

Wenyu Xie • Zhihe Wang • George E. Derfer
Whitehead and China

PROCESS THOUGHT

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Volume 4

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Whitehead and China

Relevance and Relationship



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Content:

Preface	.7
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Part I. Engagements:

Can Process Thought and Chinese Thought Be Fused?

1. John B. Cobb, Jr.: Is Whitehead Relevant in China Today?	.15
2. David R. Griffin: Whitehead, China, Postmodern Politics, and Global Democracy	.25
3. Catherine Keller: The Tao of Postmodernity: Process, Deconstruction and Postcolonial Theory	.39
4. Meijun Fan and Ronald Phipps: Process Thought in Chinese Traditional Arts	.51
5. Joseph Grange: Process Thought & Confucian Values	.69
6. George E. Derfer: Education's Myths and Metaphors: Implications of Process Education for Educational Reform	.77
7. Wang Shik Jang: The Problem of Transcendence in Chinese Religions from a Whiteheadian Perspective	.101
8. Brook Ziporyn: Whitehead and Tiantai: Eternal Objects and the "Twofold Three Thousand"	.113
9. Michel Weber: Concepts of Creation and the Pragmatic of Creativity	.137

Part II. Perspectives:

Process Thought in Chinese Minds

10. **Wenyu Xie:** Non-sensuous Perception and Its Philosophical Analysis .153
11. **Guihuan Huo:** Can Whiteheadian Process Philosophy Challenge Western Philosophy? .163
12. **Zhihe Wang:** The Postmodern Dimension of Whitehead's Philosophy and Its Relevance .173
13. **Zhen Han:** The Value of Adventures in Whiteheadian Thought.189
14. **Shiyan Li:** Defining Environmental and Resource Protection in Process Philosophy .197
15. **Nini Zhang:** Towards a Whiteheadian Eco-feminism .205

PREFACE

During mid-June, 2002, a conference of international scholars met in Beijing, China. The theme that brought them together was Whitehead and China in the New Millennium. The conference was co-sponsored by the China Project of the Center for Process Studies, Claremont, California, and the Center for the Study of Values and Culture, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China. More than 180 scholars presented and discussed papers. This volume contains a selection of those papers.

The conference aimed at a two-way exploration and exposition: process thinkers in the tradition of Whitehead addressing Chinese thought, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Chinese thinkers addressing Whiteheadian process thought. Of course, many of the papers did not feel neatly into these two categories. The papers we have selected fall into the following two groups: one set of papers addressing the interaction or fusing of the two traditions and another devoted to the contributions of Chinese scholars addressing Whiteheadian process thinking.

In Part One we have collected 9 papers, which explore interconnections of Whiteheadian thought and Chinese traditional thought. John Cobb and David Griffin contribute the first two essays. These address issues that Chinese society is now encountering in the fields of religion, politics, and economy. They acknowledge the mistakes that Western modernization has made and express their hope that China will not repeat them. Based on this observation and concern, they suggest that Whitehead's thought, which is rooted in both Western and Oriental philosophy, may help China not only to be aware of the problems but also to find a different way ahead.

In "The Tao of Postmodernity: Process, Deconstruction and Postcolonial Theory," Catherine Keller picks up the concept of "not yet

beginning” in the thought of Zhuang Zi (Chuang Tzu) and shows its connection to Whitehead’s notion of beginning, which refers to irruption out of potentiality. Keller employs this notion in understanding the recent development of postcolonial theory within postmodernism.

Meijun Fan and Ronald Phipps, in their presentation, “Process Thought in Chinese Traditional Arts,” begin with the assumption that Chinese traditional thought and Whitehead’s process thinking are alike in many ways. They examine several pieces of Chinese art aesthetically and philosophically and show that they express a sentiment agreeable with the spirit of Whitehead’s thought.

Joseph Grange begins with Whitehead’s notion of *in solido*, in which one’s experience must be felt in the presence of the whole. Based on this notion, in “Process Thought & Confucian Values” Grange defends the view that we should define “good” in light of our knowledge of ecology as nature’s way of pursuing excellence, and that democracy is good because it is closely in agreement with ecological structure. He believes that Confucian values support this position.

George E. Derfer’s presentation, “Education’s Myths and Metaphors: Implications of Process Education for Educational Reform,” is about education. In it he asks an existential question: “What motivates us: informs and inspires us?” He then emphasizes Whitehead’s generally ignored concern for and concept of “deeper faith”, which he sees as an essential dimension of cosmic evolution in general and our participation in this in particular. With an assumption that Whitehead and Chinese thought share a common “deeper faith”, Derfer proposes a direction for the reforming of education.

Wang Shik Jang’s essay is entitled “The Problem of Transcendence in Chinese Religions: From a Whiteheadian Perspective.” Jang targets a thesis of David Hall and Roger Ames, that the notion of non-transcendence should be emphasized in interpreting Chinese religions. Jang argues that the notion of strict transcendence is also required for an adequate interpretation. He selects Xunzi for analysis and shows that Xunzi’s thought never denies transcendence. Jang concludes that, from the perspective of a Whiteheadian theology, Chinese religious thought has actually been fostering a notion of immanent transcendence.

Brook Ziporyn’s lengthy essay, “Whitehead and Tiantai: Eternal Objects and the Twofold Three Thousand,” displays the similarity between Whitehead and Buddhism. Ziporyn compares the Whiteheadian concept of eternal objects and the Buddhist concept of three thousand and finds that

they refer to the same things: the totality of actual occasions. Ziporyn exemplifies this similarity by an analysis of the respective treatments of evil. In his conclusion, both Whitehead and Buddhism attempt to demonstrate the value of process in its transient concrete contingency.

In his paper “Concepts of Creation and Pragmatic of Creativity,” Michel Weber traces Whitehead’s efforts to understand creation and creativity. Whitehead proposes abandoning substantialism and promoting the idea of creation. To fulfill this program, Weber considers the potential contribution of Chinese Taoism, which advocates spontaneity and pragmatically levels differences among beings.

Part Two is a collection of six articles by Chinese writers. In China scholars may have known Whitehead by name for some time, but serious study and discussion of his process thought are just beginning. However, the unexpected registration of 120 Chinese participants demonstrated that there is now a strong interest in contemporary process thought among Chinese scholars. We may call them the first generation of Chinese Whiteheadian scholars. Their perspectives on and interpretations of process thought may shape its future development in China.

The first two articles in this division are quite analytical and critical of process thought. Wenyu Xie presents a philosophical analysis of the concept of actual entity in “Non-sensuous Perception and Its Philosophical Analysis.” Actual entity is the fundamental concept in Whitehead’s scheme. After examining the definition of the concept in terms of non-sensuous perception, Xie demonstrates that, to define the concept is to distribute subjectivity among all actual entities. This raises the question of inter-subjectivity, and shows that faith (or emotional prehension) is required in this distribution.

Guihuan Huo perceives Whitehead’s philosophy in the scheme of a theory of his own, called “the social individual growing-up theory.” He imposes a question as the title of his paper, “Can Whiteheadian Process Philosophy Challenge Western Philosophy?” His theory emphasizes the development of an individual in a social context on the one hand and, on the other, the impact on society of an individual’s growing up. The dichotomy of subject and object in modern philosophy treats a subject as a static and independent being and therefore ignores the significance of its growing up in its interactions with objects. Huo considers that the concept of process may contribute something to break up the dichotomy. To realize this contribution, however, Huo suggests that a combination of process thought and the social individual growing-up theory may help.

Zhihe Wang shifts the tone of the preceding articles and evaluates the contributions of process thought to the movement of postmodern thought in Chinese scholarship. In his paper, “The Postmodern Dimension of Whitehead’s Philosophy and Its Relevance,” Wang suggests that process thought contains an attitude of openness, which may help us overcome the dominant closed mentalities supported by Western cultural imperialism and Chinese Yelangism (self-centralism).

Similarly, Zhen Han writes appreciatively of Whitehead’s sentiment of adventure. His paper is entitled “The Value of Adventure in Whiteheadian Thought.” Han believes that human society must retain a spirit of adventure in order to survive. His reading of Whitehead reveals that Whitehead’s thought indeed urges people to pay attention to the potentiality of society and individuals.

The last two chapters, contributed by Li Shiyan and Nini Zhang, look for the constructive contributions of process thought to contemporary Chinese thought. In her “Defining Environmental and Resource Protection in Process Philosophy,” Li perceives the agreement between process thought and the current scientific understanding of the evolvement of nature. She then concludes that we should apply process thought in developing projects of environmental and resource protection. Zhang’s article, “Towards a Whiteheadian Ecofeminism,” on the other hand, finds that we need an ecofeminist concept of nature that is complementary to, and interactive with, the male-defined concept of nature. Zhang documents discussions of ecofeminism in the tradition of process thought, and argues that process thought can help establish a Chinese ecofeminism.

The conference resulted chiefly from the work of the China Project of the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California, and especially its executive director, Zhihe Wang. This Project began in 1994 with the translation and publication of *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern proposals* (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyishe, 1995), thanks to the efforts of Drs. David Griffin, Wenyu Xie, and Zhihe Wang. This book was surprisingly well received by Chinese scholars. The following story gives evidence of its success.

In October of 1996, the Association of the Philosophy of Nature in China held its annual conference in Guangdong. Zhihe Wang was invited to the conference as an honored guest because of his editorship of the Chinese translation of *The Reenchantment of Science*. Wang was amazed that the book set up the theme of the conference, and its name was mentioned in all the presentations. This encouraging sign paved the way

for an aggressive translation project, resulting in a strong presence of process thought in Chinese scholarship.

Since the conference from which the essays in this book are derived, publication has continued. This includes both translations of additional works in English and new books by Chinese authors. Notable among these is *The Third Metaphysics—Constructive Postmodernism* by Prof. Weifu Wu. A group of scholars from the Academy of Social Sciences collaborated with the China Project in publishing the first issue of *Chinese Process Studies*.

The rapid growth of interest in process thought in China is attested by the establishment of eight centers for its study and promotion in Chinese universities, with others under consideration. In collaboration with these centers and universities, numerous conferences have taken place, dealing with a wide range of issues. These have attracted eminent Chinese scholars and considerable attention in the media. Two have dealt with educational reform, and the relation of process thought to education has been of special interest to several of the new centers. The relation of Marx and Whitehead has also been a major concern.

The range of topics considered in relation to process thought is shown by the series of international conferences. In Wuhan, at a university devoted to science and technology, the topic was “Science and Spirituality in the Postmodern World.” John Haught, an international leader in the dialogue between science and religion was the keynote speaker. A conference in Suzhou was entitled “Toward a Sustainable Urbanization.” This featured Paolo Soleri, a visionary architect who invented the idea of “architectural ecology” or “arcology,” a city that, among other things, would be self-sufficient in energy. John Cobb gave a keynote address at a conference in Shanghai on “Marxism and the Harmonious Society.” In Beijing a conference was held on “Land and Social Justice in Modernization.” James Brown and Cliff Cobb gave major addresses.

Whitehead acknowledged that “the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of...Chinese thought.” Some scholars have attempted to explore this relationship and its implications. The Beijing Conference provided a good forum for interested and engaged scholars to address each other directly, in an atmosphere of mutual regard and respect. The ongoing scholarly work on process thinking in China is impressive. It is the editors’ conviction that the publication of this book in English will promote international discussion of the themes and issues herein set forth. This should contribute significantly to the broader

discussion between West and East, so important in this age of cultural globalization.

Editors
Claremont
Summer, 2005

Part I

Engagements:

**Can Process Thought
And Chinese Thought Be Fused?**

1.

IS WHITEHEAD RELEVANT IN CHINA TODAY?*

John B. Cobb, Jr.

(I)

I would not be here if I did not believe the answer is emphatically Yes. If I may make some bold, sweeping generalizations, I will claim the following.

1. The religions and philosophies of India and China are full of profound insights badly needed in the contemporary world in both East and West. However, they had their fullest development in an age when science was not an important part of cultural and intellectual life, and technology was not highly developed. They were formulated in less continuity with mathematics than was true of Western philosophy. They do not express a refined historical consciousness.
2. These traditions richly contribute to the interior and daily life of many people in the East, and in recent decades they have attracted much appreciative attention in the West as well. But beyond the very personal sphere, they have more ambiguous effects. For example, they continue to inform much of the attitude toward political authority.

* Prepared for presentation at the Fourth International Whitehead Conference, Beijing, June 17-20, 2002.

3. Having developed in a context where authority was concentrated at the top, they do little to undergird a more democratic spirit. They assume a traditional society, and do not respond directly to the problems of a modern one. In short, despite the great potential of traditional Asian thought, outside the realm of daily life and religion, its relevance to contemporary problems has not been adequately articulated.

4. Whitehead's thought developed in close relation to science and mathematics and in the context of modern social and political problems. Precisely in that context he came to a view of reality that has remarkable points of contact with traditional Indian and Chinese ideas. His process thought can be greatly enriched by assimilating the wisdom accumulated in those traditions over the millennia. It can also function as a bridge, expanding the application of those ideas and relating them to the issues of our time.

Now consider what is happening in the West.

1. Western philosophy as a whole has run dry. The Kantian tradition that has dominated the European mind for two centuries has contributed meanings, but it fails to provide us with a context for private or public life. Deconstructive postmodernism tends toward nihilism whether its practitioners want to go there or not. Most philosophers of science provide little help to scientists themselves as they struggle to make sense of the strange phenomena they encounter. A number of philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, have proclaimed the end of the philosophic tradition.

2. At the deepest level, the problem with Western philosophy is that it has not freed itself from the domination of substance categories. Of course, most philosophers are aware of the difficulties with the idea of substance, and they rarely affirm the reality of substances directly. But because they reject the discipline of metaphysics, they have no way of replacing the substance categories that pervade our Indo-European languages with alternative ways of thinking. This leaves the idea of substance intact in the background of their thought.

3. The same is true for the sciences. Physicists know that traditional categories based on substance thought have broken down. For example, the ether they posited to underlie the light waves does not exist. But because the mathematics developed to describe wave phenomena continued to achieve useful results, they continue to use the idea of wave as if there were something to wave. They often acknowledge that science no longer

corresponds with some objective reality, and the resulting science is full of paradoxes. Because, like the philosophers, they eschew metaphysics, they cannot develop an alternative conceptuality that fits their evidence. Science itself suffers from the results.

4. Indian and Chinese philosophies include alternatives to substance thought much more fully than does European philosophy. Hence they have much to offer. But as we saw above, they are not formulated in way that is directly relevant to the concerns of the contemporary world.

5. Whitehead's basic conceptuality is closer to that typical of East Asia than to that typical of Europe. But because he developed it out of a background in mathematics and physics, it has a systematic rigor and relevance to contemporary issues that Asian philosophy usually lacks. Because he was not afraid of metaphysical questions, Whitehead worked out an alternative to substance thinking that fits the evidence of the sciences while differing from their usual formulations. In this way he offers to Asians a bridge to the correction of Western science and its incorporation into their own worldview.

Now I will take another tack in making my claim for Whitehead's usefulness.

1. China is committed to modernization. Modernization is nearly equivalent to Westernization. There is no doubt that modernity in the West has brought great advances in knowledge and technology. It has also encouraged democracy and human rights. It has brought about an economic prosperity for masses of people that has no precedent in human history. There is much for which we Westerners, who are heirs of modernization, are grateful. But we are also painfully aware of its limitations. Modernity has been extremely, and damagingly, individualistic. In its later forms it has been preoccupied with gaining wealth and employing competitive means to this end. In the process it has strained the social fabric to the breaking point.

2. Modernity has denied any intrinsic value to the natural world and accordingly we have exploited our environment shamelessly. We now see that we pay a high price for this. The nature that has nurtured us so long is no longer able to do so. We are trying to slow the degradation of nature and preserve bits of it, but much is forever lost. And the policies of modernity continue to eat away at what is left. Modernity has led

inevitably to an ecological crisis in which we are already involved but which will become far more acute in the decades immediately ahead.

3. The critique of modernity is now widespread. Most of what is called postmodernism leads to the abandonment of any quest for comprehensive vision. It attacks the idea of a master narrative or a cosmology. It leaves us with local knowledge that is powerless against the continuing advance of the steamrollers of modernity. Although it criticizes brilliantly, it offers few concrete proposals for the way ahead. On the whole, it is as alienated from the natural world as was the modernity it critiques. In some respects it carries dangerous tendencies within modernity to an extreme rather than providing a different point of departure.

4. Whitehead provides an alternative. He, too, was critical of the modern world, and his followers pursue and extend that critique. But he wanted not just to tear down the ideas of the modern world but also to replace them with more adequate ideas. These provide positive proposals for responding to the issues of the day. In this sense his ideas are part of the movement of constructive postmodernism. We need to have our thought checked and corrected by deconstructive postmodernism and enriched and developed through interaction with Asian, communitarian, ecological, and feminist thought as well as that of primal peoples. But there is thus far no indication that encounters with these other positions will undercut or invalidate our basic ideas. Modified and enriched by all these influences, Whiteheadian thought can suggest a way ahead in science, economics, politics, education, and social policy.

In the area of religion, China is now at a very interesting place. The traditional culture met the religious needs of people in a variety of ways. But, for reasons I have already indicated, that culture is no longer unproblematic. Partly this is because it was systematically attacked and weakened during the Red Guard period. Partly it is because modernization, by its nature, is in tension with traditional cultures. For a while leaders hoped that Communism would meet the needs that traditional religions once fulfilled. But today this is true for only a few. Accordingly, there is an openness in China for religious teaching of many varieties. Since Whitehead's understanding of reality is so close to that of traditional Chinese thought, the comments above about Whitehead's ability to act as a bridge between traditional ideas and the contemporary world are relevant here. I want to add now a comment about Christianity.

1. As a professional Christian teacher, I am happy that Christianity has won many converts in China and attracted interest at a number of levels. Yet my pleasure is not unqualified. In the West we know much that is good to which Christianity has profoundly contributed. We want to share that. I believe that Christianity can make very important contributions in China as well. But we know that many Christian beliefs have done great harm as well. We would like to warn against those. Unfortunately, large-scale movements to Christianity are unlikely to be critical. They are likely to support some of the ways of thinking that have done harm in the West.

2. One of the problems of Christianity in the past has been otherworldliness and an accompanying dualism of spirit and body. This has been connected to patriarchy and homophobia. I do not know how far that has been appropriated by Chinese Christians, but it stands as a threat to the healthier potentialities of traditional Chinese culture. Another risk is biblicism, a kind of absolutization of the authority of the Bible that leads to irrational beliefs and actions. Another danger is that believers may expect of their faith more than it can deliver, and live in either self-deception or disillusionment.

3. On the whole, China has dealt with religious diversity, historically, better than did Western Christianity. Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, and others have lived side by side. Indeed, a single individual could participate in all of these traditions. This has not been true of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the West. All of these have tendencies to exclusivism and to the rejection of other communities of believers, but Christianity has the worst record. China does not need that.

4. You will not be surprised to hear me say that I believe that Whitehead can help in this respect as well. Process theology has built on Whitehead's thought and has interpreted the Christian tradition accordingly. It is certainly not the only form of revisionist Christian theology that works against the dualism, biblicism, and false expectations associated with so much of historic and contemporary Christianity. It is certainly not the only way to avoid Christian exclusivism. But, in my biased opinion, it offers the most thorough and systematic way around these problems and encourages a form of Christianity that could make a positive contribution to working out the relationship among the religious communities of China as well as their relations to the prevailing secular society.

These sweeping claims will simply have to stand here undeveloped. I hope that by the end of this conference, they will not seem altogether

preposterous. I will take the time remaining to me to develop just one claim somewhat more fully. I implied that Whiteheadian thought could bring some traditional ideas to bear on contemporary problems. I believe that among these contemporary concerns, economics is central. Hence I will offer a critique of the dominant economic thinking of modernity and also suggestions for a different way of thinking about economics and also practicing it. My exposition will show how close together are the necessary deconstruction of the modern and the reconstruction of the Whiteheadian postmodern.

(II)

Modern economic theory is based on an understanding of human beings in their capacity as economic actors. We call the resulting model of the human being *Homo economicus*. No economist supposes that human beings are exhaustively understood as economic actors. Everyone knows that human beings are also political actors, *Homo politicus*, and religious actors, *Homo religiosus*. The list can be extended. The features of the human being identified as *Homo economicus* are abstracted from the complex fullness of human existence. The academic discipline of economics is based on these abstractions. This discipline is unusual among the social sciences in the influence it has on public life.

Homo economicus is self-contained in a thoroughly individualistic way. "He" (and I think the male language is appropriate here) relates to others only in market transactions. In these he seeks to gain as much as possible in goods and services for himself at the smallest possible expenditure of money or labor. This is "rational" behavior, and the science of economics depends on the rationality of human actors.

Now we must ask, is this an accurate picture of human economic behavior? Certainly, we must agree that much behavior in the market place conforms to this model. People bargain to get what they want for the lowest price possible. When they sell, they try to get the best price they can. Typically they seek the employment that is the best paid. And employers try to get the work they need done as inexpensively as possible. This is the pattern to which economists appeal.

It is not, of course, exhaustively accurate. In seeking employment, pay is not the only consideration. People will accept lower pay if the conditions are pleasant and the work interesting. To an employer it is important to have loyalty and good morale in the workforce, and these are not

exhaustively a matter of pay. Occasionally economists try to put money values on all of these intangibles, but for the most part, following their model's most apparent implications, they ignore these other factors.

Furthermore, unless there is basic honesty and self-discipline, the whole market system breaks down. The government can enforce honesty and self-discipline in some respects, but laws cannot replace internal commitments and character. Unfortunately, the market, especially as economists interpret it, tends to erode these crucial values. In terms of market values, if dishonesty is profitable, there is nothing wrong with it. If employees can persuade their employers that they are doing good jobs, there is no harm in dawdling. For the market to work well, it must be set in a context in which ethical values not characteristic of *Homo economicus* are nevertheless operative. If the market and its values extend into larger sections of society, as they now do in the United States, the market itself suffers.

The clash between market values and concern for justice and the common good is shown by a series of experiments conducted some years ago. Large groups of people were given tokens that they could invest in one of two ways. They could exchange their tokens for one cent each. Or they could put them in a pool that pays 2.2 cents each but distributes the proceeds to all players. Market values dictate that one exchange all one's tokens for money to be paid to oneself. One could then hope that other players would put money in the collective pool from which one would receive additional funds. On the other hand, it is clear that if all players put all their tokens in the collective pool, all would benefit maximally.

In fact most people exchanged part of their tokens in one way and part in the other. Overall, the division was roughly half and half. When asked why they did not follow what most economists would call rational practices, they said they thought that exchanging some tokens in the collective pool was only fair. Many said that a truly fair-minded person would put more in the collective pool than they had themselves done.

The only group that deviated drastically from the pattern was composed of a group of beginning graduate students in economics. This group contributed only 20% to the collective pool. Clearly their specialization in economics had led them to adopt market values! The power of the market model in the thinking of economists was were conducted today, far more people would act the way the students of economics acted; far fewer would act for the common good.

Market values are influencing more and more segments of society. The medical profession has recently, quite publicly and openly, been turned into the medical industry. The educational system is now supported for its service to the market rather than its contribution to citizenship and human values. There is a systematic effort to develop a theory of law based on the application of economic principles.

One might suppose that market principles have always dominated business, but, as I have noted, business itself requires the functioning of other values. A popular adage has been that "honesty is the best policy." Today, however, businessmen are sometimes counseled to obey the law only when that is profitable, and to break it when they can thereby earn more money. For example, the punishment for violating regulations protecting the environment is usually a fine. Operating by market principles, the businessman is encouraged to calculate the extra cost of obeying the law and to count against that the cost of penalties likely to be levied by the government. If profits are likely to exceed penalties, then the businessman who behaves "rationally" will break the law.

Process thought provides a different model of human beings, one that, if accepted, would have quite different consequences for public life generally. Instead of viewing individuals as isolated substances relating to others only through market transactions, Whitehead encourages us to see the individual as largely constituted by relations to others. This makes a huge difference.

With the now standard model, the well being of other human beings contributes nothing to mine. Hence, harming others in order to get ahead is quite rational. With the Whiteheadian model, my well being is largely the result of the well being of other people, especially those who are close to me. Rational behavior is that which improves the community of which I am a part rather than that which increases my wealth at the expense of others. A thoroughgoing Whiteheadian, in the experiment of which I have spoken, would calculate correctly that all would benefit most if all put their money in the common pool and act accordingly.

The contrast can be stated in terms of the importance of human community. The now dominant economics has no place for community. We are simply collections of individuals, each seeking his or her gain. The application of this model leads systematically to the destruction of given communities. Karl Polanyi's book, *The Great Transformation*, shows what happened in eighteenth century England. In the United States, in the past fifty years, applying the dominant model to agriculture and to