

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
AHAN7024 Heavenly Discourses
Bernadette Brady

Notes on the Process Philosophy

If you are noticing and recording the changing sky then you may wish to discuss your findings in the light of process philosophy.

In essence process philosophy is that view that the world should be viewed as in a state of constant change. It is the 'process', the change itself that is important, not the object in any moment in time. This notion has classical roots and is captured in Plato's philosophy as the concepts of becoming (process) versus being (object). However the first philosopher to place *process* instead of *static* as being the central focus of the world cosmology was Heraclitus, A Greek philosopher of Ephesus (Turkey) who lived around 500 BCE. He put forward that things, all things, are constantly changing (universal flux).

We are only left with fragments of Heraclitus' writings but the one that most people know is the idea that you cannot step into the same river twice.

[You can download a PDF of his complete fragments from:

<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf> .

However a really enjoyable little book is :Heraclitus (2003). *Heraclitus Fragments*, New York, Penguin Classics, translated by E. V. Rieu with a forward by James Hillman.]

A few others from Heraclitus (2003). *Heraclitus Fragments*, translated by E. V. Rieu New York, Penguin Classics.

'The river
where you set
your foot just now
is gone —
those waters
giving way to this,
now this.
Heraclitus fg.41

Heraclitus' river fragment has received comments by other classical authors

B12. *potamoisi toisin autoisin embainousin hetera kai hetera hudata epirrei.*

On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow. (Cleanthes from Arius Didymus from Eusebius)

B91[a]. *potamôi ... tôi autôi ...*

It is not possible to step twice into the same river according to Heraclitus, or to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state. (Plutarch)

Plato commented on Heraclitus by stating:

‘Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing stays, and comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river.’
(Plato *Cratylus* 402a = A6)

Other fragments that may prove useful for your journal are:

‘The Sun is new
again, all day.’
Heraclitus fg.32

Without the sun,
what day? What night?
Heraclitus fg.31

What was scattered
gathers.
What was gathered
blows apart.
Heraclitus fg.40

The difficulty with Heraclitus’ philosophy is that it tends to dismiss attempts at seeking knowledge because if all things are in a state of change then observations cannot be generalised to other instants. For more information on Heraclitus visit Prof. James E. Mahon Heraclitus web pages from Washington and Lee University.
[[http://home.wlu.edu/~mahonj/Ancient Philosophers/Heraclitus.htm](http://home.wlu.edu/~mahonj/Ancient_Philosophers/Heraclitus.htm)
accessed 20 April 2013]

Various philosophers have re explored this philosophy and the most notable is Alfred Whitehead. Whitehead returned, in principle, to Heraclitus’ concept of the world as becoming rather than being.

In his work, *Process and Reality*, rather than assuming substance as the basic metaphysical category, Whitehead introduces a new metaphysically primitive notion

which he calls an **actual occasion**. In Whitehead's opinion an actual **occasion** is not an enduring substance, but a process of becoming.¹

Whitehead challenged the science of Einstein and wrote:

There persists, [a] fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread through space in a flux of configurations. In itself such a material is senseless, valueless, purposeless. It just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being. It is this assumption that I call 'scientific materialism.' Also it is an assumption which I shall challenge as being entirely unsuited to the scientific situation at which we have now arrived.²

Whitehead's work has led to a new branch of philosophy known as Process Philosophy. Johanna Seibit, on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy web pages, defines process philosophy as,

Process philosophy is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it. Even though we experience our world and ourselves as continuously changing, Western metaphysics has long been obsessed with describing reality as an assembly of static individuals whose dynamic features are either taken to be mere appearances or ontologically secondary and derivative. For process philosophers the adventure of philosophy begins with a set of problems that traditional metaphysics marginalizes or even sidesteps altogether: what is the role of mind in our experience of reality as *becoming*? Are there several varieties of becoming — for instance, the uniform going on of activities versus the coming about of developments? Do all developments have the same *way* of occurring quite independently of *what* is coming about? How can we best classify into different kinds of occurrences what is going on and coming about? How can we understand the emergence of apparently novel conditions?³

Since the 1980s process philosophy has largely been involved in establishing what is known as process theology, in terms that God as a concept is in a state of becoming, rather than the Platonist model as God as 'being'. However, process philosophy has also found a home in Complexity Science. Broadly speaking complexity has been focused into environmental studies but it is also gaining ground in the study of any complex living and or non-living system.

¹ Sherburne, Donald W. (1995) "Whitehead, Alfred North," in Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 852

² Whitehead, Alfred. (1925) *Science and the Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 22.

³ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/> accessed 20 April 2013

Some Books and JSTOR papers to give you more literature on this theme

Casti, J. L. (1994). *Complexification – Explaining a Paradoxical World Through the Science of Surprise*, London, Abacus

Cilliers, P. (1998, 2005). *Complexity and Postmodernism, Understanding complex systems*, London, New York, Routledge.

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Eigenauer, J. D. (1993). 'The Humanities and Chaos Theory: A Response to Steenburg's "Chaos at the Marriage of Heaven and Hell".'. *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 86, 455-469.

Derrickson-Kossmann, D. & Drinkard, L. (1997). 'Dissociative Disorders in Chaos and Complexity'. In: Perna, P. A. & Masterpasqua, F. (eds.) *The Psychological Meaning of Chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Goodwin, B. (1994). *How the Leopard Changed its Spots, the evolution of Complexity*, London, Phoenix.

Griffin, D. R. (2001). 'Process Philosophy of Religion'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 50, 131-151.

Johnson, A. H. (1944). "'Truth, Beauty and Goodness" in the Philosophy of A. N. Whitehead'. *Philosophy of Science*, 11, 9-29.

Lawrence, N. (1961). 'The Vision of Beauty and the Temporality of Deity in Whitehead's Philosophy'. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 58, 543-553.

Mainzer, K. (1994). *Thinking in Complexity: The complex dynamics of matter, mind and mankind* London, Springer-Verlag.

Masterpasqua, F. (1997). 'Towards a Dynamical Developmental Understanding of Disorder'. In: Perna, P. A. & Masterpasqua, F. (eds.) *The Psychological Meaning of Chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Proctor, J. D. & Brendon, M. H. L. (2005). 'Ecology, Complexity, and Metaphor'. *BioScience*, 55, 1065-1068.

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