

Relativity In The Cosmos: A Philosophical Appreciation Of Whitehead's Philosophy

Adam Blatner, M.D.

Highlights: Need for creativity. Philosophical approach that makes creativity a core dynamic is the "Process Thought" of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), developed further by Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and others.

Precursors: Heraclitus: It is impossible to step into the same river twice. All is in a continuous process of dynamic change. Later 19th century: Charles Sanders Peirce; Early 20th century: Henri Bergson, John Dewey, William James—some elements of "process"-like thinking.

In other cultures, also. E.g., In Hinduism, one of the main gods, Shiva, is often portrayed dancing—the name for this is Shiva Nataraj. With his four arms, in a circle of fire, Shiva dances the universe into being, creating, destroying, preserving, revealing, concealing. From another perspective, it is the Goddess Leela playing.

Some Basic Principles of Process Philosophy:

1. Pan-psychism. There is no inert matter. There is something akin to primordial mind—note that it need not be reflective or self-aware—in all events, in atoms, cells, and so forth (deQuincey, 2002). This concept is also called "pan-experientialism." Nor should we presume to withhold the idea of mind from larger collectives or spheres of energy. God also partakes of and embodies this mind-field.

2. Creativity is an integral element in the nature of each process event and of mind.

3. God is not apart from the cosmos, but includes it—"pan-en-theism." There is nothing apart from God. This is not necessarily a traditional Western concept of Divinity but a more trans-religious form of dynamic Deism. It may be encouraging to imagine that our personal and professional development and the development of the collectives in which we serve are all part of the Divine Creative Advance.

4. Contrary to the Aristotelian idea of the "unmoved mover" that is at the base of classical theology, Whitehead's and Hartshorne's thesis is that God also is in process, evolving—at least in part—and thus capable of enjoying our progress and suffering with our lapses. Knowing that our creative participation helps the greater whole advance may encourage our creative efforts.

5. God doesn't act through force, violence, coercion, but rather the rather more subtle and extended effect of lure, emerging as the felt value within each event, in each moment. Over time, this effects a gradual process of evolution. Attending to these values helps open to creativity.

6. The relationship of God to the individual is not so much that of a parent to child or king to subject as a super-organism to a cell. We are thus an integral part, however minute. Whitehead called his approach a philosophy of organism, and the emergence of systems theory, the recognition that things work as whole systems within more encompassing whole systems, an on and on—i.e., “holarchy”—again supports the image that your actions are meaningful parts of the great Creative Advance.

It is not necessary that you agree with any of these ideas, but the point is to generate a philosophical map of sorts that makes creativity a meaningful activity, rather than being viewed as a threat to the established dogma or order. Psychologically, creativity can be enhanced by an opening to the flow of images and ideas from the creative subconscious, and this may be aided by general images that suggest that the creative subconscious exists and is offering creative insights.

Another facet of Whitehead’s work is that Process Thought constitutes a moderate re-visioning of spirituality and the potentials of religion in a changing world. These ideas represent a significant re-imagining of what God is and how God works in the world, a kind of “process theology” that resolves many of the problems posed by the more common ideas about religion. (Whitehead also proposed that religion should be recognized as a growing body of understanding that should evolve as science does, rather than clinging to the illusion that more pristine and perfect knowledge was achieved in the past and we need to go back and understand it.)

If you have trouble with anything approaching the God concept, perhaps you can play with some alternatives, such as the idea that the subconscious may be able to tap into a vaster field of insight than your ordinary consciousness can access through acts of will. The point is that in the realm of creativity, expectation in the dynamic potential of the “muses” tends to be fulfilled, whereas not believing there is any source of inspiration tends also to be fulfilled.

I hope this dip into philosophy has served to remind you of the deeper and broader significance of your work. I want to invite you to play with me more, by reading some of the papers on my website—going on and browsing and reading others, too— and responding, emailing me with your ideas, suggestions, additions, corrections, arguments. The Web offers an opportunity for serious dialogue, should anyone take the time to compose thoughtful responses.

Website: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/> Email to adam@blatner.com

Blatner, A. (2002). The process theology of Alfred North Whitehead: its relevance from a psychiatrist’s perspective. <http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/processthought.html>
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deQuincey, C. (2002). *Radical nature: rediscovering the soul of matter*. Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press.

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