

History of Philosophy

61 Whitehead's Process Philosophy

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Abstract:

This text features a lecture by **Dr. Arthur Holmes** regarding the **process philosophy** of **Alfred North Whitehead**. Holmes explores how Whitehead transitioned from **mathematics** to **metaphysics**, blending **19th-century evolutionary idealism** with **modern physics** to view reality as a dynamic **creative process** rather than static substance. The lecture highlights Whitehead's rejection of **scientific abstractions** in favor of a **naturalistic** yet **value-laden** worldview influenced by **Romantic poetry** and **Platonic philosophy**. Central to this framework is a **phenomenological analysis** of experience, which identifies **causal efficacy**, **eternal possibilities**, and **decisive actualization** as the core components of every cosmic event. Ultimately, Holmes illustrates how Whitehead seeks to bridge the gap between **scientific fact** and **human purpose** through a sophisticated **metaphysical scheme**.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of Whitehead's Process Philosophy

Executive Summary

Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy represents a significant shift in 20th-century metaphysics, moving away from the "unchanging substance" of traditional Western thought toward a dynamic, relational, and "process-oriented" understanding of reality. Originally a mathematician and scientist, Whitehead synthesized influences from Hegelian idealism, Romanticism, and 20th-century physics to create a "naturalistic metaphysic" that views the universe as a series of creative events rather than a collection of static objects.

The core of Whitehead's system is the concept of **Creativity**, the ultimate process through which novelty emerges. He rejects mechanistic science and traditional empiricism—specifically John Locke's theories—identifying them as victims of the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." Instead, Whitehead proposes a model where every "event" or "actual entity" in the cosmos is shaped by three factors: objective causal data, eternal possibilities (the Logos), and a "decision" that actualizes a specific outcome. This framework seeks to reconcile the scientific account of the world with the inherent presence of value, meaning, and purpose.

Intellectual Foundations and Influences

Whitehead's philosophy is a synthesis of diverse intellectual traditions, ranging from 19th-century idealism to cutting-edge 20th-century physics.

1. Evolutionary Idealism and F.H. Bradley

While Whitehead identifies as a naturalist, his framework is deeply rooted in the "evolutionary idealism" of G.W.F. Hegel.

- **From Substance to Process:** Whitehead adopts the Hegelian view that reality is not an unchanging "basic stuff" but a creative, dialectical process.
- **The Influence of F.H. Bradley:** Whitehead explicitly cites Bradley's critique of the substance-quality distinction. He agrees that the world of appearances consists of varying "degrees of reality" and that traditional distinctions—such as space vs. time or primary vs. secondary qualities—are often "sheer abstractions" rather than concrete reality.

2. Romanticism and Wordsworth

Whitehead's metaphysics is a "Romanticist reaction" against the mechanistic science of the Enlightenment. He was deeply influenced by the poet William Wordsworth, viewing nature as "value-laden" rather than a cold, machine-like entity. Whitehead's work seeks to bridge the gap between "fact" and "value," asserting that aesthetic and moral values are inherent in the physical world.

3. Modern Science: Physics and Biology

As a former mathematician and co-author of *Principia Mathematica*, Whitehead's philosophy is grounded in scientific realism. He highlights three specific developments in physics as metaphysical catalysts:

- **Electromagnetic Field Theory:** Replacing solid bodies with force fields.
- **Quantum Physics:** Identifying basic units of reality as energy rather than matter.
- **Relativity Theory:** Recognizing the interdependence of space and time.

4. The Alexandrian Church Fathers

Whitehead draws on the Platonism of the Alexandrian fathers (such as Origen and Clement) to incorporate the **Logos Doctrine**. He views the Logos as the ordered structure of nature that accounts for the world's "orderedness" and goodness.

The Critique of Traditional Empiricism

Whitehead identifies several logical errors in traditional scientific and philosophical thought, which he terms "fallacies."

Fallacy	Definition
Misplaced Concreteness	The error of treating intellectual or theoretical abstractions (like "matter" or "substance") as if they were concrete, real entities.
Simple Location	The assumption that an object can be located at a fixed point in uniform space and time, ignoring the relativity of motion and the space-time relationship.
Pracy of Presentational Immediacy	The Lockean error of assuming that "ideas" or cognitive content are the primary starting point of perception, rather than the "feeling" of causal influence.

The Phenomenological Model of Perception

Whitehead uses sense perception as the "paradigm case" for understanding all events in the universe. He breaks perception into three distinct modes:

1. **Causal Efficacy (Affective):** The initial, direct experience of being affected by an external cause. It is a "felt" connection rather than a thought. This allows

Whitehead to be a realist; we have direct awareness that a real object exists because we feel its effect.

2. **Presentational Immediacy (Cognitive):** The emergence of a "hypothetical idea" or mental image. Unlike Locke, Whitehead does not see these ideas as "copies" of reality but as symbols.
3. **Symbolic Reference:** The process of taking the idea (the symbol) and referring it back to the cause of the stimulus. This provides "indirect knowledge" of the essence (the *what*) of an object, whereas causal efficacy provides "direct knowledge" of its existence (the *that*).

The Metaphysical Scheme: The "Event"

Whitehead's "speculative imagination" extrapolates the perceptual model to the entire cosmos. Every "actual entity" (event) in the universe is a confluence of three constituent elements:

I. Objective Data (Actual Entities)

These are "causal givens"—the influences of prior events that intrude upon the present. Reality is a stream where individual "sub-processes" are constantly related to and affected by others.

II. Eternal Objects (Eternal Possibilities)

Whitehead refers to ideas or logical possibilities as "eternal objects." These are not substances but "thought objects" that represent what *could* be. These possibilities are "value-laden," containing potential for good or bad.

III. Decision and Satisfaction

A "decision" is the moment an event actualizes one specific possibility from the range of eternal objects.

- **Inversion of Choice:** In conscious beings, this is a literal choice. In lower-grade entities (like a tulip reacting to frost), "decision" refers to the "cut-off point" or the confluence of events that dictates a specific outcome.

- **Satisfaction:** The result of the decision, where the causal stimulus is assimilated into the entity, becoming part of its "ongoing individuality."

The Role of God and Creativity

In Whitehead's system, **Creativity** is the ultimate reality—the "process of the emergence of novelty" that pulses through everything.

- **God as Manifestation:** God is not the creator *ex nihilo* (creator out of nothing) nor a traditional causal force. Instead, God is the "highest manifestation of creativity."
- **The Ordering Principle:** God functions as the "Logos" or the "providence" that orders the eternal possibilities. God is the source of the "orderedness" that allows the process to move toward novelty and value.
- **Non-Traditional Classification:** Whitehead is not a theist (God does not create the process), a deist (God does not set it in motion and leave), or a pantheist (there are events distinct from God). He occupies a unique category in process philosophy.

Conclusion

Whitehead's philosophy replaces the "mechanistic machine" of the 18th century with an "organic growth process." By viewing entities as "relational units" rather than "isolated atoms," he provides a framework where science and value are inextricably linked. This "gradualism" allows for a unified view of reality, where the same basic structure—causal data, eternal possibility, and decision—applies to everything from human self-consciousness to the growth and decay of a flower.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Whitehead's Process Philosophy

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical systems developed by Alfred North Whitehead, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur

Holmes. It explores the transition from substance-based metaphysics to process-based reality, the influence of modern science and Romanticism, and the intricate structure of Whitehead's metaphysical scheme.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided lecture materials.

1. What was Alfred North Whitehead's professional background prior to becoming a professor of philosophy at Harvard?
 2. How does Whitehead's "evolutionary naturalism" differ from the "evolutionary idealism" of Hegel?
 3. According to the text, what is the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness"?
 4. Why does Whitehead reject the "fallacy of simple location"?
 5. How did the poetry of William Wordsworth influence Whitehead's philosophical development?
 6. What are the three developments in modern physics that Whitehead identifies as philosophically significant?
 7. Define the "primacy of presentational immediacy" and explain Whitehead's critique of it.
 8. In Whitehead's system, what is the relationship between "causal efficacy" and "symbolic reference"?
 9. What role does "decision" play in the formation of an individual event or actual entity?
 10. How does Whitehead's conception of God differ from traditional theism or deism?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. Whitehead began his career as a mathematician at Cambridge, where he co-authored *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell. He later served as a professor of the philosophy of science at the University of London before joining Harvard at age 63.
2. While both views replace unchanging substance with a creative process, Hegel's idealism views the underlying reality as absolute spirit manifesting through history. Whitehead's naturalism, conversely, seeks to describe this process within a scientific and realistic framework rather than an immaterial spiritual one.
3. The fallacy of misplaced concreteness occurs when an individual treats a theoretical or intellectual abstraction as if it were a concrete reality. Whitehead specifically accuses mechanistic science of this error by mistaking abstract mathematical qualities for the actual stuff of existence.
4. Whitehead rejects simple location because it assumes things exist at fixed coordinates in uniform Newtonian space and time. Based on relativity, he argues that motion involves both place and time simultaneously, making static spatial coordinates useful abstractions but ultimately inaccurate for describing reality.
5. Whitehead deeply resonated with Wordsworth's Romantic reaction against the mechanistic science and rationalism of the Enlightenment. He saw Wordsworth's poetry as containing vital philosophical content that helped him view nature as value-laden and organic rather than machine-like.
6. Whitehead points to electromagnetic field theory (force fields), quantum physics (units of energy), and Einstein's theory of relativity (space-time relativity). These developments allowed him to move away from "solid pellets of matter" toward a reality defined by energetic processes.
7. This fallacy, associated with John Locke, mistakenly assumes that the cognitive "idea" presented to consciousness is the primary starting point of perception. Whitehead argues that this ignores the deeper, affective "causal efficacy" that precedes the formation of a conscious idea.
8. Causal efficacy is the direct, felt awareness of a cause affecting the organism, providing a direct knowledge that something exists. Symbolic

reference is the process where the mind takes a hypothetical "idea" (presentational immediacy) and refers it back to that cause to understand *what* the object is.

9. Decision is the final factor that selects one specific path from a range of "eternal possibilities" suggested by a causal stimulus. This act of selection "cuts off" other possibilities, actualizing a specific result and providing the event with its unique individuality or "satisfaction."
10. Whitehead does not view God as a creator *ex nihilo* or a causal force, but rather as the "Logos" or orderer of the process. In his view, God is the highest manifestation of "creativity" and provides the structured order and providence for the world's flux.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop deeper thematic analyses of Whitehead's philosophy. Answers are not provided.

1. **Realism vs. Empiricism:** Compare and contrast Whitehead's "scientific realism" with the classic empiricism of John Locke and David Hume. Specifically, address how Whitehead's focus on "causal efficacy" attempts to resolve Hume's skepticism regarding causal connections.
2. **The Organic Model of Reality:** Analyze Whitehead's move from a "mechanistic" view of the universe to an "organic" one. How does he use the concept of "actual entities" and "relational units" to argue that the world is a growth process rather than a machine?
3. **The Role of Modern Physics:** Discuss how Whitehead extrapolates "flights of speculative imagination" from 20th-century physics. How do concepts like force fields and energy units provide the foundation for a metaphysics based on "creativity" rather than "substance"?
4. **The Problem of Value:** Whitehead seeks to preserve a "romanticized view of life" within a naturalistic framework. Explain how his "Logos Doctrine" and the "eternal possibilities" inherent in nature allow him to argue that the world is value-laden and teleological.

5. **The Anatomy of an Event:** Detail the three constituent elements of every cosmic event: objective causal data, eternal possibilities, and decision. Use Whitehead's "paradigm case" of sense perception to explain how these elements function in the broader cosmic process.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Actual Entities	Also called "events," these are the basic, relational units of reality that make up the space-time process.
Causal Efficacy	The initial, affective mode of perception characterized by a direct, felt awareness of a cause acting upon the organism.
Creativity	The ultimate reality in Whitehead's system; the continuous process of the emergence of novelty.
Decision	The act within a process that selects from a range of possibilities to actualize a specific outcome, providing individuality.
Eternal Objects	Purely logical "eternal possibilities" or objects of thought that are not yet actualized but are available to be realized in an event.
Evolutionary Naturalism	Whitehead's metaphysical stance that accepts the evolutionary process as the framework of reality without appealing to an immaterial spirit (idealism).
Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness	The error of mistaking intellectual abstractions or theoretical models for concrete, physical realities.
Fallacy of Simple Location	The mistaken belief that an object can be located at a fixed point in space independent of its relationship to time.

Gradualism	The view that the basic nature of reality (such as consciousness or decision) exists in varying degrees across a hierarchy of being, from low-grade events to high-grade ones.
Logos Doctrine	Borrowed from the Alexandrian Church Fathers, this is the concept of an ordered structure or "providence" that governs the processes of nature.
Presentational Immediacy	The mode of perception that deals with the clear, cognitive "ideas" or images presented to the conscious mind.
Satisfaction	The point at which a causal stimulus is assimilated into the self, completing an individual event and contributing to its ongoing identity.
Symbolic Reference	The mental act of using an idea (a symbol) to refer to the cause of a stimulus, allowing for indirect knowledge of an object's essence.