

THE FALLACY OF MISPLACED CONCRETENESS

In doing our consulting work we have noticed over the years that not only we but many of our clients and colleagues have a strong, habitual and it seems largely unconscious habit of perceiving on-going, emergent processes (e.g. relating, communicating, experiencing) as relatively fixed things (e.g. the relationship, the present moment, the conversation, the experience) and themselves as separate from their experience of that particular thing, others and the world. This way of being is in our view a significant hindrance to getting into full, conscious contact with what is unfolding at any moment, in particular it seems to us if that moment is experienced as being full of difficult and challenging stimuli that trigger habitual defensive routines.

In contrast, process philosophy (which has existed for about 2'500-years) is a philosophical tradition that sees 'process as constituting an essential aspect of everything that exists – a commitment to the fundamental processual nature of the real' (Rescher, 1996 p. 8). Process philosophy points to a paradox that lies at the very root of our existence – *feeling solid while at the same time being in constant flux*. Your experience of, say, sitting behind your desk and reading these words at this very moment is not experienced by a thing that has a self called I or me, but you *are* this experiencing. In other words, to use words such as I, me, mine, myself is 'simply a convenient way of referring to a particular collection of mental and physical states' (Harvey, 1990 p. 51) that change from moment to moment as conditions change.

The great difficulty is that this self-construct seems so self-evident in everyday experience. It is embedded in the most deep-rooted characteristic of human thought and perception: the tendency to regard every object of experience or perception as a separate entity or "thing" having its separate concrete existence and identity and only secondarily related to other "things". Jeremy Hayward (1987) calls this mode of perception (...) "thing-thinking". But "thingness" or "inherent existence" is actually an imputation or attribution, not a characteristic of "things" – an instance of what Whitehead ... called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (Safran, 2003 p. 88).

We are intrigued by what it is like, what it takes and what implications it has for us as persons and consultants when we reframe and retrain our habitual abstract attitude into an increased ability to experience the process of living, that is, if we turned life into living, relationships into relating, the present moment into presencing, identity into identitying and so forth. Granted, all somewhat awkward and artificial sounding terms, but nevertheless we feel potentially useful ways of thinking because...

...what people commonly think of as concrete objects are actually successions of occasions of experience. Occasions of experience can be collected into groupings; something complex such as a human being is thus a grouping of many smaller occasions of experience. According to Whitehead, everything in the universe is characterized by experience ...; there is no mind-body duality under this system, because "mind" is simply seen as a very developed kind of experiencing.
(<http://wikipedia.com>.)

In short, the challenge it seems to us is to be 'present in embodied everyday experience ... [and] to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations, back from the abstract attitude, to the situation of one's experience' (Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 1993 p. 22). As Langer says,

The categories we make gather momentum and are very hard to overthrow. We build our own and our shared realities and then we become victims of them – blind to the fact that they are constructs, ideas. (1989 p. 11)

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