
David Ray Griffin's book is an attempt to situate Whitehead's thought within the controversial landscape of postmodernism and to demonstrate its superiority in clarifying perennial philosophical issues. Whitehead's philosophy is postmodern because it "provides a reasoned critique of, and alternative to, those [most problematic] premises while retaining the clear advances associated with modernity." The reason Whitehead's thought has not been examined within the context of postmodernism is due to "the common fallacy of equating a genus with one of its species." The popular species of postmodernism is a deconstructive, nihilistic version. This species is clearly anathema to Whitehead's thought. But "the equation of a genus with one of its species can be pernicious," — similar to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Whitehead's philosophy is in a deep sense postmodern because of his view of modernity as "an essentially antirational enterprise." Many of the traditional insights that have emerged from modernity, e.g. the sensationalist view of perception and the mechanistic view of nature, need to be superseded. Griffin sees Whitehead as ushering in a new and vitally productive stage in philosophy — "a postmodern modernism."

The book is organized into three major parts. Part One examines the postmodern aspects of Whitehead's philosophy within the context of the enlightenment project. Here Griffin demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the cultural, religious, and scientific contexts that defined enlightenment thinking. Griffin describes this "battle of the world views" as a struggle between "the Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Cabalistic traditions" and "the legal-mechanical view." The hegemony achieved by the mechanistic perspective was not due to its "relative explanatory success" but its ability "to support the social-political-economic status quo" — a characteristically "postmodern" explanation. This adoption of a mechanistic paradigm lead to the rejection of three important conceptions: "self-moving matter," "influence at a distance" and "non-sensory perception."

Griffin sees Whitehead's philosophy as "a postmodern reemergence" of these rejected themes. The traditional philosophical doctrines that emerged out of the enlightenment project, i.e. naturalism, empiricism, and rationalism—to name just a few—are developed in creative, non-traditional ways by Whitehead. The result, in Hartshornean terms, is "a new enlightenment." For example, Whitehead devises a version of naturalism (ppp) [prehension-panentheist-panexperientialist] that leaves behind the traditional naturalism (sam) [sensationist-atheist-materialist]. Empiricism, in its Whiteheadian form, advances beyond the traditional, sensationalistic paradigm and embraces three types of perception: causal efficacy, presentational immediacy, and symbolic reference. "Full-fledged" perception in the mode of causal efficacy allows for the perception of fundamental emotional states inaccessible to perception in the mode of
presentational immediacy – “things that could be either sensory or nonsensory.” This type of perception also provides for the possibility of ethical knowledge “which allows us to experience God.” Rationalism, in its enhanced Whiteheadian form, strives for harmony amongst the plurality of experience and will not attempt “to achieve consistency at the expense of experiential inclusiveness.” This traditional, truncating type of rationalism is most evidenced in the case of Hume who, when confronted with the limitations of sensationalist perception, settled for a rejection of what Griffin calls our “hard-core common sense” notions. Griffin views this as tantamount to violating the law of contradiction because “it is irrational to deny in theory ideas that one necessarily presupposes in practice.” By taking a “both yes and no” position vis à vis the enlightenment, Whitehead’s philosophy sets itself apart from traditional enlightenment reason which is “a one-eyed reason, deficient in its dept of vision.”

Part Two addresses several ongoing philosophical issues in the light of Whitehead’s philosophy. Chapters are devoted to the Mind-Body problem, Ecology, Time, and Morality. One comes away from these chapters convinced that Whitehead’s philosophy may be the best option for addressing many of these vexing issues. One also might wonder why those philosophers who are truly committed to Whitehead’s philosophy are in many ways operating outside of the mainstream of contemporary philosophy. A brief summary of these chapters is all that can be achieved in this review. For example, mind-body dualism is a “complete failure” and woefully inadequa[te]” and must be supplanted by a “panexperientialism with organizational duality.” The latter, a repudiation of the doctrine of “vacuous actuality,” maintains that “all genuine individuals have experience.” According to Griffin, this notion that experience “goes all the way down” is supported by some of the most recent developments in physics and biology. Such panexperientialism allows for the overcoming of traditional mind-body dualism through “a perpetual oscillation between two modes of existence: subjectivity and objectivity.” The denial that actualities are devoid of experience carries over in to the “deep” ecological debate because “entities ... should be thought to be only different in degree from us, however greatly, not wholly different in kind.”

One of the hallmark principles of popular postmodernism is the view that the correspondence theory of truth represents a “transcendental illusion.” According to Griffin, to reject the correspondence theory of truth would be to jettison one of those “hard-core common sense beliefs ... that we really believe” and is key to our ability to act rationally. Issues surrounding truth must be “properly distinguished from the question of knowledge.” Here Griffin develops the notion of “truth as correspondence, knowledge as dialogical.” Knowledge as dialogical enables us “to do justice to a reality which is far more complex than any of our theories about it.” Correspondence theories of truth not only support the pursuit of, but also presuppose the very “indescribable complexity” of reality. The idea that reality is indeed complex – and hence not suited to conform to a correspondence requirement – must in some way correspond to an indescribably complex reality.

Whitehead’s panexperientialism is also able to address the issue of whether or not time is reversible by arguing that “irreversible time ... go[es] all the way down.” This
version of pantemporalism turns out to be the key to protecting our basic intuitions about time.” Recent developments relativity physics have given rise to theory of “nontemporalism” which sees “a complete symmetry with regard to the direction of time.” Whitehead’s notion of an actual occasion as cumulative, consisting of a “prior, prehended event as the cause and the prehending experience as the effect … gives time its in principle irreversibility.”

Whitehead’s philosophy is especially instructive, and timely, in its ability to defend “moral realism.” Moral realism has traditionally been supported by heteronomy. In the absence of divine sanction, contemporary human beings are at a loss as to how to see non-relativistic values as part of “the fabric of the world.” Again, from Griffin’s perspective, to deny moral objectivity is to invoke the law of non-contradiction. Whitehead believed that values are “actively envisaged” somewhere and, according to his “ontological principle,” this somewhere is the “primordial nature of God.” Whitehead’s transformed, radical empiricism enables us to have access to these ideals. By tapping into God’s conceptual experience, a novel possibility is made available to us as well as the appetition for that possibility.

Part Three consists of an attempt to develop the coherence of Whitehead’s theism. Chapter 8 is an attempt to reconcile conflicts between relativity physics and Whitehead’s view of God. The lay person needs to be forewarned that this is a technical chapter. Conflicts surrounding temporal theism’s requirement for a cosmic “now” and relativity theory’s denial of absolute simultaneity have been left largely unresolved; so much so that Hartshorne referred to it as “the problem.” Whitehead’s temporal theism requires a present moment in God’s experience that exists between a past which causally influences the present, and a future which the present will influence.” The absence of a cosmic present “renders problematic the interaction between God and the world.” One possible solution is to argue that “Einsteinian special relativity physics does not provide the metaphysical truth, or even the ultimate cosmological truth, about time.” This raises the question of the possibility of whether “supraluminal influences” can occur which “might be different in kind from that involved in signals … a kind of influence that is not transmitted through contiguous occasions.” Here we see a resurgence of the repressed enlightenment notion of “instantaneous … causal influence at a distance.” This chapter contains correspondence between Griffin and physicists David Bohm and Henry Stapp in which both maintain the possibility of “instantaneous action at a distance, which, however, does not disrupt the relativistic invariance at the level of observed phenomena.” Griffin is to be credited with grappling with these difficult, highly technical issues.

Chapter 9 is a spirited engagement with the process theology of Robert Neville. This ongoing debate concerns to what extent Whitehead develops an adequate notion of God. Neville maintains that “Whitehead’s conception of God is largely mistaken and that an alternate conception is to be preferred.” The issue surrounds the category of the ultimate: Is it God (Neville) or Creativity (Whitehead-Griffin)? If the latter is correct, then, as Neville maintains, “God is finite, [and] not the infinite source of everything determinate.” The reader must work through this chapter and come to their own conclusion—recognizing, of course, that Griffin is providing the play by play as well as
the color commentary (at times with a bit of vitriol.) And despite Griffin’s best efforts at exegesis, one comes away wondering how creativity, according to the orthodox Whiteheadian reading, could get underway without a creative decision. The ontological fact that the world is requires a conception of creation ex nihilo — a conception Griffin refuses to embrace. If God is robbed of its ontological power, are we left, as Neville says, with a second rate God, one “less worthy of worship”?

The Appendix is a detailed examination of Whitehead’s “subjectivist principle.” We are adequately forewarned that this section may appeal “only to a small coterie of Whitehead scholars.” That being said, Descartes “subjectivist turn … is an insight of the greatest importance.” If Descartes had followed his radical epistemological program far enough, he would have been lead necessarily to panexperientialism. Had this been the case, we might now be living in a Whiteheadian instead of a Cartesian world.

David Rodick
University of Southern Maine


Dewey’s thought on education and the ways it can be improved are thought to be an important, albeit unclear, part of his philosophical legacy. James Scott Johnston’s recent book explores this topic by focusing on two key parts to this equation—inquiry and democracy. Noting that other scholars have made significant efforts to discuss Dewey on growth, community, and democracy, Johnston indicates that his book aims to bring education back into such discussions. A key part to Dewey’s educational plan, of course, will be “inquiry.” What is meant by this term? Johnston’s book focuses on explicating Dewey’s notion of inquiry, and ends with its connection to growth and democracy. In all, he does an admirable and enlightening job of surveying the various ways that Dewey discusses inquiry, as well as the variety of critiques to which his rich idea of inquiry left him open.

The book is composed of five chapters. Save for the first one, each chapter has four sections and always begins with a historical treatment of the selected topic. Chapter One introduces us to Johnston’s general problem—accurately conceptualizing Dewey’s notion of inquiry. He usefully summarizes this task in a variety of questions or choices that Dewey and others have to make about inquiry—is it subjective or objective, and what exactly does it require? Johnston’s overall theme in this work is that Dewey was not very clear or consistent on such conceptualizations, a point evidenced by Johnston’s tactic of laying out a variety of differing, and often conflicting, quotations from Dewey of the concept in question. In this chapter, however, Johnston characterizes the debate among partisans of pragmatism as a difference in which set of these textual indicators are emphasized. Some commentators read inquiry as very scientific in nature, and choose their textual evidence accordingly. Others emphasize the connection between inquiry and the generic traits of experience, leading them to a more aesthetic reading of inquiry. Johnston’s thesis is that both of these sides err insofar as they search for the model of