

# Process Philosophy in the European Cultural Tradition

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# *THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY*

## PROCESS PHILOSOPHY IN THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL TRADITION

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### *Abstract*

The subject of the present exposition is namely the discussion of the question when and how process philosophy has entered into the European cultural tradition. We could approach this question in two ways: the philosophical and the historical perspective. We shall focus of our attention on both perspectives, which concern the return of process philosophy in Europe after its original moulding as a contemporary philosophical trend by Whitehead and his immediate followers. If we trace and systematize chronologically the acts of influence of Whitehead's works on eminent scientists and philosophers in Europe, we can provisionally outline three stages. The paper evaluates the manner in which process philosophy became so attractive for the European philosophical thought. At the present time we can definitely conclude that it is confirmed the existence of "a school" of representatives of process philosophy in Europe.

**Keywords:** European cultural tradition, European philosophical thought, process philosophy, Whitehead.

Process philosophy is a possible answer to the questions concerning the opposites of being against becoming and constancy against change which have been central for the metaphysics since the time of Ancient Greece. The present exposition will not have the task to explain the essence of process philosophy, nor will it discuss the variety of answers about it. As it is well known, contemporary process philosophy has as its founder or spiritual father Alfred North Whitehead, with his

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philosophical works of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through a combination of circumstances, it has taken place in the USA after working at Harvard University. That is why it is usually accepted that contemporary process philosophy has originated and developed first as a trend in the American philosophy before Whitehead and his immediate pupils and followers. In the course of years, the interest in process philosophy went far beyond the boundaries of the American continent as a result of the originality of the approach, of its significance for the development of contemporary philosophy in general and of the actuality of problems to which this approach is directed even outside of the sphere of philosophy. Nowadays it is an affirmed trend in the philosophical and, *in extenso*, in the humanitarian thought in America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

The subject of the present exposition is namely the discussion of the question when and how process philosophy has entered into the European cultural tradition. We could approach to this question in two ways. If it is considered in philosophical and historical perspective, it is clear that the roots of process philosophy are European because a number of its predecessors in the history of philosophy as Heraclitus, Leibniz, Hegel etc. are Europeans, and also concretely because of the fact that the views of Whitehead himself has been moulded in the Great Britain in purely European cultural environment.<sup>2</sup> In that sense we can say that process philosophy has never left the European continent. We shall not focus our attention on this aspect of the question.

The other aspect of the question – concerns, so to speak, the second return of process philosophy in Europe after its original moulding as a contemporary philosophical trend by Whitehead and his immediate followers. The fact of the great development of process philosophy in Europe is recently noted by many researchers (Lucas 1989, 6) and cannot be questioned.

I would like to begin the exposition with a story which has taken place more than 50 years ago. In 1956, several years after the World War II:

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<sup>2</sup> As George Lucas, Jr. points out, Whitehead is “representing in fact a unique and functional blend of some of the main currents of English and American” tradition (Lucas 1989, 148).

Prof. John Smith of Yale University in USA has come in Europe and decided to pay a visit to the venerable Martin Heidegger. Their conversation lasted for three hours, during which time Heidegger expressed his passionate interest in turning toward a new, post-Hegelian pursuit of a philosophy of nature. Smith responded that in America A. N. Whitehead had already spawned such a movement. Heidegger was most pleasantly surprised and interested, and expressed a desire to read some of Whitehead's philosophy. It was, in fact, at Heidegger's request that the tremendous project of translating *Process and Reality* was begun at Suhrkamp Verlag (Frankfurt). (Veken 1990, 240-47)

As a matter of fact, the translations lasted longer and Heidegger died before the end of the work. But nevertheless it was carried to the end and the German translation has appeared in 1979 (Whitehead 1979). Many other examples could also express the interest of eminent European philosophers and thinkers to the philosophy of Whitehead. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had read Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* during an exploration in the Gobi desert and he had vowed to study in greater detail the ideas of Whitehead. Merleau-Ponty, toward the end of his life, read a French translation of *The Function of Reason* and declared Whitehead to be one of the most original and creative philosophers he had ever read (Veken 1990).

If we trace out and systematize chronologically the acts of influence of Whitehead's works on eminent scientists and philosophers in Europe, we can provisionally outline three stages. In the first one we are speaking of an early influence of Whitehead during his lifetime on thinkers as Bergson (1859-1941), the chemist and philosopher of science Emile Meyerson (1859-1933), the philosopher and mathematician Louis Couturat (1868-1914), the historian and philosopher Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943), the philosophers Charlie Dunbar Broad (1887-1971), Philippe Devaux (1902-1979) and Enzo Paci (1911-1976) etc. (Weber 2004, 45).

The second stage includes the next generation of European thinkers that had been influenced by Whiteheadian philosophy. Of course, the borderline between the first and the second stages is only conventional. We should point out here the philosophers Dorothy Emmett (1904-2000) and Wolfe Mays (1912-2005), the scientist Ilya Prigogine (1917-2003), the philosophers Jules Vuillemin (1920-2001), Jean Ladriere

(1921-), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Volfhart Pannenberg (1928-), Reiner Wiehl (1929-), Jan Van Der Veken (1932-) and many others (Weber 2004, 45).

The third stage can be dated conventionally as beginning from the first half of the 1970-ties, when translations of Whitehead's works began to appear into German, French and Dutch. For example, the first translation into Dutch appeared in 1974. During that time the interest in process philosophy in Belgium increased. The students there began to study process philosophy and several doctoral dissertations had been defended in this area. One problem then was still finding enough materials and documents in Europe, devoted to process philosophy which were necessary for an effective investigation. The investigator up to there had to travel to the USA, where the Center for Process Thought already existed at Claremont. So, it was decided to establish such a center in Europe. In 1978, during the visit of one of the most eminent representatives of process thought, Charles Hartshorne, in Leuven (Belgium), the Louvain Center for Process Thought was created. Soon after that, on the basis of this Center, the European Society for Process Thought was created. The task of the Center is to reunite scholars from Europe with interest in process thought, to invite specialists in that field from all over the world for seminars, discussions and research work. One focus of the investigations in this Center is the correspondence of process philosophy to the state of affairs in the contemporary European philosophical stage.

We should also mention that the European Society for Process Thought already began to publish *European Studies in Process Thought*, whose first volume appeared in 2003, followed by two further issues that are currently in the press. This series is intended as a continuation of the world-famous journal *Process Studies*, published in the USA. Quite recently, in October 2005 a "Whitehead Metaphysical Society" was created in Poland by a group of Polish philosophers interested in process philosophy. This society plans to organize conferences yearly and already it began to publish its own journal *Studia Whiteheadiana*. Analogous societies exist in other European countries, for example in France, Ireland, and the Netherlands.

The same process is in its course also in Central and Eastern Europe. Whiteheadian society was created in Hungary and it has realized the

Hungarian translation of Whitehead's book *Process and Reality*. Next it was Bulgaria, where a Bulgarian center for process studies was established and soon it became a collective member of the European society for process thought. In 2016 Bulgaria organized one of the European Summer schools in process thought. Efforts to establish Whiteheadian society were made also in Romania in the last few years.

International conferences devoted to specific problems of process philosophy, considered in European perspective, have begun to be organized in Europe during the third stage of the influence of Whiteheadian thought on European philosophy. The first conference has taken place in Leuven in 1978 and next conferences have been organized in Bonn (1981), Bad Homburg (1983) and Switzerland (1987). These events have been followed by the conferences "Whitehead and the Rhythms of Education" in Lille (France) in 1994, and "The Future of Process Thought in Europe" in Kortrijk (Belgium) in 1997; "The Interplay between Science, Philosophy and Religion: the European Heritage" in Leuven (1998) and "The Philosophical Significance of Whitehead's Concept of Creativity" in 1999. We should also observe that there are International Whitehead Conferences, held every two years. The last two were organized in China in 2002 and in Korea in 2004, but during the 2006 year there were the 6<sup>th</sup> International Whitehead Conference again in Europe, in Salzburg University in Austria from 3-6 July. The discussions have gone parallel in more than 40 sections on philosophy, religion, and science and humanities. Next few conferences were in Asia, but in 2013 there was an International Whitehead conference in a European country – in Poland. These facts speak about the great importance which process philosophy had in Europe.

After this short review of facts and events which are evidences for the firm settlement of contemporary process philosophy in the European cultural space, it is relevant evaluate the manner in which process philosophy became so attractive for the European philosophical thought. In answer to the last question, it should be pointed out the theoretical dialog between the Whiteheadians and non-Whiteheadians in the area of philosophy, as well as fruitfulness of process philosophy for other fields of knowledge. It is not an accidental fact that outstanding scientists as Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers have been attracted by

the approach of process philosophy. David Bohm should be added to this number of scientists. Process approach is fruitful not only for physics, but also for biology, for the contemporary ecological and related ethical problems, and for medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Process philosophy is attractive not only for the philosophy of science. It offers a definite approach also to the philosophy of culture, philosophy of economics and philosophy of the political theory. Here we should mention the classical works of Whitehead as *Adventures of Ideas* and *Modes of Thoughts*, as well as publications of contemporary processualists (Cobb 2002). Process philosophy also gives support to intercultural dialogue. Its non-substantial approach is particularly attractive to Buddhists, claiming to be ancient predecessors of process philosophy. Such problems are frequent themes of the regular East-West conferences. This subject-matter is particularly interesting for the humanitarians from Europe. Last but not least, process approach is related to the great challenges of our time, such as our attitude toward nature, the problems of different nations among the world, different aspects concerning the justice, and so on.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that this approach does not offer decisions at key for any of these problems, but it frames a conceptuality which is probably most suitable for their solving. One of the dangers for the contemporary world consists in efforts to solve the problems in isolation. In this respect, the process approach is most adequate with its stress on the interconnectedness of the things in the world (including problems of the day).

As to the philosophy in proper sense, contemporary process philosophy is a constructive way of thought, opposing to the deconstructive trend both in Europe (in the face of Derrida, etc.) and in USA (in the face of Rorty etc.). The philosophy of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became influenced by their debates about constructive postmodernism, one of the fathers of which is Whitehead (Griffin 1993). Independently of their conventional recognition as constructive

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<sup>3</sup> See the papers of the volume edited by Griffin (Griffin 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Very indicative in this respect is the paper signed by John Cobb, Jr. from January 2006 dedicated to the current threats of USA to Iran for an air attack because of its nuclear programme.

postmodernists, the representatives of process philosophy successfully tried to restore the trust amongst philosophers to the possibility on principle for a new type of metaphysics, and with their activity in this respect they earn sympathy both on the other side of ocean and in Europe. This is valid not only for Whitehead and his immediate pupils, but also for the present day followers of process philosophy. On the other hand, the attractiveness of process philosophy to the European philosophers is also due to the fact that Whiteheadian philosophy can claim a number of important anticipations of problems, which have been laid down and developed subsequently in the works of such eminent philosophers as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Saul Kripke, John Searle, Hilary Putnam, John Perry and others.<sup>5</sup>

Generalizing the considered reasons for the interest in process philosophy in Europe, we should outline, to use the words of George Lucas, Jr., that “students of the Western philosophical tradition can perceive a recent, intelligible, and highly plausible attempt to forge a unified and coherent perspective on the problems and concerns that they themselves (and the contemporary culture in which they participate) share and seek to understand” (Lucas 1989, 11).

We can definitely say that at present time there already exists an affirmed school of representatives of process philosophy in Europe. There is a great amount of publications concerning the European process philosophers in different areas of process philosophy, many of them quite notorious.<sup>6</sup> They have already initiated many discussions in that direction. As an example, we can point out to the fact that when the American philosopher Nicholas Rescher created his own version of process philosophy, expressed in a series of his books<sup>7</sup>, it was organized immediately a discussion published as a large book on different themes and versions of process philosophy, following the initiative mainly of

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of Whiteheadian philosophy is considered in detail by George Lucas, Jr. in chapter 8 of his book (Lucas 1989, 129-49).

<sup>6</sup> Some of them are: Veken 1999a; Veken 1999b; Jonas 2001; Poli 2001; Decock 2002; Debrock 2003; Seibt 1990; Seibt 2004a; Seibt 2004b; Riffert, Weber 2003; Dietz 2006 and many others.

<sup>7</sup> See Rescher 1996; Rescher 2000a; Rescher 2000b; Rescher 2001.

European process philosophers (Weber 2004) who work in Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Italy and other European countries.

In conclusion, I would like to remember the observation of George Lucas, Jr. that parallel with the process of increasing the interest in Europe in process philosophy, there is also a process of “continentalisation” of the philosophical (including process) thought in America, through useful comparisons with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and even with Hegel, Schelling and other European thinkers from the past (Lucas 1989, 203). It is clear that these are processes connected with the increasing of mutual influence of the different cultural (including philosophical) traditions in contemporary world. We can rightly expect that this mutual influence of the different cultural traditions will give creative stimuli for new authentic philosophical investigations.

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