

UNITED WISDOM

Whitehead: Reality as Becoming

World and Consciousness

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Imagine a hypothetical scene. Two people return to a café where they once met often. The sign is the same, the table by the window is still there, and the cups look familiar. One says, “Nothing has changed.” The other replies, “Everything is different here now.” They notice different things: the first recognises the setting; the second feels the absence of their former conversation. Can a place remain the same when the life that unfolded there has changed?

The question seems ordinary until we try to explain what, exactly, persists through time. A thing? Its constituents? Its form? Its history? The relationships through which we recognise it? Alfred North Whitehead proposes placing becoming at the foundation of our picture of reality. Stability then ceases to be an obvious absence of movement and becomes something that also needs explaining.

What this article explores

This article introduces the central turn in Whitehead’s philosophy: from a world of ready-made things that undergo changes to a world of events whose relationships give rise to enduring formations. We will consider why this turn matters, how to understand “actual occasion” and “prehension,” and why “experience” in his metaphysics should not automatically be replaced with “consciousness.”

Whitehead constructs a philosophical system, not a psychological technique or an established physical theory of everything. We will therefore distinguish his positions, scholars’ explanations of them, and our own contemporary examples. Particular attention goes to difficult questions: how to preserve responsibility when a person changes; how to acknowledge dependence on the past without making the future predetermined; how to see processes without losing sight of particular people and things. The value of this reading may lie in describing a situation more precisely. It does not require accepting the author’s entire metaphysics in advance.

1. Change as part of the world’s structure

We usually begin a description with a noun: there is a river, a family, a business, a person. Then we add a verb: the river flows, the family changes, the business develops. This grammar is convenient. Yet it quietly suggests a philosophical picture: first an independent thing exists, and then something happens to it.

In a process approach, the direction of explanation changes. An enduring formation is considered through the activity and relationships that keep it going. The academic overview

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“Process Philosophy,” opening paragraphs emphasises that giving priority to becoming is compatible with recognising recurrence and lasting stability. Process philosophers disagree about how their systems work; this orientation itself extends beyond Whitehead’s thought.

Consider our café example. Keeping the same name does not guarantee keeping the same place in human life. Nor does a change of customers erase the café’s legal or spatial continuity. We call it the same in one respect and different in another. Trouble begins when one criterion is declared the only real one without explanation.

A process perspective invites us to ask which order we recognise. Perhaps the address, the interior, and the habit of meeting endure. Perhaps the activity that made the place important has disappeared. We gain several concrete questions in place of the sweeping clash between “everything remains” and “everything is gone.”

This does not mean nouns are mistaken. Without them, we could not make agreements, preserve history, or identify obligations. The question concerns their status. A word may designate a sufficiently stable organisation of what happens without promising an unchanging core underneath. A river persists through a particular flow, rather than despite flowing; a conversation exists in the connected unfolding of its exchanges, rather than separately from them. These are our explanatory analogies, not proof of the structure of all reality.

2. Why relationships cannot simply be added afterward

In *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead proposes seeking fundamental connections through events and criticises the unexamined conversion of an abstract bearer of properties into nature’s substrate. At the same time, he expressly insists that real permanences must be acknowledged: a philosophical theory that ignores them is unsatisfactory. These two moves appear together near the end of Chapter I. His turn therefore cannot be retold as a denial of things.

Now consider a hypothetical workplace case. Someone calls themselves a “bad manager” because decisions are constantly delayed in their team. The description could cover many things: unclear tasks, slow approval procedures, powers that do not match responsibilities, or people afraid to report mistakes. Until the relationships are examined, the quality seems lodged inside one person and presented as the independent cause of everything that happens.

Here it helps to distinguish the bearer of responsibility from the unit of explanation. A manager may be responsible for a decision even though explaining its delay involves several people’s actions. Broadening the description does not remove responsibility. It means ceasing to expect one label to explain the mechanism.

The opposite error is to dissolve everything into a “system” in which nobody did anything. Yet a system does not answer an email, sign an order, or change a deadline by itself. Particular actions remain significant. Relationships help us see their conditions and consequences; they do not remove the people acting.

In our reading, the strength of a process perspective lies precisely in holding both scales in view. A person acts; their way of acting takes shape within particular relationships. Changing those relationships can change some available actions. But no diagram yet tells us whether participants actually agree, whether a change is feasible, or whether its consequences will be desirable. Those questions require separate investigation.

3. Actual occasions: an unfamiliar unit of reality

Before introducing the technical vocabulary, we should clarify the contrast between thing and process. It does not amount to two ways of saying the same sentence. If we say an object first exists and then enters relationships, we can mentally separate its identity from every connection. If connections help constitute what it is, that separation changes what we are explaining. A queue, for example, maintains its order through the relationship of who stands behind whom. Remove that relationship, and the same people remain, but the queue no longer exists. Our example shows a particular formation’s dependence on relationships; it does not prove that every physical object works this way.

That final step is precisely what needs an argument. An opponent may accept that queues, conversations, or institutions depend on processes while retaining a different understanding of elementary physical objects. An attractive human analogy will not suffice. Process metaphysics proposes a more general foundation; anyone accepting it must explain why a particular example reveals reality’s structure rather than only the features of social formations. This marks a substantive boundary between a useful perspective and accepting a system.

In Whitehead’s mature metaphysics, “actual occasions” are fundamental. They are elementary processes, while familiar objects are understood through their organisation. “Concrescence” means the becoming of a unity from a multiplicity of data; “prehension” is the relation through which data enter a new occasion. These are technical concepts in the philosophy of organism, not an ordinary sequence of human actions. This minimal vocabulary is given in the Whitehead overview, §6.

To sense the direction of the thought, imagine our own analogy: a musical chord as it sounds. For a listener, it takes shape through several tones, a particular timbre, and its place in a sequence. It cannot be identified with one note. Nor is it an empty box into which separate sounds have been placed one at a time. The unity of what is heard arises through their relationship.

The analogy has a limit. A chord lasts a measurable time, can be recorded, and can be explained acoustically. A Whiteheadian occasion is a metaphysical category. The musical example neither reproduces the technical structure of concrescence nor confirms that nature's elementary constituents work this way. It helps us notice why unity might require a process rather than precede it.

This distinction matters especially when a philosophical term begins to sound like an elegant universal explanation. Saying "our meeting is a concrescence" has not yet explained the meeting. Who participated? What happened? Which data actually changed the conversation? What explains its particular outcome? Without those questions, a specialised word may merely make a familiar description sound grander.

A philosophical category is useful as a proposal to change the foundation of a picture. Investigating a particular case still requires information about that case. The possibility of thinking of an occasion as an emerging unity does not mean that every human experience harmoniously combines everything entering it. Conflict, loss, and failed connections need descriptions of their own.

4. Prehension: the past enters the present

In ordinary language, to "grasp" means to understand or catch something. In this philosophical vocabulary, the term is broader than conscious understanding. What matters is the direction of the connection: a new occasion arises with reference to what already exists, rather than in an absolute vacuum. Technical prehension, however, cannot be identified with human memory, intuition, or a psychological mechanism without an argument.

Our hypothetical example is a brief message: "We need to talk." For one recipient, it means an ordinary discussion. Another remembers an earlier quarrel. A third is busy working and postpones replying. The text is identical, but its place in what is happening differs. We can say that the present here is connected to earlier experience. This everyday observation does not require accepting Whitehead's metaphysics.

Yet the question deserves to be continued. If a past conflict enters someone's understanding of the message, does that mean its meaning is already settled? No. The memory reasonably draws attention, but the sender's intention remains unknown. Clarification may lead the person to revise their first reading. The past supplies some conditions of the encounter; it does not replace information about the current action.

Three things then become distinguishable: the message received, one's own expectation, and further checking. Without this distinction, history seems to seize the right to speak for the present. Conversely, demanding that someone "forget the whole past" deprives them of significant grounds for caution.

In our application, a process reading allows us to leave both extremes behind. What came before enters the situation; its role can be investigated. We can ask which part of an expectation rests on observed recurrence and which arises from resemblance. The answer may sometimes confirm the concern, sometimes weaken it, and sometimes leave uncertainty. Philosophy does not promise a more pleasant outcome in advance.

5. Experience is not human consciousness

One of the most unfamiliar features of Whitehead's system is its extension of elementary experience to reality's fundamental constituents. Scholars call this panexperientialism. §6 of "Alfred North Whitehead" expressly distinguishes experience from consciousness: attributing elementary experience does not mean attributing human self-awareness to everything. This is a metaphysical position, not an experimentally established fact.

Compare several statements without merging them. "I feel cold" is a person's report of experience. "The material changes shape when cooled" is a testable description of physical properties. "Elementary occasions have an inward aspect of experience" is a philosophical hypothesis about reality's structure. Some form of influence appears in all three cases, but a shared word does not make the propositions equivalent.

Two independent questions help our assessment. How coherent is the proposed metaphysics? And what work does it do that a more economical explanation cannot? The answer to the first may be positive while the second remains disputed. An elegantly organised system gains no advantage simply by bringing a great many things together.

We can also ask what would be lost by abandoning panexperientialism while retaining attention to relationships and becoming. Much would probably remain available for analysing a team's work or a life story. The consequences for the internal coherence of Whitehead's system would be more substantial. A practical reader and a historian of philosophy may therefore legitimately undertake different tasks.

This distinction protects both interest in the author and precision. We need not declare his teaching proven to read him seriously. We need not turn a stone into a small person to understand the problem he is trying to solve. Nor need we use "quantum" to lend metaphysics contemporary authority: an individual physical discovery does not by itself test an entire philosophical system.

6. Stability as the work of preservation

Another difficulty concerns continuity. If we see becoming, why do we recognise one object through a sequence of changes? Consider our own thought experiment: a boat's planks are gradually replaced. Its constituents change, its form remains similar, and its history of use continues. We might call it the same boat through uninterrupted maintenance and a different boat in terms of its material. The answers need not contradict each other if they address different questions. A conservator cares about the authenticity of parts; an owner about the history of ownership; an engineer about whether the structure works.

A process description does not issue the one correct identity certificate. It requires us to show the order of changes through which our chosen continuity is maintained. But an overly convenient answer becomes possible: any result can be called a continuation if the process's boundaries are drawn widely enough. The criterion must therefore be chosen before it begins serving a desired conclusion. If a restored boat contains no former parts and has no uninterrupted history of use, calling it "the same" needs another justification. A story of connection alone does not erase every difference between preservation, replacement, and making anew.

This clarification also helps us understand habits. Repetition is not simple immobility: each enactment occurs under new conditions. Yet an altered habit may stop doing its former work while retaining its name. A friendly meeting continued solely from obligation maintains the calendar and may no longer sustain the friendship. It does not follow that the meeting must automatically end. We should distinguish forms of stability and ask what participants want to preserve.

When reality is thought through becoming, stability acquires a new meaning: it can be seen as the reproducibility of an organisation. This general process move is identified in the introduction to "Process Philosophy". The following examples develop it in our contemporary interpretation.

A hypothetical library remains a library through preserving books, access rules, people's work, and the possibility of finding material. Its name and building matter, but may survive after this activity disappears. A hypothetical friendship is sustained through memory, meetings, respect for boundaries, and sometimes shared work. Its history matters, but history does not do all the work of the present relationship.

A useful question emerges: what actually sustains stability? In one case, care distributed among people. In another, coercion. In a third, a habit that currently suits the participants. The same outward order may rest on different foundations. Saying "this is stable" does not yet tell us whether it is good, or for whom.

Consider a counterexample. Someone thinks good relationships require constant discussion of what is happening because everything is a process. Their companion wants more quiet and predictability. The first can easily call the second “closed to change.” But that is a judgement, not a consequence of metaphysics. Preserving a calm rhythm may itself be an activity, a deliberate choice, and a condition of trust.

Dynamism does not require endless intensity. Every conversation costs time and attention; a pause sometimes helps sustain a relationship. Our contemporary application of the process view therefore asks both “what should change?” and “what should be preserved, and how?” Stability cannot automatically be called stagnation, just as change cannot automatically be called development.

7. What remains of responsibility

Thinking about becoming raises a concern: if a person is different today, why should they answer for yesterday’s promise? This is a serious question. A cheerful phrase about life’s fluidity cannot remove it. A change of state does not erase an action’s history or its consequences for others.

Imagine a hypothetical agreement. Someone promises to help with a move, then realises they overestimated their strength. An honest change of decision is possible. Yet another person already relies on the help. What meet here are not a motionless essence and a free flow, but several continuing histories: a promise, an expectation, new limitations, and the search for an alternative.

In our reasoning, responsibility includes acknowledging that continuation. One can communicate the change, state known limitations, and discuss consequences. One cannot retrospectively call the promise someone else’s action simply because one’s own desire changed. That would use philosophy to make a convenient break in continuity.

There is an opposite counterexample: demanding that every old agreement be honoured while ignoring illness, changed conditions, or danger. This makes constancy a value without limits. Sometimes responsible action consists precisely in revising an obligation. Revision, however, differs from erasure: it acknowledges that an earlier decision was made and affected others.

A process perspective helps describe the transition without choosing its moral assessment for the participants. What has become known? Which consequences have already arisen? Who can influence what happens next? Which boundaries remain? These questions do not form a universal decision procedure. They simply retain the situation’s connections through time when the temptation to reduce everything to one moment is especially strong.

8. A strong objection: does “process” explain too much?

A philosophy of becoming may seem invulnerable: every event is called a process, every stability a stable process. But this raises a question about the concept’s power to discriminate. If the word fits absolutely everything, what have we learned?

To examine our use of it, compare two descriptions of one hypothetical situation. First: “A team is a process of mutual becoming.” Second: “Decisions are delayed because two participants can revoke an approval and no deadline for reconsideration has been set.” The second already allows us to seek specific changes. The first may help choose the scale of attention, but does not itself explain the delay.

This does not refute Whitehead’s metaphysics. A metaphysical system and a working hypothesis about a team have different purposes. It does, however, reveal a risk in transferring concepts. A philosophical term may be valuable at its own level and too indefinite for a particular decision.

Another objection concerns boundaries. To speak of a process, we must distinguish it from surrounding events: choose its beginning, duration, participants, and significant changes. The scale often depends on the question. We cannot assume that “process” itself supplies the correct unit of inquiry.

A mature reading acknowledges this difficulty. One question may require a biography; another an episode of conversation; a third an organisation’s rules. Several descriptions may coexist if their grounds are clear. Philosophy becomes more useful when it helps formulate more precise questions than when its vocabulary closes discussion. Being able to say “this perspective adds nothing here yet” is part of taking it seriously.

9. What this means in practice

There is also the question of what counts as a complete description of nature. At the beginning of Chapter II of *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead objects to dividing perceived nature from a nature of causes supposedly alone real. Primary text. We are not reconstructing his whole position here; we single out a difficulty for our own reflection. Describing a sunset through physical processes and describing the colour seen serve different purposes. If the first is declared the only account of reality, the appearance of the second still needs explaining. If we favour only the impression, we may lose testable causal connections.

Our argument is not that every description is equally suitable for every purpose. Designing an instrument requires some distinctions; understanding why someone stopped to look at the sky requires others. The question is whether our chosen picture can connect these purposes without presenting one scale as the complete inventory of what exists. That demand is more

rigorous than an attractive phrase about unity: it allows that the reconciliation has not yet been found.

Intellectual disagreement with Whitehead can therefore remain fruitful. A reader may reject panexperientialism, doubt elementary occasions, and still notice how ordinary speech hides the work of preservation and the role of relationships. Conversely, sympathy with the general metaphysics does not release us from describing a particular case precisely. Useful reading need not force a choice between total acceptance and total rejection. It allows us to establish which question the author clarified, where he proposed a disputed transition, and what information a further decision would require.

Whitehead can be read as an invitation to look more closely at the conditions under which a situation emerges. Our practical application is limited to that invitation; it does not turn philosophy into treatment or a compulsory programme of change.

To try this perspective, you might choose one familiar episode usually described with a fixed label: “I always put things off,” “they are indifferent,” or “everything here is badly organised.” Then separate the observed sequence from the general characterisation. What happened before the action? Which possibilities were available? What followed? What repeats, and what differs each time?

In a hypothetical case, for example, someone postpones only tasks whose finishing criterion is unclear. That observation does not prove a psychological cause. It suggests checking a condition of the task. In another case, postponement may be explained by overload, missing agreement, or unwillingness to participate. A process description retains these differences until the information permits a choice.

It also helps to notice the resources of preservation. If a conversation did take place calmly, what preceded it? Better timing? A clear subject? The possibility of declining? The answers need not become rules for everyone. They may simply suggest conditions worth considering in this situation.

Finally, a process perspective has limits in situations of threat and coercion. Detailed inquiry into mutual influences must not make the requirement of safety depend on fully understanding the history. Sometimes knowing which action occurred and which boundary one wants to preserve is enough. Attention to relationships does not oblige anyone to continue them, and understanding causes is not the same as justification.

10. Changing and remaining recognisable

Return to our hypothetical café. The two visitors might stop arguing about whether it has “really” remained the same and notice different continuities. There is a space. There is memory. There is the present conversation. Some connections endure, others end, and still others are only emerging. This does not make them equally desirable or remove the feeling of loss.

Whitehead’s turn matters because it asks how unity originates. What is stable is not simply given; it arises and is maintained in a particular way. For everyday thinking, this opens a possibility of noticing more precisely the work of relationships, time, and conditions. Yet that possibility does not entitle us to call every change a good or every connection obligatory.

A person may keep a promise while changing how they fulfil it. They may leave a former role while acknowledging its history. They may be connected to the past without allowing it to determine the present completely. These are our contemporary conclusions for reflection, not universal consequences of the philosophical system.

There is a quiet value in asking “how does this become what it is?” It slows an overly quick judgement about an unchanging essence and helps us see a particular sequence. Sometimes that question is enough to reveal a new fork in the path. Sometimes it confirms that an important boundary is already clear. And sometimes it leaves us with the unknown, without an elegant final explanation.

In a world of becoming, stability need not disappear. It may become more intelligible: what we recognise, what we sustain, what we allow to end, and what consequences we leave behind. Here philosophical reading returns to a human scale, to attention to what is happening and continues after the final page.

Sources used

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