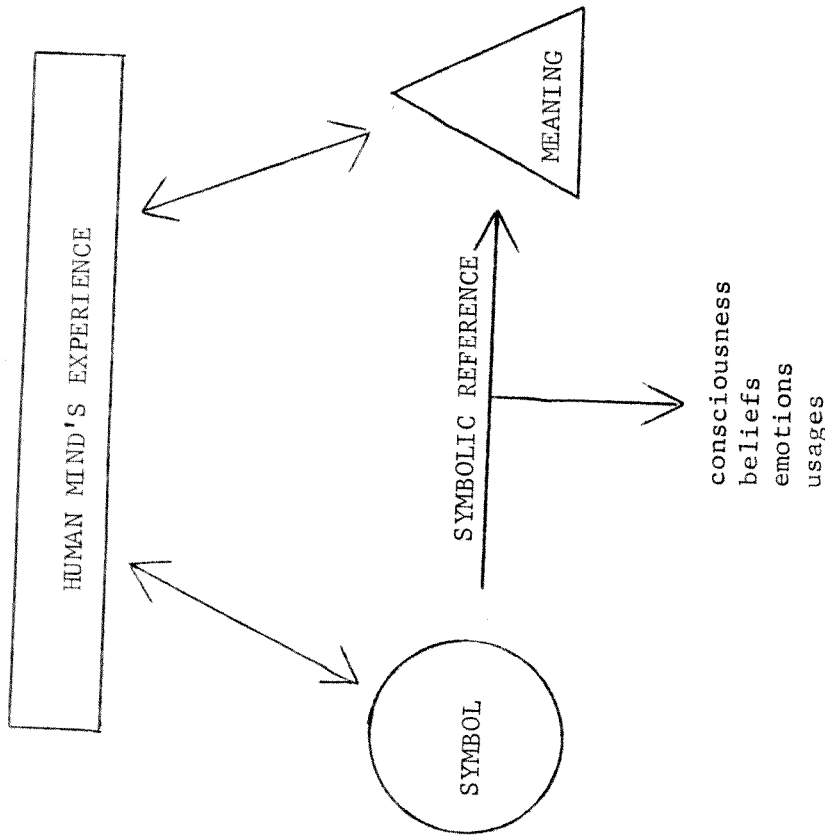
"Direct experience is infallible. What you have experienced, you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce...mere notions without...exemplification."

"I shall develop the thesis that symbolism is an essential factor in the way we function as the result of our direct knowledge. Successful high-grade organisms are only possible, on the condition that their symbolic functionings are usually justified so far as important issues are concerned. But the errors of mankind equally spring from symbolism. It is the task of reason to understand and purge the symbols on which humanity depends."

"The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of the components are the 'symbols,' and the latter set constitute the 'meaning' of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called 'symbolic reference.'

"The symbolic reference is the active synthetic element contributed by the nature of the percipient. It requires a ground founded on some community between the natures of symbol and meaning....We must conceive perception in the light of a primary phase in the self-production of an occasion of actual existence....apart from it, there can be no moral responsibility.

"An actual occasion arises as the bringing together into one real context diverse perceptions, diverse feelings, diverse purposes, and other activities arising out of those primary perceptions. Here activity is another name for self-production."



Primary Perceptions	Diverse Perceptions Diverse Feelings Diverse Purposes Diverse Activities	One Real Context	An Actual Occasion
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EXPERIENCE IS AN ACTIVITY

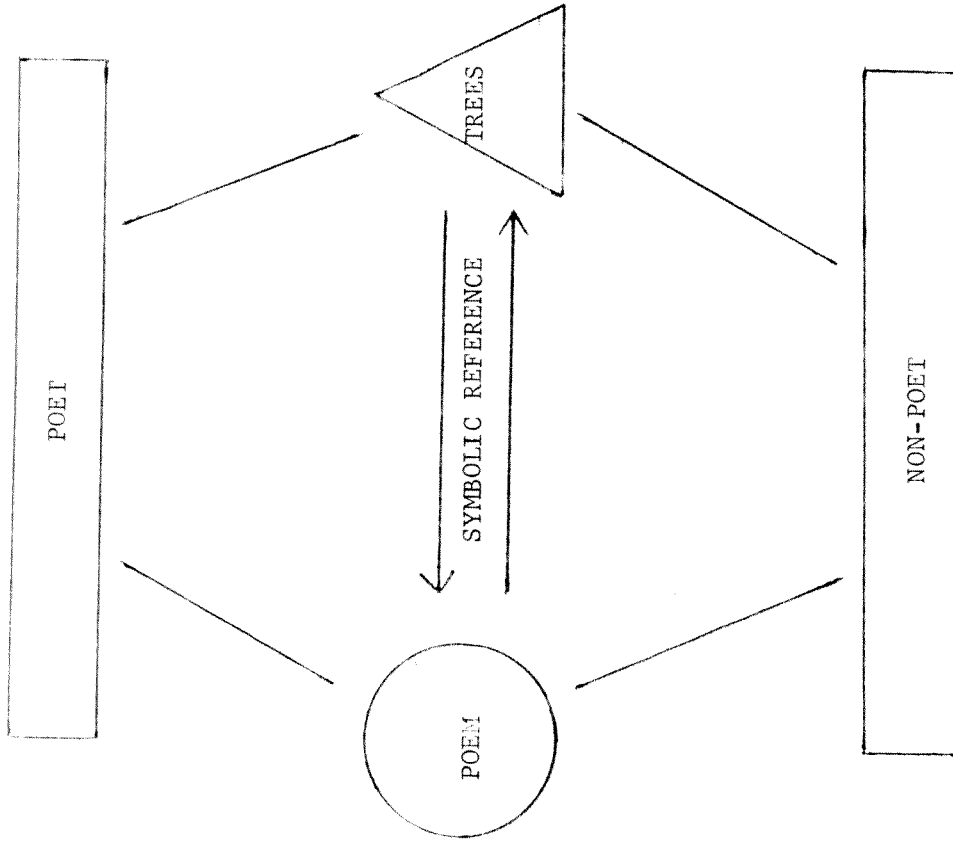
The percipient is active in the production of its own experience although any one occasion is nothing else than the percipient itself. The perception is an internal relationship between the percipient and the things perceived.

The percipient is responsible for the total activity involved in perception of the symbolic reference. Neither the symbol nor the meaning requires either that there be a symbolic reference or that it proceed one way or the other. There are no components of experience that are only symbol or only meaning. However, the more usual symbolic reference is from the less primitive to the more primitive and both can be experienced by direct perception.

A word is a symbol which can either be written or spoken. Either one may suggest the other to the percipient. Either one may function as symbol or meaning for the other. A double symbolic reference occurs in the use of language. The best example may be that of the poet and the non-poet in relationship to a poem on trees.

The poet observes the trees in order to elicit words for a poem. For him the trees are the symbols and the words which constitute the poem are the meanings. The reader who is not a poet encounters the poem as the symbol and the trees are the meaning.

"When in an act of human experience there is a symbolic reference, there are...two sets of components with some objective relationship between them..." which will vary greatly in different instances. The total constitution of the percipient effects the symbolic reference from one set of components as symbol to the other set as meaning. But the question as to which is which depends on the peculiar constitution of that act of experience.



### SENSE-DATA AND PERCEPTION

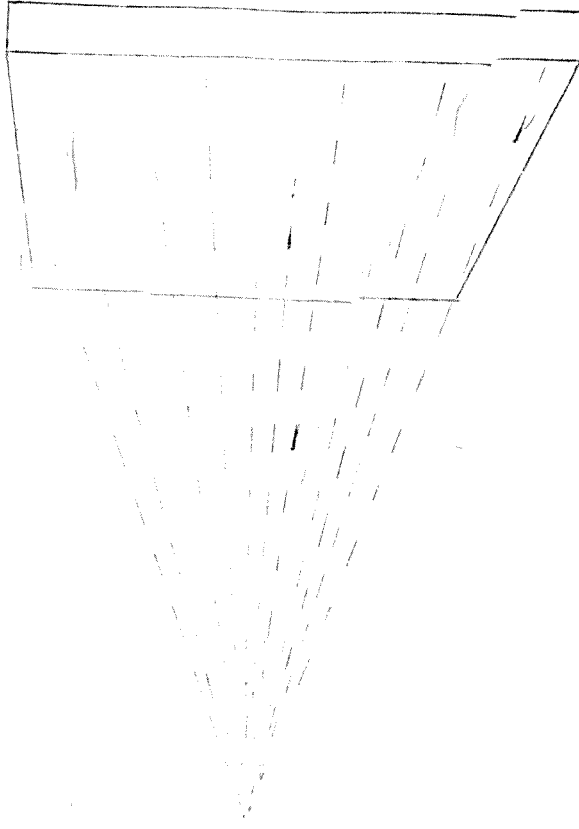
"Our perception of the external world is divided into two types of content..." perceptual and conceptual. The perceptual is involved with the familiar immediate presentation of the contemporary world, by means of our projection of our immediate sensations which determine for us the characteristics of contemporary physical entities.

The world is decorated with sense-data. Our experience of it is dependent upon the immediate states of relevant parts of our own bodies. While there are no bare sensations which are first experienced and then projected, the 'projection of our sensations' is an integral part of the situation as much as the wall we may have disclosed to us under the guise of spacial extension, perspective and sense-data (color). These are abstract elements characterizing the concrete way in which the wall enters our experience.

The mere color and the mere spatial perspective are very abstract entities arrived at by discarding the concrete relationship between the wall at that moment and the percipient at that moment. But in the context of that concrete relationship they are relational elements between the two.

The concrete relationship is a physical fact which may be very unessential to the wall but very essential to the percipient. The spatial relationship is equally essential to both wall and percipient. The color relationship is indifferent to the wall though it is part of the makeup of the percipient.

In this sense and subject to their spatial relationship, contemporary events happen independently. This type of experience is 'presentational immediacy' and it expresses how contemporary events are relevant to each other and yet preserve a mutual independence.



THE TEST OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The word experience is often deceiving. By experience we mean here, our direct recognition of a solid world of other things which are actual just as we are actual. There are three modes of experience. Two of them are perceptible. We have already discussed one of them, that of presentational immediacy. The other is causal efficacy. The third one is conceptual analysis.

The perceptive modes introduce into human experience components which are analysable into (1) actual things of the actual world and, (2) abstract attributes, qualities, relationships which explain how those actual things contribute themselves as components to our actual experience. The abstractions express how the other actualities are objects for us. They objectify for us the actual things in our environment.

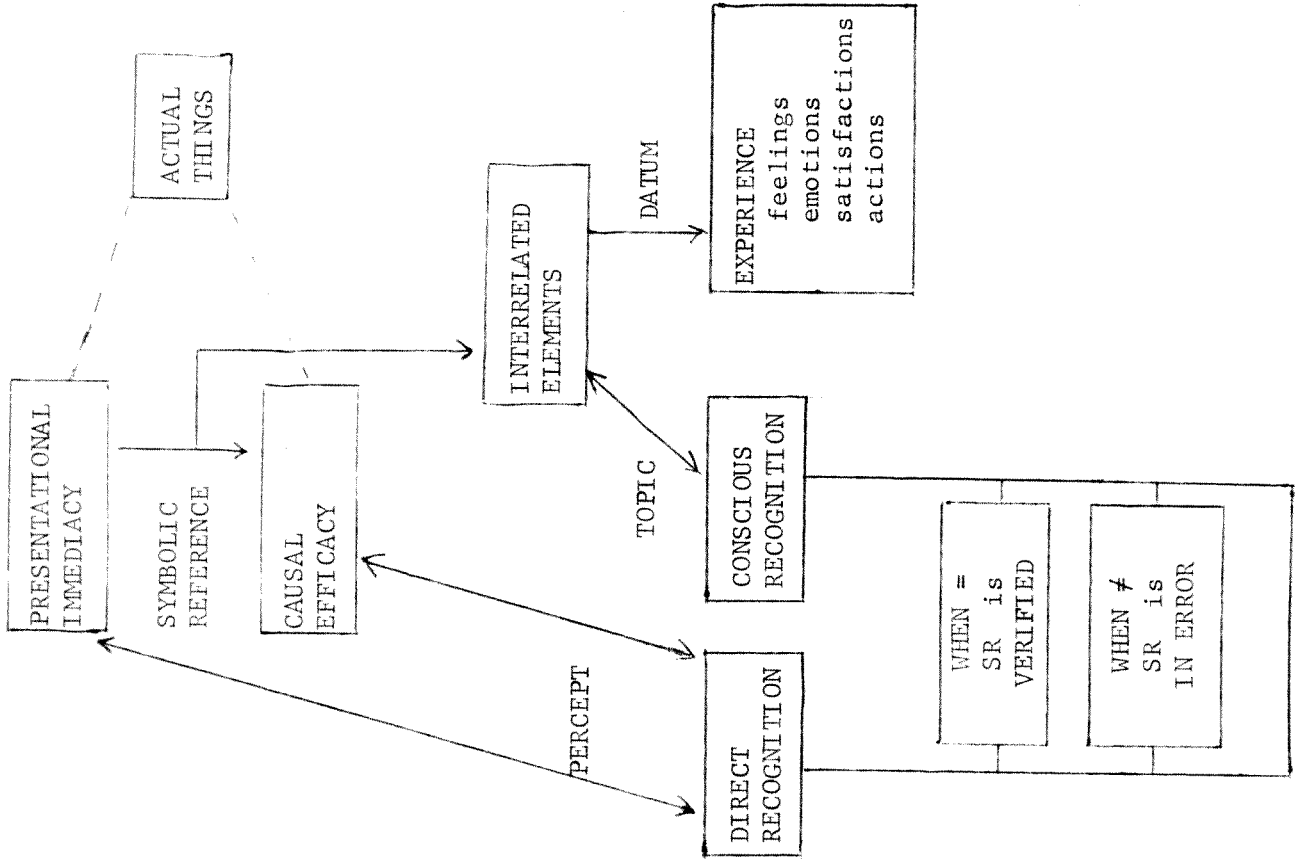
Our environment is "those things which are objectified in some important way." It is both immediate and remote---immediate as the organs of our body and remote as the physical world.

All actual things in our experience are objectified under the modes of either presentational immediacy or causal efficacy. In this perceptual functioning symbolic reference correlates and/or identifies these various actualities as interrelated elements in our environment. These interrelated elements are the actual world for us.

These interrelated elements become the datum in our experience productive of feelings, emotions, satisfactions and actions. They are also the topic for conscious recognition when our mentality intervenes with its conceptual analysis. A conscious recognition of a percept in a pure mode devoid of symbolic reference is a direct recognition and it may often disagree with it.

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## ERROR AND FREE IMAGINATION

Symbolic Reference is most responsible for error. It is not the outcome of conceptual analysis, yet it is dominant when mental analysis is at a low ebb. "We must not...judge too severely of error. In the initial stages of mental progress, error in symbolic reference is the discipline which promotes imaginative freedom."

There is risk involved. Aesop's dog lost his meat when he opened his jaws to grasp at the reflection of the meat in the water, "but he gained a step on the road to a free imagination." Though symbolic reference must be explained before conceptual analysis, there is a strong interplay between them by which they promote each other.

### SENSE-DATA IN SPATIAL RELATEDNESS:

There is no conscious knowledge without conceptual analysis but regardless, "there is no proper line to be drawn between the physical and mental constitution of experience." The perceptual and conceptual cannot be simply divided into the categories of mental and physical. Though there is the absence of thought in low-grade purely physical organisms, that is not the reason why they cannot make mistakes--the reason lies in their absence of presentational immediacy.

Aesop's dog had presentational immediacy. His mistake was the result of an erroneous symbolic reference. "In short, truth and error dwell in the world by reason of synthesis: every actual thing is synthetic; and symbolic reference is one primitive form of synthetic activity whereby what is actual arises from its given phases.

Presentational immediacy is our immediate perception of the contemporary external world which appears as an element constitutive of our own experience. This appearance is effected by the mediation of qualities, such as colors, sounds

and tastes which can be either described as our sensations or as the qualities of the actual things which we perceive. These qualities are thus relational between the perceiving subject and the perceived things.

To isolate them in this manner they must be abstracted from their implication in the scheme of spatial relatedness of the perceived things to each other and to the perceiving subject. The spatial scheme of relatedness is a completely impartial morphology of the complex organisms forming the community of the contemporary world--impartial between the observer and the perceived things.

The way in which each actual physical organism enters into the make-up of its contemporaries has to conform to this scheme. Sense-data introduces extended physical entities into our experience under perspectives provided by spatial schema. By themselves both are mere generic abstractions, but "the perspectives of the sense-data provided by the spatial relations are the specific relations whereby the external contemporary things are to this extent part of our experience."

The three main facts about presentational immediacy are:

- i. The sense-data involved depend on the perceiving organism and its spatial relations to the perceived organisms;
- ii. The physical world is exhibited as extended and as a plenum of organisms;
- iii. Presentational immediacy is an important factor for a few high-grade organisms; for others it is embryonic or entirely negligible.

Besides disclosing the solidarity of actual things, presentational immediacy is vivid, precise and barren. It is controllable in that one moment of experience can predetermine to a considerable extent by inhibitions, intensifications, or other modifications, the characteristics of the presentational immediacy in succeeding moments of experience.

## OBJECTIFICATION AND ABSTRACTION

Things are objectively in our experience but also formally existing in their own completeness according to the preceding analysis. By the process of abstraction through the mode of presentational immediacy of sense-data, thus making them abstract entities, we thereby objectify any actual thing, organization of things, or organism in the context of their spatial relatedness and our spatial relationships to them.

Objectification itself is abstraction--"nature's mode of interaction...(which) is not merely mental. When it abstracts, thought is merely... exhibiting itself as an element in nature." Therefore, no actual thing is objectified in its formal completeness.

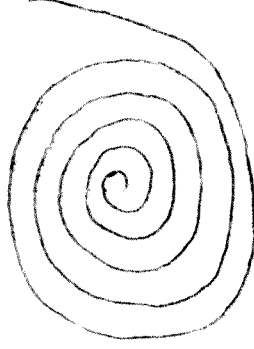
Every actual thing exists formally (is something) by virtue of its activity, i.e. its relevance to other things. Its individuality consists in its synthesis of other things so far as they are relevant to it. The unity of its own experience is any individual existing formally. As it enters into the formal existence of other things, this entrance is that individual existing objectively (abstractly), exemplifying only some elements in its formal content.

In speaking of any actual individual such as a human being with this conception of the world, we would be referring to that man in one occasion of his experience. But the life of a man from birth to death is a historic route of such complex occasions which are capable of analysis into phases and other components. These concrete moments are bound together into one society by the partial identity of form and by the peculiarly full summation of preceding concrete moments which each moment gathers into itself.

"The man-at-one-moment concentrates in himself the colour of his own past, and he is the issue of it."

"This doctrine of the nature of the life-history of an enduring organism holds for all types of organisms, which have attained to unity of experience, for electrons as well as for men. But mankind has gained a richness of experiential content denied to electrons."

Here it "has been maintained...(that) direct experience of an external world" is a doctrine which drives one to see "...the world as an interplay of functional activity whereby each concrete individual thing arises from its determinate relativity to the settled world of other concrete individuals, at least so far as the world is past and settled."





## CAUSAL EFFICACY

The second mode of perceptual experience is causal efficacy. It is the alternative mode to presentational immediacy which is necessary for the process of the symbolic functioning through which we objectify the world of actual things as the interrelated elements of our actual world.

The notion of causal efficacy in the immediately past philosophic tradition of Hume and Kant was not the same as it is in Whitehead's thought. For them it was based on the generic conception of time and the similar modes to his conceptual analysis, thus dependent upon thought process for their perception and unable to participate in the synthesis activity of symbolic reference in the purely perceptual experience of any organism.

Whitehead maintains, to the contrary, that this generic concept of time as a succession of integers is an abstraction from the fundamental relationship of conformation of the immediate present to the immediate past. "The given-ness of experience...expresses the specific character of the temporal relation of... (any) act of experience to the settled actuality of the universe which is the source of all conditions.

Put more simply; "There can be no useful aspect of anything unless we admit the principle of conformation, whereby what is already made becomes determinant of what is in the making. " Whenever we consider the immediate present in its relationship to the immediate past, we discover the overwhelming conformation of fact in present action to antecedent settled fact.

Furthermore we usually anticipate conformation of the immediate future to immediate present activity. However; "Irresolution in action arises from consciousness of a somewhat distant relevant future, combined with inability to evaluate its precise type....Again a vivid enjoyment of immediate sense-data notoriously inhibits apprehension of the relevance of the future. The present moment is then all in all."

## PRIMITIVENESS OF CAUSAL EFFICACY

The perception of the conformation of realities in our environment is the primitive element in our external experience, "...is vague, haunting and unmanageable....heavy with the contact of things gone by, which lay their grip on our immediate selves." It is "...the experience dominating the primitive living organisms, which have a sense for the fate from which they have emerged, and for the fate towards which they go."

Presentational Immediacy "...is handy, and definite in our consciousness; also it is easy to reproduce at will....for all its decorative sense-experience, is barren. It displays a world concealed under an adventitious show, a show of our bodily production." It "...is the superficial product of complexity, of subtlety; it halts at the present, and indulges in a manageable self-enjoyment derived from the immediacy of the show of things.

## THE PRAGMATIC TEST

Whitehead says there are those periods in our lives when we perceive pressure from a world of things which have characters in their own right which seem surely to be mysteriously moulding our own natures. When those periods are strongest it is a result of our reversion to some primitive state through a heightening of some primitive functioning of the human organism or the enfeeblement of some considerable part of our normal sense-perception.

Anger, hatred, fear, terror, attraction, love, hunger, eagerness, massive enjoyment, are all feelings related to this primitive functioning. "These arise in the higher organism as states due to a vivid apprehension that some such primitive mode of functioning is dominating the organism." We either retreat from or expand toward this externality which is impressing upon us its own character. "When we hate, it is a man that we hate and not a collection of sense-data--a causal, efficacious man.

This primitive obviousness of the perception of conformation may be further illustrated by the emphasis on the pragmatic aspect of occurrences. "In practice we never doubt the fact of the conformation of the present to the immediate past. ...The present is luminously the outcome of its predecessors, one quarter of a second ago....If dynamite explodes, then present fact is that issue from the past which is consistent with dynamite exploding....the complete analysis of the past must disclose in it those factors which provide the conditions for the present.

"The world given in sense(perception)--presentation, is not the aboriginal experience of the lower organisms, later to be sophisticated by the inference to causal efficacy. The contrary is the case. First the causal side of experience is dominating, then the sense-presentation gains in subtlety. Their mutual symbolic reference is finally purged by consciousness and the critical reason with the aid of the pragmatic appeal to consequences."

## INTERSECTION OF THE MODES OF PERCEPTION

A pair of percepts from the two modes of perception must have elements of structure in common which enable them to be engaged in the action of symbolic reference. The two elements which must be present are (1) sense-data, and (2) locality. Such commonality Whitehead calls intersection.

Sense-data are given for presentational immediacy from the natural potentiality which shapes a particular experience in the guise of causal efficacy. In the former mode they are projected to exhibit the contemporary world in its spatial relations. Through the latter mode, bodily organisms are imposing their characters on the experience in question--i.e., we see the picture, and we see it with our eyes. The fundamental point here was stated by Hume; "that sense-data functioning in an act of experience demonstrate that they are given by the causal efficacy of actual bodily organs." Thus, perception in the mode of causal efficacy reveals that it provided the data in the mode of sense-perception. Every such datum constitutes a link between the modes of causal efficacy and presentational immediacy.

## LOCALIZATION

"The partial community of structure, whereby the two perceptive modes yield immediate demonstration of a common world, arises from their reference of sense-data common to both, to localizations diverse or identical, in a spatio-temporal system common to both. For example, colour is referred to an external space and to the eyes as organs of vision."

Complete ideal purity of perceptive experience, devoid of any symbolic reference, is in practice unobtainable for either perceptive mode. However, earlier we note that Whitehead maintained that percepts devoid of symbolic reference could be encountered through direct recognition and used to test against the results of the conscious recognition of the results of symbolic reference. This is an analytic activity, however, and not a perceptive one.

"Our judgments on causal efficacy are almost inextricably warped by the acceptance of the symbolic reference between the two modes as the completion of our direct knowledge....This symbolic reference is a datum for thought in its analysis of experience. By trusting this datum, our conceptual scheme of the universe is in general logically coherent with itself, and is correspondent to the ultimate facts of the pure perceptive modes. But occasionally either the coherence or the verification fails. We then revise our conceptual scheme so as to preserve the general trust in the symbolic reference, while relegating definite details of that reference to the category of errors.

These errors are known as delusive appearances and result from the utter vagueness of spatial-temporal perspectives in the case of perception through the pure mode of causal efficacy. Exact discrimination of thing from thing and position from position is almost negligible, but we in fact do make definite discriminations and these arise almost wholly through symbolic reference from presentational immediacy.

"Ultimately all observation...consists in the determination of the spatial relation of the bodily organs (causal efficacious) of the observer to the location of 'projected' sense-data (of presentational immediacy)."

#### SYMBOLIC USE

Project<sup>ed</sup> sense-data are generally used as symbol. This is because of their characteristics which make them handy, definite and manageable. On the other hand the sense of controlling presences has the contrary character of being unmanageable, vague, and ill-defined. But these are what we want most to know the meaning of. We want always to penetrate to the meaning behind the symbols for there lie the forces determining the immediate future.

Symbols do not create their own meaning. The meaning is separate, existing in its own right as "effective beings reacting upon us." But symbols do discover or uncover the meaning for us. Nature has taught us this as their use.

### SOME REFLECTIONS

Imagination is the free and experimental interplay between analytic and perceptual functionings of the mind. It is not the abandonment of reason but an adventurous use of it. It is not boundless indulgence in illusory synthesis, but the bold risking of engagement in that conscious activity. Through the self-conscious testing of these contemporaneous activities of experience man enjoys a richness and depth to reality which is his gift to himself and to all future generations.

This 'depth' he offers as new images of possibility, forged out of his awareness of the limitations of the immediacy of past-present-future reality but taking into account his potential to avoid past errors and to determine a new course for his living. His new images are the relationships he chooses between himself and reality.

These 'images' become reality in his experience when <sup>he</sup> objectifies them, projects them as the sense-data before which he lives, and orders his activity in accord with the memory and meaning they uncover and awake for him. Everyman must create his own symbols or re-create and fill with meaning those about him.

The sociality of community is the corporate functioning of this process. Many of the symbols formed are merely functional, convenient and elementary like a red light or the up and down buttons on an elevator. Others, like the flag or the national anthem, are more significant but often reacted to with as little analysis as is given the red light. We are peculiarly more prone to respond to Chopin with an analysis of our experience than we are to a hymn--a tragic loss in the sense of the significance of meaning.

Thus to simply respond in a given manner is the line of simplest and least resistance. It is the natural activity of those organisms which have a low level of perceptivity and the absence of conceptuality. But in man it is more often the consequence of his reasoning that it is both simplest and safest to act that way.

There would be no order in society if this were not practiced to some degree or some level. However, there would be no future in any society if it were practiced absolutely. Indeed, the fall of any given society may be attributed in great part to its inability to forge new symbols or recreate the old. "Occasionally, a revolution in symbols is needed." This revolution must come from within both individuals and society. It occurs when symbols are again subject to the activity of symbolic reference and that to conceptual analysis whereby are revealed the errors. Such 'revelation' frees the percipients to take another step down the road of free imagination.

Closer Home:

I know more clearly now that I am a symbolically functioning creature, from the first smell of bacon in the morning till the turning-to-my-left-side at night. The potential perversions of this reality of my acting and reacting to every aspect of my environment are clearly that of the brain-washed man--socially, politically, and economically.

It is most often my brother who intrudes to shatter my illusions and release me from what I thought 'just ought to be.' My images of reality encounter his and his mine (our symbolic references clash) and we reason together what the truth is. Tomorrow we will have to do it again, but for the moment revelations free our imaginations as together we dance to life.

The haunting thing is that I am never sure who my brother is or was--a book, a professor, my son (often most profound), my wife, or a slut, or even some anticipated word heard in a new and unanticipated way. The discovery of reality as symbols and their meanings, once subjected to all the critical analysis I can impose upon these percepts which have imposed themselves upon me, finally leads me back to the mystery with which I began; the life that is given to me is only partially a gift from myself--it is mostly from another.