Truth and Beauty in Whitehead's Cosmos

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"Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow."

—John Keats

Contents:

I. Introduction

Is philosophy, as Keats suggests, inimical to a romantic view of the world? Certainly, it is possible to create a philosophy that leaves the gnomes in their mines, but in the twenty-first century it is unlikely that very many will be swayed by it. Natural philosophy (that is, science) has made such sentimental philosophies untenable. But, while the gnomes may be disproved and the rainbow split by a prism, does this also entail the unhaunting of the air and the clipping of angels' wings? Many claim that it does. Richard Dawkins in *Unweaving the Rainbow* and many other books, essays, and lectures has argued that

religion is blight on humanity, and that religious experience is a fundamentally flawed perception of the world, left to fester by evolution. A summary of this quite common philosophical outlook is that it is

> a fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations. In itself, such a material is senseless, valueless, purposeless. It just does what it does do, following a fixed routine[…].[1]

This is the worldview that Alfred North Whitehead called, "scientific materialism." According to adherents of this view, matter is inert; symbolism, and especially religious symbolism and ritual, is separate from and inferior to language as a means of communication; all value is a human construction; beauty is a matter of mere taste; and God is a dispensable, indeed pernicious, hypothesis.

Against this view, Whitehead presents an alternative hypothesis. To be sure, according to Whitehead, scientific materialism is "not wrong if properly construed."[2] Elsewhere, he writes, "I assume as an axiom that science is not a fairy tale."[3] If we constrain our explanations and descriptions to certain portions of experience, we can generate perfectly functional theories on the basis of scientific materialism. However, when pushed to its limits, scientific materialism ultimately collapses and begs off the final explanation of meaning and being as not proper subjects for inquiry. This failure of scientific materialism may not be definitive. It is perhaps a mere limitation of rational thought and inquiry. Nevertheless, if it is possible to construct a theory which can account for more of our experiences without stripping away either the values that make practical life possible or the scientific insights that have revolutionized the human experience, and without being a mere chimera of the two, then practical reason suggests we investigate it thoroughly.

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1. *Science*, p. 17. To be fair, Dawkins allows that the universe is beautiful and so forth from the perspective of humanity, but as Whitehead points out this is a "theory of psychic additions." Nothing in Dawkins' universe is good or bad but human thinking makes it so.
2. *Ibid*.
3. *Concept*, p. 45.

II. Whitehead's aims and outlook

In order to understand how Whitehead challenges the views of scientific materialism, it is necessary to first briefly describe some of the differences between his thought and that of conventional philosophy. Whitehead defined philosophy as the "critic of abstractions"[4] and described his own speculative metaphysics as a series of "working hypotheses" crafted with the goal of functioning as a framework with which to interpret every element of our experience.[5] As such, one of Whitehead's goals was explaining the ways in which prior philosophies failed to account for aspects of experience due to the application of mistaken abstractions. Whitehead reserved particular ire for what he calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," in which the casual assumption of a substance ontology causes an endless variety of perplexities and incongruities. The end result of Whitehead's critique is what he called "the philosophy of organism," but what has come to be called by its contemporary adherents "process philosophy." As Nicholas Rescher describes it, the difference between process ontology and substance ontologies is that whereas substance ontologies must posit both events (like waves crashing on the shore) and substances with properties (like water that is blue), process ontology is "a one-tier ontology of process alone," with "an internally complex monism of activities of varying, potentially compounded sorts."[6] In other words, in a Whiteheadian philosophy, the world is not a collection of static substances with inhering properties but a dynamic process of "creative advance into novelty"[7] in which "every actual thing is something by reason of its activity[…]."[8]

Along with this antagonism to the dualism of substance and event, Whitehead also opposes the dualism of fact and value. Whitehead's system is ultimately an aesthetic

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4. *Science.*, p. 87.
5. *Adventures*, p. 222.
6. Rescher, p. 9.
7. *Process and Reality*, 42. All quotes of *Process and Reality* are from the corrected edition, but for the convenience of readers with old editions, all numbering is from the Macmillan edition.
8. *Symbolism*, p. 26.

system of values. In *Science and the Modern World*, he approvingly quotes Tennyson's verse, "'The stars,' she whispers, 'blindly run,'" as a critique of the mechanistic framework of modern science and philosophy.[9] Such systems may attempt to reintroduce value as a constituent of experience but do so in such a way that value is ultimately an extraneous appendage on an otherwise complete system, merely awaiting its pruning off by an ambitious nihilist. In contrast, according to Whitehead, aesthetic value enters into the universe in its minutest elements and thoroughly permeates all levels of experience. Value is "the intrinsic reality of an event"[10] and "the outcome of limitation."[11] That is to say, whether we are speaking of an electron which is limited in experience to orbiting a proton or a human being choosing one action over another, on every level value is the actuality that results from the event of productive engagement with limits.

This vision of a philosophy which is general enough to apply to both the electron and the human being reveals the other distinctive aspect of Whitehead's philosophy and part of his motivation for calling it "the philosophy of organism." For Whitehead, reality follows the same principles at every level with only differing degrees of complexity and integration, rather than qualitatively different substances, as in Cartesian mind-body dualism. As he writes, "It is a matter of pure convention as to which of our experiential activities we term mental and which physical."[12] Of course, there is a difference between matter and mind, but it is only a difference of the "routes" that give rise to their occasions. In either case, a bit of mind or matter is just "a route whose various occasions exhibit some community of type of value."[13] The ultimate justification for Whitehead's unitary view of nature is that, "there is but one nature, namely the nature which is before us in perceptual knowledge."[14] In order to avoid any mistaken bifurcation of nature,

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9. *Science*, p. 77.
10. *Ibid*., p. 93.
11. *Ibid*., p. 94.
12. *Symbolism*, p. 20.
13. *Religion*, pp. 108–9.
14. *Concept*, p. 46.

Whitehead posits a philosophy that is a holographic system at the highest level of generality in which each part exhibits the structure of the whole. At the same time, Whitehead does not attempt to reduce our concrete experiences to expressions of the abstract laws of physics, as contemporary scientific materialists might. To the contrary, the job of philosophy is "to explain the emergence of the more abstract things from the more concrete things,"[15] not vice-versa. Attempts to explain the concrete in terms of the abstract always fail because they seek to explain what is certain in terms of what is uncertain.

III. Theory of perception

With this background in place, we can now explore the theory of perception that Whitehead presents. He finds an interesting antecedent to his own work in the *Natural History* of Francis Bacon. According to Bacon,

> It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception; for when one body is applied to another there is a kind of election to embrace that which is agreeable, and to exclude or expel that which is ingrate; and whether the body be alterant or altered, evermore a perception precedeth operation, for else all bodies would be like one to another.[16]

Whitehead embraces Bacon's distinction between perception and sense. Clearly, an object like a stone lacks sense as we know it. However, according to Whitehead, that does not mean that the stone lacks all forms of perception and experience. Indeed, it is a kind of "perception" that allows the stone to negotiate its boundary with the earth it rests on and the air around it. Reconceptualizing the inanimate world in this way allows Whitehead to explain how it is that our consciously apprehended experience is non-reductively built up out of the simpler "prehensions" (uncognitive apprehensions[17]) of our parts. While this doctrine may seem radical, in many ways, it is merely an attempt to take the way that we use language seriously. For example, Whitehead points out that Hume repeatedly violates the tenets of his own theory of perception by saying that "the

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15. *Process*, 30.
16. Quoted in *Science and the Modern World*, p. 43.
17. *Science*, p. 69.

eye sees." In Humean perception, it is not the eye that sees but the soul that sees thanks to "unknown causes."[18] For Whitehead, we really do see with our eyes, touch with our hands, etc. Of course, sometimes our seeing is due to other causes, such as intoxication, but this does not challenge the idea that seeing is normally done by the eye.

The traditional division of the qualities of substances into primary qualities that really inhere in the object and secondary qualities that arise from the sense organs of the perceiver is also seen by Whitehead as a problematic reversal of common sense. If it were true that secondary qualities ought to be attributed to the perceiver rather than the perceived object then,

> nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: The rose for its scent; the nightingale for his song; and the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless[…].[19]

Again, owing to his organismic model, Whitehead seeks out modes of perception that really do get at the world, while at the same time accounting for our lived experiences. So for example, when we look at a wall, "the wall contributes *itself*" to our experience, so that "we perceive *the wall's* color and extensiveness."[20]

Against Descartes and others, Whitehead suggests that in order to find the most basic forms of perception involved in our experience, we should not seek out what is most clear and distinct. In fact, "the opposite doctrine is more nearly true."[21] It is only after great training that an artist is able to see a chair as just a blob of colors.[22] Clarity of perception is the result of refinement rather than rawness. Seeing a wall as merely a field of color is only possible by "discarding the concrete relationship between the wall-at-that-

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18. *Process*, 259, *passim*.
19. *Science*, p. 54.
20. *Symbolism*, p. 15. Emphases original.
21. *Process*, 263.
22. *Symbolism*, p. 3.

moment and the percipient-at-that-moment."[23] Whitehead divides experience into two types comprising three modes. The main types are conceptual and perceptual.

Conceptual analysis stands by itself as a mode of experience[24] in which experiences "are primarily derivate from physical feelings, and secondarily from each other."[25] It is in conceptual valuation that experiences gain a positive or negative valuation. In other words, conceptual analysis is a meta-experience of the value of other experiences.

The type of experience called "perceptual experience" can be further sub-categorized into the modes of "presentational immediacy" and "causal efficacy." When we see the wall as a wall (as opposed to a color field), this is an experience of perception according to the mode of presentational immediacy. It is what other philosophers have termed "sense-perception."[26]

To understand causal efficacy, it is helpful to look at organisms of a "lower grade," such as flowers or stones. A flower rarely fails to turn toward the sunlight, and a stone never fails to negotiate, in Baconian way, its boundary with the earth beneath it.[27] These actions are examples of perception in the mode of causal efficacy. Other philosophers like Hume and Kant deny that causal efficacy is a direct part of our experience. Rather, they suggest that it is something added to experience, either by irrational habits or transcendental reason. However, when Hume admits that we see "by the eye," he shows that he has already imported the notion of causal efficacy to explain the means *by which* we see.[28] Causal efficacy is an inescapable part of our experience. It is in the eye that the causal efficacy of light on the eye becomes a part of the presentational immediacy of a light seen before us.

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23. *Ibid*., pp. 15–6.
24. *Ibid*., p. 17. *Process*, passim.
25. *Process*, 378.
26. *Symbolism*, p. 21.
27. *Ibid*., p. 42.
28. *Ibid*., pp. 50–1.

IV. Symbolism
A. In perception

The two modes of perception constitute a Jamesian foreground/background or focus/field structure. As Whitehead describes it, "the habitual state of human experience" is "a vast undiscriminated, or dimly discriminated background, of low intensity, and a clear foreground."[29] In the center of our experience is a clear focus of presentational immediacy which is surrounded by a halo of increasingly dim causal efficacy. This foreground/background distinction can also be cast in terms of the traditional distinction between the "Appearance" of presentational immediacy and the "Reality" of causal efficacy (though the different nuance of these terms in Whitehead's philosophy must be kept in the foreground of our thoughts). He explains,

> Thus it is that Appearance which in consciousness is clear and distinct, and it is Reality which lies dimly in the background with its details hardly to be distinguished in consciousness. What leaps into conscious attention is a mass of presuppositions about Reality rather than the intuitions of Reality itself. It is here that the liability to error arises.[30]

The connection between these two modes of perception is an important precondition for fallibility. At the lower level, causal efficacy is a reliable future orientation in perception, but at the higher level, the perception of causal efficacy where it does not exist is possible. Say, for example, I look at a chair and see it as something for sitting. In that case, in addition to the foreground presentational immediacy of my sight of the chair, in the background I also experience a causal efficacy that I associate with it. When I do sit in it, only to have it collapse, what has happened is that the presentational immediacy of my experience of the chair was erroneously fused to a background memory of previous perceptions of causal efficacy and as a result I made a mistake. This fusion of the two perceptual modes of experience is called "symbolic reference." Symbolic reference reveals the common ground of unity of feeling that lies at the basis of presentational immediacy and casual efficacy. It is not the same as the experience of conceptual analysis,

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29. *Adventures*, p. 260.
30. *Ibid*., p. 270.

although it can be the product of conceptual experience as well as perceptual experience when something experienced in conceptual analysis refers to something presentational immediacy or causal efficacy.[31] The difference is that symbolic reference merely refers, whereas conceptual analysis is the mode of valuation. A pure mode of perceptual experience by itself and devoid of symbolic reference is called "direct recognition." Direct recognition is, in a certain sense, infallible, in that if one sees an illusionary object, it is still true that one sees it. Symbolic reference is basis of fallibility.

Symbolism is bound up in liability to error as the link between Appearances and Reality, perceptual immediacy and causal efficacy. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead gives the conditions of all symbolism:

> The requisites of symbolism are that there be two species of percepta; and that a perceptum of one species has some "ground" in common with a perceptum of another species, so that a correlation between the pairs of percepta is established.[32]

Symbolic reference is a "synthetic activity"[33] which pervades our existence. While certain forms of symbolism, like religious iconography, can be pushed out of life, on the whole symbolism is indispensable.[34] While its form must change to suit the times, symbolism itself is basic to our existence. Again, it is symbolism that allows us to effortlessly treat a blob of visual data as a chair.[35] Moreover, language itself operates on the principles of symbolic reference. This is not just a simple process by which the word "tree" maps onto the thing tree. In fact,

> Both the word itself and trees themselves enter into our experience on equal terms; and it would be just as sensible, viewing the question abstractly, for trees to symbolize the word "tree" as for the word to symbolize the trees.[36]

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31. *Symbolism*, p. 19.
32. *Process*, 274.
33. *Symbolism*, p. 18.
34. *Ibid*., pp. 1, 2, 61, 62, et al.
35. *Ibid*., p. 3.
36. *Ibid*., pp. 10–1.

Indeed, exactly this sort of inversion takes place when, for example, one has the idea of what one wants to say but not the words.[37] In that case, it is the actual tree which symbolizes the thing sought for, which is the word. This is to say nothing of the further interplay between a spoken word as "a species of sounds"[38] and the further abstraction of the written word, etc. In each of these cases, there is a different but overlapping set of abstract associations that arrives with the experience. Symbols are so useful for us because they allow us synthesize our experience in a way impossible for organisms of a lower grade. The rock can react to gravity and the earth, but it cannot react to what is in front of it, like a frog, or to its expectations about future events, like the higher animals. Of course, this ability of higher organisms comes with the penalty of fallibility, but this is merely the price of more elaborate truth.

Whitehead's philosophy allows for different kinds of truth, but what is common to the different kinds of truth is that "two composite facts participate in the same pattern."[39] For practical purposes, the kind of truth we most often deal with is "symbolic truth." One mark of symbolic truth is that in spite of the general commensurability of Appearance and Reality, "in no direct sense is the Appearance the cause of the Reality, or the Reality the cause of the Appearance."[40] Because of this property of symbolic truth,

> it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the very meaning of truth is pragmatic. But though this statement is *hardly* an exaggeration, still it *is* an exaggeration, for the pragmatic test can never work, unless […] there is a definite determination[…].[41]

The final test of symbolic truth is in the definite experience of comparison between the symbol and the meaning in the modes proper to them. Their relationship is merely conventional, but no less important for that. Once the link has been established then we can interpret from one form of experience to another by means of the symbol:

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37. *Symbolism*, p. 12. *Process*, 277.
38. *Process*, 276.
39. *Adventures*, p. 242.
40. *Ibid*., p. 248.
41. *Process*, 275.

> Two behavior patterns mutually interpret each other, only when some common factor of experience is realized in the enactment of either pattern. The common factor constitutes the reason for the transition from one to the other.[42]

Thus, the English word "God" translates the Greek word θεός only to the extent that both refer to a similar set of meanings (which in turn may or may not refer to some ultimate object), just as the word "tree" represents a tree by virtue of their common connection in experience to the meaning of tree. To be sure though, there is always something lost in translation from one symbolic reference to the next, such that "no verbal statement is the adequate expression of a proposition."[43]

B. The fallacy of simple location

To fully understand the meaning of Whitehead's system of symbolic reference, we must also be aware of his opposition to what he called "the fallacy of simple location." According to Whitehead,

> In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location.[44]

This doctrine may seem surprising, but it can be understood as Whitehead's reinterpretation of relativity theory. When I see the chair from the front, the chair is present to me in the aspect of "chair from the front." Even when I am no longer in the room with the chair, conventional science tells us that there is still a consciously imperceptible effect on us from the gravitational field of the chair. Whitehead wants us to expand this notion of the field, so that we understand the chair itself to be the manifestation of an omnipresent field in a particular place that nevertheless has a relation with all other places in the present and future universe, though this is expressed in different aspects in different times and places. The causal efficacy of the chair is always with me, though it may grow so dim that it can no longer be distinguished from the rest of the background of my

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42. *Adventures*, p. 250.
43. *Process*, 19.
44. *Science*, p. 91.

experience. Because of this, each "epochal occasion is a microcosm inclusive of the whole universe."[45]

This understanding of location also helps explain why Hume referred vision to the eyes, even against his own philosophical system. For example, when we see a colorfield, we do not merely see the field, we see it as located in space. Moreover, we not only locate the colorfield in an external space, but we also locate the perception of the colorfield in the eye. Thus, "color is referred to an external space and to the eyes as organs of vision."[46] From this Whitehead concludes that,

> Ultimately, all observation, scientific or popular, consists in the determination of the spatial location of "projected" sense-data.[47]

The implication of this non-simple location for our perceptions is that, due to symbolic reference, it is possible for unlikely pairs to mediate for one another in experience. As a result, in our aesthetic experience, meanings and symbols come to be experienced together. Just as we see by the eye, we feel from the symbol:

> This is the whole basis of the art and literature, namely that emotions and feelings directly excited by the words should fitly intensify our emotions and feelings arising by a contemplation of the meaning.[48]

Thus, words may take on symbolic connotations beyond their meanings, music generates strong feelings, and religious art takes on the emotional associations and holiness of its subject.

The connection between religion and symbolism is well-known. Religious ritual in particular makes much use of this connection:

> [E]motion waits upon ritual; and then ritual is repeated and elaborated for the sake of its attendant emotions. Mankind became artists in ritual. It was a tremendous discovery—how to excite emotions for their own sake, apart from imperious biological necessity. […]
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> Mankind was started on its adventures of curiosity and feeling.

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45. *Religion*, p. 100.
46. *Symbolism*, p. 53.
47. *Ibid*., p. 56.
48. *Ibid*., p. 84.

> It is evident that, according to this account, religion and play have their origin in ritual.[49]

Thus, through the manipulation of symbolism in ritual, religion is able to make present in experience emotions that would otherwise be absent. That these ritual actions center on the emotional does not mean that they are devoid of truth content, however:

> Music, ceremonial clothes, ceremonial smells, and ceremonial rhythmic visual appearances also have symbolic truth, or symbolic falsehood. [… Music] performs this service, or disservice, by introducing an emotional clothing which changes the dim objective reality into a clear Appearance matching the subjective form provided for its prehension.[50]

The truth relation of ritual consists of the appropriateness of the Appearance or presentational immediacy that ritual produces in corresponding to the Reality or causal efficacy that it relates to. Furthermore, the medium in which the relationship is expressed affects, through the inclusive nature of non-simple location, the content of the relationship. This means that just as certain relationships are difficult to express through religious ritual, so too there are certain relationships which are more easily expressed through religious ritual:

> It is easier to smell incense than to produce certain religious emotions; so, if the two can be correlated, incense is a suitable symbol for such emotions. Indeed, for many purposes, certain aesthetic experiences which are easy to produce make better symbols than do words, written or spoken.[51]

In the example of incense in particular, one's foreground attention to the emotions and experiences of piety and devotion becomes symbolically linked with the background experience of the smell of the incense, allowing the incense to stand in the place of the emotions and assist in generating them on subsequent occasions. Just as we can see with the eye, we may also be able to feel with the incense.

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49. *Religion*, p. 21.
50. *Adventures*, p. 249.
51. *Process*, 278.

V. Value in experience

A. Beauty

There is more to symbolic reference than truth value. There are innumerable true things, but not all of them appropriate at all times. Thus, Whitehead explains that, "It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true."[52] Whitehead says this not denigrate the inherent value of truth or the strength of the correlation between degrees of truth and degrees of interest but to reinforce his commitment to the permeation of value in experience:

> Value is inherent in actuality itself. To be an actual entity is to have a self-interest. This self-interest is a feeling of self-valuation; it is an emotional tone.[53]

As mentioned previously, value enters experience through the mode of conceptual analysis, in which the experience of other experiences feels either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Whitehead writes in *Process and Reality*,

> The integration of each simple physical feeling [ie., a feeling of presentational immediacy or causal efficacy] with its conceptual counterpart produces in the subsequent phase a physical feeling whose subjective form has gained or lost subjective intensity according to the valuation up, or the valuation down, in conceptual feeling.[54]

These valuations in conceptual feeling may be oriented toward different intermediate goals, but their ultimate goal is satisfaction by synthesis into a novel harmony. This goal is the normative force of experience—what ought to happen. However, "There cannot be values with antecedent standards of value […]."[55] What is the antecedent standard of value that drives the valuation process forward? Since beauty is defined as "the mutual adaptation of the several factors in an occasion of an experience"[56] according to the conceptual mode of experience, we can also call the norm that drives our conceptual valuation of experience "beauty."

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52. *Adventures*, p. 244.
53. *Religion*, p. 100.
54. *Process*, 380.
55. *Science*, p. 178.
56. *Adventures*, p. 252.

For Whitehead, beauty is "the one aim which by its very nature is self-justifying. "[57] Beauty is the force that gives a truth its quality of interestingness, since "Apart from Beauty, Truth is neither good nor bad,"[58] and "Truth matters because of beauty."[59] The universe itself aims at beauty, since "The real world is good when it is beautiful,"[60] and, "The Adventure of the Universe starts with the dream"—the dream of youth—"and reaps tragic Beauty."[61]

Beauty is at its highest when there is the contrast between the components that make up an experience allow for the highest intensity. It takes the background elements of an experience and brings them into the foreground. For this purpose, contrast is vital, since

> Contrast elicits depth, and only shallow experience is possible when there is a lack of patterned contrast.[62]

In a state of beauty, the contrast between parts brings everything into focus, so that

> the whole heightens the feelings for the parts, and the parts heighten the feelings for the whole, and for each other.[63]

B. Art

Symbolism is important not only because it is a means of expressing truth relations, but also because it is an important means of creating a higher form of beauty, art. Art uses symbolism to join together absoluteness and relativity:

> In the work of art the relativity becomes the harmony of the composition, and the absoluteness is the claim for separate individuality advanced by component factors.[64]

A work of art expresses in the foreground the unbounded cosmic background of causal influence that affects every occasion.

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57. *Ibid*., p. 266.
58. *Ibid*., p. 267.
59. *Ibid*.
60. *Ibid*., p. 268.
61. *Ibid*., p. 296.
62. *Process*, 175.
63. *Adventures*, p. 268.
64. *Ibid*., p. 264.

The purpose of art is two-fold, since it aims at both truth and beauty.[65] Moreover, like religion, its medium is always highly concrete even though what it symbolizes is highly abstract. Accordingly, examining the category of religious art allows for a highly resonant application of Whitehead's philosophy, since religious art employs symbolism and ritual in the pursuit of truth and beauty, and at the same time, considers this pursuit to be no different from the pursuit of God.

VI. The pursuit of ultimate values

A. God, creativity, and the world

In Whitehead's system, beauty is the aim of God. As he writes, "God is the measure of the aesthetic consistency of the world."[66] God is the "lure of feeling" which draws all entities toward new heights of creative beauty. God is both the measure of their past successes and their spur to new ones. God is "the ultimate limitation, and His existence is the ultimate irrationality,"[67] since God explains the evolution of everything else but cannot be explained in terms of anything else. God is both the Alpha and the Omega, since God is both the primordial source of normativity and the harmony of beauty towards which experience strives.

To be sure, Whitehead is not a traditional theist. He is rather a panentheist.[68] For Whitehead, "The kingdom of heaven is God,"[69] but following the Gospels, "the kingdom of heaven is within you."[70] This can be understood on the one hand as an extension of his doctrine of non-simple location, but more profoundly, it is an expression of the way that aesthetic beauty lures us forward by speaking to our own natures in themselves allowing for the realization of the self by its aesthetic fulfillment in beauty.

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65. *Ibid*., p. 267.
66. *Religion*, p. 99.
67. *Science*, p. 178.
68. This interpretation is not accepted by William Christian. See *Religion in the Making*, Glossary, p. 250.
69. *Religion*, p. 154.
70. *Ibid*., p. 72 quoting Luke 17:21. Whitehead makes the same remarks elsewhere, notably *Process and Reality*.

Also unlike traditional theistic philosophies, in Whitehead's system God is not the only ultimate. There are three ultimates in Whitehead's system: "creativity," "many," and "one."[71] Process theologians and advocates of deep religious pluralism have put these three ultimates to use in explaining the diversity found in the varieties of religious experience across the world. According to David Ray Griffin, what Whitehead calls "one," or "the singularity of an entity,"[72] is also called, "'Amida Buddha,' 'Sambhogakaya,' 'Saguna Brahman,' 'Ishvara,' Yahweh,' 'Christ,' and 'Allah,'"[73] among other names. All of these are names for the ultimate reality that draws the universe forward into a synthesis of beauty.

The actual process of advance proceeds according to the principle of creativity. Under its auspices, "The many become one and are increased by one."[74] Something really new is created, which responds to what has come before without simply recapitulating it. According to Griffin, this ultimate has been called "Emptiness," "Śūnyatā," "Dharmakaya," "Nirguna Brahman," "the Godhead," and "Being Itself."[75] Because this is a very different aspect of ultimate reality, we should not be surprised that the ways that humans symbolically relate to these ultimates is different. God is "worshipped," but Emptiness is "realized."[76] The reason for these differences is that it is inappropriate for humans to relate to very different kinds of ultimates in the same way.

The third ultimate is the many, called by Whitehead the "disjunctive diversity"[77] of the universe. The many and the one presuppose one another as flip sides of the same concept. For the deep religious pluralists, the existence of this third ultimate explains the many religions which hold the cosmos itself to be sacred and worship the cosmos

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71. *Process*, 31.
72. *Ibid*.
73. Griffin, p. 47. In his article, Griffin is taking these names from John Cobb, but for simplicity, I am referring to them as Griffin's.
74. *Process*, 32.
75. Griffin, p. 47.
76. *Ibid*., p. 46.
77. *Process*, 31.

rather the creator of the cosmos. Other deep religious pluralists show how certain religions reflect aspects of each of the three ultimates but in different ways appropriate to each.

B. Religion

According to scientific materialists, the existence of a variety of religions shows with diverse opinions on what the universe is like and how we should behave proves that no religion is true, since they conflict. This conclusion is very strange, since by the same criteria, the fact that Einstein contradicts Newton should disprove both.[78] According to the deep religious pluralists, the key is that different religions represent different means of grappling with different ultimates towards different goals.

For Whitehead, religion is both "a thoroughly social phenomenon"[79] and "what the individual does with his solitariness."[80] The reason for this paradox is that religion is the outcome of a social process by which individuals have attempt to concretize what is most abstract. It is a way for the individual to grasp the general through the particularity of one's personal, individual experience. This makes religion philosophically significant both as a source of experiential data and as a prompt that allows the individual to grasp the more abstract aspects of experience:

> Religion is the translation of general ideas into particular thoughts, particular emotions, and particular purposes; it is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity. Philosophy finds religion and modifies it; and conversely religion is among the data of experience which philosophy must weave into its own scheme.[81]

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78. Cf. *Process*, 20–1, in which Whitehead points out that the changing of metaphysics through the centuries ought to be no more scandalous than the changing of science. The same argument can be made for religion.
79. *Religion*, p. 27.
80. *Ibid*., p. 47. *Religion*, p. 16 has a similar quote but with "his *own* solitariness" (emphasis mine) substituted.
81. *Process*, 23.

From this we can see that a philosophy that merely dismisses religion without adequately investigating the nature of religious experiences discards an important source of information about the world.

The chief danger for religion is dogmatism:

> A dogma—in the sense of a precise statement—can never be final; it can only be adequate in its adjustment of certain abstract concepts. […]
>
> […] A dogma may be true in the sense that it expresses such interrelations of the subject matter as are expressible within the set of ideas employed. But if the same dogma be used intolerantly so as to check the employment of other modes of analyzing the subject matter, then, for all its truth, it will be doing the work of falsehood.[82]

Unlike a dogmatic religion, a rational religion organizes its rituals and beliefs into "a coherent ordering of life" that both "elucidates thought" and commands "ethical approval."[83] What makes a religion rational is its ability to resist the impulse to dogmatism, to continually make its truth new through the reorganization of its symbolic relations. When a religion refuses to adapt its symbolism to changes in the experience of life, it is liable to both stifle thought and commit ethical atrocities.

VII. Whitehead's Burkean anti-conservatism

While religion must continually be critiqued so as to prune away its harmful dogmas, this is by no means a smooth process. Changes in the symbolic order always dangerous, such that

> It is not therefore true that any advance in the scale of culture inevitably tends to the preservation of society. On the whole, the contrary tends more often to be the case, and any survey of nature confirms this conclusion.[84]

For this reason, Whitehead deliberately compares his view of social change to Burke, stating that Burke "was right in his premises and wrong in his conclusions."[85] Burke was right to think that social "progress," so-called, often leads to the destruction of the society

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82. *Religion*, p. 131.
83. *Ibid*., p. 31.
84. *Symbolism*, p. 69.
85. *Ibid*., p. 71.

that embraces it, as was the case in the French Revolution. Burke was wrong to think that as a result such revolutions must be avoided at all costs. For Whitehead, there is something to be said for both the path of the iconodule and the path of the iconoclast:

> There is a greatness in the lives of those who build up religious systems, a greatness in action, in idea, and in self-subordination, embodied in instance after instance through centuries of growth. There is a greatness in the rebels who destroy such systems[…].[86]

What makes both paths productive is that they both lead to the building up of a more complex, responsive system able to take in new abstractions and enjoy the beautiful harmony of new contrasts. Symbolism is always "dangerous," since it "may involve an arbitrary imputation of unsuitable characters."[87] Still, this danger is worth it, since it is the cost of higher consciousness. In the end,

> The art of the free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in the fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.[88]

The gnomes, thus, must be dismissed, but the haunted air may remain.

VIII. Challenges and criticisms

Of course, as initially indicated, Whitehead's philosophy is ultimately a "working hypothesis." Nothing presented here guarantees its truth. As is the case with all symbolic truth, the ability to grasp what is more complex brings with it the danger of fallibilism. What suggests the general usefulness of Whitehead's philosophy is its ability to take in and explain a greater variety of experiences than can be accommodated by conventional scientific materialism, but this suggestion must always be tempered by a sense of its potential for revision.

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86. *Process*, 513.
87. *Symbolism*, p. 87.
88. *Ibid*., p. 88.

Even among those who accept Whitehead's philosophy in general, there remain disputes about the finer details. Given the aforementioned comments of Whitehead about the importance of criticism and progress, this is as he would have wanted. The one element in Whitehead's philosophy that has generated the most intense debate is his idea of God. For process theologians, Whitehead's picture of God is a useful precursor for further refinement through engagement with specific religious traditions. Others, however, feel that use of the term "God" in Whitehead's system is misleading, and that its function might better be served through more pluralistic vision of aesthetic good. In particular, Donald Sherburne argues convincingly in "Decentering Whitehead" that Whitehead has not solved the problem of evil. Although Whitehead's God acts only as lure for value and not as an omnipotent Father, nevertheless, our own experiences of pain, evil, and suffering belie the existence of even this more constrained God. Accordingly, Sherburne sketches out a vision of the universe that retains many elements of Whitehead's system without retaining God.

In a similar vein, David Bentley Hart in *The Beauty of the Infinite* argues that any theodicy which, like Whitehead's, attempts to justify God on the basis of the goodness of the final result fails

> the test of Ivan Karamazov: If the universal and final good of all creatures required, as its price, the torture of one little girl, would that be acceptable? [… T]he moral enormity of this calculation is not mitigated if all creation must suffer the consequences of God's self-determination.[89]

In other words, Hart suggests that the beautiful end state of the cosmos in a Hegelian or Whiteheadian system is no excuse for the innumerable cruelties suffered along the way. Surprisingly, Hart is nevertheless a theist. He suggests though that evil, rather than being the necessary byproduct of a process aimed at ultimate good, is meaningless and marked for absolute overturning by God. As the title of his book suggests, he shares with Whitehead an aesthetic vision of the world redeemed by beauty, but his vision is

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89. *Beauty*, p. 119

ultimately founded on the dogmas of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, rather than philosophical reconstruction. In the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami Hart wrote,

> [S]uffering and death, considered in themselves, have no ultimate meaning at all.
>
> I do not believe we Christians are obliged—or even allowed—to look upon the devastation visited upon the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to console ourselves with vacuous cant about the mysterious course taken by God's goodness in this world, or to assure others that some ultimate meaning or purpose resides in so much misery. Ours is, after all, a religion of salvation; our faith is in a God who has come to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death, and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred.[90]

For Hart, Whitehead's concept of God is in need of revision because it is insufficiently soteriologically oriented, and his philosophy gives evil too much credit by calling it the "contrast" that makes the beautiful more beautiful.

Marilyn McCord Adams agrees with Hart that most theodicies, including Whitehead's, fail the "Karamazov test," when they attempt to effect

> *global* aesthetic solutions that rest content with defeating horrors via their organic relations to 'higher harmonies' of cosmic wholes[…]. What I conclude (tipping my Platonizing hand) is not […] that aesthetic concerns are irrelevant, marginal, or of dubious propriety, but that it is wrong to make the global context the primary, much less the only frame of evaluation when it comes to horror's challenge of the Goodness of God.[91]

Like Hart, she feels that the philosophical question of theodicy is too often bogged down by being

> carried on at too high a level of abstraction. By agreeing to focus on […] "restricted standard theism," both sides avoided responsibility to a particular tradition; […].[92]

Her recourse is, like Hart, to attempt bridge this gap by focusing on the ways that specifically Christian traditional doctrines may be able to answer the questions of theodicy that are not available to non-sectarian attempts, like Whitehead's. At the same time, by bringing the lived religious experiences of that lead to the creation of those Christian dogmas to bear on the problems of theodicy, what Hart and Adams are doing

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90. "Tsunami and Theodicy."
91. Adams, p. 149. Emphasis original.
92. *Ibid*., p. 3.

is exactly in line with Whitehead's call to rationalize religion by ever testing its applicability: Christianity must engage with the problem of evil if it is to contribute positively to the societies it inhabits.

While there is not enough space here to assess the success of either Sherburne, Hart, or Adams, they do point to ways that Whitehead's philosophy may be open to further critique or revision and are worthy of further examination in future works.

IX. Conclusion

As we have seen, Whitehead's "philosophy of organism" or "process philosophy" allows us to overcome many of the difficulties associated with scientific materialism. Whitehead agrees with Hume's conclusion that scientific materialism ultimately rests on faith in the ability of abstractions of science to classify all that is worth classifying.[93] The working hypothesis that Whitehead presents, however, allows us to more easily account for our concrete perception of qualities inhering in external objects, causal efficacy in perception, the symbolism of language, the seemingly paradoxical interrelatedness of spatially separate locations, and the permeation of value (especially aesthetic value) in experience. On this basis, he goes on to speculate about the non-cognitive apprehensions underlying the physical world, the plurality of ultimates in experience, the importance of ritual and art as means of symbolic expression of truth, and the importance of both critique and conservatism for the flourishing of society. While some, like Sherburne, have expressed doubts about the necessity of God in Whitehead's system, and others, like Hart and Adams, have expressed concerns about the attempt to resolve the issue of theodicy through appeals to global harmony, nevertheless, we can confidently conclude that philosophical system of Whitehead offers an important new tool for the preservation of the romance of existence against those who would reduce the richness of its content in order to better fit their simplicity of their abstractions.

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93. *Science*, p. 51.

" 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

—John Keats

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