

DISCUSSION

SIMPLE LOCATION

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NATHANIEL LAWRENCE in an acute and stimulating paper, "Single Location, Simple Location, and Misplaced Concreteness," contained in a recent issue of this Journal,¹ has raised afresh the problem of interpreting Whitehead's concept of simple location, partly by way of criticism of an earlier paper of mine on the subject.² I am sure that all students of the Whiteheadian philosophy can learn much from Lawrence's able presentation and defense of a heterodox interpretation, and from the careful textual analysis which he makes in the process. I am writing this comment on Lawrence's paper, not so much by way of defense of the letter of my previous remarks, which require alteration in the light of the considerations brought forward by Lawrence, but rather in order to exhibit both sorts of interpretation in what I take to be the proper context, and so to make explicit the grounds on which we might prefer one over the other.

The difference between our interpretations can be put most succinctly by saying that whereas his is based on the works preceding *Science and the Modern World* (hereafter "SMW"), principally *The Concept of Nature* (CN) and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (PNK); mine finds the key in the works which succeed it, principally *Process and Reality* (PR). Indeed it seems to me that the use of some such help from other works of Whitehead is inevitable. After a number of determined sallies, I have been forced to conclude that SMW is in itself unintelligible. If we are to make any coherent sense of it we must, I believe, construe its cryptic utterances in the light of a more

¹ VII (Dec., 1953), pp. 225-47.

² "Whitehead's Denial of Simple Location," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLVIII (Nov. 8, 1951), pp. 713-21.

systematic exposition of Whitehead's basic categories. And the difficulty in this procedure lies in the fact that there are two expositions available for this purpose—that of the earlier and that of the later works—which differ in certain crucial respects.

To apply these general remarks to the specific problem at hand, the term "simple location" is used, to the best of my knowledge, only in SMW; at least that is the only book in which it plays a major part in the discussion. And if we confine our attention to its employment there, certain crucial questions remain unanswered. Whitehead criticizes simple location as a part of a more general attack on what he calls "scientific materialism," the principle of simple location being one of the defining characteristics of that position. This means that the concept of simple location is only defined for the sorts of entities which are basic in scientific materialism, viz., enduring bits of matter.³ This is all very well as long as we are interested simply in an analysis of scientific materialism and in how, according to Whitehead, it fails to give an adequate and coherent account of our experience and knowledge of the world. The trouble begins when we ask what, *in Whitehead's own scheme*, the denial of simple location amounts to. Whitehead is not denying simple location of the same sort of entities of which it is asserted by scientific materialism; in fact, entities of this sort find no place among the basic constituents of Whitehead's world. The question then arises: what sort of entities replace the material particles of scientific materialism, and exactly what characteristic do they have in place of simple location? Just how does simple location fail to hold of them? In other words, how is the contradictory of simple location to be expressed in terms of Whitehead's own categories? Here the discussions of SMW, taken in themselves, are of little help. There are in the book some essays at cataloging basic categories,⁴ but they are interjected in a rather offhand manner and are not explicated at any length or integrated with the rest of the discussion. More important for our purpose, they are not used in framing the denial of simple location. Wherever

³ See SMW, pp. 72, 84.

⁴ Notably pp. 102, 254-55.

Whitehead speaks of his philosophy as involving the denial of simple location he uses vague and metaphysically neutral terms like "thing" and "element," and fails to spell out just what the denial means in terms of his own categories. Consider the following passages:

My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. (SMW, p. 133).

... the idea of simple location has gone. The things which are grasped into a realised unity, here and now, are not the castle, the cloud, and the planet simply in themselves; but they are the castle, the cloud, and the planet from the standpoint, in space and time, of the prehensive unification. (SMW, p. 102).⁵

I shall argue that among the primary elements of nature as apprehended in our immediate experience, there is no element whatever which possesses this character of simple location. (SMW, pp. 84-85).

There is no way out of this dilemma except to turn elsewhere in Whitehead's writings for a basis of interpretation. And this is exactly what both Lawrence and I have done in different ways. He explicitly bases his interpretation on the categoreal scheme worked out in PNK and CN,⁶ one which divides reality into "events" and "objects." If it is this scheme which Whitehead is opposing to scientific materialism and proposing as its alternative, Lawrence has fully established his case. For in that scheme one of the categoreal distinctions between events and objects is that whereas each event can only be in one spatio-temporal region, a given object can be, in different senses, in many such regions, even in a single ingression, and hence is "ingredient throughout nature."⁷ And, as Lawrence points out, this property of objects is no mere afterthought but is used by Whitehead as the basis of his whole attack on the "bifurcation of nature." Moreover

⁵ Lawrence in his paper (pp. 240-41) criticized my omission of the sentences containing the word "aspect" from these passages as quoted in my earlier paper. For a discussion of the bearing of the notion of aspect on the question, see below, p. 340.

⁶ See, e.g., Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁷ CN, p. 145.

Whitehead here carefully distinguishes various modes of ingression of objects into nature, only one of which is called "location." Hence if we read SMW in the light of this scheme, the alternative to construing the world as made up of material particles simply located is a conception of it as consisting of events into which objects (at least some of which perform the functions which are performed by matter in scientific materialism) ingress in a multiplicity of different ways, only one of which is "location." And so Lawrence would be correct in asserting that what is objected to under the label of "simple location" is *mere* location, exclusive of other modes of being in space, and that it is objects, not events, which in Whitehead's alternative would escape the fate of mere location.

But if we use the scheme of PR as a basis of interpretation, the situation is radically altered. Now events have been replaced by "actual occasions" and the honorific title "eternal" has been added to "objects." An actual occasion, unlike the "event" of CN, is conceived as an act of experience, a process of unification or "concrecence" of feelings, in the course of which an initial plurality of data is fused into the unity of a single felt immediacy. And since these data (or the basic ones anyway) are other actual occasions, it follows that among the components of any given actual occasion, which is "concrecing" in a particular spatio-temporal region, are other actual occasions, each of which has already "concreced" in its own spatio-temporal region. This means that a crucial revision has been made in the earlier principle that it is a fundamental property of an event that it can only occupy a single spatio-temporal region. In fact the whole basis of distinction between the two fundamental types of entities has been altered. A given actual occasion, as well as a given eternal object, can be, in different senses, in many different regions. We now distinguish, with respect to an actual occasion, between its subjective immediacy and its objective immortality, or, in other terms, between its formal and objective being. In terms of this distinction it is only with respect to its formal being that an actual occasion exhibits the property previously said to be fundamental to events—that of being limited to one space-time region. In its objective being it is present, to some extent, in every space-time

region which is later than its occurrence, i.e., later than the region it occupies in its subjective immediacy. The principle of differentiation between actual occasions and eternal objects is now changed correspondingly to read: an actual occasion, but not an eternal object, has formal as well as objective being. As a result of this thickening in the concept of event, its taking on additional functions and modes of being in its new status of an actual occasion, there is a correlative shrinking at the other end of the categoreal pole; the eternal objects become much closer to the universals of the Platonic tradition and have the primary function of accounting for identical characters and data of different actual occasions. This is one reason^{*} why in PR we hear nothing of the multiple modes of ingression of sense objects, of which so much was made in CN. The new theory of mutual immanence of actual occasions has provided, in a different way, for the interconnectedness of nature, the basis for which in the earlier works was the theory of different modes of ingression of objects into events.

Thus if we ask what in terms of the categoreal scheme of PR is the positive correlate of the denial of simple location, the answer clearly is: the presence of the same actual occasion, in its objective immortality, in many different space-time regions. Simple location is replaced by the doctrine that

Every actual entity in its relationship to other actual entities is in this sense somewhere in the continuum, and arises out of the data provided by this standpoint. But in another sense it is everywhere throughout the continuum; for its constitution . . . includes the continuum; also the potential objectifications of itself contribute to the real potentialities whose solidarity the continuum expresses. Thus the continuum is present in each actual entity, and each actual entity pervades the continuum (PR, pp. 104-05).

This is what I referred to in the earlier paper as "multiple location." In the light of Lawrence's criticisms I would admit to having been careless in the use of the term "location" for this purpose, when Whitehead had earlier used the term in the precise

^{*} Another reason is the new slant given the theory of perception in the later works.

sense of one of the modes in which objects are related to events. But whatever term be used, the fact remains that the feature of Whitehead's mature metaphysical system which is in direct opposition to the Principle of Simple Location is the presence of a given actual occasion as a component in many different actual occasions in many different regions of space-time.

To further sharpen the issue between the two interpretations it might also be put in terms of the notion of misplaced concreteness, to which Lawrence very properly called attention.⁹ Whitehead in rejecting scientific materialism accuses it of misplaced concreteness, of taking very high abstractions—viz., enduring material particles, which could be properly said to be simply located—as if they were the ultimate concrete elements of nature. But when we come to ask what is the concrete fact from which the notion of matter is abstrated and what there is in this concrete fact instead of simple location, we get quite different answers according as we look to the earlier or the later scheme of categories. In terms of the earlier the answer is: a continuum of events into which each of an indefinite variety of objects ingresses in a multiplicity of different events in a plurality of different ways, only one of which is location. In terms of the later scheme, the answer becomes: a nexus of actual occasions, each of which is a unity of prehensions of various data, among which are other actual occasions, so that a given actual occasion is not restricted to one unique space-time region. Thus the undoubted relevance of the notion of misplaced concreteness to the question does not of itself, as Lawrence suggested, enable us to decide for one or the other interpretation.

The issue between the two interpretations can now be seen to hinge on the question as to which frame of reference to use in understanding SMW in general and the attack on simple location in particular. This is a difficult question to answer, for there are definite indications in the text of SMW to support both readings. On the one hand, there are definite affinities, at least of a verbal character, between assertions in SMW and the major doctrines of

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 236-40.

the earlier works. For example, in SMW the basic particulars are still called "events" more consistently than anything else; the denial of simple location is, as Lawrence points out,¹⁰ several times stated in terms of "aspects" of one event being present in other events, and the term "aspect" seems to be construed in terms of the modes of ingression of sense-objects into events;¹¹ and the basic term of our problem, "location," as Lawrence points out, is used in a precise sense in the earlier works, but is not found at all, to any important extent, in the later ones. But on the other side of the ledger, SMW is big with the future as well as heavy with the past. It is crammed full of statements which to the initiated forecast the novel features of the categoreal scheme of PR. The following passage, for example, foreshadows the doctrine of an actual entity as a process of concrescence: "... the realisation of natural entities . . . is a gathering of things into the unity of a prehension" (SMW, pp. 101-102). And to take the doctrine in which we are most interested here—the mutual immanence of actual occasions—we have the following anticipations in SMW:

Thus in the same way that every occasion is a synthesis of all eternal objects under the limitation of gradations of actuality, so every occasion is a synthesis of all occasions under the limitation of gradations of types of entry (SMW, p. 252).

Actuality is through and through togetherness—togetherness of otherwise isolated eternal objects, and togetherness of all actual occasions (SMW, p. 251).

The aspects of all things enter into its very nature. It is only itself as drawing together into its own limitation the larger whole in which it finds itself (SMW, p. 137).

¹⁰ Op. cit., pp. 240-42.

¹¹ Although a closer examination will reveal this term also to exhibit an ambiguity with respect to the two interpretations. Lawrence cites a passage in which an aspect is identified with a "mode of a sense object" (SMW, p. 103). But if we concentrate on such a passage as: "The aspect of B from A is the *mode* in which B enters into the composition of A" (SMW, p. 95), where A and B are volumes of space, we have something more like the sense which the term "aspect" takes on in the later scheme, where it refers to that part of an occasion which is a constituent of another occasion. Thus the assertion that "aspects" of one event are present in another is itself susceptible of either interpretation.

On a just view of the matter, which would take full account of the indications on both sides, we could not claim that Whitehead had either the earlier or the later scheme clearly in mind when he wrote SMW. Hence there is, I believe, a certain latitude of choice in deciding for one or the other frame of interpretation. My reasons for preferring the later scheme are, briefly, as follows. If SMW were Whitehead's last work, we would have no choice but to interpret it as a further development and application of the categories of CN, with perhaps a few unaccountable and bizarre deviations, to be attributed to approaching senility. But in fact the book was written at a time when the metaphysics of PR was germinating in Whitehead's mind; it was written in the stage of transition from the earlier to the later scheme. In view of this fact, and in accordance with the Aristotelian principle that a thing should be understood in terms of what it is developing into rather than what it has started from, it seems to me that SMW is most properly viewed as a rough first draft of the ideas of PR, still largely expressed in the language of CN and PNK, and hence not free of an admixture of foreign and even contradictory elements. If we recognize the place of the book in the development of Whitehead's thought, we will understand best the significance of its contents if we read them in terms of the metaphysical scheme which they are heralding. So interpreted the attack on simple location becomes a propaedeutic to a theory of the mutual immanence of actual occasions as the ultimate units of nature. It seems to me that this conclusion can only be avoided by those who consider the 1920 books to mark the last period of Whitehead's philosophical sanity, and who value the later works only to the extent that fragments of the earlier doctrines can be found therein, a group in which Mr. Lawrence would presumably not wish to count himself. But whatever be the final word on this problem, we must all be grateful to Mr. Lawrence for his carefully documented plea for the opposite reading.

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