

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



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ABSTRACT

The transmission of knowledge requires trust, which is a moral relation between teacher and student. This relation requires the suspension of democratic/individualistic suspicion against the idea of intellectual rank and authority. Ultimately this is for the sake of an end that is affirmable by the lights of democratic individualism: the intellectual independence of the student. But education cannot itself be a democratic enterprise if it is to sustain deference to the idea of truth, as it must.

Polanyi understands the transmission of knowledge on the model of apprenticeship: as a student one must submit to a teacher's way of doing things without yet being able to give an account of why it is the proper way. Learning requires trust. Trust is a *moral relation* between persons, rather than a strictly *cognitive operation* of individual minds. As such, trust has no recognized place in the official epistemology of cognitive science or its guiding antecedents in early modern philosophy. To follow Polanyi further, this mismatch between prevailing epistemology and the actual practice of education is due to our fraught relationship to the idea of authority. We live within a horizon that continues to be shaped by Enlightenment thought, with its highly individualistic picture of human knowing. To place trust in the testimony of others is to substitute mere hearsay for knowledge.

The role of trust in education bears thinking about in our current moment, as there seems to be a widespread breakdown of trust in the university. Many teachers report that they are afraid of their students, in particular of the Jacobin political passions that

currently circulate under the heading of “social justice.” For their part, students do not seem to trust that the discomfiting effects of the books assigned by their teachers are for their own good. They have been encouraged toward an emotional fragility and traumatized self-image, and a corresponding defensiveness that is inimical to learning.

In the chapter entitled “Conviviality” in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi addresses the conditions for the transmission of culture, in particular, the conditions that sustain deference to the idea of truth. It turns out you can’t have that without deference to human beings who are thought to know better. And reciprocally, the required stance toward intellectual authorities arises from caring passionately about the distinction between truth and error. If I understood some remarks near the beginning of the chapter correctly, Polanyi thinks this circle of mutual dependence cannot be grounded in a realist, correspondence theory of truth. But that doesn’t make the circle itself any less real. One could call his account historicist or pragmatic, according to emphases that emerge at various points, but I am open to being corrected about this.

To begin with the primitive, animals learn by mimicking. “A true transmission of knowledge stemming from conviviality takes place when an animal shares in the intelligent effort which another animal is making in its presence” (*PK*, 206). What Polanyi calls conviviality in this context is illuminated by recent research into *joint attention*.¹ “There are telling examples...of chimpanzees watching a fellow animal’s attempt to perform a difficult feat and revealing by their gestures that they participate in another’s efforts” (*PK*, 206). Since Polanyi wrote, we have discovered “mirror neurons” that are dedicated to this kind of imitation, and learned that use of the hands and body to mirror the actions of another are no mere epiphenomenal accompaniment to learning, but integral to the cognitive processes that take place.²

Polanyi writes, “All arts are learned by intelligently imitating the way they are practiced by other persons in whom the learner places his confidence” (*PK*, 206). This includes the acquisition of language by young children. Confidence or trust is the key idea here. And this remains the case in adult society; without such confidence the transmission of culture comes to a halt. Polanyi writes,

Our modern culture is highly articulate. If another Flood came over us, the largest liner afloat would not suffice to carry the millions of volumes, the many thousands of paintings and hundreds of different instruments, musical, scientific and technical, together with the host of specialists qualified to use these means of articulation, by which we might transmit to post-deluvian society even the crudest remains of our civilization. The current transmission of this immense aggregate of intellectual artefacts from one generation to another takes place by a process of communication which flows from adults to young people. This kind of communication can be received

only when one person places an exceptional degree of confidence in another, the apprentice in the master, the student in the teacher, and popular audiences in distinguished speakers or famous writers. The assimilation of great systems of articulate lore by novices of various grades is made possible only by a *previous act of affiliation*, by which the novice accepts apprenticeship to a community which cultivates this lore, appreciates its values and strives to act by its standards. This affiliation begins with the fact that a child submits to education within a community, and it is confirmed throughout life to the extent to which the adult continues to place exceptional confidence in the intellectual leaders of the same community. Just as children learn to speak by assuming that the words used in their presence mean something, so throughout the whole range of cultural apprenticeship the intellectual junior's craving to understand the doings and sayings of his intellectual superiors assumes that what they are doing and saying has a hidden meaning which, when discovered, will be found satisfying to some extent (*PK*, 207-208).

In case there are people here unacquainted with Polanyi's thought, I should pause to note that it would be a gross error to read this as an endorsement of authoritarianism. Indeed, Polanyi's political concern, as a refugee from both Soviet communism and Nazism, is precisely a concern for liberty of thought. He is making an epistemological point about how intellectual competence, and therefore real independence, is achieved. And he sees a threat to such independence not only in the totalitarian systems he narrowly escaped as a Hungarian Jew, but also in the theory of knowledge that underwrites liberal individualism.

Polanyi's treatment of the role of authority in education reveals a fundamental tension between learning and democratic culture. Many have noted higher education's creeping embrace of a commercial ethos, and its attendant transformation along the lines of a service industry. The professor's role is to provide a service for pay, and to do so congenially. Plato's Socrates anticipated this in Book 8 of the *Republic*, which describes a tendency of democracy to degenerate: "As the teacher in such a situation is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers, as well as of their attendants." "The old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that's so that they won't seem to be unpleasant or despotic."

In the journal *The Mentor*, one observer who attends meetings of college administrators reports the following: "The first person to speak was a senior dean from a distinguished university. He announced proudly that he and his colleagues admit smart students and then make a special effort to 'get out of their way.' 'Students learn mostly

from one another,' he argued. 'We shouldn't muck up that process.'" Students learning from one another is a respectably democratic-sounding formula, though one wonders why parents keep paying those aristocratic tuitions.

Here the basic model for intellectual life is commerce: just as markets free of interference are said to produce ideal outcomes by the workings of a mysterious hidden hand, so truth will prevail in the open competition of the "marketplace of ideas" among students who *aren't yet educated*. But can an opinion be taken as true merely because it prevails? As a practical matter it is not clear how the college administrators' conviction about the robustness of truth differs from simple deference to public opinion.

Polanyi says a "previous act of affiliation" is required to begin the process of apprenticeship by which culture is transmitted. Such acts of affiliation, or "granting of one's personal allegiance" to an authoritative figure, are what seem no longer to be routine. When you go to the doctor, you go as an empowered consumer of medical information. One doesn't merely seek a "second opinion," one finds a provider whose approach comports with what one has learned oneself by consulting and digesting a dozen different websites, a little traditional Chinese medicine, and any number of holistic and alternative approaches. Likewise, when you shop for a professor, you consult Rate My Professor Dot Com, that sophomore panopticon by which teachers are held to norms established by students: easiness, availability outside class, hotness, etc.

And then there is the *ressentiment* toward authority that is endemic among professors themselves, in the humanities. In her stunning essay "When Nothing Is Cool," the English professor Lisa Ruddick (2015) writes,

Decades of antihumanist one-upmanship have left the profession with a fascination for shaking the value out of what seems human, alive, and whole...Bruno Latour has described how scholars slip from "critique" into "critical barbarity," giving "cruel treatment" to experiences and ideals that non-academics treat as objects of tender concern.

Such objects include the great works of the mind. Undergraduates learn this hermeneutic of suspicion well and direct it against their teachers. Laura Kipnis (2015) describes how some students seek, and find, real coercive power over their professors by enacting a self-infantilizing melodrama of victimhood, with the acquiescence of administrators whose first concern is for public relations. Be sure to read her follow-up essay in the same journal, about being brought before a secret kangaroo court on federal Title Nine violations. Unbelievably, her offence was *publishing the first article*.

If Polanyi is right that education, the transmission of culture, consists of apprenticeship in devotion to truth, then it seems the institution ostensibly dedicated to this risks becoming instead the locus of an anti-culture of suspicion and resentment against

one's intellectual superiors: students against teachers, and teachers against the great works that might have instructed them (in a moment of lapsed vigilance).

Polanyi wrote, "our adherence to the truth can be seen to imply our adherence to a society which respects the truth, *and which we trust to respect it*" (PK, 203, emphasis added).

All this bears quite directly on the recent political convulsion in the United States, which perhaps brought to fruition these tendencies nursed in the academy. It is widely remarked that we have entered a kind of post-truth politics. How postmodern. My suggestion is that we can view this as the product of a post-trust culture in which there remains hardly any such thing as authority. What we saw in the election was disregard for truth *as a standard* before which one might feel some embarrassment. Reality TV doesn't even pretend to be real, and one of our presidential candidates didn't feel it necessary to offer even "truthiness" as a rhetorical style.

The choice facing voters in November 2016 was between a candidate seemingly bent on the destruction of institutions that embody cultural authority, and a candidate who represented precisely those institutions. But in doing so, she unwittingly brought into clarifying relief the ossified, non-falsifiable, self-serving misapprehensions of reality embedded in some of those institutions, and therefore the shaky legitimacy of their claim to cultural authority. At the risk of being overwrought: it looked like a choice between the terrifying prospect of blowing up society, on the one hand, and the suffocating prospect of a tightening net of cultural imperiousness that seemed to be armed with every organ of bureaucratic and commercial power in an axis running from Silicon Valley to Pennsylvania Avenue.

So, half of the country decided to blow up the country. It was the better half, according to a Leninist standard that identifies *winning* with possession of the only kind of truth worth pursuing (for it is History that decides, and when you feel its wind at your back, it is an intoxicating feeling). Of course, this is precisely the standard embraced by progressives, but now the winds have shifted. That would seem to explain their mood of stunned impotence and rage.

My reading in Polanyi has been glancing and superficial, taking bits here and there. The question I would like to pose to my fellow panelists who know Polanyi better is this: does he offer us the means to distinguish between epistemic communities that are successfully getting at the nature of things, and epistemic communities that are merely successful in perpetuating their authority, even at the cost of covering over the nature of things? This is, precisely, the old Enlightenment concern, and one feels the force of it anew. I suspect Polanyi does have something to say on this, and at this moment your fellow citizens might like to hear it. Maybe it comes down to cultivating an awareness of fallibility as a cultural norm.

ENDNOTES

¹See Crawford 2015, 145-148 and the references cited there.

²At the highest levels of athletic training this is being exploited. In the last winter Olympics, you may have noticed ski racers with their eyes closed, moved their hands and bodies in a Tai Chi-like exercise of visualization, executing a practice run before the start. Rehearsing a performance in this way, in a mental simulation that also recruits the body, has been found to consolidate the learning process in many areas of human endeavor.

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