

## “Gregory Bateson and Michael Polanyi on Minds, Nature and Beauty”

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### Outline

#### 1. Bateson redefines “Mind” and Mental Systems (through Biology, Anthropology & Cybernetics). Like Polanyi, he aims to fix a destructive (Cartesian) epistemology.

1. Mental units: difference, information, pattern, context, logical types

2. Minimal Characteristics of Mind

1. The system shall operate with and upon differences. [1,2]

2. The system shall consist of closed loops or networks of pathways along which differences and transforms of differences shall be transmitted.

[What is transmitted on a neuron is not an impulse, it is news of difference.] [4,5]

3. Many events within the system shall be energized by the respondent part rather than by impact with the triggering part. [3]

4. The system shall show self-correctiveness in the direction of homeostasis and/or in the direction of runaway. Self-correctiveness implies trial and error [partly 6, as higher order features] (Steps, 490).

Mind is a system that recognizes *difference*, and typically uses that information to self-correct towards a stable unity, and to learn.

3. Examples of mental circuits, processes, & mind:

1. Examples of Mental Circuits

Governor and steam engine;

Person, Axe, tree

2. Mental Processes:

Embryology

Evolution

3. Minds:

Individual organism (and some of their parts)

Organism & Environment

Larger ecosystem

“We get the picture, then, of mind as synonymous with cybernetic system—the relevant total information-processing, trial-and-error completing unit. And we know that within Mind in the widest sense there will be a hierarchy of subsystems, any one of which we can call an individual mind” (Steps, 466).

2. **The interaction of minds can trigger an aesthetic response.** “Aesthetic” is defined as “Responsive to *the pattern which connects*” (M&N, 9).

1. The context for aesthetic feeling as a wider/higher-level mental system, containing both the experiencing mind and the mind experienced; wider patterns connect both.

- “The ‘primrose by the river’s brim’ is beautiful because we are aware of the combination of differences which constitute its appearance could only be

achieved by information processing, *i.e.* by *thought*. We recognize another mind within our own external mind” (Steps, 471).

2. Beauty signals an ecological fitness or health (and sanity) of a mental system.

The Alpha animal is necessarily beautiful

3. Ugliness signals dysfunction (and insanity) such as:  
“Schismogenenic change”: parts of a mental system in “runaway” lower-order part attempting to control (when it, necessarily, does not have knowledge of the total system).

### 3. Rational Consciousness is a *part* that can become dysfunctional for the self-correcting total mind.

1. Difference between mind (beyond the skin) and typical understanding of self and consciousness.
2. Consciousness operates on partial, selected information & can be pathological
  1. Parts necessarily have an “expansive character” kept in check by the system.
  2. Rational consciousness has become a part that attempts to direct the whole.
  3. Technology has given us the power to be a “runaway” part, destroying the stability of the system on which it depends.

### 4. Aesthetic experience in nature and art can reconcile us to greater wholes.

1. Information processed tacitly (most mind is not conscious) can assist in the self-correction of the system (reining in runaway tendencies) & reconciling the runaway part to the system/whole.

1. Aesthetic Experience-engagement in Nature  
unconsciously provides information; connects us with the wider circuits we are phylogenetically evolved to be integrated with.

2. Aesthetic Experience and production of art  
Approach art as “engagement” rather than a disinterested spectator (Charlton)

Art’s “play” reconnects us with unconscious and wider circuits/information

Art engages in finding “patterns that connect,” especially patterns of patterns that relate and integrate *different levels*:

- i. “artistic skill is the combining of many levels of mind—unconscious, conscious, and external—to make a statement of their combination” (Steps, 470).

3. Understanding the new epistemology can make us aware of our connections with nature and encourage us to exercise more caution, or else...

We drive “Eco” –the larger mind—insane.

### 5. Preliminary Points of Comparison between Bateson’s Epistemology & Polanyi’s

1. Both provide notions of what Polanyi calls *dual control*.
  1. Polanyi seems to want something more active than the “restraints” of cybernetics for the higher-orders/levels
2. Polanyi offers a more integrated *view of information and physical systems via* logic of tacit integration and structure of emergence.

1. Bateson has a sharper separation with “bridges,” but he (like Polanyi) also claims *we cannot cleanly separate epistemology and ontology*.
3. Both are *neo-Platonic* in their understanding of ideas as real (Steps 250), but
  1. Bateson seems to believe we can never get at the things through signs.
  2. Polanyi believes we do get at things and they reveal themselves & have indefinitely many future manifestations.
4. Both see *final causes* as active in nature, through something like cybernetic systems (Bateson) or telic fields (Polanyi) these seem consistent with dynamical systems and Connectionist computer architectures.
5. Polanyi (over-?) emphasizes the *from-to* trajectory; Bateson emphasizes circuits.
  1. Here they can mutually assist each other:
  2. Leads to more of a “*from-through-to*” or “*from-via-to*” structure (in Polanyi).
6. Both emphasize the importance of metaphor and its distinction from deductive logic.
  1. Bateson shows its importance in biology (along with homology, abduction)
  2. Polanyi gives a better analysis (I think) of what metaphor is [via a logic of tacit integration: the relations of clues to focus (in a symbol) and back (in metaphor)].
  3. The fittingness of metaphor is a step on the way to an understanding of what the experience of beauty is for Polanyi; information makes tacit sense in a mutually enhancing pattern. Alison’s theory of beauty as a symbol of mind fits for both.
7. The “Sacred” for Bateson is something that can’t & shouldn’t be said; for Polanyi it may be something that cannot be can’t be said, but that shouldn’t stop the attempt.