

A. N. Whitehead's Ideas on Peace

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Abstract

The quest for peace has been a central motive in the life of men. The essential problems of peace with Whitehead are sought in terms of social harmony and human reason. Whitehead believes that the Greeks and Romans, in their best periods, have been taken as the standard of western civilization. They were speculative, adventurous and eager for novelty. For these reasons, the civilization of society requires the virtues of adventure. Without adventure, civilization is full of decay.

What distinguishes Whitehead from Russell and Kant is that while these two mainly rely on a world government, Whitehead mobilizes creative advances to attain world peace. Whitehead's emphasis on a gradual approach to peace of the world constitutes the main characteristic of his thoughts of peace through a creative advance. Therefore, for him peace cannot be completed but can only continually be approached, that is, asymptotically reached.

I

Discussions on peace have been generally related to an outlook on the universe or a world view. Desire for peace has been a central motive since human being began to exist in the world. Conflicts between war and peace increased the intensity and urgency of peace as civilization and human enlightenment developed. It is true that the great philosophers of every age contributed to solve the difficult problem of what is the real essence of peace. Exploration of peace is part of a larger effort to confirm conditions to facilitate progress and peace of man, rather than only to pursue the essence itself. Therefore, the study of peace in philosophy shifted its emphasis from human nature to an analysis of social organism in connection with historical background.

Whitehead establishes a new metaphysics, not restricted to philosophical problems such as analysis of language and epistemology, and sought the philosophical foundation for an organism based on mathematics and modern science, different from other philosophers concerned. He argues that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."¹ He also mentions that Plato tried to conceive of the complete fact. Plato distinguished, "the seven main factors interwoven in fact: - The Ideas, The Physical Elements, The Psyche, Eros, The Harmony, The Mathematical Relations, The Receptacle."² As Plato identified seven basic elements as his final problem, Whitehead, despite a 2500 year time lapse, proposed the issue as his main philosophical interest. In this aspect, Whitehead's system is another footnote on Plato. However, as human beings have experienced drastic changes in social organization, in artistic achievement, in religion and science for 2500 years, the philosophical system of Plato and Whitehead has been observed to have substantial differences.

Whitehead argues that the specific aspects of Plato's seven elements were activated among Western nations and these aspects civilized those nations. I think that when these seven metaphysical notions are interpreted with modern meanings, the interpretation must start from a concept of "process." For Whitehead, 'process', as a creative act, belongs to an essence of creative advance that is absorbed into a new unity in which the past is accompanied by the ideal and by foresight. "The new direction of aim is initiated by Spontaneity, an element of confusion. The enduring Societies with their rise, culmination, and decay, are devices to combine the necessities of Harmony and Freshness. There is the deep underlying Harmony of Nature, as it were a fluid, flexible support."³

¹ A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Ed. by D.R. Griffin and D.W. Sherburne, The Free Press, N. Y., 1978, p.39 (Indicated as *P.R.*).

² A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, The Macmillan Company, N. Y., 1967, p.158 (Indicated as *A.I.*).

³ *Ibid.*, p.286.

II

Whitehead tries to find in Plato's philosophy a clue for solutions to social problems of our era. As mentioned above, a 2500 year time interval between Whitehead and Plato reveals substantial differences of historical intellect such as social organization, artistic achievement, religion and science. Socrates' death made Plato think that to lead the state stricken by injustice to the righteous state and to terminate human misery, philosophers, who are convinced that justice is necessary virtue for an ideal state, should govern the state. Plato's ideal state is a state where citizens do their jobs harmoniously and thus realize state-justice. For Plato, justice is achieved through social harmony among citizens and justice becomes a condition of peace. Citizens' individual desires result in disunion of a state. Therefore, to achieve a states' peace, it is necessary for each citizen to restrain his individual desire.

Plato implicates an ideal state according to his idea of peace, but his implication can be the same as a contemporary philosopher, Whitehead. According to Whitehead : "the Universe achieves its values by reason of its coordination into societies of societies, and into societies of societies of societies. Thus an army is a society of regiments, and regiments are societies of men, and men are societies of cells, and of blood, and of bones, together with the dominant society of personal human experience, and cells are societies of small physical entities such as protons, and so on, and so on",⁴ and "a society is a nexus which 'illustrates' or 'shares in', some type of 'Social Order'."⁵ A society possesses attributes that make it a society, and as situations change, it also changes its inessential attributes. The Greek and Roman societies at their best have been the standard of western civilization. They were speculative, adventurous and eager for novelty. Without adventure, civilization decays. For a society to be civilized, five attributes; truth, beauty, adventure, art and peace are necessary. Whitehead argues that "I choose the term 'Peace' for that Harmony of Harmonies which calms destructive turbulence and completes civilization."⁶ For Whitehead, peace does not mean anesthesia, but the crown of life and motion of soul in positive feeling. "It[peace] comes as a gift. The deliberate aim at Peace very easily passes into its bastard substitute, Anesthesia. In other words, in the place of a quality of 'life and motion', there is substituted their destruction. Thus Peace is the removal of inhibition and not its introduction. ... In fact it is largely for this reason that Peace is so essential for civilization. It is the barrier against narrowness. One of its fruits is that passion whose existence

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.203.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.285.

Hume denied, the love of mankind as such.”⁷ As seen here, Whitehead's idea of peace is a philosophical concept to establish peace.

As mentioned earlier, Plato notes that to realize state justice, citizens must do their lots harmoniously. Justice is achieved through social harmony among citizens. Citizens' individual desires can result in the disunion of a state. Therefore, to achieve a state's peace, it is necessary for each citizen to restrain his individual desires by reason. Whitehead argues that as a community changes, every rule and norm needs to change according to the light of reason. “It is the first step in sociological wisdom, to recognize that the major advances in civilization are processes which all but wreck the societies in which they occur : - like unto an arrow in the hand of a child. The art of free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.”⁸

III

The ancient natural philosophers sought permanence in the process of fluxes. Pythagoras regarded men, society and the universe as a product of numerical harmony and order. Logical harmony accompanied by a situation that composes a unity is exclusive and subsumptive. Therefore, order and disorder come from numerical harmony and disharmony. Peace and war all come from harmony and disorder. Peace means harmony and order, and war means disharmony and disorder. They are made of numerical arrangements and proportions. Pythagoras penetrates the importance of numbers as a supporting measure that represents conditions inherent in the order of the nature. Whitehead argues that “his philosophical speculations reach us through the mind of Plato. The Platonic world of ideas is the refined, revised form of the Pythagorean doctrine that number lies at the base of the real world.”⁹ There is 2500 years interval between the era of Pythagoras and Plato and an era when Whitehead and Bertrand Russell co-authored *Principia Mathematica*. But the clue of Whitehead's idea on peace can be found in both Plato and Pythagoras. His definition, “mathematics is the science of the most complete abstractions to which the human mind can attain”,¹⁰ is a philosophical definition rather than a mathematical definition. This reveals

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.285-286.

⁸ A. N. Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y., 1958, p.88.

⁹ A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.34.

Whitehead's metaphysical inclination. Whitehead's philosophy laid the cornerstone of process, passing through a period of mathematical logic, of science philosophy and of metaphysics. Whitehead's philosophy succeeds the western traditional philosophy, but he reorganizes western traditional philosophy into philosophy of process.

It is quite likely that Whitehead's process philosophy originated from Heraclitus. Whitehead argues that becoming and perishing of an entity is a process that is constantly repeated, and his argument is in the same vein with Heraclitus' proposition, "no one crosses the same river twice", which means all things are in a state of flux. By introducing a unity that is hidden behind flux and change, which is a concept of logos, a unifying rule, Heraclitus explains nature.

As a process philosopher, Heraclitus regards confrontation and harmony as factors of flux and change. His theory that confrontation and harmony are interwoven became a model of dialectic theory. Heraclitus' formula of peace is harmony through confrontation. Permanent peace is not achieved by ending the war. Rather, after the confrontation is terminated, extinction and anesthesia are left. As Heraclitus who recognizes that peace is achieved through harmony of opponents, Whitehead considers peace as harmony and confrontation as anesthesia.

Whitehead and Russell expand in *Principia Mathematica* the meaning of mathematics through a series of arguments by symbols. In those three books, they confront the challenge of mathematics and philosophy. Russell mentions that Whitehead handed over philosophical problems to him.¹¹ Comparing Whitehead's philosophy of peace with Russell's will help to consider the former's.

Even when Russell focused on writing *Principia Mathematica* he never lost his interest in politics. Russell warned the outbreak of the third world war and if it really breaks out, he thought human being would be exterminated. Because of this desperate urgency, he suggests that to achieve peace, people must abandon nuclear weapons and a world government should be established for the long term solution. Because of nuclear weapon, the third world war will be a horrible one. The only permanent method to prevent this tragedy is to establish the world government to monopolize the military force. Russell's idea on establishment of the world government to prevent the third world war is based on an unrealistic idealism resulting from an obsessive thought that men must avoid war.

Different from Russell who advocates the constitution of a world government to prevent war, Kant advocates a union closer the League of Nations that is guaranteed by agreements among nations. Kant thinks there is no complete solution for permanent peace. What men can do is to try to approach gradually to a goal of eternal peace. In terms of peace, history is a process of a consistent endeavor to reach that goal.

¹¹ cf. Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, George Allen & Uwin, Ltd., London, 1959, p.74.

IV

Whitehead's idea of peace differs from both Russell who advocates for a world government and Kant who favors a world confederation as seen in the League of Nations. Whitehead's solution is not through concrete institutes or organizations. As mentioned earlier, Whitehead argues that we should make progress and peace gradually through a creative advance. Therefore, For him peace cannot be completed but only approached, that is asymptotically reached. This is in the same vein as Kant who considers eternal peace as an gradual approach and history is a process to achieve it. Whitehead's thought that is applied to the ideas of peace is based on a process through historic progress. He declares that peace is a standard of civilized behavior, and he tries to find the historical basis for peace. As human beings who experience their history, they know which is climax and decline of human experience when political or cultural aspects are described intensively. Whitehead argues that the adventures of ideas are a synonym of human history. "The history of ideas is dominated by a dichotomy which is illustrated by this comparison of Steam and Democracy in recent times to Barbarians and Christians in the classical civilization. ... Sometimes the period of change is an age of hope, sometimes it is an age of despair. When mankind has slipped its cables, sometimes it is bent on the discovery of a New World, and sometimes it is hunted by the dim sound of the breakers dashing on the rocks ahead. The Fall of the Roman Empire occurred in a prolonged age of despair: Steam and Democracy belong to an age of hope. It is easy to exaggerate the contrast between these two kinds of ages of transition."¹²

Whitehead's history of ideas dichotomizes concepts such as the modern times of steam and democracy, and the Roman Empire of Barbarianism and Christians. "To Attila and his hordes their incursion into Europe was an enjoyable episode diversifying the monotonous round of a pastoral life. But we have preserved for us hymns and ejaculations of sentinels in North Italian towns as they paced the walls amid the gathering gloom of a winter's night: - 'From the fury of the Huns, Good Lord deliver us.' In this instance it seems easy to discriminate; barbarism and civilization were at odds with each other, and we stand for civilization."¹³

To sum up, discussions on peace have become an important ingredients to the world view. The quest for peace has been a central motive to facilitate human progress and peace. Analysis of social organism is a working hypothesis to irenology. Since a working hypothesis is essentially hypothetical, to approach the principle of irenology, it must be asymptotic. Whitehead tries to seek a solution of peace in social harmony and human reason. He thinks of the Greek and Roman societies

¹² *A.I.*,pp.5-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

during their best periods as the standard of civilization. Ideas that built their societies are speculative, adventurous and eager for novelty. Without adventure, civilization is completely decay.

What distinguishes Whitehead from Russell and Kant is the fact that while these two mainly rely on a type of world government, Whitehead mobilizes the creative advance to attain world peace. Whitehead's emphasis on asymptotical approach to peace of the world constitutes the characteristic of his thought of peace through a creative advance. Therefore, for him peace cannot be completed but can only be continually approached, that is, asymptotically reached.

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