Introduction to SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought[1]

The rapid spread of the term *postmodern* in recent years witnesses to a growing dissatisfaction with modernity and to an increasing sense that the modern age not only had a beginning but can have an end as well. Whereas the word *modern* was almost always used until quite recently as a word of praise and as a synonym for *contemporary,* a growing sense is now evidenced that we can and should leave modernity behind—in fact, that we *must* if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on our planet.

Modernity, rather than being regarded as the norm for human society toward which all history has been aiming and into which all societies should be ushered—forcibly if necessary—is instead increasingly seen as an aberration. A new respect for the wisdom of traditional societies is growing as we realize that they have endured for thousands of years and that, by contrast, the existence of modern civilization for even another century seems doubtful. Likewise, *modernism* as a worldview is less and less seen as The Final Truth, in comparison with which all divergent worldviews are automatically regarded as "superstitious." The modern worldview is increasingly relativized to the status of one among many, useful for some purposes, inadequate for others.

Although there have been antimodern movements before, beginning perhaps near the outset of the nineteenth century with the Romanticists and the Luddites, the rapidity with which the term *postmodern* has become widespread in our time suggests that the antimodern sentiment is more extensive and intense than before, and also that it includes the sense that modernity can be successfully overcome only by going beyond it, not by attempting to return to a premodern form of existence. Insofar as a common element is found in the various ways in which the term is used, *postmodernism* refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than to any common set of doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern.

Beyond connoting this sentiment, the term *postmodern* is used in a confusing variety of ways, some of them contradictory to others. In artistic and literary circles, for example, postmodernism shares in this general sentiment but also involves a specific reaction against "modernism" in the narrow sense of a movement in artistic-literary circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Postmodern architecture is very different from postmodern literary criticism. In some circles, the term *postmodern* is used in reference to that potpourri of ideas and systems sometimes called *new age metaphysics,* although many of these ideas and systems are more premodern than postmodern. Even in philosophical and theological circles, the term *postmodern* refers to two quite different positions, one of which is reflected in this series. Each position seeks to transcend both *modernism,* in the sense of the worldview that has developed out of the seventeenth-century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science, and *modernity,* in the sense of the world order that both conditioned and was conditioned by this worldview. But the two positions seek to transcend the modern in different ways.

Closely related to literary-artistic postmodernism is a philosophical postmodernism inspired variously by physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, a cluster of French thinkers—including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva—and certain features of American pragmatism.[2] By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of this movement, it can be called *deconstructive, relativistic,* or *eliminative* postmodernism. It overcomes the modern worldview through an antiworldview, deconstructing or even entirely eliminating various concepts that have generally been thought necessary for a worldview, such as self, purpose, meaning, a real world, givenness, reason, truth as correspondence, universally valid norms, and divinity. While motivated by ethical and emancipatory concerns, this type of postmodern thought tends to issue in relativism. Indeed, it seems to many thinkers to imply nihilism.[3] It could, paradoxically, also be called *ultramodernism,* in that its eliminations result from carrying certain modern premises—such as the sensationist doctrine of perception, the mechanistic doctrine of nature, and the resulting denial of divine presence in the world—to their logical conclusions. Some critics see its deconstructions or eliminations as leading to self-referential inconsistencies, such as "performative self-contradictions" between what is said and what is presupposed in the saying.

The postmodernism of this series can, by contrast, be called *revisionary, constructive,* or—perhaps best—*reconstructive.* It seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews (or "metanarratives") as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview

through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts in the light of inescapable presuppositions of our various modes of practice. That is, it agrees with deconstructive postmodernists that a massive deconstruction of many received concepts is needed. But its deconstructive moment, carried out for the sake of the presuppositions of practice, does not result in self-referential inconsistency. It also is not so totalizing as to prevent reconstruction. The reconstruction carried out by this type of postmodernism involves a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions (whereas poststructuralists tend to reject all such unitive projects as "totalizing modern metanarratives"). While critical of many ideas often associated with modern science, it rejects not science as such but only that *scientism* in which only the data of the modern natural sciences are allowed to contribute to the construction of our public worldview.

The reconstructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview. It is equally concerned with a postmodern world that will both support and be supported by the new worldview. A postmodern world will involve postmodern persons, with a postmodern spirituality, on the one hand, and a postmodern society, ultimately a postmodern global order, on the other. Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. Reconstructive postmodern thought provides support for the ethnic, ecological, feminist, peace, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from the destructive features of modernity itself. However, the term *postmodern*, by contrast with *premodern*, is here meant to emphasize that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances, as Critical Theorists have emphasized, which must not be devalued in a general revulsion against modernity's negative features.

From the point of view of deconstructive postmodernists, this reconstructive postmodernism will seem hopelessly wedded to outdated concepts, because it wishes to salvage a positive meaning not only for the notions of selfhood, historical meaning, reason, and truth as correspondence, which were central to modernity, but also for notions of divinity, cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature, which were central to premodern modes of thought. From the point of view of its advocates, however, this revisionary postmodernism is not only more adequate to our experience but also more genuinely postmodern. It does not simply carry the premises of modernity through to their logical conclusions, but criticizes and revises those premises. By virtue of its return to organicism

and its acceptance of nonsensory perception, it opens itself to the recovery of truths and values from various forms of premodern thought and practice that had been dogmatically rejected, or at least restricted to "practice," by modern thought. This reconstructive postmodernism involves a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values.

This series does not seek to create a movement so much as to help shape and support an already existing movement convinced that modernity can and must be transcended. But in light of the fact that those antimodern movements that arose in the past failed to deflect or even retard the onslaught of modernity, what reasons are there for expecting the current movement to be more successful? First, the previous antimodern movements were primarily calls to return to a premodern form of life and thought rather than calls to advance, and the human spirit does not rally to calls to turn back. Second, the previous antimodern movements either rejected modern science, reduced it to a description of mere appearances, or assumed its adequacy in principle. They could, therefore, base their calls only on the negative social and spiritual effects of modernity. The current movement draws on natural science itself as a witness against the adequacy of the modern worldview. In the third place, the present movement has even more evidence than did previous movements of the ways in which modernity and its worldview *are* socially and spiritually destructive. The fourth and probably most decisive difference is that the present movement is based on the awareness that *the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet.* This awareness, combined with the growing knowledge of the interdependence of the modern worldview with the militarism, nuclearism, patriarchy, global apartheid, and ecological devastation of the modern world, is providing an unprecedented impetus for people to see the evidence for a postmodern worldview and to envisage postmodern ways of relating to each other, the rest of nature, and the cosmos as a whole. For these reasons, the failure of the previous antimodern movements says little about the possible success of the current movement.

Advocates of this movement do not hold the naively utopian belief that the success of this movement would bring about a global society of universal and lasting peace, harmony and happiness, in which all spiritual problems, social conflicts, ecological destruction, and hard choices would vanish. There is, after all, surely a deep truth in the testimony of the world's religions to the presence of a transcultural proclivity to evil deep within the human heart, which no new paradigm, combined with a new economic order, new child-rearing practices, or any other social arrangements, will suddenly eliminate. Furthermore, it has correctly been

said that "life is robbery": A strong element of competition is inherent within finite existence, which no social-political-economic-ecological order can overcome. These two truths, especially when contemplated together, should caution us against unrealistic hopes.

No such appeal to "universal constants," however, should reconcile us to the present order, as if it were thereby uniquely legitimated. The human proclivity to evil in general, and to conflictual competition and ecological destruction in particular, can be greatly exacerbated or greatly mitigated by a world order and its worldview. Modernity exacerbates it about as much as imaginable. We can therefore envision, without being naively utopian, a far better world order, with a far less dangerous trajectory, than the one we now have.

This series, making no pretense of neutrality, is dedicated to the success of this movement toward a postmodern world.

David Ray Griffin
Series Editor

Notes

1. The present version of this introduction is slightly different from the first version, which was contained in the volumes that appeared prior to 1999.

2. The fact that the thinkers and movements named here are said to have inspired the deconstructive type of postmodernism should not be taken, of course, to imply that they have nothing in common with constructive postmodernists. For example, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze share many points and concerns with Alfred North Whitehead, the chief inspiration behind the present series. Furthermore, the actual positions of the founders of pragmatism, especially William James and Charles Peirce, are much closer to Whitehead's philosophical position—see the volume in this series entitled *The Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne*—than they are to Richard Rorty's so-called neopragmatism, which reflects many ideas from Rorty's explicitly physicalistic period.

3. As Peter Dews points out, although Derrida's early work was "driven by profound ethical impulses," its insistence that no concepts were immune to deconstruction "drove its own ethical presuppositions into a penumbra of inarticulacy" (*The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Culture* [London: New York: Verso, 1995], 5). In his more recent thought, Derrida has declared an "emancipatory promise" and an "idea of justice" to be "irreducible to any deconstruction." Although this "ethical turn" in deconstruction implies its pulling back from a completely disenchanted universe, it also, Dews points out (6-7), implies the need to renounce "the unconditionality of its own earlier dismantling of the unconditional."

Purpose of This Book

Persons who dip just a little bit into the works of Alfred North White-head are likely to have the uncomfortable feeling that they have slipped into a philosophical world that is quite foreign—isolated from the tradition and unconnected to anything happening in philosophy today. Those of us who have worked long and hard to master Whitehead's conceptuality, by contrast, experience his scheme of ideas, that is, his process philosophy, as deeply related to the tradition and helpfully relevant to contemporary philosophizing. Unfortunately, however, the initial sense of entering a foreign, isolated world often turns readers away before they have become familiar enough with Whitehead's work to appreciate its aptness to serve as a ground from which to approach the issues embedded in contemporary thought. The present volume seeks to address this problem: in it, philosophers with a double expertise in Whitehead's thought and some contemporary philosophical issue or some other important philosopher focus their bridging expertise on the topic/title, *Whitehead's Philosophy: Points of Connection.*

Whitehead found himself with a process vision in an intellectual world dominated by the notion of substance. He knew from the very beginning that he could not capture his process orientation in the language of substance, which has been dominant in philosophy as well as ordinary discourse. Whitehead, accordingly, quite deliberately set about creating a complex set of neologisms, and thereby a partially new language, designed to support his vision. He knew full well that the newness and the density of his language would cut him off from the casual reader, but he wrote for the long haul, for the time when a supporting scholarship would investigate, interpret, and develop his ideas and the language in which they were expressed, then struggle to make them more accessible to a wider community. That indeed has happened. Whitehead wrote his philosophical treatises in the 1920s and '30s. After a modest amount of discussion of his ideas in the 1940s and '50s, the 1960s brought an outpouring of books and

articles devoted to clarifying and disseminating his ideas, an outpouring that shows no signs of abating. In 1970 a journal, *Process Studies,* began an uninterrupted stream of interpretive essays. The present volume is just the latest of a vast and growing secondary literature.

Given Whitehead's new language, which often makes his writings so forbidding, it would clearly be helpful if this volume were to start with an introduction to that idiosyncratic language. Fortunately, this task can be carried out in the context of an introductory essay that relates Whitehead's language to the familiar terms found in the writings of Descartes. This means that the introductory essay can follow the structure of the book as a whole by exhibiting a very central point of connection, that between Whitehead and the Father of Modern Philosophy. The essays that follow this introductory essay, written by Professor Sherburne, will be able to presuppose that the reader has at least a modicum of familiarity with Whitehead's vocabulary and orientation.

While the contributors to this volume are sympathetic with the Whiteheadian perspective, in the essays that follow the concern is with points of connection, not points to be made in polemical debate. The aim of this volume is to show various ways in which Whitehead's ideas are connected to the tradition and relevant to the contemporary scene, not that they are infallible.

As a final introductory thought, it is worth noting that this volume appears in a series devoted to "constructive postmodern thought." Whitehead, of course, never used the term *postmodern,* but in chapter IX of *Science and the Modern World* he did observe that he was putting "Descartes and [William] James in close juxtaposition" because "[t]hey each of them open an epoch by their clear formulation of terms in which thought could profitably express itself at particular stages of knowledge, one for the seventeenth century, the other for the twentieth century" (147; cf. 143ff). Descartes opened an epoch of thought that lasted for some two hundred and fifty years; James was a major player in opening a new epoch of thought just shortly before Whitehead came upon the scene. Without any doubt, Whitehead saw himself clearly as standing at the end of one era and at the beginning of the new one. It is certainly fair to characterize that passing era as "Modernism"—Descartes is, after all, the Father of *Modern* Philosophy! So Whitehead is certainly "postmodern," but, it must be noted, most assuredly "constructively postmodern" and not "deconstructively postmodern." While it is true that the term *postmodern* is most widely understood to connote a type of philosophy that emphasizes deconstruction, Whiteheadians believe that a properly "postmodern philosophy," while certainly containing heavy doses of

deconstruction, must also engage in the task of reconstruction. It is here that Whitehead excels.

It is worth noting that many philosophers believe that, in spite of their very real differences, there are genuine "points of connection" between the orientation generally known as "deconstruction" and "constructive postmodern thought." There is, in fact, a recent volume in this series that has explored this claim in depth. It is titled *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms* and is edited by Catherine Keller and Anne Daniell. We commend it to your attention.

Biographical Sketch of
Alfred North Whitehead

Before moving to the introductory Whitehead/Descartes essay, it will be useful to have a brief summary of Alfred North Whitehead's distinguished career, a career that included election to England's Royal Society and as a Fellow of the British Academy on one side of the Atlantic, and to the presidency of the American Philosophical Association on the other.

Alfred North Whitehead was born in 1861 in the southeast corner of England at Ramsgate on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. The son and grandson of Church of England clergy, who were also educators, Whitehead prepped at the Sherborne School in Dorsetshire before entering Trinity College of Cambridge University in 1880 to study mathematics. In 1884 he received his degree in mathematics with first-class honors and was elected a Fellow of Trinity College, where he remained on the faculty until 1910.

Six years after Whitehead began his teaching career, the young Bertrand Russell arrived at Trinity as an undergraduate. Russell, too, had a brilliant undergraduate career that also led to an appointment to the faculty. As the century turned, the two colleagues traveled together across the channel to Paris, where they attended the Second International Congress of Mathematics. While there they listened to presentations concerning the foundations of mathematics delivered by the famous Italian mathematician, Giuseppe Peano. Back home they both discovered, in playing around with Peano's formulations, that inconsistencies could be derived from Peano's principles taken jointly.

Both Whitehead and Russell had written a book in the general area (*A Treatise on Universal Algebra* by Whitehead and *The Principles of Mathematics* by Russell), and each was planning a second volume that would dig more deeply into the issues involved. Quite reasonably they decided to write that next volume jointly. Whitehead originally projected that this

new undertaking would require a year to complete; in fact, it consumed a decade and resulted in the publication, in 1910, 1912, and 1913, of their three-volume, groundbreaking masterpiece, *Principia Mathematica.*

Whitehead's move to London (which led to the chair of applied mathematics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology of the University of London) and quite different attitudes toward Britain's role in World War I led Whitehead and Russell to drift apart. In addition, Russell's interests remained largely formal in character, while Whitehead's interests broadened quite naturally toward the philosophy of science and then into metaphysics.

Whitehead had a long-standing interest in geometry. It was originally projected that he would write a fourth volume to *Principia Mathematica,* a volume on the foundations of geometry which never appeared, though materials that might have originally been intended for this volume could have ended up years later in Part IV of *Process and Reality.* Issues in the foundations of geometry, issues involving the nature of space and the relationships between space and whatever it is that is in space, constitute a natural bridge between mathematics and natural science. Whitehead spent the war years crossing that bridge and in 1919, 1920, and 1922 he published three volumes that explored issues in the philosophy of science: *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge, The Concept of Nature,* and *The Principle of Relativity.*

By this time Whitehead was well known not only in England and Europe, but in America as well. He had had several invitations from Harvard and finally, in 1924 at age sixty-three, accepted a five-year appointment in the Department of Philosophy, an affiliation that continued until 1937 and resulted in thirteen extraordinarily productive years. As he finished writing his three books dealing with the philosophy of science in the early 1920s, Whitehead became convinced that writings in that area, including his own, were fatally flawed by their working assumption that mind could be bracketed out of nature, could be safely ignored as one studied nature. That assumption was built into the philosophical framework with which Descartes launched modern philosophy. If a substance required nothing but itself in order to exist, and if mind and matter were two totally different, independent substances, then philosophers and scientists were justified in ignoring mind when they explored the fundamental issues in the philosophy of science. That philosophical assumption had cleared the way for several hundred years of remarkable advances in science—it had been exactly the assumption needed at that moment in the history of ideas—but by the opening decades of the twentieth century, Whitehead had come to believe, that foundational assumption was no longer com-

patible with the huge advances in understanding that it itself had made possible. Shortly after his arrival at Harvard, in 1925, he published a remarkable book setting forth, and defending, this view. It was titled *Science and the Modern World.* It chronicled the negative impact of developing scientific views on the philosophical assumptions that made that progress possible and adumbrated some leading ideas describing a philosophical standpoint more in harmony with the new science. In 1929 he published his masterwork, *Process and Reality,* in which he took the suggestions for a new perspective presented in *Science and the Modern World* and developed them into a full-blown version of what he titled the philosophy of organism, or process philosophy. In a sentence, what Whitehead did in this book was to create a scheme of ideas that did justice to the richness and complexity of human being yet exhibited human being as an integral part of nature. In short, Whitehead had moved, as had Plato long before him, from being a mathematician to being a full-fledged metaphysician.

Other books appeared developing aspects and implications of these ideas. In 1926 he wrote *Religion in the Making,* followed in 1927 by *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect. The Function of Reason* was published in 1929, as was *The Aims of Education,* and in 1933 Whitehead produced another classic with *Adventures of Ideas,* a wise set of reflections on the philosophy of civilization that explored certain implications of his philosophy in less technical and more metaphorical terms than one finds in *Process and Reality. Modes of Thought,* in 1938, was the last of his books. He lived out his life in the new world Cambridge, often in rather fragile health. He died in December 1947.

One final reflection. Oxford and Cambridge Universities, in the nineteenth century, were extraordinary places, exquisitely tuned to the needs of the day. They provided the environment that prepared Gladstone and Disraeli to govern the Empire by earning double firsts in mathematics and greats. The intensity and richness of the intellectual atmosphere was remarkable. One may have formally studied "maths," yet the common room discussions and debates ranged over the entire intellectual landscape. Whitehead was elected a member of The Apostles. Formed early in the nineteenth century by Tennyson, this group, officially titled the Cambridge Conversazione Society, has been described by Victor Lowe as "the most elite discussion club in the English-speaking university world." Its members went on to become leading figures in the literary, artistic, and political life of the country. Later on, in his London years, Whitehead became a member of the Aristotelian Society, participating fully in its frequent programs. The intellectual breadth generated by these experiences served Whitehead well as he moved through the phases of his intellectual development.