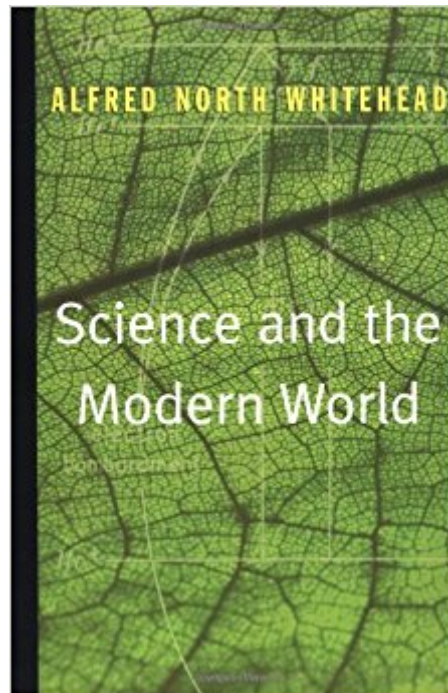




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Science And The Modern World



Synopsis

Alfred North Whitehead's *SCIENCE AND THE MODERN WORLD*, originally published in 1925, redefines the concept of modern science. Presaging by more than half a century most of today's cutting-edge thought on the cultural ramifications of science and technology, Whitehead demands that readers understand and celebrate the contemporary, historical, and cultural context of scientific discovery. Taking readers through the history of modern science, Whitehead shows how cultural history has affected science over the ages in relation to such major intellectual themes as romanticism, relativity, quantum theory, religion, and movements for social progress.

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Customer Reviews

Naturally, a book written in the midst (or even aftermath) of the relativity revolution is going to be both insightful and limited. Whitehead's book is, in this regard, a child of its age. Yet this is not the entire story, since Whitehead possessed the gift of being able to contextualize his own thought and thus leave it open-ended. The technical aspects of the book are, of course, sparse on facts. There is evidence that Whitehead (who, in 1925, had been at Harvard for only a year and was now engaged full-time with philosophy, less so with the mathematics of his earlier career) was aware of the sweeping changes in the world brought on by the quantum physics. He was certainly aware of its potential. Niels Bohr said that anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it; on this definition, Whitehead did indeed understand it, because the new physics never ceased to amaze him. He grew up, after all, and was educated as a mathematician, in a very Newtonian world. But it is important to situate the book: the theories that shape what we today know as quantum

mechanics were still being debated and worked out in the 20s. Most of the most striking information has been theorized since that time, certainly long after Whitehead's death. Two examples are Bell's work on separated systems (60s) and Wheeler's discussion of a self-observing universe (1979!). Whitehead's book is most useful as a book on the philosophy of science, as well as a succinct and accurate appraisal of science in the modern world (modern meaning 17th-19th centuries, historically speaking).

I cannot make a good summary of this book, for I do not know it well enough. I do have a sense of its great depth and beauty. Whitehead seems to me not only a profound thinker but a humble person who stands in certain awe before the Universe. He opens by describing the way a few people in a small part of Europe caused a great revolution in human thinking. He argues that this Scientific Revolution will amount to the triumph of Reason in the world. His chapters are on, The Origins of Modern Science, Mathematics as Element in the History of Thought, The Century of Genius, The Eighteenth Century, The Romantic Reaction, The Nineteenth Century, Relativity, The Quantum Theory, Science and Philosophy, Abstraction, God, Religion and Science, Requisites for Social Progress. I was moved by the concluding words of his book. "I have endeavoured in these lectures to give a record of a great adventure in the region of thought. It was shared in by all the races of Western Europe. It developed with the slowness of a mass movement. Half a century is its unit of time. The tale is the epic of an episode in the manifestation of reason. It tells how a particular direction of reason emerges in a race by the long preparation of antecedent epochs, how after its birth its subject-matter gradually unfolds itself, how it attains its triumphs, how its influence moulds the very springs of action of mankind, and finally how at its moment of supreme success its limitations disclose themselves and call for a renewed exercise of the creative imagination. The moral of the tale is the power of reason, its decisive influence on the life of humanity. The great conquerors from Caesar to Napoleon, influenced profoundly the lives of subsequent generations.

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