

# Response to David Rutledge and Dale Cannon

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, postmodernism.

*This response to review essays (covering all of my major scholarly writing) by David Rutledge and Dale Cannon appreciatively affirms most points emphasized in their respective analyses. I acknowledge that my scholarship has served my teaching, as Rutledge notes; I frequently use diagrams because I believe they usually are pedagogically very effective. My writing has strong interdisciplinary overtones and I have special interest in religion, art and education. Slowly, I have worked to integrate the ideas of Polanyi and other important thinkers emphasized by my teacher William Poteat, and, as Cannon recognizes, this is not an easy task. I frequently use the term “postmodern” rather than Polanyi’s “post-critical” because the term engages the current philosophical dialogue outside of Polanyi circles. I believe that metaphorical thinking and speaking is the heart of our embodied, everyday discourse and it liberates our language and thought from the restrictions imposed by the “pseudo-objectivism” of the standard way of carrying on philosophical endeavor. I have focused on the epistemological rather than the existential aspects of Polanyi’s thought.*

I must begin by expressing my very deep gratitude to everyone who brought this event about. I am deeply humbled by and pleased with what David and Dale have written. I also have learned a good deal about myself and my own ideas.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with everything David says concerning the limitations of my overall project. He has it right that I have always seen myself primarily as a teacher rather than as a scholar. It is the work in the classroom that has shaped all my writing. This accounts for my efforts to summarize briefly the thought of many complex thinkers, my frequent repetition of certain schema, and my dependence on charts and diagrams. I still believe that the use of such graphics strongly facilitates the students’ grasping of the main aspects of an issue.

In this regard I have to say that even though Bill Poteat did not care much for my diagrams, especially the one charting the main dynamics of Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowing, my students have always found them useful points of departure. Moreover, Michael himself told me that he thought that particular one was both useful and appropriate for comprehending the main thrust of his epistemology.

Also, David is surely right that I have a tendency to think “architecturally” or programmatically. That is to say, I am continually interested in what he calls the “big picture” with regard to the issues and thinkers involved in a given issue. As such, I am not nearly as interested in the details of a thinker’s overall thought as I am in the main drive of his or her approach to the subject. In short, I am not a “scholar’s scholar”, but rather an undergraduate teacher.

The contours of my thought have, as well, been shaped by my strong interest in interdisciplinary inter-connections. I think Polanyi’s insights are extremely valuable when applied to such fields as religion, art, and education. All three of these fields have played an important role in my own life, and thus I have been

drawn to try to understand them by means of Polanyi's angle of approach. The price one pays for this broad-scoped posture is inevitably less attention to detail.

Then there is the matter of the effect of my own life span on the development of my thinking. I published my first journal article in 1960 when I was just starting out as a teacher. My work with Bill Poteat, which began some four years later, opened many doors for me, but it took some time before I was able to take advantage of these fresh perspectives in the development of my own thought. I think his greatest impact on me was the way he sought to integrate the insights of such diverse thinkers as Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Polanyi. This is my 53<sup>rd</sup> year as a teacher/thinker and I am still exploring the implications of the intersection of their respective perspectives.

It is in this light that I would explain my "short shrift" treatment of Kierkegaard. My *On Knowing God*, to which David refers, was an early effort to wrestle with these issues. In my later essay, "Faith Is As Faith Does", in Robert Perkins' volume, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals* (1981), I tried to make a fresh case for interpreting Kierkegaard's authorship. I suggest there that we should take his pseudonyms far more seriously than most interpreters have. I see him in control of his overall authorship, somewhat like Shakespeare, with his respective pseudonymous "authors" serving as his players expressing their own points of view rather than that of Kierkegaard. If we fail to interpret Kierkegaard in this way, I find his "blind faith" posture both irresponsible and irreligious.

Finally, David should rest assured that there are, indeed, more of my efforts yet to come. Unfortunately, some of these end up on the shelf for want of a publisher. I keep telling my wife Mari that "this is my last book", but she just laughs.

Now, to respond to Dale's extremely thorough and provocative review of my *Deep Postmodernism* book. It is obvious that Dale has gone over this book with a fine-toothed comb, not only detailing its content very carefully but interacting with it from his own perspective on these four thinkers. For this I am very grateful. Moreover, it should be obvious to the readers why it was so easy for me to give you "A" grades in all the courses you took with me fifty some years ago during my beginning years as a teacher. Our lasting relationship continues to be a great gift to me.

Now, with regard to my choice of the term 'postmodern' instead of 'post critical', I can only say that while I agree that the latter term is perhaps every bit as insightful with regard to the issues involved, especially in relation to Polanyi's thought, I think the former term engages the current philosophical dialogue outside of Polanyian circles more directly.

Also, about my pervasive use, or overuse, of metaphors rather than more straight-forward analytic terminology when unpacking the thought of these four seminal thinkers, it seems to me that it is precisely this strategy that is required when one is seeking to overcome both the traditionalist and modernist way of approaching the issues involved. Metaphorical thinking and speaking, which lies at the heart of our embodied, everyday discourse, liberates our language and thus our thought from the restrictions imposed by the "pseudo-objectivism" of the standard way of carrying on philosophical endeavor.

About my inability to thoroughly understand the intricacies of Whitehead's thought, as well as my failure to refer to the scholarly explanations of his philosophy (cf. your footnote 8), I must admit that I find

these “explanations” even more prolix and obscure than Whitehead’s own efforts. I have tried to do my best in this regard.

Finally, about my overall understanding of Polanyi’s thought. In my own work I have admittedly usually focused on the more narrowly epistemological aspects of his work and not upon its broader, more “existential”, if you will, aspects as have both you, Dale, and our mentor William Poteat. I guess I can only say that I have not written the book that you and/or Bill would have written.

To be more specific, Dale, you are correct that I should have prefaced my account of Polanyi’s insights into tacit knowing by saying that this is how I have come to understand them. Nevertheless, I must say that on two separate occasions Michael himself commented to me that he thought my diagram of the dynamics of his notion of tacit knowing was both accurate and helpful. I have found in working with students it has proven useful to begin with the diagram and its various components before moving on to the more experiential examples and explanations.

In conclusion let me say that this whole undertaking (reviewing my life’s scholarship) leaves me rather stunned. That others, especially such esteemed colleagues, would find my own thought worthy of this sort of examination is truly humbling. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.