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GETTING SUBSTANCE TO GO ALL THE WAY: NORRIS CLARKE'S NEO-THOMISM AND THE PROCESS TURN

The misconception which has haunted philosophic literature throughout the centuries is the notion of "independent existence." There is no such mode of existence; every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way in which it is interwoven with the rest of the Universe.  

Perhaps more than any other aspect of his thought, Alfred North Whitehead\'s rejection of the notion of "independent existence" or substance has been taken to define his philosophy of organism. Moreover, it is this rejection of substances which has been the source of some of the most significant objections to Whitehead\'s thought. Many commentators often indicate sympathy with Whitehead\'s project but ask, if the world is composed exclusively of microscopic events which neither endure nor have histories, then how can Whitehead account for enduring, macroscopic individuals such as ourselves? That is, having rejected the notion of unchanging subjects of change, how can Whitehead account adequately capture the unity and self-identity of macroscopic individuals? The contemporary Neo-Thomist W. Norris Clarke\'s gives voice to this potentially damaging objection. A close analysis of Clarke\'s work will prove rewarding in several respects. Not only does Clarke provide a clear challenge to a non-substantial model of individuality by explicitly formulating and defending the objection that Whitehead\'s system only allows for an attenuated conception of macroscopic individuality, Clarke\'s own dynamic interpretations of the classical notion of substance seriously calls into question the very need for Whitehead\'s "process turn" toward what Clarke sees as a misguided metaphysical atomism. Thus, engaging Clarke\'s objection provides a valuable opportunity not only to evaluate the adequacy of his dynamic notion of substance, but also to respond to the common criticism that Whitehead\'s system does not do justice to the unity of macroscopic individuals.

SUBSTANCE AS DYNAMIC?

In his recent monograph, The One and the Many, Clarke traces the source of what he sees as Whitehead\'s misguided metaphysical atomism to his repudiation of the doctrine of substance. From Clarke\'s point of view, what is particularly
tragic about this error is that Whitehead’s repudiation of substance itself was the result of a flawed understanding of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas’ notion of substance. Clarke has devoted much of his august career to advancing what he calls a “creative retrieval” of St. Thomas which interprets substance dynamically. In contrast to the traditional depiction of substances as independent, unchanging subjects of change, Clarke conceives of every being as inherently active or “self-communicating.” According to Clarke, “A non-acting, non-communicating being is for all practical purposes [...] equivalent to no being at all. To be real is to make a difference.” This emphasis on being active and self-communicating also brings Clarke to refuse to endorse that substances are independent and unrelated. To have a universe, a community of real existents, its members would have to communicate with each other, be linked together and all communication requires some kind of action or to state that a completely unrelated, unchanging entity would not only be “totally pointless,” an unchanging entity “could not be the work of a wise creative God. And so we live in a universe where all the real beings that count, that make a difference, are dynamically active ones, that pour over through self-manifesting, self-communicating action to connect up with other real beings, and form a community of interacting existents we call a universe.” Clearly, this is not the notion of vacuous existence which Whitehead had in mind when he referred to “independent existence” or “substance.” Therefore, far from joining Whitehead in repudiating substance, Clarke steadfastly affirms the supremacy of substance as “the principle of continuity and self-identity throughout the whole spectrum of accidental change open to a particular being.” Clarke is quick to point out, however, that being self-identical is not the same as being unchanging or immutable, as Whitehead, among others, have charged. Clarke reminds his reader that “the authentic meaning of self-identity through change is this: ‘In an accidental change, the substance itself changes, but not substantially or essentially, only accidentally.’ Thus the subject that changes retains its essential self-identity through the spectrum of accidental change open to it in terms of its accidental properties.” For Clarke, then, a substance is something which actively maintains self-identity over time, but this self-identity does not signify something which is static or self-enclosed. On the contrary, Clarke insists, “Self-identity is not immutability but the active power of self-maintenance in exchange with others. Thus the best way to maintain psychological self-identity is not by not changing, doing nothing, but by stability of goals, perseveringly pursued.” “You could not,” Clarke retorts, “End more dynamic notion of [substance] than this.” In this way, Clarke believes the subject can at once affirm the traditional concept of substance as well as capture the dynamic, processive nature of reality in systems such as Whitehead’s. Accordingly, given his dynamic interpretation of substance, Clarke seems to be arguing not only that Whitehead’s complicated account of process is inadequate, but also that it is unnecessary.

SUBSTANCE OR SOCIETY?

Ironically, just as Clarke finds that Whitehead misinterprets Aristotle and St. Thomas’ notion of substance, I believe that, in participating in misleading aspects of what I refer to as the classical interpretation of Whitehead’s metaphysics, which, in insisting on a sharp ontological distinction between the past and the present, drains the past of both creativity and value, Clarke misinterprets Whitehead’s notion of “society.” Thus, before turning to analyze Clarke’s “creative retrieval” of the doctrine of substance, let us first examine what I believe are serious flaws in Clarke’s interpretation of Whitehead.

In The One and the Many, Clarke characterizes Whitehead’s system as a “metaphysical atomism in which “process itself is made up of many discretely distinct, tiny entities, ‘actual occasions’ or ‘actual entities,’ following each other in an ordered sequence.” Clarke’s understanding of Whitehead’s account of macroscopic individuals follows directly from this interpretation of process as composed of discrete entities:

The macroscopic objects we call things—plants, animals, humans, chains, etc.—are really societies or collections of many actual entities bound together by various relations, causal connections etc., existing at any one time. Down through time there is no actual entity that remains the same, unchanged, but only a series of successive entities that we call one being because the series is closely connected by a chain of “inheritance” of properties one from the other. Thus what we call the human “self,” the “I,” is really only a succession of selves bound together by a common chain of inheritances.”

It is this understanding of Whiteheadian macroscopic objects as “only a series” or “collection” of “discretely distinct” actual entities that brings Clarke to criticize Whitehead’s system for not adequately accounting for the experienced unity of macroscopic individuals. Simply stated, Clarke’s objection is that a mere succession of entities, no matter how closely connected, could never account for the way we experience ourselves or the way we experience others. As Clarke puts it, a society of “discrete, non-identical selves linked in a temporal and spatial chain is not nearly strong enough to do justice to these powerful experiences of feeling unity and self-identity. [...] The unity of a society, founded on essential relations, not on the inner unity of the being itself, is again not strong enough to do justice to the evidenced facts.” It is primarily this problem—the unity of macroscopic individuals—which makes Clarke want to embrace process metaphysics. If correct, this objection would be devastating for a system which strives to be adequate to experience. For if Whitehead is indeed affirming that macroscopic individuals

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are merely a succession of "selves," he would be unable to account for the unity of our own experience and of our experience of others. The question, then, is whether Whitehead's organic model of individuality is able to do justice to the "evidenced facts." Given that Clarke recognizes that Whitehead's emphasis on interrelatedness is "one of the most fertile of all the Whiteheadian insights into what it means to be in our world," it is surprising that he characterizes process as being "made up of many discreetly distinct, tiny entities [...]" Though it is true that Whitehead believes that experience comes in "drops" and that, in a sense, actual occasions are the atomic stuff of which the universe is made, it is important also to recall that this atomism is of the unity of the universe. The relations obtaining between actual occasions are primarily internal, not external, wherein these internal relations "are constitutive of what the event is in itself." Each actual occasion is, in this sense, its relationship to the universe. However, Whitehead, the concept of individuality (both macroscopic and microscopic) itself requires essential reference to others. This emphasis upon interrelation and interdependence is what is meant by referring to Whitehead's model of individ- uality as "organic." Furthermore, it is in this way that Whitehead sees himself explicitly rejecting Aristotle's dictum, which Clarke affirms, that a substance is never present in another. Indeed, according to Whitehead's principle of relativity, "an actual entity is present in other actual entities. In fact, if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity." Given that every actual occasion is present in every other, actual occasions are anything but "discretely distinct," as Clarke contends. As a matter of fact, given the principle of relativity, they are more near- ly the opposite. Given the constitutive relation between societies and actual occasions, the proper understanding of the latter as organically interrelated has a significant impact on how to conceive of the former. Clarke, incorrectly, I contend, depicts a society as "an aggregate of many distinct beings held together in an extrinsic unity based on external relations." Yet, this interpretation of Whitehead's con- cept of "society" is incorrect on virtually every point. A society is not an "aggregate" of "discrete," "externally related" beings held together in an "extrinsic unity." Rather, a society is a socially ordered nexus of internally related occasions, which form an intrinsic unity. Societies are not mere collections or aggregates of entities to which the same class-name applies. This is the difference between a nexus and a society. Whereas a nexus is simply any real fact of togetherness, including extrinsic or aggregative units such as boulders and mountains, a soci- ety is a particular type of nexus which enjoys "social order." That is, a society's constituent occasions share a common, defining characteristic because of the conditions imposed upon them by their internal relatedness with previous members of that selfsame society. Hence, contrary to aggregate entities, complex, struc- tured societies such as plants and animals are organic entities which, like system- atic entities, are characterized by strong internal relations which make possible a regnant unity. This intimate relationship between a macroscopic whole and its parts brings to light a crucial difference in the role of "relations" in Clarke and Whitehead's respective systems. Whereas, for Whitehead, the relations between individuals are constitutive of their very character, for Clarke, although it is essen- tial to the nature of substances that they be related to "some other beings and sys- tems of them," it is merely "accidental to which particular beings and systems [they] are related." That is, although, according to Clarke, every substance or real being is nested within and depends upon various kinds of order or systems, which others and which systems a substance is or is not related to is purely acci- dental; that is, it does not affect its essence. For Whitehead, on the other hand, in a sense, every individual just is its relationships to every element in its world. Though some relations may be more central in the constitution of an entity than others, there are no purely accidental relationships. Thus, although he may affirm a notion of substance as being in dynamic interrelation with its environment, inso- far as these interrelations are only external and accidental to what that substance is, Clarke still adheres to the notion of "independent existence," which, according to Whitehead, is the "misconception which has haunted philosophic literature throughout the centuries [...]." Hence, I find that Clarke is incorrect in his interpretation both of process as involving discrete entities and of societies as collections of externally related enti- ties. Far from being "discretely distinct," actual occasions are in fact constituted by their internal relations with others. Similarly, rather than being more "extrinsic units" composed of "collections" or "aggregates" of "externally related" enti- ties, societies are intrinsic units of socially ordered actual occasions which, by reason of the conditions imposed upon them by their internal relatedness to previ- ous members of the society, share a common characteristic (what has traditionally been called the essential form). CLARKE AND THE PROCESS TURN Both of these misinterpretations, I suspect, derive in large part from Clarke's misunderstanding of why Whitehead felt compelled to reject the doctrine of sub- stance. While he is correct that, at least in part, Whitehead developed his meta- physics of process in response to the inadequacies he perceived in substance ontologies, Clarke is mistaken when he further claims that Whitehead's motiva- tion was primarily to "banish any notion of a unitary subject perduing through Getting Substance to Go All the Way: Norris Clarke's Neo-Thomism and the Process Turn Brian G. Honing
The mistake which Clarke and many others make is to assume that Whitehead denies that we experience the world in terms of substantial, perduring individuals. Yet, this is clearly incorrect.

With Clarke, Whitehead fully recognizes that it is unavoidable and even important that the human mind think in terms of substance and quality. For, he says in *Science and the Modern World*, “without these ways of thinking we could not get our ideas straight for daily use.”34 Things such as tables, and roses are not fictions, nor do their forms of order derive from the functioning of our minds. Rather, Whitehead’s claim is that part of what it is to be the type of high grade organism that we are is to have the ability to abstract from, as James put it, the “booming buzzing confusion” which constantly confronts us.35 For Whitehead, our experience of the world, indeed the experience of most animals, is the product of a complex physiological process which has as its primary function the attention to a focal foreground purchased as the expense of a much neglected background. “There are other elements in our experience, on the fringe of consciousness, and yet massively qualifying our experience. In regard to these other facts, it is our consciousness that flickers, and not the facts themselves. They are always securely there, barely discriminated, and yet inescapable.”36 Consequently, Whitehead claims, if we look closely at the concepts of substance and quality we will find that they are essentially “stubborn low level constructions of a high degree of abstraction.”37 They are complicated and highly useful abstractions, but they are abstractions nonetheless. Thus, the problem is not the fact that we perceive the world in terms of substantial individuals—this is both unavoidable and practically important—but that we fail to recognize “that we are presenting ourselves with simplified editions of immediate matters of fact.”38 This inappropriate substitution of the abstract for the concrete is the essence of what Whitehead calls the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”39 I humbly suggest that Whitehead explains, the violation of this fallacy does not result from the mere employment of the word “substance,” but from taking, whether consciously or unconsciously, independence rather than interconnection as ontologically ultimate.40 Whitehead denies, then, is not the unity of macroscopic individuals, but the notion that these macroscopic, perduring individuals are the most basic ontological units of explanation. Accordingly, I contend that the question which this stake is not whether Whitehead seeks to “banish” the idea of perduring individuality, which he does not, but rather how perduring individuality is to be explained.

It may be helpful to formulate this claim by means of Bernard Lonergan’s distinction between description and explanation,41 to which Clarke himself subscribes.42 According to Lonergan, a description differs from an explanation in that a description derives from relating objects of inquiry to the percipient, whereas an explanation derives from relating objects of inquiry to one another. For instance, while a descriptive account of a sunrise, by relating the data to the percipient, would claim that the sun literally rises over a stationary earth, an explanatory account, by relating the data to each other, would claim that the sun appears to rise because the earth revolves on its axis around the sun.

Taken in these terms, Whitehead is rejecting substance as an adequate explanation of the nature of things, not as an adequate description. Hence, I contend that it is Clarke’s account of experience in terms of substantial, perduring individuals which is insufficiently explanatory because it arrives at its most basic ontological units—i.e., macroscopic, perduring individuals—by means of the way the world appears to us (humans). To put this in Whiteheadian terms, this would be to say that, in taking our perception of the world as delimiting the most basic ontological units, substance ontology violates the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

“It is the mistake that has thwarted European metaphysics from the time of the Greeks, namely, to confuse societies with the completely real things which are the actual occasions.”43 Beyond this criticism, which applies to substance ontologies in general, there is an additional way in which Clarke’s dynamic account of substance is uniquely lacking in explanatory force.

For if Clarke is to truly avoid the conception of substance as a static cabinet of accidental changes, if active self-maintenance is not achieved by “not changing, doing nothing,” then it is incumbent upon him to give an explanation, not just a description, of how this active self-maintenance takes place.44 For Whitehead, it is not sufficient simply to say that substance or essential form just is that principle which provides unity and links the accidental attributes of a being. What is needed, I submit, is an explanation of how the active maintenance of self-identity takes place from moment to moment. Furthermore, I contend that in order to do so, Clarke must ultimately appeal to some doctrine of internal relations. For if an individual is not essentially the same by not changing, but by changing at each moment, by actively responding to changing circumstances in its environment, then at each successive moment, from the time of its creation until its destruction, its self-identity must be continually reaffirmed. Unfortunately, Clarke is lacking any such account of how this active reassertion of a given character at each successive moment takes place. It is just because self-identity must be continually reasserted and maintained that the fact of the internal relatedness of each moment to the one before it cannot be taken for granted. As a practical demonstration of the greater explanatory power of Whitehead’s organic model over Clarke’s, I propose that we briefly examine the ontological status of systems in each.

Having the benefit of extensive advances in fields such as ecology and biology, Clarke recognizes that he must break with Aristotle and St. Thomas and affirm that a system is
a new mode of unity existing between and binding together individual substances, which is not merely the sum of many different accidental relations but forms a new unity with its own properties that is not reducible merely to the sum of all the individual relations, but is a new mode of unity that resides in all the members at once.80

Quite rightly, Clarke recognizes that "things" such as ecosystems are not simply aggregates of externally related substances. A system is a mode of unity with properties of its own. However, this introduces a problem for Clarke. While sys-
tems have properties of their own and, therefore, are more than a mere aggregate of entities, they have insufficient unity to be considered a substance in their own right. Within his system, it simply is invalid to claim that a system is "partially" or "sort of" a substance; something is either a substance or it is not. Given the con-
straints of his substance ontology, Clarke takes the only option open to him.

Namely, he argues that a system "belongs to the order of accidents, but it is a unique kind of accident that inheres in many subjects at once—a form of one-in-
many—and so deserves a name of its own because of its special properties.80

Unfortunately, I think that Clarke is appealing to a distinction which, in fact, makes no difference; referring to systems as a type of accident, even a unique type, cannot do justice to the real form of unity which a system is.

Interestingly, Clarke flirts with a model very similar to the one being defend-
ed when he examines systems which so strongly dominate their constituents that
their individuality becomes almost submerged or wiped out, e.g., the
ants in an ant colony or bees in a hive are so powerfully governed by the "psychic field" of the whole that they surrender themselves instinc-
tively and totally to the good of the whole, and will die soon if removed from it, even though they have adequate food, water, etc. The system has almost totally absorbed them; it so dominates them that they can be almost said to compose one being, but not quite.81

What is particularly noteworthy is that Clarke has his finger on the difference between a structured living society and a personally ordered, structured, living society. For Whitehead, it is the dominance of a single, serially ordered, continu-
ous society that governs its structured society that characterizes human experi-
ce. Whereas, on Clarke's model of substance, such a relation is problematic, for Whitehead, it is simply a matter of analyzing the types of order achieved by a partic-
ular nexus of actual occasions. For in an organic philosophy such as Whitehead's, macroscopic individuality is a matter of order. If the degree of order is particularly high and novelty is introduced, then it is a living society. If it is higher still it may be a personal society. The question, then, is not whether a partic-
ular form of order is or is not a substance, as it is for Clarke. Though systems, such as ecosystems, may not have the same degree of intrinsic unity as a plant or animal, for instance, they are nonetheless a real form of togetherness with proper-
ties of their own. By taking only the macroscopic units which we perceive at our

scale of experience as the ontologically basic units, Clarke is unable to affirm the notion that there are degrees of coordination each of which is a real form of togetherness.80 Thus, I believe that it is Clarke who must ultimately make the process turn if he is to truly explain, not merely describe, the fact of dynamic self-identity. This conclusion brings to light the very important difference between the classical notion of essential form and Whitehead's notion of defining characteris-
tic. Whereas, according to the tradition, the essential form imposes and is the cause of the unity and self-identity of a substance by imposing its activity, as it were, from "above," for Whitehead, the defining characteristic arises out of the mutual immanence of the genetically related nexus of actual occasions which comprise a society. For Clarke, the essential form is "that central unifying force in a material being that binds all its elements together into an intrinsic unity of being and action, not a mere aggregate. It functions as the abiding center of character. Namely, he argues that a system "belongs to the order of accidents, but it is a unique kind of accident that inheres in many subjects at once—a form of one-in-
many—and so deserves a name of its own because of its special properties.80

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"IC. [A]s a matter of history, no ... Iversteed. "Immortality" 687.

"IC. explicitly examine the similarity between a confusing characteristic and the classical notion of essential or substantial form more from a past perspective, and yet retain it as the basis of our present moment of realization. We do not posit a form, and yet we retain our indi- cynical stance towards its existence, as is the mystery of personal identity, the mystery of the immateriality of the past in the present, the mystery of tran-" (163).

"IC. "What is it?" It is a set of relations forming a new whole, order, or 'togetherness,' being together (sein-zusammen) in German), which has in its own set of properties as a system and influences its members accord-" (136).

"IC. "But, as a passage from his essay "God and the Community of Existents," Clarke gets surpris- ingly close to the interpretation being advanced. Rather than simply affirming something as hav- ing sufficient unity to be a substance or not a substance, Clarke advances the idea that an essential form can have greater or lesser degree of control over its parts. "The ontological unity of living beings is not a static state, either given univocally or not, but an active achieve-" (Whitbread, Science 152).


"IC. "If in a word, self-identity and immortality are not at all identical or interchangeable con- cepts. The self-identity of a real being is not a static, immovable thing but more like an ad- cent for change in such a sense. (Clarke, "God and Community" 272, author's emphasis).

"IC. "but it has had one success: it has extended itself in language, in Aristotelian logic, and in metaphysics. For its employment in language and in logic, there is an abstract notion above a sound pragmatic defense. But in metaphysics the concept is sheer error." (Whitehead, Process 79). Also, "This error (of a mistaken kinds) is the result of high-grade intel-" (Whitbread, Science 152)."