

# Introduction

There is no one behavior system belonging to the essential character of the universe, as the universal moral ideal. What is universal is the spirit which should permit any behaviour system in the circumstances of its adoption. Thus morality does not indicate what you are to do in mythological abstractions. It does concern the general ideal which should be the justification for any particular objective. The destruction of a man, or of an insect, or of a tree, or of the Parthenon, may be moral or immoral. . . . Whether we destroy or whether we preserve, our action is moral if we have thereby safeguarded the importance of experience so far as it depends on that concrete instance in the world's history.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*

THERE IS CURRENTLY a battle being waged in the marketplace of ideas over which relations “count,” morally speaking. Traditionally, ethical theories have held that the only morally significant relations are interhuman relations or those obtaining between human beings.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, human beings’ relations with organisms such as insects and trees or inanimate objects like the Parthenon are not moral relations at all; they do not count in this sphere. In con-

tradistinction to this long-held conception of ethics, Alfred North Whitehead affirms a fundamentally different model of morality: whether one's actions affect a human being, an insect, a tree, or even an inanimate object, such as the Parthenon, that action is moral if, by one's relation to such entities, one has thereby safeguarded both the value experience which in that instance is possible and all subsequent repetitions of that value.

If Whitehead is right, morality as we know it must undergo a dramatic transformation. No longer can it be limited exclusively to those relations obtaining between human beings or even those between sentient beings. Rather, morality must concern how we, as humans, ought to conduct ourselves with each and every aspect of reality. This project takes on added urgency when we consider the environmental and social crises such as overpopulation, deforestation, global warming, and species extinction that threaten not only human civilization, but all forms of life on this planet. If we are to have any hope of reversing the potentially catastrophic destruction and consumption of our natural environment, we must devise an ethical theory grounded in an axiology that acknowledges that *every* individual—from the most insignificant flicker of existence at the opposite end of the universe to complex individuals such as ourselves—has value not only for itself, but for others, and for the whole of reality.

Yet how can we claim to understand the value of an individual and its community if we do not first at least attempt to give a systematic, metaphysical account of the nature of individuality? It is in part with such a question in mind that I turn to the organic metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead and, to a lesser extent, the pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce. One of the greatest services that a Whiteheadian moral philosophy can provide to contemporary environmental and moral philosophies is to provide the metaphysical basis for understanding not only the locus and scope of intrinsic value, but also its na-

ture. Thus one aim of this project is to reclaim the central role of metaphysics for moral theory. Yet, as my analysis will make clear, I do not mean to affirm the traditional view of metaphysics as first philosophy. Metaphysical speculation must remain as fluid as reality itself. In a way, then, I am calling for what may be called metaphysics in “real time.” That is, in seeking always to be adequate to experience, metaphysics must embrace its fallibility by continually revising its conclusions in light of new discoveries. Only in this way can it serve as an adequate basis for moral philosophy.

The aim of this project, then, is to develop and defend a holistic, organic ethical theory grounded firmly in Whitehead’s aesthetico-metaphysics of process. The seminal insight of this ethic, which I refer to as the ethics of creativity, is the fundamental sense of value at the base of existence; there is no vacuous, valueless existence. This idea is the foundation of Whitehead’s metaphysics and the source of my title. Creativity, Whitehead’s most basic category, what he calls the “category of the ultimate,” describes the unceasing process by which “the many become one, and are increased by one” (PR, 21). The full meaning of this complex and enigmatic term will become clear only gradually; let me note at the outset that my motivation for adopting it as my title is not only to acknowledge its indebtedness to Whitehead but, more important, to indicate a fundamental refusal to accept a dichotomy between the interests of the one and the many. This is to be an ethics of *creativity* in the sense that, like the creative process of the universe itself, morality must always aim at achieving the most harmonious, inclusive, and complex whole possible.<sup>2</sup>

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 establishes the critical and substantive ground for developing the ethics of creativity, which is the task of part 2. Chapter 1 seeks to expose the axiological implications of the dualistic and materialistic presuppositions that often uncritically underlie much of contemporary moral and environmental philosophy. Rather than merely repudiating the in-

vidious logic of axiological dualism and materialism, we must systematically develop and defend an alternative. With this in mind, I turn to the organic metaphysics of Whitehead.

Because both Whitehead and the classical pragmatists argue that to be an individual is to be essentially related to every other individual, they reject any form of ontological dualism or bifurcation that might seek to carve reality into unrelatable pieces. Unlike Descartes and Kant, for example, they observe no absolute bifurcation or ontological gap between human beings and nature, between the animate and the inanimate, or even between the universe and God. Thus, what they reject is not only the ontological bifurcation or reduction of nature, but also its axiological bifurcation or reduction. According to such a worldview, we must repudiate any form of dualism or materialism that makes of certain entities sheer facts, devoid of value. There is no longer dead, lifeless, valueless “stuff.” In a processive cosmos, everything has value to some degree. Given such a worldview, the important question is not whether others have intrinsic value, but whether the intrinsic value of others and of the whole is recognized, appreciated, and affirmed.

Yet, as I note in chapter 2, Whitehead’s bold affirmation that actuality and value are coextensive presents a potential problem for his axiology in general and for the development of an ethics of creativity in particular: if actuality is coextensive with value, but actuality is itself limited to subjects of experience, then the objective world (that is, superjects or achieved occasions of experience) and future potential individuals can have no intrinsic value. In other words, Whitehead’s entire metaphysical project would be in danger of collapsing into exactly what it was designed to overcome: a universe of independent subjects selfishly seeking their own ends. In this chapter I argue that the problem of subjectivism is ultimately a product of the classical interpretation of Whitehead’s metaphysics, which insists on a sharp ontological distinction between the past and the present that thereby drains the past of both creativity and value. Thus, in order to avoid the very real danger

of subjectivism, I appeal to a group of process scholars who affirm the actuality and value of both the past and the present. This interpretation, which I refer to as the ecstatic interpretation, makes it possible to interpret Whitehead's metaphysics so as to avoid the problem of subjectivism.

Having established this foundation, I then proceed to deepen the earlier analysis of Whitehead's theory of value. Specifically, I examine Whitehead's use of the crucial notion of intrinsic value by contrasting it with its use in established environmental ethics traditions. I conclude that Whitehead's insistence that every individual has value not only for itself, but for others and for the whole of reality, establishes a rich axiological foundation for the development of an organic moral philosophy. Thus chapters 1 and 2 not only provide an indispensable foundation for the later chapters, but also frame the heart of the project in general.

Building on the microscopic metaphysics of process developed in the preliminary chapters, chapter 3 seeks systematically to develop what is referred to as the organic model of individuality. Contrary to popular conceptions of Whitehead's system, this chapter examines how Whitehead's rich account of microscopic process can not only do justice to the unity and self-identity of macroscopic individuals, but also supports meaningful moral responsibility. A primary goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that difference may be real without the multiplication either of ontological kinds or, what is more important for my project, of the statuses that attach to them. If individuality is conceived organically, it is possible to affirm the existence of different types of entities, but these differences of type are in reality the result of differences in the complexity of social order of the actual occasions of which they are comprised. In an ethics of creativity, then, the language of *kind* and *type* has real moral footing without being ontologically basic. That is, we are able to appreciate the very real, and potentially morally significant, differences between individuals without introducing ontological gaps in the fabric of reality. Only by systematically developing this

basis can we correctly assess the scope and locus of our direct moral concern and responsibilities toward others. This will become particularly important in chapter 7 when I engage the relationship between an individual's ontological status and its moral significance.

Chapter 4 introduces one of the more novel (and for some, troubling) elements of a Whiteheadian moral philosophy: namely, Whitehead's insistence that the telos of the universe, and therefore of every actual occasion, is aimed at the achievement of beauty. Creativity, the dynamic process of the universe, is not aimless. Rather, the process of becoming is the achievement of beauty; every pulsing element of our processive cosmos is beautiful to some degree in itself and for itself. Given the view that process aims at the attainment of beauty, this chapter establishes an important bridge between Whitehead's metaphysics of creativity and the development of an ethics of creativity. For insofar as all forms of process aim at the achievement of beauty, the conditions of beauty are the conditions of maximally effective processes in general, and, by implication, of morality. Thus, by uncovering the complex conditions involved in the achievement of beauty, we simultaneously establish the conditions of good and evil.

In chapter 5, my aim is to establish the ideal of the ethics of creativity by examining the kalogenic or beauty-generating structure of reality as the source and foundation of moral obligation. However, before beginning the difficult work of developing such an ethic, it is first necessary to confront two related criticisms that arise due to the constitutive relation between beauty and goodness: (1) that, in founding reality on value experience, any Whiteheadian moral philosophy is ultimately a subjectivistic moral interest theory; and (2) that, in reducing ethics to aesthetics, such a theory is guilty of a vicious aestheticism. Having closely examined these two points, by enlisting the work of William James, I then proceed to develop the ideal of the ethics of creativity and the delineation of five different obligations, all of which are contained with the obligation of beauty: the obligation to always act in such a way so as to

bring about the greatest possible universe of beauty, value, and importance that in each situation is possible.

Yet if a Whiteheadian moral philosophy is to be of any practical use, it must move beyond abstractions and concretely demonstrate how a general ideal of morality can help us make meaningful moral decisions. Accordingly, the primary goal of chapter 6 is to move beyond the abstract analysis of ideals and obligations and demonstrate how the ethics of creativity would help us address the all too prevalent moral conflicts that confront us. I begin by delineating a three-step process of decision making that follows from the obligations of beauty detailed in chapter 5. I then proceed to examine how, in general, the ethics of creativity suggests we ought to comport ourselves toward each of the primary types of individuals in the world. In addition to these still abstract analyses, I then set out to test both the adequacy and applicability of the ethics of creativity by examining how it would handle a particular instance of moral conflict. Specifically, I address how we are to decide between our own intrinsic value as human beings and the intrinsic value of the organisms we destroy in order to sustain ourselves. That is, I examine the ethics of food.

Although, throughout, I bring the ethics of creativity into dialogue with established moral and environmental theories, in chapter 7 my aim is to explicitly indicate how the ethics of creativity relates to some of the most prominent moral theories. I ask, "What is the proper classification of the ethics of creativity?" Initially, several different answers suggest themselves. For instance, in that it places a high emphasis on education and the character of the moral agent, is perhaps the ethics of creativity a form of virtue ethics? However, in calling for the maximization of beauty, value, and importance overall, is it perhaps closer to a form of utilitarianism? Or, since it affirms the irreplaceable uniqueness of every individual, maybe it is closer to a form of deontology? Then again, in that it affirms the intrinsic value of everything in the universe, maybe it should be classified with Schweitzer, Leopold, or deep ecology?

In the end, we find that although it has much to learn from established theories of moral and environmental ethics, a Whiteheadian moral philosophy is every bit as unique, speculative, fallible, and dynamic as the metaphysics on which it is based and therefore cannot be squarely aligned with any extant moral or environmental philosophy.

Anyone seeking to develop a moral philosophy based on Whitehead's work faces many challenges. One obvious reason for the relative lack of attention given to Whitehead's work by mainstream environmental and moral philosophers is the density and abstruseness of the texts themselves. Coupled with the generally unfavorable view of metaphysical speculation among most contemporary ethicists, this has led many to admire Whitehead's work from afar.<sup>3</sup> Given this, a secondary, though not unimportant, goal of this project is to show the value of Whitehead's complex process metaphysics for moral and environmental philosophy by presenting it in language that strives for clarity and seeks to do justice to the richness and nuances of his thought.

While the present project presents a Whiteheadian ethic, it is not Whitehead's moral philosophy. I am not primarily interested in debating what Whitehead himself may or may not have believed. Rather, in the spirit of Whitehead's own approach to philosophy, while this project is inspired by and builds upon the work of those who came before me, it ultimately stands or falls on its own merits.