



Words of Wisdom The Table Talk of a Modern Sage

Review of *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead, OM*

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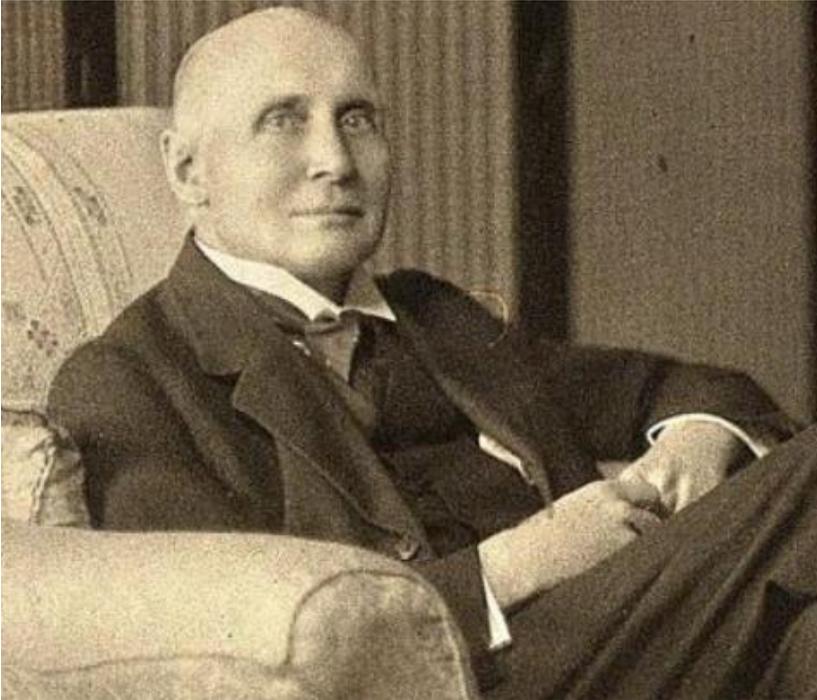
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Words of Wisdom

The Table Talk of a Modern Sage

Review of *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead, OM*, as recorded by Lucien Price (Boston, 1954: Little, Brown; London, 1954: Max Reinhardt), *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 February 1955, 18



THE LATE Professor A. N. Whitehead was one of the few eminent men of our time who, despite his dominant preoccupation with mathematics and its application to the natural sciences, took a deep interest in general ideas, was at home in them, and in the latter years of his life showed a capacity for profound and beautifully formulated generalisations about the history of ideas, and of human culture generally, which expert historians and sociologists could well envy. Some would say that the metaphysical

treatises which he published after he had retired from his chair in London and had come to be a professor of philosophy at Harvard University were his greatest works – his crowning achievement, which dimmed even the luminous criticism of mathematical and scientific method which had secured his fame in England. However this may be, he remains one of the most wide-ranging, humane, civilised and delightful, intellectually stimulating and scrupulously honest and original writers of his time. Moreover, he was a very pure-hearted, generous and noble human being, of wonderful charm and sweetness of character, in whom the liberal English culture of the nineteenth-century had reached its culmination, a man of whom his country, and, indeed, humanity, can justly feel proud.

Lucien Price, a Boston journalist devoted to Whitehead, has recorded the conversations which he had with him. At these, Mrs Whitehead, still happily with us, was sometimes present, and sometimes others. Because Mr Price is a trained journalist, and took careful notes, the conversations have a very authentic ring; the reality and the life of the spoken words come plainly through, and make one of the most readable and agreeable volumes imaginable. The talk ranges over many subjects, and Whitehead's comments are always direct, spontaneous and first-hand – as if the subject were one to which he had only just given his mind – and spoken without premeditation or self-consciousness.

One feels, too, the fascinating presence of Mrs Whitehead, whose remarks are quoted almost as frequently as those of her husband, and deserve quotation no less. Whitehead is always large, benign, wise, tender-hearted, liberal-minded, drawing from a rich treasury of ideas and historical facts and social observation, juxtaposed in original and often startling fashion, and articulated with elegance and lucidity. Mrs Whitehead is sharper, true as a die, more pungent, with an insight into human nature and an interest in human character and understanding of the human heart greater than her husband's. It is, perhaps, her sharply critical sense, her indestructible hold on the truth that may have kept the genius of her husband from altogether losing itself in the jungle and

quicksands which are the peril menacing all ‘cosmic thinkers’. His works will at least escape the fate of Spengler and Professor Arnold Toynbee, whose whitening bones will long deter the philosophically-minded traveller from following in their footsteps.

Whitehead’s agreeably discursive argument moves without system from subject to subject, with an inconsequence which itself makes for the pleasure of the reader. He adores Plato because Plato did not answer questions, but illuminated all their many-sided complexities without forcing them into an Aristotelian straitjacket; he has illuminating things to say about American culture; about words and symbols and how thoughts are formulated in language; about the horrors of religious and political persecution and the role of the Roman Church; about contemporary politicians.

He is interested in Jews and Hebrew literature. He contrasts the almost total absence of anti-Semitism in the England of his day (he speaks of his father’s friendship with Moses Montefiore) with the intolerance of American society. He finds two conflicting trends in the Old Testament, one gentle, one harsh. He thinks the Hebrews, and, indeed, the Jews, to be humourless – in modern days they have not humour but irony – because of a frustration due to not having governed a state of their own for so long. He points to the fact that there is singularly little humour in the Bible as compared, say, to ancient Greek literature; he thinks the Jews are the ablest of all the races, but their ability is liable to peter out at a comparatively early age; he speaks with infectious warmth of his Jewish friends, notably Justice Felix Frankfurter, and Mrs Whitehead gives an amusing and indignant picture of social discrimination in Cambridge, Mass.

This is a faithful and worthy memorial to one of the best men who ever lived. It is impossible not to be affected by its singular combination of moral beauty and unquenchable intellectual vitality.