

Restoring Personal Knowledge and Virtue: Response to Commentary

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ABSTRACT Key Words: personal knowledge, childrearing, virtue, small-band hunter gatherer, science, objectivity, self, well-being.

The orientation to personal knowledge rather than inert, detached knowledge, may be established in early life when brain and body systems are shaped by caregiving. The restoration of social supports like ancestral parenting practices in early life may return humanity to its highest intelligence, a whole-brain eco-mindedness.

I appreciate the thoughtful and constructive comments from Gus Breyspraak and Paul Lewis. And I enjoyed the group discussion after my talk. I have tried to create an integrative response to several comments.

Inspiration and the Past

When we refer to past societies, we have to be clear about what aspect and what era of the past we are referencing. I am referring to the social environment of the small-band hunter-gatherers in which 99% of human genus history was spent. This is the period before war, before the hoarding of resources and before institutions of hierarchy. I am engaged these days in reading anthropological and explorer accounts of contemporary or historically-recent small-band hunter-gatherer societies, where prosocial behaviors, peaceableness, and psychological well-being flourished (Fry, 2006). I use this context as the baseline for discussion of the human family, society and human nature. It is not that I want us to return our societies to this very environment, but there are important insights that knowledge of our genus' typical lifestyle can provide.

In the small-band hunter-gatherer context, the stressors were/are mostly physical (food, shelter, predators) rather than social. The social environment was supportive and, from the anthropological reports of societies in these conditions, fun, leisurely and egalitarian (in cases of conflict, groups split up). In these conditions, the mind/brain grows socially and intellectually optimally, facilitating collective functioning and adaptive physical survival. Somehow in modern life we have put the emphasis on physical supports (e.g., comfort) rather than on social supports, even though the latter may be more critical for physical, social, and collective wellbeing.

The Effects of Objectivism on Child Rearing

We live and raise children in an environment that is opposite to the small-band hunter-gatherer, with relative physical comfort but with enormous built-in social distress. For example, separating a baby from mother at all is detrimental to brain and body development but we routinely cause such pain (and much more) to babies at birth. We have drifted away from the practices that foster well-being in early life when the brain is developing so rapidly (extensive, on-demand breastfeeding; constant touch, responsiveness to needs—so the baby doesn't cry, multiple adult caregivers in the midst of adult life, free play and natural childbirth). I call the lack of these characteristics “undercare” and it characterizes the lives of many USA children today (Narvaez, in preparation; Narvaez & Gleason, in press). Such practices create mind/brains that are less adaptive and

less conducive to cooperative eco-mindedness, which is a given in small-band indigenous thought. Poor early environments, as in many settled societies, lead the brain to become oriented to self-protection, to fantasize and develop all sorts of strange beliefs to keep painful reality at bay (like the Azande). The strange beliefs we see in complex societies, including in the West,¹ also correspond to the trauma that children and/or adults have undergone, perhaps through coercion of some sort, which is a rare occurrence in small-band society. The natural tendency of the mind/brain is to explain and draw causal conclusions from experience. In contrast, the reports of small-band hunter gatherers indicate that they do/did not have extensive belief systems about what they did not/cannot know directly (e.g., Everett, 2009). They don't experience the institutionalized violence and neglect that characterizes modern life from birth and don't need the extensive narratives of explanation to make meaning and generate self comfort.

Through the neglect of what children need, I think the USA has been increasingly obsessed with left-brain, detached thinking, in part because we have neglected right brain development (Schoore, 1997, 2000, 2001). When you isolate children from others in early life, the brain is forced to derive pleasure not from relationships and connection (as evolved to do) but from the objects and cognitive interactions given in the place of physical closeness and affection (teddy bears, computers, i-phones). Socio-emotionally neglected children grow up to be emotionally-detached parents, and low nurturing caregiving worsens by generation in animal studies (Meaney, 2001). Without the tacit knowledge of how to be a social animal, parents feel the need to turn to experts ("objective knowledge") to replace missing personal knowledge. And science has been messing up parenting and parenting advice for some time (see James Watson's bestselling book on parenting from 1928 where he contends that babies should be touched as little as possible). I know that it is ironic that I am a scientist arguing for paying attention to scientific evidence on these matters! But if people just took the time to observe and learn from experience, they would quickly adopt many methods of childrearing from our ancestors, as it is much more encouraging to live with pleasant children than the mis-raised children of today.

Humans evolved to find great pleasure in parenting but we've been eradicating social pleasure with each new wave of engrossing technology. Generally speaking today, parents seem more and more detached from the pleasurable emotions of parenting in early life and more and more enthralled with technology (e.g., talking on cell phones while with their young children). Perhaps because they did not receive the deep nourishment to the self in early life, many parents seem absorbed in their own self-development, unnecessarily leaving children in "stranger" daycares, the vast majority of which are documented to be suboptimal for child development (NICCHD, 2004).

Virtue is comprised of sets of situated cognitive-affective-action knowledge units that are built from immersed experience and from guided mentoring—creating embodied knowledge. These are the tasks of early caregiving. To develop full sociality, one must have the relational presence of caregivers—habitual I-You experience. Too many children have regular experiences as an It to their caregivers. This sets children up for an artificial life in which facebook substitutes for true friendship and texting is more comfortable than face-to-face dialogue. Real, lived learning becomes a foreign experience to a child raised in front of screens instead of climbing trees in self-directed play with others. Then inert knowledge taught from external authorities seems like real knowledge rather than the personal knowledge that comes from direct, full-bodied, active experience.

Am I Being Reductionistic Or Too Hard On Science?

I don't think science can solve the mysteries of life nor can neuroscience. Neuroscience can be useful in outlining some specific functions but not the emergent properties that comprise much of human functioning. And, as interacting complex, dynamic systems, humans are too individually different to follow psychological laws like the laws of physics. There is a mystery to life that can likely never be completely understood by our conscious mind (reason) although it is sometimes glimpsed by the nonconscious mind (faith).

Whereas I might behave like a scientist, using its tools and findings (and raising hackles about being reductionistic!), I am increasingly concerned about science's effects. So much damage has been done to our planetary biosystem and subsystems as a result of "scientific thinking." But perhaps it is mostly due to a left-brain intellectual science. Science as a detached method was not necessary for our small-band hunter gatherer ancestors who spent their days "indwelling" to learn and manage their habitats. Too often, science encourages Buber's "I-It" relationship instead of "I-You" with the entities in the world (thanks to Paul Lewis). Science must be grounded in both first and second hand understanding rather than the third hand accounts that pervade scientific discourse.

The detached intellectual understanding of life that Western civilization and science encourages has brought us to where we are today: wellbeing is decreasing in every age group across the USA (UNICEF, 2007; USDHHS, 1999; WHO/WONCA, 2008;); every eco-system is under duress from human activity (Millennium Eco Assessment, 2005); the planet is about to pass into irreversible and catastrophic climate instability (IPCC, 2011). We have to yet to return to what Frances Moore Lappé (2011) calls an ecomind—realizing the connection of us all to each other and to everything in nature. For too long science, religion and capitalism have been encouraging objectification, detachment and manipulation of nature to the detriment of life (Jensen, 2000).

True personal knowledge must be embedded in the natural world—how can one be a true human being without being in love with the natural entities in the environs? Crawford (2009) raises for me the question whether one can be a true human being without knowing how to carve out a life with one's own hands and abilities. Moral virtue comes about from lived experience, actual face-to-face relationships, ideally in small communities (MacIntyre, 1981) situated in a world of nature. Instead, each person must learn how to develop personal knowledge of self and the world in natural environments. As the film, *The Age of Stupid*, points out, as we face the abyss of climate instability right now, we seem to think we are not worth saving. If we can restore our sense of self as we are meant to be—deeply socially engaged and collectively mindful of life—we will indeed remember that we are worth cherishing.

Endnotes

1 For example, 5-6% of US citizens believe that they have been examined by aliens (Appelle, Stuart. *The Abduction Experience: A Critical Evaluation of Theory and Evidence*. *Journal of UFO Studies*, 6, 1995/96, 29–78)

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WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi> or polanysisociety.org/ or polanysisociety.com/) provides information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings. The site also contains the following: (1) digital archives containing all issues of *Tradition and Discovery* and predecessor publications of the Polanyi Society going back to 1972; (2) indices listing *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) the history of Polanyi Society publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Michael Polanyi’s thought; (5) a link to the “Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi,” which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL 60637; (6) photographs of Polanyi; (7) links to a number of Polanyi essays (available on the Polanyi Society web site and other sites), Polanyi’s Duke Lectures (1964), as well as audio files for Polanyi’s McEnerney Lectures (1962), and Polanyi’s conversation with Carl Rogers (1966).