

WHITEHEAD'S PHILOSOPHY OF CIVILIZATION: IDEAS, GREAT INDIVIDUALS, EDUCATION, AND THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Kevin K. J. Durand, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Abstract

In Whitehead's view, there are five factors in the development and endurance of a human civilization – Ideas, Great Individuals (perhaps Heroes), Education, the Inanimate World, and Economic Activity. A necessary condition for the development of a virtuous civilization is the embrace of certain Ideas (e.g., Freedom, Peace, etc.) first by Great Individuals and ultimately by the society as a whole, more or less. That is, in one way or another, the society comes to know (or more likely, embody) certain Ideas. Whitehead's paradigm for this is the progression of Anglo-American society from one in which the Idea of Slavery was accepted over Freedom to one in which the reverse was true; that is, from a society in which Slavery was embedded in the web of concepts that formed its cultural identity to a civilization in which Freedom assumed that central role and Slavery was marginalized. His model of this paradigm is the Methodist movement in England and the colonies (and later the States) during the 18th and 19th centuries. I argue in this paper that this aspect of Whitehead's view is a plausible reading of the importance of Ideas to the development of Civilization and that he presents contemporary philosophy with a potentially fruitful way of addressing the problem of Collective Action that is often seen as a result of Rational Choice Theory.

“**N**owadays, to be intelligible is to be found out.”^[1] The dense, technical vocabulary employed by Alfred North Whitehead, standing as an exemplar of that jargon-filled language that often makes arguments inaccessible, seems to exemplify this quip from Oscar Wilde. Surprisingly, Whitehead's philosophy of civilization, explicated in a number of places (*Adventures of Ideas*, *Process and Reality*, *Modes of Thought*), is some of his clearest work. Paradoxically, it is the work for which he is least known. However, as A.H. Johnson put it, “those who had personal contact with Professor Whitehead quickly became aware of his great interest in the problems of civilized living, not only in the area of theory, but also in the realm of practice.”^[2] This is not to say that there are not some opaque passages and highly technical vocabulary, but in his discussions of civilization, Whitehead makes perhaps his most extensive use of examples to clarify his view. I suspect this contributes to Johnson's assertion (unargued) that Whitehead's views of civilization are quite plausible.^[3] There are at least three potential criticisms of a Whiteheadian view that would serve to unravel its plausibility: (1) Collective Action Theory, (2) a naive [Johnsonian] reading, and (3) the Myth of Progress. I argue for the plausibility of Whitehead's view by addressing the three potential criticisms.

1. Introduction

I limit the scope of the discussion to three facets of Whitehead's view of civilization: Ideas, Great Individuals, and Education. The first two are necessary (though not sufficient) for a

society to become “civilized.”^[4] I will address briefly Whitehead’s definition of civilization before turning to potential criticisms in Sections 3, 4, and 5. I conclude with some thoughts about Whitehead’s view of Education in Section 6.

There are some preliminary remarks about Whitehead’s overall project that need to be made. One distinguishing characteristic is a two-fold analysis of the topic. Whitehead advances theories about both the micro and macro levels of reality, but is ultimately committed to causal explanations at both, neither of which is strictly identical with the others. That is, he develops causal theories at the macro level that are not ultimately reducible to those at the micro level, and vice versa.^[5]

That Whitehead’s work proceeds at two levels (at least) is another reason that his work seems, at times, less than completely penetrable. However, by keeping this approach in mind, it makes it easier to clarify his position. This is especially true in the following sections where his view and RCT and Collective Action are addressed respectively.

A final assumption needs to be addressed before moving on. Given his process metaphysics, it is not odd that Whitehead should hold something like the following:

Civilized Society Principle: If civilized societies exist (or have existed) at all, they have developed from societies to which the moniker “civilized” could not appropriately be applied and they have ceased (or will cease) to exist. Or, more simply put, civilizations rise and fall, come to be and perish.

2. The View

2.1 - Ideas

Despite the complex language, Whitehead’s notion of “idea,” at least as it is relevant to this paper, is fairly straightforward. That is not to suggest that it is uncontroversial. For the most part, Whitehead equates “idea” with “ideal,” reflecting a platonic twist. Controversies about ontology aside, suffice it to say that Whitehead uses “idea” to mean those ideas of a grand sort; e.g., Justice, Freedom, etc. This differentiates “idea” from its more vulgar usage; e.g., the idea of half-priced hamburgers after 5:00 p.m. on Tuesdays. The primary characteristic of any idea, whether it be grand or vulgar, is the persuasive power which it possesses. More formally, this can be expressed as follows:

Persuasive Ideas Principle: Any idea possesses a persuasive power.

This is not some sort of magical power inherent in the idea. Rather, the Persuasive Ideas Principle expresses what Whitehead takes to be an empirical claim that arises from his observations of the efficacy of ideas in the realm of science. In his work *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead goes to great lengths to show how many of the great ideas of science can be traced from humble beginnings to profound influence upon the human community. As Johnson says, “[Whitehead] contends that as we think, so we live.”^[6] Thus, as the ideas with which a society identifies change, so will the character of the society. Whitehead is merely

expressing the observation that ideas, great and small, have within them the power to move people. Or in language that would be more amenable to Whitehead, ideas are lures that attract people to the ideals that they represent. What then differentiates the great from the small is the sort of attraction. In the case of Freedom, the lure is a stirring of the intellect – permanent and persuasive. In the case of the half-priced burgers, to the extent that there is a stirring at all, it is of the belly – transient and for the most part ineffectual.

2.2 - Ideas and Great Individuals

Ideas on their own, in abstraction from the world, are largely ineffectual even if they are great ideas. For ideas to be actualized in any real way, there must be individuals who put them into practice. Or, “The ideas must be understood, accepted, and applied by human beings.”^[7] Thus, the role of individuals is indispensable in the development and actualization of great ideas. Yet the question that arises from these remarks would seem to be “How is it that great individuals cause ideas to be actualized in human society and thus advance a society towards civilization?”

Simply put, great individuals give expression to ideas and, through persuasion, lure societies of people to understand, accept, and apply them. So, what does it mean to give expression to ideas? In Whitehead’s view, “expression” means “to introduce novelty.”^[8] Or, the introduction of novelty that marks the expression of an idea is the drawing out of possibilities for the society that heretofore have been unexpressed. This becomes somewhat clearer in example. The paradigm case of Whitehead’s view is the movement from society’s presupposition of slavery to the presupposition of freedom. He writes, “the growth of the idea of the essential rights of human beings, arising from their sheer humanity, affords a striking example in the history of ideas.”^[9]

Because the subject matter is civilization and the lives of individuals living in communities, it is not surprising that such supremely ethical notions as Freedom and Justice make up the majority of those ideas that Whitehead classifies as ideals. It is also not surprising that ethical notions are at the center of what Whitehead takes to be the development of civilization. He sums up the interplay between ideas, individuals, and the social change that the former two can introduce in this way, “In ethical ideas, we find the supreme example of consciously formulated ideas acting as a driving force effecting transitions from social state to social state. Such ideas are at once gadflies irritating, and beacons luring, the victims among whom they dwell.”^[10]

Thus, ideas and great individuals play a causal role in social change and the development of civilization. Ideas represent ideals for which individuals and societies can strive. Individuals sense those possibilities, especially those that introduce novelty into the society, and strive to actualize them. An example, not used by Whitehead, but entirely consistent with his own, is Harriet Tubman – a woman lured by the ideal of Freedom who envisioned possibilities for her people who had themselves, to varying degrees, dreamed of the ideal, and then sought, through the Underground Railroad and at great personal peril, to actualize that ideal in society, one life at a time. The following Whiteheadian example of social change brought about through the

interplay between great individuals and ideas will hopefully illuminate these topics further.

2.3 - Example: Slavery to Freedom

It has not always been the case that human rights, including the individual right to self-determination, have been recognized. Indeed, Lincoln's "peculiar institution" is one of the more pervasive features of societies from ancient Greece (and earlier) through the 19th century United States (and later). Today, it is considered to be one of the more odious features of our ancestors' legacy. Clearly significant social change has occurred. This is Whitehead's paradigm of positive social change.

Whitehead recalls that the Methodist movement in England in the middle 18th century and then in England and the United States from the late 18th century throughout the 19th played perhaps the largest single role in eradicating slavery in Europe and America. That change did not take place overnight nor is it the product of any one individual.[\[11\]](#) Overcoming slavery and embracing freedom were together the culmination of thousands of years of fits and starts. Questions about the appropriateness of slave-holding date to ancient Greece, a society in which slavery was widely accepted if not as widely practiced. But those questions did not issue in the overthrow of slavery. That would be many years later, when, as Whitehead writes, the "right time" had arrived. He writes, "It is true that the Methodists produced the final wave of popular feeling which drove the anti-slavery movement to success. But the Methodist movement succeeded because it came at the right time."[\[12\]](#)

Whitehead is not saying that the overthrow of slavery was somehow prescribed to occur at a particular time. Rather, he means to suggest that the time had come when society had become sufficiently persuaded of the virtue of freedom and the vice of servitude for the change to occur. Great individuals, driven by high aims, brought the particular idea of freedom to expression. Whitehead concludes his example of this developmental feature of civilization in this way:

Thus in the evolution of the strands of thought which constituted the final stage in the destruction of the iniquitous slave-foundation of civilization, there are interwoven the insights and the heroisms of sceptical humanitarians, of Catholics, of Methodists, of Quakers. But the intellectual origin of the movement is to be traced back for more than two thousand years to the speculations of the philosophical Greeks upon functions of the human soul, and its status in the world of flux.[\[13\]](#)

Thus, the idea of Freedom gains expression in a society in which Slavery had previously been seen as foundational through the efforts of widely varied individuals to whom the moniker "hero" is properly attached. Social change is brought about by great individuals, lured by grand ideas, seeking to express previously unexpressed possibilities.

3. Collective Action and Rational Choice

There is a criticism to which Whitehead's view may be particularly susceptible. Given the reliance on ideas and great individuals, his view is perhaps even more dependent upon the rationality of agents and those agents' choices for the good of themselves and the classes to

which they belong. In Whitehead's picture, Great Individuals need not (and often do not) consider themselves first and foremost in their decision-making. Or, given Whitehead's picture, there needs to be a way of addressing the Collective Action problem of Rational Choice Theory. At the same time, it would seem that more than great individuals, drawn by grand ideas, is necessary for social change of the sort necessary for widespread expression of ideas like Freedom, for example. I will propose a solution to these problems. In short, the problem amounts to this: Given that what is good for a class or a civilization may require such actions as are not good for any of its particular members, some explanation of individual action in accordance with the good for society over his/her particular good is necessary.

3.1 – Rational Choice Theory

There are at least two primary conceptions of Rational Choice Theory: Daniel Little's and Jon Elster's. In Little's version, there are three basic logical requirements for Rational Choice Theory:

(Little 1) Utility is a function that takes goods as a variable and specifies the value of the good to the agent as a result,

(Little 2) A rational agent always prefers the outcomes with great utility, and

(Little 3) The utility scale is continuous.[\[14\]](#)

Elster's version differs in some important ways:

(Elster 1) The person must be able to compare any two options with each other. He/she must prefer the one, or prefer the other, or think them equally good.

(Elster 2) The person must be consistent in his/her preferences: if he/she prefers an orange to an apple and an apple to a pear, he/she must also prefer the orange to the pear.

(Elster 3) The person must be able to trade off values against each other.[\[15\]](#)

In Little's view, the utility scale must be continuous. This allows the agent to make measurements of the utility of particular options with which she is presented and to choose on the basis of those measures. For Elster, however, the scale need not be continuous. Rather, the requirement is that the agent be consistent and that his preference assignments be transitive (from Elster 2). Thus, all that is required is that the agent is able to say that he prefers an orange to an apple and an apple to a pear and thus it should follow that he prefers an orange to a pear.

Both accounts have difficulty explaining why social change in which no significant utility, or even fairly significant disutility, for the individual agents involved can and does occur. One might suspect that this is a difficulty to which Whitehead's view will be susceptible as well since one of the integral features of his explanation is the presumably rational actions of agents.

3.2 - Collective Action Problem

The problem of collective action is straightforward. In overly simple terms: Rational Choice Theory will not account for social change for a class or perhaps even a society as a whole in which no individual in the class has a rational reason to anticipate a reward for acting to bring it about. There is a problem between private rationality and collective action. Suppose that some class of individuals would be better off, as a class, in opposing slavery, for example. Yet, no individual of that class (or only a very few) has the potential for personal utility in acting to overthrow slavery. Suppose that there is even potentially great disutility in acting to overthrow the status quo. In such a case, it would not be rational for the individuals to oppose slavery (because L2 fails to obtain). Thus, it would seem that Rational Choice Theory cannot explain certain valuable social change.[\[16\]](#)

Consider the following situation. In Upton Sinclair's great novel *The Jungle* (a call to unionize packing plants in Chicago, among other things), the conditions of the plants are so horrific that anyone who would want to initiate unionization can rationally expect the results of his efforts to result in death and the addition of his carcass to the sausage line. The disutility for individual action is considerable. Thus, we have the following:

(3.1) The disutility for every individual, taken separately as rational agents, is higher than the utility for acting to unionize.

Given Rational Choice Theory, we would then expect that there would be no unionization effort. Or, in other words,

(3.2) No individual acts to initiate unionization.

From these we get the prediction that

(3.3) The unionization does not occur.

Yet, we also have the empirically observable fact that

(3.4) Unionization occurs.

Hence, Rational Choice Theory does not explain such phenomena as these that involve collective action (thus, the Collective Action Problem). It does not seem that Rational Choice Theory has available to it the appeals to the greater future good, at least in the cases where the individual agent has little rational reason to think that she will be a part of that brighter future.[\[17\]](#)

3.3 - The Whiteheadian perspective

Whitehead's view does not succumb to the Collective Action Problem, despite its dependence on rational agents for the development of civilization. While the discussion in the foregoing section did not settle this question completely, with a little enhancement it will. Recall

the *Persuasive Ideas Principle*. On this view, ideas themselves possess a motive power - they are lures. Great ideas, e.g., Freedom, are greater lures than small ideas, e.g., half-priced burgers every Tuesday night. Further, ideas are interwoven in the fabric of any particular society at any particular time. Slavery and Freedom are ethical ideas present in past societies, first one in ascendancy and then the other. These ethical ideas come to be expressed by human agents whose understanding and acceptance of the idea leads to their expression of it in the life of the society, even when the expression of the idea may entail disutility for the agent. For example, the idea of Freedom was such a compelling lure that many sacrificed their personal freedom to express the idea. Because Whitehead seems to have something like this as his view, then he can accept that:

(Whitehead 1) Social change happens without succumbing to the difficulties of the Collective Action Problem.

It follows from the discussion in Section 2 that

(Whitehead 2) Social change does not begin with a single spark.

For example, it is inappropriate, in Whitehead's view, to point solely to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria as the "cause" of World War I. Admittedly, the reactions of and interactions between nations following that event led directly to the hostilities. But, the seeds of war had been sown years before (ideas of Nation-building, Empire, and Nationalism) and the assassination came at the "right" time to foment attempts to express those ideas.

Thus, Whitehead's view seems to be that social change has at least two necessary conditions.

(Whitehead 3) For social change to occur, ideas and individuals are required.

As trivial as that might appear of first glance, we must remember that what differentiates this view from Rational Choice Theory, for example, is the notion that ideas possess motive power. The idea of Freedom is so much to be desired and the idea of Slavery so much to be despised that a rational agent would select the former.^[18] However, Rational Choice Theory would take note that the disutility associated with the former for individual agents makes it unlikely that any will select it. Whitehead must deny the notion that an agent must act to bring about utility for herself. The idea of Freedom is itself so compelling that many rational agents will choose to express it even in the face of significant disutility. This view has the happy consequences of providing an explanation that seems to fit with the empirical observations of social scientists and of not succumbing to Collective Action Problem.

4. Johnson's Whitehead

Johnson elaborates a troubling interpretation of Whitehead's view, one that Whitehead himself explicitly rejects. In Johnson's view, all that has been said of Whitehead's view heretofore holds. The place of divergence from Whitehead is the relationship between ideas and great individuals. Johnson recognizes that individuals and ideas do not "function in a

vacuum.”[19] Ideas and individuals are located within a complicated context of relationships. This is consistent with Whitehead’s view. The difficulty lies in Johnson’s treatment of ideas. In his view, ideas are quite passive. The resulting position is that the great ideas linger on the margins of a society until there are enough people to actualize them and bring them to the center of society’s life.[20] This reduces the plausibility of the picture of civilization and its development that Whitehead himself has been arguing. Indeed, he explicitly denies that the Johnsonian interpretation is his view:

The final introduction of a reform does not necessarily prove the moral superiority of the reforming generation. It certainly does require that that generation exhibits reforming energy. But conditions may have changed, so that what is possible now may not have been possible then. A great idea is not to be conceived as merely waiting for enough good men to carry it into practical effect. That is a childish view of the history of ideas.[21]

5. The Myth of Progress

Whitehead’s broad philosophical position has been criticized from time to time for its seeming consequence of viewing human beings as fallible and yet ever-evolving entities. That is to say, Whitehead has been accused of falling victim to the Myth of Progress. This is not surprising in itself. The process model lends itself to such misrepresentations. Because Whitehead uses a number of very positive metaphors to describe the process, one can easily be tempted to equate process with progress. Indeed, the slavery/freedom example seems to lend itself to that interpretation; that is, that things are progressing nicely, getting better and better. This view was relatively common in 19th century Victorian England.[22] It is not completely uncommon to interpret Whitehead this way. One of those who interprets Whitehead as being committed to this Evolution of Culture is actually one of his supporters, Richard S. Davis.[23]

Davis focuses on Whitehead’s understanding of the development and decay of civilizations. He argues that Whitehead is committed to the view that morality, in a very practical sense, is really a concern with the future. He elaborates this a bit to show that practical morality, for Whitehead, is particularly concerned with “the usefulness of the present to the future.”[24] From this he argues that we have already seen the critical aspect of Whitehead’s view; namely that moral interests are self-transcending.[25] Or, alternatively, great individuals can and often do rationally choose to express certain ideas which entail some measure of disutility for themselves precisely because of the future benefit to society. This result allows Whitehead to avoid the difficulties of RCT and Collective Action.

However, Davis also takes this to commit Whitehead to something of an Evolution of Culture position. He cites Whitehead’s claim that “This great fact of progressiveness, be it from worse to better, or from better to worse, has become of greater and greater importance in Western Civilization as we come to modern times.”[26] Davis infers that Whitehead is “speaking of the preparation of a social environment for gradual attainment of the humanitarian ideal.”[27] It is this overarching humanitarian ideal that Davis takes to be Whitehead’s view of the future culmination of civilization and the human species.

Where Davis’ argument is concerned, I suspect that he has simply not given the clause

“or from better to worse” its due while at the same time reading too much into the “fact of progressiveness.” But it points to the broader question about Whitehead’s view: does his process paradigm necessitate a commitment to progress. It is to this broader question of whether Whitehead is committed to the Evolution of Culture worldview in general that I now turn.

If Whitehead is committed to a rosy picture of the human animal, his view has some rather significant explanatory troubles. Two instances that spring to mind are the Holocaust and the troubles between his native England and the five counties of Northern Ireland. The latter is generally presumed by most philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century to have finally nailed the coffin of the Myth of Progress shut once and for all.[\[28\]](#) If Whitehead is committed to the Myth, then his view is buried in the same coffin. I do not see Whitehead’s philosophy of civilization ultimately committing him to such a view, however.

It does seem that Whitehead’s characterization of civilization is not entirely removed from the stereotypical late 19th century, British landed-gentry version. Indeed, he takes civilization to be marked by five features without which a society cannot be called “civilized”: art, beauty, truth, peace, and adventure. This seems, *prima facie*, suspiciously similar to Edward Tylor’s view that “civilization” is the “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” However suspiciously Victorian Whitehead’s view may initially sound, he is not in the thrall of the inherited view. The terms are typically Whiteheadian, which is to say particularly technical. His mature view was forged in the aftermath of one world war and in the looming shadow of another. So it should not seem odd to interpret the mature view as very far from a naive Victorian picture. Indeed, Whitehead has some rather explicit things to say about the Myth of Progress and goes to great lengths to separate his own views from it.

For Whitehead, process does not necessitate progress. We have seen two indications of this already.[\[29\]](#) Whitehead explicitly states “the final introduction of a reform does not necessarily prove the moral superiority of the reforming generation.”[\[30\]](#) It should also be recalled that Whitehead allows for the destruction of a civilization. He spends considerable time outlining the conditions under which a civilization will inevitably perish. For example, when a society loses creative initiative or when a society becomes convinced of its worldview and advances it with dogmatic certainty, such a civilization is in danger of the stagnation that precedes decay. In Whitehead’s view, such dogmatic certainty is an “exhibition of folly.”[\[31\]](#)

Further evidence can be found in the very place from which the accusation arises: his treatment of ideas. As noted, there are great ideas and small ideas, each with persuasive lure. Some progress toward civilization does take place when the great ideas like Freedom and Justice are expressed and the small ones like half-priced burgers are moderated against. But great and small ideas are not the only ideas available to humanity. It is precisely because vicious ideas are part of the tapestry of society that any progress that is made is made only with fits and starts and over great lengths of time. He notes that along with ideals (great ideas) has been interwoven the concept of “Divine Despot and a slavish universe.”[\[32\]](#) So, too, the notions of slavery, intolerance, force, and “blind worship of the good old days” are (or have been) present.[\[33\]](#) Thus, given this evidence, it is difficult to see how Whitehead’s view could be construed as

committed to the Myth.

6. Education

Finally I turn to what Whitehead takes to be the necessary condition upon which the four decisive factors depend: Education.^[34] Whitehead believes that without the proper educational system the attempt at civilization will ultimately be futile. This is unsurprising given his view of ideas, particularly the ways ideas take hold of a particular society. If it is a necessary condition for civilization that ideas must be understood, accepted, and applied, then the educational system must facilitate understanding, acceptance, and application. Whitehead construes the “educational system” to be something considerably larger than K-12, college, and university. Educators need not be connected with the formal educational system of a civilization at all. Indeed, some of the educators to which Whitehead points as exemplars of this dissemination of ideas are Socrates, Jesus, and Hume. The important fact is that ideas are disseminated. As Johnson notes, it is Whitehead’s view that these are men who through the expression of ideas “manifest the ideals [and] serve as a stimulus to others.” Thus, in addition to the inherent persuasive lure of an idea, there is also the personal example of a great teacher to stimulate interest, understanding, acceptance, and application.

Given Whitehead’s view that understanding and application are two poles of an idea’s expression, it should be the case that the education process provides the mechanism by which the problems of Rational Choice Theory are overcome. Johnson describes Whitehead’s view: “There must be a fruitful balance of theory and practice, fact and ideal. It must be the type of education which issues in ‘insight and foresight and a sense of the worth of life.’”^[35] In Whitehead’s view, such insight and foresight along with the sense of worth of life will enable the rational agent to choose those moments when it is acceptable, or perhaps required, to accept great personal disutility in the interest of great ideas.

This view is fairly consistent with one advanced by Thomas Nagel in his discussions of economic rationality. As Little notes, Nagel argues that rationality requires altruism. He then defines altruism as “recognition of the reality of the interests of others and a direct willingness to act out of regard for those interests.”^[36]

Nagel goes on to argue that it is “perfectly consistent” to reject an egoist line in favor of a view in which individuals are understood to define several sets of goals – “from narrow self-interest to the interests of the family to the interests of more encompassing groups, and choose their actions according to the degree to which various alternatives serve this ensemble of interests.”^[37] Thus, it could be the case, in Nagel’s view, that in assessing the ensemble of interests, some personal disutility is to be rationally preferred by agents.

This is consistent with Whitehead’s picture. If it is perfectly consistent to define a range of goals, then it is also consistent to expect that those goals could be broadened given a fruitful balance of theory and practice in which one is exposed to the novel possibilities that great ideas express. Indeed, the educational process that Whitehead advocates is one that broadens the narrow circles of self-interest and family interest to include ever larger groups. For example, in the Slavery/Freedom example, it is through one pole of the education process—that is,

understanding—that the circle of humanity is broadened to include people of color where they had been considered only 3/5th persons before. It is through the other pole—that is, application—that Freedom actually is experienced by those now included in the circle.[\[38\]](#)

7. Conclusion

This is what I take to be Whitehead's general view of civilization. To argue that his view is plausible has required the interpretation of some opaque passages and the rebuttal of three possible criticisms of the view. I should note that while I have sketched the general view, only the interplay between two decisive factors—great individuals and ideas—has received extensive treatment. This is primarily the result of the fact that the most significant and potentially problematic potential criticisms of Whitehead's view focus on the relation between ideas and individuals. For this reason, I have explored the condition Whitehead takes to be necessary for the development of these two decisive factors; namely, education. Having shown the plausibility of Whitehead's view, I hope that I have not, at the same time, compromised its intelligibility.

Biographical Sketch

Kevin K. J. Durand is Assistant Professor of Philosophy. He has taught at Henderson State University since 1999. He completed his Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma in August of 2000. He previously completed a M.A. in Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma (1997), an M. Div. in Theology at Emory University (1993) and a B.S. in Mathematics at Henderson State University (1990). Currently, Kevin serves as President of the Mid-South Philosophy Conference, Convener of the Process Circle, and as a member of the Henderson Honors Faculty. His first book, *Wisdom: History, Theory, and Application*, was published in the Summer of 2001. His current project, *Sidgwick's Utility and Whitehead's Virtue*, is forthcoming in the Spring of 2002.

[\[1\]](#) Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

[\[2\]](#) A. H. Johnson, "Whitehead's Philosophy of Civilization," Whitehead and the Modern World: Science, Metaphysics, and Civilization, Victor Lowe, et al. eds., (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950) 43.

[\[3\]](#) Johnson 43.

[\[4\]](#) Ideas and Great Individuals actually are two of the four necessary factors. These two factors must be joined with Economic Activity and the Inanimate World. I will not say much about Economic Activity because it is subject to the same sort of analysis as Ideas and Great Individuals. However, in the case of Ideas and Great Individuals, it is easier to note the interplay of relations that is most reflective of Whitehead's larger view. This narrowing of focus will, in turn, make critique and response more clear. I will not say much regarding the Inanimate World

because this is fairly well-plowed ground. If nothing else, Whitehead is considered a first-rate philosopher of science and logician. For example, see Robert Palter, Whitehead's Philosophy of Science, University of Chicago Press, 1960, and/or Filmer S.C. Northrop, "Whitehead's Philosophy of Science"; Evander Bradley McGilvary, "Space-Time, Simple Location, and Prehension"; Joseph Needham, "A Biologist's View of Whitehead's Philosophy"; William Ernest Hocking, "Whitehead on Mind and Nature"; Roy Wood Sellars, "Philosophy of Organism and Physical Realism"; and W.V.O. Quine, "Whitehead and the Rise of Modern Logic," all in The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, P.A. Schilpp, ed.

[5] This interpretation of Whitehead is none too controversial. Indicative of this position is perhaps Whitehead's second most famous apophthegm – "the many become one and are increased by one." (The most famous being the oft-misquoted "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Process and Reality, 21.) This saying concludes a discussion of the ontology of compositional objects whose penultimate sentence summarizes the foregoing discussion. Whitehead writes, "The novel entity is at once the togetherness of the 'many' which it finds, and also it is one among the disjunctive 'many' which it leaves; it is a novel entity, disjunctively among the many entities which it synthesizes." Or, put in another way, an object, M, is a composite of smaller objects, $m_1, m_2, m_3, \dots, m_n$, which can be examined separately, with little or no reference to the whole. But when the "disjunctive 'many'", $m_1, m_2, m_3, \dots, m_n$, are conjoined into the "novel entity," M, the new object is a separate object from the "disjunctive many." That is, an explanation of M is not reducible to an explanation of its parts. Thus, any explanation must proceed at both the micro level - examining the "disjunctive many" - and at the macro level - examining the "novel entity." Process and Reality, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, eds., (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

[6] Johnson 46.

[7] Johnson 47.

[8] Whitehead Modes of Thought (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 26.

[9] Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), 21.

[10] *ibid.*, 25.

[11] Methodism is a religious movement begun by John and Charles Wesley who were priests in the Church of England. Following the Revolutionary War, the Methodists in America were no longer considered part of the Church of England and became a separate church. Throughout the 19th century, Methodism was the largest protestant denomination in the United States. Currently, it is the second largest. During the Christmas Conference of 1787, the Methodist Church in the United States became the first denomination to incorporate into the order of the church a prohibition on the owning and trading in slaves. The church was not univocal in this and eventually split in half (a northern and a southern) in 1844 over the question of slavery. It was not re-united until 1939. However, the struggles within this church are a microcosm of the

struggles over slavery within the larger society.

[12] Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas 31.

[13] *ibid.*

[14] Little 45.

[15] Elster 23.

[16] Indeed, as Little points out, the theory of collective action provides a ready explanation of social phenomena like “worker passivity in the face of opportunities for revolutionary action” [Little 62]. That is, it explains why large groups of people will **not** act in order to advance the good of the group when the individual utility is sufficiently low or there is in fact disutility in acting.

[17] Attempts to solve the problem with appeals to ordinal rather than cardinal utility frameworks fail as well. This is so because the intensity of desire (for a particular gain for the rational agent) still does not effect 3.1. Even accepting that the agent will want X much more than Y still does not give us an ability to say what happens when X is not in the individual agent's interest and the agent knows that it is not. Mancur Olson notes that even when the several agents have a common interest in obtaining a particular benefit, “they have no common interest in paying the cost of providing that collective good. Each would prefer that the others pay the entire cost, and ordinarily would get any benefit provided whether he had borne part of the cost or not.” Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* 60.

[18] It would seem that Whitehead has something like an ordinal scale in mind.

[19] Johnson 47.

[20] Johnson 46-7. Since this is surely a passage with which Johnson is familiar and since so much of Johnson's exposition of Whitehead's view seems in concert with Whitehead, one is frankly perplexed by the view that he attributes to Whitehead at this point. Perhaps it is a momentary lapse in the interpretive process.

[21] Whitehead Adventures of Ideas, 29.

[22] It was advanced by social scientists like the Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer and empirical scientists like the geologist James Hutton. Put oversimply, Spencer appealed to a Darwinian evolutionary model to argue that more advanced societies are more intelligent and more productive; that is, more fit. Hutton argued that the very structure of the terrain was beneficial to the development (and continued positive development) of humanity.

[23] In support of his view, Davis cites Whitehead's claim that “[g]eography is half of character” and that “civilization haunts the borders of waterways.” Whitehead, “Harvard: The Future,” The

Atlantic Monthly (1938); “The Education of an Englishman,” The Atlantic Monthly (1943). I should note here that while Johnson also cites these passages, he is not one of those who attributes the Evolution of Culture view to Whitehead. Indeed, he inveighs against such a view when he writes that “It is to be noted that Whitehead is not guilty of fuzzy optimism”(Johnson 47).

[24] Richard S. Davis, “Whitehead's Moral Philosophy” Process Studies (Summer 1973) 79.

[25] Davis 80.

[26] Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas 98.

[27] Davis 81.

[28] For example, the existentialists of this century (e.g., Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Elie Weisel).

<p>[29] Both of these were in the discussion of the Johnsonian reading of Whitehead’s view.

[30] Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas 29.

[31] Whitehead, Process and Reality xiv.

[32] Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas 33.

[33] Johnson 44.

[34] For a brief refresher on the four decisive factors, see the discussion in Note 4.

[35] Johnson 46. Whitehead 125.

[36] Little 64. Whitehead would accept this with little in the way of amendment. Indeed, he writes, “In any human society, one fundamental idea tingeing [sic] every detail of activity is the general conception of the status of the individual members of that group, considered apart from any special preeminence. In such societies as they emerge into civilizations, the members recognize each other as individuals exercising the enjoyment of emotions, passions, comforts and discomforts, perceptions, hopes, fears, and purposes” (Adventures of Ideas) 17.

[37] Little 64. Another pertinent example is that of Women’s Suffrage. It is only through a torturous process that the circle of humanity is broadened to include women. And, consistent with Whitehead’s view that certain progress once attained is not somehow inviolate, the struggle to raise consciousness continues in things as mundane as insistence upon inclusive language so that the very language we use to speak of the human animal reflects the full humanity of women. Thus, education is an ongoing and necessary process in any society that is moving toward attainment of the moniker, “civilized.”

[38] It seems that Johnson's suggestion that education involves understanding, acceptance and application causes one small problem. In Whitehead's treatment of education, as Johnson elsewhere recognizes, he posits two poles - theory and practice or, in philosophy, rationalism and empiricism. [Process and Reality, 3] My reading of Whitehead suggests that "understanding" and "acceptance" form something like the theoretical pole while "application" is the practical.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.