

Broken Threads, Interpretive Frames, and Conceptions of the Educated Person

Chris Higgins

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Jon Fennell has searched the shelves and found an elixir. Simply in dusting off figures such as Broudy and Polanyi, he has done us a service. But what is this malady we are said to suffer and what is the proposed cure? Fennell draws his diagnosis from Arendt and prescribes a Polanyian potion. It is my task to offer a second opinion and attempt to uncork the bottle to test its potency.

The symptoms of our late modern condition are nausea, anxiety, and the unbearable lightness of being. The diagnosis is that the thread of tradition has broken. Notice that on this metaphor, tradition is not some aspect of the past but a thread stitching together past, present, and future into a meaningful narrative. We once felt secure in our understanding of where we had been, where we were headed, and thus of what was demanded in the present. Now we find ourselves confronting not the ordinary job of finding the right course of action in a given frame, but the vertiginous task of determining the right frame. After an initial rush of freedom, we start to feel overwhelmed by the arbitrariness of our choices. These are the themes explored by existentialists from Dostoevsky to Sartre and Kundera, and they also surface in communitarian correctives of atomistic liberalism. In *Habits of the Heart*, for example, Bellah's team found their middle class, U.S. participants trapped in a circular ethical logic.¹ When asked to explain their life choices, they pointed to their values. When asked to explain their values, they said they had chosen them.

For many of us, this account strikes a chord. It takes some skill to play interpretations off of each other and to expose timeless, universal truths as local, historical inventions. But is it a way of life, or just a very long, verbal game of paint ball? Why believe anything when beliefs come so cheap? And why do anything if I don't know what I really believe. Wordsworth is probably not the only one to have wished he were "A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn."²

That said, there are problems with this account, starting with what seems to be a very good example of the royal "we." After all, 84% of the world's population remains happily theistic.³ Aren't we then the proverbial pot calling the kettle absolutist? This narrative about the waning of meta-narratives is about as "meta" as it gets. And we have our bibles, quoting chapter and verse from Dewey or Arendt or Lyotard or Bauman. This would seem to be Taylor's point, a thinker Fennell cites approvingly but whose account might differ in an important respect from Arendt's. For Taylor, while the modern self has lost touch with some older moral sources, it draws on others. We cannot help, Taylor argues, but understand ourselves in relation to "hypergoods," so-called because of the way they help us define, articulate, and order our commitments.⁴ We inevitably find ourselves making sense of ourselves, the world, and our lives in terms of larger imaginaries. Whatever the problems with

rootless cosmopolitanism, it remains an imaginary, an organizing narrative, an inhabitable “moral ontology.” In contrast to Fennell’s epigraph from Arendt, we rootless cosmopolitans can “simply go on,” to Starbucks, for example.

We can make this same point in relation to the concept of “seeing as.” We do not go through the world in a mode of radical empiricism, first collecting discrete bits of data and then assembling a picture of our situation. The situation comes first, organizing the particulars. And where does the sense of the situation come from? From past situations. We assimilate the new to the old, taking in at best some small portion of the novelty and particularity that resists our framing. It is only with effort that we may enter the hermeneutic circle and attempt a series of reframings, bringing us into greater contact with those aspects of the phenomena to which we had been oblivious. Returning to Arendt’s metaphor, but scaling it down to the individual knower, we can say that the worry is not so much that the thread connecting past, present, and future will break, but that we will weave the present so tightly to our pre-conceptions that we miss its novelty. This idea, which chafes against Arendt’s diagnosis, is central to Polanyi’s program. What we know *of* we know *from* a given stock of pre-conceptions and extended embodied repertoires, and this background must remain obscure to us if it is to do its job of foregrounding certain features of the situation. So how does this picture square with the stated problem of our modern anxious unmooring?

At first glance, the sub-argument about Broudy might seem to help, since even if we are always-already sense-readers, a focus on education brings to the fore the question of what interpretive lenses to stock in our allusionary store. Perhaps it is this question, Spencer’s famous “What knowledge is of most worth?,” that leads to paralysis in an age of incredulity toward meta-narratives. This solution will not work, however, since if we accept the line from Taylor and Polanyi that we are inevitably embedded in horizons of significance, then our educational thinking will be no different. We will find ourselves experiencing not vertigo over the myriad rival answers to Spencer’s question, but rather a struggle to see beyond our given conceptions of the educated person. Consider Dewey’s warning (Chapter 1, Section 3, Verse 8) that a society that starts to equate education with schooling will come to mistake “sharps in learning” for educated persons, to confuse knowledge with conscious awareness of that which was deliberately imparted.⁵ He is talking about us. And we can update this a bit in light of the rise of high-stakes tests. Today, it is increasingly taken for granted that the educated person is a high-speed, pressure-proof, symbol manipulator. In education, as in other spheres, it is the weight of our baggage, not our unbearable lightness, that seems of most concern.

Educational philosophy, one could say, is the attempt to reopen the question of the educated person, and Fennell’s paper should be no exception. With Northrop Frye, Fennell raises a variant of Spencer’s question: what does it mean to possess an educated imagination? However, Fennell then brackets off the bulk of this question to focus on one portion of our allusionary store, namely our relation to the very idea of truth-seeking. Fennell sees Polanyi as offering a way out of the bad choice between subjective meaning-making and ludic postmodernism on the one hand and

impersonal discovery and scientism on the other. For Polanyi, knowledge is personal, but what this means is that we commit ourselves to our beliefs neither as facts nor as inventions but as bids at truth, the holding of which compels us to pursue further the activities in which they are to be tested and revised. There is much more to be said about this, about Fennell's distinction between foundations and grounds, about Polanyi's theory of commitment and evolution. In the space remaining, though, I want to focus on the bracketed off question about the educated imagination.

The goal is not merely to stock the allusionary store but, as Fennell admits at one point, to do so "appropriately." But what does this mean? Is it the Enlightenment worry about prejudgments themselves, hoping to move us from reliance on pre-conceptions to methods that minimize the contributions of the knowing subject to the object of knowledge? This is certainly not the view of Polanyi, who develops his position as a critique of impersonality. Is it then the contrary concern, that the young will encounter the world with an insufficient stock of ideas, leaving them unable to cope with new situations? This also seems foreclosed by Polanyi's Gestalt-psychological approach. Perhaps the ideal is the cosmopolitan one about overcoming the limits of the ideas we happen to have acquired in our particular "corner of the earth," as Oakeshott puts it.⁶ On the hermeneutic version of this account, the aim is not merely to see differently but to see more; to interrupt our habits of "seeing as" in order to better do justice to the complexity and otherness of the phenomena. There are yet other aesthetic ways to frame the idea of the educated person. For example, the worry may be not the parochialism of one's allusionary store, but its deadness. On this view, the educated person is one who seeks constantly to outgrow rote habits of perception. Then there is the idea of connoisseurship, which surfaces briefly in Fennell's paper and represents yet another way of understanding what the uneducated person lacks and what the educated person acquires (namely, taste or discernment). In my view, once he reaches back for Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing and Broudy's conception of the interpretive uses of schooling, defending some such conception of the educated imagination becomes unavoidable for Fennell.

In this brief response, I have tried to complicate both the picture of our late modern condition that serves as Fennell's problem and the conception of the educated imagination that serves as his solution. I have raised questions about how the thinkers invoked — Arendt and Taylor, Broudy and Polanyi — fit together and to suggest that we need a much fuller treatment of each to address these questions. Fennell has here offered us a provocative prologue and we await the further chapters.

1. See, for example, Robert Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 75.

2. William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much with Us," in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 182.

3. According to the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures data set at: http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/explorer/#/?subtopic=15&chartType=pie&year=2010&data_type=number&religious_affiliation=all&destination=to&countries=Worldwide&age_group=all&pdfMode=false.

4. Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 63-73.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 9.
6. Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning" (1975), in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 24.