

A Whiteheadian Aesthetics of Morals: From the Metaphysics of Creativity to the Ethics of Creativity

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I would like to begin with a passage from Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*:

[M]orality does not indicate what you are to do in mythological abstractions. It does concern the general ideal which should be the justification for any particular objective. The destruction of a man, or of an insect, or of a tree, or of the Parthenon, may be moral or immoral. [...] Whether we destroy or whether we preserve, our action is moral if we have thereby safeguarded the importance of experience so far as it depends on that concrete instance in the world's history. (MT 14-15)

I have always enjoyed this passage, in part because it reminds me of just how radical and far-reaching Whitehead's thought is. One of the first things one is likely to notice in this passage is how broadly Whitehead paints the scope of morality. According to most traditional ethical theories, the only relations that are morally significant are inter-human relations or those obtaining between human beings.¹ Accordingly, human beings' relations with organisms such as insects and trees or inanimate objects like the Parthenon are not moral relations at all; they do not count. In contradistinction to this long-held conception of ethics, Whitehead is affirming a fundamentally different model of morality and it is in the spirit that I present my comments this evening. This essay is my attempt to distill some of the main insights from my forthcoming book, entitled *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos*. In this larger work, I set out to *systematically* develop and defend a holistic, organic ethical theory grounded firmly in Whitehead's aesthetico-metaphysics of process. My comments tonight are

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divided into three main parts. I will begin by examining the scope of moral concern constituted by Whitehead's unique triadic theory of value. Then, given this axiology, in the second section I examine the *aesthetic* foundation of what Whitehead refers to in the quotation above as the "general ideal which should be the justification for any particular objective" (MT 14-15). However, ever wary of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, we must not make the mistake of previous moral philosophies and focus on what we are to do in "mythological abstractions" (14-15). In recognition of this fact, I conclude with a brief discussion of how the general ideal of morality can give practical guidance.

However, before I begin I hasten to add that, while the present project is a *Whiteheadian* ethic, I do not claim that it is *Whitehead's* moral philosophy. I am not primarily interested in debating what Whitehead himself may or may not have believed. Rather, in the spirit of Whitehead's own approach to philosophy, while this project is inspired by and builds upon the work of those who came before me, it ultimately stands or falls on its own merits.

A. Whitehead's Triadic Theory of Value

While most scholars readily point out that Whitehead had deep and penetrating misgivings about the view of individuals as static, enduring substances, fewer emphasize the fact that, at root, Whitehead's critique was as much axiological as it was ontological.² Process philosophy is fundamentally a rebellion against what Whitehead called "vacuous actuality" or the view that there is anything that is a mere fact of no intrinsic importance whatsoever. As he states in *Function of Reason*, "if we discard the notion of vacuous existence, we must conceive each actuality as attaining an end for itself. Its very existence is the presentation of its many components to itself, *for the sake of its own ends*" (30-31, emphasis added). The repudiation of vacuous actuality effects a fundamental sea change in the conception of value: if *nothing* is

devoid of experience (vacuous actuality), then *everything* that exists must have *some* intrinsic value; there are no “mere facts.” Whitehead puts it this way in *Modes of Thought*, “At the base of existence is the sense of ‘worth.’ It is the sense of existence for its own sake, of existence which is its own justification, of existence with its own character” (MT 109). There is, in other words, no longer such a thing as dead, lifeless, valueless stuff. In a processive cosmos such as Whitehead’s, everything has value to some degree. “The zero of [value] intensiveness means the collapse of actuality” (RM 103). Put simply, to be actual is to have value.³

But what exactly does it mean to say that something has value for its self or intrinsically? I suggest that the answer to this question is ultimately to be found in the perplexing category of creativity. As Whitehead’s most basic category, creativity is the unceasing process by which “the many become one, and are increased by one” (PR 21). But what, one may fairly ask, does this oft quoted, but less often understood, category really mean? Do many discrete individuals come together to form a single monistic unity in which all individuality is lost, or is there truly a multiplicity of atomic individuals? In the following passage, Whitehead provides a potentially illuminating qualification of this enigmatic category:

The fundamental *basis* of this description is that our experience is a value experience, expressing a vague sense of maintenance or discard; and that this value experience differentiates itself in the sense of many existences with value experience; and that this sense of the multiplicity of value experience again differentiates it into the totality of value experience, and the many other value experiences, and the egoistic value experience. There is the feeling of the ego, the others, the totality. (MT 110, author’s emphasis)

Initially, this passage simply reiterates the conclusion above that self-worth is at the base of experience. But here we see that this fundamental value experience differentiates itself into the recognition of the value of the diverse individuals of the world for each other. Accordingly, and this is fundamental, the value experience at the base of existence is not solipsistic; self-value

essentially involves the real presence or objective functioning of other values as themselves.⁴ Put differently, the individual's egoistic upholding of value intensity for itself cannot be taken apart from its sharing its value intensity with the universe. Hence, when an actual entity functions objectively it still has intrinsic value. "There must," Whitehead writes in *Modes of Thought*, "be value beyond ourselves. Otherwise every thing experienced would be merely barren detail in our own solipsist mode of existence" (MT 102). As I will argue more fully below, the attention to and recognition of this fact is the essence of morality.

However, we must not stop our analysis here. For Whitehead goes on to note that the recognition of a multiplicity of values in the world is further differentiated into the sense of the value of the whole objective world, which is at once a community derivative from the interrelations of its component individuals and necessary for the existence of each of these individuals (RM 59). Interestingly, as we see in the following passage from *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead characterizes this sense of the value of the whole as a religious intuition.

The moment of religious consciousness starts from self-valuation, but it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive. The intuition into the actual world gives a particular definite content to the bare notion of a principle determining the grading of values. (RM 59-60)

The religious intuition, then, is this recognition of the value of the whole, which includes, but does not devour, the value of others and the value of the individual.

At its core, therefore, value is neither monistic nor solipsistic. Rather, in keeping with Whitehead's organic conception of individuality, self-value is always intertwined with the value of others and with the value of the whole. The true import of this crucial conclusion only begins to become clear in the following lengthy passage from *Modes of Thought*:

The basis of democracy is the common fact of value experience, as constituting the essential nature of each pulsation of actuality. Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole. This characterizes the meaning of actuality. By reason of this

character, constituting reality, the conception of morals arises. We have no right to deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe. Existence, in its own nature, is the upholding of value intensity. Also no unity can separate itself from the others, and from the whole. And yet each unit exists in its own right. It upholds the value intensity for itself, and this involves sharing value intensity with the universe. (MT 111)

In one form or another, many elements of a Whiteheadian moral philosophy can be found in this passage. For the immediate context, what is important to note is, first, that the very meaning of actuality is characterized by this triad of self, other, whole. Each actual entity has self-value, is self-important, but this realization does not entail, as it all too often does in ethical theory, that the individual is the sole locus of value which must be protected at all costs. What these debates over moral considerability often miss is that each individual, *qua* value experience, has value not only for itself, but also value for others and for the whole. In politico-ethical terms, this is to say that every individual is a locus of value, but each individual also has value for its community and even for the whole cosmos. Classical liberal atomic individualism is not, on this interpretation, an option nor is simplistic communitarianism. Every entity “exists in its own right” and “upholds value intensity for itself,” but this upholding of value intensity for oneself *necessarily* involves “sharing value intensity with the universe” (111). Every entity is self-important *and* important to the universe. This axiological triad of self, other, and whole captures the essence of Whitehead’s unique sense of intrinsic value: to have intrinsic value is (1) to have incorporated the values of others (concrecence), (2) to subsequently become a (instrumental) value for others (principle of relativity), and (3) thereby to contribute to the value experience of the whole.⁵ To put this in more familiar terms, everything that in any sense exists has intrinsic value, which includes having instrumental value, and religious value.

Importantly, not only does this triadic structure characterize the meaning of actuality, but it is also the reason that the conception of morals arises (MT 111). For, if it were the case that

each entity was only understood in terms of egoistic, self-value, then the conception of morals would not arise. For in such a world, each entity would, like Adam Smith's invisible hand requires, simply strive for its own selfish ends. This would be egoism and even solipsism on an ontological level. If solipsism were true, the conception of morality would not even arise. However, because every entity has some value not only for itself, but also for others and for the whole universe, the conception of morality becomes possible. Again, if it is the case that each entity's own value *essentially* involves the values of others, solipsism and egoism become impossible, at least ontologically speaking.

Whitehead's triadic conception of value has a dramatic impact on the scope of our direct moral concern and, consequently, on our system of obligations. *If* the very fact of being an individual introduces, as Whitehead put it, "the element of value, of being valuable, of having value, of being an end in itself, of being something which is for its own sake" (SMW 136), *then* every individual lays an obligation on us (moral agents) to take it into account.⁶ That is, if every individual is a unique subject of experience with intrinsic value, then no individual may be excluded from the scope of our direct moral concern. Given this conclusion, it should begin to become clear why Whitehead claimed that "The destruction of a man, or of an insect, or of a tree, or of the Parthenon, may be moral or immoral" (MT 14-15). Contrary to most western ethical theories, the Ethics of Creativity insists that *every* individual represents an obligation which must be considered in its own right. *Every* relation into which we (humans) enter, whether it be with another human being, an insect, a tree, or the Parthenon, is a moral relation. Thus, no longer can we regard non-human entities as objects of only indirect duties or, even less, as objects strictly for our own self-interest.

Given Whitehead's theory of value, then, the important question is not *whether* others have intrinsic value, but whether the intrinsic value of others and of the whole is *recognized, appreciated, and affirmed*. That is, actuality is intrinsically valuable and it is the *obligation* of each individual to recognize that value. The other does not have value because I, in some anthropomorphic sense, affirm it. The other and the whole are *intrinsically* valuable. An adequate moral philosophy must give an account of responsibility which acknowledges that *every* individual – no matter how fleeting or seemingly insignificant – has value not only in and for itself, but also for its community and for the whole. Of course, the question which naturally presents itself is “How do we get from these grand axiological commitments to an actual moral theory?” That is, how do we move from a *metaphysics* of creativity, to a genuine *ethics* of creativity? Perhaps surprisingly, I believe that the answer is ultimately to be found in Whitehead's notion of beauty.

B. Beauty and the Ideal of Morality

In our analysis of Whitehead's metaphysics we found that every form of existence aims at and achieves an end for its own sake and, in so doing, has value for itself, for others, and for the whole. However, what is missing from this account is the nature of the aim of the creative advance of the universe. This introduces one of the more novel, and, for some, troubling, elements of Whitehead's philosophy. As the following passages indicate, Whitehead believes that the telos of the universe, and therefore of every individual, is aimed at the achievement of beauty:

The final actuality has the unity of power. The essence of power is the drive towards aesthetic worth for its own sake. All power is a derivative from this fact of composition attaining worth for itself. There is no other fact. [...] It constitutes the drive of the universe. (MT 119)

The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty. Thus any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence. (AI 265)

For Whitehead, then, creativity, the dynamic process of the universe, is not aimless. Rather, the process of becoming is the achievement of beauty. *Everything* is beautiful to some degree; the zero of beauty is the zero of actuality. According to this interpretation, then, actuality, value, and beauty are coextensive. Given the centrality of this category, which receives surprisingly little attention from scholars, it is appropriate to begin by examining what makes something beautiful.

Our first clue comes in *Modes of Thought*, where Whitehead warns his reader that “In the history of European thought the discussion of aesthetics has been almost ruined by the emphasis upon the harmony of the details” (62). Although it is not altogether clear from this statement alone what precisely he finds objectionable, the statement which follows it gives us a clue as to how Whitehead positively conceives of aesthetics: “In the greatest examples of any form of art, a miraculous balance is achieved. The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, and yet not destructive of themselves” (62).⁷ The similarity between this description of beauty and Whitehead’s definition of creativity is, of course, no accident. Just as creativity is the universe’s drive toward a complex unity which does not devour individuality, beauty is the achievement of a whole which enhances the value of each part while not being destructive of them. The jagged rocks of monism and solipsism are equally to be avoided. As Whitehead puts it, “There is one whole, arising from the interplay of many details. The importance arises from the vivid grasp of the interdependence of the one and the many. If either side of this antithesis sinks into the background, there is trivialization of experience, logical and aesthetic” (MT 60). With

Whitehead's warning regarding overemphasizing harmony in mind, let us push this initial conception of aesthetics further by turning to the treatment of beauty in his work *Adventures of Ideas*.

Here, Whitehead concisely, and, at first glance, unhelpfully, defines beauty as "the mutual adaptation of the several factors in an occasion of experience" (AI 252). The first thing Whitehead mentions regarding this definition of beauty is that adaptation implies an end and that this end is twofold. The first aim of adaptation is at the "absence of mutual inhibition among the various prehensions" (252). One will recall that in concrescence actual occasions bring together elements in their actual world. Hence, concrescence achieves the first aim of beauty when the data prehended do not inhibit each other. However, Whitehead suggests that this is merely the "minor form" of beauty. For this form of beauty is essentially the attenuated form of aesthetics described in *Modes of Thought* as the *mere* harmony of details. Thus, it would seem that this form of beauty is inadequate or deficient by itself. There is, however, a second aim of the adaptation toward beauty. As we see in the dense passage marked, according to Whitehead, the major form of beauty

presupposes the first form, and adds to it the condition that the conjunction in one synthesis of the various prehensions introduces new contrasts of objective content with objective content. These contrasts introduce new conformal intensities of feelings natural to each of them, and by so doing raise the intensities of conformal feeling in the primitive component feelings. Thus the parts contribute to the massive feeling of the whole, and the whole contributes to the intensity of feeling of the parts. (AI 252-3)

Since this account of the major form of beauty involves a number of technical terms, it would profit us to treat the parts of this account one piece at a time. First, it is clear that the major form of beauty presupposes the absence of mutual inhibition involved in the minor form of beauty. But in addition to the *lack* of mutual inhibition, the major form of beauty also involves the achievement of intensity via the introduction of *new* contrasts. "Contrast" is a technical term for

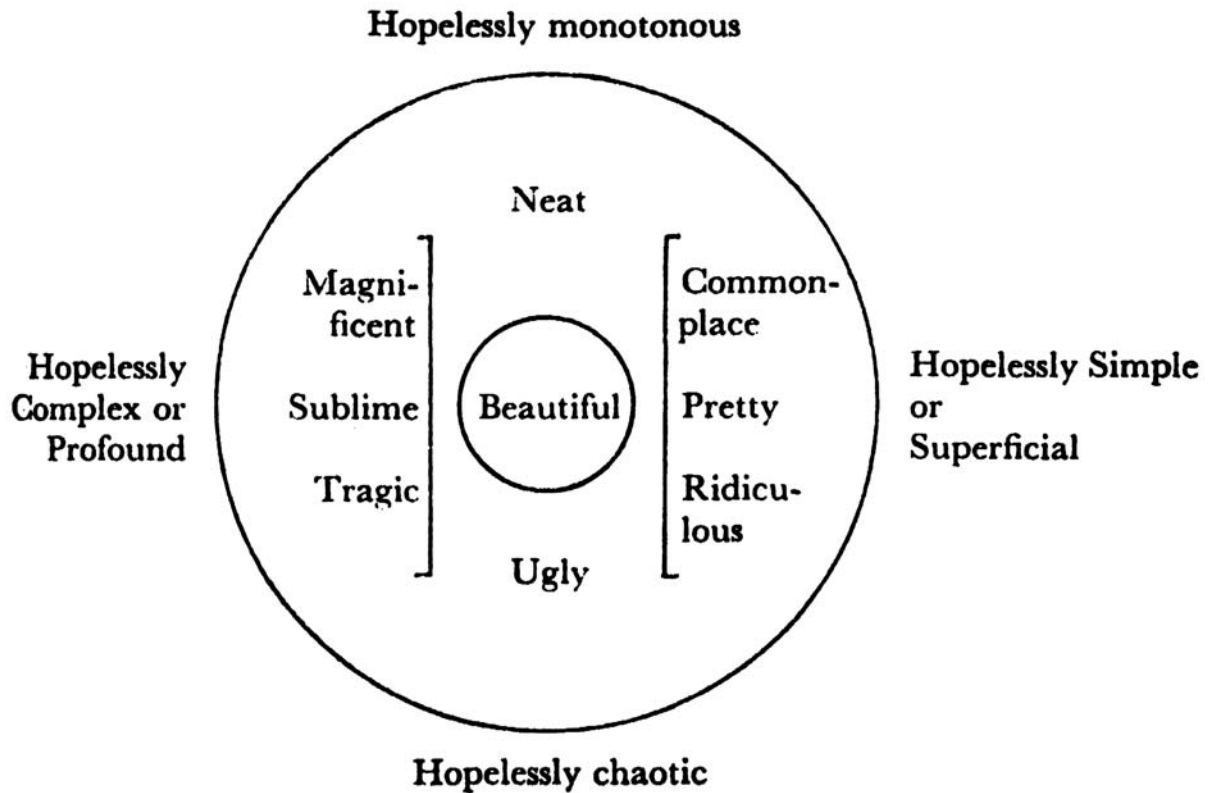
Whitehead which refers to the positive relation of two or more elements involved in experience such that those elements are not only mutually compatible but are mutually enhancing (Jones 12). It is the introduction of new contrasts that makes it possible for the parts to “contribute to the massive feeling of the whole, and the whole contributes to the intensity of feeling of the parts” (AI 252). According to Whitehead, then, the perfection of beauty involves two elements: (1) “massiveness,” what will later be called harmony, which concerns the greatest possible variety of detail with effective contrast, and (2) “intensity,” which concerns the comparative magnitude or depth of the contrasts achieved. This is the “miraculous balance” referred to in wherein “The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, and yet not destructive of themselves” (MT 62).

By defining beauty as a form of unity in diversity, Whitehead places himself within a long tradition of aesthetics. However, it is important not to conclude too much from this familial similarity. Although Whitehead’s conception of beauty is similar to the traditional formulations of beauty, taken in conjunction with his reformed subjectivism, which holds that there is nothing apart from the experience of subjects and the complex process of concrescence which this involves, Whitehead’s aesthetics is in fact much more complex than it may first appear. In order to gain greater access to Whitehead’s rich and complex conception of beauty, it will be helpful to turn to the work of Charles Hartshorne, who, over the course of his wonderfully long and august career, significantly develops and clarifies Whitehead’s basic insights into the structure of beauty.

In several different works, Hartshorne develops a diagram which will be helpful in understanding the complex notion of beauty being advanced (Figure 1).⁸ Consider a large circle,

in the middle of which is a small circle. The small circle represents beauty in the truest and most complete sense. The large circle, on the other hand, stands for aesthetic value in the most comprehensive sense. Since everything has some value, there is nothing outside the larger circle. Thus, although we may call an experience unaesthetic if its degree of harmony and intensity is low, this negation should not be taken absolutely. In rejecting the zero of actuality, we must also reject the notion that there is an “absolutely unbeautiful object or unaesthetic experience” (Hartshorne, “Aesthetic Value” 204).

Figure 1



A helpful way of beginning to conceiving of the Aesthetic Circle is as a two-dimensional version of Aristotle’s conception of virtue as a mean. However, rather than a one-dimensional relation between a single pair of extremes, the Aesthetic Circle is two-dimensional and, therefore, is constituted by two opposing pairs of extremes. Let us begin with the vertical

dimension. The vertical axis of the Circle focuses on the poles of unity and diversity. Accordingly, it corresponds to the minor form of beauty which is concerned with harmony. The ideal of this dimension is maximum diversity in unity.⁹ Hence, the region inside the top of the outer circle represents those forms of beauty which are very orderly but, due to a lack of diversity, are merely “neat” or “tidy,” rather than beautiful. For instance, picture an orchestra which is instructed to play a single note over and over again. The “music” played would be very orderly and possess a degree of harmony, but, due to the lack of diversity, the result is what one would likely call monotonous, rather than beautiful. Thus, due to the paucity of variety, unity and order are easily achieved, but the unity achieved is overly simple, monotonous, and, at the extreme, borders on absolute order. The ideal of beauty, therefore, is not one which aims at absolute order; there must be sufficient diversity for experience to be beautiful.

However, too much diversity ultimately results in the deterioration of unity. Accordingly, at the opposite extreme of the undiversified unity of monotony lies the ununified diversity of chaos. Thus, the region inside the bottom portion of the outer circle represents those forms of beauty which, due to an excess of diversity, lack unity and are what Hartshorne labels “ugly.” Since “ugliness” popularly refers to any form of aesthetic deficiency, a better term would be “chaotic.” What is important to note, however, is that this form of experience misses the mean of beauty because its excessive inclusion of variety undermines the formation of significant unity and, at the extreme, borders on absolute disorder or chaos. If one has ever had the misfortune of listening to a primary school orchestra warm up, then one has an idea of what the chaos of excessive diversity entails. Accordingly, just as Aristotle’s notion of courage is the mean of fear and overconfidence,¹⁰ Whitehead’s conception of beauty involves, though is not limited to, the mean of unity and diversity.¹¹

Whereas the vertical dimension concerns the degree of harmony achieved, the horizontal dimension concerns the relation of complexity and its contrary, simplicity. It is the relation of complexity and simplicity that determines the intensity of experience. The region inside the right portion of the outer circle represents experience which, due to its lack of significant complexity, is merely “pretty.” For instance, played by a novice pianist, the song “Green Sleeves” is pretty rather than beautiful because its chords lack sufficient complexity. The song is too trivial; it fails to introduce effective contrast. On the other hand, the region inside the left portion of the outer circle represents experience that is too complex or too profound to grasp. Thus, continuing, though stretching the limits of, our music metaphor, one might think of a symphony with 10,000 different parts all being played simultaneously as being so complex that it is impossible to grasp.¹²

In this way, Hartshorne’s diagram of aesthetic value provides us with a powerful tool for conceiving of Whitehead’s very rich and complex notion of beauty. One thing in particular which this diagram helps make apparent is the importance of effective contrast, which, as we have seen, is crucial to the major form of beauty.¹³ Beauty depends upon the optimal *contrast* between, on the vertical dimension, diversity and unity and, on the horizontal dimension, complexity and simplicity.¹⁴ Thus, an occasion is more or less beautiful depending on its success in achieving the most effective contrast between maximally diversified unity and the maximum balanced complexity. Put more simply, an individual is beautiful to a greater or lesser degree depending on the depth of its harmony and intensity.¹⁵ Therefore, to say that the aim of the universe is the production of beauty is to claim that the universe aims at the maximum degree of harmony (unity in diversity) and intensity (balanced complexity). To the extent that experience falls short of this ideal, there is ugliness or evil. Now, the question you might be asking yourself

at this point is, “How in the world do we use these *aesthetic* categories to construct a *moral* theory?”

The key, I suggest, is that morality is simply one species of process, all forms of which aim at the achievement of beauty. Insofar as *every* process aims at the achievement of beauty, the conditions of beauty are the conditions of maximally effective processes in general, and, by extension, of morality. Thus, by uncovering the complex conditions involved in the achievement of beauty, we simultaneously establish the conditions of morality. That is, the *moral* ideal must be an instance of the ideal of every form of process, which is to achieve the most beauty possible. Or, as Whitehead concisely put it in *Adventure of Ideas*, “The real world is good when it is beautiful” (AI 268). It is this sense that aesthetics is the bridge between the metaphysics of creativity and the development of an ethics of creativity.

Specifically, if we combine our analysis of Whitehead’s triadic axiology with his conception of beauty, then we arrive at five interrelated obligations:

- (1) the obligation to always act in such a way so as to bring about the greatest possible universe of beauty, value, and importance which in each situation is possible (beauty);
- (2) the obligation to maximize the intensity and harmony of one’s own experience (self-respect);
- (3) the obligation to maximize the harmony and intensity of experience of everything within one’s sphere of influence (love);
- (4) the obligation to avoid the destruction (or maiming) of any actual occasion, nexus, or society, unless to not do so threatens the achievement of the greatest harmony and intensity which in each situation is possible (peace);¹⁶
- (5) the obligation to continually strive to expand the depth and breadth of one’s aesthetic horizons (education).

In that the obligation to maximize beauty is not only the aim of morality, but the ideal and aim of process itself, the first obligation, which will be referred to as the obligation of beauty, captures most fully the heart of the Ethics of Creativity.¹⁷ Our most fundamental

obligation is to always act in such a way so as to bring about the greatest universe of beauty, value, and importance which in each situation is possible.

The second and third obligations focus on the first two legs of the axiological triad of self, other, and whole. Specifically, the second obligation focuses on the affirmation of an individual's self-value. In rendering its perspective on the world determinate, each individual is an achievement of value experience in and for itself. Although ethical theory is normally concerned with moral agents' relations with others, the second obligation recognizes that all individuals should have respect for the achievement of value which they themselves represent. We (moral agents) have the obligation to respect our own self-value. That is, we have the obligation to maximize the harmony and intensity or, equivalently, beauty, of our own experience. Accordingly, the second formulation may be called the obligation of self-respect.¹⁸

However, in that Whitehead's notion of individuality *essentially* involves others, self-value cannot be separated from the intrinsic value of others. Accordingly, the third obligation recognizes that, as unique achievements of value experience, we have the obligation to maximize the harmony and intensity of experience of every individual that we influence, no matter how small, weak, or seemingly insignificant. We have an obligation *not* to "deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe" (MT 111) by treating *anything*, whether it be another person, an insect, a tree, or the Parthenon, as having purely instrumental value. The appropriate attitude toward all of reality ought to be one of respect and awe. In fact, according to the third obligation, not only do we have the negative duty to avoid violently defacing achieved forms of beauty and value, we have the positive obligation to seek to maximize the harmony and intensity of experience of others. Because of its focus on the value of the other, I will refer to this formulation as the obligation of love.

Properly understood, the obligations of love and self-respect may be seen as the two poles on which the obligation of beauty turns. For if we are to truly act in such a way that we bring about the greatest possible universe of beauty, value, and importance which in each situation is possible, we must affirm not only our own value, but also the value of every individual which we influence. Although the practical tragedy of cross-purposes is ultimately unavoidable, the good of the one and the many are not conceptually opposed. As an ethics of *creativity*, the system being advanced repudiates the view that we must sacrifice either the good of the individual or of the whole. For Whitehead, truly beautiful experience involves not only a harmony of the diverse parts of experience, which achieves a complex and unified whole that is at once beyond its parts and yet not destructive of them, but by their participation in such a unity, the value experience of each part becomes more intense.¹⁹

More than the first three, the fourth obligation provides us practical guidance in how we ought to conduct ourselves toward others, especially in instances of moral conflict. The first portion of this obligation follows from the obligation of love. In that every individual is a unique locus of value, we should not, either through action (violence) or inaction (anesthesia), destroy or otherwise maim the value experience of others. Unfortunately, in the present structure of our cosmos, conflict is inevitable; ends are mutually exclusive. William James incisively captures this point in his essay “The Moral Philosophy and the Moral Life,” when he states that “The actually possible world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded; and there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind” (202). Thus, although we aim at satisfying the demands of everything within our sphere of influence, inevitably we are forced to choose between competing goods. This is where the latter part of this obligation becomes crucial. Ultimately, that course of action is to be preferred

which maximizes the beauty possible in the situation taken as a whole. This affirmation, while seemingly innocuous, is one of the more novel, and, likely, most controversial, claims of the Ethics of Creativity. For it demonstrates the full extent to which it is committed to the claim that something is only as good as it is beautiful; for, in the end, that action is to be preferred which achieves the most beauty, not which always gives preference to the interests of high-order individuals. As it essentially entails what Whitehead calls a “trust in the efficacy of beauty” (AI 285), this formulation will be called the obligation of peace.

As with the others, the fifth and final obligation of the Ethics of Creativity is an enumeration of an aspect of the obligation of beauty. According to this obligation, we must continually strive to expand the depth and breadth of our aesthetic horizons. In an important sense, this obligation is essentially the condition necessary for the possibility of successfully following the other four. Aesthetic education, then, must be our first concern, so that we may understand the values affected by and achievable through our actions. Accordingly, this final formulation will be called the obligation of education.

Yet the statement and explanation of these five interrelated obligations cannot be the last word tonight. For as Whitehead reminds us in the [first quotation], morality is not concerned with “mythological abstractions.” If a Whiteheadian moral philosophy is to be of any *practical* use, then it must *concretely* demonstrate how this “general ideal” of morality can help us make meaningful moral decisions. Thus, I would like to conclude my comments this evening with an all-too-brief sketch of a decision-making process that is implied by the moral ideal outlined above.

C. Beyond the Ideal

Though it is the last obligation, the first step in any moral decision-making process should be education or the attempt to understand and appreciate the beauty and value of the individuals involved in a given situation. For, in an important sense, our ability to successfully act in accordance with the ideal above is directly proportionate to the adequacy of our aesthetic judgment. Clearly, if we do not know of the values both affected and achievable by our actions, then the evils of anesthesia and violence will be unavoidable. Anesthesia involves the frustration of greater possibilities by the interposition of lesser achievements, while violence is the active destruction of existing forms of value and beauty. The first step in any moral decision, therefore, must be to educate ourselves as fully as possible regarding the values affected by and achievable through our actions. That is, if we are to meet our obligation to relate to the world in such a way that we always maximize the intensity and harmony of experience achievable in every situation, we must first commit ourselves to continually expanding the depth and breadth of our aesthetic horizons.

However, as Aristotle keenly recognized, what is important is not mere *knowledge* of what is virtuous, but actually *acting* virtuously. By focusing on the two dimensions of beauty, that is, harmony and intensity, and the obligations which flow from them, it is possible to discern two further steps in a moral-decision-making process. The second step in the decision-making process corresponds to the vertical dimension or the dimension of harmony, which concerns the mean between unity and diversity. If diversity is too great or too little, then the experience will either be too chaotic or so orderly as to be monotonous. Accordingly, in the second step the aim is to act in such a way that we are as inclusive of the demands of others as possible. This step bears a strong relation to the obligations of peace and love. For if we are to truly be as inclusive and respectful of the beauty and value of others as possible, then we must not destroy or

otherwise maim others unless not to do so threatens the achievement of the most beautiful whole possible. Thus, the second step involves relating to others in such a way that we are as inclusive of their demands as possible without sacrificing the unity of experience. Our bias, therefore, must always and everywhere be toward inclusivity. The burden of justification, in other words, is on those who would seek to use violence to destroy achieved forms of beauty and value. This applies as much to inter-human conflicts, such as the so-called “war on terror,” as it does to our (humans) relationship to the extra-human world. Too often, for instance, decision makers hastily conclude that economic prosperity and environmental protection are mutually exclusive. The second step in the moral decision-making process, then, requires that we use the moral imagination formed by our aesthetic education to think creatively as to how we can “invent some manner” of realizing our own interests as well as the interests of others.

The third step of the decision-making process corresponds to the horizontal dimension of beauty or the dimension of intensity, which concerns the mean between complexity and simplicity. If complexity is too great or too little, then the experience will either be too profound to grasp or too trivial to be bothered with. In a sense, this final step is at once the most difficult to explain and the most important. For, if an experience is to be truly beautiful and moral, it must not only be as inclusive as possible, it must also be sufficiently complex in its organization so as to introduce new contrast. Harmony without intensity is trivial or superficial.²⁰ Recall that the major form of beauty involves not merely the lack of mutual inhibition involved in harmony, but also the achievement of intensity via the introduction of new contrasts. These new contrasts are not only mutually compatible but are mutually *enhancing*.²¹ Accordingly, this step requires that we strive not only to include the greatest variety possible, but also that we seek the most intense whole possible. It is intensity which gives experience its depth. As James beautifully puts it, we

must “vote always for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter to complex combinations, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole” (“Moral Philosopher” 210). It is the idea of organizability or the whole which is “most fit to enter to complex combinations” that captures the third aim of the decision-making process.

In the end, although a Whiteheadian moral philosophy bears significant similarities to and contains elements of virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and deontology, it is ultimately not reducible to any of them. As I hope I have begun to show, a truly Whiteheadian moral philosophy must be every bit as unique, speculative, fallible, and dynamic as the metaphysics on which it is based.

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Notes

¹ Utilitarianism is an exception in its extension of moral standing “to the whole sentient creation” (John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Mary Warnock, ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1962) 263). Of course, it does not extend its sphere of concern to the relations between humans and rocks or insects.

² Although scholars such as Ivor Leclerc, William Christian, Lewis S. Ford, Donald Sherburne, Joseph Bracken, and Jorge Nobo present extensive and penetrating analysis of various elements of Whitehead’s metaphysics of process, none of them devote more than an occasional line or paragraph to the importance of axiology to Whitehead’s system. For instance, even though Leclerc devotes a number of pages to Whitehead’s repudiation of vacuous actuality, he fails to significantly examine the axiological foundation of this repudiation (see *Whitehead’s Metaphysics* 125-30). This omission may be owing to the fact that process scholars think that their analyses of other key terms covers “value” by default. A very notable exception to this trend in process scholarship is Frederick Ferré’s excellent trilogy *Being and Value*, *Knowing and Value*, and *Living and Value*.

³ This claim is not as foreign as it may at first appear. After all, it is a cornerstone of both Platonic and medieval philosophy that, inasmuch as something is, it is, to that extent, good. In a sense, then, actuality and value are coextensive for Whitehead just as being and goodness are one for, say, Augustine. See chapter 4 of my forthcoming book for a more detailed comparison of Augustine and Whitehead.

⁴ This thesis is at the heart of Judith Jones’ notion of ecstatic existence, which claims that “the functioning of an existent in another existent must be ascribed to the internal account of the first existent, as much as it is to be ascribed to the present self-constitution of an entity in concrescence. The fully determinate feeling characterizing the “satisfaction” of any occasion includes elements whose sources lie in *other* entities that to some significant extent retain their character as determinate unities of feeling *in themselves* even as they are objectified in a present concrescence. The objective functioning of one thing in another, in other words, never completely loses the subjective, agentive quality of feeling that first brought it into being” (Jones 3, author’s emphases).

⁵ According to Whitehead, each of these divisions are “on a level. No one in any sense precedes the other” (MT 117). Though I cannot address it here, this conclusion is important when responding to Clare Palmer’s objection that process theology’s doctrine of contributionism leads to a form of totalizing utilitarianism. Although I find that Hartshorne and Cobb’s doctrine of contributionism is correct that the value of an entity derives from the “contribution” that it makes to God’s experience, at times, it seems that they so emphasize this aspect of value that

they are in danger of reducing the other two to the third alone. To the extent that they do this, they are in very real danger of being subject to Palmer's criticisms. See my treatment of this in chapter 7. Also, see chapter 5, section C.4 for a more complete discussion of God and an individual's value for the whole.

⁶ However, this obligation is not, as with what Kant might call, an absolute obligation.

⁷ Little scholarship has been dedicated to an examination of Whitehead's aesthetics. A notable exception is Donald W. Sherburne's *A Whiteheadian Aesthetic*. However, it is important to note that Sherburne would not agree with my characterization of aesthetics as primarily concerning beauty. Sherburne argues that "It is true, of course, that many philosophers have wanted to restrict aesthetics to the single task of defining beauty. [...] One might, by using 'aesthetics' in this narrow sense, conclude that in defining beauty Whitehead has worked out the implications for aesthetics of his metaphysical speculation. It is my contention that in the broader, today more generally accepted, sense of the term Whitehead has not himself worked out the implications for aesthetics of his metaphysical system" (6, n. 3). My own analysis will be limited to the so-called "narrow sense" of aesthetics in that it focuses predominantly on defining and exploring the importance of beauty. Of course, given that the achievement of beauty is the aim of every process, it is not clear why such an analysis would be "narrow."

⁸ According to Hartshorne, this diagram was created by himself, Max Dessoir, whom Hartshorne describes as a German writer on aesthetics, and Kay Davis, whom Hartshorne describes as an artist and former student of his from Emory University. See Charles Hartshorne, "The Kinds and Levels of Aesthetic Value" and "The Aesthetic Matrix of Value."

⁹ Hence, the region inside the top of the outer circle represents those forms of beauty which are very orderly but, due to a lack of diversity, are merely "neat" or "tidy," rather than beautiful. For instance, picture an orchestra which is instructed to play a single note over and over again. The "music" played would be very orderly and possess a degree of harmony, but, due to the lack of diversity, the result is what one would likely call monotonous, rather than beautiful. Thus, due to the paucity of variety, unity and order are easily achieved, but the unity achieved is overly simple, monotonous, and, at the extreme, borders on absolute order.

¹⁰ See Aristotle, NE 1107b1-5.

¹¹ It is important to recognize, as Hartshorne does, that the extremes of absolute order and absolute disorder (chaos) are purely verbal entities to be found nowhere in reality. "Any state of affairs that can be definitely conceived without contradiction has some degree of order. A hopelessly discordant entity is not *an* entity, nor can an experience be without some minimal degree of concord among its aspects. There is always some 'satisfaction,' to use Whitehead's term" ("Aesthetic Value" 204). Accordingly, if absolute order and absolute disorder are equally unrealizable, then every experience has some degree of order and some degree of disorder. Thus some degree of disorder or conflict is an unavoidable part of the creative advance. For both Whitehead and Hartshorne, then, not only is discord unavoidable, it is in fact necessary for the achievement of deeper forms of beauty. Although the loss resulting from the conflict between two individuals is tragic, this discord helps avoid tameness or "anesthesia" by introducing uncertainty, unpredictability, and freedom. Discord plays an essential role in the procurement of beauty. "Thus chaos is not to be identified with evil; for harmony requires the due coordination of chaos, vagueness, narrowness, and width" (PR 112). Whitehead explicitly links discord and novelty in the following passage: "In considering the life-history of occasions, forming the historic route of an enduring physical object, there are three possibilities as to the subjective aims which dominate the internal concrescence of the separate occasions. Either (i), the satisfactions of the antecedent occasions may be uniform with each other, and each internally *without discord or incitement to novelty*. [...] Such pure conformation involves the exclusion of all the contraries involved in the lure, with their various grades of proximity and remoteness. [...] Or (ii), there is a zest for the enhancement of some dominant element of feeling, received from the data, enhanced by decision admitting nonconformation of conceptual feeling to other elements in the data, and culminating in a satisfaction transmitting enhancement of the dominant element by reason of novel contrasts and inhibitions. Such a life-history involves growth dominated by a single final end. [...] Or (iii), there is a zest for the elimination of all dominant elements of feeling, received from the data. In such a case, the route soon loses its historic individuality. It is in a state of decay" (PR 187-8, emphasis added). Thus, in an importance sense, significantly novel experience depends upon discord. See also Hartshorne, "Aesthetic Value" 204.

¹² A better example of this type of complexity may be the human brain, which is the most complex unity known. Its complexity is beyond our grasp, at least for the time being.

¹³ "It is an aesthetic principle that intensity of experience depends upon contrast" (Hartshorne, "Beyond Enlightened Self-Interest" 215).

¹⁴ Cf. “On both dimensions, (1) chaos versus monotony, (2) the profound versus the superficial, beauty is the golden mean, balanced between excess of unity and excess of variety, between excess of depth and excess of superficiality” (Hartshorne, “Aesthetics of Birdsong” 311).

¹⁵ Although Whitehead affirms the beauty and value of every individual, he does not go on to affirm the doctrine of ecological egalitarianism. According to the process model, the differences between the occasions that we experience are ultimately explicable in terms of the complexity of the organization of an individual’s constituent actual occasions.¹⁵ To be precise, differences in organization are a product of the degree of harmony and intensity (beauty) of the occasion in question.

¹⁶ This is adapted very closely from Dombrowski’s argument in *Hartshorne and the Metaphysics of Animal Rights*, 46. However, my own version of this obligation differs in an important respect. See chapter 6, section D of *The Ethics of Creativity* for a complete discussion.

¹⁷ It is in this context that I understand Whitehead’s claim that “There are experiences of ideals – of ideals entertained of ideals aimed at, of ideals achieved, of ideals defaced. [...] We are essentially measuring ourselves in respect to what we are not. A solipsist experience cannot succeed or fail, for it would be all that exists. There would be no standard of comparison. Human experience explicitly relates itself to an external standard. The universe is thus understood as including a source of ideals” (MT 103).

¹⁸ This obligation has long played a significant role in the history of moral philosophy, for instance, in the work of Aristotle and Kant, though not, of course, in the same sense.

¹⁹ Consider, “The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, and yet not destructive of themselves” (MT 62).

²⁰ For instance, the beauty created by a child who skillfully draws a picture using every crayon in their possession is merely “pretty” compared to the complex beauty of a painting by Monet. While the child’s drawing may bring a significant degree of diversity into unity, it lacks sufficient complexity or integration to achieve affective contrasts.

²¹ Cf. “The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, and yet not destructive of themselves” (MT 62).