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Towards a Metaethics Grounded in a Simplified Process Metaphysics

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Abstract

This thesis aims to not only illustrate a metaphysical position, but also explore a possible metaethical scheme which can be grounded therein. First is offered an outline of the core principles of Process metaphysics. Then the author differentiates their own take on these principles, bringing into dialogue several other philosophers, both within the tradition of Process philosophy and outside of it. Next is explored the way in which this scheme can inform issues in other domains of inquiry relevant to the final issue being addressed, which is metaethics. Though it is found that this scheme can support at least a few different metaethical positions, one in particular is chosen to illustrate how Process metaphysics can inform how the issues surrounding metaethics are framed and analyzed.

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Prologue

To the Layman

The field of philosophy is in the curious position of being yet another highly technical field with all of the jargon associated therewith, while still attempting to be accessible to all. After all, one cannot choose not to have beliefs and a worldview, if one is going to live one's life. Everyone must be a philosopher, in some sense of the word. Still, often the jargon and the debates – which all too often end up in the weeds of details and nitpicks – will put many off from the study altogether. This prologue will be an attempt to explain this thesis to the layperson who happens upon it.

Metaphysics is the field of study within philosophy that deals with the nature of existence itself. Some relevant metaphysical questions might be: What is the nature of time? Of space? What are things, events, or relations? What is causation? How does our conscious experience fit into a world of physical stuff that science describes? Metaphysics therefore deals with questions which cannot necessarily be directly addressed by something like empirical science.

The questions I focus on in this paper are the first one and also the last two. I situate myself in a long tradition of thought now known as Process philosophy. The metaphysics espoused therein is known as Process metaphysics. Process metaphysics unites all three concepts into one framework. Time, causation, and a sort of proto-conscious-experience are united in one single metaphysical structure. How can this be? Process metaphysics submits that at bottom, all reality is composed of events. These events have structure, but everything – substance, form, laws of nature, etc. – are the way they are because these events happen the way they do. The events therefore have structure, and this structure is of what all else in Process philosophy is borne out. This structure takes the following form: Each event is said to have three “phases”. The first is

prehension. This is the proto-conscious-experience mentioned earlier. The event perceptively assimilates other events. This is indeed a pseudo-mental phenomenon. Consider consciousness with everything “thought-related” stripped away such that one is left with pure experience. This is what is being conceived of here. The second phase is self-determination. This is where spontaneous creativity is instantiated in reality, and also why time is the way it is, for the second phase differentiates the present from the past, and makes real, dynamic change possible. The third phase is concrecence, which is simply a “physicalization” of the event, allowing it to enter into other events’ prehensions. This “entering into” is the nature of causation, as, in virtue of how the next event prehends the previous one’s concrecenced form, cause and effect can have an understandable internal link through time. So for an event to concrece just is for that event to affect the future. Moreover, for an event to prehend others just is for it to experience them. And finally, for an event to concrece just is for it to be in the past. In this metaphysics, the relations of past-future, cause-effect, and object-subject collapse into a single relation. The past is cause is objective. The future is effect is subjective.

This may be a lot to take in, and we seemingly have no real reason as of yet to believe it is true. So what is the method by which a metaphysical scheme is “tested”? The only way a philosopher knows to test something: ask questions – specifically, famous ones that philosophers have wrestled with for centuries. Process metaphysics gives satisfactory answers to many famous problems, the first of which is how consciousness could exist in a world of physical stuff. The answer, of course, is that all reality contains extremely basic or “watered-down” experience of a sort, and so when this is combined in an extremely complex nexus of causal structure like the brain, one would expect on our metaphysics that what accompanies this is an extremely complex nexus of experience as well. The thesis itself delves into many other philosophical problems that Process

philosophy solves, but even a summary of those would require a significant amount of setup and discussion, which I will leave for the larger work to properly spell out.

So let us move on to the third and final section: metaethics. Metaethics is the field of philosophy dealing with the very nature of moral value. That is, what does “good” even mean? Is it a meaningless property? Is it perhaps created by each individual person? Societies? Humanity as a whole? Or perhaps the good is transcendent, within the realm of Forms, or even in the mind and nature of God. These are metaethical issues. So what could Process metaphysics have to say about metaethics? I argue that Process metaphysics actually supports quite a few metaethical positions. My reasoning in that section begins by bracketing what is most supported by this scheme, however. On the fundamental realists’ side, I argue that since Process philosophy is essentially relational in nature, the good will also need to refer to some aspect of dynamic, relational structure involving humans. This means the good cannot be so transcendently realist that it has no contingency upon humanity. Secondly, I argue that once we have cornered ethics into pertaining to action, and our statements regarding it are shown to be extremely similar to those regarding other domains, it becomes best thought of as realist and neither antirealist nor simply based on emotional expression. To be sure, the number of different metaethical positions that fit within these boundaries (realism and some contingency upon humanity) is still quite large. However, I argue that the Sensibility theory of McDowell and others comes the closest out of the different metaphysical theories that I have explored.

Sensibility theory claims that morality involves a certain sensibility of the mind, somewhat like humor, wherein that part of a developed human mind will respond in kind to an event which is moral or immoral. It is of course possible to be wrong about the overall moral value of an event, meaning that either one’s moral sensibility is underdeveloped or undeveloped, or that one is

reacting to a smaller feature of that event rather than the entire event as a whole. But what does this have to do with Process metaphysics? Many a philosopher has criticized Sensibility theories of moral value for being circular. That is, if a sensibility of the mind is a moral sensibility simply because it discerns moral value in the world, then moral value is now transcendently real. However, if some property in the world is moral value simply because the human moral sensibility discerns it, then moral value is now entirely subjective. Process philosophy gives the most satisfactory rejoinder to this critique, by pointing out that this question of the relative priority of mind and world is in the same vein as the debate over consciousness and physical stuff. Whereas the latter asked how physical stuff and consciousness could interact and make sense together, this dilemma asks how a happening in the world and a sensibility of human mind could interact and make sense together. The answer is the same in both contexts: the two things should not be considered isolated phenomena at all, but rather two sides of a relation. The relation itself is what makes the two things what they are. The relation of events to one another is what makes both the physical world and consciousness possible, at once. The relation of human moral sensibility to moral value out in the world is what makes either concept possible as well. This relation of course takes on the character of Process and completes the rough sketch of what a metaethics grounded in a simplified process metaphysics could be like.

Chapter I.

An Overview and Brief Defense of Process Metaphysics

The criticisms of philosophers throughout the centuries on the futility of metaphysical theorizing¹ are to be taken as seriously now as ever. However, as debates escalate regarding what the findings of fundamental physics tell us about our reality, and deeper solutions to the hard problem of consciousness are explored, metaphysics remains a domain of philosophical inquiry which is alive and well. For now, I will choose to undertake an exercise in speculative metaphysics, putting aside those criticisms which target metaphysical theorizing *simpliciter*. Of all of those in recorded history who have taken this same road, those who fit into the broad camp known as Process philosophy² are, I argue, closer to an all-encompassing metaphysical theory than any others.

Causation vs Experience

Let us start with one of the most often discussed metaphysical questions: What is causation? The metaphysical basis for causal connection is analyzed differently by any number of philosophers, who offer such explanations as “nomological subsumption” (Jaegwon Kim), “counterfactual dependence” (David Lewis), and “property transference” (Max Kistler). Others have hinted at or endorsed eliminativism regarding causation (Russell, Quine). Even the temporal directionality of causation has been called into question in recent years, wherein “the coincidence of the causal and temporal orders is merely a contingent feature of the actual world” (Jonathan

¹ The best example being the Logical Positivists, though figures such as Hume and Kant have spoken on this as well.

² I will hereafter capitalize Process when I mean the philosophy or metaphysical scheme, to distinguish between this and the word used in common parlance.

Schaffer)³. Keeping all of this in mind, I want to argue that causation is in fact far simpler, and far more universal, than these and other myriad positions in the contemporary literature of metaphysics of causation make out.

I submit three observations here: First, there exists a far more basic type of experience beneath what most people, and even many a philosopher, conceive of as “consciousness”. Second, this experience and the physical world are causally connected. That is, an account of causal connection cannot exclude basic experience. Third, our common-sense conception of causation involves a relation between events where the former event “instructs” the latter as to how to occur, and/or where the latter event “takes into account” the former event when manifesting. The first observation demands some support, though most would leave it uncontested. The arguments of the eliminativists regarding what is meant by experience are relevant and worth closer scrutiny, but for now I will table that discussion until I expound upon it in Chapter 2. I am arguing here instead against those who would suppose that experience comes with any number of complex characteristics, such as thought, a self, etc.⁴: There exists a more basic type of experience, disconnected from any unified self, and lacking intentional thought. The event and processes thereon characterized by this type of experience I will term “experiential impingement”. A few examples might be the experience of coming to or being drugged to the point of ego-death. Neither necessarily correlate with rational thought, a coherent self, or any other characteristic of “mind” as a classical dualist might conceive of it. We can certainly conceive of less cognitively developed animals as possessing vast arrays of such experience, without a complex consciousness to speak

³ All these quotes from [1]

⁴ Such as classical dualists, whether the substance type or the property type, for instance

of. At bottom, all consciousness includes basic experience, but certainly basic experience need not be accompanied by a unified consciousness⁵.

The second observation needs support as well. Why must the hard problem of consciousness⁶ necessarily be one about causation? First, the hard problem is usually put forth as a causal problem – “How could goings on in the physical world *cause* our vivid experience?”. Second, the immediate issue of the “meta-problem”⁷ arises: If conscious experience (as a real phenomenon rather than merely a concept) is not part of any causal chain, then it cannot be part of the causal chain that results in speech regarding it. Put another way, it cannot then be a meaningful semantic referent⁸. And so, any theory which neglects to explain the causal connection of the experiential and the physical becomes meaningless. Somehow experience must play a causal role, at least with regards to the brain, if we are to make sense when discussing it as a real phenomenon.

The third observation is merely a commentary on how most people intuitively conceive of causation – as a former event actively determining how a latter one manifests. It does not purport to do any explanatory work – however, if my proposed theory ends up giving credibility to common sense, this is ostensibly an explanatory virtue concerning its plausibility, compared to one that would have us reject common sense in favor of an unintuitive conclusion, *ceteris paribus*.

⁵ Such an idea, that a more basic form of experience reaches into “lower” levels of reality, is represented quite well among Eastern philosophical traditions. For instance, in Buddhism, there exist many different terms to refer to different qualities of experience which constitute a significant part of fundamental ontology.

⁶ The hard problem in philosophy of mind is a problem coined by philosopher David Chalmers which goes as follows: Science claims to give us a complete picture of reality by giving physical descriptions of things and their goings-on. However, how is it that such a world results in the phenomenal experience of what it’s like to be something or someone? How can a physical world give rise to experiential phenomena? In Chalmers’ own words: “Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all?” [2].

⁷ Also coined by Chalmers [3]

⁸ Again, one could give a coherent explanation about a meaningful semantic referent that isn’t a “real” phenomenon, such as, for example, “God” being a meaningful semantic referent as the personification of the ideal good, even though God himself may not really exist. Here I mean to say that the meta-problem arises if one attempts to posit that consciousness is a real phenomenon, but also that it does not play a causal role.

A Simplified Process Metaphysics

Keeping in mind these three observations, and the overarching consideration of the metaphysical basis for causal connection, I will now give a brief introduction to the father of modern Process philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead. It is his detailed metaphysical scheme – built on an ontology, semantics, and epistemology derived fundamentally from a notion of process and event which are conceived of as metaphysical primitives – that I will now borrow from, though not wholesale. I will take a speculative turn here and see how the resultant theorizing pans out when critiqued metaphysically and then applied to different domains of inquiry. In *Process and Reality* [4], Whitehead submits the notion of an ontological primitive called the “actual occasion” – a structured event. Process philosophy implies therefore an event-based ontology rather than a thing- or substance-based ontology. The actual occasion consists of three “phases”. The first is prehension. In prehension, the event perceptively assimilates immediately past events. This is clearly analogical to experience. The second is self-determination. This is what distinguishes the event *from* the past. The third is concrescence. Concrescence “physicalizes” the event and allows it to enter into other events’ prehensions. This “entering into” is an analog to causation. All of reality is grounded in such actual occasions – in the “ether of events”, a complex, relational, dynamic structure.

This is a simplification of Process metaphysics, but a simplification that I nonetheless take to be able to do the bulk of the explanatory work when solving the problems that I will claim that it solves. Whitehead’s own metaphysical scheme was much more eloquent, with eight different ontological categories, of which actual occasions were only one, though they were the most fundamental. I contrast my position from much of Process philosophical literature here by claiming

that this simplified (and perhaps more tendentious) scheme possesses explanatory power adequate to solve the problems I am setting out to solve.

So, what are some ramifications of this simplified Process metaphysics? The most important ramification is that the relation between actual occasions – the relation wherein an actual occasion prehends concreated events – is one of experience, causation, and time at once. Or, said better, the relations between actual occasions in this metaphysics is the grounding for all three concepts at once. More precisely, I am arguing that the cause-effect relation, the subject-object relation, and the past-future relation are fundamentally the same, grounded in this metaphysics of Process. To be a cause just is to be physical just is to be in the past. To be affected just is to experience just is to move into the future. Why is this? Under this scheme, concreated events are what are prehended in the first phase of any actual occasion. To be concreated is to be able to be prehended at all. Likewise, concreated events are all that are prehended. How one event concretes is prehended in another's first phase. Phrasing the above statements with more commonly-known terms: Physical phenomena are what are experienced. To be physical just is to cause. Likewise, the immediate past is all that is experienced. The structure of a cause will manifest in the future it brings about. This is the metaphysical basis for causal connection (along with many other things), and though it may seem radical at first glance, we will see that the problems it solves are myriad.

Process and Causation

First, how does this metaphysical scheme address the three observations made in the previous pages? The first – that basic experience extends far “lower” than just to humans or even to other animals – is enriched even further by this metaphysics by postulating a panexperientialism. All Process involves extremely basic experience. One might ask how our human experience is (by intuition at least) relatively far richer, more complex, etc. than other animals, and the answer lies

in the concept of nexus – another category of Whitehead’s to which I will give due diligence later. The second – that causation must be able to admit experience if we are to be realists about experience – is also clearly given its due. Not only is experience a *possible* effect of cause, but to be affected just is to experience, on this metaphysical scheme. Third, Process metaphysics grounds a notion of causation that lines up quite well with intuition. Just as common sense conceives of causation as an event (largely) determining how the next one manifests, so Process metaphysics gives this notion structure in the dyadic relation between actual occasions, where an actual occasion prehends past events and assimilates them into its own dynamic manifestation.

Process and Time

I discussed in the last major section the relations among actual occasions as they pertain to the phases of prehension and concrescence. But why the second phase, that of self-determination? Why couldn’t reality be “static” such that all events are identical? Recall that this structure of Process in fact embodies yet another concept – time. The actual occasion gives structure to the becoming of the future out of the past, and therefore gives structure to time; the exact same structure, in fact, as both causation and experience. Again, all three concepts are fundamentally aspects of the same relation – grounded in this metaphysical structure, and simply instantiated from different explanatory perspectives. If causation is Process as conceived of in terms of “causal powers”, and experience is Process as conceived of in terms of an “experiencing subject”, then what is time? I argue that time, as a concept, is the metrical abstraction of Process.

To clarify further, let us consider Process philosophy's answers to Zeno's paradoxes⁹ regarding time. After all, if we are attempting to give structure to time itself, we must satisfactorily answer these kinds of pressing metaphysical problems. First, do we mean to say that an event has infinitesimal duration? Or that an event has a set duration? *Prima facie* either one seems problematic. Second, do we mean to say that the change from event to event is an infinitesimal change? Or do the "event parameters" change by some set amount between events? To clarify: when contemplating an event, one's intuition is prone to visualize some tiny segment of – or point on – a "timeline" wherein time is represented spatially, as physicists and other scientists are apt to do, creating conditions for the possibility of imposing a metrical structure thereon – "geometrizing" the concept of a measurable duration. This is the metrical abstraction of Process that is time. In being able to measure duration, we as thinkers gained a valuable tool. However, this was at the cost of taking the fundamentally dynamic and attempting to apply static labels – labels such as ticks on a timeline. But once we shrug off the prejudice that renders us prone to want to spatialize time, the concept of Process becomes clearer. Measuring duration caused us to abstract away the dynamic as static; Process philosophy invites us to do the opposite – to take what we assume as static and ground it back into dynamicism. Every "point" on a "timeline" is nothing more than the active becoming of the future out of the past – a dynamic Process. With this basic assumption, it becomes clear why there is no universal time to speak of, and why the subjective feeling of time passing can vary wildly. It also answers Zeno directly. The question regarding the duration of an

⁹ Zeno's paradoxes, first put forth by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea (ca. 495 – 430 B.C.E.), attempted to show that plurality (in the spatial sense) and change (in the temporal sense) were illusory. The paradox is usually stated as: Imagine a distance or duration. One must reach the halfway point of said distance or duration before one can reach the end. This must be repeated for each consecutive half-distance or half-duration. But then it would seem that before getting to the end of a "finite" distance or duration, one has moved infinitely through space, or infinitely through time.

event is a nonsensical question on the face of it, because Process cannot be spatialized. “Infinitesimally long” only makes sense in a spatially visualized framework¹⁰. Likewise, the concept of “amount of change from event to event” is logically and epistemically reduced to a metrical abstraction, where change can only be conceived of as a comparison of one measurement to another at different times. Not only does this presuppose the spatialization of time, but it also confuses the comparative difference between two condescended occasions as they are measured with the dynamic phase of self-determination mentioned earlier. If further clarification on how relations could possibly ground relata is needed, I refer the reader to the extensive research done in Ontic Structural Realism (Ladyman, et. al, 2007 [5]; Rickles and Landry, 2012 [6], etc.) and other metaphysical theories that share this essential notion. In these theories, it is the relations themselves (in the case of Process philosophy, the relations being essentially dynamic, understood above by way of reciprocity) that are fundamental and serve to ground the measurable relata.

Process and Experience

Three more foreseeable questions remain: First, why does prehension necessarily need to be experiential in nature? It is surely very similar to our conception of experience, but perhaps this is our error. Perhaps, as an epiphenomenalist might posit, the prehension *sans* experience does all of the explanatory work, and experience simply supervenes on prehension¹¹. This objection deserves a paper of its own, and thankfully, philosopher Anderson Weekes has already deigned to write one. In his work *Consciousness and Causation* [8], he says,

[Whitehead] proposes that experience isn't just a paradigm case of Process, but the key to its essential structure. All Process involves the emergence of something ever so briefly

¹⁰ Presupposing of course a metrical space, i.e. the very mathematical principle of “geometrizing” an extension

¹¹ See Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism or Something Near Enough* [7].

mind-like out of the physical, creating some modicum of both novelty and continuity through an assimilation and accommodation between what already is and what is, more or less creatively, just now becoming.

Weekes 427

Process metaphysics completely reconceptualizes experience, as panexperientialism has as its two important consequences that experience is ubiquitous and real, but also that our own experience is not as special as we would like to believe.

The Nexus

Even though I won't develop further exposition of this category of Whitehead's until later, the question remains from earlier what a nexus is and how it solves the problem of answering at once how our human experience is not as special as we usually conceive it to be, but also how it is certainly far richer as compared to the experience of, say, a rock. In this chapter, I will outline what is meant by a nexus of Process, and I will explain how it resolves this dilemma in Chapter 2. At present, consider the concept of "nexus" in common parlance to be very similar to what Whitehead has in mind, though not entirely. In Whitehead's own words: "A nexus is a set of actual entities in the unity of the relatedness constituted by their prehensions of each other, or – what is the same thing conversely expressed – constituted by their objectifications in each other" (Whitehead, *PR*, 24). This establishes that a nexus involves multiple actual occasions and is defined primarily by their relatedness to one another. Furthermore, this relatedness takes on the character of Process – that of causation, experience, and time as one, as explicated in the section before. Whitehead submits a subcategory under the category of nexus, which he terms "society". A society is a nexus with a "defining characteristic". What our normal experience lends us to

perceive, therefore, are mostly societies. Objects, cells, molecules, etc. are all societies of actual occasions, with a certain structure or defining characteristic. The line between societal nexus and non-societal nexus is not a hard one. Likewise, any said defining characteristic will never capture a nexus's full structure, but such are the limits of language. Regardless, however, such a subcategory "...serves to link [Whitehead's] speculative conception of actual entities with entities of ordinary experience, such as material bodies and living organisms (including cells and molecules)" [9].

Process as Ground

Here there may be one final point of confusion or contention. Did we not introduce our ontological primitive as a structured event? If so, then are there many of these events, all extended in reality, relating to one another through time, space, etc.? Not necessarily. As James Bradley writes in *Whitehead and the Analysis of the Propositional Function* [10]:

Contrary to ... maintaining that ... occasions are extensive, tiny little contents of the world, I have argued ... that the various categories of Whitehead's theory of Process constitute a *new* kind of transcendental analysis: they are transcendental conditions of actualization. (As such, ... occasions are not themselves extensive but are the conditions of extension.) ... Moreover, [Whitehead] can sidestep the debate between empiricists and Kantians on the relative priority of time and causation, for both find their condition in the transcendental recursive series [of Process].

Bradley 153-4

Process is not the metaphysical substructure of matter-energy and the causation it undergoes; it is the modal and metaphysical substructure of reality itself; at least, any reality wherein time,

causation, or experience are concepts that mean anything at all. In short, it is the metaphysical substructure of an enormous amount of conceivable realities. Although this may seem a daring claim, the philosophical problems and questions such an axiom can address are myriad.

Chapter II.

Process Metaphysics as Applied to Various Domains of Inquiry

In Chapter I, I stated that I would address the eliminativist position on conscious experience. I will first answer this thoroughly and in doing so explore what a philosophy of mind looks like through the lens of this metaphysics, before moving on to other domains of inquiry, such as psychology and even semantics. This exercise will set the stage for how to approach the subject of metaethics.

First-Personhood of Conscious Experience

One of the most often-contested claims about consciousness by the eliminativists is that consciousness involves a phenomenon which cannot be described or arrived at through third-person means – that is, the observation and reasoning thereon of scientific methodology¹². Such a claim is expressed in different ways, whether by way of David Chalmers’s original formulation of the hard problem¹³, Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument¹⁴, or Thomas Nagel’s famous stipulation about bats¹⁵. All three of these posit the phenomenon of first-person knowledge: knowledge that cannot be arrived at without being oneself and only oneself. I will not delve into a defense of this position, but it seems most philosophers who hold the hard problem to be a legitimate problem consider this the crucial point. If detractors of this concept point to, as one of their reasons for

¹² See, for instance, Daniel Dennett [11].

¹³ Again, how could the physical processes as described by science lead to the rich phenomenal experience of consciousness?

¹⁴ The knowledge argument in philosophy of mind is a thought experiment involving Mary the color scientist who has access to all possible third-person knowledge about color perception, but who has never seen color herself. One day she is let out of her colorless lab and allowed to see a red rose. Does she learn anything new? [12]

¹⁵ Nagel famously argued that though one know everything there possibly is to know *about* a bat, one can never know *what it is like to be* a bat. [13]

denying it, the apparent fact that there is no grounding for such a phenomenon, Process philosophy at least answers that qualm. A proposed solution is stated by, again, philosopher Anderson Weekes: “Notice first of all that ... experience, whether it is conscious or not, must be entirely a private affair. An occasion can never be prehended by another before its own subjective enjoyment has perished¹⁶, making the act (but not the object) of experience wholly private” (Weekes, *CC*, 447). I believe that most of the argumentation between the eliminativists and the consciousness-realists revolve around this point. Moreover, though the former traditionally have a legitimate point against the latter in the nonexistence of an explanation for such first-personhood, Process metaphysics gives us a straightforward ground for how such a phenomenon is possible.

In the introduction to this section, I promised to satisfy even the common assumptions about consciousness which many philosophers of mind relegate to mistaken folk psychology. To bolster this argument, I will be borrowing heavily from the great Process thinker David Griffin, in his paper titled *Consciousness as Subjective Form* [14]. Griffin recalls that Whitehead “endeavor[s] to interpret experience in accordance with the overpowering deliverance of common sense” (Whitehead, *PR*, 50). What would these overpowering common-sense notions be? Griffin lists four: “...that conscious experience exists, that it exerts an influence upon the body, that it has a degree of self-determining freedom, and that it can act in accord with various norms” (Griffin, *CSF*, 177). Let’s examine each of these in turn and discuss how Process philosophy elucidates an explanation for each.

¹⁶ In other words, its own phases, especially prehension, have already played out. Furthermore, it is coherent to use temporal language here given that this relation is also one of time itself, grounding the concreated occasion as past and the prehending occasion as present-into-future.

Ontological Status of Consciousness

As for how such consciousness is possible (i.e. the hard problem), the panexperientialism inherent within Process metaphysics offers a satisfying answer. Griffin writes:

If we hold that neurons are sentient¹⁷, the insoluble problem of how conscious experience could emerge out of insentient neurons does not arise. Even McGinn grants this point, saying that if we could suppose neurons to have ‘proto-conscious states,’ it would be ‘easy enough to see how neurons could generate consciousness’ (McGinn, 1991, 28n).

Griffin *CSF* 187

Recall the previous discussion on the concept of nexus. Consciousness is indeed a nexus, and certainly a society. Its defining characteristic may be regarded as its inordinate complexity and interrelatedness to both its immediate organismal body and its environment. Specifically, human consciousness as a society also admits abstract thought as a defining characteristic. It should be noted again, however, that there is no hard line between this kind of experiential society and the experiential society of lesser organisms, or even non-life. There are only differences in the level of complexity of the nexus therein, and the specific form they take. Process metaphysics therefore offers a theory characterized by epistemic humility, bringing us and the world closer on the ontological landscape. Not only do other organisms (and perhaps the machines we create) have a complex experience rarely appreciated, but our fragile consciousness is not as exceptional as we often believe it to be. Indeed, Process philosophy does answer the hard problem, but reframes consciousness completely, forcing us to think differently about its relation to the world around us.

¹⁷ “Sentient” here meaning possessing experience, not possessing thought of some kind.

Mental Causation

The second common sense assumption about consciousness is that it exerts an influence upon the body. This is where most philosophers will attribute common sense to be mistaken. However, Process philosophy gives us a framework to at least give this commonsensical notion its due diligence, without appealing to dualist interactionism or some other counterintuitive metaphysical notion. Instead, this assumption can be slightly modified so as to mesh with our metaphysics here: consciousness is an integral and essential part of the causal chain that results in (a significant portion of) bodily action. Recall that, in chapter 1, it was discussed how Process philosophy could answer the “causal closure” objection. Griffin agrees, and elaborates:

Rather than, with materialists, thinking of billiard-ball collisions as paradigmatic [of causation] or, with dualists, thinking in terms of two radically different kinds of causation and then wondering how [they] can interact, panexperientialism conceives of all causation as ... analogous to the transference of feeling between two moments of our own experience.

Griffin *CSF* 188

It therefore follows that our conscious experience influences our body; indeed, experience is how influence itself manifests.

Freedom of the Will

The third assumption is that we act with a degree of self-determining freedom. This, of course, is built directly into Process metaphysics at its core. The second phase of all actual occasions is creative self-determination.

... [Whitehead] did not have to explain how our experience, with its great capacity for self-determination, could have arisen out of entities that interacted in a wholly deterministic way. ... Rather, compound individuals with increasingly more mentality emerged out of ones with less.

Griffin *CSF* 188

The natural objection to this premise is the observation that even if, say, quantum mechanics were truly nondeterministic, doesn't physics normalize to determinism at a macroscopic scale? There are two major points to consider here, without even delving into physics itself, *per se*. The first is that Whitehead, like Peirce and James, was descriptionist rather than prescriptionist about "laws of nature" such as those which would be described as deterministic. The second is that pattern, such as that described by the "laws of nature" we have observed, has no quarrel with creative self-determination. Creativity – in this context meaning spontaneity, or true indeterminism – with no pattern would be utter chaos, but if there were no creativity then time would simply not be what it is. Reality is ever-changing, and though the present is forever closed to the past and future, the latter boundary is constantly transcended to bring about new present moments, characterized by actual occasions vis-à-vis an experiencing subject. Determinism postulates that these future events are fully and completely determined, and that the only definite property they lack is being in the present. Process philosopher Charles Hartshorne argues against those who would suggest that "before events happen, they lack nothing except a totally transparent, featureless something called 'occurrence'. To some of us this is truly an absurdity. If becoming does not create new quality and quantity, ... it creates nothing, and nothing ever really becomes" (Hartshorne, *LP*, 165) [15]. If, along with Hartshorne, this seems absurd, one must be willing to affirm the opposite: that the structure of time – the structure of Process – is creative in nature. In so affirming, it follows that

an extremely complex, integrated society of Process like one's conscious self would also be creative in nature. Therefore, we have in hand a coherent explanation as to how our conscious self could act with a degree of self-determining freedom.

The fourth assumption, recalling back to Griffin's original listing, was that one can act in accord with various norms. This is more accurately stated as: that consciousness can discern norms with which one can act in accord. As this directly alludes to metaethics, a discussion on this assumption will be tabled until chapter 3.

The Modern View

Before applying Process thought to a few more domains of inquiry, there is one more assumption about consciousness, not mentioned by Griffin, to which Process philosophy gives a satisfactory answer. The modern view of consciousness, that of a subjective "container" into and from which experiential "contents" are put and discarded moment-to-moment, raises some peculiar metaphysical questions indeed. For instance, "... how can consciousness be conscious of (i.e. "contain") matter? ... Or, how can consciousness be conscious of the past, that is, how can the present (present consciousness) contain the past?" (Weekes, *CC*, 453). On traditional metaphysical models, these are simply intractable. The first seems to restrict one to phenomenalism – as clearly consciousness can only ever perceive or discern the phenomenal properties of matter and never it as it is – and the second cannot possibly occur, by definition of present and past. On a Process view, however, these are readily answered. Consciousness can clearly be conscious of matter, if we take consciousness to mean experience and matter to mean physical reality as it manifests efficient causation. The experienced simply is the physical cause, and the physical effect simply is the experience. And the past? This, too, follows directly. Once again, to be "in the past" is to be concreated and therefore able to be prehended. The immediate

past is in fact all that experience *can* directly relate to. So, this modern view of consciousness, while it does not capture the essence of what consciousness is, should not be misconstrued as misguided or unmotivated. I qualify my point here to remind the reader that even all that exposition comes nowhere close to a summary of the literature on Process philosophy of mind. It is hopefully enough, however, to serve our purposes looking ahead into our metaethical questions.

Process and the Self

Let us briefly touch on just a couple more domains of inquiry on which Process philosophy can comment valuably, and which will help in our discussions of metaethics – namely, personhood and semantics. Both will undoubtedly prove instrumental regarding the upcoming metaethical issues. To analyze these issues, I will be standing on the shoulders of yet another great Process thinker, Nicholas Rescher, and his 2003 work *The Promise of Process Philosophy* [16]. Let us start with personhood – that is, answering the question “what does it mean to be a person?” Since this specific question usually carries considerable ethical baggage, perhaps we can first answer the question “what does it mean to be me?” That is, what is the self? David Hume was skeptical of the substantialist view of the self, as he writes in *Treatise of Human Nature, Part II* [17]:

From what impression could this idea be derived? ... For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble upon some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.

Hume *THN2* [Appx]

Hume is correct here, though the substantialist dualist would argue that of course the self can never be perceived since it is the perceiver, and therefore the substantial self’s existence must always be

inferred rather than observed. Descartes's first move epistemically was to attempt just this by famously stating "cogito, ergo sum". I argue that Descartes got this move only slightly wrong. Instead of an induction from a coherent yet complex process of thinking and experiencing to a substantial, unitary "self", the latter is an abstraction from the former. However, Process philosophy does not wish to dissolve the self into obsolescence. On the contrary, rather than being unitary in substance, the self is instead *unified* in the societal nexus of mind. Rescher elaborates:

Once we conceptualize the core "self" of a person as a bundle of actual and potential processes ... then we have a concept of personhood that renders the self or ego experientially accessible, seeing that experiencing itself simply *consists* of the exercise of such processes¹⁸. In a Process-oriented approach, the self or ego (the constituting core of a person as such, that is, as the particular person he or she is) is simply a megaprocess – *a structured system of processes*,¹⁹ a cohesive and (relatively) stable center of agency.

Rescher *PPP* 58

Perhaps there could still be pushback against the idea that the self could be constituted by a nexus of Process – that this concept deflates the notion of a self to the point that it is nearly meaningless. But this is not so. Consider an analogy put forth by Evan Thompson in his *Waking, Dreaming, Being* [18], where he analogizes what he calls the "mind-body aggregate" (or, more accurately on our theory, one's cognitive processes) to a mirror and the self to an image therein:

The self is like an image in a mirror. The image depends for its existence on the mirror – the mirror is the basis for the image – but the image isn't one and the same thing as the

¹⁸ Recall that experience-experienced is one of the fundamental relations involved in all Process.

¹⁹ This is clearly similar to the previously-exposed Whiteheadian nexus and, in this case, society.

mirror, nor is it made of the same stuff as the mirror, for as an image it exists only in relation to an observer. The mirror image, though mind dependent, isn't a subjective illusion. Nevertheless, the way that the self appears does involve an illusion ... The illusion – or delusion – is taking the self to have an independent existence, like taking the mirror image to be really in the mirror.

Thompson *WDB* 364

If calling the essence of a person a societal nexus of Process – when I have given molecules and cells as examples of societies as well – seems demeaning in some way, as if our personal livelihood were no different in kind (or no more important, even!) than the life cycle of a mitochondria, it should be noted that Process philosophy is decidedly nonreductionist. The metaphysical structure is the same with regards to all “levels” of nature, and there is no “privileged level” upon which all other levels are grounded. For instance, it would be a mistake to say that a human being is the way they are simply in virtue of all of their particles being the way they are. Likewise, it would be a mistake to say that a human being is the way they are simply in virtue of the universe being the way it is. Recall, again,²⁰ that Process is not extended in space and time, but rather the condition for the possibility of extension. Accordingly, metrical size is a result, rather than a contributing parameter, of a society of Process. The causal-experiential structure is the only characteristic of note. This can be analyzed at multiple levels, and though the metaphysics holds true at all levels, no one level is privileged above the rest. It makes perfect sense to talk about the nexus of an atom and, in the same breath, refer to the nexus of a galactic supercluster. That being said, it is clear to see that the causal-experiential structure of the human brain is unlike any other

²⁰ Page 10

organism that we as of yet know of in terms of its richness and depth. Its ability to think, imagine, consciously choose, etc., are what set it apart in terms of its defining characteristics. In this way, the very fact that both human persons and complex molecules are societies of Process should not be a cause to doubt human beings' exceptional place in the world.

Process Semantics

I move to the final point of setup before introducing the metaethical scheme, and that is semantics. One of the fundamental suppositions of our metaphysical scheme here is that the dynamicism of Process is fundamental and grounds any object- or substance-based ontology that we might want to construct. Therefore, a more accurate semantics than our heavily noun-based common English would be one centered around dynamic process. What this would entail would be changing all nouns to gerunds and all adjectives to adverbs. This particular transformation of semantics was in fact suggested by Donald Davidson [19]. For instance, in traditional subject-predicate semantics, one encounters the problem of nonexistent individuals. Rescher recalls the example, first put forward by Gottlob Frege [20], of connoting 'Pegasus' with the predicate 'winged horse': "Pegasus is a winged horse". But how is this statement to make any sense, when neither exist? "How are we then to avert the awkward consequence that the truistic premise 'winged horse (Pegasus)' does not yield the patently false conclusion '($\exists x$) x is a winged horse'?" (Rescher, *PPP*, 62). The answer is to convert the statement to a Process semantics: "Pegasizing is winged-horsing" or, more, precisely, "Pegasizing instantiates the processual structure of winged horsing". And we can clarify by saying that for all existence, no Pegasizing is occurring.²¹ In

²¹ I will in fact argue against Rescher on a minor point, which is that a Process semantics should be accompanied by spatial positioning in order to indexicalize a certain process. Instead, such indexes ought to be relational in nature, relying on the ontological category of nexus rather than the nebulous concept of absolute position in space.

Rescher's words, "In general, a Process semantics must accomplish with verbs and adverbs what a semantics of individuals accomplishes with properties and relations. When the one says, 'X has the property F' the other says, 'X functions F-ly'" (Rescher, *PPP*, 64). While Process semantics does not presume itself a panacea to all semantical problems, it is a compelling part of Process methodology in analyzing a given problem, question, or set of premises. I argue in the next chapter that it is particularly invaluable at dissecting the semantics of morality.

Chapter III

Process Metaphysics and the Ontological Status of Moral Value

Given such a metaphysical theory, how are we to make sense of the ontology of ethics? Certainly, there are concerns in metaethics that do not entail a recourse to metaphysics – however, a comprehensive metaphysics should be able to inform one’s metaethical theorizing in principle and in practice. Debates concerning the semantics of moral statements can be informed by a Process semantics. Debates between realism and antirealism more generally can be informed by the more fundamental aspects of Process ontology, while debates concerning methodology of discernment can be informed by the Process concept of nexus. We will analyze each of these debates in turn and see where the clarifications offered by Process philosophy lead, on the metaethical landscape.

Process and Moral Statements

The first question that a metaethical theory should be able to answer is, “What do people mean when they utter a moral statement?” This question can be analyzed in different ways, both purely semantically and with regards to what exactly the referents in such a statement are. Consider the first: applying Process semantics to a simple moral statement such as “Killing is wrong” is quite straightforward. We can transform this into “Killing is acting wrongly”, or, more precisely, “The set of processes characterized by ‘killing’ is within the set of processes characterized by ‘acting wrongly’”. These characterizations, as said before, pertain to causal-experiential structure. Whether or not one agrees with this final statement, it is a far more clearly announced claim, which can be analyzed further. But the original, untransformed statement here already implies dynamic action and so naturally lends itself to Process semantics. What about one which deals

with (allegedly static) situations? Consider the statement “My situation is good”. In Process semantics, this becomes “Situation-ing I-ly is acting well”. While this seems nonsensical, it need not be. It may make more sense to say, “Happenings directly related to the society ‘me’²² are happening well”. In other words, to describe one’s situation as good is to describe the structure of the processes acting upon oneself²³. The error in the original statement is conceptualizing a situation as, again, a point in time – an indexable thing with a property, rather than a set of ever-dynamic processes with relational structure as pertaining to other processes. A third case of moral statement might be when things, and not acts or situations, are described as immoral. For example: “Pornography is immoral”. In Process semantics, this becomes “Pornography-ing is acting immorally”. Unfortunately, in this statement, we can see that we are left with much ambiguity. What exactly does one mean by “pornography-ing”? One cannot mean any and every process involving the ‘thing’ itself, or that would admit deleting it, burning it, etc. And surely the person making such a statement would want to say that those actions are good. He or she would need to qualify quite a lot in order to make this statement precise when transformed to a Process semantics. For instance, “Creating pornography is immoral”. This would become “Pornography-creating is acting immorally”. This, like the first example, is simple to parse and analyze further.

Why is this type of transformation a valuable tool? In each case, the moral characteristic is normalized to an adverb. If it can’t be, the statement is ambiguous and in need of further qualification. This has potentially wide-reaching implications. First, we can easily see why some have perceived the is-ought gap²⁴ to be unbridgeable. For those who have looked for moral

²² Recall the Process view of the self.

²³ We can also put this statement into far more precise set theoretic terms, as we did for the first example, but this somewhat less precise structure serves our purposes well enough.

²⁴ A term made famous by David Hume, sometimes referred to as “Hume’s Guillotine”. Hume attempted to show that one could never, even in principle, get from a set of descriptive statements to a normative one. That is, that one cannot induce moral value from observation.

properties within the realm of things, the moral character of events was sure to be elusive, as we illustrated with the third example in the preceding paragraph. Attempting to situate morality in a primarily thing or substance-based ontology was almost surely a venture to prove itself a non-starter. We can even construct a relatively straightforward error theory as to why this happens. For instance, one can say that a certain pornographic image is tan in color, and one can say that the image is immoral. However, though it makes sense to convert the first into Process semantics – “Emitting photons that-image-ly is emitting photons tan-ly” – we have already discussed why the second does not transform coherently. This is because, though the processual characterization of color is straightforward and known in full by science, the processual characterization of morality is not straightforward at all and hardly agreed upon by philosophers. This is no accident, of course. It is extremely likely that such a simple statement (“That image is immoral”) cannot be transformed into Process semantics and stay coherent at the same time. But this is not necessarily a particular issue produced or delivered for Process semantics per se – it is instead an issue with lack of qualification and therefore obscurity of meaning. The same problem obtains with simple descriptive statements, if one presupposes a substantival ontology. Consider: “Roller coasters increase one’s heart rate”. Surely the analogy is clear – one must qualify with regards to riding them, designing them, looking up at them, etc. It is no small consideration that any moral speech which takes this basic form, and the theorizing based on it, commits this fundamental error.

Process and Consequence

As follows naturally from our metaphysical scheme, moral properties, if they exist, must exist as properties – here meaning aspects of relational structure – of dynamic processes, and not as properties that singular things or situations could have. One direct result of this paradigm shift is that, demonstrated in the second example earlier, it is a mistake to conceive of situations as

having inherent value; they therefore cannot be the grounding for the ethicality of action. Consider the Process semantical transformation of a simple consequentialist²⁵ statement such as, “Flipping the switch is good because the resultant situation if I do will be better than the alternative”. Our transformation gives, “This instance of switch-flipping is acting ethically. Said ethicality is grounded in the ethicality of the situation-ing resulting from said switch-flipping, as compared to the ethicality of the situation-ing resulting from non-switch-flipping”. But it is quite clear that this creates an infinite regress. If a property of processes now is always grounded in the same property of processes at some time in the future, this pushes the grounding relation infinitely into the future. This is untenable, and so the ground for morality must be found elsewhere.

Realism vs Antirealism

Whether morality is a property of things or processes, the main issues of metaethics still obtain: What does one mean by the good? Is it an abstract ideal, best likened to a Platonic Form? Is it a real property in the external world, just like electrical charge or distance? Or is it a constructed concept, useful to humans in societal configurations but ultimately supervenient upon – or even nonexistent within – the best description of the physical world? Or could moral properties simply be ascriptions of disfavor by uniquely human minds, projecting emotion or something close thereto upon the world? All of these views could, in principle, incorporate Process philosophy’s stress upon dynamicism rather than staticity. However, there is one which coheres the best with the specific metaphysical scheme offered here.

²⁵ Consequentialism in ethics is a broad camp that attempts to ground the ethicality of a given action in how much net good it will bring about, i.e. the best action is the one that produces the best consequences. The meaning of the term “consequences” here can be further clarified as two or more different resultant situations at some future time *t*, one of which will (likely or certainly) come about as a direct result of a certain action now.

I start by addressing the second question here: “Are moral properties and physical properties such as electrical charge alike in their ontological status?” To be able to approach this, we must recall what Process philosophy has to say about physical properties, which is that they are a stable pattern of dynamic structure. A red pigment is not red because it has some “essence” which makes it so²⁶. It is rather red because the process of photons absorbing into and/or reflecting upon the pigment is relatively stable such that those reflected predominate in the “red” part of the electromagnetic spectrum. To answer the rejoinder questioning if that pigment were to stay red even if no photon were to ever hit it again is to emphasize that such properties are dispositional and thus counterfactual-supporting. The Process answer would be that in that case, at least as it pertains to the pigment, the word “red” has lost all meaning – as the ascription’s referent is an actual relational predicate, hence indexed in a particular context, denoting a particular process – and so such a statement will as well. But this in fact elucidates an important observation: If morality is a property of processes involving humans²⁷, then Process philosophy can confidently say that if no humans were around, then the morality we refer to would cease to carry any meaning. This assessment eliminates a few of the more fundamentally realist positions in morality regarding the ontological status of norms (such as the Neo-Platonism alluded to in the first question before). Even with this formulation, morality so conceived as a normative dimension concerning particular societies (in the Process metaphysical sense) is as real or actual as any nexus, even if that existence is contingent upon human interaction. But, on the other hand, the processes able to be referred to by moral concepts can only arise in relation to human experience, lending seeming credence to the noncognitivist’s claims regarding morality as an expression and projection of feeling.

²⁶ As in the case of Moliere’s satirical example of “dormitive virtue” as the explanatory principle for a sleeping potion.

²⁷ I of course want to tell an evolutionary story here, so I do not doubt whatsoever that less cognitively complex animals have a kind of proto-morality. However, here we are focusing on humanity and what we mean by “moral”.

Sensibility Theory

The relevant question to ask, then, is this: are these two options in fact mutually exclusive, as they first appear to be? I will argue that they are not, and that there exists a well-illustrated theory which meshes extremely well with Process philosophy and its commitments both to realism and the efficacy of experience. On the views of the sensibility theorists such as John McDowell and David Wiggins, the editors of *Moral Discourse and Practice* [21] write:

[These thinkers] have drawn inspiration from the idea that normative or evaluative judgments might bear some analogy to ... judgments essentially tied to the exercise of certain human sensibilities.

...

Noncognitivism has, in their view, rightly stressed the contribution of sentiment to moral judgment, but wrongly forced such judgments into the mold of expressive projection. Intuitionism has, again in their view, rightly stressed the cognitive aspects of value judgment, but wrongly forced such judgments into the mold of detecting a special realm of independently existing properties.

...

McDowell made possible a significant innovation within ... cognitivism by showing ... [that] the very sensibility that gives individuals the capacity to discern these sensibility-tied properties could, he urged, necessarily involve possession of certain affective or conative propensities.

The above quote contains many themes to consider. Firstly, what is moral sensibility theory? Though a myriad of works on sensibility theory have been written, I will attempt to give a brief summary here. Sensibility theory proposes that moral properties are largely dependent upon a feature of human minds known as a moral sensibility. The relation goes the other way, such that a moral sensibility is a human's capacity to perceive moral properties in the world. If this seems *ad hoc*, let us use humor as a direct analogy²⁸. To describe something as humorous would make no sense whatsoever if humans did not exist. Likewise, if humor did not exist then not only would there be nothing by which a sense of humor is affected, but also statements such as "That was funny!" would be meaningless. The sensibility theorists see great potential within this analogy and others like it. As discussed in the previous quote, this scheme preserves moral meaning's heavy dependence on human experience, both generally and to each particular event as it arises. However, it preserves in full the cognitive content of moral statements. How does it do this? Consider again the humor analogy and imagine there exists an individual bereft of a sense of humor completely. Could said person still take the statements "Every joke comedian A tells is funny" and "Joke X is a joke comedian A tells" and deduce the conclusion "Therefore, joke X is funny"? Absolutely. And this is sound logical deduction (if a bit far-fetched in reality). In just the same way, sensibility theory avoids all of the semantic problems that have long fraught noncognitivism, such as the Frege-Geach Problem²⁹, and so distinguishes itself as a theory which attempts to give due diligence to expression and/or sentiment and yet stay fully cognitive.

²⁸ This analogy is used by McDowell; unfortunately, as his illustration of this analogy is quite verbose and lengthy, I decided to paraphrase here.

²⁹ The Frege-Geach Problem (put forth in [22]) is a problem for noncognitivism which demonstrates how different replacements of moral statements in different ways (such as "Boo! X" or "I don't like X") cannot be true replacements, as moral statements can figure into logical deductions, formalized like any other. For instance, "If X is wrong, then Y is also wrong. X is wrong. Therefore, Y is also wrong" would collapse when these statements are transformed into the "Boo! X" form. The deduction is no longer logically valid and so this cannot be what we are really saying when we make moral statements.

Process Metaethics

Perhaps there is a concern that this explanation is circular. That is, if an event is ethical in virtue of human moral sensibility discerning it negatively, and a certain human sensibility is a moral one in virtue of its discerning the ethicality of events, this seems to create problems. As Darwall et al write, “A peg that fits a round hole has a particular shape; so does a hole that fits a square peg; but what shape in particular do an otherwise unspecified peg and hole have thanks to the fact that they fit each other?” (Darwall et al, *MDP*, 21). However, on our metaphysical scheme, this problem can be easily resolved, because it manifests the exact same structure as the hard problem. Said another way, “An experience resulting from an unethical event has a particular structure; so does the cause of a negative moral sensibility experience; but what shape in particular do an otherwise unspecified experience and cause have thanks to the fact that they fit each other?” This is akin to asking, “What form does mental/physical interaction take?” Once again, our metaphysical scheme is able to reframe and solve this problem easily. The phenomenon itself is a unified process; it is only our cognitive biases that tempt us to frame either side as a separate thing, i.e. unethicality as a cause of some experience or other and negative moral sensibility as an experience of some cause or other. Once again, we have fallen into the trap of conceiving the relation as the grounding for the relation rather than the other way around. Just as causation, experience, and time are abstractions birthed from different explanatory perspectives on the more fundamental metaphysical ground of dynamic and relational Process, so too ethicality and moral sensibility are the physical and mental – i.e. causal and experiential – abstractions from the underlying value-laden Process which connects humanity to the world. On this account, our metaethics is *still realist*, because to say a given event is unethical is to say that the relation between that event and the world of human experience is laden with negative value. This perspective directly solves the peg-and-

hole dilemma by allowing the relation between peg and hole itself do the explanatory work. No reference need be made to purely abstract things such as shapes. One can describe how the system really changes as one fits the pieces together, and their dynamic relation within the process. This dynamic relation, and not the abstracted, static “shape” property, is what grounds their “fitting together in such and such a way”. So, too, the causal-experiential relation between event and moral sensibility *just is* the ground for value we are looking for. Similarly, the causal-experiential relation between delivering a joke and eliciting a laugh is where humor will be found. Neither concept can be found in the mind or the world, for both are instantiated in the relation between the two. We can now freely discuss events as being ethical or unethical, as long as we keep in mind that, just like in talking about causation, experience, or time as concepts in isolation, this concept (that of an event having objective moral value devoid of relation to human experience) is an abstraction from the true relational ground of value.

We now have in hand an ontological ground for moral value. But the question of “What do we mean by morality?” does not only admit ontological grounding as an interpretation. It also admits what might be called the practical meaning of the term; that is, people generally use the term to what end? Most people have not pondered on the ontological status of moral value, but they use normative statements every day. It might even be argued that, outside academic circles, this is the only meaningful definition of the word. This is still within the realm of metaethics, though it incorporates semantics and even empirical linguistic considerations. I will take for granted that – whatever precise meaning it may carry for each person – there is a special character to something being moral, and that is that it greatly affects one’s conscious action. One also expects an action being moral or immoral to greatly affect others’ conscious actions in the same way. This is, in fact, what McDowell argues is a salient piece of sensibility theory as opposed to other

theories: If human moral sensibility is tied intimately together with the conscious, motivational reasoning of our minds, it could be said that one property of moral sensibility itself is that it has the capacity to elicit a conative response different in kind than other motives – a conative response having to do with instantiating/furthering such an event as is experienced, or refraining from instantiating/halting such an event³⁰. To follow the humor analogy, the humor sensibility (one’s sense of humor) has the capacity to elicit a response like laughter, or at least a rise in one’s spirits. What is so perspicuous about this observation is that, because humans have the capacity to imagine performing a certain action before acting, we can experience such imagined actions and our moral sensibility can then elicit a conative response thereon. This is one way in which moral sensibility differentiates itself from simple impulsive motivation.

Within such a framework, we can detail a story about one’s practical utterances about morality. When one hears about a given action by an agent and declares, “That was wrong”, the following is, on our Process view, what is at play: First, the statement can be better said in Process semantics: “Acting just like that was acting unethically”. The referent is a complex action and the claim is that that action’s causal-experiential structure was unethical in nature. Transforming the statement further via the sensibility theoretic relation³¹, that action’s causal-experiential structure was such as to produce moral disapproval in humans with a developed moral sensibility. (Recall that both facets – the unethicity and the moral response – are grounded in the value relation between the action and human experience more generally.) The latter part of such a statement implies that that action’s structure was such as to produce moral disapproval in the agent him or

³⁰ I am tempted to go out on a limb and say that this conative response is exactly what we refer to when we say “virtue”, though I will table that discussion for another day.

³¹ It is of utmost import to note here that this transformation is for practical purposes. One or the other side of this transformation is no more or less accurate, true, etc. than the other. Discussing the ethicality of an action without referring to moral sensibilities can be perfectly coherent.

herself, given both that the agent had imagined the action prior to taking it, and that the agent has a developed moral sensibility. So, we see that the crux of such a statement has in fact a lot to do about responsibility, right down at the simple linguistic level. What one is implying with such a statement is that the agent either did not think before he or she acted or did not have a developed moral sensibility, or perhaps manifested moral disapproval which was overshadowed by other motivational influences. So, the sensibility account makes clear some important distinctions in ethical responsibility as well.

Process and Particularism

There is, as I can foresee, one significant charge against this account, which I will address before concluding. That charge is found in Darwall et al, stated as:

Moreover, though there may be something to the idea of a “Gestalt” of value or obligatoriness when we experience certain simple and familiar cases, when we face more complex or novel moral questions where multiple tradeoffs and aggregation are involved, it looks as if any experienced “attraction” or “must” will be the result of a complex deliberation, not something that straightforwardly guides judgment. ... the blending of moral considerations may yet yield a *judgment* that a certain policy or course of action is best, or most just, but not thanks to any irresistible qualitative state to which one can attend closely and that guides judgment.

Darwall et al *MDP* 42

In other words, what methodology of discernment does this metaethics offer? It seems that most of what we actually do when contemplating complex situations is reason using moral principles. How can such principled reasoning mesh with a metaethics that, however realist, seems to be based

in some important ways on phenomenology? The answer here lies with the larger metaethical camp that Process metaethics finds itself within: moral particularism. I will not here give moral particularism a proper, in-depth defense, but I will provide a brief definition. Moral particularism's main claim is that moral principles are not where ethics is grounded; instead, the moral features of each unique event are particular to that event, hence particularism. How the scheme as I have laid it out entails moral particularism is straightforward. If value is grounded in the relation of each event to the world of human experience as it pertains to moral sensibility, it would follow that the ethicality of each event is also particular. If this is true, it would entail that, at best, moral principles are "crutches" of a sort for moral reasoning. They may still hold true in an abstract, statistical sense, however. One's statement of "Killing is wrong" can be just as true as "Dogs have four legs". Clearly, there are poor dogs who have lost a leg but are still obviously dogs. However, the statement holds true in an abstract, statistical sense. In the same way, there are certainly ethical forms of killing, e.g. shooting a would-be mass murderer, but the vast majority of killing is indeed wrong; and so, the principle also holds true in the same fashion.

So how do we arrive at such moral principles and weed out which ones are bad for reasoning? I would argue that these are arrived at through a methodology of moral experience and education (using one's moral sensibility) coupled with reflective equilibrium³². The moral principles at which we arrive through this methodology are extremely useful for analyzing such complex situations as this charge alludes to, and this is why we use them. Breaking down an event into all of its particular features – isolating causes, variables, effects, motives, etc. is utterly impractical for making ethical decisions in the real world. And so moral particularism has no quarrel with the methodology commonly used today – that of weighing moral principles. However,

³² See [23] for an illustration of this topic.

in a meta-ethical sense it should be noted that the reality of moral value can only be found in actuality, in the relation of each action's ethicality to a developed human moral sensibility.

Conclusion

The ambition of this thesis is well understood. I have attempted to not only detail a Process metaphysics that heavily borrows from A. N. Whitehead and others, but also differs from them in important ways. I have attempted to show how this metaphysics grounds the different aspects of reality, and which aspects are more fundamental to others. I have attempted to scale up this metaphysical scheme and apply its axioms to different domains of inquiry, such as consciousness, the self or personhood, and semantics. Finally, I used this same method to approach metaethics, and found my scheme to mesh quite nicely with important aspects of the sensibility theory of McDowell and others, though, again, there are important differences. I conclude not only that this simplified, yet bolder version of Process metaphysics is true – insofar as a metaphysical theory can be true – but also that it can solve a myriad of problems in multiple philosophical areas of inquiry, including being able to ground moral value in a satisfying manner.

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