

POSITIVISM, SKEPTICISM, AND THE ATTRACTIONS OF “PALTRY EMPIRICISM”: A CAVELLIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CURRENT SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

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Introduction: A Brief Portrait of School Reform Today

Horace Mann, Frederick Taylor, Hans Reichenbach, Rudolph Carnap, Edward L. Thorndike, Lewis Terman, Charles Eliot, James Conant: Wherever they are at the moment (and I would not want to speculate one way or the other), they must surely be looking glowingly on current school reform efforts in this country. After all, their ideas, their ways of talking and thinking about the processes and purposes of schooling, are clearly resurgent once again. And they have come together like at no other time in our nation's history. We are all no doubt cognizant of the fact that efficiency, quality control, measurable outcomes, standards, excellence, and professionalism have very much become the parlance of the day in education. Numerous voices now clamor for standardized curriculum, intensified testing of students at all grade levels, and strong accountability measures with the unabashed goal of ensuring that the United States maintains certain levels of economic productivity -- or what is oftentimes figured as “national security” since the publication of 1983's *A Nation at Risk*. (Look, for instance, at the way “capitalism” is now routinely being used synonymously with “democracy” in mainstream politics and the popular media.)

Of course not everyone is pleased that the ideas of Taylor, Reichenbach, Thorndike, Eliot, and his cohorts are presently winning the day on the contested ground of school reform. As people working in and around the area of educational foundations, we have all probably heard, and perhaps articulated ourselves, various arguments for why these reforms are a mistake on political, ethical, socio-economic,

educational or other grounds. We have read that they promote an impoverished “one-size-fits-all” form of education (which they do), lead almost invariably to “forced” (read behavioristic) pedagogies of one sort or another (which they do), put excessive pressure on students to perform in certain narrowly-defined contexts (which they do), serve primarily moneyed interests and numerous allied technocratic agencies (which they do), and are demeaning of teachers, while simultaneously placing responsibility for “fixing” our schools squarely on their shoulders (which they also do). I very much hope that these arguments continue to be made and that their advocates and audience continue to grow beyond the academy. Much is at stake here.

In this paper, however, I would like to assume a more limited focus and investigate the positivistic ethos that lies back of these current school reform efforts. Though attacked repeatedly by philosophers and social scientists over the past half century, this ethos contains a powerful set of assumptions that holds great appeal to both policy makers and the general public in today’s uneasy geo-political and socio-economic climates. It has also no doubt been reinvigorated by our computer/information age, where unremitting calls for more and more rapid exchanges of information are presumed to contain the solution to all of our problems, while questions about what to do with this information, when asked at all, appear somehow quaintly naive. The lived world is just one grand puzzle of atomistic facts, it is implied, and everyone agrees on what the picture is supposed to look like in the end. Cost-benefit analyses patterned after a singular conception of the good are now being employed in virtually every aspect of public life.¹

As its most notable feature, this positivistic ethos holds out the promise of a scientifically validated certainty. In educational terms, that translates into precisely the kinds of reforms that we are seeing today. We are led to believe that we can have certainty where education is concerned – happily, it can be ascertained by the concise tables found in our daily newspapers -- if teachers and schools would only teach, test, and make themselves accountable for it. The

general line of thinking that accompanies this notion goes something like the following: 1) Teaching implies learning in accordance with certain prescribed standards. 2) Learning can be accurately assessed by high-stakes paper-and-pencil tests that reflect these standards. 3) If students' test scores are meeting these standards, then teachers are teaching, but if students' scores are not meeting these standards, teachers are not teaching. (Notice that as a by-product of this the idea of teaching to the test is not thought so bad anymore. In fact, it is sometimes vigorously defended.)

However because we are also committed to the idea that we live in a democracy, where free thinking individuals are said to be the agents of progress, these premises and the conclusion drawn from them are all purportedly open to debate. Of course experience has taught us that things do not always work out that way. Consider the recent dispute between New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills and a coalition of twenty-eight alternative schools over the requirement that all students take and pass Regents exams if they are to graduate. In stating their position the coalition sensibly argued, and with considerable scholarly support, that these exams are incompatible with their progressive teaching methods, curricula, and assessments, which include various kinds of student projects and portfolios. They also pointed to evidence that students in these schools have both lower dropout rates and higher college attendance rates than comparable schools using Regents exams. That did not seem to matter to Commissioner Mills, however, who in ruling against the coalition dismissed such evidence out-of-hand and then played his peremptory trump card: To wit, the public has made it clear that it wants tougher school standards, but a panel of testing and assessment experts finds that the alternative assessments are not rigorous, objective, consistent, or precise measures of student performance. In short, the coalition schools were accused of doing bad science; they were not using the proper positivistic methods in the disinterested fashion required to ensure equal educational opportunity for all. Equality and excellence, you will note, almost always mean sameness of treatment in the ethos of positivism; and if one really knows something, the assessment

format should not make any difference.²

What I am basically trying to show with this example is that we need very much to account for this resurgent positivistic ethos, and to understand its persistent attractions, if we are effectively to critique and combat any or all of the educational reforms cited earlier. This is not to suggest that the many arguments aimed at the various political and social forces involved should be considered any less important. Given the hegemonic concentrations of power that increasingly control policy formation today, these arguments are certainly as pressing as ever. But I think that we must also begin to come to terms with the powerful – and I also want to say destructive -- ontological claims and assumptions that inform, sustain, and in a sense justify the current reform ideology. That, in brief, is what I would like to do below.

Stanley Cavell and the Linkage Between Positivism and Skepticism

The philosopher Stanley Cavell holds a rather unorthodox position with respect to skepticism and its conditions and consequences. By skepticism here, I have in mind the purposeful denial of claims to knowledge about the external world and/or other minds. Briefly, external-world skepticism derives from our inability to be in direct contact with the external world, without the mediation of our senses, while other-minds skepticism demurs at our powerlessness to access the minds of others from any perspective but our own. Not surprisingly, the skeptic is usually thought to be somewhat neurotic in this refusal of the common-sense world. He accepts nothing less than an impossible certainty. He seems obsessively to will his doubt into being, to actively contrive it, as C.S. Peirce once observed. Of course this also suggests that the skeptic's illness is exceptional and can be cured, just as David Hume soon forgot the skeptical conclusions of his deliberations when he left the confines of his chamber and set out to play backgammon and converse with friends at a local pub. To Cavell's way of thinking, however, this standard account of skepticism is dismissively superficial. All of us struggle with the skeptic's illness in varying degrees, he wants us to understand, and the cure

will never be complete or final.

Cavell conceives of skepticism broadly as a general orientation towards the everyday world –“a perpetual dissatisfaction with the human position, a demand for a God’s Eye View or Nothing, that degrades the only perspective that is actually available to us.”³ This means that skepticism and the quest for certainty are really two sides of the same coin for Cavell. Each embodies a desire to live beyond or transcend the natural parameters of the human condition. Importantly, however, he also maintains that this skepticism is in some degree inevitable given the aleatory nature of our world and where uncertainty is an inexorable part of this human condition. Moreover, its liberatory desires are an essential part of our humanity. That is to say, “the urge to be more than (what we have known as being) human is part of being human.”⁴ Cavell’s aim, then, is not so much to cure us of skepticism as it is to “to teach us to live gracefully (and perhaps gratefully) with it” through a more domesticated transcendence from *within* the human condition, a path to a deeper, more expansive recognition of our full humanity.⁵

According to Cavell, the impulse to skepticism appears most frequently in our efforts to evade the uncertainty that necessarily attends our everyday affairs. However it becomes distinctly problematic when it results in as emphatic a withdrawal from the everyday as that exhibited by the supra-empirical or transcendental impetus of traditional metaphysics, or in the modern era, the more restrictive outlook of positivistic thinking – the latter of which Ralph Waldo Emerson would surely consider a “paltry empiricism.”

Now, this interpretation of skepticism probably seems rather odd, since the term is usually used to denote the denial of claims to knowledge; and positivism is thought to be some sort of answer to these claims. But Cavell asks us to consider positivism as itself a form of skepticism, or at least an expression of the skeptical impulse. For as he sees it, the positivist essentially concedes the correctness of almost everything the skeptic says – for example, that we do not know any-

thing about other people except their behavior (hence the positivistic roots of behaviorism) – in the hopes of withholding from the skeptic the claim to some kind of minimal “scientific knowledge.” Yet it seems obvious that this paltry empiricism leaves us with a “true world” that looks little like “our quotidian world of common sense objects and fellow passengers to the grave.”⁶ This is because both the skeptic and the positivist reject the primacy of the ordinary human world, the full-lived situation of the everyday. It is this “downgrading of the human position, this aspiration to be outside our own skins (nothing else would be good enough), that Cavell calls ‘skepticism’”⁷

In his recent book *Pragmatism*, Hilary Putnam makes this same point in contrasting the basic positivistic model of inquiry with that of pragmatist thinkers Peirce, Dewey, and James. He reveals that for pragmatists, “inquiry is cooperative human interaction with the environment” where “objectivity” denotes intersubjective understanding.⁸ In addition, Peirce and the others believe that all inquiry is fallible and that inquirers must “actively *seek* falsifying experiences,” that “ideas must be put under strain if they are to prove their worth.”⁹ The model of inquiry advanced by positivists like Carnap and Reichenbach, on the other hand, is vastly different. Their idea of the most primitive form of inquiry, notes Putnam, is induction by simple enumeration:

The model is always a single scientist who determines the colors of the balls drawn successively from an urn, and tries to estimate the frequencies with which those colors occur among the balls remaining in the urn. For the pragmatists, the model is a *group* of inquirers trying to produce good ideas and trying to test them to see which ones have value.¹⁰

This positivistic picture of a single isolated spectator observing phenomena as if through a one-way mirror – a purportedly value-neutral God’s Eye View -- naturally makes the New York coalition school’s assessment methods appear fatally tainted with subjectivity.

Theirs is essentially a cooperative endeavor, after all, with decisions regarding student performance being made jointly and in light of context, not on the basis of a standard algorithm. And to make matters worse, they are actively participating in and thus influencing the assessment process.

However if one subscribes to the pragmatist notion that inquiry of any sort is impossible without some orienting matrix of values, it is the positivist spectator who is, in his “methodological solipsism,” *in practice* so tainted.¹¹ For he is left to address his subject-matter through static algorithms rather than dynamic maxims requiring contextual interpretation. Inquiry is reduced to a method of computation, and quality reduced to quantity – neither of which adequately recognizes the everyday human lifeworld. The positivist’s activity of fact-gathering and sorting according to certain immunizing criteria for meaningful discourse thus renders a flat, two dimensional world, a world of supposedly *a priori* atomistic truths integrated by the supposedly *a priori* laws of logic. In addition, the theorized single isolated observer unduly binds himself to a limited fund of perspectives and ideas. It is a particularly glaring instance of exactly the type of “subjectivism” that worries pragmatists like Pierce, Dewey, and James. It also suggests, *contra* the New York State Board of Regents, that there is nothing inherently objective about standardized testing.

Like Cavell after him, Emerson often identifies this positivist form of skepticism with the morbidly alluring certainty and finality of death; and he speaks of its everyday manifestation as the impulse to clutch or grab at the more intractable phenomena of the experienced world. Emerson writes:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the

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amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject lenses have creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. . . . Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us. I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.¹²

Cavell takes this to mean that the positivist's skepticism is at bottom a destructive, even immoral act, one that disfigures objects and people by attempting to possess and control (or normalize) them. They either disappear or become something less with the skeptic's longing to make them fully present, to attain that elusive certainty. The positivist's world is consequently a sterile place, a scene of icy abstractions, hoary principles, cool reason, and glassy essences. (This might also be taken as a description of the positivistic learning environment.) For Cavell, then, the positivist's search for knowledge, and his equation of the real with the known or knowable, finally constitutes a particularly grievous and degrading form of violence against the basic human lifeworld.

Positivism and the Ethos of Skeptical Schooling

In the Introduction to his classic study of the dynamics of classroom learning, *Life in Classrooms*, Philip Jackson describes the circumstances of his life- and career-altering move away from positivistic research and towards a more naturalistic paradigm. He tells us that this move began somewhat fortuitously. Even as a young, successful researcher, he writes, "I was starting to feel uneasy over the prospect of a career that would keep me . . . far removed from the phenomena of everyday life." It disturbed Jackson that the process of data collection as he had known it consisted of little more than "rooms full of [anonymous] students putting marks on pieces of paper."¹³ Then he

happened to attend a seminar at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in California led by a number of anthropologists who were studying the social behavior of primates. He calls the experience a revelation. These investigators had spent years in the field, developing their perceptual acuity in ever new experiential contexts, and they spoke repeatedly of the astonishing differences between the animals' behavior in the wild and in captivity: "Apparently, some animals that were very gregarious in the wild became very solitary in captivity. Others that huddled together in cages roamed companionless much of the time across their native terrain."¹⁴

Such insights were the seed crystal of Jackson's revelation about his own work. He describes that experience this way:

As I sat listening to these reports I began to realize that the instruments that I knew how to use best, paper-and-pencil tests of one kind or another, created artificial environments for the persons called upon to respond to them. They were like little cages in which people sat while the investigator poked at them with questions, forcing them to respond whether they wanted to or not. Most people did not seem to mind the intrusion, true enough, but that did not alter its artificial nature. The analogy of a captive animal being prodded with sticks was one I could not shake. It led me to begin wondering what *my* usual objects of investigation, students of all ages, looked like in their natural habitat.¹⁵

Jackson claims to have taken from this experience that the findings of positivistic science – "The Atoms of Democritus / And Newton's Particles of Light" of William Blake's disdain – "[are] but pale abstractions when contrasted with the multi-colored wonders of human creation and the natural world."¹⁶ They simply do not "measure up."

At the risk of hyperbole, I want to suggest that there is a direct and disturbing parallel between Jackson's characterization of his

former research subjects here and the situations of students where atomistic facts, standards, high-stakes paper-and-pencil tests, and other paraphernalia of positivism hold sway. These students, too, might be described as captives of highly structured, passivity-inducing environments, environments in which they are prodded to respond in kind to a profusion of scripted questions whether they find them personally engaging and relevant or not.¹⁷ Furthermore, the basic purpose of such an environment is likewise to take the uncertainty out of the process, in this case the inherently uncertain process of teaching and learning, of interacting with concrete human beings. Carefully controlled artificial conditions (like animals in cages) thus become the preferred way to carry out what is from a Cavellian perspective a calculated process of dehumanization. And, tragically, teachers are ever more compelled to be the immediate agents of this process.

Conclusion: An Alternative Response to the Enticements of Skeptical Schooling

It should be clear at this point that our response to the tragedy of skepticism cannot for Cavell be one disavowal. To deny the reality of the impulse to skepticism, he argues, is to deny part of our humanity – and that is itself a form of skepticism. Therefore Cavell's response takes a more compensatory or pragmatic form. In a nutshell, he urges us to be more attentive to the diverse elements of the everyday human lifeworld, to the claims they make on us, and to our indefinite capacity to receive and acknowledge them without guarantees of certainty. We must learn to concede degrees of uncertainty, he tells us, without recoiling from the everyday and sacrificing the opportunities for growth and renewal it offers. Cavell further suggests that our failure to attend more fully to this lifeworld is ultimately a failure to attend to ourselves, to the numerous ways in which we are (already) implicated in the welfare of the people and things around us. Thus if clutching is the most unhandsome part of our condition -- the part that allows genuine education to slip through our fingers the more we grasp for certainty in how we teach and assess our students -- its opposite, receiving and responding to the rightful claims the world and

others make upon us, is the most handsome. Cavell maintains that this non-skeptical attitude requires that we rethink several basic aspects of our customary orientation towards knowledge.

From his earliest published writings, Cavell has argued that a non-skeptical attitude necessitates that we relinquish the idea that our primary relation to the world is one of knowing or not knowing. The world's contingent presentness to us, the way it is disclosed to us, he contends, is not and cannot be principally a knowledge affair. It is rather a function of those immediate meanings emanating from our shared forms of life and the intrinsic significance that people and things come to possess over time through the part they play in various life activities. This suggests that we must begin to talk and think more of education as the quest for meaning – and various kinds of meaning – and less as simply the quest for knowledge or truth. In other words, we must recognize the paltriness of educating students as though human beings are little more than epistemic subjects whose primary purpose is to generate and assimilate propositional truth claims about the world.

Cavell's recommendations for cultivating a non-skeptical attitude also play on the kindred etymology of the words knowledge and acknowledge. Indeed, knowing and acknowledging are ultimately inseparable for Cavell. The former, he says, implies the latter: "I do not propose the idea of acknowledging as an alternative to knowing but rather as an interpretation of it, as I take the word 'acknowledge,' containing 'knowledge,' itself to suggest."¹⁸

The skeptic regards knowledge claims as inherently threatening and dangerous; she tends to withhold any affirmative response, desiring that some degree of scientific certainty could somehow first be secured. Accordingly, she often turns away from or discounts what she knows, just as a teacher might deny her firsthand knowledge of a particular student's abilities when confronted with conflicting evidence from, say, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or some other measurement tool. Such denial does not of course just occur among teachers. In

the ethos of positivism, as Jackson points out, “when it comes time to talk about how effectively our schools are functioning or how well a particular group of teachers are doing their job we seem to forget what we know from personal experience and we wind up relying on evidence, such as achievement test scores, that completely ignores” the value and validity of such experience.¹⁹

Alternatively, then, knowledge as a sort of acknowledgement takes an active, one might even say prophetic form. While it does not ignore the more “intellectual” criteria of knowledge claims, acknowledgement also does not endlessly seek to reveal new information about the person or thing in question. On the contrary, it ultimately sets its sights beyond knowledge (in the manner I believe of all good teachers), to the need to respond to the best possibilities of this person or thing. It realizes that the demand for hard evidence or proof where certain matters are concerned is unreasonable, even pathological, disparaging of the human condition and our everyday lifeworld. Appealing to what one might call moral perception, acknowledgment strives to read imaginatively and act appropriately within particular contexts and in recognition of the uniqueness of particular persons and things. It registers both a positive interest and investment in the world, and a willingness to live with the vulnerability that comes with this disposition, with this response-ability. Thus for the teacher mentioned above, knowing that her student was misevaluated (and perhaps wrongly labeled) by the test means at the very least knowing that the situation demands some sort of active response on her part, even if that response is effectively limited or turns out to be based in error. For misunderstanding, uncertainty, and failure on the part of either teachers or students is not some accidental risk, something that can be successfully overcome by putting students in metaphorical cages and poking at them with sticks. “It is a necessary risk, and it is precisely this risk that makes education possible in the first place.”²⁰ That, I believe, is the true lesson of skepticism.

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ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Robert Bella et al., *The Good Society*, (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
2. As Alfie Kohn writes, "A computer printout is regarded as authoritative not in spite of the fact that it's removed from personal experience but precisely because of that feature." See Kohn's *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p.197.
3. This is how philosopher Hilary Putnam describes "Cavellian skepticism" in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam, eds., (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), p.viii.
4. Ibid., ix.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p.vii.
7. Ibid., p.viii.
8. Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism*, (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p.70.
9. Ibid., p.71.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., pp.70-72.
12. See Emerson's essay "Experience" in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, William H. Gilman, ed., (NY: Penguin Books, 1965), pp.342 and 330.
13. Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*, (NY: Teachers College Press, 1990), p.x.
14. Ibid., p.xi.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., pp.xi-xii.
17. In a similar vein, Dewey once remarked that "there is all the difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something." See *The School and Society*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.56.
18. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.8. This seems to me very comparable to Dewey's claim that "knowledge is a case of belief," a passionate disposition to act. "To say in a significant way, 'I

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think, believe,” he writes, “is to accept and affirm a responsibility.” See *Experience and Nature in Later Works, Volume 1*, Jo Ann Boydston, ed., (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 316 and 179-180.

19. Philip W. Jackson, *Untaught Lessons*, (NY: Teachers College Press, 1992), p.19.
20. See Gert J.J. Biesta, “How Difficult Should Education Be?” in *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (2002), p.387.