

Polanyi and Some Philosophical Neighbors

Introduction to This Issue

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Marjorie Grene, Susanne Langer, Aristotle, post-critical philosophy. *This brief essay introduces five articles that (1) explore the relationship between the philosophy of Michael Polanyi and several other philosophers and that (2) suggest ways that Polanyi's post-critical thought might be enriched by their philosophical insights.*

Michael Polanyi was driven by his intellectual passions toward philosophy; it was hardly his original career choice. As first a physician, then a physical chemist, and then a social scientist, he embarked upon his philosophical reflections with a rich background of experience but as a stranger to the philosophical profession. He was not the disciple of some particular philosopher, nor did he identify with some philosophical movement. Thus perhaps more than is the case with most philosophers, there is a need to place Polanyi's thought in relation to significant figures in the philosophical tradition.

This issue of *Tradition and Discovery* is devoted to extending the ongoing process both of identifying Polanyi's relationship to other philosophers and to advancing the post-critical movement he initiated by suggesting ways his thought might be creatively combined with the insights of other philosophers. All the articles, other than the memorial piece by Phil Mullins on Marjorie Grene, were originally given at the Polanyi Society's gathering held in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association's meeting in Philadelphia on December 28, 2008.

Let me comment on Mullins' thoughtful, even loving, tribute to Marjorie Grene first, for after all, Grene was doubtless the first philosopher to work deeply with Polanyi on philosophical topics, and she did this over a greater length of time than any other person. She wrote, "The great philosophers are pioneers as other great artists are – they provide new visions of what there is, new perspectives on the fundamental or 'insoluble' problems" (*Proceeding of the American Philosophical Association*, Supplement to 61:1 [September, 1987], 77). It might justifiably be said that Polanyi was a pioneer, but if so, then Grene would surely qualify as his chief scout and guide to a strange land. Mullins' essay shows how Grene's engagement with Polanyi was a significant step in her own process of becoming a philosophical pioneer.

In a letter of September 4, 1960, Polanyi playfully confided to Grene his awareness of being a pioneer, but one on the order of Moses looking at the land of milk and honey from Mount Pisgah but unable to enter it:

I have just [been] reading the opening of Langer's *Feeling and Form*. She says: 'It is peculiarly in the vague unsystematic realms of thought that a single problem, doggedly pursued to its solution, may elicit a new logical vocabulary, i.e. a new set of ideas, reaching beyond the problem itself and forcing a more negotiable conception of the whole field'. This is true, and here I stand at the edge of this enormous field, with precisely the kind of new ideas Langer speaks of, prevented by rapidly diminishing prospects from entering it. And you do nothing about it! Clash and Rathdrum!!' (Polanyi Papers, U of Chicago Library, Box 16, Folder 1).

The essays by Robert Innis, Walter Gulick, and Vincent Colapietro suggest that Susanne Langer might also well have served Polanyi as a philosophical guide. Polanyi refers to Langer's ideas several times in the corpus of his writings, but there is no indication that he incorporated her essential insights into the nature of meaning. This is unfortunate, because there is an enticing overlap not only between the new provinces Langer was exploring and the philosophical terrain Polanyi had encountered, but in the assumptions each brought to the search. They both understand human reason to be much broader and deeper than has been the case in most twentieth century Anglo-American thought. Both see themselves called to develop an embodied epistemology understood in terms of its evolutionary development and as having both logical and psychological dimensions. Each grants emotion a central place in cognitive development, although Langer gives feeling a much more significant place in her philosophy than Polanyi does. Each is influenced by Gestalt thought and opposes positivism and behaviorism. Both emphasize language as what distinguishes human from other forms of animal consciousness. And each pays attention to meaning as being of special importance not only for epistemological theory but for understanding human existence as such.

In his magisterial essay, Innis notes that Polanyi and Langer are complementary in their emphases within the context of their shared concerns. Langer, he says, focuses on the logical or semiotic dimensions of meaning, while Polanyi, with his stress on personal meaning, attends more closely to the psychological structures and activities that bring personal meaning into being. Innis' schematic suggestions about the way their thought may be integrated is the product of many decades of reflection and writing about both Polanyi and Langer; his informative book on Langer's thought published this year will be the subject of a review in a future issue of TAD.

My essay on Polanyi and Langer is a step in my effort to craft a comprehensive theory of meaning from a post-critical perspective. Polanyi's stress on the primacy of perception, the importance of tacit processes, the role of integration within the from-to structure of consciousness, and so on, maps out the general features of the strange land of personal meaning. Langer's brilliant discussion of the types of meaning provides building materials for the post-critical habitation of this fertile land. I give a report on one way that creative construction may help colonize the land's intellectual thickets and swamps .

Colapietro endorses the integrative efforts of the Innis and Gulick essays, but his commentary stakes out territory left relatively unexplored by the other two articles on Polanyi and Langer. He constructively traces out the roles that acknowledgment, responsibility and innovation have for a theory of persons who acknowledge their calling, take responsibility for even that which exceeds their conceptual grasp, and innovatively cast forward yet more adequate nets of meaning consistent with that responsibility.

Charles Lowney turns to more ancient philosophical sources in his provocative study of how Polanyi's thought supports the spirit rather than the letter of the moral law. He uses Aristotle's virtue ethics to provide food for thought, sprinkled with the salt and pepper of Kant's and MacIntyre's ideas. Yes, the moral novice needs the guidance of moral rules, but moral mastery is gained by imitation of the master's actions. Like the master craftsman, the master of moral wisdom has so integrated practical experience with theoretical reflection that his or her indwelt way of life provides skills for negotiating life's moral complexities with an agility that no set of rules can ever adequately express.

Polanyi may not have felt that at his age he had the capacity to enter and dwell in the land his pioneering efforts had discovered. But the five essays in this issue reveal that there are indeed persons inhabiting his philosophical neighborhood – Grene, Langer, and Aristotle surely – whose ideas provide resources for post-critical construction.