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## Philosophy and Meditation

Review: Michael Webb,  
*The Whole at Once: A Conversation on Meaning*  
(Austin, TX: Fire Hill Press, 2020), 244 pages.

### Summary Statement by Michael Webb

I have a folder called “Inquiry” where I have put all the material I have gathered on this project. Basically, this is an inquiry on inquiry. The Greeks, of course, figure in it – including the pre-Socratics, such as Heraclitus – and in modern times – Heidegger: for example with his articulation of the disclosure of Being, his idea of the *Lichtung*, or clearing, into which Being reveals itself, and especially the post-War Heidegger with his discussion of technology as a mentality, or framing. Most Western interest in Asian methods has been psychological. The “mindfulness” movement has been focused on helping to manage anxiety, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and so forth. I am interested in inquiry, however, not in relieving suffering.

My first “innovation” (if I can say that) has been to try to apply the Asian methods (of contemplation) outside of a motivation to relieve suffering. I am not trying to make people happier. Instead, I am wanting to apply these methods to scientific, philosophical, and artistic or creative inquiry – into discovering (or uncovering) truth or reality – that is to say “truth for its own sake.” Yes, if you align yourself with truth, you will probably suffer less. We will probably be better at meeting our material needs if we put inquiry first. But that

is not why I am suggesting it. I am talking about turning outward, away from the narrow perspective of “me” and “my concerns” and toward the ungraspable vastness of the cosmic background order. This has to do with “growing up” as a species. Becoming adults in this universe. Rather than just treating everything as a tool to fulfill our needs and make us happier.

My second “innovation” has to do with how I am understanding contemplation in the Asian traditions. My innovation is to see it in terms of “awareness without attention.” The enlightened state is this presence, that is to say when the mind stops focusing attention on any objects and is instead completely open and receptive. The Tibetan meditators, in Dzogchen for example, come closest to describing this, I think. Most traditions make a big deal of it. They wrap it up in complicated language and concepts. Most forms of meditation are concentration practices. Hold the mind in one-pointed attention on an object of meditation, such as the breath. This leads to a state of *samadhi*, or absorption. However, it is not what we are looking for in inquiry. In their mature stages, the Eastern traditions all go to “awareness without attention.” They just use concentration practices as an initial step for their students. So my innovation has been to ask how to release attention, not how to strengthen it. This is a different orientation, but I think it actually clarifies what the Eastern meditators are ultimately doing. But I am emphasizing it from the beginning, because I am interested in inquiry, rather than release from suffering. That is my little invention.

My third “innovation” has been to apply this open state of consciousness to dialectics. We take one perspective, then a contradictory one, to reach paradox, or *aporia* in Greek. Then a third emerges, which is distinct from the first two, but is discovered because of the paradox, or through the paradox. The paradox points us toward it. My insight is that the third, or root, or essence, is the same as what the Hindu Vedanta tradition call the *Brahman*/reality; “hidden in the cave of the heart of all beings” as immaterial soul. We cannot get it just by looking at the various surface perspectives. We have to take all the perspectives at once, simultaneously. That gives rise to the emergent realization. Importantly, we cannot do that by means of our usual cognition! The perspectives are contradictory, or inconsistent, after all. We cannot believe a proposition and also its denial. However, that is exactly what this method entails. It can happen only in the open state, of “awareness without attention.” This is *theoria*, or contemplation.

That leads to my fourth “innovation,” which is to apply body-awareness. This is not entirely new. A few psychotherapists also use this approach. My discovery is that attention or focal awareness shows up in the body as a feeling of contraction, or tightening, or as an urge to move, to make an effort. The body-sense can take us into the contemplative state! Again, many people (especially in the New Age culture) are close to this, with their idea of “energy,” and so forth. But, I am cleaning it up a bit, removing all the mystical talk. Also, I am looking specifically at how it applies in inquiry.

## A Review

This is a book about a phenomenological challenge: to reach the depths of meaning. It relies principally on becoming aware of the self and of the core essence of wholes, be they collections of objects or sentences or ideas. But meaning is the end point constituting, according to the author, a drive more powerful even than the will to live (WO, 137). It lies beyond any given perspective. The work is presented as a dialogue between student and master; its 244 pages actually make for a quick and relatively easy read, not burdening the reader with jargon. It intends to be a popular presentation but without skimping on issues of relevance to philosophy.

Phenomenologically, Webb’s approach accordingly leans heavily on Gestalt psychology. The route to meaning is receiving impressions of the root or essence of a whole, achieved by avoiding focal attention on anything. “When you perceive the whole as a collection of pieces, you miss what’s vital. The interesting dimension

comes with the whole taken as a whole. That's where the magic is. Learn how not to pay attention to anything at all. No focal attention. That's all you need to do" (WO, 4, 7).

In the epistemology of perception, "an impression is more subtle than an idea or concept. It's more subtle than feelings or emotions. It's very precise and it's not a notion at all. You can't put it into words" (WO, 15). Hume relied heavily on impressions and ideas but reversed the stress: "Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*... By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning."<sup>1</sup>

More broadly, the epistemology is *enactivist*. The state of mind is active, not passive. In waiting patiently for an impression to make itself known, one is to be "actively receptive" (WO, 23). The object is to be fully aware; to be present, but without scanning or staring (WO, 37). At every step of the way toward sensing the essence of the whole, marking our way toward true consciousness, "what" questions are to be asked, just as, in the enactivist account, they are essential to mundane consciousness. Like Jaak Panksepp<sup>2</sup> and Ralph D. Ellis,<sup>3</sup> Webb recognizes the priority of seeking, exploration, and inspiration – the importance of "being actively open. Creating. Delving" (WO, 197). In sum, "we explore. We discover. We seek to understand what's true" (WO, 210). There is even a hint of Peirce, where Webb makes use of Secondness (the *object*) in saying that we remain ignorant of our hidden assumptions "until something crashes against them" (WO, 51). Here assumptions are the *sign* at Firstness. At Thirdness we presume they are identified and defined (at the *interpretant*). The stress Pierce is getting at is just *activity*.

Webb is happily sensitive to the distinction between emotions and moods. It can be said that emotions in sentient animals entail physiological responses as well as conscious feelings without which the emotion could not achieve its purpose. Webb correctly identifies the garden variety of moods to be "more subtle than feelings. Moods stay in the background. They set the tone. They make a group more likely to feel certain emotions or to look at their situation in a certain way" (WO, 135).

Metaphysically, the approach is essentialist. One cannot "imagine" essence: "The essence isn't a feeling or a concept. An impression of the whole points you toward it. You never find it absolutely. It's more like a direction than a destination. It's like beauty, in how it astounds us and fills us with wonder. It's also like truth, in how it aligns with reality" (WO, 26–7, 34, 154). In seeking to understand a conversant, one articulates the essence of what is understood thus far (WO, 67) – conversant(s) doing likewise.

Apart from essentialism, the approach is in part Buddhist, but mostly Vedanta (knowledge as explicated in the Upanishads in which one finds an essence or center). The consistent stress is on the incapacity of the mind to accurately represent reality, and that the suitably trained mind can arrive at the essence of wholes and thus, impliedly, of Absolute Reality. The issue: "When you hear someone speak, you assume they must be feeling what you would feel if you were saying that. It works so well that it creates the illusion of carrying subjective experience from one brain to another" (WO, 104–5). But in fine, nothing is what it seems (WO, 193). Furthermore, Webb contends that though we see reality, we cannot "see" what the true reality is: existence itself. That is, we do not experience it except through the mind's awareness via meditative exercises (WO, 189–90).

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1) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner, (New York: Penguin, 1969), 49.

2) Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

3) Ralph D. Ellis, *The Moral Psychology of Internal Conflict*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). At page 139 he says this: "As soon as the exploratory drive [Panksepp's "seeking" system] comes into play ... we then have a need to ask ourselves about the criteria for prioritizing various people's interests in various ways [e.g. universalizing intrinsic worth]. Most important, we want to know the truth as to which actions really are best. The exploratory drive is the only one that leads us to seek the truth independently of what we would like the truth to be."

A modified Buddhism manifests in a few important passages. One can learn not to struggle against reality, but without entirely losing the desire to desire. “You can control your mind instead of trying to control the world. Then you don’t suffer. There’s no gap between what you want and what you have. If we’re preoccupied with our needs and desires, won’t we always disagree over what’s fair?” (WO, 158–9, 166). And this: “The grasping in your body. Let it come and go in non-focal awareness. Let it pass through” (WO, 172). Finally, he urges us to attend to our experiences and to recognize at every moment what precisely is true (WO, 173).

In axiology, Webb concludes that what we create we discover, not invent (WO, 151). Meaning takes priority over happiness. “We can seek to understand the world for itself. Not just for what it can do for us. By exploring and creating. But not just to accumulate knowledge. To discover meaning” (WO, 162). This is the result, Webb asserts, of opening up closed loops in our worldview, loops in which our search is limited to whatever generates our own happiness.

In the philosophy of consciousness, Webb contends that consciousness is “the act of being aware” (WO, 182). But, this applies to all life forms (WO, 211). As long as we are focused only on the finite, only on perpetuating ourselves and our happiness, we exist in that closed loop: “To the extent that we function as a closed loop, we’re not conscious” (WO, 209). We must transcend happiness and approach ultimate meaning. To do this we must move beyond perception, what we unthinkingly identify with consciousness. Escape from perception and we shall gain awareness of existence – the ultimate meaning.

Calling his work an example of “post-Post Modern” he writes, “I’m aware that we live in an age where people deny that truth exists. I wanted to propose a set of methods for approaching truth, but without outlining a particular doctrine for what truth is, or even a doctrine of what specifically is true.”<sup>4</sup> The final practical objective, he notes, is to arrive at all perspectives simultaneously as a “subtle impression” (non-verbal, non-conceptual). Participants in the method follow the impression toward the “root” – which gives rise to fresh insight and essential understanding.<sup>5</sup> Intended as (and I think likely to succeed as) a practical manual for individual and collaborative creativity, the book also includes a helpful selection of exercises.

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4) Personal communication, November 12, 2020.

5) Ibid.