

Andrew Grosso on Polanyi as a Resource for Christian Theology

John Apczynski

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, personhood, indwelling, economic and immanent trinity, Christology, marginal control, boundary conditions.

These reflections on Andrew Grosso's recent book Personal Being highlight his philosophical construction of a concept of personhood based on themes from the writings of Michael Polanyi and his use of this conception to express creatively elements of the traditional Christian doctrines on the trinity. Additional clarifications are sought regarding his formulations on the divine personhood of Jesus, the adequacy of his formulations on the intra-trinitarian relations, and the insightfulness of the absolute personhood of the divine. This study is a helpful model for extending Polanyian insights into the realm of dogmatic theology.

Andrew T. Grosso. *Personal Being: Polanyi, Ontology, and Christian Theology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Pp. viii+234. ISBN 978-0-8204-8897. Cloth. \$70.95.

In this ambitious work Andrew T. Grosso goes where no student of Polanyi – to this reviewer's awareness at least – has dared to go before. His intention is to extrapolate from features of Polanyi's theory of knowing a philosophical doctrine of personhood which might serve as a resource for expressing a contemporary understanding of the traditional doctrine of the Christian trinity. On the surface, such a project may seem inauspicious insofar as an implication of Polanyi's principal epistemological concern included a critique of the autonomous subject that normally lay behind the objectivist yearnings of much of modernity. The very effort of proposing an ontological understanding of personhood might thus appear to require a critical move toward something like a totally reflective cogito. Since he is relying on insights from Polanyi's epistemology, however, the notion of the person which Grosso constructs is wholly relational. How does he arrive at this conception?

Grosso begins, as one would expect, with a survey of some features of Polanyi's theory of knowledge. Given his overall ontological concern, this exposition highlights the importance of the "object-dimension" of knowing. There is nothing objectionable in such a strategy, but it may be misleading to a reader unfamiliar with Polanyi's theory. In his exposition of the structure of tacit knowing, for example, Grosso presents this under the rubric of the structure of apprehension (17). This is proper when describing our knowledge of objects in our experience, but incomplete for a fuller account of the meaningfulness of the frameworks within which we dwell. Similarly, he develops his presentation of the hierarchical implications of reality under the rubric of "contact with reality" (37ff). This allows Grosso to emphasize Polanyi's insistence on the non-reducible elements of comprehensive entities (such as machines) subject to marginal control. This comes at the expense of implying that there is some sort of a distance that needs to be bridged between knowing and the object known, when for Polanyi a person is always already in relation to the environment through subsidiary awareness. Polanyi himself speaks of the need to bridge a gap only in heuristic moments when the subsidiary features are not quite brought into a focal whole by the knower. Grosso's emphasis even leads him to assert that in all cases of reliable knowledge there is an objective reality existing independently of the knower (147). When Polanyi makes such claims, however, they are normally concerned with "empirical" knowledge of the sort made in science (see *PK* 311, 104). The purpose of these emphases in Grosso's analysis is to highlight the importance of the role of dwelling within a framework of meaning in order to allow someone to recognize the objectivity of emergent realities present in experience.

Structuring his presentation of Polanyi's thought in this way allows Grosso to identify three key features constituting the reality of a person. There is an organizing center or an indwelling self which represents a person's sense of being oriented and is not susceptible to full articulation. There is, secondly, an indwelt self or the horizon of meaning which shapes and situates a person's identity. And there is, finally, an extended self which includes a horizon of meaning within which a person is integrated into a wider frame of meaning. These three elements are something like coordinates of personhood. None of them have ontological priority over the other; rather they are better appreciated as continuously interacting patterns of activity that constitute personhood. The process of indwelling serves to integrate and bring these features of personhood into focus for us (90-94). While all of these features may be found in his writings, Polanyi himself, as Grosso readily acknowledges, had never marshaled them together in such a way as to provide a coherent statement of what constitutes personhood. This extrapolation is the major contribution of Grosso's study, and it can be said to form his understanding of personhood based on Polanyian insights. It also forms the guiding principle for his effort to formulate an understanding of the doctrine of the Christian trinity.

The application of this understanding of personhood to the orthodox doctrine of the trinity takes us far beyond customary Polanyian themes. Because their provenance involved the use of Hellenistic metaphysical categories from the fourth and fifth centuries, any effort to explicate their meaning in contemporary forms must be cautious. Grosso is well aware of this. Yet his desire to remain faithful to orthodox formulations while utilizing Polanyian terminology leads to some problematic claims. The doctrinal claim that Jesus is the Son of God, for example, includes the fifth-century affirmation that the *hypostasis* or *persona* of the Son is the basis of the unity of the reality of Jesus. Grosso transposes this into Polanyian terms by considering the divine personhood of the Son the "supervenient dynamic" exercising marginal control over the human nature of Jesus so that Jesus is not to be understood as exercising "independent personhood" in his preaching or ministry (133-37). While this may sustain fifth-century assumptions, I am not as convinced that it is meaningful for a twenty-first century context. The doctrinal tradition never made any claims about human personality in this sense, obviously, because it was not aware of it. Might it not be more adequate to transpose these beliefs by claiming that the divine "indwelling self" functions as the ground of the "indwelt self" of the personality of the historical Jesus which is tacitly aware of this divine foundation and which must come to an awareness of it through his "extended self" mediated by his Jewish heritage? This requires, perhaps, a more flexible application of Grosso's ontological depiction of personhood.

When Grosso attempts to explicate doctrines about the "immanent" trinity in terms of the Polanyian perspective on "graduated multi-modalism" (147), we face similar difficulties if this suggestive metaphor begins to function more like a literal metaphysical doctrine – which appears to be the way he attempts to push these reflections. In a very dense presentation of the intra-trinitarian relations, Grosso explains the relations as exercising marginal control over the "boundary conditions" within the divine being (152-55). Grosso may be on to something here, but to speak of boundary conditions within the divine being which is normally understood as limitless is more than paradoxical. Finally, Grosso asks about the absolute divine personhood of God, in distinction from the immanent relations. Here he wisely qualifies this discussion by utilizing the medieval notion of formal, not real, distinctions (157). This permits him to say that the absolute personhood of God can be understood to be the operational dynamics of personhood within the trinity and, derivatively, within the created order.

This is a fine exercise in expressing the traditional orthodox doctrine of the trinity through the use of a contemporary Polanyian idiom. Students of Polanyi interested in exploring the basic contours of Polanyi's thinking will be best advised to look elsewhere, such as in the studies by Gelwick or Prosch. Students of Polanyi who would like to probe how Polanyi's thought might be helpful for theological reflection on the dogmatic tradition of Christianity, however, would find a splendid model here. Grosso's formulation of the features of personhood is stimulating and wholly consistent with Polanyi's outlook. His application of these features to the orthodox doctrine of the trinity is illuminating and suggestive, even though, as I indicated, the complexity of the issues call for further clarification. It marks an auspicious beginning.

Re-Visiting *Personal Being*: A Response To Apczynski's Review

Andrew Grosso

ABSTRACT Key Words: indwelling, subsidiary awareness, Polanyian realism, theology

This brief essay addresses questions raised by John Apczynski's review of my book, Personal Being, especially (1) the nature of subsidiary indwelling, (2) the ontological ramifications of Polanyi's thought, and (3) the transposition of Christian doctrine in a more contemporary, Polanyian key.

I am grateful to John Apczynski for his careful and thoughtful reading of my book, and to Phil Mullins for the opportunity to respond to Apczynski's review. This brief exchange has given me an chance to revisit my arguments and consider how I might sharpen and elaborate them.

Apczynski rightly notes that (1) at the heart of my efforts is the extrapolation of a Polanyian understanding of personhood amenable to theological reflection and (2) my aim is to provide, not a Polanyian version of absolute idealism, but a more relational understanding of the being of persons.

There are, I believe, three primary questions Apczynski wants to pose about my project. First, he's a little apprehensive about my reading of Polanyi's understanding of the tacit dimension, especially (1) the phenomenology of indwelling and (2) the ontological ramifications of personal knowledge. Second, he's not convinced that my efforts at rehabilitating traditional Christian doctrines are entirely effective. Third, he wants to see a more detailed account of the broader region lying beyond the relatively narrow horizon of the study.

It might be fair to say that some of these issues follow from the different ways in which Apczynski and I make use of Polanyi's thought. As I mention in the book, Richard Allen (and others) have pointed out that there is more than one way to approach Polanyi. I opted neither to confine myself to the precise limits of Polanyi's epistemology nor to superimpose his thought on a controlling theological system, but to pursue a mutually determinative conversation between his philosophy and a more theological mode of reflection (cf. 113-117). I was especially interested in exploring (and even pushing) the boundaries of Polanyi's program relative to his views on personhood, language, and the possibility of (Christian) metaphysics.

I think Apczynski and I agree about the differences between a phenomenological as opposed to an ontological exposition of the tacit dimension; there is a significant and important difference between "the meaningfulness of the frameworks wherein we dwell" and the "object-dimension' of knowing." Apczynski's

concerns in this regard highlight the need for a more fulsome exploration of the character of religious experience from a Polanyian perspective. I find Polanyi's thought a potentially rich resource for the development of a theology (including a theological method) equally attentive to "descriptive," "exact," and "deductive" modes of religious awareness (see PK, 82-87).

I'm intrigued by Apczynski's observation that subsidiary awareness situates us within an environment prior to our focal awareness of particular objects within that environment, thus obviating the need to overcome any perceived "distance" between these objects and ourselves. On the one hand, this is of course wholly in keeping with Polanyi's thought, and was also one of the principles underlying my distinction between the "indwelling self," the "indwelt self," and the "extended self" (88-95). On the other hand, I wonder if we may not need to distinguish between different modes of subsidiary indwelling; it seems that the kind of subsidiary awareness one employs when dwelling in a proximate horizon for the purpose of apprehending a distal object is markedly different from the kind of subsidiary "awareness" (if we may even call it that) at work when we indwell a proximate horizon that we do not so employ. I would not want simply to relegate this latter mode of subsidiary indwelling to something like the unconscious, even less to suggest that such a subsidiary horizon cannot meaningfully be said to exist for us, because I think this kind of indwelling would be an important element in the exposition of a fully relational account of personal being. But much more would need to be said to develop this possibility further.

The "'object-dimension' of our knowing" and the ontological thrust of Polanyi's thought is something that I wanted to try and push rather hard. Polanyi's taxonomy of language, as well as his commitment to the importance of freedom, rationality, and the axiological dimensions of knowing (both moral and aesthetic) suggest to me that his work yields anything but a minimalist (i.e., strictly empirical) ontology. One might suggest that Polanyi's commitments to such principles were largely pragmatic, but Polanyi eschewed strictly utilitarian accounts of knowing (e.g., PK, 16-17, 113-114, 169-170).

I'm not sure the theological concerns Apczynski raises could be adjudicated on strictly Polanyian grounds. He is, for example, unsure about the value of "Hellenistic" thought forms in today's world, but I would suggest (1) that one might justifiably read the patristic tradition as the Christianization of Hellenism rather than the Hellenization of Christianity and (2) that it may be a mistake to conflate traditional formulas with the meaning they intend to express. We may have reason to revisit the technical details whereby a given doctrine is articulated, but doing so does not automatically enjoin us to reject the doctrine itself; to do so would be to confuse a focal object for its subsidiary horizon. In part for this reason, I'm not sure Apczynski's alternative christological proposal is viable; it sounds more than a little Apollinarian to me. However, he's right to suggest that I should have engaged the issue of theological language and the difference between real and formal distinctions earlier and more thoroughly than I did, rather than burying it in the middle of my consideration of immanent divine personhood (148-160). I covered some of this ground in chapter four (see esp. 113-125), but I'm afraid my enthusiasm caused me to pass too quickly over some important methodological problems.

Apczynski is entirely justified when he says that the complexity of the issues I engage requires more extensive and detailed clarification. It is my hope to use the foundation I outline in *Personal Being* as a starting point for a more far-ranging personalistic cosmology, one organized around the concept of interpersonal mutual indwelling (154, 160-166). I'm indebted to Apczynski for providing me with an opportunity to reflect critically on my initial efforts.