Thinking about organizational change as if change mattered: Insights from process philosophy

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Doesn't organizational change (OC) matter?

"The point is that usually we look at change but we do not see it. We speak of change but we do not think about it. […] In order to think change and see it, there is a whole veil of prejudices to brush aside, some of them artificial, created by philosophical speculation, the others natural to common sense"
Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, p.131

Question: what "prejudices", preconceived notions or underlying images do we need to "brush aside"?

Episodic change: "Change occurs through replacement" (Weick and Quinn, 1999:370; Ford and Ford, 1994: 773).

Change is treated as a succession of positions

Stage models of change deal with change by turning it into a series of immobilities. They make sense of change by denying change

"The stages into which you analyze a change are states, the change itself goes on between them"
William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p.234

Emphasis on continuous, ongoing change

From ongoing organizational change to organizational becoming (Tsoukas, H. and Chia, R. (2002) On organizational becoming: rethinking organizational change, *Organization Science*, 13, pp.567-582)

The argument thus far (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002):
- Organizational becoming is inescapable insofar as actors re-weave their webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained through interactions
- As a result of the radical structure of categories, there is an intrinsic indeterminacy when organizational members interact with the world

Question: How can we advance the perspective of organizational becoming?

Alfred North Whitehead: *Process and Reality* (1929/1978)
His "philosophy of organism" provides a process vocabulary for understanding organizational becoming

The universe is a creative advance into novel
Alfred North Whitehead,
Process and Reality, p.222

"Nature is never complete.
It is always passing beyond itself.
This is the creative advance of nature".
Alfred North Whitehead, in D.W. Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*, p.34
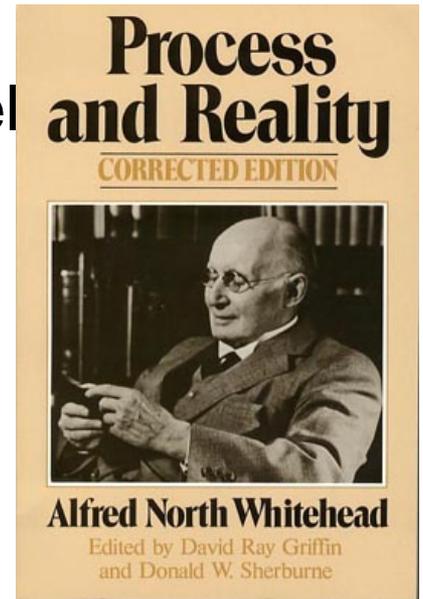
Five recent examples from process organization studies:

- Gehman, J., Trevino, L.K., Garud, R. (2013), Values work: A process study of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56, pp.84-112

    Focus: the development of an honor code within a large US Business School

"[…] our primary focus was on *events* […] (Gehman et al, 2013:89)

"As actors emerge and interact, spillovers are likely to occur; that is, the practices of one group of actors can easily produce concerns for otherwise uninvolved actors, prompting them to become involved"
Gehman et al (2013:92)

"The honor code emerged and was performed through entanglement: concerned stakeholders were catalyzed by precipitating events, becoming spokespersons for specific values practices, and associating with each other" (Gehman et al, 2013)

"Boundaries begun shifting as members who were once unconnected became involved, bring in their wake additional issues from other actor networks to which they belonged. Such as the case with the advisory board members who brought with them values practices from other organizations, such as their own companies or their children's universities" (Gehman et al, 2013: 103)

- Howard-Grenville, J., Metzger, M.L. & Meyer, A.D. (2013), Rekindling the flame: Processes of identity resurrection, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:113-136

Focus: the resurrection of identity in a community

"our model captures the interactions between tangible and intangible resources and lived experiences; identity inheres and is propelled by these interactions" (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013:121)

"*orchestrated experiences*" generated by community leaders.
"Responses to those orchestrated experiences rely also on other experiences that enable observers to interpret their meanings, imbue them with significance, and ultimately generate the intangible symbolic and relational resources that proper the identity forward in time" (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013: 121)

"*ongoing experiences*" are generated from the bottom up by, primarily, identity custodians who draw on symbolic resources that "capture past expressions of the identity" (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013: 121)

- Maguire, S. and Hardy, C. (2013) Organizing processes and the construction of risk: A discursive approach, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:231-255

    Focus: the organizing processes through which chemical products become risky

Through "*normalizing*" and "*problematizing*" practices risk is constructed. Such practices "are collectively enacted and unfold over time and, in so doing, bring the past to bear on the present in specific ways" (Maguire and Hardy, 2013: 247)

- Luscher, L.S. and Lewis, M.W. (2008), Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox, *Academy of Management Journal*, 51, pp. 221-240

Focus: studying production managers in the midst of   extensive restructuring at Lego Company, through action research

Helping managers to makes sense of, and act upon, changing demands: "sparring sessions" and "review sessions"

"As the managers' roles "morphed", blurred, and multiplied, paradoxes of performing arose from conflicting managerial demands"
Luscher and Lewis, op.cit., p. 230

"As a manager you are used to being the guy who can handle it on his own. You are supposed to have all the answers, be the best technician and be very sure of yourself…Now we should be people-oriented; and we are supposed to reveal our own uncertainty and still be in charge"
(transcript of an interview, May 1999; source Luscher and Lewis, op.cit., p.230)

- MacKay, B.R. and Chia, R. (2013), Coice, change, and unintended consequences in strategic change: A process uncerstanding of the rise and fall of Northco Automotive, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:208-230

> Focus: a five-year longitudinal study of the top management team at NorthCo Automotive and their undertaking of intended actions, which, interacting with chance environmental circumstances, resulted in changes that produced unintended consequences that, in turn, shaped decisively the fortunes of the company

"*owned process theories*": processes are construed as the "doings" of/to otherwise stable social entities; they are the causal determinants of outcomes

"*unowned process theories*": change happens "of its own volition", without need for an identifiable agent of change; every choice managers make and every deliberate action taken are necessarily partial, generating unintended consequences.

"In any set of circumstances latent possibilities are always present, but that these possibilities may never be realized simply because they were never noticed or because of the choices not taken" (MacKay and Chia, 2013: 211)

"Actors make decisions and take actions, but every choice made and action taken contain the seeds of both latent possibilities and unintended consequences that remain as potentialities as a specific moment in time; "ignorance and knowledge coexist"" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005:412) (MacKay and Chia, 2013: 211)

"While Napoleon thought he was in control of events, the Russian general Kutuzov knew that neither of them were, and so made fewer mistakes"
Leon Tolstoy (1869/1993, *War and Peace*, cited in MacKay and Chia, 2013:208)

Question: What do these illustrations have in common?

Focus on: experience,   interaction,   potentiality, processes   unfolding in   time, bringing the past to bear on   the present

Objective: to   develop   a   coherent   ontological-epistemological   framework that will both enable us to appreciate   the novelty of hitherto process studies *and* deepen our understanding of process thinking for   the   purpose   of   developing   robust process theories   more self-consciously

What is process philosophy?

Reality is a relational process: the world is composed of dynamic interrelated processes
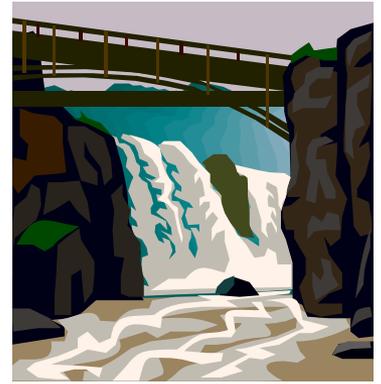
Relational ontology: everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things.

A process orientation prioritizes activity over product, change over persistence, novelty over stasis, open-endedness over determination, events over substances.

A process view treats organizational phenomena not as *faits accomplis* but as (re)created through interacting agents embedded in sociomaterial practices, whose actions are mediated by institutional, linguistic and objectual artifacts

A process perspective does not deny the existence of states or entities, but insists on unpacking them to reveal the complex processes - sequences of activities and transactions - that are involved in, and contribute to, their constitution.

"The idea of discrete "events" dissolves into a manifold of processes which themselves dissolve into further processes"
N. Rescher, *Process Philosophy*
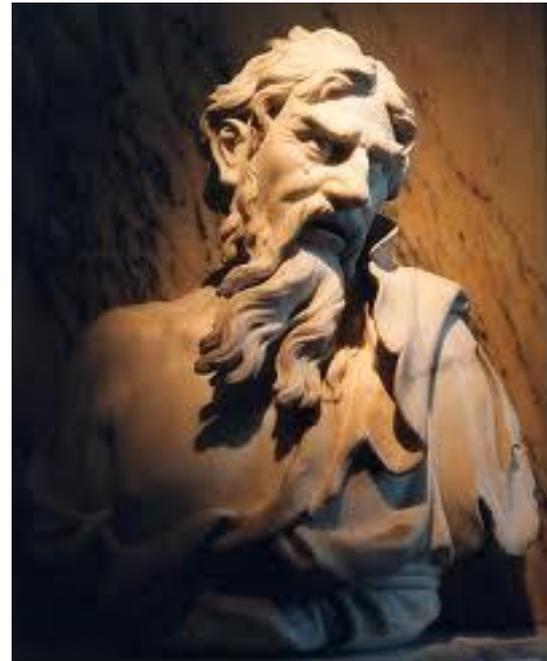
Substance thinking: change is an epiphenomenon; the world consists of substances.
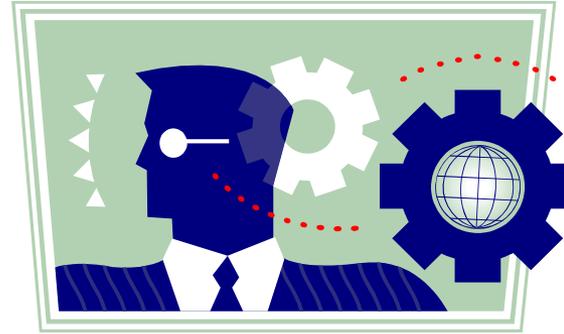
Substances:
(a) exist independently of other substances,
(b) stand under (*sub*-stance) their qualities and endure unchanged even when their qualities change
(R. Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy*)

"By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist"
R. Descartes, *Philosophical Works of Rene Descartes*

Substance thinking recognizes the occurrence of events but it explains them in terms of substances – i.e. events happen to substances

e.g.: "The student is reading" [the event ("reading") happens to the substantial entity ("the student")]
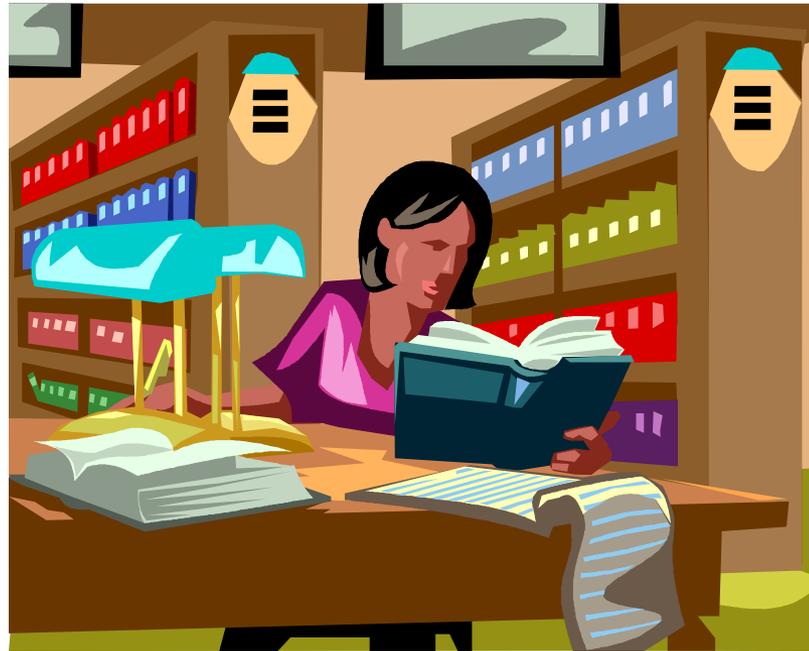
Process thinking recognizes the existence of enduring entities, but it explains them in terms of repeated patterns of interrelated events

Events are constituted by sociomaterial interactions unfolding in time

e.g.: The student is constituted by her experiences – "reading" is one of the events that constitute the student.

"Reading" can be further analyzed in terms of further *events* such as visual perception, memory, etc.
(R. L. Farmer, *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic,* pp.64-65)

There is a close connection between the substance view of reality and the subject-predicate structure of language (Mesle, op. cit)

e.g.   "The wax is white"
         "The pencil is …."
         "3M is an innovative company"
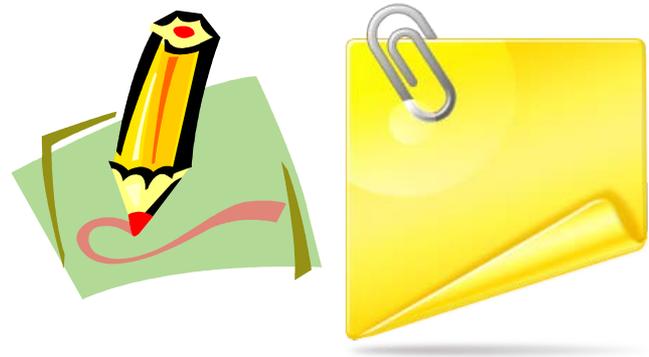
Any qualities/predicates may change but the substance (the wax, the pencil, 3M) remains unchanged

From a *process* view, the subject term is a shorthand for all the predicates; every time the predicates change, the subject term changes too

From a process perspective, agents are not unchanging mental substances but bundles of qualities.

The mental self is
"nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement"
D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

"You *are* the flow of your experience. Your mind, your soul, your psyche is that flow. Your sense of identity in that flow comes from memory and anticipation. There is a chain of experience out of which you arise, in each moment, more directly than anyone else. [..] You arise out of your past, out of your relationships with the whole world, and enjoy a momentary present that includes anticipation of future experiences. That moment becomes and perishes and gives birth to a new moment, which recreates you, with both continuity and novelty"

R. Mesle, op.cit., pp.48-49

Process-Relational Philosophy
An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead

C. ROBERT MESLE
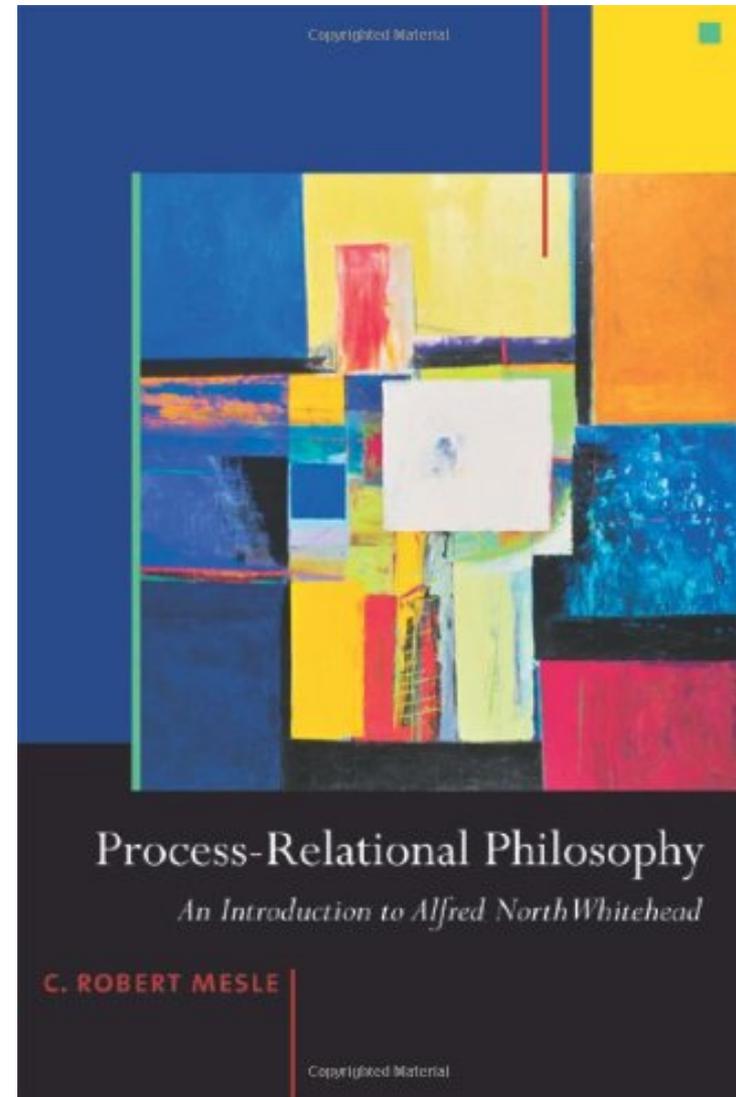
Understanding process: A Whitehedian vocabulary

The primacy of *experience*: Non-mechanistic/organismic understanding – *feeling* goes all the way down from consciousness to subatomic reality – "subatomic articles are drops of spatial-temporal experience. They experience their physical relationships with the world around them as vectored emotions – feelings that drive them this way and that" (Mesle, op.cit, p.36)

Understanding process: A Whitehedian vocabulary

Alfred North Whitehead...on the passion for discovery

THE RAND CORPORATION, SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

"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. Also this character of our experience suggests that consciousness is the crown of experience, only occasionally attained, not its necessary base" A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p.267

Human experience is "all that is going on within the envelope of the organism at any given moment which is potentially available to awareness" (C.R. Rogers, A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in client-centered framework, 1959, p.197)

Experience is (see Cooper et al, *Handbook of Person-Centred Psychotherapy and Counseling*):
- potentially available to awareness (what is experienced vs. what is symbolized in awareness)
- in the moment (past or future events can be part of our experience insomuch as they are manifested in the here-and-now)
- subjective
- bodily (is what we create within us through our sense modalities) – "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1962)
- process-like (flow)

"The actual world is a process, and the process is the becoming of actual entities" (Whitehead, op. cit., p.22)

Actual entities/occasions/events: "[…] the final real things of which the world is made up. […] drops of experience, complex and interdependent" (Whitehead, op.cit., p.p.27, 28)

An actual entity must create itself out of past actualities; it reaches out, apprehends, and draws them in, creating itself out of them.

Eternal object: "pure potential" (Whitehead, op.cit., p.23)

Prehensions: an actual entity creating itself (apprehending, grasping) out of past actual entities

"Prehensions are the vehicles by which one actual entity becomes objectified in another […]. [They] are 'vectors'; for they feel what is there and transform it into what is here" (Whitehead, op. cit., p.133)

Process and Reality
CORRECTED EDITION

Alfred North Whitehead
Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne

In a prehension what was there-then becomes here-now; the way a momentary experience incorporates (apprehends) its predecessor; the past flows into the present; an element moves from the objectivity of a past actual occasion (there-then) to the subjective immediacy of the becoming actual occasion. How the element is prehended constitutes the *subjective form*.

Physical prehension: apprehending a past actual entity –

*Conceptual prehension:* apprehneding an eternal object – a possibility

Positive prehension: actiovely apprehending a past actual entity; takes into oneself the experience of the past as material for self-creativity

Concrescence is an actual entity's process of becoming concrete; it is the growing together of a many into the unity of one

Creativity is the dynamic rhythm between the *many* and the *one*. There is continual advance from the universe disjunctively (the "many") to the universe conjunctively (the "one"). The universe expands through unifications of itself in novel actual entities; each new actual entity offers itself as a member of a new multiplicity in need of unification: "The many become one, ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿ one" (Whitehead, op.cit., p.21; Farmer
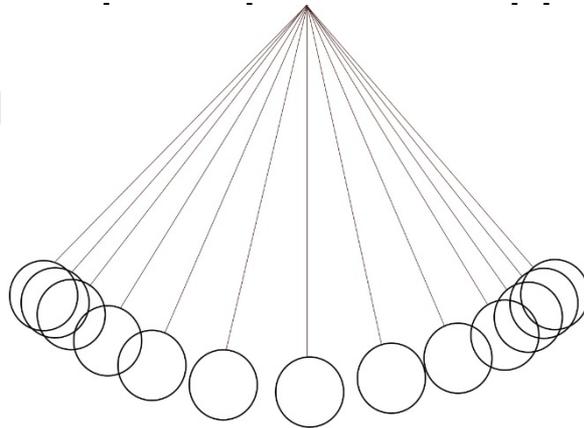
The process of concrescence
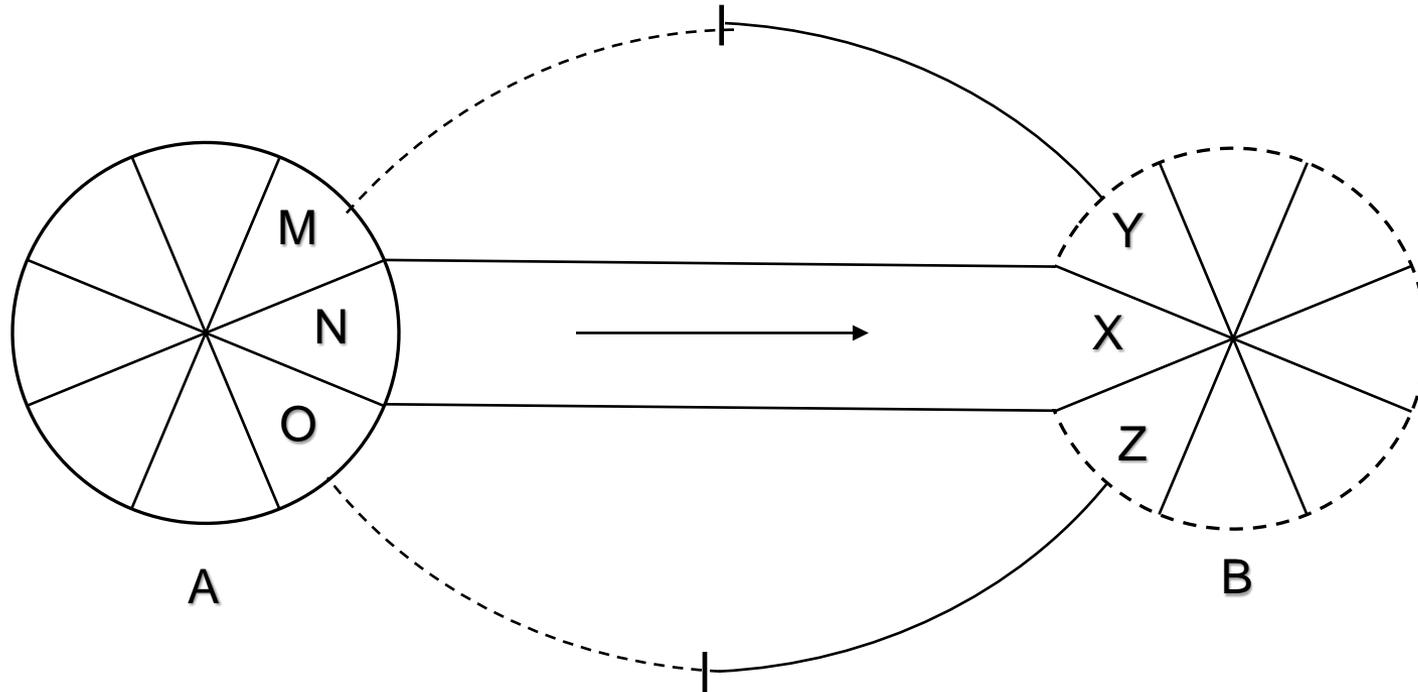
Source: D.W. Sherburne, A key to Whitehead's Process and Reality, 1966 p. 10

Illustrations

1. Gehman, J., Trevino, L.K., Garud, R. (2013), Values work: A process study of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56, pp.84-112

Focus: the development of an honor code within a large US Business School

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Concluding Questions

- What is the role of intentionality in a world of becoming?

- How is stability generated out of pervasive change?

- How does the "logic of attraction" (Weick and Quinn, 1999:380) work in continuous change?

- How do "micro" changes lead to "macro" consequences?

- How do we capture the flux of experience in organizational life through empirical methods of inquiry?

etc …