

General introduction

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Alfred North Whitehead, a British-born mathematician and philosopher who attained widespread acclaim in America in the first half of the twentieth century, is perhaps best known among the wider public for his famous saying that the European philosophical tradition ‘consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’.¹

A student of mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the 1880s, Whitehead was elected a Fellow of the College in 1884, where he mentored the mathematical studies of such notable figures as John Maynard Keynes and Bertrand Russell, and was also a member of one of the most elite societies in the English-speaking university world at the time, the famed ‘Cambridge Apostles’.²

In 1910, Whitehead resigned his fellowship at Trinity College and moved to London, where (after a year spent in research and writing) he obtained a lectureship in mathematics at University College London. In 1914, he began lecturing at the newly organised Imperial College of Science and Technology (now Imperial College London) before being elected Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of London in 1918 and Chairman of its Academic Council in 1920.³

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Whitehead began a collaboration with his student and protégé, Bertrand Russell, that lasted well over a decade and resulted in the publication (in 1910, 1912 and 1913) of the three-volume *Principia Mathematica*, a monumental study intended to establish the foundations of mathematics in formal logic. Subsequently, in 1922, Whitehead himself concluded two-decades of study of the geometry of space-time in *The Principle of Relativity*, a path-breaking work of theoretical cosmology explicitly intended to pose an alternative to Albert Einstein’s General Theory. Other works spanning Whitehead’s academic career in England include *A Treatise on Universal Algebra* (1898), ‘On mathematical concepts of the material world’ (1906), *An Introduction to Mathematics* (1911), *The Organisation of Thought* (1917), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919) and a significant work on the philosophy of science, *The Concept of Nature* (1920). These works cemented Whitehead’s reputation as one of the leading figures in the early development of analytic philosophy, alongside Russell, G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978 [1929]), p. 39.

2. For more on Whitehead and the Apostles, see Victor Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work, Volume I: 1861–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 111–145.

3. Both University College London and the Imperial College of Science and Technology were member colleges of the University of London.

In 1924, at the age of sixty-three, Whitehead retired from his position at the University of London and sailed to America to accept a position at Harvard University, where he would teach until his retirement in 1937. He would live the rest of his life in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Upon his arrival in the United States, and with inspiration allegedly derived from the uniquely American philosophy of ‘experience’ (particularly that of William James and John Dewey), Whitehead undertook a series of works on far broader philosophical themes. His later work encompasses the history and philosophy of science, the sociological development of civilisation, the philosophy of history, philosophical reflections on education and, most famously, an ambitious attempt to develop a descriptive metaphysical system commensurate with early twentieth-century relativistic cosmology and quantum mechanics, which he called the ‘philosophy of organism’ and which scholars now commonly refer to as ‘process philosophy’. Works during this American period of his career include *Science and the Modern World* (1925), *Religion in the Making* (1926), *Symbolism* (1927), *The Function of Reason* (1929) and his best-known work, *Process and Reality* (1929), based upon his Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh delivered in June 1928. In addition to subsequent books, such as *Adventures of Ideas* (1933) and *Modes of Thought* (1938), Whitehead also published a number of lectures and essays on diverse topics during this period, many of which he later published in collections such as *The Aims of Education* (1929) and *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (1947).

Whitehead’s stature as a pivotal figure in American philosophy, his significant contributions to the rise of analytic philosophy, and the recent and worldwide renewal of interest in the constructive contribution of his seminal ideas to a number of important contemporary metaphysical and cosmological problems in philosophy argue for the appropriateness and timeliness of a complete critical edition of his works – an edition intended to rank alongside critical collected editions already produced or in progress on the works of his eminent predecessors and contemporaries, including William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, George Santayana and C. S. Peirce, as well as Einstein, Russell and Wittgenstein.

The need for a complete critical edition of the unpublished and published manuscripts of Whitehead is compelling. Beginning around 2010, an enormous body of unpublished material steadily began to come to light, thus helping to dispel the myth that all of the Whiteheadian *Nachlass* had been lost or destroyed.¹ The new discoveries included copious and detailed lecture notes taken by both students and faculty colleagues attending Whitehead’s classes. These lecture notes were recorded by philosophers who became quite accomplished in their own right, such as W. V. O. Quine, Charles Hartshorne, Raphael Demos, Susanne Langer and Paul Weiss.

Despite the fact that much of his work undertaken in America was written comparatively recently (that is, during the early part of the last century), scholars

1. For more on this see Brian G. Henning, ‘Preface: A Brief History of the Critical Edition of Whitehead’, in Brian G. Henning and Joseph Petek (eds), *Whitehead at Harvard, 1924–1925* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Brian G. Henning, ‘On the Recently Discovered Whitehead Papers’, Whitehead Research Project, 14 January 2019, <<https://whiteheadresearch.org/2019/01/14/on-the-recently-discovered-whitehead-papers>> (accessed January 2025); and Joseph Petek, *Unearthing the Unknown Whitehead* (Lanham: Lexington Press, 2022), pp. 8–9.

at present do not have a clear sense of what motivated Whitehead or what led to the development of his thought. Part of the reason for this has to do with the fact that his personal correspondence with colleagues – along with the lecture notes of his students and colleagues which were not either discarded, donated or destroyed following his death – had been scattered in libraries and archives across the United States, Canada and the UK.

The editors of the Critical Edition of Whitehead have invested considerable time and effort locating, collecting and cataloguing a substantial body of these extant unpublished materials. The newly discovered materials in particular shed considerable light on the factors influencing the development of Whitehead's later philosophy, and also often elucidate – in considerably greater detail than ever before – many of the principal concepts encompassed within that body of philosophical reflection (e.g. through the apparent use by Whitehead himself of illustrations, equations and blackboard diagrams in classroom settings which have never before been seen by contemporary scholars).

Whitehead's published works, meanwhile, remain in disarray: some are out of print, while others remain in print from multiple sources, replete with inconsistencies and extensive uncorrected typographical and textual errors. Many lack more than a cursory index. Apart from a newly reprinted edition of Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, the sole exception was the re-issue (in 1978) of a so-called 'Corrected Edition' of *Process and Reality*. This proved to be a helpful interim work but it did not fully adhere to the rigorous protocols since established for scholarly editions generally.¹ Finally, while multiple copyrights for extant works are claimed by several publishers, in point of fact all of Whitehead's materials (published and unpublished) continue to remain legally in the sole possession of the Whitehead family estate, whose sole executor² has granted full permission for the publication of both unpublished and published works to the Whitehead Research Project.

When finally completed, the Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Complete Works of Alfred North Whitehead will encompass the entire collected works of the author, published and unpublished. Furthermore, by organising, archiving, digitising, transcribing, editing and indexing all of his writings, the full breadth and significance of Whitehead's diverse work will, perhaps for the first time, come fully into view. Not only will this make available materials that have never been published, but it will also improve the scholarly understanding of previously published items. Perhaps the most useful and exciting aspect of this project to many scholars, however (beyond the publication of newly discovered material), will be the creation of a fully searchable electronic archive of these primary source materials.³ In these ways, this Critical Edition should facilitate and energise the scholarly study of one of the twentieth century's most original and influential intellectual figures.

1. See for example Mary-Jo Kline and Susan Holbrook Perdue, *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 3rd edition (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

2. George W. Whitehead (a grandson).

3. Digital scans of many items can be viewed online at <<https://wrl.whiteheadresearch.org>>.