

P4C, Community of Inquiry, and Methodological Faith

Dale Cannon

ABSTRACT: In this paper I venture to bring out and disclose an element of faith at the heart of the kind of critical inquiry that we encourage and foster in philosophy with children. It is clearly distinct from doubt, the kind of doubt we customarily associate with what makes critical thinking critical, but, properly understood, it grants to doubt and critical reflection essential roles in the process. What I mean by “faith” in this connection may be understood as trust and confidence in the process of thoughtful inquiry (especially with thoughtful peers). Our coming to recognize the centrality of faith in this sense within philosophy with children may entail some changes in our thinking about where philosophy with children fits into the larger cultural movements of our time and as well about how involvement in philosophy with children bears upon the beliefs and traditions of the sub-cultural backgrounds of children who participate.

I should make clear that my perspective is informed by the philosophical insights of Michael Polanyi into what he calls the tacit dimension of all kinds of knowing, even the most rigorous and formal, especially considering knowing as an ongoing process. Polanyi focuses a great deal on what he speaks of as “the fiduciary [i.e., faith] coefficient of our knowing” – indeed, of all explicit propositions we may happen to entertain or hold. He takes as his paradigm of knowing (that is, the knowing process) the anticipation of an approaching discovery, whether in the natural sciences or in other areas.

I will also relate my discussion to the well-known controversy between W. K. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief” and William James’ “The Will to Believe.” I contend that James’ most important point in that controversy has much more to do with general epistemology than philosophy of religion.

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to bring out and disclose an element of *faith* at the heart of the kind of reasoned, critical inquiry that we encourage and foster in philosophy with children. I think that there is something of this sort at the heart of all varieties of what we normally think of as “critical thinking.”

But in philosophy with children (though this may also apply elsewhere, such as in the college classroom), we often find ourselves in a position of having to initiate and help develop in young people not only a certain *practice* of critical inquiry (the kinds of intellectual and verbal moves that it involves and the skills that its exercise entails) but also and crucially *a trust* in it, a confidence that it is a worthwhile thing to pursue and acquire competence in, and *a hope* that something of value will come of its pursuit. Now normally in the everyday practice of critical inquiry we take for granted these things; they go unsaid. But when we seek to get it started in young people, and between them and their peers in a genuine community of inquiry, where we are seeking to get them to invest themselves in it in a way they have never done before, it becomes more a self-conscious matter for we who are its facilitators; it becomes something we can’t take for granted or ignore.

Methodological Faith

I believe it is appropriate to call this trust, this confidence, and this hope, taken together, a sort of *faith* in the process of critical inquiry, a methodological faith. Of course I do not mean “faith” in a religious sense. I am

not trying to smuggle religious faith into the back door. I am comfortable with calling it “generic faith” or “faith in a generic sense,” or “methodological faith.” To give oneself over to reasoned inquiry clearly involves a sort of venture that is fraught with uncertainty and risk. One cannot know with any certain assurance what will result, especially for the person whom we are trying to initiate into the process. You can’t justify with any completeness that it will be worth her self-investment in advance, although you may be able to expose her to a limited extent to the successful ventures of others.

I want to make clear that the sort of faith I am speaking of involves as an essential component of that faith a *respect* for the contributions of other participants in the process of inquiry (both those who have already spoken and those who have not yet spoken, a trust, a confidence, and a hope in their contributions) and, crucially, a *nurturing care and respect for one’s own contribution to the process* (both what has been contributed up to the present and what is yet to come). A crucial role for the facilitator therefore is to evoke and build that faith and that respect in each member of the community, where there may be very little of it in evidence when a community of inquiry is first finding its feet with all that it involves. That is to say, a given would-be member of the community may have, even when asked, no faith at all in the process and no faith that she/he might have anything valuable to say, least of all valuable to the others. In such a case, the facilitator/teacher must supply the missing, not yet evident, not yet emergent, faith and respect in the person and her/his contribution that she/he does not yet have.

What I want to call attention to here is that what I am here calling *faith* is the exact opposite of a certain kind of *doubt* – specifically, doubt that anything good at all will come from investing *myself* in the communal process of inquiry, doubt that *I* will have anything of value to contribute to the process, indeed, doubt that anything of value *to me* will result from the inquiry. And if there is much of a spirit of skepticism about the process of inquiry shared by members of the group (as there often can be as adolescence is approached), especially a skepticism or cynicism that might occasionally be directed toward the potential contributions of shy and reticent students who doubt the value of their own contributions, you can be sure that the shy and reticent students in question will never move beyond ground zero – unless there is some kind of intervention on the part of the facilitator to counter that skepticism and doubt and bring to birth from within the group hope and confidence in the process and in those persons’ contributions.

Now all of this I suspect may be fairly obvious to reflective, seasoned facilitators of young people’s communities of philosophical inquiry. I don’t think I am saying anything radically new. However, I want to call attention to how there is a certain tension between the cultivation of this sense of faith in the process of reasoned inquiry and our dedication to cultivating critical thinking in accordance with the paradigm of *critical inquiry* that has characterized modern intellectual culture—a paradigm whose motto is “Doubt unless and until one has sufficient reason to believe.” “Doubt,” versus “Believe” or “Doubt” versus “Have faith.” Make the advocate of belief first offer proof, or at least sufficient reason to believe before taking him at his word. Take nothing simply on faith.

Now were methodological doubt to be our first advice to young people we seek to initiate into a community of philosophical inquiry, and were this advice meant and understood literally, I think we would all agree that we would get nowhere fast and be working against ourselves. To doubt the process of reasoned inquiry before it has even gotten off the ground, to cultivate a critical suspicion that takes in (or takes on) this process as well as everything else, to insist that reasoned inquiry first prove itself before one gives oneself to it (even tentatively), is a ticket to failure. Indeed, I believe that were we to come to think about this deeply, we would realize that our own trust, confidence, and hope in the process of reasoned inquiry is similarly grounded in faith in this generic sense and not in doubt. I do not mean faith in some absolutist unquestioning sense. Doubt continues to have its place and function, to be sure—please don’t get me wrong—but prior to doubt and even enabling reasoned doubt is a root faith and confidence in reasoned inquiry—not *uncritical* but an *acritical* or *precritical* faith that is prior to critical examination and grounding it.¹

Michael Polanyi and the Shift from Critical to Post-Critical

Were we to come to recognize the centrality of faith in this generic, acritical sense within philosophy with children may entail some changes in our thinking about where philosophy with children fits into the larger cultural movements of our time. What I have in mind has to do with the so-called shift from a modern to a post-modern intellectual sensibility. What goes under the name of “post-modern” intellectual movements is a very mixed bag of things, not all of which are compatible—some good, some not so good. I don’t think it is all simply confusing and confused. It is quite a chore to sift the wheat from the chaff. I do think that much of what has gone under the name, especially of “deconstructive post-modern” currents is to a large extent modernist critical doubt turned upon modernism’s own presuppositions and paradigms—i.e., it amounts to the modern critical project deconstructively turned upon itself. Much of this is good as far as it goes, but rarely if ever does it point forward to any constructive alternative. There are a few exceptions, sometimes going under the name of “constructive post-modernism.” One of these exceptions, though he made no use of this phrase, is the work of philosopher-scientist Michael Polanyi, who subtitled his magnum opus *Personal Knowledge, “Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy.”* I see philosophy for children, as I am conceiving it in this paper, as exemplifying the shift from a Critical to a Post-Critical sensibility in the sense that Polanyi understood it.²

I should make clear that my perspective is informed by the philosophical insights of Polanyi into what he calls the *tacit dimension* of all kinds of knowing,³ even in the most rigorous and formal of the sciences, especially considering knowledge as an ongoing process (shifting from the noun “knowledge” to the verb “knowing”). We have been accustomed through positivist philosophy, the epitome of the modernist critical project, to think of knowing in its explicit dimensions only, especially in the sciences. This has led to all sorts of distortion, principally because of its neglect of what is going on in the tacit, non-explicit, unspoken dimensions of scientific practice only recently come to light (in large part due to Polanyi’s contributions and influence) come to light. Polanyi focuses a great deal on what he speaks of as “the fiduciary [= faith] coefficient of our knowing”⁴ – indeed, of all explicit propositions we may happen to entertain or hold. This tacit coefficient of our knowing is largely *acritical*, not *uncritical*. The very attempt in science or anywhere else to make it critical (i.e., to subject it to explicit critical examination) easily misrepresents it and disables the tacit practice that it relies upon. He takes as his paradigm of knowing (that is, his paradigm of the knowing process) the anticipation of an approaching discovery, whether in the natural sciences or in other areas.⁵ For me this paradigm serves well for what it is that is pursued in a community of philosophical inquiry.

W. K. Clifford and William James

It may help to clarify what I am getting at by relating it to the well-known controversy between W. K. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief” and William James’ “The Will to Believe” in the last years of the 19th century. All of us have been long accustomed to think of critical thinking as specifically involving a disposition to doubt until sufficient evidence proves otherwise and therefore as essentially opposed to a disposition of faith as a matter of believing without sufficient evidence. Very likely for many of us Clifford’s paradigmatic essay, “The Ethics of Belief,”⁶ has had some influence upon us on this topic. In that essay he famously advances the claim, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” The argument he offers in support of it, when examined closely in light of the concept of methodological faith as I am articulating it, is a lot less convincing that it may otherwise seem. There he sets out two vivid cases where inquiry was cut short and a conclusion prematurely reached and then acted upon with tragic consequences: one where a ship owner concluded that his emigrant ship was seaworthy without having thoroughly investigated the evidence, and the other where certain agitators concluded that some teachers of religion were illegally and immorally indoctrinating their children, again without having thoroughly investigated the evidence.

I agree with Clifford that the ship owner and the agitators are wrong in these cases, but I submit that they were wrong not because they believed when they should have doubted, as Clifford maintains, but that they allowed their impatient hankering for a certain outcome of the investigation in question to override an appropriate faith in the process of reasoned inquiry and in the result that that sometimes agonizingly slow process would have produced. They allowed their prejudice to sway their conclusion rather than actual evidence. One might say that each case was a situation of distrust, lack of confidence, and lack of hope in the process of reasoned investigation. Of course it is possible to say, as does Clifford, that the ship owner and the agitators should have doubted their premature conclusions; but that doesn't get at the crucial problem. The real problem is that they failed to have faith in the process of inquiry (the disposition to attend to that process and to follow it to the end).

Note here that methodological faith in these cases does not in advance of a result have sufficient evidence that the reasoned inquiry in question will come up with a satisfying result. There are unavoidable uncertainties and risks involved in trusting in it ahead of time. Simply following Clifford's general advice to doubt rather than to believe literally would undermine this faith and bring the investigation to a halt. No doubt there will be objections that Clifford did not mean that we should doubt the process of reasoned inquiry! But if we take him literally here, such a doubt would be entailed. My point is that faith in reasoned inquiry and in wherever it uncertainly leads on to, takes precedence over doubt and skepticism and should always take precedence.

Now what about William James' response in his equally famous essay, "The Will to Believe"? There are some unfortunate circumstances that have led many readers of James' essay to miss what I think is its main and most important point—which has less to do with an issue in philosophy of religion (specifically, with believing "the religious hypothesis") than with an issue in epistemology. James is in large measure responsible for these unfortunate circumstances. But I would like for us to reconsider his basic argument independently from its relevance to "the religious hypothesis."

James' principal claim is that where there is insufficient evidence we should withhold belief (note that here James is in agreement with Clifford) *except where there is what he calls a genuine option*.⁸ A genuine option he defines as a situation where (1) we are presented with two candidates for belief, (2) there is no possibility of not choosing between them (i.e., when not to choose the one is to choose the other) – i.e., believe or not believe; (3) both options are real possibilities; and (4) one of the options holds a unique opportunity for realizing a significant benefit. He then presents five cases besides the religious hypothesis,⁹ several of which are relevant to methodological faith in reasoned philosophical inquiry. (A) In order to reach a just verdict in a court of law, one must first believe (have faith, have the methodological faith) that there is a just verdict to be reached. (B) In order to make progress in pursuit of a scientific discovery, one must believe a discovery is there to be reached by following up certain clues. (C) To make progress in discovering the morally best thing to do in a given set of circumstances, one must believe that there is a good to be discovered. (E & F) Certain realities (such as personal relationships like friendship and love, and social organisms of any sort like nations and fraternities [and communities of inquiry]) do not come into being, nor do they remain in existence, apart from belief in them.

My point in rehearsing these cases cited by James is to call attention to how methodological faith in reasoned inquiry is a prime case, perhaps it is the paradigmatic case, of a genuine option for belief, where belief in the sense of methodological faith can come—indeed, must come—prior to sufficient evidence, for it is the very means that will turn up and bring to light the evidence we seek. Now in the process of reasoned inquiry, doubt—even what I would call methodological doubt—may have an important role to play. It's just that its role is not dominant but is subordinate to faith in reasoned inquiry and serves it. There is no good point to be realized in doubting for doubting's sake; we need good reasons to doubt (even when they may not be fully clear). As James himself put it, we seek first and foremost not to avoid error by doubt but to seek truth by believing in the process—"faithing,"¹⁰ as it were.

Summary Conclusion

To summarize: I have sought in this paper to call your attention to the central and essential role of methodological faith in reasoned inquiry in philosophy for/with children, and how it is somewhat in tension with our fidelity to the dominant paradigm of critical thinking in our culture. I have suggested that a recognition of the centrality and priority of methodological faith in this connection coincides with much of what Michael Polanyi has written of as a shift from a critical to a post-critical cultural philosophical outlook and what he has to say about the tacit dimension of knowing. And I have shown how it relates in turn to the controversy between W. K. Clifford and William James, which many, unfortunately, have misinterpreted as exemplifying a conflict between critical inquiry and faith in any sense, whereas James actually was arguing for recognition of a foundational role of faith to reasoned inquiry and by no means did he mean to set faith over against reasoned inquiry as its opposite.

Endnotes

1. "Acritical" is distinct both from "critical" and "uncritical." Whereas uncritical refers to what could be and perhaps should be subject to critical reflection, "acritical" in important respects cannot be made subject to critical reflection. It is something on which we are inarticulately relying, particularly in our very act of critical reflection; it is prior to it and grounds it, giving it, as it were, a place on which to stand. My use of this distinction is drawn from Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1958), 264 et passim (see the index).
2. For a fuller discussion of what is meant by Critical and Post-Critical sensibilities and the shift between them – and how they relate to Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern sensibilities, see my essay, "Beyond Post-Modernism via Polanyi's Post-Critical Philosophy," *The Political Science Reviewer*, Volume 37, 68-95, especially the chart on p. 72f.
3. See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009, reprint of the Doubleday 1966 edition). See also Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, especially indexed reference to the "tacit coefficient" or "tacit component" of knowledge; and Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, edited by Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), especially part three: "Tacit Knowing."
4. See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 264ff: "The Fiduciary Programme," and indexed references to "tacit component" and "fiduciary."
5. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, p. 25.
6. For ready access to Clifford's essay, go to this website: <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html>. The two imagined cases Clifford proposes for consideration, including variations, are given in the first few paragraphs of the essay.
7. For ready access to James' essay, go to this website: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>, pp. 1-31.
8. James sets out his definition of "genuine option" in *Ibid.*, section I, pp. 2-4. He expresses his agreement with Clifford with respect to non-genuine options in the next couple of sections.
9. *Ibid.*, sections VIII and IX, pp 18-25.
10. *Ibid.*, section VII, pp. 17-19.

References

For more information on Michael Polanyi, see:

The Polanyi Society website: <<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>>.

Polanyi, Michael, 1969. *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, edited by Marjorie Grene, Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

Polanyi, Michael, 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

Polanyi, Michael, 1946. *Science, Faith and Society*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1964.

Polanyi, Michael, 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2009.

Mary Jo Nye, 2011. *Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science*, New York: Oxford U Press.

Gelwick, Richard, 1977. *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004.

Cannon, Dale, 2008. "Beyond Post-Modernism via Polanyi's Post-Critical Philosophy," *The Political Science Re-*

viewer, Volume 37, 68-95.

For the original essays by Clifford and James, see:

Clifford, W.K., 1879. "The Ethics of Belief" in *Lectures and Essays*, Vol. II. London: Macmillan. Available online at <http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html>.

James, William, 1896. "The Will to Believe," *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Dover Publications, 1956. Available online at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>>.

For further insight and teaching suggestions on methodological believing in relation to methodological doubting, see:

Elbow, Peter, 1987. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Teaching and Learning*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Address Correspondences to:

Dale Cannon

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Dept. of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Western Oregon University

345 Monmouth Ave., Monmouth, OR 97361

cannodw@wou.edu