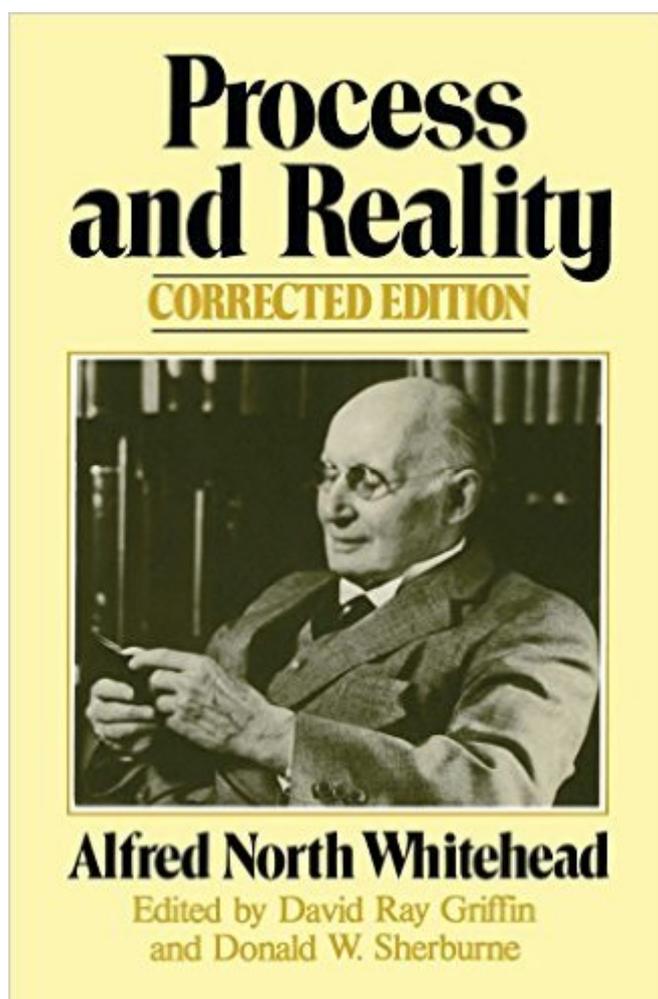


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# Process And Reality (Gifford Lectures Delivered In The University Of Edinburgh During The Session 1927-28)



## Synopsis

One of the major philosophical texts of the 20th century, *Process and Reality* is based on Alfred North Whitehead's influential lectures that he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in the 1920s on process philosophy. Whitehead's master work in philosophy, *Process and Reality* propounds a system of speculative philosophy, known as process philosophy, in which the various elements of reality into a consistent relation to each other. It is also an exploration of some of the preeminent thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Descartes, Newton, Locke, and Kant. The ultimate edition of Whitehead's magnum opus, *Process and Reality* is a standard reference for scholars of all backgrounds.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Early in this century American philosophy made a 'linguistic' turn that determined the direction it would take all the way to the present day. In the spirit of the times, language made its way to the forefront of philosophy, the end result being (among other things) Positivism and a scientific approach to the Geisteswissenschaften. It is a turn many of us, looking back, wish it had never made. Because of this turn, certain philosophers and ways of doing philosophy all but stopped being considered. Among these philosophers were Dewey and James. These thinkers have in recent decades been resurrected by contemporary neopragmatists, most notably Richard Rorty, who look back at the arid desert of mid-twentieth century philosophy and wonder how far we have come after all. To quote Rorty (who is certainly no Whiteheadian), American philosophical thought

'began taking its cue from Frege rather than Locke.' Broadly considered, this meant that language rather than experience, mind rather than body, was taken to be the most serious matter for philosophy. Whitehead stayed with Locke. Whitehead wanted to critique most Modern philosophy with what he termed the 'philosophy of organism;' that is, Whitehead insisted that experience or 'feeling' rather than disembodied thinking was the hallmark of human existence, and that all experience was subjective. Now, this does not sound like Locke. Anyone writing this side of modernity knows that Locke was the quintessential modern philosopher, with all the baggage that entails. But when Whitehead wrote in the preface to *Process and Reality* that 'the writer who most fully anticipated the main positions of the philosophy of organism is John Locke,' he was stressing the fact that Locke discarded metaphysics, seeking rather to look at what was actually happening, as far as he could tell. In many ways, and though they wrote at the same time but in complete isolation from each other's thought, Whitehead and Heidegger were searching for the same thing, the thing both philosophers thought that Plato and Aristotle had known, but that had been forgotten in the intervening centuries: what it actually meant to experience something, or, as Cooper puts it, how 'to make intelligible our immediate experience so that we can discover how it is possible to have any experience of the actual world.' Rather than reading Whitehead as an elaborate and old-school metaphysician, one ought to read him as a phenomenological empiricist, if such a beast exists, and thus find an answer to the people who dismiss Whitehead as 'behind the times,' people who simply don't bother to actually read Whitehead. It is true that thinkers still committed to a reductionist/linguistic approach to philosophy will not see Whitehead's importance as a critic of closed systems (Whitehead's is expressly open and revisable, one reason it has endured as long as it has without being widely read in philosophy departments). It is also true that American philosophy left Whitehead behind. However, the blind alleys linguistic analysis and positivism lead us into should cause us to wonder if we were led in the right directions, or if we should have left in the first place. Leaving something behind certainly does not necessarily mean progressing beyond it. Whitehead's goal was expressly NOT the goal of philosophy in America after his time, though Whitehead's goal had been an important part of James's 'Radical Empiricism,' ironically. Whitehead looked back to James and Dewey, and Bergson on the continent, hoping 'to rescue their type of thought from the charge of anti-intellectualism, which rightly or wrongly has been associated with it.' Present-day neopragmatism, noting how vapid and unsatisfying most rationalist and linguistic philosophy has become in American thought, also looks back to Dewey and James, but to the pragmatism rather than to the empiricism of these two masters. It has become axiomatic that the only way to read James and Dewey is as pragmatists, after all. However, the axiom is not true. A

`rediscovery' of Whitehead by contemporary American philosophy might lead to another and equally valid reading of James and Dewey. James, Dewey, and Whitehead were thinkers of the same ilk. If you like any two, you should at least consider reading the third. Similarly, the relations between Heidegger and Whitehead have only recently been resurfacing, and deserve closer scrutiny. Analytic philosophy never took seriously the questions raised by Heidegger because they weren't precise enough for logical analysis. When a grandfather of the analytic movement, Wittgenstein, began distancing himself from his earlier work, his own disciples balked because, they said, he seemed to be retreating into metaphysics! It is much more likely, however, that Wittgenstein realized that life cannot be reduced to propositions and truth tables. This was also Whitehead's view. Whitehead was also not precise enough for the analytic philosophers (I always wonder who is). Whether or not the fact that he did not measure up to their standards (and still does not) should be seen as an indictment or a complement remains to be seen. Whitehead is an immensely difficult writer. Hosinski's *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance* (1993) is a brilliant introductory work, and I highly recommend it, especially if you have to read Whitehead for a class. Sherburne's *Key* is also very helpful, though you get a lot of Sherburne, too. At issue is usually Whitehead's neologisms. To draw another analogy between Heidegger and Whitehead, however, both men were notorious for creating new words because what they wanted to explain was both so uncanny and yet so obvious that the old words didn't work. Don't let the language scare you away. Whitehead rewards hard work, and you will likely never forget what you learn from him. The ideas that we are beginning to take much more seriously these days about holistic thinking, interconnectedness, interdisciplinarity, non-dualism, commensurability between science and religion, and creativity were all covered by him seventy years ago. Don't let your professors tell you that Whitehead is an outmoded metaphysician. His `philosophy of organism' is as inherently open-ended, properly understood, as anything passing today as postmodernism. Read Whitehead.

*Process and Reality* was published the year that Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge to begin the movement known as linguistic analysis. Whitehead's masterpiece is everything that analysts despise: metaphysical, jargon-filled, and systematic. Whitehead's philosophy of language is terse: "philosophy redesigns language in the same way that, in a physical science, pre-existing appliances are redesigned." The book is arranged in five "Parts". The first part gives an overview of philosophy, its aims and methods, together with a set of premises on which the substance of his philosophy will be built. He calls this set "The Categoreal Scheme" and intends the remainder of his book to be an exposition of this scheme. His work is, then, "systematic" in a way that the 20th century has largely

rejected, and hearkens back to the 19th century. In fact, he does so explicitly, naming his book after Bradley's "Appearance and Reality", and stating that, despite their metaphysical differences, he and Bradley come to much the same conclusions. The second part discusses the categorical scheme in terms of the history of philosophy, with emphasis on the Empiricist tradition that begins with Locke, but covering the range of modern as well as ancient philosophy. In this section he elaborates his "philosophy of organism" which sees each actual entity as a psycho-physical unification of its environment, a unit of space, time, and value. Deeply influenced by early 20th century physics, Whitehead presents us with a universe that is dynamic. Grounded in Plato (Western Philosophy consists of "a series of footnotes to Plato"), he also presents us with a changeless ground for this dynamism. The result is a fascinating, modern interpretation of an ancient mode of thought. The third and fourth parts develop the philosophy of organism in its own terms, rather than in relationship to the history of philosophy or to science. These sections are of special interest to the technical philosopher, and continue to be the subject-matter of articles and books by professional philosophers. The fifth and final part is a rhapsodic interpretation of the philosophy he has presented. This "Final Interpretation" has inspired a theological movement called "Process Theology", and provides provocative oracles for the amateur philosopher. This is not an easy book to read once you get into part two, and it is recommended that the reader have some familiarity with philosophy. However, the determined undergraduate or the dedicated amateur will find that the complexity of Whitehead's jargon is not merely to impress the uninitiated, but expresses a view of reality that aims to be "consistent, coherent, applicable, and adequate". The view from inside makes it worth the effort necessary to enter into Whitehead's universe. Once entered, it is a world you will not forget.

Studied this in college and was totally blown away! Process & Reality is, in a nutshell, mathematics-based, process metaphysics, with quantum mechanics thrown in for good measure. Say that 3 times fast! Given that he wrote this in 1927-28, many of the concepts he proposed were way ahead of the times. The concepts he proposed were similar to Spinoza & Meister Eckhart, although more advanced than either one. I found it fascinating! I was a Philosophy major at the time & this was one of the first texts that really ignited my passion for philosophy & quantum mechanics. I would recommend this to Philosophers, Physicists, and anyone who is just naturally inquisitive about the way the world and its parts work.

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