

The Validation of Private-Subjective Knowledge Claims

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The teacher today, whether in elementary, secondary, or university classrooms, in a somewhat different way than when I began to teach almost thirty years ago, faces the problem of how to respond to students who make a wide assortment of knowledge claims generated through an equally wide assortment of thinking and inquiry processes. This condition has come about, at least superficially, by the general dissemination over the intervening years in the American culture of knowledge claims and the methods of generating knowledge claims that range from the trues of Marx and Chairman Mao, through the wisdom of Yoga and Zen, into the occult realms of Don Juan or Dr. Buzzard, and include the acid trips of Timothy Leary and Dr. Hoffman. Characteristic of the times we teach in, for example, is the increasing frequency of exchanging Signs early in the process of getting acquainted with someone. When I first began to teach, I did not know my Sign, my impression is that most of my students and colleagues did not know theirs, and to ask someone "*what's your Sign*" was usually to ask a meaningless question. When or if the correct meaning was given to the question, one usually doubted the seriousness, intentions, or good sense of the questioner. When in 1971 a graduate student proposed to me to write a paper recommending the use of astrological data in the counseling of high school students, I knew that in some respects, "*the times were a changing.*" What I hypothesized, incidentally, was that a consensus in the culture of the school about what constituted valid knowledge claims and methods of validating knowledge claims had or was breaking down. While it is not the purpose of this paper to test this hypothesis, rather for purposes of this paper, I assume it, my reading about and experience of American culture generally and of the school particularly since 1971 have supported this hypothesis.

For the purpose of this paper, therefore, let us assume that the classrooms and culture we teach in confront us with competing knowledge claims and methods of generating knowledge claims, many of which are sufficiently alien to teachers that they are uncertain how to treat them. Except for Marx and Mao, who fall within the Western tradition of reason and science, the methods of knowledge claims I've alluded to fit into what I term the private-subjective mode of thought, a mode which consists of trans-rational and non-rational styles of thinking, and includes such methods of thought as the intuitive, zazen, dreaming, and acid trips. The private-subjective mode offers means of exploring inner space, and if outerspace, then that through inner space first. As a general rule, these styles of thinking and many of the knowledge claims they generate are alien to most teachers, alien in the sense that they are manifested in the classroom but not with awareness of their private-subjective natures, are excluded, or included for purposes of rejection. This paper will focus on the private-subjective mode of thought. It asks how can or should I as a teacher distinguish between those private-subjective knowledge claims and methods that are creditable and those that are invalid? As a pedagogical question, the teacher must decide which knowledge claims made by a student by which methods should receive her support or disapproval, how behaviorally she should act as

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a teacher, and to what ends? As a curriculum problem, the teacher must decide which knowledge claims and which methods of thought and inquiry should be brought consciously and systematically to the attention of her pupils, how much merit or demerit to assign to each, how she should act, and for what purposes?

Now that I've indicated what I propose to do in this paper, I shall describe further how it came about that I decided to focus on this problem. As we all know, a little autobiography among Reconceptualists is not out of order. Most obviously, it is a problem that I've faced, and as I've suggested, that many teachers face. The problem became apparent to me somewhere between 1965 and 1975 as I underwent a process which called into question what I believed about the processes by which knowledge claims were validated, and therefore, what constituted a valid knowledge claim, that is, what might constitute knowledge. By 1970, the conceptual framework from which I addressed such problems was rapidly breaking down, and coming from a largely Deweyan pragmatic philosophic background, I saw myself engaged in the "reconstruction" of my own thought about thinking. As the extent and implications of this "reconstruction" drew me further from my Pragmatic base, I came to view the effect as radical. For this, and other reasons that I presented in conference papers and FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES (THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW YORK STATE FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, Winter, 1978, pp. 2-19) I began to espouse a "radical" conception of inquiry. During this period, William Pinar joined the University of Rochester faculty and organized the first Reconceptualist Curriculum Conference in 1973. As I more and more frequently confronted that concept, I increasingly viewed myself as reconceptualizing my own thought about thinking. The switch, however, was not just in name. "Reconceptualization" rather more accurately expressed what was going on in my beliefs about thinking, just as "Reconstruction" more accurately described where my beliefs had been. I am not sure what name best fits my present beliefs about thinking, but in respect to what was happening to my thoughts about thinking, between 1965 and 1975, a process that continues, radical and reconceptualizing named a large part of the game.

Two years ago, I embarked on a scholarly effort to unravel the mysteries of thinking. I intended to make up my mind about what it meant to think. I began to ask myself what it was that I/we mean when we urge a student to *think* further about this or that problem. The vocabulary may change somewhat, but the problem does not. We may ask our students to "*look into this matter more thoroughly.*" In more formal settings or, perhaps for the more serious occasions when philosophers of education or curriculum theorists discuss methods for attacking problematic situations, synonyms for *think* appear such as *reflect* or *inquire*. Thus, educational theorists should engage in reflection when they think, and/or inquiry or thinking should be central to the curriculum.¹ But whatever the word used, the problem reduces to the same question, what do or should we mean when we urge a pupil to *think*? What is it that we expect another person to do in the name of *thinking*? What is it that we see ourselves doing when we go off to do some thinking? Is there any similarity between the message "to think" which we send to a student and the message received; between what we believe he should do and what he in fact does? Similarly, is there a resemblance between what we believe we do or should do when we think and what we do in fact do? If the answer to these questions is no, as I have concluded is likely the case, then in what sense has meaningful communication occurred between a teacher and a pupil when the pupil has been

advised "to think?" Perhaps, more importantly, to what extent are we justified in attempting to teach our pupils to think, or to make thinking central to the curriculum?

It was this problem that I initially decided to address when I agreed to participate in this conference; however, since the writing I had done on the subject, which seems only about half completed, had grown to over one hundred pages, and did not seem reducible to a twenty minute presentation, I decided to focus on one important question which I've had to confront increasingly as I've dug deeper into "thinking." That question is the same one that this paper begins with. That is, as I read the literature of scholars, brain researchers, and gurus of varying credentials and persuasions, I concluded that I could assert little more about thinking than that it is highly complex and individualistic, that I believe we know very little about how we think, certainly how others think, and this, even if I take as given the work of such structuralists as Piaget and Chomsky, which I question. What I can comfortably claim, however, is that the literature contains a great variety of speculation about how we think, or perhaps, more accurately, how we should think. Moreover, in a practical sense, I am struck by the fact that all the many and diverse processes of thinking or inquiry that I have identified in the literature to produce knowledge for some people. We may not know what thinking is, although people may describe what it is or should be, but whatever thinking is, it does produce what people hold to be knowledge.

Thus the problems I confront as a philosopher of education interested in thinking or as a teacher confronting both the processes and products of my students' thinking, are how can or should I distinguish between those knowledge claims and processes that are creditable and should enjoy my support, and those that are sufficiently questionable so as to risk my disapproval, and this especially in respect to private-subjective modes and methods of thought? To begin an answer, at this point the autobiography ends. I contend we can and should judge the validity of knowledge claims and methods for generating them. To do otherwise requires that we treat all knowledge claims as equivalent, and all methods of producing knowledge as equal in their power to produce knowledge. This may suggest to some that knowledge is solely a projection or reflection of the self, a conclusion I try to avoid in my solutions to this problem, though I am sometimes charged with having failed in my attempt. It is, however, one way of dealing with the problem. It requires the teacher to treat all knowledge claims and thought processes as equally valid. A second response, more typical of the cultural climate of the school when I began teaching, required the teacher to suppose that claims to knowledge could only count if they were rationally grounded, that is, generated by the methods of science or of philosophy and the social and psychological sciences, what I term the public-objective mode of thought and inquiry. While clearly less scrupulous in practice than theory, teachers, and more especially text books, either did not seriously consider or rejected knowledge claims and thought processes representative of the private-subjective mode. This position still dominates the classroom and curriculum theory today.

A third response, the one I hold, suggested already in the above, asserts that a teacher can and should evaluate the knowledge claims and techniques of thought of his students, supporting some and resisting or rejecting others. Where I differ from the second response, however, is that I give legitimacy to private-subjective modes of thought. To avoid the solipsism inherent in the first response, I weigh private-subjective knowledge claims against a set of criteria which provides me a basis for distinguishing the valid from the invalid. At

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the end of this paper, I will stipulate what those criteria are and explain each briefly.

Thought as used in this paper represents a conscious disciplined, and purposeful neural activity, manifesting itself both internally and externally, through which people attempt to understand, control, and hopefully transform the physical, social, and cultural world which they inhabit, and by which they strive to guide and justify their own thought and behavior in that world. Taking this definition of thought and applying it to the many ways philosophers and prophets claim to establish knowledge, what I confront are a thousand ways to truth if not a thousand trues. Recall here that I previously said that I believe we know next to nothing about what goes on in the mind when people think. We may know something about how we as individuals think. But whether we know a little or a great deal about thinking, the literature is replete with various descriptions about how we think and recommendations about how we should think, all of which purportedly lead to knowledge.

To help myself think more clearly about thinking and the problem of evaluating knowledge claims, I have divided the many conceptions of thought into two categories, or modes, the private-subjective and the public-objective. I have further divided each of these into two styles of thought which roughly reflect their characteristic intellectual moves and methods of inquiry. As already indicated, the private-subjective mode includes the trans-rational and non-rational styles; the public objective, the rational scientific and the rational psycho-social-philosophic styles. These modes and styles are not completely separate and distinct, either conceptually or as they express themselves in a person's mental activity. Conceptually, I place them on a continuum, and in practice a person's mental activity includes both modes. Thus, the intuitions of a scientist may be expressed as an hypothesis which will be tested under laboratory conditions, the hypothesis originating in the trans-rational and tested in the rational scientific. Finally, I break each of the styles of thought into its characteristic methods. For example, meditation as a method fits into the trans-rational, private-subjective mode, and experimentation into the rational scientific, public-objective mode.

Whatever the mode, style, and method, thought has the power of producing knowledge for an individual or group, and the practical consequence of this is a world of competing truths. In practice, thought and inquiry become uncertain tools. A particular method often produces different knowledge claims for different groups. Even scientific experiment falls heir to this difficulty, probably far more frequently than most scientists are prepared to admit. While different methods result in different truths, they also produce similar truths. Within a narrow domain of the physical world, scientific experimentation seems to produce more reliable and convincing accounts than non-scientific methods. Once outside this realm, the reliability and persuasiveness of scientific methods and knowledge claims drop off sharply; their credibility as is the case with non-scientific methods depending significantly on the harmony existing between the claim and the psycho-social make-up of an individual or culture. I have yet to be convinced that, outside the physical world, science provides us more truth and less error than any other method of establishing knowledge. Insofar as thought is technique, it operates in terms of much that is accepted on faith, or given in the person and the culture, and it primarily functions to preserve that body of faith or those givens.² All thought so operating produces knowledge, but it also generates mystery, and is not immune to error and/or madness.³ The knowledge claims of either prophets or scientists can be

valid or invalid, moral or immoral, sane or insane. Our problem, and no easy one in my mind, is to distinguish which is which.

So I return to the problem or question with which I began this paper, how can or should we judge the wide assortment of knowledge claims and the equally mixed bag of thinking and inquiry processes our culture contains. I restrict the question to the private-subjective mode, although it is just as relevant to the public-objective. I have raised this problem first as a pedagogical question which I as a classroom teacher face, indeed I do not see how a teacher can avoid it. Secondly, I have raised it as a philosophical question, one that philosophers of education and curriculum theorists must also face. The ingredients of the resolution to the problem that I offer reflects the personal mix that I have given to my pragmatic, functionalist, phenomenological, radical experience and background. While this resolution provides me guidance in the context of both the classroom and the library, I do not contend that the tool is a certain one, nor that it will provide others assessments of knowledge claims identical to my own.

One way of distinguishing among knowledge claims which has been traditional in the Western scientific and scholarly community has been to exclude those that have not been derived through public-objective processes. Somewhat like the early twentieth century logical positivists who would not consider questions that were not at least in theory verifiable, teachers did not seriously consider knowledge claims of students that were not derived or derivable from rational scientific and psycho-social philosophic inquiry processes. Public-objective conceptions of thinking defined reason and what was reasonable. For the most part, private-subjective modes of thought and inquiry were defined as unreasonable, along with the knowledge claims judged to have been derived by these processes. Of course, a good deal of private-subjective material entered the classroom with the blessings of most teachers, and indirectly with the blessings of the scholarly community, but much of that material was self-evident, which means it went largely unrecognized and unassessed. For such reasons as this, I hold that we cannot exclude private-subjective knowledge claims and methods from the classroom; moreover, that we should and cannot avoid granting validity to some private-subjective knowledge claims, which means that we must assess those claims that are offered in the classroom, and the methods that generated them.

A teacher may also respond to knowledge claims by holding a position of neutrality or impartiality, in effect treating all knowledge claims as if they were equally warranted. As I indicated earlier, I cannot accept this point of view. It defies my reason to believe that all knowledge claims are equally valid, that all that is crucial is an individual's willingness to assert that such and such is knowledge. To hold this position a teacher must accept the proposition that knowledge, morality, and sanity are no more than personal perceptions or projections of the self. This position is untenable, or so I contend, in fact, I hold that no teacher really practices it, even when they assert they do. The best that we can do, or is it the worst, is to remain unaware of what it is that we are really doing. Thus, in my view, neutrality or impartiality are untenable. Teachers must decide what counts as a valid knowledge claim and as a reliable method for establishing knowledge, both private-subjective and public-objective. Such judgments require that we establish criteria for what constitutes valid claims to knowledge. Specifically, in terms of the concern of this paper, I test private-subjective knowledge claims against the following criteria.⁴

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(1) The claim is stable, i.e., it persists in the person or group over time. What I look for here is the power of the claim to persist; its ability to obtain reconfirmation through the life and thought of the individual and/or the group. How long has the person believed this claim? How securely does she hold to the claim under questioning? The stability of a knowledge claim may also be indicated by the existence of groups that have or might sustain the claim. Here again stability would be related to the span of time over which groups had maintained the claim. This suggests the second criterion, viability.

(2) The claim is viable, i.e., it is representative of or grows out of a living social and cultural tradition. To what extent is the claim of the individual backed up by or likely to receive the support of a group. Does the student's case for the claim reflect the best expression of that case by a group that makes the claim? Should the knowledge claim be original, it must earn the assent of groups. In that case, is the claim convincingly presented such that it is likely to receive the support of others? Credibility here is attached to institutional support, or the possibility of that. This suggests that the claim should have the backing of an institutionalized authority which vouches for the authenticity of the claim. Knowledge grows out of or harmoniously fits with a cultural tradition, or else it has to create its own niche in the culture. For the most part, knowledge as an isolated social and cultural phenomena does not exist except at the moment of creation. After that, numbers of believers, organizations, institutions and time confer viability upon a claim to knowledge.

(3) The claim is replicable or duplicable, i.e., it can be replicated either by the individual or the group. Duplication, the private and/or public confirmation of a knowledge claim, confers both viability and stability upon a claim to knowledge. This usually requires that both the claim and the method that produced it be replicated. At a minimum, replication requires that the appropriate methods have been systematized to the point that they can be taught and learned and the knowledge claim ultimately reproduced by the younger and newer members of the group. Duplication stands as absolutely fundamental to the power of a knowledge claim to sustain itself. To me it is interesting and significant that the reality of our social, cultural, and human condition is such that alternative knowledge claims appear to have little difficulty obtaining the requisite sustenance through duplication.

(4) The claim is communicable, i.e., the belief and the method that produced it can be described to others in sufficiently meaningful terms so that others can understand the claim and the method, and evaluate both. Communication does not necessarily mean replication or that another will accept the knowledge claim that I offer, but it is fundamental to either. It is also fundamental to the evaluation of a knowledge claim. Certainly, that which cannot be communicated cannot be understood, evaluated, or disputed. In fact, so vital is communication, and so varied and complex is thinking, that I've concluded the curriculum should probably center more on communication than thinking. Also, if there is or can be a "science of human subjectivity", communication would seem the indispensable tool.⁵ In any case, inability to communicate a knowledge claim, to make it public enough to test, provides grounds on which to question the claim.⁶

To this point, the criteria I've proposed do not indicate anything about the validity, significance, or worth of a knowledge claim. The three remaining criteria deal with those concerns. Obviously, the territory I move into becomes heavily value laden.

(5) The claim is authoritative, i.e., it is really valid or it qualifies for real knowledge. We

all know it is possible for both individuals and groups to be in error about what they claim as knowledge. Some attempt must therefore be made by the teacher to assess the validity of a knowledge claim. A customary approach is to appeal to authority. Authority, in this case, refers to those persons and individuals who constitute "authority" or who speak with "authority" in the society at large. Authority must be thought of as the "*best informed opinion*" available in the community. A knowledge claim put forward by either an individual or a group must therefore be compared with and evaluated in terms of the beliefs of authorities on the subject. Is the claim reflective of and consistent with authoritative belief? Is it representative of an authoritative expression of the knowledge claim, or if it is a creative response, what power does the claim have for convincing "authority" that it is valid? Answers to such questions are clearly value charged, and while designed to settle opinion about what constitutes knowledge, by no means always do so.

For the final two criteria, I move even further into the subjective world of what I value.

(6) The claim is ethical in its personal and social consequences, i.e., the belief and method that support it should nurture human values and the survival of humankind. Human values are those that enrich the quality of social life and ennoble persons generally. Herbert J. Muller has made this point in distinguishing knowledge claims that are reasonable from those that are rational. The reasonable supports human values; the rational denies them. In an article in which I developed a concept of radical inquiry, I proposed that methods of inquiry should be self consciously normative, indeed transformative, that thought and inquiry should be conceived as fundamentally an ethical enterprise. (Osborn, FOUNDATIONAL STUDIES, see especially pp. 6-11) In any case, the point seems made, that a knowledge claim should be assessed in terms of its consequences for the quality of individual and social life.

Already suggested in the preceding

(7) a knowledge claim promotes personal and social transcendence and transformation, i.e., it is liberating and emancipatory in its effects. This suggests a way of ordering knowledge claims and the search for knowledge; those claims or those areas of exploration that possess the greatest potential for promoting emancipation should be granted the greatest personal and social worth. By the same token, those methods of thought and inquiry that promote transcendence and transformation are of great social value. Obviously, this is why I am taken by "radical inquiry", and by conceptions of inquiry such as are contained in Gouldner's "reflexive sociology" or in other variations on a "critical theory" or "hermeneutics" theme. So in the end, and most importantly, knowledge should be tested by the contribution it may make to the possibility of self and society transcending themselves and thereby transforming themselves into something better and richer for all humankind. Thus, together, both self and society gain.

So I end with a conception of what constitutes and should constitute knowledge and thought that is explicitly value laden. Those values are the ones that I believe should characterize the transformed persons and society that ought to be. I know of no way to successfully avoid this. In my view, all theories of knowledge and methods of thought end up at this point, consciously or unawares.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Subsequently, in this paper, such words as think or reflect will refer to (private) internal processes that go on within the mind or neural system, processes that are not readily, or, to this point, reliably observable; while such words as inquire, research, or experiment will refer to external (public) manifestations of thought which take place in libraries and laboratories, activities which are in certain aspects more readily observable, and perhaps, more easily and precisely described, controlled, and replicated. The two together include all the processes of intellection by which we come to know, judge, or solve problems. Such processes are conscious, purposeful, and disciplined, which excludes a great deal of mental activity which therefore does not constitute thinking.
2. For me, the basic building blocks of a person or a society are psycho-social materials consisting of primary assertions and identifications. These are given in the slice of the culture into which one is born, and are acquired through our experience of that culture. A major function of techniques of thought is to maintain the psycho-social givens of a person or a society.
3. It is more common to assign error and madness to trans-rational and non-rational styles of thought. An example of this may be found in Meerloo, pp. 57-58. What I refer to as the trans-rational and non-rational, he describes as the ecstatic state, which includes many kinds of ecstasy - "*esthetic ecstasy, mystic ecstasy, and sick, toxic ecstasy.*" The latter characterizes "*the lynch mob and the riot.*" Meerloo shows much less concern with the possibility of a "*rationality that could be unreasonable,*" although he does mention the possibility. (p. 143) In MISPERCEPTION AND THE VIETNAM WAR, Ralph K. White describes how "*normally sane human beings can unwittingly through cognitive distortion*" embroil themselves in war. The process bears all the appearances of being rational, but just the appearances, (JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES, 1966, pp. 1-163). For such reasons, Herbert J. Muller distinguishes between the rational and the reasonable. Reasonable thought serves human values; rational thought violates them. (THE CHILDREN OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1971, p. 13) While this distinction leaves some problems, it calls attention to the possibility that rational-scientific and psycho-social-philosophic thought may lead to conclusions and decisions that are mad. In any case, the above authors provide evidence for my contention that we must guard against the potential for all thought, functioning as an instrument of our psycho-social structure, to lead to error, immorality and/or madness.
4. The following criteria can be applied to both knowledge claims and methods of generating knowledge, although at the present state of development in my thinking, they cut less cleanly in respect to methods. Unless a person insists that methods be judged only in terms of their power to predict, which would immediately undermine most claims to knowledge, what I am left with is the observation that any method of inquiry can produce either truth or error. Even in the case of science, the guarantee, if there is such, is only again ultimate error. As Popper and others have pointed out, science tells us not so much what is true as what is probably false.
5. The extent to which there might be a science of human subjectivity, or the conditions required to establish such a science, is the subject of an article by Thomas Natsoulas, AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST, March, 1978, pp. 269-283. Whatever the stand one takes on that

issue, science has almost no way of entering the mind and the subjective world of a person except through words and the ability of persons to communicate about that world. Barbara Brown, however, (NEW MIND, NEW BODY, p. 48) believes that the subjective world of the mind may be opened up by instrumentation and research. She doubts the power of communication to reveal the subjective world. "A person could not explain to anyone else what went on inside of his own mind." Such phenomenologists as Alfred Schutz hold to the contrary. (THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD, 1967, p. 31).

6. In preparing this paper, I had to decide whether to put the criteria for testing knowledge claims in terms of what would or would not count as a valid knowledge claim. I chose the former. The phrase, "inability to communicate a knowledge claim," indicates the other approach. Certainly, there is a sense in which it may be clearer what doesn't count as knowledge as what does or should count. Had I more space and time, I would have done more of the latter. It might also be noted here that were I concerned with knowledge claims generated by public-objective methods, the criteria would be somewhat different. For the most obvious examples, I would have been more concerned with canons of evidencing and logic,

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