
The Future of Our Illusion

Transcendental Subjectivity and the
Evolution of Human Consciousness

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Paradigm Shift

In his 1962 classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn articulated a now-famous framework for understanding the mechanism by which communities of people come to abandon one dominant mode of thought for another. Ideas, he argued, exist within a complex web of interrelationships that converge in a central interpretive framework: a *paradigm*.

Paradigms, according to Kuhn, act as organizing principles of meaning, exerting a gravitational pull on other ideas and shaping how information about the world is understood. By virtue of their efficacy and self-reinforcing centrality, the more an idea becomes intertwined towards the center of the paradigm, the harder it is to dislodge it or replace it with an alternative.

This conceptual resilience can be a virtuous process, leading to ideas that grow stronger and more certain by virtue of their ability to withstand critique. However, a paradigm can also reach a place of entrenched stagnation, in which its ability to dominate a field of discussion continues by virtue of its accumulated centrality—despite being increasingly recognized as false.

Such was the case, for example, with the Earth-centered model of the ‘Ptolemaic’ universe, whose explanatory power over the motions of the heavenly bodies dominated the cosmological imagination of the ancient and medieval world. The Ptolemaic model eventually came under strain due to the unexpected orbital behavior being observed by telescopes at the dawn of the Scientific age. Defenders of the model developed increasingly complex mathematical corrections called ‘epicycles’ to reconcile the aberrations until the entire edifice eventually collapsed under its own weight. It wasn’t until the Copernican Revolution of the early 1600s, however, that the new heliocentric model of the solar system became generally accepted; Not soon enough, unfortunately, to save imaginative thinkers like the Franciscan friar Giordano Bruno who was burned alive by the Inquisition in 1600 for speculating on the swirling infinities above. Such are the stakes involved when dominant paradigms are being challenged.

It should be no less intimidating, then, to consider the challenges involved in overturning dominant modes of thought in our time. While the flames of the Inquisition

may have died down to a secular quiescence, the intransigence of false and destructive ideas has even more destructive potential in a modern world whose industrial, economic, and technological powers have reached the planetary scale of the Anthropocene.

The need to do so, however, has never been more urgent.

Having released 2,000 gigatons—that is, two *trillion* tons—of carbon dioxide into our planet’s atmosphere over the past 250 yearsⁱ, human civilization is in the process of committing planetary-wide ecological suicide. Despite an overwhelming body of scientific evidence pointing to irreversible catastrophe—a consensus that has been building for over a generation—the increasingly desperate calls for change have not been able to effectively catalyze the political will and coordination required to avert disaster. For a species that prides itself precisely on its exceptional intellectual capacity for reason, the irrationalism of such self-destruction is humbling, if not revealing. In the context of this accelerating tragedy we are forced to ask ourselves: What is in the way?

Decades of work by scientists and activists clearly shows that the answer to this question is *not* a lack of information or knowledge. There is something deeper at play, something that is keeping humanity from taking the kind of urgent action that is needed. The obstacle, we are coming to suspect, exhibits similar dynamics to that described by Kuhn’s analysis of paradigms and their resilience. Could it be that what is blocking our ability to catalyze the planetary course-correction required is a

conceptual *paradigm* at the heart of modern civilization that interferes with the kind of cooperation that would be required to mount a coordinated response to the crisis?

This is precisely the picture that is beginning to emerge.

A growing body of practitioners in the social sector is attempting to apply Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions to the kind of paradigm shifts that are needed in politics and economics to avert catastrophe. As a method for interrogating and changing culture, this work often called *narrative shift* and focuses on identifying and modifying the "operating metaphors" that serve as a community's shared paradigm of beliefs and drive its cultural dynamics. Recently, a group working in the field of narrative shift produced a publication *Transforming the Transition* whose goal was to investigate narrative strategies that could effectively catalyze public action in the Anthropocene. It found itself unable to proceed with its goals, however, in the face of an alarming, intractable divide between what it found to be two "dominant belief systems that anchor the narrative space."ⁱⁱ The first strand was that of individual freedom, the second of collective solidarity: individualism versus collectivism. "We could not confirm the hopeful promises of our hypotheses," the report reluctantly concludes. "Instead, we have hit a wall where we surfaced divisions and a deepening 'Us vs Them' logic that stands in the way of a transition."ⁱⁱⁱ The report concludes that the underlying values and worldviews of these two belief systems are in such opposition to each other that they have resulted in "narrative stagnation" at a cultural level that will preclude

further progress until a conceptual path forward can unlock the stalemate.

“Ultimately, what our data is showing is stagnation,” the authors write. “This is the time for societal change, yet we cannot see whether and how this change can indeed happen.”^{iv} The report ends without identifying what a path forward could be. It concludes, however, that the work of transitioning away from the current path of catastrophe cannot begin until this occurs.

The implications of such a conclusion for contemporary philosophy are clear. The urgent progress we need depends upon a philosophical investigation of the conceptual foundations that underlie this cultural stalemate. At its deepest level, this is a question of identity. Social research like that of *Transforming the Transition* is identifying an urgent need for contemporary philosophy to engage in the development of a new conceptual model of identity—a new operating metaphor—that can lead away from the binary choice of individualism versus collectivism into a new paradigm that can respond to the needs of both.

Our hypothesis is that the success of this project hinges on the core challenge of how we come to articulate and understand a structure of *identity-in-relation* that maintains both individuality and relationality in the same breath. The path to doing so requires the deconstruction of a set of inter-related concepts that lie at the heart of the Western metaphysical tradition, specifically the

relationship between individual identity and an epistemic-ontology of transcendence.

In the course of this investigation, as we will discuss, we shall see that it is precisely the concept of the *transcendent Subject*, of the knowing Subject in a world of objects, that best encapsulates the paradigm that has guided modern humanity to the brink of disaster. We shall interrogate how the Subject, and in particular its mode of relating *via transcendence*, is the common thread across the entangled crises—racial, economic, and ecological—that we are navigating. And we shall investigate why it is so difficult to dislodge the operating metaphor from our individual and collective psyche, due to its place at the very center of our philosophical paradigm of knowledge and identity. By critiquing this paradigm at the root, in its flawed epistemology and inherently aggressive and self-destructive existential dynamics, we can avail ourselves of an alternate imaginary—of a cosmological vision that does not assume the kind of fundamental *separatedness* that undergirds our current conception of individuality. In doing so, we could conceive of an existential phenomenology that would find a way to say ‘I’ within such a world and thus inhabit it anew.

In order to think this path we will be engaging with the work of Alfred North Whitehead, whose radical vision of a cosmological metaphysics was premised upon precisely such a relational ontology and whose critique of the reigning paradigm provides a conceptual architecture by which to move into a different space.

In our ongoing investigation of the question of what it means to be human, perhaps it is time to ask the same question in a far more personal sense: What does it mean, not just to be human, but to be able to ask the question in the first place; *What does it mean to say 'I'?*

Our belief is that if we are to escape from the paralysis of individualism versus collectivism, we must learn how to say 'I' in a new way. The current task is to show how saying 'I' is related fundamentally to our ability to say 'We'. Having done so, we are able to pursue a new structure of consciousness based on a different paradigm of identity. No longer merely 'I', but standing in the entangled cosmos, to inhabit a structure of consciousness *that becomes I* as an emanation of its relational encounter. Able to say 'I' because of a primordial 'We' that forms the soil from which it emerges, in a participatory act of blessing and co-creation.

To *survive the future*, as a recent book coins it^v, we need a new paradigm. We must abandon the isolated 'I' of Subject-consciousness and find a different way to inhabit the world—one that would not be stuck in a false choice between individualism or collectivism and unable to come into adaptive, cooperative relationship with the world around us. Modern science no longer sees the process of evolution as a "survival of the fittest"—an interpretation as false biologically as it is harmful sociologically. Instead, we recognize cooperative mutuality in the behavior of all organisms (or at least those that survive). We see, at all levels of nature, what

scientist Lynn Margolis famously discovered about the basic cellular structure of life on earth: a *symbiogenesis*, a cooperative emergence of life together, in and through relationship. Biologically speaking, this paralysis between competing poles of identity is an illusion—an illusion enshrined into a paradigm at the heart of our culture and deriving from a false epistemology at the dawn of modern civilization that must be abandoned if we are to move forward as a species. Can we find a way to map our paradigm of individual and collective identity to this most basic truth of our biology, the symbiogenetic reality of the world around us? This would be a vision of a new way to say ‘I’, to become and to relate in a world of becoming. To say, not just ‘I’ but ‘I:We’.

It is to this project that we now proceed.

The Immanent Cosmos

The decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another,” Kuhn wrote^{vi}. And so the task of critiquing the paradigm of Subject-consciousness must involve two primary goals. The first is to show how and where this conception of identity and consciousness is internally flawed. The second is to articulate an alternative that can replace Subject-consciousness and still perform its essential functions.

No text is more important or helpful to this fundamental task of shifting the central paradigm of identity and consciousness in Western philosophy than the magnum opus *Process and Reality*, written in 1929 by the British philosopher and mathematical physicist Alfred North

Whitehead. Having previously established himself as one of the leading philosophers of logic and mathematics—co-writing with Bertrand Russell the famous three-volume *Principia Mathematica* in 1910-1913 on the foundations of mathematics—Whitehead's departure from the University of London for Harvard University in 1924 was an abrupt shift for a celebrated logician into what was at the time the particularly unfashionable field of metaphysics.

Whitehead's engagement with metaphysics was provoked by what he recognized to be a fundamental revolution in scientific cosmology that was occurring as a result of the new science of relativity and quantum physics. With relativity, no longer could the world be understood as it had for thousands of years since Aristotle through the lens of a 'substance ontology'—a universe fundamentally comprised of discrete units of matter floating in absolute space and time. Rather, relativity was demonstrating that space and time were not, in fact, absolute as Newtonian physics demanded. Instead, the very fabric of reality had to be reimagined, away from substance towards an event-based ontology that Whitehead called "the philosophy of organism". The result, which became more widely known as 'process' philosophy, was a highly original formulation of a cosmological metaphysics based on the notion that the fundamental nature of reality was comprised *not of substances floating in space and time but of organic temporalities emerging and relating through intersectional trajectories of evolution.*

So original was Whitehead's philosophy, in fact, that his work was nearly completely ignored by mainstream

philosophy for most of the past century, but for the careful attention and stewardship of its ideas in schools of theology, whose abiding interest in metaphysics never waned in the face of the scientific positivism of the age. It should be noted, however, that Whitehead's thought was not so ignored as to prevent a young Martin Luther King, Jr.—then a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at Boston University in 1955—from being exposed to Whitehead's philosophy and writing a doctoral dissertation that cites Whitehead multiple times (five, to be exact) in an investigation on competing modern conceptions of the nature of God.^{vii}

For the purposes of our task, the importance of Whitehead's philosophy is that it sets out to systematically critique and replace the dominant philosophical school of Enlightenment thought that had emerged from the now-defunct era of Newtonian physics. Principle among his targets was the epistemological framework constructed by Immanuel Kant known as transcendental idealism, so named because of the "Copernican revolution" Kant instigated in philosophy in response to the radical empiricism of David Hume, and the way it appeals to the transcendental capacity of reason to achieve certain knowledge.

While Whitehead's critique includes a careful engagement with major philosophers of the Enlightenment—Rene Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume among others—it is Whitehead's dismantling of the premises upon which the Kantian philosophy had been erected that represents the most powerful opportunity to

conceive of a new paradigm for identity and consciousness in the 21st century.

We will look in detail at this critique, but from the outset we are guided by the following goal. Subject-consciousness emanates from a conception of identity that presupposes three fundamental assumptions about the relationship between self and world: ontological separatedness, phenomenological *a priori*, and the transcendent constitution of the epistemological self. The philosophy of Whitehead, through its critique of Descartes, Hume, and Kant, sets about to dismantle each of these assumptions and to present an alternative. Its success paves the way for a philosophy of immanence, and an existential phenomenology of intimacy and alterity in which consciousness emerges from the world of relations rather than standing *a priori* to it in an epistemological transcendence.

Epistemological Errors

The focus of Whitehead's critique in *Process and Reality* can best be understood as an attempt to dismantle the epistemological errors of Enlightenment philosophy, with the goal of guiding the reader towards a different set of metaphysical conclusions that those reached by the leading thinkers of the age—most specifically by Descartes, Hume, and Kant. “The philosophy of organism abolishes the detached mind,”^{viii} Whitehead writes in Part II, Chapter 1, and with this statement we know immediately what is being abolished: the reigning paradigm of identity, the *cogito*, the knowing Subject.

But we cannot abolish the *cogito* without replacing the epistemological framework it grounds, and so the primary target of *Process and Reality* is not Descartes, but rather Kant, and this is quite clear in Whitehead's own words: "The philosophy of organism is the *inversion* of Kant's philosophy," Whitehead writes (emphasis added). "For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world."^{ix}

With this summary as a guiding framework, the focus of Whitehead's critique becomes clear. His goal is to articulate a unified cosmology that includes in its explanatory framework the way in which personal existence can occur naturally and organically in the world without requiring the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, and without positing the Subject as its transcendental curator. Whitehead objects to what he sees as a false division of the world of subjective experience and the world of objective reality that had become enshrined in the philosophies of Descartes and Kant. The task of unifying subjectivity and objectivity was what he called "the problem of the solidarity of the universe."^x

As such, in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead sets out to dismantle three major philosophical errors that he sees as related to one another and linked inextricably with the Newtonian cosmological vision that can no longer be supported by science but is stuck in its insufficiency for lack of an alternative framework. He identifies these three errors as:

- “(i) The substance-quality doctrine of actuality,
- (ii) The sensationalist doctrine of perception,
- (iii) The Kantian doctrine of the objective world as a construct from subjective experience.”^{xi}

Let’s take each of these in turn:

By his critique of the “substance-quality doctrine of actuality”, Whitehead is referring to the substance-based ontology of Western metaphysics inherited from Aristotle, in which the fabric of reality is conceived of as an enduring primary substance that acts as the material substrate underlying behind and beneath the qualities we experience of it. In casual language, a substance ontology conceives of the world as comprised of the physical *stuff* we call matter. While modern physics shows physical matter to be merely the temporary crystallization of energy flows emerging from a quantum flux, the natural philosophy that undergirds the history of western metaphysics is wedded to a false belief in matter as an enduring substance that comprises the fundamental building blocks of reality. This false conception posits enduring *things*—enduring substances which exist on their own accord, stable and static, before and outside any relational encounter.

A substance ontology thus gives rise to a world of concrete physical objects, which is helpful for explaining the existence of atoms, rocks, and cannonballs, but the problem is that it cannot account for the nature and reality of *subjective experience*—leading either to the

speculation that personal identity is an illusion (materialism) or requiring philosophers like Descartes to posit a dualistic universe that consists of *two* substances, mind as well as matter. Not only does Cartesian dualism stand out as a glaring violation of Occam's famous principle warning against unnecessary complexity, it also leads to a bifurcation of the world into subjective experience and objective reality which leaves the human mind residing in a detached realm of incorporeal mist, and further adds the conceptual difficulty of explaining how an immaterial mental substance is able to influence the material world, such as in the mind's willful movement of parts of the body. (Descartes famously speculated about the role of the Pineal gland in the brain as the solution to this problem.)

In rejecting the substance ontology of Aristotle, Whitehead wants to bring metaphysics into harmony with the new Einsteinian cosmology that shows matter to be an ephemeral constellation of energy, and to no longer grasp onto objects as if they consisted of a fundamental material substance. More importantly, Whitehead wants to articulate an alternative to this view—a relational ontology, an ontology of *events* rather than things—that conceives of all actual entities as arising from interactions within the world. Whitehead's picture removes the forward progression of Newtonian absolute time and instead locates temporality within a flux of actual occasions evolving in a process of emergence and “perpetual perishing,” only to arise again in the next occasion. Whitehead sees this event-based ontology as conceptually valid both at the level of physical atoms and

of subjective experience, removing the need for a separate “mental” substance and reuniting the cosmos as consisting of fundamental interactions that give rise equally to both matter *and* mind together. “The misconception which has haunted philosophic literature throughout the centuries is the notion of ‘independent existence,’” Whitehead concludes. “There is no such mode of existence; every entity is to be understood in terms of the way it is interwoven with the rest of the universe.”^{xii}

Whitehead’s critique of substance ontology in favor of a more scientifically-sound ‘event-ontology’ does away with a philosophical position that views the world as consisting of fundamentally discrete, separate units of matter. Further, by unifying mental and physical dimensions of reality into a dynamic dance of encounter and reaction, Whitehead’s philosophy also does away with the “detached mind” of Cartesian metaphysics. This is relevant for our discussion because it points to the very root cause of our modern paradigm of the self as fundamentally separated, existing prior to relationship. As developed by Descartes, the detached mind of the *cogito* is understood primarily as a pre-existing self that experiences the world through bodily sensation and mental cognition. For Descartes, as for all of the Enlightenment philosophers, the self as *cogito* exists *separate* from the physical world and *prior* to experience. This conception of fundamental separatedness is the first conceptual building block of what would become the modern paradigm of personal identity as Subject-consciousness. In the philosophy of organism, we are

presented with an alternative that could ground a different mode of consciousness that inverts the Cartesian formula by framing consciousness as emerging *from* relationship, as a *result* of experience.

This issue of “experience” would become the crux of the greatest debate in Enlightenment philosophy—the debate between the empirical philosophy of David Hume that insisted that the foundation of all knowledge was based on experience, and the rationalist position articulated by prominent philosophers like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who asserted that thought alone, unaided by experience, could reveal absolute truths about reality to the human mind through pure reason. As he described in his 1666 essay *De Artes Combinatoria*, Leibniz aimed to develop “a general method in which all truths of reason would be reduced to a kind of calculation.”^{xiii} For Hume, such a project was doomed from the start because it could be shown that there is nothing inherent to reason that can justify even the most basic and fundamental of premises as, for example, the law of cause and effect. Hume famously demonstrated that even our belief that the sun would rise tomorrow was based on nothing other than the habit of having observed this pattern in experience and assuming its necessary repetition. “That the sun will not rise to-morrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, that it will rise,”^{xiv} wrote Hume in his 1748 *Enquiry into Human Understanding*. The implication of Hume’s radical skepticism was that our knowledge about the world could never be certain. He agreed that reason could deduce truths in the realm of ideas alone—truths of mathematics

and logic—but that any speculation on the world itself could be based on nothing but experience, the scientific method for example. Knowledge could never attain certainty, therefore, because it was prohibited from ever asserting with certainty that the future would behave exactly the same as the past. In essence, it meant that any dream of certain or absolute knowledge of the world was impossible and that the task of knowledge was a valuable, though utilitarian, practice that cannot be used to certify metaphysical claims.

For Kant, the empiricist assault on the epistemological foundations of reason was deeply troubling. In the Introduction to his 1783 *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant goes so far as to “confess” that Hume’s philosophy forced him to awake from his “dogmatic slumber” and to take up the task of defending reason’s ability to have certainty in its knowledge of the world. Kant’s solution to Hume, developed in detail in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, relied upon a special type of knowledge made possible by an operation of reason Kant called “the synthetic *a priori*”. Before we turn to this, knowing that Whitehead’s primary critique ends up inverting the Kantian philosophy, it is important to understand Whitehead’s critique of Hume’s empiricism.

Firstly, Whitehead agrees with Hume that experience is the foundation of all knowledge. Truth, for Whitehead, is not to be found in “self-sustained facts, floating in non-entity”^{xv} but rather knowledge is a pragmatic tool in which “the proper test is not that of finality, but progress”^{xvi}. Whitehead is not concerned, therefore, with Hume’s

empiricist refutation of reason's ability to achieve 'absolute' truth. However, Whitehead sees the "youthful skepticism"^{xvii} of Hume's radical empiricism as having illegitimately robbed nature of its internal relatedness—namely of the reason why effects do, in fact, follow their cause. Whitehead sees Hume's error as what he identified as the second major philosophic error in modern philosophy—the "sensationalist doctrine of perception." According to Whitehead, Hume too narrowly defines what counts as experience. For Hume, experience is generated by the physical sensations of the body—sight, sound, touch, etc. But this reductionist account of perception disregards the way in which perceptual experience registers not only physical sensation but also a direct experience of causal connection itself, through a perception of the "togetherness of things"^{xviii}. When we abandon the false Newtonian premise of mathematical instants in space and time, we are free to more clearly perceive the processual nature of phenomena themselves—their generation and evolution being driven by forces of internal relatedness. Furthermore, we have a direct perception, according to Whitehead, of the internal relatedness of the world in the immediacy of our own body. Even in physical sensation, we perceive more than is contained in the sensation itself when we realize that our perception of physical sensation is joined by our perception of *experiencing* such a sensation *with* and *through* a body that is *ours*. The perception of this intimate conjunction of self and world contains the *immanent facticity* of the world, whose theoretical divisibility should not obscure from our analysis its *actual* togetherness in experience.

It is important to note therefore that despite Whitehead's critique of Hume, he is fully committed to a radical empiricism. However, he goes beyond Hume in defining the scope of experience to consist of more than mere sensation. The experience of this expanded sense of perception is still *experience*, and thus gives rise to a knowledge about the world beyond the "meagre fact" of mere sensation. Thus, Whitehead critiques both Descartes and Hume for their too-narrow understanding of perception whose "only avenue of direct knowledge limits us to this barren residuum" of sensation.^{xix}

Whitehead's critique of Hume's sensationalist theory of perception is an important component of an inherently embodied, radically empiricist philosophy of immanence. In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead declares that "the only intelligible doctrine of causation is founded on the doctrine of immanence," and that the fundamental essence of experience discloses that the "togetherness of things involves some doctrine of mutual immanence."^{xx} We will return to this immanental vision, but first it is necessary to point to an even more important aspect of Whitehead's critique of Hume's analysis of experience. For our purposes, this is the way in which Whitehead shows that Hume's empiricism still presupposes, along with Descartes, the "subject-predicate habits of thought"^{xxi} derived from Aristotle that assume the pre-existence of the Subject prior to and independent of experience. For Whitehead, all three of these major philosophers—Descartes, Hume, and Kant—are guilty of the same error:

conceiving of consciousness as the ground of experience; placing consciousness *prior to* experience, as its receptor.

In what is potentially the most consequential and radical conclusion of *Process and Reality*, this chronological order of consciousness and experience is entirely reversed. For Whitehead, *consciousness does not precede experience but is rather produced by it*, emerging as the consequence of the more primordial encounter of perceptual experience itself and in some ways as a reflection and response to it.

For Whitehead, it is critical to grasp that experience and consciousness are not the same. Experience is more primordial than consciousness, occurring at the level of each interaction that occurs in the cosmos, but only reaching the state of consciousness in higher-orders of complexity. “The principle that I am adopting is that consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness,”^{xxii} he writes. What he means by this is that consciousness, when it occurs, “is the crown of experience, only occasionally attained, not its necessary base.”^{xxiii} In a longer and more poetic passage, Whitehead writes: “Consciousness flickers; and even at its brightest, there is a small focal region of clear illumination, and a large penumbral region of experience which tells of intense experience in dim apprehension. The simplicity of clear consciousness is no measure of the complexity of complete experience.”^{xxiv}

There could not be a more direct refutation of the entire epistemological and metaphysical framework of Enlightenment thought than this inversion of the order of

consciousness. The philosophy of the Enlightenment is premised on the idea that consciousness is the foundation, the “base,” of experience, upon which the intellect is then able to reason. The philosophy of organism, however, asserts that consciousness comes *after* experience. “Consciousness enlightens experience, which precedes it,”^{xxv} Whitehead declares. For the philosophy of organism, the with-ness of consciousness is its primary relationship with the world—a relationship of experiential encounter that has the ability, under the right circumstances, to generate what we call consciousness.

Before we turn to the implications of such a conception of consciousness, it is important to conclude this section by understanding Whitehead’s critique of the third major philosophical error—“the Kantian doctrine of the objective world as a construct from subjective experience.” In so doing, we will see how Whitehead’s goal is not to eliminate the Kantian framework but rather to *complete it* by joining the Subject into relational encounter with the *actual* world—an encounter that Kantianism erroneously and unnecessarily precludes from itself.

First, it is necessary to stress that Whitehead holds Descartes, Hume, Locke, Kant and other major philosophers in great admiration. His effort in *Process & Reality* is not to reject or oppose the contributions and discoveries of these important thinkers. Rather, Whitehead’s premise is that each thinker is to be congratulated for making an important advance in

philosophy, but that the purpose of the philosophy of organism was to point to the discarded or unseen implications of their thought so as to uncover further terrain of exploration. In this way, Whitehead believes that Descartes is to be recognized as having “undoubtedly made the greatest philosophical discovery since the age of Plato and Aristotle” in recognizing *experience* as the primary data for philosophy. However, “like Columbus who never visited America, Descartes missed the full sweep of his own discovery”^{xxvi} by assuming that experience emanates from mental or material substances, rather than representing a constitutive element in their very construction. Kant, on the other hand, is to be credited as “the great philosopher who first, fully and explicitly, introduced into philosophy the conception of an act of experience as a constructive functioning,”^{xxvii} but whose subjectivism alienates experience from the outside world, trapping it in an echo chamber of internal subjective reflection and not recognizing that experience *is a coming together of the two*. For Kant, an act of experience is limited solely to the epistemological function of knowledge, in which “apart from concepts there is nothing to know.”^{xxviii} In contrast to this position, for the philosophy of organism, an act of experience occurs as “emotional feeling, felt in its relevance to a world beyond.”^{xxix} Knowledge, like consciousness, is a consequent stage that emerges later, if at all, in the process. For Whitehead, Kant not only misidentifies the location of consciousness and overestimates the role of knowledge in experience, but also misunderstands *the co-constitutive nature of objective and subjective reality in the production of both*.

A further critique of Kant is necessary to explore here, however, because of the particular way in which Kant responded to the empiricism of Hume by appealing to the transcendental capacity of reason to attain knowledge of the world independently of experience through the ‘synthetic *a priori*’. As an empiricist, Whitehead rejects Kant’s transcendental epistemology, but he does so not based solely on the “insurmountable difficulty for epistemology” that Kant’s transcendentalism creates in its relationship with the outside world, but rather from an ontological perspective that Kant’s philosophy is premised on illusion of an ontological “togetherness not derivative from experiential togetherness.”^{xxx} For Whitehead, ontological togetherness is not only knowable through experience, but it is produced *by experience*. It is the function of experience that produces reality itself—not just subjective reality, but each actual entity is produced as a “throb of experience including the actual world in its scope.”^{xxxi} For Whitehead, Kant’s transcendental method attempts to deny the primacy of experience by positing an *a priori* correspondence between the knower and the known that gives the knower the ability to say something with confidence about an object in the world without needing to have any experience of or with it. The price of such intellectual powers is, however, a mediated knowledge that verges towards solipsism by virtue of recognizing only the subjectively constructed side of the experience as knowable and leaves whatever the “unknown something” on the other side of experience is to itself.

With this last part of Whitehead's critique, we come most clearly and precisely to a vision of what Whitehead means by the "solidarity" of the world. Driven not by some ancient apophatic mysticism but by the scientific vision that has emerged in our contemporary era that describes a world of entangled emergence in the very material fabric of the universe itself—Whitehead sees the solidarity of the world as a mutual immanence, a mutual co-constitution of each other's actuality. For Whitehead, Kant was right that the actuality of the world is a constructive endeavor, but Kant failed to see the picture correctly. Kant overemphasized the role of the Subject and rendered the objective world inert and passive, ignoring the active role that the objective world plays in constituting both itself and the consciousness that emerges from it. For Whitehead, the creative construction of the world emerges from an encounter between subjectivity and objectivity in which the two come intimately together to form something new. Whitehead describes this process of actualization in detail in *Process and Reality*, using terms like ingression, prehension, and concrescence to describe their dynamic encounter. Whitehead describes—in ways similar to the collapse of the wave function in quantum mechanics—a 'concrescence' that occurs as the universe crystallizes in a new way and adds to itself in what he calls the "creative advance" of the universe. In his famous phrase: "The many become one, and are increased by one."^{xxxii} This mutual flowing into one another occurs at every fractal level of the cosmos, from the atomic level to the level of consciousness itself.

This creative dynamic of the world is, as Whitehead describes, the *inversion* of the Kantian framework—producing consciousness as the emergent fruit of relational encounter and no longer relying on the false aggrandizement of the transcendental ego to conceive the world into phenomenal existence. Indeed, from the perspective of paradigm shifts and the many ways in which a reigning paradigm will attempt to prop itself up in the face of competing evidence, Whitehead's critique makes clear the ways in which the Kantian framework was the last and greatest of epicyclic attempts to shore up the crumbling paradigm of Aristotelian substance ontology and the detached, separated self it envisions. With Whitehead, we might conceive of identity in an entirely different way—no longer separate, prior, and alone with our impressions of an otherwise unknowable world beyond, but rather deeply emergent from within a world of relationships, as the *experience* of this relationship itself, an experience of immanence: *conscious immanence*.

When we consider the implications of Whitehead's critique of Enlightenment epistemology, we are led away from the bifurcated metaphysics of Descartes, the barren sensationalism of Hume, and the transcendental idealism of Kant. As a measure of its incredible value for the work of shifting the core paradigm of identity bequeathed to us at the heart of the Enlightenment project, Whitehead does not aim merely at critique. He gives, instead, an alternative—an alternative epistemology that no longer

dictates a metaphysics of separation, of priority, of transcendence. Instead, he presents a vision of the *solidarity* of the world, and invites us to see through a different lens how the world gives rise to ontic existence through a process of emergent co-creation. Whitehead restores the causal connectedness of the world through a philosophy of immanence whose dynamism occurs at the level of encounter—a mutual indwelling that produces consciousness in the same way that it produces all actual entities: through relational experience. In a Whiteheadian universe, consciousness is no longer the autonomous ‘I’ but rather something very different, an ‘I’ that *emerges* from the ground of a prior relationality, an autochthonous ‘I’.

It remains as a crucial next step to investigate this different ‘I’ and to explore what it would mean to inhabit the world in this way. As a mode of consciousness that emerges from immanent relationality rather than transcendental subjectivity, this ‘I’ stands in a fundamentally different posture in its relation with the world than the Subject-consciousness that derives from Kantianism. To explore what this means and how it could generate a different paradigm for identity in the future, we must pursue this path of inquiry—a phenomenological inquiry of the existential dynamics of consciousness in an immanent cosmos. One fruitful path in doing so would be to trace the lineage from Kantian epistemology to the existential dynamics of the ego in Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy. His 1943 “phenomenological essay on ontology” *Being and Nothingness* is a heartbreakingly accurate account of the alienation and antagonism that

the transcendental Subject finds itself navigating as it struggles to understand its identity in a world in which its only choices for relationship across the transcendental divide are Sadism, Masochism, or despair. If “hell is other people,” as Sartre famously wrote in *Nausea*, we can lay the blame for this anomie squarely on Kant, who paints human consciousness into an epistemological corner and forces its relationship with the world into the distorted goggles of the transcendental Subject—a Subject alone with its thoughts and unable to relate with the world of Others except through modes of relational encounter that involve conflict, submission, or domination. Indeed, through Sartre we begin to understand how this separated ego finds only two options to ground its identity: that of individualism, or that of collectivism—both doomed to conflict, alienation, and despair. Both representing a different angle on the same attempt to ground identity in transcendence.

As we see from *Being and Nothingness*, the world of the transcendental Subject is, essentially, a world devoid of intimacy, and while Whitehead’s critique of Kant does not frame itself in the language of ethical relation, it provides a comprehensive critique of the epistemological fallacy that gives rise to such an illusion and an alternative framework of immanence that would allow for another narrative to spring up. We find just such an alternate vision in the existentialist writings of another prominent philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Buber, whose 1923 *I and Thou* articulates for the first time in modern thought what we might call a relational existentialism. When he writes “I require a You to become; becoming I, I

say You. All life is encounter”^{xxxiii}—Buber is articulating a vision of human existence in which personal consciousness emerges and becomes, as the fruit borne of relationship itself. Buber’s philosophy represents a different path made possible by a different set of presuppositions. If Sartre’s vision is the existential consequence of a Kantian epistemology, the thought of Martin Buber shows us a vision of what could be built on top of its inversion, the Whiteheadian cosmos.

But the detailed exploration of this path will need to be left for a subsequent discussion. In the meantime, we are left with an important glimpse of a different vision. The type of consciousness that emerges in the immanent cosmos described by Whitehead is not like the Subject-consciousness of Kant’s transcendental idealism. It is a mistake, as Whitehead compellingly argues, to conceive of consciousness as ontologically separated, phenomenologically *a priori*, or epistemologically transcendental. Rather, in Whitehead we see a vision of consciousness as fundamentally *with* the world—with the world ontologically, phenomenologically, *and* epistemologically.

This *with*-ness of consciousness should be no surprise. It is written into the very word itself. *Con*-sciousness, at its deepest level, means: *with-knowing*. The Kantian framework, and the Enlightenment edifice in its entirety, has obscured this fundamental truth about ourselves. It has left us devoid of connectedness in a world that is falling apart as a result.

While much yet still needs to be explored, we know that the path forward involves the existential dynamics of consciousness in an immanent cosmos, a phenomenology of consciousness as with-knowing—a philosophy of conscious immanence.

Conclusion

What if we took seriously this primordial *withness* of consciousness?

Is a mere *concept* strong enough to overturn four hundred years of cultural imagination and cast a vision of personal identity different from the model of transcendental subjectivity we have inherited?

If we engage seriously its etymology, the conjunctive ‘*with*’ of *con*-sciousness implies something remarkably different from the traditional, epistemologically-defined Subject of European philosophy. Rather than the fundamental separatedness of something like the *cogito*, in which the conscious ‘I’ stands behind and prior to experience as its receiver, a theory of *con*-sciousness

implies a structural relatedness at the heart of experience itself—a participation with the world from which consciousness emerges as an affirmation or negation, a blessing or a curse.

In short, a theory of *con*-sciousness would indicate a *relation* at the heart of identity. It changes the meaning of the word ‘I’ and invites us to speak such a word in a different way.

This is *not* how consciousness has traditionally been conceived. Since the time of the Enlightenment, we have conceived of ourselves fundamentally as *separated*; Separated minds in a world of objects. In this dualistic world of mind and matter, consciousness is identified with and resides firmly in the disembodied, immaterial realm; leaving the natural world as an object to be used and consumed. Our only mode of relating with the world, we are told, the world outside our mind, is mediated and governed by our mode of knowing it: *objectivity*—an epistemological reduction of the unknown *to the knowable* and a disregard for that which cannot be contained by such a container. The metaphysical violence of such a reduction often rendered invisible by banality, submerged in the phenomenological depth of its relational frame. And on the other side of this existential binary of self and world, the epistemological self reigns sovereign and alone—a consciousness at once alienated and antagonistic, fundamentally separate from the world, prior to, and transcendent over it. This is the pattern of consciousness we call Subject.

This paradigm of the transcendental Subject has been the consequence of a philosophical tradition that has attempted to use epistemology to do metaphysics. It has been the dominant metaphor for identity in the history of European philosophy, and its sphere of influence is no accident—arising as it did from the mind and milieu of political, commercial, and colonial empire. If, on the other hand, we decide to question this tradition and explore an alternate path—the idea that consciousness is, as, a *with*-knowing—we find a different set of relational dynamics. *Con*-consciousness, we find, does not exist outside of relationship, nor does it exist prior to experience. It is immanent *within* relationship and consequent *to* experience. It finds the uniqueness of identity in *alterity* rather than transcendence—no less capable of supporting unique individuality than Subject-consciousness, but achieved in a different mode and within a different relational frame, one of *intimacy* rather than antagonism.

Intimacy and alterity: This inverts the fundamental narrative of transcendence that has dominated the history of European philosophy. Intimacy and alterity become the phenomenological framework for a philosophy oriented around something very different from the project of transcendence. Rather than the transcendental Subject and the alienation and antagonism we find inscribed into its very logic, a consciousness as with-knowing becomes a starting place for something very different—a philosophy of immanence.

Better yet: a philosophy of *conscious* immanence.

Conscious immanence as a *with*-knowing indicates an *intimacy* at the very heart of identity. A relatedness that exists prior to consciousness and gives it its tone and tenor. A relatedness from which consciousness *emerges*. These words: intimacy, relatedness, and emergence have been the themes by which we have explored this topic. By doing so, we are aiming at recasting in a different light the Kantian understanding of consciousness as *transcendental*, and seeking instead a consciousness no longer separated *a priori* in the world before relationship or experience, but rather being constituted as the result of *both*.

Unlike the transcendental Subject, conscious immanence does not need to maintain its identity through a transcendental mode of relating with the world and the violent, assimilative epistemology it entails. An identity founded in conscious immanence would instead find its distinct identity in a dynamism of intimacy and alterity—a relational frame that does not require separation to secure difference but rather fosters the infinite potential of individual diversity in order to facilitate greater and greater intimacy.

In order to think this imaginative path and explore its terrain we have engaged with the work of Alfred North Whitehead, whose radical vision of a cosmological metaphysics was premised upon precisely such a relational ontology and whose critique of the reigning paradigm of the epistemological Subject provides a conceptual architecture by which to move into a different space. Thinking *with* Whitehead, we find an important

resonance with the existential philosophy of Martin Buber, whose exploration of relational encounter can be seen as an invitation to step into the personal experience of inhabiting a Whiteheadian universe. When Buber writes “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All life is encounter,”^{xxxiv} he is articulating a first-person phenomenological account of the kind of relational cosmology that Whitehead describes. By joining the two accounts together, we see a more complete picture. Whitehead allows us to understand the world we’re in, while Buber invites us to inhabit that world by enabling us to say ‘I’ in it. Together, Buber and Whitehead allow us to become ‘I’ in a different and new way—one that emerges no longer from the disembodied transcendental form of consciousness we know as the Subject, but rather from within relationship itself, as relational identity. In Buber and in Whitehead, we are introduced to an ‘I’ that emerges from relationship, indeed from multiple intersecting relationships. In short, these two thinkers invite us into a radically different conception of identity. No longer an ‘I’ that says *It* and knows itself thereby, but rather an ‘I’ that emerges from ‘We’ to say ‘You’, and to say ‘Us’.

Changing the conceptual structure of identity implies an engagement with the deepest dynamics of individual and community life. As such, it is as difficult to achieve as it is infrequent in the history of humanity. And yet, as we find ourselves *descending* into the 21st century—entering the frightening roar of planetary disequilibrium we have caused and surprised by the abrupt shift of direction from the ascent we have been fashioning—we might find

ourselves more open than usual to an invitation to inhabit the world in a different way.

Perhaps in this context, a change in the structure of identity, a shift in conceptual paradigm, is exactly what we need. A revolution—of heart and mind, and so much more. A way to speak, and bless, and welcome in a new way this urgent, imminent, immanent evolution of the world.

Notes

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- xii Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and Philosophy*. Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2014, p. 54.
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xviii Whitehead, Alfred North. *Modes of Thought*. Free Press, 2010, p 164.

ixx *Process & Reality*, p. 122

xx *Modes of Thought*, p. 164.

xxi *Process & Reality*, p51

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xxiii *Ibid*, p. 267.

xxiv *Ibid*, p. 267.

xxv *Ibid*, p. 242.

xxvi *Ibid*, p. 159.

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xxviii *Ibid*, p. 156.

xxix *Ibid*, p. 163.

xxx *Ibid*, p. 190.

xxxi *Ibid*, p. 190.

xxxii *Ibid*, p. 21

xxxiii *I and Thou*, p. 62.

xxxiv Buber, Martin. *I And Thou*. Touchstone, 1996, p. 62.

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