

Positivism, Skepticism, and the Attractions of “Paltry Empiricism”: Stanley Cavell and the Current Standards Movement in Education

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INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF SKETCH OF SCHOOL REFORM IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY

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 the United States. After all, their professed ideologies, 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 this nation’s history. We are all no doubt aware 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 policy makers and pundits are now pushing 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 and world power — or what, taken together, are commonly construed as “national security” since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.

Of course not everyone is pleased that the precedents of Taylor, Reichenbach, Thorndike, Conant, and their positivist 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 probably all heard from our Philosophy of Education Society colleagues, and perhaps articulated ourselves, various arguments for why these reforms are erroneous on political, ethical, socio-economic, educational or other grounds. We have been told that the current standards movement promotes an intellectually and socially impoverished “one-size-fits-all” form of education that confuses equality with sameness; that it leads almost invariably to passivity-inducing behaviorist pedagogies that neither engage genuine student interest nor foster life-long learning; that it puts excessive pressure on students to perform in certain narrowly defined contexts; that it exacerbates socioeconomic and other inequalities, while serving primarily moneyed interests and numerous allied technocratic agencies; and that it is demeaning of teachers, yet simultaneously places responsibility for “fixing” our schools squarely on their shoulders. It is my own hope that arguments along these lines continue to be developed and that they begin moving from the margins to the center of public debate. Much is obviously at stake here.

In this essay, however, I would like to assume a rather limited focus and investigate the positivistic ethos that lies behind the current standards movement. Though assailed 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 the present 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. Cost-benefit analyses patterned after a singular conception of the good are presently being used in virtually every aspect of public life.

As its most notable feature, this positivistic ethos holds out the promise of a scientifically validated certainty. It maintains that science alone can be trusted to provide us with knowledge about the world, and that what is truly real is solely a function of the known or knowable. Whatever questions cannot be answered by scientific (or rational versus creative) means must be left permanently unanswered. Moreover, this positivistic knowledge ultimately consists in certain discrete facts or atomistic truths, things that can be readily observed, measured, and quantified. In educational terms, that translates into precisely the kinds of reforms 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 local newspapers — if teachers and schools would only teach, test, and make themselves accountable for a prescribed body of “official” knowledge.

However, because we are also committed to the idea that we live in a democracy, where free thinking individuals are said to be the necessary agents of progress, these ideas and the related policies and practices are all purportedly open to debate. Of course experience has taught us that such debate is often neither democratic nor sensitive to power differentials among the participants. Consider, for example, the recent dispute between New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills and a coalition of twenty-eight alternative schools over the new requirement that all students take and pass state 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, action research, 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 select panel of testing and assessment experts finds that the alternative assessments are not rigorous, objective, consistent, or precise measures of student performance. In a word, the coalition schools were accused of doing bad science, of being intellectually soft, even permissive. Their assessments did not follow the proper positivistic model required to ensure equal educational opportunity for all. Equality and excellence, again, almost always mean sameness of treatment in the ethos of positivism; and if one really knows something, the assessment format should not make a difference anyway.

What I am basically trying to show with this not-unrepresentative 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 previously. This is not to suggest that the many arguments aimed at the various political and social forces involved in the standards movement should be considered any less crucial. Given the hegemonic concentrations of power that increasingly control policy formation in the United States today, these arguments are certainly as pressing as ever. But I think that we must also begin to come to terms with the powerful ontological claims and assumptions about our everyday world and its educational value that inform, sustain, and in a sense justify the current reform ideology. In the remainder of this essay, I will look at how the work of Stanley Cavell might assist us in this endeavor.

STANLEY CAVELL AND POSITIVISM AS A FORM OF SKEPTICISM

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. On orthodox readings, external-world skepticism is said to derive 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 often thought to be suffering from some sort of neuroses in his refusal of the common-sense world. And he is easy to identify, since he accepts nothing less than an impossible certainty and is loath to act on particular claims to knowledge without it. At times he even seems obsessively to will his doubt into being, to actively contrive it, as Charles S. Peirce once observed. Of course this portrayal 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 orthodox 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.”¹ 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, the limits and liabilities, 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 condition. Moreover, its liberatory desires are a necessary 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” (CS, ix). 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 and the potential range of conventional understandings and norms (CS, ix).

According to Cavell, the impulse to skepticism appears in all manner of endeavors to turn away from or deny the uncertainty and disappointment that often attends our everyday affairs. However it becomes most 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 where positivism is concerned, since the term is usually used to denote the denial of claims to knowledge, and the rigorous science of 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 as 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 anything about other people except their observable behavior (hence the positivistic underpinnings of behaviorism) — in the hopes of withholding from the skeptic “the claim to some kind of minimal ‘scientific knowledge’” (*CS*, vii). Yet it seems obvious that this paltry empiricism leaves us with a supposed true or genuine reality that is extremely limited and limiting when viewed against “our quotidian world of common sense objects and fellow passengers to the grave” (*CS*, vii). 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’” (*CS*, viii).

In his book *Pragmatism*, Hilary Putnam reaches a similar conclusion in contrasting the basic positivistic model of inquiry with that of pragmatist thinkers John Dewey, Henry James, and Peirce. He observes that for pragmatists, “inquiry is cooperative human interaction with the environment” whereby “objectivity” denotes not a value-free spectator posture on the world, but rather a tentative understanding between situated individuals on some matter.² In addition, Dewey and the others believe that all inquiry is fallible and that inquirers must “actively *seek* falsifying experience,” that “ideas must be put under strain if they are to prove their worth.”³

The model of inquiry espoused by positivists like Carnap and Reichenbach (and that ultimately underlies the standards and accountability movement) could scarcely be more 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.⁴

This positivistic picture of a lone inquirer observing phenomena as if through a one-way mirror — a purportedly value-free God’s Eye View — naturally makes the New York coalition schools’ assessment methods appear fatally tainted with subjectivity. Theirs is essentially a cooperative undertaking, after all, with students

working primarily in groups and decisions regarding student performance made jointly and in light of specific educational contexts, not on the basis of a standard mathematical formula or algorithm. They are, as the positivist might say, proceeding creatively as opposed to rationally. And to make matters worse, these schools are actively participating in and therein interfering with the assessment process.

Notice, though, that it is a simple matter to turn the tables on the positivist here. For if we consent to the pragmatist notion that inquiry of any sort is impossible without some values orientation, and that these values are never absolute, it is the positivist spectator who is, in his “methodological solipsism,” *in practice* so tainted.⁵ This is because he must address his subject-matter through static formulas rather than dynamic maxims requiring contextual interpretation. Inquiry is reduced to a method of computation, and quality is reduced to quantity — neither of which adequately recognizes the diversity of human learners and schooling contexts or the infinite dimensions of our everyday world. The positivist’s activity of fact-gathering and sorting according to certain immunizing criteria for objective inquiry renders a rather sterile and intellectually confining world, a world of supposedly *a priori* atomistic truths integrated by the supposedly *a priori* laws of logic. In addition, the theorized lone inquirer inevitably binds himself to his own limited fund of habits, perspectives, and ideas. It is a particularly glaring instance of exactly the kind of “subjectivism” that concerns pragmatists like Dewey, James, and Peirce. 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 frequently relates this positivist form of skepticism to 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 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 let’s them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.⁶

Cavell takes from this that the positivist’s skepticism is a bottom a destructive, even immoral act, one that disfigures objects and people by attempting to possess and control 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, like the positivist schooling environment, is consequently a sterile place, a scene of icy abstractions, hoary principles, cool reason, and glassy essences. For Cavell, then, the positivist’s search for certain knowledge and equation of the real with the known or knowable constitutes a particularly grievous and degrading form of violence against our everyday human lifeworld.

THE POSITIVISTIC MEANS 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 inclusive 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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. As Jackson writes: “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.”⁹

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.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ Ironically, 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 individual learning, discrete 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 individually and in kind to a profusion of scripted questions whether they find them personally engaging and relevant or not. Furthermore, the basic purpose of this 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: BEYOND THE CLAIMS 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 measured or compensatory 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 endless 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 learning it offers. Cavell additionally 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 aspects of our customary orientation towards knowledge and learning.

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 principally a knowledge affair. Rather, it is a function of those immediate meanings that emerge 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 diverse kinds of meaning — and less as simply the quest for knowledge or truth. In other words, we need to 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.”¹²

As we saw earlier, the skeptic regards knowledge claims as inherently threatening and dangerous; she tends to withhold any affirmative response, desiring that some kind of 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 “official” 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 potential value and insight of such experience.¹³

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, an affront to the human condition and our everyday lifeworld. Appealing to what one might call moral perception, acknowledgement 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 responsibility. 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 positivistic cages and poking at them with sticks. “It is a necessary risk,” as Gert Biesta reminds us, “and it is precisely this risk that makes education possible in the first place.”¹⁴

1. This is how philosopher Hilary Putnam describes “Cavellian skepticism” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), viii. For all subsequent references this text will cited as CS. Importantly, it puts Cavell at odds with the “end of philosophy” reading of his intellectual precursor Ludwig Wittgenstein.

2. Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 70.

3. *Ibid.*, 71.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 70-72.

6. See Emerson’s essay “Experience” in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 342 and 330.

7. Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), x.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, xi.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

12. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8. This seems to me compatible with Dewey’s claim that “knowledge is a case of belief,” a passionate disposition to act. “To say in a significant way, ‘I think, believe,’” he writes, “is to accept and affirm a responsibility.” See *Experience and Nature*, in *Later Works, Volume 1*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 316 and 179-80.

13. Philip W. Jackson, *Untaught Lessons* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 19.

14. Gert J.J. Biesta, “How Difficult Should Education Be?” *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (2002): 387.