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Is There an Ethics of Creativity?

Brian G. Henning[1]

Is there an ethics of creativity? Though this question appears innocent enough, it proves surprisingly difficult to answer. A survey of the literature on the topic reveals that process ethics has variously been categorized as or seen as compatible with: moral interest theory, ecological virtue ethics, utilitarianism, Confucian virtue ethics, and even deontology.[2] What can account for such divergent and even contradictory conclusions? On one level we might blame Whitehead, whose sporadic comments on morality may appear to be more suggestive than systematic. While, as I argue elsewhere,[3] there is a greater coherence to Whitehead's statements about morality than is initially apparent, it is undeniable that he never attempted to develop a *theory* of morality. Yet it is unlikely that the state of the texts should shoulder all of the blame for the lack of consensus on the basic nature of process ethics. It would seem that there is a more fundamental problem lurking beneath the surface. Indeed, I suggest that there are at least five basic confusions — four substantive and one methodological — that have vitiated attempts to understand and develop a process approach to morality. Until these confusions are recognized and resolved, we will have no hope of understanding the promise or realizing the potential of the ethics of creativity.

1. The Axiology of Creativity

One of the chief sources of confusion over the *ethics* of creativity can be traced to persistent confusions over the *axiology* of creativity. This should not be surprising given that it is the nature and locus of value which most determines the nature and aim of morality. While most scholars readily recognize that process thought affirms the value and importance of *every* form of actuality, no matter how fleeting or seemingly trivial, there is a surprising degree of disagreement among scholars over how to interpret this point. What exactly does it mean to affirm the value of every individual? It is the widely varying answers to this question which have led to such diverse characterizations of process ethics.

It is helpful to conceive of interpretations of process axiology as occurring along a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum are those positions which locate all value in the subjective process of concrescence, by which process every actual occasion represents a unique achievement of value. Given this

conception of value, scholars such as Paul Arthur Schilpp and David L. Schindler have suggested that the aim of a process ethic would be to maximize subjective value experience and that, therefore, it is essentially an egoistic and subjectivistic moral interest theory.

At the opposite end of this spectrum is the doctrine of "contributionism," which holds that, although each individual aims at and achieves a unique intensity of value, its meaning is ultimately derived from its contribution to the divine life. As Hartshorne characterizes it, the contributionist doctrine states that "the ultimate value of human life, or anything else, consists *entirely* in the contribution it makes to the divine life. Whatever importance we, and those we can help or harm, have is without residue measured by and consists in the delight God takes in our existence."[4] Thus, in stark contrast to the subjectivist interpretation, a contributionist axiology entails that the aim of morality is not to maximize the richness of one's own experience, but to bring about the richest possible experience for the divine life. Though many scholars dispute her interpretation, it is this contributionist conception of value that is the basis for Clare Palmer's claim that process ethics is ultimately a totalizing form of utilitarianism.[5]

Thus, on the one hand, we have scholars claiming that a process approach to morality amounts to a selfish moral interest theory and, on the other hand, we have the interpretation that process ethics requires each individual to unselfishly choose the richest experience for God. If the concrescing subject of experience is given primacy, then process axiology is seen as embracing an egoistic and subjectivistic position. On the other hand, if the individual's relationship to the divine is given primacy, then an individual's self-value is reduced to its relationship to God. What are we to conclude from such divergent positions, both of which claim to accurately characterize process thought?

In a certain sense, both positions are correct. The subjectivist interpretation is correct that every individual represents a unique and irreplaceable achievement of value. However, the contributionist is also right in noting that an individual's value also involves its contribution to the whole or to God. The problem with both the subjectivist and contributionist interpretations is that too often they imply that an individual's value is wholly limited to one or the other of these poles. However, conceived within the context of process thought's organic conception of individuality, we see that an individual's value cannot be reduced either to its value for itself or to its value for God.

Contrary to the subjectivist interpretation, value is *not limited* to the concrescing subject and morality does *not* aim solely at the maximization of value for the subject. And, contrary to the contributionist interpretation, value is *not* limited to an individual's contribution to God. Properly understood, a complete conception of value requires that we equally

recognize the value an individual has for itself, for others in its community, and for the whole, or for God. As we see in the following passage from *Modes of Thought*, this triad of self, other, and whole is at the heart of our understanding not only of value, but actuality itself.

> Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole. This characterizes the meaning of actuality. By reason of this character, constituting reality, the conception of morals arises. We have no right to deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe. Existence, in its own nature, is the upholding of value intensity. Also no unit can separate itself from the others, and from the whole. And yet each unit exists in its own right. It upholds the value intensity for itself, and this involves sharing value intensity with the universe. Everything that in any sense exists has two sides, namely, its individual self and its signification in the universe. Also either of these aspects is a factor of the other. (MT 111)

In this way we see that process thought is grounded in a unique triadic conception of value. As the result of a subjective process of concrescence, every individual has value for itself, but in achieving a felt contrast of value intensity, every individual will contribute that value to others. In determining what it is, each individual has intrinsic value for its own sake and in contributing its achievement of value to others, it has value for those in its community and for the whole universe. This unique, triadic conception of value has several important implications for the understanding and development of a process moral philosophy.

First, it is worth noting, if only briefly, that in affirming the value of every individual occasion of experience, a process ethic can exclude nothing from its scope. Everything is in some sense a moral patient. That is, as intrinsically valuable, every form of actuality must be given moral consideration for its own sake. Second, we see that the failure to fully recognize the unique triadic conception of value that grounds process thought has led to the mischaracterization of process ethics. Morality does not *merely* aim at richness of experience for the subject or for God. "Everything has some value for itself, for others, and for the whole" (MT 111). Finally, we recognize that, unlike many traditional moral philosophies, the aim of a process approach to morality does not derive from the nature of human beings, but rather from the aim of the creative advance of the universe itself. Although morality only becomes relevant with the emergence of moral agents who are complex enough to be conscious and free enough to be responsible,[6] the aim of morality is the same as that of *every form of process*. In this way, to understand the nature of a process approach to ethics requires that we first understand the aim of the creative advance itself. It is

this point which brings me to the second major confusion over the nature of process ethics: the role of beauty.

2. The Aesthetics of Creativity

One of the more distinctive features of process thought is the central role it gives to beauty. As Whitehead puts it, "The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty" (AI 265; see also MT 119). Process is, in this sense, inherently "kalogenic" or beauty generating.[7] The view that the world process is kalogenic has a profound effect on the shape of any would-be Whiteheadian moral philosophy. Insofar as aesthetic experience is the foundation of the world process, all order, including the moral order, is ultimately an aspect of aesthetic order (RM 105). Or, as Whitehead concisely puts it in *Adventures of Ideas*, "The real world is good when it is beautiful" (AI 268).

Given such unequivocal statements regarding the centrality of beauty, its relative absence from discussions of process thought in general and of process ethics in particular, is troubling. Perhaps even more troubling is that those who do examine the relationship between beauty and morality often draw one of two problematic conclusions: either process ethics reduces ethics to aesthetics and is thereby guilty of a vicious aestheticism or it is argued that the reduction is only apparent and that the references to beauty are merely metaphorical. The former position was first put forward by Paul Arthur Schilpp in his 1951 essay "Whitehead's Moral Philosophy." The latter position was most notably defended by Lynne Belaief in her 1984 work *Toward a Whiteheadian Ethics*. As even a brief analysis will reveal, both positions — the charge of aestheticism and the attempt to avoid it — fall short because they fail to adequately understand the rich and complex conception of beauty being advocated.[8]

For both Whitehead and Hartshorne, beauty is best understood in terms of an ideal mean between two sets of extremes. In a sense, you can think of the mean of beauty as being a two-dimensional version of Aristotle's golden mean. Whereas for Aristotle courage is the mean between rashness and cowardliness, for Whitehead and Hartshorne, beauty is the ideal mean between, on the one hand, unity and diversity and, on the other hand, simplicity and complexity.

In order to aid in the understanding of this complex concept of beauty, Hartshorne developed the following diagram[9]:
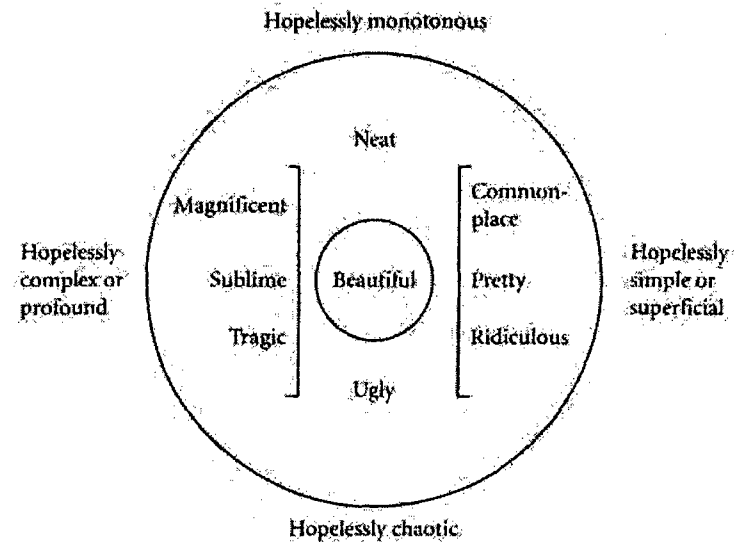
The first thing to note regarding this diagram is that, as inherently kalogenic, every occasion aims at and achieves some form of beauty. The zero of beauty is the zero of actuality. Thus, strictly speaking, there is nothing outside the larger circle, which denotes beauty in the most inclusive sense. The smaller circle, on the other hand, refers to beauty in the truest sense as the ideal mean between these two pairs of extremes. The vertical axis or the axis of harmony describes the aim of process at maximum diversity in unity. When there is an excess of *diversity*, experience becomes chaotic. Yet when there is an excess of *unity*, experience threatens to become monotonous. Truly harmonious experience, therefore, includes as much diversity as possible without sacrificing the unity of experience.

However, as Whitehead notes in *Adventures of Ideas*, the achievement of truly beautiful experience involves more than the "absence of painful clash, the absence of vulgarity" (AI 252). Beauty aims not only at harmony, but also at intensity. Thus, on the horizontal axis or the axis of intensity, the aim is to achieve the ideal balance between simplicity and complexity so as to achieve effective contrast. If an individual's experience is too *simple*, it risks becoming superficial, while experience *lacking* in simplicity threatens to be too profound to grasp. In this way, beauty in the truest sense is understood as the ideal balance between harmony and intensity.

Given this rich conception of beauty, we can see that the charge of a vicious aestheticism is unfounded. While it is true that ethics is ultimately subsumed under aesthetics, this is because according to process thought

every form of process aims at the achievement of beauty. Like everything else in our processive cosmos, morality aims at the realization of beauty. To suggest otherwise is to make morality into an inexplicable aberration. This point also provides a response to those who suggest that the subordination of morality to aesthetics is merely metaphorical. To argue that morality aims at something other than the achievement of the most harmonious and intense experience possible is to introduce an unjustified bifurcation into the heart of process thought that threatens both its coherence and its applicability.

On the other hand, if it is taken seriously, the view that the world process is inherently kalogenic provides an important clue as to how to develop a Whiteheadian moral philosophy. To be specific, if something is only as good as it is beautiful, the complex conditions of a beautiful experience are also the conditions of a moral experience. Morality, like every form of process, aims at the most harmonious (unity in diversity) and intense (balanced complexity) whole that we can see. It is this insight which has guided my own attempt to develop a process ethic, which takes as our most basic concern the obligation always to act in such a way as to bring about the greatest degree of beauty and value which in each situation is possible.[10] Of course, my own approach is far from the only way to attempt such a project. For instance, in his recent trilogy, Frederick Ferré develops a rich and promising moral philosophy that puts beauty at its center.[11]

However, my point at present is not to defend the relative merits of either of these approaches. Rather, my point is that until we recognize that morality, like every form of process, aims at the achievement of beauty, we will have no hope of understanding either the nature or value of a process approach to morality.

3. A Multidimensional Continuum

The affirmation of the triadic nature of value and the kalogenic nature of process introduces our third substantive point of concern: while every achievement of actuality is a unique realization of value and beauty, the depth of value and beauty achieved by a given individual varies. Put in terms of the discussion of value above we can say that, although every individual is equal in *having* value, every individual does not have value *equally*. Put in the language of aesthetics we might say that, although no experience is lacking in beauty, the depth of beauty achieved by an individual varies.

Process scholars have, rightly in my opinion, insisted that there are real and potentially morally significant differences between, for instance, humans and bacteria or between horses and mosquitoes. Indeed, it is a

distinct advantage of a process position that it is able to meaningfully explain these differences. Unfortunately, for many otherwise sympathetic scholars, the affirmation of differing degrees of beauty and value raises two serious concerns: (1) that a process approach amounts to an invidious hierarchy of being and (2) that, given the likely position of humans within this hierarchy, process ethics is little more than a "thinly veiled" form of anthropocentrism.[12]

To a large extent, I share critics' concerns over the historical role that ontological hierarchies have played within moral philosophy. The invidious use of such hierarchies have often been tools of violence and domination, justifying, among other things, the wanton destruction of the environment, the subjugation of women, and the devastation of "less civilized" cultures. In this important sense, concerns over the *invidious* use of metaphysical and axiological hierarchies are justified. The question, then, is whether the form of hierarchy entailed by process thought is in fact invidious. There are two reasons to suggest that it is not.[13]

First, it is important to note that affirming that there are different grades of value and beauty does not necessarily commit one to a traditional "chain of being." Indeed, rather than a one-dimensional hierarchy, the conception of value and beauty outlined above would seem to imply a multidimensional continuum.[14] The axiology being defended is a true continuum in the sense that there are no absolute gaps. Everything has some degree of value and beauty. However, it is not a flat or one-dimensional hierarchy. Rather, the continuum of value and beauty is complex and multi-dimensional, running from the trivial to the profound. Yet, even the notion of a multidimensional continuum is unlikely to allay all concerns.

Thus, beyond noting the complexity of the continuum being advanced, we should recognize that the problem is not with the notion of a continuum or hierarchy *per se*. What makes a hierarchy invidious is not merely the affirmation that one individual has achieved or is capable of achieving a deeper, more intense form of beauty and value than another, but rather the additional conclusion that this fact *determines* its moral significance. However, a closer examination of process thought reveals that an individual's "onto-aesthetic status" — the depth of beauty and value it has achieved and is capable of achieving — *is relevant to but not constitutive of* its moral significance. Although the potential and actual depth of an individual's beauty and value will be an *important* factor determining the morality of a course of action, its onto-aesthetic status does *not* wholly constitute its moral significance.

In this way we see that the moral agent's task is *not* simply to affirm the beauty and value of the most complex individuals. Rather, an individual's moral significance is dependent upon the extent to which, in a particular situation, the realization of its interests would foster or frustrate the

achievement of the most intense and harmonious whole possible. Whitehead put this point quite well when he argued that, "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" (MT 14-15). Ultimately, the morality of an action is determined not by the extent to which the preferences of more complex individuals are affirmed at the expense of less complex, but by the extent to which we affirm the greatest degree of beauty and value achievable in the situation taken as a whole.

Given this conclusion, we see that process thought is not a thinly veiled form of anthropocentrism as some have claimed. Given a proper understanding of the role and nature of beauty, we see that our obligation is not merely to affirm the beauty and value of "higher-grade" individuals. Rather, our obligation is always and everywhere to affirm the greatest beauty and value which in each situation we can see. A genuine ethic of creativity, therefore, is not anthropocentric, but neither is it sentientcentric, biocentric, or ecocentric. The ethics of creativity is irrevocably kalocentric;[15] "The real world is good when it is beautiful" (AI 268).

4. Society, Self-Identity, and Moral Responsibility

The final substantive impediment to developing a viable process ethic concerns one of the most basic tenets of process thought: its rejection of the classical conception of individuals as static substances with accidental adventures, in favor of the view of reality as composed of internally related events or "actual occasions." Accordingly, enduring objects such as oak trees, golden retrievers, and human beings are not the most basic ontological units. Rather, they are complex "societies" of actual occasions.

This conception of a macroscopic individual as a society of occasions, introduces a potentially serious problem for the development of a process approach to morality: if the most basic ontological units are occasions of experience which only become and perish, but which do not change and have no history (AI 204), how can we meaningfully talk about moral responsibility? If you can't, as Whitehead once remarked, "catch a moment by the scruff of the neck,"[16] how are we to hold it accountable? For as Norris Clarke aptly noted, it is one thing to take responsibility for a predecessor's action and it is quite another to take responsibility for having personally committed an action oneself.[17] If process thought cannot do justice to our experience of macroscopic individuality, then any ethical theory based on it will be doomed to fail before it ever begins. The challenge, then, is to

develop a conception of macroscopic individuality which, on the one hand, avoids committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness or violating the ontological principle and, on the other hand, is robust enough to do justice to the undeniable unity which we experience of ourselves and of other macroscopic objects. While a complete treatment of this important issue is not possible in this context, we can suggest a line of thought that would respond to this important concern.

While it is true that process metaphysics insists on the ontological principle that the most fundamental ontological units of reality are ephemeral pulses of energy, this does not require that we abandon all reference to macroscopic individuality. What it does require is that we account for, rather than begin from, the forms of order we see around us. The most basic form of social order is what Whitehead calls a "nexus," which is essentially any form of togetherness, from a jumbled aggregate to an integral organism. When the internal relations between members of a nexus become intense enough to genetically impose a common characteristic on subsequent members, then the occasions form a "society" with a "defining characteristic" (what has traditionally been called the essential form). If the organization of the society is sufficiently complex, as it is in the case of animals, the society is able to act *as a whole*. Thus, although in the strictest metaphysical sense the ontological principle limits agency to actual occasions, with Joseph A. Bracken I find that in order to make sense of the experience of complex structured societies such as ourselves, it is necessary to affirm some meaningful sense in which societies exercise what Bracken calls "collective agency." In complex, structured societies, such as animals, the "soul" or regnant personally ordered subsociety allows the structured society as a whole to be a subject of experience and to make decisions in a way that is not possible in organisms which lack a central nervous system.[18]

An organic model of individuality, then, is able to *meaningfully*, not just metaphorically, refer to macroscopic wholes as "individuals" in a way that not only avoids committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and violating the ontological principle, but also does justice to our experience of ourselves and of other macroscopic individuals. Furthermore, in so doing, it demonstrates that an organic model of individuality is, in principle, able to support meaningful, personal moral responsibility.

5. New Wineskins

Finally, beyond these substantive concerns regarding value, beauty, and self-identity, I add one last concern regarding methodology. One of the mistakes which has most thwarted the development of a genuine process approach to morality is that too often scholars insist on conceiving of

process ethics as an instance of existing moral paradigms, such as utilitarianism, virtue ethics, or even deontology. Of course, one might ask, what is wrong with drawing analogies between process ethics and traditional moral theories? After all, Whitehead himself often described his metaphysics by comparing it to the systems of Leibniz, Locke, Plato, and others. The problem, I contend, is not in *comparing* a process approach to morality to the philosophies of Mill, Kant, or Confucius, but in trying to *reduce* process ethics to one of these traditions. Although Whitehead's metaphysics is *like* the systems of Leibniz and Plato, no one is tempted to claim it is ultimately a version of one of these metaphysical systems. Why, then, do scholars so often move beyond drawing analogies and attempt to force process ethics to fit within existing ethical traditions? While perhaps understandable, this approach is particularly troubling for process thought, because it risks importing into the system some of the very presuppositions it was designed to avoid. Until we resist the temptation to see it as a version of existing moral paradigms, we are doomed to misunderstand the shape and significance of a process approach to morality.

Ultimately, if we are to have any hope of understanding the nature and potential value of process ethics, we must approach it on its own terms. Once we commit ourselves to the hard work of building the ethics of creativity from the ground up, we will see that the moral theory that flows from process thought is ultimately as unique, fallible, and promising as the metaphysics on which it is based.

Notes

[1] Mount St. Mary's University (MD, U.S.A.). An early version of this essay was originally presented at the Sixth International Whitehead Conference in Salzburg, Austria (July 2006) and benefited greatly from the comments of several scholars. In particular, I wish to thank John Lango and Franklin Gamwell for reminding me of the importance of including a discussion of macroscopic individuality.

[2] These interpretations are defended respectively by: Paul A. Schilpp, "Whitehead's Moral Philosophy," *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead,* ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, 2d ed. (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1951); Gregory James Moses, "Process Ecological Ethics," Center for Process Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, http://www.ctr4process.org./MembersOnly/Member-Papers/vol23no2.htm (accessed February 2, 2001); Clare Palmer, *Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); John W. Lango, "Does Whitehead's Metaphysics Contain an Ethics?" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37 (2001): 515-536; and Nicholas F. Gier, "Whitehead, Confucius, and the Aesthetics of Virtue," *Asian Philosophy* 14 (2004): 171-190.

[3] See my, "Process and Morality," in Weber & Desmond (eds.), *Handbook of Whiteheadian Process Thought* (Ontos Verlag, forthcoming).

[4] Charles Hartshorne, "The Rights of the Subhuman World," *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979): 49-50.

[5] See Palmer, *Environmental Ethics,* esp. 25-29, 212ff. For more on the dialogue between process scholars and Palmer see, Daniel A. Dombrowski, "The Replaceability Argument," *Process Studies* 30 (2001): 22-35; John B. Cobb Jr., "Palmer on Whitehead: A Critical Evaluation," *Process Studies* 33 (2004): 4-23; Timothy Menta, "Clare Palmer's Environmental Ethics and Process Thinking: A Hartshornean Response," *Process Studies* 33 (2004): 24-45; Clare Palmer, "Response to Cobb and Menta," *Process Studies* 33 (2004): 46-70.

[6] I thank Frederick Ferré for this concise formulation of moral agency. See Frederick Ferré, *Living and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 140.

[7] This term was coined by Ferré, *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 340.

[8] For a more developed treatment of this important claim, see my essay "On the Possibility of a Whiteheadian Aesthetics of Morals," *Process Studies* 31 (2002): 97-114. See also chapter four of my *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). For a detailed treatment of Hartshorne's conception of beauty, see Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Divine Beauty: The Aesthetics of Charles Hartshorne* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

[9] According to Hartshorne, this diagram was created by himself, Max Dessoir, and Kay Davis. He describes the former as a German writer on aesthetics and the latter as an artist and former student of his from Emory University. See Charles Hartshorne, "The Kinds and Levels of Aesthetic Value," *The Zero Fallacy and Other Essays in Neoclassical Philosophy*, ed. Mohammad Valady (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1997), 205. For another version of this diagram see Hartshorne's, "The Aesthetic Matrix of Value," *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1970), 305.

[10] See Henning, *Ethics of Creativity, op. cit.,* esp. chapter 5.

[11] See especially Frederick Ferré, *Living and Value, op. cit.*

[12] The deep ecologist John Rodman makes this claim in "Four Forms of Ecological Consciousness Reconsidered," *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 125. In this context, see also, John B. Cobb, Jr., "Deep Ecology and Process Thought," *Process Studies* 30 (2001): 112-31.

[13] While valuable in its own right, Whitehead's extended discussion of hierarchies in *Science and the Modern World* is not helpful in this context (166ff.). In SMW, Whitehead is concerned with hierarchies of eternal objects which are "entirely within the realm of possibility." Whereas eternal objects are "devoid of real togetherness" and "remain within their 'isolation'" (169), the intense relationships among the occasions constituting a macroscopic individual (society) are intimately related and interdependent. What is at issue in the present context is not the relationships between sets of otherwise isolated eternal objects, but rather the comparative depth of beauty and value achievable by different concrete individuals.

[14] Ferré, *Being and Value, op. cit.,* p. 374.

[15] Again, I am indebted to Ferré for this valuable formulation. See Ferré, *Living and Value, op. cit..*

[16] Ernest William Hocking, "Whitehead as I Knew Him," *Alfred North Whitehead: Essays on His Philosophy*, ed. George L. Kline (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), 8.

[17] See W. Norris Clarke, "God and the Community of Existents: Whitehead and St. Thomas," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 158 (2000), 268. For an extended discussion of Clarke's criticisms of process thought and my own defense of an organic theory of individuality, see my "Getting Substance to Go All the Way: Norris Clarke's Neo-Thomism and the Process Turn," *The Modern Schoolman* 81 (2004): 215-225.

[18] See Joseph A. Bracken, *Society and Spirit: A Trinitarian Cosmology* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991) and *The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).