

Polanyi on Language and the Human Way of Being Bodily Mindful in the World

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ABSTRACT Key words: Michael Polanyi, articulate frameworks, intellectual passions, universal intent *Using the ideas of Clifford Geertz, Adolf Portmann, Charles Taylor, and others, I seek to develop and expand Polanyi's account of language and its role in our human way of being bodily mindful in the world. The expansion of Polanyi's ideas on language in the evolutionary rise of Homo sapiens and in the moral and mental development of the child does two things that I believe are important: (1) obviates the need to appeal to an incorporeal thinking substance - i.e., dualism - to ground the reality of human transcendence, and (2) highlights the place of natural language in the irreducibility of human mentality.*

The articulate life of man's mind is his specific contribution to the universe; by the invention of symbolic forms man has given birth and lasting existence to thought.... 1

Our native gift of speech enables us to enter the mental life of man by assimilating our cultural heritage. We come into existence mentally by adding an articulate framework to our bodies. Human thought grows only within language and since language can exist only in society, all thought is rooted in society. 2

Long ago, Michael Polanyi spoke of the impairment of "man's moral consciousness" (*PK* 153), of the "crippling mutilations" (*PK* 381) that crass objectivism and facile physicalism impose on our humanistic self-understanding.³ Polanyi set out to free us from the sense of obligation we feel towards scientific ideals that rendered dubious the ontological integrity of anything that couldn't be made explicit to objective investigation (*PK* 360 & 372), inviting us "to enter avenues of legitimate access to reality from which objectivism debars us" (*PK* 292). Polanyi's account of personal knowledge shows us the hermeneutical heart of the realities most near and dear to us, disclosing how intimately we participate in and contribute to what we come to know.⁴ His recognition of the role of focal and subsidiary awareness helps us accept that the most meaningful realities we encounter are the most dependent upon what he called the "ontology of commitment" (*PK* 379), and thus are not susceptible to exhaustive specification or objective demonstration (*PK* 380).

Contemporary philosophy of mind has a lot it can learn from Polanyi. Perhaps foremost is that we will never come to possess an objectively specifiable knowledge of mind, that objective observation of the particulars of mind yields knowledge only of the necessary conditions of mind's expression, but dissolves altogether our knowledge of the person whose mind is embodied in those particulars (*PK* 372).⁵ Owing to the dual nature of our awareness and our essential participation in all we come to know, mind, whether one's own or another's, will never itself become an *object* of knowledge. We can come to know persons and their embodied actions, but not a mind separable from these.⁶

My interest in this paper focuses on the role of what Polanyi calls "articulate cultural frameworks" (*PK* 70) in the rise of mind. I attempt to "fill-out" Polanyi's account of articulate cultural frameworks by drawing on the work of others – e.g., C. Geertz, A. Portmann, C. Taylor – and thereby to move towards a broadly

naturalistic (i.e., non-dualist), but non-reductive, perspective on mind, what I prefer to call *the human way of being bodily mindful in the world*. I first contrast two popular views on language's role in the life of human mentality, one associated with rationalist and empiricist philosophies (the prevailing view of contemporary analytical philosophy of mind), and the other associated with romanticism and hermeneutical philosophy (the prevailing view of contemporary phenomenological philosophy of the person). Then I seek to demonstrate that the latter view comports well with the best evidence we have concerning the phylogenetic emergence and ontogenetic development of mindful bodies. Finally, I explore some of the fundamental transformations of the human way of being bodily mindful in the world engendered by language acquisition. This paper thus takes Polanyi's general outlook on language and mind and develops it to: (1) challenge, at least implicitly, the absurd reductive-physicalist ideal of parsing the mind's essence in the descriptions and categories of the physical sciences; (2) make a bit more credible the possibility of a broadly naturalistic account of mind as embodied and socially constrained yet still capable of significant agency; and, (3) reduce the temptation to posit some exotic non-physical substance to do all the magical works of mind (i.e., substance dualism).

Two Positions on Language's Role in the Life of Human Mentality

Before we consider the speculative terrain of the phylogenesis and ontogenesis of language, we need briefly to look into two contrasting philosophical views on language's role in the development of human intelligence and agency.⁷

The *designative-communicative* view of language has its deepest roots in Aristotle, who claimed, "spoken words are the symbols of mental experience."⁸ I call this the designative-communicative view, because it makes linguistic meaning a function of linking bits of language (i.e., words of one's mother tongue) to bits of mind (i.e., stored mental representations or ideas) in a role of *designation* or reference. Moreover, the linking of words to ideas is motivated by the exigency of *communicating* the ideas of one mind to another. The 17th century grammarians, Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot, at Port-Royal Abbey in France argued "words were invented only in order to make ... thoughts known."⁹ They developed this designative-communicative conception of language into a linguistic rationalism that assumed "the structure of thought determines the structure of verbal expression."¹⁰ Empiricist thinkers, such as Hobbes, Bacon, Locke and Hume, embraced a view very similar to the linguistic rationalism of the Port-Royal grammar. They, of course, rejected the Port-Royal's rationalist account of innate ideas, but they held on to the notion that ideas were the primary referents of words. Locke, for example, claimed "Words in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing, but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them . . .,"¹¹ and a bit later in the *Essay* he states, "The use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification."¹² On this view, we humans think independently of language, but since we need language to pass our ideas on to others, we externalise our thoughts by encoding them into a mother tongue. Human ideas have to, as it were, don the particular clothing of a particular mother tongue before they can go public. Language and thought are thus conceived to be two independent, externally-related domains, so much so that Descartes and Bacon argued that when doing *real* thinking, one should strip thought of as much language as possible, because a mother tongue, unlike pure mental discourse, is prone to diversion and abuse.¹³ Ideas were understood to be images that language *fallibly* denotes and/or describes. This view of thought as a purely private affair and the notion that language is merely thought's ticket to the public have dominated the linguistic speculations of modernity, and are still with us today,¹⁴ although, as we shall see, they were challenged heartily in the 19th century.

The *historical-hermeneutical* view of language emerges in the late 18th century, and derives from Hegel's outlook on historical development and Romanticism's aesthetics and anthropology. It came to explicit expression in the writings of Condillac, Humboldt, and Herder, all of whom recognised that history enters and structures human consciousness through language. On this view, language does not designate preexisting ideas (whether innate, as the rationalists believed, or gained through experience, as the empiricists argued) in an individual's mind, but rather functions as a catalytic medium of social expression that transforms a species' instinctual intelligence into hermeneutical self-consciousness. Herder, in particular, developed the insight that language acquisition transforms the human way of being in the world, that language acquisition brought with it the emergence of a new kind of being, a reflective, self-interpreting being who "completes himself in expression."¹⁵ This essentially Romantic (or expressivist) conception of language is taken up and expanded in the onto-hermeneutical writings of the Martin Heidegger and Georg-Hans Gadamer, where understanding is conceived of as the means by which the mind and the world are unified in language.¹⁶ For Gadamer, humans dwell in a world that is linguistically saturated; language is the historical-cultural *a priori* that makes possible the human way of being in the world. From this perspective, the thinking most expressive of human being is essentially dependent upon language. And language, as these thinkers conceive of it, is both the product of social relations *and the producer of social beings* – self-reflexive beings whose identities are socially forged through mutual linguistic expressivity. Polanyi relies upon a conception of language that bears significant similarities to this view, a view that has tremendous import for a philosophy of mind capable of affirming a robust humanism without, at the same time, being drawn into the self-alienating and body-trivializing import of substance dualism.

The Emergence of Homo Sapiens through the Rise of Language

We turn now to the emergence of our species to get a sense of the role that language played in that stupendous drama. According to the evolutionary data, our story really begins about 7 million years ago when the hominid lineage took a separate path from the ape family. But we need not begin so early in our considerations. In fact, we need only focus our speculations on the rise of *Homo sapiens* (about 100,000 years ago). The cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, has thought a lot about the nature of our humanity and its social dimensions in relation to symbolic media, and as we shall see, his observations help us understand the evolutionary basis of Polanyi's claim that the true mental life of humanity arose when our species transcended its mute beasthood through its development of a lasting articulate framework of thought (*PK 388*).¹⁷ Geertz points out that recent anthropological evidence demands a revisioning of the traditional account of human descent. The traditional outlook postulates a sequential view of relations between the physical evolution and cultural development of humanity: first comes biological development, and then the *biologically complete* *Homo* develops culture.

The problem with this view, says Geertz, is that recent estimates suggest it took the genus *Homo* millions of years to achieve the cultural mode of life. Presapiens, such as *Australopithecines*, produced cultures of tool making and hunting rites well over a million years prior to the rise of *Homo sapiens*, so "the final phases (final to date, at any rate) of the phylogenetic history of man took place in the same grand geological era - the so-called Ice Age - as the initial phases of his cultural history."¹⁸ This significant overlap suggests to Geertz that human being may well be a *naturally artifactual kind* of being, because culture, rather than being an excrescence of a finished animal, actually was ingredient in the production of the animal itself. The slow emergence of culture through the Ice Age, says Geertz, "altered the balance of selection pressures for the evolving *Homo* in such a way as to play a major role in his evolution."¹⁹

If this is true, a subtle culture sophistication dawned early on Homo's horizon, giving a selective advantage to those individuals who were best able to exploit it – e.g., the effective hunter, adept toolmaker, resourceful signaler and signal reader. This would mean that early on culture influenced the genetic development of our species by making the adept toolmaker or perceptive signal reader more likely to remain around long enough to push his or her genes into the future.²⁰ The genetic pool, long before the emergence of Homo sapiens, was already selectively constrained by the influences of artifacts and symbols – i.e., culture. And, of course, the selection pressures that artifacts and symbols created, once started, snowballed over the generations into a vast store of cultural practices that was passed on through traditions that later generations had the advantage of beginning already immersed in and, consequently, had a greater aptness to advance and surpass. Geertz explains the temporally correlated ballooning of the neocortex and the burgeoning of culture in Homo sapiens' past as a function of this positive feedback system of genetics and culture, each stimulating and shaping the other to higher orders of complexity.

According to Geertz then, our species' neocortex “grew up in great part in interaction with culture,” and thus is now “incapable of directing our behaviour or organising our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols.”²¹ Humans utterly bereft of systems of significant symbols would be “unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognisable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases.”²² Hence, if Geertz and others are right,²³ the very dichotomy of nature/nurture lacks application in reference to human being – for the constraints of cultural nurture were woven directly into the selective pressures sculpting Homo sapiens' genes.

Ontogenesis: Language and Mind in the Infant

The relation of language to the emergence of a child's mind in some ways parallels the phylogenetic story already rehearsed. Instead of a species modifying its way of being through an emerging framework of symbols, we have an infant whose instinctive repertoire of responses to environmental stimuli exponentially expands as it begins to pour its explorative passions into a pre-existing mother tongue, primarily through imitation of its caregivers' behavior.²⁴ The child's way of being in the world radically changes as its mother tongue penetrates deeper into the subsidiary roots of its point of view on the world, producing a concept of self, and the ability to abstract from its own point of view, among many other distinctly human capacities. Children begin to internalize, or as Polanyi would put it, *indwell* their mother tongue as soon, if not even before, they are born.²⁵ This process temporarily overlaps the exponential growth of the child's central nervous system - again reminiscent of the phylogenetic story. Unlike most other animals, however, human infants don't keep their offspring in the womb or in an egg until the offspring are well developed. Human babies enter the world helpless, utterly vulnerable, and completely dependent upon the nurture and protection of caregivers. In fact, the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann claims that humans are, when compared to other animals, born a year too soon;²⁶ they are born physiologically premature, which means they are exposed in their final stages of development to the influences of social culture. John McCrone notes, the human infant's central nervous system continues to develop morphogenetically well into its third year of life.²⁷ Without this prolongation in the morphogenetic development of the CNS, the acquisition of language by a child would likely be impossible. The prolongation of this process of development means that myelination takes place largely outside the womb and thus under the direct impress of social and cultural stimuli.²⁸ The areas of the brain associated with hearing and speech are some of the last areas of myelination, suggesting that genetically our brains are preset for a protracted saturation in linguistic stimuli – giving children the unique opportunity to be “osmotically” shaped by their language community. In this way, stimuli tune the human brain to the cultural and social salencies of the *human* world. A child's CNS, even prior to birth, is immersed in linguistic stimuli that help attune it to the linguistic

distinctions operative in the lifeworld²⁹ of its caregivers. As we demonstrated earlier, culture was active in the phylogenetic shaping of our species' genome, here we see that language, and culture in general, are folded ontogenetically into the child's developing brain's corrugations.

While Geertz helped us recognize the evolutionary underpinnings in support of Polanyi's account of the role of language in the phylogenesis of mind in our species, Portmann provides us with some of the neurophysiological data that underwrites Polanyi's account of the role of language in the ontogenesis of mind in a child. A child, like any other animal, has what Polanyi calls "intellectual passions," meaning by this expression, an innate endowment of purposive and exploratory drives and impulses. He speaks of these passions as arising from the tacit dimension of human experience, the sub-articulate intelligence that underwrites all the symbolic, self-extending achievements of humans. As he puts it, "The inarticulate mental capacities developed in our body by the process of evolution [become] the tacit coefficients of [our] articulate thought." He aligns himself squarely with the hermeneutic-expressivist account of language in his claim that "All human thought comes into existence by grasping the meaning and mastering the use of language" (*KB* 160). Polanyi conceives of language acquisition as a catalytic process (reminiscent of language's phylogenesis), igniting within the child a multitude of new intellectual passions (*PK* 389). The child's innate intellectual passions are, according to Polanyi, "refashioned and amplified into something new" (*PK* 194) as they are inscribed by the vast networks of social rules, rituals, laws, institutions, traditions, and ideals embodied in its caregiver's lifeworld and expressed in its caregiver's mother tongue. "[T]he whole universe of human sensibilities – of intellectual, moral, artistic, religious ideas – [is] evoked by living and growing up within the framework of our cultural heritage."³⁰ The child's body is, as it were, a Mobius strip that acquires its subjectivity as it ribbons through human relationships and is inscribed by the cultural and linguistic forces that structure its caregiver's lifeworld. "To use language in speech, reading and writing," Polanyi notes, "is to extend our bodily equipment and become intelligent human beings," because when we learn to use language we indwell, or extend our bodily subsidiary awareness into, the cultural heritage it carries, which, in turn, develops "new faculties in us," making us grow "into a person seeing the world and experiencing life in terms of this outlook" (*KB* 148). Thus the child acquires an openness and responsibility to an already existent social world that obligates the infant's self-centred ego to de-centre, "to unfold into forms of existence more satisfying to its transmuted self" (*SM* 99). The child gradually begins consciously to experience its world under the concepts of its mother tongue, which are, in turn, the concepts of the child's society. The child's uptake of an articulate framework enables it to enter into the mental life of human culture – that is, the intensionality³¹ and metaphors of its mother tongue seep into the child's intellectual passions, transforming them over time into a mindful self. Acquisition of an articulate framework transforms the self-centred passions fundamental to the child's survival "into an intelligent person, reasoning with universal intent" (*PK* 395).

What Language Hath Wrought: The Human Way of Being Bodily Mindful in the World

The preceding examination of the evolutionary and neurophysical mechanisms of the phylogenetic and ontogenetic transformations brought about by language helps explain Polanyi's use of the historical-hermeneutical account of language acquisition and the central place he accords it in our becoming fully human. I am convinced that philosophers, especially many of those of the Anglo-American tradition who claim to have passed through the "linguistic turn," have yet fully to absorb the meaning and import of mother tongue acquisition in the human way of being bodily mindful in the world.³² For many of them, still held captive by rationalist notions of "language of thought" and the designative-communicative view of language it supports, are blinded to the historical and cultural *a priori* that structure our human way of being mindful in the world. Below I briefly highlight a few of the civilizing transformations that the rise of articulate cultural frameworks brought to human being – the phenomenological "phase transitions" engendered by language acquisition.³³

A: The Inauguration of the Lifeworld Through Language

Prior to the phylogenetic rise of language in *Homo sapiens*, external relations³⁴ reigned over the energies of the natural world; causation – the quintessential external relation – solely structured all finite being. No doubt there were animals with tremendously sophisticated repertoires of adaptive and learned behavior, but this animal ingenuity bottomed-out in the impersonal biological forces of survival. The environmental niche occupied and instinctively orchestrated by the animal forebears of *Homo sapiens* had yet to be named and thus become *world*, i.e., lifeworld, the communal matrix where the meaning of things slips between causal stimulus and instinctive response, where bodily purposiveness acquires an intentionality that bears universal intent (*PK* 389). These early forms of animal communication were a form of signaling, i.e., conspecific emissions of stimuli, evoking genetically selected, hard-wired, responses. Where this communication had a proto-semantics (e.g., chimp shrieks) it altogether lacked syntax, and where it had a proto-syntax (e.g. bird songs) it entirely lacked semantics. To use some distinctions Walker Percy borrows from Charles Pierce, such communication was wholly “dyadic” in nature.³⁵ Dyadic communication supervenes on external relations. Perhaps a helpful way to understand what dyadic communication amounts to is to consider a case of indigestion. One’s stomach typically growls due to the stomach acids breaking down ingested foods. Although this may communicate to one that his or her stomach is upset or in need of food, the growl itself does not symbolize the acids or even the state of the stomach. Consequently, the stomach acids’ relationship to the acoustic shape of the stomach growl is wholly explicable in terms of physical causation, and thus ultimately dyadic in nature. The same holds true for whatever intra-species signaling transpired prior to the development of articulate frameworks. But with the rise of language in *Homo sapiens*, this all changed, and a whole new level of reality emerged in the living world. Polanyi, following Teilhard de Chardin, called this new level of reality the “noosphere” (*PK* 388). Environmental stimuli for the first time would be subsumed under the auspices of symbols, thereby giving birth to what Percy, following Pierce again, calls “triadic” behavior, wherein stimuli are mediated through arbitrary symbols whose meanings have no causally-sufficient physical conditions.³⁶ Now the *word* “growl” has an internal relation to a certain class of physical processes, a naming relation that lacks any physical necessitation, and thus exceeds the explanatory purview of all physicalisms. World arises out of the environment through the word.

With the emergence of language, new kinds of relations become possible as well, relations that don’t contravene dyadic forces but co-opt them to serve supervening triadic possibilities. The environment, the organism-indexed array of causally impinging stimuli, becomes in-habited as it were, with internal relations, giving way to a totality of linguistically mediated, socially motivated, holistically constrained, and culturally sustained individuations and affordances.³⁷ So now an infant is thrown into the lifeworld of its caregivers to rise to self-consciousness already participating in triadic behavior and relations. A rift in being was effected by language, because now items of one’s environment may not be items of one’s lifeworld: e.g., a certain toxin may have permeated one’s environment undetected – the descriptions one lives one’s life under don’t mention toxins although they are part of the environment one lives one’s life in. But as well, not all items of one’s lifeworld are items of one’s environment: e.g., Santa Claus – the descriptions one lives one’s life under may include Santa Claus, although Santa Claus isn’t an item in one’s environment. However, even as an undetected toxin may cause cancer in my body, so too my belief in Santa Claus may cause me to go to bed early and experience great difficulty in sleeping. To one possessed of a language, environmental items are no longer the sole causal factors determining his or her trajectory through the world. We live our lives under descriptions; our very identities are formed and sustained by the semantic and social spaces they create. Consequently, environmental causes no longer sufficiently account for much of human behavior and becoming.

B: The Restructuring of Subjectivity That Language Brings

As Polanyi pointed out, the child's channeling of its prearticulate intellectual passions into a linguistic framework profoundly alters these passions: a linguistic framework is not a neutral conduit, nor merely a tool for forging wordless thoughts into social commodities. Through training, nurture, and immersion in a linguistic culture, a child progressively relies upon a linguistic means of expressing its desires and thereby progressively in-habits a lifeworld. Prearticulate passions and desires are in-formed and transformed by the inherited distinctions of the traditions and practices that have become part of the linguistic medium that structures the linguistic culture the child rises to self-consciousness through. And those same passions, once articulated into self-consciousness narrative agency, may turn on the traditions and practices, thematise, evaluate, and even reject some of them (*PK* 104).

The language-afforded capacity to re-present at will the perceptual actualities of past and present, distances one from the immediacy of perceptual actuality, and effectively robs the five senses of their sovereignty over one's repertoire of discriminations and attentions.³⁸ One's transactions with otherness become *more than* causal, because one's conscious uptake of the perceptual world is structured by the conceptual discriminations of one's language, which means one is always conscious of something *as* something. That is, humans inhabit their lifeworlds under the auspices of signs, under descriptions; intensionality and interpretation pervade the human way of being in the world, so much so that most of human behavior is driven by meanings rather than determined by causes.³⁹

We now can explicitly thematise our experience and re-present it in various ways such that our possibilities of response to it are greatly multiplied. Our linguistic framework gives us the resources to freeze and sustain the present experience in a linguistic re-presentation, and even cast it into counterfactual contexts both spatially and temporally. A nonhuman animal's sensory ingress into an environment comes in real time and space, and the animal, not having a means of objectifying and re-presenting its environment, responds to its challenges with whatever wisdom its bodily instincts and repertoire of learned responses possess. The language-born capacity to transcend conceptually space and time allows our intentions, emotions, and moods – what Heidegger called our “existentiality” – to encounter not only new possibilities of existential enrichment, but also new existential liabilities as well. To name just a few of the more important of these liabilities, misrepresentation,⁴⁰ preoccupations with possibilities that never become actual, and anxious brooding over one's own being-towards-death.⁴¹

The moral of this story - which we've only had time to touch upon - is that once a child indwells its mother tongue, it attends *from* a new tacit base of sensitivities *to* a world of new affordances (i.e., enhancements of what Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty called our bodily “I can”). And engagement with these new affordances feeds back through the child's tacit base of sensitivities, dialectically restructuring its pre-articulate subjectivity into an articulated and articulate point of view on, and point of action in, its lifeworld.

C: The Possibilities of Self-making That Language Brings

I only have time here to highlight a few of the many ways that language truly is the primary medium in which selves live and move and have their being. Charles Taylor implicitly endorsing Polanyi's notion of the ontology of commitment, notes that we don't have selves like we have hearts or livers.⁴² Hearts and livers are not, according to Taylor, description-sensitive realities, because they continue to function and be what they are

independently of how they are described – they are wholly dyadic entities. The situation, however, is otherwise, with selves: self-description does not leave the self unchanged, for selves possess their being through narrative self-employment. We do not begin with a unified self; a unified self is an achievement realized by living a life under descriptions that are amenable to narratized coherency and cogency. While the nominal and pronominal apparatuses of one’s mother tongue calls forth the self-notion, selfhood itself is unified, sustained and advanced through a dialectic of first-person *and* second-person conceptualisation and narratisation that can only occur in a consciousness pre-structured by the semiotic resources of an articulate framework, which means, therefore, that selves can develop ontogenetically only in relations with other selves.⁴³

The linguistic ability to bind time’s tenses into a unified narrative, gives one’s self the wherewithal of weaving memories of its past (the “no longer”) into its hopes and fears regarding the future (the “not yet”) so that its *present* actions will be conditioned by and oriented according to these *absences of intentionality*⁴⁴ – i.e., the nothingnesses that help structure human selves. *Socially* who I am is who I’ve been woven into relations with, so too *temporally* I am now who I am because I am not anymore who I was nor am I yet who I will be. My memories and hopes are as ingredient to who I am now as are the actualities of my present perceptual consciousness. The socio-linguistic storehouse of cultural *a priori* embodied in the lifeworld – i.e., one’s cultural memory – gives the emerging self the ideals and norms towards which it may transcend and define itself. These cultural absences get folded into the human way of being bodily mindful in the world – this is how traditions make their way to the future. So human selves are actually shaped by taking up positions towards things that are *not*, and some that never were or will be, actualities. Think of how fictions figure into our identities. Language acquisition brings with it the capacity to create and sustain intersubjective and fictive spaces where one can co-attend to posits of highly theoretical or fictive worlds of discourse as well as to culturally demarcated features of empirical realities. Think as well of the role of ideals in our self-formation. By bringing new ethical ideals to bear on one’s past actions, one’s self-understanding may alter dramatically, e.g., from pride to shame or vice-versa – distinctly language-dependent transformations. Bringing new ideals to bear on one’s first-order desires (i.e., egoistic desires that one is pushed around by) generates higher-order desires (i.e., desires infused with universal intent that one is pulled around by) such that one can take up a position on the contours of one’s self and take action to modify them. Only a being that is linguistically apt could re-present its own interests *as* less than desirable – this is the beginning of an ethical way of being in the world.⁴⁵

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by reflecting briefly on ethical self-making and the cultural determinism latent in most social constructionist accounts of human being. As we noted earlier, a mother tongue is acquired through surrendering (acritically) one’s intellectual passions, many of which are natively self-centred and survival-vectored, to the individuations, saliencies, affordances, narratives and norms pre-articulated in one’s language community’s practices. Consequently, the agent of language acquisition inherits a wealth of “linguistic facticity” that has already begun him or her long before he or she self-consciously and intentionally begins articulating him or herself. One is always already emplotted to some extent in narratives of which he or she is a character – not the author. Thus we all begin becoming selves already having been begun, but we are able, because of the transcendence articulate cultural frameworks engender, to redirect and sometimes even refuse some of the biological and social forces in-forming our selves. Social constructionists fail to recognise that although our entrance into selfhood precedes our intentions, the self we end up with is severely dependent upon what we make of the self we were thrown into being-with-others through – we are not merely passive sites through which cultural forces circulate, intermingle, and ultimately disperse. Despite the socio-linguistic forces

in-forming its nature, the self has genuine agency in the world, such that despite who it began its adventure to personhood as (e.g., an abandoned child, a spoiled child, etc.), who it becomes is to some extent its own responsibility.

Linguistically apt human selves can turn on the very forces that gave them birth, the biological forces churning in their loins and the emotional, psychological, and socio-linguistic dispositions and biases their caregiver's invested them with, and call these into question. This is nowhere more apparent than in the resistances of the four "F's" of evolutionary survival that the most human of our species, saints for instance, have carried out. To give some concreteness to the moral space created by the acquisition of an articulate cultural framework, consider:

Feeding. We are passive to hunger's importunities, but language allows us to bring the ideals we've acquired from our linguistic heritage to bear on this impersonal force such that we can make our natural desire to eat when we are hungry an object of a higher desire, say the desire for justice,⁴⁶ and thereby transgress the trajectory of our natural survival drives. We can take the position of the other on our own first-person desire to eat and refuse it so that others may eat. We are *not* locked into the first-person, self-centred perspective that our body natively gives, and thus we can personalise our way of being hungry and even starve ourselves right to death so that an other might not starve.

Fighting. Nonhuman animals will fight when it comes down to a perceived chance of escaping harm. Humans can and do become pacifists and will sometimes choose even death when the slightest effort to fight would preserve their lives.

Fleeing. Nonhuman animals typically run to safety in the face of life threatening danger. No doubt dogs and other animals have died seeking to protect their masters, but such actions are not committed in full awareness of the bearing of their act on their own non-being. Yet humans sometimes spurn the threat of death and courageously and knowingly embrace torture unto death to protect others they do not even know.

Fornicating. Intentional celibacy entered into the natural world of survival of the fittest through *Homo sapiens*. Out of concern for the interests of others, certain humans have taken up a position of refusal towards the powerful, impersonal forces of reproduction. One would be hard pressed to find any example of this in the world of sub-articulate animality.

These are just a few examples of how the firmament of obligations supervening our articulate cultural frameworks has brought to our species possibilities of self-transcendence.

Language acquisition inducts a naturally purposive but largely reactive animal agent into a world of meanings and possibilities through which it can actively take up a position on impinging stimuli and on its own purposes. This language-afforded transcendence gives humans the ability to become morally kenotic in their way of being in the world. Non-human animals' way of being in the world is pretty much settled by the forces of nature coming to expression through the interaction of their genes and environmental conditioning. Nonhuman animals do not therefore *bear* the burden of their being as a possibility, a task, or a risk – they are not self-makers. Only linguistically-reflexive animals can represent their own point of view on the world as one possibility amongst many others, and only normatively reflexive animals can position themselves for-others against their own self-interest, or bring "I ought" to bear on their "I can." Language gives one the possibility of taking up the position of the other on one's own desires and interests, and this issues in a choice of the kind

of self one will bear one's being into the future through. Clearly, language is the primary medium in which selves live and move and have their being.

It is shocking to realise what little is left of the human way of being in the world once language is theoretically bleached out of it. And this, of course, should raise suspicions about those philosophical accounts of language that depict it as a mere conduit through which fully constituted thought flows to an outside world, as well as relieve the temptation to embrace substance dualism as the only means of "saving the appearances" of human subjectivity. Because language is always already there tacitly in-forming the flow of our experience and constraining the trajectory of our intentionality, its role in our way of being in the world is easily passed over in silence.⁴⁷ Polanyi's account of the role of articulate cultural frameworks in the rise of mind and selfhood helps provide the conceptual resources for forging an embodiment perspective on mind that can absorb the legitimate insights of naturalism without having to, at the same time, either embrace the crude reductionism that often accompanies them, or feel obliged to appeal to a soul substance to account for all the phenomenological danglers that reductive physicalism cannot plausibly explain.

Endnotes

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 264. Henceforth, *PK*.

² "A Conversation with Michael Polanyi," Interviewer Mary Harrington Hall. *Psychology Today*, 1968: vol. 1, p. 67.

³ See Polanyi's essay "The Two Cultures," p. 46 in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, edited by Marjorie Grene, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969 (henceforth *KB*), where he states that a humanistic revisionism can be secured only after we have emancipated the biological sciences and psychology from the scourge of physicalism.

⁴ "Indwelling" is the word Polanyi uses to describe the tacit intimacy that breaches the entrenched dichotomy of subjective and objective: "We shall remain blind in theory to all that truly matters in the world so long as we do not accept indwelling as a legitimate form of knowledge" in Schwartz, Fred (ed.) *Scientific Thought and Social Reality: Essays by Michael Polanyi*. New York, 1974: International University Press, p. 148. In his Preface to the Torchbook edition of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi says of his notion of indwelling that it "is Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*", p. x.

⁵ As Marjorie Grene puts it in her introduction to *Knowing and Being*: "The atomic topography of my central nervous system is not myself; it is a set of objectified conditions of my existence, and only self-delusion can equate my existence with its conditions, however complex and however necessary"(xi).

⁶ See Polanyi's essay, "Faith and Reason," p. 127 in *Scientific Thought and Social Reality: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, edited by Fred Schwartz, New York: International University Press, 1974.

⁷ This is not meant to suggest that there are only two views on language's relation to human mentality, but that these two views are largely representative of the tendencies and content of the contemporary discussions of this issue.

⁸ Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* and *Categories*, H. P. Cook, London: Heinemann, Leob Classic Library, 1938; *De Interpretatione*, 16^{ab}.

⁹ From *Grammar* p. 66; quoted by Harris, Roy and Talbot J. Taylor *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought: The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ John Locke, *Essay concerning human understanding*, P. H. Nidditch's edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, bk. II, ch. iii.

¹² *Ibid.*, III.ii.1.

¹³ See Ian Hacking's *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1975, p. 16.

¹⁴ Today a designative-communicative view of language is implicit and often explicit in much that goes under the name of cognitive science see, for example, Jerry Fodor's *Language of Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975, Noam Chomsky's *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988, and Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*, New York: William Morrow, 1994.

¹⁵ See Charles Taylor's, *Philosophical Papers*, vol I, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985: p. 233, where Taylor argues, "Language realizes man's humanity. Man completes himself in expression."

¹⁶ Heidegger claims: "Language is the house of Being. In its lodgings dwells man" ["Letter on Humanism," 1946: 239]. According to Gadamer, "Being that is understood is language" [*Truth and Method* (2nd ed.), xxxv], and "...language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world" [*Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 1976: 29].

¹⁷ Polanyi elsewhere refers to language as a "symbolic formalism" that is itself "an embodiment of our antecedent unformalized powers – an instrument skillfully contrived by our inarticulate selves," PK 131.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Here we have an example of "Baldwinian evolution," where the learning of flexible behaviors by certain individuals actually amplifies and bias the course of natural selection – see Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, pp. 322ff.

²¹ Geertz, p. 49.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Terrence Deacon, a biological anthropologist, argues in *The Symbolic Species* (1997), that the brain of *Homo sapiens* co-evolved in relation to the constraints of language's emergence – see his discussion of "Emerging Universals," pp. 115-122.

²⁴ See Jerry Gill's Polanyi-influenced Wittgensteinian reflections on language acquisition in his *If a Chimpanzee Could Talk*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1997. Deacon (1997) contends that the information needed to "grow" a language "is highly distributed across myriad interactions between children's learning and the evolution of a language community," p. 115.

²⁵ Elaborating on Hans Leowald's psychoanalytical view of language and early primary mother-child relations, Stephen A. Mitchell, in his *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity*, Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 2000, says that language is a fundamental dimension of human experience "not only after birth, but in utero. ...[T]he earliest experience of language is deeply embedded and embodied in the child's undifferentiated union with the mother inside of whom he slowly grows into awareness." pp. 8-9. Mitchell appeals to the experiment of DeCasper and Fifer to corroborate Leowald's view. Their experiment involved pregnant women in their final trimester reading aloud Dr. Suess' *The Cat in the Hat* to their fetuses. Shortly after birth these babies displayed a definite preference for the tape-recording of their mother's voice over a tape-recording of another woman reading the same book. This phenomenon also has significant bearing on the case of Helen Keller who, at age five, seems to have been catapulted into the linguistic way of being in the world almost instantaneously outside the pump-house in Alabama; see chapter Three in Gill (1997), where he offers a helpful account of the nurturing stage setting for this phenomenon. I'd like to thank the anonymous reviewer who directed me to Mitchell's fascinating book.

²⁶ See Marjorie Grene's discussion of Adolf Portmann in her book *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology*, New York: Basic Books, 1968, pp. 42-54.

²⁷ See John McCrone, *The Ape that Spoke: Language and the Evolution of the Human Mind*, London, Macmillan, 1991, pp. 164-5.

²⁸ Myelination is the process whereby a fatty protein forms around nerve branches (axons) to insulate neuronal connections. Like the rubber around electric wiring, myelin stops the neuro-electrical pulses from leaking out and diffusing into other neural pathways. This fatty sheathing thus speeds up a nerve impulse and prevents it from dissipating before it reaches its proper destination (McCrone, 37). There is a kind of natural selection that takes place among the many neural branches in the brain. Those branches that aren't stimulated are pruned away and those that are used are myelinated into the hard-wired architecture of the brain.

²⁹ This is an expression deriving from philosophical anthropology and taken up by phenomenologists to denote the world of meanings through which humans inhabit their environments.

³⁰ Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, p.98. Henceforth, *SM*.

³¹ Intensionality refers to semantic relations whose truth-value is not preserved under substitution of co-referring terms, creating what is known in philosophy of language as opaque semantic contexts. This failure to preserve truth-value under co-referring substitution is what makes the project of reducing mind to neurophysiology incredible. If the human way of being bodily mindful in the world is linguistically sustained and structured (as I argue was Polanyi's position), then causality – the paradigmatic external relation – will always prove inadequate to tracking the so-called "state transitions" of human thinking, for they are driven by meanings (e.g., rationality constraints) and therefore cannot support psychophysical causal laws essential to such a reduction. This is one of the central points of Donald Davidson's influential paper "Mental Events," in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, chapter 11.

³² Typically language acquisition figures into discussions of linguistics and/or cognitive science only as it bears on the nature/nurture, rationalist/empiricist debate: do humans have an innate language of thought (Fodor's mentalese or Chomsky's *mentis lingus*) or do they learn their language of thought. Sometimes this discussion unfolds into questions of whether humans can think without a sententially structured innate language of thought, or whether they can think without having acquired a mother tongue (feral child), or whether some of our thoughts can be carried by mental images alone, etc. As well, one might find post-linguistically-turned analytical philosophy mentioning language acquisition and the role of mother tongues in discussions of speech-act theory or in the debates surrounding the realism/antirealism question. However, these discussions rarely, if ever, explore the way the acquisition of a mother tongue gives birth to the distinctly human way of being mindful in the distinctly human world.

³³ I.e., what Polanyi refers to as the "semantic" and "phenomenal" transformations brought about by the integrations of tacit knowing – see Grene (ed., 1968), p. 218.

³⁴ External relations, put quite simply, obtain between relata whose identity is constituted independently of the relations they sustain.

³⁵ See Percy's stimulating essay, "A Triadic Theory of Meaning," in his *The Message in the Bottle*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.

³⁶ In Sausaurre's terms, the development of articulate frameworks brought into the world new relationships that are meaningful, yet causally arbitrary, through the coupling of signifier and signified, thereby making explanatorily incomplete even an exhaustive physical specification of the causal antecedents of most instances of social behavior.

³⁷ "Affordances" is J.J Gibson's term for the opportunities that *gestalted* stimuli provide an organism, see Gibson's *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

³⁸ In this context it is interesting to think of language as a kind of meta-sense. Let me briefly explain. Our senses give us a point of view on otherness. Our sense of taste, for example, gives us otherness in a very immediate, intimate, and vulnerable fashion - we must take the otherness into our own bodies and thus risk altering and being altered by whatever the gustatory sense opens us to. The ingress into otherness that the gustatory sense offers is very limited in terms of information extraction (sweet/sour, salty/not, etc) and is extremely risky. At the other end of the spectrum is sight - the noblest sense, as both Aristotle and Descartes claimed. Sight is the most distanced of senses. With the native eye we can see things millions of miles away. Sight extracts information about objects without altering them or risking alteration by them. It opens us to actual objects, but owing to its transcendence of space, it also gives us a preverbal encounter with possibility; our uptake of distance objects includes an uptake of possible routes to them or away from them – i.e., we can see the road not taken. And, of course, as the existentialists make so compellingly obvious, the greater the context of possibility a point of view projects itself into, the more individualised it may become through what it actualises.

Now a linguistic framework becomes a kind of meta-sense in this regard. It takes up and unifies all of the possibilities that derive from one's sensory access to the world and re-presents them in the context of a whole culture's experiences, present and past. The world that the language "sense" (*communis sensus*) opens upon is infinite in possibility, and it is in this linguistically structured and culturally sustained context that we forge our identity by actualising certain of those possibilities and taking up a position of refusal towards the others.

³⁹ This is why we don't experience the "booming buzzing" environment of stimuli William James suggests babies encounter, nor do we experience the sense data the phenomenalist suppose, but rather, we hear the chirping of a bird, or, for some of us, the chirping of a canary - such linguistic distinctions aren't added on to the raw stimuli, but are experienced as ingredient to the encounter – see Heidegger's *Being and Time*, tr. Macquarrie and Robinson, New York: Harper, 1962, p.207. For languaged beings, such as ourselves, our world comes pre-configured linguistically and only in moments of severe disorientation do we experience mere stimuli or sense-data. As adults, our experience of, and response to, the perceptually impinging world is always already enchanted by our indwelling-attunement to the semantic and phenomenal salencies carried by the linguistic framework of our cultural heritage.

⁴⁰ Although animals can mis-take a decoy for a conspecific, they are exempt, Polanyi points out, from the "errors due to elaborate systems of false interpretation, which can be established only in verbal terms," *PK* 93. See too *PK* 253.

⁴¹ This is why humans "need a purpose that bears on eternity," Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1966, p. 92.

⁴² Charles Taylor, (1985), *Philosophical Papers I: Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.75.

⁴³ Alasdair MacIntyre speaks of "the narrative unity of life," which depends upon the "interlocking" of characters in each other's stories, and he emphasizes the essential role of narrative in the formation of self-identity, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, pp. 217-18. See as well, Anette Baier's (1985) *Postures of Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*, London: Methuen, p. 85, where she states "Persons come after and before other persons. . . . Persons are essentially successors, heirs to other persons who formed them and cared for them. . . ."

⁴⁴ The expression "absences of intentionality" is meant in a subjective genitive sense (were English an inflected language), suggesting not a negation of intentionality, but absences in the plenum of being that come to *be* (resultative) only through intentionality. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for identifying this ambiguity.

⁴⁵ Second-order desires require a symbolic medium in which to re-present first-order desires as intentional objects of propositional attitudes, e.g., "I desire (2nd) to not desire (1st) x".

⁴⁶ In this context, it is interesting to take note of Hans Jonas's critical review of Rudolph Arnheim's (1969) *Visual Thinking*, in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Fall 1971, where he rejects Arnheim's naïve claims that language merely names perceptual entities. Jonas argues that language actually *creates* ideals, such as validity and justice, and these are then used to criticize perceptual entities such as human behaviours. The concepts of validity and justice do not originate in observation – here the *logos* is a priori to the *phainomena*.

⁴⁷ We easily remain focally ignorant of language's *role* in our way of being bodily mindful in the world, because it is so subsidiarily ubiquitous in our *way* of being bodily mindful in the world. Along the same lines, see Polanyi's argument that the "pseudo-substitution" underwriting modern science's mythical objectivist self-understanding is a result of its failure to recognize the self-effacing transitivity of subsidiary awareness and its tacit funding of the scientific point of view, *PK*, 169.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. MLA or APA style are preferred; because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody's "standard English." Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered. Consistency and clear writing are expected.

Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide a hard copy and a disk or an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins. Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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