

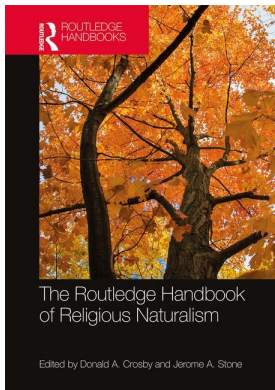
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THE SOLEMNITY OF THE WORLD

George Allan

In attempting to develop a metaphysical interpretation of the natural world as sacred, I begin, as Aristotle says metaphysicians must, in wonder. Not wonder in the abstract, wondering why there is anything at all or whether God exists. Not wondering in general whether all moral imperatives are categorical or if beliefs that are not empirically verifiable can be meaningful. But rather, concrete wonder, wondering about the world as I find it, the buzzing blooming, coming going, hurting helping menagerie of things and events that I cannot avoid experiencing and therefore remembering and imagining. Here I must begin, from here my generalizations can grow and my abstractions spring.

Necessary contingency

A buzzing mosquito circles nearby and eventually settles on my arm, ready to insert her proboscis and draw out some blood. I short-circuit that intent, however, by swinging my other arm around and swatting her dead. Poor mosquito, her life normally so short, barely hatched and out for the first time in search of food when a force of which she was not aware until too late brought that life to a premature end. She would not have died so soon had she not been in search of food, and she would not have risked such a dangerous food source as myself had what she needed been ready at hand. But it wasn't, so she was left with no choice, for she would perish were she not to eat; and yet she has perished instead in the very quest for things to eat. She needs food, but she also needs protection from becoming food. Both needs, however, are not easily satisfied, both often ending for mosquitoes in momentary failure and after a few brief days in permanent failure. So it is with creatures all around me, whether prematurely or after a normal lifespan, or living to ripe old age: they die. Not just mosquitoes but also spiders and squirrels and purple finches, eagles and elephants and chimpanzees.

I include myself and others of my species among these creatures, understanding that we all go through the same kind of cycle, a journey from origination through a constant struggle for survival to eventual demise. Though my own cycle is not at its end, I understand that all too soon it will be. Thus, by abstracting and generalizing from my mosquito experience, I arrive at the metaphysical hypothesis that all living entities are essentially contingent.

Essential contingency is not an oxymoron, although in one sense it obviously is. Many of the events comprising the life of an organism could have been otherwise without changing

what the organism is. Such contingences are accidental to its existence, as are also the time and place and manner of its coming to exist and ceasing to exist. I might have been distracted when the mosquito landed on my arm, and it would have enjoyed a satisfying meal that afternoon, although it might have soon thereafter become a meal for a passing bird or dragonfly.

Organisms are contingent in another sense, however, the sense in which they are necessarily so. They are systems that survive by means of processes the success of which are always at risk, a risk that increases the more complex the system, the more ways in which its functional components can falter and need repair or break down and need replacement. The risk of system failure also increases as the system ages and its processes grow less effective. Organisms are fragile systems that can forestall breakdown but are not able to prevent it. It is a contingent matter that any one of them arises, and a contingent matter how long it will survive, but it is necessary that once begun it will eventually end.

The reason why any individual life must have an end is that it is finite. It is something fashioned from limited resources by some already existing finite thing that has the power to bring it into existence. To exist is necessarily to be another's accomplishment. But these are fragile accomplishments because finite: made from limited resources by makers with limited powers. Although built to endure, they can be unbuilt instead, and if all organic things are made and can be unmade, then the makers of such things must also be themselves fragile achievements. The makers of contingent organisms must be themselves contingent. The power of the makers is contingent in two further senses as well. Although they can try to make or unmake something, they need not succeed in doing so. Nor do they have the power to create something that cannot be destroyed, for it cannot be the case that what is made cannot be unmade. Both the maker and what it makes necessarily can be undone and so necessarily will be.

What is made, given the risks of a contingent process, has worth. It is an achievement that might not have taken place, an integration of available resources into a new reality, but a fragile one. Precisely for this reason, its worth is intrinsic, a fundamental quality of what it is, apart from any additional value it might have because of its pragmatic usefulness to others or its moral importance or aesthetic import. It is precious, its value beyond price, because available only once and only for a while. To exist is to have worth doubly: as an achievement of making, and as a victory, albeit temporary, over the threat of its unmaking.

Fleeing contingency

Humans like all other organisms live out their brief lives attempting to overcome threats to their continued existence, seeking food and shelter, and avoiding or overcoming dangerous situations both inanimate and animate. In addition, however, humans have the capacity to understand that this is so, to grasp the fact that their lives are fragile and finite, and to imagine pathways toward more secure lives. Key to this capacity is language, the ability to use sounds or marks to stand for ideas, for abstract generalizations that refer to the world around them.

So language makes reflective consciousness possible. It expands the world as we know it to encompass not only what can be tasted, touched, smelled, seen, or heard, but also what can be remembered, imagined, abstracted, and generalized. It gives us a world in which we are aware of ourselves as having experienced aspects or features of it once before as well as now, and thereby are able to image how it could have been different or yet might be. The curse of language, however, is that we not only are fragile and finite but know we are, and know as well that the meaning we find in life is also fragile and finite. We come to believe that we need more than pantries stocked with food and shelters covered with mosquito netting. We need to be rescued from our fragility and finitude. We need our lives to be assuredly meaningful, and this they cannot be if at

any moment they can abruptly end. We also need the meanings we embrace to transcend us, to last long after we have died, but this cannot be if those meanings are no less at risk that we are. “Out, out, brief candle” (Shakespeare “Macbeth”: Act 5 Scene 5) cannot be the final word, for then what’s the point of living?

The traditional answer to Macbeth’s cry of despair has come in many forms, each in its special way protecting human worth by rescuing it from the threat of ultimate loss. The rescue requires introducing a kind of reality not in need of protection. One form of rescue looks to the past, arguing that the world, and we as a part of it, have been created by a power not dependent on some predecessor power that made it possible, a power that makes all other things possible. Another form of rescue looks to the future, to endings rather than origins, arguing that things happen as they do because they are shaped by a finality that has no successor, a fullness that needs no replenishment. A third form is oriented downward, arguing that things must have a basis, a foundation that has no foundation, on which all else can rest. A fourth form argues that the source of meaningful order lies not beneath but above, at the apex of a hierarchy of kinds of things, running from transient contingencies of little worth to timeless necessities that approach but never quite attain the complete perfection of a superior that has no superior.

All of these ways of rescuing the worth of what we do and are from the world’s contingencies, of rescuing the world from meaninglessness, rely on an ontological exception. Even though all things are contingent, it is claimed that they cannot exist except by virtue of what is not contingent. Whether it be a First or Last reality, a Base or a Summit, it is the Other of the things composing the world as we find it. We are temporal entities that come to be and perish, yet what we are essentially is not temporal but timeless. The lives we live, and the things we make by our actions alone or in groups, are finite achievements, but they gain everlasting significance through their relation to an ultimate source. Alas, however, the value of these immortal things is taken as trumping the value of mortal things, which are judged inferior or even illusory. The world as we find it is thereby lost. Better then that we abandon the quest for ontological exceptions, accept instead the ontological necessity of contingency, and set about exploring the ways in which the implications of that ontology offer us meanings worth living by.

Bounded ambients

The world as we find it, because everywhere contingent, needs boundaries. Boundaries order things by setting them within a frame that orients us with respect to what is fundamental. They mark a definitive horizon and so identify an objective center, a midpoint equidistant at all points from that horizon. A boundary locates us within an intelligible system able to distinguish here from there, near from far, now from earlier and later. As this frame fills in, as the order expresses its particular implications, a world becomes manifest, a coherent structure spread out in space and time to its uttermost limits. That part of the world that serves as the primary resource for what an organism is able to accomplish, a resource that it can shape to suit its ends but that reciprocally shapes it, is its ambient (Langer 1967: 282–83). This ambient is meaningful if structured sufficiently so that particulars can be grouped into kinds, arranged sequentially, assessed by degree of worth, across which purposes can be formed and ends pursued, where failures can have reasons from which to learn how better to achieve an end or why a different end should be sought. I will call this kind of world a “bounded ambient.”

A bounded ambient provides systemic stability and hence stability of meaning. Therefore the primary task of humans in attempting to make their lives more meaningful is to grasp the formal features of their ambient, the functional connections that organize things, and the causes of those

features. Fundamental to them is replication, the components of systems repeating themselves, making it possible for things not merely to occur but to recur. Recurrences are how stability arises even though whatever occurs is unique and therefore fleeting. What recurs is the form, repeated across a content composed of sequences of novel behaviors of an organism, or across sequences of recurrent subordinate forms, or across sequences of organisms. It is the recurrence of the form that turns cacophony into patterns, piles into hierarchies, meanders into trajectories. That turns wilderness into civilization.

These forms are manifold: constitutional laws, governmental statutes, civic rituals, performative scripts, habits, rules of thumb. Across this vast range of forms, the function is always the same: to establish a way of securing similar behavior in different individuals in order to achieve and sustain something meaningful. We fashion a clearing in the wilderness and plant a garden, surrounding it with a stockade tall enough and sturdy enough to keep out wild animals and barbarous strangers. When technology improves, the stockade becomes a castle wall, perhaps complete with moat. After a while, walls may no longer be needed as the community is able to control its boundaries by the distinctive authority of its cultural tradition, perhaps supplemented by strategically placed military garrisons.

The serpent in our ambient garden is the temptation to deny the contingency of the most fundamental of these forms, those laws that assure all we hold important, that ground our sense of who we are and why we exist. Surely, it is thought, these cannot merely be stable. They must be permanent, self-evident in the sense of being unarguably obvious, rational in the sense of providing coherent and adequate conditions of existence fully sufficient for living meaningfully. In the absence of supernatural ultimates to provide such permanent principles of order, we attempt to fashion within the flux of history a social system that approximates them: a well-ordered stable society marked by a well-defined stable perimeter. Eventually, we come to forget that our clearing is an achievement, the result of a struggle to overcome the wild, to impose a system of common laws and the institutions that embody them on a lawless landscape. We come to think of our ambient not as a temporary approximation to some ideal of permanence, but as itself permanent. We are The People who have existed from the beginning of time, holding high the ideal toward which all the world's peoples should strive. Ours is a bounded ambient but an unthreatened one, ancient beyond imagining and as everlasting as the surrounding mountains. We take our good fortune for granted because we are not aware there is anything on which it depends and so nothing we need fear. The old ways and beliefs are self-justifying: they have always worked in the past and so they can be counted on to work in the future.

Thus a bounded ambient becomes another kind of flight from the radical contingency of the world. We imagine ourselves living in a world in no danger of destabilization because stabilized by an ultimate reality, or in a world where destabilization is taken as inconceivable because at odds with the range of possibilities its presumed stability affords. Both interpretations are blind to the dangers their ambient order has avoided, by a bit of good luck and a lot of hard work on the part of its citizens. One interpretation insists on the reality of ultimate ontological conditions and agencies, denying that these realities are of human origin, crafted as a way to achieve very human ends and so only temporary. The other interpretation insists that what is not known to have happened cannot happen, insisting that the ordered conditions giving meaning to life must therefore be permanent and so can be ignored because they are never in danger and hence never at issue.

The fate of such blindness to the necessity of contingency is to perish prematurely. In a world always changing, a hard carapace is at best a short-term adaptive strategy. Without flexibility, an organism or a group or a civilization will eventually face what it does not know

how to avoid and will be shattered by unexpected blows for which it was not prepared. Living in a world where all things, including all makers, are vulnerable, we need constantly to do new things in new ways in order to cushion our vulnerability. Meaningful boundaries need to be established, functionally useful procedures put in place, but they cannot be taken as permanent. They must be recognized as having been made for reasons that may at any time no longer be relevant. The wild, in all its unknown power and mystery, must be recognized as an inescapable threat to the pleasant garden of our established ways.

Knowing we remain at risk, however, that our flight from risk has failed, is not enough. We need to use contingency positively, as a way to achieve a meaningful future by transforming our closed ambient into an open one.

Open ambients

In a world that has no ultimates, in which contingency is an inescapable fact, stability can never be guaranteed. It is always a temporary solution to processes that wear away and work around whatever well-wrought structures we might erect, whatever boundary conditions for such structures we might establish. How do we continue to live meaningfully if we abandon belief in a guarantee of the conditions for that meaning? How do we realize that there are limits to the ways by which we can secure our world against the destruction of its protections? How can we discover alternatives to the world as we know it, alternatives that it harbors but hides? Let me suggest three ways by which to break out of the constraints of our bounded ambients in order to further the survival of meaningful conditions for how we might live.

First, there are the strangers we encounter, their strange ways shattering our confidence in the self-evidence of our well-established beliefs and practices. However odd their dress and speech, their attitudes and mannerisms, they are living breathing humans whose ambient, like ours, has boundaries, but ones clearly not ours. Yet these are human-fashioned boundaries, so not unintelligible. To discover a world other than our own by encountering people who embody it is to realize concretely that our world's boundaries can be transgressed. An abstract claim about the virtue of boundary transgression permits us to wonder in leisure about its truth or falsity. But strangers are a living presence that forces our acknowledgment of the viability of their worlds and hints at alternative ways of being human that we might explore—and should; or must.

Art offers us another way by which the boundaries of our ambient are revealed as transgressible. It does so by presenting truths that cannot be said, not by asserting that something is true but by revealing it as true. One fundamental boundary of a society is that created by the limits of its language, for all is silence beyond what can be said. No theory can point our way into that silence, no set of facts pave a path, no rational extrapolation parachute us to a destination of which we are ignorant. It's no wonder that beyond what we can say is thought to be beyond what is real. Linguistic faltering is not due to bumping up against an ultimate boundary, however, but rather a cultural one, the outer limit of a coherent world order thought to be adequate but disclosed by the work of art to be inadequate. Beyond the boundary of our linguistically established world is more reality: things and events, and possibilities of things and events, that our world has left out. Any coherent system, any world, is necessarily finite, for reality is too complex to be contained within a coherent harmonic whole. Art can offer us a glimpse into what our established boundaries have excluded, let us hear what they have silenced, touch what they have denied as real. This beyond that art discloses is more than what we know, not other. It's a wider reality, not a different one. A beyond that is a function of our limited familiar world, and that will change if the boundaries of our world change.

In contrast, metaphors are a use of language that undermines the stability of our linguistic framework and hence the protections of the established boundaries of what can meaningfully be said, thought, or even imagined. A metaphor does this by taking the framework from one world of discourse and using it in place of the appropriate framework for the content of another world. It involves a shift of standpoint from a context where it is appropriate to another where it is not, thereby committing the signal sin of literalism: a category mistake. Except that a metaphor is not a mistake but rather a transformation. Romeo, seeing Juliet on the balcony above him, exclaims:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

(Shakespeare "Romeo and Juliet": Act 2, Scene 1)

Now obviously, Juliet is by no means the sun; she's a young Capulet girl with whom Romeo has fallen in love. It is daybreak, Juliet's balcony faces west, and Romeo notes quietly to himself, and quite accurately, that the sun is just rising above the horizon behind it. But then he whispers a blatant falsehood, referring to her as the sun even though she is only human. The literal meaning is foolish, but Romeo is not speaking nonsense. He's in love, and lovers know how to use language in ways other than scientists use it, but with no less truth. Romeo takes the astronomical framework offered by the blaze of light announcing the sun's appearance, and uses it to describe his love: Juliet is the sun. A bevy of lovely implications suggest themselves: Romeo is a planet pulled into her orbit, captured by her, nurtured by her presence, dazzled by her radiance, unable to live without her. Negative implications hover at the edges, however: she is dangerous to approach too closely, her grandeur diminishing his to triviality.

An analogy works within a bounded ambient. Juliet is said to be like the sun with respect to something specific, her radiance for example. The framework is the standardly accepted one, within which a comparison is pointed out: there is a radiance to Juliet that is similar to the sun's, but of course different in kind and intensity. Romeo, however, is not making a comparison; Juliet *is* the sun. What this means is fundamentally unclear, the extent to which the astronomical framework alters the Italian content left vague, offering indefinite possibilities for what is meant. His metaphor creates an unresolvable tension between two standpoints, one of them astronomical and one cultural. And yet it is precisely because the metaphor holds these irreconcilables together, holds together a framework with boundaries that have no place for Juliet and another framework for which suns and moons and planets are of no concern, that our taken-for-granted view of things, our familiar way of understanding what goes on, is shaken and new possibilities able to breach its walls. Romeo's claim about Juliet is not factually true, but neither is it merely a rhetorical confection. It is his realization, and ours, of a deep truth about himself: the transforming intensity with which he loves that girl on the balcony. It is a change, but not like his earlier recognition of her genetic heritage. When Romeo realized that Juliet is a Capulet, his existing perspective was affirmed, changing Juliet from an attractive new acquaintance into an enemy he obviously must disdain. But now, realizing that Juliet is for him the sun, Romeo's earlier perspective is replaced by another, the implications of which are unclear, unsettling, and can be true only if taken as meaning that he has discovered that she is for him more valuable in a way fundamentally different in kind and importance than what he had thought.

So boundaries, although necessary, are never fully adequate. They can be breached; there is always more than what is contained in any of our philosophies. Strangers, works of art, and metaphorical expressions are important examples of the kinds of occasion in

which we are carried beyond the limits of our familiar ambient, shoved dramatically or lured step by quiet step into the presence of more than we thought actual or possible. But this more is relative to a finite system; there is no absolute beyond.

Boundaries are necessary to meaning. Systems, to function well within the confines of their applicability, must be coherent and adequate. Order is essential to both inorganic and organic existence, to natural processes independent of human control and to human processes, including languages and cultures. But not just any order. Ordered processes need to be dynamic, able to adjust to changes capable of destabilizing them. Human order, to be effective, must be adaptively purposeful, its processes able to be redirected from the pursuit of initially determined outcomes toward ones found to be more likely to succeed. When our efforts at stabilization fail, when the boundary walls crucial to the endurance of our world system are breached, we can simply repair the walls, or buttress them so they do the old job better, or redesign them. All these options, however, result in reaffirming the established reason for the wall being there. What is to be done if the problem is that very reason, and therefore the wall it justifies? What if the fissures in the wall have revealed a beyond that cannot be ignored, that makes it clear the problem is the inadequacy of the system of which the broken walls are boundaries? How do we make the transition from a closed to an open ambient?

To begin with, we need to realize that the beyond of the culturally given is not a destructive agency that will leave us and our familiar purposes and practices bereft of meaning. The unknown is not unknowable. It is an unexplored land, a wilderness into which we can journey and from which we can return, because it is a continuation of the world that we know. It is what our world could have included but did not, a part of our world but without our world's pathways and waypoints, and because knowable, it might be relevant to our needs. In short, the boundless is a resource for reshaping the bounded. There can be no final achievements, no absolute systems, because any bounded system is finite. It leaves things out, with respect not only to its conditions for membership and its design of how member elements should be organized, but also to the shifting features of its ambient. Boundary-making is a journey with waypoints but no fixed destination, because goals in an ever-changing ambient are initially vague and can be clarified only by assuming a stability that is always at risk. There can be no fixed waypoints either, since as the destination changes so does the pathway and hence the waypoints.

So a meaningful open ambient is a creation always in the making. But the power of agents to create what is meaningful and the ability of their ambient to provide the conditions that make this possible must be constantly remade. Both agent and ambient must change so that they can both endure. Together they can marshal the power to invent on the fly solutions that suffice. Organisms interacting with other organisms are able to fashion mutual ambients that complicate these solution-making processes, but in doing so they also make possible new forms of sustainability and the emergence of higher orders of meaning, in particular human civilizations. The power to create a reality that makes it possible to amend that reality, in endless symbiosis, is how there can be a meaningful world in which humans live meaningful lives that increase the likelihood they will be able—for a while—to continue doing so.

Solemnity

I have characterized the world as composed exclusively of necessarily finite things—matters-of-fact of all kinds—but focusing on those with which we are most familiar: ourselves. I have characterized us as complex systems intrinsically related to other systems, oriented toward outcomes that perpetuate ourselves as individuals and as members of groups, creating novel systems

that make our individual and collective lives more secure and meaningful. I have questioned approaches for achieving these aims that rely on supposed ultimate non-finite realities, arguing that we have only ourselves on which to rely, selves profoundly influencing and influenced by others: by other humans, other organisms, all the matters-of-fact that comprise our ambient. I have argued that we need to recognize the limitations of closed-boundary finite systems and affirm the adaptive power of those with open boundaries.

This understanding is “religious” in the sense that it affirms and seeks to express in daily life what is of ultimate significance: the making and securing of contingent matters-of-fact by the contingent efforts of contingent creatures in their endless struggle to create and sustain the only intrinsic values there can be. What is ultimate, worthy of our allegiance and source of our meaning, is a world of comings to be and perishings, a limited process with limited products, but of unlimited worth. To explain myself, I will draw out some ideas from Alfred North Whitehead’s last two books.

Whitehead begins *Modes of Thought* by suggesting that among the ultimate notions with which philosophers should concern themselves two are fundamental: importance and matter-of-fact (1938: 4). Anything created “expresses its nature as being *this*, and not *that* ... [I]t expresses exclusion; and exclusion means finitude.” But this finitude is “combined with the sense of modes of infinitude stretching beyond each finite fact” (78). What is merely finite is trivial; what is merely infinite is vacuous. “Importance arises from this fusion of the finite and the infinite” (79), an importance best expressed in the phrase “Have a care, here is something that matters!” (116).

The experience of actualities as mattering has on Whitehead’s analysis three aspects, no one of them more significant than the other two: Intensity, Externality, and Totality. I sense my own intrinsic importance, my here-and-now factuality as a unique person with my unique story of achievements and failures, striving as best I can to live as well as possible. I’m also aware of other matters-of-fact, ones of which I am right now aware, but also those previously encountered or heard about or imagined as possible, friends and enemies, animal, vegetable, mineral, each with its own intrinsic importance. I am aware of myself and these others comprising a whole world stretching indefinitely in all directions, modes, and manners, a boundless totality of intrinsically important finite achievements.

My recognition of matters-of-fact as important in this threefold way is how I come to sense the “full solemnity of the world” (78). A sense of solemnity is not an experience of the sublime, of standing in awe at the immensity of the world, its vast measureless totality. It is not a spectacle that I behold but a reality of which I am a part. For I and my ambient are interdependent, and my sense of the totality of the world is my sense of the extent of that ambient. It is my awareness of the “necessary relevance” of my concrete here-and-now self, of this that I have made of my life, to what lies “beyond its own limitations.” This sense of relevance beyond my finite matter-of-fact self is my “perspective of the universe” (79), a perspective that is necessary, for “mere matter-of-fact refuses to be deprived of its relevance to potentialities beyond its own actuality of realization” (83). My perspective, when it includes an appreciation, however dim, however far short of specific knowledge, of the perspectives of all other matters-of-fact, is the sense of totality. Totality is therefore not a reality other than myself. It is my importance, that of what I am that reaches beyond me, and that reaches beyond every other matter-of-fact, because it is our common creation.

“Actuality,” says Whitehead, “is the self-enjoyment of importance. But this self-enjoyment has the character of the self-enjoyment of others melting into the enjoyment of the one self” (117–18). He immediately offers as “the most explicit example” of what he means the fusing of

the remembered various self-enjoyments of the sequence of our recently past selves with our current self-enjoyment (118). The “one self,” in other words, is the unique individual, myself for instance, whose present achieved actuality includes a sense of other individuals with their differing actualities, including those the actuality of which is only possible, and is at the same time a sense of myself and all those others selves as a boundless ongoing interdependent whole.

Crucially, the value of each individual matter-of-fact is intrinsic, including in its value the value of all other matters-of-fact, and hence including “our sense of the value, for its own sake, of the totality of historic fact in respect to its essential unity” (119). Whitehead’s immediate example is “the subtle beauty of a flower in some isolated glade of a primeval forest.” No creature with the capacity to do so has ever experienced that beauty, including the flower itself, and yet its beauty “is a grand fact in the universe” (120). Things that have no utility for us, and seemingly none for anyone else or any other thing, have intrinsic worth in their own right, each of them a grand fact in the universe. Totality so experienced, resplendent with a recognition of “the value of the details for the totality,” is an experience of “holiness,” of “the sacred” (120). The value of the totality is the value of its details, a value not reducible to the details but vacuous without them. To sense how precious each particular thing is, and how crucial it is to why every other particular thing is precious, is to sense how precious the totality is, how interdependent the fragile finite makings of the world. This world, the grand fact that is the totality of grand facts, is sacred because it is beyond price, holy because intrinsically precious. Qualities that are transferred in traditional religions to a supernatural Creator or Ground, Source or Guide, belong properly to the natural order, the world of particulars in communion, endlessly creating value and created by it.

At the end of *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead describes the power of beauty—of finite ideals—to lure us within the limitations of our ambience to seek their actualization, to make under their tutelage new matters-of-fact. But these are finite powers, functioning within a finite ambience, and in their exercise we can only succeed approximately if at all. Hence the sense of tragic beauty and the intuition of peace to which it gives rise.

The recognition of tragic beauty has been a fundamental theme of this essay, echoing Whitehead’s instance that “Decay, Transition, Loss, Displacement belong to the essence of the Creative Advance” (1933: 286). Acknowledging these facts is not to suggest Macbeth’s counsel of despair, however, because they are necessary features of finitude. The flower in the forest may bloom gloriously, but it might wither before it can bloom because of draught or be destroyed in a storm or eaten by a grazing herbivore. And yet it matters, as do the words in this essay, as do Romeo’s words to Juliet, as does the creation of civilized societies. For they are matters-of-fact, the results of processes oriented toward the actualization of beauty, the creation of new particulars.

It is natural that we appreciate, and right that we should, the intrinsic value of each of the particular achievements of the immense congregation that comprises the totality of the world, including those that fell short of what they could have been because of their own or their ambient’s limitations. These achievements, meager or cornucopic, are not only intrinsically valuable, however, but also have instrumental value as resources for our own creative efforts. These resources include especially the ideals those achievements failed in part or whole to actualize, ideals not lost but in having become integral to those efforts have been made available for its successors, including us, to actualize. In recognizing that our efforts fall short, and that they will be fleeting even should they succeed, we admit the inescapable tragedy of having ideals. However, argues Whitehead, we should also see “the tragedy as a living agent persuading the world to aim at fineness beyond the faded level of surrounding

fact. Each tragedy is the disclosure of an ideal: —What might have been, and was not: What can be. The tragedy was not in vain” (286).

Loss is inevitable and all too often unredeemable, but such “gross evil” is not “tragic evil,” because the tragedy is motivating, an urgent appeal to others to take up a task anew, to attempt in a new time under new conditions its completion. “The inner feeling belonging to this grasp of the service of tragedy is Peace—the purification of the emotions” (286). Totality is the community of finite things made by predecessors and making successors, sustaining and undermining one another, succeeding and failing, emerging and perishing within an open ambient of boundaries and possibilities. Peace is the sense of belonging to this community and, because tragic beauty is its essence, celebrating it. “Amid the passing of so much beauty, so much heroism, so much daring, Peace is then the intuition of permanence” (286) and “the individual whose strength of experience is founded upon this ultimate intuition, thereby is extending the influence of the source of all order” (292), which is the drive to make and preserve what matters.

Whitehead hesitates about what word he should use to name this intuition (284–85). He rejects Platonic terms like “Harmony,” “Eros,” “Ideas,” and “Mathematical Relations” because of their “absence of ‘life and motion.’” “Tenderness” and “love” emphasize the rejection of “restless egotism,” but they are “too narrow” because specializations of what he wants. “Impersonality” is “too dead.” So Whitehead settles for “Peace,” immediately hastening to insist it is “not the negative conception of anaesthesia” but a “positive feeling which crowns the ‘life and motion’ of the soul.” Nor is it “a hope for the future” or “an interest in present details,” not a focus on importance or a focus on matter-of-fact but rather on their integration. It is a “broadening of feeling,” the first effect of which is “the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul’s preoccupation with itself.” Peace is “a surpassing of personality” through “a trust in the efficacy of Beauty,” its “self-justification.” It is “a grasp of infinitude, an appeal beyond boundaries” whereby “interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality.”

Whitehead tends here to emphasize the problem of narrow self-interest so much that we might overlook that his appeal is not simply to infinitude but to totality, to the infinitude of the efficacy of Beauty. When we trust it, this teaches us that what we can do is what others could and can and will be able also to do: to create what matters, with the help of others and on their behalf. To realize that I am not alone, that my inadequacies are conditions of my humanity, and that what is true of humans is true of all things, that their value lies in what they are, and that what they are is a gift from what has preceded them, offered to them to remake as a gift for what follows after them to shape as best it can.

“At the heart of the nature of things, there are always the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy” (296). At the heart of things. Comprising the world’s essence, its very nature. Both the dream and the harvest. Always. Always ideals of what should matter, embraced and pursued. Always with results that fall short. Always lessons learned, hopes chastised. The sense of Peace is “the immediate experience of this Final Fact, with its union of Youth and Tragedy” (296). All those dreams, all those partial failures, including my dreams and my partial failures, united in one ongoing Totality stretching indefinitely in all modes and dimensions. My life finds its meaning as a matter-of-fact not only in this me here and now, not only in all the other thises and thats there have ever been and ever will be, not only in the intrinsic value of each, not only in the infinitude of those meanings. But in their union, in the great Matter-of-Fact that is the world ever-changingly what it becomes. Through this sense of the solemnity of the world, which is the intuition of Peace, “the World receives its persuasion towards such perfections as are possible for its diverse individual occasions” (296).

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