As Kimball intimated earlier, Whitehead's theory of symbolic reference is vulnerable to an incompatibility quite similar to the one separating the traditional phenomenological and causal accounts. Kimball writes, "the mode of causal efficacy. Second, symbolic reference leads to the self-contradictory epistemological conclusion that we perceive actualities though they come to us, transformed, through a medium. I "our environment" (S 19). This integration of the two modes of perception happens by virtue of the common ground between them. This ground is constituted by the a) shared locality of the two modes, and b) the eternal object expressed by them.

In our experience, the pure modes are very rarely experienced in their pure form, what Whitehead called "direct ... respectively by the two modes are either identified, or are at least correlated together as interrelated elements in

Symbolic Reference

implausible because human awareness is too narrow to entertain both modes at the same time. My own investigation into the manner in which causal efficacy discloses itself begins with his rejection of William James’s theory of causal efficacy as a precise and too commonsensical for the task. Kimball’s rejection of James’s doctrine of causal efficacy as ‘philosophically innocuous . . .[and] in fact it would not be able to sustain the weight of

Whitehead’s Theory of Perception

Whitehead’s theory of perception is one of the most important developments within the field of philosophy of perception. The theory is built on the idea of causal efficacy, which Whitehead defines as the ability of one event to bring about another.

Whitehead believes that this interpretation of causal efficacy is too simple and commonsensical -- it cannot be what Whitehead intended. Such an interpretation makes Whitehead’s doctrine of causal efficacy philosophically nonsensical. . .[and] in fact it would not be able to sustain the weight of two philosophical weights it has to support, that of psychology and that of philosophy. (PR/116).

Thus a preliminary criticism of Kimball’s historical background sketch is that though he includes significant elements from the traditional accounts, he caricatures both PA and CA in a way which makes them likely to be irreconcilable.

Kimball on Whitehead and Perception – Religion Online

http://www.religion-online.org/article/kimball-on-whitehead-and-perception/
... symbolic reference clearly requires that presentational immediacy and causal efficacy be present together in a single, unary act of awareness. Consider what this means. It means that an awareness of the cause of a perception -- in the mode of causal efficacy -- must be co-present with the experience of the effect -- in the mode of presentational immediacy. We must be aware of the causes of our sensation while we are experiencing them. (PR 9:9; emphasis mine)

The difficulty which Kimball implies is encountered here is due to two things: the demands that "cause" exerts on our consciousness, and the degree to which the complexity of perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy aggravates these demands. Kimball illustrates the impossibility of experience with an example: in close-up seeing of a skirt with no rear.

...while a view is concentrating on the skirt, the feeling of the efficacy of the eye fades from consciousness, and while one is concentrating on the feeling of the eye, the chair fades away. We can be conscious of objects and conscious of ourselves, but not with equal vividness at the same time. (PR 9:103, emphasis mine)

In this example, Kimball sets up a deep allegiance to the traditional equating between perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy and the entire context of consciousness. These aspects of the example make this obvious. First, the example chooses is one of sight, a sense which dramatically expresses attention to perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy. Second, Kimball’s description for mental attention is the highly selective “concentration.” Notice, too, the expressionist shift from “concentrating” to “conceive.” Third, the criterion employed to judge the experience is “equal vividness,” a criterion which sets an unwavering high standard to achieving a balance between apprehensions in the two modes, and which takes from presentational immediacy a naturally vivid role. Despite Kimball’s rather acknowledgment that Whitehead himself does not equate perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy with the entire context of our present consciousness, Kimball nevertheless goes ahead and applies this Cartesian type of equivalency to perceptions meant to discredit Whitehead. With standards as uncharitable to Whitehead as these, it is not surprising that Kimball concludes that simultaneous, direct awareness of perceptions in the two modes is not possible.²

Reconciliation and Mediation
In the end, Kimball believes, Whitehead’s theory of perception avoids up being an epistemologically round square. It attempts to be both a realist and a mediated theory of perception. Kimball writes,

Perception for Whitehead is mediated; we do not perceive objects directly, but only through a mediator. This means that we do not perceive things as they are in themselves but only modified versions of them... Yet Whitehead still opts for realism, because he thinks we have direct awareness of how these objectified entities have been changed by the time we perceive them (PS 9:103)

The problem Kimball raises is this: suppose a perceivable M is an object modified by a host of intervening occasions; in the example M is conscious to perceive O, the final link in the causal chain, occasion Z. M is a modified version of the first datum in the sequence. A, because perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy are of the character that some conformation has taken place. Kimball is acquainted with this account because it leads to a standard by which M may compare final perception Z with initial perception A, and find source O in order to know how modified Z really is. Without such a standard, Whitehead's belief in the direct receptivity of perception is in question.

In an actual instance, however, unless we really do have some direct, unmediated perception of the original datum of objectification, so that we can tell what it is that has been changed and that it has been changed. Otherwise we will take modified objects for things as they are themselves. (PS 9:103)

Kimball's argument runs: If we had no standard to compare O with Z, we would have direct access to things and would no longer need to maintain a theory of mediated perception; conversely, if we have access to its mediated perceptions, such a standard is empirically impossible to discover. But Whitehead himself insists that an actual occasion never has another actual occasion as its immediate only as objectified data and subjective form; and from this we must deduce that we can have no such unmediated standards. Therefore, Kimball concludes, Whitehead's theory fails because it claims we can have true knowledge of mediated actualities but it does not explain how an unmediated standard is possible.

A proper response to Kimball's conclusion must include two main points: First, Whitehead's interpretation of causal efficacy as something that gives direct awareness of how entities are objectified is correct. As noted above, Kimball interpreted causal efficacy to disclose causal chains; in considerable detail. This interpretation led him to believe that causal efficacy could bridge the gap between perceptions in his words, "modified objects" and "things as they are in themselves." But for Whitehead this gap does not exist, because Whitehead's notion of perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy is simply a way for us to know that "how" our perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy are the objectified culmination of a genetically earlier process. Any certainty about what we perceive would entail an extended process of inquiry rather than a comparison with an unmediated source of the "meant-it-in-them." As Whitehead states "Symbolism cannot justify, or unjustify. The test of justification must always be pragmatic... in a slightly narrower sense, the symbolism cannot be right or wrong; and rightness and wrongness is also tested pragmatically" (PR 100).

The second point has to do with Kimball's underlying assumptions. Kimball faults Whitehead for not recouping his theory's "supposed transition of realism and mediatism," but given the cosmology described in Whitehead, realism and mediatism are not contradictory, but co-present and co-exist. In this example, Whitehead underscores the conflict between traditional theories by juxtaposing them with a more comprehensive picture.

References


Notes

1. See Whitehead, p. 103: "The use of a theoretical explanation of intuition, on Whitehead's view, is not to deduce causal efficacy but only to describe a context within which it is logically possible to 'acknowledge the fact of experience' (MM).

2. See Christian, p. 103: "The use of a theoretical explanation of intuition, on Whitehead's view, is not to deduce causal efficacy but only to describe a context within which it is logically possible to 'acknowledge the fact of experience' (MM).

3. A more possible counter example could be offered to support Whitehead. If one sits at a desk, for example, and forces their vision to go out of focus, there are indistinguishable perceptions in both modes: the page-like and the line of the eye (PS 9:104) and the conformation of the line with the page-like (PS 9:104). One might even be tempted to attribute to the modes perceptions as "equal vividness.

4. Whitehead's own, "Whitehead's account of causal efficacy is not an attempt to demonstrate real connections. It is his business logically to delimit the effect from the cause... After all has been said about the reproduction of feeling, there comes a point when he does not attempt, conceptually, to bridge the gap between cause and effect, between the past subject and the present subject." (MM 105)