

# A.N. Whitehead and the Avoidance of Knowledge

The English-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) personifies a powerful justification for the continued study of Western culture in the modern world. It is not possible to rank cultures in terms of intrinsic value—they are of intrinsic value to the peoples whom they embrace, and who feel them in their blood. It would be like arguing that an orange has a better skin than an apple. However, the Western culture is, in instrumental terms—its contribution to the betterment of the lives of people of all races and cultures—arguably the greatest culture that has ever existed.

Over the period of a millennium, highlighted by the Enlightenment, and with a significant contribution from the Greco-Roman and Islamic cultures, the West has provided the scientific and technological foundations of the modern world. The achievement of the Islamic golden age is preserved in the names of thousands of stars, and words such as *chemistry*, *algebra* and *zero*. However, this age came to an end when Islam embraced monotheistic puritanism in the thirteenth century, and it was left to the West to carry on the material progress of humankind.

Nor was humanity's spiritual progress left behind. Standing on the shoulders of the giants of previous ages, artists and philosophers progressively refined approaches to the ultimate questions of existence. Whitehead, absorbing and critiquing the lessons of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Descartes, Bacon, Kant and others, originated Process philosophy, which, rejecting the static substance-quality model of the medievals, sees the world as a continuous development, in which God is central—although this is arguably not a God with which the established churches would be comfortable, or might even comprehend. I would like here to discuss three topics from Whitehead's masterwork *Process and Reality* in relation to some phenomena that may be critical for the US and the world.

## Language

“Cancel culture” in relation to language is acting as police force, judge, jury and executioner. For example, Mimi Groves, an American girl seeking to embark on her adult life in college in 2021, has seen that life possibly ruined forever, by the dredging up of a three-second video of her uttering the “n” word at school. Coon cheese has felt compelled to change its name, because of its supposed associations with slavery. A popular song which satirises a particular type of person (*boof-head* gives the idea) was banned in Canada because of its placing of the word *faggot*—supposedly a homophobic slur—in the mouth of one of those satirised.

These reactions are widely felt to be unjustified; and Whitehead can help us understand why. One often hears the maxim that we think with words, and that those words create our world. This is far from the whole story. In his study of “symbolic reference”, Whitehead argues that words are “handy” symbols, and that we think, ultimately, with the imaginal and intellectual content of what those symbols refer to. Further, a word is, so Whitehead argues, a genus comprising many species, the form of any of which in a particular instance will be determined by, in its spoken form, its pitch, intonation, accent, sound quality, and so on. The great mistake of “cancel culture” is to think that words stand alone *qua* words, denuded of depth of reference, and identical in all species.

Claudius in *Hamlet* hints at this: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go”—where *thoughts* refers to the forms of the imagination, referred to by the words as symbols. The “n” word forms part of the title of a Joseph Conrad novel. Yet the “n” person here has a deeply symbolic role, and Conrad displays no trace of *de haut en bas* towards him. Context is everything. This novel cannot be taught



now in the American academies (where senior academics have lost their jobs from merely mentioning the “n” word in class), and this arguably is a tragedy for the emotional and intellectual lives of its students. Quentin Tarantino insists, thank God, on his right to use language as he sees fit in his films, in his pursuit of, in Aquinian terms, the consonance, radiance and integrity of the product. Whitehead judges that “Symbolism is essential for the higher grades of life.” A failure to convey in education the symbolic function of language may then entrap participants in a lower grade. The neanderthal argumentation in much of social media may be an expression of this.

Cultural Marxism and critical theory in education, expressed in the neglect both of great imaginative works of art in favour of those which are ideologically correct, and of the colossal achievements of the Enlightenment, are widely held to be an important cause of much that ails modern (particularly black American) youth. Whitehead makes this remarkable argument in his discussion of slavery in *Adventures in Ideas*:

There is a freedom lying beyond circumstance ... [It] is conditioned only by its adequacy of understanding. And understanding has this quality that, however it be led up to, it issues in the soul freely conforming its nature to the supremacy of insight.

I suggest that the lack of understanding and insight among educationally impoverished black Americans may well be the real “slavery” that so aggrieves BLM, and arguably justifiably so, whatever their blindness as to its true nature. The late black American professor of economics Walter E. Williams made these telling points about the education of black youths in Democrat states in September 2020:

Democrat-controlled cities have the poorest-quality public education despite their large, and growing, school budgets. Consider Baltimore. In 2016, in 13 of Baltimore’s 39 high schools, not a single student scored proficient on the state’s math exam. In six other high schools, only 1% tested proficient in math. Only 15% of Baltimore students passed the state’s English test. That same year in Philadelphia, only 19% of eighth-graders scored proficient in math, and 16% were proficient in reading. In Detroit, only 4% of its eighth-graders scored proficient in math, and 7% were proficient in reading. It’s the same story of academic disaster in other cities run by Democrats.

Another black commentator suggests that Democrats, many of whom are of course black, may be more comfortable having black Americans needy and weak rather than independent and strong. The incarnation of this contrast *mutatis mutandis* in the persons of Biden and Trump is irresistible. The toppling of Democrat governors rather than statues could help improve the lot of black Americans; but it is unlikely to happen soon. The US is truly in a state of “chassis”, as Jack in Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* might have said, and it’s hard to imagine a route of recovery, at least in the next four years.

## Theory

Whitehead argues that:

The conception of propositions [theories] as merely material for judgments is fatal to any understanding of their role in the universe ... Error is the price which we pay for progress ... in the real world it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. The importance of truth is, that it adds to interest. [emphasis added]

The Fourth Estate, which at present is so lamentably failing to do its job, particularly in the US, is fond of adding the pejorative “conspiracy” to any theory of which it disapproves. The theories of Covid’s origination in the Wuhan virus research laboratory; of the influence of China—particularly Chinese money—on the recent cataclysmic events in Washington; and of the Democrats’ theft of the 2020 election; these are examples of theories that an alert and curious Fourth Estate, at its best, would fasten on, like a dog on a bone. As it happens, the current feeling in the US, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in mid-January, is that the first of these theories is likely to be true. The second may or may not be true, but it would be extremely interesting to find out; and it would be hard to imagine a theory of greater interest to the American people than that of the 2020 election fraud. However, for there to be interest there has to be attention; and the American people have been deprived of attending to such theories by the totalitarian suppression of dissenting, mostly conservative, voices from mainstream and social media. Under these conditions there can be, according to Whitehead, no progress.

## Stubborn facts

Whitehead argues that “the creative advance of the world is the becoming, the perishing, and the objective immortalities, of those things



which jointly constitute *stubborn fact*" (Whitehead's emphasis). A fact will remain stubborn despite all attempts of mainstream and social media—of such infallibles as Zuckerberg, Dorsey and Bezos—to suppress it. One has had to go to Fox News and alternative voices—who, surprisingly, turn out not be horned devils at all but in many cases angels—to find the "stubborn facts" underpinning the election fraud theory.

For example, there are Tucker Carlson (on whose show our own Miranda Devine regularly appears), Sean Hannity and Alex Jones. Jones is perpetually in Christ-and-the-money-lenders mode, and his passion sometimes overflows its banks (although never deliberately to promote physical violence—in fact, the opposite is true), but on Jones's *Infowars* you can at least see the data (Cameron Stewart of the *Australian*, please take note): the CCTV evidence of fraud; the in-person eyewitness testimonies, under oath, at senate hearings in Georgia, Pennsylvania and Michigan; the 1000 sworn affidavits (the penalty for the falsification of which is jail) by eyewitnesses to wrongdoing in counting centres;

the data from the Allied Security Operations Group audit of the Dominion voting machines in Antrim County, Michigan; and much else. These are stubborn facts that will not go away. The preservation of democracy will require the Fourth Estate in the US and Australia to pay attention. They will need to display a great deal more intellectual curiosity, courage, open-mindedness, self-belief, integrity and perseverance than they have thus far.

In an environment of CCP-style suppression of dissent, there can be no progress, no "creative advance". The US can have, in short, no future. Whitehead warns in *Science and the Modern World*, "There is, however, a Nemesis which waits upon those who deliberately avoid avenues of knowledge." Trump's pre-election warning that if Joe Biden were to be elected then China would own the United States, perhaps gives an idea of what form this Nemesis may take.

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## Someone I Don't Know Side-Swiped My Car

Bad luck recently, you could say, after surviving some extremely unfortunate luck. For hours I sat across from you in the Emergency Bay: your face dripping with blood. They gave you a compress to stop the flow of red from your cheekbones and your nose. Every time you touched your face, it opened up the wound. Punched in both eyes and the nose. A robbery as you walked home, I hear you tell your girlfriend on the mobile. And then you're telling the emergency nurse you can't wait any longer to see a doctor. "You may have concussion," she cautioned.

Did you find your way home?

For days I wonder how you are. I sniff the first spring jasmine hanging over the fence and your girlfriend whom I've never met crowds my thoughts, till one day, peering out my bedroom window, I notice someone has side-swiped my car. Not exactly what I'd expected to see but, man, the wisteria are showing their purple blooms. A nervous possum balances on the telephone line above the road and there's a newspaper article about an elderly cyclist who died after a freak bike accident caused by a swooping magpie.

Bad luck that a second vehicle crashed into my car while it waited at the smash repair place. Look up, take care, someone or something you don't know may sideswipe you or punch you in the nose.

*Libby Sommer*