

Polanyi Society Zoom Sessions June 11 and 12, 2021

Below are materials for Zoom presentations/discussions scheduled for June 11 and 12, 2021. As was the case with past Polanyi Society-sponsored Zoom sessions, if you register, you will be sent a link for all sessions. Join any sessions that fit your interests and schedule. All sessions will be recorded and posted on the Zoom cloud within approximately 24 hours (and registrants will be sent a link) so it is possible to review recordings of sessions.

To register, send an e-mail to **both** Gus Breytspraak (gus.breytspraak@ottawa.edu) and Phil Mullins (mullins@missouriwestern.edu).

Posted materials are for non-commercial use of scholars and students. The second paper scheduled for June 12 is not yet posted but should be available by mid-May.

I. Friday, June 11, 2021: 11 a.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time

1. [A Polanyian Appraisal of Likert-Scale Measurement in Social Psychology](#)

Collin D. Barnes

Rating scales that link numbers to verbal labels are ubiquitous in social psychological research and are used to re-express individuals' attitudes on wide-ranging matters in quantities that can be treated statistically. These re-expressions pay tribute to an objectivist framework, but at the expense of eclipsing the powers of personal knowing Polanyi attributes to other minds. This fact comes to the fore in the present paper through an investigation of Polanyi's analysis of linguistic indeterminacy, indication and symbols, and the application of neurological models to persons who are competent to make sense of their own lives. Accrediting the result of this inquiry compels one dedicated to Polanyi's thought to wonder how social psychology ought to be conceived. Clues to an answer appear in the educational bonds formed between mentors and pupils in the transmission of cultural lore.

12:20 p.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time

2. [Gregory Bateson and Michael Polanyi on Minds, Nature and Beauty--Outline](#)

Charles Lowney

In his study of biology, anthropology, and cybernetics, Bateson was led to expand the conception of mind to a wider range of self-corrective systems that could learn and grow. Being a mind has to do with organizing, transforming and exchanging information. Most of that information is relayed below explicit awareness, and some of it comes coded to us in aesthetic experience. An

animal's experience of beauty, for instance, can relay information about the health of a natural system.

In Bateson's expanded understanding, an ecological system itself can be a mind, and we humans can be parts of a larger mind that he identifies as "Eco." Associating mind solely with our rationality can be pathological according to Bateson. In fact, acting strictly rationally to fulfill conscious purposes can be like one cancerous part overrunning a larger working biotic system. A technocratic approach to society or exploitative approach to nature can thus be a form of madness. Sanity comes with ecological wholeness, i.e., with the realization and experience of our interconnection with a larger mind, and a respect for our tacit communication with other minds. Aesthetic experience in art and nature connects us with our deeper selves and with the total mind.

Comparing Bateson and Polanyi can lead to important insights. Bateson's distinctions between levels in knowing cybernetic systems are consistent with Michael Polanyi's conceptions of tacit knowing and emergent dual control systems. We see learning happen below awareness, and we see minds within minds. Like Polanyi, Bateson challenges the Neo-Darwinian Synthesis by bringing intention and epigenetic learning back into natural evolution. Conceptions of "telos" and "field" come back in a non-obscurantist way consistent with Dynamical Systems and Connectionist computing approaches, prefigured in cybernetics. The notion that aesthetic experience can convey important information is also something common to Bateson and Polanyi; it is suggested that both develop and support Archibald Alison's theory that beauty is a sign of mind.

II. Saturday, June 12, 2021: 11 a.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time

1. A Polyanian Encounter with John 3:16-21

Jon Fennell

The thesis of this study is that there is a notable affinity between John 3:16-21 and central elements of *Personal Knowledge*, and therefore an understanding of one of these fertile sources can inform and thereby influence our grasp of the other. After providing evidence in support of this proposition, the essay turns to three troubling questions raised by that discussion:

- 1) Is meaning possible in the face of a future in which it is as though the source of meaning never existed?
- 2) Might Polanyi's conception of Christianity, in which comfort comes through and is defined in terms of ongoing stimulus of dissatisfaction, be perverse?
- 3) Under the logic of "ultimate self-reliance" that is the ground of Polanyi's conception of personal meaning, what sort of God is possible?

Consideration of these questions is an occasion for the exercise of faith regarded as vital by both the Gospel and Polanyi.

12:20 p.m. Central Standard Daylight-Saving Time

2. The Post-Critical Shift as Key to Exiting the Predicament of Modernity

Dale Cannon

My intent in this essay is to explain what Polanyi is getting at by the shift from a Critical perspective to a Post-Critical perspective and bring to light some of its larger but often unnoticed implications. Other than myself and my principal mentor, William H. Poteat, not many Polanyi scholars have attempted to explicate its meaning. Poteat's interpretations of Polanyi's writings and ideas, I acknowledge, have had a strong influence in developing my own understandings.

The meaning of this shift is a topic I have been exploring for my entire career (since 1967) and have previously published several articles and essays addressing. The present effort is a kind of distillation and summing up of what the shift to a post-critical perspective is all about. In some respects, though, it goes beyond what I have previously published.

One respect in which it says something new is as follows: the shift from a critical to a post-critical perspective is very much like (akin to) the struggle to escape from the condition of being a prisoner in a cave (according to the familiar story told in Plato's Republic). Recall, if you will, that the condition of the prisoners in Plato's cave is that of persons wholly accustomed and habituated to taking impersonalized representations of reality (projected on the wall of the cave by the 'prison custodians') for reality itself. The fundamental problem for the prisoners is a matter of coming to realize the predicament they are in, struggling to break free of it, struggling to grope their way out of the cave (out of their condition of being captive to representations of reality as being in no significant way different than the realities they represent), and eventually coming directly and freshly to acquaint themselves with realities outside the cave, which formerly they had known only representations thereof. According to the analogy I am proposing, to be ensconced within the critical perspective is like being one of these prisoners in the cave, captive to explicit representations of reality (and, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has said, being "captive to a picture" of oneself fixated on representations of reality as the closest one could hope to come to reality). To shift to a post-critical perspective is to escape the cave and find oneself in a direct and fresh acquaintance with reality beyond the cave, beyond the representations of reality on which one had been formerly fixated as the closest one could hope to some reality but which are now seen to be abstract representations.

The paper goes on to trace the principal facets of the shift and implications as to one's self-understanding, all expressed in different insights that Polanyi has brought to light and explained. In addition, it will also identify some of the modern philosophical conundrums that the shift clearly points to a way through and beyond. The paper's final section will attempt to set out what I propose intellectual criticism should look like and involve when pursued within a post-critical, rather than a critical, perspective.