

## Kimball on Whitehead and Perception

by [David L. Hildebrand](#)

David L. Hildebrand is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas. His current research concerns John Dewey and the contemporary realism/anti-realism debate.

The following article appeared in *Process Studies*, pp.13-20, Vol. 22, Number 1, Spring, 1993. *Process Studies* is published quarterly by the Center for Process Studies, 1325 N. College Ave., Claremont, CA 91711. Used by permission. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

### SUMMARY

The author believes that Robert H. Kimball is mistaken in believing that Whitehead is trying to reconcile realism with mediatism.

In "The Incoherence of Whitehead's Theory of Perception" (PS 9-94-104), Robert H. Kimball tries to show how Alfred North Whitehead's account of perception is a failed attempt to reconcile two traditional theories of perception: phenomenological (or sense-data) theory and causal (or physiological) theory. Whitehead fails, Kimball argues, in two main ways. First because his notion of symbolic reference requires the *simultaneous* enjoyment of perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy and causal efficacy. Kimball believes this experience is, in principle, impossible and supports this claim by attacking Whitehead's conception of causal efficacy and the experiential evidence used to support it. Whitehead's second failure results from the first: Whitehead's erroneous belief in the simultaneous enjoyment of the two modes of perception leads him to construct a theory of perception which is composed of two contradictory parts: realism and mediatism. In this essay, I will examine Kimball's attack on causal efficacy and symbolic reference and show why Whitehead's theory of perception is not susceptible to Kimball's charge of incoherence.

#### Kimball's Traditional Accounts

Before considering Kimball's arguments, it is important to understand his conception of the two traditional accounts which he believes Whitehead is attempting to reconcile. The phenomenological account (hence "PA") is only and can only be a *description* of what is given in immediate experience; it is not at all concerned with explaining how such experiences are caused. The only things that can be found in such experiences are geometrical areas and the sense qualities which inhere in them. As far as knowledge of objects is concerned, these are the only truly certain things -- all else is (doubtful) inference. As far as PA is concerned, Kimball writes, "...a legitimate account of perception can only describe what is perceived, and all that is clearly and distinctly perceived are such areas and sense qualities" (PS 9-95).

The other traditional account to be considered is the causal account (hence "CA") of perception, sometimes described in physical and/or physiological terms. "[T]his type of theory," Kimball writes, "takes the experience of perception as a result of an extensive series of unperceived antecedent causes. ...In this way it goes beyond what is immediately experienced in perception and in fact asserts that what is immediately experienced is relatively unimportant compared to the causal mechanism which contributed to its production" (PS 9-95). The purpose of CA is to draw attention to the fact that our perception of objects is, contrary to the way we unreflectively consider it, indirect; perception comes through a complicated medium. CA attempts to explain how perception transforms objects and how the effects experienced in perception are produced.

It is Kimball's position that PA and CA, as described above, are incompatible. "Each theory," Kimball writes, "has implications which trespass on the territory of the other. For this reason it is not possible consistently to hold both, at the same time" (PS 9-95-6). For example, the proponent of PA will not be able to hold CA because to do so would require the subject to entertain a more distanced, or "objective," perspective. The PA holds that to sacrifice immediacy for a more "objective" explanatory viewpoint is to give up certainty; thus, adopting non-immediate perspectives is illegitimate. In order for a proponent of PA to accept CA, the full array of causal mechanisms responsible for a subject's present sense-datum must be apprehensible by that subject's immediate awareness. This, Kimball argues, is impossible because "There is not enough room in consciousness for that. One can occupy only one perspective at a time; the field on which one can focus one's attention is limited" (PS 9-96).

Conversely, according to Kimball, the proponent of CA must also reject or discount the claims of PA. The reason is that for CA, "one can come to see the perceived datum as only the final link in a long causal chain...With this perspective on the whole act of perception -- the true or 'real' perspective, according to the advocates of [CA] -- one is apt to discount the significance of that small part of the causal nexus which is consciously experienced...one is led to a belief in the 'mereness' of what appears" (PS 9-97).

Because Kimball will allege that Whitehead's account is irreconcilable for similar reasons, it is important to pause for a moment to make several observations about Kimball's portrayal of these traditional accounts and their incompatibility.

First, it should be noted that Kimball's version of the PA seems to define an extreme, rather than a moderate, position. It severely restricts awareness to a tightly-focused area of attention, *vis* one's indubitably clear and distinct perceptions. This kind of phenomenological description is not the only possibility, of course; e.g., one may allow descriptions of unclear sense-data from the penumbra of consciousness and still be giving a PA. In short, Kimball's version of PA reflects a conservative adherence to Cartesian criteria, criteria which predispose this particular version of PA towards insularity.

Second, Kimball's version of the CA describes an account which values its explanatory *telos* so highly that it is predisposed to downgrade or dismiss the importance of the data of immediate consciousness as "mere" appearance. Other causal accounts, such as those which view sense-data as the *culmination* or achievement of the causal chain, are also possible; a scientist concerned with causation may speak legitimately of "aims" and even "crescendos" of a causal sequence and still be giving a causal account.

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

#### Whitehead's Theory of Perception

Kimball's next step is to describe the components of Whitehead's theory of perception. He writes,

Following intuition and tradition Whitehead acknowledges two "modes" of perception: presentational immediacy and causal efficacy. These correspond roughly to [PA] and [CA]. He differs sharply...in the way he relates his two modes. This constitutes the uniqueness and, in view of the difficulties, the boldness of Whitehead's theory of perception. (PS 9-97)

Like the PA, Whitehead's presentational immediacy describes those perceptions which are vivid and immediate. In perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy, no causal past nor future is given, only geometrical areas with qualities inhering in them. In addition, these perceptions have relatively little efficacious force and cannot do much more than vividly discriminate one society from another.

Kimball notes that unlike PA, Whitehead does not equate perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy with the entire content of our present consciousness; i.e., "attention" or "concentration." For Whitehead, perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy constitute a highly sophisticated and (genetically) late phase of the actual occasion's concrescence; they are just a part of our overall consciousness. Thus, "consciousness" in Whitehead's philosophy is not as narrow as the consciousness PA describes and so it may have the "room" to entertain causally efficacious factors. Because this difference seems to mitigate at least one obstacle to the simultaneous enjoyment of perceptions in both modes, Kimball turns his focus towards the other mode of perception, causal efficacy.

In Whitehead's scheme, causal efficacy complements the "barren aesthetic display" of presentational immediacy with the "...perception of the various bodily organs, as passing on their experiences by channels of transmission and of enhancement" (PR 119). The mode of causal efficacy discloses the causal relationships which result in the sense data of presentational immediacy and it is precisely the nature of this disclosure that Kimball is unclear about: "... perception in the mode of causal efficacy is supposed to give some kind of awareness of causal relationships. Exactly what kind of awareness it is supposed to give, however, is far from clear" (PS 9-97). Kimball is asking reasonable questions, for these perceptions contribute a great deal to Whitehead's theory. What are these disclosures like? How much do they tell us and about what? Under what circumstances can we know we are enjoying them in a pure form?

Kimball's investigation into the manner in which causal efficacy discloses itself begins with his rejection of William Christian's interpretation that perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy are not perceptions in the same sense as those in presentational immediacy. Rather they are (1) a disclosure of the relations between presentationally immediate data and (2) an indication that "something is going on in nature and some things are affecting other things" (IWM 147). In the example "The flash made me blink," "flash" and "blink" are entities of the same logical type, but "made" is of another kind. Christian writes,

What is felt is an activity going on in that situation, an activity which relates the entities ... in a dynamic way... The important distinction is not between data which are clear and distinct and data which are vague, but between entities given in contemporary space ... and the transitional activity apprehended in causal feelings. What the man feels is put as a proposition about the flash and blink, not as an object of the same order as the flash and the blink. (IWM 147-8)

Kimball believes that this interpretation of causal efficacy is too simple and commonsensical -- it cannot be what Whitehead really intended! Such an interpretation would make Whitehead's doctrine of causal efficacy "philosophically innocuous ... [and] in fact it would not be able to sustain the weight of the philosophical edifice he builds upon it" (PS 9-98). It is unfortunate that Kimball does not give any further reasons for his rejection of Christian's interpretation, which I believe was quite well-grounded. Instead, Kimball moves on to what he feels is a more plausible interpretation, one which he believes is supported by other evidence given by Whitehead, that of "witness" of the body.

#### Kimball's Interpretation of Causal Efficacy, His Attack on the Evidence

Kimball believes that causal efficacy makes an even stronger claim than Christian thought. This causal efficacy

not only ... presents a vague sense of activities and dynamic relations in nature, but ... it also discloses in considerable detail the causal mechanism by which the perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy were produced. In this sense causal efficacy provides the basis for the physiological account of perception. (PS 9-98, emphasis mine)

To Kimball, Whitehead's conception of causal efficacy was one which could, through the experience of "witness" of the body, give direct evidence for a full physiological account of perception. But when Kimball looks to the passages in which Whitehead describes "witness", Kimball discovers that "in none of the passages...does Whitehead describe this phenomenon in anything approaching the detail of a physiological theory; he hits only the high points" (PS 9-102). What Kimball was hoping causal efficacy could provide was the direct experience of, for example, the nerve links which supposedly operate between the hand holding the stone and the brain; causal efficacy fails to provide this. This failure prompts Kimball to conclude that causal efficacy's evidence is insufficient:

Now if these intermediate links are so dimly "felt" as not to be evident to consciousness at all, then the "evidence" of this experience clearly does not prove enough to establish the full physiological account of perception. It would provide enough only for a direct stone-hand-consciousness sequence. The intermediate links are certainly not felt, though they may be inferred. (PS 9-102)

A defense of Whitehead could proceed by asking where Kimball got the idea that "witness" (or causal efficacy itself) is supposed to disclose in detail the subtle routes of transmission of a perception. Kimball might have had in mind Whitehead's statement that

... there is, in the mode of causal efficacy, a direct perception of those antecedent actual occasions which are causally efficacious both for the percipient and for the relevant events in the presented locus. The percipient ... prehends the causal influences to which the presented locus in its important regions is subjected. (PR 169)

However this quote claims for perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy only "direct" perception not "detailed" perception. In fact if Kimball had examined Whitehead's slightly earlier discussion, he would have noted that the presented locus

enters only subordinately into the perceptive mode of causal efficacy, vaguely exemplifying its participation in the general scheme of extensive interconnection, involved in the real potentiality. *It is not disclosed by that perceptive mode in any other way; at least it is not directly disclosed.* (PR 168-9, emphasis mine)

Whitehead seems to be saying that so far as causal efficacy's presented locus is concerned, nothing approaching Kimball's required level of specificity is even possible in direct perception. In his article, Kimball gives no reference in Whitehead's writings for this aspect of causal efficacy and I have tried in vain to find a passage in Whitehead that claims causal efficacy has any ability to "disclose in considerable detail." My conclusion is that Whitehead did not believe an immediate detailed awareness of a complex causal chain is either possible or necessary. The vector character of the stone in the hand is enough, I believe, to indicate the fundamentally conformat nature of experience and to let us know that a chain must exist; it is up to the inductions of science to depict the chain. Perhaps Kimball has not taken to heart Whitehead's warning that for too long philosophers have preferred to worry about "remote consequences" instead of "stubborn fact" and the time has come for them to "confine attention to the rush of immediate transition" (PR 129).

Kimball's lack of references is unfortunate for he intends to use this interpretation of causal efficacy as an important component in later criticisms against symbolic reference. Part of his contention will be that the complexity of perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy makes symbolic reference implausible because human awareness is too narrow to entertain both modes at the same time.

#### Symbolic Reference

In our experience, the pure modes are very rarely experienced in their pure form, what Whitehead called "direct recognition" (S 19). In symbolic reference "the various actualities disclosed respectively by the two modes are either identified, or are at least correlated together as interrelated elements in 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.

Kimball finds Whitehead's theory of symbolic reference to have two main incoherencies. First, symbolic reference requires the mind to perform an impossible task: focus on both modes of perception simultaneously. This conclusion largely depends on Kimball's preferred interpretation of perceptions in 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 will now evaluate these two incoherencies in turn.

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,

... symbolic reference clearly requires that presentational immediacy and causal efficacy be present together in a single, unitary 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. (PS 9:99, emphasis mine)

The difficulty which Kimball implies is encountered here is due to two things: the demands that "copresence" makes on one's consciousness, and the degree to which the complexity of perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy aggrandizes those demands. Kimball illustrates the impossibility of copresence with an example. It involves seeing a chair with our eyes:

...while one is *concentrating* on the chair, 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. (PS 9:103, emphasis mine)

In this example, Kimball betrays a deep allegiance to the traditional equivocation between perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy and the entire content of consciousness. Three aspects of the example make this obvious. First, the example chosen is one of sight, a sense which dramatically represses attention to perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy. Second, Kimball's descriptor for mental attention is the highly selective "concentration." (Notice, too, the quotation's shift from "concentrating" to "conscious.") Third, the criterion employed to judge the experience is "equal vividness," a criterion which sets an unreasonably high standard on achieving a balance between perceptions in the two modes, and which also favors presentational immediacy, a naturally vivid mode. Despite Kimball's earlier acknowledgement that Whitehead himself does not equate perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy with the entire content of our present consciousness, Kimball nevertheless goes ahead and applies this Cartesian-type equivalency to examples 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.<sup>3</sup>

#### Realism and Mediatism

In the end, Kimball believes, Whitehead's theory of perception winds up being an epistemological round-square: it attempts to be both a realist and a mediatist theory of perception. Kimball writes,

Perception for Whitehead is mediated: we do not perceive objects directly but only through a medium. 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 envisions is this: suppose a perceiver **M** sees an object **O**, mediated by a host of intervening occasions. In this example **M** will consciously perceive **O** by the final link in the causal chain, occasion **Z.M** is aware that **Z** is a modified version of the first datum in the sequence, **A**, because perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy alert **M** to the fact that some conformation has taken place. Kimball is uncomfortable with this account because it lacks a standard by which **M** may compare final percept **Z** with initial percept **A** and initial source **O** in order to know how modified **Z** really is. Without such a standard, Whitehead's belief in the direct realist perception of **O**

is an idle assumption, 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 in themselves. (PS 9:103)

Kimball's argument runs: If we had a 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 all we have access to is mediated perceptions, such a standard is empirically impossible to discover. But Whitehead himself insists that an actual occasion never feels another actual occasion in all its immediacy (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, Kimball's interpretation of causal efficacy as something that gives direct awareness of how entities are objectified is askew. 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, to use Kimball's words, "modified objects" and "things as they are in themselves." But for Whitehead this gap does not exist to be bridged because Whitehead's notion of perceptions in the mode of causal efficacy is simply a way for us to know that (not "how") our perceptions in the mode of presentational immediacy are the inherited culmination of a genetically earlier process.<sup>4</sup> Any certainty about what we perceive will result from an extended process of inquiry rather than a comparison with an unmediated vision of the "real thing-in-itself." As Whitehead states "Symbolism can be justified, or unjustified. The test of justification must always be pragmatic. . . . In a slightly narrower sense, the symbolism can be right or wrong; and rightness or wrongness is also tested pragmatically" (PR 181).

The second point has to do with Kimball's underlying assumptions. Kimball faults Whitehead for not reconciling his theory's "opposing tendencies of realism and mediatism," but given the cosmology described in *Process and Reality*, how could such a reconciliation really make any sense? For Whitehead, mediation -- or more accurately, "transaction" -- is a basic fact of all existence. In perception one may, if one wants, move in for a "closer look" and thereby reduce the number of intervening actual occasions. But a closer look offers nothing more "real" or "true" than the initial look, only more detail. It is a mistake to believe that even the closest look will ever reveal anything more (such as Kimball's "thing-in-itself") immediate than the objectified data and subjective form passed on by the satisfaction of an actual occasion. Thus, Kimball is mistaken in believing that Whitehead would even try to fit the square peg of realism into the round hole of mediatism, for Whitehead is not playing that game. Kimball's charge that Whitehead's theory of perception is incoherent is the result of his desire to contain it within the confined parameters of a debate between two traditional theories. In actuality, Whitehead resolves the conflict between traditional theories by superseding them with a more comprehensive picture.

#### References

IWM -- William A. Christian. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

PS9 -- Robert H. Kimball. "The Incoherence of Whitehead's Theory of Perception." *Process Studies* 9 (Fall/Winter 1979): 94-104.

#### Notes

1 See Whitehead's account in *Process and Reality*: "Thus [the experient subject] M, which has some analytic consciousness of its datum, is conscious of the feeling in its hand as the hand touches the stone. According to this account, perception in its primary form is consciousness of the causal efficacy of the external world by reason of which the percipient is a concrescence from a definitely constituted datum. The vector character of the datum is this causal efficacy" (PR 120).

2 See Christian, p. 150: "The use of a theoretical explanation of influence, on Whitehead's view, is not to deduce causal efficacy but only to describe a context within which it is logically possible to acknowledge a fact of experience" (IWM).

3 A possible counter example could be offered to support Whitehead. If one stares at a book, for example, and forces their vision to go out of focus, there are distinguishable perceptions in both modes: the page-blur and strain of the eye (PI) and the correlation of that strain with the page-blur (CE). One might even be tempted to attribute to the mode's perceptions an "equal vividness."

4 As Christian notes, "Whitehead's account of causal efficacy is not an attempt to demonstrate real connections. It is not his business logically to derive the effect from the cause. . . . After all has been said about the reproduction of feeling, there comes a point where he does not attempt, conceptually, to bridge the gap between cause and effect, between the past subject and the present subject" (IWM 150).