THE ORGAN MAKER'S SHOP, EROTIC ATTENTION, TEACHING, AND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

In response to Crawford's presentation on teaching and trust, I note how Crawford's latest book has helped me teach history of Christian ethics. I also highlight two Polanyian themes relevant to the topic: dwelling in/ breaking out and intellectual passions. I then discuss additional challenges to developing trust between teachers and students.

An Opening Confession

I begin with a confession: I am a fan of Matthew B. Crawford's work. I have been interested in it since an editor of *Autoweek* magazine mentioned *Shop Class as Soulcraft* in a column several years ago. I have used that book, to good effect, as a text in several classes. A few years ago, I sent a copy of his section on higher education to our provost when we were in the midst of discussions about curricular reform and the purpose of a university. While I never heard back from the provost and am not sure what to make of his silence, I continue to find Crawford's work incisive and worthy of both our attention and action.

Crawford mentions Polanyi some in *Shop Class*, but does so more extensively in this second book, *The World Beyond Your Head* (hereafter *WBYH* with page numbers given in parentheses.), as he develops and extends themes from the earlier book. In my response to this latest book and his presentation on teaching and trust, I highlight two Polanyian themes in *WBYH* that bear on the topic: dwelling in/breaking out and

intellectual passions. I conclude by identifying some additional challenges to developing trust that teachers face today.

Dwelling in and Breaking Out in The Organ Maker's Shop

Crawford illustrates Polanyi's concept of dwelling in and breaking out in a way that I have found useful in teaching the history of Christian thought, oddly enough. Polanyi's most explicit discussion of dwelling in and breaking out can be found in the sections of *Personal Knowledge* devoted to intellectual passions and doubt (195-202 and 279-286). Using the experiences of scientific discovery and religious worship as examples, Polanyi argues that as we dwell in "articulate systems" through our practices, whether lab procedures or liturgy, we can be drawn out of ourselves into contemplation of that to which these practices point. Although we do not see it made explicit in these sections of *Personal Knowledge*, breaking out implies that practices will and should evolve in response to our contemplation, a point that is consistent with Polanyi's discussion of scientific controversies (*PK*, Ch. 1).

Crawford's description of organ makers George Taylor and John Boody offers a concrete example of what it means to dwell in and break out. Crawford notes that a particular organ they were refurbishing was originally built using synthetic materials that had not aged well. Boody says that he plans to replace the trackers (mechanisms that link keys with pipes) with either wood or carbon fiber. In response to Crawford's query about the use of carbon fiber, Boody says, "Carbon fiber turns out to be *excellent* material for trackers. It's stable, extremely strong, and stays absolutely straight" (242, emphasis original). In short, Taylor and Boody have dwelt in the history and practice of organ-making and here break out of it by innovating with new materials that better serve the functions of the original.

Of course, we should note that Taylor and Boody do not always break with precedent. In another situation, they have to re-leather a bellows. This time, they decide to use traditional materials and techniques: hide-based glue and a vegetable-based process for tanning the leather instead of a chemical one. They do that because, in their judgment, this course of action is not only better, but makes future restorations easier (227-228). In this case, then, Taylor and Boody do not break out of tradition; in effect, they dive deeper into it to recover a neglected part of it.

Yet another angle on dwelling in and breaking out of the tradition of organ building can be found in Crawford's discussion of organ wars. He describes Albert Schweitzer's judgment that the then new Liederhalle organ in Stuttgart was "not a step forward, but backward" (219). Crawford notes that this organ was built at a time when organ builders were more focused on displaying their technical ingenuity than anything else (220). Here then, is a situation in which breaking out of the tradition, in Schweitzer's and Crawford's views, represented too much of a departure from the tradition, insofar

as it did not preserve some values that Schweitzer, as one who deeply dwelled in the tradition, thought it important to preserve.

So how do organ makers decide whether to remain in or depart from tradition in specific situations—or judge whether a departure is good or bad? In Crawford's account, the criteria seem to be driven by the creative tension between attitudes of reverence and rebellion (210, 236). Furthermore, they appear to arise at the place where the needs of musicality, historical accuracy, engineering, and economics intersect (228, 231, 234; cf. 217-218). Of these, musicality and longevity are arguably the first among equals, as Crawford describes the "the best organ" (241) as one that plays beautifully (238) and lasts for hundreds of years (244).[1]

In sum, as Taylor and Boody work on organs, they are faced with making thoughtful, personal judgments about whether acts that break out of the tradition of organ building extend that tradition or break it. In having to make these kinds of decisions, they demonstrate that they are participants in what Crawford rightly describes as a *living* tradition. In saying this, Crawford, like Alasdair McIntyre, means that they are part of an ongoing argument about the goods of the tradition and how best to achieve them. What makes the tradition living, Crawford says, is that participants don't seek "to replicate the *conclusions* of tradition…but rather to enter the same *problems* as the ancients and make them one's own" (244, emphasis original).

This statement offers a nice segway to theology, as John Howard Yoder—a Mennonite religious thinker who is hardly a theological liberal—uses similar language to describe the Christian theological task. He says that our job is not to translate the results of earlier generations, but to "emulate their exercise" (1984, 56). We might therefore characterize dwelling in and breaking out in Christian thought as an exercise in faithful innovation. The criteria for judging what counts as a faithful innovation in theology emerges where the words and deeds of the first-century Jesus of Nazareth, the teachings and practices of the Churches over time, and the challenges of twenty-first century life all intersect.

In the Christian tradition of theological inquiry, many doctrinal and ethical innovations have been deemed faithful, even if only in hindsight after a period of argument. A good example is that of Thomas's synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy with Augustinian (neo-Platonic) theology, a synthesis that resulted in Thomas being declared a heretic. Of course, he later eventually became known as *Doctor Angelicus* and his work continues to be the touchstone for Roman Catholic thought today. In Polanyian terms, Thomas dwelled so deeply in both the Neoplatonic Christian and Aristotelian traditions that he was able to break out of slavish devotion to either (compare MacIntyre 1989, 167-168). This indwelling enabled him to break out of the received tradition in a way that continues to be fruitful today.

An example of ethical innovation concerns teachings about marriage and divorce, innovation we see happening in the New Testament texts themselves. We find that there are four instances where writers recall Jesus' teachings on divorce. Of the four, Paul (in I Corinthians), Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus said no divorce, ever. Matthew's Jesus, however, allows for an exception, i.e., in the case of adultery. To this, Paul adds two more. First, he says that those who do divorce should not remarry (unless you remarry the person you just divorced). Second, he advises those who are married to an unbelieving spouse should stay married, unless the non-believer wants out. In that case, a divorce should be granted. And just in case someone notes that he has just contradicted Jesus, Paul adds in typically modest fashion, "And I think that I, too, have the spirit of God!" (I Corinthians 7:10-15 and 40b). Jump ahead to the early 20th-century and divorce was still often seen as a sin that would prevent people from being leaders in the churches—a view fewer Christians hold today. As Lisa Cahill observes, while the tradition has from the beginning upheld an model of permanent, monogamous, heterosexual marriage, it has come to accept certain allowable/justifiable exceptions (1984, 143-145). In short, some clear departures from the teachings of Jesus have been deemed faithful innovations by later generations.

So what does this discussion of "faithful innovation" in the historical evolution of Christian theological ideas have to do with teaching and trust? In a class on Christian theology and ethics, some students are threatened by the idea that the tradition has changed over the centuries. Crawford's description of Taylor and Boody provides a vivid and non-threatening example of a living tradition. Hopefully, this innocent example enables students, in their better moments at least, to see parallels with the history of Christian thought and so diffuse any defensive reactions they may have. This can be step that builds the trust that enables them to break out of pre-existing notions on the way to a new, richer, personal integration of the tradition.

Intellectual Passions and the Erotics of Attention

A second Polanyian theme in Crawford's *WBYH* that bears on teaching and trust concerns the importance of intellectual passions. This connection between Crawford and Polanyi seems less explicit to me and so I briefly explain it and offer an observation. Polanyi identifies three interconnected intellectual passions: scientific passions that help us selectively attend to features of our world, heuristic passions that enable us to intuit larger patterns worthy of further investigation, and persuasive passions that motivate us to enter into conversation with others (*PK* 159). Crawford's rough analog can be found in what I have already noted as attitudes of rebellion and reverence, as well as Chapter 10 of *WBYH*, which he devotes to the topic of "The Erotics of Attention." Central to Crawford's account is a love (168) that focuses our attention on "objects that have intrinsic appeal" and so can "provide a source of positive energy"

(170). Although Crawford does not develop this point along Polanyian lines, there is certainly an affinity between Crawford's focus on that which has intrinsic, energizing appeal and Polanyi's intellectual passions that drive discovery.

It might also be worth exploring these ideas in conversation with both Augustine and Thomas. For Augustine, the moral task is learning to love the right things in the right way, a view that can be summarized in his oft-quoted maxim, "Love and do what you will."[2] We do well to remember too, with Thomas, that all passions do not attract us; some drive us away.[3] We therefore have to learn not only to love the right things, but also to be repulsed by the right things. The take away here is that part of our task as teachers then is to address the whole student, not just the head—to help students be attracted to and repulsed by the right things. Some ways we can operationalize this insight in classes are by using provocative examples from literature or film, role play, cases, service learning, and other experiential pedagogies. Regardless of the tools we might use, Crawford's work reminds me that part of our role as teachers is to help students find something worthy of their love and attention. Doing so requires that students break out of their existing ideas and practices, something that will to be threatening to many, especially if they do not trust us as their professors.

More Challenges to Developing Trust

As Crawford has pointed out, there are challenges we face in developing trust with students. While I think he is correct in identifying some of them as the deep-seated ideologies of individualism and anti-authoritarianism, I want to add two more. First, consider that eighteen-year olds especially, and undergraduates more generally, are developmentally at a point where they are beginning to experience challenges to their naïve trust in either authority figures or their own preferences (Perry 1999). Indeed, part of our job is to find ways to disabuse them of their ideas that a high-priced and prestigious education will inevitably lead to better a job and/or material success, their convictions that beliefs about good and God are simply subjective preferences, that they are simply welcome to their own opinion, and that all opinions are equal. Instead, we demand reasoned arguments based on evidence.[4] From our students' perspective, we—to use Crawford's terms—are the world that pushes back against them, and the standards that we try to hold them to are more complex than whether the lights come on after changing a switch. We therefore find ourselves in the paradoxical position of asking our students to trust us as we invite them to distrust and un-love what they have heretofore thought and loved. This task is complicated not only by the fact that the standards of excellence for good arguments and good citizenship are not as concrete as those for building a good organ, but also that we may not have known most of our students long enough to demonstrate that we are trustworthy guides.

A second challenge is that both student and teacher need to trust the larger institution if our relationship is to be a healthy one. Students come to college (and parents send their children to college) with an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, they express a trust in the utility of higher education, but on the other, are suspicious that the cost may be disproportionate to the payoff. Put differently, they come in with a hermeneutics of suspicion. This situation leads to ever more demands for "accountability," demands that are increasingly measured in decidedly illiberal ways adapted from the crudest economic models of efficiency and accounting. University administrations and accrediting bodies, along with the federal government, are more than happy to provide "metrics" that demonstrate whether our schools are worth "the investment" (measured only in dollars) we demand. Even our defenses of the liberal arts too often focus on their utility, albeit sometimes in sophisticated and eloquent ways.[5] One price of this emphasis on accountability is that administrators too often—at least in practice—lose any sense of the institution's founding vision or the end goal of education. That in turn undermines faculty trust in administrators and contributes to the misrepresentation of the *telos* of education at the popular level. In short, it creates a downward spiral that no one seems to know how to escape—or at least is willing to try.

Concluding Thoughts: Restoring Trust

But the talk of challenges makes for a rather bleak ending. While I do think there are serious challenges to developing trust between student and teacher, as well as between student, teacher and institution, I do not want to end on too negative a note and thereby succumb to the too easy task of recognizing what is wrong. I think we can find ways to address these matters by first identifying practices that have become second nature to us such that we take them for granted. As professors, we build trust by how we develop and implement classroom policies. We build trust when we try to create safe places for trying out new ideas, i.e., places that are safe for rich discussion and real argument (which is decidedly not what some want "safe spaces" to be today). We build trust by challenging others at the same time that we provide them with resources that can help them rise to the occasion. We build trust by modeling good judgment and by explaining the paths by which we arrive at our own conclusions. We build trust by being vulnerable and willing to learn ourselves. Administrators can build trust by doing similar things—and by standing up to popular misconceptions about higher education. So there are practices already in place that may help us restore trust— at least to some degree. May their tribe increase.

As I said earlier, I am a fan of Crawford's work. I greatly value how he does what Robert Pirsig encourages us to do, i.e., keep philosophy grounded in "the everyday world" (1974, 221). Whether describing short-order cooks, motorcycle racers, glass-blowers, or organ-builders, Crawford has an uncanny ability to bring to life

philosophically-rich concepts and to do so with clear, rightly-directed passion. I have tried to demonstrate that value by showing how I have found his work helpful in teaching the history of Christian ethics as a process of dwelling in and breaking out. I have also found his work to be a helpful reminder that teaching requires not only a reorientation of the mind, but also the passions. He also raises important issues about the conditions necessary for creating a healthy learning environment. The "metrics" for determining such may not always be clear, but the task is important and the goal is certainly worthy of our passionate pursuit in the company of people truly committed to that end.

ENDNOTES

[1]The criteria for distinguishing between faithful and unfaithful forms of breaking out will likely be domain specific. Later, I suggest what they may be in Christian theology. In the natural sciences, Polanyi equates breaking out with discovery, a process that is guided by criteria of sufficient degree of plausibility, scientific value, and originality (*KB*, 53-54. For a slightly different list, see *PK*, 135-6 and 148-9).

[2]See his "7th Homily on the Epistle of I John" and "The Morals of the Catholic Church," both available at www.newadvent.org).

[3]Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between two types of passions: the concupiscible that attract and the irascible that repel (*ST* I-II, Q. 23).

[4]See Stokes 2012 for a nice piece on why opinions are not welcome. I often give it to classes.

[5]See, for example, the Phi Beta Kappa toolkit, "The Arts and Sciences are Key" and Biggar (2010). Of course, the tradition of liberal arts itself is an argument about the purpose of education. One vision is rooted in Athens, modified by the Enlightenment, and embodied in the research university: learning has intrinsic value and the primary method of inquiry is doubt. The other main vision is rooted in Rome and the Reformation. In this view, learning is instrumental and helps people find their vocation as they serve the good of society (Lambert 2015).

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