

Who are “civilized beings”? And what is “civilization”?

“Civilized beings are those who survey the world with some large generality of understanding,” and thus have “ideas of adequate generality respecting their own actions and the world around them” (MTr: 4, 3). Significantly, the “ideas of adequate generality” that civilized beings have are ideas respecting *both* “their own actions” *and* “the world around them.” In other words, they constitute an *ethics* as well as a *metaphysics*, even if only at the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, or as comprised by what Whitehead calls “the presuppositions and the interpretations of ordinary life” (12).

As for “civilization,” Whitehead says, “Civilization involves the understanding of the given world in respect to its qualifications”(118). Recalling his statement earlier in the same book, “The animals enjoy structure. . . . Man understands structure” (76), I should say that civilization, as Whitehead understands it, involves understanding the given world with respect to *its* qualifications, or structure, i.e., by means of “ideas of *adequate* generality” (italics added).

Of course, since “[o]ur habitual experience is a complex of failure and success in the enterprise of interpretation,” philosophy has its work cut out for it. For while “[p]hilosophy does not initiate interpretations,” which it finds as “matters of practice” when it comes on the scene, “[i]ts search for a rationalistic scheme is the search for more adequate criticism, and for more adequate justification, of the interpretations which we perforce employ” (PRc: 14 f. [22]). It is in this sense, then, that Whitehead can say, “The useful function of philosophy is to promote the most general systematization of civilized thought” (17 [25 f.]); and “Philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization” (MTr: 174).