foreword

Whitehead is the great example among modern philosophers of a man who prizes comprehension above clarity. He is an example in both senses of the word. He is an instance strikingly exemplifying this cognitive evaluation; and he is a model for philosophers to consider and perhaps to emulate. His example is the more notable because he entered the cognitive field as a mathematician well aware of the ideals of rigor and clarity and respected for his contributions in this area. But when he became engrossed in the problem of understanding and adequately describing our world and our ways of knowing it, he encountered the dilemma which every serious philosopher must meet: that of either arbitrarily restricting the area of inquiry and the mode of inquiry to attain clarity, or else of allowing alternatives and indeterminacies and even contrarities to enter in so as to attain fullness of comprehension.

The philosophic ideal is no doubt both clarity and comprehension—unless, by a stroke of definition, some philosopher seeks to exclude comprehension as unphilosophical! The example of Whitehead is particularly pertinent at this moment when the ideal of clarity is so much in fashion, and so starving the hunger for comprehension that a new eruption of cognitively irresponsible romantic theories is already upon us.

Hence, this introduction to Whitehead's central work is most illuminating and most timely. In tracing the movement of Whitehead's thought from his early works, where he sought to isolate an understanding of the nature of physics from considerations of human values and the typical problems of knowledge, through

his intermediate works, where the need of total comprehension was more and more clearly revealed to him, Lawrence has performed a most valuable analysis. It is serving as more than a scholarly interpretation of an important man's writings. It is serving as a reminder of a traditional task of philosophy that philosophers cannot with impunity ignore.

Only those who have struggled over Whitehead's writings can fully appreciate the amount of clarification Lawrence has brought to an understanding of Whitehead. For although we applaud Whitehead's pertinacity in seeking for maximum comprehension, no one can well deny that his thought becomes unusually obscure the further he proceeds. Lawrence shows how a great deal of this obscurity is due to the steady change of mind that Whitehead was passing through. It was the obscurity of an honest and growing thinker. Many of Whitehead's inconsistencies then fall into place as views associated with successive stages of his thought. There was danger that Whitehead would cease to be read because of these superficial confusions. That would have been unfortunate, for he was without much question one of the great minds of the twentieth century. Lawrence's careful and sympathetic exposition may do much to stimulate a more extensive reading of Whitehead. For this we should be grateful, for no one has become more keenly aware than Whitehead of the deep-lying issues that rend our modern world and of how they must be faced in order to be solved. Though few of us may follow his suggested solutions, all may profit from his record of his struggles to understand and from his manifold insights.

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