

Faith, Form and Meaning: A Report on the U.K. Centenary Conference

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The United Kingdom Centenary Conference on Michael Polanyi's thought was held at St George's, Windsor Castle, in November, 1991. It was planned as an exploration of certain key ideas from the later chapters of *Personal Knowledge*, and thus to contribute to the current, growing conversation between literature, science and theology in the areas of faith, form and meaning. We were particularly encouraged when three distinguished speakers agreed to come: Professor Stephen Prickett from Glasgow University, Professor Brian Goodwin from the Open University and Professor the Rev'd Dan Hardy from Princeton. Their three lectures, summarised below, sparked off searching and lively discussion in the groups that also met. Important contributions were also made by three Hungarian guests.

I

Stephen Prickett, in a paper entitled, "Ambiguity and Symbol in Living Language," placed Polanyi within a tradition which flows through Coleridge and the Romantic Movement and on to Newman. "Anyone familiar with [Coleridge and Newman] will have little difficulty in recognising in Polanyi one of the twentieth century's most distinguished exponents of that same 'fiduciary' tradition. Both share a common epistemology, believing that commitment is an essential part of knowing, and that such knowledge...belongs to and is inescapably a part of a linguistic community."

Prickett then stressed a number of similarities between Newman and Polanyi, but there were differences too: "The most striking... is that whereas Newman finds his linguistic community in 'the community of faith,' in other words the Catholic Church itself, standing in contradistinction to the World which surrounds it, Polanyi sees no reason at all to cordon off the life and language of the Church from that of the rest of human existence and seems to imply that all language is of its intrinsic nature 'fiduciary,' and ultimately, therefore, pointing towards the existence of God. We need, I think, to recognise how big a leap this is."

It was Nietzsche, rather surprisingly, who first saw that language itself can be proof of God. "I fear we are not getting rid of God," he wrote, "because we still believe in grammar." Prickett sees a tacit understanding of this in Polanyi and speculates as to why he never made it explicit.

There followed a full and fascinating exploration of the openness of language to what is new: "That final inability of living ordinary human language to maintain itself as a totally closed system." This is what Polanyi means by "indeterminacy." At a later stage, Prickett considered both the similarities and the profound dissimilarities between Polanyi's view of "openness" and that of the contemporary deconstructionists in literary theory, Roland Barthes particularly. The difference is that the deconstructionists are concerned with the transparency or absence of the person

in the processes of language; whereas with Polanyi, it is the creative presence of persons which is emphasised in all his work.

Prickett concluded by commenting on recent books by Kevin Hart and George Steiner. The latter's *Real Presences* is a powerful meditation on the above-mentioned theme, the centrality and necessity of creative personal powers. "Steiner is asserting," says Prickett, "with a boldness not hitherto attempted, the confluence of the aesthetic and the religious. All art is ultimately religious art. It is not in grammar, but in poetry that we encounter God."

II

Brian Goodwin spoke to us about the emergence of a new perspective in biology. His title was, "A Science of Qualities," and he, too, spoke of "a presence," something over and above the parts which constitute a new whole. "Clearly, living beings have some property of dynamic order that is elusive, a kind of presence that speaks to us at a deeply intuitive level since we share the condition." He was not suggesting, however, nor, indeed, was Polanyi when he touched on these matters, any return to vitalism.

Goodwin started with a powerful critique of the current "selfish gene" orthodoxy. He showed that this is a kind of essentialism (genes = the essence of life). Like some kinds of religion, this introduces a false dualism: "a part of the organism [the genetic material] is regarded as the source of distinctive qualities and is given powers it does not possess." "This is like the view that the plan for making a house contains all the information required for its construction"--leaving out all the information embodied in the bricks and mortar and all the personal knowledge flowing through the builders' hands. Goodwin presented these ideas as the background to a new, emerging holistic theory in which *form-development* (morphogenesis) rather than inheritance would be at the centre. These ideas are "intimately linked to structuralist thinking as it has developed during this century [in, for example, linguistics or anthropology]. Together, they provide a basis for a holistic science of qualities."

What evolves then, is not genes, though, of course, these play a key role, but whole organisms, dynamic entities, that reproduce and have hereditary properties. "What," asks Goodwin, "is the nature of these entities? They are fields of particular kinds. A field is a domain of relational order in which the state of any part is a defined function of the states of neighbouring parts, (the neighbourhood can be local, or extend over the whole organism)." A simple example of a non-living "natural kind," shaped by a field, would be the spiral pattern of water flowing down a hole.

A spectacular example of this kind of morphogenesis initiated by but vastly transcending the instructions of the genes was demonstrated by the development of giant, single-celled alga - acetabularia. Goodwin and his colleagues have studied the complex, spontaneous development of this organism in detail, using a powerful computer-modelling technique to imitate it.

Such studies which are being carried out by many researchers suggest that we are in sight of a new, "intelligible unification in biology."

[This will] shift the emphasis from the historical reconstruction of life on earth, Darwin's goal and that of current evolutionary theory, to the construction of the systems of transformations that define the range of biological forms, making a rational taxonomy possible. Evolution [will then be seen as]

an exploration of this realm-of-the-possible and each species [as] a natural kind rather than as an individual resulting from historical contingency

Much of Goodwin's subject matter and, indeed, the whole approach, was unfamiliar to many of his audience but his main themes carried familiar Polanyian echoes. "An organism is a dynamic form engaged in process, becoming other in order to remain itself." This also summarises one of Goethe's insights into biological nature. Such non-reductive, holistic understandings are, once again, beginning to be taken seriously. "A science of qualities grows out of a new biology to heal old dualisms and alienations and to provide a context of significant action in the creation of a holistic global culture."

III

In Dan Hardy's paper, "Theology and Life's Irreducible Structure," there was a strong sense of the complexity of our "contextuality" -- of the process within which we have to find and sometimes lose our intellectual bearings. Yet the problems we face in such a heuristic field are not merely intellectual but practical. The issues are wide; "more akin to the issue of the place of science and theology in what is sometimes called wisdom, and the place of wisdom in them."

Among the many twisting strands which constitute our experience, the shifting balance between the Hebraic and Platonic traditions has been a major thread. During recent centuries, the swing has been away from the Hebraic strand mainly because "[h]istorical teleology has been supplanted by evolution and experience . . . has lost its transcendent direction and historical continuity." This shift has been the main cause of the widespread sense of alienation and meaninglessness in our culture.

Hardy went on to question the view, not entirely absent from Polanyi's (and his successors') writings, that we can learn the much-needed corrective lessons "from experience," i.e., as autonomous persons working within a tradition. Is this kind of knowledge enough? We were asked to consider the kind of experience-based "moderate realism" of science which has been expounded and developed from Polanyian foundations by Harr and others. Such realism is certainly far richer and more morally responsible than the varieties of positivism which it has largely supplanted. But does it reach out? Is there not a danger of it promoting a kind of person-centred narcissism? And "does the initiation of knowing rest so much with the human person as Polanyi suggests?" This is the central problem about Polanyi today which Hardy posed. He dealt with it, at least in part, by advocating the recovery of Polanyi's "seminal understanding of the person," not as an autonomous monad but as a "multi-dimensional focus of contextual forces."

The issue is not . . . how the human person learns to know and to speak reality and to do so responsibly before God; for that would simply lead us back to a concentration on the person. It is rather how reality knows, does and speaks itself in and through the human person, and how, as it does so, the transcendent God who is the source, order and energy of both reality and the human person, is present in this. It is only by asking the question in such a form that we can move beyond the privileging of the human person in knowing and doing and speaking reality.

In his concluding "Chairman's Summary," John Puddefoot picked up a theme which united all three speakers, "Are we open--do we open ourselves--to the potentially destructive forces in the world, or do we shelter behind the armour of self-consistency and self-constituting individuality that so easily becomes a shroud?" He pointed out that Dan Hardy "was trying to grope towards an answer . . . by inverting all the traditional conceptual tools and turning, quite literally, inside out the way we think of ourselves and our individuation."

Polanyi himself had not ducked this issue. He demanded a similar courting of danger, a readiness to be proved wrong and to invert many conventional ways of thinking for this very reason; that we might be open to new forms and to new contingencies. This was what made Polanyi's philosophy of science so unpopular. It was dangerous because he had developed, "single-handedly a non-equilibrium philosophy in which open structures . . . are supplied by the operation of human minds acting in concert in a process of spontaneous ordering as they fall, in their knowing and being, under the spell of the real." Puddefoot stressed that "Polanyi's thought, forged in the laboratory, is inherently dynamic and the non-equilibrium character is sustained by the personal." Properly understood, it should not lead to the kind of self-regarding complacency of which Hardy warned. "It is a philosophy of Life of a quite new kind," a philosophy which can transcend self by self-loss.

The Conference would not have been possible without the excellent and sensitive help of Canon Derek Stanesby and the staff at the St George's House Conference Centre at Windsor Castle. We were also fortunate to receive financial support from a number of anonymous individuals. Most of the planning was the responsibility of the Convivium Group which is the European focus of Polanyian study and the editorial link with *Tradition and Discovery*.