

The Crucial Concept of Embodiment: David Nikkel's Account

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This review essay describes David Nikkel's broad conception of embodiment as a remedy for the insanity of modern mind/body dualism. He employs Polanyian themes, supplemented by the insights of cognitive scientists and neuroscientists, to show that all knowing is bodily, that tradition functions in knowing in a way similar to the body, and that thinking metaphorically of the world as God's body leads to a new appreciation of panentheism.

David H. Nikkel, *Radical Embodiment*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications/Wipf and Stock, 2010). 173 pp. + biblio + index. ISBN: 13: 978-1-55635-578-3. \$22.00 (Web Price: \$17.60).

A hallmark of the modern period is the mind/body dualism which became a persistent feature of most philosophical and scientific perspectives in the three centuries after Rene Descartes.¹ While the separation of all entities into “thinking things” and “extended things” helped release the power of science to transform knowledge of the natural world, it also resulted in the alienation of persons from themselves and their past. David Nikkel’s ambitious goal in *Radical Embodiment* is to overcome this alienation by “advancing a picture of our meaningful, radical embodiment in our biosphere and in our social traditions, within a universe regarded as the body of God” (ix).

Nikkel’s book is sophisticated philosophical theology, using the work of Michael Polanyi as a reference point for a re-thinking of western assumptions about “mind” and “body,” and in dialogue with Polanyian scholars (Zhenhua Yu, Esther Meek, and particularly William Poteat).² It endeavors to engage not in exegesis of Polanyi, but in constructive philosophy from a perspective thoroughly grounded in Polanyian themes. Let me first sketch Nikkel’s general argument, and then focus on those sections that I think will be of most interest to *TAD* readers, before ending with questions for further consideration.

The plan of the book is clear. It affirms that our culture is “insane”: one reason for the madness is our assumption that knowledge and values are discarnate; part of the cure is to grasp that knowledge is inextricably embedded in the physical body, in social tradition, and in a divine source of all meaning. The villain of the story is “the modern spirit,” which Nikkel quickly sketches in his opening chapter and assumes throughout the book. The modern knower is an isolated individual, accepting only clear and explicit evidence as true, applying a method of skeptical doubt to all claims, and assuming that her mind has no essential relation to her body. An important feature of Nikkel’s approach is his claim that western culture is in the midst of a fundamental shift from this modern worldview to a “postmodern” perspective, and that any move to a sounder position requires conforming to the “postmodern spirit.” Though he favors Polanyi’s term “postcritical,” Nikkel nevertheless accepts the majority usage of “postmodernism,” and spends much of the first chapter

delineating differences in contemporary theology between radical postmodernists, postliberals, and moderate postmodernists, where he places himself.

Though Nikkel notes that “postmodernism” certainly “is a multivalent term used in diverse contexts,” he claims widespread agreement on “postmodern epistemological assumptions and claims” (30). His listing of these assumptions and claims (30-31) is helpful, but it is striking that he feels compelled to create categories into which every thinker can be placed, running the risk of reifying what is actually a plethora of styles of thinking, sensibilities, disciplinary habits and heuristic efforts to get beyond problems of the past. As a quick way to see what some of the differences are between thinkers, this use of discrete types of postmodernism is helpful, but the reader must always remember the lively conversation and its implications that are going on outside of these categories.

The center of the book comprises four chapters which examine “tradition” and “body”: (1) the dismissal of tradition by the modern spirit and the various efforts of contemporary postmodernists to overcome this dismissal; (2) the bodily embeddedness of all human thought; (3) the benefits of conceiving of “tradition” as standing to thought in a way parallel to the body’s relation to thought, that is, of conceiving of “tradition as body;” and (4) embodiment in relation to evolutionary biology and cognitive science, and consciousness as a “mystery” whose nature and purpose cannot be explained fully by science. These chapters are an important, indeed exciting, extension of Polanyian insights to new areas of epistemology. The concluding chapters apply some elements of “embodiment” to the theological position of “panentheism,” which Nikkel is convinced can overcome the tension between transcendence and immanence.

Having set out initially the various positions with which he is in dialogue, Nikkel begins building his real argument by turning to tradition and describing the move, in both Cartesian philosophy and the Reformation, to “enthroning the ideal of a universal reason not dependent upon particular traditions,” (28) particularly the tradition of the Church.³ Both the rationalist and empiricist schools of philosophy sided with the “mind” half of Descartes’ dualism, denigrating the concrete, lived body. This disengagement from tradition and from the body have produced the anxiety and alienation of modernity. In gradually reacting against this truncated epistemology, postmodernism has affirmed several counter assumptions: that knowledge is never the result of isolated mind grasping independent object, but is rather the interconnection, the interaction, of embodied knower with his or her environment. Thus knowledge is in part constructed by the mind from within the context of its interaction with the world through its body. The totalizing, “essentializing,” absolute dualism of the “transcendental subject” is renounced by postmodernism in favor of the complex, contextual, interdependent engagement of minded body with physical and social reality.

Here Nikkel makes a real advance in discussions of postmodernism by employing specifically Polanyian themes to recast central terms. He uses the structure of tacit knowing to elaborate an understanding of tradition as that tacit givenness, that prereflective, implicit ground of particulars on which we rely to attend to the focal meaning which they jointly comprise (41-42). We are always embedded in “tradition,” that is, the “premises, metaphors, analogies, images, pictures” (77, quoting Poteat) which give thought its power subsidiarily, but which are normally unrecognized or ignored by critical thought, which has eyes only for the explicit, “focal” pole of knowledge. Our language, assumptions, habits of mind as well as of gesture, our store of knowledge of all sorts, are indwelled by the knower, but tacitly, in the same way the muscles, bones and nerves of our bodies are relied upon in perception, in conversation, in reading and writing: “...the prereflective givenness of tradition strongly parallels the prereflective givenness of the human body” (74).

Rather than seeing “tradition” solely as a canon of classical texts or concepts that one can appropriate self-consciously, we should use Polanyi’s insight to recognize the subconscious, pre-reflective role of our lived traditions. Not only is such a concept of tradition much richer, but it allows us to see that we cannot choose to bypass this pre-reflective tradition, for it is the very condition for our saying and thinking anything at all. Even postmodernism, obsessed with the hegemonic “logocentrism” present throughout the Western tradition, has in its more radical figures imitated its modernist forebears by condemning tradition, ignoring its inevitability as the subsidiary particulars of our knowing (34).

Nikkel also describes a variety of postmodernist thinkers who, despite differences between them, do recognize that knowing is in part a constructive practice that involves judgment; that despite the lack of absolute rules in knowing, “a non-arbitrary decidability obtains” (41); and that tradition is “a prereflective or tacit givenness” as well as an explicit body of texts or practices. Not surprisingly, moderate postmodernism “stands in the best position to avoid extremes” of absolutism and relativism, and Nikkel divides the moderates into four camps: the neo-pragmatist historicists (Putnam, etc.), the hermeneuticists (Gadamer, Ricoeur, Tracy), the neo-romantics (Cavell and C. Taylor), and the bodily philosophers (Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, Poteat). He also notes, however, that many moderates are overly reliant on linguistic models for interpreting reality, while he (like Poteat) favors the role of embodiment in generating meaning.

At this point Nikkel raises an important question of Polanyian interpretation. Since some postmodernists would question the legitimacy of any and all tradition appealed to as an authority — even tradition which operates tacitly — it is important to determine whether “some aspects of tradition may be so deeply tacit and embedded as to defy adequate explicitization” (78). Nikkel argues “some aspects of knowledge in principle defy specification,” making our reliance on tradition unavoidable and inescapable, but notes that some Polanyians hold contrary views, especially Zhenhua Yu, who claims that “tacit knowledge cannot be fully articulated by verbal means, but can be articulated in action” (quoted, 78).⁴ Here the Polanyian examples of someone learning to ride a bike, or learning to play a composition on the piano, or learning a language are relevant. Are the tacit elements of these performances in principle beyond articulation, or only beyond it because of the practical limits of being able to name all of the particulars involved? Nikkel states, “I conclude that full non-verbal articulation is impossible regarding motion, art, and language use” (79), and more fully, “I do not think Zhenhua’s distinction, of tacit knowledge subject to verbal articulation versus knowledge amenable only to articulation through action, can stand, on Polanyian terms” (80).

Though I will not attempt to settle this debate in a review, it should be noted that Nikkel has raised a basic question here that deserves careful attention, and I will try at least to lay out the issue clearly. Yu’s claim quoted above appears in his discussion of Scandinavian Wittgenstein scholars who also employ Polanyi’s tacit knowing to express Wittgenstein’s dictum that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁵ The work of Grimen, Janik, and Johannessen stresses the importance of activity in knowing, a practical process or using of terms that always accompanies the intellectual, conceptual products of knowledge. These thinkers carefully discriminate between various forms of knowing that go beyond our powers to verbally articulate them—the sound of a clarinet, say, or the smell of coffee, recognizing a friend’s face, or mastering a skill such as playing a piano or a violin.⁶ This emphasis on the practical activity of knowing strikes me as very close in spirit to what Nikkel is advocating in *Radical Embodiment*, particularly in that Yu acknowledges the “logical gap” that exists between subsidiary and focal awareness, between inarticulate and articulate forms of knowing.⁷ The significant exception, however, is that this talk of action and process includes no direct attention to the body as the locus and vehicle for all such activity. Nikkel’s charge, then, could be put as follows: the

Wittgensteinians whom Yu endorses perhaps have begun to break through modernism's discarnate model of knowing, but they have not gone far enough—they have not rooted meaning-making deeply enough in the physical body and its environmental and social context.

One last comment: it does seem that the differences between these discussions of tacit knowing hinge on the varied meanings of "articulation." Yu points out that the Scandinavians have a much broader view of "articulation" than just linguistic expressions; it may include non-verbal forms of expression as well. Confusion, however, is introduced when it is implied that an action can fully or completely articulate or express meaning, which I think Nikkel is right in judging as going beyond Polanyi's claim about tacit knowledge. Perhaps the expression which Yu quotes from Johannessen would be more appropriate: "This tacit, 'surplus' knowledge is displayed in the very acts of applying...language"—displays, rather than 'articulates.'"⁸

These references to language provide a link to his next three chapters, where Nikkel argues at length that "language depends on bodies." Here he provides that "next step" which he seems to feel Yu has not yet taken, of rooting language not only in an abstract, general "activity," but in concrete bodily activity. Though referring briefly to the work of Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty, Nikkel focuses primarily on a number of neuro- and cognitive scientists, psychologists, and philosophers who have addressed this question specifically in recent years (Head, Rosch, Spelke, Mandler, Hung, Johnson and Lakoff, Nagatomo, and particularly Edelman and Damasio, 48-60, 96-117). The scientific evidence is growing that beneath linguistic, spatial, color, and mathematical concepts are "schemas" that depend directly on our body's orientation and motile skills. Nikkel is clear that while consciousness can be better understood in evolutionary perspective, it cannot be reduced in normal neo-Darwinian fashion to a brain simply responding to environmental stimuli. The "natural drift" of "self-organizing, dynamic biological systems" means that they possess "an integrity that puts pressure on the environment, so to speak, even as the environment puts pressure on it" (93). Thus the attempt to render the human mind as a mechanistic response to its environment must be rejected, as must the equally myopic attempt to render human consciousness in terms of a computing machine model: "Such computational models represent the purest form of functionalism, where hardware, material, structure, and process matter not at all, subordinated to the final product of the software program" (96-97; see also 111).

Here the concept of emergence, which is so important for Polanyi in the final chapter of PK, is crucial: as Goodenough and Deacon put it, "emergence defines the onset of telos on this planet and, for all we know, in the universe. Creatures have a purpose, and their traits are for that purpose" (quoted, 101). Nikkel distinguishes several types or levels of emergence in an effort to acknowledge both that "consciousness always depends on its component neural correlates for its very existence" (111), and also that "consciousness as emergent property exercises a measure of independent causal effectiveness, the power of some indeterminate free will" (110). Philip Clayton's work on emergence, as illustrated in the issue of *TAD* (XXIX: 3 [2002-2003]) that examined and critiqued that work in relation to Polanyi, would helpfully extend and amplify Nikkel's treatment here.

This portion of the book will certainly be instructive to Polanyian scholars in that it is written out of a thorough immersion in the science that has occurred in the fifty years since PK, and presents perspectives normally absent from epistemology and theology. It also extends concretely Poteat's talk of the "mindbody" by connecting that concept to parallel discussions in other areas. Given Poteat's own references to Piaget, Erwin Straus, and linguistic theorists in *Polanyian Meditations*, I suspect he would appreciate Nikkel's use here of "extraterritorial" scholarship. Despite the difficulties of working with two dissimilar vocabularies and sets of

assumptions, Nikkel is largely successful, it seems to me, in navigating the fine line between acknowledging the biological, material nature of “body,” without surrendering the necessity of humanistic, spiritual language in adequately describing the person.

After discussions of “tradition” and “body,” Nikkel is ready to move to a third level and take on “the status of God,” the focus of his last two chapters. The link in these topics is perhaps most clearly seen in his recognition that the biblical tradition of the west presents human beings as a psycho-somatic unity in contrast to the dualism of Greek thought (90), and thus he is inevitably led to a panentheistic theology that unifies the transcendent and immanent dimensions of God. A strength of the book is that one learns a great deal about the intellectual landscape of postmodern theology through Nikkel’s many conversation partners, both early and late in the argument. He relates his views to reactions to modernism by poststructuralists or deconstructionists (Derrida, Mark C. Taylor and others), postliberals (G. Lindbeck, S. Hauerwas, J. Milbank, and Esther Meek), and moderates (S. McFague, P. Hodgson, D. Tracy and others). In tracing the theological response to postmodernism, he positions himself in chapter six in relation to minimalist conceptions of God (Kaufman, McFague, Wieman, Loomer and Meland), atheism and its near-cousins (where he would apparently put Mark C. Taylor), and traditionalists, which would include both postliberals and process theologians or their relatives (Berdyayev, Macquarrie, Jonas, de Chardin, Fox, Cobb, and Griffin).

Among these various perspectives, the minimalists rightly reject the absolutism of traditional theology, but they replace it with its mirror opposite, a minimalism that so embraces the *via negativa* and the limits of human speech about God that it renders real commitment virtually impossible (12-18; 123-24). The conservatives or postliberals affirm the importance of being embedded within a tradition, but employ postmodernism defensively, rejecting the possibility of real dialogue with other traditions. On this ground he criticizes Esther Meek’s “excellent book” *Longing to Know* where “in step with evangelical tradition, Meek does hold to supernatural interventionism to guarantee the historicity of the biblical witness” (21-22). This, he judges, departs from Polanyi’s acceptance of historical criticism because it allowed for modern scientific knowledge while also allowing for the mytho-poetic thinking of biblical culture. To do otherwise, Nikkel suggests, preserves the personal, existential relation to biblical truth, but at a high price: God’s “personal particularity wins out over a wider, more consistently immanent revelation” (22). While Nikkel raises good questions for Meek, I suggest that beneath the surface of this issue is another question with which I think Meek is perhaps unconsciously struggling, and to which Nikkel has not yet provided an answer, namely the possibility of “transcendence,” of the divine, of God, in a “consistently immanent revelation.” While Polanyi’s discussion of biblical theology in PK is limited, it is not clear to me that he would embrace the full immanentism of Nikkel.

Against the extremes of the radicals and the postliberals, Nikkel tries to fill a void in the discussion by articulating a “moderate” postmodernism “by developing and promoting an explicit and full-fledged panentheistic understanding of God” (127). Moderates recognize that skepticism is “parasitical upon meaning,” so that the normal human experience of meaningfulness can be accepted as a portent of a deep ontological fact (contra the minimalists and atheists), and while no foundational absolutism is possible in our truth claims (contra the postliberals), we can affirm meaning and value that are adequate to our needs. The centerpiece of Nikkel’s effort is his panentheistic concept of God’s relation to the world, for which he prepares by briefly discussing the “inevitability of metaphysics,” and why the “unknowability of God” only limits, but does not eliminate, the possibility of theology (128-33).

Here this reviewer must admit that I found this last section of the book less satisfying, not because of Nikkel's full-fledged pantheism, with which I agree, but because of what we might term his theological method, and because his pantheism stresses pan, in detriment to theos. Regarding the issue of method, one of the mantras of Radical Embodiment is that any claim to knowledge in the contemporary world, especially the theological, must conform to "the postmodern spirit" (see 21, 122, 127, 131, etc.). Though Nikkel initially shows awareness of the dangers of his schema ("I offer my understanding of the modern versus postmodern spirit not as an absolute or monolithic schema that disallows countervailing tendencies or alternative schemas, but as a general description of some contrasting tendencies involved in this cultural shift," [2]; and "the postmodern spirit calls us to guard against absolutizing our own perspective," [9]), this awareness seems to dim when he returns to theology late in the book. For example, though tradition is an essential category for Nikkel, his treatment of theological concepts pays no attention to the role of such concepts in Christianity or western tradition generally, but is thoroughly abstract, defined to meet the logical demands of postmodern philosophy. "Tradition," in other words, seems to lack any historical dimension. Though he "prefers" a personal God, Nikkel's treatment severely restricts notions of revelation and of divine action in the world when these concepts threaten certain assumptions of postmodernism: "I myself cannot accept a too sharp demarcation between a transcendent (God in God's self) and an immanent (God for us) aspect of the divine. Such dualism smacks more of the modern than the postmodern spirit" (132). The question is not about Nikkel's distinction between transcendence and immanence, but about his standard for deciding the question: it is not an examination of biblical claims about God, or the theological tradition's claims about God that must be examined, but the dictates of "the postmodern spirit." "The postmodern spirit... must discount certain traditional sources for knowledge of God... we must deny the validity of the following: 1) revelation in the sense of a supernatural or self-authenticating intentional action... from God" (141). To discuss the nature of "God" in the west through such central concepts as "transcendence," "immanence," "revelation," and "divine action," while paying little attention to what the theological tradition has said about these matters, makes one wonder just what tradition actually means for Nikkel. It would seem that one of the claims of postmodernism is that all voices - including that of theology - should be heard, not just those regnant in the academy.

The second point raised concerns the way in which Nikkel's discussion of pantheism seems to reduce God to a deist figure, by greatly attenuating the possibility of God's actual presence in the world. "Immanence" is the primary category for Nikkel's "postmodern" understanding of God, and one can certainly appreciate the tendency to 'balance the scales' by stressing this dimension of the divine. If this requires eliminating some fairly central claims of the Christian theological tradition, however, one is justified in asking for a fuller defense. At this point it seems to me Nikkel's work would benefit from that of Jerry Gill, whose *Mediated Transcendence: A Postmodern Reflection* tries to grapple with the traditional "dualism" of the west's notion of God.⁹ From a Polanyian perspective, Gill suggests ways that "transcendence" may be "encountered mediationaly, known tacitly, and expressed metaphorically," "in and through the particulars of tangible reality."¹⁰ While Gill may not solve all of the problems involved, his work would supplement Nikkel's, strengthening his case for pantheism. I do not want to suggest by these criticisms that David Nikkel's discussion of pantheism, based on his well-thought-out understanding of embodiment, is not full of helpful avenues for moving beyond some weaknesses of modern theology. Here disagreement is meant to be the sincerest form of flattery. But if a God embodied in the world, to use McFague's metaphor, does not act or cause events, is not "intentional" or "purposive," and does not communicate with humans (145, 156-160), one is left wondering to what "God" refers, other than a logical construct ("the one reservoir of all possibility") (148-49).

In the very effort to summarize Radical Embodiment in a review, I have not done justice to its richness of implication, its complexities of argument and reference. Nikkel has written a book that will engage and challenge you to think for yourself in new and exciting ways; and that is the highest standard to which a book can aspire.

Endnotes

¹As Nikkel points out on p. 90, one could argue this dualism actually begins with ancient Greek philosophy.

²Nikkel's book is dedicated to Poteat, and he received his PhD at Duke, where Poteat taught. He also refers often to Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, often part of the "canon" of Polanyian scholars. His earlier work, however, was on Hartshorne and Tillich.

³It would perhaps flesh out Nikkel's discussion of tradition to cite some of the modernists who have criticized it (as he does in pointing to Descartes in speaking of mind/body dualism). One might, for example, think of figures like Condorcet, Gibbon, and Diderot as they are described by a contemporary modernist, Peter Gay, in *The Enlightenment* (1968) vol. I, chs. 1, 4-6

⁴Nikkel is referring to two articles by Zhenhua Yu in *TAD*: "Tacit Knowledge: A Wittgensteinian Approach," XXXIII:3 (2006-07), 9-25; and "Tacit Knowledge/Knowing and the Problem of Articulation," XXX:2 (2003-2004), 11-23.

⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed. (NY: 1958), Pt. 1, sec. 43.

⁶Zhenhua Yu, "Tacit Knowledge: A Wittgensteinian Approach," 11-13.

⁷*Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁸*Ibid.*, 20. There are some confusing aspects of Yu's generally illuminating article. He states that Wittgensteinians distinguish various forms of tacit knowing, including "tacit knowledge as something that is not articulated by verbal means, but can be articulated linguistically" (10). 'Linguistically articulated knowledge that cannot be articulated verbally' needs clarification.

⁹Jerry H. Gill, *Mediated Transcendence: A Postmodern Reflection* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 142-143.

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi> . In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) digital archives containing all issues of *Tradition and Discovery* and its predecessor publications of the Polanyi Society going back to 1972; (2) indices listing *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) the history of Polanyi Society publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Michael Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi," which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL 60637; (6) photographs of Polanyi; (7) links to a number of essays (available on the Polanyi Society web site and other sites) by Polanyi as well as audio files for Polanyi's McEnerney Lectures (1962) and Polanyi's conversation with Carl Rogers (1966).