

Acknowledgment, Responsibility, and Innovation: A Response to Robert Innis and Walter Gulick

Vincent Colapietro

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Susanne Langer, Robert Innis, Walter Gulick, acknowledgment, responsibility, innovation, validation, meaning.

This response affirms the content of the previous two articles but is focused on highlighting some features of Polanyi's and Langer's philosophies they do not emphasize. The rise of knowledge and trajectory of meaning Polanyi and Langer describe may be seen as incorporating a complex, innovative process of acknowledgment – of tradition, social norms, previous experience, and personal commitments of which one may not even be aware – for which one is responsible.

Introduction

My main objective is twofold – *first*, to get out of the way as quickly as possible, without allowing my haste to generate undue static or noise or, worse, to give the misleading impression of less than large admiration for the impressive achievements of our two speakers; *second*, to tarry just long enough to highlight what I take to be several *tacit* themes in these probing presentations. While I might to some extent tarry *with* the negative, insofar as considering matters otherwise than they have been conceived is in effect a negation what has been said, I have no intention of tarrying *in* the negative. Put alternately, my task here is constructive, not critical, and not even constructively critical: rather it is to join Bob and Walt as co-inquirers, in the same manner and spirit as they have joined Polanyi and Langer. Conviviality ought to be among us more than an empty word; it ought truly to be a personal aspiration and, to some extent, communal achievement.

Polanyi indeed invites comparison with any number of theorists, philosophical and otherwise (Terrence Deacon no less than Paul Grice or Ruth Milikan, Bahktin no less than Todorov or Kristeva), but some of these comparisons of course promise to be more fruitful and rewarding than others. As Bob and Walt have just shown, a comparison with Langer is especially worthy of painstaking elaboration and creative reframing. No one is more ideally situated to offer an instructive or illuminating comparison between Michael Polanyi and Susanne Langer than Walt or especially Bob.

Given the array of topics and wealth of details our speakers have brought into sharp focus, there are a number of particulars upon which I might concentrate (e.g., Langer's contested and, arguably, properly challenged distinction between presentational and discursive modes of symbolization). But, out of respect for both you, the members of the audience, and you, the speakers, I feel under no obligation to inform you of what you have just heard or to remind you of what you moments ago just said. You [speakers] have been admirably clear and you [audience] are unquestionably intelligent. *I do* however feel inclined to muse, for a moment at least, about themes on which Bob and Walt touched rather lightly – that is, on what their listeners might *not* have just heard, or (more accurately) have not heard emphatically expressed. Please do not take this to imply a note of criticism, only to prepare the way for interjecting several suggestions of my own regarding how to reframe our understanding of Polanyi and Langer. I take these suggestions to be in deepest accord with the not only the animating intentions but also the explicit formulations of our two speakers.

Acknowledgement, Responsibility and Innovation

These suggestions fall under three distinct but ultimately overlapping headings: *acknowledgment*, *responsibility*, and *innovation*.

(1) Acknowledgment. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein suggests: “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment [*Anerkennung*]” (#378). Much of Stanley Cavell’s project is that of working out the implications of this apparently simple claim or suggestion. As his writings demonstrate, the task of acknowledgment is anything but simple and straightforward. It concerns (among other things) the creative appropriation of an inescapable inheritance and, thus, the dialectic between tradition and innovation. Acknowledgment also encompasses the drive to come to fuller and finer terms with the presuppositions and implications of our commitments. That is, it concerns what Bob identifies near the end of his paper as “the logic of commitment” (see p. 18).

In my judgment, what makes the writings of Polanyi and Langer so valuable, rewarding, and far from easy to assess or even comprehend is that both in their own ways undertake a strictly theoretical inquiry, but one interwoven with the task of *acknowledging* what makes knowledge possible. The *performative dimension* of even their most straightforwardly theoretical writings ought not to be overlooked especially by us, presumably sympathetic readers and creative appropriators. *I* (emphasized by our two speakers) at any rate am strongly inclined to insist upon an existential dimension being integral to their distinctive styles of theoretical inquiry. For each one this task is, in other words, ethical and arguably also political; for Polanyi at least, it is also religious or at least lends itself to being expressed in religious language. This task is irreducibly *personal* without being merely *subjective*. It is moreover *post-critical*, partly because it cannot be properly cast into *any* orthodox form of transcendental argument (even if it is in some crucial respects a descendent of this mode of argumentation or validation).

As Bob notes, the distinction between verification and validation is important and hence needs to be explored in more detail and depth than it has been thus far (see p. 18). The exploration of this distinction will, I suspect, drive us in the direction of confronting the task of acknowledgment, as both an irreducibly personal undertaking and a constitutively communal affirmation (for the *I* as a responsible agent is claiming – more likely, re-claiming – some historically evolved and yet evolving community as its matrix).

As Bob stresses, symbolization and experience – or articulation and experience – do not stand in opposition to other another (see p. 10). Even so, Langer’s construal of the *symbolic transformation of experience* might to some extent obscure the extent to which human experience, as a natural process, is an inherently semiotic affair. She might be more critical than post-critical, closer to the neo-Kantian tendencies of Ernst Cassirer than the post-Kantian thrust of Michael Polanyi. In general, the appeal to experience can never be naïve, for it is always motivated at a historical crossroad, for a critical purpose. The appeal to experience virtually always carries with it a reconceptualization of the very *meaning* of experience (what today counts – or, even more strongly, *must* count – as experience). Both Polanyi and Langer not only appeal to experience but also offer nothing less than a reconceptualization of its meaning, one calibrated to the work of validation no less than that of verification. The immediate relevance of this to our first theme is that, given the character of our experience, acknowledgment must always be, to some extent, a struggle against our disavowals and evasions, our compulsive denials and systemic occlusions. In noting this, we have in effect landed on the threshold of our second theme: responsibility. Our responsibility is radical, in extending to that over which we seemingly have no control.

Before turning to the second theme, however, please allow me a brief summation of my main conclusion regarding the first theme. The question of meaning cannot be reduced to verification (however critical the verification of our claims is in certain contexts), but must extend to validation. Validation itself must extend to the modes and depth of participation characteristic – indeed, constitutive – of *responsible* agents. Such validation requires the self-imposed task of acknowledgment. While knowledge is ultimately based on acknowledgment, acknowledgment is itself the *ongoing* task largely consequent upon those fateful ruptures and semantic upheavals in which our accredited modes of indwelling are rendered deeply suspect or, at least, debilitatingly self-conscious. Our *breaking out* of inherited frameworks of meaning is more often than not experienced by us as a *breakdown* of these frameworks, indeed, a collapse of our world as we have known it but without for the most part *acknowledging* it. Our responsibility hence extends to the work of reparation and renovation, just as the work of acknowledgment enjoins such responsibility.

(2) Responsibility. We hold ourselves responsible for what we have uttered. So, too, we hold others accountable for what *they* have uttered. The only legitimate forms of human authority are forged and refashioned in such complex networks of mutual accountability.

As Polanyi was fond of reminding us, we always mean more than we say. But we not only always mean more than we say, we also are often forced to acknowledge (as Hegel notes) that we meant something other than we intended (*PhG*). We are responsible for both the meanings transcending our conscious intentions (we are responsible for more than we consciously mean) and the very frameworks in which meaning can alone be articulated – indeed, we are responsible for nothing less than the world as the ultimate matrix of self-transcending and self-transformative modes of utterance and articulation. Personal acknowledgment and cosmic responsibility (responsibility for the cosmos, especially as the matrix – the womb – whence meaning springs and the contexts in which meanings evolve) are, for Polanyi and arguably also for Langer, intimately connected. Here I remind you of Polanyi’s *The Study of Man*, not only “The Calling of Man” but also the following chapter (“Understanding History”). While this might not be so readily apparent in the case of Langer, there are at least indications in her writings (e.g., *Philosophical Sketches* and concluding chapters of the third volume of *Mind*) where she seems to be moving in the direction of a position more fully – at least more explicitly – espoused by Polanyi.

The question of meaning must ultimately be framed or, more precisely, reframed in terms of considerations of responsibility. In turn, responsibility must be conceived in terms of our response to various forms of alterity, not least of all what is other than what we are disposed to think or equipped to conceptualize; moreover, it must be conceived in terms of holding ourselves and others accountable for nothing less than the world as a matrix of meaning and meaning-making, hence meaning-improvisation.

(3) Innovation. My third theme is innovation or improvisation. Meanings made – those consolidated and integrated in recognizably useful and valid patterns – are for both thinkers ultimately in the service of *meaning in the making*. I take all three points of emphasis (acknowledgment, responsibility, and innovation or novelty) to be congruent with what each of you either assert or imply, with different emphasis (that is, I take any of this to be in deepest accord with the animating purposes of your papers). Creativity might be either subsumed under novelty or added as a topic in its own right. In either case, the question of meaning is, for Polanyi no less than Langer, as much a question of creativity as anything else.

Any theory of meaning articulated in the spirit of these thinkers must, in the end, stress the form of emergence so prominent in all the diverse modes of human articulation – the emergence of genuinely and dramatically novel modes of articulation, not infrequently ones transforming the very frameworks of meaning in which we have dwelt (indwelt) prior to the eruption and thus disruption of such novelty. That is, the question of meaning is ultimately one with the question of innovation and creativity.

Conclusion

In the end, we are forced to *acknowledge* the limits of formalization and, arguably, also certain genres of theoretical discourse (in particular, those fixated on formalization and classification, taxonomies and hierarchies). This is so even when these formalizations and classifications are, at bottom, functional. In working toward a truly pragmatic acknowledgment of the performative dimensions of our theoretical undertakings – toward practically *acknowledging* what we are *doing* when we are making these claims in this fashion or those in that manner – we are (I suspect) driven toward theorizing in a manner not adequately avowed by either Polanyi or Langer. The resources of Hegel, Ricoeur, Foucault, MacIntyre, and Butler (to name but a handful of the most obvious exemplars here) need to be more fully deployed, the turn toward history and thus toward narrative more decisively taken. But this is itself a story – indeed one about theorizing as a mode of narration or, at least, a mode of discourse in which narration is critical, truly critical – for another occasion.

On this occasion, suffice it to say Robert’s opening question (“Why would, or even should, someone deeply interested in the work of Susanne Langer turn to Michael Polanyi’s work for insight as well as perhaps an intellectual challenge – and vice versa?”) has been effectively addressed by Walter as well as by Robert. In turn, Walter’s central focus – the nature of meaning – has been radiantly illuminated by Robert no less than Walter himself. And suffice it to conclude by asserting that my own response to their papers has aimed at exemplifying what it has thematized (at least, what it has tried to render explicit and central) – the task of acknowledgment, the exercise of responsibility, and our irrepressible drive for symbolic innovation.

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 is 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 an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment.

Phil Mullins
MWSU
St. Joseph, MO 64507
Phone: (816) 271-5686
Fax (816) 271-5680
mullins@missouriwestern.edu

Walter Gulick
MSU, Billings
Billings, MT 59101
Phone: (406) 657-2904
Fax (406) 657-2187
WGulick@msubillings.edu