

Whitehead's Philosophy as Postmodern Philosophy

CALLING WHITEHEAD'S PHILOSOPHY "POSTMODERN"

I, along with several others, have long referred to Whitehead's philosophy as "postmodern," but the hitherto dominant connotations of this term can make this usage seem inappropriate, perhaps opportunistic. In this chapter, I explain why referring to Whitehead's philosophy as postmodern is not only appropriate but also illuminating, calling attention to aspects of his philosophy that challenge several distinctively modern tenets. This chapter, by introducing these aspects and pointing to the subsequent chapters in which they are developed and applied, thereby serves as an introduction to the book as a whole.

Although 'postmodern' was not used by Whitehead himself, the notion was implicit in his 1925 book, *Science and the Modern World*, in which he said that recent developments in both physics and philosophy had superseded some of the scientific and philosophical ideas that were foundational for the modern world.

Whitehead's most explicit statement about the end of the modern epoch occurred in a discussion of William James's 1904 essay "Does Consciousness Exist?" Whitehead took the crux of this essay to be the denial that consciousness is a stuff that is essentially different from the stuff of which the physical world is composed. Whitehead suggested that just as Descartes, with his formulation of a dualism between matter and mind as different kinds of substances, could (with some exaggeration) be regarded as the thinker who inaugurated the modern period, James, with his challenge to Cartesian dualism, could (with similar exaggeration) be regarded as having inaugurated "a new stage in philosophy."

Combining this challenge with that offered to “scientific materialism” by physics in the same period, Whitehead suggested that this “double challenge marks the end of a period which lasted for about two hundred and fifty years” (SMW 143).¹ Having described the scientific and philosophical thought of that period as distinctively modern, Whitehead thereby implied that his own philosophy, which sought to unite the philosophical implications of relativity and quantum physics with the Jamesian rejection of dualism, was distinctively postmodern, although he did not use the term.

The term itself was applied to Whitehead's philosophy in a 1964 essay by John Cobb entitled “From Crisis Theology to the Post-Modern World,” which dealt with the emerging discussion of the “death of God.”² Arguing that the dominant modern mentality, which equates the real with the objects of sensory perception, excludes the possible causality and even reality of God and thereby leads to relativism and nihilism, Cobb portrayed Whitehead's philosophy as distinctively postmodern by virtue of three features: its epistemology rejected the primacy of sense perception, its ontology replaced material substances with events having intrinsic value and internal relations, and these ideas were developed through reflections on problems in modern science.

Cobb restated his argument that Whitehead provides a postmodern vision in several subsequent writings,³ most importantly in his 1975 book *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, in which he enlarged his use of ‘postmodern,’ now employing it to refer to a pluralistic method and mind-set that goes beyond the idea of a single truth without falling into complete relativism.⁴ Cobb's writings provided the stimulus for my own first use of the term in an essay on Cobb's theology written in 1972.⁵

Cobb was not the only one who was thinking of Whitehead's philosophy as postmodern. In the same year as Cobb's seminal essay (1964), Floyd Matson, who was also influenced by Whitehead, advocated a “postmodern science,” by which he meant one that overcame mechanistic, reductionistic, and behaviorist approaches.⁶ In 1973, a “post-modern science” was advocated at greater length and with more explication of Whitehead's position by Harold Schilling.⁷ In that same year, Charles Altieri argued that it is Whitehead's philosophy, even more than Heidegger's, that best explains the connection between fact and value suggested by a number of American poets considered distinctively postmodern by Altieri.⁸ And in a 1976 book subtitled *Resources for the Post-Modern World*, Frederick Ferré, besides following Schilling in speaking of the need for the kind of “post-modern science” provided by Whitehead, also suggested that Christian process theology presents a “post-modern version of Christianity” that could help overcome the ecological crisis engendered by modernity.⁹

Having long considered 1964 the year in which ‘postmodern’ began to be applied to the Whiteheadian approach, I subsequently learned that this application had actually been made as early as 1944. In that year, John Herman Randall Jr.,

writing of the emergence of “‘post-modern’ naturalistic philosophies,” referred to Whitehead as “one of the pioneers” of this movement. The great advantage of this postmodern naturalism, said Randall, was that by rejecting the modern, mechanistic, reductionistic type of naturalism, it overcame the modern conflict of scientific naturalism with moral, aesthetic, and religious values¹⁰—a description that accords completely with the stated purpose of Whitehead’s philosophy (SMW vi, 156, 185; PR 15).

In any case, whether the use of ‘postmodern’ to refer to Whiteheadian process philosophy is said to have begun in 1944 or 1964, it is ironic that some critics, understanding the term in light of meanings it took on in the 1980s, have considered the Whiteheadian use of the term opportunistic. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that in a 1995 volume on early “postmodernism,” in which Altieri’s 1973 article was reprinted, editor Paul Bové’s introductory essay draws attention to the great difference between this early postmodernism and the type of thought with which the term later became associated.¹¹

We have here historical evidence that postmodernism is a genus with more than one species. In light of the fact that Whitehead’s thought was being called “postmodern” long before the term became fashionable, it would very strange to argue that the application of the term to Whitehead’s philosophy is illegitimate. But it would be equally strange to argue that the use of the term for the later type of postmodernism is illegitimate. Postmodernism needs to be understood as a generic phenomenon, which can and does have more than one species.

In any case, although the idea of Whiteheadian postmodernism can claim legitimacy by virtue of historical priority, the more important questions are substantive: Does thinking of Whiteheadian process philosophy as postmodern help to illuminate central doctrines of distinctively modern thought that have led to intractable problems? Do the central doctrines of Whitehead’s philosophy provide a way to overcome these problems? I will suggest that an affirmative answer can be given to both questions. First, however, I need to address the widespread assumption that any philosophy that affirms the ideal of reason and engages in metaphysics is ipso facto not postmodern.

THE QUESTIONS OF METAPHYSICS AND RATIONALITY

Whereas Whitehead affirms the need for a metaphysical cosmology, “metaphysics” is one of the things that most discussions of postmodernism assume that we now are—or at least should be—beyond. This difference is to some extent terminological, in that many of the characterizations of “metaphysics” presupposed in this widespread rejection do not apply to Whitehead’s thought.

Many postmodernists, for example, presuppose the Kantian conception, according to which metaphysics is the attempt to talk about things beyond all

possible experience. Whitehead, by contrast, understood metaphysics as the endeavor to construct a coherent scheme of ideas “in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted,” adding that the “elucidation of immediate experience is the sole justification for any thought” (PR 3, 4).

Sometimes metaphysics is understood as an approach that necessarily does violence to experience for the sake of a tidy system. But Whitehead, who praised the intellectual life of William James as one long “protest against the dismissal of experience in the interest of system” (MT 3), insisted repeatedly on the need to consider the “whole of the evidence” and *every* type of experience, adding that “[n]othing can be omitted” (SMW vii, 187; AI 226).

Thinkers influenced by Martin Heidegger sometimes portray metaphysics as necessarily committed to the domination of nature. Whitehead's metaphysical analysis, however, led him to say that our experience of actuality is “a value experience. Its basic expression is—Have a care, here is something that matters!” (MT 116).

Still another reason for rejecting metaphysical systems is that they allegedly claim to attain certainty. But Whitehead regarded a metaphysical system as a tentative hypothesis, an “experimental adventure,” adding that “the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly” (PR 8, 9, xiv). Closely related is the widespread assumption that metaphysics is necessarily “foundationalist” in the sense now widely discredited, according to which the philosopher begins with a few indubitable basic beliefs, from which all other beliefs are to be deduced. Whitehead, however, explicitly rejected the idea “that metaphysical thought started from principles which were individually clear, distinct, and certain” (FR 49).

Nevertheless, although most of the apparent differences between Whiteheadians and other types of postmodernists can be dismissed in these ways, a real difference does remain. Whitehead's philosophical work was oriented around the conviction that we must and can reconcile religion and reason, which in our time largely means religion and science. Whitehead, in fact, said that philosophy's most important task is to show how religion and the sciences—natural and social—can be integrated into a coherent worldview (PR 15). Many other postmodernists, by contrast, reject any attempt at a comprehensive account of things, whether the attempt be called a “metaphysics,” a “metanarrative,” or something else, considering all such attempts to be ideological efforts to impose one's will on others. Whiteheadian postmodernists, while recognizing that every attempt at a comprehensive account will involve distortions due to ignorance and bias, deny that the very effort to engage in such thinking necessarily involves hegemonial intentions.¹² They argue, furthermore, that the human need for stories or narratives orienting us to reality as a whole cannot be removed by declaration.¹³

The differences here involve fundamentally different ideas about modernity's fatal flaw. While these other postmodernists see modernity as afflicted by rationalistic pretensions, Whitehead regarded modernity as an essentially *antirational* enterprise. Whitehead's view here depended on his conviction that the ideas that we inevitably presume in practice should be taken as the ultimate criteria for rational thought. "Rationalism," said Whitehead, "is the search for the coherence of such presumptions" (PR 153). Rationalism, thus understood, is not opposed to empiricism. It is simply the attempt to combine into a self-consistent theory all the ideas that we find inevitably presupposed in our experience—ideas that I have come to call "hard-core commonsense ideas."

A precedent-setting instance of modern antirationalism was Hume's acknowledgment that in living he necessarily presupposed various ideas, such as a real world and causal influence, that could find no place in his philosophical theory. Whitehead argues that rather than resting content with a philosophical theory that had to be supplemented by an appeal to "practice," Hume should have revised his philosophy until it included all the inevitable presuppositions of practice of which he was aware (PR 13).

The reason that it is antirational to deny in theory ideas that one necessarily presupposes in practice is that one thereby violates the first rule of reason, the law of noncontradiction. It is irrational simultaneously to affirm and deny one and the same proposition. And this is what happens when one denies a hard-core commonsense idea. That is, one is denying the idea explicitly while affirming it implicitly. This point has been made by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas in their critique of "performative contradiction," in which the very act of performing a speech act contradicts its semantic content, its meaning.¹⁴

Let us take, for example, our assumption that we live in a real world, consisting of other things and other people. Hume agreed that he could not help presupposing this in practice. As a philosopher, however, he said that he had to remain skeptical, because his theory provided no basis for affirming a real world. Let us assume then that Hume told an audience that he was a solipsist—that, as far as he knew, he was the only actual being, with everything and everyone else being mere elements in his imagination, like characters and things in a dream. In saying that to other people, Hume would have shown by the very fact of addressing them that he did not really doubt their existence. The meaning of his statement would have been contradicted by the very act of making it. Such a self-contradiction is "absolutely self-refuting" in the sense clarified by John Passmore: "The proposition *p* is absolutely self-refuting, if to assert *p* is equivalent to asserting *both p and not-p*."¹⁵

It is impossible, accordingly, for one to deny the existence of a real world beyond oneself without being guilty of this kind of self-refuting inconsistency. The same is true of all our other hard-core commonsense ideas.

OVERCOMING PROBLEMATIC MODERN ASSUMPTIONS

From a Whiteheadian perspective, it lies at the heart of the task of postmodern thinking to overcome the assumptions that led to the modern dualism between the ideas affirmed in theory and those presupposed in practice. The crucial assumptions are the *sensationist view of perception*, according to which our sensory organs provide our only means of perceiving things beyond ourselves, and the *mechanistic view of nature*, according to which the ultimate units of nature are devoid of all experience, intrinsic value, internal purpose, and internal relations. It is these correlative ideas that led to the modern divorce of theoretical from practical reason and thereby to the Humean-Kantian conviction that metaphysics, which would show how the two sets of ideas can be integrated into a self-consistent worldview, is impossible.

Causation, the World, the Past, and Time

The sensationist theory of perception is responsible for many of the problems, including those involving causation, a real world, and a real past. With regard to causation, Hume famously pointed out that although we have usually thought of causation as involving some sort of *necessary connection* between the cause and the effect because the “cause” is thought to exert *real influence* on the “effect,” sensory data provide no basis for this idea, so that causation, to be an empirical concept, must be redefined to mean simply *constant correlation* between two types of phenomena. Although Hume continued to presuppose in practice that causation involves real influence—that his wine glass moved to his lips because he used his hand to lift it—he said that he qua philosopher could not employ that meaning.

Hume even said, as mentioned earlier, that he as philosopher could not affirm the reality of the world. He could not help, he pointed out, being a realist in everyday life, necessarily presupposing that he lived in a world with other people and things, such as tables and food. According to his analysis of perception, however, he did not perceive such things but only sense data, such as colors and shapes. As a philosopher, therefore, he had to be a solipsist, doubting the existence of an external world, even though in practice, including the practice of using a pen to record his skeptical ideas on paper, he had no doubts.

At the outset of the twentieth century, George Santayana showed that the Humean brand of empiricism leads not simply to solipsism but also to “solipsism of the present moment.”¹⁶ That is, because sense perception reveals only various data immediately present to our consciousness, he concluded, we must be agnostic about the reality of the past and therefore of time.

Empiricist philosophy was said, accordingly, to be unable to support four of the most fundamental presuppositions of the empirical sciences—the reality of causal influence, the reality of time, the reality of the past, and even the reality of the world as such. Having no basis for saying that causal relations observed in the past will hold true in the future, this kind of empiricist philosophy obviously could not justify the principle of induction. Much postmodernism has drawn the conclusion that science, generally taken to be the paradigm of rationality, is itself rationally groundless.

Normative Values

The sensationist version of empiricism leads to the same conclusion about normative values. Philosophers had traditionally affirmed the existence of logical, aesthetic, and moral norms. Sensory perception, however, can provide no access to such norms. Early modern philosophers, such as John Locke and Francis Hutcheson, said that we know such norms because they were divinely revealed (Locke) or because they were divinely implanted in our minds (Hutcheson). But late modernity, having rejected supernatural explanations, concluded that all such norms are our own creations. Most forms of postmodernism have emphasized the implications of this conclusion, saying that we must regard even our most basic moral convictions as local conventions with no rational grounding, even while continuing to presuppose, in the very act of writing such things, that various moral norms—such as the idea that we should not repress “difference” and oppress the “other”—are universally valid. The apparent necessity to presuppose various ideas even while criticizing them is sometimes justified by referring to them as “transcendental illusions” in the Kantian sense.¹⁷

Whitehead on Causation, the World, the Past, and Time

Whiteheadian postmodernism, rather than accepting the inevitability of such contradictions, follows the “radical empiricism” of William James in rejecting the sensationist view of perception. At the heart of Whitehead’s epistemology is a deconstruction of sensory perception, showing it to be a hybrid composed of two pure modes of perception. Hume and most subsequent philosophy noticed only “perception in the mode of presentational immediacy,” in which sense data are immediately present to the mind. If this were our only mode of perception, we would indeed be doomed to solipsism of the present moment. But this mode of perception, Whitehead argues at great length—much of *Process and Reality* and virtually all of *Symbolism* are devoted to this point—is derivative from a more fundamental mode, “perception in the mode of causal efficacy.” In this more

fundamental mode, we directly perceive other actualities as exerting causal efficacy upon us—which explains why we know that other actualities exist and that causation is more than Humean constant conjunction. One example of this mode of perception, or “prehension,” is our awareness that our sensory organs are causing us to have certain experiences, as when we are aware that we are seeing a tree *by means of* our eyes. Such prehension, while presupposed in sensory perception, is itself nonsensory. In seeing a tree, I do not see my brain cells or my eyes, but I doprehend them and hence the data they convey.

Another example of this nonsensory perception is our prehension of immediately prior moments of our own experience, through which we know the reality of the past and thereby of time.

This point depends on a third idea deconstructed by Whitehead. This is an idea about the things that are the most fundamental actual entities. Such actual entities, traditionally called “substances,” are those things that are regarded as both actual and not analyzable into entities that are more fully actual. Whitehead rejected the idea, common to modern and premodern Western thought (although rejected long ago by Buddhists), that the world’s most fundamental actual entities, or substances, are individuals that endure through time. According to Whitehead’s alternative account, an enduring individual, such as an electron, a living cell, or a human soul, is analyzable into *momentary* actual entities, which he calls “actual occasions.”

To remember a previous moment of one’s own experience, therefore, is toprehend an actual entity that is numerically different from the actual occasion that is doing the remembering (AI 220–21). This prehension of previous occasions of our own experience gives us our idea of time. Modern and (non-Buddhist) premodern thought, by regarding the soul or mind as numerically one through time, had blinded philosophers to the primary experiential basis for our category of time.

The significance of these explanations of the origin of our basic categories, such as *time*, *causality*, and *actuality* (which combines the Kantian categories of *existence* and *substance*), would be hard to overstate. Besides the fact that Hume denied the empirical basis for these concepts, Kant’s “Copernican revolution,” which lies behind most forms of idealism, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, was based on the need to explain such categories while assuming, with Hume, the sensationist doctrine of perception.

Whitehead on Norms and Scientism

Equally important to the distinction between Whitehead-based and Kant-based forms of postmodernism is the fact that Whitehead, by insisting on the reality of nonsensory perception, allows our apparent awareness of normative values to be

accepted as genuine. Our moral and aesthetic discourse, accordingly, can be regarded as *cognitive*, capable of being true or false (or somewhere in between). This fact—that the Whitehead-based type of postmodernism affirms, while the other type denies, our direct apprehension of normative ideals, such as truth, beauty, and justice—is the most important difference between them in relation to social-political-cultural issues.

The distinction between Kant-based and Whitehead-based forms of postmodernism is fundamental to the question of the appropriate strategy for overcoming modern scientism. Kantian forms of postmodernism, such as Richard Rorty's, put moral and aesthetic discourse on the same level with scientific discourse by denying that either type tells us about reality. This denial supports the widespread equation of postmodernism with an antiscience bias. Whiteheadian postmodernism, by contrast, achieves parity by showing how all three types of discourse can express real, if partial, truths about the nature of things—partial truths it is the cultural role of philosophy to harmonize.

Freedom

Whereas the sensationist view of perception led to contradictions between theory and practice with regard to realism, causation, the past, time, and normative values, the mechanistic view of nature led to such a contradiction with regard to freedom. Early modernity reconciled human freedom with the mechanistic view of nature by means of a Cartesian soul, different in kind from the stuff of which the body is composed. However, the relation of such a soul to its body could only be explained—Descartes, Malebranche, Thomas Reid, and many others agreed—by means of a Supernatural Coordinator. As William James said: "For thinkers of that age, 'God' was the great solvent of all absurdities."¹⁸

The late modern demise of supernaturalism, accordingly, entailed the transmutation of Cartesian dualism into a full-fledged materialism, in which the soul, mind, or self is taken to be merely a property, or at best an epiphenomenon, of the body's brain, not an entity with any agency of its own. Whatever the "self" is, it has no power of *self*-determination. Freedom must be denied or—which comes to the same thing—redefined to make it compatible with determinism. Some late modern philosophers explicitly admit that they must continue to presuppose freedom in practice while not being able to make sense of it in theory.¹⁹ Much postmodernism accentuates this contradiction, proclaiming the "disappearance of the (centered) self" while exhorting us to use our freedom to overcome oppressive views and practices.

Whiteheadian postmodernism, instead of accepting materialism or antirationalism or returning to early modern dualism, rejects the mechanistic view of nature at the root of these stances. Its alternative view—again, anticipated by

James²⁰—is panexperientialism, according to which experience and thereby spontaneity, intrinsic value, and internal relations go all the way down to the most primitive units of nature. Besides referring to actual entities as actual “occasions,” accordingly, Whitehead also calls them “occasions of experience.” On the basis of this panexperientialism, the unanswerable questions faced by materialists as well as dualists—*Where* and *how* did things with experience, spontaneity, intrinsic value, and internal relations emerge out of bits of matter wholly devoid of these?—need not be asked. Evolution involves real emergence, but it is the emergence of higher types of spontaneous experience out of lower types.

All such doctrines, usually under the name *panpsychism*, have been widely rejected as patently absurd. Such rejections often rest on characterizations that do not apply to Whiteheadian-Hartshornean panexperientialism. Critics rightly say, for example, that it would be absurd to attribute any freedom and thereby any experience to sticks and stones. But it is essential to the Whiteheadian-Hartshornean position, the more complete characterization of which is “panexperientialism with organizational duality,” to distinguish between aggregational organizations, which as such have no experience or spontaneity, and “compound individuals,” which do.²¹

Even after becoming aware of this distinction, however, modern thinkers tend to consider panexperientialism to be obviously false—a fact that suggests that one of modernity’s most basic assumptions is being challenged. The same is true of the Jamesian-Whiteheadian endorsement of nonsensory perception, as evidenced by the fact that most admiring treatments of James’s thought virtually ignore the fact that he endorsed the reality of telepathy and devoted much of his time to psychical research.²² In any case, these distinctively postmodern views about being and perceiving, besides solving various philosophical problems, also provide the basis for a distinctive type of postmodernism.

WHITEHEAD’S PHILOSOPHY AND THE DOMINANT IMAGE OF POSTMODERNISM

‘*Postmodernism*’ is commonly associated with a wide variety of ideas that together constitute what can be called the “dominant image” of postmodernism. Whiteheadian postmodern thought exemplifies this dominant image in many respects. It rejects foundationalism and with it the quest for certainty. It accepts the need to deconstruct a wide range of received ideas, including the substantial self, history as having a predetermined end, and the “ontotheological” idea of God (in which a Supreme Being is identified with Being Itself). It seeks, moreover, to foster pluralism and diversity, both human and ecological.

But the Whiteheadian type of postmodernism also involves many radical differences from the dominant image of postmodernism. For example, whereas

most postmodernists speak derisively of the “correspondence theory of truth” and the idea of language as “referential,” Whiteheadian philosophers defend these notions, partly by pointing out that their denials lead to performative contradictions, partly by showing how Whitehead’s philosophy, with its panexperientialist ontology and nonsensationist view of perception, overcomes the standard objections, as shown in chapter 5 of this book.²³

Other differences are implicit in the differing ideas about just which distinctively “modern” ideas and practices need to be overcome. One extreme view is that a genuinely postmodern view must overcome *all* modern ideas and practices. This extreme idea is rarely if ever explicitly stated, but it is implicit in many critiques, in which a particular position calling itself postmodern is said not to be *really* postmodern because it still affirms X, Y, and Z, all of which are modern ideas.

At least most forms of postmodern thought, however, portray themselves as involving a critique of some of modernity’s *pernicious* ideas and concerns, with the intent thereby to defend and extend modernity’s *valuable* ideas and concerns. For example, in a summary account of my own Whiteheadian position, I speak of the need for an emancipation from modernity but then add: “The term *postmodern*, however, by contrast with *premodern*, emphasizes that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances that must not be lost in a general revulsion against its negative features.”²⁴

One of these advances, especially emphasized in Jürgen Habermas’s defense of modernity, is its aspiration to universal human liberation. Habermas rejects postmodernism in large part because the versions of it with which he is familiar undercut the conceptual basis for this aspiration. Whitehead’s philosophy, as I show in chapter 7, recovers this basis—while also providing, as chapter 4 shows, the basis for a more inclusive, ecological liberation.

Another modern advance, which Franklin Gamwell has labeled “the modern commitment,” is the insistence that ideas are no longer to be accepted on the basis of authority but are instead to be defended solely on the basis of experience and reason.²⁵ Whitehead’s defense of empirical rationalism is an exemplification of that commitment.

In light of its strong agreement with these two modern emphases, in fact, the Whiteheadian position could well be called “postmodern modernism.”

Another feature of Whiteheadian process philosophy that differentiates it from the dominant image of postmodernism is its theism—which, as chapter 7 shows, is essential to its defense of the objectivity of moral norms. Some postmodernists seem to take it as self-evident that a position that is theistic could not be appropriately called “postmodern.” From a Whiteheadian perspective, however, the decline of theism is based partly on the fact that early modern theism retained a premodern idea of God—one that could *not* be defended on the basis of experience and reason—and partly on modernity’s mechanistic idea

of nature and its sensationist version of empiricism. From a Whiteheadian perspective, therefore, the return to theism—albeit of a significantly different type, best called “panentheism”—is part and parcel of the overcoming of modernity’s fatal flaws, flaws that prevented the development of a worldview that could be defended in terms of the ideals of rational empiricism (or empirical rationalism). Chapter 9 deals with the question of the rational need for, and defensibility of, the kind of theism to which Whitehead pointed.

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, the fact that Whitehead provides the basis for a “postmodern science” has been central to references to his philosophy as postmodern from the beginning. This concern to develop a postmodern framework for science is partly for the sake of reconciling science with our moral, aesthetic, and religious intuitions. But it is also for the sake of science itself. This twofold point is developed most fully in chapters 3 through 6. At the center of these chapters is the idea of panexperientialism.

The appendix shows that Whitehead’s “subjectivist principle,” the correct interpretation of which had long baffled Whitehead scholars (including myself), most basically refers to Descartes’ famous “subjectivist bias.” This chapter also shows that Whitehead’s argument was that if the implications of this subjectivist turn are properly thought through, we are led to panexperientialism. This argument hence says that panexperientialism, the central ontological idea of postmodern philosophy (of this type), is implicit in the methodological turn introduced by Descartes, the generally recognized founder of modern philosophy. Descartes and his modernist successors could not see this implication, of course, because of other assumptions they held. But once those assumptions are relinquished, we can see that the step from a modern to a postmodern worldview is not as great as it had seemed.