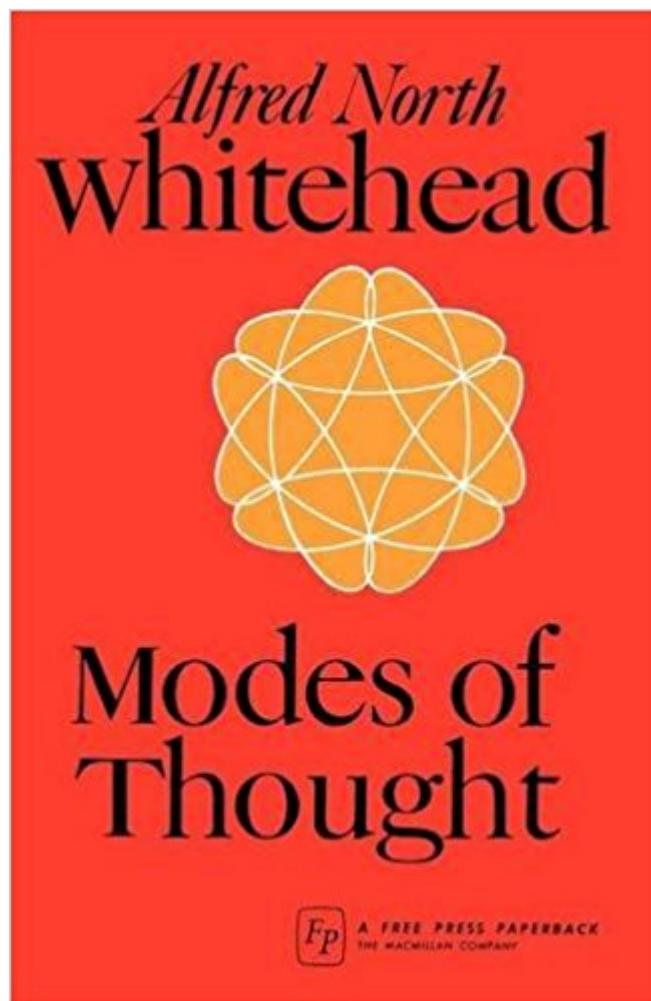


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Modes Of Thought



Synopsis

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An English mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead provided the foundation for the school of thought known as process philosophy. With an academic career that spanned from Cambridge to Harvard, Whitehead wrote extensively on mathematics, metaphysics, and philosophy. He died in Massachusetts in 1947.

It was not made clear that the paperback edition is an abbreviation of the hardback copy. This is my first experience with such an inexcusable practice.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) was an English mathematician [he is credited as co-writer with Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica*] and philosopher, best known for developing Process Philosophy. He wrote many other books such as *Process and Reality*, *Modes of Thought*, *Religion in the Making*, etc. He wrote in the Preface to this 1938 book, "The doctrine dominating these lectures is that factors in our experience are clear and distinct in proportion to their variability, provided that they sustain themselves for that moderate period required for importance. The necessities are invariable, and for that reason remain in the background of thought, dimly and vaguely. Thus philosophic truth is to be sought in the presuppositions of language rather than in its express statements. For this reason philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express

that ultimate good sense which we term civilization. He says in the first chapter, "In Western literature there are four great thinkers whose services to civilized thought rest largely upon their achievements in philosophical assemblage; though each of them made important contributions to the structure of philosophical system. These men are Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, and William James." (Pg. 2) He suggests, "philosophy must found itself upon the presuppositions and the interpretations of ordinary life. In our first approach to philosophy, learning should be banished. We should appeal to the simple-minded notions issuing from ordinary civilized social relations." (Pg. 12) He asserts, "It will be noticed that these definitions involve the direct negation of any extreme form of Behaviorism. In such behaviorist doctrines, importance and expression must be banished and can never be intelligently employed. A consistent behaviorist cannot feel it important to refute my doctrines. He can only behave." (Pg. 22-23) He states, "Let it be admitted then that language is not the essence of thought. But this conclusion must be carefully limited. Apart from language, the retention of thought, the easy recall of thought, the interweaving of thought into higher complexity, the communication of thought, are all gravely limited. Human civilization is an outgrowth of language, and language is the product of advancing civilization. Freedom of thought is made possible by language" (Pg. 35) He acknowledges, "philosophy, in any proper sense of the term, cannot be proved. For proof is based upon abstraction. Philosophy is either self-evident, or it is not philosophy. The attempt of any philosophic discourse should be to produce self-evidence. Of course it is impossible to achieve any such aim. But, nonetheless, all influence in philosophy is a sign of that imperfection which clings to all human endeavor. The aim of philosophy is sheer discourse." (Pg. 49) He suggests, "There is reason to believe that human genius reached its culmination in the twelve hundred years preceding and including the initiation of the Christian Epoch. Within that period the main concepts of aesthetic experience, of religion, of humane social relations, of political wisdom, of mathematical deduction, and of observational science, were developed and discussed." (Pg. 65) He observes, "We live in a world of turmoil. Philosophy, and religion" dismiss turmoil. Such dismissal is the outcome of tired decadence. We should beware of philosophies which express the dominant emotions of periods of slow social decay. Our inheritance of philosophic thought is infected with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and with the decadence of eastern civilizations. It expresses the exhaustion following upon the first three thousand years of advancing civilization. A better balance is required, for civilizations rise as well as fall. We require philosophy to explain the rise of types of order, the transitions from type to type, and the mixtures of good and bad involved in the universe as it stands self-evident in our experience. Such a universe is

the locus of importance. A frozen, motionless universe can at most be the topic of pure knowledge, with the bare comment---That is so. (Pg. 80) He asserts, "Process and individuality require each other. In separation all meaning evaporates." (Pg. 97) He continues, "The notion of potentiality is fundamental for the understanding of existence, as soon as the notion of process is admitted. If the universe be interpreted in terms of static actuality, then potentiality vanishes. Everything is just what it is. Succession is mere appearance, rising from the limitation of perception. But if we start from process as fundamental, then the actualities of the present are deriving their characters from the process, and are bestowing their characters upon the future." (Pg. 99) He goes on: "If there be no historic process, then everything is what it is, namely, a mere fact. Life and motion are lost. Apart from space, there is no consummation. Space expresses the halt for attainment. It symbolizes the complexity of immediate realization. It is the fact of accomplishment. Time and space express the universe in including the essence of transition and the success of achievement. The transition is real, and the achievement is real. The difficulty is for language to express one of them without explaining away the other." (Pg. 101-102) He comments, "Thus in a sense, the experienced world is one complex factor in the composition of many factors constituting the essence of the soul. We can phrase this shortly by saying that in one sense the world is in the soul." (Pg. 163) This is one of Whitehead's more interesting works, and will be of keen interest to anyone studying his philosophy.

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