



Adventures of Ideas

Alfred North Whitehead

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The title of this book, Adventures of Ideas, bears two meanings, both applicable to the subject-matter. One meaning is the effect of certain ideas in promoting the slow drift of mankind towards civilization. This is the Adventure of Ideas in the history of mankind. The other meaning is the author's adventure in framing a speculative scheme of ideas which shall be explanatory of the historical adventure.

Adventures of Ideas Details

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From Reader Review Adventures of Ideas for online ebook

Cameron says

Wonderful book. It has a permanent place on my bookshelf.

Chris Wells says

My only criticism is the old-fashioned ethnocentrism inherent throughout. On the whole, however, Whitehead was an amazingly progressive thinker whose perspectives, though often difficult and clothed in his own metaphysical terminology, are interesting and sometimes sublime.

Mohammad says

A Classical Whitehead- Style Book , with an amazing flow of ideas , Coherent contents. I really liked it.

Zach says

For a philosophical treatment of the effect of ideas' on history and culture, this book was a veritable page-turner. I had read Part I probably over a year ago, and was all amped to continue, when the book disappeared from the living room coffee table. When it turned up last month in our black hole of a garage, I tore back into it, even though *Blood Meridian* was currently holding my interest, and, oh yeah, I was then living with a one-month old in my house. I tore into it and didn't stop until I was finished with it. That's a page-turner, right?

In case you're not familiar, Alfred North Whitehead is sometimes known as the philosopher who first put forward a coherent, comprehensive metaphysical system that we would now term "process philosophy". Many of these same people would argue that his system still stands as the best example of that branch of philosophy (he was writing about this stuff in the 1920s-1930s). *Adventures of Ideas*, despite my opening synopsis, is typically recommended as the most accessible of the 3 books that articulate his system-- the other two being *Process and Reality* and *Science and the Modern World*. So, though Whitehead does reference historical events to illustrate aspects of his thought, this book is mainly a work of metaphysics.

And to me, it's fascinating metaphysics. The key chapter is Chapter 11, "Objects and Subjects." There, Whitehead challenges the pervasive characterization of the subject-object relationship as "knower-known", and instead offers a characterization in which the subject experiences "concern" (as the Quakers use that term) for an object. He feels that knowledge and conscious discrimination (indeed, consciousness itself) only present themselves in the more elaborate occasions of experience. "The basis of experience is emotional," or, what subjects normally experience is an "affective tone" provoked or brought about by an object.

This essential "structure of experience" allows Whitehead to expound on his notion of "prehension," which is the "concern" or "feeling" or "affective tone" that a subject experiences when interacting with an object. A

follower of Whitehead's, Charles Hartshorne, has said the concept of "prehension" is one of the great contributions to metaphysics in the 20th century. Suffice it to say, you should read about it more from someone other than me-- but do check it out if intrigued.

It also becomes clear in this chapter that, to Whitehead, "occasions of experience" constitute the fundamental unit of existence. Not "subjects" or "substances" or "matter" as various schools of Western metaphysics have offered. No, it is rather events, big and small, as they slide in and out of the present, continually into the past-- these are what existence is fundamentally made of. And as such, we should not talk about "beings", because nothing ever just "is." Everything changes-- everything becomes something and then perishes into the past. We would be more honest if we talked about things in terms of "becoming." The notions centered around "occasions of experience" is where you begin to recognize Whitehead's philosophy of process. Everything is becoming and in a state of process.

Elsewhere, Whitehead discusses the different meanings attributed to the word "law," in the history of science and in scientists' conceptions of the "laws of nature" (Chapter 7). In "The Grouping of Occasions" (Chapter 13), Whitehead talks about "societies" in many different ways. One society is a personal society-- that is, a society of occasions of experience which make up a person, or a person's soul. To me, this is by far the clearest characterization of what constitutes a soul, all other attempts being vague and/or unable to withstand to usual critiques of personal identity.

Part 4 deals with five ideals of civilization: Truth, Beauty, Art, Adventure, and Peace. All of these ideals are heavily informed by Whitehead's general metaphysics, and the way he works out their meanings and relations to each other from that starting point is first-rate.

A highlight of his discussion of Beauty is his closely related discussion of Discord (i.e., evil). I have a great interest in this topic, as music that incorporates "noise" -- in essence, treating discord as a form of beauty -- never fails to amaze me when it conjures emotions you'd usually associate with a pretty melody. "Dischord" could be my favorite record label name. The time I stopped skipping over Sonic Youth's messy parts is something I'll always remember. Etc etc etc. So I was delighted to see Whitehead engaging the topic straight-on, and to attach significant value to Discord. The details of this value, and its relation to the ebb and flow of civilizations, I'll leave for you to read.

The chapter on Adventure (19) touched on the various stages of a civilization as it struggles to its own ideal perfection, its possession of that perfection, and the slow decline once adventure loses its utility and appeal, and decadence and satire become the hallmark of an era. Again, these considerations reflected vague notions I had entertained regarding music, namely jazz. At a typical adventurous jazz show these days, you can't help getting the feeling that there's not much more room to advance from here. That, sure, it's a great experience hearing it now, but that sooner than later there won't be enough jazz players interested develop this sound to keep it alive-- and so, are we in the midst of a decline? Whitehead's general treatment of the subject didn't reveal any hidden prophecies in this regard, but it was interesting to try and fit my fleeting ideas to his very precise and considered concept of Adventure.

There are many other highlights -- for instance, the relationship between Ideals and the practice of science -- but instead of extending my recap, I'll end with a run of quotes that I liked:

"We notice that a great idea in the background of dim consciousness is like a phantom ocean beating upon the shores of human life in successive waves of specialization" (pg. 19, "The Human Soul")

"The folly of intelligent people, clear-headed and narrow-visioned, has precipitated many catastrophes" (pg.

48, "Aspects of Freedom")

"The creativity of the world is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact" (pg. 177, "Objects and Subjects")

"Thus it belongs to the essence of each occasion of experience that it is concerned with an otherness transcending itself" (pg. 180, "Objects and Subjects")

"It is not a mere question of having a soul or of not having a soul. The question is, How much, if any?" (pg. 208, "The Grouping of Occasions")

"To know the truth partially is to distort the Universe. For example, the savage who can only count to ten enormously exaggerates the importance of the small numbers, and so do we whose imaginations fail when we come to millions" (pg. 243, "Truth")

[note: this one's more wrapped up in Whitehead's special terminology]

"Music elicits some confused feeling into direct apprehension. It performs this service, or disservice, by introducing an emotional clothing which changes the dim objective reality into a clear Appearance matching the subjective form provided for its prehension" (pg. 249, "Truth")

"Progress is founded upon the experience of discordant feelings. The social value of liberty lies in its production of discords. There are perfections beyond perfections. All realization is finite, and there is no perfection which is the infinitude of all perfections. Perfections of diverse types are among themselves discordant. Thus the contribution to Beauty which can be supplied by Discord -- in itself destructive and evil -- is the positive feeling a quick shift aim from the tameness of outworn perfection to some other ideal with its freshness still upon it. Thus the value of Discord is a tribute to the merits of imperfection." (pg. 257, "Beauty")

"The human body is an instrument for the production of art in the life of the human soul" (pg. 271, "Truth and Beauty")

"One principle is that the very essence of real actuality -- that is, of the completely real -- is *process*. Thus each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing. There is no halt in which the actuality is just itself, accidentally played upon by qualifications derived from the shift of circumstances. The converse is the truth." (pg. 274-275, "Adventure")

Phillip Ross says

My undergraduate degree in philosophy focused on Whitehead. This was prior to my own conversion. While I now am quite critical of Whitehead, I acknowledge him as an import modern thinker.

Peter Mcloughlin says

I like Whitehead. In his writing he comes off optimistic, liberal, humane, urbane and interesting. He seems

like a good decent person. He I would guess believes in a very liberal form of Christianity. Like most decent and humane Christians he honestly tries to engage with modern science and the enlightenment. At the same time being an optimistic Christian I sense that he wishes for some divine purpose to the Universe an impulse almost universal to people. He is a liberal humane and scientifically literate writer of the early twentieth century. His solution and metaphysic is a kind of process theology. God to him is kind of creative principle working through time. Needless to say this position is very far from most forms of orthodoxy in Christianity. It is a great attempt in my view to square the circle of modern knowledge with ancient faith. It is admirable in its solution. It appeals to the hunch that the universe has a purpose and we are here for a reason outside of the ones we invent. However ultimately as much as I admire his decency and the optimism of his metaphysic the world does not have an ultimate purpose outside ones we create and as much as I would like there to be a cosmic plan or rationale their doesn't appear to be one. I enjoyed the book even if I disagreed with the conclusions.

Roberto Rigolin F Lopes says

Whitehead travels loose but deep within ideas supporting human understanding/control over nature and over ourselves. The fun here comes from his provocative argument often saying that civilization is composed by patterns of behaviour + emotion + belief but it also need adventurous actions (e.g., his own) to keep things evolving. To conclude that "religions are often more barbarous than the civilizations in which they flourish". Go for it if you feel adventurous!

J Puntillo says

Brilliant at times. Utterly annoying at others. I enjoyed Whitehead's description of philosophy at the end of Chapter 6. He also seemed to possess some kind of prophetic power concerning the dangers of unbridled capitalism. Had I flipped ahead (or paid closer attention to the table to contents), I might've understood the significance of his seemingly senseless history of human civilization and his apologia for Hume and Plato. You have to harden yourself to the obviously Occidentalism in Whitehead's epistemological survey. The "Far East" might as well have been a footnote in the great history of ideas. Par for the course, I guess, given when Whitehead published. But it did all seem a little shortsighted by today's understanding. Oh, and if I'd had the time, I would've went back and counted all the places where he reminds his virgin philosopher that we owe so much to Plato's dialogues... especially the *_Timaeus_*, which Whitehead most certainly had read at least four dozen times. Instead it DID all seem quite disparate in the end making it a slog to get through. A good read but by no means an indispensable piece of modern philosophy for the occasional reader.

Dan says

Alfred North Whitehead's "Adventures of Ideas" of 1933 could be two separate books. Parts I and II ("Sociological" and "Cosmological") show a fine thinker considering the history of ideas and the rise of civilization. There are interesting propositions on every page, presented with refreshing clarity of thought. It is not a fast read but is accessible.

Parts III and IV ("Philosophical" and "Civilization"), perhaps except for the early chapters, are not for the general reader but rather for students of Philosophy. It may today strike others as consisting of overfine

distinctions, some of matters fairly obvious and others of concepts which appear possible of simplification (for instance by reference to adaptive models). I am not competent here of fair judgement.

Well worth five stars for the first parts; benefit of the doubt for the rest.

Henry Sturcke says

This book is more ambitious than its title, which suggests a primer for youths interested in philosophy, might indicate. Then one comes to the final chapters and gains a full grasp of what the terms “adventure” and “ideas” signified for the author. *Adventures of Ideas* represents an integral part of Whitehead’s lifelong quest to reestablish metaphysics in a way that takes seriously challenges to previous metaphysics raised by sensationalist views of the human mind (Locke through Hume) and positivist views of society and history. This project was not pursued for its own sake, however. As Whitehead writes: “The point is, that speculative extension beyond direct observation spells some trust in metaphysics, however vaguely these metaphysical notions may be entertained in explicit thought. Our metaphysical knowledge is slight, superficial, incomplete. Thus errors creep in. But, such as it is, metaphysical understanding guides imagination and justifies purpose. Apart from metaphysical presupposition there can be no civilization” (p. 128). High stakes indeed. Still, he admits that the project cannot be crowned with any “triumphs of finality. We cannot produce that final adjustment of well-defined generalities which constitute a complete metaphysics” (p. 145).

Whitehead wrote at a time when unbridled capitalism and industrialism had been overcome; this seems poignant in light of recent developments. He confidently declares: “[N]o one now holds that, apart from some further directive agency, mere individualistic competition, of itself and by its own self-righting character, will produce a satisfactory society” (p. 35). One could not help but think of the post-2016-election society as the author diagnoses a civilization that has passed its zenith and reached the close of an epoch. He sees two possibilities. One is slow decline: “The prolongation of outworn forms of life means a slow decadence in which there is repetition without any fruit in the reaping of value.” The other is when a form of civilization has been exhausted, but not the creative springs of originality that were its basis. “In that case, a quick period of transition may set in, which may or may not be accompanied by dislocations involving widespread unhappiness” (p. 278). So which are we in for?

This book is said to be one of the author’s more accessible works, but I could have used some help bootstrapping my way into his thought-world. For a long stretch, the material seemed so disparate that I asked myself for whom the book was written or whether the book had an overall point. Then in the last three chapters, it all came together. Still, this reader would have found it helpful if the connecting tissue would have been more evident throughout. Also, I would have liked to see more sentences that began “for instance.”

When going back over the book a second time, I noticed that the author had given clues along the way of where he was heading. For instance, in Chapter 6, *Foresight*, he writes a description of philosophy that seemed to sum up his aim in this book:

“Philosophy is not a mere collection of noble sentiments. A deluge of such sentiments does more harm than good. Philosophy is at once general and concrete, critical and appreciative of direct intuition. It is not—or, at least, should not be—a ferocious debate between irritable professors. It is a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities. In philosophy, the fact, the theory, the alternatives, and the ideal, are weighed together. Its gifts are insight and foresight, and a sense of the worth of life, in short, that sense of importance which nerves all civilized effort. Mankind can flourish in the lower stages of life with merely barbaric flashes of thought. But when civilization culminates, the absence of a coordinating philosophy of life, spread throughout the community, spells decadence, boredom, and the slackening of effort.”

This claim seems to express the rationale behind Whitehead’s project. For him, nothing less is at stake than

the progress of civilization, a teleological aim he sees threatened by a loss of the sense of adventure. My copy could have been copy-edited more carefully. Not a significant number of typos overall, but more than a quality book should have. Some were amusing, though. On page 216, I'm fairly sure Whitehead meant "brain," not "grain."
