

The Tacit Victory and the Unfinished Agenda

EDITOR'S NOTE: *On April 11, 1991, at the Kent State University conference celebrating the Polanyi centennial, there was a panel discussion which bore the title listed above. The panel included nine persons whose interest in Polanyi's thought is long-standing; panelists were asked to comment on the relevance of Polanyi's thought to issues and discussions current in their areas of interest. Five of these comments are included below. A similar panel discussion with different panelists will occur at the November 22, 1991 Polanyi centennial banquet held in conjunction with The Polanyi Society meeting at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (for details, see the announcement on page 43). Additional comment summaries will be included in a future issue of TAD]*

Feminist and Ecological Issues

David W. Rutledge

I believe that the most profitable reading of Michael Polanyi does not consider him a philosopher of science or epistemologist in a traditional, technical sense, though his place in those debates can be approximated, to a reasonable degree, by triangulating from his peers -- the Kuhns, Hempels, Feyerabend, and Lakatoses.

I find it much more interesting to read him as a visionary who, despite *not* fitting neatly into the academic discipline of philosophy, nevertheless presents insights about basic problems that illuminate wide areas of intellectual life. We might say that he was, unbeknownst to him, a kind of seer or prophet, a cultural critic whose fresh reflections on his own area of natural science opened up new ways of thinking about a whole range of issues.

In this vein, I want to speak for a moment about how Polanyi's work relates to one of the popular topics of the day, that is, the post-modernist critique of traditional western values and intellectual standards that has been widely discussed this past year (v. *The New York Times Magazine* on Richard Rorty, December 2, 1990; the *Atlantic Monthly* on "Illiberal Education" among the politically correct, March 1991; John Searle in *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 1990). I think that there are important ways in which Michael Polanyi can help us see both the value of these critiques, and also their limitations. Intellectuals -- some of them, anyway -- are fascinated today by the end of the "modern age." I like the anecdote told by William Christian, remembering his predecessor at Yale, Robert Calhoun:

At one time nearly forty years ago he had been in Chicago as a visiting professor. I asked him what he thought of it. He said, with an air of surprise and puzzlement, "Those people don't know the Enlightenment is over" (Wm. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*).

The Enlightenment is over. This has been acknowledged with dismay by those who are worried about the specter of relativism, which always seems to haunt periods of social or intellectual unrest; it has been greeted with shouts of joy by others who have chafed under the rigid certainties and avid conclusions of the “age of Reason” (think of the range from Alan Bloom to camp followers of Derrida). I do not presume to make judgments here about this debate over the end of the Enlightenment, but want to suggest to you one way in which this discussion relates to our Polyanian interests.

Feminist critiques of science are one form of the much broader suggestion that science is a social enterprise, strongly shaped by the context -- personal, social, economic, political -- in which it occurs. (S. Harding, M. Hesse, B. Barnes, historians of science, etc.) The feminist critic argues that the claims that truth must be objective, disincarnate, abstract, clear and distinct, and fully specifiable -- claims that the Enlightenment enshrined after the example of science -- are *not* simply readings off of reality, but social constructions of a particular experience of reality, one shot through with biases of social class, of politics, and especially, of gender. These charges have been elaborated in historical studies which correlate the rise of science in the 17th and 18th centuries with the political role of scientific academies, and with the economic interests of the mercantile class which supported science (see Lindberg and Numbers, *God and Nature*). Can we say, it is asked, that the insistence of science on “free inquiry” was unrelated to the insistence of these groups that they be freed from the oppressive authority of church and crown? The answer to this question is perhaps not as important as the question itself, which opens up the possibility that *thinking* cannot be isolated from our social living and acting in a variety of contexts. This is often called a “Marxist” approach, of course, seeing social forces at the bottom of ideological convictions.

How do we deal with these troubling charges?

Evelyn Fox Keller notes the comment of George Simmel, “the equation objective = masculine is a valid one,” and then describes how the objectivity of science has a gender bias which greatly weakens its authority, particularly for women. Polanyi argued that “science” does not equal “objectivity,” in Simmel’s sense (what Polanyi would term “objectivism”), and thereby provides a way of undercutting the masculinity of scientism, without diminishing the power of science itself. His chastening of science connects in a significant way with the feminist program. It connects constructively because as a practicing scientist, Polanyi seems to have been aware “in his bones,” so to speak, of the social nature of the enterprise. He is never so abstracted from the actual *doing* of science, as many philosophers of science often seem to be, that he makes the mistake of thinking of science simply as a system of ideas. In *Science, Faith, and Society* he gives a convincing portrait of this social rootedness in disciplines of scientific education, professional conferences, refereed journals, team research, and the master-apprentice relationship. And yet he avoids suggesting that scientific knowledge is *determined* by its social character, that it can be reduced to political or economic formulae.

A key to his helpfulness here is his awareness, as a scientist, that reality cannot be restricted to my thinking about it, however powerful that thinking may be in *shaping* our understanding. A typical formulation:

... a scientific truth, when it conforms to reality, gets hold of a truth that is far deeper than its author’s understanding of it (PK,43).

Reality surprises us, it confounds our complacent assumptions, both by refuting our certainties and by confirming our hesitant intuitions in unpredictable ways. The passing of the Enlightenment and the prospect of a post-modern world

hold no terrors for Polanyian thought, for his vision of science and knowledge has already moved to post-critical grounds. I see no reason that his work cannot be illuminating and *corrective* in many areas of the post-modernist debate today, though Polanyi would certainly be ill at ease with much of its public discourse. To me the work of William Poteat, Walter Ong and Wendell Berry illustrates much of the potential here.

The social context of science, represented by feminist criticism, links up appropriately with a related realm within which the implications of Polanyi's work are far reaching, that is, the current revision of scientific orthodoxies as a result of the ecological crisis. I submit that he may help us greatly in correcting our attitudes to nature, attitudes which have contributed to what Bill McKibben predicts is the "End of Nature." Historians and philosophers have begun to uncover the images that have guided our relations with the physical world -- an *anthropocentrism* that reduces nature to a mere stage for humans; *mechanism* that depicts natural process in fully explicit, manipulable images of a quiescent machine; *pragmatism* that argues our only moral imperative is to use nature wisely for the progress of the *human* species. The very notions of objectified nature -- mechanical in form, passive in its essence -- which Polanyi argues against have undergirded the destruction of nature in the contemporary period.

Here is a representative quotation of Polanyi's *alternative* vision of nature, from *PK*:

I have suggested before that in a generalized sense commitment may be acknowledged even at the vegetative level In this sense our knowledge of the normal growth, functioning and being of the organism is an appraisal of its primordial commitments The aphorism that biology is life reflecting on itself now acquires a fuller meaning (363).

Here the focus is on the living, organismic character of nature, and on its actively interconnecting, through its functional commitments, with a wide range of other phenomena. It is a far more dynamic, holistic view of nature than we are accustomed to see.

If we are to re-vision our relation to nature, we surely must discard the picture of science as a technique of control, and move toward an understanding of the connectedness of the human world and the natural. Ecologists now often tackle the environmental dilemma with technology -- which preserves the attitudes which got us into the problem -- or give up western science for superficial postures drawn from eastern religions [the "Deep Ecology" movement, various parts of the Earth First! movement, etc.]. Polanyi's purging of scientism from science has ecological implications, which invite our tracing out.

Reformed Epistemology

Walter B. Gulick

According to Charles Taylor, "Epistemology, once the pride of modern philosophy, seems in a bad way these days. Fifty years ago, during the heyday of logical empiricism, which was not only a powerful movement in philosophy but also immensely influential in social science, it seemed as though the very center of philosophy was its theory of knowledge. It seemed evident that that had to be philosophy's main contribution to a scientific culture" ("Overcoming Epistemology," in Baynes, et. al., *After Philosophy*, p. 464). The power of philosophy resided in its claim to be the adjudicator between knowledge claims which were valid and those which were invalid or otherwise could not support

the advance of science. Philosophers claimed objective validity for their determinations.

Today there are not many who even think of themselves as epistemologists, for many of the traditional philosophical boundaries have been blurred. There are fewer still who believe in a priori knowledge, deducible transcendental foundations for knowledge, or self-evident givens against which philosophical claims may be judged. Now even standards of rationality are often judged to be embedded in cultural and historical contexts which affect the course of inquiry. Most philosophers acknowledge the fallibility of their thought and the finite limits of any philosophical system. What has happened to epistemology over this past half century, the period during which Polanyi published the results of his philosophical labors, to bring it so far from its earlier objectivistic predilections?

By and large, the sorts of changes which have occurred are consistent with the reforms of epistemology advocated by Michael Polanyi. In saying that epistemology is in a bad way now, Taylor is really celebrating the loss of its arrogance and pretentiousness. So do I. Epistemology's claims to objective validity were ill founded and blocked philosophical progress, as Taylor himself has well shown. It would be nice to claim that Polanyi's thought has been widely influential in breaking the hegemony of objectivist forms of epistemology. Unfortunately, there is no strong evidence to support this claim. Rather, the evidence of citations in the literature suggests a more diffuse and indirect sort of influence. One sees fairly frequent reference to the significance of such of Polanyi's insights as the importance of tacit knowing and the personal factor in knowledge, especially scientific knowledge. But typically the references are of a general and vague sort. It is quite rare to find extended engagements with Polanyi's thought on the part of those who do not consider themselves Polanyians. One such appreciative analysis is Drew Leder's recently published study of embodiment, *The Absent Body*. Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* seems generally respected as a work of substantial insight, yet its imposing bulk, its position outside the mainstream philosophical conversation, and its challenging and even formidable style of exposition have seemingly relegated it for many to that fateful pile of books: "works which I mean to read when I get the time."

Clearly Polanyi's work has not had the broad and popular impact that Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has enjoyed, even though the latter book is in many respects a derivative work. But the narrower focus of Kuhn's work and the greater accessibility of his writing have made his thought the paradigmatic touchstone for those examining the cultural and historical components involved in scientific change and development. Certainly Polanyi's thought no longer evokes the sort of outrage or rejection it earlier suffered at the hands of some within the Anglo-American philosophical establishment. Paul Feyerabend has for some time assumed the mantle of the *enfant terrible* among historians and philosophers of science. His denial that there is any fundamental distinction between scientific inquiry and voodoo is reminiscent of Polanyi's earlier examination of the coherence of Azande witchcraft, yet Feyerabend ends up with nihilistic conclusions which Polanyi successfully avoids. By now Polanyi seems to be treated as one of the respected elders among contemporary philosophers of science and epistemologists --respected, but not as well known or as fully understood as those of us in The Polanyi Society believe he should be. In order to see how well important themes from Polanyi's thought are faring today, I will conduct an all too brief and impressionistic survey. Let us examine what has happened to four dimensions of his thought which derive from or bear upon his epistemology: embodiment, the tacit dimension, the practices of a community of explorers, and the theory of emergence.

First, theories of embodiment have increasingly assumed a central significance in contemporary philosophy (one is almost tempted to ask: is a new explanatory mechanism, *embodiment*, *emerging* out of previously *tacit* particulars through the cooperative work of a *community of explorers*?). The body was implicated within Polanyi's

thought through his analysis of tacit knowing. In our engagement with the world we rely upon subsidiary skills and processes which are embodied. Moreover, our very engagement with the world entails that we *incorporate* its objects and ideas in line with a literal understanding of “incorporation,” implying an assimilation in the body (*corps*). So embodiment is essential to Polanyi’s thought, even though he does not elaborate greatly on the details of embodiment. Developments in theories of embodiment have been most pronounced in feminist thought and among phenomenologists influenced by Merleau-Ponty. Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* and Nel Noddings’ *Caring* are examples of feminist works which utilize notions of the body in important, although rather different, ways. Richard Zaner’s *The Context of Self*, David Michael Levin’s *The Body’s Recollection of Being* and Quentin Smith’s *The Felt Meanings of the World* are examples of three works in the phenomenological tradition which advance our understanding of embodiment. But of course it is William Poteat’s *Polanyian Meditations* which in its exposition of mindbodily being most thoroughly works out some of the implications of Polanyi’s notion of embodiment. Two works on embodiment which I think connect to and extend Polanyi’s thought in exciting ways are Mark Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind* and Drew Leder’s *The Absent Body*.

Second, I would wager that in the long run it is Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal distinction and all his work on the tacit dimension which will be recognized as his most creative and enduring legacy to subsequent generations. One finds in the literature many indications of appreciation for Polanyi’s work on this topic. John Searle is one who works from within the analytic tradition toward a conception of a tacit dimension in his book, *Intentionality*, now eight years old. He postulates that humans apply a Network of intentional states to symbols and seek thereby meaningful mental satisfaction. The conditions of satisfaction are specified by the Network of intentions and understood in relation to what he terms the relevant Background of tacit practices, capacities, and skills which define the context of meaning seeking. The one time Searle refers in *Intentionality* to Polanyi, he shows that he does not quite understand what Polanyi means by “subsidiary,” which he treats as if it were synonymous with “unconscious” (see p. 150). Because of his misunderstanding of the subsidiary/focal distinction, he engages in an unnecessarily convoluted way of explaining how we learn the skill of skiing. “As the skier gets better he does not internalize the rules better, but rather the rules become progressively irrelevant. The rules do not become ‘wired in’ as unconscious Intentional contents, but the repeated experiences create physical capacities, presumably realized as neural pathways, that make the rules simply irrelevant. ‘Practice makes perfect’ not because practice results in a perfect memorization of the rules, but because repeated practice enables the body to take over and the rules to recede into the Background” (p. 150). Searle is right in his intuition that we dwell in a skill differently than we focus on explicit rules, but his distinction between Intentionality and the Background does not have the elegance or clarity of Polanyi’s subsidiary/focal distinction. On the other hand, Searle’s work with intentionality has some advantages over Polanyi’s somewhat unsystematic references to purposes, functions, and heuristic powers. For Polanyi, intentionality is implicit within the very conceptuality of the from-to direction of consciousness, but he does not elaborate on how that vectorial aspect is aimed or changed.

Third, an interest in communal practices and the transmission of social lore has been manifest in ways reminiscent of Polanyi in much recent philosophical thought both inside and outside the domain of epistemology. At one extreme, there is the nihilistic thought of Michel Foucault, who sees many communal standards as but the exercise of political control. Even the language of truth is seen as merely a rhetorical exercise in establishing power and maintaining it. Much closer to Polanyi in spirit, although not apparently dependent upon his thought, is Alasdair MacIntyre. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and especially *After Virtue*, MacIntyre sets forth an ethical vision which demonstrates the importance of practices, narratives, and common goods to the establishment of moral communities, communities which do not lay the whole burden of moral decision making upon the overburdened

individual will. MacIntyre is fighting Nietzschean moral solipsism, the bureaucratic individualisms of procedural justice, and liberal autonomy. He borrows from Aristotle in returning to a language of virtues and practices. MacIntyre is as wary as Polanyi is of Marxist ways of imposing rules upon individuals, but perhaps because his primary concern is with refurbishing ethics rather than safeguarding scientific inquiry, he lacks the passion for an individualistic logic of liberty which Polanyi displays. Nevertheless, a good Polanyian will discover that much of MacIntyre's language has pleasant resonances. Listen to MacIntyre's discourse on a practice, for instance: "A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards . . . Practices of course, as I have just noticed, have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far" (*After Virtue*, 2nd ed., p. 190).

Finally, it seems to me that the subject of emergence has entered quite extensively into contemporary philosophical discussion, although rarely do I see it discussed in full awareness of Polanyi's analysis of the role of free boundary conditions in the development of new levels. If they understood Polanyi's analysis, I don't think Charles Birch and John Cobb in *The Liberation of Life* or Heinz Pagels in *The Dreams of Reason* would be so quick to discount emergence theories. Rather than utilizing the language of emergence, many discussions contrast "top down" with "bottom up" types of analysis. This presupposes some type of hierarchical view which may well be compatible with Polanyi's approach. Actually, I think there is still a great deal of work to be done in teasing out Polanyi's distinction between conceptual and ontological levels; I see this as an intriguing area for extending Polanyian studies. In his latest writings, Polanyi ceased to refer to the ontological dimension of from-to consciousness, and I think he had good reason to be wary of over-commitment to a stratified universe paralleling our stratified knowing.

In sum, if he were writing today Polanyi would not need to attack an objectivist epistemology. That battle has largely been won; indeed, his thought contributed to the victory. However, the complete vision of Polanyi has yet to be fully explored or assimilated. The Polanyi Society continues to have a significant role today.

Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi: Is There Truth After Foundationalism?

John V. Apczynski

Michael Polanyi's analysis of the ills of our age is more radical than he is often given credit for. It not only challenges the ideal of impersonal objectivity in knowledge by uncovering its logical incoherence and its impossibility of being achieved in practice. Even more importantly, in my estimation, his insights provide a way of escaping the seductive spell of this impersonal ideal by means of a program of acknowledging our commitments as the fragile grounds for upholding responsibly our limited but adequate approach to transcendent values, including the quest for truth. As a student of Polanyi's thought, I find it gratifying that culturally dominant intellectual fashions of today may rightly be said to have finally accepted the sorts of critique Polanyi was advocating some fifty years ago. Unfortunately, it cannot always be said that they have proved radical enough to have escaped the consequences of the ideal of impersonal objectivity. I believe one of the abiding strengths of Polanyi's thought is that it fosters among his students the ability to make such important discriminations, particularly insofar as these have profound cultural implications.

As an example of the continuing power of Polanyi's position for enlightening our own reflections, I would like to consider the view of our current cultural situation advocated for the past decade or so by Richard Rorty. To begin with I can do nothing but heap unqualified praise for his magnificent exposure of the failure of the enterprise of epistemological foundationalism in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). In this respect he develops the case against the recent philosophical tradition of the West as a member of the guild, i.e., with the technical mastery that an outsider like Polanyi could not match. The conclusion that Western thought had failed to establish an impersonal, objective vantage point with an uninterpreted access to reality was brilliantly argued in a fresh and philosophically erudite way, even if as students of Polanyi we already would have appreciated this from another vantage point.

In spite of this my suspicions about Rorty's project arose almost immediately when he seemed to find the only alternative to the role of the philosopher as the cultural overseer to be the "informed dilettante" (317). Similarly I was puzzled by the severely limited view of "edification," consisting in nothing more momentous than finding new ways of speaking, which he advocated in its place (360). Were such proposals genuinely radically new alternatives to the ideal of classical epistemology? Or were they simply its dying gasp? In Rorty's more recent clarifications of these initial probings I believe that it can be shown, from a Polanyian perspective, that the latter is the case.

In Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Rorty defines himself as a liberal ironist. By "liberal" he means someone opposed to human cruelty and suffering. By "ironist" he means someone who recognizes the contingency of all fundamental (or what he calls final) beliefs, including one's own, so that the only worthwhile human endeavor is self-creation. No criterion of assessment of any sort is possible, whether for action or for our understanding of nature or for society. Moreover these private and public concerns have nothing to do with each other: the demands of irony and liberalism are both equally valid, but can contribute nothing to each other so must remain "forever incommensurable."

For Rorty, the point of human existence is to "seek consolation, at the moment of death, . . . in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself" (27). Notice, Rorty does not say who had created himself well, but simply who had the resources to be creative in no more profound sense than

being novel (29). If this adequately describes personal goals, we might suspect that we know why Rorty wants to privatize this: some attempts at creative novelty may be morally perverse. But this is not, in fact it cannot be, Rorty's reason for privatizing. If it were, he would have to admit, he feels, something like a transcendent moral norm accessible independently of any community of discourse. Precisely this sort of claim would be perverse for Rorty. Consequently the only social goal he will countenance is that of avoiding cruelty (65). He accepts the implication that there can be no understanding of "progress" in political life in the sense of a society's becoming more "rational" (48).

In essence Rorty holds that human life is pointless, if this is taken in some transcendent sense, just as social progress is a chimera if it taken be based on some objective conception of justice or the like. Since there is no neutral, uninterpreted stance for anything like a "pure reason" to have a direct access to reality, then all that is left to us is to work out our life's projects within the limited space offered by our historical contingencies. The best we can hope for, in short, is to create ourselves without causing others too much pain.

Now while this portrait of Rorty's recent efforts to edify us lacks his richly detailed and highly persuasive descriptions, nonetheless in its general thrust this does capture what he proposes. Here is where I believe Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge becomes extraordinarily valuable as a discriminating tool. For in light of Polanyi, Rorty appears, paradoxically enough, still to be trapped in the ideal of critical reason. By this I mean that he seems to hold that either we have a neutral, direct, uninterpreted access to reality in order to make *any* claims about the world or, by implication, that we simply give up entirely any claims to know reality because the way defined by critical reason is the *only* way to know it. Those of us who understand Polanyi realize that there is a more radical alternative to this: precisely within our contingent assumptions to which we are committed we have a partial but adequate knowledge of the world.

There is an additional import to this value of Polanyi's theory: because of its wide acceptance, Rorty's position is culturally significant. It is likely that many Western intellectuals will follow his lead in recognizing the exhaustion of the ideals of critical rationality, but since his edifying discourse discerns no alternative they will likewise follow his lead in retreating into the realm of creative subjectivity and limited expectations in the social sphere.

Twenty-five years ago Polanyi pointed to the dangers for culture that an inadequate theory of knowledge could have in "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution" (*Knowing and Being*, 24-39). At the end of the twentieth century he is being vindicated again by events in Eastern Europe. Just as in the middle of this century, Western intellectuals had difficulty in understanding the import of aspirations for freedom in Eastern Europe, so today they need to be reminded again. Consider, for example, Vaclav Havel's recent declaration that our personal self is grounded in tradition and "in that pre-reflective meaningfulness from which culture is born." He goes on to explain:

In this world, categories like justice, honor, treason, friendship, infidelity, courage, or empathy have a wholly tangible content, relating to actual persons and important for actual life. At the basis of this world are values which are simply there, perennially, before we ever speak of them, before we reflect upon them and inquire about them. It owes its internal coherence to something like a "pre-speculative" assumption that the world functions and is generally possible at all only because there is something beyond its horizon, something beyond or above it that might escape our understanding and our grasp but, for just that reason, firmly grounds this world, bestows upon it its order and measure, and is the hidden source of all the rules, customs, commandments,

prohibitions, and norms that hold within it. The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates, and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd, and superfluous, and which we can only quietly respect (*Vaclav Havel or Living in Truth*. Ed. Jan Vladislav. London: Faber and Faber, 1987: 137).

Here we see full blown an alternative to the collapse of classical epistemological foundationalism, an alternative that Polanyi's epistemology can help us appreciate, understand, and defend, even if we disagree with the particular metaphysical and theological underpinnings of Havel's claims. Being able to identify the differences between stances such as Rorty's and Havel's is one of the continuing contributions that Polanyi's theory makes; supporting those, like Havel's, who uphold the sort of commitment to the transcendent value of truth which can shape history is something that still needs to be done.

Personal Knowledge In Arts

Doug Adams

My first report as fine arts' coordinator for The Polanyi Society ("Implications of Polanyi's Thought Within the Arts: A Bibliographic Essay," *The Polanyi Society Newsletter* (Spring 1975), pp. 3-5) contained references to a few of Polanyi's brief comments on the arts and a few passages in the secondary literature. As the poet of Michael Polanyi, Elizabeth Sewell had produced *The Orphic Voice* (1960) which expressed (through the poems at the back and the text throughout) a Polyanian perspective; and she extended her inquiries through a Polyanian perspective in *The Human Metaphor* (1964).

In subsequent reports in the *Polanyi Society Newsletter* I could point to whole dissertations and theses exploring implications of Polanyi's epistemology for aesthetics or hermeneutics: most notably Carl Phillips Mullins' "Hermeneutical and Aesthetic Applications of the Thought of Michael Polanyi" (Ph.d. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1976) and John S. Nuveen's M.A. thesis (Pacific School of Religion) which is written in poetry:

A Para-propositional Approach to My Belief
(Offered for Your Perusal and Enjoyment, My Relief)

Michael Polanyi, Poet, in Two Books of His
Provides for Me, I've Found, the Best Resource There Is.

Barbara Bennett Baumgarten continues such significant inquiries in her current dissertation work entitled "Visual Art as Theology: the Development of a Post-Critical Aesthetic for Theology Based on the Epistemology of Michael Polanyi" (Ph.d. dissertation in progress, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley).

Some of these inquiries are aided by Polanyi's own writings about art (e.g., "A Theory of Poetry" from a letter dated 19 May 1953, Gelwick Microfilm Collection of the Non-Scientific Writing of Michael Polanyi, Pacific School of Religion; "What is a Painting?" *American Scholar* 39, Autumn, 1970, 665-669; or *Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) which they then use in exploring the arts and developing an aesthetics: e.g., Adams and Mullins, "Meaning with the Arts: The Implications of Polanyi's Epistemology for the Arts," *Studia Mystica*, I, 2, Summer 1978, 28-48. What is a more recent development is the use of Polanyian epistemology by artists and art historians in their doing of art or art history. Here the focal attention is not on Polanyi's thought but rather a subsidiary reliance on it in attending to the making or exploring of art. Artist Robert Irwin (introduced to Polanyi's thought by psychotherapist Edward Wortz) has created art revealing Polanyian insights much as Elizabeth Sewell's poetry has done. Irwin quotes Polanyi often as in his book *Being and Circumstance* (New York; Lapis Press, 1985).

My own art historical and art critical work employs Polanyian epistemology to see Polanyian parallels in works of major artists such as Jasper Johns: cf. Doug Adams, *Transcendence with the Human Body in Art: Segal, De Staebler, Johns, and Christo* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). William H. Poteat in *Polanyian Meditations: in Search of Post-Critical Logic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985) provides significant grounding for those discerning Polanyian developments in the arts. Both postmodern visual art and postmodern art history show significant developments which Polanyi anticipated. There was a time (during the reign of modernism in art and art criticism) when it was inappropriate to observe the person of the artist as well as the person of the viewer (much less the communities in which they stood) in doing or discussing art. But now the human body and explicit historical subject matter (often explicitly religious subject matter) has returned in abundance in visual art, and art history has become more historical. Such developments reveal our tacit dimensions as artist and viewer in the triadic community structure of knowing and doing which Polanyi revealed.

A summary of my own recent investigations drawn from my book noted above shows how far visual artists are moving in directions indicated by Polanyi's achievement:

Human bodies and biblical subject matter appear increasingly in contemporary American art. This book explores perceptions of transcendence through the human body in the art and interviews of four major contemporary artists. With George Segal's sculptures, one moves beyond the sense of loss still evident in post-modern a/theology and toward a sense of place connected to biblical subject matter and a center beyond oneself. In Stephen De Staebler's art, there is a recovery of relation with religious forms and times of graceful aging, dying, and rising as well as a recovery of the commitment to the dinner table conversation rather than the cocktail party chatter. Through Jasper Johns' art, one perceives post-critical philosophies beyond subject/object and mind/body dichotomies. The reaffirmations of one's own body in art, philosophy, and theology extend to an appreciation of one's relationships with wider communities and the earth as evidenced by Christo's process art which invites pilgrimage to see the world as gift. Human bodies generate a sense of relation. Such art not only exhibits whole bodies (in contrast to modern art's fragmented parts) but also generates family groupings reminding us of relations with others beyond self.

Let me briefly amplify this comment upon the new and Polanyian sense of the body which is evident in the recent work of these contemporary artists. Each of De Staebler's earlier postmodern works featured a fragmented or

emerging body communicating an affirmation of the incomplete individual and his or her relation with the earth. In contrast, the works of modern artists such as Baskin or Golub exhibited fragmented bodies symbolic of the disintegration of person and world. De Staebler's recent *Pieta* (1989) introduces relationship between two figures who merge in ways establishing a sense of place and time missing in much modern thought. Each of many early Segal works featured isolated individuals in lonely surroundings; but his recent works including Abraham's *Farewell to Ishmael* (1987) provide perceptions of family relations which transcend brokenness and affirm the earth. Jasper Johns' art has similarly developed from earlier body fragments and isolated individuals into the full human figure and its progeny as in his most recent drawings of *Seasons* (1989).

Such perceptions of transcendent relations move beyond the connections which Charles Jencks cited as characteristic of early post-modern art: "For the Modernist predicament, often epitomized in Yeats' words--Things fall apart; the center cannot hold--we have the dialectical answer--Things fall together and there is no center but connections" (*Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* p. 350).

De Staebler, Segal, and Johns help us perceive not only connections but also relations which lead us to center beyond self and to sense our place and time.

Chaos Theory, William Poteat's Polanyian Explorations and Indwelling

J. Stines

I would like to point to three areas in which it might be claimed in Polanyian fashion that Polanyi said more than he knew and in connection with which his thinking might continue to bear fruit eminently worth harvesting.

The first area relates to the emergence of chaos theory. It seems to me that the relatively new attention to so-called chaotic phenomena or the non-systematic systems generated by non-linear determinism--richly present all around us but until recently ignored and/or masked by abstraction--offers both confirmation and a rich new field of exploration in tandem with Polanyi's thinking. That extremely simple initial conditions in nature can give rise unpredictably to extreme complexity, to novel comprehensions or organizations which are themselves not closed but fraught with, in effect, infinite possibility, is a discovery, if it may be called that, of chaos science which should come as no surprise at all to students of Polanyi. His work had already disclosed or was prescient of much that is now coming to the attention of the theoreticians of chaos, but which was forced upon their attention on other grounds than those which originally engendered Polanyi's reflections. Polanyi's sense that, both ontologically and epistemologically, particulars become comprehended in boundary conditions which are irreducible and inexplicable in terms of their subsidiaries and the laws which govern them was already a plea for attention to non-linearity, but one which the scientific and philosophical community largely tended to ignore just as they ignored turbulence and non-linear equations except when occasionally forced to pay attention, but even then, only to attempt to reduce these phenomena to linearity, or, in short, to ignore them at a new level. So it is perhaps not so much new observation *per se* as it is new attention to perennial phenomena, which we can no longer mask, which underlies a rich new area of investigation and reflection. Chaos science can, I believe, provide an extremely fruitful hermeneutical source for unpacking Polanyi. In turn, chaos

theory desperately *needs* Polanyi since, in spite of the apparent compatibility of the objective pole of its observations with Polanyi's ontological claims, many of its practitioners are still immured epistemologically, however subtly, with the bewitchment of the intelligence by the subject-object dichotomy. Tacitly, mind, in Cartesian fashion, is left out of the non-linear loops that make for resonance between knowing and being and emergence. The resultant mental cramps beg for massage with Polanyian balm.

Another area of agenda for the future: I believe that the work of W.H. Poteat strongly suggests that, far from nearing the end of Polanyi, we have scarcely begun. Clearly, Poteat's work in the post-critical tradition has a life of its own, standing in more than linear relation to Polanyi. Since his *Polanyian Meditations: In search of a Post Critical Logic*, Poteat has published *Philosophical Daybook*; and two more volumes of his essays are in the wings soon, I believe, to be published. The mutually enlightening relationship between his work and Polanyi's deserves and, I expect, will receive much attention in the future.

I take as one example an essay by Poteat entitled "For Whom Is the Existence of Values a Problem: Or, An Attempt to Show that the Obvious Is Plausible." It is an essay which thrusts upon the reader's attention, in a rich and ingenious manner, the ways by which value everywhere and inescapably clings to us as the very vectoring of our being, sinewed and pre-tended in our mindbodily integrity which is the tacit coefficient of all of our sense for the hanging-togetherness of things. For Poteat, by virtue of a kind of recapitulation of the original sin (manifest in our Gnostic hatred of our incarnate existence), we despise our own mindbodily tensedness and orientedness and regard it as a bondage from which we must be free so that we can pronounce freedom itself, and meaning, and value, illusions.

In the correlated theatre of the imagination the thinker is a solitudinous, i.e., disconnected, spectator, observing in the mode of a detached and invulnerable god. From this theatre of solitude we do not even envision an audience to whom we are speaking; and we are oblivious to that power which *enables* us to *claim*, insofar as we make claims, which power itself is descended from the primal, inalienable being-in-the-world which each of us in our mindbodily existence *is*. Poteat makes a novel and powerful case for the affirmation that we live and know from our whole nature which itself prefigures, and is not divorced from, the nature of world. One way Polanyi would put this would be to say that the logic of commitment to standards that arise within us (i.e., which are "self-set") is such that "action and submission are totally blended in a heuristic communion with reality" (*PK*, 386). In this essay on value by Poteat, I receive a new experience of the meaning and force of that passage in *Meaning* (though it is not mentioned by Poteat) in which Polanyi and Prosch claim that "we are addressed by nature to the attainment of meaning, and what genuinely seems to us to open doors to greater meaning is what we can only verbally refuse to believe" (p. 18). I believe that, both in the directions suggested by Poteat's work and in other but cognate directions, there is much more to be done in the field of Polanyi's import for value theory, ethics and culture critique.

That leads me to another but closely related point of departure for future exploration. It seems to me that one concept quite crucial to ethics, the concept of violence, is peculiarly parasitic on the phenomenon of indwelling. If we think of "soul" in an Augustinian way, as orientation, violence will seem to be a negative corollary of ensoulment. Violence seems to have no phenomenological toehold in relation to disensouled bodies or inanimate matter.

That is, the concept that violence is occurring is parasitic upon our sense that the violent phenomena are a violation of something which is being achieved in the victim of violence, something which is irreducible to radically contingent material processes or, that is, to potential energy. Hence, particulars are violated, or are the objects of

violence, only insofar as we take them to be an abode or dwelling place of a reality or a meaning which they are achieving which is irreducible to material processes which are taken to be disensouled. Our post-animistic reductionist mentality has made the very notion, for example, of “violence to the earth” seem, both popularly and to the hard-nosed materialist-technologist- industrialist, the crassest silly superstition. Polanyi’s concept of indwelling gives us an important way beyond that mentality--a way which is much more and other than a mere return to Aristotle, however much it seems to echo him at certain points. To recall Heidegger and Holderlin it seems, both from Polanyi and chaos theory, that it is not only man who “dwells poetically, upon the earth, beneath the sky” but *all* of the actual, which is to say, the *human* world. The concept of indwelling particulars in response to our sense of their promise for, or bearing upon, the future can give new power and comprehension for sensibilities which eco-catastrophe, especially, is forcing into our awareness. We need to exploit Polanyi’s concept of indwelling in that direction. Further, as this comment has already implied, I find Heidegger’s way of thinking about dwelling in relation to building and thinking highly resonant as both promising and fulfilling in relation to Polanyi’s notion of indwelling. For Heidegger our time of need, our sense of homelessness, is descended from a memory of dwelling; and remembering would call us forward into our past and if you will, a re-membering of dwelling. In *this* primal context we build for the sake of future dwelling. Heidegger seems to be saying that if we are going to deal with the real housing shortage we must search anew for the meaning of dwelling. Polanyi and Poteat greatly enrich our efforts to fill-in the portent of Heidegger’s poetry here.<F129M>q<F255D>