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Whitehead's rejection of a coercive divine lawgiver is well known, but the underlying ethic which led him in that direction needs to be examined. Arguing that he is an ethical naturalist with an aesthetic theory of value, and an act utilitarian, I find that this gives priority to eros over agape, limits moral responsibility, and obscures the depth of moral evil.

Over the last 30 years or so, an extensive literature has been devoted to drawing theological implications from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and to relating the Whiteheadian scheme to Christian beliefs. Indeed, much of what he held is highly attractive both philosophically and theologically. Yet Whitehead himself did not exactly make the task easy. In the first place, his own theological remarks are unsystematic and underdeveloped, strewn along the way throughout his American writings. In the second place, he voiced strong antipathy to much in the Christian tradition and in the Bible itself. His God is not the *ex nihilo* creator, not the moral lawgiver and final judge who separates the wheat from the tares.[1] Whitehead's dislike focuses on what he takes to be a coercive tyrant-God. As a result, he rejects the Judao-Christian ethical monotheism which for centuries was the context of the Christian gospel.[2]

Much of the literature and most of the criticism Whitehead has received in this regard focus on his God-concept. D. D. Williams, however, claims that it was Whitehead's ethic that led him to overlook the coercive aspects of being and of God.[3] Despite the fact that Whitehead never addressed ethical theory as such, he was socially concerned and wrote at length about the shape and goals of human civilization, and the values he emphasized are plainly rooted in his metaphysic. I shall therefore ask what kind of ethical theory is implicit in his writings, that might have influenced him as Williams suggests.

A first step into his thinking takes us to *Science and the Modern World*, where he argues convincingly for the unity of fact and value. In a memorable chapter on "The Romantic Reaction," he affirms a position that runs throughout his work.

Remembering the poetic rendering of our concrete experience, we see at once

> that 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, must not be omitted
> in any account of an event as the most concrete actual something. 'Value' is
> the word I use for the intrinsic reality of an event. Value is an element which
> permeates through and through the poetic view of nature. We have only to
> transfer to the very texture of realization [viz. the process of reality] in itself
> that value which we recognize so readily in terms of human life.... Realiza-
> tion therefore is in itself the attainment of value.[4]

In particular he is critical of the mechanistic philosophy. Descartes' plurality
of mutually independent substances, characterized only by primary qualities
and controlled only by external forces, denuded nature of intrinsic value.
"The heavens had lost the glory of God," he laments.[5] And if the mind is an
independent substance, then moral intuitions apply only to its private world
of psychological experience.[6] On the other hand, if values are rooted as he
maintains in the internal relatedness of all reality, then ethical subjectivism
is ruled out and some kind of *ethical naturalism* is in.

But what kind of ethical naturalism is this? What does he mean by "real-
ization," that it should hold value as he claims? In *Adventures of Ideas*, he
distinguished four conceptions of natural law:[7] immanent, imposed, descrip-
tive and conventional. A purely immanent order does not explain why the
universe should not lapse into lawless chaos. Yet an imposed order seems to
require the Cartesian doctrine of external relations and suggests a deistic
imposition of force. On the other hand a descriptive view makes the cosmos
an unlikely product of mere chance, and a purely conventional view could
be stretched to mean that any interpretation we like will do. Whitehead leans
toward immanence, deriving order in an evolving universe, not from the im-
posed will of a transcendent God, but from the fact that finite events in nature
share in the nature of an immanent God. God is the "lure for feeling" immanent
in every event, the inner eros in which all nature participates, and that draws
events to the fulfillment of their possibilities for value. He is "that factor in
the universe [sic] whereby there is importance, value and ideal beyond the
actual."[8] Thus the order of nature still "expresses the characters of the real
things which jointly compose the existences to be found in nature."[9]

This gives us a very soft sense of "imposed" law in comparison with
Semitic monotheism's laws imposed by external divine fiat. Augustine too,
he claims, saw grace as arbitrarily imposed, like Calvin's God imposing his
will. But Plato's God is rather persuasive than coercive. Whitehead prefers
Plato's persuasion.[10] In regards to morality too, we can expect a teleological
ethic, with the teleology immanent in the universe rather than due to any
special action by an external deity.

Notice here the significance of Whitehead's well-known distinction be-
tween the primordial and consequent natures of God. The primordial nature
is the envisionment of value-possibilities, the consequent nature is the satis-

faction he experiences in the realization of value. God therefore seeks his own realization in and with that of nature. It is a divine *eros*, not *agapē*, that Whitehead stresses and in which we all participate.

This distinction is evident in his use of the term "importance" in regards to value. A feeling of importance accompanies our knowledge of each possibility offered in any occasion, determining how any specific possibility is received. Valuation ("up" or "down") is thus the subjective form of a "conceptual feeling." But while importance includes this sense of the particular, it also responds to the world as a whole. It is "primarily" monistic in its reference to the universe,"[11] he says, for no one particular possibility can exhaust the overall unity of purpose in the world. Each and every occasion has value and importance for the whole, and so for that self-realization at which the divine *eros* aims.

Whitehead again speaks approvingly of Plato's view:

> the entertainment of ideas is intrinsically associated with an inward ferment, an activity of subjective feeling, which is at once immediate enjoyment and also an appetition which melts into action.[12]

The term "*eros*" is linked with a broadly aesthetic conception of the good. It is "beauty which provides the final contentment to the Eros of the Universe."[13] "The teleology of the universe is directed to the production of Beauty."[14] "All order is therefore aesthetic order, and the moral order is merely certain aspects of the aesthetic order...derived from the immanence of God."[15]

Mathematics reveals order, as Plato well knew; so does animal life. Science in fact depends on the preservation of universal features in a world of change, features reflected in logic and mathematics and induction. And human purpose too depends on understanding this structure of things.[16] The Supreme Being of Greek philosophy was through and through a God of order: the Form of the Good, the Unmoved Mover, the Logos. And Whitehead's God is analogous to this—more so than to the creator and Lord God of Israel.

Yet the aesthetic, for Whitehead, is not a contemplative ideal. Beauty, the Good, is more than order, more even than perfect harmony in which the detailed components of reality are effectively contrasted within the magnitude of the whole. Beauty in its broader sense is primarily realized in experience, and only secondarily can we ascribe it to objects that contribute to the experience. It is the subjective form of an occasion of experience, involving strength of feeling as well as harmonious order. Variety of detail makes for what Whitehead calls "massiveness," while the comparative magnitude of the whole generates "intensity" of feeling.[17] Aesthetic experience in this broad sense, its intensity and its satisfaction, is the aim of every event, and the overall aim of God in the universe as a whole.

Civilization itself must be seen in this light, and Whitehead accordingly

speaks of peace as "that Harmony of Harmonies which calms destructive turbulence and completes civilization."[18] Peace, like beauty, is not a kind of anesthesia, but a positive experience that crowns the adventure of the soul. Its primary characteristics are aesthetic rather than ethical, and as such it stands in significant contrast to the emphasis of the Hebrew *Shālom* on economic justice and personal righteousness. Whitehead's *aesthetic theory of value* takes its dominant inspiration from the Greek and Romanticist rather than the Judao-Christian tradition.

How then does he relate the moral to the aesthetic? Beauty for Whitehead is a broad concept which he extends "by stretch of metaphor" to include the moral.[19] It is not the beauty of the moral life in particular that makes it moral, but its contribution to beauty as a whole. Thus the business of morals is the effect of the present on the future, for ethical ideals act as a driving force in transitions from one social state to another. Morality aims at beauty, at the intense satisfaction of harmony which is important for each occasion of experience.[20] As William Christian points out, the problem in moral conduct is to decide what to inhibit and what to include in life.[21]

Aesthetic experience in Whitehead's broad sense accordingly has intrinsic value, while truth and morality have largely instrumental worth. Moral decisions must then be made with an eye to ideal outcomes. It is never morality for morality's sake or righteousness for righteousness' sake, but both for the sake of aesthetic order and satisfaction in the world.[22] The moral aim is always to create beauty, both in the present moment and in the relevant future, for the anticipation of future beauty contributes to the intrinsic satisfaction of the present experience—to its beauty, that is. Whitehead expresses this by distinguishing between "beauty" and the "beautiful." Some things may be called "beautiful" by reason of their contribution to beauty, yet they may still inhibit more beauty than they create. A moral decision may be "beautiful" because it is justified by its contribution to beauty, but only beauty itself is self-justifying.[23]

The similarity to G. E. Moore's ideal utilitarianism is plain, although Moore never to my knowledge took the aesthetic in this broad sense to be the overall ideal. The similarity is not surprising in the light of their long association at Cambridge. Yet unlike G. E. Moore's ideal utilitarianism, Whitehead's ethic is metaphysically based. For example, his emphasis on aesthetic satisfaction in each occasion might be supposed to imply ethical egoism, a preoccupation with individual self-interest.[24] But Whitehead argues that no occasion exists by or for itself, but only in relation to the whole. Morality therefore emphasizes loyalty to the ideal ends of the community, rather like Bradley's "My Station and its Duties." Whitehead's doctrine of internal relations is at work here, and his immanent teleology: God directs our individual purposes towards larger ends, which may seem impartial to

our own interests but which he transforms into value for us,[25] satisfying our needs in the process. As an individual I can therefore show benevolence as well as self-interest, agapē as well as eros.

Utilitarianism is, I think, the one ethical theory on which Whitehead explicitly comments. In *Adventures of Ideas*, he declares about Bentham and Comte:

> Most of what has been practically effective in morals, religion, or in political theory from their day to this has derived strength from one or other of these men.[26]

His own alignment is implied. Yet he criticizes their rejection of any metaphysical basis for human values and moral intuition: they gained nothing in the way of certainty by dropping Plato and religion. Moral regard for humanity cannot be founded on either "survival value" or benevolent emotions, he claims, but rests on our internal relatedness within the universe as a whole.[27]

Underlying the Whiteheadian ethic is God's influence on things. While the primordial nature of God provides relevant eternal objects as a lure to each new emerging occasion, the initial aims he holds out differ with each situation. Apart from the broadly aesthetic ideal, he has no common goal for each occasion, no universally applicable moral law.

This theme is carried out in Whitehead's assertion that the immanent natural law is changeable, and that unchanging moral codes and invariable social orders are arbitrarily imposed. Since order itself is not the aesthetic end, does not exist for its own sake, there is no one ideal order for all societies—that would be either fanatical over-moralization, or unimaginative pedantry. Moral codes likewise are useful, even essential but, when they are ascribed to God on a mountain top or to a divine despot on a throne, they become unchangeable and therefore unapplicable to other situations. Underlying all moral codes and social orders, as with the laws of natural science, however, is the ultimate aesthetic ideal. Moral laws are means that humans agree on in order to live together harmoniously and with satisfaction.[28]

Whitehead is not speaking just of detailed casuistic rules, but as well of more general moral rules that cover whole areas of conduct with apparently universalizable intent. The Ten Commandments are a case in point. They are not ultimate laws of the universe, he says, but "formulations of behaviors which in ordinary circumstances, apart from special reasons, it is better to adopt." Killing a man or an insect may be moral or immoral: it is moral if we safeguard the aesthetic value of that concrete event in the world's history.[29] Moral rules in effect are prudential, general rules of thumb. This sounds more like act-utilitarianism than rule-utilitarianism, and is far from the note of rule-deontology sounded in the Biblical account of moral law.

We can now see why Whitehead rejects ethical monotheism. Ethical

naturalism in itself is not a problem for Christian ethics, nor need teleolog-
ical ethics be. The problem arises rather with an immanentistic (as distin-
guished from transcendent) teleology, in which God is an aesthetic lure
within the universe rather than the moral lawgiver. It increases with a util-
itarianism that lacks a deontology grounded in the commanding will of God.
And it is further complicated by an act-ethic which reduces the law of God
to prudential rules.

I shall not here pursue Whitehead's concept of an immanentistic non-coer-
cive non-creator God, nor his account of moral decision: these are large and
complex matters. Rather I want to look more closely at his ideal utilitarianism
with its aesthetic theory of value, and at the question of moral responsibility.

Historically morality has been variously related to the aesthetic. The Stoics
saw the good as a rational harmony of the soul corresponding to the natural
harmony of nature. Shaftesbury found a kind of aesthetic pleasure in the
harmony of egoism and altruism. But Whitehead's point of reference is al-
ways Plato, most plainly the *Phaedrus* where the soul's love for Beauty takes
it away from the particulars and the passions of this world, beyond appetitive
preoccupation with its own self-interest.

My concern is that directing the moral always to aesthetic ends blurs dis-
tinctively moral concerns. Consider the concept of justice, which Plato de-
fines in terms of harmony in the soul and in society. Whitehead says little of
justice (the term does not even appear in the index to *Adventures of Ideas*)
yet his position of course implies a Platonic view. He sees the idea of indi-
vidual rights as a driving force in the history of our civilization,[30] exempli-
fying the triumph of persuasion over force. But his only basis for asserting
such a doctrine is its historical helpfulness. In effect human rights represent
a particular kind of moral order that has utility for individual aesthetic satis-
faction as well as the overall harmony, whereas Christian ethics has tradi-
tionally claimed that the *imago dei* makes a human person intrinsically
important not only to herself, but more significantly to God. For Whitehead,
respect for persons does not appear to be a categorical duty.

Let us however suppose that Whitehead sees equal justice and human rights
as a kind of social order akin to a moral code. Then it has situational worth,
but no universal or morally absolute significance. It contributes to the aes-
thetic ideal. But in that case, as Ross and Frankena have argued against
utilitarianism, justice might well be waived for the sake of more desirable
consequences. Whitehead seems not to face such characteristic problems with
utilitarianism.

It might be argued that he preserves the intrinsic value of morality because
the anticipation that our present decision will make a contribution to the
future enters into the intrinsic value of the present experience. But an en-
hanced present experience of deciding is still an enhanced aesthetic experi-

ence (in the broad sense of "aesthetic"), and such an experience might well be afforded by morally wrong decisions if we think they will make a valuable contribution to the future. Doubtless Adolph Hitler and Idi Amin had many such experiences in the course of their careers. Surely a decision can be morally right or wrong on other grounds than either present or future satisfactions provide. Again it seems that Whitehead's aesthetic theory of value obscures moral concerns.

Consider also the matter of punishment. The Whiteheadian emphasis on persuasion rather than coercion precludes any retributivist approach. Donald Sherburne even argues that on Whitehead's account of the self as a thread of conscious events, I cannot now be held accountable for past decisions. He therefore adopts a utilitarian approach to reforming possible offenders rather than punishing them.[31] But as have often been argued, utilitarian and therapeutic approaches of this sort that deny human accountability fail to respect persons, whereas retributive justice on God's part and on ours is based on respect for persons and their right to be treated as such, duly responsible for their own decisions and free actions. It is an application of distributive justice.[32]

Consider Whitehead's emphasis on the divine eros rather than on the agapē-love that gives of itself for others. In a panentheistic scheme, God's eros will of course have beneficent consequences for individuals, yet beneficence remains either a means to, or else a by-product of aesthetic ends.

We see this in the final chapter of *Adventures of Ideas*, where Whitehead speaks of peace as a feeling of harmony between the individual's activities and ideal aims that lie beyond individual satisfactions. From peace, he claims, flows benevolence towards humankind. But then agapistic benevolence flows from peace which flows from beauty. Aesthetically grounded peace contrasts starkly with the Biblical conception of *Shālom* as a moral and societal state of affairs in which justice and love are paramount. In the one benevolence is a by-product of peace; in the other it is the ground of peace, of the very essence of peace itself.

Again we are told that peace involves the acceptance of tragedy, understanding that it is not in vain, but fits into the harmony of the whole. The optimism involved is perhaps characteristic of nineteenth century thought, evolutionary and Hegelian. But the Nazi holocaust and the real possibility of a nuclear war give second thoughts: Whitehead leaves no room for the intractable, the demonic, nor for a God who has to eventually separate the wheat from the tares. Oddly, he calls the parable of the tares the first Biblical pronouncement "in which tolerance is associated with moral fervour."[33] Yet the tolerance involved is obviously limited. Wheat and tares are not harmonized but separated in the end, and for intrinsically moral reasons rather than aesthetic ones.

What account does he give, then, of human moral responsibility, a factor

which figures large in the ethical monotheism of the Judao-Christian Scriptures? A *feeling* of responsibility arises, we are told, in the freedom of an uncertain decision. It is not self-imposed, but inheres in the experience of facing future possibilities in the light of a God-given initial aim. This sense of obligation points us beyond self-interest, says John Cobb, to duty.[34]

Moral obligation is then the claim which the possibility of good makes on our decisions. But since this possibility depends on God, moral obligation is God's claim on us. The lure of good in the initial aim comes from God's aim to draw all things harmoniously together with intense satisfaction. His aim is the ideal to which morality moves. His ideals are ours, and only by his eros is any unified structure of good even possible.[35] Whatever is of value in our lives, moreover, is retained immortally in God's experience. In this over-all sense, then, we are responsible to God.

But is this enough for ethical monotheism? I think not. God does not *hold* me responsible at all, nor can he coerce. In his primordial nature he is a *final* cause only, alluring me with his ideals. In his consequent nature he experiences the outcomes of my decisions, but this makes me responsible *for* him rather than accountable *to* him. His superjective nature feeds back into my experience, as part of the immediate past that I feel;[36] in this regard he is perhaps an efficient cause, but still not a sufficient cause of anything, not therefore coercive. He can allure, he can limit future possibilities, and I can feel the consequences of my own decisions, but God can neither command nor punish. He does not *hold* me responsible.

For Whitehead, with his view of evil, this may not seem a problem. But E. H. Peters asks why the doctrine of sin plays little part in process theology. By virtue of the divine immanence, he points out, no occasion can intend less than aesthetic synthesis, and none can fall short of some such satisfaction. Sin, it would seem, is at worst a minor deviation that God effectively integrates into the good for his own satisfaction. Radical estrangement from God is impossible.[37] The wheat and the tares, along with the sheep and the goats, coexist in detente and gradually become one. No final separation occurs; the divine judge finds the creative art of therapy more satisfying than an ethic of punishment.

It seems that Whitehead's optimistic aestheticism has obscured the depths of moral evil, reducing it from a pervasive perversity in human nature to a medley of not-so-beneficial decisions which God then blends into the overall mix. God is ultimately concerned with aesthetic satisfaction, after all, and does not agonize over human sin as such. He is in fact not a moral being at all—the term is inapplicable, according to William Christian, for God does not have to choose ways of actively achieving his purpose.[38] Counselling about the overall good is all he can give, for he can only persuade, not coerce. He cannot legislate and cannot enforce, but can only make aesthetic ideals

feel appealing. Such a God can neither hold us accountable not guarantee firm hope. Were God also an active agent there would be more reason for optimism. His mighty acts would coerce as well as persuade. He could take us to task. But then he would be a moral deity, selecting alternative ways of achieving his purpose, and Whitehead's aesthetic theory of value as well as the metaphysic on which it rests, would need significant modification.

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NOTES

Editions of Whitehead's writings are referred to as follows:

AI = *Adventures of Ideas*. Penguin Books, 1942.

MI = *Modes of Thought*. Free Press, 1968.

PR = *Process and Reality*. corrected ed., Free Press, 1978.

RM = *Religion in the Making*. New American Library, 1974.

SMW = *Science and the Modern World*. Free Press, 1967.

1. See especially PR, part V, ch. 2, and AI, ch. 10.

2. By ethical monotheism, I refer to the belief in one creator-God, who is the just and loving lawgiver, judge and savior. Whitehead talks of God loving and saving the world, but with a markedly different sense of both love and salvation than in traditional theology.

3. "Deity, Monarchy and Metaphysics: Whitehead's Critique of the Theological Tradition," *The Relevance of Whitehead*, ed. Ivor Leclerc (Macmillan, 1961), p. 370.

4. SMW, 93f. See also MT, lecture one.

5. SMW, 195.

6. *Idem.*

7. AI, ch. 8.

8. MT, 102.

9. AI, 133.

10. AI, 137, 143f, 155.

11. MT, 20. Also the entirety of MT ch. 1; PR p. 240f; AI p. 12f.

12. SMW, 175.

13. SMW, 20.

14. AI, 305.

15. RM, 101.

16. MT, 75-78, 93-99; SMW, ch. 1-2.

17. AI, 290-294.

18. AI, 327.

19. AI, 20.

20. AI, 27, 308ff; MT, 13f; 15.

21. W. Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (Yale University Press, 1959), p. 401.

22. See Richard S. Davis, "Whitehead's Moral Philosophy," *Process Studies*, III (1973), 75-90.

23. AI, ch. 17, sec. III.

24. On this role see Lynne Belaief, "A Whiteheadian Account of Value and Identity," *Process Studies* (1975), 44f. See also her "Whitehead and Private-Interest Theories," *Ethics*, LXXVI (1966), 277-286.

25. RM, 97, 151; AI, 327ff; PR, 15.

26. AI, 49.

27. AI, 49-54.

28. PR, 83f; AI, 51ff, 333ff. Cp. S. E. Hooper, "A Reasonable Theory of Morality," *Philosophy*, XXV (1950), 54.

29. MT, 13-15.

30. AI, part I.

31. "Responsibility and Punishment and Whitehead's Theory of the Self," in *Alfred North Whitehead: Essays on His Philosophy*, ed. G. L. Kline (Prentice-Hall, 1963).

32. Eg. Herbert Morris, "Persons and Punishment," in A. I. Melden (ed.), *Human Rights* (Wordsworth Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 111-34; C. S. Lewis, "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," in *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 287-300.

33. AI, 65.

34. *A Christian Natural Theology* (Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 125-31.

35. See D. D. Williams, "Moral Obligation in Process Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* LVI (1957), 263ff. Charles H. Reynolds, "Somatic Ethics: Joy and Adventure in the Embodied Moral Life," *John Cobb's Theology in Process*, eds. David R. Griffin and T. J. J. Altizer (Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 116-32. Cobb makes Jesus' uniqueness that he kept to his God-given initial aim without distortion. See *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 140.

36. PR, 349-351.

37. E. H. Peters, *The Creative Advance* (Bethany Press, 1966), p. 128f.

38. William Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 401.