

THEOSOPHY-SCIENCE GROUP

NEWSLETTER NUMBER 69

MARCH 2011

EDITORIAL NOTES

This Newsletter is prepared by the Theosophy-Science Group in Australia for interested members of the Theosophical Society in Australia. The email version is also made available on request to members of the Theosophical Society in New Zealand and USA by the respective National bodies. Members in USA should contact tsa@theosophy.org, Members in New Zealand should contact: john@serion.co.nz. Recipients are welcome to share the Newsletter with friends but it must not be reproduced in any medium including on a website. However, permission is given for quoting of extracts or individual articles with due acknowledgment. Selected items appear from time to time on the website of the TS in Australia – austheos.org.au.

T H E O S O P H Y - S C I E N C E S E M I N A R

From 4pm 19 May – 9am 23 May 2011

THEOSOPHICAL EDUCATION AND RETREAT CENTRE,
2184 Springbrook Road, Springbrook

All TS members who have some scientific/medical/health training or who are keenly interested in attending are welcome to apply. Total cost will be \$240 for your registration, accommodation, meals (vegetarian) and all sessions. Space is limited, so please lodge your application (see below) as soon as possible, along with a cheque or money order for the \$50 non-refundable deposit. All applicants will be contacted by 01 May to confirm their booking. A maxi taxi transfer will be arranged for those flying into Coolangatta Airport or arriving by train at Varsity Lakes Station preferably between 12.30 and 15.30.

Registration

Registration Form for TS Members - Science Seminar 19-23 May, 2011. If you wish to attend this seminar, please fill in the registration form on the last page of this Newsletter. Detach (or copy) it and mail it to Dr Brian Harding, 16 Jetty St, Shorncliffe, QLD 4017 with your non-refundable deposit of \$50. It is preferred that the balance of \$190 be paid on confirmation of your booking rather than on arrival. Please make cheques payable to "The Theosophical Society in Australia."

THE PANSUBJECTIVISM OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

An edited version of a talk by

Dr Brian Harding

Brisbane Theosophical Society

At

The Theosophy-Science Seminar, Adelaide, October 2009

1. Introduction

Alfred North Whitehead was an English mathematician and physicist who later became a philosopher. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and later worked at University and Imperial Colleges, London. In 1924, at the age of 63, he was invited to teach philosophy at Harvard University. He spent the rest of his life in America, where he died in 1947.

Whitehead's thought, now known as "process philosophy," seems to have been stimulated by the development of quantum physics and relativity. His ideas crystallised (1929) in a book that came out of the 1927 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh.

A major aspect of Whitehead's philosophy is what has been called "pansubjectivism whole sequence of entities to the smallest fundamental particle. In other words, all entities are "subjects" not just "objects."

Put yet another way, since subjects are able to experience things, process thought says "experience" is not," or "panexperientialism." Here, I will give a brief introduction to process philosophy before looking in more detail at pansubjectivism. I will conclude with brief reference to Theosophy.

2. Process Philosophy

Elements of process philosophy can be traced back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE). Among other ideas, Heraclitus saw continual change as the fundamental fact of life. "All things flow," he said. Process thought also shares some ideas with the Neo-Platonic and Hermetic traditions. Its starting point is "becoming" rather than "being," that is, its thinking is organic rather than mechanistic. Like Heraclitus, it sees transition and activity as more fundamental than permanence and substance. Like Einstein, process philosophers reject the Newtonian view that time and space is absolutes. And, like some interpretations of theosophy, process philosophy sees the flow of time as simply the flow of experience or events.

Now to pansubjectivism. In what follows, I'll make frequent reference to the writings of Charles Birch, one time evolutionary biologist at Sydney University.

Article I.

3. Pansubjectivism (panexperientialism)

A question that confronted Birch and his fellow evolutionary biologists was: "Can mind evolve from no mind?" Birch (2008 p35) says that most biologists think that it did. That is, at some stage in evolution, mind appeared where it did not exist before. Sewell Wright (quoted by Birch, *op cit*, p35) argued that to believe this is to believe in miracles. He suggested that the property of "mind" (or "mentality") must exist all the way down to fundamental physical particles.

Next, moving beyond mere physical evolution, Birch (*op cit*, p166) says “If mentality in some form were present in the building blocks of the universe, we would expect there to be an evolution of mentality.” He concludes that “Humans are built out of a mindful universe ... consciousness evolves from a mentality that is not conscious in atoms to one that is conscious in higher organisms.”

Developing this idea further, Sewall Wright and Charles Hartshorne proposed that things possess an inner aspect as well as an outer aspect (see Birch, *op cit* p36, Teilhard de Chardin, 1955). In our own case, others see our outer aspect, the third person view. We ourselves are aware of an inner aspect, the first person view. Process thought attributes an inner aspect not just to humans, but to other animals, on down through the confined to human beings – all “events” or “entities” in creation are subject to experience. So pansubjectivism is also called “panexperientialism.”

Experience central

We see then that idea of “experience” is central to process philosophy. Whitehead himself did not restrict “experience” to (outer) sensory data alone. He recognised the validity of non-sensory (inner) experience; religious experience; our sense of value, anticipation and purpose; and paranormal experiences such as telepathy.

As we have seen, Birch came to the organic view of nature and the centrality of experience through thinking about the evolution of mind. Earlier, Whitehead came to it from a different beginning. Rather than regarding material things such as the atoms or sub-atomic particles as the fundamental building blocks of nature, Whitehead looked to the complexity of living organisms as his starting point.

But, he reasoned, the only entity we really know from the inside is ourselves. And we know there is more to us than a collection of atoms and molecules. So Whitehead extended this idea to other organisms – they too are more than collections of atoms and molecules, they too have senses, mental attributes, a sense of value and purpose. So again, all entities from humans down to quarks are centers of subjective experience.

With this understanding of the universality of experience, process thought presents the radical idea that the world is not made up of material substances but of events or processes, “droplets of experience.” Birch calls this “the doctrine of a feeling world (*op cit* p133). He says “Instead of all the entities being static and unchanging, they are continually changing, becoming themselves by establishing internal relations with entities in their environment.” So now we come to the importance of relationship in pansubjectivism.

The experience of relationship

It is obvious to many today that “no man is an island.” On the human scale, examples include the World Wide Web, international trade, war, and so on. Further, study has shown how species are interdependent, making up whole ecological systems. Physics has revealed networks of interacting systems, right down to elementary particles. Early quantum theory showed that the act of observation alters the state of the observed. All our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us. However, as Birch reminds us (*op cit*, p138), all these are merely external relationships. And as we saw above, we have to consider the internal as well.

Human beings experience love or compassion with or for another person. We have inner feelings as the result of the behavior of others. We become changed when we experience such internal relations. We change as a result of the friendships we make and the thoughts that dominate our lives.

Pansubjectivism sees this as a model for entities all down the line from humans to amoeba to atoms to quarks. Even atoms are affected by their relationships. The constitution of entities by their (internal) relationships is often summed up in Whitehead's much quoted statement that "The many become one and are increased by one" – which is another way of saying that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Whitehead's famous statement, says Birch (*ibid* p141), "is a universal principle of creativity and of cosmic evolution. The new unity is no mere rearrangement of old units. It is a new singular actuality. The evolving universe is a vast ecological system for the creation of novelty." The summing of many parts creates an entirely new entity with properties that cannot be found in the original units.

Experience, value and purpose

Among the internal feelings we have are things like value and purpose. So again, Birch says "Values, considered to be aspects of all entities in the intentions and anticipation are not only features of human life but are, in process thought, sequence humans to quarks" (*op cit*, p146).

Whitehead suggested that "value" is intensity of richness of experience. There is an evolution of richness of experience (value) from amoeba to fish to reptiles to humans. Says Birch, "living organisms besides humans experience value because they have feelings." Hence pansubjectivism profoundly influences the way we view our world. For example, many conservationists say we have a responsibility to conserve rain forests because that's where many beneficial medicinal plants grow. This attitude relates to what we can call "instrumental value." But pansubjectivism recognises a second type of value in nature – the "intrinsic value" of individual organisms. Process theologian John Cobb (see Birch, *op cit*, p156) says it is feeling that gives entities their intrinsic value – simply put, things are valuable merely for their own sake, merely because they feel.

Again, the human experience of purpose stretches down the scale to entities that are less and less complex. Birch (*op cit* p127-129) suggests that, as an example, the observed behavior of Amoeba and amoeboid cells in our bodies allows us to postulate that they have experience, feelings and purpose, though they may not be much like ours - it must be remembered that process thought does not attribute conscious feelings to atoms, cells, lower organisms etc. It does propose, as we saw earlier, that something akin to mentality, or purpose, or final causation, is attributable to these entities.

Evolving cosmos

The centrality of interconnection and relationship puts great responsibility human shoulders. Birch (*op cit* p158) puts it beautifully when he says “We are participants in the adventure of an unfinished universe.” Cosmic evolution, says Birch, has the appearance of a struggle for integration and order against influences that tend to disorder. Human life is now the fighting frontier of the progressive integration of the universe (so far as we know). In us, richness of experience is greater than at any of the previous levels of creation. But, it may be asked, what is the point of it all? This leads us on to meaning and the other major prong of process philosophy, *panentheism*, which I will have to leave for another time.

4. The Theosophical view

Theosophy shares a number of key ideas with process philosophy, especially the idea that all things are interconnected, and that time is the “succession of our states of consciousness” (SD 1:37, 44). What does “theosophy” have to say about pansubjectivism? In *The Secret Doctrine*, HPB writes: “...everything lives and is conscious, but not all life and consciousness are similar to those of human or even animal beings...things that have life are living things, whether they be atoms or planets.” (SD 1: 49)

This parallels the process idea of “mentality” in all things, and emphasizes the differing degrees of consciousness at different levels of being acknowledged by process philosophy.

Again:

“Everything in the Universe, throughout all its kingdoms, is conscious; that is, endowed with a consciousness of its own kind and on its own plane of perception. We men must remember that because we do not perceive any signs – which we can recognise – of consciousness, say, in stones, we have the right to say that no consciousness exists there. There is no such thing as either “dead” or “blind” matter...” (SD 1:274)

And again:

“Nature, taken in its abstract sense, cannot be ‘unconscious,’ as it is an emanation from, and thus an aspect (on the manifested plane) of, the Absolute consciousness. Where is that daring man who would presume to deny to vegetation and even to minerals a consciousness of their own? All that he can say is that this consciousness is beyond his comprehension.” (SD 1:277 *fn*)

We find here something of the argument, used by Charles Birch, that mind cannot evolve from no-mind. And if this is so, the chain must go right back to the birth of the universe.

Finally, the Theosophical ideal of brotherhood is echoed in the emphasis placed in process philosophy on relationship. Shirley Nicholson (1985, p25) writes: “Brotherhood is seen, not as an ideal to be achieved, but as a reality of nature, an expression of the unity which pervades life at every level.” And, of course, brotherhood involves subjective experience and relationships, both external and internal.

5. References and Bibliography

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WHEN THE SEA SAVED HUMANITY
SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN
(AUGUST 2010)Curtis W Maran

The time from 195,000 BP (i.e Years ago) until 123,000 BP is noted in the article as being abnormally cold. [I interpolate here that ~ 120 000 BP was a time when the Earth was closest to the Sun in its orbit about the Sun. This is consistent with the end of the ultra cold period].

Our species Homo sapiens arose about 190,000 BP. There was initially a very small number of Individuals. At first the evidence was solely genetic but the date was subsequently confirmed by an archaeological dig. The present article is concerned with how early Homo sapiens survived the long cold period. Much of the land mass would have been uninhabitable. “Only a few regions could have supported our species, namely those with grassland or Mediterranean scrub vegetation. The Southern Coast would have been a particularly plentiful oasis, thanks to the edible fynbos plants that grow only there and the dense shellfish beds...nurtured by the current upwelling from the sea bottom”. A long gentle slope seaward could be accessed over time as the sea level rose and fell cyclically, providing continuous access to nourishing food such as shell fish, a high quality source of protein. The author and his colleagues made extensive exploration for suitable sites. They homed in on the far Southern tip of Africa as having the most suitable sites. They explored in detail one particular area known as Pinnacle Point at the Southern tip of Africa. Nearby they found a large cave (with other caves in the vicinity) which would have given especially good shelter. “The deposits in these caves, combined with analysis of the ancient environment there, have enabled us to piece together a plausible account of how the prehistoric residents of Pinnacle Point eked out a living during a grim climate crisis...so long as people tracked the shore; they had access to an enviable bounty.”

NUMEROUS EXTRA-SOLAR PLANETS DISCOVERED

NASA's Kepler mission has now discovered many new extra-solar planets including the first evidence of a rocky planet (1.4x Earth size) outside our solar system. This was achieved by looking at just 1/400th of the sky, observations made between 12 May and 17 September 2009 of 155,453 stars; 288 extra-solar planets are super-Earth-sized, 662 Neptune-sized, 165 Jupiter-sized, and 19 that are larger than Jupiter. Launched in 2009, Kepler is in a heliocentric orbit surveying an area of space in the Cygnus and Lyra constellations portion of the Milky Way galaxy, looking for extra-solar planets. Kepler's ultra-precise photometer measures the tiny decrease in a star's brightness that occurs when a planet crosses in front of it. The size of the planet is derived from these periodic dips in brightness, and the planet's distance from the star is calculated from the time between successive dips as the planet orbits the star. The Kepler telescope was also able to detect high-frequency variations in the star's brightness caused by stellar oscillations (like earthquakes) adding to our understanding of the nature of planet-hosting stars.

For more information, visit:

[http:// www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/kepler/main/index.html](http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/kepler/main/index.html)

Regards to you all,
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Please make cheques payable to: **“The Theosophical Society in Australia.”**

Name:

Address:

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Email:

All meals are vegetarian. No smoking allowed.

Special dietary requirements:

(Other than vegetarian; e.g. gluten free)

Transport:

(Use only if transfer from and return to Gold Coast airport or Varsity Lakes railway station is required)

List Arrival time and Flight Number at Gold Coast Airport:

or Arrival Time at Varsity Lakes Railway Station: