



# An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge (1919)

*Alfred North Whitehead*

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Alfred North Whitehead (1861 – 1947) was an English mathematician and philosopher. He is best known as the defining figure of the philosophical school known as process philosophy, which today has found application to a wide variety of disciplines, including ecology, theology, education, physics, biology, economics, and psychology, among other areas.

In his early career Whitehead wrote primarily on mathematics, logic, and physics. His most notable work in these fields is the three-volume *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13), which he co-wrote with former student Bertrand Russell. *Principia Mathematica* is considered one of the twentieth century's most important works in mathematical logic, and placed 23rd in a list of the top 100 English-language nonfiction books of the twentieth century by Modern Library.

Beginning in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Whitehead gradually turned his attention from mathematics to philosophy of science, and finally to metaphysics. He developed a comprehensive metaphysical system which radically departed from most of western philosophy. Whitehead argued that reality consists of processes rather than material objects, and that processes are best defined by their relations with other processes, thus rejecting the theory that reality is fundamentally constructed by bits of matter that exist independently of one another. Today Whitehead's philosophical works – particularly *Process and Reality* – are regarded as the foundational texts of process philosophy.

The present volume is a philosophical consideration of the traditions and data of science, followed by a detailed development of what the author terms "the method of extensive abstraction," which deals in a generalized and systematic manner with the relations of time and space.

The four parts of the book deal with: The traditions of science, The data of science, The method of extensive abstraction, The theory of objects. In the investigation the scientific concepts of space and time are considered as the first outcome of the simplest generalization from experience.

This is a book of real importance. There are pages filled with definitions of queer technical terms, but that is not what makes it hard reading. The difficulty lies in the thought. You need some mathematical training to read the book, and you need some acquaintance with the previous writings of the author, or the related writings of Mr. Bertrand Russell. But far more than these, you need a sense of the whole movement of modern physical science, and an imagination undaunted by four-dimensional manifolds interweaving with other four-dimensional manifolds. In short, we have a book here which ought to be read by every philosophy student interested in metaphysics or in the philosophy of nature, but a book which most students of philosophy are not competent to read.

The subject of the enquiry is stated to be "geometry as a physical science," or "how is space rooted in experience?" And its fundamental thesis is that the verifiable data of physical science extend temporally as well as spatially. All nature can, and indeed must, be analyzed into a complex of time-filling and space-filling events. It is therefore assumed that certain so-called "mathematical" objects, such as points of space

and instants of time, do not exist. Or rather, proof is advanced that we can get along without assuming that they exist, and can still have a mathematics applicable to nature. Professor Whitehead does not argue that points and instants are unperceivable and therefore unreal.

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