"An authority that is nameless": Learned Prejudice and the Problem of Agency in Gadamer

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Fennell's essay draws our attention to what is perhaps the fundamental question of educational thought in the modern era, namely, if the human subject exists as the sum of its educational influences, then how do we account for our feelings of selfhood and agency and the moral attitudes that go along with these feelings? How do I remain committed to my moral convictions knowing that they are merely the result of being born into a particular ZIP code at a certain time in history? Fennell's own inquiry seems appropriately inspired by Gadamer's account of human selfhood as subject to a nameless authority that works somewhere beyond our critical capacities, leading Gadamer himself to ask whether the subject is "not at his own disposal."[1]

Fennell finds himself "startled" at Gadamer's "controversial" understanding of the relationship between tradition and subjectivity, and his work bridging the ideas of Gadamer, Polanyi and C.S. Lewis not only seeks to extend Gadamer's work but to demonstrate the continued relevance of problems of agency and identity in educational thinking. Despite our engagement with various forms of de-centered subjectivity over the past half-century, educational thought remains deeply rooted in a view of learning as a matter of enlightened criticality, in which the individual emerges from its domination by traditional norms as it grows from childhood to maturity. While this narrative is useful in the sense that it inspires students to work toward a goal of self-mastery, our sincere commitment to popular myths of autonomy suggests that we might have

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 2018 | Megan Laverty, editor
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swallowed the Kool-Aid that was intended for the kids.

Fennell suggests that "[i]n clarifying and extending what Gadamer has so far said there is no more fruitful direction in which to turn than toward the work of Michael Polanyi." He is right to draw connections between Gadamer's de-centering of subjectivity and Polanyi's sense of "inarticulate knowledge," but I will argue here that Polanyi only serves as an appropriate guide to Gadamer's understanding of subjectivity if we are willing to hedge against the controversial position that inspires interest in Gadamer's thought in the first place.

My purpose here is to draw Gadamer's ideas into the frame of this discussion more directly by indicating a few moments from *Truth and Method* that beg our attention insofar as they require us to consider potentially fruitful differences between Gadamer and Polanyi.

As an example of how Polanyi's work might serve as an extension of Gadamer's educational thought, Fennell offers Polanyi's description of a primary site of instruction:

> Its effort to learn to speak is prompted in the child by the conviction that speech means something. Guided by its love and trust of its guardians, it perceives the light of reason in their eyes, voices, and bearing and feels instinctively attracted towards the source of this light.[2]

Fennell emphasizes the child's inborn search for meaning by asking us to:

> Note here the underlying "conviction" on the part of the learner. This conviction, which is a necessary condition for the learning that follows, is not itself taught but instead seemingly exists by default and is a presupposition of subsequent education.

The trouble with reading the subject's primal attachments through the

loaded concepts of *conviction of meaning* or *perception of reason* is that these seem to endow very young children with a faculty of discrimination between meaning and non-meaning that, according to a Gadamerian understanding of the subject, untaught children cannot possibly have. According to Gadamer, the only way a child would command the "veto power" over its own education that Fennell describes is if the child were already inscribed within a horizon of meaning with its own established prejudices, or, stated more succinctly, only if the child were already educated within a competing set of fore-meanings. While the primary mode of attachment expressed in the quotation above emphasizes affective rather than rational connection, the love expressed is the child's love, informed by an inborn capacity to distinguish between meaning and non-meaning., ultimately undermining Gadamer's position by providing the child an opportunity to name the nameless authority that constitutes its horizon.

As a point of comparison, we might turn to a quotation that illustrates Gadamer's understanding of the place of affective connection in education, namely his praise of Droysen's "profound" remark, "You must be like that, for that is the way I love you: the secret of all education."[3] The difference here is clear: in Polanyi's theory, the child has agency in its own learning; its untaught instincts are already attracted to human exchanges by virtue of their meaning. Gadamer's quotation of Droysen, on the other hand, displaces the question of agency in the effects of tradition; the child's developing sense of itself is claimed by an existing community according to the love that sustains its premature existence. Only through this love called tradition is it thinkable for a child to develop the kind of prejudices that would make it capable of distinguishing meaning from nonsense.

The idea of a rational moral agency that precedes tradition returns in Fennell's appeal to principle in defining moral maturity: "If an indi-

vidual is to act morally, he or she must be willing and able to live in light of principle." Fennell supports his claim with quotations from Polanyi in support of the subject's dedication "to the service of a transcendent reality" and "surrender to the service of impersonal principles."

At first glance, Fennell's emphasis on submission and surrender seems to echo Gadamer's insistence that understanding entails "subordinating ourselves to the text's claim to dominate our minds."[4] But submission to principles and submission to texts turn out to be different things. To understand the task of subordinating ourselves to a text, we can follow Gadamer's idea that "[t]he interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself."[5] Submission, in this sense, entails asking what it would mean for the text's worldview to be our own, recognizing the difference between our existing perspective and the text's, and allowing that difference to show us our own limitations.

The principle, for Gadamer, whether historical, moral, or scientific, seems to work in the opposite direction, insofar as it establishes an idealizing fiction that allows the reader to subordinate various texts to a unifying, transcendent ideal. Gadamer's extended critique of Romantic hermeneutics diagnoses a common problem in the work of Schleiermacher, Herder, Humbolt, and especially Hegel in that each proposes "ways of conceiving history that invoke a criterion that lies outside history."[6] By reading history, literature, or even our own moral landscape through the lens of a transcendent principle, we may experience a feeling of freedom from the nameless authority of tradition, but by Gadamer's account this experience is misleading, insofar as the principle simply reifies one aspect of our traditional prejudice that has been isolated and elevated to a higher status.

Gadamer's critique of principles presents us with numerous opportunities to reconstruct the idea of moral agency from within our status

as subject to nameless authority. The space afforded here does not allow for more than a gesture toward some of these ideas: the concept of play borrowed from Huizinga; an idea of agency premised upon the logical incoherence of our own worldviews; the fusion of disparate horizons, or to return to Polanyi, the role of inarticulate knowledge in shaping moral law, might serve as potential sites of further inquiry into Gadamerian moral education. The good news in this regard is that a number of scholars, including Deborah Kerdeman, Chris Higgins, Charles Bingham and Brett Bertucio have already shed light on educational questions inspired by Gadamer's thought.[7] Their work provides shoulders for us to stand on in attempting to understand moral agency under the auspices of tradition.

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1 H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Second Revised Edition, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 316.
2 Jon Fennell, "Achieving Maturity: Gadamer, Polanyi, and Coming to Age," this volume.
3 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 233
4 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 311
5 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 324
6 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 201
7 Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308; Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice*, (Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2011); Charles Bingham, "I am the missing pages of the text I teach: Gadamer and Derrida on teacher authority," *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002): 265-272; Brett Bertucio, "Tradition, Authority, and Education: Insights from Gadamer and Giussani," *Philosophy of Education 2016*, ed. Natasha Levinson (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2017): 390-400.