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Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism, Toward Holistic Healing

In Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda, from the Rockwell Lecture series, Nancey Murphy writes about the various aspects of the deep conflict between liberal and conservative Protestant theologians (Murphy ix). Murphy claims that the origin of this “bifurcation” comes, in large part, from “the philosophy of the modern period” (1). However, her second thesis is that postmodernism has cast doubt on the validity of modern thought that serves as the basis of the divide and provides an opportunity for reconciliation (x, 1). Richard A. Young writes that Murphy’s work “is an important book that must be honestly engaged by the wider evangelical community” (665). As a part of that evangelical community, I will here offer my own (abbreviated) engagement with this text. I find that her claims regarding the bifurcation and her proposed solutions to it are confirmed by their correlation to the proposals of covenant epistemology by philosopher Esther Meek and those of tacit knowing by philosopher-scientist Michael Polanyi. I will show this by summarizing some of Murphy’s claims in her work, along the way demonstrating how Meek’s and Polanyi’s work (including Meek’s incorporation of Polanyi’s work) correlates with her proposals. Finally, I will show that this correlation confirms the validity of Murphy’s proposals, particularly responding to concerns, such as a rejection of foundationalist certainty, which evangelicals may have with accepting Polanyi’s thought and Meek’s incorporation of it.

In her book, Murphy outlines three specific areas in which “modern philosophical assumptions provided limited options to theologians if their work was to make sense in the modern world” (ix). These “limited options” are dualistic “pairs of choices” (Murphy 1). Murphy
explicates these dualisms as “ideal types,” thereby avoiding having to “write a history of modern theology” (6,7).

Perhaps the most obvious link between Murphy’s thoughts and covenant epistemology is their attempts to overcome dualisms. Covenant epistemology, as posited by Esther Meek in her unpublished work *Contours of Covenant Epistemology: Conversations on the Way to Knowing*,¹ is the “proposal that we take as our paradigm of all knowing the interpersonal, covenantal constituted relationship” (ch. 2 7). This is opposed to the Western “default setting” of knowing that consists in dichotomies, favoring such things as reason over faith, and holds “fundamental commitments” to “certainty, the ocular metaphor, and substantivalism [defining objects by their substance, not relationally]” (Meek ch. 1 3,9).

Before the solutions to these dichotomies can be offered, however, the dichotomies must first be explicated. Here I only have the space to examine one of them. Murphy argues that the modern concept of foundationalism has deeply affected Christian theology: conservatives and liberals hold to Scripture and experience, respectively, as the core foundation of their theology (12). Murphy’s set of assumptions as to what constitutes foundationalism are as follows: “first, the assumption that knowledge systems must include a class of beliefs that are somehow immune from challenge; and, second, the assumption that all reasoning within the system proceeds in one direction only—from that set of special, indubitable beliefs to others, but not the reverse” (13).

Murphy goes on to summarize the difficulties inherent in the conservative and liberal positions concerning knowledge. Trying to find a firm foundation for knowledge in Scripture is problematic because there is no way to guarantee Scripture as God’s word with certainty, and when one uses experience as a foundation, a question can always be raised about whether one’s

experience is actually real (Murphy 81). Covenant epistemology and Polanyi’s thought also reject the foundationalist drive for certainty. Meek writes, “The ideal of certainty is illusory…Michael Polanyi made the case that, for every truth claim to which we are giving our attention at a certain time, there are several truth claims which we cannot even specify and yet must rely on in trust. It is not possible to doubt or question all our commitments simultaneously and offer foolproof justification for the lot” (ch. 1 10). This effectively dismantles the claims of foundationalism in its quest for indubitability.

The second part of Murphy’s work proposes postmodern solutions to these dualism problems that allegedly work because they play by different “‘rules’” from those of modernity (Murphy 85). It is her belief that “these new approaches … form more of a continuum or spectrum of theological options than a dichotomy” (Murphy 154). Murphy writes that she does not view many Continental philosophers as really postmodern because they “actually share too many assumptions with their modern predecessors”; instead, she turns to certain “Anglo-American” philosophers for answers (Murphy 87). For the problem of foundationalist knowledge, Murphy proposes Quine’s holist epistemology that posits “knowledge as a web or net” and where holism “means that each belief is supported by its ties to its neighboring beliefs and, ultimately, to the whole” (88, 94). This means that reasoning is not limited to the upward direction from foundations, and there is recognition of the fact that “data … are theory-laden” (Murphy 94). Holistic belief is justified by “showing that problematic beliefs are closely tied to beliefs that we have no good reason to call into question” (Murphy 94).

While Murphy makes a good start at modifying foundationalism by way of Quine, the thought of Michael Polanyi is even more effective. This is because, unlike Quine, Polanyi recognizes that our presuppositional beliefs are subsidiary, not explicit or, in Polanyi’s words,
focal. We relate to our presuppositions as we do to our bodies: we indwell them (Meek “Working” 1-2). Meek writes, however, “if you feel that this makes presuppositions subjective or irrational, it’s only because you need to think more about how it feels to live your body” (“Working” 2). At the same time, Polanyi’s thought allows for benefits corrective to foundationalism that are similar to Quine’s. In his philosophy of tacit knowing, reasoning is not confined to an upward movement from foundations, and data also reflect theories. An example of the former is given by Polanyi when he writes that one determines what universals, such as “man,” are like by “not attending to any kind of man, but relying on our subsidiary awareness of individual men, for attending to their joint meaning….This explains why the concept of man cannot be identified with any particular set of men, past or future” (Knowing 149). Polanyi’s thought also confirms the principle that data are theory-laden; he writes in Personal Knowledge that scientists who come from different theoretical points of view “do not accept the same ‘facts’ as facts, and still less the same ‘evidence’ as evidence” (167).

Murphy also as part of her solution highlights some of the input from nonfoundational theologians, including Ronald Thiemann who “recognizes the intrinsic relationship between human knowing and doing. It is not merely consistency among beliefs that rationality requires, but also consistency between belief and action” (97). This corresponds well with what covenant epistemology proclaims in its efforts to transcend the dichotomy between theory and practice: “knowing is action; theory is always embedded in a responsible, active, interpersonal context, and only makes sense in that context. ‘Truth’ unlived is not truth. All truth is bodily lived” (ch. 12 9). These ideas of Meek incorporate what Polanyi calls “the bodily roots of all thought” (Tacit 15, 15-16).

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2 I am particularly indebted to Esther Meek and Dale Cannon for showing me how Polanyi improves upon Quine.
I have been arguing for the correspondence between Murphy’s thought and that of Meek and Polanyi. In order to claim that this correspondence thereby justifies the validity of Murphy’s ideas, however, I must demonstrate why evangelicals should accept the thought of Meek and Polanyi. The demonstration of the legitimacy of these sources of thought is particularly important in light of the implications of Murphy’s proposed changes for evangelical theology. As Young writes, “It would call for engaging in a new form of apologetics and rethinking basic assumptions” (665).

Perhaps the best justification I can give for the relevance of Meek and Polanyi to Murphy’s thought as an indication of the soundness of the latter is the potential for healing that their work provides. In her description of covenant epistemology which significantly incorporates the thought of Polanyi, Meek writes:

>Covenant epistemology offers, to ordinary human knowers, the liberation to be and know and do, fully, freely, effectively. A paradigm of knowing which elucidates all such acts, and which reincorporates into the knowing act dimensions of our lives which have predominantly been excluded, offers insight not simply into knowing but into what it is to be human and what humans do in the world….It offers healing both to knower and to known. (ch. 2 11)

Some evangelicals find certain of Meek’s and Polanyi’s ideas, however rich and healing, still troubling. Perhaps the biggest question is what to make of the commitment of Polanyi (and, therefore, Meek) to the idea that certainty cannot be attained and that all pronouncements of knowledge are ultimately commitments of the knower. Is the quest for certainty really as hopeless as they claim? If faith and commitment are the basis of all knowledge, does this not lead one to a relativistic stance regarding different commitments made by different people? This
is an issue that Murphy also realizes needs to be addressed (155). Polanyi presents an answer to this question in the terms of his realist standpoint. In *The Tacit Dimension*, he describes the “personal responsibility” that accompanies the pursuit of truth by a scientist and denotes it as the “universal intent” of the knower; in other words, though the scientist, as Polanyi describes, knows that her idea may prove to be wrong and may not be agreed with by others, she still claims that it should “be accepted by all” (75, 78). This is because the scientist believes, as Maben Poirier writes, that he “is not inventor of his vision” but “is responding to the beckoning of the real” (qt. in Jacobs 464). Scientists following Polanyi, then, vouch for the truth of their insights and are not content to let them be true for themselves alone. The real is intricately connected with a non-relative truth. Also, Polanyi’s characterization of reality as that which can beckon to people should particularly appeal to evangelicals who believe that Jesus Christ, a Person, is the Truth. Meek writes, “The real not only is personal; it is ultimately Person” and specifically incorporates this thought into her covenant epistemology (ch. 2 8).

However, just because someone thinks that what he or she believes is real does not mean that it is, in fact, real. Polanyi also gives an account of the evidence that one finds as confirmation of the reality of an insight that one has discovered. As described by Poirier again, “To the extent that this insight is truly about what is real, it is a wager that the insight … will uncover more of that order than is presently known” (qtd. in Jacobs 464). The future results of the insight, then, will confirm the truth of that insight, especially if, as evangelicals believe, truth is revealed to us a by a trustworthy Person.

Under this conception of truth as Person, truth and reality are personal as opposed to impersonal. If truth is personal, the quest for certainty is a faulty one, for it does not correspond to the way reality truly is. One can only have certainty if reality is, as Dr. Meek says,
“impersonal, mindless, soulless, impassive, facts or states of affairs” (ch. 1 6). This does not mean, however, that one cannot have confidence in what a personal reality reveals, just as one can have confidence in what a person, or most importantly, a Person, reveals, especially as it becomes confirmed in various ways throughout the future. Polanyi and Meek’s stance, while therefore not one of impossible absolute certainty and objectivization, is at the same time not relative.

Murphy’s calls for change in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* can therefore be accepted by evangelicals. While they may not agree on all of the particular details of her suggestions—I know that I certainly did not, such as her agreement with the theory of evolution—they can acknowledge the truth of her overriding claim for a way to move beyond liberalism and fundamentalism, particularly in her suggestions using postmodern philosophy. They can do this because of the confirming, corresponding insights of Michael Polanyi and Esther Meek whose philosophies speak to the reality of a personal truth.
Works Cited


