WHAT IS PROCESS PHILOSOPHY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO THE ECOZOIC?
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By Herman Greene

What Is Process Philosophy?

A process philosophy is one that understands the universe as continually becoming. In the Greek tradition Heraclitus said than no person ever steps into the same river twice. He was in the process tradition. Daoism and Buddhism are also in the process tradition.

The opposite of process philosophy is not ontology, because process is an ontology. The opposites of process philosophy are substance philosophies and philosophies that see the universe as unchanging. A substance is something that requires nothing but itself to exist. In the Greek tradition, Democritus, a substance philosopher, said the world as composed of tiny bits of matter that he called atoms. In contrast, in process philosophy everything exists by virtue of its relationships.

The term “process philosophy” itself is a modern term. It came into being to describe the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. He privileged becoming over being in a temporal but not an ontological sense. Something has to become itself for it to be itself. Becoming is the creation of the self. Then the self becomes a being for every other future becoming (for the growth of others).

As a distance runner I learn this each time I prepare for a marathon. I can’t be a marathoner, I have to become a marathoner. Further if I want to continue as a marathoner, I have to continue becoming a marathoner. What I am as a marathoner (as continually becoming a marathoner) affects others. They are infected with the possibilities of marathoning (continually becoming a marathoner). In some sense, the whole world is infected with this possibility just as I have been infected with that possibility from others who have gone before me.

What Are the Key Characteristics of a Process Philosophy?

According to the bylaws of the International Process network:

“Process” as used in these Bylaws refers to process-relational philosophies that have
- creativity,
- organic change over time,
- subjectivity, and
- interdependence
as fundamental aspects of their understandings. Such philosophies include, and are not limited to, those based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead.
**What Is the Relationship between Process Philosophy and Thomas Berry’s, Brian Swimme’s, Mary Evelyn Tucker’s and John Grim’s work?**

If one accepts the International Process Network’s definition of process, then Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim are process thinkers. If one reads Thomas Berry’s work through the screens of creativity, organic change over time, subjectivity, and interdependence, then his faithfulness to process thought is evident.

Another relationship of the work of these people to process is that they have been heavily influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, who is classed as a process thinker. Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead did not know each other, but the work of each was influenced by Henri Bergson, also a process thinker.

Sometimes leaders of Thomas Berry’s work don’t like to say he is a process thinker out of concern that his work will be labelled and associated too closely with Whiteheadian thought. The concern is that this would narrow the appeal of Berry’s work. This is not necessarily the case. As stated above process thought is not limited to Whitehead’s thought, it is defined by the four key concepts. Without keeping these concepts in mind in the understanding and teaching of Berry’s work, his message is diluted.

In his final years Berry expressly rejected process thought, but this was during a period when he made other statements that were inconsistent with his published work. Whether Berry was a process thinker and what the meaning of his late years rejection of process thought means is the subject for another paper.

Among Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, Brian Swimme is the one most closely involved with Whiteheadian process thought. He has studied Whitehead closely and taught courses on Whitehead. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim are generally familiar with the ideas of Whitehead and have close associations with people in the process community.

**Why Is Process Philosophy Important to the Ecozoic?**

Process philosophy as a general term is important to the ecozoic because creativity, organic change over time, subjectivity, and interdependence are important to the ecozoic.

Whiteheadian thought in particular is important because it provides a philosophical undergirding for the work of Thomas Berry. For example, few people realize the usage of the term creativity began with Whitehead in his Gifford Lectures of 1927-28. He made “creativity” the centerpiece of his philosophy.

Thomas Berry uses creativity and the related term spontaneity throughout his work.
Is Philosophy, in Particular Metaphysics, Important Anyway?

Philosophy in our time has had a bad run. It is considered a technical subject of marginal importance, not where big things happen. This is in contrast to the past where philosophy generated big, widely influential ideas. This was so much the case that until the modern period in the West, science was “natural philosophy” and philosophical ideas determined that way that people understood the world, for example “nature hates a vacuum.” Later science became empirically based and a scientific method was developed for testing things. No longer, many have thought, has philosophy had any bearing on what is discovered by science. With regard to metaphysics, Kant dealt a severe blow to this when he declared the way the world actually is—the noumenal world—to be a matter of speculation, and the world we experience—the phenomenal world—as being the only world we can really know. The noumenal world, the world of theology and metaphysics lost its standing except for ethical purposes.

This worked so long as the modern world worked. Now as we face the possibility that modernity is on a crash course, people are seeing that empirical science is not only not value neutral but it presuppose a metaphysic. The metaphysic is that the universe is composed of inert matter that through some means takes on the properties of feeling and consciousness, and strangely, nonetheless is determined and knowable by scientific laws. This metaphysic indeed does have ethical implications—nothing matters in the universe but matter and there is no accountability to a higher order of existence because there is no meaning and value inherent in the universe or the universe process.

Changing this philosophy/metaphysic won’t solve any immediate problem, but without changing this philosophy/metaphysic a host of immediate problems will be insoluble. Changing this philosophy is basic. How to do so and what philosophy to substitute is challenging for many reasons, but of the alternatives process philosophy with specific reference to Whiteheadian philosophy is the most promising.

The best statement of why philosophy is basic to cultural reform was given by E. Maynard Adams and is repeated here:

The modern period, while opening up new vistas of understanding and much progress in human affairs, has introduced many distortions in our understanding of the world. Descartes is considered the originator of modern philosophy in the West. His “Cartesian dualism” divided mind from matter. Other ontological dualisms of the modern period include fact and value, primary qualities and secondary qualities, science and the humanities, the religious and the secular, humans and nature, objective and subjective, and civilized and uncivilized. These dualisms have become natural for the modern mind, but they are not natural to nature, not even our human nature.

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1The following text that is not attribute to Adams if from Herman Greene, “Process Ecozoics,” (lecture, Eco-Sophia Conference, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan September 26, 2011).
Much can be written about how contemporary philosophy has accommodated itself to the un-natural distortions of the modern worldview. The philosopher E. Maynard Adams, in “The Mission of Philosophy Today,” describes how, in the modern period, scientific naturalism, based on sensory empiricism, materialism and efficient causation, seeped into and came to dominate the cultural mind. He wrote that this is attributable to the great success of science:

Empirical science provided the factual knowledge that was fruitful in making things and in the manipulation and control of the material environment. In time, the great success of empirical science in providing the knowledge base for mastery of nature, the making of useful things, and the production of wealth led to the discrediting of all other kinds of knowledge claims.

Further, the presuppositions of science undermined the humanistic dimensions of society and led to skepticism, subjectivism, relativism and even nihilism in the cultural sphere.

Science . . . . eliminated, normative, value, and meaning concepts, the fundamental categories of the humanities and humanistic thought in general, from its descriptive/explanatory conceptual system because they cannot be funded with meaning by sensory experience, and so statements containing them [could] not be confirmed or falsified by scientific methods of inquiry. Thus, according to the presuppositions of modern science, there are no normative laws, values, inherent structures of meaning, ends, or teleological causality in nature—only existential and factual structures and elemental and antecedent causes that engage them. One cannot accept modern science’s descriptive/explanatory account of something as the truth about it without accepting its presuppositions about the basic structure of the world. Yet the presuppositions of science are inconsistent with the presuppositions of most religious beliefs and humanistic thought in general.

Adams wrote of a “cultural mind” based on a widely shared set of assumptions and beliefs. He believed it is the province of philosophy to discover and critique the presuppositions of experience, thought, and action in the cultural mind. Further, philosophy needs to “[excavate] the inherent commitments about the categorial structures of various subject matters and the world as a whole that are hidden in these presuppositions, and to develop an account of how the culture is grounded in and maps[,] or is not grounded in and does not map[,] the basic structure of the world.”

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3Ibid., 354-55.

4Ibid., 353-54.

5Ibid., 357.
He understood the mission of philosophy as cultural critique and reconstruction, a mission few academic philosophers, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, would accept. With this understanding, and his conviction that the cultural mind contained fundamental errors about the categorial features of the world and the humanistic enterprise, he wrote:

The mission of philosophy in our time is daunting, even overwhelming, for our basic cultural problems are philosophical. While there are other resources in the culture that must be utilized, it is only through clear philosophical analysis and education that we can come to grips with our deepest problems in a way that will overcome our cultural derangement and prepare the way for cultural renewal. We must redefine the human enterprise by shifting our priorities from materialistic to humanistic values, reassess the semantic and knowledge-yielding powers of the human mind, reexamine all sectors of the culture to determine how each is grounded in experience and related to the items, features, and structures of the world, and construct a coherent worldview that makes sense of all the realities we know, especially human existence and the whole human phenomenon.\(^6\)

Adams understood that philosophy alone could not bring about a cultural reformation, but it was his position that there cannot be a cultural reformation without a philosophical reformation. With respect to philosophical reformation, he wrote, “It is not enough for a few philosophers to solve these problems intellectually; the solutions need to be worked out in the culture, in the experience and lives of the people, and in the social structure and the institutions of the society.”\(^7\) This meant for him that philosophers needed to be engaged in the culture working to bring about change. Of course, there are boundaries to what philosophers should do. Those philosophers who take the approach of engaging the culture are sometimes the ones who are perpetuating the errors of the modern cultural mind, or worse bring new or old distortions of understanding forward. There are good reasons, both historical and contemporary, for the cautionary ideal of the detached intellectual in the modern university, but they have become anachronisms when they serve to prevent, in this critical period of history, good philosophy from fulfilling the mission set forth by Adams. Adams offers three historical examples of how changes in philosophy functioned to bring about cultural reformation:

[(1)] The Greek enlightenment from the sixth to the fourth century B.C.E., [(2)] the development of Christian feudalism in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire and its supporting culture, and [(3)] the dissolution of Christian feudalism and the emergence of modern Western civilization from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. In each of these periods, philosophers exposed cultural errors in the dying civilization and helped construct and defend a new vision of

\(^6\)Ibid., 356.

\(^7\)Ibid., 362.
humankind and the world and a culture that would support, and generate social institutions that would support, the new way of life.\textsuperscript{8}

The transition from modernity to the ecozoic will involve an even more basic cultural reformation and philosophy, including metaphysics, has a basic role to play.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 360.