

THE CONTRIBUTION OF PROCESS THOUGHT TO REFLECTION ON LOVE

John B. Cobb, Jr.

Process thought can be understood as a philosophy or theology of love. Of course, other language, such as “sympathy”, is commonly used, but “love” also appears fairly often. The best systematic theology written from a process perspective is that by Daniel Day Williams, entitled “The Spirit and the Forms of Love.”

For Whitehead himself love was determinative of what he affirmed and what he criticized in traditional teaching about God. He saw in traditional theology three dominant ways of thinking about God: as imperial ruler, as moral energy, and as ultimate philosophical principle. He did not favor any of them, and those who identify God in those ways are likely to see Whitehead and his followers as atheists. He wrote: “There is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity, yet another suggestion which does not fit very well with any of the three main strands of thought. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love.” (PR 343) Some of us think, following Whitehead here, that John’s assertion that “God is love” is a profound metaphysical truth.

When process thinkers write about love, they say many of the same things that other writers do. Nevertheless, the underlying convictions about the nature of reality do influence the way love is understood and its centrality. In this lecture I will talk about a few ways in which Whitehead’s conceptuality leads to distinctive formulations.

I. Altruism and Selfishness

In reflections about love, grounded, usually not consciously, in other metaphysical systems, there is often a sharp distinction between acting selfishly and acting altruistically. Pure selfishness is concern only for the self. Altruism is concern for others for their own sake. Some thinkers suppose that there is no such thing as genuine altruism, that all apparent concern for others is really, at least indirectly, an expression of concern for oneself. The economic theory on which so much of the economic system is constructed -- and now the social and political systems as well -- assumes self-interest as the only relevant motivation. Others argue that altruism is a real, independent element in human experience and action. Underlying this debate, for the most part, is the assumption that one’s present self extends into the future and is clearly marked off from other selves. To seek the well being of oneself in the future is then understood to be strictly self-interested.

The process view frames the question differently. The identity of the self through time is a matter of degree and fades with the passage of time. Strictly speaking, the self is momentary, and in the next moment there is a new self. To be completely self-interested is virtually impossible. It would mean to care nothing for the consequences of the way one constitutes oneself moment by moment.

It would not be metaphysically impossible for one to care only about the consequences in that succession of future selves that will constitute one as an enduring person. But that this is a common situation appears implausible when approached in process perspective. One is typically concerned about the effects of one's actions more broadly than that. In a conversation one wants the hearer to understand what one is saying, and often one hopes the hearer will agree with it and enjoy learning what one has to offer. One may suppose that one hopes for such understanding because it will lead to enjoyment in some of the selves that will make up one's future person. Surely that is part of one's hope and expectation. But to insist that no pleasure is taken in the expectation that others will be pleased, in short that one takes pleasure only in the expectation that others being pleased will bring pleasure to the future occasions of one's personal life is to impose one's assumptions on the situation.

Further, it is not uncommon that one's immediate intentions are to bring pleasure to one's child or spouse. Of course, their well being and happiness normally contribute to the happiness of future occasions in one's own personal life, but that does not mean that one does not want them to be happy as well. Sheer indifference to their present well being except as it will contribute to the well being of one's personal future is an extreme that, fortunately, is rarely realized.

Whitehead taught that occasions of experience aim at the realization of value in themselves *and* in their relevant future, that is, in occasions they will influence and that they care about. In the strictest sense, all positive concern for the relevant future is a matter of "altruism," that is, it is love for another, even when that other consists in one's own personal future. Almost always the relevant future includes the occasions that will constitute one's personal life in the future. But almost always it includes other occasions as well.

Altruism is as important when directed toward one's personal future as when directed toward others. It is, unfortunately, very inadequately realized in most cases. The most immediately anticipated occasions are often given far more weight than those at a greater remove. These are likely to receive less attention than other occasions in the near term.

For example, many of us know that the occasions in our personal future will be healthier and happier if we eat moderately now. But the immediately present snacks promise us a pleasure that we do not resist. We decide to begin dieting "tomorrow" – and tomorrow never comes. We need to develop a greater love for those future occasions.

For Whitehead morality is a matter of the breadth of the future that we experience as relevant. The strengthening of concern about more remote occasions in our personal future makes us more moral. The extension of concern to all those with whom we directly relate contributes to our morality. Caring about members of our communities who are not present adds to our moral stature.

II. Altruism and Internal Relations

In the first section I pointed out that in a process view there is a blurring of the line between self-interest and altruism. Much that many people consider self-interest is in fact a concern for another, that is a future self. Sufficient concern for that future self is not to be taken for granted. It requires moral discipline and growth.

But there is another way in which process thought blurs the line between self-love and other love. This is by its doctrine of internal relations. Each occasion of experience is largely constituted by its relations to past occasions, chiefly to immediately past ones. This means that my future well being depends on the well being of those around me, and my well being contributes to theirs.

We all know this. It is depressing to be surrounded by depressed people. It is exhilarating to be in a group of people who are excited and energized. To contribute to the enjoyment of those around one is to contribute to the enjoyment of one's future selves. When, out of ill temper or ill will, one throws a cold blanket over a party, the result ruins one's own chances for enjoyment.

Of course, matters are never this simple. There are times when one feels left out of the general excitement or exhilaration and resents it. One may, then, take a certain pleasure in destroying it. The contrast of the happiness of others with one's own pain worsens the pain, and it is alleviated when pain is imposed on others. The complexity of human psychology is inexhaustible. The aim to damage occasions in one's relevant future also belongs to the sphere of the moral as the immoral. Whatever the immediate satisfaction taken in reducing others' enjoyment, the result is to reduce the possibilities for happiness in one's future occasions as well

III. The Relation of Self-interest and Altruism

Taking self-interest in the strictest sense as the aim to realize what value one can in the immediate occasion, how is it related to altruism as aim to realize value in successor occasions, whether in one's personal life or in others? Are they opposed to one another? The answer is No, not in general, but there can be tensions.

In general the satisfaction to be found moment by moment is enhanced by the sense that what one is doing in that moment will contribute to enjoyment in the future. This sense gives some zest even to the menial tasks performed either in order to earn money for survival or to support a cause in which one believes. Still more commonly one enjoys contributing to the good spirits of those around one. Since others enjoy the company of one who is enthusiastic and happy far more than the company of one who is upset or bored, aiming at one's own immediate happiness generally contributes to the happiness of others. Consciously subordinating one's immediate enjoyment for the sake of another usually backfires, as the other does not appreciate being the cause of the self-sacrifice. It is hard to live with a "martyr". For the most part, self-interest and altruism are mutually supportive.

But there can be tensions. Addicts place self-interest, as the aim to attain in the moment a craved satisfaction, ahead of all consequences, and all of us have addictive tendencies to some extent. Adolescents seeking thrills may ignore the consequences of their risk-taking for even a quite proximate future, with horrendous consequences for themselves and others.

On the other side, a focus on future benefits at the expense of present enjoyment can occur. Some of this is necessary. Few can complete school or do well in a profession without frequently sacrificing immediate enjoyment for the sake of future goals. The anticipation of future satisfaction can contribute to satisfaction in the present, but it does not do away with the tension. Sadly, some become so fixed on subordinating present enjoyment to future goals that they lose the capacity for enjoying life as it comes. Their altruism harms them.

The goal, clearly, is not to become less and less self-interested and more and more altruistic. A world made up of altruists trying to benefit others without regard to their own immediate enjoyment would be a poor world indeed. The goal is to reduce the tension between immediate self-interest and altruism. The fact that over a wide range they are mutually supportive means that this goal is not utopian in a negative sense. On the contrary it is quite practical.

I mentioned schooling as a source of tension between immediate enjoyment and altruistic concern for the future, one's own and that of others. But the tension can be reduced with beneficial results all around. The goal is for learning to be intrinsically satisfying. In principle real learning always is. But schools can make, and often have made, learning boring. Whitehead calls for restoring the element of romance to education. Students learn far better when they find the material interesting. An educational system in which students gain immediate satisfaction in most of what they do will also prepare them better for their professions.

IV. The Metaphysical Character of Compassion

Thus far I have been speaking of love in terms of acting for the sake of something and the motivation of such action. I have shown how the issue of love of self and love of others is formulated somewhat differently in a process context than in one which takes the identity of the self through time as a metaphysical given. In either the process or the more substantialist framework, this relationship is surely important, and I will return to it. But the tendency of Christians to focus on other love, understood as *agape*, has obscured the importance in the Bible of another form of love, compassion.

Recently, *agape* has lost some of its admirability. It is associated with "do-goodism", which often seems to be a form of imposing one person's idea of what is good on others who do not want it. Or it can be understood to be a distant and impersonal way of seeking the benefits of others. Anders Nygren emphasized that *agape* is the downward movement from God to us and implied that it is most clearly expressed by us when we

direct our concern to those who are not able to reciprocate, at least in an equal way. Many of us who recognize the role that such love plays as sometimes needed still think that mutuality and reciprocity is a better form of love. We also think that real feelings of affection and concern are better than calculated acts of virtue.

In this context, there has been a shift of emphasis from *agape* to compassion. Politicians have recognized this. Two presidents in a row have emphasized compassion. Clinton liked to say that he felt people's pain. The current President Bush identifies himself as a compassionate conservatism. I will not judge the degree of sincerity in either case, but still say that their use of "compassion" tends to trivialize it and lead us to call for *agape*.

The problem is that "compassion" can be thought of as an occasional rush of sympathetic feeling, which may, or may not, have any effect on action. In short it may be merely sentimental. If the policies promoted by a president in fact exacerbate the suffering of people, the assurance that the president feels compassion is of little importance. Even if there are occasional gestures that express concern for this or that group of suffering people, if they are surrounded by other acts that systematically occasion suffering in broader groups, what is called "compassion" remains *merely* sentimental.

This does not mean that sentiment is unimportant. When we move from the political to the personal sphere, nothing is more important than feeling understood. Full understanding requires some sharing of our feelings, that is, sympathy, empathy, or compassion. There are many occasions when our need is for this compassion more than for some other form of help.

Such compassion is not merely sentimental if it is genuine. The one who is truly compassionate will take action to help when that is possible. Action that grows out of real compassion is likely to be more sensitively appropriate than the action of one who is only calculative in trying to help. It will also mean more to the recipient.

Thus far I have spoken of compassion in its usual meaning. It means feeling with those who suffer. Usually we assume that those who are compassionate are not also suffering, or at least not comparably to those toward whom they are compassionate. This is all valuable and important. But from a Whiteheadian perspective it is only a special case of a more fundamental relationship.

For Whitehead, every momentary occasion of experience comes into being out of the whole of its past. The first phase of that becoming he calls the conformal phase. The new occasion conforms to the world out of which it arises. If we examine this more closely, we find that this conformation is the feeling of the feelings of past occasions in such a way as to reenact them in the new occasion. For example, if I am angry about what someone has said to me in one moment, the next momentary occasion will include a strong tendency to reenact that anger. It will feel the previous feeling. My personal continuity through time is grounded in this reenactment in one moment of the feelings of

the previous moment. This is feeling with the other, the fundamental structure of compassion. It is also the fundamental structure of causality and memory.

In earlier sections I commented on the way in which the moods of others contribute to our moods. This metaphysical structure is the deepest reason that we cannot separate self-interest and concern for others very sharply. We are constituted by our relations not only to our own past experiences but to others as well. These relations are initiated by feeling the feelings of others, that is, by compassion.

Fortunately, at least with human beings, this is not the whole story. We have some capacity to objectify what we inherit from others and prevent it from completely controlling what we become. At some point I may be able to recognize that my continuing to be angry over the unkind remark is destroying a relationship that is important to me. I see that my anger results from my unwillingness to accept certain weaknesses in myself that the remark forced me to recognize. I continue to feel the anger, but I now feel it with shame more than with renewed anger. Gradually I can weaken its hold over me. Similarly I may be able to help the depressed person not by simply sharing the depression but by transcending it. In this case, it may be possible to feel the depression as that of the other person and genuinely to appreciate what it means in that person's life and yet not be depressed myself. This is the kind of feeling with, or compassion, that may help the depressed person.

This means that, in the perspective of process thought, the problem is not simply that we fail to feel the feelings of others sufficiently. Instead the problem is usually that our empathy for some leads to limiting our empathy towards others. In the extreme case of the sociopath, one might have empathy only for one's own personal experiences. But this phenomenon requires extensive explanation. It is the rare exception, not the basic problem. We are not born as sociopaths who have to be taught to be responsive to others. We are born as relational beings who, through terrible circumstance, may lose much of that capacity for relation.

But this does not mean that simply growing up naturally, without destructive forces impinging on us evades the problem of too limited empathy. In the normal situation, as children, the others toward whom we feel empathy or compassion constitute a particular group. In the nature of the case, empathy is directed strongly to those who are near at hand, those with whom they chiefly interact, or those who are brought vividly to their attention through stories. Since groups have historically formed in part over against other groups, children naturally assimilate negative attitudes toward these other tribes, communities, races, social classes, or nations along with the positive empathy toward members of their own group. They feel the feelings of members of a group that fears or despises other groups, while feeling only very obscurely the feelings of members of those other groups. They will then objectify these others in terms of the feelings of those who despise them and not in terms of what these others feel.

Sadly, this can hardly be avoided in a fragmented world. Each occasion conforms much more fully to the nearer environment than to what is more remote. Hence the more

remote is experienced through the lenses of the more immediate. This more immediate environment, such as the nuclear family, is immensely important for human nurture and growth. It is necessary that it play the primary role in our conformation.

Ideally this near environment will open us, as we are ready and able to be opened, to the wider environment, without limit. But the ideal is rarely realized. Hence, the limitations of compassion are passed from generation to generation. Even when we overcome gross expressions of prejudice, subtler distortions of perception are likely to remain. Genuine compassion in relation to others in the communities with which we identify usually inhibits compassion to those in other communities felt to be competitors or threats.

It is at this point that religions play their ambiguous role. On the one hand, they become communities claiming our loyalty over against one another. Christians are encouraged to have deep empathy for one another. This intensifies their identity as Christians. This identity, in turn, leads to distrust of those who separate themselves from Christianity, defining themselves in a different way. This different definition is typically felt as threatening to the Christian, and the sense of being threatened inhibits compassion. Sometimes this distrust is felt with particular acuteness toward other religious communities and their members. Today, many Christians distrust Muslims and have difficulty feeling empathy for them; and the reverse is also the case.

On the other hand, both Christian and Muslim teaching calls for extending compassion to all God's creatures and especially to all the human ones. One main task of pastors and theologians, and, indeed, of all people of faith, is to show that participation in one religious community, if it is deep and perceptive of the meaning of that community's faith, will counter the tendency to define one's community as over against others. The ideal for both Christians and Muslims is to extend compassion toward all. When this truth is internalized, then it will be that the more devoted one is as a Christian or a Muslim the more one will have compassion to those who are not Christian or Muslim. Further, this compassion will not be sentimental but a real sharing in the way others feel and see the world.

Many of us identify ourselves as Christians or as Muslims precisely because we see in these traditions the call, and, to some extent, the power, to transcend loyalty to any particular group and direct it to the whole of creation. Whitehead described the religion he affirmed as "world loyalty." Perhaps this can be attained without claiming one particular tradition or another, and independently of participating in a community of people who seek to attain to that goal. But even under ideal circumstances it is difficult. If one does not divide the world into believers and unbelievers of one stripe or another, one is likely to divide it into those who seek peace and justice and those who do not, or into those who transcend parochial loyalties and those who do not.

One of the most beautiful passages in Whitehead's writings deals with this matter of the inclusiveness of human love. It is in the chapter on Peace in *Adventures of Ideas* (p. 368) Peace "results in a wider sweep of conscious interest. It enlarges the field of attention. Thus Peace is self-control at its,--at the width where the 'self' has been lost, and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality. . . . One of its fruits is that passion whose existence Hume denied, the love of mankind."

V. Love as Emotion

Earlier, I criticized sentimentality. An emotion that does not affect action does not suffice. As I have presented them, both *agape* and compassion are acts. The former is action directed toward the well being of some segment of the future. The latter is the act of empathetic inclusion of what has been felt in the past. For Whitehead, both are metaphysically grounded. To come into being is to conform to the past and so to constitute oneself as to affect the future. The real issue is the breadth of the past to which an occasion of experience responds empathetically and the extent of the future which it aims to affect positively. This can be formulated with little attention to emotion.

However, Whitehead has taught us that emotion is of great importance. Indeed, in his metaphysics, the world consists chiefly of droplets of emotion. Emotion is the subjective correlate of what physicists call energy. The intensity of emotion is the quantity of energy.

The difficulty of accepting this, as of so much of Whitehead's thought, is that we are conditioned by centuries of Western thought to suppose that the world of subjects is quite distinct and separate from the world of objects. We are taught to assume that the world studied by physics exists only in the objective way in which physicists study it. We Whiteheadians think, that this objective world is more than appearances for human beings, that it had some kind of existence before sentient beings emerged. If so, it cannot be composed simply of objects. Objects exist only for others. Only subjects exist for themselves.

Our understanding of subjects comes, primarily from our understanding of ourselves. Western philosophers have focused on our subjectivity in terms of sense perception and conscious knowledge. These phenomena depend on elaborately organized organisms and could not have existed before such organisms emerged. If this is what subjectivity means, then it is a very late comer to the history of the universe.

But there are more primitive aspects of experience, even of human experience. There is feeling that does not depend on either sense organs or central nervous systems. We feel our own bodies and our personal past. And we feel them feelingly. In Whitehead's language, there is something objectively given in each moment, and this is appropriated into the new subject. There is the "subjective form" of appropriation. This subjectivity becomes what Whitehead calls the "satisfaction", which is the way that moment is given for subsequent momentary experiences. The satisfaction of an occasion is primarily emotional in character.

There is still a great difficulty for most Westerners, so deeply shaped by dualistic thinking, to attribute emotion to very simple entities such as the quanta of energy. One problem is that people are inclined to limit experience to conscious experience. It would be counter to common sense to attribute consciousness to the quanta of energy studied by physicists. Whitehead certainly does not do that. But is it meaningful to speak of nonconscious emotion?

I think it is. I think that most of us recognize that when we become conscious of some emotion we often recognize that it was there before we became conscious of it. Sometimes someone else tells me that I am anxious or angry before I have recognized that fact myself. It takes hard work to be honestly aware of our own emotions.

Furthermore, the emotions of which we become aware are already complex ones that are usually affected by sense perception, memory, and thought. They are not the truly primal elements in our experience. As conscious emotions fade off into those that are not currently conscious but capable of becoming conscious; so those that are not conscious but subject to becoming conscious fade off into others that are too elementary to enter conscious experience. It is those that connect our subjectivity with the subjectivity of very simple entities. Like us they appropriate these emotions from their context and pass them on to their successors.

Such speculation may not appeal to you. I have developed it only to indicate here what is distinctive of Whiteheadian thought. His cosmology is an effort to integrate what we learn subjectively with what we learn objectively. He suggests that the actual world is constituted by emotion and its transmission from occasion to occasion.

When we speak of human emotions we know that the names we give them are very crude. Poets and novelists enable us to discriminate shades of emotional tone, and complex patterns for which we have no adequate labels. Even so we can verbally identify a considerable range and variety. As I have said, most of these variations are possible only for complex organisms such as vertebrate animals, and, indeed, many of them can be attributed only to human beings.

The question arises whether we can make any sensible guesses as to the character of the emotions that extend to simpler types of entities. I suggest that “attraction” and “repulsion” may point in the right direction. These are terms that suggest themselves to the observer of physical events but are still connected to subjective experience. We know subjectively what it is to be drawn toward another or repelled.

All of this is to say that love cannot be understood apart from the emotion of love. In the human instance, there is a wide range of emotions grouped together in that way, and there is often good reason to sort some of them out. Nevertheless, they have something in common, something that we might call “attraction.” This attraction seems to operate in the body as well as in the psyche. Indeed, much of the attraction the psyche feels seems to be derivative from far more primitive attractions it derives from the body.

VI. Body and Psyche

Whitehead helps us to understand the intricate interconnection of the psyche and the body as well as the distinctive role of the psyche within the whole psychosomatic organism. A full account of love would require untangling this. We need to appreciate and celebrate the role of our bodies in supporting and expressing love as well as the importance of the role of the psyche in directing, channeling, and supplementing this bodily love. This points the way to many research projects. Simple introspection can take us only so far.

Whitehead's contribution is not to answer detailed questions about the respective role of the body and the psyche in human love. It is rather to give a framing of the question which enables us to ask meaningful questions. The psyche is part of the same natural world as is the body. The causal efficacy of bodily events on psychic events and of psychic events on bodily events is not metaphysically of a different order from the causal efficacy of bodily events on other bodily events or of psychic events on other psychic events. All of these can be understood as the transmission of emotion or energy. The attraction which pervades nature takes on more complex forms that evoke from us the word "love." How it functions in the simplest entities and how it takes on more complex forms are questions susceptible of meaningful examination.

VII. Conclusions

I am not sure whether I have any conclusions to share other than what I take to be the fruitfulness of a Whiteheadian approach. I believe it to be the most developed nondualistic approach available. In principle it fully integrates introspection and phenomenology on the one side with objective scientific study on the other. Since I believe love is appropriately studied in both, and that what is learned from each can be helpful to the other, I consider this important. I believe that in its broadest and most general meaning love is central to all reality and order, and that it is grounded in the very nature of reality.

I also believe that God is the supreme instance of the love that is to be found everywhere. Of course, just as human love is far transcendent of the attraction of quanta to one another; so God's love is far transcendent of anything we can actually experience as love. But that does not entail that the word "love" is not literally applied to God. As Charles Hartshorne used to say, it is only to God that it can be applied literally. That is all our emotions and motives are so mixed that to call any of them "love" is not truly accurate. Yet we are not lacking in an idea of what love in its purity would be. It is that ideal love that we Christians attribute to God. It is to that purer and all inclusive love that we aspire.