

## WHITEHEAD ON "SUBSTANCE"

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There seems to be a tendency to feel that Whitehead's philosophy excludes absolutely the notion of substance. Victor Lowe, in his *Understanding Whitehead*,<sup>1</sup> may exemplify this tendency when he says (p. 44) that Whitehead "eliminates" an underlying substance. I should like to argue that Whitehead does not *eliminate* this concept, and that it is therefore misleading to speak, unqualifiedly, as if he does.

Whitehead does sometimes write as if the total rejection of substance is a *sine qua non* of his philosophy of organism. He says, for instance, that Descartes

writes in (*Meditation II*): "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it." Descartes . . . conceives the thinker as creating the occasional thought. The philosophy of organism inverts the order, and conceives the thought as a constituent operation of the creation of the occasional thinker. The thinker is the final end whereby there is the thought. In this inversion we have the *final contrast between a philosophy of substance and a philosophy of organism* [italics mine].<sup>2</sup>

He even says substance thinking is "evil": "The evil produced by the Aristotelian 'primary substance' is exactly this habit of metaphysical emphasis upon the 'subject-predicate' form of proposition" (PR 45). And Whitehead expresses himself similarly in other places of his works (cf. Christian, p. 105).<sup>3</sup>

And yet it seems that Whitehead did not, in the last analysis, want to eliminate the notion of substance. Take for instance the Aristotelian "evil" just referred to: he had specified a few pages before that his category of the ultimate, creativity, "replaces"—not eliminates—"Aristotle's category of 'primary substance'" (PR 32). And, as concerns Descartes, Whitehead actually calls an actual entity "a Cartesian 'substance'" in an early page in *Process and Reality* (PR viii).<sup>4</sup> These brief references suggest, what I shall try to show in more detail in the sequel, that Whitehead did not intend to set aside entirely the supposition of substance. This problem of interpretation does not, I think, resolve itself into a mere quibble about words: to be informed that one's source of financial support, e.g., has been replaced is one thing; to be told it has been eliminated is quite another thing.

Whitehead carries out his "reconstruction in philosophy," as far as substance is concerned, against the background of the philosophical and scientific tradition. Characteristically, he states the view of a noted philosopher, or a view he associates with modern science, and then points out how he believes his own view to be theoretically more adequate. In

the course of expounding his philosophy, Whitehead makes use of several definitions of substance. For purposes of the stated objective of this paper, I shall give attention to only three of these notions: energy, power, and self-causation. And all these can be considered varieties of the general concept of self-existence—a notion of substance Whitehead may have preferred. At any rate Descartes is the first philosopher he refers to in *Process and Reality* in the context of substance. After stating that the positive doctrine of the whole of his lectures is concerned with the careers of actual entities, he says an "actual entity" is a *res vera* in the Cartesian sense . . . it is a Cartesian 'substance' . . ." (PR viii-ix). And Descartes' definition of substance is "an existent thing which requires nothing but itself in order to exist"—a definition that is logically derivable, Whitehead believes, from Aristotle's definition of primary substance as that which is "neither asserted of a subject or present in a subject" (PR 79; cf. 129).

The notions of power and energy are closely related; they may be "polar concepts."<sup>5</sup> Energy may be thought of as the putting to work of power, the actualization of a potentiality. However this may be, I wish to give some attention to what Whitehead calls the "notion of physical energy" before considering his direct pronouncements on power. He tells us that his "philosophy of organism is a cell-theory of actuality" (PR 334). According to his vision, the world is composed of a vast number of microscopic atoms: "each actual entity is a throb of experience including the actual world within its scope" (PR 290). In one place in his writings,<sup>6</sup> he calls these cells quanta of energy passing "from particular occasion to particular occasion." In fact the starting point of Whitehead's interpretation of experience would seem to be the "quanta of the flux of energy" of physical science:

The notion of physical energy, which is at the base of physics, must then be conceived as an abstraction from the complex energy, emotional and purposeful, inherent in the subjective form of the final synthesis in which each occasion completes itself. It is the total vigor of each activity of experience. The mere phrase that 'physical science is an abstraction,' is a confession of philosophic failure. It is the business of rational thought to describe the more concrete fact from which that abstraction is derivable (AI 239).

Now physical energy here, even if considered as the base of a model ("abstraction"), functions as substance in the model. Whitehead is not saying that the abstraction at the base of physics should be done away with. He is saying that we must, in the interests of a meaningful cosmology, conceive energy to be a far richer notion than physicists, as physicists, suppose. He wants to replace the concept of physical energy with a concept of "metaphysical energy," as it were; that is, a "complex energy, emotional and purposeful."

As concerns power Whitehead indicates quite clearly—certainly at least in the following passages—that his intentions are to transform or reinterpret the idea of substance he finds in the philosophical tradition. In PR 28 he says Locke

asserts that 'power' is 'a great part of our complex ideas of substances.' The notion of 'substance' is transformed [in Whitehead's philosophy] 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— . . . .

And he writes that his exposition in the lectures entitled *Modes of Thought* (MT).<sup>7</sup>

is nothing else than the expansion of the insight that 'power' is the basis of our notions of 'substance.' This notion of 'power' is to be found in Locke and in Plato, flittingly expressed and never developed. Our experience starts with a sense of power, and proceeds to the discrimination of individualities and their qualities. . . . The essence of power is the drive towards aesthetic worth for its own sake. All power is a derivative from this fact of composition attaining worth for itself. There is no other fact. Power and importance are aspects of this fact. It constitutes the drive of the universe.

In PR 65 Whitehead says again (cf. PR viii cited above) that an actual entity is "a substance": "In Cartesian language, the essence of an actual entity consists solely in the fact that it is a prehending thing (i.e., a substance whose whole essence or nature is to prehend)" (PR 65). To be sure an actual entity is a substance "in Cartesian language." But, even so, is it not apparent again that, at the very least, we should not speak unqualifiedly as if Whitehead sets aside entirely the concept of substance?

I turn now to the concept of substance as "cause of itself." Whitehead frequently points out the similarity, as he believed, between his doctrine of the self-creativity of actual entities and Spinoza's notion of substance: it is *causa sui*. The creativity is not an external agency with its own ulterior purposes. All actual entities share with God this characteristic of self-causation" (PR 339). How can an actual entity "satisfy" the Spinozistic sense of substance? An adequate answer to this question would, of course, require a monograph in itself; but let us examine a couple of summary statements of the two philosophers on the subject. These statements will at least show us one direction to look for an answer to the question.

Spinoza begins his *Ethics* with a *definition* of self-causation: "By cause of itself, I understand that, whose essence involves existence; or that, whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing" (*Ethics*, I, Def. 1).<sup>9</sup> Similarly Whitehead may be said to begin his metaphysics with a *definition* of creativity. It "is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the

universe conjunctively" (PR 31). This "principle of *novelty*" is "pre-supposed"; it "lies in the nature of things"; it is, by the requirements of his theory, the category of the ultimate. The "creative advance" of the universe "is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which *it originates*" [italics mine] (PR 32). Hence creativity necessarily exists (PR 5); it exists by definition. Spinoza says that "it pertains to the nature of substance to exist" (*Ethics*, I, Prop. 7); similarly Whitehead says that the "notions of 'process' and 'existence' presuppose each other" (MT 131). Self-causation

*means* [italics mine] that the process of concrescence is its own reason for the decision in respect to the qualitative clothing of feelings. It is finally responsible for the decision by which any lure for feeling is admitted to efficiency. The freedom inherent in the universe is constituted by this element of self-causation" (PR 135).

Of course *an* actual entity is not eternal like Spinoza's substance (*Ethics*, I, Def. 6), but actual entities are continuously created: The "ultimate metaphysical truth is atomism. The creatures [actual entities] are atomic. In the present cosmic epoch there is a creation of continuity. Perhaps such creation is an ultimate metaphysical truth holding of all cosmic epochs. . . ." (PR 53). Spinoza is "satisfied," then, because his substance and Whitehead's creativity perform similar functions. Indeed Whitehead, in one place, says his philosophy is "closely allied to Spinoza's scheme of thought"; the difference being that the philosophy of organism *avoids* the subject-predicate forms of thought and *replaces* morphological description "by description of dynamic process" (PR 10).

Personally I have grave misgivings about Whitehead's ultimate category, the principle that "makes process ultimate" (PR 11). Lowe states that it is a "mistake" to think "that Whitehead erected creativity into a kind of God beyond God. Creativity is the ultimate, inexplicable stuff of the universe—not an entity."<sup>10</sup> I am not interested in whether it is an "entity" or not. To me the *function* of creativity is as much a standing miracle as almost any god—in some respects even more so. But creativity, as such, is not the subject of this paper. I wish merely to point out here that creativity in Whitehead functions as substance. And, indeed, Lowe virtually admits that Whitehead gives us a transformed theory of substance rather than no substance at all when Lowe speaks of "the underlying energy of creativity" in Whitehead's system.<sup>11</sup>

We have very briefly considered three notions of substance: energy, power and self-causation.<sup>12</sup> And we have seen that Whitehead uniformly speaks of reinterpreting, not eliminating, these notions. Even *if* we assume, with Hartshorne and Lowe, that "creativity is the ultimate analogical concept" in Whitehead's process philosophy "as 'being' is in Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy,"<sup>13</sup> we still have replacement, not

displacement. The conclusion would seem to be warranted that Whitehead gives us a revised (reformed, transformed, etc.) theory of substance. And, if so, it surely does not promote the understanding of Whitehead to speak unqualifiedly as if he eliminates the notion of substance altogether.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), p. 228. Hereafter, frequently referred to as PR.

<sup>3</sup>William A. Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. PR 50-1 where Whitehead is discussing a nexus, i.e., "an 'enduring object,' or 'enduring creature'": "Such a nexus is called a 'society,' and the common form is the 'defining characteristic' of the society. The notion of 'defining characteristic' is allied to the Aristotelian notion 'substantial form.'" And in *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1933), p. 262, n. 4, he makes a similar pronouncement respecting Descartes: "This notion of 'society' has analogies to Descartes' notion of 'substance' . . ."

<sup>5</sup>See John Herman Randall, Jr., *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 64 and n. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933), pp. 238-39. AI will serve to indicate this book.

<sup>7</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1938), pp. 162-63.

<sup>8</sup>Christian, p. 106, is right in suggesting that Whitehead overestimates the prevalence and importance in Western philosophy of the doctrine of substance as vacuous and static.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. in one (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1961), 1:129. For Descartes the term *causa sui* "has both a negative sense and a positive sense. In its negative sense it means that God has no cause; in its positive sense it means that God stands to himself in the same way as an efficient cause does to its effect. The term *causa sui* similarly in Spinoza is not a mere negation, meaning causelessness; it means also something positive: it is an assertion of self-sufficiency and hence actual existence."

<sup>10</sup>*Understanding Whitehead*, p. 108.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 100-101.

<sup>12</sup>The processive realm of actual entities is not, of course, the only reality in Whitehead that can be interpreted to function as substance; God certainly can be so interpreted. Charles Hartshorne says that although Whitehead takes "states more seriously than substance," it is nevertheless true that "Whitehead can more truly conceive God, at least, as a self-identical substance than the old substantialisms could." Charles Hartshorne, "Whitehead's Idea of God," in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1951), p. 548.

<sup>13</sup>Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead*, p. 108.

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