

## The Process of Inquiry

In the final chapter of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, the children are drawn into a critical examination of their past inquiries by Lisa's challenge to its proposed continuation. Initially questioning the value of the process as they have experienced it, she wonders if she has merely unearthed things she already knew. Lisa's query and the ensuing dialogue raise three questions vital to an appreciation of *Philosophy for Children*.

Do we already possess principles of knowledge which we merely rediscover? John Dewey discards this Aristotelian concept and traces its danger in past stagnation of science which attempted to adapt all singular cases of experienced phenomena to pre-existent principles already privy to the mind of man. While general principles are valuable as indicators of similarities and differences between experiences, they must allow for a continuity in growth. Continually open to revision and adaptation, such principles are to intelligence what habit is to action. Their greatest strength subsists in the encouragement of the process of inquiry.

This draws us to the second question — Is there such a thing as an objective process of inquiry? Dewey defines inquiry as “... the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.”<sup>1</sup> Inquiry pervades every facet of our lives and, despite its diverse subjects and “special techniques,” it affords a common pattern. Like art, inquiry is capable of transforming its creator's subject matter. So, too, it is, in Dewey's analogy, akin to the formative principles exemplified in law. The dual image projected by such a metaphor aptly summarizes the process of inquiry. The congested uncertainty of any indeterminate situation promotes inquiry. However, insofar as each new situation is to some degree unique, it provides a “peculiar quality,” exercising control over the special procedures of inquiry needed in its regard. The process of inquiry necessarily involves anticipation of consequences, examination of enviroing conditions with reference to their potentialities, and selection and ordering of activities to actualize those potentialities. Key to the pattern of inquiry is its progressive nature. Once identified, the “problem” draws sustenance and suggestion from its constituent terms. Constant, creative interaction of these terms evokes continually more relevant meanings and seeks the formation of a consistent, ordered solution. “Logical theory is liberated from the unobservable, transcendental and ‘institutional,’ ”<sup>2</sup> by providing the vital links which insure its supreme importance to man.

Hence the third question: Is inquiry really important? It would take no great insight to ascertain Dewey's response to such a fundamental question. Yet, to assume immediate acceptance of its value among the children we seek to educate would be to run headlong into the very pitfall the philosopher so often warns against — accepting too quickly a proposed solution and thus cutting off inquiry. Two overwhelming concerns we face (whether as children or adults) are need for objectivity and meaningfulness. Fortunately,

inquiry provides or enables the eventual attainment of both. Objectivity is achieved “... in virtue of its (logical inquiry) concern with objectively observable subject matter by reference to which reflective conclusions can be tried and tested.”<sup>3</sup> Made accessible to communal examination through its symbolic nature, inquiry holds itself open to constant revision and thus greater verifiability. Its flexibility provides the vital link between the normative and formative nature of inquiry. While originating from experiential material (its objective domain), the process suggests modifications and new interpretations of the data (its meaningfulness). Because we are drawn to that which provides consistency and meaningfulness to our apparently fragmented experience, inquiry is invaluable. Seen as a means to interpret all of our responses to the environment — intellectual, physical, emotional and moral — inquiry returns man to himself. What greater gift can we give children?

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### Footnotes

1. John McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Structure of Experience*, p. 226.
2. Ibid, p. 225.
3. Ibid.

### Bibliography

- Lipman, M. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1971.
- McDermott, J. *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Structure of Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Press, 1981.