

Re-Centering Process Thought: Recovering Beauty in A. N. Whitehead's Late Work

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Abstract

In his brief preface to *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead provides a rare window into how he conceived of his own work. “The three books – *Science and The Modern World*, *Process and Reality*, *Adventures of Ideas* – are an endeavour to express a way of understanding the nature of things.... Each book can be read separately; but they supplement each other’s omissions or compressions” (vii). If I am correct, one of the most important concepts in process thought is virtually absent from Whitehead’s magnum opus, *Process and Reality*. I suggest that the single most important omission remedied by *Adventures of Ideas* is the claim that beauty is the one self-justifying aim of the universe, that “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (AI 265). The goal of this brief essay is to defend the view that process thought, particularly process ethics, will be more adequate and applicable if it is “re-centered” around the concept of beauty.

In his brief preface to *Adventures of Ideas* Whitehead provides a rare window into how he conceived of his own work. “The three books – *Science and The Modern World*, *Process and Reality*, *Adventures of Ideas* – are an endeavour to express a way of understanding the nature of things.... Each book can be read separately; but they supplement each other’s omissions or compressions” (AI vii). If I am correct, one of the most important concepts in process thought is virtually absent from Whitehead’s magnum opus, *Process and Reality*. I suggest that the single most important omission remedied by *Adventures of Ideas* is the claim that beauty is the one self-justifying aim of the universe, that “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (AI 265).¹ Creativity is in this sense kalogenic, it is inherently beauty generating.² Though there are notable exceptions, surprisingly few process scholars have recognized and embraced the significance of this claim.³ Indeed, beauty is notable in its absence from most of

the major works on process metaphysics, which works tend to focus on Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* and *Process and Reality*.⁴ Perhaps fearing charges of aestheticism, those who do note the centrality of beauty have mistakenly sought either to minimize its significance or to explain it away as metaphorical embellishment.⁵ The goal of this brief essay is to defend the view that process thought, particularly process ethics, will be more adequate and applicable if it is "re-centered" around the concept of beauty.

Harmony, Intensity, and Beauty

Whitehead defines beauty as the dual aim at harmony and intensity. The subjective aim of every occasion is at the achievement of the most harmonious and intense experience possible. Harmony, what Whitehead calls the minor form of beauty, is understood as the "absence of mutual inhibition among the various prehensions..." that constitute an experience (AI 252). The aim at harmony, then, is at maximally inclusive unity in diversity. If the inclusion is too great, there is a "painful clash" (252) and experience risks degenerating into chaos. On the other hand, if the inclusion is too limited, the deficiency of diversity results in a "tame" monotony.

Yet, Whitehead insightfully notes, the absence of mutual inhibition is not sufficient to achieve deeply beautiful experience. Beauty requires not only the absence of conflict (harmony), but also the realization of new contrasts (intensity). It is through the realization of patterned contrasts that "new conformal intensities of feelings" are achieved (252). It is in the aim at intensity where the depth and richness of experience is purchased. "Thus the parts contribute to the massive feeling of the whole, and the whole contributes to the intensity of feeling of the parts" (252). Each occasion of experience aims at the achievement of beauty, then, in the sense that it seeks to bring the elements within its actual world together in a way that avoids the painful clash of conflicting ends (harmony) and furthermore seeks to relate these elements together in

such a way as they not only avoid the conflict of mutual inhibition, but deepen the intensity of experience felt through the introduce of new contrasts.

As a unique achievement of harmony and intensity, every occasion of experience is, to some degree, beautiful. The zero of beauty, as Hartshorne noted, is the zero of actuality. In determining itself, every occasion necessarily achieves some degree of beauty and is, to that degree, justified in its existence. Yet, it is still very much the case that an occasion of experience can fall short of the maximally unified diversity and balanced complexity open to it. It is, in this sense, ugly.

Whitehead fully recognizes that ugliness is all too real in our finite world. The ugliness of violence, what Whitehead calls aesthetic destruction or discord, involves the destruction of achieved forms of beauty in the realization of new forms. As Whitehead readily notes, the great novelty and intense beauty achieved by living occasions is only possible through such violence. For this reason, although tragic, violence is preferable to the sweet, anesthetic death of experience in which an occasion embraces lower forms of beauty when higher forms are possible. This embrace of “tameness” is far more destructive in the long run for it cuts against the very “essence of the universe” in its pursuit of ever-higher forms of beauty. As the aim of the creative advance of the universe, beauty is the central category of Whitehead’s system.

Beauty and the Ultimate

Although I will not significantly develop the claim here, a renewed focus on the aesthetic character of process provides greater depth to our understanding of the ever-enigmatic notion of Creativity. Rather than understanding the Category of the Ultimate as a sort of koan on which you are meant to meditate, we should understand the *content* of this central category in more explicitly aesthetic terms. Taken in the context of his discussion of beauty, the claim that “the

many become one and increased by one” takes on greater depth. The many contribute to a new whole whereby the intensity of each part is greater, yet this increase in intensity does not require the loss of individuality.

Indeed, there is good reason to believe that it was reflection on the beauty of great art that increasingly defined Whitehead’s understanding of Creativity. According to his account in *Modes of Thought* (1938), every occasion represents the achievement of a composition whereby there is “one whole, arising from the interplay of many details” (60). Like great art, the aesthetic synthesis of concrescence achieves a “miraculous balance” between the parts and the whole in which “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). Importance, meaning, and value are achieved not in sacrificing the many parts for a more meaningful whole, but from “the vivid grasp of the interdependence of the one and the many.” We trivialize experience “if either side of this antithesis, [the one or the many,] sinks into the background” (MT 60).

While I have no doubt that the study of process *metaphysics* would benefit from being “re-centered” around the concept of beauty, my main concern in this essay is the rather unfortunate effect that the omission of beauty has had on the development and defense of a Whiteheadian moral philosophy. Indeed, I will argue that much of the neglect of process ethics among contemporary moral philosophers and environmental ethicists is ultimately traceable to process scholars’ refusal to recognize the kalogenic nature of process.

The Failure of Process Ethics

Process ethics, insofar as there is such a thing, has failed. Despite near unanimous agreement among process scholars regarding the worth of a process approach, process ethics has

failed to capture the interest or attention of mainstream philosophers. Nowhere is the failure of process ethics more apparent and more disappointing than in the area of environmental ethics. Whereas a process approach never gained significant attention from mainstream moral philosophy, process scholars were present at the very inception of environmental ethics. For instance, two of the most eloquent and insightful proponents of process thought, Charles Hartshorne and John Cobb, contributed to the first anthologies dedicated to the topic in the late 60s and early 70s and their work was included in the first issues of the journal *Environmental Ethics*. Indeed, according to the journal's founding editor, the first dissertation on environmental ethics was titled "The Rights of Nonhuman Beings: A Whiteheadian Study."⁶

Despite the innovative and groundbreaking work by process scholars, it is increasingly rare to find a process perspective represented in mainstream anthologies and course texts on ethics and the environment.⁷ Since I count myself among those who see process thought as an ideal basis from which to develop a rich moral philosophy, I have become particularly interested in diagnosing the cause of this systemic neglect. Why is it that, despite process scholars' insistence over the last 40 years that Whitehead's rich philosophy of organism is an ideal ground for a rich moral theory, mainstream moral philosophers roundly ignore it? What happened?

In an important sense, process ethics has failed because it has never been developed. To be sure, many capable scholars have written essays or dedicated chapters to the topic.⁸ Yet very few scholars have taken on the project of *systematically* developing a Whiteheadian moral philosophy and those who do have largely refused to recognize the central role of beauty.⁹

David Griffin's work is a good example of both of these trends. To date, Griffin has not systematically advanced a Whiteheadian moral philosophy, but in both *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism* (2001) and *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy* (2007) he

dedicates a chapter to Whiteheadian ethics. In the former, Griffin rightly notes that “satisfaction is discussed in terms of the aesthetic criteria of beauty: harmony and intensity. Experience that is ‘aesthetic’ in this sense is said to be the whole point of existence” (301). Despite his recognition that “the whole point of existence” is the achievement of beauty, in his more recent project, Griffin effectively omits the concept of beauty. Yet even in *Reenchantment*, where he recognizes the importance of beauty, Griffin inexplicably denies that beauty is the aim of morality.¹⁰ Griffin’s odd position seems to be motivated less by Whitehead’s own claims, which are unambiguously in conflict with Griffin’s,¹¹ than by his desire to avoid the view that Whitehead’s ethics is utilitarian.¹²

Griffin’s reactive approach is characteristic of most process scholars’ approach to ethics. Instead of systematically exploring the unique contours of a kalocentric Whiteheadian approach to morality, process scholars more often ask how Whitehead’s work is like or unlike existing moral paradigms. In hindsight, the effect of this tendency is predictable. Because process scholars have not positively and systematically developed a Whiteheadian approach to morality, we have allowed others to characterize it for us. The results are as diverse as they are mutually contradictory. For instance, process ethics has over the last four decades been characterized as “selfish individualism,”¹³ a “moral interest theory,”¹⁴ a “consequentialist, maximizing, and totalizing” form of utilitarianism,¹⁵ a “deontological ethic,”¹⁶ a “deeply ecological” ethic,¹⁷ a land ethic,¹⁸ and a clandestinely anthropocentric version of moral extensionism.¹⁹

The failure to systematically develop a Whiteheadian moral philosophy has allowed others to define it for us, with insalubrious results.²⁰ It isn’t enough to suggest how a process position would address particular problems or to point to a few of the contours of a Whiteheadian approach. We need finally to begin the long and difficult work of systematically developing a

Whiteheadian moral philosophy. The first step in doing this, I argue, is fully embracing the central role of beauty. Indeed, we will find that only by adopting a fully kalocentric approach can process thought address the root cause of the neglect of process ethics: its embrace of a hierarchical conception of value.

Onto-Aesthetic Status and Moral Significance

Beyond the failure to systematically develop a coherent moral philosophy, I am convinced that much of the neglect of process ethics can be traced to its embrace of a hierarchical conception of value. Despite the unpopularity of the position, process scholars have generally been steadfast in their insistence that complex judgments of value are necessary and in fact unavoidable in the daily course of life. They rightly recognize that it is metaphysically irresponsible and ethically dangerous to refuse to recognize that there are differences in the degree of beauty and value achievable by different occasions of experience. The richness of experience achievable by the occasions defining a dandelion are significantly shallower than that achievable by a Labrador retriever. Because of the greater complexity and integration of its parts, a dog, for instance, is capable of far richer and more beautiful experience than the more diffusely organized dandelion. In continuing to recognize the moral significance of these differences, process philosophers have alienated many potentially sympathetic philosophers.

Val Plumwood is representative of those who wonder whether in retaining a hierarchy process scholars have truly abandoned their anthropocentrism. “The criterion of experience builds in an anthropocentric hierarchy, since it conceives the world of nature as similar to but of lesser degree than the human mind, rather than as simply different. Such a position seems to offer little prospect of a real challenge to the thesis that the natural world is inferior to the human sphere, depending as it does on the extension in a weakened form of properties which are exemplified most fully by the human mind” (130). Although process scholars claim to have abandoned anthropocentrism, their axiological hierarchy seems to suggest otherwise.

The refusal to repudiate hierarchical thinking has also been the chief point of contention between process scholars and deep ecologists, who otherwise maintain a fundamentally similar view of reality as an interdependent system of intrinsically valuable individuals. Deep ecologists

such as John Rodman, George Sessions, and Bill Devall, claim that, by insisting on a complex hierarchy of value, a Whiteheadian moral philosophy is simply a thinly veiled anthropocentrism that will always put humans on top. “‘Subhumans’ may now be accorded rights,” John Rodman writes, “but we should not be surprised if their interests are normally overridden by the weightier interests of humans, for the choice of the quality to define the extended base class of those entitled to moral consideration has weighted the scales in that way” (125). Process philosophy claims to move beyond anthropocentrism, but it ultimately fails because it continues to embrace a conception of values that puts humans at its peak. As Sessions and Devall put it “This attempt to apply Whiteheadian panpsychism, while positing various degrees of intrinsic value to the rest of Nature, nonetheless merely reinforces existing Western anthropocentrism, and thus fails to meet the deep ecology norm of ‘ecological egalitarianism in principle’” (Sessions and Devall 236). Deep ecologists such as Devall and Sessions insist that the only way to fully repudiate anthropocentrism is to embrace the “intuition of ecological egalitarianism,” whereby every individual not only has value, but has value equally.

The response to these criticisms have not been lacking. For his part, John Cobb has noted consistently and vehemently that it is a misinterpretation to suggest, as Plumwood does, that process thought is anthropocentric in the sense that it judges the value of an individual by its similarity to humans. The depth of value achievable by an individual is a function of the complexity of its integration, not its similarity to humans. Humans are “more valuable” because of their greater degree of complexity, which affords them a richer form of experience. It is this richer experience, this more inclusive, harmonious, and intense experience, that makes humans more valuable than simpler organisms. The hierarchy of value, in other words, is not constructed in terms of how similar an individual is to us.²¹ While Cobb’s response does address

Plumwood's misinterpretation, the disagreement with deep ecology seems to run deeper. The problem for deep ecologists has to do not only with the relative location of humans within the axiological hierarchy but also the use to which this recognition is put.

In his most recent work, Griffin takes a rather creative approach to the longstanding impasse between process philosophy and deep ecology. He suggests that the intuition of "biocentric equality" that some deep ecologists are after is in fact something that process scholars can embrace alongside a hierarchical conception of value in which not all individuals have equal value. Griffin executes this impressive mental contortionism by making a distinction between "intrinsic value," which varies based on individual's complexity, and "inherent value," which is an individual's total value, taking its intrinsic and extrinsic value together. Griffin notes that, given the inverse relationship between an individual's intrinsic value and extrinsic value, those individuals that have less intrinsic value because of their diminished complexity end up having greater extrinsic value within their ecological niche. Thus, taking the individual's total intrinsic and extrinsic value together, Griffin suggests, each individual's "total inherent value" is roughly equal.²²

Cobb's and Griffin's solutions are insightful and fully consistent with process thought. Cobb is right that it is a misunderstanding to claim that process thought is anthropocentric. Judgments of value are accurate only insofar as they accurately describe the actual depth of value achievable by an individual, not their perceived similarity to humans. He is also right to point out that deep ecologists do in practice, if not in their philosophy, make complex judgments of value and that it would be irresponsible to do otherwise. Griffin's work is also very helpful in pointing out that we must include both an individual's intrinsic value and its extrinsic value in understanding its overall worth. Despite its unpopularity among environmental philosophers and

feminists, process scholars should steadfastly recognize that in fact different individuals are capable of differing degrees of experience. Not all individuals are equally, and it is ethically irresponsible to suggest that they are.

Despite these very valiant efforts, with which I am in significant agreement, I remain convinced that both Cobb and Griffin's interpretation of process ethics fails to properly account for the *moral significance* of these complex judgments of value. There is a reason why their accounts have failed to persuade others. The problem, I contend, is that they continue to fall short of fully addressing critics' core disagreement with process thought. What bothers Plumwood, Sessions, Devall, Rodman, and others is not merely the *recognition* that the intensity of experience across individual's varies greatly, but the use to which this realization is put. The concern, it would seem, is that recognition of this hierarchy, which puts humans at the top of the scale, inevitably reinforces and repeats the old patriarchal and anthropocentric hierarchies. Although things have value independently of humans, since they have less value, the scales are still going to be tilted in our favor. In a sense, the objection is not metaphysical, it is moral. It is here that Cobb and Griffin have failed.

It is my contention that, if we give greater weight to Whitehead's later works, such as AI and MT and we properly understand the kalocentric nature of the creative advance, then we will see what most process philosophers have failed to recognize: *an individual's onto-aesthetic status is not strictly determinative of its moral significance*. It is the illicit inference that an individual's onto-aesthetic status is completely constitutive of its moral significance that most philosophers rightly reject. It is their desire to break the longstanding relationship between the Great Chain of Being and an individual's moral significance that has led many otherwise

sympathetic philosophers, such as deep ecologists and ecofeminists, to reject the idea that there are degrees of value in nature, despite the ethically paralyzing consequences of this rejection.

Instead of running from the kalocentric nature of a process ethic, we should embrace it. By embracing beauty as the teleological aim of every form of process, we can rightly affirm the varying degrees of beauty and value achievable by individuals but refuse to allow this to neatly determine an individual's moral significance. In a kalocentric ethic, the only thing that determines an individual's moral significance is whether its affirmation would lead to the most harmonious and intense whole achievable in that situation. Or as Whitehead puts it in *Modes of Thought*, "Morality is always the aim at that union of harmony, intensity, and vividness which involves the perfection of importance for that occasion" (MT 13-14). Our moral obligation is always and everywhere to affirm the most harmonious and intense whole that we can see. Whether this means sacrificing or satisfying the interests of one individual over another depends entirely on what would achieve the most beauty in that situation. In this way, an individual's onto-aesthetic status, the depth of beauty and value it is capable of achieving, is relevant to but not strictly determinative of its moral significance. The aim of human action, like that of every form of process, is at the production and promotion of the most harmonious and intense experience possible.

In their efforts to flee from the specter of aestheticism, process scholars have abandoned the heart of a process approach to morality. In recovering beauty as a central focus of Whitehead's later work and re-centering process thought we will find that it is possible to develop a distinctive, kalocentric approach to morality that can do justice to the differences between individuals, without succumbing to an invidious logic of traditional hierarchies. Unless

and until Whiteheadians recognize and embrace the kalocentric nature of process, we will fail to appreciate the truly unique nature of a Whiteheadian moral philosophy.

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¹ My claim here is not that beauty first appears in *Adventures*. Whitehead's interest in aesthetics is apparent in some of his first Harvard works of philosophy. For instance, a discussion of the aesthetic character of process can be found in his 1925 *Science and the Modern World* (e.g., SMW 94, 162-63, 199) and his 1926 *Religion in the Making* (e.g. RM 105). My claim here is that the dominant focus on *Process and Reality*, which does not emphasize the aesthetic character of process, has led to the neglect of beauty as a central category in process thought.

² This elegant term was coined by Frederick Ferré. "Since intrinsically satisfying experience is what Whiteheadians mean by beauty, and since beauty is always present when self-consistent actuality blooms from conflicting possibility, the process of concrescence is the process of beauty-creation. Combing the Greek roots for beauty (*kalós*) and for creation (*genesis*), the acknowledgment of a valuer, achieving patterns of preferences that create moments of intrinsic satisfaction, leads to the acknowledgement of *kalogenesis* at the heart of ethics and of actuality" (*Living and Value* 109).

³ The most notable exceptions are Charles Hartshorne and Frederick Ferré. The former does much to develop Whitehead's notion of beauty. The latter makes beauty the central category of his trilogy on metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

⁴ For instance, major representatives of the classical interpretation of Whitehead's metaphysics, such as Christian, Leclerc, and Ford, fail to appreciate fully the role of beauty in their accounts of process of metaphysics.

⁵ Schilpp is among the first to explicitly charge that process thought is aestheticist. Belaief, who has written one of the few books on process ethics, explicitly argues that Whitehead is being metaphorical. More recent and less supportive interpreters of process ethics, such as Clare Palmer, largely ignore the role of beauty, arguing instead that Whitehead's ethics is a totalizing form of consequentialist utilitarianism. The most notable and most confusing reference comes from Griffin, who recognizes the central role of beauty, but then argues that it is not the aim of morality. Below I will argue that this interpretation is incoherent.

⁶ According to her website, Susan Armstrong wrote the first dissertation on environmental ethics in 1976. For a copy of her dissertation and defense of this claim see: <http://www.humboldt.edu/~phil/armstrong/armstrong.html>.

⁷ A review of current environmental anthologies reveals not a single piece written by a process scholar. See, for instance, Sterba, Pojman and Pojman, and Armstrong and Botzler. Given that she authored the first dissertation on environmental ethics from a process perspective, it is noteworthy that such a perspective is completely absent from her otherwise excellent anthologies on the environment (2004) and on animals (2008).

⁸ See, for instance, Jones (1998) and Griffin (2001 and 2007).

⁹ See Gray (1983), Belaief (1984), Cauthen (1984). None of these works received significant attention, either from process scholars or mainstream moral philosophers.

¹⁰ Very similar to Lynn Belaief's incoherent claim that Whitehead's references to beauty as the aim of morality were merely metaphorical (cf. Belaief, "Private-Interest Theories" 278), Griffin claims that aesthetic value is the "basis for *establishing* the importance of morality," but that beauty is not actually the aim of morality (*Reenchantment* 301).

¹¹ See, for instance, "The metaphysical doctrine, here expounded, finds the foundations of the world in the aesthetic experience, rather than – as with Kant – in the cognitive and conceptive experience. All order is therefore aesthetic order, and the moral order is merely certain aspects of aesthetic order. The actual world is the outcome of the aesthetic order, and the aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God" (RM 105). And "Good and evil lie in depths and distances below and beyond appearance. They solely concern inter-relations within the real world. The real world is good when it is beautiful" (AI 268).

¹² With little explanation or defense, Griffin claims that because morality aims at the maximization of importance, and not beauty, a Whiteheadian moral philosophy avoids the traditional problems associated with utilitarianism, such as justice and the role of the past. "[M]any commentators have taken Whitehead's position to be a utilitarian ethic according to which we should seek to maximize beauty in every situation. His position is certainly heavily teleological. Instead of saying that we should always seek to maximize beauty, however, Whitehead speaks of *importance*..." (author's emphasis, Griffin, *Reenchantment* 305). I assume that Griffin has Clare Palmer's work in mind here. However, beauty plays no significant role in Palmer's interpretation. Indeed, her characterization of process ethics as a totalizing utilitarianism has more to do with her emphasis of process theology's notion of contributionism, which at times seems to reduce an individual's value to its contribution to the divine.

¹³ Schindler 128

¹⁴ Schilpp 572, 589.

¹⁵ Palmer 28-29.

¹⁶ Lango, 515-536.

¹⁷ Griffin, *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy* 70.

¹⁸ McDaniel 94.

¹⁹ See Rodman 125.

²⁰ I have defended the view that any attempt to understand a process ethic by categorizing it among traditional moral theories will ultimately fail. Although it will surely share features in common with traditional moral paradigms, a Whiteheadian moral philosophy will necessarily be as unique, speculative, fallible and dynamic as the metaphysical system on which it is based. Any attempt to force it into preexisting moral categories will distort its unique character. See "Process and Morality"

²¹ Cf. "We do know that human beings are capable of remarkable scope and depth of experience, and that, accordingly, human experience often has great intrinsic value. Other creatures that are like us in relevant respects, we judge, also have rich experience and thus great intrinsic value. But our judgment is about the probable richness

of experience of other animals, not about the similarity of their experience to our own. Because of our limited imagination, this judgment may be distorted by similarities. We may underestimate the richness of a dolphin's experience and overestimate that of a monkey because the latter is more like us. But this would be an error in judgment; it is not built into the basis for judgment" (Cobb, "Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology" 224-25). See also, "As a Protestant process theologian I reject anthropocentrism in the following ways. 1. God cares for all creatures, not just for human beings, and human beings should follow in that universal care. 2. The value of other creatures is not limited to their value for us. Their value for God, for one another, and for themselves is also important. Human values should sometimes be sacrificed for the sake of others.... As a process Protestant theologian, I retain what deep ecologists call anthropocentrism in the following respects. 1. In all probability individual human beings are the greatest embodiments of intrinsic value on the Earth. 2. Human beings have a responsibility for other creatures in a way that is shared by no other species. ... 3. In order to exercise our responsibility well, we must make judgments of relative value about other creatures" (227-28).

²² Cf. "The central implication of this terminological discussion is that a rough equality in the inherent value of the various species results from an inverse relation that exists, in general, between intrinsic value and ecological value. ... [A]ssuming that this inverse correlation generally obtains throughout the ecological pyramid, we can say that *all forms of life have, roughly, the same inherent value.*" (Griffin, *Whitehead's Radically Different* 83). "The distinctive point of egalitarian deep ecology is, therefore, compatible with the Whiteheadian emphasis on many different levels of intrinsic value" (83).