

## Whitehead’s Radical Notion of Prehension

By Matthew David Segall

“The key notion from which [the construction of a new cosmology] should start is that the energetic activity considered in physics is the emotional intensity entertained in life.”

-Whitehead (MT 168)

### Introduction

Charles Hartshorne was not exaggerating when he referred to Whitehead’s novel concept of “prehension” as the most “extraordinary generalization in the entire history of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> Extant student notes from his Harvard lectures suggest that Whitehead’s first public utterance of the term occurred in Emerson Hall on January 8th, 1925.<sup>2</sup> Anticipating his Lowell lectures a month later that would eventually be published as *Science and the Modern World*, he defined prehension as a noncognitive form of experiential togetherness. In *Process and Reality* (1929), prehension receives a more systematic treatment and becomes the generic process by which actual entities integrate and transform the influences of the past and the possibilities of the future into the present immediacy of their becoming. It names the way the process of reality *feels* its way forward moment by moment. Prehension is not simply a theory *about* our knowledge of reality—it is part of a description *of* reality (including our knowledge) as a nexus of feelings.

This essay explores the concept of prehension by tracing its philosophical origins, its role in overcoming the bifurcation of nature, its implications for the coherent integration of causality and creativity, and its theological significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hartshorne, “Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (3):253-263 (1979), p. 256. Hartshorne goes on to enumerate a long list of conceptual clots that account for the two-and-a-half-millennia delay in formulating such an elucidative concept.

<sup>2</sup> *The Harvard Lectures of Alfred North Whitehead, Volume 1*, p. 162, 164.

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## Historical Antecedents of Prehension

While mining the history of Western thought, Whitehead stumbled upon many examples of the idea of prehension fleetingly ingressing into the imagination of philosophers. In *Science and the Modern World*, he mentioned David Hume, Bishop Berkeley, and Francis Bacon.<sup>3</sup> While writing *Process and Reality*, he found the concept latent also in Rene Descartes and John Locke.<sup>4</sup> In each case, prehension was never fully articulated or given a secure ontological status due to the epistemic constraints of their systems. They were all constrained in varying ways by the representationalist paradigm, which led them to treat experience as primarily an epistemological problem having to do with how the human mind comes to know the world, rather than an ontological problem concerning how any existent comes to be amidst its relations.

Bacon came closest to affirming the doctrine of prehension with his distinction between perception and cognition. Whitehead quotes him attributing noncognitive perception to all physical bodies (where “perception” is “a kind of election to embrace that which is agreeable, and to exclude or expel that which is ingrate”).<sup>5</sup> On Whitehead’s reading, right at the start of the seventeenth century, Bacon articulated an alternative approach to the study of nature that expresses a more fundamental truth than the doctrine of dead, passive matter that came to dominate modern science.

Writing around the same time, Descartes became at least fitfully aware of the “fatal gap between mental symbol and actuality symbolized,” and so proposed an alternative theory of “*realitas objectiva*”—of “the sun itself existing in the mind.”<sup>6</sup> His account of the intuitive reception of the sun into experience comes close to acknowledging a prehensive relation. But Descartes quickly relapsed from this promising theory due to his presupposition of the mind with its private ideas only accidentally related to external things.

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925/1967), 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 76.

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Whitehead’s contribution to the history of philosophy is not just an epistemological revision but an ontological metamorphosis: prehension serves as a universal principle of relatedness that extends beyond conscious human cognition, beyond life itself, down into the very sinews of the physical world.

### **Prehension as a Generalized Concept of Feeling**

The best way to begin grasping Whitehead’s new concept of prehension is to consider it by analogy to the more common term *feeling*. According to Whitehead’s biographer, Victor Lowe, the connection to “feeling” stems from Whitehead’s embrace of William James’ radical empiricism.<sup>7</sup> It is helpful to understand Whitehead’s cosmology as a systematic generalization of James’ psychology. “The more imaginative power one has,” Hartshorne writes, “the more sense one can have of the difference between the specifically human and the generic meaning of ‘feeling.’”<sup>8</sup> Whitehead seeks to generalize the term so thoroughly that it applies equally to the feeling of an electron spinning in its field, a leaf greening in sunlight, a child absorbing the emotional tone of her mother’s face<sup>9</sup>, and even to God’s relation to the world. Prehension operates at every scale, intimately relating actual entities to one another in a way that still grants each varying degrees of individuality.

Hartshorne describes Whitehead’s invention as “revolutionary,” but to my mind it is less a historical rupture than a new alloy that collects the hidden embers and fuses the stray shards of ancient and modern thought into the metaphysical equivalent of Tolkien’s *mithril*, a magical metal known for integrating normally opposed qualities. Prehension is an amphibious notion, as internal and subjective as it is external and objective. It functions to dissolve the traditional Cartesian divides between subject and object, inside and outside, mind and world. It allows us to see that experience does not occur inside an isolated mind; rather, prehension is the very medium through which a mind-imbued world comes into

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Lowe, “William James and Whitehead’s Doctrine of Prehensions,” in *The Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 38, No. 5, 1941), p. 114).

<sup>8</sup> Hartshorne, “Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept,” p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 146.

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being. As must continually be repeated until the shock of its novelty wears off, for Whitehead, the subject-object relation is not fundamentally a cognitive or epistemological one. It is primarily an *affective* relation, or a relation of “concern”:

“The occasion as subject has a ‘concern’ for the object. And the ‘concern’ at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed towards it.”<sup>10</sup>

Prehension embodies a radical protest against modern philosophy’s “bifurcation of nature” into external causes and internal affects.<sup>11</sup> This bifurcation is an inevitable consequence of the substance-quality mode of thought (and its attendant representationalist theory of perception) dominant in Western philosophy since Aristotle. It has become the “stronghold of modern metaphysical difficulties”:

“The Greeks looked at a stone, and perceived that it was grey. The Greeks were ignorant of modern physics; but modern philosophers discuss perception in terms of categories derived from the Greeks.”<sup>12</sup>

“The grey stone” is, at first glance, an ordinary enduring entity, apparently unified, continuously itself through time, and passive. But upon closer inspection modern physics has revealed it to be an anarchic society of vibrating molecules. How are we to explain our perception of such an entity? Beheld by the eyes on a sunny day, the stone is a colored outline; held in the hand, it is a warm mass. Are we to say that its quantifiable shape and mass (or that of its molecules) are primary material realities, while the qualities of its shade and felt warmth are secondary mental additions irrelevant to nature? Whitehead refuses to sever the mental from the physical, since after all it is with our own physical bodies that we perceive the world around us. Stones and animal bodies are made of the same molecules, with the important difference that our living bodies are organized so as to

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<sup>10</sup> Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933/1968), p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1929/1978), p. 289. See also *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 26ff.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 117.

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pass vector feelings originating in the environment through “channels of transmission and of enhancement,” some of which may culminate in our conscious perception of grey stones.

“It is the accepted doctrine in physical science that a living body is to be interpreted according to what is known of other sections of the physical universe. This is a sound axiom; but it is double-edged. For it carries with it the converse deduction that other sections of the universe are to be interpreted in accordance with what we know of the human body.”<sup>13</sup>

If we follow Whitehead in adopting both rational and empirical criteria for assessing our metaphysical generalizations—he includes consistency and coherence among the rational criteria, and adequacy and applicability among the empirical<sup>14</sup>—then it becomes obvious that modern bifurcations including cause/affect, subject/object or mind/matter fail both logically and experientially. Conscious perception, understood as an outgrowth of more originative prehensions, is not the internal mental representation of external material causes; it is rather an affective participation in vector feelings transmitted from beyond the body. Feelings that were once in the stone-society are transmitted through routes of inheritance in my organism to be felt by me. My bodily cellular-society transmutes the feelings of the stone-society in various ways relevant to my life as a conscious animal. I experience not unmediated stone feelings but human feelings of stone feelings, channeled through the sense organs unique to our species. Nonetheless, there is no ontological gap between the molecular agitations composing the stone and those composing my retinas, neurons, and skin.

As with any philosophical hypothesis prehension is a wager that comes with potential risks and rewards. If successful, it resolves longstanding problems related not only to perception but also to causation, emotion, memory, purpose, and knowledge—all by way

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<sup>13</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 3.

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of a single imaginative generalization. It fails if the generalization falls prey to what Hartshorne called “the pathetic anthropocentric fallacy.”<sup>15</sup> The creative advance afforded by the concept of prehension requires an imaginative leap—a willingness to embrace a form of analogical reasoning that has fallen into neglect. In the modern era, anthropomorphism became a habit that scientific rationality sought to avoid, in many cases for good reason. When this critical stance becomes overly *anthropophobic*, however, we run the risk of the opposite extreme of anthropocentrism, wherein all the subjectivity, value, and aim in the universe is thought to be sequestered in human heads. Whitehead’s qualified anthropomorphism is not a fallacy but an acknowledgment of a deep continuity between experience and nature. Prehension generalizes what we know as human experience—what we call “feeling”—so that it applies to all natural events and physical processes. The vast majority of feelings are unconscious. We have plenty of examples in human life of such unconscious feelings, including the unnoticed moods and background undercurrents of our awareness. When feelings on the fringes of consciousness suddenly catch our attention, we realize that we were already experiencing something even before we became consciously aware of it. Prehension in its originaive sense refers not to the “what” but to the “how” of experience.<sup>16</sup> An unconscious feeling can later become a conscious “what” when we reflect on or remember it (which for Whitehead involve a more complex comparative form of feeling he calls propositional prehensions).

### **Prehension, Causality, and Creativity**

Prehension, in its physical form, is what allows the past to influence the present without being identical with it. It establishes a relationship in which the past becomes data for the present—data that does not determine the present but is a necessary condition for it. As Hartshorne specifies, if prehension were a *sufficient* condition, then cause and effect

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<sup>15</sup> Hartshorne, Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension, p. 261.

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 64, 164.

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would merge and the past and present would be indistinguishable.<sup>17</sup> Instead, prehension establishes an asymmetrical continuity between the past and the future in an ever-new present. “The creativity of the world,” writes Whitehead, “is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact.”<sup>18</sup>

The past is thus determinate without being determining of the present. This asymmetry stems from the dipolarity of actual occasions, whichprehend not only the already actualized past but also the unrealized possibilities or “eternal objects” available as alternatives for future becomings. The former are the physical prehensions, while the latter are called conceptual prehensions. Some critics, including Hartshorne and Lowe, have questioned whether Whitehead’s eternal objects are metaphysically necessary. Lowe proposes that a reformed conception of Whiteheadian propositions (i.e., *impure* potentials) could do some of the work shouldered by the pure potentiality of eternal objects.<sup>19</sup> Hartshorne argues that physical prehensions alone might suffice, provided one includes God’s primordial valuation of possibility among our prehensions of the past.<sup>20</sup> In this, Hartshorne claims to be less Platonist than Whitehead. But in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead had already made a similar move.<sup>21</sup> Whitehead describes the mental pole of an actual occasion as itself having two phases, the first being “conceptual reproduction” of elements already given in the physical pole’s prehension of the past, thus preserving continuity. He then describes how novelty enters into a concrescing occasion through “conceptual reversion,” the second phase within the mental pole. The second phase introduces relevant alternatives—unrealized eternal objects that were not directly felt in the antecedent phase—thereby enriching the qualitative pattern and intensity of contrasts felt in the newly forming occasion. This process allows for creativity that is nonetheless constrained by the “ground of identity” derived from what was already given in the physical

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<sup>17</sup> Hartshorne, Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension, p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 320. See also Segall, “Standing Firm in the Flux: On Whitehead’s Eternal Objects” in *Whitehead at Harvard, 1925-1927*, edited by Joseph Petek and Brian Henning (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Hartshorne, “Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension,” 256.

<sup>21</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 249-250.

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pole and reproduced in the first phase of the mental pole. By insisting on both a ground of identity and an aim at contrast, Whitehead maintains that every new synthesis retains continuity with its past while still leaving room for self-creation.

He then explains that, in strict alignment with the ontological principle (which holds that all reasons must be found in actual entities), the deeper answer to how one unrealized eternal object can be more or less relevant than another to a given actual situation must be sought in God’s conceptual feelings. Conceptual alternatives do not simply float into an actual occasion from nowhere; they come through the “hybrid physical feeling” by which God’s primordial conceptual valuation of eternal objects is transmitted as an “initial aim” into an occasion’s concrescence, functioning as an objective lure toward what would be most ideal in a given situation. With this recognition, Whitehead effectively “abolishes” conceptual reversion as a standalone category, returning to the principle—shared with Hume—that all conceptual experience is derived from some form of physical experience, albeit now mediated by God’s conceptual ordering of possibilities. Hartshorne’s argument is thus not all that different from Whitehead’s.<sup>22</sup>

### **Theological Implications of Prehension**

Whitehead’s introduction of God is not a matter of religious worship but a philosophical attempt to make good on the ontological principle: that every potential has to be prehended by an actual entity, even those not yet realized in the physical world. For Whitehead, God, or the everlasting macrocosmic concrescence, performs precisely this function. But the theological ingredient in Whitehead’s metaphysics need not be read as identical with classical theism. The process God is not to be treated as a ruling Caesar or ruthless moralist, but as an ideal lure toward future harmonies uniquely tailored to the local spatiotemporal condition of each occasion.

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<sup>22</sup> It is possible, of course, that Whitehead was led to abruptly abolish his category of conceptual reversion three quarters of the way through writing *Process and Reality* because of conversations he’d had with Hartshorne while the two worked together at Harvard.



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Hartshorne explicitly introduces God as “unsurpassably excellent” and so worthy of worship, whereas Whitehead insists that his philosophical conception of God is not motivated by any religious feeling. Although I appreciate Hartshorne’s more personal, confessionally oriented language, it is important to note that Whitehead was wary of conflating his philosophical depiction of the macrocosmic creative process with the God worshipped by religion. He wanted a concept that explains how eternal potentials are relevantly prehended by novel actualities, thus avoiding the implication that potentials lie in wait in some lifeless heavenly freezer. The net result is a dipolar divine function that includes both God’s “primordial” universal valuation of possibility that is uniquely prehended by each finite actual occasion, and a “consequent” universal integration whereby each new achievement of actuality is prehended in turn. In this way, prehension applies even to God.<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Whitehead’s radical notion of prehension transforms the modern understanding of reality from a collection of inert material substances into a communion of affectively related activities. Whitehead wove the forgotten insights of thinkers like Bacon and Descartes into a logically coherent and experientially adequate process ontology that dissolves the bifurcation of nature. Prehension clarifies how past actualities condition the present while still leaving room for novelty. Both physical inheritance and conceptual imagination are given their due. Causation is thus integrated with creativity, such that each new occasion of experience appropriates and transforms its heritage in an ongoing process of self-determination. By emphasizing unconscious feeling as the real basis of our conscious cognition, Whitehead provides the conceptual keystone for bridging the supposedly disparate disciplines of physics, biology, psychology, and theology. As a philosophical gesture, prehension stands at the heart of his cosmic vision, deftly knitting together what long dominant dualistic modes of thought had torn asunder.

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<sup>23</sup> Hartshorne, “Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension,” 262.