

History of Philosophy

62 Whitehead and Process Theology

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes provides a comprehensive overview of **Alfred North Whitehead's process theology** and his unique metaphysical framework. Moving away from traditional concepts of permanent substance, Whitehead posits that **reality consists of momentary events** characterized by objective data, eternal possibilities, and subjective decisions. The text explains that **God is not an exception to these rules** but is the supreme example of an "everlasting event" possessing primordial, consequent, and superjective natures. Through these roles, God acts as a **principle of order and a "lure"** for the universe, offering possibilities and feeling the world's experiences without being its traditional creator or efficient cause. Holmes highlights how this system incorporates **teleology and aesthetic satisfaction**, viewing evil as a transitory lack of harmony within a creative, evolving whole. Ultimately, the source characterizes this philosophy as a **panentheistic, Romanticized vision** where God and the world are interdependently linked through a continuous process of creativity.

Briefing Document:

Alfred North Whitehead and Process Theology: A Metaphysical Analysis

Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes the metaphysical and theological framework of Alfred North Whitehead as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes. Whitehead's philosophy represents a fundamental shift from a "substance" metaphysics—where reality is composed of enduring, unchanging entities—to a "process" metaphysics, where the basic constituents of reality are "events" or "actual occasions."

Central to this system is a reimagining of the nature of God, who is not viewed as an exception to metaphysical rules but as their supreme example. Whitehead's God is "system-dependent," functioning as the "principle of concretion" that orders the world's creative processes. Rather than an efficient cause who intervenes through "mighty acts," God acts as a formal and final cause—a "lure" that provides the initial aims for all events. This framework emphasizes teleology over mechanism, aesthetic harmony over moral legalism, and a "panentheistic" relationship where God and the world are mutually influential.

The Metaphysical Foundation: Reality as Event

Whitehead rejects the traditional philosophical focus on enduring substances. Instead, he posits that all reality consists of events of varying duration, from "actual occasions" (momentary micro-events) to "maxi-events" (such as a college education or national history).

The Three Factors of an Event

Every event, regardless of scale, is composed of three constituent elements:

1. **Objective Data:** The "efficient causes" or existing states of affairs from prior processes that intersect to initiate a new event.
2. **Eternal Possibilities:** Also termed "eternal objects," these are the abstract, objective logical possibilities inherent in the nature of things.
3. **The Decision:** The "cut-off point" or selectivity that determines which possibilities are actualized, providing a "subjective aim" for the event.

Prehension: Affective vs. Cognitive Experience

Whitehead criticizes representational theories of knowledge (Descartes, Locke, Kant) for prioritizing the cognitive. He argues that the primary initiating factor in any experience is **physical prehension**—an affective, causal stimulus or "feeling" of objective data. **Conceptual prehension** (the awareness of ideas/possibilities) follows the affective stimulus.

The Three-Fold Nature of God

In Whitehead's system, God is an "everlasting event" characterized by three distinct phases. These phases correspond directly to the three factors of a natural event.

Nature of God	Corresponding Event Factor	Description
Primordial	Eternal Possibilities	The unchanging "sum total of all logical possibilities." It is the ordered harmony of all eternal objects (Platonic forms/archetypes).
Consequent	Objective Data	The changing nature of God that "feels" and experiences the world. God is "touched with the feeling" of what occurs in nature through physical prehension.
Superjective	The Decision/Subjective Aim	The phase where God provides the "initial subjective aim" or purpose to the world process, acting as a lure for new events.

The Role of God in the Process

The Principle of Concretion

Whitehead defines God as the **Principle of Concretion** (or "concrecence," meaning "growing together"). God is the force that maintains order within the creative process, ensuring the world does not self-destruct. However, God is not the originator of the world process—that role belongs to the ultimate category of **Creativity**.

God as Final Cause, Not Efficient Cause

A critical distinction in Whitehead's theology is that God is the **formal and final cause**, but not the **efficient cause** of the world.

- **The Lure:** God does not "act" through force or intervention. Instead, God "lures" events by offering possibilities.

- **Lack of Agency:** Because God is not an efficient cause, the traditional biblical concept of "mighty acts of God" is precluded. God is a "ground of being" rather than a personal agent who intervenes in history.

Aesthetic Teleology and the Problem of Evil

Whitehead's universe is teleological (goal-oriented) rather than mechanistic. The ultimate goal is **Satisfaction**, defined as an "ordered harmony of opposites" or "aesthetic satisfaction."

- **The Nature of Good:** The good is that which is instrumental toward beauty and the synthesis of a unified feeling.
- **The Nature of Evil:** Evil is defined as "triviality" (boring or stagnant) or as a "fragmentary, transitory opposition" to harmony. Much of what is perceived as evil is simply the conflict of opposites that will eventually be harmonized in a grander synthesis.
- **Historical Optimization:** Whitehead views God as the "poet of the world," saving what is achieved in individual joy and sorrow by relating it to the "completed whole."

Historical and Theological Influences

Whitehead's thought is a synthesis of several traditions, particularly the Alexandrian Church Fathers and 19th-century Idealism.

The Critique of Traditional Theism

Whitehead identifies three traditional "idolatrous" images of God that he seeks to replace:

1. **The Imperial Ruler:** God in the image of a Roman Caesar (Divine Caesar).
2. **The Ruthless Moralist:** God as a personification of moral energy (Hebrew prophets).
3. **The Unmoved Mover:** God as a cold philosophical principle (Aristotle).

The Galilean Origin

Whitehead promotes a "Galilean" model of Christianity, which emphasizes "tender elements" that operate by love rather than force. He views God not as a dictator but as a patient presence who "dwells upon the tender elements in the world."

Philosophical Lineage

- **Platonism:** God's primordial nature is a repository of "eternal objects," similar to the *rationes eterne* (eternal forms) in the mind of God in the Augustinian and Alexandrian traditions.
- **Hegelianism:** The world process follows a dialectical structure (thesis, antithesis, synthesis). For Whitehead, religious concepts like the Incarnation are "symbolic" of the imminent loving activity of God rather than literal, historical truths.
- **Romanticism:** Whitehead's view is described as a "Romanticized version of 19th-century theology," heavily influenced by the immanentism of Schleiermacher and the nature poetry of Wordsworth.

Personal Identity in Process

Under this framework, human beings are not enduring substances with a fixed identity. Following David Hume, Whitehead describes the self as a "society of events with a unifying structure." Personal identity is the "continuity of experiences" over time, tied together by memory and the persistent structure of the event-chain.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Whitehead and Process Theology

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the metaphysical and theological framework of Alfred North Whitehead, as presented in the lectures of Dr.

Arthur Holmes. It focuses on Whitehead's transition from a substance-based philosophy to a process-based one, his three-fold conception of God, and the mechanics of "events" as the basic constituents of reality.

Quiz: Short-Answer Questions

1. How does Whitehead's metaphysical starting point differ from traditional substance-based philosophy? Whitehead rejects the idea that reality is composed of substances with enduring, unchanging identities. Instead, he argues that the basic constituents of all reality are events or "actual occasions," which can range from momentary flashes of duration to large-scale historical processes.

2. What are the three constituent factors found in every event according to Whitehead? Every event is composed of objective data, which act as the efficient causes or starting points; eternal possibilities, which represent the logical alternatives available to the process; and the decision, which determines the final direction the event takes.

3. What is the difference between physical and conceptual prehension? Physical prehension is an affective, non-cognitive experience where an entity accepts or absorbs the influence of objective data. In contrast, conceptual prehension is cognitive and involves the apprehension of eternal possibilities or "eternal objects" as ideas.

4. Why does Whitehead prioritize the "affective" over the "cognitive" in his theory of knowledge? He criticizes representational theories (like those of Descartes and Locke) for giving primacy to ideas, arguing instead that the primary initiating factor in any experience is the causal stimulus or affective feeling. He believes the forceful presence of the stimulus comes first, and the cognitive idea follows.

5. How does Whitehead define "satisfaction" in the context of an event? Satisfaction is the culmination of an event where the three constituent elements achieve an ordered unity or harmony of opposites. It is an aesthetic moment where the event becomes a singular, unified experience, similar to the completion of a symphony.

6. Describe the "initial subjective aim" and how it might be modified. The initial subjective aim is the goal or purpose presented to a new event by the natural causal process and God's influence. In beings with consciousness, this initial aim can be resisted or altered, resulting in a "modified subjective aim."

7. What is the "primordial nature" of God in Whitehead's system? The primordial nature is the unchanging, everlasting phase of God that contains the ordered harmony of all eternal objects or logical possibilities. It serves as the conceptual "bank" of all that could ever be, functioning as God's eternal wisdom.

8. Explain the "consequent" and "superjective" natures of God. The consequent nature is the phase where God experiences and feels the world, physically prehending the objective data of history. The superjective nature is the phase where God "gives back" to the world by offering new possibilities and providing the initial subjective aim for future events.

9. Why does Dr. Holmes argue that Whitehead's God is a formal and final cause but not an efficient cause? God acts as a formal cause by providing the structure of possibilities and a final cause by "luring" the world toward harmony through ideals. However, God does not act as an efficient cause because he does not "act" in the sense of a personal agent performing mighty deeds; the ultimate creative force is "creativity" itself.

10. How does Whitehead's view of "evil" relate to his aesthetic focus? Whitehead views evil as either the conflict of opposites that have yet to be harmonized or as "sheer triviality" that leads to boredom. From his perspective, evil is a transitory opposition to the grand synthesis of the "beautiful completion" of the world process.

Essay Questions

- 1. The Shift from Substance to Process:** Analyze the implications of Whitehead's decision to replace "substances" with "events" as the foundation of metaphysics. How does this shift affect the way one must conceive of personal identity and God?

2. **The Aesthetic Paradigm:** Explore Whitehead's use of aesthetic analogies—such as the symphony and the poet—to describe the universe. How does his "utilitarian ethic," which views the good as instrumental toward beauty, differ from traditional moral frameworks?
3. **The Relationship Between God and Creativity:** Whitehead identifies "creativity" as the category of the ultimate. Discuss how God relates to this category. Is God the creator of the world process, or is God a participant within it? Use the concepts of "panentheism" and "principle of concretion" in your answer.
4. **Process Theology vs. Traditional Theism:** Contrast Whitehead's "Galilean" vision of God (emphasizing love and tender patience) with the three traditional models he identifies: the imperial ruler, the moral energy of the prophets, and the unmoved mover. How do these differences impact doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Second Coming?
5. **Teleology without Eschatology:** Dr. Holmes notes that Whitehead has a teleology (purpose) but no eschatology (final end). Explain how a system can be goal-oriented without having a final terminus, and discuss the implications of an "everlasting harmony" that is constantly being created.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Actual Occasion	The smallest scale of an event, sometimes lasting only a fraction of a second; the basic unit of reality.
Concretion (Concrescence)	The process of "growing together" where various elements and possibilities are unified into a single, completed event or harmony.
Creativity	Whitehead's category of the ultimate; the inherent force that allows novelty to emerge from the conflict of opposites and one event to give birth to another.

Decision	The factor in an event that selects certain possibilities to be actualized while cutting off others; it provides the event's subjective aim.
Eternal Objects	Whitehead's term for objective, logical possibilities; similar to Platonic forms or the "archetypes" in the mind of God.
Lure	The method by which God influences the world, not through force (efficient cause) but by attracting events toward specific ideals (final cause).
Panentheism	The theological view that the world is "within" God's experience, but that God is also more than the sum total of the world process.
Prehension	A term derived from Leibniz; the act of "taking hold" of or being aware of something. It can be positive (accepting influence) or negative (rejecting/ignoring influence).
Principle of Limitation	A role of God whereby He limits the available possibilities for the world process, ensuring it does not self-destruct and maintains an ordered path.
Subjective Aim	The intrinsic goal or end that an event moves toward; it begins as an "initial" aim provided by God but can become a "modified" aim in conscious beings.