

Process Philosophy Reloaded

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This introduction presents the issue dedicated to process philosophy and argues for its renewed relevance in addressing contemporary challenges that strain substance-based ontologies. In light of the ecological crisis, technological transformation, and systemic interdependence, it proposes process thought as a conceptual framework centered on temporality, relationality and creativity. Bringing together Alfred North Whitehead with Henri Bergson, William James, Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, and phenomenological approaches, it reconstructs a constellation of thinkers who conceive reality as becoming rather than as a set of enduring substances. The introduction also situates the volume within the distinctive Italian reception of process philosophy – shaped by the dialogue between process thought, phenomenology and pragmatism – and outlines its tripartite structure, devoted to categorial investigations, historical analyses, and applications.

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1. On the Current Relevance of Process Philosophy

The renewed interest in process philosophy is neither accidental nor merely historiographical. It arises from a structural tension within contemporary thought: the growing inadequacy of substance-based ontologies to account for the complexity, relationality, and temporality that characterize both natural and technological phenomena. Climate instability, ecological interdependence, artificial intelligence, and the hybridization of biological and technical systems confront philosophy with realities that resist static description. If philosophy is to provide more than retrospective commentary, it must clarify the categories through which such phenomena become intelligible.

In this sense, the task of philosophy retains the radical ambition described by Alfred North Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World*: “If my view of the function of philosophy is correct, it is the most effective of all the intellectual pursuits. It builds cathedrals before the workmen have moved a stone, and it destroys them before the elements have worn down their arches” (Whitehead 1925, viii-ix). Philosophy does not merely register transformations already accomplished; it prepares conceptual architectures within which worlds can be interpreted and reconfigured. When inherited categories become insufficient, entire intellectual edifices begin to tremble.

Process philosophy emerges precisely at such a juncture. It does not simply oppose “substance metaphysics” with a generalized celebration of flux. Rather, it advances a systematic reconfiguration of ontology and epistemology grounded in temporality, relationality and creativity. It seeks to describe reality not as a collection of pre-given entities, but as an ongoing becoming in which relations are constitutive and novelty is real. In doing so, it also opens the space for a pluralistic mode of thought: a framework capable of integrating diverse traditions, methodologies, and levels of analysis without reducing them to a single foundational principle. The world understood as process is neither monolithic nor fragmented; it is articulated through multiple, interacting processes whose unity is dynamic rather than static.

2. Recent History and Theoretical Gist of Process Philosophy: Temporality and Relations

Although reflections on becoming accompany Western philosophy from its origins, process thought acquires a distinctive theoretical profile only in the twentieth century. It is in this period that “process” ceases to function as a descriptive metaphor and becomes the organizing principle of a systematic ontology. Above all with Alfred North Whitehead, process philosophy takes shape as a rigorous alternative to substance-based metaphysics.

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead replaces the ontology of enduring substances with that of “actual occasions,” whose very being consists in their becoming. Reality is not composed of things that undergo change; rather, it is constituted by processes of concrescence, by temporal integrations of relations. Temporality is not an external container within which entities persist. It is the intrinsic structure of reality itself. Each actual occasion is internally related to the world it inherits and transforms;

nothing exists in isolation, and no entity can be understood apart from its relations.

This ontological reorientation implies a radical shift in the understanding of both objectivity and subjectivity. The traditional dualisms – subject and object, mind and matter, substance and predicate – lose their foundational status. What is primary is not a static bearer of properties but a dynamic nexus of relations. Creativity, for Whitehead, names the ultimate principle of this dynamic order: novelty is not reducible to the rearrangement of pre-given elements but expresses the real emergence of the new.

Whitehead's project unfolds in dialogue with other early twentieth-century thinkers, including Henri Bergson and William James. Bergson foregrounded duration (*durée*) as lived temporality, irreducible to spatialized time, while James emphasized the "stream of consciousness" and developed radical empiricism, according to which relations are as real as the terms they connect. In different ways, both contributed to the displacement of substance ontology and the centrality of temporality. This constellation also includes Charles Sanders Peirce, whose logic of relations and evolutionary cosmology provided formal and metaphysical resources for conceiving reality as a developing continuum in which laws of nature emerge as habits. Likewise, John Dewey reconceived experience as an ongoing transaction between organism and environment, dissolving rigid oppositions between subject and object and embedding the process of inquiry within dynamic situations. Together, these perspectives reinforced the conviction that temporality and relation are not secondary attributes of reality, but its constitutive dimensions.

At the same time, twentieth-century phenomenology placed temporality at the center of philosophical reflection. From Husserl's analyses of time-consciousness to the ontology of embodiment developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the constitution of objects and subjects alike was shown to depend upon a temporal horizon that cannot be reduced to spatial presence. In Merleau-Ponty's thought in particular, the intertwining (*entrelacs*) of body and world, perceiver and perceived, undermines the idea of a detached spectator confronting inert objects. Experience is always already relational and temporal; perception is not the reception of fixed data but participation in a field of becoming.

Process thought, thus understood, is not a mere doctrine of flux. It is an attempt to articulate categories adequate to a world in which stability is achieved within change, identity within relation, and order within creativity. The challenge it poses – still unresolved – is to develop logical and ontological tools capable of grasping becoming without dissolving structure, and of recognizing novelty without abandoning intelligibility.

3. Process in Action: Ecology, Technology, Medicine and More

The contemporary relevance of process philosophy becomes particularly evident when one considers two domains that define the present intellectual horizon: ecology and technology. In both cases, static ontologies prove insufficient. Ecological systems cannot be understood as aggregates of independent entities governed by fixed laws; they are dynamic networks characterized by feedback, co-evolution, emergence, and irreversible

transformation. Likewise, contemporary technologies – especially artificial intelligence – cannot be adequately described either as neutral instruments or as autonomous substances. They operate within socio-technical processes in which human practices, material infrastructures, symbolic systems, and environmental constraints are reciprocally constitutive.

A processual framework offers conceptual resources capable of addressing both domains without reducing one to the other. By interpreting nature as relational becoming rather than inert objectivity, it displaces the dualism between humanity and environment, situating human agency within larger systemic interactions. By conceiving technology as embedded within evolving patterns of use, habit, and mediation, it avoids both instrumentalism and technological determinism. In both cases, what emerges is a vision of reality as structured yet dynamic: stability appears as a temporary achievement within change; laws as sedimented regularities within ongoing processes; intelligence as distributed and emergent rather than localized in discrete entities.

Such an approach does not prescribe specific ethical or political conclusions. Rather, it provides the “conceptual scaffolding” (see Bernardi della Rosa & Brioschi 2026) necessary for thinking of interdependence, responsibility and creativity under conditions of ecological fragility and technological acceleration. If the present age is marked by the entanglement of biological, environmental, and technical processes, process philosophy offers a vocabulary adequate to this entanglement – one capable of integrating scientific insight, experiential analysis, and speculative reflection without collapsing their differences.

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4. Process Philosophy: The Italian Way

The renewed attention to process philosophy that animates the present issue does not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. It inscribes itself within a trajectory that, in the Italian context, has a precise genealogy. Unlike other national receptions – where Alfred North Whitehead was primarily associated either with theological developments or with post-structuralist reinterpretations – the Italian engagement with process thought unfolded in continuity with phenomenology and pragmatism, generating a distinctive (and open) theoretical constellation.

The philosophical milieu shaped by Antonio Banfi at the University of Milan provided the conditions for this development. Banfi’s “critical rationalism” was characterized by the refusal of closed systems and by the demand that philosophy remain open to experience, history, and the sciences. Within this horizon, phenomenology was received not as a transcendental doctrine but as a methodological return to the concreteness and plurality of lived experience. It is precisely this openness that made possible an early and original dialogue with Anglo-American thought.

In this context, Enzo Paci played a decisive mediating role. His engagement with Whitehead was not a marginal episode but part of a broader attempt to rethink phenomenology through temporality and relation. Subjectivity, for Paci, is not a static pole of constitution but a process emerging within a relational field; temporality is not a formal condition but the dynamic horizon in which world and self co-constitute one another. The encounter with John Dewey further reinforced this

orientation, encouraging an understanding of experience as interaction and historicity rather than as isolated interiority.

What thus takes shape is not a mere synthesis of influences but a coherent perspective in which process philosophy, phenomenology, pragmatism (and more) converge around shared concerns: the critique of dualism, the centrality of temporality, the relational constitution of reality, and the refusal of abstract substantialism. This “Italian way” does not claim doctrinal purity; rather, it exemplifies a plural and connective mode of philosophizing. Process becomes both an ontological thesis and a methodological attitude: a way of thinking capable of holding together structure and becoming, rational articulation and experiential depth.

The present issue consciously situates itself within this lineage. To rethink process today is, in this sense, also to reactivate a tradition in which the dialogue between phenomenology and pragmatism already anticipated many of the questions that define our contemporary horizon. The Italian reception of process philosophy thus appears not as a historical curiosity, but as an ongoing resource for conceptual renewal.

5. Process Philosophy and Pluralism

The organization of the issue reflects the three dimensions announced in its subtitle – history, categories, and applications.

The first section gathers contributions of a predominantly theoretical and categorial orientation. These essays aim to rethink some of the fundamental concepts through which process philosophy articulates reality: the very idea of nature (Luca Vanzago), the notion of personhood (Bennett Gilbert), the question of scale and granularity (Yuri Di Liberto), the status of technology and relationality (Alessio Martino), and even the possibility of formulating a renewed critical existentialism (Riccardo Manzotti). Rather than presupposing a fixed understanding of process, these contributions interrogate its conceptual architecture and test its internal coherence.

The second section is devoted to historically grounded investigations. Here, the focus shifts to decisive constellations in the development of process thought and its interlocutors – from some ancestors of process thought such as Hegel (Samuele Cantori), to classical figures of this approach such as Whitehead (Nicola Turrini), Dewey (Paul Walter), and Merleau-Ponty (Tommaso Ciabatti and Marta Gailli), up to some of its most recent representatives and innovators, such as Latour (Buenaventura Marco Moreno). These studies do not merely reconstruct doctrines; they clarify how the concept of process emerged, transformed, and positioned itself in tension with substantialist, metaphysical frameworks.

Finally, the third section hosts contributions that apply the category or perspective of process to specific domains and problems. In these essays, process philosophy is put to work in reflections on philosophy of medicine (Raffaella Campaner), on the interpretation of pain as an embodied experience (Letizia Cipriani, Roberta Lanfredini and Andrea Velardi), on ecological and economic dynamics (Milan Stürmer), and on architecture (Carlo De Conte). The aim is not simply to illustrate a theory, but to test its explanatory and critical potential within concrete fields of inquiry.

This plurality does not disperse the project; it articulates it. If the

Italian reception of process philosophy has been characterized by its capacity to connect heterogeneous traditions without erasing their differences, the present collection continues precisely in this spirit. Process philosophy appears here neither as a closed system nor as a univocal doctrine, but as a field of inquiry in which historical reconstruction, logical refinement, and practical experimentation mutually illuminate one another. In this sense, to rethink process today is also to practice a plural mode of philosophizing – one that assumes temporality and relations not only as ontological theses, but as methodological commitments. The vitality of process thought lies not in uniformity, but in its capacity to sustain differences within a shared orientation toward becoming.

Bibliography

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