



THE
ETHICS
OF CREATIVITY

BEAUTY
MORALITY
AND
NATURE
IN A
PROGRESSIVE
COSMOS

Brian G. Henning

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A Whiteheadian Aesthetics of Morals

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.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*

THE VIEW THAT world process is inherently kalogenic or beauty creating has a profound effect on the shape of any would-be Whiteheadian moral philosophy.¹ As we see in the passage above, insofar as aesthetic experience is the foundation of world process, all order, including the moral order, is ultimately an aspect of aesthetic order. It is in this sense that we should understand Whitehead's claim that "the real world is good when it is beautiful" (AI, 268). The relation between what is good and what is beautiful provides an important clue as to how to develop a Whiteheadian moral philosophy. Insofar as something is only as good as it is beautiful, the complex conditions of a beautiful experience are also the conditions of a

moral experience. In a sense, then, ethics must, as Hartshorne put it, “lean upon aesthetics.” For “the only good that is intrinsically good, good in itself, is good experience, and the criteria for this are aesthetic.”

The aim of this chapter is to establish the ideal of the ethics of creativity by examining the kalogenic structure of reality as the source and foundation of moral obligation. However, before beginning to develop such an ethic, we must first confront two related criticisms that arise because of the constitutive relation between beauty and goodness: (1) in founding reality on value experience, any Whiteheadian moral philosophy is ultimately a subjectivistic moral interest theory; and (2) in reducing ethics to aesthetics, such a theory is guilty of a vicious aestheticism. Both of these objections were first advanced in 1941 by Paul Arthur Schilpp in “Whitehead’s Moral Philosophy,” a contribution to the Library of Living Philosophers volume dedicated to Whitehead. Schilpp’s essay is an apt point of departure for our investigation because it set the tone for nearly all subsequent analyses of the moral dimension of Whitehead’s thought. (I will limit my exposition of Schilpp’s arguments to those that serve as the context for those analyses.)

Morality as a Species of Process

Schilpp’s argument is twofold. First, in grounding his ethics in the psychic processes of value judgments, which are themselves largely emotionally dominated and controlled,³ Whitehead not only establishes a foundation for morals that is “treacherously thin,”⁴ but also makes importance equivalent to “interest.”⁵ For this reason, Schilpp suggests, “Whitehead’s moral philosophy could well be classed among the so-called ‘moral interest theories.’”⁶ Second, although Schilpp agrees that both ethics and aesthetics “fall into the field of value-judgments and value-experience, and that both make use of ideal abstractions,”⁷ this similarity is not a sufficient reason for

subsuming the one (ethics) under the other (aesthetics). There are “sufficient differences, both of kind and in number, between the two types of value judgment and value experience to warrant a rather precise method of differing analysis, procedure, and conclusion for the two areas.”⁸ Because Schilpp conceives of substantial differences between ethics and aesthetics, it would be a “disastrous reduction” to subsume ethics under aesthetics. “After all,” Schilpp argues, “morality is not beauty, though the moral life—like a lot of other things—may be beautiful; but it is not the fact that it is beautiful which makes it moral.”⁹

Before examining Schilpp’s claims directly, I will first introduce Lynne Belaief’s attempt in *Toward a Whiteheadian Ethics* to circumvent Schilpp’s objections.¹⁰ Belaief insists that Whitehead’s use of aesthetic categories in ethical contexts is merely metaphorical. She writes, “I suggest that the apparent identity of ethical concepts with the basic aesthetic analysis is only apparent, Whitehead [is] being intentionally metaphorical when using the language of aesthetics to apply to ethical phenomena, except in the justifiable case when he is discussing the generic origin of moral experience.”¹¹ This attempt to defuse Schilpp’s arguments by claiming that Whitehead’s references to aesthetics are merely rhetorical is greatly problematic. I intend to demonstrate to the contrary that Whitehead’s use of aesthetic categories in reference to ethics is an extension of the fundamental metaphysical principles at work in the universe. To make ethics anything other than a species of aesthetics is to make it into an inexplicable aberration. Both Belaief’s and Schilpp’s positions ultimately fall short because of their uncritical acceptance of and dependence on the classical interpretation’s reading of the nature and aim of process.

Let us begin with Schilpp’s first contention that Whitehead’s conception of importance results in a subjectivistic moral interest theory. He derives this argument from Whitehead’s definition of morality as “the control of process so as to maximize importance”

(MT, 13). However, in a passage that occurs several pages before this definition, Schilpp misinterprets both the scope and depth of Whitehead's notion of importance in limiting it to interest: "Importance is a generic notion which has been obscured by the overwhelming prominence of a few of its innumerable species. The terms *morality*, *logic*, *religion*, *art*, have each of them been claimed as exhausting the whole meaning of importance. Each of them denotes a subordinate species. But the genus stretches beyond any finite group of species" (MT, 11).¹² First, insofar as he sees morality, logic, religion, and art as merely a handful of the "innumerable species" of importance, it is evident that Whitehead uses the term in a much wider and more fundamental sense than mere "interest." Whitehead explicitly states as much: "There are two aspects to importance: one based on the unity of the Universe, the other on the individuality of the details. The word *interest* suggests the latter aspect; the word *importance* leans toward the former" (MT, 8). Given critics' claims to the contrary, it is ironic that Whitehead intentionally chooses the term "importance" *because* it emphasizes the unity of the universe. Moreover, it is crucial to note that Whitehead defines importance by reference to both the "unity of the Universe" and "the individuality of the details." This directly contradicts Schilpp's claim that Whitehead's emphasis on importance limits morality to the interests of individuals alone. Consequently, it is inappropriate to classify it as a subjectivistic moral interest theory.

This conclusion clarifies the sense in which morality is a species of process, as well as Schilpp's misinterpretation of Whitehead. Indeed, what most commentators miss is that Whitehead defines morality as the control of process so as to maximize importance: "The generic aim of process is the attainment of importance, in that species and to that extent which in that instance is possible" (MT, 12). Morality, then, is but one species of the process of the universe, the whole of which aims at the attainment of importance. With this conclusion, the relation of Whitehead's aesthetics and ethics also begins to become clear.

In my initial presentation of Whitehead's conception of aesthetics and its relation to metaphysics, I argued that because every process aims at the achievement of beauty, Whitehead's metaphysics is also an aesthetics. If we juxtapose the above passage with earlier statements on aesthetics, we also see that importance and beauty are essentially equivalent. For both importance and beauty are appealed to as the ultimate aim of world process. Recall that the discussion of Whitehead's aesthetics in chapter 4 included the claim that the teleology of the universe is directed toward the production of beauty. Now we find Whitehead making the claim that the general aim of process is the attainment of importance in that species and to whatever extent is possible in each situation. Hence, both importance and beauty are described at different times as the ultimate aim of the universe. In this context we should understand Whitehead's claim that "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). Whitehead's statement that the aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God should not be interpreted as implying that all experience is only about achieving value experience for God. Every achievement of value is for the entity itself, for others in its community, and, ultimately, for the whole. (We should keep this in mind when examining Clare Palmer's criticisms of process theology's doctrine of contributionism in chapter 7.)

However, by making morality a species of process, a process that aims at the achievement of beauty, do we not agree with those critics who suggest that Whitehead is guilty of aestheticism? That is, if every process aims at the achievement of beauty, if importance and beauty are equivalent, and if morality is but a species of process, then doesn't Whitehead thereby reduce morality to aesthetics, as Schilpp contends?

As with the problem of subjectivism, the answer to these questions ultimately lies in how one interprets Whitehead's metaphysics.

Like most commentators, Schlipp examines Whitehead's definition of morality by focusing almost entirely on what he means by importance, to the nearly complete neglect of his notion of process. However, insofar as the "maximization of importance" aimed at in morality is made possible only by the "control of process," we must return to our examination of Whitehead's notion of process. If we interpret his metaphysics properly, the relation of Whitehead's ethical theory to his aesthetico-metaphysics will be made apparent. Thus, let us again examine Whitehead's definition of morality in terms of the two competing interpretations of Whitehead's metaphysics: the classical interpretation and the ecstatic interpretation.

As we established in chapter 2, for the classical interpretation, activity, creativity, and actuality are limited to concrecence, to subjectivity. Insofar as this interpretation limits actuality to the subject, it also limits importance and value to the subject. "A concretum has significance—meaning and importance—not for itself but only for something other than itself; namely, the subsequent concrecences which causally objectified it."¹⁸ How does this interpretation of process and importance affect our understanding of Whitehead's definition of morality as the control of process so as to maximize importance? If, following the classical interpretation, process is cast in terms of an ontologized distinction between the subject and the superject, and if the maximization of importance is solely a matter of the decision of the subject, it is no wonder that Schlipp concludes that Whitehead's is a moral interest theory that reduces ethics to aesthetics. In fact, as argued in chapter 2, if all importance is relative solely to the subject, an ethics of creativity is not only a moral interest theory, it is more nearly a moral solipsism.

What are the implications for a Whiteheadian moral philosophy under the ecstatic interpretation, particularly as it is defended in Jones's ontology of intensity? It would seem that, by making the aim of process the attainment of aesthetic intensity, Jones would be forced to affirm a subjectivist form of ethics and aesthetics. However, as the following passage suggests, not only is Jones aware of

the subjectivist and even solipsistic flavor often given to Whitehead's moral philosophy, she believes that her own ecstatic interpretation avoids these problems:

The standard problem of subjectivism is held to be particularly acute in a scheme such as Whitehead's, since the scheme founds reality on subjects whose immediate aims suggest the extreme possibility of the most vicious and aestheticist moral solipsism. I hope that the concept of ecstatic individuality, founded on a thorough understanding of intensity, has already begun in the reader's mind to circumvent such a subjectivism, solipsism, or egoism. Since the subject is wherever its effects are, and in a nonderivative ontological sense, subjectivism in the solipsistic or egoistic sense is not an option, or at least not the primary form of moral experience derivable from the atomism.¹⁴

While the ecstatic interpretation undermines the axiological assumptions of Schlipp's position, one may still ask why, if the ecstatic interpretation grants that the aim of process is the attainment of aesthetic intensity, is it not subject to a "vicious and aestheticist moral solipsism"?

To answer this question, let us examine the definition of morality in light of the ecstatic interpretation. Recall that because the classical interpretation limits all activity, and thereby all control of process, to the subject, it also restricts all importance to the "interests" of the concrecing subject. Proponents of this view would cite in their defense this statement by Whitehead: "Actuality is the self-enjoyment of 'importance'" (MT, 117). The classical interpretation focuses on passages such as this because they seem to limit both actuality and importance to the subject. But is this really the case? Is Whitehead limiting self-enjoyment, and thereby actuality and importance, to the concrecing subject alone? According to the ecstatic interpretation, this cannot be true. In stark contrast to the classical interpretation, the ecstatic interpretation contends that we cannot isolate the subject from the superject and, therefore, we

cannot limit activity or importance solely to the subject. Everything, including the subject's objective functioning in another, is in some sense active and self-important.¹⁵ Thus, the ecstatic interpretation extends importance to the actual occasion as a whole, as subject-superject. Interestingly, if we take the above statement in its larger context, we find corroboration for this interpretation: "But the sense of importance is not exclusively referent to the experiencing self. It is exactly this vague sense which differentiates itself into the disclosure of the whole, the many, and the self. . . . Actuality is the self-enjoyment of importance. But this self-enjoyment has the character of *self-enjoyment of others* melting into the enjoyment of the one self" (MT, 117–18, emphasis added). Contrary to the classical interpretation, to which Schilpp seems to adhere, importance is not exclusively referent to the subject or experiencing self. Rather, self-enjoyment is marked by the fusing of the self-enjoyment of others into the "enjoyment of the one self." Thus, the "others" to which this refers are past actual occasions that are themselves in some sense self-enjoying. Every individual has value for itself, for others, and for the whole. This conclusion brings us to an important point: namely, the relation between importance and value.

As with importance and beauty, which we have found to be co-extensive, importance and value are also ontologically equivalent. This equivalence is clearly demonstrated by juxtaposing several key passages from Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*. First, Whitehead uses both importance and value to describe what is attained by actuality. Compare, for instance, the following statements: "Our enjoyment of actuality is a realization of worth, good or bad. It is a value experience" (116); and "Actuality is the self-enjoyment of importance" (117). Second, both importance and value have the same triadic structure of self, other, whole: "But the sense of importance is not exclusively referent to the experiencing self. It is exactly this vague sense which differentiates itself into the disclosure of the whole, the many, and the self" (117); and "Everything

has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole. This characterizes the meaning of actuality" (111). Third, Whitehead describes morality in terms of both value and importance: "Morality is the control of process so as to maximize importance" (13–14); and "Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole. . . . By reason of this character, constituting reality, the conception of morals arises" (111). Thus, value and importance have the same structure and equally characterize morality and actuality. I therefore contend that value and importance are ontologically interchangeable.¹⁶ Consequently, if morality aims at maximizing importance and importance is equivalent to value, it is valid to conclude that morality aims at maximizing value.

This conclusion is significant because if morality aims at the maximization of value, but value is understood to extend not merely to the self but to others (the past actual occasions in an occasion's actual world) and to the whole (the totality of achieved occasions), it becomes impossible to interpret Whitehead's moral philosophy as affirming a form of subjectivistic moral interest theory. The subject is not the arbiter of all value, as the classical interpretation suggests. Actual occasions have value for themselves, but in having self-value they also become a value for others and the whole. In Whitehead's words, "There must be value beyond ourselves. Otherwise every thing experienced would be merely barren detail in our own solipsist mode of existence" (MT, 102). As we saw in our discussion of the concept of peace, the perfection of beauty and importance at which every individual aims involves surpassing an individual's narrow self-interests. Thus, the very ideal and aim of process conflicts with Schilpp's theses.

This argument also reveals the true relation between Whitehead's moral philosophy and his aesthetics. Because the aim of the universe itself is at the attainment of beauty, importance, and value, morality must be a species of aesthetics, but in a nonreductive sense. For inasmuch as morality is simply a specialized species of process,

it follows that the aim of morality is the same as that of process in general; again, the world is good only when it is beautiful (AI, 268). At this point my reasons for disagreeing with Brelief become most apparent. For if one were to suggest, as Brelief does, that Whitehead's use of aesthetic categories with ethical phenomena is merely metaphorical, then either one must deny that the universe aims at the achievement of beauty, or one must argue that the aim of ethics is different from the aim of process in general. Both of these conclusions are unintelligible, given Whitehead's project.

Moreover, given the rich and complex conception of beauty being defended, the fact that ethics is a species of aesthetics is in no way reductive. Let us pose this question to the critics, "Why is it reductive to make ethics a species of aesthetics?" I believe that the crux of arguments regarding the so-called reduction of ethics to aesthetics lies in Schilpp's simple objection, "After all, morality is not beauty, though the moral life—like a lot of other things—may be beautiful; but it is not the fact that it is beautiful which makes it moral."¹⁷ Thus, it seems that it is reductive to subsume ethics under aesthetics because what is moral is broader than, or at least different from, what is beautiful. However, this statement portrays a greatly attenuated notion of aesthetics, wherein the independent subject is the arbiter of all value and importance. Yet, as I have taken great pains to suggest, Whitehead's aesthetics is not a matter of subjectivistic or solipsistic considerations. He is defining beauty, importance, and value in a far broader and richer way. Again, since the aim of the universe itself is at the attainment of beauty, importance, and value, morality must be a species of aesthetics, but in a nonreductive sense. Indeed, given such a view, it is not possible for something to be moral but not beautiful; for everything is beautiful to some degree.

Therefore, the ecstatic interpretation of Whitehead's aesthetic metaphysics, which requires that beauty, importance, and value be extended to the entire life of the actual occasion—as both subject

and superject—makes it possible to affirm that Whitehead's ethics is a species of his aesthetics in a nonreductive sense. For to do so is simply to affirm that morality is a process that is continuous with the creative advance of the universe as a whole. Accordingly, in stark contrast to contemporary trends in moral philosophy, Whitehead seeks to reestablish the role of metaphysics (and by extension aesthetics) as the ground of morality. This conclusion has a dramatic, transformative effect on both the nature and limits of moral philosophy.

The Limits of Moral Philosophy

It had been less than thirty years since Lee surrendered to Grant, ending the Civil War, when William James delivered "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" to the Yale Philosophical Club. In this provocative essay, James contends that the moral philosopher is ultimately distinguished from the skeptic, the relativist, and the absolutist by the ideal at which the philosopher aims and the strenuous mood instilled by that aim. For James, the aim of moral philosophy is to "find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view."¹⁸ However, the moral philosopher does not have the luxury of surveying the moral landscape from some elevated position; there is no Archimedean ethical point. The problem, as James was well aware, is that we are in a world where "every one of hundreds of ideals has its special champion already provided in the shape of some genius expressly born to feel it, and to fight to death in its behalf."¹⁹ The force of this point was made brutally clear by the events of September 11, 2001. Given such a world, an ethic that is situated, but not grossly relativistic, is more important than ever. In this spirit, I am interested in investigating what James's ideal of a genuine ethical universe would look

like through the lens of Whitehead's kalocentric panexperientialism. Since James himself embraced a form of panexperientialism at the end of his career, this comparison is particularly germane.²⁶

In keeping with the fallibilistic stance toward truth and certainty that characterizes both pragmatist and process thought, James begins "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" by baldly stating his departure from established ethical theories: "The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance."²⁷ Whitehead echoes James's sentiment when he argues in *Modes of Thought*, "There is no one behavior system belonging to the essential character of the universe, as the universal moral ideal" (14). In sharp contrast to most modern ethical theories, then, James and Whitehead do not understand the task of moral philosophy to construct abstract moral laws. They agree that abstract principles have no place in moral philosophy for two interrelated reasons: (1) owing to our fallibility, it is not possible to know with absolute certainty which state of affairs is to be preferred over another prior to a particular concrete situation; and (2) because of the dynamism of world process, every situation is, strictly speaking, ontologically unique. Let us examine each of these points.

Perhaps in the spirit of Socratic elenchus, it is standard procedure to test an ethical theory by posing various—often exaggerated—moral dilemmas. If an ethical theory is unable to neatly resolve a given dilemma, it is implied that it should be rejected whole cloth. Although testing the adequacy of proposed theories is itself a laudatory goal, from the fallibilist point of view, the motivation for this procedure often rests on the presupposition that moral inquiry leads to—or is in principle capable of—absolute certainty. Pragmatist and process philosophers, however, reject this notion of epistemology, acknowledging that because absolute certainty is an unrealizable ideal, epistemological, and therefore moral, fallibility is inescapable. Thus, with James, we must acknowledge the limitations of moral philosophy imposed by the fallibility of human in-

quiry and not expect our moral theories to abstractly prescribe what ought or ought not to be done prior to a particular situation. As Aristotle recognized, "Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts."²⁸ Unlike problems in mathematics, for example, every moral problem does not have a single indisputable answer existing prior to its solution that we need only divine and then codify in a moral law. Morality, like life, is inherently "messy."

James pushes this point even further when he argues that in fact "there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics."²⁹ Initially, this comparison may seem to imply the opposite of James's intention. Many in his audience at the Yale Philosophical Club must have regarded physics in particular and science in general as possessing absolutely certain truths. Given such a notion of physics, James's assertion of an isomorphism between physics and ethics would at best have seemed incongruous, and at worst scandalous.

The problem with this interpretation, James would contend, is that it embodies an attenuated notion of physics that is false. James's comparison is meant to promote the fact that moral inquiry is a species of inquiry in general and that all forms of inquiry are inherently fallible. Accordingly, the so-called laws of science are not infallible formulations exempt from development or revision; they are exceedingly probable formulations of observed regularities. As Whitehead notes, assuming the "unqualified stability of particular laws of nature and of particular moral codes is a primary illusion which has vitiated much philosophy" (MT, 13). Thus, although scientists may still use the language of "laws," few continue to perceive them as absolute, static formulations like Newton, for example.³⁰ If the last century's scientific discoveries have taught us anything, it should be that the "truths" of science are limited.³¹

In a sense, it is as if James and Whitehead are asking, "If we no longer believe physics contains 'final truths,' why should we find ethics to be any different?" Ethics, like every form of inquiry, is

necessarily fallible. Of course, like Peirce, Dewey, and Whitehead, James recognizes that physics, like any other subject of investigation, no doubt possesses a great many truths. He is not denying that one account may be truer—more explanatorily adequate—than another; he denies that any of these “truths” could be called “final.” In this context, I understand James’s claim that “ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day.” Put more succinctly, ethics, like physics, must “wait on facts.”⁷⁶ Just as there is no final or absolute certainty in physics that allows us to make perfect predictions about future physical events, there is no final truth in ethics that allows us “dogmatically” to determine in advance the good in any particular situation. Like scientists who must wait and revise their conclusions on the basis of new evidence, to lead the moral life, we also must continually and resolutely revise our conclusions in light of the goods that we can at present see and resist the temptation to codify these conclusions in abstract moral laws. Whitehead states, “The codifications [of morality] carry us beyond our own direct immediate insights. They involve the usual judgments valid for the usual occasions in that epoch. They are useful, and indeed essential, for civilization. But we only weaken their influence by exaggerating their status” (MT, 14).⁷⁷

In addition to the epistemological limitation placed on moral philosophy by our fallibility, there is a deeper, metaphysical justification for James’s and Whitehead’s rejection of moral philosophies dogmatically made up in advance. James hints at this view when he notes that, strictly speaking, every moral dilemma “is a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.”⁷⁸ In the context of Whitehead’s metaphysics of process, James’s intuition regarding the metaphysical and moral uniqueness of every situation gains additional ontological teeth. For, as Whitehead argues in *Science and the Modern World*, strictly speaking, “nothing ever really recurs in exact detail. No two days are

identical, no two winters. What has gone, has gone forever. Accordingly, the practical philosophy of mankind has been to expect the regular recurrences, and to accept the details as emanating from the broad recurrence, beyond the ken of rationality. Men insist that the sun to rise, but the wind bloweth where it listeth” (SMW, 5).⁷⁹ Strictly speaking, every situation is ontologically unique because every actual occasion brings together the diverse elements of its actual world in just this way, just here, and just now. Furthermore, because every situation is ontologically unique, it is also morally unique in the sense that the values obtainable in a situation are never strictly identical. Thus, in addition to the limits that our fallibility places on moral philosophy, given the ontological and moral uniqueness of every moral dilemma, we must be suspicious of any system that advances absolute moral codes or laws. In a processive cosmos, we must conceive of moral philosophy as a tentative and fallible formulation that “in the environment for which it is designed will promote the evolution of that environment towards its proper perfection” (AI, 292). Ethical theories, therefore, do not exist in an ahistorical vacuum. Any moral code that reaches beyond the environment for which it was designed, becomes, as Whitehead puts it, “a vacuous statement of abstract irrelevancies” (MT, 13). Once again, like science, morality must test its theories by actively seeking out and then incorporating new evidence. Consequently, with George R. Lucas Jr. I find that there can be no Archimedean ethical point; there is no “transcendental” privileged moral position outside of some cultural context rooted in some common life:

When intuitionism, deontology, utilitarianism, and finally even emotivism are stripped of their Archimedean pretensions, we discover, as Hume apparently recognized, that there is no “transcendental” privileged moral position outside of some cultural context rooted in what Hume termed “the common life,” or alternatively, in what MacIntyre identifies as narrative practices within the setting of a cultural tradition. Any attempt to get “outside of” or

"beyond" this situation is simply a fake—a covert smuggling of our particular cultural prejudices and dispositions into a theory of calculative rationality or "pure reason."⁶⁰

Although human experience is the "inescapable context for whatever data we receive," the analysis of human experience discloses the status of values resident in the world.⁶¹ In other words, to begin with human experience does not mean that we must end with human experience. The Whiteheadian metaphysics being advanced is concerned with elaborating the general structure of process as such: human experience is simply the exemplification of the general structure of process with which we are most familiar and to which we have the most access; the order of discovery does not dictate the order of being.

In abandoning the notion of a privileged Archimedean ethical point upon which we could leverage the world, we must recognize the situatedness of morality. "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, emphasis added). In this way, we are affirming what may be called a "situated ethic": (1) it is situated in that what is morally appropriate will always be relative to the value and beauty present in and achievable through a given situation; and (2) it is situated in that it does not claim to be capable of extricating itself from the values of a given social context.

However, note that this does not amount to the affirmation of a gross relativism. As I will discuss in detail, what constitutes a moral or beautiful relation to one's world is not relative to one's own interests or even a culture's interests. Rather, what is moral will always be that action that achieves the maximum degree of harmony and intensity. Two things are relative: (1) the values that are potentially achievable, and (2) the moral agent's knowledge of those values. Again, morality must remain every bit as dynamic as reality itself.

With James, then, the ethics of creativity concludes that the honest embrace of the limits of moral inquiry forces us to admit that a moral philosophy in the "old-fashioned absolute sense of the term" is no longer possible.⁶² Just as we have moved beyond the notion that nature's "laws" give us infallible access to natural processes, we must abandon dogmatic moral philosophies. In part, it is in this spirit—constructing a model of moral inquiry that appreciates our situatedness—that I present the ethics of creativity. Perhaps paradoxically, although James and Whitehead recognize the limits of moral philosophy, they do not abandon the possibility of a moral ideal as such. However, as we will see, it does drastically alter the status of such an ideal. Having recognized the limits of moral inquiry, let us turn to the ideal of the ethics of creativity.

The Ideal of a Genuine Ethical Universe

The Moral Philosopher in a Processive Cosmos

In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James advances the bold idea that the ideal or aim of the moral life "is to find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view."⁶³ Part 2 of this book is an attempt to formulate just such an account. At present, I am interested in investigating what James's ideal of a genuine ethical universe would look like through the lens of Whitehead's panexperientialism, a form of which James himself embraced at the end of his career.⁶⁴

To achieve a genuine ethical universe by finding an account that weaves the moral relations between things into a unified, stable system, we must first determine which relations in an organic, processive cosmos are truly "moral relations." In other words, we must determine what the scope of direct moral concern would be in a processive cosmos and what impact this would have on our moral

ideal. Once again, James locates the heart of the issue. Contrary to many conceptions of the good, the bad, and obligation, James contends that moral relations cannot “swing *in vacuo*.” Rather, goodness, badness, and obligation must be concretely “*realized*” somewhere in order really to exist.¹⁸ Good and bad must be felt by a particular individual in order to be real. To be more precise, it is only in being felt that good and bad are made real. In an important sense, James is advancing what may be called the moral correlate of Whitehead’s ontological principle. Just as the ontological principle insists that “actual entities are the only *reasons*; so that to search for a *reason* is to search for one or more actual entities” (PR, 24), James’s moral principle similarly insists that good and bad, better and worse, “must be *realized* in order to be real. If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone’s perception. It cannot float in the atmosphere, for it is not a sort of meteorological phenomenon, like the aurora borealis or the zodiacal light.”¹⁹ This insight reveals the metaphysical basis of James’s rejection of traditional moral theories. For given the moral principle that something is good or bad only if a particular individual feels it to be so, abstract moral laws are simply unintelligible. If abstract pronouncements regarding good and bad are to be real, they must be realized or felt as being good or bad by a particular individual, for example, God. However, in being the concrete demands of an individual, they may no longer be seen as abstract laws. Thus, James writes, “we have learned what the words ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ and ‘obligation’ severally mean. They mean no absolute natures, independent of personal support. They are objects of feeling and desire, which have no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the existence of actually living minds.”²⁰ Taken in the context of Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, how does this conclusion affect the scope of our direct moral concern?

Although Whitehead does not go as far as James’s unguarded claim that “the whole universe . . . is everywhere alive and con-

scious”²¹ he does insist that there is nothing apart from the experience of subjects: nothing is a mere fact entirely devoid of feeling. Insofar as we repudiate the notion of vacuous actuality, everything —from the subatomic entity to the sequoia and from the snail to the human—is a unique subject of experience and center of value, everything has a good for it, everything we do fosters or frustrates the ends of another. Existence as such, no matter how small, weak, or insignificant, has value in and for itself, for others, and for the whole. Therefore, as a unique center of intrinsic value, no individual may be excluded from the scope of our direct moral concern. For if every individual is a unique subject of experience with intrinsic value, then everything to which a moral agent relates is at least a moral patient. That is, from the point of view of a moral agent, everything is an object of direct moral concern. Every relation into which we (human beings) enter, whether it be with another human being or with a pile of dung, is a moral relation; there are no “things” that are incapable of “moral relations.”²² Consequently, the scope of our direct moral concern may exclude nothing from its reach.

Inviolability and Moral Paralysis

Before examining the radical impact that this conclusion has for constructing an ethical theory, let us briefly examine two opposing objections that present themselves almost immediately: if one affirms the intrinsic value of all of reality and the subsequent inclusion of every individual in the scope of our direct moral concern, it may be objected that either (1) Whitehead makes all values both equal and absolute, thereby putting the moral agent in a position of moral paralysis; or (2) he endangers the inviolability of humanity by making value a matter of degree.

According to the first objection, in affirming that everything in the universe has intrinsic value, Whitehead extends the scope of direct moral concern so as to include everything that exists. Everything from the most trivial occasion to God has intrinsic value.

However, an objector may note that in so doing Whitehead puts the moral agent, at best, in the position of having to choose arbitrarily between equally valuable but conflicting occasions or, at worst, in a position of moral paralysis, unable to choose one out of the sea of often mutually exclusive values. For if everything has intrinsic value and has it equally, then one must either make an arbitrary choice or do nothing at all.⁴⁰ One could object that if each option is presumably unsatisfactory, it is necessary to limit both intrinsic value and our moral concern to human beings or, perhaps, to sentient beings.

I contend that this objection is a result of an inability to extricate oneself from the metaphysical presuppositions of modern ethical theories. By rejecting these presuppositions, one also avoids their axiological implications. According to the model of individuality being advanced, all actual occasions are equal in *having* value, but we must also recognize that there are different grades of experience and, therefore, different grades of value and beauty. For the philosophy of organism, then, actuality is coextensive with value, but actuality itself is differentiated by degrees of complexity of organization—that is, by different degrees of beauty. In chapter 6, I will examine the effect of this conclusion on the practical employment of the ideal of the ethics of creativity. For now, it is sufficient simply to note that while everything is equal in having value, everything does not have value equally.⁴¹

This conclusion leads directly to the second objection, namely, that Whitehead's notion of a multidimensional continuum of beauty and value cannot support our intuition regarding the inviolability of human beings. Unlike the first, this objection does not arise from a misunderstanding. We simply do not share the objector's commitment to inviolability and the conception of absolute value upon which it rests. In other words, the axiology being advanced denies that anything has absolute value. I suggest that the very notion of absolute value is itself faulty and rests not only on what Hartshorne calls classical theism, but on an implicit Kantian con-

ception of autonomy. For Whitehead, autonomy cannot be metaphysically interpreted as substantial independence; in our processive cosmos, there is no absolute independence. As an end in itself, every individual has intrinsic value. But it does not follow from this that any individual is inviolable.⁴²

The Obligations of Beauty

To include every individual in our scope of direct moral concern, which follows from affirming the intrinsic value of every individual, dramatically transforms our system of obligations. If the very fact of being an individual introduces "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.⁴³ With James, then, the ethics of creativity advances the view that claim and obligation are coextensive.⁴⁴ If we are to achieve a genuine ethical universe, we must consider every individual as laying an obligation on us (moral agents) that must be included in the "stable system" of "moral relations" that we seek. No longer can we regard nonhuman entities as objects of only indirect duties or, even less, as objects strictly serving our own self-interest. No matter how weak that individual may be, its demands ought, "for its own sake," to be satisfied.⁴⁵ Obligation, then, is not a function of convenience, utility, or self-interest. Through the lens of the axiology of process thought, the moral ideal of a genuine ethical universe entails that the air, the soil, the flower, and the animal all make claims and obligations on us that must be considered for their own sake. This conclusion begins to make it 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, then, the ethics of creativity insists that every individual represents an obligation that must be considered in its own right. To be more precise, if we examine the moral ideal of a genuine ethical universe through the

lens of Whitehead's axiology, aesthetics, and metaphysics, we arrive at five interrelated obligations:

1. the obligation always to act in such a way as to bring about the greatest possible universe of beauty, value, and importance that 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 not doing so threatens the achievement of the greatest harmony and intensity that in each situation is possible (peace);⁴⁶
5. the obligation to strive continually to expand the depth and breadth of one's aesthetic horizons (education).

These obligations will be explored in the sections to follow. However, first let us discuss briefly what each one entails. Because subsequent obligations are in some sense contained within the first formulation, the first obligation captures most fully the heart of the ethics of creativity. For the obligation to maximize beauty is not only the aim of morality, it is the ideal and aim of process itself. Thus, this obligation, the obligation of beauty, follows directly from the interpretation of actuality as a teleological process oriented toward the achievement of beauty, value, and importance for the self, the other, and for the whole.⁴⁷ Given such a worldview, we have an obligation always to act so as to bring about the greatest universe of beauty, value, and importance that in each situation is possible.

The second and third obligations concern the first two legs of the axiological triad of self, other, and whole. The second obligation affirms 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 sec-

ond obligation recognizes that all individuals should have respect for the achievement of value that they themselves represent. We (moral agents) have the obligation to respect our own self-value. That is, we are obliged to maximize the harmony and intensity or, equivalently, the beauty of our own experience. Accordingly, the second formulation may be called the obligation of self-respect.

However, as I have argued throughout this work, because Whitehead's notion of individuality essentially involves others, value of self cannot be separated from the intrinsic value of others. Accordingly, the third obligation recognizes that, as unique achievements of value experience, we are obliged 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 is 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 the experience of others. Because of its focus on the value of the other, I refer to this formulation as the obligation of love.⁴⁸

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 as to bring about the greatest possible universe of beauty, value, and importance that in each situation is possible, we must affirm not only our own value, but also the value of every individual 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. Truly beautiful experience involves a harmony of the di-

verse parts of experience to achieve a complex and unified whole that is both beyond its parts and yet not destructive of them; moreover, by participating in such a unity, the value experience of each part becomes more intense.⁴⁹

The possible tension between the one and the many or the obligations of self-respect and love is aptly captured in the notion of marriage. If a marriage is to be healthy, both individuals must at once respect, appreciate, and protect their own value and the value of their partner. If either of these poles is lacking, the relationship will degenerate and retard the experience of both. For instance, if one member fails to meet the obligation of self-respect, caring only about the welfare of the other, then the relationship will become imbalanced and the experience of both will suffer. At its extreme, such relationships lead to cycles of physical and emotional abuse that can scar entire families for generations. Unfortunately, in many cultures today, the overabundance of self-value is more often the case. Too often people are concerned only with their own narrow self-interest. Marriages involving such individuals are most often predicated on procuring status and convenience, not mutual respect and love. Thus, a marriage will be “healthy” only if each partner meets both the obligation of self-respect and the obligation of love. Such a marriage is beautiful in achieving a unity that enhances the intensity of the experience of both members while not destroying their individuality.

The fourth obligation provides practical guidance in how to conduct ourselves toward others, especially in instances of moral conflict. It has two parts. The first follows from the obligation of love. Because 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, given the present structure of our cosmos, conflict is inevitable; ends are mutually exclusive. In James’s words, “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.”⁵⁰ Thus, although we aim at satisfying the demands of everyone within our sphere of influence, inevitably we are forced to choose between competing goods. This is why the latter part of this obligation is crucial: ultimately, that course of action is to be preferred that maximizes the beauty possible in the situation as a whole. This seemingly innocuous affirmation is one of the more novel, and likely most controversial, claims of the ethics of creativity, for it demonstrates the full extent of its commitment to the claim that something is only as good as it is beautiful. As it essentially entails a “trust in the efficacy of beauty” (AI, 285), I call this formulation the obligation of peace.

Like the others, the fifth obligation of the ethics of creativity is an extension of an aspect of the obligation of beauty: we must continually strive to expand the depth and breadth of our aesthetic horizons. In this way, the fifth obligation demands the rejection of anesthesia or embracing lower forms of beauty when greater forms are possible. In an important sense, this obligation is a necessary condition for successfully following the other four. For if we are to continually affirm the greatest degree of beauty possible in any given situation, we must first recognize the forms of beauty that exist and are possible. Thus, to act morally, we must in good faith seek to attain the greatest depth and breadth of experience—that is, we must acquire the correct habits of character. Accordingly, this is the obligation of education.