

## Ideas in Process: Three Whiteheadian Transitions

Andrew M. Davis, Ph.D.

*The Center for Process Studies*

*Claremont School of Theology*

The sort of ideas we attend to, and the sort of ideas which we push into the negligible background, govern our hopes, our fears, our control of behaviour. As we think, we live. – **Alfred North Whitehead**

At the heart of Whitehead's process philosophy are a variety of existential and theological transitions. These are transitions in how we think about ourselves and in how we think about God. This presentation focuses on three transitions in particular.

*From Exception to Exemplification.* One of Whitehead's principal critiques of modern philosophy and science concerns the tendency to abstract or bifurcate human existence and experience from the realm of nature. In other words, human beings were treated as *exceptions to*, rather than *exemplifications of*, everything that is going on in the natural world. Without recourse to human experience *as nature*, nature was revealed to be purely material, non-experiential, valueless, purposeless, and ultimately blind. Whitehead fundamentally rejects this picture and insists that human beings are *part and parcel of nature*. Our experience, therefore, holds fundamental clues as to the depths and character of the world at its most fundamental levels. For Whitehead, however, neither is God a "great exception" to the deepest principles of nature; rather, God is their "chief exemplification." On this vision, God does not establish the ultimate principles of reality, but *embodies* them preeminently. As such, God is *naturally* as opposed to supernaturally related to the world.

*From Being to Becoming.* For Whitehead, one of the most obvious convictions wedded to the data of human experience is that reality is most fundamentally a *process of becoming*. Becoming is *deeper* than being such that reality is verb-like *before* it is noun-like. Indeed, to be a "process philosopher" is to affirm that verbs are more fundamental than nouns, that process and relationality are more fundamental than "things." On Whitehead's model, therefore, you are not so much *a being* that becomes; rather, you are a *becoming into being* that is happening moment by moment. This means that who and what you are or could be in this life is *open* rather than closed. You are a verb-like pattern that shifts and shapes, becomes, and adventures forward. In contrast to classical theology which viewed God in terms of "being" to the neglect of "becoming," Whitehead insists that God too *becomes* in intimate relation to a becoming world. Becoming is not contradictory to God, but *complimentary*; it is part of divine perfection and not a fall from it.

*From Mechanism to Organism.* Whitehead called his philosophy the "philosophy of organism." In part, his philosophy was a response to the collapse of the mechanistic/materialistic worldview with its assumption of senseless, valueless, purposeless "matter" as the ultimate constituent of reality. Whitehead saw that the sciences began to reveal the universe as *fundamentally organic* in nature and as populated by societies of active organisms even at the level of physics. He thus developed his philosophy as an alternative to the mechanistic universe. If the universe was like a growing organism rather than a machine, then so too must God be understood in *organic* rather than mechanistic terms. God can no longer be viewed as externally (mechanically) related to the world process; rather, God is *symbiotically* related to the world from the within. On this model, God and the world are *ecologically entangled* such that the world is the environment for God and God is the environment for the world.