

PROCESS THOUGHT

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Rescher on Process Metaphysics



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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS OF N. RESCHER RELEVANT WORKS

Works by Rescher are henceforth cited by the following abbreviations. For the complete reference see the General Bibliography.

- CI** *Conceptual Idealism*, 1973.
Comp *Complexity*, 1998.
CP *Cognitive Pragmatism*, 2001.
EI *Empirical Inquiry*, 1982.
ID *Inquiry Dynamics*, 2000.
Ind *Induction.*, 1980.
NU *Nature and Understanding*, 2000.
PM *Process Metaphysics*. 1996.
PP *Process Philosophy*, 2000.
PrP *The Primacy of Practice*, 1973.
PRRR *Paradoxes. Their Roots, Range, and Resolution*, 2002.
PS *Philosophical Standardism*, 1994.
RP *Realistic Pragmatism*, 2000.
Scep *Scepticism. A Critical Reappraisal*, 1980.
SPI *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, 1992-1994.
SR *Satisfying Reason*, 1995.
TP *A Theory of Possibility*, 1975.
TPL *Topics in Philosophical Logic*, 1968.

X. PROCESS PHILOSOPHY: *VIA IDEARUM* OR *VIA NEGATIVA*?

Anderson Weekes (New York)

Abstract

In his recent and seemingly sudden spate of apologetics for process philosophy, Nicholas Rescher makes many strong claims on its behalf. Among them, in chapter X of *Process Metaphysics*, he credits process philosophy with the uncommon virtues of reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence. While Rescher may seem a late-comer to process philosophy, his affinity for process thought appears quite natural once we see that process all along was the key to his own philosophical project. Over the course of forty years of prolific output Rescher has developed a highly nuanced theory of knowledge that uses pragmatism to negotiate between the pitfalls of idealism and realism. The success of his attempt to understand knowledge as *both* non-trivially mind-relative *and* empirically world-referring depends crucially on his concept of knowledge as *process*. But Rescher's way of understanding the reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence of process philosophy reflects the needs and ambitions of his own philosophical project and commits him to a conceptually ideal interpretation of process. Process becomes a transcendental idea of reflection that can always be predicated of our knowledge of the world and of the world *qua* known, but not necessarily of reality *an sich*. Rescher's own taxonomy of process thinking implies that it has at least four principle variants. Only one of these conforms to the version endorsed by Rescher. While Rescher's approach to process philosophy makes it both intelligible and appealing to mainstream analytic philosophy, at the same time it leaves behind the more daring ideas of Bergson, James, and Whitehead, all of whom envisioned the primordial reality of process in a radical ontology of becoming. This variant of process thought can be construed as coherent and self-consistent, too, but not without relinquishing the correspondence theory of truth and embracing challenging ideas that bring us in close proximity to existentialism, apophatic theology, and Buddhism.

1. Introduction

In his sympathetic overview of process philosophy, *Process Metaphysics*, Nicholas Rescher is very much in his *own* element. As much as any of his other books (which wring variations on the inter-animation of realism, pragmatism, and idealism), *Process Metaphysics* is a broad meditation on the nature of things and the nature of our ideas of things. It affords Rescher an opportunity to explore the dialectic of his favourite topic, which we could perhaps describe as the relationship of things, ideas, and Ideas. His apology for process metaphysics proceeds systematically, comparing the substance and process approaches to explaining the nature of things, how we have ideas of them, and what (constitutive, regulative, or nugatory) role Ideas play in nature and ideation.

Having argued for the theoretical strength of process philosophy in addressing the usual topics of philosophy (questions about what categories are ontologically and hermeneutically primary, about the nature of particulars and of persons, about the status of universals) and in conducting the characteristic inquiries that make up the business of philosophy (philosophy of nature, epistemology, philosophy of science, theology) Rescher turns in the concluding chapter, “Process in Philosophy,” to philosophy itself. What could be left to say about the virtues of process philosophy *qua philosophy*? Rescher advances two additional arguments that constitute the core contentions of this last chapter. Process philosophy has, he argues, two salient and uncommon virtues. It is self-consistent, and it is able to provide a coherent meta-philosophical account of philosophy itself in all its complexity as both an Idea and a fluid historical reality. Process philosophy has the reflexive virtue of self-consistency and the second-order virtue of meta-philosophical coherence.

But before we can really assess Rescher’s strong claims for the reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence of process philosophy, we need to understand his own way of approaching process philosophy. For this we must recur not only to the previous nine chapters of *Process Metaphysics*, but to some extent also to the wider context of his formidable philosophical oeuvre. The decisive question is: why is process philosophy so congenial to the author of *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, *Conceptual Idealism*, *The Primacy of Practice*, *Methodological Pragmatism*, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, *Realistic Pragmatism*, and *Cognitive Pragmatism*, to name but a few of his many books?

Given Rescher's philosophical standpoint as it is extensively articulated independently of his recent apologetics¹ for processism, we can learn what his pre-disposed affinity for process thought is, but also something more. We can clarify what particular kind, construal, or aspect of process philosophy it is that he finds an affinity for—and, conversely, what aspects his appreciation may be biased against. Teasing this out will have some revealing implications for the questions of reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence. It will prove useful in this connection for us to compare the analysis of reflexive consistency in chapter X of *Process Metaphysics* with Rescher's work on the logic of semantic and mathematical paradoxes.²

By following this indirect route I hope to show that Rescher has, while speaking out compellingly on behalf of process philosophy, nevertheless assimilated its revolutionary ideas to something tamer and less threatening to the tradition than was intended by proponents like Bergson, James, and Whitehead.

2. The Four Variants of Process Philosophy

In the Introduction to his *Process Metaphysics*, Rescher contrasts substance and process metaphysics in terms of the relative precedence philosophers accord to substance and process, distinguishing a weak and a strong version of both positions.³ The weak version posits the *priority*, but not the primacy of the one over the other. Rescher understands priority by way of dependence: if the one term is dependent on the other, but not *vice versa*, the independent term is prior. The strong version posits the *primacy* of the one over the other. Rescher understands primacy by way of reducibility: the one term not only depends on, but also reduces to the other, having no residual being of its own save that of appearance, illusion, or epiphenomenon. The following table illustrates the implied matrix along with Rescher's examples drawn from pre-Socratic philosophy:

¹ Besides PM, Rescher has also published a series of papers on process philosophy, collected in PP.

² Directly relevant are: CP, ch. IX (166-185), "Reification Fallacies and Inappropriate Totalities;" PRRR; and TPL.

³ PM 2f.

TYPES OF METAPHYSICS

Precedence of:	Substance over Process	Process over Substance
Weak Version: Priority, but not primacy	E.g., Democritus	E.g., Empedocles
Strong Version: Primacy	E.g., Parmenides	E.g., Heracleitus

On the weaker metaphysical interpretation, substances depend on (e.g., are engendered and characterized by) processes (such as Empedocles' Love and Strife), but are not reducible to them, or processes depend on (e.g., are accidents of) substances (such as Democritus' atoms), but are not reducible to them.⁴ On the stronger metaphysical interpretation, the one term does not just depend on the other. Its sole reality is constituted by the other: things consist in (are just constellations of) process, such as the flux of Heracleitus; or processes consist in (are simply the unreal "appearances" of) substance, such as the One of Parmenides.

Although Rescher represents "priority" as the weaker form of metaphysical precedence (because dependence is a weaker relationship than reducibility), there is a phenomenological sense in which it involves a more radical position. In a relationship of non-reductive dependency, the

⁴ Rescher does not seem to be altogether consistent in his use of the terms *primacy* and *priority* or in his understanding of the difference between the strong and the weak philosophical programs. Here (PM 2f.) the atomism of Democritus appears as an example of the ontological *priority* of substances, but elsewhere (PM 34) it features as a paradigm example of the ontological *primacy* of substances. The difference between primacy and priority and the logical structures of dependency, reduction, and transcendence are themes not explored with sufficient clarity by Rescher or the present writer.

independent term *transcends* the dependent one. Ontological priority therefore involves a radical transcendence that is not necessarily associated with ontological primacy. The full significance of this does not become evident until chapter II, in Rescher's discussion of unowned processes: unowned processes acquire special importance for metaphysics because their transcendence provides unequivocal proof of the precedence of process over substance in the form of ontological priority.⁵ To anticipate: my argument will focus on whether Rescher's approach to process philosophy really does justice to this ontological priority of process, especially as it is disclosed by such unowned processes as *time*.

In addition to the primacy/priority contrast, in chapters II, III, and IV of *Process Metaphysics* Rescher operates with a further distinction, which is crucial to his whole interpretation of process philosophy, between an ontological and a conceptual version.⁶ This distinction, too, is not uniquely applicable to process philosophy. Indeed, it is fundamental in Rescher's own philosophical project, as his early defense of a "conceptual" (as opposed to an "ontological") idealism reveals.⁷ The "conceptual" approach (which he also calls epistemic or hermeneutic) concerns the mind and the world *insofar* as it is an object of understanding.⁸ The "ontological" approach (which he also calls metaphysical or causal) concerns being and "things in themselves."⁹ Conceptual processism, the weaker contention, is committed to the primacy or priority of process in the order of knowledge or understanding, while ontological processism, the stronger contention, is committed to the primacy or priority of process in the order of nature or being.¹⁰ The former contends that we cannot *understand* the world without recourse to the idea of process. The latter contends that the world cannot *be* without process.

It is not altogether clear how Rescher's two distinctions (priority/primacy and conceptual/ontological) relate to one another. Do

⁵ PM, ch. II, secs. 4-5 (41-46); compare PM 2 on the weak ontological precedence of process: "Process has *priority* over substance. [...] But processes as such transcend the realm of things since there are also substance-detached processes."

⁶ PM 27ff., 32f., 46, 56ff., 60, 113ff.

⁷ CI 1ff.

⁸ PM 27f., 32f., 56ff., 113ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ PM 33.

they correspond as two ways of making the same distinction, or do they intersect, creating a matrix of four possibilities? In the former case, primacy would be the same as precedence in the order of being, and priority would be the same as precedence in the order knowing. But in the latter case we would have to discriminate four basic types of metaphysics. In the case that interests us, for example, we would have four kinds of process philosophy (and a similar matrix of types would have to be drawn up for “substance philosophy”):

TYPES OF PROCESS PHILOSOPHY

Approach:	Ontological	Conceptual
Weak Version: Priority, but not primacy	1. Things depend on processes (while processes transcend things)	3. Our understanding of things depends on process ideas
Strong Version: Primacy	2. Things are constituted by processes	4. Our understanding of things is constituted by process ideas

Rescher’s examples of pre-Socratic philosophers, all being examples of ontologies, suggest that the primacy/priority distinction intersects with the ontological/conceptual distinction in this way—unless, somehow, Democritus is meant to exemplify “conceptual substantialism” and Empedocles “conceptual processism.” However, Rescher does not systematically explore the implications of such a four-fold typology and does not consider the specific possibility that the questions of reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence may need to be differently evaluated in each case. In fact, as we shall see in the next two sections, his preferred form of processism is the *strong conceptual* approach, conceptual

primacy, which appears in the display above as variant (4), and it is exclusively this version that Rescher has in mind when he argues for the merits of process philosophy *qua philosophy*. Variant (3), on the other hand, which I shall argue is the necessary epistemological counterpart of any genuinely ontological processism (and may well be the most vibrant—and universal—of process philosophies), receives but scant attention. Its importance becomes clear when we remember that transcendence is the corollary of dependence. In the same way that the dependence of things on process implies that process transcends things, it may be that the dependence of our understanding of things on the idea of process implies that the idea of process transcends our understanding. This possibility will be the linchpin of my critique of Rescher's version of conceptual processism.

Rescher's approbation for conceptual processism has much to do with his long-standing commitment to pragmatism. For example, one reason Rescher gives that we can understand the world only in terms of process is that things manifest what they are only through processes, processes of affecting one another and processes of affecting us. Things *are* what they *do*, he tells us.¹¹ Another, correlated reason is that understanding itself *is* a process, a physical process of being affected by things and an intellectual process of wagering and emending interpretations of them as the course of experience continues.¹² We could say that the being of understanding lies in process, making process the most fundamental "idea of reflection" with profound implications for cognitive methodology and meta-theory. But this fact does not of itself imply a commitment to the stronger, metaphysical thesis that being as such is process, and from the vantage point of pragmatism it is not clear what could support the stronger claim.

It is characteristic of Rescher's outlook to see the ontological approach as *conceptually defective*. Ontological *realism* he sees as an attempt to understand the world while precinding from its being understood. But it is conceptually impossible, he argues, to think about the

¹¹ PM , ch. II, sec. 6 (46-49); CP 100ff. What Rescher means when he says "Things are what they do" might be better put as: Things are *for us* what they do *to us*, either directly or by way of what they do to other things. This emphasis keeps the notion of *power* implied in this slogan conceptually ideal. A different emphasis is obviously possible.

¹² PM , ch. VII, secs. 1 and 3-5 (123-126; 129-137).

world as it would be if it were not being thought about.¹³ Ontological *idealism*, on the other hand, avoids this pitfall by identifying the being of the world *an sich* with its being thought about. But it is conceptually impossible, he argues, for us to give up the regulative idea that reality is different in being from its being thought, the idea of a reality that functions as an external constraint and independent control on our thought about it.¹⁴ So in his view ontology is either engaged in the impossible exercise of trying to think the unthought or it is engaged in the grandiose exercise of identifying being with thinking. According to Rescher, ontological processism tends to the errors of the idealistic approach in ontology. It takes the fact that the being of experience or understanding lies in process to mean that being as such is process, dubiously assuming that all being is experience.¹⁵ It is thus no surprise that his overriding preference is for the conceptual version of process philosophy.¹⁶ In fact, what Rescher understands as the conceptual version of process philosophy is hard to distinguish from the position he has himself been developing for a long time under such rubrics as pragmatic idealism and realistic pragmatism. This position involves a commitment to the pragmatic theory of truth (which, indeed, has close, historical ties with process philosophy), elaborated in the context of what Rescher calls conceptual idealism. Just what is conceptual idealism?

Over the course of forty years of prolific output, Rescher has developed this highly nuanced theory of knowledge that uses pragmatism to negotiate between the pitfalls of idealism and realism.¹⁷ The Scylla here

¹³ This is the whole thrust of CI; see especially ch. IX, “An Idealist Theory of Nature.” More recently, see CP, ch. VI, sec. 10 (119ff.).

¹⁴ CI, ch. IX, secs. 4-7 (158-174), ch. X, sec. 3 and 5 (180-183 and 186-194); CP, ch. VI (92-121); RP, chs. IV-VI (103-165); PP, ch. VI (91-106); Scep 62, 136.

¹⁵ PM 43, 113ff.

¹⁶ PM 60.

¹⁷ The works noted in the introduction to this paper appeared from 1973 to 2001 and contain articles dating as far back as 1962. Rescher provides an overview of his system in his three-volume SPI. Volume I (*Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective*) presents his ideas on metaphysics and epistemology. A shorter précis of his theoretical system may be found in his “Cognitive Realism: A Pragmatic Perspective on Existence and Our Knowledge of It,” which appears as chapter VI of CP (92-121). Volume III of SPI, *Metaphilosophical Inquiries*, is Rescher’s most extensive exploration of philosophical self-reference and its doctrinal and methodological implications.

is an extreme idealism that denies to “reality” any causal or ontological role as an independent variable or external constraint on the content of our experience and theorizing. This includes Absolute Idealism, as well as the amorphous idealism that results from an unrestrained relativism or self-referential hermeneutics. These approaches account poorly for the cognitive value of natural science and its undeniably empirical character. The Charybdis here is a naïve, direct realism, which fails to account for the relativity, contextuality, and essential mind-dependency of what we think we know about the world. Conceptual idealism is an approach that allows one to concede the subjectivity and fallibility of our experience without forsaking objective constraints altogether. Let’s look at how Rescher negotiates this *via media*.¹⁸

3. Rescher’s Transcendental Approach: The Conceptual Primacy of Process

In his 1973 book, *Conceptual Idealism*, Rescher argues that possibility, lawfulness, causation, identity, particularity, space, and time are all conceptual idealities. By this he means that they are *entia rationis* manufactured by the mind, rather than objective features of a mind-independent reality to which the mind is merely accommodating by having such ideas. The crux of his argument, however, is not that these conceptual instrumentalities are ideal because they are mind-made (which he considers trivially true), but because they are essentially “mind-patterned, and so reflective of their mentalistic origin” (CI 193). Reality, as we standardly conceive it, he argues, is essentially *noomorphie*.

The reader of a book such as *Conceptual Idealism* might wonder if its author is not altogether too preoccupied with outdated and discredited philosophical programs such as German and British Idealism. A close reading, however, shows that Rescher’s rehabilitation of Kant and the British Hegelians speaks directly to the issues of his day. *Conceptual*

¹⁸ In SPI, vol. I, and in CP, ch. VI, as in Rescher’s earlier works, pragmatism functions as the mediating link between realism and idealism. The theme of a philosophical *via media* is often explicit in Rescher’s writings. Volume III of SPI concludes with the observation that “Sensible philosophizing involves a complex negotiation between idealism and pragmatism” (249). RP concludes with the proposal to see pragmatism as a *via media* between modernism and post-modernism that “opens the door to objectivity without absolutism, thus combining the most promising features of the traditional absolutism and present-day relativism in respect of knowledge” (240).

Idealism is effectively an apology for the cognitive value of “theoretical entities” at a time when they were in disrepute. But why come to the defense of theoretical entities?

The history of philosophy in the 20th century is the history of the rise and fall of foundationalism in empiricism: its bold campaigns and their spectacular defeats, each forcing an ever greater retreat. With each new manifesto of empiricism, the residue of “positive data” grew smaller and more problematic, and the unwanted theoretical entities grew fatter and more domineering. Given the narrow construal of reason in positivism, the end in view was a retreat from rationality itself that declared “anything goes.” In *Conceptual Idealism*, on the other hand, Rescher appreciated theoretical entities for what they are: indispensable to the business of science and even to the business of life. Most important, they are not all created equal. Some turn out to be more useful than others in facilitating our cognitive and practical business. Pragmatic success and applicative efficacy thus restore a measure of purpose and rationality to theoretical entities, while leaving their essentially mind-dependent nature unchallenged. The ineliminable role of theoretical entities in constituting our reality does not therefore imply “anything goes.” What goes is what works, and we all know that’s not just anything. Rescher sums up his position in just this way near the end of *Conceptual Idealism*:

Causes, material objects, persons, all represent theoretical entities within a framework for organizing our thought about things. They are conceptual *vehicles of imputation*. [...] But if all these standardly applied conceptions step beyond their evidential base and are *not* justified by *inductive* considerations, then how are they justified at all? They are justified *by articulation through a conceptual scheme that is in turn entrenched on Darwinian grounds and validated through pragmatic considerations*. (CI 183)

From the outset, then, *conceptual idealism* and *realistic pragmatism* were for Rescher biconditional. By espousing a *realistic* pragmatism Rescher is once again squaring off against those who in his view have scuttled any notion of objectivity and declared “anything goes!”¹⁹ What Rescher describes in his recent book *Realistic Pragmatism* as a “pragmatism of the

¹⁹ Rescher views Rorty as the most recent exponent of this kind of pragmatism, which he sees as deriving from William James. See RP, Introduction (xi-xiv), and chs. I-II (1-80).

left” reasons as follows: if truth is efficacy in getting what you want, then everything is relative to your desires and nothing is objective; hence, “anything goes.”²⁰ Rescher opposes to this what he calls a “pragmatism of the right,” which reasons differently in a small, but significant respect: truth is efficacy *given* what your desires are, and this is *not* something that is relative to your desires.²¹ Whether your car starts on a cold morning has little or nothing to do with your feelings about it.

It is true, in other words, that desire is constitutive of all human projects, including the scientific one. To this extent desire is the independent variable in our projects and success the dependent one. But success does not depend on desire alone. After all, we must adapt our means if we are to reach our ends. Truth is relative to our desires in the sense that they must be presupposed as a starting point, to get the game going, and, to be sure, their specificity will bias the outcomes. But they do not have power to determine success unilaterally. The fact that we must adapt our means implies that success is also a function of the way things are, and that this, too, is an independent variable. We may never comprehend the way things are as such, but we certainly know its effects in frustrating or facilitating our desires. It is for Rescher in this sense that truth is efficacy:

Someplace along the line of justification there must be provision for a correlative contact with a self-sustaining and largely unmanipulable reality—an agency that furnishes a “reality principle” quite independently of the drift of our thoughts and wishes. This crucially requisite principle is provided for [...] by the factor of the success consequent upon implementing action. Goal attainment—successful goal-pursuing *praxis* [...]—is the ultimate guarantor of validity of the products of man’s endeavors at the acquisition of empirical knowledge. (RP 97)

²⁰ This portrayal is not caricature: “A new opinion counts as ‘true’ just in proportion as it gratifies the individual’s desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. [...] its success [...] in doing this, is a matter for the individual’s appreciation” (James 1975, 36). “We say this theory solves it [i.e., the problem of assimilating the novel] on the whole more satisfactorily than that theory; but that means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic” (James 1975, 35).

²¹ RP, chs. II and IX (57-80 and 231-251), especially IX, sec. 6 (244-249).

Realism, on this telling, is simply a pragmatic and regulative commitment to the fallibility and corrigibility of what at any given time we take to be real. And this corrigibility follows from the fact that under-determination by subjectively available evidence is, according to Rescher, *constitutive* of what we mean by an objective reality.²² Rescher accepts a classically modern notion of subjectivity as a private sphere of feeling and seeming essentially self-evident and transparent to itself.²³ What does not transcend subjectively available evidence does not transcend the subject and is *ipso facto* not objective. What does transcend subjectivity is therefore inherently problematic.²⁴ It is in essence something presumptive, based on evidence to be sure, but evidence that is by the very nature of the case never sufficient.²⁵ (Rescher's thinking here is very close to that of Husserl when he construes unfulfilled surplus intentionality as constitutive of mind-transcendent things.) Rescher documents this constitutive insufficiency in numerous ways that all have to do with the perspectival and contextual nature of experience. There is the fact alluded to already that things *are* what they *do*—or, more properly, they are what they *can do*. To say that things are defined by their effects on other things and on us is to say that they are defined by their facultative properties, that they *are* clusters of certain facultative properties. But to know what a thing's facultative properties really and truly are, we would have to experience it in every possible context. This is not only practically impossible, but, as Rescher argues, also logically impossible, since many possible contexts will not be *compossible*, but mutually exclusive.²⁶ Another powerful argument looks to the limitations imposed by the specifically cognitive sort of contextuality we call perspective and standpoint relativity. Just as there is a visual parallax involved in the perception of depth from different vantages, so there is an inevitable cognitive parallax involved in thinking and talking about something experience-transcendent from different

²² PM 130ff; RP, ch. V, sec. 3 (114 -124); CP, ch. VI, secs. 4 -5 (98-103).

²³ RP 159.

²⁴ This consequence is precisely what Bergson, James, and Whitehead seek to avoid by rejecting the Cartesian understanding of subjectivity at the outset. James is especially clear about this (James 1912, 127).

²⁵ SPI, vol. I, ch.IX (129-156); CP, ch. II (21-46).

²⁶ RP 159ff.

experiential standpoints.²⁷ This cognitive parallax is constitutive of what it means to be experience-transcending. It constitutes for us the objectivity of real things at the very same time that it makes such objectivity something inherently problematic.²⁸

This notion of objectivity is damning to any semantic theory of truth that aims at realism in anything more than Rescher's pragmatic sense. Necessarily, then, every possible construction of reality is a defeasible presumption, allowable only as long as and to the extent that it works. It thus follows from the basic orientation of Rescher's "conceptually idealistic pragmatism" that what counts as reality for us is always and of necessity something unstable and revisable. Indeed, by the very nature of the case it is something that is always in the *process of revision*, something no sooner proffered than destabilized as the available evidence actuates differently over time. So we come, at last, full circle. Rescher's affinity for process thought appears quite natural once we see that process all along was the key to his own philosophical project. The success of his attempt to understand knowledge as *both* non-trivially mind-relative *and* empirically world-referring depends crucially on his concept of knowledge as *process*. Knowledge itself is essentially a process if it is presumptive adequation in time to an inherently experience-transcending reality.

This explains why Rescher can marshal the cognitive opacity of things as an argument in favor of the process approach in philosophy. Realism, as Rescher understands it, implies the inexhaustible depth of things vis-à-vis experience and knowledge, and this inexhaustible depth implies that knowledge will always be a process of never-fully-consummated adequation as our presumptive constructions of reality are pragmatically tested over time. The argument from cognitive opacity occupies a prominent place in *Process Metaphysics*:

[O]ur deliberations about our cognitive limitedness have a further deeply idealistic aspect, for the fundamental fact of the literally unending cognitive depth of real things—their bottomless cognitive depth—is not actually a discovery that we make about them. It is not something that we learn about things in the course of experiential interaction with the real. Instead, it reflects an aspect of our very conception of what it is to be "real"; for it is an integral feature of our conception of the real that the actual nature

²⁷ EI, chs. I and IV (3-26 and 101-128).

²⁸ RP, ch. V, secs. 1-3 (126-142).

of the world's furnishings outruns our current knowledge of them. Our knowledge of fact is always in flux. It is not a thing, a definite corpus, but an ever-changing and ever-growing manifold of process. (PM 132)

The passage is striking. First of all, we see how process comes into play here in a clearly conceptual and idealistic (rather than ontological and realistic) way. It is our *knowledge* of fact and our *presumptions* about reality that are in flux.²⁹ Process is a predicate of *knowledge* and of the *world qua known*, not of being or reality *an sich*. Reality *an sich* functions in this scheme merely as a regulative postulate, as the concept of that to which discourse or ideation must conform if it is to be true.³⁰ But, given Rescher's commitment to the modern notion of subjectivity, the practical import of this regulative postulate is, as we see, that reality-for-us is never finalized, that it is necessarily and always a process. In many pages of his recent writings Rescher emphasizes the non-empirical, regulative character of this reality postulate and its consequences.³¹ This regulative idea of reality, itself contentless,³² is, he argues, a necessary precondition of there being any empirical discovery or inter-subjective communication at all. Rescher is clear about this:

[O]ur view of the nature of things puts "the real world" on a necessary and a priori basis. [...] Our attempts at communication and inquiry are thus undergirded by an information-transcending stance [...]. This is not something we learn. The "facts of experience" can never reveal it to us. It is something we postulate or presuppose. Its epistemic status is not that of an empirical discovery but that of a presupposition that is a product of transcendental argument for the very possibility of communication or inquiry as we standardly conceive of them. (PP 92, 94f.)

²⁹ The passage quoted is embedded in a series of three sections that establish the processuality of knowledge, experience, and communication: PM, ch. VII, secs. 3-5 (129-137). See also PM, ch. VIII (139-151), "A Processual view of Scientific Inquiry."

³⁰ CI 169; PP, ch. VI., sec. 2 (96-103); CP 14 as well as ch. VI, sec. 9 (113-119).

³¹ RP, ch. V, secs. 1-3 (126-142); PhP, ch. VI (90-106); CP, ch. VI, secs. 6-10 (103-121).

³² CP 62; SR 202.

So Rescher's argument is, by his own avowal, *transcendental*. It is a direct and necessary consequence of his kind of transcendental approach that knowledge be an ongoing process. No other mediation of a temporally-distributed Cartesian subjectivity with a transcendently-presumed transcendent reality³³ is possible than a pragmatic one that makes of reality a contentless, regulative principle and of knowledge an infinite process in time. But notice that in this argument process itself must now function as a transcendental category, not as an empirical one. Because all knowledge is *necessarily* a revisable process of knowing, process itself becomes a condition of the possibility of knowledge and a necessary predicate of everything *qua* knowable. But a transcendental predicate is essentially incorrigible. In achieving self-knowledge as process, it seems that the mind, indeed, philosophy itself, has finally gotten beyond the transience of pragmatic truth and its characteristic defeasibility. With process as a "transcendental idea of reflection" we have, after all, achieved a knowledge that is itself immune to process: an a priori knowledge that is, just as Kant had wanted it, empirically real *because* it is transcendently ideal.

How do we classify this approach in our four-fold typology? Must we say that it involves the conceptual primacy of process (alternative (4)) or its conceptual priority (alternative (3))? In a way, it seems to involve conceptual priority: construed as transcendental, process becomes an idea of reflection that conditions, but also transcends all other ideas. However, it does not transcend *ideation*. In good Kantian style, its purchase is limited to possible experience. Within these limits, the idea of process is *constitutive*. Rescher's philosophy can thus be seen as a sustained effort to demonstrate the various ways that our experience is *conceptually reducible* to process. But that means: reducible to the *idea* of process. It does not mean: dependent upon process itself as something necessarily *transcendent*. I shall therefore reserve the label "conceptual priority" for the seemingly paradoxical alternative, discussed below in section (5), of an idea that transcends ideation. If construed in this way, the conceptual priority of process, as we shall see, implies and is implied by ontological processism. They are the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of the same doctrine. But the situation is not analogous if our starting point is the conceptual *primacy* of process. The transcendental and meta-philosophical implications of the conceptual-primacy approach make it clear that it is

³³ The critical distinction, instituted by Kant, between "transcendent" and "transcendental" is carefully heeded throughout my argument.

incompatible with a truly ontological approach, as I argue in the following section.

4. The Reflexive Consistency and Meta-philosophical Coherence of Process Philosophy

When Rescher affirms the reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence of process philosophy in chapter X of *Process Metaphysics*, what he has in mind is the evident fact that no theory is ever definitive and that philosophy itself is an ongoing and never-ending process.³⁴ A philosopher who proposes a definitive theory is guilty, it seems, of a performative contradiction: she knows that she has revised her theory over time and that she will continue always to revise and develop it, yet she offers it as final. A philosophy that affirms the pervasiveness of change and process is thus consistent with the performative conditions of theorizing in a way that dogmatic theories can never be: “Process philosophy [...] has the virtue of self-substantiation” (PM 168).

But right away this butts against paradox. Can a theory “at once elaborate its claims and concede their limitations” (PM 166)? Rescher has treated this question elsewhere in his writings under the heading of the Preface Paradox.³⁵ It often happens that an author, in the preface to the very book where he affirms a certain theory, admits that some of his claims may be, indeed, most certainly are, wrong. How can he avow and disavow the same claims at the same time? Rescher’s resolution of this paradox is intimately connected with his regulative interpretation of realism and his pragmatic approach to truth: “authors who advance their claims in the mode of plausibility can proceed on a tentative basis and need not present their assertions as categorical claims to truth” (PRRR 214). In other words, contradiction results only if we affirm something as definitively true and yet also falsifiable. It is perfectly consistent to affirm something as plausible, as pragmatically warranted, while conceding the possibility that it will turn out to be false. Indeed, performative consistency requires us to proceed in this way at all times. But there is still a problem. If the implication of the process thesis, applied to philosophy itself, is that philosophizing is never finished and all truths are revisable, what about this very thesis? “All truths are revisable” seems to envision its own

³⁴ PM 167f., 170ff.

³⁵ PRRR 213ff.; RP, ch. IV, sec. 3 (114-124), especially 120.

falsification and revision. And if not, that is, if it is unrevisably true, it counter-exemplifies itself. So which way should we go here? Should the tentativeness of human knowledge itself be only *tentatively* affirmed, paradoxically leaving open the possibility of categorical certainty, or is the tentativeness of human knowledge itself something we can, paradoxically, affirm with categorical certainty?

I suggest that this is a question about which ontological and conceptual-primacy processism must disagree. Rescher's treatment of this question in chapter X of *Process Metaphysics* is one-sided and reflects his own commitment to the *conceptual primacy* of process. "All truths are revisable" becomes a transcendently secure meta-truth, exempt from its own scope of application.³⁶ The steps of his argument are instructive. They show that his understanding of reflexive consistency and metaphilosophical coherence are not applicable to the other varieties of process philosophy. This, in turn, will show how far his version of process philosophy is from the ontologically radical thesis of Heraclitus that "everything flows."

While dogmatism involves a performative contradiction, "fallible knowledge" seems to be a theoretical contradiction. If we follow Rescher, we escape the latter paradox by affirming everything tentatively, but we court a fallacy by adding categorically *that* all knowledge is tentative. Rescher is clear about the fallacy he is courting: "How can [one] say that everything changes and that the world has no permanent features when this condition of ever-changingness and impermanence is itself (according to [this] theory) a permanent feature of reality?" (PM 166). It seems that we have, after all, merely replaced a performative contradiction with a theoretical one. Alternatively, we can avoid the fallacy of self-exclusion if we grant our thesis self-exemption, but, as Rescher also notes³⁷, this has the suspicious look of *ad hoc* expediency about it: "Everything changes—except the meaning and truth of this claim." Or: "All knowledge is tentative—except the knowledge embodied by this claim." But this is precisely where conceptual idealism leads us, as we have seen in the previous section: the process thesis is exempt from its own scope because it is *transcendental*. However, we are surely entitled to ask a philosopher of process: *how is transcendental knowledge possible?* Rescher explains its self-exemption from process by invoking a distinction of levels

³⁶ PM 166ff.

³⁷ PM 167.

reminiscent of Russell's Theory of Types "between the domain of facts with which a theory deals and the domain of facts to which the theory belongs" (PM 167). But this distinction can do what it is supposed to do only if there is, indeed, an *ontological* difference between the facts in the object domain, which are inherently mutable, and the facts in the domain of truths about the object domain, which are (or at least can be) immutable. Rescher appears to accept the necessity of an ontological distinction of levels:

a metaphysical position [...] is not itself part of the phenomena of nature, and [...] need not fall within the scope of its own immediate concerns. In saying that *everything within* nature changes, we need not deny that certain *facts about* nature [...] may themselves hold changelessly true. (PM 167)

So eternal verities do exist. They exist, or subsist, in a domain of special facts immune to process. It is not clear how Rescher's pragmatic semantics can sustain such a domain. By "a metaphysical position" Rescher is clear that he does not mean the *belief* in a metaphysical position, which *is* a natural phenomenon that changes over time.³⁸ What is the position "itself"? Rescher's claim here is perfectly consonant with a process theory of the Whiteheadian sort that postulates, over and above processes, "eternal objects," that is, universals as Platonic entities ("Ideas") and theories composed of these entities.³⁹ Whitehead follows a long metaphysical tradition in seeing universals as constituting an eternal matrix of possibilities. But Rescher is curiously silent about this aspect of Whitehead's thought and for his own part tends to espouse an adverbial and functionalist theory of universals as the repeatable "how" of certain complex happenings.⁴⁰ This is really just a functionalist variation on a different metaphysical tradition which holds that universals result from a

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Questions have rightfully been raised about how Platonic Whitehead's eternal objects really are. Noting the cogent arguments to be found in Bergson 1992, 91-106 [=1959,1331-1345], Michel Weber has persuasively argued that not all eternal objects can be prefigured in the primordial envisagement. At least some eternal objects must come into being in the consequent nature as a result of the creative advance. Were all eternal objects to *pre-exist* eternally in timeless anticipation of all contingent possibilities, then there could be no creative advance, no real novelty, only a kind of menu selection. (Personal Communication)

⁴⁰ PM, ch. IV, sec. 1 (69-74).

distinctio rationis cum fundamento in re. This functionalist approach, along with Rescher's commitment to the "priority of the actual"⁴¹ and the conceptual ideality of the possible⁴², makes it hard to see how in some of his more recent writings he can be so sanguine about eternal verities and Platonic universals⁴³. But more important, we have to ask: does this position really have the virtue of self-substantiation? It is consistent, yes, but does it exemplify its own teaching, or does it purchase consistency at the price of self-exemption?

Rescher's solution to the self-referential paradox of the process thesis, "Everything is impermanent," is simply to forestall self-reference by exempting the process thesis from its own scope. But then this is not a *self-substantiating* theory of process. It is consistent, but not *self-referentially* consistent. It is, on the contrary, an exception to itself. It hypostatizes its own truth as a non-process in a domain of facts immune to change. Similarly, because all philosophies are revised and revisable, the truth *about* revisability becomes a meta-philosophical finality.⁴⁴

As reasonable and viable as this approach may be, I can't help but thinking that it is not in the spirit of the process philosophy that emerged in the intellectual milieu of the mid-19th to early 20th century and emphasized a radical ontology of becoming. As the stream of thought particularly enlivened by Bergson, James, and Whitehead, process philosophy was a process *metaphysics, stricto sensu*, committed to an ontological rather than a conceptual approach to process, indeed, committed in general to the fundamentality of ontology over epistemology. As such, it seems to belong more to the movement broadly characterized as existentialism than it does to the neo-Kantian, positivist, or analytic traditions preeminently concerned with issues of epistemology and transcendental argument. Along with philosophical approaches more narrowly called existential (Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty), *this*

⁴¹ TP 7f.

⁴² CI, chs. II-III (27-57).

⁴³ For an extended defense of Platonic universals, see PhP, ch. VII (107-122). Noteworthy also is the appearance of the "fixed identity" of persons at PM 117 and of "eternity" at PM 122, to say nothing of the essentialism espoused in RP, chs. VII-VIII (167-229) about our "true needs" and the "true value of things." All these Platonisms are hard to reconcile with the idea of the universal as "a commonality of programmatic structure" (PM 74) that is "no more mysterious than how distinct birds can share the same song" (PM 73).

⁴⁴ PM 170ff.; SPI, vol. III, 179ff., 219-249.

process philosophy was motivated by an opposition to transcendental approaches. This is the import of “pure experience” in James’ radical empiricism and of “intuition” and “feeling” in the metaphysics of Bergson and Whitehead, respectively. Process philosophy and existentialism share the conviction that the ambient facticity of the world (or language or nature or history) is the transcendent condition of the possibility of the subject and its experience. This is a reversal of the transcendental approach which sees the subject as the transcendental condition of the world or at least of its experience of the world.⁴⁵ But if the subject and its experience are constituted by a world of which it is not the condition, *then there is no transcendental subject* and so no foothold for transcendental argument. The proper medium of philosophical insight is therefore what Bergson calls “intuition” and James calls “pure experience,” not reflection. This existential approach must seek the gift of ontological insight—something much emphasized by Heidegger in his late writings. The transcendental approach, on the other hand, views epistemology as a foundational science and transcendental argument as a way of leveraging philosophical truth. Rescher’s focus on conceptual idealism at once betrays his commitment to the preeminence of epistemology.

Process acquires importance for Rescher because the adequation of appearance to reality is a never-ending process. Process itself thus appears to reflection as the transcendental condition of such adequation. This is very different from Bergson’s ontological thesis that reality *is* process (or its Heideggerian variant that being *is* time). It is also very different from Whitehead’s ingenious refinement according to which each entity is a

⁴⁵ Rescher does not deny the dependency of the subject on the world, but he distinguishes it as *causal* dependence from the *conceptual* dependence of the world on the subject. The upshot of this dualism is precisely that our causal dependency on the world becomes a transcendental postulate rather than a *primordial experience*. This conceptual/causal distinction is a new name for the old mental/physical dichotomy of classical modern philosophy. It plays a decisive role in the version of process philosophy Rescher defends [e.g., PM 41f. and ch. VI, sec. 2 (112-116), *passim*]. Yet Rescher seems to be aware that his conservation of this dichotomy is not in the spirit of the turn-of-the-century philosophy we are concerned with, which sought to overcome what Whitehead called *the bifurcation of nature*: “[H]ere we come to the point at which James and Dewey [and, by implication, Bergson and Whitehead, as well] went astray. For insofar as pragmatism is part of the ‘revolt against dualism’—against splitting the world into scientific and humanistic spheres—the proper route is not that of reconciliatory monism that negates distinctions [...], but rather that of a pluralism [...].” (RP 187).

perspectival concrescence of the antecedent world. For Whitehead, the *status quo* of the world is transcended (becomes past) by becoming manifest as an appearance *for* a newly emerging subject of experience. The reality of each actual entity is the time-creating process in which a novel subject is precipitated as the dative for such manifestation. In short, a process metaphysics very different from Rescher's results if we suppose that process is not the adequation of our theories to a transcendent reality, but rather the reality to which we want our theories to be adequate. We can imagine, for example, a dogmatically inclined philosopher who hopes to bring the process of coming to know to a halt in a definitive and incorrigible theory of how reality *an sich* is pure process. But this could in no way be a transcendental argument. Epistemologically it would have to remain an empirical gambit. Whitehead envisions process in just this way. It is not a transcendental category in the Kantian sense (cognitively transcendental), but an expressly empirical hypothesis, generalized from subjective experience, about the way things really are in themselves. By the same token it is not really a dogmatic thesis, but one that may turn out to be false: a defeasible proposal about the Absolute, rather than an absolute truth about defeasibility.⁴⁶

A distinctive consequence of conceptual-primacy processism is therefore its unwillingness to consider the possibility of metaphysical absolutes on *a priori* grounds.⁴⁷ But is it really impossible—do we really know *a priori* that it is impossible—for the course of contingent experience to lead us to an experience that supersedes its own contingency: a history-terminating revolution in “man's historical consciousness,” for example, or, more pertinent to our theme, a revelation? As a matter of fact, this is something that separates Rescher from Bergson, James, and Whitehead, all of whom took the testimony of religious

⁴⁶ “[T]he philosophic scheme should be ‘necessary,’ in the sense of bearing in itself its own warrant of universality throughout all experience [...]. This doctrine of necessity in universality means that there is an essence to the universe which forbids relationships beyond itself, as a violation of its rationality. Speculative philosophy seeks that essence. [...] Metaphysical categories [...] are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities” (Whitehead 1978, 4, 8).

⁴⁷ “What a sensibly construed pragmatism opposes ideologically is not objective standards [...], but metaphysical absolutes” (RP 248). Rescher's treatment of fallibilism and metaphysical realism (RP, chs. IV-V) makes this opposition itself absolute, placing it on an *a priori* epistemological foundation.

experience as seriously as empirical science.⁴⁸ This makes for a crucial difference between the ontological and conceptual-primacy approaches to processism. By affirming the tentativeness of human knowledge tentatively, ontological processism leaves open the possibility of a categorical truth that is ontological, not transcendental.

Before leaving the subject of Rescher's preferred construal of the reflexive consistency and meta-philosophical coherence of process philosophy, let us note a further concordance between the form of processism he defends and his own philosophical project. Anyone familiar with Rescher's approaches to the resolution self-reference paradoxes could have anticipated his solution to the paradoxical implication of the process thesis on purely logical grounds, independent of his transcendental-epistemological motivations.⁴⁹ The fact is that "All truths are revisable" is paradoxical only if we attempt to construe it as true. In that case it either destroys itself by self-impugment (affirming its own falsifiability) or counter-exemplifies itself (instantiating an infeasible truth). Rescher notes of self-counter-exemplifying propositions (e.g., "No propositions are negative") that no paradox results if they are simply considered false, and this is what he proposes to do.⁵⁰ On the other hand, autodestruction by self-impugment (e.g., "All claims in this paper are false"), he considers symptomatic of "illicit totalization" and, once again, grounds for considering the proposition false (or in some cases meaningless).⁵¹ Rescher's treatment of paradoxes thus leads us, independently of his theory of knowledge, to expect him simply to deny that "All truths are revisable," clearing the way for him to affirm "All truths are revisable—except this one." Self-exception is thus not something Rescher invokes *ad hoc* to legitimate transcendental knowledge. It finds its license in general considerations of logic that have occupied him since his work on self-reference in the 60's. In fact, in the broader context of what Rescher in the early 90's developed into a general methodology of "philosophical

⁴⁸ We can mention here James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Bergson's *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, and Whitehead's *Religion in the Making*.

⁴⁹ Besides PRRR, see also CP, ch. IX (166-185), "Reification Fallacies and Inappropriate Totalities," as well as TPL, ch. II (14-17), "Self-Referential Statements," and XIV, "Assertion Logic," sec. 16 (277-280) on "Inconsistent Assertors."

⁵⁰ PRRR 194.

⁵¹ PRRR, ch. VIII-X (137-215); CP, ch. IX (166-185).

standardism,” self-exception becomes simply one example of the kind of exceptions that are inevitable in a world shot through with contingency.⁵² These exceptions “prove the rule” precisely because they fall outside its “standard” acceptance.

Taking a very different tack, I shall propose that the process thesis is not just “standardly” true and that its unrestricted, self-referential version is not false or meaningless, but true in philosophically important ways. Needless to say, truth cannot be construed here in the classical sense Rescher privileges. I do not deny that the self-referential version of the process thesis suffers autodestruction by self-impugnment. But I propose that autodestruction by self-impugnment is in this case like the *via negativa* of mystical theology and spiritually-motivated skepticism: not a fallacy, but a vehicle of metaphysical apophansis. What it reveals is precisely the self-referentiality of process: the seemingly paradoxical impermanence of impermanence, or what the Mahayana Buddhists call “emptiness.”⁵³

5. The Existential Approach: The Ontological Priority of Process

Despite his preference for conceptual processism, Rescher discusses and even elaborates on several ideas fundamental to ontological processism, which can serve as the starting point of our discussion of this variant of process philosophy. Explanatory power is a cardinal consideration here: static substances alone could never explain the emergence of processes, but process as a primitive category can explain the emergence of substances.⁵⁴ This is a logical argument for the ontological *primacy* of process: it is conceivable that substances could be reducible to processes, but not *vice versa*. But Rescher also adverts to arguments for the *priority* of process, which imply its transcendence. The crucial notion here is that of unowned processes:

⁵² On the rationale of standardism see PS, *passim*; chapter VII (139-153) applies standardism to paradoxes of self-exclusion. The justification of standardism may already be inferred from Rescher’s early—and, I must say, brilliant—essay “A Critique of Pure Analysis,” PrP, ch. VI (107-123).

⁵³ The paradox implied by the permanent truth of “All things are impermanent” was known in Indian antiquity and appears to have motivated Nagarjuna’s dialectical critique of early Buddhism, which remained “attached” to this one illusion of permanence. See Matilal 1971, 146-167.

⁵⁴ PM 29, 46, 48f., 52f.

Owned processes are those that represent the activity of agents[...]. Such processes are ownership attributable with respect to “substantial” items. Unowned processes, by contrast, are free-floating [...] and do not represent the activity of actual (i.e., more than nominal) agents: the cooling of the temperature, the change in climate, the flashing of lightning, the fluctuation of a magnetic field. [...] [T]he existence of unowned processes is particularly important because it shows that the realm of process as a whole is something additional to and separable from the realm of substantial things. (PM 42)

Unowned processes show that process transcends substances ontologically. Grammatically, unowned processes are marked by impersonal or “subjectless” sentences like “it rains.”⁵⁵ These grammatical forms came under philosophical scrutiny by Franz Brentano⁵⁶ in the late 19th century. It was most likely from Brentano that Heidegger inherited the notion that subjectless sentences were ontologically revealing, with existential sentences being the most important kind: “there is ...” (“*es gibt ...*”).⁵⁷ For Heidegger the being of something is an *unowned process of disclosure* and is therefore something fundamentally temporal. Heidegger shares with thinkers like Husserl, Bergson, James, and Whitehead a seriousness about the phenomenon of time, forcing such things as contingency, passage, inheritance, novelty, and loss into the primary focus of ontology. How could substance have primacy in a world permeated by time and its congeners? But more than that, these thinkers share an appreciation for the *priority* of process, recognizing time as the transcendent process *par excellence*. Time not only reveals all things, it also transcends them. Time *is* the subjectlessness of becoming.

In general, the ontological precedence of process means that change and becoming are not simply predicates anchored to stable things, as was

⁵⁵ PM, ch. II, secs. 4-5 (41-46); PP 4ff, 28f.

⁵⁶ In 1883 Brentano published a review, entitled “Miklosich über subjektlose Sätze” (reprinted in Brentano 1971, vol. II, 183-196) suggesting that Miklosich’s monograph “Die Verba impersonalia im Slavischen” deserved more attention than it had received, indeed, that it had potentially epoch-making philosophical implications for logic, psychology, and ontology.

⁵⁷ The ontological importance of the subjectless existential sentence is already evident, before the “*Kehre*,” in *Sein und Zeit* (see Heidegger 1967, 7, 71f., 212, 214, 226, 228, 230, 316, 411ff.). With the 1947 *Brief über den “Humanismus”* it becomes the focus of Heidegger’s metaphysics (see Heidegger 1978, 333ff.).

the case in Aristotelian metaphysics. For Aristotle, it is always something enduring that undergoes change, and the change is really an exchange of predicates, each passing into and out of existence without otherwise changing. But this is not so much change as the dissimulation of change: change as a second-order effect, a shuffle of rigid predicates, just as for atomism it had been a shuffle of inelastic particles. By contrast, the ontological precedence of process means that becoming itself is the subject, the *hypokeimenon*, of being, as with Whitehead's category of the ultimate, creativity.⁵⁸ In this respect, creativity bears some resemblance to Nietzsche's will to power and Bergson's *élan vital* as ultimate categories that are meant to provide a *dynamic ground of being*. Being is grounded in becoming. Accordingly, it would be wrong to say of the primordial becoming that it *is*. We can only express the ontological precedence of process paradoxically by saying that becoming itself becomes or change itself changes.⁵⁹ Otherwise we must resort to subjectless sentences or to non-substantialist categories like will, creativity, temporality. What's important is that the ontological precedence of process, however it is construed, discredits classical predicate logic as an instrument of metaphysical inquiry. If change changes, what does it change to? And if it continues to be change, how can we say that it has changed? We see the same problem in the old question about time: if, as we like to say, time flows, doesn't it need another time to flow in? And if this is absurd, then, as Husserl discovered in his phenomenological investigation of time consciousness, time must be a primordial flux, a self-creating difference,

⁵⁸ "In all philosophic theory there is an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents is devoid of actuality. In the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed 'creativity' [...]" (Whitehead 1978, 7). "'Creativity' is another rendering of the Aristotelian 'matter,' and of the modern 'neutral stuff'" (Whitehead 1978, 31). Compare James' statement that "pure experience" is "the name I gave to the *materia prima* of everything" (James 1912, 138).

⁵⁹ Here and elsewhere my argument adverts to becoming and/or change without specifying the difference since it is only the fundamental aspect of passage, of difference over time, that is relevant to the argument.

not the change *of* something *with respect to* something, but a change that is itself changing, however paradoxical this may be.⁶⁰

The ontological processism of the 19th and early 20th centuries thus has deep affinities with phenomenology and existentialism. All three recognize the *priority* of process and becoming in the ontological transcendence of time. It is also characteristic of all three to explore the paradoxical epistemological implications of the ontological precedence (whether primacy or priority) of process and becoming and to emphasize its incompatibility with traditional interpretations of truth and apophansis. Rescher is not wholly averse to this. His suggestions for a process semantics based on his topological logic are essentially an attempt to provide a logical formalism compatible with the ontological priority of becoming.⁶¹ It employs a logic in which everything is a process of becoming, and becoming is subjectless. Despite its being a *logical formalism*, this is the aspect of his work that brings him closest to the metaphysical concerns of 20th century continental philosophy. Rescher does not, however, pursue the epistemological implications of an ontological processism with the same methodical zeal he dedicates to the epistemology of conceptual-primacy processism and conceptual idealism, although his valorization of a logic of truth-value indeterminacy also makes a significant approach to the issue.⁶²

The epistemological issues arising from ontological processism are philosophically trenchant and will be discussed in the remainder of this paper. As Rescher notes, if the world is made of process, then it cannot be known with static categories.⁶³ The burning question then becomes: so how is it known? How is something without fixed identity knowable? What does it mean to speak truly of something totally unstable? How would we know when we had spoken falsely about it? Aristotle claimed that a proposition says “something about something” (“*ti kata tinos*”) and must assert something definite about it one way or another, something

⁶⁰ This is the dramatic result of Husserl’s *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins*. See Husserl 1966, §§ 35-36 (73-75) and Beilage VI (111-115).

⁶¹ PM , “Appendix: Process Semantics” (175-182); TPL, ch. XIII, “Topological Logic” (229-249).

⁶² PM , ch. III, sec. 6 (65-67), ch. VII, secs. 1-2 (123-129); TPL, ch. VI, “Many-Valued Logic (54-115).

⁶³ PM 135.

which can be and is either definitely true or false. But can we retain bivalence and the predicative structure of traditional apophantic discourse if it's got to be "about" something wholly dynamic? If so, can we say anything about it other than "it changes"? Is this itself a stable truth? Or another false lead that substitutes a fixed idea for the real becoming?

One temptation is to see becoming as something inherently unknowable (as chaos), to see process as knowable only insofar as it is stable and definite—geared and contoured by fixed predicates. This Platonic view is not without its echoes in process philosophy—for example, in Whitehead's theory of eternal objects. But the opposite tendency is represented in Whitehead's thought as well, the tendency, along with Bergson and James, to see becoming as what is best known and most familiar to us, albeit in a way that remains intuitive, inarticulate, even mystical.⁶⁴

A great deal of 19th and early 20th century thought was devoted to the question how something without fixed identity (like pure becoming, firstness, change itself, existence, or time) could be knowable. The most provocative philosophical concepts of this period are all answers to this question. Inwardness, will, feeling, intuition, authenticity are all ways of communing with a truth, of living *in a truth*, that is not conceptually articulable. What these proposals have in common is a rejection of the notion of truth as correspondence and specifically as conceptual representation.

In this regard, Rescher rightly draws attention to the paradigmatic role of Bergson's reasoning in process thought—if concepts are fixed and reality is fluid, then concepts cannot mediate any adequate grasp of

⁶⁴ On the mystical or non-discursive apprehension of flux, see Whitehead 1978, 208ff. and 81f.; on flux as the inner being of the subject, see Whitehead 1978, 29, 136f., 150, 155, and 210. Bergson affirms similar positions in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Bergson 1992, 159-200 [=1959, 1392-1432]). "The consciousness we have of our own person in its continual flowing, introduces us to the interior of a reality on whose model we must imagine all others" (Bergson 1992, 188 [=1959, 1420]). On the being of the subject as flux, compare also Bergson 2001, 75-139 [=1959, 51-92]. For James, a principal thesis of his "radical empiricism" is the pre-verbal givenness of "conjunctive relations" (James 1912, 44-52) and in particular "*the co-conscious transition [...] by which one experience passes into another when both belong to the same self. [...] Personal histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced*" (James 1912, 47f.). According to James this pre-verbal experience of transition is the very essence of the self (James 1912, 128f., and 1950, vol. I, 330-342).

reality.⁶⁵ However, Rescher's charting of the currents of 19th century process thought (in PM, ch. I) suggests that he may have misidentified its source of inspiration. While Rescher is right to see Bergson as a thinker of evolutionary process descended in part from Hegel, this is for the most part an academic comparison rather than a historical connection. Hegel's developed system was widely perceived as conceptual imperialism, as an attempt at totalizing knowledge through concepts.⁶⁶ Bergson thus belonged to a movement of thought that is better seen as Hegel's nemesis. The first important critics to suggest that Hegel's "motion of the concept" was a sham, a shuffle of brittle concepts that failed to grasp the reality of flux and becoming, were the later Schelling and, independently, F. A. Trendelenburg.⁶⁷

To document this sham we need not delve in to the complex arguments of Schelling or Trendelenburg. It is enough to follow their lead in examining the famous first maneuvers of Hegel's speculative logic, which we can do adequately in terms already familiar from our present analysis. In the opening pages of his *Science of Logic* Hegel advanced the view that change, in order to be what it is, has to change to something

⁶⁵ PM 18.

⁶⁶ See in this regard Max Wundt's "Der sog. Zusammenbruch der Hegelschen Philosophie, Geschichtlich Betrachtet" in Nicolini and Pöggeler 1961, 247-253. As harbingers of the Hegel-reaction Wundt mentions the younger Fichte [Immanuel Hermann Fichte], Weisse, Bachman, the aged Schelling, and Herbart: "Common traits of the whole movement [against Hegel] were the following: protest against Hegel's assertion of the unity of idea (*Gedanke*) and its subject-matter (*Sache*) or of thought (*Denken*) and being (*Sein*) and so the triumph of formal logic over [Hegel's] speculative logic[...]. The task of metaphysics is thus to get to being, which is separated from thought. In stark opposition to the universality of the concept, being is understood as particular, indeed, as something foreign to thought." From this orientation we can glimpse a common interest animating such disparate intellectual currents of the 19th century as positivism and the philosophical valorization of empirical science and its methods, Schelling's late quest for a "positive" philosophy, the preferential development of formal logic in the interest of a scientific methodology (*Wissenschaftslehre*), and the substitution of psychology for transcendental philosophy. Some roots of neo-Kantianism are also to be glimpsed here: the opposition of being as particular to the concept as universal is Rickert's fundamental intuition (Rickert 1915, 31ff.).

⁶⁷ See Schelling's treatment of Hegel in his 1827 lectures *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (Schelling 1976, 408-446) and chapter III ("Die dialektische Methode") of Trendelenburg's *Logische Untersuchungen* (Trendelenburg 1862, 36-129), which first appeared in 1840.

other than change. His example was (the concept of) becoming. If it continues to be becoming, he argued, it is *ipso facto* an instance of being, not of becoming. Becoming can instantiate becoming only by ceasing to *be* becoming and actually becoming something not becoming, which he called *Dasein*, a particular being.⁶⁸ *Becoming* becomes *Dasein*. This may be the most convincing example of what Hegel meant by the “motion of the concept” in his logic, but it also shows that the identity of concepts is the basis of his dialectic, not the primordially of a becoming that is beyond concepts, beyond the *is* of identity and its cousin, the existential *is* of identical duration in time.

From Schelling and Trendelenburg on a strong current of thought developed in reaction to Hegel that I shall call western mysticism simply because it sought an intuition of reality in that which was not graspable in conceptually articulate thinking. After Hegel many philosophers tried to show that the truth about being was precisely what could *not* be captured in a conceptual representation. The Truth, they claimed, was precisely that which concepts leave out: Becoming (Trendelenburg, Bergson), the Positive (late Schelling), Subjectivity (Kierkegaard), Will (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche) Feeling (Bradley, Whitehead), Life (Dilthey), Existence (Heidegger). The ontological priority of *process* is therefore only one of many examples of ontological priority surfacing in 19th and early 20th century philosophy. It is clear, however, that temporality and eventfulness are features common to all of these 19th and early 20th century ideas of ontological transcendence. In this sense, Kierkegaard more than Hegel, Nietzsche more than Spencer, are process metaphysicians.

What unites much of post-Hegelian philosophy is therefore an intuition that truth as correspondence divides rather than bridges mind and being. Correspondence, however, is the most that discursive thinking, that is, thinking with concepts, can ever hope for. The only Absolute it knows is the transcendental Absolute of epistemology. The only reality it knows is one subject to the conditions of representation. The manifestation of ontological priority, on the other hand, is something that, like Kant’s feeling of the sublime, explodes the limits of representation and discloses itself in the manner of a revelation rather than a discursively mediated grasp. This negation of epistemology is seen as potentiating an encounter with reality *an sich* much the same way negative theology potentiates an encounter with God.

⁶⁸ Hegel 1978, 57f.; 1985, 69-95.

In this light, the valorization of feeling, will, intuition, and poetry in 19th and early 20th century philosophy can all be seen as parallel to the vigorous philosophical interest that developed at this time in eastern religious mysticism, meditation, and yogic trance. Kant had already persuaded most philosophers that our concepts applied only to appearances, not to things in themselves. For many what this implied was not that knowledge of things in themselves was impossible, but that it had to dispense with conceptual mediation. It is therefore no coincidence that the first English translator of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was Max Müller, the monumental scholar of eastern religion, editor of the historic *Sacred Texts of the East* series, and translator of, among other things, many Buddhist scriptures, as well as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. Like Kierkegaard's inwardness,⁶⁹ James' non-rationality,⁷⁰ or Heidegger's "poetic dwelling,"⁷¹ mystical intuition is a truth that is lived rather than represented. In the case of Buddhist meditation, the content of this intuition also happens to be, according to traditional interpretation, process and impermanence. This example vividly illustrates what is meant by an impermanence that is ontologically revealed rather than transcendently imposed, and it may not be as far from the heart of process philosophy as one might first suppose.⁷²

The revolutionary aspect of 19th and early 20th century process thought—the aspect lacking in Hegel or Spencer—stands out clearly if contrasted with classical modernism. With Descartes' notion of subjectivity as a private, self-transparent, and essentially self-evident sphere of feeling and seeming, it became axiomatic that epistemology is the only possible *prima philosophia*. Seeing the direct metaphysical

⁶⁹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book Two, Part II, ch. ii, "The Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity" (Kierkegaard 1941, 169-223).

⁷⁰ I am indebted to Michel Weber for drawing my attention to the importance of the notion of non-rationality in James' later thought. See James 1909, 212f., and Weber 2004.

⁷¹ See the essay "...dichterisch wohnet der Mensch..." and the cognate essays "Was heisst Denken?," "Bauen Wohnen Denken," and "Das Ding" in Heidegger 1985, 123-198.

⁷² "In [...] monistic schemes, the ultimate is illegitimately allowed a final, 'eminent' reality, beyond that ascribed to any of its accidents. In this general position the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate" (Whitehead 1978, 7).

approach of the ancients as an unsalvageable naïveté belongs to the very essence of modernity. Salvaging the epistemologically unmediated precedence of metaphysics can only mean giving up Descartes' notion of subjectivity. Exploring the nature of a subjectivity bereft of epistemological privilege is the revolutionary agenda of 19th century thought.⁷³ The process thought of Bergson, James, and Whitehead is part of this revolution. They see process in terms of ontological priority and truth as a lived epiphany of this priority. Contrariwise, a philosophy of process that remains committed to the Cartesian notion of subjectivity cannot concede the ontological priority (or primacy) of process and must continue to construe truth in terms of correspondence, even if this correspondence is attenuated to a regulative postulate. Rescher himself draws attention to his agreement with Hegel in this respect.⁷⁴ Correspondence is not repudiated, but seen as mediated by coherence (pragmatically for Rescher, dialectically for Hegel). The varied notions of ontological priority surfacing in the 19th and early 20th centuries and especially the ontological priority of process revoke even the mitigated validity of correspondence common to Hegel and Rescher and urge a different approach to understanding apophansis.

6. The Epistemological Consequence of Ontological Priority: The Conceptual Priority of Process

We have dealt in the previous section with ontological processism and its associated epistemological problems, e.g., how, in the case of process priority, a reality without fixed identity could be knowable. In asking about the epistemological implications of ontological processism, we have also posed a general problem that is not specific to the *process* interpretation of ontology. Namely, what are the epistemological implications of epistemology not being fundamental, of its not taking precedence over metaphysics? And the answer to both these questions is, as we saw, that truth cannot be correspondence. It must be lived in the manner of an existential revelation.

⁷³ The reader may glimpse here the reason why I cannot agree with Arthur Lovejoy (Lovejoy 1961) that the critical reaction to Hegel was merely a return to or continuation of the philosophical position of Jacobi. While Jacobi denied the cognitive value of understanding through concepts, he did not deny the epistemological self-sufficiency of the subject.

⁷⁴ SPI, vol. I, 141-145; Ind 35ff.; CI, ch. IX, sec. 6 (166-171).

This brings us to variant (3) of process philosophy, according to which the idea of process transcends the understanding. If we understand the conceptual priority of process in the way I have proposed, it is compatible with ontological processism and especially with the ontological priority of process. Indeed, it is the epistemological consequence of the ontological priority of process: what I am calling its existential revelation. Rescher draws very near to this position when he explains:

The conceptual aspect [of process philosophy] is based on the idea that process and its ramifications affords the most appropriate and effective conceptual instruments for understanding the world we live in. And the ontological aspect inheres in the idea that this conceptual state of affairs obtains because process is the most pervasive, characteristic, and crucial feature of reality. (PM 28f.)⁷⁵

Rescher here envisions a conceptual processism that is *consequent* to ontological processism. But if what he means is that “process is the most pervasive, characteristic, and crucial feature of reality” *as reality exists for us*, then we are back to the transcendental arguments of conceptual-primacy processism, and so it is the ontological aspect which follows from the conceptual aspect, and not vice versa. By the same token, what we are dealing with then is not really an ontological processism, but a pseudo-ontological processism that is really predicated on the transcendental character of process. But if the inference from the processuality of experience to the processuality of reality is not a transcendental inference about reality-for-us, how could it be a valid inference at all?

Here we come up against another assumption that divides Rescher from processists like Bergson, James, and Whitehead. The flip side of his epistemological orientation is his principled agnosticism about the nature of reality *an sich*.⁷⁶ Knowledge of external reality is always a hypothesis for Rescher. Even if it is a transcendently necessary hypothesis and even if it is pragmatically retro-validated, it is still a hypothesis.⁷⁷ For Bergson, James, and Whitehead, *it is an intuition*. It is a lived truth of metaphysics

⁷⁵ See also PM 135.

⁷⁶ See CI, ch. I, sec. 6 (15-24), ch. VI, sec. 8 (114-118), ch. IX, sec. 6 (166-171), and Conclusion (195-197); and, more recently, CP, ch. VI (93-121), e.g., 120: “‘Reality as such’ is no doubt independent of our beliefs and desires, but what can alone concern us is reality as we view it.”

⁷⁷ RP, ch. V (125-148).

that we inhabit a real world not of our own making that envelops, conditions, and sustains us, and ultimately destroys us, too.⁷⁸ This is the metaphysical significance of an idea of the understanding that actually transcends the understanding, of an experience that transcends experience, something the later Schelling called “*the positive*”⁷⁹ and Heidegger called *facticity*⁸⁰. From a Kantian or neo-Kantian perspective, this is surely an impossible notion, a *contradictio in adjecto*. But it is precisely this alternative to epistemological transcendentalism that 19th and early 20th century philosophy explores. I proceed to some brief documentation of this claim.

In opposition to the more usual idea—that our knowledge of the external world is a transcendental inference or hypothetical construction from the facts and patterns of our sense-perceptions—Whitehead observes that the inhibition of these sense-perceptions does not attenuate, but heightens our sense of “a circumambient world of causal operations” which becomes all the more threatening the more it is rendered vague by the inhibition of sense-perception: “In the dark there are vague presences, doubtfully feared; in the silence, the irresistible causal efficacy of nature presses itself upon us; [...] the inflow into ourselves of feelings from enveloping nature overwhelms us [...].”⁸¹ At the root of experience is not an inference or a transcendental postulate, but a *revelation* of transcendent reality, and it is revealed through our very dependency upon it. Whitehead calls this experience the feeling of causal efficacy and makes it the cornerstone of his whole metaphysics.

Bergson meditates upon the same experience. He calls it “pure perception” and emphasizes its dependency upon an external world by contrasting it with the spiritual autonomy of “pure memory” in which

⁷⁸ This claim is argued in the remaining paragraphs of this section. In addition to the passages cited below, see Whitehead 1978, 162f. and 178f.; Bergson 1988, 228-233 [=1959, 359-363]; and James 1950, vol. II, ch. XXI (283-324).

⁷⁹ Schelling 1972 and 1983, vol. II, 337-356.

⁸⁰ Heidegger 1967, 56, 135, 191f. In his later writings Heidegger spoke not of facticity, but of our being essentially conditioned (“*be-dingt*”) by the worldly thing (“*Ding*”), which “metaphysics” misconstrues as an “idea” or “object” conditioned by the subject. Mindful of this *Bedingt-sein* (our being-conditioned-by-the-world), thinking, says Heidegger, leaves behind the arrogance of holding itself to be in any way unconditioned. See Heidegger 1985, 172.

⁸¹ Whitehead 1978, 176.

images are, in his view, preserved in independence from material reality.⁸² If we could eliminate the contribution of memory to ordinary perception, we would be left, he argues, with a causal residue, a wholly positive, albeit momentary content of givenness identically one and the same with an aspect of the world itself at that moment. In this manner “we should pass from perception to matter, from the subject to the object,”⁸³ disclosing the “impersonal basis [...] in which perception coincides with the object perceived and which is [...] externality itself.”⁸⁴ In pure perception thus isolated, the role of consciousness would be “confined to threading on the continuous string of memory an uninterrupted series of instantaneous visions, which would be a part of things rather than ourselves.”⁸⁵ It follows that “the reality of things is no more constructed, or reconstructed, but touched, penetrated, lived [...]”⁸⁶ “[I]n pure perception we are actually placed outside ourselves; we touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition.”⁸⁷

James arrives at a similar position through the conjunction of his doctrines of “radical empiricism” and “pure experience.”⁸⁸ Owing something to the doctrines of Ernst Mach as well as to Bergson, James’ notion of pure experience means that “what represents and what is represented is [...] numerically the same; [...] no dualism of being represented and representing resides in [...] experience *per se*.”⁸⁹ What we ordinarily take to be representation or consciousness is simply an “extrinsic denomination” (to use, for reasons that will be presently evident, the Scholastic term) accruing to a pure experience by dint of an external relationship with another, specifically, later pure experience.⁹⁰ It is a functional relationship that obtains when one experience is affectively

⁸² Bergson 1988, ch. I (17-76) [=1959, 168-223].

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 70 [=1959, 217].

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 66 [=1959, 214].

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 65 [=1959, 212].

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 69 [=1959, 216].

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 75 [=1959, 222].

⁸⁸ These doctrines are sketched in James’ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. See James 1912.

⁸⁹ James 1912, 23.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. I (1-38).

appropriated by a later one. I see something, for example. What obtains initially is not a simultaneous contrast between seeing and a thing seen, although language suggests this. What obtains is simply the sight seen. But now I reflect on this as *my* experience. As James says, because I look back upon it and find it “warm,” I “greet” the pure experience as “mine.”⁹¹ I thereby appropriate the sight seen as an object of my seeing. Only now can I really speak of the sight as something subjective, as a “content” of consciousness, but strictly speaking this remains an extrinsic denomination.

Anticipating ideas of Whitehead, James emphasizes the asymmetry of the relationship of appropriation, which is external with respect to the appropriated and internal with respect to the appropriating experience.⁹² The position of naïve realism that two minds can know the same thing, generally, that we all know the selfsame “real” world, is thus in principle vindicated because “appropriation is *part of the content of a later experience* wholly additional to the originally ‘pure’ [one]. *That* [original experience], virtually both objective and subjective, is at its own moment actually and intrinsically neither. [...] *it* stands, throughout the operation, passive and unchanged.”⁹³ Different acts of appropriation may thus share the same original pure experience, without having to “multiply” it as so many subjective representations.⁹⁴ At the same time, the *relationship* to the represented reality that constitutes consciousness is not a mere postulate or hypothesis, because it is *internal* to the appropriating experience: “part of its content,” as James says. This is James’ doctrine of radical empiricism, which holds that the relations among our experiences are themselves experiences, given with no less empirical authority than the non-relational contents empiricism has traditionally favored.⁹⁵ Together, pure experience and radical empiricism imply that consciousness is founded on the affective appropriation of earlier world-stuff by later world-stuff and thus involves an undeniable primordial feeling of the antecedent, transcendent world.

⁹¹ Ibid., 128ff.

⁹² Ibid., ch. IV (123-136).

⁹³ Ibid., 130.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 130-133.

⁹⁵ Ibid., chs. II-III (39-122).

Rescher seems to have missed the crucial significance of transcendent feeling for ontological processism. Although he adverts to the argument familiar to us from Whitehead that the feeling of causal efficacy proffers a refutation of Hume's critique of causality,⁹⁶ he fails to draw the further and more dramatic consequences that ultimately incriminate the correspondence theory of truth. Similarly, he does not note the paramount importance that James ascribes to pure experience and its temporal appropriation or that Bergson ascribes to the dilation of pure perception into a metaphysical intuition of reality-as-process. That the lived influx of transcendent feeling is the one epistemological condition of our being able to know about the ontological priority of anything goes unremarked. In reference to Whitehead, this oversight becomes patent when Rescher declares, "Whitehead inclined to regard feeling as a non-relational mode of awareness" (PM 112). To this he counters that most feelings

are psychic processes that relate subjective sentiment to a (putatively) objective state of the world in a way that introduces an at least purported objectivity upon the scene. And under the pressure of evolution these psychic processes are reality-coordinated [...]. (PM 113)

The objective correlative Rescher wants to supply to feeling is, as we see, his preferred conceptually ideal and pragmatically vetted objectivity. But this supplementation of Whitehead's theory is not so urgent once we realize that Whitehead never thought of feeling as non-relational in the sense that Rescher understands. It is true that Whitehead refers with qualified approbation to Bradley's doctrine of "non-relational" feeling⁹⁷ according to which feeling is "the primary activity at the basis of experience. It is experience itself in its origin and with the minimum of analysis."⁹⁸ It is even true that Whitehead says expressly: he agrees with Bradley that "experience is not a relation of an experient to something external to it,"⁹⁹ but this is because for Whitehead the experient has, in feeling an external thing, incorporated that thing into its own self-

⁹⁶ PM 48.

⁹⁷ Whitehead 1967, 231ff. His approbation is "qualified" because, after noting that feeling for Bradley is "non-relational" he says straightaway, "There are of course grave differences between my own doctrine and that of Bradley" (231).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

constitution. Thus, without being an *external* relation, feeling is, just like James' "appropriation," always a feeling of the transcendent world and specifically of the *past* transcendent world, which, asymmetrically, retains its independence:

Two conditions must be fulfilled in order that an entity may function as an object in a process of experiencing: (1) the entity must be *antecedent*, and (2) the entity must be experienced in virtue of its antecedence; it must be *given*. Thus an object must be a thing received, and must not be either a *mode* of reception or a thing *generated* in that occasion. Thus the process of experiencing is constituted by the reception of objects into the unity of that complex occasion which is the process itself.¹⁰⁰

Whitehead is here deliberately contradicting the principle of the modern *via idearum*, according to which "objects," that is, our ideas of things (*res verae*), are simply *modes* of affection.¹⁰¹ According to this principle, the *manner* (*modus*) in which we are causally affected by things is all we know of them.¹⁰² Living and thinking, as we still do, in the shadow of Descartes, it is difficult for us to recover the impact of Descartes' declaration that the mind is a thinking thing. The revolutionary part of this is that *the mind is a thing*. For Aristotle and his Scholastic followers, the mind knows by becoming the thing known, or at least by becoming its essence (if the thing is a composite of matter and form).¹⁰³ But for this to be possible, Aristotle argued, it was necessary that the mind, before it thinks, be nothing in itself.¹⁰⁴ Otherwise the mind would modify and adulterate the manifestation of the thing, and, accordingly, the thing would merely effect an alteration of *the mind*, not a realization of its unadulterated essence *in the mind*. Descartes did not disagree with Aristotle that the mind could

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 178f.

¹⁰¹ The exposition presupposes as familiar the Scholastic distinction, much valued by Brentano as well as by Whitehead, between thing (*res*) and object (*objectum*).

¹⁰² Consider the canonical formulation of Spinoza, who defines the "*essentia objectiva*" as the "*modus quo sentimus essentiam formalem*" (*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, sec. 35): the objective essence is the manner in which we sense the formal essence.

¹⁰³ *De Anima*, Gamma 4-5, 429a10-429b10; 429b22-430a18. See also Gamma 7, 431a1 and 431b17, and *Metaphysics*, Lambda 9, 1074b35-107515.

¹⁰⁴ "*ho nous [...] entelecheia(i) ouden, prin an noe(i);*" see *De Anima*, Gamma 4, 429b29-430a2; also 429a18-429a29.

become the thing known only if the mind itself was not a thing; he disagreed when Aristotle declared that the mind is, indeed, not a thing (*outhen tôn ontôn*—“not one of the beings”¹⁰⁵). Being a thing with its own proper nature, the mind can know other things only representationally through their effects, which manifest as alterations in its own qualities. The object of knowledge is thus the mode in which one thing—which remains unknown or at best only mediately known—effects an alteration in another thing, which happens to be the mind. Needless to say, in such a scenario the mind and the thing are related only externally.

Whitehead’s bald declaration that the object is not a mode, but is simply the thing itself functioning as a constituent in a new thing, obliterates the merely modal character of objects that was the stranglehold of epistemology on metaphysics ever since Descartes. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this same issue—the reality of objects—was the sticking point between Caterus and Descartes in the first exchange of objections and replies appended to the *Meditations*.¹⁰⁶ Caterus sensed what Descartes was up to: banishing the reality of objects taken for granted in Scholasticism. It must be admitted that Descartes, a close reader of Suarez, was only developing ideas to some extent prefigured in late Scholasticism. But by seizing on the most un-Aristotelian elements in Suarez, he sought to destroy what remained of Aristotle in Scholastic psychology. Caterus of course seized on the contrary elements in Suarez in a bid to preserve the reality of objects. The first exchange of objections and replies pits these two sides of Suarez against one another.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 429a23.

¹⁰⁶ Descartes 1984, vol. II, 66-86 [=1964-76, vol. VII, 91-121].

¹⁰⁷ Caterus identifies “idea” exclusively with the Suarezian *objective concept*; Descartes identifies it exclusively with the Suarezian *formal* or *subjective concept*. But there is no place for the formal concept in Aristotle’s psychology. By stressing the role of the formal concept (“the material reality of ideas”) Descartes makes it impossible to preserve the Aristotelian function of the objective concept. Ideation becomes an intrinsic denomination of the thinking subject rather than an extrinsic denomination of the thing thought. The same tension Caterus and Descartes unintentionally bring to light in Suarez is evident in Ockham’s famous vacillation between the *fictum* and the *intellectio* theory of concepts. The *fictum* theory prioritizes the objective concept; the *intellectio* theory prioritizes the formal concept. It is doubtful that Descartes knew Ockham’s writing, but he certainly knew the writings of Gabriel Biel, who whole-heartedly adopted Ockham’s *intellectio* theory of concepts.

Caterus insists that an idea (=object) has no formal reality associated with it other than the thing it represents. *Per se*, the idea is merely an *extrinsic denomination* of the thing, its “being thought about.”¹⁰⁸ The idea of the sun is thus the sun itself “being thought about.” Descartes cannot agree with this.¹⁰⁹ The reality (=thingliness) of the intellect implies that ideas have a formal reality of their own *qua ideas* distinct from the realities they manifest. Descartes discovers this formal reality of the idea *qua idea* by considering the idea “materially, as an act of the understanding,” rather than “objectively,” as representing something.¹¹⁰ Aristotle would have denied, as does Caterus, that such a consideration discovers anything at all. Against Aristotle Descartes insists that ideas have such a formal reality of their own and against Scholasticism that this

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 74ff. [=ibid., 102ff.].

¹⁰⁹ It was Descartes who shrewdly introduced the sun as an example here in order to highlight the strangeness of the Scholastic-Aristotelian viewpoint. The sun’s “being thought about” is something that presumably takes place in the mind. But clearly the sun *itself* is not *in* the mind, so it seems perfectly obvious that the sun’s being thought about is not “the sun itself under an extrinsic denomination,” but rather something which *can* properly be said to be “in” the mind in some appropriate sense of “in.” What is in the mind must be some sort of immanent designation of the real sun, its mental proxy or representation, and Descartes calls this an “idea.” Whitehead calls this reasoning “the fallacy of simple location.” It supposes that the sun itself can’t be in the mind because, quite obviously, it’s up in the sky—and no doubt too hot and too big to take up residence “in” the mind. The suspect assumption here is that the one real sun cannot be *both* in the sky *and* in the mind. The alternative viewpoint proceeds from the same no-nonsense intuition as the Cartesian viewpoint, although it draws a very different conclusion. It agrees that the *idea* of the sun and the *sun itself* must be two very different things—so different, in fact, that it wonders how such an idea could ever introduce us to the *thing* we are so familiar with. The sun is hot, big, and bright. The *idea* of the sun is, to be sure, not hot, big, or bright, just as the *idea* of a dog does not bark or bite. What seems perfectly obvious to *this* way of thinking is that we could know the sun only by virtue of its real properties and their real effects upon us, such as heat and illumination, and not by virtue of “ideas” that have no reality, power, or agency of any sort. Think of Husserl’s “noema,” the phenomenological counterpart to Descartes’ “idea.” According to a famous passage in Husserl’s *Ideas* (§89), the perceptual noema (the object *qua* perceived) has *no real properties*. Hence, the “noematic” tree, that is, the one we actually perceive insofar as we perceive it, has no chemical composition and is not combustible (Husserl 1980, 183f.). Apparently there are no forest fires in the life-world.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 7 and 162f. [=ibid., 8 and 232].

is the *only* formal reality that is *necessarily* attached to them, overturning the last remnants of Aristotelian realism in Scholastic psychology.

This intrinsic reality of an idea is, for Descartes, nothing other than its modal incidence in the mind: an idea is the real modification of a real thing (an incorporeal thing, to be sure, but nevertheless a thing). As such it is an effect different in number and in kind from whatever real thing that caused it. By dint of this difference, the intrinsic reality of an idea occludes, rather than manifests, the reality of the thing represented. In fact, the idea can simply do without the reality of the thing represented. The reality of the mind is by itself sufficient to sustain it. The result is, as Whitehead was wont to emphasize in *Process and Reality*, the problematic status of any reality other than the mind itself (as the subject of ideational experience). The modality of objects and the reality of the subject imply one another, and they preclude the transcendent reality of objects. If the disputed reality of the object is to be anything more than a modification in the reality of the subject, then we must return to pre-Cartesian modes of thought.

Whitehead's denial of the modality of objects takes us back to Suarez, or even to Aristotle, for whom the mind becomes the thing known. Whitehead's variation on this is simple: the thing becomes known by itself becoming a factor in the actual constitution of the knowing mind. Either way, whether the mind becomes the thing or the thing becomes the mind, experience is a declension of the thing known, not the manner of its affecting us or an effect generated by its affecting us.

It is beyond my scope to trace in detail the various ways that different process metaphysicians seek to recover the transcendent reality of the object. It is enough to note that this was their principal intent. As much as Whitehead's theory of concrescence as the centripetal gathering of the world by prehensions, Bergson's intuition as pure perception and James' pure experience preclude the modality of objects by restoring something akin to Aristotle's "potential intellect," thus allowing subject and object to coincide in an unmediated feeling of transcendent reality. The transcendent reality of the object is not recovered *tout entier*, to be sure. This is no full-scale return to Aristotelian realism. But it is recovered at least in a way that is foundational of our being and makes our being in the world a metaphysically revealed primordial fact, rather than a pragmatically vetted apriori hypothesis.

7. Conclusion

Let there be no mistake: Rescher's philosophical approach is compelling in its own right, and it represents an entirely valid approach to process philosophy. Moreover, it impressively demonstrates the viability of process philosophy in terms that the non-process philosophy of the Anglo-American mainstream must accept. This is no small feat. It does this by viewing process philosophy from the perspective of a conceptual idealism. The result is a philosophy of process that emphasizes the processuality of experience, knowledge, communication, and scientific inquiry. Process philosophy is thus brought to bear incisively on the epistemological concerns that logical positivism, critical rationalism, and linguistic analysis inherit from the modern tradition. Nevertheless, to assimilate to the traditional epistemological orientation of modern philosophy, process philosophy must disengage from its radical, turn-of-the-century ideas about ontological priority. The result is a bifurcation of process philosophy into disparate approaches that reflects the larger division in philosophy today between analytic and continental orientations. I have tried to characterize some important differences between the two approaches to process philosophy, to make clear that they are not mutually compatible, and to balance Rescher's emphasis on the virtues of conceptual-primacy processism by highlighting some strengths (without denying the weirdness) of the alternative approach. I recapitulate my argument in the remaining two paragraphs.

The question addressed in this paper is simply whether the fluidity of experience is to be understood as a transcendental condition of any attempt to know what is, or is itself an instance and epiphany of what is. Rescher chooses the former alternative. The transcendental approach, however, drives a wedge between conceptual and ontological processism. In general, the epistemological primacy of concepts entails a thoroughgoing ontological opacity. Whether *being* is a process, Rescher therefore remains agnostic. For him, it is ideation (experience) that is necessarily a process. By the same token, however, the truth about this epistemological state of affairs is not a process. The truth about process is a *non-processual being* of which we can be transcendentially certain.

Historically, process philosophy took the other path at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries—the path of process *realism*. This path does not lead to the denial of all ontological opacity (as does an ontological idealism), but nor does it lead to the denial of all ontological translucency (as does a conceptual idealism). For Bergson, James, and Whitehead, the original and motivating insight is precisely that the conceptual and

ontological versions of the process paradigm are one and the same if process has *priority*. The process of coming to know the world is itself a paradigmatic and ontologically revealing instance of the being of things. According to this approach, self-knowledge is impossible without revealing something about the world. Reflection is a declension of pure experience. So we have an answer to the epistemological question Rescher finds unanswerable: even granting the ontological priority of process, how we could ever know it as such. The transcendent nature of process means that it both penetrates and transcends everything, including the understanding, where it reveals, if nothing else, at least its own transcendence and ontological priority. If this sounds abstruse, the experience of time suggests otherwise. Numerous idealists have sought to “refute time.” In fact, time is the refutation of idealism.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Michel Weber, whose enthusiasm and painstaking attention to detail go well beyond the editor’s call of duty.

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REPLIES

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I am grateful to my colleagues who have contributed to this volume for the time and thought they have devoted to their critique of various parts of my work. Goethe once remarked to Eckermann that: "What we agree with leaves us inactive, but contradiction makes us productive."¹ How true this is! It should thus occasion no surprise that in writing my responses I have focused on those issues where the commentators most sharply disagree with my views. In philosophy, above all, disagreement is a stimulus and criticism a mode of collaboration.

I would, however, like to make one preliminary observation regarding the business of philosophical critique. The type of critic I have in mind here is one whose discussion proceeds by looking at the topics being addressed by an author and asking: "How do I myself see the problem-field at issue and how would I address it?" And he then proceeds to complain that the author at issue has not written *that*—the critic's own—book. The critic's grinding star is thus his own conception of the topic. What the author's conception is and whether his book manages to accomplish the task that its author set for himself is something that is pretty much absent from the critic's agenda. And so in the present case he feels free to complain (with Michael Hampe) that a book geared to the process-philosophical tradition Heraclitus-Leibniz-Whitehead does not discuss "the philosophy of life that can be found in the thought of Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Simmel." All I can say here is, to quote from Matthew: "sufficient unto the day are the problems thereof."

¹ See Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*, Wednesday, March 28, 1827.

comprehension. Affection does not require a parity of status. (Reflect here on the idea that people may well have no friend and adherent more loyal and loving than their dog.)⁹

10. Weekes on Process Philosophy

In these comments I have sometimes complained that my critics have not read enough of my work and have focused their critique on too small a context. With Anderson Weekes the situation is the diametrical opposite of this, and I am deeply appreciative of his concerted effort to keep the bigger picture in view. His treatment of my views is so wide-ranging as to qualify it not just as a critique but as a constructively synoptic introduction to my metaphysical position.

The deep worry that (rightly and plausibly) pervades Weekes' critique of my view of process philosophy is the question of "whether Rescher's approach to process philosophy really does justice to *this* [existentially and experientially] ontological priority of process, especially as it is disclosed by such unowned processes as time." Bergson deemed it a treason to process to *spatialize* time, and Weekes—so it seems to me—deems it an analogous treason to *conceptualize* time, and sees me as an arch-traitor in this light.

Weekes' principal complaint against my processism is that my approach to process philosophy "leaves behind the more daring ideas of Bergson, James, and Whitehead, all of whom envisioned the primordial reality of process in a radical ontology of becoming." As Weekes sees it, I have "assimilated the revolutionary ideas [of these processists] to something lesser and less threatening" by insisting on the conceptualistic turn from reality itself to our cognitive operations in conceptualizing it, thereby replacing an ontologically *existential* processism by an epistemologically *conceptualistic* one.

I think that Weekes' explanation of my position is right on target so that my oft-reiterated reaction elsewhere of having been misunderstood would be entirely out of order. How then would I respond to Weekes' complaint?

⁹ This essay is a revised version of a response to some comments by Professor John R. Cobb Jr. on the author's book in *Process Metaphysics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996) at an (unpublished) exchange at a Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

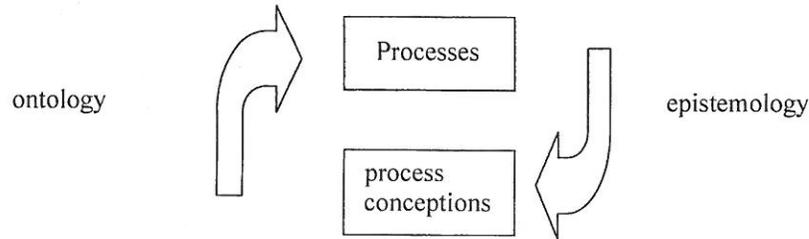
In effect I would want to argue that reality often blurs the edges of our theoretical contrasts. Weekes' instrument of critique is the linguistic contrast between the existential/ontological aspect of process and its conceptual/epistemic aspect. But insofar as truth and knowledge are a matter of *adaequatio ad rem*—of a coordination of thought and reality—we cannot prize these two aspects of the matter apart into a neat separation.

I propose to do so by taking a leaf from the book of classical pragmatism. The classical pragmatist from Peirce to Dewey strove to soften up the rough edges of distinction insisting that reality generally intermediates between the seemingly sharp dichotomies inherent in our concepts. And so where Weekes wants to impale me on sharp edge of a distinction between an ontological and a conceptual approach, I would want to insist that these two cannot be separated but must be combined and coordinated. For we have no way to get to *what* is via the doorway of *what we think it to be*. "Tell me what is the case in such-and-such a matter but do this quite separately and apart from what you think about the matter" is an instruction that is in principle unfulfillable. We simply cannot get at the ontology of things save by means of the conceptual thought machinery at our disposal for its characterization. Of course reality transcends our conceptualizations of it. But insofar as we can come to grips with any reality-characterizing fact we must and cannot but come to grips with it via our own conceptualization of the matter. The existential (ontological) and epistemological (conceptual) aspects of an issue—whatever it be, existence included—cannot be effectively separated. Where the concept of some item is concerned, object and concept are fused together. Coordination and coherence are unavoidable here.

The key point—so it seems to me—is that man as *homo sapiens* is a conceptualizing being, one whose experience is largely articulated in linguistic and thus conceptual terms. If it is indeed the case that (as I believe) *to be is to be in principle experientiable* with experience broadly construed to encompass *conceptual* experience then the ontological issue of existence cannot be surgically separated from the epistemic issue of conceptualization. Experience is the linkage which makes the two into a unified whole so that one cannot here justly complain of a conceptualizing abandonment of ontology (or of what Ortega y Gasset called ontophobia).

Whenever existential claims are warranted, both object and concept have to come into it. Both are needed. But which comes first? What of the issue of priority? My response is simply: *At this point there is no*

functional priority but only coordination! Diagrammatically its situation may be represented as follows:



In the order of becoming (of ontology and causality) processes doubtless have priority *vis-à-vis* over our conceptualizations of them. But in the order of understanding (of epistemology and hermeneutics) our process concepts are in the driver's seat. And an adequate philosophical account requires a suitable coordination here, a "closing of the circle" that dispenses with functional primacy or priority and reflects the sort of systemic coherence that any adequate philosophy demands. Here as elsewhere, a category egalitarianism of systemic interdependence reigns: there is systemic coordination alright, but no hierarchical order of precedence.

So on this perspective, we have it that in the order of being and existence, the ontology of process does indeed enjoy priority. But in the larger scheme of things that takes the synoptic view characteristic of philosophical inquiry, matters stand otherwise and the issue is not one of precedence but one of conjunction.

And on just this perspective I would deny the charge that I "seem to have removed the crucial significance of transcendental feeling from ontological processism." Agreed, from the existential perspective at issue with feeling, a prioritization of process is entirely in order. But when we turn from feeling to understanding—to explanation and interpretation—the issues of conceptualization will and must come to the forefront. And both of these perspectives have to figure coordinatively in the larger picture.

Just this, so it seems to me, meets the challenge of Weekes' complaint that a conceptualistic approach to process philosophy does not do justice to the affective aspect of the feeling of processual change as a factor in human experience—a view he sees as a sign of backsliding into the outdated way of ideas that was prominence in the 16th and 17th centuries. But here too I would incline to resist the insistence on a dichotomous either-or. The status of process has to be seen a triangular

way: *ontologically* processes are the furniture of the real, *ideationally* the concept of process is an indispensable instrumentality of description and explanation, and *experientially* (as for example, when I blink my eye) we are bound to have, conjointly!, both the processual object in the observed world—the blink—and the experientially subjective experience of blinking). Such processes in which one is oneself involved, be it by way of observation or production (or both), actually serve as the very paradigms of process, and it seems plausible to say that if we humans had not experienced, process the concept of process as inherently of description and explanation might well have occurred to us. The experiential role of process must clearly play a key role in process philosophy, and I frankly cannot see how anything I have said on the subject could invite—let alone constitute—a denial of this undeniable fact.

And so, in sum, when Weekes confronts me with the elegantly worded question: "Whether the fluidity of experience is to be understood as a transcendental precondition of any attempt to know what is, or is in itself an instance or epiphany of what is?" I would—Weekes' surmise to the contrary notwithstanding—refuse to opt for that first alternative but would, instead, insist on having it both ways. (I am, after all, not just a processist but a coherentist as well—a process-coherentist, in sum.)

11. Poli on Process Semantics

The brief Appendix to *Process Metaphysics* observes that modern quantificational logic in its classical formation is based on an *object/property* semantics and outlines an alternative *process/feature* semantics that manages to avoid various difficulties encountered by the classical approach. In reacting to this discussion, Roberto Poli makes the following successive points:

- (1) that one of these difficulties (relating to nonexistent entities) can also be averted by a shift from classical quantificational logic to one of the so-called free logics.
- (2) that the particular process semantics I suggest, which describes processes adverbially and concretizes them "spatially" (that is, by reciprocal concurrent interrelationships) also encounters the problem of nonexistents in a form that I claim process semantics averts.
- (3) that process semantics can also be developed along the lines of the transition kinematics that has come into vogue in computer science.