

Action Theory for Creativity and Process

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Abstract

The three major assignments for the philosophical community in contemporary society are:

1. universalization and globalization resulted from technological development
2. interactions between human beings and the environment, the ecology or even the aerospace
3. multi-cultural concerns aroused by an awareness of historical awaking as well as related issues in studies of cultural boundaries and comparative philosophy

To try to respond to the above-mentioned three assignments, the author suggests appropriating the thoughts of modern philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861—1947); his philosophy of organism and the concept of “nature” can be used to generate an action theory for creativity and process by which the human society can bring out an action theory of philosophy, which completes the function of philosophical praxis.

I. Introduction:

The three major assignments for the philosophical community in contemporary society are:

1. universalization and globalization resulted from technological development
2. interactions between human beings and the environment, the ecology or even the aerospace
3. multi-cultural concerns aroused by an awareness of historical awakening as well as related issues in studies of cultural boundaries and comparative philosophy.

Facing these three major assignments, what does the philosophy community have to offer or what action theory can it offer to answer the questions? It seems to me that theories of contemporary philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) can be appropriated to answer them.

II. Whitehead's Theory of Nature and Process

Grounded upon the concept of creativity of Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead developed it a step further, and regarded it as a category of the ultimate. For Whitehead, creativity is an ever-adapting and ever-renewing conglomeration; a process that involves the becoming from one to many or that of from many to one; or a process that relates the inclination of changes to that of the existence then back to changes again. The universe is engaged in an ever-changing process; therefore his definition of "nature" is not limited to the environment we live in but the totality of the universe, which encompasses even the smallest star from the remotest galaxy. As the universe comes as the result of a process of creative advance, therefore, it will keep on changing, renewing, formulating new combinations, and revealing new structures. That is to say, nature itself is a process of creative advance.

There are two key points in Whitehead's philosophical thoughts: first, about nature. "Nature" is engaged in an ever-changing and ever-regenerating process, which indicates that nature is an organic entity, with each and every part related and inter-related with others. Second, in

regard to the relationships between men and nature, nature precedes; men are but a part of nature. Natural environment is indispensable in human life, and maintains close relationships and interactions with it. Men are blessed with cognitive capacity through nature, and the cognitive process itself renders transformation to the totality of nature.

From the philosophy of Whitehead, we see the possibility of generating an action theory for creativity and process by way of knowing the relationship to nature and the inter-relationship between men and nature. A well-rounded action theory should be based upon empirical rationalism, which helps mature the theory. Empirical rationalism functions as a medium which facilitates encounters between men and the world they live in; and it is through this medium men come to process and formulate an action theory based upon the data steered in.

III. Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism

Whitehead further sees creativity as the category of the ultimate to multiply from one to many, from changes to being, and then from being to changes again. For Whitehead, the universe is undergoing this incessant process of creativity. Definition of "nature" not limited to our surrounding environment, but it indicates the ontological existence of the universe. As the universe is itself a creative process, it is constantly undertaking changes, and generating new combinations, and revealing fresh structures. Therefore, nature is a process of creative advance.

By the phenomena of the existence of materials, Whitehead develops his treatise about how the evolution of nature, and how the process of evolution is equivalent to the creative process of the universe, which allows all the beings to formulate a new natural conjugation.

i. The Concept of "Reality"

In his treatise on science and philosophy, "Science and the Modern World", Whitehead calls his philosophy, philosophy of organism. Later, when he discusses his philosophical ideas, he favors to use the term "philosophy of organism" too. In his most significant work, *Process and Reality*,

Whitehead presents his cell-theory of actuality, he said, “The philosophy of organism is a cell-theory of actuality. Each ultimate unit of fact is a cell-complex, not analyzable into components with equivalent completeness of actuality.”¹(334) The actual world is in the process of becoming, through which the actual entities come into being. As all the actual beings are creations, they can thus be called “actual occasions.” Many of the beings possess the potentiality of entering into an actuality and becoming one of the elements in a synthesized creation. This potentiality is a metaphysical feature that is common among all the real and unreal existences.

Each and every being possesses its potentiality, which with the natural phenomenon of the universe can manifest the innate significance of its existence and constitute the process philosophy on the metaphysical level.

ii. The Concept of “Event”

One of Whitehead’s earlier tasks in the development of philosophy of organism is to substitute “substance” with the new metaphysically primitive notion which he calls, “an actual occasion” as the ultimate fact of nature. Whitehead suggests,

We are accustomed to analyse these events into three factors, time, space, and material. In fact, we at once apply to them the concepts of the materialistic theory of nature.... We perceive one unit factor in nature; and this factor is that something is going on then—there.... We are so trained, both by language and by formal teaching and by the resulting convenience to express our thoughts in terms of this materialistic analysis that intellectually we tend to ignore the true unity of the factor really exhibited in sense-awareness. It is this unit factor, retaining in itself the passage of nature, which is the primary concrete element discriminated in nature. These primary factors are what I mean

¹ Alfred North Whitehead. “Process and Reality: An essay in Cosmology.” New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.

by events.² (250)

Whitehead's theory of "event" is obviously under the influence of "theory of relativity" by modern physicists such as Albert Einstein. Inspired by Einstein's theory on seeing "event" as the basis of the physical world and treating the human body as the most concrete and direct reflection of experiences, Whitehead argues that human life and the universe come as the result of the combination a multitude of occasions. The actions and speeches of myself, or the activities of the plants and trees, and the movement of the whole universe are to be seen as "event." Whitehead's philosophical system itself is an organic body, and thus also an actual occasion. Based upon Whitehead's philosophy of organism, we can start from any actual occasion, then extend and associate it to another. That is, we can perceive the total philosophy of Whitehead with a comprehensive understanding his theories of event and real existence.³ (123-125)

The most important thing in "event" is what the perceiver perceives—the temporal and spatial relationship between the event and natural world, the structural features in relationship to quality and quantity, which locate the situation of "object"⁴. (163)

iii. The Concept of "Object"

Human beings can have cognizance again and again, and it is this ability which helps them to recognize the everlasting and ever-renewing objects in nature. Whitehead calls this factor, "object." As Whitehead said, "Objects convey the permanences recognized in events, and are recognized as self-identical amid different circumstances; that is to say, the same object is recognized as related to diverse events. Thus the self-identical object maintains itself amid the flux of events..."⁵ (62-63)

² "The Concept of Nature." from F. S. C. Northrop and Mason W. Gross eds. *Alfred North Whitehead: An Anthology*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953.

³ Yang Shi-Hi. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Whitehead: Transcending the Modern and Postmodern*. Taipei: Yang-Chih Book Co., 2001.

⁴ Yu-Xian Yu. *An Enquiry into the Philosophy of Organism—Whitehead's Philosophy of Nature*. Taipei: Cheng-Chung Press, 2001.

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*. New York: Cosimo Inc., 2007.

iv. The Concepts of Ingression and Prehension

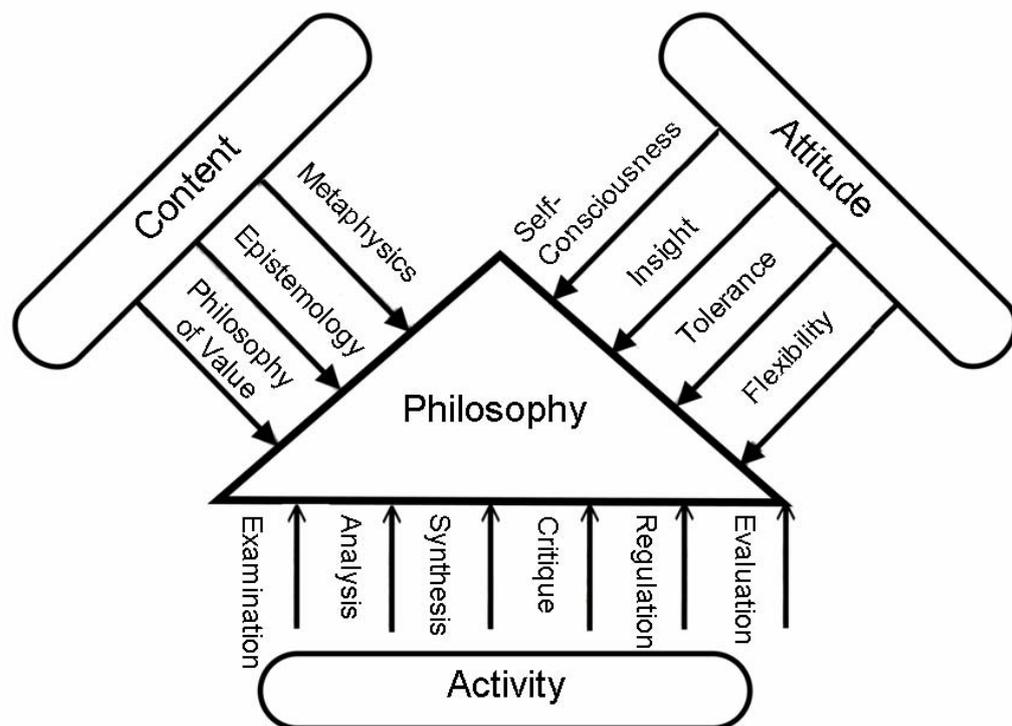
The ingression of objects involves a mutual relationship between the subject and the object. That is, object and the occasion cannot be definitely separated and exist independently. In metaphysical epistemology, ingression means “being prehended by a subject.” Epistemologically, prehension is the broadest, most basic and the most fundamental activity of knowing, which is not necessary equal to conscious and self-awaring cognizance. Yet, in metaphysical cosmology and ontology, prehension is the root activity and process for the constitution of concrete existence, and it is through the mutual actions of prehension that formulate this concrete existence.

Within this creative process, each object in nature serves as each others’ prehension; that is to say every object can actively impose ingression, but at the same time will passively receive prehension. Moreover, prehension should not only be understood from the physiological aspect, but also from the metaphysical. Human consciousness is an accumulative process of a broader flux of prehension experiences, which to a certain point help us develop our awareness and consciousness of the world. Therefore, human beings exist in the nature, and they also exercise their cognitive capacity in the backdrop of nature. Men should not see their cognition as the only determining factor of natural world; on the contrary, they need to perceive men, born in nature with innate cognition, as an integral part of the whole in nature in observing the natural environment. In other words, though men differ from other creatures in that they have cognitive capacity, still they are equal to other creatures. It does not make sense to isolate or separate men from the rest of the world. The proper attitude is to have men recognize themselves as part of nature in their efforts to understand nature. Also important to note is that aim of the process is not to explain nature but to see cognition as an activity which in itself will bring about changes internally.

IV. Action Theory within Creativity and Process

The ultimate aim of human actions is to seek changes—to arrive at a status that differs from the

status quo. Changes may not necessarily bring out a result that proves to be better than the status quo, but they have at least fulfilled the essential quality of action. Actions involve two functions: first to seek improvement or perfection, and second, to perform action. Self-realization cannot be fulfilled without changes. Based upon the theory of human nature, philosophers would argue that the goal of seeking is to be limited to individual improvement; more important than that, is the intent to approach goodness with the whole human community. Therefore, the momentum of action is an imitation of goodness. From the following chart, we can see the relationship between the content, attitude and activities of philosophy, and how through their interplay philosophy can initiate action.



V. The Action Theory of Philosophy

Socrates said that, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Therefore, when men encountered difficulties or dilemmas, it is normal to feel a sense of helplessness or loss. Yet, human beings desire more than just solving the problems at hand, they want to develop and own the ability to solve problems. Therefore, in many ways, philosophers are in a better position than others in tackling difficult problems in that they cannot only observe and analyze the problem at

hand, but can also see through what lies behind the problem. It is with this ability to perceive the “problem behind the problem that philosophers possess the power to solve the problems. The ability to perceive can be applied on three different levels, on the self, on the others, and on relationships.

Since ancient times, philosophy is alternately called, “the science of science”; therefore, is a way of thinking that generates actions. It was not until the age of enlightenment when science started to take off that philosophy is forced to abandon its role as a science that is capable of creating action. With the development of scientific branching, philosophy further drifts away from a discipline of praxis. Yet, the tide is nowadays reverted when people taste the failure of scientific branching. The modern task of our time is to promote interdisciplinary integration, which can re-adjust the role that philosophy play; when philosophy can be regarded again as a science of praxis, it can engage in actions to help people through philosophical counseling.

Broadly speaking, philosophical counseling is defined as a method which uses language, wisdom, axioms and logic to help people; through the axioms that are inherited to us by the philosophers who have reflected in-depth the various experiences in life, people can be propelled to think in a more comprehensive manner, and by way of these reflections, they can achieve new insights. This type of philosophical counseling may sound like no more than an impromptu conversation, yet as these philosophical axioms are structured upon a well-rounded argument and thought system, when philosophical counselors have a good command of the philosophical language and logic, they can inspire people change their mindset or their life.

In a narrower sense, action theory in philosophy is restricted to the practice of helping people with the philosophical system. What I mean by “philosophical system” here is a set of complete treatise of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology and value philosophy. The development of modern philosophy has focused too much upon epistemology but neglected metaphysics, which distorts the balance of the philosophical system. The influence of scientism and empiricism has been so immense that the enriching capacity of philosophy becomes so flawed that it no longer can reach out to people in need. When modern philosophy cannot formulate a complete philosophical system, it is inadequate to investigate ways of helping people. Therefore, to explore the full capacity of philosophical counseling, we have to recourse all the way back to Aristotle and the medieval philosophers who have a comprehensive and universal set of theory in humanism. It is this set of cross references between metaphysics, epistemology and action, then from action to epistemology and existence—a system replete with mutual support that can serve as a firm ground for the development of philosophical counseling, which is the modern embodiment of the action theory of philosophy.