

NEOPROCESSISM

TRUTH, REALITY AND LANGUAGE RECONSIDERED

Glen Veitch

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2019

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY:

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Glen Veitch

ABSTRACT:

This thesis seeks to explore the coherence and potency of process metaphysics and asks the question: what bearing does process metaphysics have on the role and import of human language? Beginning with an examination and critique of Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism, a thorough appreciation and application of both a principle of perspective and what Whitehead terms the 'subjectivist principle' are found to be lacking. Through an expounding and upholding of each of these principles, an alternative, naturalistic process metaphysics the author terms 'neoprocessism' is established. First, offering a serious critique of the divine entity based on the principle of perspective, Whitehead's God is shown to be incoherent. Similarly, the assumption of a determinate, monistic model of truth is challenged and shown to be incoherent with reference to the inherent and unavoidable panexperientialism of any process metaphysics predicated on a subjectivist principle. 'Neoprocessism' arises as a viable alternative that takes seriously the central claim of process philosophy — that reality is reducible and exhaustively explained as perspectival, experiential event. It becomes apparent that neoprocessism has serious implications for models of truth and reality and a coherent inclusion of relativistic conceptions for each is achieved. Having established a thoroughly immanent, naturalistic and internally consistent process metaphysics, the thesis finally examines the role and import of language under such a metaphysical framework and argues that a logical conclusion for all naturalistic process philosophies is that language must be seen as its own species of event and thus ontologically creative.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| SECTION I – PROCESSISM..... | 5 |
| CHAPTER 1 – PROCESS PHILOSOPHY..... | 7 |
| CHAPTER 2 – WHITEHEAD’S PHILOSOPHY OF ORGANISM..... | 31 |
| CHAPTER 3 – THE GOD QUESTION..... | 55 |
| CHAPTER 4 – EMERGENCE: AUTHENTIC NOVELTY..... | 75 |
| SECTION II – NEOPROCESSISM | 109 |
| CHAPTER 5 – PANEXPERIENTIALISM | 111 |
| CHAPTER 6 – PERSPECTIVISM | 129 |
| CHAPTER 7 – RELATIVISM | 151 |
| CHAPTER 8 – TRUTH | 169 |
| SECTION III – LANGUAGE | 191 |
| CHAPTER 9 – THE HUMAN BEING | 193 |
| CHAPTER 10 – LANGUAGE AS EVENT | 209 |
| CHAPTER 11 – LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY | 235 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 261 |

INTRODUCTION

Process metaphysics is by no means a recent philosophical approach to the nature of reality. However, the strength and applicability of this school of thought (or better: *schools* of thought) has been largely overlooked or under-valued. As a result it is appearing on the scenes of much of Western academia as a little-understood, novel approach to many philosophical issues, both contemporary and ancient. One of the leading reasons for this apparent neglect of influence is the lack of a unifying coherent system to which one could ostensibly identify with process philosophy. The work of Alfred North Whitehead, particularly his philosophy of organism as it is laid out in *Process and Reality*, is by far the closest process philosophical literature has come to establishing something of a formulated presentation of process philosophy, which could also be rightly inclusive of many, if not all, event-based ontologies. Due to its dominance in contemporary process philosophical literature, it is primarily with *Process and Reality* in mind that I offer up this thesis as a both a revisional critique and an important step towards a unified and coherent process metaphysics.

This thesis seeks to achieve three distinct tasks. First, I seek to extrapolate and explain some of process philosophy's plausibility for a coherent metaphysical worldview, and subsequently highlight its strengths and applicability first for questions of philosophy but also for science and sociology. Second, I intend to at once embrace and yet seriously critique Whitehead's philosophy of organism in order to establish a more robust and coherent process philosophy that honours essential philosophical tenets of event-based ontologies, namely, the production of authentic novelty, the primacy of subjective experience and the unavoidable perspectivism inherent in any metaphysic that takes both of the former to their logical conclusions. Finally, the question of the role and function of human language, spoken or otherwise, will be

investigated under an assumed internally consistent neo-Whiteheadian process metaphysics.

The reason for the final focus on the question of language is two-fold. First, Whitehead and other process thinkers have spent relatively little time offering any distinct philosophy of language. Like many metaphysical frameworks, questions of language — its nature, efficacy and potency — haunt process philosophy. However, process metaphysics is uniquely positioned to tackle these questions from novel perspectives, with original metaphysical assumptions. At the time of writing, this has scarcely been attempted. This thesis will attempt at making a first step, as it were, to a process philosophical discourse on the role and function of language. The second reason for my focus on the question of language is that the use and receipt of language soon presents itself as an elegant paradigmatic example of the implications of a neo-Whiteheadian process metaphysics that holds subjective, perspectival experience to be primary. As a result, I wish to ask the question: could language, treated as event in itself, be seen as ontologically creative under an assumed process metaphysics?

It does need to be addressed from the outset that my engagement with language has more to do with the internal logic and metaphysical underpinnings of the phenomenon and less to do with linguistics or specific human dialects. It is for this reason that the focus of my investigations have as their primary target the subject-predicate logic of language which is at work in many, but not all, human tongues. Primary among them is the Indo-European linguistic family which encompasses the languages employed by the bulk of process scholarship, including this thesis. The subject-predicate linguistic logic is embedded within this family of languages and it is this logic that provides many of the distinguishing features of language broadly for Whitehead and other process ontology. Additionally, the subject-predicate logic of the Indo-European tradition happens to sit relatively comfortably within the modern scientific paradigm which isolates and delimits subjects for fixed analysis of qualities and properties. The subject-predicate logic thus implicitly endorses an ontology of substance, which process ontology challenges — causing much of the perceived “problem of language” for process thinkers. For these reasons my investigation will deal exclusively with the subject-predicate logic of the bulk of human language.

The structure of the thesis is comprised of three sections with the intention of gradually building towards conclusions and implications for a neoprocessism arising out of prior investigations and critiques.

Section I: Processism, first deals with process philosophy broadly. The tradition's history will be covered briefly before an explanation of several pertinent core tenets shared between process philosophers and reflected in the literature. From there a more detailed expounding of Whitehead's philosophy of organism, its strengths and weaknesses, will be undertaken. Two of the most striking weaknesses, with significant import for our purposes, will be the existence and coherence of Whitehead's divine entity: God, and the account of the production and quality of novelty offered by his system. Each of these areas will be heavily critiqued and alternative metaphysical propositions will be offered in an effort to simplify and bring internal consistency to a novel process metaphysic.

Section II: Neoprocessism, will embark on a thorough explanation of a proposed neoprocessism. First, the inherent panexperientialism presented by a taking seriously Whitehead's subjectivist principle (a principle at work, whether named as such or not, in most event-based ontologies) will be taken to its logical conclusions. Likewise the unavoidable perspectivism of any process metaphysics that takes seriously such a subjectivist principle will be explored and will quickly indicate serious questions pertaining to the nature of truth and reality for neoprocessism. The final two chapters of this section will address each of these concerns and offer a unique, robust model for truth embedded within a pluralistic ontology.

Section III: Language, will be the point of application for neoprocessism, specifically application to the problem of language. By "problem of language" what is first intended is the problem Whitehead and other process thinkers identify, namely, the apparent impotence of language when tasked with accurately reflecting reality. However, under neoprocessism this problem is shown to be largely a misunderstanding, as the ambiguity and indeterminacy of human language is indicative of the ambiguity and indeterminacy of any process ontology predicated on perspectival subjective experience. The investigation into language then becomes the seeking of a way forward after asking questions of the role and function of

language under such a metaphysical framework. In order to carry out such an investigation the nature of a human being, when considered under neoprocessism, is first in need of being established and opens the section accordingly. Secondly, the implications of the nature of language being a flavour of event itself — as all things must be — for event-based ontologies is explored. This exploration leads to a striking conclusion that process thinkers heretofore have either failed to recognise or have neglected to incorporate into the process philosophical canon. The conclusion is that language, considered as event, must bear the hallmarks of any other event for process metaphysics, including being causally efficacious in the production of novelty. It is argued in this final section that language must be understood as being ontologically creative.