PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF EVENT ONTOLOGY

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Abstract

Whitehead's event ontology has become one of the most outstanding frameworks for the understanding of the basic structure of reality. It bridges the metaphysical reality with practical fields such as technology, science and everyday life and lays emphasis on change, process, relations and creativity as the primary building blocks of existence in contradistinction with the traditional substance ontology that focuses on static objects that are fixed and constant. This classical position on substance is construed as inadequate to explain reality especially as revealed by the quantum realm. It is the contention of Whitehead that events rather than substance capture reality better. Recent developments in the fields of science and technology such as in biology and artificial intelligence have demonstrated Whitehead's position given the myriad discoveries and developments that demonstrate the dynamism and relational characterizations of events as Whitehead adumbrated. This paper explores the practical and philosophical relevance of event ontology by drawing from Whitehead's point of view. Its significance for addressing a wide range of modern issues is highlighted while demonstrating the interdisciplinary applicability and nature of event ontology. Event ontology has helped to grapple with and redefine philosophical issues like temporality, identity, change and causality. Using the analytic and hermeneutic methods to gain deeper insights into Whitehead, the paper concludes by making a case for the adoption of event-inspired standpoint by all and as a conceptual tool from and with which the rapid changes, developments and preponderant interconnectedness of everything can be better appreciated which would further foster a more inclusive and holistic construal of reality.

Keywords: Creativity, Dynamism, Event, Interconnectedness, Ontology, Substance

Introduction

Whitehead's speculative philosophy gave rise to process philosophy which is a reaction to the 17th century dualism. The early influential modern science was premised on the metaphysical basis of materialism that Whitehead rejected. His book, *Science and the Modern World* is a presentation of the arguments against materialism and its presuppositions. A major presupposition concerns the idea of matter that constitutes reality as simply located bits that are defined by mass, velocity and location among others rather than by non-physical properties such as value, relatedness and consciousness. In the place of these bits of matter as the basis of nature or the final real things the world is made up of, Whitehead posits *events* as that which captures the real essence of what the final real things of the world should be. These events, also known as *actual entities/occasions* are momentary occasions of experience and processes of becoming that unifies. Whitehead's ideas have been found to be relevant and useful in various aspects of modern life in the 21st century as shall be discussed further.

Solving Human Psychological and Psychiatric Problems

A very important area of application of Whitehead's process philosophy is the field of psychiatry and psychology. In this regard, process philosophy can be seen to provide solutions to various human problems. Process philosophy gives an insight into the problems of the mind that is superior to the mechanistic view by presenting the mind as evolving, dynamic and non-static. It helps humans in solving their problems ranging from emotional to psychiatric problems caused by issues like socio-economic stress, addictions, and biological predispositions, among others. In his paper: "Why Process Thought is Relevant: A Psychiatrist's Perspective", Adam Blatner focuses attention on *alienation* that humans face. By alienation, the authenticity of a person is at stake and is negated (Blatner). It is a state of disconnect from the grounds of being. It demonstrates a lack of belongingness. Panteleon Iroegbu brings the etymological view by pointing out that 'alienation' originated from the French verb, 'aliener' which is a composite of 'a' meaning 'out of', 'outside of' and 'lien' which means 'link, band, and nexus'. Put together, 'aliener' would mean 'out of link or nexus'. He further adds:

The greatest ontological evil that can happen to being in its essence, existence and expression is *alienation*. By alienation here, we mean not just the absence of a being, nor the diminishing of life of a given reality. Ontological alienation is the oblivion of being. It is the conscious attitude or act of indifference toward a fellow being (Iroegbu 380)

Many other personal problems are attributable to the problem of a gaping sense of alienation. There is also the problem of the search for meaning individuals struggle with. To solve these and many other personal challenges confronting humans, Psychiatrist Alan sees the solution in process thought of Whitehead. He outlined five major grounds in Whitehead that can lend help. First, the heightened ontological status accorded the mind in the theory in panexperientialism, developed from the need to reject the idea of 'vacuous actuality' thus leading to subjectivity. He writes: "The implication of this is simply that it suggests that people can deepen their connection with God through the development of their own consciousness — which is a type of mysticism. This is contrast to requiring the intervention of external ritual and specialized intermediaries in order to become reconnected." (Blatner)

Ecological Relevance

Whitehead's views have arguably been said to resonate with the tenets of the ecological movements. While some may prefer Deep Ecology to Ordinary Ecology, Whitehead remains relevant to the field of ecology which speaks of the relationship that exists between living organisms, including humans and their physical environment. It unveils the vital connections that exist between animals and plants and the world around them (www.esa.org). This captures the essence of the interrelatedness of all things in the world that is a very crucial aspect of Whitehead's philosophy. Some writers see it as the most important feature of Whitehead's metaphysics. The vision of ecologists is to help humans develop ecological sensibilities that would make them realize their unity with nature. A consequent of the metaphysical underpinnings of materialism of the 17th century is the individualism of social philosophy of that period. Individualism underscores the belief and practice of being independent and self-reliant. It disconnects rather than promote relatedness. Whitehead decried the mechanistic outlook when he opined:

The Western world is now suffering from the limited moral outlook of the three previous generations....The two evils are: one, the ignorance of the true relations of each organism to its environment and the other, the habit of ignoring the intrinsic worth of the environment which must be allowed its weight in any consideration of the final ends (Whitehead 50)

With this disconnectedness the relation that should exist between man and his environment became that of conquering and over-exploitation of the environment. Due to the underlying philosophical idea, man became alienated from any vital connection with is environment or the natural world in such a way as not to see himself as a part of the ecology. This deep disconnect manifested in unappreciated relationship between science and cosmology with ethics and economics; this creates a negative impact on the economic system that currently guides our life. Deep ecology is a term coined by Arne Naess and represents a concern for any species with intrinsic value outside humans. Deep ecology captures environmental ethics that is not anthropocentric. While animal liberalists come under deep ecology, the term stretches to other forms of life that could or should be imbued with values. As Griffin pointed out, deep ecologists are concerned with the biosphere and all that have value within it (Griffin 70). Some deep ecologists reject any kind of value hierarchy that categorizes being as more or less valuable. This is known as egalitarian deep ecology. Whitehead's views are seen to be deeply ecological as he sees all shades of deep ecology - whether nonanthropocentric deep ecology or biospheric deep ecology or egalitarian deep ecology- as rooted in intuition. He however, rejects egalitarian deep ecology which brings hierarchy among beings in term of intrinsic values that are graded.

Deep ecology as a movement is an attempt to recognize the intrinsic value in nature as against the traditional position. It extends to the attempt to highlight and pursue our ethical obligations to other lives other than human on earth. In contrast to Deep Ecology, the ecology that only focuses on human life's value only is seen as shallow ecology. According to Cobb, deep ecology requires "a basic revision of traditional Western thinking toward the acceptance of the reality and intrinsic value of the natural world and the intimate interconnectedness of all things" (Cobb) It obligates us to preserve the ecosystem only if it serves some purpose for man. Deep ecologists want us to preserve nature for its own sake – what it is and not what it holds for man.

Naess has highlighted the principles of deep ecology movement which include the intrinsic value of the environment beyond its usefulness to man which implies some kind of biocentric equality; richness and diversity of life forms as value; vital needs of man as the only basis to reduce the richness and diversity; the importance of smaller population to the flourishing of human life, cultures and nonhuman life and the worsening and excessive interference with the non-human world. Others are change of policies to reflect in the economic, technological and ideological structures based on appreciation of life quality and not numbers. Appreciating life quality – situations of inherent values- should underscore the ideological changes and not just pursuit of higher standard of living. Lastly, emphasis is laid on the obligation for action on all who subscribe to the philosophy of the deep ecological movement. Further, this movement has three actions namely, the need to preserve the wilderness and biodiversity, the control of human population and lastly living on the planet with minimum damage to other life forms. Deep ecology is traced to the monism and pantheism of Spinoza considering their metaphysical foundation (McHenry 229). Monism is the view that all things are ultimately one that dissolves into a web of interconnections.

Whitehead's relevance to the ecological movement is still hinged on the deep interconnectedness of his philosophy. His organic view of nature provides a veritable worldview that can help man escape the crisis that is ahead. Its organicity holds the view that everything in nature – humans and plants inclusive – has an organic basis and is a part of an organic whole. This is such that what affects one will invariably affect the other as nature is integrated. Whitehead's doctrines of actual entities, prehension and panpsychism or panexperientialism, among others, portray the world as systemic and organic as against the bifurcation worldview in all its forms including atomism which foisted an individualistic mindset on social and moral philosophy and is responsible for the loss of the unity that Whitehead sought to restore. Panpsychism/panexperientialism emphasizes sentience up to the basic level of nature that makes nature alive and organic. The experience does not have to be necessarily conscious as humans have it. On the other hand, actual occasions/events form the core of realities and are experiential upward hierarchically as consciousness as experienced cannot emerge from dead and insentient matter of materialism. Whitehead speaks of environment that contains different kinds and levels of social order of actual occasions which forms nexus and different kinds of societies. As Leemon McHenry points out:

Each society is an organism that is barbored within the environment of another larger society, which serves as an organism for another and so on. The special sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, geology, astronomy study some layer of society or organisms and their environment -subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, cells, plants, animals, planets, galaxies, to the widest society of actual occasions...." (McHenry)

These actual occasions are processes of becoming and unification that make up reality and not bits of matter. Thus, the environment is integrated and filled with entities of different levels that are conscious and interdependent. The survival of smaller societies depends on the survival of larger societies that contain them. By extension, the Earth has to be sustained if lives in it are to be sustained.

Whitehead and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence has come to be a very important aspect of human life in the 21st century. Al is defined based on the thought processes/reasoning and behavioural standpoints (Russell and Norvig 4). It has become an essential part of the technology industry that helps to solve many challenges that confront humanity. It is said to have been properly lunched in 1956, but its foundation had been laid by various scientists with contributions from different fields of human endeavours such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, mathematics, computer science and engineering, to mention a few. Al is also known as machine intelligence which contrasts with natural intelligence as displayed by humans. It sees computers and machines as intelligent agents that can display various concepts that usually and ordinarily are associated with humans such as action, intelligence, logic and consciousness among others. Herein lies the nexus between Philosophy and Al. Al studies and seeks to understand and build intelligent entities beyond humans – Homo sapiens. Al deals with entities such as computers that have human-level intelligence or even better. Al has found applicability in healthcare, military operations, automotive industry, finance and economics, government, auditing and video gaming.

The subject of Consciousness ranks very high in any discussion that borders on Al. There cannot be intelligence without consciousness. The relevant questions become, "Can machine act intelligently and thus be regarded as conscious?" Can a machine have mental states as humans do? These and more are the questions that engage Al developers/researchers including philosophers like Whitehead. The relevance of Whitehead to Al can be discerned in his ideas about perception, experience and consciousness which have been properly captured in the word, *Panexperiencialism*. Panexperientialism has been found relevant in understanding Al. This is because Al is more amenable to process-thinking than static-thinking in the sense that the subject matters/cognitive functions Al deals with such issues as perception, memory, consciousness, intelligence among others are processual rather than mechanistic subjects. This makes process philosophy relevant to the field of Al. Whitehead, no doubt, helps to clarify and bring out these issues to the fore thus bringing about attention to them leading to their development and exploration..

In defining consciousness, one will have to deal with experience which could either be conscious or unconscious. Consciousness is seen as a property of an experiencing subject. The problem of consciousness is at the centre of philosophy of mind of the classical period known as mind-body problem which Whitehead's postmodern ideas solved. There are three traditional parts of consciousness namely, sensitive (from senses), intellective (from thoughts) and affective (from feeling). Many phenomena such as time and causality are process-related. This inexorably led him to focus on the nonconscious such as feeling. This is the point Whitehead makes when he says:

One implicit assumption of the philosophical tradition is repudiated. The assumption is that the basic elements of experience are to be described in terms of one, or all, of the three ingredients, consciousness, thought, sense-perception. The last term is used in the sense of "conscious perception in the mode of presentational immediacy (Whitehead, PR 36).

Much of Whitehead's philosophy is presented as a critique of the modern philosophical tradition which focused on thought and sense perception seen as fundamental modalities of consciousness. He discerns that the mistake springs from the association of experience with consciousness only. Herein lies the crux of the difference between panpsychism and panexperientialism. Whitehead rejected Modernists position which holds consciousness as exhaustive of all mental activities. To him, this is an attempt to over-value consciousness. This is because consciousness as held by Modernist obscures process. He did not accord same value to consciousness as the Modernists did.

Panexperientialism vs Pansychism in AI

Panexperientialism is the way Whitehead grappled with the subject of consciousness, which as has been mentioned, is foundational to the subject area of AI. In saying that "apart from the subjects, there is nothing" (Whiehead, PR 164). Whitehead thus rejected actuality without subjective experience. Panexperientialism is a doctrine that portrays the actual world as composed of creative, experiential and physical-mental events, a replacement of the vacuous entities of the classical period. It is a theory that derives from Whitehead's philosophy and means that fleeting momentary experience happens from occasions of experience (actual occasions) at the sub-atomic level of interaction up all through nature. From the sub-atomic level, through evolution, the momentary experience extends to more complex organic entities with human beings becoming self-conscious at the zenith. This

position is a reaction to supernaturalism or "appeal to a *deus ex machine* who was capable of rising superior to the difficulties of metaphysics" (Whitehead, SMW 156). Panexperientialism is seen as implying "all" things as "pan" suggests including aggregations of rock do have experience. David Ray Griffin defended Whitehead by pointing out that he implied all genuine individuals have experience (Griffin 58). These genuine individuals are only of two kinds: simple (such as quarks) and compound individuals built out of simpler ones. An example is an animal that is built out of cells. Compound individuals whose experience is built to the highest level from the experience are seen as genuine. The compound individual therefore differs in kind from the mere aggregation of individual. This finds expression in Whitehead's theory of societies and applicable to the idea of consciousness in Artificial Intelligence.

Panpsychism implies that all things are endowed with psyches or soul or mind which is an enduring entity. Etymologically, the Greek version means "all" and "soul": the doctrine that everything is psychic or has a psychic aspect, at least. It is the belief that everything is mental and psychical in nature. Panpsychism is known for attributing consciousness to experience and defines it in terms of consciousness and attribution of high-grade conscious mentality. Whitehead rejected the attribution of consciousness at the basic level, pointing out that what exists is basic sentience. To him, consciousness is not fundamental to experience unlike those who conceive consciousness — cognition—as part of inorganic nature. The determinant of consciousness is the intensity of mental pole or physical pole dominant in the experiencing actuality. Mental pole inclines to higher consciousness than physical pole. Experience is more of an uncognitive prehension and is not dependent on sensory organs.

Philosophy of organism of Whitehead conceives of nature as a continuum in which organic and inorganic systems are bound together as sentience and value lie at the base of basic units of experience – actual occasions. This holds the key to the full understanding of evolution from Whiteheadian standpoint: from low-grade sentience to high grade sentience of complicated organisms. This provides an ontological explanation as to how organic matter issued from lifeless matter and how consciousness came from organic life processes. Griffin posits that panexperientialism "holds that all individuals have experience, but that consciousness is a very high-level form of experience, enjoyed by relatively few individuals" (Griffin 59). To have experience is different from consciousness that implies thought. Science is known to have proven that there is experience down through the phylogenetic tree. The three experiments discussed earlier also confirm this. Primitive types of experience and rudimentary forms of decision-making are seen at the prokaryotic levels in Biology. Accordingly, even the previously conceived mechanistic terms are now proven to be organismic (Griffin 60).

Whitehead, doubtless contributed to the ontological foundations of the field of Artificial Intelligence that is set to be the basis of the 4th industrial revolution, even as it throws up further novelties. Event ontology is amenable to novelty and creativity by which new things erupt into existence. Basic sentience or experience underlies all reality at the subatomic level. As computers and robots are compounded, the basic sentience of the constituting entities grows as well thus making it possible for artificial intelligence artifacts and robots to behave intelligently. The research is still ongoing to answer those basic questions with regards to the field of the Al. The foregoing is the way Whitehead solves the classical mind-body problem and can be summarized as follows: the doctrine of the physical-mental experience and creative nature of event by which the physical aspect of event is not devoid of experience. Similarly, the idea of compound individuals based on phylogenetic

tree – from the lowest to the highest with increasing degrees of mentality, hence increasing capacity for deeper experience and self-determination.

Whiteheadian's Solution to the Problems of Modernism

Postmodernism is a reaction against a naïve and too much confidence reposed in progress, objective/scientific truth. It is a rejection of the autonomous individual who is sovereign. It is a mistrust of modernity in the West and rejects ultimate meaning or correspondence between science and the world. Objectivity is a ploy for power for the elite. Postmodernism dismantles objectivity thus leading to liberty/freedom in all spheres. It celebrates the formless, the subjective, spontaneous and non-traditional. It jettisons any concept of objectivity. Postmodernism has shades as is somewhat difficult to characterize. Rorty's version denied the reality of objective truth. David Ray Griffin brings on what he calls constructive postmodernism which is a movement beyond modernity. It serves as the foundation of the New Age philosophy. Derida's postmodernism is deconstructive as to him, truth does not exist.

According to postmodernism, our views of the nature of reality are informed by our social constructs. Scientific knowledge is seen to be a reflection of the dominant ideologies of dominant social class. Griffin's postmodernism sees modernity as originating from the 17th and 18th centuries. The modernity's implication or emphasis includes individualism, anthropocentricism, mechanization, consumerism, nationalism and militarism. The individual is autonomous and lacks intrinsic connection or relation to others in line with the view that matter is hard, impenetrable and not related. Griffin, following Whitehead, argues that following the developments in in quantum mechanics, biology and thermodynamics, the modern paradigm had outlived its usefulness. This is at the heart of Whitehead's philosophy.

Whitehead sounded the death knell to modern epoch when he believed the crux of the essay to be the denial that consciousness is a stuff which is essentially different from the stuff of which the physical world is composed. It was William James that opined that denial. Two developments, to Whitehead, brought an end to over 250 years period in which modernism reigned supreme (Whitehead, SMW 143). They are the challenge new physics posed to scientific materialism and secondly, the inauguration of a new age of philosophy by William James' challenge to Cartesian dualism just as Descartes inaugurated the modern era with his Dualism. Modernism equates reality with objects of sensory perception thus excluding the possibility of causality, the bedrock of science and the possibility of the reality of God.

Whitehead's philosophy was intent on uniting James' rejection of dualism with the philosophical implications of relativity and quantum physics, which task is postmodern in nature, even though he never used the term. Modernity equated the real with objects of sensory perception, leaving out the possibility of causality and the reality of God. This leads to relativism and nihilism. Whiteheadianism is shown by Cobb to be postmodern on these three reasons namely Whitehead's epistemology rejected the primacy of sense perception; his ontology replaces material substance with events that have intrinsic value and are relational and his ideas developed due to his reflections on the problems of modern science. Another reason Whitehead's philosophy is regarded as postmodern is because it came about as a result of the reflections on the problems of modern science orchestrated the revisional ideas of his philosophy. By his postmodernism, Whitehead envisions a science that will overcome the mechanistic, reductionist and behaviourist approaches of modernism.

Postmodernism brings to the fore the connection between hard fact and value. Being postmodern, Whitehead was a radical empiricist in the order of William James having rejected sensationalist view of perception in its entirety. His epistemology sought to discredit and deconstruct sensory perception. He accused Hume and many other subsequent philosophers of operating only on the perception in the mode of presentational efficacy, pointing out that there exists a more fundamental mode from which the first derives. He calls it "perception in the mode of causal efficacy", which is nonsensory but cognitive. He regards sensory perception as a hybrid of both modes but however holds the later as more fundamental and primary than the former. As Griffin points out:

In this more fundamental mode, we directly perceive other actualities as exerting causal efficacy upon us – which explains why we know that other actualities exist and that causation is more than Humean constant conjunction (Griffin 10)

Prehension is an example of the mode of causal efficacy — direct apprehension. Through it, we have certain experiences that are nonsensory. It is the prehensions of previous moments that give credence to the idea of time. The solution to the intractable problems of modernity with its mechanistic view of nature and the sensationalist view of perception, Whitehead came up with event ontology. Through the mechanistic conception, nature is seen to be ultimately made up of units/substances that are devoid of all experience, intrinsic value, internal purpose and relations. Event ontology portrays nature as otherwise having events, not units/substances that have experience, value, freedom and internal purpose.

Whitehead's postmodernism solves the problem of normative values which deals with the issues of justice, beauty, truth etc. Modernity, in rejecting the appeal to authority, as done by Hume and Hutcheson, dealt a death blow to norms. Whitehead rejected this. He reactivates norms by means of cognition which issues from the reality of nonsensory perception by which we have awareness. Thus, norms are genuine. By being cognitive, norms can therefore be true, false or somewhere in between (Griffin 11). If norms are denied, there would be no basis for socio-political-cultural life.

Conclusion

Whitehead's ideas find applicability in a wide range of areas of human interest presently as noted in this work and also in the future. Event ontology/Process philosophy is an appropriate philosophy of life capturing science and values thus overcoming dead science in its limitations. Process philosophy provides a more comprehensive way of looking at the nature of reality at its deeper recesses. In a world suffused with the dualities of quantities/qualities, material/spiritual, economic/political, wave/particle, yin/yang, motion/rest, existence/non-existence, rich/poor, Whitehead's event ontology provides an entitative view of nature that is imbued with dynamism, freedom, change, development and not substance that is hard, impenetrable, stultified and static, blurring the differences and pointing to an Organism that is integrated, whole, free but interconnected.

The effect of such view cannot be overemphasized as it will cure all dichotomies and differences that have led to so many conflicts. Opposites would be transcended while unity would be attained. The principle of complementarity would further be embrace making for the much desired peace in today's world. The principle of indeterminacy that holds between the dualities would lead to novelties. Herein lies the significance of this study. To be reiterated is the concomitant ecological view of event ontology capable of saving the world

from the global environmental crisis and its myriad effects. The global environmental crisis speaks to the issues of the deteriorating or depletion of the biosphere and the over-exploitation of the Earth's resources that have led to the uninhabitability of the Earth for human life. Novelties and possibilities of the future are to be expected and embraced with open arms. The 21st century has witnessed new vistas and a flurry of new ideas in science and technology including new diseases such as the novel Coronavirus also known as COVID-19. Event ontology opens us up to possibilities of the future thus making for advancement and progress.

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