

Perhaps yet another use of Whitehead's notion of "the aim of life"—to live, to live well, and to live better—is to shed light on the main stages of human progress from barbarism to civilization to enlightenment. If the aim of human life at the earliest stage of barbarism is to live or to live well, its aim at the intermediate stage of civilization is to live well or to live better, and at the final stage of enlightenment, to live better still. Clearly, the transitions between the stages are fluid, even as the distinctions between living, living well, and living better should never be drawn too sharply. And yet there are important differences between the three stages, rather as, on John Oman's in many ways parallel account, the differences between the stages in the development of the human capacity to use general ideas are also important.

The important difference made by civilization appears to be the emergence at once of individualism and universalism over against the collectivism and particularism characteristic of barbarism. In other words, human beings become civilized just insofar as they somehow become aware that, for all of their social and cultural differences from those of other communities, they are one and all members individually of the encompassing community of all human beings as well as of the larger cosmos of beings as such. What mediates this awareness, whether religiously or philosophically, are completely general ideas about what is really going on and what we as human beings are thereby authorized to be and to do. Of course, there is no single, universally shared formulation of these general ideas, but only a plurality of formulations, each reflecting the specific historical conditions out of which it arises. But distinctive of each of them is a claim to universal validity, to formulate norms binding not only on this, that, or the other individual or group but on any and all human beings simply as such. In the sphere of religion, this first great transition marks the difference between preaxial and axial religions—or, in Whitehead's terms, "social" and "rational" religions, and in Santayana's, "natural" and "ultimate" religions. This means, among other things, that each "axial," "rational," or "ultimate" religion claims a decisive existential authority, and that not only substantially but also formally, over against all merely "preaxial," "social," or "natural" religions as well as all other comparable claims to universal validity.