# TRIBUTE TO JOHN COBB Jr. 1925-2024

John Cobb Jr., founder and co-director of the *Center for Process Studies* in Claremont, California, passed away on 26th December, 2024. He was widely regarded as the leading figure in the process philosophy movement for half a century. He himself had a particular focus on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, along with Charles Hartshorne, but he was sympathetic to and encouraged research on the whole tradition of process metaphysics and its deployment in various branches of science and the humanities. He was also important for keeping alive the broader ambitions of philosophy which had been stunted by mainstream academic philosophy. While the leading figure in the promotion of process philosophy as an intellectual movement, both in USA and internationally, he was also a political activist and a leading figure in promoting the application of process philosophy to life. His transdisciplinary approach involved integrating insights from different areas of study, bringing different specialized disciplines into fruitful communication. By virtue of this, Cobb influenced a wide range of disciplines, including theology, philosophy, physics, biology, ecology, economics and social ethics. He was an early and major proponent of environmentalism. More recently, forging links with China, he was central to promoting 'ecological civilization' as a vision of the future and the goal of humanity.

Cobb was the author of more than fifty books and co-edited a number of major anthologies. With David Ray Griffin he founded the journal *Process Studies* in 1970 and the *Center for Process Studies* in California in 1973, which together provided and continues to provide a focus for work on process philosophy world-wide. In 2015 he helped launch *Process Century Press* dedicated to publishing transdisciplinary applications of process thought. All this was at a time when academic philosophy in the Anglophone world had been dominated by some

form of analytic philosophy, with the main alternative being some form of 'continental philosophy', each of which were actively hostile to or dismissive of metaphysics and speculative philosophy. Cobb helped launch the *International Process Network* linking more than thirty related centres at academic institutions in USA and throughout the world, with centres in China, Latin America, Europe, Japan, Korea and Australia. Twenty-three centres were established in China.

While lauding diverse contributors to the tradition of process thought, as noted, the main reference point for Cobb's work was Alfred North Whitehead, and it was Whitehead's understanding of philosophy and its role in history that Cobb embraced. Whitehead argued in *Science and the Modern World* that modern civilization is dominated by scientific materialism, which is really a metaphysical doctrine. As Whitehead characterized this:

> There persists … throughout the whole period [seventeenth century to twentieth century] the fixed cosmology that presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations. In itself such a material is senseless, valueless, purposeless. It just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being. It is this assumption that I call "scientific materialism." (p.22)

This is not only fundamentally defective as a doctrine, but has damaged this civilization. As he put it:

> A scientific realism . . . based on mechanism, is conjoined with an unwavering belief in the world of men and of the higher animals as being composed of self-determining organisms. This radical inconsistency at the basis of modern thought accounts for much that is half-hearted and wavering in our civilization. (p.94)

Subsequently, scientific materialism, identified with science and equated with true knowledge, was extended to eliminate this dualism by characterizing living organisms, including humans, as nothing but complex machines having evolved through the struggle for survival and domination, ultimately entirely explicable through chemistry and physics. From this perspective, humans are now regarded as information processing cyborgs, or machines for reproducing genes. This view has facilitated the revival of Nineteenth Century economic doctrines and associated with these, social Darwinism, which previously had been at least partly discredited by the Great Depression and the effects of racism, exemplified by Naziism. This worldview is what is now known as 'scientism', virtually identified with common sense, although proponents of 'scientism' tend to ignore advances

in science going beyond scientific materialism. It is a worldview that is seen to have proved itself by producing knowledge of how to control nature and people.

Cobb's work, advancing Whitehead's philosophy, along with allied traditions of process thought, in theology, philosophy, science and the humanities, was conceived by him and his supporters as a struggle to replace this purported scientific worldview, transforming science to align it with the humanities and uphold and advance civilization, confronting and overcoming, or least orienting people to overcome the various crises facing civilization, including a crisis in meaning in people's everyday lives and the global ecological crisis. The *Center for Process Studies* defined its mission in relation to Whitehead's conception of philosophy, proclaiming on its website:

> As Whitehead once said, "As we think, we live. This is why the assemblage of philosophic ideas is more than a specialist study. It moulds our type of civilization." And that's ultimately what CPS is about; advancing more sustainable, equitable, peaceful, and meaningful ways of living—what we call an ecological civilization.

While being committed to the practical consequences of philosophy, the central focus of the centre was to challenge and replace current ways of thinking in thought and practice; that is, to replace the ways of thinking embodied in scientific materialism and the 'scientism' that has entrenched it as the core of modern civilization.

There have been major challenges to scientific materialism from its original triumph, beginning with the philosophy of Leibniz but more fully developed by the Romantic reaction to it, mostly associated with developments in theology, the arts and the humanities. However, these challenges have had to struggle to overcome the influence of the defenders of scientific materialism, who have marginalized them and denied and belittled their claims to cognitive significance. This included dismissing metaphysics altogether and redefining art and history as forms of entertainment to be consumed according to the subjective preferences of consumers. The defence of this scientific materialism was bolstered by the development of what Whitehead referred to as 'muddle-headed positivism' which gave no place to speculative thinking and insulated prevailing metaphysical assumptions, including those in science, from criticism. Following Whitehead, Cobb believed that what is required is that we make conscious these metaphysical assumptions, particularly those of mainstream science. and replace them, and in this way, replace the metaphysical assumptions dominating modernity. Both in

his publications and the institutions he established, he sought, and largely succeeded in providing the conditions for such work and in supporting such efforts not only in USA but around the world.

Cobb saw the growing ecological crisis as necessitating this intellectual and cultural struggle. In 1972 he published *Is It Too Late?: A Theology of Ecology*, the first book published on environmental ethics. Cobb's cultural agenda was evident in one of the first anthologies he (along with David Ray Griffin), organized and edited, *Mind in Nature: Essays on the Interface of Science and Philosophy,* published in 1978. This was based on a conference held in Italy in 1974 focussed on making life intelligible, in opposition to reductionist biology which effectively denied the reality of sentient life. Transcending all disciplinary boundaries and the opposition between the sciences and humanities, engaging philosophers and leading theoretical scientists from diverse disciplines, this brought together the leading Bergsonian philosopher, Milic Capek, the eminent Whiteheadian, Ivor Leclerc, the philosopher of science, Ann Plamendon, and radical scientists influenced by process philosophy, including the theoretical physicist David Bohm, the theoretical biologist C.H. Waddington, and the ecologist Charles Birch. Also represented was the Austro-Hungarian author and journalist, Arthur Koestler.

This work was followed by a number of books and anthologies furthering this project. Cobb co-authored a book with Charles Birch, *The Liberation of Life*, published in 1981. Anthologies were produced, mostly edited by Griffin with Cobb contributing chapters and comments, included *Physics and the Ultimate Significance of Time: Bohm, Prigogine, and Process Philosophy,* published in 1986, and *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals,* published in 1989.

*Physics and the Ultimate Significance of Time* was a major advance in work on the philosophy of nature, bringing into relationship Bohm's radical ideas in physics and Prigogine's work on non-linear thermodynamics and complexity theory. In both cases, temporal becoming was fully acknowledged, with Bohm arguing that '[t]ime is an abstraction from movement, becoming, and process.' Prigogine, working with the Belgian Whiteheadian philosopher, Isabelle Stengers, argued that his work on dissipative structures generated by far from equilibrium thermodynamic systems, feeding on negative entropy and dissipating heat, created a new alliance between science and the humanities. The crucial issue,

argued Prigogine and Stengers, is the irreducible reality of creative becoming in which the future is not entirely determined, assumed in the humanities but denied by mainstream reductionist science. *Physics and the Ultimate Significance of Time*, while giving a place to debates in theoretical physics, was designed to transcend the opposition between the two cultures identified by C.P. Snow, science on the one side, arts and humanities on the other.

*The Reenchantment of Science* contained a paper by Cobb defending the quest for a coherent worldview, decrying the role of universities in undermining this quest, while invoking non-reductionist developments in ecology, including the work of the deep ecologists, as the basis for developing a new worldview to advance this quest.

Such works were a beacon for those struggling against the fragmentation of philosophy in particular and in all intellectual life, with most academics dismissing the quest for a coherent worldview while tacitly imposing a mechanistic worldview and undermining the conditions for questioning it. This has also been true of academics in the humanities who no longer take their disciplines seriously. It is difficult to overstate the influence of Cobb's work challenging mainstream thinking in this regard, and the importance of having a major centre promoting and supporting the development of a new worldview and those philosophers and scientists engaged in this project and risking their careers in doing so.

With the development of the *International Process Network*, with regular international conferences, a range of thinkers from philosophy, science, the humanities and theology from around the world were brought into the orbit of this centre, expanding the range of ideas contributing towards the quest for a coherent worldview, rediscovering the work of philosophers in the past and traditions of thought which had been marginalized by mainstream philosophy and mainstream science. Historians of philosophy, science and mathematics gradually uncovered a coherent, if suppressed, tradition of thought from which Whitehead's work had emerged, recognizing that the Romantic tradition of thought had had a major impact on science and mathematics as well as on the arts and the humanities, and was much more profound than even Whitehead appreciated, and included the mathematician Hermann Grassmann who had inspired some of Whitehead's early work in mathematics. It is now often identified

as the 'Radical Enlightenment' to emphasise the challenge it posed to mainstream thought.

Recognized as such, this has facilitated a better appreciation of the affinities of a range of thinkers normally looked at in isolation, which includes Friedrich Schelling and the mathematicians and scientists he influenced, the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, the Russian philosophers Alexandr Bogdanov and Mikhail Bakhtin, the pragmatists C.S. Peirce William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and the phenomenologists influenced by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who late in his life was studying the works of Schelling, Bergson and Whitehead. Nicholas Rescher, originally a logician (influenced by Arabic logic) and an analytic philosopher who then embraced and defended process metaphysics in his book *Process Metaphysics* (1996), and forged links with the *Center for Process Studies*, played an important role in identifying more recent Anglophone process philosophers. It is worth noting that many of these thinkers were also influenced and inspired by non-European traditions of thought.

In advancing process philosophy through ecology, Cobb also endorsed the work of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis along with their Gaia hypothesis – that the Earth is a living organism, and the work of Thomas Berry, a Catholic theologian and scholar of the world's religions, especially Asian religious traditions, who after studying the Earth sciences and evolution, called for a new Ecozoic Era to replace the Cenozoic Era. He characterized the Ecozoic Era as an era committed to mutually-enhancing human-Earth relations. Also important in this regard was the work of Robert Ulanowicz, an anti-reductionist theoretical ecologist and complexity theorist, who embraced process metaphysics and forged links with the *Center for Process Studies.* In his books *Ecology, The Ascendent Perspective* (1997) and *A Third Window: Natural Life beyond Newton and Darwin* (2009), Ulanowicz argued that ecology has the greatest potential of all the sciences to overcome the limitations of the Newtonian paradigm of science, in so doing, replacing reductionist physics as the reference point for defining what is science.

All this supported Cobb's own work, where, in the quest to make process philosophy more relevant to scientific and social issues and to everyday life, he moved on from theology and philosophy to ecology to ecological economics. He teamed up with one of the founders of ecological economics, Herman E. Daly, to

publish *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. The first edition of this was published in 1989, with a second, expanded edition published in 1994. This was not only a major challenge to mainstream economic theory, dominated by physics envy and scientism and promoting the subordination of societies to unconstrained markets, but in defending a communitarian social and political philosophy, provided direction for the advance of civilization at practical level, both locally and globally. Ecological economics is now a major global movement in its own right.

One of the most important notions defended by Daly and Cobb was that of 'communities of communities' in place of 'cosmopolitanism', which was not only a rejection of neoliberal globalism but also a challenge to its critics and opponents who have paralysed by their tacit acceptance of the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's claim - that there are only individuals, families and the global market, and that consequently, there is no alternative to neoliberalism as socialism understood as involving a command economy was discredited by the failure of the Soviet Union. Prior to the call for a multipolar world to replace the unipolar world that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cobb and Daly provided guidance on how to create a multi-level multipolar world based on ecological thinking and required to address the global ecological crisis.

Whitehead argued that his philosophy had more in common with Eastern traditions of thought than Western traditions of thought, a view strongly argued by Joseph Needham, the historian of science and civilisation in China who had been strongly influenced by Whitehead. In expanding the *International Process Network*, Cobb was particularly concerned to extend this network to East Asia in general, and China in particular (although links were also forged with Indian environmentalists, notably Vandana Shiva). A receptive audience was found for process metaphysics in China, and links were made to its growing environmental movement, with Wang Zhihe from Peking University playing a major role in advancing this project. In this way, links were made with the eco-Marxist and eco-socialist movements. When the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government embraced, developed and promoted the notion of ecological civilization from 2007 onwards, this was immediately taken up and served as a focus for advancing not only efforts within China but world-wide to confront environmental problems, and for creating a new world-order.

The quest for a global cultural transformation to overcome the culture of modernity by developing process metaphysics was then integrated with the quest to create a global ecological civilization, a civilization of communities of communities both supporting global governance through developing the United Nations and international law while decentralizing power, recognizing the diversity of cultures and civilizations while avoiding conflict by promoting transculturalism – with cultures learning from and criticizing each other. Organized decentralization involves promoting regionalism based on major regions of the world, creating a multipolar world, promoting environmental nationalism while also empowering local communities, all oriented to creating a new world-order to overcome current concentrations of wealth and power and to effectively address the global ecological crisis. Along with developing the new ways of thinking required for advancing this quest for a global ecological civilization, the *International Process Network* has provided crucial support for people aligned with this quest. This includes those struggling against imperialism, colonialism and exploitation globally and locally, and those striving to create a peaceful world order based on a fundamentally different understanding of the relations between people, nations, civilizations, and of humanity as a whole and its place in nature.

The survival and development of process philosophy throughout the world has in great measure been due to Cobb's success through his publications, the institutions he founded or helped found and the conferences he organized or helped organize in maintaining the broader ambitions of philosophy in general and process philosophy in particular. Through the *International Process Network*, radical philosophers have been able to forge links not only with the Claremont *Center for Process Studies*, but with like-minded thinkers throughout the world. Through his efforts, Cobb has succeeded in creating a global movement of process thinkers, which is continuing to advance, making further links to similar intellectual movements. Many of these are engaged in cultural and political struggles, generally calling for more radical solutions than most people are presently prepared to contemplate. This is evident in the quest to address the global ecological crisis where even those who do face up to the seriousness of the problems, prefer to work within the framework of current thinking, calling for sustainable development rather than the creation of a new, ecological civilization.

However, if proponents of ecological civilization are right, these more modest responses to ecological problems will not be adequate, and the important point is that the process philosophy movement, developing and fine-tuning process-relational thought so that when major crises do occur, they will have the alternative policies and strategies required to put in place. As philosophers, they have to be prepared to suffer failures in the short run, knowing from history that despite horrific events occurring that could have been avoided, in the long run, the quest for truth in the fullest sense of this word, a globally coherent understanding of the world, will prevail. As Whitehead observed:

> [Philosophy] is the most effective of all the intellectual pursuits.... It is the architect of the buildings of the spirit, and it is also their solvent:- and the spiritual precedes the material. Philosophy works slowly. Thoughts lie dormant for ages; and then, almost suddenly as it were, mankind finds that they have embodied themselves in institutions. (p.x)

The thoughts that finally embody themselves in institutions are not entirely dormant before this, however. They are kept alive by efforts to understand and reformulate them as circumstances change. Whitehead also wrote of the objective immortality of the past (1978, p.340 & *passim*.). The lives of people engaged in such efforts have an objective immortality that is incorporated (or prehended) into the lives of those who later continue the struggle to advance these ideas, inspired by the work of their predecessors. Cobb's books, the institutions he was involved in establishing, and above all, Cobb himself, who struggled for more than half a century to build the foundations for the cultural transformation required to create a civilization that augments life, an ecological civilization, is objectively immortal, an immortal and inspiring contribution to world culture, to world-history and to the global civilization that has to be created if humanity is to survive.

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