A Middle Way:  
Process Philosophy and Critical Communication Inquiry

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Abstract

My contention in this article is that in order to construct critical communication knowledge useful for understanding change and affording a productive politics, critical scholars would benefit from an ongoing, serious discussion of the metaphysical assumptions that underlie our work. Conceiving change—understanding its process and how to create humane change—is the axis on which critical work turns. Process thought provides a relevant and useful philosophical context in which to address questions of change. I begin this article, then, with a brief argument to revisit and reconsider process thought in the context of communication scholarship. Next, I offer an overview of Alfred North Whitehead’s speculative and systematic approach, contrasting it with a traditional metaphysics approach. Following is an explication of process in contrast to substance and a discussion of some fundamental tenets that comprise a process theory of reality. A brief analysis of temporality animates the foregoing concepts and points to some implications, in the final section, for conceiving change in critical communication work from a process-oriented perspective.

Key Words

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Metaphysics is a rather unpopular topic in Communication Studies scholarship. In a context where modernist and postmodernist discourses struggle against one another for legitimacy, those philosophers of communication who harbor a deep suspicion of any discourse that seems to necessitate the status of master narrative reject metaphysics out of hand. Given the seeming arrogance of modernist narratives that lay claim to absolute, abstract universal principles, philosophers of communication who have taken postmodernism seriously focus their attention, instead, on concrete communicative particularities and understanding the construction of local, contingent narratives.¹ Others, concerned that idealist approaches to studying communicative interaction distract our attention from “real” materialist issues, choose to return to the body, so to speak, and focus their attention on the structure and function of corporeal experience in relation to communicative interaction.² Neither camp is interested in metaphysics.

In general, both the challenge of postmodernity and the concern that idealism distorts or obstructs our vision of the actual have relegated discussions of metaphysics to the boundaries of dialogue in communication scholarship. In particular, critical communication scholars³ have all but eviscerated serious discussion of metaphysics. Indeed, at a relevant conference panel discussion, Larry Grossberg, in response to a question about what constitutes the “real world” with respect to cultural artifacts for critical analysis, replied, “This is ontology, epistemology—it’s metaphysics—we don’t need to go there”.⁴ Judith Butler also expressed what I suggest is a fundamental concern critical scholars have with respect to metaphysics: “I worry that a certain metaphysical hopefulness takes the place of the analysis of power. So perhaps I will stay here, worrying the relation between power and discourse a bit longer”.⁵ These issues and others have circumvented a potentially productive examination of the general presuppositions about reality that make possible those concerns, fears, and worries in the first place.

Given historical abuses by some in the name of the ostensible necessity of metaphysical principles, and given how often actually oppressive circumstances have been overlooked in favor of metaphysical speculation, it is certainly understandable (indeed, even justifiable) that most

¹ See Calvin O. Schrag, Communicative Praxis and The Space of Subjectivity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); John Stewart, Language as Articulate Contact: Toward a Post-Semiotic Philosophy of Communication (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
³ I follow Doug Kellner’s description of critical foci when I refer to critical communication scholars and research: “How representations construct a culture's normative views of such things as class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, place, occupation, and the like, and how these representations are appropriated to produce subjectivities, identities, and practices”, in ‘Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and Radical Democracy at the Turn of the Millennium’, Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies, 1 (2001), 220-239 (p. 228).
critical communication scholars would choose to focus on practical, concrete communicative phenomena and abandon considerations of metaphysics altogether. However, it is also a mistake. Some metaphysics—that is, some general, speculative theory of reality or another—guides our work, whether we acknowledge it or not. And, as Lenore Langsdorf notes, “we [philosophers of communication] have done comparatively little to explore the metaphysical implications of constitutive communication theories in general”.

Further, Corey Anton underlines the implications of ignoring metaphysical considerations arguing to do so “simply sets one up to fall prey to [intellectual and theoretical] contradiction and incoherence”.

My contention in this article is that in order to construct critical communication knowledge useful for understanding change and affording a productive politics, critical scholars would benefit from an ongoing, serious discussion of the metaphysical assumptions that underlie our work. Conceiving change—understanding its process and how to create humane change—is the axis on which critical work turns. Process thought provides a relevant and useful philosophical context in which to address questions of change. I begin this article, then, with a brief argument to revisit and reconsider process thought in the context of communication scholarship. Next, I offer an overview of Whitehead’s speculative and systematic approach, contrasting it with a traditional metaphysics approach. Following this is an explication of process in contrast to substance and a discussion of some fundamental tenets that comprise a process theory of reality. A brief analysis of temporality animates the foregoing concepts and points to some implications, in the final section, for conceiving change in critical communication work from a process-oriented perspective.

**Revisiting Process Thought**

Without at least considering what theories of reality guide us in our thinking and imagining and what implications follow, critical scholars are left with a rather limited view. That is, without a general theory of reality, our critical premises are inadequate and theoretical or methodological constructs assuming those premises are consequently problematic. Moreover, intellectual work never escapes—except into illusion or denial—a collection of general presuppositions about reality. As Alfred North Whitehead writes,

> [A]ll constructive thought, on the various special topics of scientific [or disciplinary] interest, is dominated by some such [metaphysical] scheme, unacknowledged, but no less influential in guiding the imagination. The importance of philosophy lies in its sustained effort to make such schemes explicit, and thereby capable of criticism and improvement.

What is needed in both philosophy of communication and critical communication scholarship, I argue, is a sustained discussion that would delineate between types of metaphysics. That is, philosophy of communication and critical communication scholars would benefit from a discussion of the differences between a traditional metaphysics that takes substance as primary (the sort with which critics take issue) and a metaphysics that, instead, takes process as primary. Given the limitations inherent in substantialist worldviews, it makes sense to explore alternative philosophical paradigms within which critical scholars might situate their work and, potentially, alleviate some of the substantialist limitations. Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy is

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one such alternative, and several of its metaphysical presuppositions go a long way in circumventing the confines of a substantialist approach.

Whitehead’s process philosophy has historically been a part of communication studies scholarship, most prominently in the 1960s and 70s. Although Whitehead’s influence seems to have dwindled in the late 1970s, some contemporary philosophers of communication still retain process thought in their work. These philosophers of communication have focused on epistemological and, more recently, ontological and axiological concerns within a process, rather than substantialist, theory of reality. In so doing, they echo the task that Whitehead points to above: making available for criticism and improvement the most basic systems of assumptions constituting the study of communicative interaction. Certainly, critics in communication studies stand to gain from an engagement with this work.

Process-Oriented Systematic Speculation
Speculative philosophy looks at the world synoptically. Its holistic reach is important not because it offers definitive conclusions about the whole of reality, but because of the orientation it encourages for those who pursue it. The speculative philosopher is required to stand back and try to make sense of particulars in relation to a general view, in contrast to a philosophical view that focuses on either particulars or generalities. As Robert Neville points out, Whitehead’s “speculative philosophy is the attempt to create a conceptual vision of the world through which all things might be seen in their mutual bearings of value and causation”. In Whitehead’s words,

Speculative Philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of “interpretation” I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. (p. 3)


Immediately, those unfamiliar with process thought—but quite familiar with positivist abuses of the concepts *system*, *coherency*, and *logic*—will find reason to be skeptical about Whitehead’s aim here because these concepts appear, at first glance, to resemble those of a traditional modernist project. Whitehead, however, significantly reconceives these concepts.

The metaphysics to which Whitehead refers is not the traditional substantialist Western doctrine most commonly understood as *the* theory of reality (e.g., in an Aristotelian or Kantian tradition). Rather, whereas traditional metaphysics claims to exhaust all possible descriptions of reality and is, thus, *prescriptive*, Whitehead’s aim is *descriptive*. That is, his system seeks to describe everything, but leaves open the possibility of other descriptions. Whitehead constructs a system that presupposes process and relations as *fundamental* in contrast with views of reality that focus on independent substances as *foundational*. The difference in perspective between *fundamental* and *foundational* can be interpreted, in part, as reflecting Whitehead’s recognition of dynamic and mutually influencing relations between parts and wholes, or, more specifically, particulars and generalities. That is, *foundational* implies a fixedness of origins and a rigidity of causes and effects and, thus, presupposes a block universe. From this view, *what* exists in the universe is the primary question.

On the other hand, *fundamental* implies origins are relative to causes and effects, and the universe is understood from this perspective as constituted by constantly changing phenomena. From this view, the *how* of what exists in the universe is the primary consideration. By extension, a foundation generally does not move, and when one’s thinking is attached to it, less flexibility is possible. Fundamentals in thought, on the other hand, allow maneuverability in thinking, while still attending to coherence. It is a subtle difference in perspective, but a distinction that is crucial in guarding against substantialist tendencies to posit foundational first principles regarding *what* the world is and abstracting accounts from those unchanging doctrines. A process approach, by beginning with *how* the world becomes as a fundamental question, accounts for the constantly changing relations between particulars and generalities and, thus, recognizes neither is severable from the other in their relative actuality.

In addition to a shift from a foundational to a fundamental perspective, Whitehead also explicitly acknowledges the system’s incompleteness and, therefore, its intrinsic falseness when the logician’s alternative, true or false, is applied. That is, when held up against the standard “false because partial”, the system is always already false, as are all knowledge constructs. Moreover, Whitehead acknowledges limitations imposed by the inadequacy of language, the lack of self-evident certainties from which to start, and our inability to comprehend the totality of experience about which we speculate, all of which compel appreciation of our relative inadequacy when faced with the task of developing a general theory of reality. Whitehead clearly understands the limits of this enterprise when he writes, “At the best such a system will remain only an approximation to the general truths which are sought” (p. 13). This being the case, Whitehead’s approach reconceives the notion of *systematic* knowledge construction in contrast to how *system* is conceived in a traditional metaphysics.

Unlike traditional thought, Whitehead never suggested that complete systematization of all knowledge is possible. He understood that the drive to find “some moving principle by which things in the world are construed as parts of an inferred totality” (p. 65) threatens the veracity of accounts that neglect the particularity of the local by forcing it into categories of the whole. So, unlike a notion of system as being guided by an ideal principle to which all particulars submit, Whitehead avoids the demand for totalization inherent in those conceptions of system. Specifically, Whitehead recognizes that the general is always already in relation with the particular and it is from the particular that we can derive relatively true general accounts. At least two principles are assumed in this reconception of *system*. 
First, Whitehead’s systematic thinking (in contrast to thinking of the system as *a priori*) inverts a traditional approach while allowing for a feedback loop, in a sense. That is, Whitehead’s system does not start from abstractions and is not closed. Neville puts it this way: “Systematic thinking then, in contrast to contemplating the system, is the interpretive process of seeing how various local domains of life and understanding are specific versions of the systematic categories” (p. 67). In this way, Whitehead’s approach allows for explicit attention to diversity and, thus, protects the integrity and particularity of unique local areas. At the same time, Whitehead’s system describes the varieties of entities as “diverse specifications of the same system” (Neville, p. 67). As such, the system can treat fragmentation without the imperialist tendencies of substantialist schemes. A common overstatement that process thinking avoids, then, is the tendency to understand entities as only the abstractions that are reflected in the categories assigned to them. In other words, the move to categorize entities, based on particular characteristics or qualities those entities exhibit, must be understood to be an abstraction. If not understood in this way, Whitehead advises, we are apt to commit the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (p. 7): the mistake of reifying the abstraction and eliding the entity itself in all its particularity.

Second, Whitehead’s general systematic approach is supple, which means that the system itself makes no claims to universal Truth. Rather, the particulars must be interpreted to specify the system, not the other way around. As David Hall puts it, “the function of a speculative system of philosophy is not the establishment of truth, but the provision of a system from which true propositions applicable to particular circumstances can be derived”. Consequently, truths are found in particulars—they are contingent upon their context, an inquirer’s positionalities, and particular modes of analysis. For Whitehead, this means going back to particulars after abstract generalities are posited: “The scheme is a matrix from which true propositions applicable to particular circumstances can be derived. . . . The conclusion of the argument should then be confronted with the circumstances to which it should apply” (pp. 8-9). This pragmatically-oriented (most indebted to James and Peirce) approach means that Whitehead is a “benign rationalist” who employs “heuristic rationalism” in the service of contingent, speculative claims to situated relational truths (Hall, pp. 5-6).

The move to understand experience, rather than abstraction, as primary in a speculative metaphysics also means that *reason* is reconceived for Whitehead. Rationality does not mean thinking that produces conceptually rigid, fixed, and static knowledge constructs based in universal abstractions in the substantialist tradition. Rather, rationalism is “an experimental adventure”, the purpose of which is “the clarification of thought, progressive and never final” (p. 9). Reason is part of a creative process of speculation that allows thought to exceed boundaries imposed by “dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement” (p. xiv). Whitehead’s method of “imaginative rationalization” (p. 5) is a particularly productive approach in developing process principles that can, ultimately, inform philosophical, theoretical, and methodological thinking in critical communication research.

The speculative method of imaginative rationalization recognizes, acknowledges, and utilizes the vast resources in “the play of a free imagination, controlled by the requirements of coherence and logic” (p. 5). In a familiar passage, Whitehead uses analogy to illuminate this method:

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The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. (p. 5)

This method presumes at least two aspects of reason: a practical aspect and a speculative aspect. The practical aspect is understood as that move to methodologically guide purpose; that is to say, reason “not only elaborates the methodology, it lifts into conscious experience the detailed operations possible within the limits of that method”. Practical reason starts from the ground of experience. On the other hand, the speculative aspect takes off from that ground, once the practical purpose is satisfied: reason, as imaginative curiosity, then, takes flight into the realm of adventure. This speculative aspect of reason is an art of becoming that emphasizes the limits of practical science or instrumental technique: “The function of Reason is to promote the art of life” (p. 4), and it is back to the experience of life that his method returns, enriched by imaginative speculation. In this way, reason is understood as a dynamic process not limited to, but always concerned with, practical actuality. It is also as concerned with possibility: reason is an artful adventure of idea(l)s.

In sum, a systematic speculative process approach (1) begins with how the world becomes as a fundamental issue; (2) is anti-reductive because it does not reduce descriptive or explanatory complexities to one principle or idea; (3) treats system as an adverb (i.e., systematic thinking) rather than a noun, thus resists reification of systems and categories; (4) recognizes abstraction as an important modality of analysis, but acknowledges that it is derived from particularities of experience and must retain that connection to be justifiable; (5) retains a notion of truth that is always already relational, situated, and contingent; and, (6) retains a notion of reason that includes the possible as well as the actual. At the same time, this approach humbly acknowledges the human limitations inherent in any approach to knowledge construction.

From Substance to Relations in Process

In his metaphysics, Whitehead describes the general phenomena of relations--that is to say, change and permanence, fluctuation and stability, transformation and constancy. He writes in this regard:

That ‘all things flow’ is the first vague generalization which the unsystematised, barely analysed, intuition of men has produced. . . .Without doubt, if we are to go back to that ultimate, integral experience, unwarped by the sophistications of theory, that experience whose elucidation is the final aim of philosophy, the flux of things is one ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophic system. From this perspective, a process approach addresses an aspect of the question of the One and the Many (or the relations of the whole and parts): i.e., how do generalities find their basis in particulars and from particulars, how is it that generalities can be derived? Put differently, what is the relational constitution of particulars that unifies them with generalities?

In engaging this question, Whitehead problematizes assumptions about reality that conceive of the world as made up of discrete, independent substances or entities that make possible a “billiard ball” (Humean) sensationalist conception of the world. This mechanical, causal, and material impression of the world (i.e., Descartes’ extended world) means that we envisage the world to exist the way we (learned to) experience it: as a world of entities, discretely located in time and space, that bump one against the other causing “accidents” and,

thus, change. The world of substance is a world of external relations wherein entities are acted upon, have characteristics added to or subtracted from them, and where categories of quantity and quality are primary. A substance view concomitantly conceives the subject as a substance, as enduring and moving through the world unchanged, except for qualitative or quantitative changes added to or subtracted from it. It is a view that takes external relations as primary.

The notion of external relations in contrast with internal relations reflects Aristotle’s ontological distinction between external and internal dynamis (or dunamis: power, capacity, actuality) with respect to understanding causation. A world understood as constituted necessarily by external relations includes the understanding that entities are moved—that is, an action or movement of a discrete entity is understood as caused to move by other discrete entities external and not necessarily related to itself. Materiality and, by extension, actuality is primary from this perspective (or theoretical starting point) and, as such, it becomes easy to commit the genetic fallacy: the idea that actuality determines possibility, thus submitting, theoretically, to a crude, deterministic historicism in understanding change.

On the other hand, a world understood as constituted primarily by internal relations conceives that entities are moving—that is, even though an entity moves in relation with other entities, it is self-moving rather than necessarily caused to move by entities relating with it. Actual entities, for Whitehead, are experience/events and take the place of things or bits of matter in a substantivist view. Whitehead describes actual entities as “the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. . . . The final facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (p. 18).

From a process perspective, then, the world is constituted by actual entities, which are processual moments of experience—complexes in temporal stages of becoming toward an aim. This view does not dismiss the importance of external relations (or actual materiality); rather, the primacy of internal relations allows for understanding external relations as informing rather than determining possibility, while leaving ample room to understand entities as active, creative parts of a dynamic, interrelated holistic process. It is a view that takes seriously the potentiality of human agency as a specific modality of becoming.

This conception represents a departure from the traditional metaphysics that posits individual or particular substance as primary. Rather, the move to posit process as primary is to reject Cartesian dualism fully, and in “point(ing) out the identical elements connecting human experience with physical science,” construct a scientific world-view in terms of events and their relations, rather than in terms of matter in motion. Certain sorts of events and temporal series of events (or processes) would then hold the status as the fundamental units or ‘primitives’ of the universe—a position traditionally the domain of Cartesian substance. These events provide a unity between the observer and the observed, subject and object. Rejecting dualism fully meant for Whitehead, that epistemology has no priority over ontology—any inquiry into knowing is simultaneously an inquiry into being.15

Thus, being or, more precisely, the process of becoming, provides the basis for a non-dualistic—that is, holistic and anti-reductive—theory of reality. It is also the basis for a critical practice that avoids the same pitfalls. For Whitehead, “Opposed elements stand to each other in mutual requirement” (p. 348). This notion presupposes Morris Cohen’s “Principle of Polarity”, as

Charles Hartshorne clarifies: “Particular entities have universal aspects; every effect becomes a cause and there are no causes not productive of subsequent effects. Both sides of metaphysical contrasts must be illustrated in every actual case”. Thus, ostensible dualisms can be understood as contrasts: each is necessary to understand the other, and neither is more or less important.

In Descartes’ extended world, substances or entities also exist in and of themselves, with no need of other entities for their own existence. In much the same way, the primary substance in a traditional metaphysics constitutes the universal of being: it is the unmoved mover underlying the being-ness of the world. From this substantialist perspective, particular subjects (or entities) exist independently within that universe, but do not “contain” or “create” that being: substances are static, and the quality of being is added to or subtracted from them. This is a foundationalist error inherent in the substantialist view:

The static notion, here rejected, is derived by two different paths from ancient thought. Plato in the earlier period of his thought, deceived by the beauty of mathematics intelligible in unchanging perfection, conceived of a super-world of ideas, forever perfect and forever interwoven. . . . Aristotle introduced the static fallacy by another concept which has infected all subsequent philosophy. He conceived of primary substances as the static foundations which received the impress of qualification.

It is this mistaken substantialist metaphysical notion—the separation of particular, ostensibly static substance-entities from a universal force of being (or a “super-world of ideas”)—that can be understood as underlying many of the erroneous dualistic propositions in modernist philosophy. If particular entities simply exist, with no need of other particular entities, then they can be understood as active (i.e., changing) only as a result of being changed by a universal, outside force of being that infuses them (external relations). From this perspective, being is privileged, while the process of becoming (internal relations) is obscured. Put another way, the One (a certain singularity, a universal) is primary and the Many (disjunctive, diverse particulars) are simply discrete derivations of the One.

Contra the substance view, Whitehead’s principle of process recognizes that “how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is, so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming’”. Because actual entities are occasions (or “drops”) of experience—what Hall calls “microcosmic centers of energy” (p. 31)—the world, for Whitehead, is understood as constituted by this flux of experience. This is the case, even though it seems to us that the world is made up of objects in motion:

The basic building blocks out of which the universe is made are constantly in process of coming into being and of passing away. The experienced permanence, or relative permanence, of objects of ordinary human experience belies the transience of things as viewed from the perspective of fundamental entities of which they are composed. (Hall, p. 31)

That is to say, actual entities are not substances in process, as though processes were the (derivative) maneuverings of invariable objects. Rather, objects are derivative of fluctuating processes; they are the relatively “stable” structures of regularities/patterns in the flux of variable

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relations in process. Put simply, beings and things do not coalesce into processes; processes coalesce, for a time, into beings and things.

Whitehead’s process theory of reality does not, however, mean that everything is process. Rather, a process approach entails that entities cannot be separated from the processes that constitute them and that there are no entities that are independent of relations with other entities that also are in the process of becoming: “The very essence of actuality—that is, of the completely real—is process. Thus each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing”.19 This conception underlies what Whitehead calls the ontological principle, which states that “the reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities”.20 In other words, there are no reasons in abstraction from the entities for which they have meaning. With respect to decision (or agency), it is not some quality or appendage of an actual entity; an entity’s actuality, its definiteness, is its decision, its reason, and cannot be abstracted from it without risk of committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. One must always return to actuality to discern reason (or explanation).

By extension, the ontological principle implies the relativity (or relationality) of decision; that is, the radical relationalism of an entity’s decision is always already with other entities. Moreover, from a process perspective, there exists no entity that is independent from everything else. A traditional substantialist metaphysics that takes substance as independent—as “just its individual self with no necessary relevance to any other particular” (p. 5)—is “fatal to a metaphysics which would purport to remain faithful to the modern experience of the world as an eco-system”.21 Contra the traditional emphasis on quantity and quality with respect to primary substance, then, Whitehead’s focus is on relations in process. Given that both quantity and quality are derivative of relations (and are, indeed, relations themselves), Whitehead recognizes the primacy of relations in a process approach.

In sum, an emphasis on process rather than substance, (1) takes internal relations as primary, thus recognizes entities as self-moving/changing first and moved/changed (by external relations) derivatively; (2) recognizes actuality as an important ground of analysis, but retains possibility as ontologically distinct, real, and as important; (3) emphasizes relationalism between ostensible dichotomies, thus is anti-reductive; and, (4) recognizes that objects are derivative of fluctuating processes, thus being (what) is understood as derivative of becoming (how).

**Temporality, Process, and Change**

Any discussion of a process theory of reality with respect to understanding change demands an attendant conception of time. For Whitehead, at bottom, the universe is temporal, as is the process of becoming. To whit, the only generic trait (that is, essential quality) of an entity is its temporality, and temporality is the mode of relatedness that makes all other relations intelligible. Temporality is also how we begin to make sense of the inherently subjunctive or possibilizing mode of ethical being-in-the-world constitutive of (inter)subjectivity—it is where what was, what is, what will be, what can be, and what ought to be meet and mingle.22 This is in direct

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contradistinction to the Newtonian and Cartesian conceptions of time that presume absolute, true (mathematical) time which supplies an objective measure of motion and action occurring in the external, physical world. From this substantialist perspective, human experience of time is simply a subjective viewpoint from which we gauge the objective world and the objects in it. It is this notion of independent yardsticks of absolute time and space that founds the mechanistic and deterministic doctrine of change. Thus, Cartesian-Newtonian conceptions of time as discrete, independent bits of space significantly influenced (and continue to influence) physical and social scientific thought with respect to time, space, and their relationship to change.

It is also this substantialist Cartesian-Newtonian notion of time, reduced to space, that is commonly understood in our everyday (Western) lives as absolute universal time. Time, for us, flows objectively and unvaryingly: each half of an hour takes up the same space between hands on a clock and looks like every other half of an hour because every half-hour space can be divided up equally into pieces (thirty minutes; eighteen hundred seconds). The process of change, from this perspective, happens in time and, like time, can be divided up into pieces—for instance, into what came before and what came after. From this view, we measure change by how the before and after pieces align contemporaneously with pieces of time; that is, things (objects, people) change, and tallying up the differences between things before and things after is the way to mark change, or the movement of something through time. Time is an objective background against—or a sterile container within which—we understand process and change as taking place. This is the universe wherein external relations reign by causing stuff to bump into other stuff, thus determining the direction and quality of change. By extension, in this universe, it is a seemingly straightforward move to postulate or predict what something will be because of our ability to have marked its previous motion and change from before to after. This spatialized, linear conception of time also affords us a convenient and commonsensical way of knowing time, from which conceptualizations of process and change emerge. Process, from this perspective, is derivative of substance, and how change is conceived is derivative in much the same way.

Whitehead’s influences were diverse when developing a process conception of time. Inverting Aristotle’s idea that time is the measure of motion, Plotinus, in *The Enneads*, tied time to conscious concrete experience and conceived motion, instead, as the measure of time. For Plotinus, time was not abstractly numerical; rather, time is coupled with activity and, thus, is ontologically forward-oriented. Aristotle’s emphasis on the past—that is, what happens before acts as a burden in determining what happens after—is reconceived by Plotinus. For him, time tied to activity means that time is real in its active progression of novelty. Time, then, is not only in the mind of the beholder—it is ontologically real.

Leibniz was also convinced that events, rather than substances, were primary realities and turned his attention to the relational aspect of individual experiential time. For Leibniz, time (at least from a non-theological perspective) was ultimately tied to individual becoming, which connected each individual to all others, in the process of becoming. Duration is not a substance or block that we measure; rather, time as duration is order—time is the order of real changing relations and as such, time is the reason for the human experience of continuity of events. Time does not exist outside of the entity for which it has meaning; rather, each temporal entity is a manifestation of the universe as a whole. From this perspective, time qua time is a design; it is how we mark the progress of our becoming in a rational universe. Leibniz’s processual conception of time is the order of becoming for each entity and our marking it off into sections (e.g., moments) is an epistemological abstraction from the ontological status of that order. Thus, time is the phenomenon of order in becoming.

Bergson distinguished between time as a concept and time as lived. For Bergson, this distinction between the quantified measurement of time or the time of things and experiential,
authentic, or inner time allowed him also to make the distinction between absolute clock time and time as lived duration. As Bergson recognized, even if impersonal and universal time exists, when we try to measure it, we do so retroactively, dividing what has already unfolded rather than what is unfolding. Bergson believed that the mistake Aristotle and others made was focusing on being rather than becoming. Like Leibniz, Bergson’s emphasis was on time as process, as event, rather than on substance that can be divided into chunks. By converting lived duration (inner time) into a spatialized representation of it, we not only lose the processual nature of time, we also sever the possibilities (at least our consideration of them) from the actuality of processual becoming. Thus, Bergson’s lived duration enables an understanding of the reality of change. That is, static objects do not change; change is the very continuity of succession, of movement, and of duration: time is our lived experience of continuity.

Influenced by (among others) Plotinus, Leibniz, and Bergson, Whitehead understands the present as a continuation of the past and, thus, as extended, which accounts for the relatedness and continuity of events as duration:

The continuity of nature [time] arises from extension. Every event extends over other events, and every event is extended over by other events. Thus in the special case of durations . . . every duration is part of other durations; and every duration has other durations which are parts of it.\(^23\)

Whitehead also understands the present as an experienced spread: we experience the present in its thickness, and our experience means it is real. For Whitehead, reality is the actual world from the perspective of that actual entity’s experiencing, and so time as experienced duration is actual. For us, then, being is time; it is also the fundamental ontological condition for the possibility of understanding the meaning of being. Without an emphasis on futurity and, thus, finitude--without understanding that as we are becoming-possibilities we are always already moving toward our death--ethics, values, or moral development (the processes of human meaningful-ness) are utterly insignificant. Our death, then, or better, understanding the meaning of our death by understanding the meaning of the possibilities immanent in our becoming-in-time, opens up the significance of our life as free, moral persons.\(^24\)

However, given that Whitehead’s project is descriptive with respect to a theory of reality, he does not assign a priority to past, present, or future:

The passage of nature [temporality] which is only another name for the creative force of existence has no narrow ledge of definite instantaneous present within which to operate. Its operative presence which is now urging nature forward must be sought for through the whole, in the remotest past as well as in the narrowest breadth of any present duration. Perhaps also in the unrealised future. Perhaps also in the future which might be as well as the actual future which will be. (p. 73)

This focus on the “whole” does not mean that Whitehead ignores the distinctiveness of each mode of time; rather, it means that there are no normative considerations inherent in his description of time and how it functions in relation to change. Indeed, Whitehead’s metaphysics do not logically demand an accompanying ethics. Instead, Whitehead’s descriptive project treats the members of this triad as each necessary to constitute the others. An emphasis on the past or the present or the future would imply an ethical commitment about how each relates to conceiving possibility, potentiality, and actuality and the relationship between them with respect


to ethics. When, for instance, the past or present is taken as primary, how change emerges is more a matter of the past and/or present *driving* what happens in the future. From this deterministic (or, at the very least, controlled) perspective, it seems a waste of time to discuss ethics when that discussion relies on choice (as Kant recognized). When futurity is emphasized, on the other hand, the past or present may be conceived in liberating terms; that is, the future is where we strive to emancipate the past or present. An overemphasis here, though, has the potential to overlook or neglect present moral potential.

Conceiving the relational contiguousness of past-present-future cannot be achieved from no-where or no-when, what Whitehead calls “vacuous actuality”. Instead, considerations of time always already emerge from a particular standpoint, and the view from that standpoint is relative to how past-present-future are conceived in their relatedness. At the same time, conscious becoming, in Whitehead’s conception, is a concern with otherness. A process universe wherein actual entities require other entities in order to constitute contiguousness means that there must be some way to account for the nature of entities as requiring those other entities and selecting among them. Inclusion of other entities is in the nature of actual entities because they require others to become in time. Consciousness is that selection among other entities that constitutes becoming. Whitehead explains it this way:

> The objects are the factors in experience which function so as to express that that occasion originates by including a transcendent universe of other things. Thus it belongs to the essence of each occasion of experience that it is concerned with an otherness transcending itself. The occasion is one among others, and including others which it is among.

Another way to understand this is recognizing that the universe is, at bottom, *a process of radically relational interpersonal communicative interaction*.

**Some Concluding Thoughts and Implications**

We can liken Whitehead’s concept of the universe to a principle Hua-Yen Buddhist image, The Jewel Net of Indra:

> [T]he cosmos is like an infinite network of glittering jewels, all different. In each one we can see the images of all the others reflected. Each image contains an image of all the other jewels; and also the image of the images of the images, and so on ad infinitum. The myriad reflections within each jewel are the essence of the jewel itself, without which it does not exist. Thus, every part of the cosmos reflects, and brings into existence, every other part. Nothing can exist unless it enfolds within its essence the nature of everything else.

This striking illustration captures the dazzling sense of vastness and radical relatedness implied by the solidarity of Whitehead’s process universe. It is a universe in which the whole (world) is in each actual entity and each actual entity exemplifies the whole (world). In addition to its beauty, understanding process metaphysics as a philosophical middle way for the critic offers several implications for critical communication work.

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A process-oriented communication critic is anti-reductive, avoiding what Cornell West calls “one-factor analysis”\textsuperscript{28}: work that tends to oversimplify phenomena. The process-oriented critic understands that symbolic systems arise from a root intelligibility of the cosmos; that is, even though symbolic systems may contain internal coherency and the simple leads to the more complex, it does not also mean that that is a characteristic of the cosmos--thus, metaphysical description need not exhibit this same characteristic. By extension, then, reducing the complex to the simple--be it physically, theoretically, conceptually, etc.--is not a necessity for the process-oriented critic. Indeed, it is an examination of the complexities and radical relatedness of phenomena that the process approach supports in critical communication practice.

The principle of polarity also guides the practice of the process-oriented critic. An anti-reductive orientation means that acknowledging and analyzing ostensible opposites without reduction becomes important. The principle of polarity posits that oppositions can be understood as contrasts: each is necessary to understand the other, and neither is more or less important in their diverse unity. This principle provides a conceptual orientation for the process-oriented communication critic that is quite useful in dealing with many of the points of contention between modernist and postmodernist approaches to cultural critique. These points of contention comprise a variety of constructed oppositions: material/ideal, particularity/generality, concrete/abstract, body/mind, center-margin, structure/agency, order/novelty, object/subject, society/individual, determination/freedom, permanence/change, and absolute/relative, just to name a few. The result has been that, often, one pole or the other is privileged and the other is collapsed into or reduced to the other; or, one pole is seen as destructive while the other is viewed as productive and is privileged or jettisoned accordingly.

What a focus on opposition as mutually exclusive binaries has done is narrow our considerations with respect to theorizing by drawing us away from creative and imaginative speculation about relations and toward reductive dichotomies. Instead, by orienting around a principle of polarity, the process-oriented critic recognizes the dipolar contrast of possibility and actuality and focuses on their relational unity. Thus, guided by the principle of polarity, the critic restrains the urge (inherent in dichotomizing) to reduce, for instance, the possible (ideal) to the actual (material) or vice versa. When one or the other is privileged, as is often the case in reductive substantialist systems, it is far too easy to commit either the naturalistic fallacy by conflating description (actual) and ethics (possible) or to commit the genetic fallacy by conflating what has-been or what-is (actual) and what-might-be (possible). With the first, we see a return to a scientistic positivism, and with the latter we are forced to defer to a deterministic historicism. The principle of polarity allows, instead, a critical middle way.

The process-oriented communication critic also works in the pragmatic attitude, embracing a mode of knowing that is experiential in contrast to a scientistic mode that primarily employs ostensibly objective observation and abstract logic. The radical empiricism assumed in a pragmatic approach means that the critic offers for discussion conceptual analyses (knowledge constructs) that are “definable in terms drawn from experience,” recognizing that relations are as experienceable as things related.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, value, meaning, aesthetics, spirituality, and feeling as relational experience are as actual as things for the process-oriented critic and are the stuff of knowledge and truth. Addressing them is not necessitated by a process-oriented approach, but the critic does not exclude them at the outset as illegitimate (as is necessitated by a scientistic


\textsuperscript{29} William James, \emph{The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1909/1979), pp. 6-7.
approach). Truth, from this perspective, then, is not chained to the static, ahistorical, and sterile assumptions of the objective scientistic approach to knowledge. Rather, truth and knowledge are recognized as meaningful experience—-they are dynamic, contextual, relational, contingent, and incomplete. That is, truth and knowledge are acknowledged as subjectival in that the subject’s experience, for the process-oriented critic, is the affirmed perspective from which knowledge and truth are meaningfully constituted.

The process-oriented critic is also guided by the ontological principle, which states that “the reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities”. Given this, the critic understands that the reasons or descriptions offered are always slanted off of actuality and it is to that actuality that the critic must return to attest to what is created from the possibilities of theoretical flight. In other words, this recognition means that the critic employs Whitehead’s speculative method of imaginative rationalization, and experience is where the critic “begins” and “ends”. At the same time, being guided by the ontological principle allows a way to account for the relational constitution of particulars that unifies them with universals or generalities. That is, emphasizing the relation between particulars and universals/generalities means that the process-oriented communication critic respects fragmentary, particularized experiences and meanings while, at the same time, also recognizing that those experiences and meanings are uniquely related to a social whole.

The ontological principle compels the process-oriented critic to ask, “How is it that the relational constitution of particulars in this case unifies them with generalities?” One way this question helps the communication critic is in dealing with notions of center (e.g., of power, of meaning, etc.) that have become theoretically reified in much criticism, as has been the notion of margin. The process-oriented critic recognizes that applications of this reified general, abstract model miss important particular, complex relations and their communicative and cultural implications. The center/margin (or center-periphery) theoretical model of cultural relations tends to dichotomize and fix or freeze culture into general theoretical us/them, oppressed/oppressor, and colonized/colonizers configurations. Instead, the process-oriented critic recognizes that the (particular) many (margins, dissent, cultural disjunctions) may advance to (general) one (centers, consent, cultural conjunctions) and in doing so, novel disjunctions are often the result, which in turn advance to other conjunctions. Put simply, so-called centers and margins shift and change; they are functions of the relations that unify them. Understanding culture and change, then, begins with particular practices and/or performances and advances to how their relational constitution unifies them with social wholes.

Ultimately, the process-oriented communication critic prioritizes possibility. The guiding idea of a process approach to critical practice is that reality consists in, and is best understood in terms of, processes rather than things—that is, in terms of relations and modes of change rather than fixed stabilities. Because temporality is the mode of relatedness that makes all other relations intelligible, the process-oriented communication critic emphasizes temporal relations in analyzing modes of change. And, time, from a process perspective, is possibility; the notion of possibility is not reliant on a notion of necessity-impossibility (as it is from the perspective of an Aristotelian metaphysics). That is, possibility as time (in a practical sense) replaces necessity in the process-oriented worldview. This move to prioritize possibility-time allows the process-oriented critic to conceptualize subjectivity and agency (among other processes) mainly in terms concerned with “creativity, novelty, openness, deliberate decision, and purposive activity”. In

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31 Charles Sherover, *The Human Experience of Time: The Development of its*
other words, a process perspective freed from a totalizing atemporal, linear, and determinist worldview allows the critic to acknowledge subjectivity as an open process of becoming, constituted in action rather than simply reaction, and agency as that active purposiveness subjects practice to create and/or select from novel, open-ended options.

Subjectivity, then, is not biologically or environmentally determined and fixed from the perspective of the process-oriented critic; there is no code, genetic or social, that the critic can crack and then predict a subject’s reactions. Rather, these are aspects (biological, ideological) that belong to an open-ended, active temporal process of becoming, with no one aspect being reducible to any other aspect, and with indeterminate outcomes. This does not mean that the critic necessarily favors indeterminacy over determinacy or disorder over order; rather, the effort on the part of the process-oriented communication critic is to reconceptualize relations (internal and external) in a way that allows for order without banishing the novel or reducing difference to the same. Thus, the process-oriented critic resists any slide back into an easy dualism of, for instance, idealism versus materialism.

The critic working in a possibilizing attitude understands agency as will, will as time, and time as possibility. In other words, agency is the active manifestation of time-possibility as subjects become. The future, in this conception, is open/possibility-time, and subjects are lured by their anticipation, expectations, hopes, longings, pursuits, etc. toward what-might-be. This does not mean that what-was and what-is are unimportant; rather, they are given, while the future exceeds the given in its possibilities. Conceptualizing agency in this way is not a matter of rejecting the biologically or socially given (the actual), but of rejecting the idea that the biologically or socially given constitutes the whole, whether as determination or limit.

Of course, these are only a few of the potential implications of a process philosophy of communication that can inform critical communication research. And, the broad brushstrokes I have offered of some of Whitehead’s ideas barely outline the productive complexities of his metaphysics. Even so, that potential should help those who ignore metaphysics to understand that situating critical work in a process metaphysics is not a matter of the critic rejecting the given in favor of something or someone in "the beyond". Rather, it is a matter of encountering the reality of idea(l)s (what Bergson calls “the virtual”) as an irreducible dimension of the real in excess of the given actual. The alternatives, then, are not between materialism and idealism, but between a dualistic, atemporal, reductive worldview and a process worldview that embraces open, active, diverse, creative multiplicity. It is potentially a subjunctive modality that can connect time-possibility and truth and rupture static notions of what-was and what-is in order to introduce fresh ways of conceiving what might-be. My hope is that this article moves in that direction.

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