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.

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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
inquiry; instead, he will argue that inquiry is context-bound, self-correcting, and intrinsically connected to democratic ways of living.

Chapter Two discusses the readings that defend or critique a scientistic notion of inquiry. Johnston does an excellent job at reconstructing historical and contemporary accounts that take Dewey to task for being overly positivistic in his account of inquiry. He also ably discusses the arguments of those who defend a model of inquiry supposedly in Dewey that privileges the model of "scientific method." Johnston again reiterates his primary thesis that such defenses and criticisms come from the search for the model of inquiry, free of any given context. Instead, Johnston argues that a wide reading of Dewey’s passages on inquiry will lead one to see that “inquiry, far from consisting of a rigid set of formulae or steps, is to be thought of as protean...inquiry is to be thought of as a set of methods, of techniques, of habits, as well as attitudes and tempers that have arisen historically through experimentation” (36-37). Inquiry involves imagination, emotion, and a purposive engagement of the subject with a problematic environment, not merely following some determinate method. Such inquiry results in new meanings, which, if they successfully address a given problem, lead to habit formation.

The other reading of inquiry, that which emphasizes the experiential aspects to it, does not escape without equal criticism from Johnston. In Chapter Three, he considers those critiques and defenses of Dewey’s notion of inquiry that foreground the experiential aspects. The problem with this, Johnston notes, is that it is difficult to see how inquiry could be self-correcting. Johnston again does an admirable job of exploring recent and not-so-recent criticisms of such an account of inquiry. Many of these criticisms worry about tying experience (viz., inquiry) too much to present experience. What could correct it if there was nothing outside of such experience? How can the results of inquiry tie into other states of affairs in the future or past? The problem, according to Johnston, is the overly-aestheticized reading of inquiry assumed in both the defenders and objectors discussed in this chapter. Instead of emphasizing immediate, satisfactory experience, Johnston claims that inquiry is key to setting up such aesthetic or immediately absorbing situations. Inquiry produces the meanings and attitudes that create what is satisfying now and what will satisfy in the future. As he puts it, “What counts here [in the immediately satisfactory experience] are the meanings that prior inquiry has constructed” (89).

Chapter Four and Five of Johnston’s book confront the criticisms of Dewey on community, education, and democracy. By distilling important critiques of Dewey’s thought on education, Johnston highlights the two worries concerning education and inquiry—that education leads to socialization in line with the dominant powers in society, and that the lack of an external source of authority in inquiry leaves it vulnerable acquiescing to entrenched sources of power. The worry seems to be that one could simply learn to “inquire” in the state-sponsored fashion through the state-sponsored school. Johnston tries to address this account by appealing to a true notion of inquiry—if all goes well, structure and force on the part of the teacher give way to more and more complex situations calling for student inquiry in the classroom, all culminating in the individual leaving formal education with the ability to question and criticize existing structures of power. Chapter Five extends these concerns by focusing on the issue of
method, and how it can mislead philosophy and inquiry according to some scholars. Johnston answers these concerns and criticisms by describing a notion of inquiry that is integrally connected to practice in community settings, which thereby commits it to a variety of contexts and contextual demands. While he discusses inquiry in broad, general strokes, Johnston seems committed to this contextualized reading—inquiry depends on the situation in which one is inquiring. Schools aim to be educative by constructing a variety of useful situations, but the bottom line seems to be that inquiry is the type of mental habit that allows for growth in given situations. The specifics of such growth depend on the specific challenges faced and the community one is enmeshed in, but when inquiry truly leads to growth it results in an increase in the satisfying experiences that some over-emphasized in the experiential reading of inquiry (138-139). Inquiry that results in growth also leads to the establishment of new meanings (196). The key to creating the sorts of inquirers who will “grow” in this laudatory sense is education—Johnston forcefully argues in the final two chapters that the way an individual is schooled matters greatly in the sorts of habits and meanings they amass, which consequently impact their willingness and capability to be a functioning member of a democratic community.

Overall, Johnston’s book is a valuable read for anyone interested in Dewey’s educational or political thought. After perusing it in its entirety, I am still not convinced, however, that Johnston has adequately made good on the contextual nature of his reading of inquiry. If one is truly committed to such a “ground-level” reading of inquiry, it seems odd to focus on general theoretical connections among concepts such as growth, democracy, and community. Instead, one ought to examine radically different contexts in which inquiry occurs (say, in creating new musical pieces and writing a quantitative scientific article). Johnston seems forced by the topic at hand, however, to give a general account and defense of inquiry, all the while maintaining that there is no general formula or model involved. While he never gives a general formula for it, I wonder how close he gets in spirit to that outcome with the large-scale, systemic pronouncements made in the final chapters. This is the problem and challenge, of course, with attempting to deal with broad, ambiguous Deweyan concepts such as “aesthetic experience” and “growth.” I think the key to dealing with such issues—the approach taken in Dewey’s work—is in identifying common threads that can be expected to run through all the elements of that sort of phenomena. I would argue that the key to all of this, inquiry included, is the instantiation of broad (yet reflectively describable) mental habits or orientations to the people and activities involved in one’s experience. This would be what makes radically different instances of problem solving and communal cooperation all instances of inquiry. Johnston may object to this, of course, since it seems close to the “one model” approach, but short of such an approach the challenge becomes to heuristically discuss and theorize about something that contextualization renders particularized to an extreme. Notwithstanding the challenges and perils of theorizing about contextualized phenomena, Johnston’s book remains a valuable effort at unraveling the richness and ambiguities of Dewey’s thought on education and community.

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