

Poteat's Voice: The Impact of Polanyi and Wittgenstein

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Wittgenstein, Polanyi, Rush Rhees, D.Z. Phillips, Laplace, Hannah Arendt, Maynard Adams, language games, voice, meaning, use, direct/indirect, Duke, Chapel Hill, philosophy, family resemblance, personal, deep blue, formal/informal, conversation.

The focus of these remarks is on the impact that Personal Knowledge and Philosophical Investigations had in shaping Bill Poteat's philosophical voice. Of the two works, I claim that, for good or ill, it was Personal Knowledge that had the more profound influence on Poteat. Of course, both sources had profound influence. What makes Personal Knowledge more profound is that his use of it, at least in those early years, was more indirect than his direct and explicit use of Wittgenstein's ideas. Following Bill's lead, there is much that Polanyians can learn from Wittgenstein and vice versa.

1958, fifty years ago, was a big year. It was an especially big year for Bill Poteat. That was the year Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge (PK)* was published. And this was just on the heels of the publication of another book that would become almost as near and dear to Poteat as *Personal Knowledge*, namely, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*.¹ In these remarks, I want to focus on the impact that *PK* and *PI* had in shaping Bill's philosophical voice.

Of the two works, I claim that, for good or ill, it was *PK* that had the more profound influence on Poteat. Part of what I mean in saying that the influence of *PK* was more profound than the influence of *PI* comes from noting that Poteat's use of Polanyi, at least in those early years, was more indirect (to use Kierkegaard's term, also one of Poteat's prior and also profound mentors) than his direct and explicit use of Wittgenstein's ideas.

What proved for Poteat to be very important is Wittgenstein's concept of a language game. But more generally, I want to suggest that Bill's early way of indirectly appropriating Polanyi's thought, that is, as not mentioned, or at least as not at the focus of his philosophical meditations, has much to offer those who find Polanyi's work instructive. While I acknowledge that in the later writings of Poteat, the use of Polanyi was more explicit, I would say that even here, Poteat's work is better described as Polanyian rather than a study in Polanyi's philosophy. While it took me a long time to come to this, after a dissertation on Polanyi's philosophy, and after trying to teach courses in his thought, I now think that Bill's early indirect use of Polanyi has merit worth noting and which Polanyians should welcome. This early indirect use of Polanyi, use without much mention, is highlighted in Bill's essay in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi (IH, 1968)* entitled "Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology and Action: Some Polanyian Meditations."

In the first sentence of this essay, Poteat says that he will "...talk about man and language from a perspective opened up to [him] by the writings of Michael Polanyi" (*IH, 198*). And then in a footnote to this he says: "It is impossible to give specific references in the Polanyi corpus which, thus examined out of context, could yield the views I am here developing. It is the impact of the corpus as a whole which has educed these meditations."² Consistent with this remark, Michael Polanyi is (barely) mentioned again in the remainder of this quite lengthy essay.³ Wittgenstein, by contrast, is not only mentioned more directly, especially his idea of language as a game, but it is the perspective of *PI* that seems to be of focal interest in Poteat's vision of how words and persons are internally connected and how stories, history and myth are to be understood. It is not an accident

that during this period many thought of Poteat as an ordinary language philosopher, a thought supported by a spate of publications that focused on language, or better, on the later Wittgensteinian conception of it.⁴

As you may or may not know, Poteat started his teaching career in the philosophy department at Chapel Hill. This was a period just after Bill graduated from Yale Divinity School. [I mention in passing that at Yale Poteat encountered a Kierkegaardian scholar who was himself later to come under the influence of the later Wittgenstein; that scholar was Paul Holmer. Poteat was not unduly influenced by Holmer, I think, but was taken by Kierkegaard. Bill once told me that Holmer stopped him on campus as he (Poteat) was clutching a copy of *Either/Or Vol. I* close to his breast and said to Bill: “there is nothing in that book.” As Poteat’s students know all too well, Poteat thought otherwise.] While at Chapel Hill, Bill steeped himself in philosophy and was intrigued with the impact of modern philosophy on modern religion and culture. During this time, he took a Ph.D. in Religion at Duke and wrote a dissertation in which Pascal and Descartes were compared and contrasted, Pascal coming out on the better end of this comparison. In 1958, things changed for Bill. According to Maynard Adams, a long-time colleague and friend of Bill’s and a fixture in the Philosophy Department long after Bill left to teach at Duke, it was in this year that Bill Poteat found his philosophical voice.

Maynard, who was my own mentor in my Ph.D. program at Chapel Hill, told me that in 1958, just after the publication of Wittgenstein’s *PI*, that the philosophy faculty at UNC had a discussion group to read this new book and evaluate these radically new ideas about language. I can’t say much more about the details of this discussion group except to say that Maynard told me that he knew at this point that Bill Poteat was going to be a very good philosopher. And of course I think this was an understatement.

The idea in *PI* that I think impressed Poteat more than any other was Wittgenstein’s notion of language games; Poteat was especially impressed by the diversity of language games within ordinary language. This is clearly seen in his essay in *Intellect and Hope*.

As I interpret it, Poteat took over from Wittgenstein this idea that concepts derive their meaning from their use in particular language games. Each game has a peculiar grammar or logic. Although there is much overlap in these games, there is not just one fundamental logic or grammar that underlies all of them. Ordinary language is not a language game, but consists of various languages games. As he puts it, Wittgenstein’s view is that language, or better speech, is

comprised of a variety of language games, governed by constantly changing and seldom specified, sometimes unspecifiable rules, played with ever-evolving counters, and among which the only relation which obtained was that of a ‘family-resemblance... When Laplace said of God: ‘I have no need of that hypothesis,’ he was in a way making an important Wittgensteinian remark. The language games of ‘physics’ and ‘chemistry’ have no use for the concept of ‘God.’ ...And obviously, ‘hearts’ no more belongs to poker than to bridge; nor does it belong exclusively to cardiology (*IH*, 207).

Like Wittgenstein, Poteat claims that every concept gets its meaning in relation to its grammatical environment, the central feature of which is the occasion of its use.

To see how this works, Poteat says that concepts like “person,” “happen,” “action,” “decision,” “choose,” and so forth have a different meaning because they have different uses within the different language games of myth, stories (including arts like drama, novels, and so forth) and histories. Moreover, there are different senses of myth, the classical and the eschatological. Poteat sometimes refers to these different games as articulate

forms, forms that have logical environments; he says, in perfect allegiance to Wittgenstein, “No concept is logical-topography neutral” (*IH*, 227). He concludes by saying: “Every such form depends upon and has no stronger legitimation than its grounding in its living use among men” (*IH*, 251).

While it is fascinating to trace the differences between the grammar of the language game of history and the language game of the cosmos as Poteat does (a contrast often assimilated to the contrast between Jerusalem and Athens), I must turn to the bearing of all of this on the impact of Polanyi in the shaping of these Wittgensteinian ideas. At the very beginning of the essay, Poteat lets us know that while he is making use of the Wittgensteinian concept of language games, he has his reservations about this model. He says: “There may be a Wittgensteinian fly-bottle waiting behind his own illuminating injunction: ‘Don’t look for the meaning of a word, look for its use’, into which we may heedlessly fly” (*IH*, 210). And without further ado, he warns us not to fall into the following trap:

In all our preoccupation with words as tokens or tools, as having this or that ‘use’ according to rules—specified or implicit—like balls, rackets, bats [and so forth] or as occupying this logical neighborhood, we are in danger of being misled by the notion of meaning as use—*when this is taken exclusively in conjunction with the language-game model*—misled, that is, into overlooking the user, a *conditio sine qua non* of something’s having a use. The kinds of relations I may have to the words I may use cannot be exhaustively displayed in terms of the language-game analogy, or any other single analogy (*IH*, 210).

Polanyi is at work here in shaping Poteat’s acknowledgement that the language-game model is incomplete without persons who play these games, who inhabit the words with whatever personal backing that they give to them, along with whatever meaning these words are taken to carry. We must not forget that there are different ways of saying and different ways of reading what is said, as well as different logical environments. As Kierkegaard might say, these different ways of sense-giving and sense-reading include the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious use of words. Or as Polanyi and Poteat might put it, all saying is personal, even when it is “impersonal.”

But let me end with two brief remarks. First I note a criticism of Wittgenstein’s language-game model by one of Wittgenstein’s students, namely, Rush Rhees. I think Bill would have welcomed this criticism for it continues his worry about the liability of Wittgensteinians to overlook just what Polanyi brings to the table, to wit, the indispensable albeit informal role of user in the use-model of meaning.

In a kind of apostolic succession, Rush Rhees, who was Wittgenstein’s student, passed the wisdom he got from his master on to his student, D. Z. Phillips. And no doubt students are in the best position to criticize their teachers, devoted to them, and knowing them as they do. In any case, Rhees’ criticism of Wittgenstein that I now pass on comes via its telling to me by Phillips.⁵

Rhees says that Wittgenstein never got completely over the formalism that characterized his early period in his *Tractatus*. In that early work, Wittgenstein was concerned with logical form as the parameter that determines all of the possible things that can be said. In this respect he was thinking about language as bounded by rules in the way that the game of chess is so bounded. Because chess is such a formal system, it makes perfect sense to speak of all of the possible moves in the game. In principle, all such moves could be programmed into a computer like Deep Blue. But Phillips says that Rhees thought that in *PI* Wittgenstein’s idea of language as consisting of a family of games did not abandon completely the notion that language is such a formal system. As such we might be led to think that in Wittgenstein’s model of language as a family of games it would make sense to calculate

all the possible moves within a particular language game. But Rhees is, I think rightly, unhappy with this model of language. To remedy this, Rhees suggests that we can find a better analogy for language, a less formal analogy, if we substitute the model of a conversation for the game model.

Let me defer to Phillips' own words: "Rhees notes that Wittgenstein's emphasis on 'following a rule,' 'continuing a series,' 'going on in the same way,' have their natural home in the context of playing a game or operating within formal systems. They are not at home, on the other hand, if we think of our innumerable daily conversations" (Phillips, 104). One can be a chess master but not a master of conversation in the same sense. Indeed Rhees' point is that conversations proceed informally—by way of improvised responses we might say.

It is here, I think, that we arrive at Poteat's reservation about the game analogy and why he thought it needed to be supplemented with Polanyi's emphasis on the role of the person (or the user) in the use-model of meaning. And I suspect that both Poteat and Polanyi would be much more sanguine with Rhees than Wittgenstein on just this point. Moreover, I think Polanyi might well have welcomed the idea of science as a conversation as opposed to a game, and surely Poteat would have welcomed the idea of philosophy as a conversation. And like all conversations, the give and take among the participants proceeds in ways that are essentially informal and grounded in nothing more or less than the ongoing personal judgments of the participants who conduct it. Indeed, I have no doubt that both Polanyi and Poteat would resonate with the idea of life itself as a conversation as opposed to a game.

Finally, I register one final observation. To my mind Poteat saw in *Personal Knowledge* something more profound than Polanyi himself saw. And he was able to see this thanks to the insights he gained from Wittgenstein. Those insights center on the issue of meaning. Poteat found his voice in awakening (I might even say re-awakening) to the fact that voice is the paradigmatic figure of meaning for human beings. (I say that this might have been a re-awakening to note my sense that Bill's childhood was shaped by the voice of his father's sermons, a voice that perhaps never ceased to resound in his bones.) So then, while Polanyi's focus was on knowledge, Poteat's was on meaning and hence on language and voice. Yet in the end, Poteat might well agree that he and Polanyi were unified in their convictions not only that all knowledge is personal but that all meaning is personal as well.

Endnotes

¹ I might also note that it was in 1958 that another great book was published (and right here in Chicago at that), a book that was destined to become canonical in Poteat's philosophical library, namely, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*.

² Poteat repeats this idea that he is relying on a perspective opened by Polanyi in the opening of part two of the essay (*IH*, 215).

³ In an exceptional remark, Poteat brings Polanyi's ideas explicitly to bear, but again in almost a passing way as follows: He says that the relation that speakers bear to their words has an active-passive quality that "...parallels Polanyi's tacit-explicit, subsidiary-focal, proximal-distal, attending to-attending from dichotomies..." (*IH*, 199).

⁴ See for example three essays all published in 1959: "Birth, Suicide, and the Doctrine of Creation: An Exploration of Analogies" (*Mind*); "God and the Private I" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*); and "I will Die: An Analysis" (*The Philosophical Quarterly*).

⁵ *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005). Hereafter cited in parenthesis by page number as Phillips.