

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCESS PHILOSOPHY TODAY – Part 1 Cosmology**  
**(Revised 12/7/2006)**

*By Herman F. Greene*

“Process” has become a global movement. I served as the founding Executive Director of the International Process Network, or IPN, until September 30, 2006. IPN is only one manifestation of the Process movement, but it has become a symbol of the global spread of Process. In this the first of two articles on “The Importance of Process Philosophy Today,” I will address the role of Process in cosmology. In the second, I will address the importance of Process in ethics.

Here are a set of propositions I would like for you to consider:

- **Modern civilization, which began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is not simply ending, it is breaking down.**
- **Deconstructive Post-Modernism, which serves to critique modernity, is necessary, but not sufficient, for providing guidance on the next stage of civilization.**
- **Process is an *essential* participant in enabling the creative advance needed to bring into being a new mode of human civilizational presence.**

These propositions, which I accept, set the stage for this article on Process cosmology and the article to come on Process and ethics. In this article, I will not comment on the first two propositions, rather I will focus on how Process is an essential participant in articulating a new cosmology for the next stage of civilization. I will also comment on the role of IPN in the Process movement. This article is an adaptation of the text of a speech I was scheduled to give at the Sixth International Whitehead Conference in Salzburg at the conference banquet. The setting for the banquet did not permit long speeches, so I present my prepared speech here in a form edited for *Process Perspectives*.

When I spoke with Franz Riffert about the talk I prepared to give tonight, he asked me what my topic was and I said “Does Process Philosophy Have a Mission?” He fearing that I would advocate a turn to direct political action asked me to reconsider in light of the sensibilities of those who would be present who came in a spirit of inquiry. Perhaps he was also worried as a Whiteheadian about the mere hint of dogmatic certainty. So I relented and agreed to speak on the importance of process philosophy today.

So, that being settled, I would now like to address the topic, “Does Process Philosophy Have a Mission?” My presentation will have four parts. These four parts are “What is philosophy?” “What is process philosophy?” “Does process philosophy then have a mission?” “What is IPN and what is its role in this?” At the end of my talk I will begin a ceremony in which the IPN will give three Certificates of Recognition to three members of this community and “The Common Good Award” to two highly esteemed and honorable recipients.

## What Is Philosophy?

I read this morning a paper by Herman Daly where he wrote of “person-in-community.” This three word phrase contains within it a summation of all the remarks I will make here. Person-in-community is the beginning and the end of our effort.

In philosophy we ask, “What does it mean to be a part of some larger whole?” It doesn’t matter if you come to this conference as a philosopher, a theologian, an economist, a psychologist, a physicist, a feminist, an ecologist, an anthropologist or a political scientist. We have all come to ask “What does it mean to be a part of some larger whole?” With reference to humans, and once again this is our common reference, the question becomes, “What does it mean to be a person in community?”

So here we have it, part and whole, person and community. These are relational questions, but they are also inquiries into the nature of the part and the nature of the whole, the nature of the person and the nature of the community. The inquiry into the whole is ontology, the study of being or the nature of reality; it is metaphysics, the attempt to give a rational account of the totality of our experience; and it is cosmology the study of the order of existence. I am not sure that these are separate inquiries. Can one have a cosmology without a metaphysic, or an ontology without a cosmology?

When we consider the whole, this is also the study of theology. We could think of theology as being the study of ultimate reality, kind of a hyper-ontology-cosmology-metaphysic. We could also think of theology as infra-ontology-cosmology-metaphysic, for theology presupposes that at the ground, heart or base of the whole there is intelligence, compassion and morality. One could suppose such things and claim to be non-theistic, yet if one assumes that there is integrity in this pervasive, originating or supervening intelligence, compassion and morality, then it is simply a matter of semantics, in the narrow meaning of that term, as to whether one is theistic. And if one asserts there is no integrity in this pervasive, originating or supervening intelligence, compassion and morality, then one could claim to be non-theistic and would have indeed made a profound ontological-metaphysical-cosmological claim. This claim is, of course, what much of modern thought has been about (modern here meaning 16<sup>th</sup> century and later thought originating in the West and now widely influential throughout the world).

Remi Brague in *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*,<sup>1</sup> states “The image of the world that emerged from physics after Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton is of a confluence of blind forces, where there is no place for consideration of the Good.”<sup>2</sup> The world was no longer a whole, but a result of disparate forces. Cosmology gave way to cosmography—the stars, for example, no longer reflected the order of heaven, an ethical model to which one was to adapt oneself, but lacked any significance until some new theory might account for the facticity of their existence. In the words of Nietzsche concerning the

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<sup>1</sup>Brague, Rémi. *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, Teresa Lavender Fagan, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 185.

new astronomy, ““Since the time of Copernicus man distances himself from the center, and moves toward X.””<sup>3</sup>

Cosmology also gave way to cosmogony, as a focus on theories to account for the origins of nature became more important than the truth expressed in it. To the extent that post-Copernican science revealed a truth about nature, it was of its moral indifference. “[Consequently,] cosmology lost its relevance in two ways . . . : on the one hand, its ethical value was simply neutralized as the cosmology was considered amoral; and on the other hand it was more seriously discredited as being immoral.”<sup>4</sup> Further, in this modern view humans appeared as no exception to the new laws of nature. Morality was reconceived, in the liberal movement, to emulate amoral nature’s pursuit of self-interest as the way to the good; in various strains of existentialism, as a protest against nature’s indifference; or, in reactionary circles, as an “un-worldly” adherence to traditional, ideological, or religious values, in the latter case, sometimes as a protest against modern science.

Thus, the “world” that came into being in antiquity and had endured through the medieval period gave way to “worldviews” each of which was, in principle, equivalent in the light of modern scientific understandings that would validate none of them. “The long use of *world* to mean an object so patterned and unified as [to constitute] the geocentric *kosmos*” gave way to the term “universe” to mean the totality of things, whatever this may be, whether good or bad or ordered or chaotic. Further, from this acosmic vantage point, good was no longer understood to be in nature, it had to be introduced by humans “by force, by taking nature against the grain . . . inside the only realm that [was] within the scope of human action . . . the earth. Modern technology defines itself through the undertaking of domination, through a plan to become, according to the famous epigram of Descartes, the ‘master and possessor of nature.’”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we have in modern thought a bias toward an acosmic, nonmetaphysical, nontheistic account of the world. This thought results from the world as it has come to be known in modern science, which, E. Maynard Adams avers, “has eliminated normative, value and meaning concepts . . . from its descriptive/explanatory system because they cannot be funded with meaning by sensory experience, and so . . . cannot be confirmed or falsified by scientific methods of inquiry. [A]ccording 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Adams continues that “[o]ne cannot accept modern science’s descriptive/explanatory account of something as the truth about it without accepting its presuppositions about the basic

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 193, quoting Neitzche, frag.autumn1885-autumn 1886, 2 [127],KSA 12:127.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 209, quoting Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* 6, *Oeuvres*, 6:62.

<sup>6</sup>E. Maynard Adams, “The Mission of Philosophy Today,” *Metaphilosophy* 31 (2000), 353-54

structure of the world. Yet the presuppositions of [this] science are inconsistent with the presuppositions of most religious beliefs and humanistic thought in general.”<sup>7</sup>

Much of the effort of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy has been to accommodate philosophy to this situation. The most obvious example of this was logical positivism where it only those things that could be shown to be logically the case or empirically verifiable could be said to be true. Analytic philosophy sought to correct problems in the language of philosophy putatively to address the problems that philosophers had created for themselves.

### **What Is Process Philosophy**

It is right then that process philosophy is sometimes referred to as a neo-classical philosophy because it seeks to again address the questions of cosmology and metaphysics, the whole or community of which we are a part. In classical Greek philosophy a sense of “cosmos” arose, one that encompassed humans and the universe, one where humans would grapple with who they are and what they should be from the nature of the “world.” The Greek word for world was “*kosmos*.” “Pythagoras was the first to call ‘*kosmos*’ the encompassing of all things . . . because of the order (*taxis*) that reigns in it.”<sup>8</sup> The world had a moral order that governed both nature and humans. In Plato “Good is the supreme principle. Good exercises its sovereignty over physical reality, but it equally rules the conduct through which the human individual turns his soul into a coherent whole (ethics) and gives the polis where his humanity must come to its fulfillment the unity without which the polis must fall (politics).”<sup>9</sup>

In the modern understanding, the human is an anomaly. As Adams points out the humanistic is incongruent with the presuppositions of modern science. Process philosophy offers a new understanding of an order of the universe in which it is possible to account for the humanity of man out of the structure of the universe and to seek moral value in that structure.

When we began to understanding the universe as a process of evolution resulting in the human, we could no longer think of the human as a special creation outside of a mechanistic universe. We discovered, in the words of Thomas Berry, that “the human is less a being *on* the earth or *in* the universe, than a dimension of the earth and indeed of the universe itself.”<sup>10</sup> This was, also, the argument, in his presentation today, of Jan Van den Veken, relying in part on Christian de Nuve’s *A L’Écoute du Vivant*.<sup>11</sup>

I do not hear so many references in the talks in this conference to Whitehead’s “reformed subjectivist principle,” but for me it is a key to understanding Whitehead’s philosophy. If we are

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 354.

<sup>8</sup>Brague, 19, quoting Aëtius, *Placita*, 2.1.1, p. 327, DK 14 A 21.

<sup>9</sup>Brague, 32.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 195 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup>Christian de Nuve A “*L’Écoute du Vivant* (Paris: Odile Jacobs, 2002)

to accept our own experience of our humanity, then we must account for a universe in which this experience is possible.

### **Does Process Philosophy Have a Mission?**

This being the case, at least it is the case to me, I would then turn to the question does process philosophy have a mission?

E. Maynard Adams states:

Philosophy attempts to bring under critical review and to correct errors in the cultural mind of our civilization, the prevailing assumptions and beliefs about our knowledge-yielding powers, the various sectors of the culture, and the basic structure of the world. It holds the cultural mind accountable to the unavoidable presuppositions of experience, thought, and action. Errors in the cultural mind can lead to distortions in the development of the culture and to social and personal pathologies. . . . The mission of philosophy today is to point out the errors in our cultural mind and to work for a humanistic cultural reform.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to the state of contemporary philosophy he says:

[Philosophy] has been caught up in the dominant ways of thought in the culture and has tried to accommodate itself to the prevailing scientific paradigm of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Although much of what is taken for granted in our efforts to know and to cope with reality is no doubt subject to empirical confirmation or correction, the most fundamental assumptions and beliefs that constitute the mind of the culture are not. They pertain to the categorical features and structures of experience and thought as well as to the basic constitutive features and structures of whatever the subject matter of our experience and thought may be, including a comprehensive view of the world. We do not discover these features and structures of things by an empirical investigation of them in the way in which we discover contingent features and structures; rather, the way we empirically investigate and think about any subject matter presupposes commitments about its categorical features and structures. These presuppositions govern the outcome of empirical investigations rather than being the products of such investigations. This is not to say that our empirical findings may not generate problems that call into question our categorical commitments, but these problems [of categorical commitments] are of a different order from the logical problems among empirical beliefs that force revisions to keep them faithful to reality.

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<sup>12</sup> E. Maynard Adams, "The Mission of Philosophy Today," *Metaphilosophy* 31 (2000), 349

<sup>13</sup> Neo-conservative philosophy has a different problem. It adheres to the authority-based tenets of pre-modern tradition and scientific worldviews.

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Therefore, philosophy needs to focus on the presuppositions of experience, thought, and action in the various sectors of the culture, to develop a responsible methodology for excavating the inherent commitments about the categorical 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 the basic structure of the world [(by which Adams means “cosmos”)].<sup>14</sup>

Isn't this then the mission of process philosophy, “to bring under critical review and to correct errors in the cultural mind of our civilization, the prevailing assumptions and beliefs about our knowledge-yielding powers, the various sectors of the culture, and the basic structure of the world”? And should we be daunted that our efforts are resisted by contemporary philosophies which seek to accommodate themselves to the prevailing scientific, should we say, “modern” paradigm?

Two things justify our efforts:

1. Adequacy of description; and
2. If the description is adequate, the advantages to humanity of operating from these understandings.

These two combine in the single concept suggested yesterday by Ervin Lazlo. This is the concept of “coherence.” Process philosophy is coherent in explaining the world as it is and it provides a coherent manner of responding to the world to maintain its creative potentiality, its health.

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<sup>14</sup> E. Maynard Adams, “The Mission of Philosophy Today,” *Metaphilosophy* (July 2000), 352, 356-57.

## **The International Process Network**

If we have this mission, or we could simply say this work, to bring under critical review and to correct errors in the prevailing assumptions and beliefs about our knowledge-yielding powers, the various sectors of the culture, and the basic structure of the world, and if process philosophy offers more coherent understanding of person in community and of action as such, then what we are about is very important. We know the problems of approaching this mission with messianic zeal, yet, equally, there are problems with denying the significance of this effort or being oblivious or indifferent to it. We have a responsibility and it is of civilizational importance.

Our work cannot and should not be organized as such, but I believe our efforts can be strengthened by maintaining connections and communicating with each other. There are a variety of ways we have done and are doing this. I would like to recommend to you one way we can do this better and that is through the International Process Network.

Now I invite you to pick up the brochure on IPN that is at your plate. On the front you will see our new logo, which I think beautifully reflects the value of process thought with a tree of life expressing diversity in actual occasions, an ordered society and being grounded in emptiness (creativity) and the whole. I would also like to call you attention to the first line of text: "The International Process Network is a means to active communication with process-related organizations and individuals around the world to advance the Common Good." In principle this explains all that you need to know about IPN, though more helpful detail is given in the brochure.

Next I would call your attention to the third section of text on the brochure, which gives you information about how to contact IPN. Judith Jones of Fordham University is the Administrative Director of IPN and will likely serve as the Academic Director of IPN. If you want to get in contact with IPN use the information on the front of the brochure. Jude please stand. Also not there is a website listed, this also is a source of information about IPN and we hope will increasingly become a portal for information about process groups, individuals and work around the world.

Now turn to the last page of the brochure. There you will see a member form. Please email the information on the form to Jude, or fill out the form and send it to her by fax or mail.

You see a reference to dues or donations on the membership form. There are no dues for membership in IPN, but IPN depends on donations for its operations. The initial funding for IPN came from an anonymous gift of \$10,000. With this conference this is now depleted. IPN expended \$4,000 in direct support of this conference and scholarships for this conference and \$2,000 for its recent graphics work that included the brochure you see before you. The expenses of IPN are small but IPN can on occasion give needed support to efforts of the process community.

IPN came into being in 2001 at the First Whitehead Summit in Claremont, CA. The second Whitehead summit was held after the Fifth International Whitehead conference in Seoul

Korea. The third Whitehead summit will be held this Friday morning and all of you are invited. At that time we will talk about such things as where and when the International Process Conference will be held, the possibility of starting an IPN press for publication of process works, the possibility of a conference on teaching process at Fordham University in winter 2007, and a clearer commitment of the process community to ecological concerns, what I call ecozoic concerns.

We do not know what role IPN will play within this process community. We could say this will unfold, we could also say this will depend on your decision whether those of us who support process-relational philosophies will choose the IPN as a means of networking and communicating with each other.

I would like to close by saying that IPN is Whiteheadian in its conception and operation. It is a network and not a competing organization or center. We hope that it is indeed a means to active communication with process-related organizations and individuals around the world to advance the Common Good.