DOI: 10.59277/SIFU.2024.15

WHITEHEAD'S EARLY THEORY OF PERCEPTION (1911–1917): A LOOK AT ITS SOURCES

BOGDAN RUSU

Université Paris-Est Créteil

Abstract. In this paper I deal with Whitehead's early theory of perception, as presented in Whitehead's first philosophical book from 1917. I argue that it differs from the theory developed subsequently, in the works on natural philosophy, by being subjectivist. Although the theory bears resemblance to Russell's contemporary theory of perception, I hold that Russell's influence on Whitehead was shallow. Much more substantive was the influence he received from G. F. Stout. Whitehead's early theory of perception has a Stoutian infrastructure, that is, it draws on Stout's analysis of mind from *Analytic Psychology* and assumes the Stoutian concept of „presentation", as well as a Stoutian interpretation of the „principle of hypothetical sense-presentations".

Keywords: A. N. Whitehead; G. F. Stout; B. Russell; perception; subjectivism.

In this paper I will discuss some aspects of Whitehead's early theory of knowledge. For some reason, theory of knowledge did not receive the same amount of attention as other domains of Whitehead's thought (his philosophy of science, his metaphysics, or his philosophy of religion). However, a concern with the theory of knowledge can be traced in Whitehead's since 1911, and well into his metaphysical works. By „theory of knowledge" it is understood the first kind of theory of knowledge which Russell distinguishes in his *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth:*

> In the first form of theory of knowledge, we accept the scientific account of the world, not as certainly true, but as the best at present available. The world, as presented by science, contains a phenomenon called „knowing", and theory of knowledge, in its first form, has to consider what sort of phenomenon this is.[1]

That is, a natural theory of knowledge as opposed to the second form of theory of knowledge Russell calls „epistemology", which is „a critical scrutiny of what passes as knowledge"[2].

Traditionally, *The Organisation of Thought* (*OT*)[3] is said to include the first exposition of Whitehead's philosophy of science and theory of knowledge. The relevant chapters, „The Organization of Thought", „The Anatomy of some Scientific Ideas", and „Space, Time, and Relativity" were written between 1915 and 1917.

[1] B. Russell, *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, George Allan & Unwin, 1950, pp. 12–13.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 15

[3] A.N. Whitehead, *The Organisation of Thought, Educational and Scientific*, London, Williams & Norgate, 1917.

They will be republished, with some omissions, in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays (AE*), in the year of publication of *Process and Reality* (*PR*). In the Preface to *AE* Whitehead said the following concerning these three chapters: „The three final chapters of the present book, with some omissions, stand as published in 1917. They are not to be constructed as commentaries on my writings since that date. The converse relation is the true one"[4]. Surely, this is an overstatement. However, it suggests that Whitehead was unaware of the changes that had occurred in his thought throughout this period. He seemed to interpret the development of his thought as a continuous growth and expansion of a core of ideas, the ideas expressed in *OT*.

Many Whiteheadian scholars were seduced by a similar interpretation, according to which Whitehead's thought is at each stage a development, correction and improvement of the ideas from the preceding stage. For example, Lowe says the following concerning the relation between *OT* and the books from the 1920s:

> The phase now to be described begins somewhere between 1911 and 1914, its initial motive being merely to provide a logical analysis of space for the fourth volume of the *Principia*. Reflections on what is meant by space inaugurate an epistemological development, which culminates in an *epistemological* criticism of the Classical Concept of the material world, and the elaboration of a new Concept from a different empirical base. The books published in 1919 and 1920 present the culmination of this development.[5]

Another author who dealt with Whitehead's early works said, in a similar vein, that

> the last three chapters [of *OT*] are dedicated to questions of science and philosophy of sciences and, even if transitional, they remarkably announce what will be found in *PNK*[6], *CN*[7], and *PRel* […] We will not describe their content because the ideas presented there will be fully developed in *PNK*, *CN* and *PRel*.[8]

That there is continuity between the diverse stages of Whitehead's thought is evident. This continuity is especially visible when the earlier works are read on the background of Whitehead's later works. But the retrospective look has the disadvantage of obscuring discontinuities which, sometimes, may be more important than the continuity. One way of being blinded by continuity is to focus on the history of the technical aspects of the method of extensive abstraction, or on the

---

[4] A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, New York: The Free Press, 1967, pp. v–vi.

[5] V. Lowe, "The Development of Whitehead's Philosophy" in: Paul A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1991, pp. 15–124.

[6] A. N. Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, New York, Dover Publication Inc., 1982.

[7] A. N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 1964.

[8] G. Hélal, *La philosophie comme panphysique. La philosophie des sciences de A. N. Whitehead*, Montréal, Belarmin, 1979, p. 55.

relation between metaphysics and science. But as soon as one focuses on the underlying theory of perception, the impression of continuity vanishes.

I believe we can distinguish at least three theories of perception in the works of Whitehead. They succeed each other in a somewhat dialectical manner. There is first a theory of perception, worked out between 1911 and 1917, and exposed most fully in the essay „The Anatomy of some Scientific Ideas", from *OT*. It is followed by a neorealist, extremely objectivist, theory of perception, exposed in *PNK* and *CN*. To it succeeds the theory of perception independently formulated in *S*[9], and which may be called „the reformed-subjectivist theory of perception". According to me, the first two theories of perception are, despite some similarities, essentially different. When a genetic standpoint is adopted, and abstraction is made from the later works, the theory of perception from *OT* displays a subjectivist character which is absent from the theory of perception of the 1920s books. Whitehead gave up this subjectivism without much ado somewhere around 1918, as he moved towards a position similar in many essential respects to that of the British neorealists (Nunn, Alexander). This shift of attitude is responsible for Whitehead's fearsome criticism of subjectivism from his books on natural philosophy, i.e., his critique of the bifurcation of nature.

I was first made aware of the subjectivist character of Whitehead's first theory of perception by some remarks of Dawes Hicks, Whitehead's contemporary[10]. I found another confirmation in a passing remark of Victor Lowe. To my knowledge, these are the only commentators who came close to my point of view. Victor Lowe only mentions that, in *OT*, Whitehead was not yet a new realist. Dawes Hicks' argument for Whitehead's subjectivism rests on his own conception of knowledge as discriminative, as opposed to the conception of knowledge as synthetic. Although I submit that Hicks might be right, in what follows I will approach the issue from a different angle.

WHITEHEAD'S THEORY OF PERCEPTUAL OBJECTS

I will begin by summarizing Whitehead's theory of perception, which is mainly a theory of perceptual objects. The broad outlook is as follows. The perceptual object (which corresponds to the actual things of the external world perceived) is a complex construction. The construction is operated on several levels. On each level there is the possibility of error, which is error of judgment. The objects on each level (except the first) are complexes of objects of the immediately inferior level. The intellectual construction of objects of a higher level is governed by several principles, some of which can be stated from the beginning. There are three such principles:

[9] A. N. Whitehead, *Symbolism. Its Meaning and Effects*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1985.

[10] See Bogdan Rusu, „Whitehead's Early Subjectivism: a Criticism from Dawes Hicks", in M. Weber & R. Desmet (eds.), *Chromatikon*, 8, 2012.

PA. „Principle of Aggregation”[11]. The principle states that objects apprehended at different times can be aggregated into a single continuous object, if specific conditions are met.

PC. „Principle of Convergence”[12]. Is the principle by which „we confine our attention to such parts as possess mutual relations sufficiently simple for our intellect to consider”[13]. It is the principle according to which we seek simplicity by focusing our attention on regions of space-time small enough.

PH. Principle of Homogeneity. It is the principle that „the last simplicity is obtained by partitioning the facts, already restricted as to space and time, into further parts characterized by homogeneity in type of sense, and homogeneity in quality and intensity of sense”[14].

A fourth principle will be introduced later.

There are four types of objects, each one corresponding to a level of intellectual construction: sense-objects, first crude thought-objects of perception, second crude thought-objects of perception, and complete objects of perception.

Sense-objects are objects of the lowest type, constructions of the lowest level of complexity. Nevertheless, they are complex constructs or „phantasies of thought”[15], even if basic. As their status is unclear, despite their importance, I will discuss them the last. For the time being, I will just give a few examples of sense-objects: red, hot, sweet and the like.

A first crude thought-object of perception is a construction from sense-objects:

> Some composite partial stream of sense-presentation can be distinguished with the following characteristics: (1) the time-succession of sense-objects, belonging to a single sense, involved in any such a composite partial stream, is composed of very similar objects whose modifications increase only gradually, and thus forms a homogeneous component stream within the composite stream; (2) the space-relations of those sense-objects (of various senses) of such a composite stream which are confined within any sufficiently short time are identical so far as they are definitely apprehended, and thus these various component streams, each homogeneous, „cohere” to form the whole composite partial stream; (3) there are other sense-presentations occurring in association with that composite partial stream which can be determined by rules derived from analogous composite partial streams, with other space and time relations, provided that the analogy be sufficiently close. Call these the „associated sense-presentations”. A partial stream of this sort, viewed as a whole, is here called a „first crude thought-object of perception”.[16]

By an application of PA to two or more first crude thought-objects of perception we obtain second crude thought-objects of perception. Let’s suppose we

[11] *AE*, p. 128.
[12] *Ibidem.*
[13] *Ibidem.*
[14] *Ibidem.*
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 126.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 129.

look at an orange for a half of minute, then we leave the room. When we get back, our mind constructs a different first crude thought-object of perception. Nevertheless, we know we are looking at the same orange. The two first crude thought-objects of perception have coalesced into a single second crude thought-object of perception.

The second crude thought-object of perception does not yet correspond to a real existent thing. For one thing, a real orange is there whether we see it or not. But a second crude thought-object of perception is there only while we apprehend it, that is, only while we apprehend sense-objects satisfying some requirements. In a word, if nobody senses, there is no second crude thought-object of perception. In order to arrive at the concept of a full object of perception, we need to complete it with hypothetical sense-presentations[17]. Here intervenes the principle of hypothetical sense-presentations (PHyp). The concept of a perceptual object includes not only our actual sense-presentations, past and present, but also hypothetical sense-presentations of actual perceivers or of hypothetical perceivers:

> Imagination is necessary to complete the orange, namely, the imagination of hypothetical sense-presentations ... We conceive the orange as a permanent collection of sense-presentations existing as if they were an actual element in our consciousness, which they are not ... Namely, we imagine hypothetical possibilities of sense-presentation, and conceive their want of actuality in our consciousness as immaterial to their existence in fact ... The orange completed in this way is the thought-object of perception.[18]

I have mentioned that at each level there is judgment and there is possibility for error. In most cases we are talking about immediate judgments, without any inference at all. The very apprehension of a sense-object is such an immediate judgment[19]. Here is how error occurs at this level:

> […] direct apprehension is in its essence unique, and it is impossible to apprehend an object as both red and blue. Subsequently it may be judged that if other elements of the consciousness had been different, the apprehension would have been of a blue object. Then – under certain circumstances – the original apprehension will be called an error.[20]

At the second level, error may occur due to a wrong association of streams of thought-objects. For example, we associate the mewing heard in the dark with a sensation felt on the leg and we form the first crude thought-object of perception of a cat. But, in fact, we have only felt the edge of the armchair in passage. Error is even easier to obtain in the case of the second crude thought-objects of perception. I look at the orange for a half of minute, and then I live the room. When I get back, the orange is still there, in the fruit basket. Except that Tom ate it and replaced it with a plastic one. I only realize this and rectify the error when I come closer and feel the object.

---

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 130.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 131.
[19] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[20] *Ibidem*.

Finally, at the level of the full object of perception there is the possibility of all the previous errors. As a matter of fact, as errors occur as a result of a wrong application of one of the first three principles above (PA, PC, and PH), a list of perceptual fallacies could be obtained quite easily. For Whitehead, as for many of his contemporaries, there is no error of perception, but only of thought. Illusion, therefore, is an unconscious fallacy; and, as soon as the fallacy becomes conscious, the illusion is corrected.

In this brief summary of Whitehead's first theory of perceptual objects two terms have been left unexplained: sense-presentation and sense-object. The theory, which was outlined rather formally, has its content determined by the meanings of these two terms. Therefore, we will try to see what Whitehead means by these terms in the next section of this paper.

THE NATURE OF SENSE-PRESENTATIONS AND SENSE-OBJECTS

We are discussing the theory of perception. But what is that what we call „perception"? According to Whitehead, perception is a „state of consciousness"[21]. In such a state of consciousness we distinguish an „element […] which is not thought"[22] from a thought. The thought involved in perception is also called „primary thought" or „primary perceptive thought"[23]. By „thought" we have to understand an „immediate judgment"[24], which consists of „a direct apprehension of qualities and relations within the content of consciousness"[25]. For example, an immediate judgment is (improperly) suggested by the verbal expression „Hullo, red!". The judgment is said to consist in the apprehension of a „red object", or „object of redness"[26]. It seems thus that „quality" and "object" are synonymous for Whitehead. In a better approximation, the expression suggesting the immediate judgment is „Hullo, object of redness there!"[27], or „An object of redness is there"[28]. The objects are thus „apprehended"; in perception there is „direct apprehension"[29], which apparently is a mental act. From the psychological standpoint, we distinguish then in perception an „object" from its „immediate apprehension".

The primary thoughts already referred to „arise directly from sense-presentation"[30]. This is the first occurrence of the phrase „sense-presentation". Here is how Whitehead explains what he means: „When we speak of sense-presentation, we

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[22] *Ibidem*, p. 122.
[23] *Ibidem*.
[24] *Ibidem*.
[25] The thought is actually the recognition of a sense-object. *Ibidem*, p. 122.
[26] *Ibidem*.
[27] *Ibidem*.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[29] *Ibidem*.
[30] *Ibidemi*.

mean these primary thoughts essentially involved in its [the object's] perception"[31]. Does this mean that sense-presentation *is* primary thought, or that the phrase „sense-presentation" refers only to primary thoughts, although a presentation is more than just primary thought? When Whitehead says that the primary thoughts *arise* from sense-presentation, this would seem to imply that sense-presentation and primary thoughts are different. Thus, the second interpretation looks more plausible: sense-presentation occasions the arising of the primary thoughts and, although sense-presentation and primary thoughts are different, we use „sense-presentation" to refer to the primary thoughts because they are the only element of perception that matters to science: „the facts of sense-presentation as they affect science are those elements in the immediate apprehensions which are thoughts"[32]. Before we go any further, let us recall that the last quotation's context is that of a discussion about „facts". What are the facts of science? Whitehead's answer is that „so far as physical science is concerned, the facts are thoughts, and thoughts are facts"[33]. So, the second quotation says that what matters for science are the thoughts involved in the immediate apprehensions, and not what is not thought. In other words, science wants to know only about the immediate judgments involved in the apprehensions of „objects". This discussion, if it clarified anything, clarified so far that Whitehead *uses* „sense-presentation" to refer to immediate perceptive judgments. It left us clueless (almost) concerning what sense-presentation *is*, and what is the relation between presentations and objects.

Two questions need to be answered: are „sense-presentation" and „sense-object" synonymous terms? And what are their natures? (or nature, if they are synonymous).

The proper place to begin our investigation is, I think, the dependent or independent status of objects. It is very fortunate that Whitehead let us catch a glimpse of his thoughts of the subject in *OT*. Here is the crucial quotation:

> The conception of subject and object in careless discussion covers two distinct relations. There is the relation of the whole perceiving consciousness to part of its own content, for example, the relation of a perceiving consciousness to an object of redness apparent to it. There is also the relation of a perceiving consciousness to an entity which does not exist in virtue of being part of the content of that consciousness. Such a relation, so far as known to the perceiving consciousness, must be an inferred relation, the inference being derived from an analysis of the content of the perceiving consciousness.[34]

In this excerpt the expressions „the relation of the whole perceiving consciousness to part of its own content" and „the relation of a perceiving consciousness to an entity which does not exist in virtue of being part of the content of that consciousness" seem to introduce an opposition between that which is a part of the

[31] *Ibidem*.
[32] *Ibidem*.
[33] *Ibidem*.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 152.

content of a consciousness, and that which does not exist in virtue of being a part of the content of a consciousness. From this opposition I can only conclude that some entity only exists by virtue of its being a part of the content of a consciousness, in opposition to some real thing which is not itself a part of the content of a consciousness. There is considerable ambiguity in Whitehead's language; but I understand him to introduce a dichotomy between things that exist outside the content of any consciousness, and things that exist only inside the content of some consciousness, that is, between things metaphysically objective and things metaphysically subjective. Now what is that what is subjective? Whitehead speaks of „an object of redness" apparent to the perceiving consciousness as being a part of the consciousness' content. Does this not mean that sense-objects (which in this case are completely identical to sense-presentations) are metaphysically subjective entities, psychic existents, rather like Locke's ideas and Hume's impressions? I think it does. I think Whitehead's position can be interpreted as follows: suppress the consciousness, and you have suppressed a wide range of entities existing within consciousness; suppress the consciousness, and a still wider range of entities will remain unaffected and keep existing.

This choice distinguishes Whitehead from philosophers with whom, in many respects, he has affinity, but who were outspoken realists at that time. If this is correct, and sense-objects are mental entities, distinguished from physical objects, whose existence is inferred, then we should determine next whether sense-objects and sense-presentations are entities identical or different. Sense-objects exist only within the content of perceiving consciousness; they are parts of this content; I assume that it is legitimate, then, to use the language differently and speak of them as contents of consciousness. The question of the identity or difference between sense-object and sense-presentation becomes thus the question of whether sense-presentation is a mental act, and thus different from the sense-object, or a mental content, thus identical with the sense-object. We can formulate the question in yet another way. Whitehead speaks on occasions of the „immediate apprehension" of sense-objects: is then „sense-presentation" an „immediate apprehension", or a „sense-object"?

The answer is implicit in Whitehead's doctrine of hypothetical sense-presentations. Remember that, according to Whitehead, we can imagine sense-presentations of hypothetical perceivers. The psychological orthodoxy is that mental acts cannot become objects of other mental acts, direct apprehension, memory, or imagination. To use Alexander's term, we enjoy our mental acts, but we cannot transform them in objects. Some authors held that contents cannot become objects either (Twardowski, Meinong, Dawes Hicks) and hence cannot be introspected. However, Stout thought differently. He conceived of presentations as introspectable psychic entities with an existence distinct from that of the mental acts of which they are contents. From this perspective, I can imagine the content of your imagination, but not your imagining the content. Thus, if I can and do imagine hypothetical sense-presentations, then they cannot be mental acts. As they are not non-mental entities, they can only be mental contents. Hence, sense-presentations and sense-objects are identical and are contents of metal states.

THE MAIN INSPIRER OF WHITEHEAD'S CONCEPT OF PRESENTATION: G. F. STOUT

The history of Brentanian psychology on the mainland is, I suppose, well enough known not to require any detailed exposition. I will merely recall that Brentano distinguished in a psychic phenomenon an object from the act referring to it, and distinguished also three types of acts: of presenting, of judging, and emotive ones. The act is directed towards the object, and the object in-exists in the act. Brentano used *Inhalt* and *Gegenstand* indistinctly, and held that the objects of mental acts (presentations, judgments) are immanent to those acts, and do not have any real existence outside them. The doctrine of immanent intentionality was called into question by several followers of Brentano. First, Twardowski introduced a distinction between acts and objects. For Twardowski, the content is the equivalent of Brentano's immanent object; the mental state is directed towards a transcendent object, the „real" object existing outside the „circle of our ideas". The contents, it has to be remarked, are not a different kind of objects. But, whenever a mental act is directed towards an object, there is a content whereby the intention is realized. Meinong carried on Twardowski's analysis in the same direction, and deepened this tripartite analysis of a mental state, into *Akt*, *Gegenstand*, and *Inhalt*. The history might continue with Husserl and other phenomenologists in the realist tradition, such as Reinach, but this is of lesser interest to us.

If the history of Austro-German Brentanianism is satisfactorily known, the same cannot be said about its British counterpart. Brentano's act-object psychology did not fail to influence British psychology and theory of knowledge. The act-object analysis of experience became a common place of British philosophy, despite disagreements concerning the nature of „objects". Recently the Brentanian background of Stout was rediscovered and discussed. Nasim saw in Stout a counterpart of Twardowski. A psychologist and theorist of knowledge strongly influenced by Meinong was G. Dawes Hicks. James Ward, even if influenced by the Herbartians, might be considered, in certain respects, a counterpart of Brentano on the British psychological scene. He admits his debts to, among others, „Brentano and his Austrian connexions". Russell, as we know, developed his theory of knowledge and philosophical psychology by opposing Meinong. In a way, one can speak of a Brentanian debate anticipating and informing the Edwardian controversy. The psychology underlying Whitehead's theory of perception cannot be understood out of the context of this Brentanian debate, the main lines of which I will sketch next. Just like in the Edwardian controversy, Stout turns out to be the central character.

Stout's conception is disseminated in his many psychological and epistemological works, but there is one particular study which, according to him, offers „the fullest and most accurate account" of his doctrine of presentations: the study is called „Some Fundamental Points in the Theory of Knowledge". The relevance of this study to our subject is indicated by the very lines with which it begins: „The terms 'Akt', 'Inhalt', and 'Gegenstand' are the keywords of a certain theory of knowledge which constitutes, in my opinion, the most important recent development of

philosophical thought in Germany"[35]. In this study Stout once again connects and then compares his own conception, first exposed in his *Analytic Psychology*, to that of the Austro-German Brentanians.

In *Analytic Psychology* Stout explicitly criticizes Brentano's way of distinguishing mental functions, based on the way in which consciousness refers to an object. According to Stout, Bentano is wrong when he sees his theory anticipated by Kant. If Kant distinguishes indeed presentations from judgments and desires or aversions in function of the faculty to which the object is referred, he nonetheless does not use the term „object" in the same way as Brentano. Brentano's „object" is something which is the content of a presentation, while Kant's object is „that to which the content of presentation is referred"[36]. While Brentano says that consciousness refers in presentation to an object, Kant affirms that consciousness refers a presentation to an object. This already gives a clue as to the necessity of amending Brentano's conception by introducing a content which is referred to an object – and this content is called by Stout „presentation":

> In the process by which we take cognizance of an object two constituents are distinguishable. (1) A thought-reference to something which, as the thinker means or intends it, is not a present modification of his individual consciousness. (2) A more or less specific modification of his individual consciousness, which defines and determines the direction of thought to this or that special object; this special mode of subjective experience we may call a *presentation*. We may say, if we choose, that the object itself is *presented*, but we must not say that it is a presentation; and when we say that it is presented, it is better to say that it is presented *to* consciousness, than that it is presented *in* consciousness.[37]

Presentations, as contents of consciousness, may have existence independently of their thought-reference, as such, they are included under the label „sentience, or *anoetic* consciousness"[38].

It has been shown persuasively[39] that Stout's notion of presentation as *Inhalt* comes from an attempt to patch Brentano's theory. But Stout tried also to revise Ward's conception, and he affirms it explicitly on several occasions. For example:

> The term „presentation" is taken from Ward, and I ought to explain how I came to use it in a way different from his. According to Ward's formal definition a „presentation" simply means an object so far as an experiencing individual is aware of it. It thus covers all that is covered by Locke's „idea".

---

[35] G. F. Stout, „Some Fundamental Points in the Theory of Knowledge", in *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, London, Macmillan, 1930, pp. 353-383, p. 353.

[36] G. F. Stout, *Analytic Psychology*, 4th edition, London, Allen & Unwin, 1918, vol. I, p. 41.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 47.

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 50.

[39] Omar W. Nasim, *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

> I should have been glad simply to accept this use of the term if I had not found it in Ward bound up with a view of the nature of „objects" which I cannot accept. He seems to derive them all from sensation through differentiation and integration of a sensori-motor continuum. He thus ignores or seems to ignore the thought-factor which is for me fundamentally distinct from sensa and equally original. My remedy for this was to reserve the term „presentation" for the sense factor, or more generally that element in the object which is immediately experienced.[40]

Stout next says that his usage of the term caused so many misunderstandings that, in his *Manual of Psychology* he had to revert to Ward's entrenched usage of the term.

We have seen so far that Stout uses „presentation" to mean *Inhalt*, or a kind of content of mental states, namely, „contents of immediate experience which … fulfil, or are capable of fulfilling, the function of presenting or introducing objects that are not themselves contents of immediate experience"[41]. But this is merely a lexical progress. What are those contents supposed to be? For one thing, they are psychical entities having an existence distinct from that of mental acts. According to writers such as Twardowski or Meinong, intentionality is a characteristic of mental states, contents being only aspects or products of the mental states. According to Stout, intentionality (or thought-reference) is characteristic of contents, which refer to objects from within mental states (remember „anoetic consciousness"). The existence of contents is independent from their reference to objects, that is, from their intentionality. It is possible to say that, if for the Brentanians the contents were welded with the acts, for Stout the presentations are welded with the objects. The tandem presentation-object is supposed to overcome the difficulty involved in the representative theory of perception, that is, that of the passage from the presentation to the presented. His answer, in short is that there is no such passage; there is no need to pass, because we are already there. A sensum is fundamentally ambiguous from this point of view, and this caused for the theories of perception to go astray in a representationalist direction. A sensum has both an objective part, constituted by the object sensed, and a subjective part, constituted by the presentation, or content of the act of experience of the sensing subject.

Stout's notion of „presentation" was criticized, among others, by Dawes Hicks. Nasim considers that his criticism can be interpreted as „a realist defence of Twardowski"[42]. We should qualify it also as a Meinongian objection to Stout. In several places Dawes Hicks explicitly attributes the origin of some of his ideas to Meinong. From Meinong, Dawes Hicks got not only the idea of a content of mental acts (*Inhalt*), but also the belief that this content has no separate existence of its own.

---

[40] G.F. Stout, *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, London, Macmillan, 1930, p. x.

[41] G.F. Stout, „Some Fundamental Points in the Theory of Knowledge" in *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, London, Macmillan, 1930, pp. 353–383, p. 355.

[42] Omar W. Nasim, *Bertrand Russell and the Edwardian Philosophers: Constructing the World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 28.

> In the first place, it [i.e., the term „content"] does not signify a part of the act of cognition that can stand over against the other part, so to speak, and be itself cognised as an object. Rather it is an inseparable aspect of the whole act, as, for example, extendedness is an inseparable aspect of a material body. In the second place, it is not a „representation", or copy, or picture of the object.[43]

Dawes Hicks rejects thus both Stout's doctrine, and the older representative theory of perception. He sanctions as an error leading to both doctrines „the false severance that has been instituted between the content of a cognitive act and the act – a severance as false as that between the nature of a thing and the thing… The content is a 'what' that is inseparable from its 'that'"[44]. For Stout the presentations can exist in the background of consciousness and then being given a representative function; for Dawes Hicks this separation is wrong, and the content can only arise in and through the mental state's being directed upon an object.

Stout answered Hick's critique by distinguishing two kinds of content. „Content" may mean the presentation itself, but also the content of the presentation[45]. However, Dawes Hicks wrote later that „the content apprehended […] is *not* the content of the act by which it is apprehended"[46]. I take this to be an implicit dismissal of the point of Stout's reply to his criticism. The content of the act is what makes an act of apprehension of blue differ from an act of apprehension of yellow. But this content is never apprehended, rather through it there is apprehension of a „content", that is, of an idea's content. When I perceive a red spot, the content apprehended is „red", but the content of the mental act is an awareness of red. So, Dawes Hicks does not confuse the two meanings of „content", and does not hold that the *Inhalt* existentially inseparable from the mental act is anything like the content of an idea. Stout's criticism of Hicks is as misguided as his claim that he understood by „presentation" something similar with what Lipps, Husserl, and Meinong understood by *Inhalt*. His misunderstanding was noticed by Findlay, who writes the following:

> There can be no doubt that the conception to which professor Stout refers [i.e., the conception that he attributes to Meinong and to himself] is a very important one, and it is clear that the entities of which he speaks [as contents] are open to our observation. Unfortunately, however, they do not correspond to Meinong's „contents". For […] they are not the sort of thing a person could „live through".[47]

---

[43] G. Dawes Hicks, „The Basis of Critical Realism", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 17, pp. 300–359, p. 327.

[44] *Ibidem*.

[45] „Neo-Kantism as Represented by Dr. Dawes Hicks", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, vol. 6, pp. 347–390.

[46] G. Dawes Hicks, *ibidem*, p. 328.

[47] J.N. Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects and Values*, 2nd edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 27.

Indeed for Meinong the contents are not introspectable, and are of a purely qualitative nature, whereas for Stout they clearly possess some kind of substantive psychical existence. Whitehead's concept of presentation seems then to derive directly from Stout's psychology. I remark in passage that Stout's conception of thought as an original factor in psychical life dovetails with Whitehead's analysis of perception throughout his whole career. What I wish to do next, is to argue that Whitehead's early theory of perception draws more inspiration from Stout: it has what can be called a Stoutian infrastructure.

THE STOUTIAN INFRASTRUCTURE OF WHITEHEAD'S EARLY THEORY OF PERCEPTION

Our quest for the meanings of „sense-presentation" and „sense-object" brought us to the conclusion that both terms are synonymous and stand for some kind of metaphysically subjective, although psychologically objective[48] entities. Sense-presentations have nevertheless a relation with real physical things: on one side, they correspond to some of their features and, on the other side, they are caused by the action of physical things upon our sense-organs. In some sense, the resulting theory of perception may be considered a revision of Locke onto the basis of the new anti-associationist psychology and of the new relativity physics. Even if we spoke of a revision, we may briefly wonder whether it does not, despite all, fit the profile of a typical theory of representative perception, in the grand tradition of the British empiricism. From the outset the possibility can be dismissed, for one immediately apparent reason. Whitehead was here, as ever, a relationist. Not only he affirms that „our true goal is to make explicit our perception in terms of its relations"; that „our object is the analysis of the relation"[49], but he makes the distinctive claim that „nothing is in isolation; the perception of red is of a red object in its relations to the whole content of the perceiving consciousness"[50]; „no factor which enters into consciousness is by itself or even can exist in isolation"[51]. This is an application to presentations of Lotze's principle that to be is to stand in relations. The first one to have used Lotze this way in Britain was Ward, and he was followed by Stout. Influenced by Lotze, Ward came to the idea of a „presentational continuum" and criticized associationism for the fallacy of believing in the existence of psychic atoms, that is, of psychic entities that can exist completely unrelated. It is clear that Whitehead shares this view and it is plausible that he was influenced by Ward, just as Stout has been. He might have got the same view from

[48] The fact that sense-presentations are psychologically objective results also from the fact that they are alternatively called „sense-*objects*" and they enjoy some priority in relation to the act of direct apprehension; they are „there" to be apprehended, like Ward's objects-presentations.

[49] *AE*, p. 122.

[50] *Ibidem*.

[51] *Ibidem*, p. 131.

Stout's works. Be that as it may, I wish to suggest next that an essential part of the background of Whitehead's theory of perception might be constituted by an early, much debated in the epoch, version of Stout's theory of perception.

Stout presents his theory of perception as a defence of the plain man's view. Like Berkeley, he defends common sense against the philosophers' attacks. According to the scientific world-view, common sense confuses qualities of sensations and properties of external things. Thus, when the plain man says that the burning coal is hot, he is taken to attribute the quality of his sensation to the burning coal. Against this view it is contended that "„heat in this sense is no more in the fire ... than pain is in the surgeon's knife"[52]. Hence, the plain man should only assert that the burning coal has the power to make him feel hot; and that power depends on the burning coal's primary qualities. According to Stout, this criticism is based on a misconception of the procedure of common sense:

In principle the plain man is not guilty of the confusion with which he is charged. He does not in general confound intrinsic characters of his own sensations with attributes of external things. On the other hand, I admit and maintain that in ascribing secondary qualities to corporeal things he does not merely mean their power to produce certain sensations in us. His point of view is not that of his critics; but neither is it that which his critics ascribe to him. What it really is remains to be investigated. When it is fairly presented it will, I think, be found defensible, and indeed the only one which is defensible, for the case of primary as well as of secondary qualities.[53]

Stout begins to analyse the plain man's view on secondary qualities with the example of heat. What do we mean when we say that an iron bar is hot? Two hypotheses are discarded:

1. We don't mean merely that the iron is actually producing a sensation in us, for we imagine it hot before being touched by us.

2. We don't mean either merely that the iron bar has the power to produce certain sensations in us; we think of the iron as actually being hot itself, as possessing hotness as one of its properties. Stout argues that we do not conceive of hotness as a dispositional property. When we think of the iron bar as hot, we think of it as if it would actually produce sensations in a hypothetical perceiver. But this is not how we think of dispositional properties. When we think that gas is inflammable, we do not represent it as if it were actually in flames.

Stout raises the question whether we should attribute to the plain man the belief that sensations may exist when nobody has them. The question is really about how to interpret the principle of hypothetical sense-presentations. Percy Nunn, and Russell reluctantly, interpreted the principle as committing us to the existence of unperceived *sensibilia*. For Stout this is an absurdity which is not entailed by the procedure of common sense. In order to explain how comes that we can imagine hypothetical sensations, Stout distinguishes a sensation's existence from its „representative function". Let us quote in full a very important passage:

---

[52] G. F. Stout, „Primary and Secondary Qualities", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, vol. 4, pp. 141–160, p. 142.

[53] *Ibidem*.

> There are two main points to be emphasized. The first is that the sensations which mediate our knowledge of the secondary qualities do so only in so far as they represent, express, or stand for something other than themselves; and their representative function being independent of their actual existence at this or that moment or in this or that mind, they may be validly thought of as if they existed when in fact they do not and cannot exist. The second point is that the distinction between what is represented and its sense-presentation is only a latent presupposition of ordinary thinking. The plain man does not in general formulate it, though in our logical analysis of this procedure we must formulate it for him. What are called the secondary qualities of matter are not identified with what is represented in distinction from its sense-representation, nor yet with the sense-representation in distinction from what it stands for. It is rather the complex unity formed by both together and commonly left unanalysed.[54]

Stout's innovation concerns the notion of „representative function". Some changes in our sensations do not have representative value, he argues. When we move away from a fire the intensity of our sensation of heat diminishes not because there is change in the properties of the fire, but because the conditions of perception are varying. But, under invariable conditions of perception, any change in our sensations has representative value. If, remaining close to the fire, I feel less hot, it is because the heat of the fire is diminishing. Only because such changes have representative value I can think of hypothetical sensations as if they actually existed, under the assumption of the invariability of the conditions of perception. Thus, we can „legitimately represent the sun as sensibly hot before any sentient beings appeared on this planet"[55].

The idea that common sense understands by secondary properties of matter the complex unity of the sensible representation and what is represented is also a landmark of Stout's thought. He presents the following argument in support of this idea: If by secondary properties of matter we understood only what is represented, then they would be for common sense without content, or, at best, their content would be definable only in terms of primary qualities. However, it is plain that common sense attributes to the secondary properties of matter positive and specific qualitative contents. But they can acquire such content only because qualities of sensations enter, in virtue of their representative character, into the constitution of the corresponding properties of matter. As Stout remarks, we do not speak of a yellow sensation, but of a sensation of yellow.

Stout concludes from here that „the secondary attributes of matter are correlated but not identical with corresponding qualities of sensation"[56]. He extends the same analysis to primary qualities, which, „like the secondary, are correlated but not identical with intrinsic characters of sensation, especially visual, tactual, and motor sensation"[57].

---

[54] *Ibidem*, pp. 144–145.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 145.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 146.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 147.

It may be objected that Stout's distinction between the sensible representation and what is represented commits him to the kind of dualism we find in Locke. Indeed, Cook Wilson charged Stout with this very early. Stout, however, affirms that „the existences and processes which have an inner being of their own are the very same existences and processes which as sensibly represented constitute the world of material phenomena"[58]. But how can we get out of the circle of our representations? If things cause our sensible representations, how can we get from these to the things? Stout's answer is, by *immediate* inference. According to him, „the primary datum for the individual mind is our own immediate experience"[59]. But the datum is part of a whole, and this is precisely what makes it a datum: „an isolated datum is a contradiction in terms"[60]. As such, a datum is a fragment pointing always beyond itself. Hence, „immediate experience must from the outset be inseparably blended with immediate inference, and this in manifold ways"[61].

The same conception is exposed in Stout's important address from 1905 on „Things and Sensations". Having taken notice of Cook Wilson's criticism of his representationalism, Stout further distinguishes his conception from the older forms of representative theory of perception. After arguing that material things and their sensible appearance form a unity, but still have separate existence, Stout asks how comes that sensible appearance so interpenetrates the material thing that without sensible appearance there would be no material thing. The first answer to be considered is provided by Locke's representationalism. But this theory is indefensible, because it makes our knowledge of nature impossible. In order to know that our ideas represent material things, we would have to be able to compare material things with the sensible appearance we know, which is clearly impossible.

The second answer comes from Berkeley: it consists in identifying matter and sensible appearance. But this answer makes difficult to understand the distinction between thing and appearance. In order for it to be meaningful, the notion of a systematic order comprising actual, as well as possible experiences must be invoked. The thing must be defined as a „permanent possibility of sensations". This theory is constantly refuted by Stout, but I will not get into details here; suffice it to say that the notion of such a systematic conceptual order is found by Stout to be incompatible with what the notion of a physical world we actually have presupposes. The actual world is not an order of possible sensations, but a system of actual existences, „persisting, changing, and acting on each other"[62]. A third answer is provided by a modification of the previous theory along Kantian lines: „matter is regarded as an ideal construction for which the material is supplied by the content of sense-presentation"[63]. This theory succeeds in explaining the intertwining of matter and sensible appearance, and it also manages to keep them apart as each existing

[58] *Ibidem*, p. 158.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 159.
[60] *Ibidem*.
[61] *Ibidem*.
[62] G. F. Stout, „Things and Sensations", in *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, London, Macmillan, 1930, pp. 150–165, p. 157.
[63] *Ibidem*.

in its own right, although with the wrong arguments, involving the doctrine of things-in-themselves.

Stout rejects Kant's theory of things-in-themselves and, in a way, revises Kantianism along Lotzean lines. For example, he maintains that space and time are indeed forms, although not of intuition but of the intuited. He keeps, however, from Kantianism the idea that the constitution of matter „involves, even from the outset, a process which, in a wide sense of the term, may be called 'ideal construction'"[64]. But the construction involved in the procedure of common sense „must be a *construing* – a construing in terms of sensation of the nature and behaviour of an actual existence other than sensation or any immediate experiences of the individual"[65]. Furthermore, „[the] representative function of actual sensation forms the necessary basis of the ideal construction, or construing, through which our knowledge of the material world develops"[66].

Construing involves some kind of passage from sensations to things; but, Stout mentions, this passage or transition has nothing to do with the transition from premises to conclusion which we usually call inference. There is no logical inference from sensible appearance to material things. Rather „immediate experience, as it were, radiates from itself a halo of implications, and in this way primary knowledge is constituted"[67]. The inference, by which there is primary knowledge, in so far as it can be called „inference", is not thought, but „immediately experienced". Thus, the material thing is known not by logical inference from previous cognitions, but „as a direct implication of immediate experience"[68], which is possible only on the ground of the unity of the Universe.

Two points have to be made. First, that, in a certain sense, there is inference from sensible appearance to material things, but not logical or thought inference; it is „immediate". Second, that sensible appearance implies something beyond itself by virtue of its representative function, and an appearance can have this function only in virtue of its being a part of a whole, hence only in virtue of its being related to other elements of the whole. Years before Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, Stout maintained that our cognitions „contain features of immediate experience which, owing to their fragmentary nature, cannot by themselves be distinct objects of knowledge, but can only be known as related to something which is not immediately experienced"[69]. It is hard not to see that Whitehead's later theory of cognizance by adjective vs. cognizance by relatedness from *R*[70] and his doctrine of significance is closer to Stout's theory of immediate inference than it is to Russell's doctrines.

---

[64] *Ibidem*, p. 158.
[65] *Ibidem*.
[66] *Ibidem*, p. 163.
[67] *Ibidem*, p. 160.
[68] *Ibidem*, p. 161.
[69] *Ibidem*, p. 163
[70] A.N. Whitehead, *The Principle of Relativity with Applications to Physical Science*, Mineola, NY, Dover Publications Inc., 2004.

WHITEHEAD BETWEEN STOUT AND RUSSELL

When we compare Whitehead and Stout we can distinguish easily a few important similarities:

1. Critical commonsensism
2. Relational holism.
3. The doctrine of the psychical nature of sensible appearances, or sense-presentation.
4. The doctrine of the independent existence of physical things.
5. The construction or construing of the material world from sensations, or sense-presentations.

I will now briefly comment on these points of similarity. Some of them are inherited by both thinkers from common sources. Their critical commonsensism derives ultimately from Sidgwick, although Whitehead inherited it through multiple channels (directly and through Stout or Nunn). Their relational holism comes from Lotze, possibly through Green and Ward. Doctrines 3 and 4 are common places of classical British empiricism. Stout and Whitehead are influenced both by this tradition. Doctrine 5 is one commonplace of the post-Kantian idealistic tradition. Thus, both thinkers belong to two great traditions combined, that of British empiricism and of German idealism. Doctrines 1 and 4 commit them both to a generic commonsense realism (metaphysical), while doctrines 2, 3, and 4 seem to commit them to a form of epistemological idealism.

In addition to the previous doctrines, Stout accepted also the following:

6. The rejection of logical inference as a way of getting out of the „circle of representations".
7. The acceptance of immediate inference as explaining the getting out of the „circle of representations".

The doctrines 6 and 7, taken together and combined with 1 and 2 are characteristic of Stout. As a matter of fact, their conjunction is one effective way to reconcile commonsensism with 3 and 4. Does Whitehead accept also doctrines 6 and 7? What is his position concerning inference? Does he consider that there is inference in perception, or not? If there is, is it logical, or merely psychological (immediate)? These questions touch on a neuralgic point, since it appears that Whitehead gave contradictory answers between 1912 and 1917.

In a letter from August 26th 1911, Whitehead communicated to Russell his impressions after having read the typescript of *PP*. Whitehead disagrees with Russell on several issues, for example, his interpretation of Kant. But the most important part of his criticism, which concerns us here, can be gathered from the following lines:

> Here we start with the perception of a *table*. The question is asked, What properties does the table really have? […]
> Real table (if it exist) = a Physical Object (p. 9). Senses *immediately* tell us,

> not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, as far as we can see, depend on relations between us and the object – (p. 12 also cf. pp. 8, 9).
> Here, in pages 8, 9 and 12 you seem by a sleight of hand to take away the table which I (= the plain man) perceive. I see a „yellow *table*" and I feel a „hard *table*" and I infer that I feel what I see. You (rather obscurely) tell me that I see yellowness and feel hardness, and *infer* a real table. Such inference are quite beyond plain people like myself. I perceive *objects*, and want to know about the reality of the objects I perceive. You ignore this object (or rather smuggle it away) and proceed to talk about sensations of yellowness and hardness and of an *inferred* object which causes them. […]
> But the table has been smuggled away by you long ago – you have only left us sensations of color etc. and an imagined physical world which causes it. Note that particular physical objects as causes of our sensations suffer from the usual defect of all particular causation. If you trace it down far enough, all our sensations (on the scientific hypothesis) come from the relation of ourselves to the whole physical universe. […]

In criticizing Russell, Whitehead makes four major points.

a. Russell's theory *contradicts common sense* when it maintains that the plain man is mistaken when he believes that he perceives things with qualities.

b. Russell's theory „*smuggles away*" *the things* composing the physical world, and reduces them to bundles of sensations.

c. Russell's theory is mistaken when it claims that common sense *infers* physical objects from immediately known sensations.

d. The determination of the causes of our sensations as hypothetical material objects is *arbitrary*; it might just as well be said that the whole universe is the cause of our sensations.

In other words, Russell's theory contradicts common sense, is anti-realistic about things observed in perception, it is psychologically inexact and it is arbitrary. Except for the arbitrary character, all other defects of the theory are reducible to two:

A. Russell contradicts common sense.

B. Russell misinterprets the procedure of common sense.

A. Russell happily contradicts common sense, while Whitehead vindicates the „plain man's view", which he attributes to himself. Whitehead accepts the metaphilosophical thesis that philosophy should not contradict, nor explain away common sense knowledge.

B. How does Russell misinterpret the procedure of common sense? He misinterprets it when he claims that the knowledge of the things causing our sensations is the result of inference. To ascribe such inference to the plain man is to misinterpret the procedure of common sense. Let us read again two of Whitehead's sentences, in a different order. This is what he accuses Russell of: „You (rather obscurely) tell me that I see yellowness and feel hardness, and *infer* a real table". And this is how he amends Russell's interpretation of the procedure of common sense: „Such inferences are quite beyond plain people like myself". Now what is

Whitehead's description of the plain man's view? In the letter he says the following: „I perceive *objects*, and want to know about the reality of the objects I perceive". „I see a 'yellow *table*' and I feel a 'hard *table*' and I infer that I feel what I see". To these sentences we may add what he says in another work from the same year, 1911, *Introduction to Mathematics*:

> Our knowledge of the particular facts of the world around us is gained from our sensations. We see, and hear, and taste, and smell, and feel hot and cold, and push, and rub, and ache, and tingle. These are just our own personal sensations: my toothache cannot be your toothache, and my sight cannot be your sight. But we ascribe the origin of these sensations to relations between the things which form the external world. Thus the dentist extracts not the toothache but the tooth. And not only so, we also endeavour to imagine the world as one connected set of things which underlies all the perceptions of all people. There is not one world of things for my sensations and another for yours, but one world in which we both exist. It is the same tooth both for dentist and patient. *Also we hear and we touch the same world as we see*.[71]

The last sentence may indicate that Whitehead had in mind the criticism he had made to Russell's views. Whitehead, then, attributes to the plain man the procedure of ascribing the origin of his private sensations to things related together into a common public world. Our diverse types of sensations indicate the same world because in any particular sensation there is an apprehension of „locality of things"; every sensation involves a „here" or a „there" at which it is perceived, besides a reference to a sense-organ; this doctrine is expressed by Whitehead in *IM* as follows:

> The perception of the locality of things would appear to accompany, or be involved in many, or all, of our sensations. It is independent of any particular sensation in the sense that it accompanies many sensations. But it is a special peculiarity of the things which we apprehend by our sensations. The direct apprehension of what we mean by the positions of things in respect to each other is a thing sui generis, just as are the apprehensions of sounds, colours, tastes, and smells.[72]

Notice that Whitehead gives no detail of how we ascribe to actual things the origin of our sensations. Only one thing is certain: not by inference. The rest is interpretation: perhaps because sensations are immediately referred to a region of the physical space. This idea will be given a new shape in Whitehead's last theory of perception.

In *OT*, however, Whitehead seems to contradict what he had said five years before. Clearly, he accepts that the physical things are known by inference. And we infer them from things we directly apprehend. The things directly apprehended include not only sense-presentations, but also logical, moral, and aesthetic truths.

---

[71] A. N. Whitehead, *An Introduction to Mathematics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 4 (emphasis mine).

[72] *Ibidem*, p. 180.

I believe that Whitehead's claims are shown to be logically compatible when looked at in this Stoutian light. Remember that he claimed, as a „plain man", to perceive things, and not to infer them; on the other side, as a philosopher, he considered that sense-presentations are psychical existents and that other existences are inferred existences. Unless „inference" has two meanings, it is impossible to keep the theory coherent. In the procedure of common sense there is no logical inference (this is what Whitehead claims in the 1911 letter to Russell), but there is *immediate* inference (this is what he *must* claim in *OT*). I suggest that in the letter to Russell from 1911 Whitehead assumes the plain man's view as reported by Stout, and that in *OT* he gives an analysis of the plain man's view based on the one defended by Stout. He goes farther than Stout in his logical analysis of the procedure by which the plain man construes his sensations and, thus, constructs the „independent not-self", to use a phrase of Stout's. He also goes far beyond Stout when he uses the logical analysis of the procedure involved in the constructions of common sense to come up with a procedure for logically reconstructing the whole „apparatus of common sense thought" and the concepts of geometry and physical science. Both Stout and Whitehead accepted that immediate experience, by its very nature, transcends itself, indicating parts of reality known only as related to the immediate experience, but not immediately experienced themselves. The difference (an important one), will lead us into the discussion of the superstructure of Whitehead's theory of perception.

THE RUSSELLIAN SUPERSTRUCTURE

According to Whitehead, we get out of the circle of our own representations thanks to some immediate elements of perception, „other than the mere affections of the perceiving subject", which ground inference: universal logical, moral and aesthetical truths. They are „parts of the immediate presentations for individual subjects and yet more than such parts"[73]. Where Stout invokes the representative function of sensations, Whitehead speaks of universal truths being presentations. This theory of the given character of logical truths Whitehead shares with Russell and I suspect he actually got it from Russell. The theory of acquaintance with logical data was developed by Russell in his abandoned book on the theory of knowledge from 1913. It is still present in *Our Knowledge of the External World*: „the hardest of the hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense and the general truths of logic"[74]. Russell's theory apparently influenced Whitehead, who came to believe that we are acquainted with the universal forms of truth, to which he added those of goodness, beauty, and truth involved in hypothetic propositions.

In Russell the idea of an acquaintance with logical data is connected with the theory of acquaintance which, in its turn, is part of the theory of the two types of

[73] *AE*, p. 152.

[74] B. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy*, Routledge, 1995, p. 78.

knowledge, by acquaintance and by description; and this theory connects with one of Russell's most distinctive contributions to philosophy, his theory of definite descriptions. The evidence available, even when the genetic standpoint is adopted, shows that Whitehead considered Russell's „On Denoting" a great achievement in logic and philosophy of language. The theory of the logical truths being presentations, parts of perceptions, suggests now that Whitehead adopted also Russell's doctrine of acquaintance and the epistemological dualism which comes with it: there are some entities with which we are acquainted (sense-presentations and universal truths), all the rest are known by description. Russell's fundamental principle in the analysis of propositions, namely, „Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted"[75] has been interpreted as furnishing the theoretical framework for the method of extensive abstraction[76].

Some other features of Whitehead's conception suggest more influence from Russell's theory of perception in one of its phases, the phase when he came to accept *sensibilia*. According to Russell, *sensibilia* are „those objects which have the same metaphysical and physical status as sense-data without necessarily being data to any mind"[77]. A *sensibile* becomes a sense-datum when it enters into the relation of acquaintance. One important tenet of Russell's is that *sensibilia* exist before becoming sense-data. In this sense, *sensibilia* are not in the least hypothetical. However, unsensed *sensibilia* are entities which Russell accepts as hypothetical existents. Here is what he says:

> It may be thought monstrous to maintain that a thing can present any appearance at all in a place where no sense organs and nervous structure exists through which it could appear. I do not myself see the monstrosity; nevertheless I shall regard these supposed appearances only in the light of a hypothetical scaffolding, to be used while the edifice of physics is being raised, though possibly capable of being removed as soon as the edifice is completed. These „sensibilia" which are not data to anyone are therefore to be taken rather as an illustrative hypothesis and as an aid in preliminary statement than as a dogmatic part of the philosophy of physics in its final form.[78]

Whitehead had spoken of the necessity of admitting imagined hypothetical sense-presentations in comparable terms:

> It is beside the point to argue whether we ought to have such imaginations, or to discuss what are the metaphysical truths concerning reality to which they correspond. We are here only concerned with the fact that such imaginations exist and essentially enter into the formation of the concepts of the thought-objects of perception which are the first data of science. […] we imagine

[75] B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 32.

[76] E. Ramdsen Eames, *Bertrand Russell's Dialogue with his Contemporaries*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, pp. 111.

[77] B. Russell, *Our Knowedge of the External World*, p. 110.

[78] *Ibidem*, p. 117.

> hypothetical possibilities of sense-presentation, and conceive their want of actuality in our consciousness as immaterial to their existence in fact. The fact which is essential to science is our conception; its meaning in regard to the metaphysics of reality is of no scientific importance, as far as physical science is concerned.[79]

It looks then as if Russell's post-*The Problems of Philosophy* theory of perception influenced Whitehead's own pre-speculative epistemology. Notice that I am not discussing now the subject of who has primacy in the discovery of the method of extensive abstraction; one of the reasons is that the method is very important for the philosophy of science, but not so important for the philosophy of perception. This similarity, however, can contribute to enforce the impression that Whitehead's theory of knowledge is extensively indebted to Russell.

My position is the following: Russell's influence on Whitehead is undeniable; so is Whitehead's influence on Russell. But, at least in what concerns the theory of perception, neither one influenced the other profoundly. In *OT* Whitehead's philosophy is the closest it will ever be to Russell's. But both will abandon soon these convergent points of view, and adopt new, diverging points of view both in epistemology and in metaphysics.

Around the years 1914–1917 there is an undeniable parallelism between the philosophies of Whitehead and Russell, but there are also severe metaphysical divergences underlying the parallelism. Let us consider the case of unsensed *sensibilia* and hypothetical sense-presentation. Must we see in those imagined hypothetical sense-presentations analogues of Russell's unsensed *sensibilia*? Of course, the question sends to another question, logically prior: are Whitehead's sense-presentations, or sense-objects, anything like Russell's sense-data? If we agree that what Whitehead calls 'immediate apprehension' of sense-objects is the same thing Russell understood by 'acquaintance', we reach the conclusion that, indeed, Whitehead's 'sense-objects' are, from the point of view of the theory of perception alone, the same thing as Russell's *sensibilia*.

But we have seen earlier that, metaphysically, there is a very important difference between the Russellian sense-data and the Whiteheadian sense-objects: the first are physical existents, while the latter are psychic existents. The parallelism breaks down very soon: there is no correspondent in Whitehead's thought for the relation between *sensibilia* and sense-data. The logical consequence can be only that an unperceived sense-presentation is, in Whitehead's theory, an impossibility of fact.

However, this conclusion is not drawn by Whitehead. Whitehead calls back metaphysics into discussion only at the end of „The Anatomy of some Scientific Ideas", after he had stated the necessity of accepting the principle of hypothetic sense-presentations. At the moment when he formulates it, he methodologically keeps metaphysics away, hence does not countenance any ontological interpretation

[79] *AE*, p. 131.

of the principle. As stated by Whitehead in the context, the principle merely emphasized the necessity that imagined sense-presentations should be included in the concept of a physical object. Such hypothetical possibilities are conceivable, they can be thought of, and therefore they can be included in the concept of a perceptual object. This is all that matters as far as science is concerned; since for science facts are thoughts and thoughts are facts, thoughts of hypothetical sense-presentations are also facts. Thus, when Whitehead says in regard to hypothetical sense-presentations that we „conceive their want of actuality in our consciousness as immaterial to their existence in fact", this must not be taken to imply that unperceived sense-presentations can exist in fact, nor the opposite. But, when metaphysics is called back, the only possible conclusion is that the existence of sense-presentations where there is no perceiving consciousness is unacceptable. But this is precisely Stout's position. Like Whitehead, he finds it implicit in the procedure of common sense. Like Whitehead, he holds that unsensed sensible appearances are imaginable (by reason of their representative function being distinct from their existence). Unlike Whitehead, Stout rejects explicitly the possibility that these entities enjoy any kind of existence. Whitehead's position is coherent with that of Stout at a deeper level than it is similar to that of Russell.

I conclude by discarding the hypothesis that Whitehead might have owned his notion of hypothetical sense-presentation to the influence of Russell's notion of unperceived *sensibile* as not justified. Russell did not invent the principle of hypothetical sense-presentations, which was commonly accepted at that time. We have seen it accepted by Stout, and we mentioned that Nunn accepted it also. The difference resides in the metaphysical interpretation the principle receives. Stout denied that unsensed sensible appearances can exist. Percy Nunn stated the exact opposed view. Russell, rather reluctantly, followed Nunn and accepted that *sensibilia* exist whether perceived or not:

> It may be thought monstrous to maintain that a thing can present any appearance at all in a place where no sense organs and nervous structure exists through which it could appear. I do not myself see the monstrosity; nevertheless I shall regard these supposed appearances only in the light of a hypothetical scaffolding, to be used while the edifice of physics is being raised, though possibly capable of being removed as soon as the edifice is completed. These „sensibilia" which are not data to anyone are therefore to be taken rather as an illustrative hypothesis and as an aid in preliminary statement than as a dogmatic part of the philosophy of physics in its final form.[80]

We have here two conflicting types of metaphysical interpretation of the same principle, based on two conflicting metaphysical views about the nature of appearance. If I am right, Whitehead's metaphysical interpretation of the principle can only oppose that of Russell and echo that of Stout.

[80] B. Russell, *ibidem*, p. 117.

SUBJECTIVISM

As I announced from the beginning, I maintain that Whitehead's first theory of perception is subjectivist. But what is „subjectivism" in this context? Many authors identified it with subjective idealism. But this identification mixes epistemology and metaphysics. Subjectivism, if anything, must be an epistemological doctrine. I will follow Kemp Smith and consider that subjectivism opposes realism, realism being also an epistemological, not a metaphysical doctrine. Realism is hard to define; however, it is usually understood as an independence thesis: the thesis that the knowledge does not affect in any way the object known. Although this definition proves indefensible at a closer look (see Collingwood, e.g.), I will accept it for the purpose of introducing the notion of subjectivism. By contrast, subjectivism is the doctrine that knowledge affects the object known. Again, what „to affect" means in this context is far from clear, but the general idea is that the object known would not be what it is, were it not known by a knower. One version of this idea is the „theory of psychic additions", as Whitehead called it in *CN*. The theory of psychic additions arises as an attempt to bridge the „theory of representative perception", another form of subjectivism, stemming from Descartes, which ultimately leads to subjective idealism or to scepticism. There is some external object to be known, but the mind knows it only by dressing it with its own subjective representations. This kind of subjectivism stems from Kant, and comes in many forms. Through Lotze, it reached Ward and then Stout, in the first phase of his thought. Initially Stout had accepted the doctrine that matter is mind in disguise, hence our sensations are able to give us knowledge of material things because they are of the same nature, only our way of apprehending them being different. We know material things by relatedness because they are of the nature of our sensations, that is, mental. Later, as a result of the Edwardian controversy, Stout came to believe that our sensations, now called „sensa", are of the nature of physical things, that is, physical. But the transition from sense to material things takes place also by reason of their being existents of the same type. Anyway, Stout clearly held a theory of psychic additions in the first phase of his activity.

The corollary to what I have just said, in light of the whole discussion, is that Whitehead inherited a form of subjectivism from Stout, whose thought was heatedly debated by virtually anyone interested in psychology and theory of knowledge. Thus, the final outlook of Whitehead's earlier theory of perception is the following: There are minds and there are actual things interrelated into a system we call physical world. Things provoke in minds presentations, which are psychical existents, private to each individual. The stream of these presentations is construed by the minds according to the logical truths. Thus, the mind constructs from presentations complex representations, which give us an immediate (that is, not discursive), although indirect (that is, by relatedness), knowledge of the physical things actually existing in the world. If Whitehead got his concept of „sense-presentation", more generally the psychological framework of his theory of perception, as I have tried to suggest, from Stout, his theory is a theory of psychic additions, thereby subjectivist.