



title: Philosophy in Process. Vol. 7 SUNY Series in Philosophy
author: Weiss, Paul.
publisher: State University of New York Press
isbn10 | asin: 0887060803
print isbn13: 9780887060809
ebook isbn13: 9780585050447
language: English
subject: Philosophy.
publication date: 1966
lcc: B945.W396P5eb
ddc: 191
subject: Philosophy.

Philosophy in Process

SUNY Series in Philosophy

Robert C. Neville, Editor

Philosophy in Process

VOLUME SEVEN, PART 2

September 17, 1977-February 26, 1978 and an appendix

Paul Weiss

State University of New York Press

Published by

State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, address State University of New York Press, State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y., 12246

(Revised for volumes 7 and 8)

Weiss, Paul, 1901-

Philosophy in process.

Contents: v. 1. 1955-1960.[etc.]v. 7. pt. 2. September 17, 1977-

February 26, 1978, and an appendix.v. 8. 'April 28, 1978-July 28, 1980.

1. PhilosophyCollected works. I. Title. II. Series: SUNY series in philosophy.
B945. W396P5 191 63-14293

HC 0-88706-080-3

PB 0-88706-082-X

For Hester Pickman

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First Considerations (1977)

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Preface

There is an almost two-year gap between the entries published in volume 7 and volume 8 of this series. I did not remember whether or not I had written any entries during that period, though it seemed most unlikely that I did not. Recently, I have come across a manuscript whose dates occur within that span; although I have searched, I have not been able to find any others. The late discovery of these pages raised a difficulty. Their actual dating requires them to be published after volume 7. The compromise solution has been to have them fit in their proper writing sequence, while recognizing that they are not published in the order their dates would demand. Hence a volume 7, part 2.

I append a study that was commissioned but, for want of funds, was not published. It touches on themes suggested here and there in the body of this work, but it carries them out more systematically. Unlike what precedes, it was rewritten many times.

Washington, D.C.
October 15, 1984

1977

September 17

I find it valuable to set down random thoughts on various topics. This is of course what was done in previous years, published as *Philosophy in Process*. Since it has been decided that there are not to be any more volumes of that work, I will just accumulate these occasional observations, without any thought of publishing them. Perhaps at some later time it may be desirable to make a selection from them or to publish them in their entirety.

If it be true that we must start every investigation, philosophic or otherwise, from where we are, with all the confusions, errors, truths, and the like that characterize our commonsense lives, we seem then to have six options:

1. We can accept the whole without any question. But if we did that, we would accept falsehoods, superstitions, sloppy classifications and observations, incoherencies and prejudices as surely as we accept truths. We would close off the need or prospect of science, history, and religion.
2. We can reject the whole without question, on the ground that we cannot trust any part of it, having discovered that some of the items on which we put our trust have deceived us. This, of course, is what Descartes did. Sometimes he spoke as if this were a purely methodological device. But others—Russell and the early Wittgenstein—offer no such excuse. For them, the truth lies in what can be expressed in a highly sophisticated, formal, logical notation, appropriate to the presence of ultimate units, no one of which could be known in daily life. But there is no warrant for our giving up all that we in fact accept just because some items have proved to be obscure, unreliable, incomplete, and the like.
3. We can cut through the totality of commonsense beliefs and acceptances to attend to something we take to be undeniable. G.E.

Moore thought that nothing was more basic than that he had two hands, particularly when he was holding them up before his face. But without impugning the presence of undeniable truths about the commonsense world, it surely is true that we would deny that we had two hands if the affirmation required us to give up a vast body of knowledge that we were in a hospital, that we were not seeing well, that we had had an operation, that we had no feeling in the hands, and so on. It is dubious that there is some one particular proposition that we would insist on in the face of the need to deny a host of others, equally commonsensical and obvious. The Cartesian 'I am' does not refer to a commonsense reality, but to a commonsense supposition, for what is said to be is not only that which is thinking, but a detached I that is thinking, an I not known by commonsense means. And were we able to find unexceptional commonsense truths, we would still be left with the problem of what we are next to do. There seem to be three alternatives:

a. We could try to free ourselves from all those claims which are not grounded in or cannot be seen to be as firmly grounded as those we accept. But we then presuppose that what we have accepted is the model for or a test of the others. Yet they could well have warrants of their own.

b. We could take the accepted truths to provide a measure of, and a guide to what else is to be accepted. Though there might be items which might be warranted in other ways and, therefore, which would not be reached from this base, we would nevertheless be able to build up a body of knowledge. We could make use of some method of inquiry that allows us to expand our knowledge, using the accepted truths as a beginning. But then we would have to justify the method by which the expansion occurred.

c. We could allow the accepted truths themselves to take us elsewhere. What we accept is known to be present. It will therefore be that as known and as present that should take us elsewhere. But since the truths which we have fastened on are not the only truths that there might be, it would be better to look at what we accepted, not in its singularity, but as leading us elsewhere, because of an instability in it just so far as it is known and present. That, in fact, is the procedure I followed both in *Beyond All Appearances* and in *First Considerations*. By attending to the nature of knowledge and the known in the former, and to the intruded or evidential in the latter,

rather than to this or that item of knowledge or evidence, I found it possible to show how one could move from any accepted item in the common sense world to what was beyond it. Each item was shown to be in disequilibrium, inevitably pointing beyond itself, precisely so far as it was known and present.

September 27

Evidencing is formal in the sense that its structure can be specified, and its various steps can be stated. It is epistemic in that it takes us to what is known. It is ontologic since it is the terminus of relations, connecting what the finalities intrude with what they will accept. It is negative, for it rejects what makes the evidence differ from the evidenced. But it is also positive, since it moves from the lesser to the greater. It is also eminent, proceeding as it does from the finite to what is final. These various dimensions are not separate. They are distinctions within a single basic move from the intruded to the intruder. To engage in that move is to be involved in an activity that takes one, not to some initial predicate purged, reified, or displaced, but into the body of a finality that one had initially acknowledged in a limited form. When one of the dimensions is isolated, the others remain in the background, attached to the focused one, giving it ground and force.

Evidencing is a kind of 'cosmological argument' in that it proceeds from an effect to its ultimate cause. Such an 'argument' is not separable from a kind of teleological argument, since it requires one to start with a special type of effect, making evident the fact of an intrusion; it is also not separable from a kind of ontological argument since it requires one to end with what has power. The traditional cosmological argument is at best a way of finding a final 'because' or explanation, a constitutive cause of what is, while the traditional teleological argument is at best a way of moving from a lesser form of a finality to a greater.

Spinoza's ontological argument differs from others' in a number of respects. He does not work with the idea that God or substance is to be thought of as perfect. Nor does he speak as if existence were something extra. He intends only to show that his one substance is all there is, or at least that it grounds and contains all there is. Leibniz remarked that the ontological argument presupposes that the (idea of?) God is possible; if he (or it?) is, presumably he will necessarily exist.

But if it were shown that God, or the idea of him, is possible, we still would not have enough to show that God in fact exists. The existence of God follows only from an existent essence, from an essence able to exert power, from what Spinoza calls a 'causa sui'. Given that existent essence, there is an existence of that essence.

An existent essence differs from the existence of an essence in being an essence that has power, and therefore more than a mere possible. It is a real possible, a possible that can act. The existence of the essence is a condition where consequences follow (in Spinoza's case, where there are modes) not expressed in the essence. God's existence follows from his (existent essence) because this is able to give a distinct status to consequences which do not follow from the essence itself. In Spinoza's case, the *natura naturans* is the ground for a *natura naturata*. The result goes counter to the rationalism Spinoza would like to defend.

It is questionable whether any rationalist could ever acknowledge an existence that was distinguishable from an essence. If this were done and it must be done if we accept a 'causa sui' we have something productive of consequences not following from the essence itself directly, but only from what that essence allows to be. One might take the existence, which the essence permits to be, to have rationality, but it will still be a rationality not identical with the rationality of the essence itself. Another way of saying this is to distinguish the essence as a conjunctive disjunct 'a-or-b-or. . . .' from the existence as a disjunct 'a or b or c'. On such a view the *natura naturata* comes at the end of the ontological argument.

October 16

For the last month or so I have been revising "You, I, and the Others," and "Foundations for a Philosophical Anthropology." The latter started off as an introduction to the former, but now has expanded and will expand to a much larger work. I have also been going through notes for my class on Spinoza, and reading Spinoza again, preparatory to my appearance as the last speaker in the Spinoza series at Catholic University in December. I find this work tedious; I do not seem to keep my mind sufficiently well-focused, and as a consequence I have to do the job again, and more likely again and again. I am stimulated by setting down thoughts, even when they are not well-formed and even when at the end I am as much or even more confused than I

was at the beginning. But writing here, even with no prospect as yet of having it published as the eighth volume of *Philosophy in Process*, or in any other way, makes me feel as if the days are not wasted.

One of the most disturbing parts of *First Considerations* for many, apparently, is the discussion of proper names. That discussion, of course, is a development of my account of symbols, and the accompanying thesis that sign usage is derivative from symbolization. Everything used in language is taken to be expressive of the user and able therefore to be used to symbolize him. Proper names are conceived to be special cases of the use of penetrative symbols. The need for this interpretation can perhaps be made most evident by following out another set of issues.

Were we not already acquainted with an external world, what warrant would there be for raising the question as to whether or not there is one, or whether or not it could be known? Finding that what we were experiencing came and went without our explicit effort or desire, and sometimes contrary to our efforts, could lead to the postulation of a realm where entities functioned independently of us and our efforts. We would not, of course, be acquainted with that realm were we confined to our own experiences, but the attempt to explain oppositionality, persistent presence, and natures, despite our changes, could prompt the entertainment of the supposition that there was something not of our making which was to be found again and again. We would not know whether or not there was an external world, and we would not, strictly speaking, be able to say that we were postulating it, for such postulation would suppose that we could identify ourselves as distinct from the content we were undergoing, and thus were in a way 'external' to that content.

A postulate of an external world depends on its postulation by a postulator. That postulator, so far, would be unknown. Were it said that the postulator is himself, discerned through the content that is being expressed, one would have a right to ask for the evidence for the claim. That evidence, I think, would be found to be no better than and to be nowhere else than where the evidence for external entities was found.

Did we not have an acquaintance with other realities, why would the question of whether or not there are such entities arise? Is it not because we find that things come and go in more or less steady ways, that they resist us, that we are subject to various experiences of intrusions,

pains, and the like which are modified when we act in this direction or that and thereupon find that other experiences ensue? Once again, we would proceed by postulation. Once again, we would not know if there were anything answering to the postulation; and once again we would have to suppose that there were postulators, outside the data. As in the previous case, there would be no warrant for supposing that there was anything answering to our postulations.

Did we not have a penetrative contact with other men, how could the question of whether or not there are other minds or other persons arise? Is it because we find that certain experiences (commonly said to be encounters with other men) are followed by our embarrassments, enrichments, punishments, self-consciousness, support, and distinctively directed experiences, and that we can best account for these by postulating the existence of others on a footing with us? The supposition would require that others 'postulate' that we exist just as surely as it requires us to 'postulate' that they exist; both postulators being assumed to be outside the provenance of what we in fact know. Why should the work of the different postulators coincide, at least to the extent of terminating in realities which are men in the same sense?

The proposed answers to the three questions all suppose that we do not have a power to move intensively, in depth, beyond what we encounter. In our encounters we experience, make contact with the surface of things, but we always have an adumbrative subjective and objective acquaintance with what is beyond the experience. Subjectively, we are aware of our experiencing, our confronting; objectively, we are aware that there is an absencing beyond what we are confronting. The supposed postulated and postulator previously mentioned are already reached, and therefore not postulated or supposed as the outcome of mere intellectual efforts. Experiencing begins before, and ends after the experience. It terminates in experienced content only because it begins from within the experienceer and ends with what is external, real, and perhaps coordinate with himself.

Proper names, and eventually other parts of language, are means by which we concentrate on, intensify the ways we make contact with what is outside the confronted content. The names must be learned; there are conventions governing their use. But all the while, they operate within a world in which we have penetrated to some degree. The proper use of proper names requires that we keep that fact in mind,

