THE REVOLT AGAINST PROCESS

I

WHEN reviewing W. V. Quine's *Word and Object*[1] some time ago, I found occasion to make the following observation:

> Even as Kant's search for "the way the mind works" came up with the Aristotelian categories, so Quine's analysis of "the way language works" comes up with object/subject and attribute/predicate linked by a timeless copula. Quine's view, like that of Aristotle, is atemporally object-oriented, and so he slights processes, temporal notions, verbs, and adverbs in favor of things, attributes, and timeless relations.[2]

Since then, I have increasingly recognized that the point of doctrine to which my review took exception, far from being somehow idiosyncratic with Quine, appears to represent the virtually standard position among current writers on ontological subjects. The present paper is motivated largely by the (no doubt unduly optimisitic) hope that we are here dealing with a tendency of thought whose rational credentials are at bottom so *extremely* questionable as to be at least to some extent effectively counteracted by the simple expedient of subjection to the harsh spotlight of explicit consideration.[3]

The ontological doctrine whose too readily granted credentials I propose to revoke consists of several connected tenets, the first fundamental, the rest derivative:

1. The appropriate paradigm for ontological discussion is a *thing* (most properly a physical object) that exhibits *qualities* (most properly of a timeless—i.e., either an atemporal or a temporally fixed—character).

2. Even *persons* and *agents* (i.e., "things" capable of action) are secondary and ontologically posterior to proper (i.e., inert or inertly regarded) things.

3. Change, process, and perhaps even time itself are consequently to be downgraded in ontological considerations to the point where their unimportance is so blatant that such subordination hardly warrants explicit defense. They may, without gross impropriety, be given short shrift in or even omitted from ontological discussions.

It is this combination of views, which put the thing-quality paradigm at the center of the stage and relegate the concept of process to some remote and obscure corner of the ontological warehouse, that I here characterize as the "Revolt against Process."

[1] New York and London: Technology Press and Wiley, 1960.

[2] *American Scientist*, **48** (1960): 375A–377A.

[3] In writing this paper I have benefited by discussions with my friend Professor Robert Coburn who, in view of his enthusiastic dissent from my opinions, can scarcely be held responsible for them.

II

That we are actually witnessing such a revolt—that I am not contesting a merely straw-man position—is readily established.

As already indicated, Quine's *Word and Object* takes a position that squarely endorses the aforementioned tenets. The very first chapter, entitled "Beginning with Ordinary Things" is devoted to maintaining that there is a basic orientation in language toward *things* (especially physical things). Quine's position is admirably explicit:

> Linguistically, and hence conceptually, the things in sharpest focus are the things that are public enough to be talked of publicly, common and conspicuous enough to be talked of often, and near enough to sense to be quickly identified and learned by name; it is to these that words apply first and foremost (1).

The Index of *Word and Object* contains no mention of "process" or "change"; but process is in fact dealt with in a short paragraph (171) in which it is thoroughly thingified. "Physical objects, conceived thus four-dimensionally in space-time, are not to be distinguished from events or, in the concrete sense of the term, processes." So begins the paragraph I have in mind. This sentence of course can be read in two ways. If X's are not to be distinguished from Y's, then X's and Y's are obviously of equal interest and importance. But Quine, it seems, uses the identification not as an occasion for enhancing the status of processes, but as grounds for dismissing them from special consideration. Quine takes account of tense on the basis of "the idea of paraphrasing tensed sentences into terms of eternal relations of things to times" (172). Time is in fact discussed at some length (particularly in #36; but see also #40); however the discussion is promised on the thesis that Einstein's theory of relativity "leaves no reasonable alternative to treating time as spacelike" (172). In sum, it is difficult to conceive of a more outspoken advocate of the subordination of processes to things than the author of *Word and Object.*

A second work in which the doctrine under discussion figures significantly is Nelson Goodman's *Structure of Appearance.*[4] (I would exclude this interesting work from metaphysical purview only if I felt more convinced than I do that its author regarded the study of *appearance* as largely immaterial to that of reality.) The thing-quality paradigm is central to Goodman's discussion: "I shall confine myself as far as I can to language that does not imply that there are entities other than individuals [i.e., *things*]" (26). The notions of *thing* and *property* constitute the funda-

[4] Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951.

mental elements of Goodman's construction (see 93 ff.) Despite some misgivings (302), Goodman exploits and places emphasis upon the analogy of time and space (298–302). Process as such is conspicuously absent from Goodman's appearance-ontology; although there is some discussion of *change* (93–99, 300–301). Goodman, however, construes change as being simply the replacement of one static quality by another—a change of color is his paradigm (93). In consequence, the discussion of change, instead of leading in the direction of a consideration of processes, reinforces the initial penchant toward the thing-quality doctrine. The approach of Goodman's analysis is, thus, such that his book can be counted as a part of the "revolt against process."

The journal literature affords numerous illustrations of the tendency of thought under consideration. Michael Dumnet has written most ingeniously "A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time."[5] The existence of a strict analogy between (a given dimension) of space and time is cleverly argued in Donald Williams's passionate paper on "The Myth of Passage,"[6] and his thesis finds enthusiastic support in Richard Taylor's paper on "Spatial and Temporal Analogies and the Concept of Identity."[7] The ontological fundamentality of *things,* preeminently physical objects, is taken for granted by authors too numerous to catalogue (although the grounds for viewing things as more basic than processes are but seldom canvassed).[8]

The same general tendency is found in D. S. Schwayder's recent monograph on *Modes of Referring and the Problem of Universals: An Essay in Metaphysics.*[9] Schwayder's ontological perspective is completely thing-oriented, partly as the result, partly as the cause of his approaching the problem from the standpoint of the theory of reference (i.e., thing-reference) in the tradition of Russell. The most general designators occurring in Schwayder's discussion are 'object' and 'existent', both construed as

[5] *The Philosophical Review,* **69** (1960): 497–504. I am, however aware, that Dummet's (and McTaggart's) discussion can be construed as being inimical to the "revolt against process" in that their support of the "unreality" of time may be viewed as an argument for its *sui generis* character and a protest against its assimilation to space.

[6] This JOURNAL, **48** (1951): 457–472.

[7] This JOURNAL, **52** (1955): 599–612.

[8] One of the few relevant discussions is Margaret Macdonald's paper on "Things and Processes" originally printed in *Analysis* (**6**, 1938) and reprinted in *Philosophy and Analysis,* ed. by M. Macdonald (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950). But this paper avoids arduous effort by having an easy time of it with the thesis: "There are no things but only processes."

[9] University of California Publications in Philosophy, vol. 35.

referring to *things,* not processes. The paradigm "thing" is, as usual, a material object, i.e., an *inert* thing, agents not being construed qua agents, but regarded as material objects. The mathematically inspired approach of this "essay in metaphysics" is such that change, time, and process enter in only the most incidental ways (e.g., 17–18, 22, 32–33, and 86–89; where time, duly spatialized, enters generally in connection with the search for "a criterion of identity"—of course for "objects"). Time, for Schwayder, is essentially a species of "location" (to be sure in a somewhat technical sense of this term).

III

From no recent work known to me does the case for the view I am concerned to call into question receive stronger support than it derives from P. F. Strawson's *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics.*[10] No brief summary can do justice to the subtlety of Strawson's analysis; thus I waive charges of errors of omission in my discussion of his book. But I think that no errors of commission are involved in saying that Strawson urges the following theses, all of which fall squarely within the theater of our "revolt against process":

1. That material bodies are to be taken as the basic paradigm of "objects" in ontological discussion.

2. That the concept of a person adds to the concept of a thing (material body) most significantly the capacities for thought or consciousness—capacities for initiating action are largely irrelevant or perhaps merely unimportant (except in that the capacity for action is a prerequisite for having intentions).

3. That time plays no significantly independent metaphysical role—it can virtually always be what I will call "space-hyphenated" in our discussions, as in speaking of a "space-time network" or of "spatiotemporal particulars."

4. That the primary metaphysical role of time is to serve as part of a "spatiotemporal network" that permits the identification and reidentification of "particulars" (i.e., things, preeminently material bodies).

5. That processes are ontologically subordinate to things.

Strawson's book has the outstanding merit of meeting head on the question of the claims of process to assuming a place of importance in metaphysics. In section 7 of Chapter 1—the longest single section of his book—Strawson labors manfully to show that things are ontologically prior to processes. I will not enter here into any extensive consideration of Strawson's extremely interesting discussion. It will suffice for my purposes if I can

[10] London: Methuen and Co., 1959.

show—as I hope to do—that his entire approach to questions of ontological status is based upon an unacceptable premise. The premise I propose to attack is Strawson's fundamental thesis that identifiability-dependence constitutes a criterion for ontological priority.[11]

Strawson's entire analysis rests on the supposition that we have succeeded in the search for ontological priority once we have seen "whether there is reason to suppose that identification of particulars belonging to some categories is in fact dependent on identification of particulars belonging to others, and whether there is any category of particulars which is basic in this respect" (40–41). Thus the particulars of category 1 are ontologically more basic than those of category 2 when, in order to identify a (particular) thing belonging to category 2 (i.e., in order to make a linguistically self-contained [nonostensive] "identifying reference" to a particular of category 2), we must first make an identifying reference to a particular of category 1. This approach to the determination of what is ontologically "basic" seems to me to be open to serious objections.

First, it stays entirely on the side of *rationes cognoscendi,* concerning itself exclusively with the question of how we go about identifying things without any concern for other, e.g., nonconceptual, dependence relationships among things. (I am prepared to concede the possibility that this epistemological approach is the proper way of "doing" ontology, but view this as something to be demonstrated rather than assumed.)

Secondly, it appears, even on the surface of it, to be an extremely questionable strategy to tie ontological questions of what is or is not "basic" to particular-identification procedures. If (as, in some contexts, we unquestionably do in our actual practice) we generally identified persons in some setting by means of their serial numbers—so that, in order to make an identifying reference to a person, we would have first to make an identifying reference to a number (namely *his*)—this identifiability-dependence would scarcely entitle anyone to regard persons as ontologically subordinate to numbers.[12] Given, e.g., the admitted fact that we identify stars in the nonvisible range by identifying them in terms of their location with respect to visible stars, does such "identifiability-

[11] I use the term 'ontological priority' here in a (loose) sense of my own, rather than in Strawson's technical sense (59), which renders tautological the thesis that material objects are ontologically prior in "our conceptual scheme."

[12] The fact that numbers might not qualify as "particulars" on someone's conception is immaterial for this counterexample. Identification through some attached physical icon would serve our purpose just as well.

dependence" establish the visible stars as *ontologically* prior to the nonvisible ones in some genuine sense?

But the most serious objection is best put in the form of a question: Why should we use *identifiability*-dependence as the criterion for ontological precedence? Consider some alternatives. We might, with equal prima facie plausibility, say that the things of category 1 are "ontologically prior" to those of category 2 if:

(a) in order to *describe* a member of category 2 we must mention (or invoke) a member of category 1.
(b) in order to *account for* (explain the occurrence or existence of) a member of category 2 we must mention (or invoke) a member of category 1.
(c) in order *to predict* (forecast the occurrence or existence of) a member of category 2, . . .
(d) in order to *produce* (make, construct, synthesize, etc.) a member of category 2, . . .

This list could of course be prolonged, but it is long enough to make our point: Why is identifiability-dependence to be selected as the touchstone of ontological priority, rather than, say, description-dependence or explanation-dependence or prediction-dependence or production-dependence, etc.? It will clearly not do to argue that identification is *logically* somehow prior to these other resources on the basis of a claim that we must be able to identify something before we can describe or explain it, etc. In the first place, we can (for instance) explain certain phenomena without *identifying* anything—i.e., on the basis of a classification (or a description) rather than an identification. And in the second place, (particular) identification is patently not a requisite for prediction or production.

The point of the foregoing paragraph would be harmless for Strawson's argument only if all the mentioned alternative criteria for "ontological priority" awarded the palm of victory to things over processes. But just this is what they clearly do not do. It could plausibly be argued, for example, that, in the sense of criterion b, processes are ontologically prior to physical things, since the existence of (given) material objects can be fully accounted for only in terms of the processes that lead to their realization (with the possible exception of creations *ex nihilo,* e.g., of hydrogen, which figure in some cosmologies).

These considerations (among others) seem to me to cast substantial doubt on the fitness of identifiability-dependence in the sense of Strawson's discussion to provide a suitable means for deciding which of two groups of particulars is ontologically "basic." And the collapse of this fundamental criterion would carry with

it the entire edifice of argumentation that Strawson builds up to justify the ontological elevation of *things* (material bodies) over processes.[13]

IV

In broad retrospect, there can be little doubt that, throughout the texts to which reference has been made, we are confronted with battles and skirmishes which, put together, add up to a phenomenon of sufficient dispersion and intensity to warrant classification under the rubric of a "revolt against process."

In speaking of a "revolt" against process, I am of course speaking only of a general tendency, not of a universal phenomenon. Such recent metaphysicians as Whitehead or the late Andrew Paul Ushenko [14] put process at the forefront of their ontological syntheses.[15] But the fact remains that a great majority of recent writers, particularly those of a distinctly analytical bent who deliberately approach metaphysics from the direction of logic, fall into the domain of the "revolt against process."

My aforementioned review pointed a finger of reproach at formal logic for responsibility in motivating the exile of change and process from ontology in favor of a static thing-quality paradigm. This still seems to me to be correct in a significant measure. Most of the present-day philosophical writers concerned about ontological questions either are logicians or have had extensive training in logic. It is thus not surprising that they should adopt a point of view that, on the basis of the received standpoint of logic (ancient and modern alike), is natural and standard.

It is, incidentally, only a point of historic justice to observe that Aristotle himself was never so much of an "Aristotelian" logician as to be blinded to the importance of process in metaphysics—witness his concern for the concept of change and his magisterial analysis of a whole host of relevant matters, especially "coming-to-be." It is not without significance in this regard that most modern philosophers approach the concepts of time

[13] I frankly cannot see how one who purports to be a descriptive metaphysician can maintain the subordination of processes to things on the basis of ultimately linguistic considerations. It is plain that the "conceptual scheme" of our ordinary use of language puts things/nouns and processes/verbs pretty much on all fours with each other.

[14] *Power and Events* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946).

[15] The long and, I think, important paper by Wilfrid Sellars on "Time and the World Order" in Volume III of the *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962) appeared too late to be taken into account in the present paper.

and change either through logic (which has no use for these conceptions) or through physics (which has increasingly taken an essentially spatial view of time), rather than through biology and psychology, which were equally at the forefront of Aristotle's thinking.

From another angle, too, the downgrading of process appears as a natural development in the light of the common dialectic of intellectual history. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the concept of process should suffer at the hand of ontological theorists of the present day. For this would appear to be a predictable reaction against the metaphysicians of the last philosophical generation, of whom the most influential tended (like Bergson, James, Dewey, and Whitehead) to give process a place of perhaps exaggerated importance at the very center of the ontological state.

Someone given to indulging in psychoanalytical mythopoesis could, I should think, enjoy himself with the philosophical tendency that I am attempting to combat. He could take delight in discovering that the preference for things-with-timeless-qualities is merely a latter-day variant of the eternal verities of earlier philosophy. And he would doubtless discern in the revolt against process a yearning for an abiding haven in a changing world. But this sort of mythology is too facile to be profitable, and too ad hominem to be persuasive.

I am perfectly prepared to grant it as a real possibility that the present-day tendency is right—that somehow in the final analysis the thing-quality paradigm is indeed ontologically fundamental, and process not only secondary, subordinate, but perhaps even unimportant. But it does seem to me that this position is not only far from self-evident, but prima facie quite implausible. The curious and distressing fact is that, with the notable exception of Strawson's *Individuals,* one finds that nowhere in the literature of the revolt against process are we given any substantial, explicit, head-on attack upon process, designed to establish the appropriateness of its subordination to the thing-quality paradigm. Surely debatable theses on fundamental issues ought not to be allowed to carry the day by default. If the "revolt against process" is to score a philosophically meaningful victory, the revolutionists will have to gain their ground in pitched battle. However variable and fluctuating processes may be, *process* is too pervasive and persistent to wither away if only the partisans of the thing-and-quality ontology persist in ignoring or disparaging it long enough.

NICHOLAS RESCHER

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH