

## **The Buddha, Whitehead and spacing of (organisational) space: a reframing**

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*This arising, that arises*

*This not arising, that does not arise.*

The Buddha

*Someone who is building a house, has not built it.*

Aristotle (Metaphysics Theta 6)

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I make a case for the Buddha's moral philosophy, especially his philosophy of existence, in the study of organisational space vis-à-vis Western process thought such as that is proposed by English philosopher Alfred Whitehead. For this, alongside Western process thought, especially that of Whiteheadian, I examine the 'spatial turn' in organisational research and the processual understanding of (organisational) space in which the re-production of space in Southern organisations as well as employing 'Southern epistemologies' continues to be scarce. I show how Whiteheadian process thought is inclined towards Western dualistic thinking—the noun/verb dichotomy—although it proposes a comprehensive systematic approach in understanding the processual nature of (organisational) space. Against this backdrop, I examine the Buddha's nonsubstantialist epistemology, which avoids the two-valued system or dualistic thinking, and show, alongside such an epistemology, the way in which the Buddha's philosophy of existence facilitates us to overcome the noun/verb dichotomy in the study of organisational space. In conclusion, I argue that the Buddha's philosophy shows us how to capture and re-articulate the *becoming* of spatio-temporal moments in organisations without falling back on some conception of permanence or by being trapped by the noun/verb dichotomy which would lead to misinterpret and misrepresent 'spacing of organisations'.

## Introduction

Since the recent past scholars in organisation studies have been showing great interest in (organisational) space. Informed by different perspectives and theoretical–philosophical traditions, they explore and conceptualise production of (organisational) space by social practices and relations. Yet, the scholars’ engagement with the phenomenon, both theoretically and empirically, is virtually restricted to the ‘stories’ of researching organisational space in the Global North (Kornberger & Clegg 2003, 2004; Hernes, Bakken & Olsen 2006; Dale & Burrell 2008, 2011; Tyler & Cohen 2010; Beyes & Steyaert 2012; Spanger 2013; Shortt 2015; Sergot & Saives 2016; Courpasson, Dany & Delbridge 2017). In other words, except a very few attempts (e.g. Werner 2010; Lelandais 2014), the literature hardly shows the production and reproduction of space in Southern organizations. Furthermore, the literature reveals that employing epistemologies from the South—Southern epistemologies—in understanding and framing ‘organisational space’ is virtually non-existence.

Despite these lacunae, the literature provides a rich theoretical account of organisational space which shows inter alia how spatio-temporal arrangements or moments in organisations are produced by social practices and relations. As part of the theoretical account, the scholars are keen to articulate (organisational) space mostly as an ‘entity’ or as a ‘process’ (Massey 2001, 2005), the analytical conception of process versus entity which are mutually opposite to each other (Bakken & Hernes 2006): Former, the entitative understanding of space—space as an entity or a form—is imbued with Western substance metaphysics whereas latter, space as a process, is aptly informed by Western process philosophy (Bakken & Hernes 2006; Hernes et al. 2006; Tyler & Cohen 2010; Beyes & Steyaert 2012). Yet, it is argued that the processual approach to space is more meaningful in understanding (organisational) space—its nature and how it is produced—as the approach highlights the fluidity or becoming of space which is in flux (Beyes & Steyaert 2012). Indeed, space is always in the process of being made and is never finished and closed, as Massey (2005, p. 9) suggests.

Like (Western) process philosophy (see, Seibt 2017), the processual understanding of space is not a straightforward approach or idea. Instead it is informed by different theoretical-philosophical assumptions and approaches, which mingle with

each other (Massey 2005; Hernes et al. 2006; Beyes & Steyaert 2012; Sergot & Saives 2016). Among these assumptions and approaches, which are imbued chiefly with Western process philosophy, alongside Weick, Bergson and others, the English philosopher Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy is highlighted in organisation studies as well as other disciplines. Indeed, Whiteheadian process thought appears as a comprehensive systematic approach in understanding the processual nature of (organisational) space (Hernes et al. 2006; Sergot & Saives 2016; Seibt 2017).

Yet, paradoxically, the literature is silent on processual philosophy and philosophers from the East or South, even though, as Whitehead (1978) himself argues, Eastern, or Southern, thought and philosophy makes *process ultimate* whereas Western Asiatic, or European, thought makes *facts ultimate*. In fact, not only the 'spatial turn' in organisational research (Beyes & Steyaert 2012), but also the processual understanding of space in (North-)Western-dominated organisation studies hardly shows how the turn encompasses or is inspired by non-Western—Eastern or Southern—processual philosophy and philosophers. This is, notwithstanding, the literature shows how non-Western philosophers, such as the Buddha and the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, often highlight the processual nature or becoming of life and reality (Kalupahana 1995a, 1995b; Jayathileke 2010).

In this context, we see that like many other 'turns' in management and organisation studies, the so-called spatial turn in organisational research has also become a (North-)Western-dominated story where studying of the fluid nature of (neoliberalized) organisational space(s) of the Global South as well as employing Southern epistemologies continues to be scarce. This (North-)Western-dominated character of the spatial turn thus makes the articulation of 'spatial production in the South' in general and employing Southern epistemologies, for example Southern process thought, in particular extremely difficult. As a result, it remains an 'enigma' what the processual understanding of space (in organisation studies) would look like if we employ Southern process thought, such as that is proposed by the Buddha (see, Kalupahana 1995a, 1995b; Jayathileke 2010).

With this backdrop, in this paper, I make a case for the Buddha's philosophy in the study of organisational space vis-à-vis that of Whitehead since both philosophers

highlight the processual nature and becoming of life and reality more or less (see, Inada 1971, 1975). I argue that unlike Whitehead, the Buddha, especially his moral philosophy of existence, shows us how to capture and re-articulate the becoming of spatio-temporal moments in organisations, their endlessly arising and ceasing nature or impermanence, without falling back on some conception of permanence. The paper thus attempts to establish the possibility of North and South epistemological dialogue in organisation studies vis-à-vis the spatial turn in organisational research.

The paper is organised as follows. First, it recapitulates the ongoing debate on (organisational) space within which the entitative and the processual understanding of space clash and collaborate. Second, alongside Western processual thought, the paper critically examines the processual understanding of (organisational) space. In doing so, third the paper problematises Whiteheadian (process thought) inspired understanding of space vis-à-vis the Buddha's moral philosophy to see what the philosophy can offer to re-frame (organisational) space. Under the concluding remarks, the paper argues that the Buddha's philosophy, especially that of existence, shows us how to capture and re-articulate the becoming of spatio-temporal moments in organisations without falling back on some conception of permanence or by being trapped by the noun/verb dichotomy which would lead to misinterpret and misrepresent spacing of organisations.

### **Spacing of (organisational) space**

As many turns in management and organisation studies, the spatial turn, as the literature shows, is a (North-)Western-dominated story where the presence of spatio-temporal relations in the Global South organisations as well as Southern epistemologies can hardly be seen. Informed by different perspectives and theoretical–philosophical traditions, the spatial turn nevertheless emphasises the importance of studying space as a 'unique' phenomenon in organisation studies. Moreover, alongside a set of definitions and theoretical propositions, the turn provides a 'new' insight into the nature of spatio-temporal relations in (the Global North) organisations (e.g., Kornberger & Clegg 2003, 2004; Dale & Burrell 2008, 2011; Tyler & Cohen 2010; Beyes & Steyaert 2012; Spanger 2013; Sergot & Saives 2016; Courpasson et al. 2017).

The notion of space, as the literature shows, remains more abstract, complex and plurivocal, although many scholars have attempted to theorise and define it (see, Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2001, 2005). From strictly geometrical meaning space refers to 'emptiness' (Lefebvre 1991), and "... may be thought of as an absence of presence, as a vast emptiness, as something that one can get lost in" (Kornberger & Clegg 2004, p. 1095). Thus, the idea of space as an 'empty thing' also represents an unused or a non-occupied space which is 'lifeless', although "[it] is neither a frame nor a neutral container designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it" (Kornberger & Clegg 2003, p. 79).

As oppose to this so-called emptiness of space, it is argued that space is a social product or socially produced—the notion of 'social space': "While space is what shapes action and inter-action, it is reshaped by actions and inter-actions in turn. Once produced it cannot be reproduced except through actions and interactions" as Hernes et al. (2006, p. 44) put it. As such, the emptiness of space gets filled or 'disappears' once it is used and occupied by social actors (as well as actants) via spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (Lefebvre 1991). Therefore, social space, as Lefebvre (1991, p. 73) argues, "... is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity — their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object."

Lefebvre's understanding or framing of social space—in contrast to conceiving space as an 'absolute' abstract notion—encourages us to view (social) space as a 'thing' which is alive and continuously constructed and enacted by the occupants of space through their discursive-performative acts (Massey 2005; Tyler & Cohen 2010; Benson & Jackson 2013). This continuous construction and enactment, the scholars argue, not only makes space elusive and fluid but also highlights the *processual* nature of (social) space which is in flux. Thus, despite the idea of the temporal as process and the spatial as entity or form-which-is-therefore-lacking-in-process (Massey 2001, p. 3), (social) space comes to our view not as a mere site or entity where discursive-performative acts or social relations and practices take place, but as a process which is in flux.

In this context, process philosophy or thinking in the West (see, Bakken & Hernes 2006; Seibt 2017) plays a significant role in understanding and framing of space in organisational research, where scholars and researchers attempt to articulate space as a process rather than as a form or an entity. Thereby, space is viewed and articulated as performative and processual (Massey 2005; Beyes & Steyaert 2012)—space which is continuously constructed and enacted through spatial practices, thus it is in a process of becoming—what Beyes and Steyaert (2012) would call a performative concept of spacing. Yet, the processual understanding of space, as can be seen in the following section, is not only plurivocal, but also is subject to the ongoing debate on the analytical conception of process versus entity vis-à-vis the production of spatio-temporal arrangements or moments in organisations; notwithstanding the debate is dominated by Western process philosophy which proposes a more meaningful theoretical scheme or approach in understanding and framing (organisational) space (Hernes et al. 2006).

### **Western Process Philosophy and the Processual Understanding of Space**

Western tradition of process philosophy as well as that of Eastern, or Sothern, tradition has a long history. It goes back to the ancient Greek, especially to the philosophy of the Greek theoretician Heraclitus of Ephesus, and continues to inspire both classical and contemporary philosophers, thinkers and scientists (Bakken & Hernes 2006; Seibt 2017), including scholars in organisation studies, famously Karl Weick (see for example, Weick 1979; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). Nevertheless, the dominant philosophical tradition of the West, since Aristotle, is inclined towards Western tradition of ‘substance metaphysics’ or the metaphysics of presence and hence makes facts ultimate (Whitehead 1978; Seibt 2017).

(Western) process philosophy highlights the fluidity and becoming of being and opposes essentialists’ understanding of entities or world that is said to be enduring. The philosophy, as Seibt (2017, para 1) points out, “is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it”. As such, for processists the typical question is not ‘what is there’—the question of essentialists—but ‘what is occurring or unfolding’ as well as ‘ways of occurring’ (Seibt 2017). Thereby,

they suggest that “the world is an assembly of physical, organic, social, and cognitive processes that interact at and across levels of dynamic organization” (Seibt 2017, para 3). In other words, any social system, might it be society as whole or an organisation, may be seen as emerging and reproducing themselves through processes (Hernes et al. 2006). In short, process philosophy thus gives ontologically priority to the conditioned arising or the becoming of entities rather than to their permanence or essence and hence provides a world that is in flux.

Despite this ‘common’ ontological assumption or priority, Western process philosophy is plurivocal. It encompasses many philosophical traditions and ideas of both classical and contemporary philosophers (Bakken & Hernes 2006; Hernes et al. 2006; Seibt 2017). Among these processual philosophers in the West, Whitehead’s process philosophy is par excellence (see, Whitehead 1938, 978). For Whitehead, the actual world is a process and that the process is becoming of actual entities or actual occasions (1978, p.22). Indeed, Whitehead suggests that an actual entity is not a stationary thing; instead, ‘being’ of an actual entity is constituted by its becoming (1978, p.23), because any entity is a process and the process itself is the constitution of the actual entity. As Whitehead puts it:

The actual entity... is at given individual fact actuated by its own 'substantial form.' Its own process, which is its own internal existence, has evaporated, worn out and satisfied; but its effects are all to be described in terms of its 'satisfaction.' The 'effects' of an actual entity are its interventions in concrescent processes other than its own. Any entity, thus intervening in processes transcending itself, is said to be functioning as an 'object.' (1978, p. 220).

Thus, for Whitehead as well as for other (Western) processists the nature or existence of any entity or being is processual, thus in a constant state of flux. Whitehead, nevertheless, argues that in order to understand the fluid and processual nature of actual entities we need to make processes into entities. In other words, in order to make sense of processes—the processual nature of entities—Whitehead, unlike some Western processists, for example Weick (1979) who proposes us to overlook nouns or abstractions, suggests that we need to make entities or nouns from processes. As such,



... Whitehead argues that nounmaking is necessary for human sensemaking, and that we are incapable of thinking purely in terms of process. It *is* erroneous to turn nouns into real entities which are independent of the processes that make them because this leads to 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Hence, even according to a strong process view such as that proposed by Whitehead, nounmaking is an indispensable ingredient for coming to grips with processes, the point being that we make nouns *from* processes in order to make sense *of* processes. (Bakken & Hernes 2006, p.1601)

Thus, nounmaking would enable us to capture the processual nature of being which is in flux. This is because "... humans may live in a processual world, but they cope in a processual world by means of an entitative understanding of process" (Bakken & Hernes 2006, p.1602). Accordingly, if we take 'an (actual) entity as a noun' and 'a process as a verb' it can be argued that Western process thought, such as that is proposed by Whitehead, is polarised between making of verbs and nouns. In other words, in order to understand 'being' we need to *pause* the becoming of being by making noun from being which is in process of becoming. As such, when we make nouns from processes, such as space, the nounmaking enables us to make the indefinability of space—its processual nature—defined while (temporary) pausing the spatial becoming. Yet, at the same time we see that such thinking or approach—*pausing* the becoming of being—has a tendency of falling back on some conception of permanence—as it encourages us to pause the becoming of being in order to understand 'the Being'—but is also inclined towards Western dualistic thinking—the noun/verb dichotomy.

### **The Buddha meets Whitehead**

Eastern or Southern philosophical tradition and philosophers are intimately related to process thought in which the Buddha's moral philosophy is often emphasised (see, Kalupahana 1995a, 1995b; Jayathileke 2010). Like Whitehead, arguably the most prominent processist in the West whose philosophy is compared with that of the Buddha (see, Inada 1971, 1975), the Buddha's philosophy also highlights the fluid and processual nature of life and reality. Yet, the Buddha's philosophy is not trapped by the

noun/verb dichotomy or dualism, although it shows the becoming of life and reality. Indeed, the Buddha's nonsubstantialist epistemological standpoint does not allow to such dualisms or dualistic thinking in Western thought that may have influenced Whiteheadian process thought, as I argue. Instead, it emphasises *arising* and *ceasing*, the idea of impermanence (*anicca*), without falling back some conception of permanence as well as rejecting the two views of absolute existence and nihilistic nonexistence (Kalupahana 1995a, p. 45). For this, the Buddha, the linguist, realised that the current vocabulary, as Kalupahana (1995a, p. 31) illustrates, did not allow him to articulate his idea of the nature of existence—conditionality, dependent arising (*paticcasamuppada*). Thereby, the Buddha problematised or dropped the prevailing vocabulary and concepts and coined 'new' terms in order to express his idea of the nature of existence. This is, for example, vivid in the way the Buddha problematised the true/false (*satya/asatya*) dichotomy in the society he lived.

As such, one of the first tasks of the Buddha was to shake up this rationality—i.e. truth as order and false as lack of order—by presenting new conceptions of true and false. Retaining the term *satya* (true), he gave new meaning to it by equating it with the 'become' (*bhūta*), which includes both human behaviour and the world of natural happening. In the sphere of human life, it implies the 'dispositionality conditioned' (*sankara*) and in the world of natural happening, it is defined as 'dependently arisen' (*paticcasamuppanna*). Likewise, the Buddha modified the concept of false (*asatya*) by replacing it by the term *musā*, meaning 'confusion', which could be used along with the term *satya* as well as which avoids the implications of non-existence and, at the same time, allows room for new possibilities (Kalupahana 1995b, pp. 13–14). In doing so, in his idea of the nature of existence, here the case of true/false, the Buddha avoided the idea of permanence—true as existence and false as non-existence—and allowed room for new possibilities for them.

In this context, we see that in order to formulate his view of the nature of existence as conditionality or dependent arising—*paticcasamuppada*—the Buddha, the linguist, did not attempt to stamp out nouns. Rather, he for example "... created the term *paccuppanna*, meaning "that which has arisen dependent upon," which expresses the idea of the present related to the immediate past" (Kalupahana 1995, p.31). Therefore,

in 'this processual understanding', the Buddha, by dropping the term *vartamana* (the present), which simply means existing with no implication of any relationship to the past (Kalupahana 1995, p.31), connected 'the present' to 'the immediate past' via the term *paccuppanna*, which could be referred to as 'spacious present'.

Thus, unlike Whitehead, the Buddha, the linguist, in this nounmaking, I argue, does not pause—even for a moment—the contingent, fluid and processual nature of life or being, its becoming (*bhava*). Nor does he suggest us to overlook nouns in order to work (exclusively) with verbs as in the case of Weick's processual thinking (see for example, Weick 1979). Instead, the Buddha represents a world that is endlessly arising and ceasing—impermanence (*anicca*)—by connecting the present to the immediate past via the noun/term *paccuppanna* (spacious present), and thereby via connecting space and time or 'spatio-temporal moments', as I put it. Therefore, the Buddha's ontological assumption and epistemological standpoint, unlike that of Whitehead, I suggest, facilitate us to capture the endlessly arising and ceasing nature of spatio-temporal moments in organisations while not pausing the 'spatial becoming'—through the nounmaking or entities—or by even overlooking nouns as in the case of Weick's processual thinking (Weick 1979, 2005; Bakken & Hernes 2006). As such, I argue that the Buddha's philosophy, especially that of existence, shows a way to capture the spatial becoming not being trapped by the noun/verb dichotomy or by any other dualisms or dualistic thinking, such as the true/false (see, Kalupahana 1995a, 1995b) or ontological/epistemological reality (see, Bakken & Hernes 2006), embedded in Western thought.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As the literature shows, the processual understanding of organisational space as well as the spatial turn in organisational research remains a (North-)Western dominated story in which the presence of spatial practices in the Global South and Southern epistemologies continue to be scarce. This trend not only hinders the representation of the multiple stories of spatial practices in Southern organisations, but also suppresses the application of Southern epistemologies in spatial research.

Given the context, this paper attempts to establish the possibility of North and South 'epistemological dialogue' in organisation studies in relation to the spatial turn in organisational research. For this, I make a case for the Buddha's moral philosophy in the study of organisational space vis-à-vis that of Whitehead. I show how Whiteheadian process thought is inclined towards Western dualistic thinking as it depends on the noun/verb dichotomy in order to capture the processual nature of entities. In other words, from Whiteheadian perspective making nouns from processes, such as space, is necessary for human sensemaking and hence in order to make sense of the processes (Bakken & Hernes 2006). Yet, paradoxically, this very act of nounmaking, I argue, always has a tendency of falling back on some conception of permanence as it pauses the becoming of being. Therefore, space we face and produce in our organisational life through our discursive-performative acts or spatial practises (Massey 2005; Tyler & Cohen 2010; Benson & Jackson 2013), as I further argue, would only be sensible, if we pause or ignore its processual nature, its becoming, by articulating 'space as an entity'; notwithstanding we know that space is in a constant state of flux (Massey 2001, 2005).

Against this backdrop, I show how the Buddha's epistemological viewpoint—a nonsubstantialist epistemology that avoids the two-valued system or dualistic thinking (Kalupahana 1995a)—facilitates us to overcome the noun/verb dichotomy in the study of organisational space. In fact, in his processual understanding of existence—conditionality, dependent arising (*paticcasamuppada*)—the Buddha, the linguist, coined the term *paccuppanna* (spacious present) that connects 'the present' to 'the immediate past' to show and capture the becoming of life and reality; their arising and ceasing (Kalupahana 1995a).

In conclusion of the paper, I argue that the Buddha's philosophy, especially that of existence, shows us how to capture and re-articulate the becoming of spatio-temporal moments in organisations without falling back on some conception of permanence or by being trapped by the noun/verb dichotomy which would lead to misinterpret and misrepresent *spacing* of organisations.

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