

Responses to Wally Mead's paper, Atlanta, Nov. 2015 by David Rutledge

-thanks for a stimulating and insightful paper, and especially for sharing accounts of his conversations with Michael Polanyi over two days in 1970, at Oxford.

-features of Polanyi's epistemology that *might* contribute to a theology (and Mead is properly reticent here):

- the human passion to explore and discover (1). [See also in this regard Jonathan Sacks' *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (NY: Schocken, 2011), ch. 1., esp. quotes from Einstein & Wittgenstein on p. 19.]
- the person, a center of judgement and action, is the source of knowledge (3, and Part III, beginning on p. 7))
- the same tacit powers are at the basis of *all* human knowledge, including both science and theology (4); MP saw a deeper connection between the two in their common epistemology than C.P. Snow (5-6)
- in evolution, the appearance of new individuals is "guided" by the potentialities available to it from a generalized field, or heuristic field (12) (PK, 398-401). Mead calls this a "top →down teleological influence" (7).
- the boundary conditions of hierarchical levels of organization (?), are open, undetermined
- humans distinguished from non-humans by capacity to make choices, mental satisfaction at these choices, and moral passions (8). This latter is the highest quest of humans, and "would seem to call for an extension in the direction of God." (MP, *SFS*, 83-84, quoted on p. 8) Knowing reality, and accepting the standards which guide our morality, will eventually lead to "God in man and society." (9)
- concept of "emergence" (12, in quote) suggests a continually 'upward,' undetermined process of development in the world
- Polanyi refers to the 'pinnacle of the heuristic field' as a "cosmic field," "universal standards" that are "timeless," a "noosphere," an "active center"

So, Mead asks (14, top), why not call this "God"? Why not personalize this final level of reality, esp. since MP "set as his major goal the defining of personhood" (14)?

[Note that Mead reports MP's approval of Mead's effort to draw out religious implications of MP's thought - p. 14]

-MP reluctant to speak in these terms. His references to his own spiritual outlook were “groping and ... inconsistent” (14). Mead interprets his reticence positively, as stemming from MP’s awareness of the limits of the human mind, and the limits of language, as well as a humility arising from his “complete integrity.” But Mead seems to feel it is not a misreading of Polanyi’s thought to suggest that it may provide a basis for talk of transcendence, but not of the “magic and theological fantasy” of Christian doctrine (!) (15) [“transcendence” but not “God”?]

-p. 2: notable absence of comments by Polanyi on theology, esp. on his own beliefs [given his clear ‘confessions of faith’ in reason and its standards]

-p. 6: Mead: “Do you regard yourself as a Christian?” Polanyi: “No.”

-p. 7: Mead: could the guidance of a generalized field in the development of an organism indicate “a higher, cosmically centered level... of influence and action” ? (7) Polanyi: in effect, “No.”

-Mead makes a good point (p. 15) that MP had little appreciation for *mystery* as a major characteristic of God, but mustn’t a Xn embrace that mystery? (15)

-p. 9: MP sees humans as able to find a sense of meaning “sufficient for his ... brief existence in this world” (9), but not meaning defined as “the will of God” or somesuch.

-Final paragraph a fair summing-up of MP’s acceptance of much of teachings of Jesus and Paul, but rejection of some doctrines he could not accept [perhaps Virgin Birth, resurrection, the miraculous, etc.?] [*a minimalist faith?*]

Criticisms:

-p. 6: confused statement of how MP distinguished “hard sciences” from humanities

-p. 9: I’m not sure Mead correctly reads the quote at the bottom of p 9

-p. 13, bottom: Mead says MP also used the word “spiritual” to refer to the “transcending agency that lures us on;” where does he do this?

-p. 13-14: refers to the Moot as including Tillich and Niebuhr; clarify.

-pp. 15-16: Mead’s derogatory remarks about Xn theological history, based largely on Bart Ehrmann (!), are far too general and cavalier. Suggests MP might have embraced Xianity more if it were not “too often represented in the often domesticated or mythical expressions of Christian dogma.” (15)