

PLAUSIBILITY OF THE THESIS THAT “PROCESS METAPHYSICS” RESCUES METAPHYSICS FROM THE ONSLAUGHT OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This paper probes into the Plausibility of the Thesis that Process Metaphysics rescues Metaphysics from the onslaught of Analytic Philosophy. Analytic philosophy is used to describe philosophy that proceeds through analysis broadly, by seeking to understand the composition of its subject matter out of simple components. Analytic metaphysicians generally take as little interest in what goes by the name ‘metaphysics’ in non-analytic circles as they do in the ‘metaphysics’ found in New age bookstores. Generally, there is a great gulf fixed between analytic philosophers and other philosophers, including non-analytic metaphysicians. Process philosophy is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it. The concern of process philosophy is with the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence, the conditions of spatio-temporal existence, the kinds of dynamic entities, the relationship between mind and world, and the realization of values in action. Process Metaphysics elaborated in process and reality posits ‘an ontology which is based on the two kinds of existence of entity, that of actual entity and that of abstract entity or abstraction’. Process philosophy is best described as a paradigm of philosophy characterized by a set of more fundamental assumptions. This paper using critical evaluation submits that analytic philosophy objected metaphysics in a way and on the other hand defended it. Process metaphysics was able to tackle the short comings of metaphysics which made analytic philosophers reject it.

Keywords: Analytic Philosophy, Process Metaphysics, Metaphysics, Actual Entity, Philosophy

Introduction

Metaphysics as it is currently practiced in the English-speaking world, is a heterogeneous discipline, comprising a wide variety of philosophical questions and methods of answering them. However, our concern here is analytic and process approach to metaphysics. There is a divide between groups of contemporary metaphysicians. Metaphysicians of the English-speaking academy line up on one side or another of a supposed “analytic/non-analytic” divide.

Many contemporary metaphysicians belong to movements that broke away during the first half of the last century from what passed at that time, for “analytic philosophy”. For many in these movements, “analytic” became a dirty word, and “analytic metaphysics” practically a contradiction in terms. Call philosophers in these circles “non-analytic metaphysicians”.

“Paradigmatic non-analytic metaphysical movements include process philosophers, neo-Thomists, personalists, some phenomenologists, neo-Platonists, some types of idealist and a few Hegel-inspired but non-idealist system builders”¹. Non-analytic metaphysicians of all varieties usually characterize “analytic philosophy” as fundamentally hostile to the deeper questions of metaphysics.

Analytic metaphysicians generally take as little interest in what goes by the name “metaphysics” in non-analytic circles as they do in the “metaphysics” found in New age bookstores. Non-analytic metaphysicians repay the compliment, since they tend to think of analytic philosophy construed broadly so as to include the work of both analytic and new wave metaphysicians as inherently anti-metaphysical. More generally, there is a great gulf fixed between analytic philosophers and other philosophers, including non-analytic metaphysicians.

Analytic Philosophy

Analytic philosophy in its primary sense is used to describe philosophy that proceeds via analysis broadly, by seeking to understand the composition of its subject matter (or concepts of that subject matter) out of simple (or simpler) components. In a prominent but secondary sense, analytic philosophy applies to most philosophy carried out in the mainstream of Anglo-American university philosophy departments together with philosophy that bears a suitable family resemblance to it – work within the analytic tradition.

The word “analytic” is associated, in some people’s mind, with the doctrine that most traditional philosophical problems, including all the metaphysical ones, are pseudo-problems arising from misunderstanding about how words work; that philosophical problems can all be solved (or dissolved) by some sort of purely linguistic investigation. It should not be forgotten that, when it first used to describe the philosophical movement that begins with Frege, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein, the expression “analytic philosophy” did not carry these connotations. And its extension today includes mainly philosophers who reject general deflationary attitudes toward metaphysics. It was on Russell’s lips that “analysis” became, first, a rallying cry in the revolt against idealism; and then the name of the whole movement spawned by the revolt.

Today, once again, the label “analytic” has no anti-metaphysical implications or, at least, it shouldn’t, given its actual extension. Most contemporary philosophers in the analytic camp reject blanket dismissals of traditional metaphysical problems, and recognize that

“philosophical analysis” inevitably involves much more than simply unpacking the meanings of ordinary words and idioms. There was a period when many analytic philosophers perhaps even the majority believed that the problems of metaphysics were either demonstrably meaningless, or resolvable by the clarification of terms or the recitation of platitudes “in a plonking tone of voice”².

The only definitions of “analytic philosophy” that come close to tracking actual application of the term (in the broadest use) are ones that appeal to historical connections and self-identification. Consider A. P. Martinich’s counterfactual criterion, which comes as close to accuracy as any proposal seen: analytic philosophers are those who “would have done philosophy the way Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein were”³.

Across the channel, a group of mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers formed a group in Vienna in the 1920’s describing themselves as logical positivists and known as Vienna Circle. Their orientation was rigorously empirical, and they proceeded to reject the whole of enterprise of metaphysics. “Their ideal for philosophy was the unification of the sciences, hoping thereby to produce a unified system of meaningful and valid knowledge”⁴. A young former student of Bertrand Russell’s Ludwig Wittgenstein, lived nearby, and though he was not a member of the circle, he had conversations with them, since his early book, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1919), was considered by the Vienna Circle to express its philosophical point of view with great accuracy. Not only had Wittgenstein said that “whatever can be said at all can be said clearly”⁵, he concluded his book by saying that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”⁶. This dictum was less harsh than Hume’s rigorous conclusion in his *Enquiry*, where, following the implicit logic of his principles of empiricism, he wrote:

when we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion⁷.

The Vienna Circle thought of themselves as the twentieth century heir of Hume’s empirical tradition. To this tradition they now sought to apply the rigorous apparatus of mathematics and science.

In the very late 19th century, Moore began a revolt against German Idealism. There were four main sources of dissent. First, Moore felt that Idealism according to which mind and world are

interdependent was an erroneous metaphysical view and that, where possible, there should be a return to Realism according to which there is an external world that is constituted independently of operations of mind (except, of course, where the external world contains individual minds). Second, he felt that the urge to grant system building should be suppressed in favour of careful attention to detail and rigorous argumentation. Third, and related, he objected to what he saw as unnecessary obfuscation in the writings of German Idealists. He felt that philosophical theories and arguments for those theories should be open to objective assessment and so should be stated as clearly and sharply as possible. The first three sources of dissent were based upon an unfavourable comparison of the major philosophical work of the period with work in the sciences. In Moore's view, these more successful cognitive practices should serve as a model for a better philosophical methodology. The same motivations were at work in the fourth source of Moore's dissent, his negative reaction to the Idealist suppression of the method of analysis. Calling for return to the method, Moore wrote that "... a thing becomes intelligible first when it is analysed into its constituent concepts"⁸.

Inspired by Moore, and enamoured in particular by the science of mathematics, Russell began systematically to develop the programme of analysis. He was helped by his discovery of modern quantificational logic. This logic enables the systematic treatment of the inferential behaviour of a very large range of the statements that can be made in natural language (and so the thoughts expressible by the use of those statements) as well as the sharp statement of complex positions and arguments. A proposition or statement is either true or false. Using symbolic notations, a true proposition can be called *P* and a false proposition *not-P*. A molecular proposition consists of two or more atomic propositions (*p*, *q*, and so on) linked together with logical connectives, such as *and* and *or*. For Russell atomic proposition is true when its subject refers to something and the characteristics of the predicates are true of the subject.

Russell's treatment of definite descriptions showed that philosophical progress could be made by discerning the (or a) logical form of a philosophically problematic range of statements and that some philosophical disputes are usefully viewed as (at least in part) concerning how best to represent the logical forms of statements involved in those disputes.

Together with the new treatment of quantification more generally, became a model for a variety of approaches to philosophical problems that involved attention to the forms of language used in the statement of those problems. For it supported the view that philosophical problems can arise due to the misleading superficial forms of the language we use and provided a model

for how problems that arise in that way might be solved through uncovering the true logical forms of the statements involved.⁹

Wittgenstein further developed the analysis of statements, and of representation more generally, in the direction of logical atomism. According to logical atomism, the most fundamental level of representation involves point-by-point connections between simple representational elements – representational atoms and simple represented elements – represented atoms. This paradigm of analysis which bears comparison with aspects of Plato's *Theaetetus* was driven by the view that “A proposition (i.e. the content of a statement) has one and only one complete analysis”¹⁰. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*’ major conclusion was that there are two types of statement: those that represent the world, and so can be either true or false depending upon how the world in fact is – the synthetic truths and falsehoods – and those that either cannot be true or cannot be false – the logical or analytic truths and falsehoods – that fail to represent the world as being one way or another. Since genuinely philosophical statements, derived by analysis, were taken to fall on the non – representational (analytic) side of this divide, they were taken to be devoid of real content and to have a role other than that of conveying information. “And since a core sense of meaningfulness was identified with representational significance, such statements were taken to be in that core sense meaningless”¹¹.

Members of the Vienna Circle including especially Rudolf Carnap were inspired by Wittgenstein's work and sought to embed its central themes in an approach to philosophy – logical positivism – shaped by epistemological concerns. They replaced Wittgenstein's distinction between statements whose truth-value depends upon worldly contingency with a distinction between statements that admit of verification or falsification on the basis of experience and statements that cannot be so verified or falsified. The task of philosophy was taken to be the analysis of statements into experientially significant components, an analysis that would either indicate precisely the course of experience that would verify or falsify the statement or show it to be beyond verification or falsification. In that way, philosophy would either show how a statement can be assessed on the basis of scientific observation, or show the statement to be (in the Circle's proprietary sense) meaningless. Since the only properly cognitive activity was taken to be the collection of observations, the programme of the Vienna Circle was shaped by the view that “ what is left over for *philosophy* ... is only a *method*: the method of logical analysis”¹².

During the early post 1945 period, many philosophers retained the Vienna Circle's animus towards traditional metaphysics but viewed its approach to analysis as overly restrictive. They sought to replace what they saw as an empirically unmotivated fixation upon a very narrow conception of empirical content with a more expansive view of philosophical analysis. According to the more expansive view, the analysis of statements was to include the tracing of their roles within larger systems of language driven by careful attention to the way those statements are actually used in ordinary contexts.

Process Metaphysics

Process philosophy is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it. Process philosophy (or ontology of becoming) identifies metaphysical reality with change and development. Even though we experience our world and ourselves as continuously changing, Western metaphysics has long been obsessed with describing reality as an assembly of static individuals whose dynamic features are either taken to be mere appearances or ontologically secondary and derivative. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have posited true reality as "timeless", based on permanent substances, while processes are denied or subordinated to timeless substances. If Socrates changes, becoming sick, Socrates is still the same (the substance of Socrates being the same), and change (his sickness) only glides over his substance: change is accidental, whereas the substance is essential. Therefore, "classic ontology denies any full reality to change, which is conceived as only accidental and not essential. This classical ontology is what made knowledge and a theory of knowledge possible, as it was thought that a science of something in becoming was an impossible feat to achieve"¹³.

In opposition to the classical model of change as accidental (as by Aristotle) or illusory, process philosophy regards change as the cornerstone of reality – the cornerstone of the Being though as Becoming. In physics Ilya Prigogine distinguishes between the "physics of being" and "physics of becoming"¹⁴. "Process philosophy covers not just scientific intuitions and experiences, but can be used as a conceptual bridge to facilitate discussions among religion, philosophy, and science"¹⁵.

Process philosophy has full systematic scope: its concern is with the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence, the conditions of spatio-temporal existence, the kinds of dynamic entities, the relationship between mind and world, and the realization of values in action. Some

approaches to process philosophy are conceived on the grand scale and offer a full-scope metaphysics in the form of a systematic theory or comprehensive philosophical view. Other approaches, especially more recent ones, take a more modest approach.

Process philosophy share the guiding idea that natural existence consists in modes of becoming and types of occurrences. ‘Processists’ agree that the world is an assembly of physical, organic, social, and cognitive processes that interact at and across levels of dynamic organization. However, within that broad framework, process philosophers debate about how such a world of processes is to be construed, how it relates to the human mind (which is another process) and how the dynamic nature of reality relates to our scientific theories. In consequence, process philosopher also differ in their view on the role of philosophy itself and in their choice of theoretical style.

In early 20th century philosophy of mathematics, it was undertaken to develop mathematics as an airtight axiomatic system, in which every truth could be derived logically from a set of axioms. In the foundations of mathematics, this project is variously understood as logicism or as part of the formalist programme of David Hilbert.

Process thought describes truth as “movement” in and through determinates (Hegelian truth), rather than describing these determinates as fixed concepts or “things” (Aristotelian truth). Since Whitehead, process thought is distinguished from Hegel in that it describes entities which arise or coalesce in becoming rather than being simply dialectically determined from prior posited determinates. These entities are referred to as complexes of occasions of experience. It is also distinguished in being not necessarily conflictual or oppositional in operation.

The process metaphysics elaborated in process and reality posits “an ontology which is based on the two kinds of existence of entity, that of actual entity and that of abstract entity or abstraction”¹⁶. “Actual entity is a term coined by Whitehead to show the basic realities that shape all things”¹⁷. Actual entities are clusters of events that shape reality. Actual entities do not discuss the substance of anything but talk about how something is happening. “The universe is a case based on a series of actual entities intermingled with one another”¹⁸.

The ultimate abstract principle of actual existence for Whitehead is creativity. Creativity is a term coined by Whitehead to show a force in the universe that allow the presence of actual entity, others actual entities. Creativity is the principle of novelty. It is manifest in what can be called ‘singular causality’. This term may be contrasted with the term ‘nomic causality’. An

example of singular causation is that I woke this morning because my alarm clock rang. An example of nomic causation is that alarm clocks generally wake people in the morning. Aristotle recognizes singular causality as efficient causality. For Whitehead, there are many contributory singular cause of causes for an event. A further contributory singular cause of my being awoken by my alarm clock this morning was that I was lying asleep near it till it rang.

An actual entity is a general philosophical term for an utterly determinate and completely concrete individual particular of the actually existing world or universe of changeable entities considered in terms of singular causality, about which categorical statements can be made. Whitehead's most far-reaching and profound and radical contribution to metaphysics is his invention of a better way of choosing the actual entities. Whitehead chooses a way of defining the actual entities that makes them all alike, qua actual entities, with a single exception. For example, for Aristotle, the actual entities were the substances, such as Socrates. Besides Aristotle's ontology of substances, another example of an ontology that posits actual entities is the monads of Leibniz, which are said to be 'windowless'.

Whitehead's Actual Entity

For him, the actual entities exist as the only foundational elements of reality. The actual entities are two kinds, temporal and atemporal. With one exception, all actual entities for Whitehead are temporal and are occasions of experience (which are not to be confused with consciousness). An entity that people commonly think of as a simple concrete object, or that Aristotle would think of as a substance, is, in this ontology, considered to be a composite of indefinitely many occasions of experience. A human being is thus composed of indefinitely many occasions of experience.

The one exceptional actual entity is at once both temporal and atemporal: God. He is objectively immortal, as well as being immanent in the world. He is objectified in each temporal actual entity; but He is not an eternal object. Process philosophy, for some, gives God a special place in the universe of occasions of experience. God encompasses all the other occasions of experience but also transcends them, thus Whitehead embraces panentheism. Since, it is argued, free will is inherent to the nature of the universe, God is not omnipotent in Whitehead's metaphysics. God's role is to offer enhanced occasions of experience. God participates in the evolution of the universe by offering possibilities, which may be accepted or rejected.

The task of Process Metaphysics

Process philosophy is a complex and highly diversified field that is not tied to any school, method, position, or even paradigmatic notion of process. In short “process philosophy is best understood as a paradigm of philosophy characterized by a set of more fundamental assumptions”¹⁹. For example, process philosophers assume that the only primary or basic ontological categories should be terms for occurring entities, and that certain formal theories for example, set theory are ill-suited of themselves, without modifications, to express the dynamic relationships among occurrences.

Given its current role as a rival to the dominant substance geared paradigm of western metaphysics, process philosophy has the overarching task of establishing the following three claims:

- (i) The basic assumptions of the ‘substance paradigm’ (i.e., a metaphysics based on static entities such as substances, objects, states of affairs, or instantaneous stages) are dispensable theoretical presuppositions rather than laws of thought.
- (ii) Process-based theories perform just as well or better than substance-based theories in application to the familiar philosophical topics identified within the substance paradigm.
- (iii) There are other important philosophical topics that can only be addressed within a process metaphysics.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The analysis of our key problems has placed us in a better position to judge or know whether process metaphysics actually rescued metaphysics from analytic philosophy. The question is why do people particularly non-analytic philosophers and scholars in other disciplines regard “analytic philosophy” as hostile, in principle, to the traditional problems of metaphysics? Those who think that anti-metaphysical doctrines are among the defining features of analytic philosophy are mistaking the movement as a whole for the forms it took during the middle third of the last century – a period during which many philosophers in the United States and nearly all of most influential philosophers in England were under an anti-metaphysical spell of one sort or another.

For over twenty five years since after 1935 – the year of Carnap’s *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, philosophy was dominated by movements opposed to the very idea of metaphysics:

first by positivism, then by Wittgenstein “quietism” and the ordinary language philosophy championed by Austin. Metaphysics languished during the years of occupation. This period can be called ‘the beginning of dark age’ (dark age for metaphysics).

But the anti-metaphysics biases of this period in the history of analytic philosophy appear, in retrospect, as an aberration. They were not present during the first phase of the analytic movement: the revolt against British idealism effected by Russell and Moore. Russell and Moore, however, were neither dismissive of the traditional problems of metaphysics, nor anti-theoretical in the solutions they proposed. “In Moore’s early papers and classic lectures of 1910-11 (which helped to set the agenda for much of Russell’s work)”²⁰, and in Russell’s classic essays and books from the same period (e.g. *The Problems of Philosophy*, *Mysticism and Logic*, *Our Knowledge of the External World*), nearly all the traditional problems of metaphysics are discussed, and positive solutions are defended.

The first analytic philosophers were interested in most of the traditional problems of metaphysics; the anti-metaphysical period in analytic philosophy was comparatively short; and there was no lasting revolution in methodology that distinguishes metaphysics in analytic circles from what one finds in earlier periods and other traditions. Today’s analytic metaphysicians have the tools of modern logic at their disposal; but, otherwise, it’s pretty much business –as-usual. For good or ill, the problem they tackle are not significantly different from those that faced the philosophers of earlier eras; and they defend positions readily identifiable as variously Platonist, Aristotelian, Thomistic, rationalist, Humean, so on.

Empiricism and logicism are two of the main sources of the origin of analytic philosophy. The central idea of positivism is that science should use theories as an instrument and should renounce to seek for explanation. The search for such explanations is a metaphysical enterprise, and as such, nothing but nonsense. As noticed by Van Fraassen “Empiricist philosophers have always concentrated on epistemology, the study of knowledge, belief, and opinion, with a distinct tendency to advocate the importance of opinion”²¹. Against the ontological concerns of the metaphysicians, analytic philosophers engaged in epistemological issues. Within analytic philosophy epistemology seems to remain the only sensible concern.

The explanations so far shows that analytic philosophy objected metaphysics in a way and on the other hand defended it. Process metaphysics was able to tackle the short comings of metaphysics which made analytic philosophers reject it. As it was already stated above concerning the scope of process metaphysics that, process philosophy has full systematic

scope: its concern is with the dynamic sense of being as becoming or occurrence, the conditions of spatio-temporal existence, the kinds of dynamic entities, the relationship between mind and world, and the realization of values in action. Some approaches to process philosophy are conceived on the grand scale and offer a full-scope metaphysics in the form of a systematic theory or comprehensive philosophical view. Other approaches, especially more recent ones, take a more modest approach.

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