

Granger and Cavell Against Positivism: Considering the Quest for Certainty and Epistemology

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In an interview with Harry Kreisler at Berkeley, Stanley Cavell recounted the famous story of Ludwig Wittgenstein asking this question of Bertrand Russell, “Am I a philosopher or am I a complete fool?”¹ Russell told Wittgenstein he was not a complete fool. But Cavell pointed out that there is still a prior question, which is why Wittgenstein asked his question to Russell in the first place, and why Russell was credible to him as an answerer. Cavell’s moral was that you “pick your shots.” David Granger picked his shot by enlisting Cavell to help him battle the likes of Taylor, Carnap, Thorndike, Conant, and their current allies fighting on the side of positivism. In the process, Granger very nicely weaves testing, accountability, technology, humanism, and epistemology, into claims and arguments that should help those of us wishing to challenge positivism and the conservative, corporate ideologues who so tirelessly rely on it to establish and maintain power. My response briefly reminds us of some central claims Granger makes. I add a thought or two, then expand on at least one epistemological point in order to underscore Granger’s concern regarding certainty and epistemology.

Central to Granger’s essay is the analysis of positivism, especially as it relates to the current standards movement. By listing Taylor, Carnap, and Thorndike, Granger connects the long history of the social efficiency theorists of the turn of the last century with the current standards movement. Sadly, the historical lesson may be lost on current defenders of the positivist ethos. That Joseph Mayer Rice went in search of replicable “good schools” in 1893 is only mirrored, it seems, in New York Education Commissioner Richard Mills — over a hundred years later. Progressive education suffered under the universalizing claims of Rice *qua* Taylor, just like the progressive independent schools in New York appear to be suffering now. One wonders aloud: “Does anything really change?”

Regardless, what Granger so nicely does is underscore the quest. Like Dewey’s book *The Quest for Certainty*, Granger notes his concern about positivism by writing that it “ultimately consists in certain discrete facts or atomistic truths, things that can be readily observed, measured, and quantified.” The result in practice is a search for the seventeen steps of effective teaching. Not only is there the presumption that the steps exist and can be corralled, but that when they are assembled they somehow embody the perfection quested after in the first place. There is, then, a rank or base consumer quality about such an enterprise. Search for it and you will find it. Find it and you will have it. Have it and the problems that led you on the quest in the first place will be eliminated. Right?

When Granger applies Cavell, the novelty is going beyond the initial refutation of the quest for certainty. Granger uses Cavell to invert positivism as a form of skepticism, or as Granger puts it, “as an expression of the skeptical impulse.”

Granger shows us how conventional skepticism and positivism are “two sides of the same coin.” Further, “the skeptic and positivist reject the primacy of the ordinary human world, the full-lived situation of the everyday.” The consequence of what Granger calls “the positivist’s skepticism” is fundamentally, for Cavell, “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.”

This idea of certainty directly links to traditional epistemology, where *S* knows that *p* given three conditions (truth, belief, and justification). The problem for Granger, Cavell, and Dewey is that the traditional take on epistemology is based on a correspondence theory of truth via propositions. Granger points this out when he discusses the requirement for positivists that the external world correspond to linguistic utterances. When such a link is considered impossible, conventional skepticism finds its own definition. It is a rationalist approach and based, again, on propositions. What is important here is that neither Cavell nor Dewey proffer a theory of inquiry based on propositions. Given that Dewey supplants the traditional justification condition with warranted assertibility, consider Tom Burke’s claim that “it is judgments, not propositions, which are warrantably assertible or not; and judgments are essentially rooted in concrete actions in the world.”²

Warranted assertibility, for Dewey, was part of a project to explain (1) what it means to say that a statement about how things are may or may not correspond to how things actually are, when at the same time, (2) it is not possible to step back and treat this correspondence as if it were a matter of comparing the statement against reality.³ Notes Burke: “It is not as if we have some statement-independent handle on bare reality so that we can hold it up to compare against our statements, since it is the statements themselves and the processes that go into their making which are one’s handle on reality.”⁴ Akin to Cavell, what we have to do is make judgments in “real time” about consequences of actions in solving actual problems. Correspondence, then, becomes a metaphor for Dewey, allowing him to point out that while a “spectator” or “God’s eye” version of detachment is not completely wrong, neither does it describe nor explain how people actually use information from their lives to solve problems that they face in their lives.

For Dewey, the speculative enterprise of traditional epistemology suffered greatly at the hands of correspondence theories because “wondering at how something in experience could be asserted to correspond to something by definition outside experience [Spectator Theory of Knowledge or STK]...is what made me suspicious of the whole epistemological industry.”⁵ Dewey, therefore, like Cavell, rejected STK and its detachment in order that we would have individual “knowers” “concretely and dynamically embedded in the world.”⁶ As a result, those “knowers” would have direct access to knowledge, where knowledge is not understood in semantically detached terms.

Knowing, knowledge, and intelligence are distinct for Dewey. Knowing is an inquiry, knowledge constitutes the stable outcomes of inquiry, and intelligence is the result of the development and accumulation of capabilities to act in specific ways.

Knowledge is the result of successful inquiry, whereas knowing consists in using one's intelligence in given inquiries. Intelligence is stabilized knowledge... which can be utilized in other inquiries, given the principle of continuity and given the fact that judgments are not merely abstract decisions but constitute a kind of conduct (assertion)... Knowing is to intelligence roughly what asserting is to being disposed to assert.⁷

Says Dewey:

The function of enrichment and control is exercised by incorporation of what was gained in past experience in attitudes and habits which, in their interaction with the environment, create the clearer, better ordered, "fuller" or richer materials of later experience — a process capable of indefinite continuance.⁸

What we have in this quote is Dewey's basic argument for classroom interaction and something I think Cavell and Granger would endorse. Organic and natural environments for learning impel knowing and the habits of intelligence. Detachment from natural environments for learning impel spectating and habits of routine. When one supports a quest for "meanings and significances," one sides with inquiry via warranted assertions. That is, given Dewey's epistemology, classrooms should be places where students make knowledge claims at the very same time they are engaged in knowing, since the means and ends are not disparate for Dewey, and since the point of inquiry is not to collect detached, testable, "accountable" artifacts.

Students, therefore, no longer search for "the answers"; rather, students make assertions in the process of inquiring (knowing) that are gauged (judged) within the bounds of human experience. This not only represents an epistemological shift, it shifts power away from those who set up the quest for certainty and places power within the contexts of student living — one not divorced from social realities within and beyond school. In short, Granger wishes us to reconsider the certitude assumed by accountability mandates, testing, standards — all the trappings of positivism — and I cannot think of a more worthy project. The difficulty will be in bridging the philosophical dialogue with actions that actually challenge the deeply-ingrained legislative and bureaucratic habit of expecting students and teachers to engage in a project that is fundamentally hollow. The task is made even more difficult when parents and many (if not most) teachers already also buy into the positivist ethos. What will it take to draw back the curtain and reveal the wizardry of p-oz-itivism? What kind of questions can we raise to move those entrenched in the given and taken-for-granted to a different place? What say you, oh wise philosophers of education?

1. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Cavell/cavell-con0.html>

2. Tom Burke, *Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 238.

3. Ibid., 240. See, also, John Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 7 (1941): 169-86.

4. Burke, *Dewey's New Logic*, 241.

5. Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth," 183.

6. Burke, *Dewey's New Logic*, 243.

7. Ibid., 256.

8. John Dewey, "Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1939), 520-21.