

The Fulfillment of a Polanyian Vision of Heuristic Theology: David Brown’s Reframing of Revelation, Tradition, and Imagination

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ABSTRACT

According to Richard Gelwick, one of the fundamental implications of Polanyi’s epistemology is that all intellectual disciplines are inherently heuristic. This article draws out the implications of a heuristic vision of theology latent in Polanyi’s thought by placing contemporary theologian David Brown’s dynamic understanding of tradition, imagination, and revelation in the context of a Polanyian-inspired vision of reality. Consequently, such a theology will follow the example of science, reimagining its task as one of discovery rather than mere reflection on a timeless body of divine revelation. The ongoing development of a theological tradition thus involves the attempt to bring one’s understanding of the question of God to bear on the whole of the human experience. The pursuit of theology as a heuristic endeavor is a bold attempt to construct an integrated vision of nothing less than the entirety of all that is, without absolutizing one’s vision, and without giving up on the question of truth.

Engaging Polanyi Theologically

Richard Gelwick once remarked that the “impact of Polanyi’s philosophy would be to change the fundamental ground plans of contemporary theology” (Gelwick 1975, 311). In a similar vein, Avery Dulles commented that “a thoroughgoing renewal of theology along the lines indicated by Polanyi could profitably engage the joint efforts of many theologians for a considerable span of years” (Dulles 1984, 550). Following the lead of Gelwick, Dulles, and numerous other theologians who have recognized the theological significance of Michael Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy and who have critically interacted with his thought in diverse and fruitful ways, I would like more carefully to consider the distinct vision of theological inquiry latent in Polanyi’s philosophy.¹

In light of this preliminary consideration, it is crucial to remember that Polanyi was not a theologian, but first a chemist, then a philosopher. While it is true that he did make some penetrating insights into the nature of religion (Polanyi 1963, 4-14; *STSR*, 116-30; *PK*, 279-86; *M*, 149-60), for the most part he was content to speak about religion and theology in general terms.² For this reason, we concur with Dulles that “Polanyi’s value for theology lies less in what he explicitly stated about theological questions than in the transfer value of what he had to say about science” (Dulles 1984, 550). If we are to discover the untapped theological potential of Polanyi’s philosophy, it will be by attending to the implications of his epistemology.

Towards a Heuristic Theology

According to Gelwick, Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge implies that all intellectual disciplines are inherently heuristic (Gelwick 1975, 305). The word “heuristic” is used here to connote the potential

for novel discovery and an openness to continual exploration; it is intended to convey a sense of dynamism and mystery. And so the theologian will wonder: what might it mean to suggest that theology is a heuristic endeavor? This article offers a response to this question.

The initial phase of the article provides context for an answer to the question by outlining the main features of a “heuristic vision of reality” along Polanyiian lines. The second phase proceeds to give an example of a contemporary theologian whose methodology is congruent with what a corresponding heuristic theology might look like. By examining David Brown’s theological method against the backdrop of our heuristic vision of reality, paying special attention to his groundbreaking work on the interplay of revelation, tradition, and imagination, it will quickly become clear that Brown’s model is extremely compatible with such an understanding of reality. This brings me to my central claim: David Brown’s approach to theology can in fact be seen as a fulfillment of the heuristic vision of theology latent in Polanyi’s philosophy.

After completing these two phases, I will draw attention to six main points of contact between the two models and finally offer a few brief comments on how this project sets the stage for further exploration.

A Heuristic Vision of Reality

The Triadic Structure of Tacit Knowing

It will be helpful to begin our sketch of a heuristic vision of reality with a brief summary of the most salient features of Polanyi’s epistemology. This is not to assert that tacit knowing needs to be understood as the center of Polanyi’s work, but only that it provides a point of departure for this project. He starts with the presupposition that in all forms of knowing—intellectual, practical, or perceptual—“*we know more than we can tell*” (*TD*, 4, emphasis original). By emphasizing the personal participation of the knower in every act of knowing, Polanyi articulates a holistic theory of knowledge that effectively bypasses the objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy.³ This novel theory of personal knowledge is characterized by the recognition of an unspecifiable Gestalt-like integration/shift that happens when a person indwells a particular set of subsidiary elements, attending *from* them *to* their focal/joint meaning (*M*, 34ff.; *KB*, 138-58; *PK*, 55-8). Consequently, meaning lies in the comprehension of a set of particulars with respect to the emergence of a novel comprehensive entity. Because this act of comprehension is a personal accomplishment that can neither be replaced by a formal operation nor fully specified in its process, Polanyi refers to it as “tacit knowing” (*M*, 38ff.; *TD*, 9ff.). The structure of tacit knowing is itself triadic in nature: (1) a knower (2) attends from a set of subsidiaries (3) towards a focal awareness of a meaningful whole or comprehensive entity (*M*, 38ff.). This triadic structure is indicative of the harmonious relationship between the knower and what is known (*TD*, 4). Because all knowing is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowing (*KB*, 144), the human capacity for tacit integration “underlies our routine intellectual life as well as the momentous breakthroughs of modern science” (Gelwick 1975, 303).

The Dialectic of Reality/Discovery

The relationship between Polanyi’s epistemology and his ontology becomes clear at this point: in all instances of tacit knowing there is a correspondence between the structure of comprehension and the structure of the comprehensive entity of which it is a part (*TD*, 33-4). This allows us to recognize the presence of a dialectic at the heart of his ontology, that between reality and discovery. To make a discovery about reality, to designate something as “real,” is to “expect that it may yet manifest its effectiveness in an indefinite and perhaps wholly unexpected manner” (*PK*, 279-86; *M*, 116). One can only discover something that was already there, “ready to be discovered” (*SM*, 34), and at the beginning of our pursuit “we can

know only quite vaguely what we may hope to discover” (Polanyi 1981, 97). Contrary to the objectivist ideal in science—which Polanyi consistently opposed as delusional and false (*PK*, 18; *M*, 25ff.)—the acquisition (i.e., discovery) of provisional knowledge about reality in this framework “consists in the exploration and elaboration of the relation, rather than in the conquest of an alien object” (Grant 1987, 266). Truth is thus understood as the expression of a relation between a personal affirmation made with universal intent and an objective reality. Because truth is a process directed from the real to an articulate expression of the real, and because this establishes a relationship between the knower and the known, the act of knowing a reality and giving it articulate expression is something persons do rather than something they observe (*PK*, 254). From a Polanyian perspective, knowing is not a possession but a skill.

The correspondence of the structures of knowing and what is known provides another insight about the reality/discovery dialectic. Quite simply, the irreducible structure of tacit knowing suggests a corresponding irreducibility to the structure of reality. As expected, its irreducibility is also threefold: (1) a knower indwells a set of unspecifiable subsidiary clues, (2) the process by which a knower integrates these clues is not fully definable, and (3) our expectation is that the “future manifestations indicated by this coherence are inexhaustible” (Polanyi 1981, 97). Because each aspect of the discovery process is dynamic and nonlinear, the acquisition of knowledge by a “systematic” process or “prescribed manipulation” would be akin to making a survey rather than a discovery (*SFS*, 14).⁴ This allows us to appreciate an essential element of the discovery process: that there can be no success “without the thrusting imagination that pours itself into seemingly varied clues until they form a whole” (Gelwick 1975, 304). Every act of discovery testifies to the provisional nature of our knowledge of reality on the one hand, and the vital role played by the creative imagination on the other (Scott 1970, 50). The pursuit of truth is a heuristic, imaginative endeavor.

The Dynamic Force of an Inexhaustible Reality

Keep in mind that the capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways is attributed to the fact that “the thing observed is an aspect of reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it” (*TD*, 32).⁵ If we allow the creative act of discovery to exist in dynamic tension with the provisional status of our knowledge and the capacity of reality to continually reveal itself in meaningful ways, a heuristic vision begins to emerge. To attribute the status of “reality” to a discovery—at least for a scientific discovery—is “to believe that it refers to no chance configuration of things, but to a persistent connection of certain features, a connection which, being real, will yet manifest itself in numberless ways, inexhaustibly” (Polanyi 1981, 93). This suggests that the hidden reality guiding the discoverer is a dynamic force. Polanyi explains it like this: “At the end of the quest the vision is becalmed in the contemplation of the reality revealed by a discovery; but the vision is renewed and becomes dynamic again” (Polanyi 1981, 93). Subsequently, when taken up by others, this renewed, dynamic vision has the power to guide them into new discoveries. To give an “articulate expression” of the real, i.e., to make a discovery about an aspect of reality, not only says something *true* about reality, but it also opens up the possibility for future discoveries. Every discovery increases our knowledge of what is true while simultaneously expanding the horizon of what we do not (yet) know. This is why Polanyi explains that while a discovery does reveal something new about reality, “the new vision which accompanies it is not knowledge. It is *less* than knowledge, for it is a guess; but it is *more* than knowledge, for it is a foreknowledge of things yet unknown and at present perhaps inconceivable” (*PK*, 135). A heuristic vision of reality entails a dialectical movement between provisional-truth/future-discovery.

The Ontological Status of Heuristic Vision

Given the provisional status of knowledge in a heuristic vision of reality, by what measure do we uncover the significance of the ontological aspect of tacit knowing? Polanyi’s approach to this question

is as suggestive as it is counterintuitive. He regards the “significance of a thing as more important than its tangibility” (*TD*, 33). He famously quipped that “minds and problems possess a deeper reality than cobblestones” (*TD*, 32-3), which is to say, “that which is most promising in its power to provide a growing range of discoveries in the future” (Gelwick 1975, 307) is most real. Bearing in mind the correspondence of the structure of comprehension with the structure of the comprehensive entity, we can draw out an important consequence of this counterintuitive idea concerning the higher levels of existence, such as minds and ideas. The participation of the knower in the thing known increases as the objects of knowledge ascend to higher levels and the “observer also applies ever higher standards of appreciation to the things known by him” (*SM*, 94-5). For John Apczynski, what this means is that eventually our knowledge of the known ceases to be an *observation* and instead becomes an *encounter* (Apczynski 1977, 160). Knowledge of higher level comprehensive entities has a distinct perichoretic flavor.⁶

The Heuristic Circularity of Tradition

This brings us to a key feature of a heuristic vision of reality: tradition. Quite simply, the evolution of any heuristic vision is a thoroughgoing communal affair. Communities preserve funds of personal knowledge in “traditions” (*PK*, 53). A tradition is a collection of mutually agreed upon premisses and assumptions. Without them, every creative endeavor of every human community would cease to exist (*SFS*, 56). Take the example of science: “Science is a system of beliefs to which we are committed. Such a system cannot be accounted for either from experience as seen within a different system, or by reason without experience. Yet this does not signify that we are free to take or leave it, but simply reflects that it is a system of beliefs to which we are committed and which therefore cannot be represented in non-committal terms” (*PK*, 171). Scientists can only make use of a tradition by placing themselves under its service and committing to it. But the communal character of a tradition in no wise precludes the important creative work of the individual. The communal character of a tradition simply requires that individual initiatives “must accept for their guidance a traditional authority, enforcing its own self-renewal by cultivating originality among its followers” (Polanyi 1962, 70). Polanyi further describes the influence of a tradition in terms of a “spiritual reality” standing over a community that compels their allegiance (*SFS*, 54).⁷ Insofar as “our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging” (*PK*, 322), the authority this spiritual reality exercises over a tradition reflects the “heuristic circularity” of every commitment.⁸ This circularity, I contend, is a feature of the human experience that is to be both celebrated and appreciated, not explained away.

Tradition as Dynamic Orthodoxy

Pursuing science without a commitment to indwell its creeds and confessions would be to accept a positivist picture of science and regard its tradition as pure orthodoxy. In contrast to a static or pure orthodoxy, Polanyi describes the tradition guiding scientific inquiry in terms of “dynamic orthodoxy” (Polanyi 1962, 70). Colin Grant succinctly captures Polanyi’s position here: “What distinguishes Polanyi’s view of science and makes it dynamic orthodoxy is his suggestion that the orthodoxy of science, far from being firm and final in fact or even in intent, serves rather to provide a base for encouraging opposition to itself” (Grant 1988, 414; cf. Polanyi 1962, 54). In and of themselves, tradition and orthodoxy are static. They can only maintain a heuristic significance when they form a dialectic in which every affirmation contains an implicit challenge for clarification and further development.

The normative character of a tradition is in no way undercut by the demand that it be continually challenged and re-envisioned. Polanyi explains that it is “inherent in the nature of scientific authority that in transmitting itself to a new generation it should invite opposition to itself and assimilate this opposition in a reinterpretation of the scientific tradition” (*SFS*, 15-6). Inasmuch as a “dynamic orthodoxy claims to be a guide in search of truth, it implicitly grants the right of opposition in the name of truth” (Polanyi

1962, 70). This is how a heuristic vision of reality addresses the question of truth: it is precisely this “transcendence of truth over any particular approximation to it [that] facilitates the combination of orthodoxy and dynamism” (Grant 1988, 415). This is not to say that truth is some purely objective reality floating around “out there” that can only be grasped and approximated with asymptotic accuracy, but rather that truth claims never exhaust the real. Nevertheless, this combination of challenge and affirmation, of assent and dissent, is made possible by the fundamental assumption that our knowledge of the world, what we consider to be true, is always a glimpse of a much richer reality.⁹ Thus we are in accord with Gelwick’s summary of Polanyi’s position: “Tradition serves as the grounds for discovery and in turn renews and finds its own depth” (Gelwick 1975, 319). A heuristic vision of reality grounded in commitment to a tradition allows us to appreciate that the relationship of reality/discovery generates a powerful feedback loop.

Tradition, Responsibility, and Universal Intent

A tradition that values dynamic orthodoxy carries with it a special responsibility: there is a “sense of calling” that results when those committed to a tradition undertake pioneering efforts to make fresh contacts with the realities that they have been trained to serve” (Milavec 2006, 465). By establishing the normative place of heuristic vision in every act of knowing, we place a great responsibility on the one articulating a particular comprehensive vision. Articulating the vision of a comprehensive entity while being mindful of and faithful to the “accidents of personal existence” is, for Polanyi, the essence of humanity’s calling (*PK*, 322; cf. Langford 1966, 45-6). Even though the vision of a comprehensive entity emerges from a particular tradition, at a particular time, among a particular community, those who articulate it assume the requisite task of clarifying the nature and character of that vision with “universal intent” (*M*, 195).

Universal intent can easily be misunderstood. Because we cannot know whether or not our vision will be accepted, Polanyi suggests that we think of our claims in terms of *aiming* for universal intent rather than “established universality” (*TD*, 78). Universal intent is not the absolutization of our vision, nor an attribute of our understanding, but rather the *goal* of our provisional understanding. Polanyi even suggests that this desire for universal intent could be understood as a clue to God: “We undertake the task of attaining the universal in spite of our admitted infirmity, which should render the task hopeless, because we hope to be visited by powers for which we cannot account in terms of our specific capabilities. This I hope is a clue to God...” (*PK*, 324).¹⁰

Summary

Not surprisingly, the foregoing sketch of a heuristic vision of reality along Polanyian lines is incomplete and only provisional. We have identified three dialectical movements inherent to a heuristic vision of reality. The interplay of reality/discovery is naturally accompanied by the dialectic of affirmation/negation in a holistic, dynamic vision that recognizes the provisional nature of truth articulately expressed with universal intent. The need for a dialectic of particularity/universality becomes clear when a provisional expression of the real is offered with hope of universal intent by a particular person indwelling a particular tradition. We can now trace the contours of David Brown’s model of theological inquiry in hopes of catching a glimpse of heuristic theology in action.

David Brown: A Case Study of Heuristic Theology

Background

David Brown is a contemporary Christian theologian in the Anglican tradition. Born in Scotland in 1948, he is currently the Wardlaw Professor of Theology, Aesthetics, and Culture at the University of St.

Andrews. Early in his career he focused on the relation between theology and philosophy, but in more recent years his interests have expanded to the relationship between theology and culture, more specifically, the relationship between theology and the arts. Between 1999 and 2008 he published a five volume series extensively addressing the relationship between theology, philosophy, the arts, and human culture. One commentator describes this series as “one of the most ambitious projects of contemporary theology and represents a substantial challenge to currently dominant perspectives across a range of important issues” (King, MacSwain, and Fout 2012, 328).¹¹ Totalling nearly two thousand pages, it would be impossible to do justice to the full spectrum of Brown’s thought in such a short space. Because our primary interest is his theological methodology, we will focus on the first two volumes, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (1999) and *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (2000).

Primary Themes

Brown’s groundbreaking theology is distinguished by a unique array of interlaced motifs: an emphasis on the vital role of the imagination in theological inquiry; a closing of the gap between revelation and tradition; a sustained demonstration of the culturally conditioned, provisionally mediated, and continually developing character of revelation; the recognition of the Christian Scriptures as a “moving text”; the blurring of a distinction between Scripture and tradition; the expansion of God’s revelatory activity beyond the confines of the Christian tradition into the realms of secular philosophy, other religious traditions, and the arts; the rejection of a sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology; the prioritization of the incarnation over the atonement. He is a Christian theologian through and through, and his overwhelming commitment is to a “God of mystery who has disclosed something of that divinity to humanity but with an inexhaustible richness that means . . . there always remains something more to discover, something more to delight the senses and the intellect” (Brown 2008, 26).

The Philosophical Trajectory of Brown’s Argument

Before we begin to unpack his theology, we should consider a few of his philosophical convictions. Charting a course between the Enlightenment’s over-emphasis on historical criticism and the postmodern conviction that objectivity and truth are either a priori out of reach or empty categories, Brown grants the postmodern position that all thought is conditioned and involves antecedent commitments while rejecting the tendency to caricature the Enlightenment as nothing more than an excess of rationalism. He seeks to avoid the contemporary extremes of unqualified advocacy of the virtues of Enlightenment objectivity on the one hand, and the retreat from its challenges into the allegedly self-validating claims of Christianity on the other (Brown 1999, 106). He recognizes that our basic problem is not that we are forced to undertake the pursuit of pure, disinterested objectivity lest we grease the slippery slope of unadulterated relativism, but that the strict opposition of objectivity to subjectivity is as false a dichotomy in theological epistemology as it is in any epistemological framework.

In Brown’s analysis, one of modernity’s principal faults is its inclination to show contempt for tradition. The chief error of the Enlightenment, specifically, was not in looking more widely than any particular tradition but in supposing that this entailed the death of tradition rather than its enrichment (Brown 1999, 106). He recognizes that traditions often mature and develop through interaction with alternatives, and not always in opposition to them (Brown 1999, 106). Provided that the traditions to which we are committed “are allowed to function as open, both towards their past and to the wider context in which they are set,” Brown is convinced that “being aware of the traditions upon which one inevitably draws is what makes progress possible” (Brown 1999, 11). Contrary to the conventional wisdom of modern rationalism, acknowledging our dependence upon, participation in, and commitment to a tradition in no way undermines the search for knowledge and understanding. Brown’s critique of modernity on this point should not be understood as an unqualified endorsement of the extreme postmodern response, where our antecedent

presuppositions “become exempt from any form of effective critique” (Brown 1999, 52) on account of the circular nature of the hermeneutic event. Quite the contrary. The postmodern insight into the conditioned character of all thought demands that each of our commitments be subject to potential critique.

The Incarnation: The Centripetal Force of Brown’s Theology

One of Brown’s primary theological objectives is to demonstrate that no sharp lines of demarcation can be drawn among revelation, Scripture, and the Christian tradition: “Tradition, so far from being something secondary or reactionary, is the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond” (Brown 1999, 1). Brown embraces the hermeneutical circularity of his position by acknowledging that his argument begins with a commitment to the reality of the incarnation (Brown 1999, 101). In other words, Brown makes no apology for indwelling the Christian tradition even while he reimagines key elements of it. The logic of Brown’s argument for prioritizing the incarnation is straightforward. For persons to be both truly human and genuinely sane, they cannot think themselves as being divine (Brown 1999, 278). This means that, at least initially, Jesus of Nazareth could not have understood himself as the Divine Son of God (Brown 1999, 320).¹² The corresponding Christology requires that the incarnation be understood as “a real kenosis” (Brown 1999, 299).¹³ There is thus a high degree of “accommodation to the human condition in the incarnation” (Brown 1999, 276). If the incarnation can be understood as the greatest point of God’s involvement with humanity, then it follows that “God submitted perception of himself to the vagaries of a developing tradition; so why not elsewhere also?” (Brown 1999, 275). Brown’s commitment to a dynamic, unfolding tradition is immediately related to his understanding of incarnation.

The Imagination: The Centrifugal Force of Brown’s Theology

Misunderstanding the role played by the imagination in the theological task has largely contributed to sharp divisions among Scripture, revelation, and tradition (Brown 1999, 274). Whereas the incarnation acts as the gravitational center of Brown’s theology, drawing the community together in a shared commitment to God’s activity in Jesus of Nazareth, the human imagination acts as a catalyst for change, ensuring that the tradition never becomes stagnant and is always striving for cultural relevance, all in the name of being faithful to the trajectory of the tradition. Emphasizing the incarnation as accommodation to the vagaries of a developing tradition highlights “the necessary exercise of the imagination as the story [is] retold in the light” (Brown 1999, 299) of new social triggers. All else being equal, the inertia of a theological community promotes consistency over change.¹⁴ Imaginative reappropriations of the tradition become necessary when they are given some “external prod” by changing social and historical situations (Brown 1999, 187-8). Of course, this is not to suggest that culture is the only catalyst for re-imagining the meaning of a tradition’s key symbols and central commitments.

Of equal importance is the recognition that “the contribution of the imagination to understanding the significance of Christ by no means ended with the closure of the New Testament canon” (Brown 1999, 321). Once we allow the trajectory of incarnational belief to feed back upon itself, we will realize that the community makes an indelible mark on the unfolding tradition and in so doing has the capacity to actually “improve” upon the contents of the original narrative or event (Brown 1999, 76-7). This is the basis for treating the Scriptures as a “moving text” (Brown 1999, 301).¹⁵ Some will undoubtedly bristle at the notion of improving the contents of the original biblical narrative. If nothing else, this means that theological inquiry is more than fanciful speculation or mere reflection on the past; much is at stake in this potentially risky endeavor. If we truly believe that our words-about-God can and do change the way we indwell our world, if not the world itself—and why would we want to do theology if this were not the case—then theology is a dangerous enterprise that carries with it great responsibility, and making claims that go against the grain of tradition should not be made lightly if and when they must be made.

The advantage the imagination has over a purely linear, mathematical type of rationality is in its ability to think laterally, to allow for combinations not yet present in the mind or in nature (Brown 2000, 352). Even if all such connections were merely located in the mind, they would still be illuminating on account of the fact that becoming aware of a “symbolic field in the unconscious can alert us to other options, in particular that not everything that is ‘known’ has necessarily already been conceptualized” (Brown 2000, 353). This is not intended to drive a wedge between reason and the imagination as resources for accessing truth. Quite the opposite: this whole approach seeks a rapprochement between faith and reason, the imagination and tradition. Bottom line, the imagination allows for the possibility of remapping reality, not just with respect to what is already known, but with respect to what could be known as well (Brown 200, 360). Linking the imagination with the remapping of what could be known creates a space for revelation that emerges from the inside, as it were.

A Dynamic Understanding of Revelation

While Brown makes no attempt to give an account of the precise location where revelation occurs, as he believes this would be a mistake, it is clear that wherever revelation happens in space and time, the imagination plays a vital role. While revelation can be experienced as an event, sensually, we only have access to the *meaning* of revelation through our capacity to reason, to imagine (Brown 1999, 6). For Brown, this means revelation is not confined to the boundaries of the Christian tradition. His endorsement of the postmodern insight into the conditioned character of all thought leads him to expect that “God might have interacted with more than one religious tradition over the course of the centuries” (Brown 1999, 136). The ongoing reflection and imaginative rewriting of the tradition is itself part of the process of divine disclosure (Brown 1999, 169). God’s accommodation to the human condition in the incarnation means that revelation will always be tied to a developing tradition, but never limited to a single one.

Thinking of tradition as the human reflection on an original and unchanging divine discourse has obviously been a part of the Christian tradition for a long time, for better or worse. Brown realizes this, but is concerned that such an approach does not adequately account for the ways in which “all human expression is embodied within, and limited by, particular cultural contexts” (Brown 2012, 267). He further argues that throughout human history, access to the divine was the norm rather than the exception, as it was commonly believed that God was available to be experienced everywhere (Brown 2012, 266). As far as Brown is concerned, the problem of religious experience and the challenge of biblical criticism is evidence of a crisis in both natural and revealed theology. He is not interested in downplaying the contributions these two approaches have made to the Christian tradition even though he is convinced that these “commonly-assumed frameworks are altogether too narrow” (Brown 2012, 266-7). Much and more could be said about the disintegration of the divide between natural/revealed theology, but at this point, suffice to say that a rapprochement of these two discourses is one of the most significant theological implications of Brown’s work.¹⁶

A Dynamic Understanding of Tradition

Brown consistently argues against the common prejudice that treats tradition as something static, a prejudice that relegates it to the status of “mere inheritance of the past” (Brown 1999, 30). For Brown nothing could be further from the truth. The history of Christianity illustrates this: “even tradition itself needs first to be undermined before it can acquire a capacity for further development” (Brown 1999, 51). Further precedent for this is found in the Christian Scriptures. We could say that the Scriptures themselves give us permission to undermine them in the name of fidelity to the tradition. Brown shows how the Scriptures are part of a developing tradition by citing examples of how they imaginatively reappropriate material from the past to address questions of the present.¹⁷ Because the Scriptures do not address every possible social situation, it seems reasonable to expect that when a tradition encounters new social condi-

tions it might generate new insights and then incorporate them back into the tradition (Brown 1999, 71). Brown suggests that these social triggers are themselves part of the revelatory process and evidence that the text itself cannot be understood as the exclusive generator of meanings. Rather than thinking about the Bible as the “already fully painted canvas and the traditions of the later Church as offering at most some optional extra colouring, we need to think of a continuous dynamic of tradition operating both within the Bible and beyond” (Brown 1999, 365).

Three Advantages of Brown’s Proposal

Brown identifies three major advantages to this proposal (Brown 1999, 365ff.). The first is that it can release Christians from constantly trying to find justification in Scripture for positions that are more naturally read as later self-understandings. For example, rather than arguing that Jesus wasn’t opposed to divorce or that Paul was in favor of homosexuality, Brown suggests that discussion of these issues should be focused on the trajectory set by the tradition, rather than the specific commitments of the tradition at a given time in history. Secondly, the Bible would no longer have an impossible burden placed on it. Biblical history would cease to be a unique exception to the normal pattern of divine action, thus requiring the church to take responsibility for its history. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in Brown’s model, Christians would be allowed to take seriously revelation as it occurs in other religions and disciplines. Insufficient attention has been given to this point in this essay, but this is undeniably one of the primary benefits of his model. It challenges the assumption that the efficacy of revelation is somehow undermined if “external material from the surrounding culture is used to illuminate or even rewrite its story” (Brown 1999, 104).

Points of Contact

The foregoing analysis is ample evidence of the compatibility of the Polanyian and Brownian paradigms. I will now consider the six most salient points of contact between them. This will serve as a road map for reading Brown’s model as an embodiment of a Polanyian-inspired heuristic theology.

1. Overturning the Subject/Object Dichotomy

Both models challenge the assumption of a fundamental split between the knowing subject and the object known. A heuristic vision of reality accomplishes this by demonstrating the correspondence between the subject/object in the triadic structure of tacit knowing. Brown accomplishes this by blazing an epistemological trail between caricatures of modernity and corresponding extremes of postmodernity. Both thinkers realize the choice is not between disinterested objectivity and unadulterated subjectivity, but between reductive and non-reductive views of the ontology/epistemology relationship. Polanyi’s challenge to the objectivist ideal in modern science no more leads down the slippery slope of relativism than Brown’s emphasis on the human imagination rules out the possibility of divine revelation.

2. The Priority of the Creative Imagination

Both models recognize the central role of the imagination in all acts of human knowing. A heuristic vision of reality recognizes the interplay of intuition and imagination in all acts of knowing, from scientific discovery to knowledge of other minds. For Brown, it is only our capacity to imagine that allows us to participate in the unfolding drama of revelation. There is also a further, deeper connection between Brown’s notion of imagination as lateral thinking and Polanyi’s conviction that we know more than we can tell. Brown argues that the imagination allows us to remap reality—not only with respect to what is already known, but with respect to what could be known.¹⁸ This supports his argument that not everything that is known has already been conceptualized. Clearly, this is similar to the idea that we know more than we can tell. Furthermore, Brown’s notion that the creative imagination has the capacity to remap reality dovetails with a Polanyian understanding of discovery.

3. Discovery

Both models place an emphasis on discovery, even though they use different language in so doing. As we have seen, the notion of discovery is a central feature of a heuristic vision of reality. While discovering hidden areas of reality and bringing them to our understanding has long been a hallmark of science, in Gelwick's estimation, this example has unfortunately not been followed in theology (Gelwick 1975, 301). Aaron Milavec explains that in "contrast to modern science, Christianity has often been characterized as commitment to the mere repetition and preservation of a onetime discovery about God revealed through Jesus" (Milavec 2006, 48). Gelwick wonders if this type of approach to theology might partially explain "why the layman today does not really expect much from theologians except trite clichés of the past" (Gelwick 1975, 301). Brown's model seriously challenges such an approach to theology. His commitment to a God of mystery disclosing reality to humanity with an inexhaustible richness means that "there always remains something more to discover, something more to delight the senses and the intellect" (Brown 2008, 26). A heuristic vision of reality challenges theology to follow the example of science and come to understand its task as the ongoing discovery of the richness of reality rather than reflection on a static deposit of revelation preserved in a holy book. The upshot is that theologians would no longer be understood as mere "expositors of the past," but instead as "explorers of the present claiming to have an important angle of understanding reality and expecting to learn new things from it" (Gelwick 1975, 315). This is precisely what Brown is arguing for when he suggests that, "instead of thinking of tradition as purely human reflection added to an original and unchanging divine discourse . . . we need to see that continuing human reflection [is] itself an indispensable part of the process of divine discourse" (Brown 1999, 169). At this point, the heuristic character of Brown's theology becomes abundantly clear.

4. Inexhaustibility of Reality

Both models conceive of reality as inherently inexhaustible. From a Polanyian perspective, the irreducible structure of tacit knowing implies a corresponding inexhaustibility to the structures of reality. In a heuristic vision of reality, that which is most real has the capacity of manifesting itself in unpredictable, inexhaustible ways. Only that which is real can properly be discovered, and discovery always opens up the possibility of more discovery. From a Brownian perspective, there is a requisite commitment to a "God of mystery who has disclosed something of that divinity to humanity but with an inexhaustible richness . . ." (Brown 2008, 26).

5. The Primacy of Tradition

Both models maintain that there is no knowledge outside of participation in a community of shared commitments (i.e., outside of tradition). Both models further recognize the heuristic/hermeneutical circularity of these commitments. Scientists and Christian theologians alike must be committed to the particular set of presuppositions and methods appropriate to their tradition if they are to carry out their work. Attempting to ground commitment noncommittally is a non-starter in both cases.

6. The Dynamic Nature of Orthodoxy & Revelation

Both models realize the dynamic nature of a tradition. Both models recognize that the viability of a tradition is related to its ability to continually undermine itself in the name of development, relevance, and truth. A tradition matures only when its affirmations are accompanied by a corresponding invitation to challenge the legitimacy of its affirmations. The dynamic orthodoxy of tradition in a heuristic vision of reality implicitly grants the right of opposition to it in the name of truth and faithfulness. For Brown, God's accommodation to the vagaries of a developing tradition in the incarnation attest to the reality of dynamic revelation and the need for a tradition to continually re-imagine itself in light of our best knowledge of the world.

Concluding Remarks

Andrew Grosso's diagnosis of the challenges facing the theological enterprise provides context to the urgency of embracing what I have been calling a heuristic vision of theology: "One of the primary challenges facing the theological enterprise is the need to make itself understandable within the broader social and cultural context in which it exists, a context that may be in no way beholden to the religious commitments that inspire and support any particular vision" (Grosso 2007, 32). Transferring the value of this heuristic vision of reality into a corresponding model of theology thus carries with it the additional responsibility of articulating a vision of God that is grounded in tradition, strives for universal intent, and yet resists "the tendency to absolutize the content of its vision" (Grosso 2007, 32). As far as I am concerned, this challenge can only be met if theology becomes willing to engage in genuine interdisciplinary conversation, and thus becomes willing to reimagine one or more of its central commitments when necessary. For numerous reasons, a heuristic theology is well equipped for such conversation, not the least of which is its refusal to absolutize its claims. Grosso recognizes that when the elements of a theological vision become intractable, it inevitably marginalizes itself within the broader culture (Grosso 2007, 32). The stagnation of a theological vision would represent a fundamental "betrayal of the implicit purposes of a heuristic vision, that is, the ongoing effort to understand better a reality that is expected to continue to reveal itself in new and unforeseen ways" (Grosso 2007, 32-3).

Brown offers a model of theology that naturally resists stagnation. By following Brown's analysis of the role played by the imagination in the development of a religious tradition, and by implicitly placing this analysis in the broader context of Polanyi's challenge to the objectivist ideal—an ideal that has served to divide theology from science—we have seen how Brown's appeal to the imagination allows him to close the gap between tradition and revelation in theological discourse, untethering theology from anything that might resemble a "positivism of revelation" (Green 1989, 34). He has also found a way to treat other religions as sources of revelation without compromising the integrity of Christianity, thereby creating an avenue for rich, inter-religious dialogue. Heuristic theology thus sees itself as but one voice in a much larger discourse. A heuristic theology is inherently interdisciplinary.

Bearing in mind that in a heuristic vision of reality what is most real is that which is most significant and most promising to expand the horizon of future discovery, in a corresponding theological vision, systematic reflection on what is most real, significant, and promising will involve the attempt to bring one's understanding of the question of God to bear on the whole of the human experience. The pursuit of a genuinely heuristic theology is thus boldly attempting to construct an integrated vision of nothing less than the entirety of all that is. It can be seen as an attempt to give an account of the infinite from the perspective of the finite such that the infinite necessarily includes the finite, but is not a simple conglomeration of it. This of course assumes that the finite is capable of imagining and/or experiencing the infinite in meaningful ways.

As a theologian in pursuit of what it means to live as a Christian, I am interested in embodying a mode of theological discourse that is faithful to the kind of God I see at the center of the Christian tradition: a God that is creative, dynamic, and incarnate; an inexhaustible reality that can neither be reduced to the metaphysical Big Other beyond the sky nor limited to a projection of human culture and/or the human psyche. Such a pursuit is greatly enhanced by wrestling with the Polanyian tradition. A heuristic theology not only allows us to see our project as one of perpetual development, change, growth, and response, but also one that recognizes saying words-about-God happens within the broader human experience, implying that a heuristic theology sees the sciences, the arts, and other religious traditions as invaluable conversation partners, as discourses that can and do tell us true things about God, the universe, and ourselves.

Bottom line: subscribing to a heuristic vision of reality requires a corresponding mode of theological inquiry, one that endorses a holistic epistemology, sees reality as an inexhaustible playground, values discovery, the creative imagination, a dynamic understanding of orthodoxy and tradition, and aims for universal intent without denying that it is inextricably bathed in particularity. This approach to theology sees reality as a playground, finds pleasure in playing with ideas, and isn't afraid to make mistakes even while it understands the inherently risky nature of saying words-about-God as well as the immense responsibility assumed by those who undertake such a potentially dangerous endeavor. A heuristic vision of theology recognizes that Christianity contains its own negation, that its radical, subversive core prevents it from ever becoming a stagnant system of dogma (for too long), and that it is first and foremost a way of living, moving, and being in the world.

Such is the trajectory of theological inquiry latent in Polanyi's philosophy. It has been my argument that Brown's model largely follows this trajectory, and that his approach can be seen as an embodiment of heuristic theology. I have not undertaken this pursuit simply to add clutter to academic shelves by bringing together two thinkers who have hitherto been treated separately. I have undertaken this conversation because Polanyi's thought continues to be a positive conversation partner for the theologian, because I am convinced that a heuristic theology has implications that cannot be ignored, and that we can begin to appreciate the implications of Polanyi's work for a mature, dynamic approach to theology by paying attention to the exciting work being carried out by David Brown.¹⁹

Endnotes

¹Based on his analysis of Thomas Torrance's interaction with Polanyi, Alister McGrath has identified a methodological distinction between two ways of theologically appropriating Polanyi's work: "foundational" and "illuminative." Whereas illuminative approaches simply involve "pointing out convergence at points of significance," foundational approaches involve a much more sustained engagement that entails a "form of total commitment to Polanyi's general methods or assumptions" (McGrath 1999, 229). Upon surveying a selection of theologians who have constructively appropriated Polanyi's work, theologian Andrew Grosso—attending to McGrath's distinction—argues that "neither approach has managed to represent the theological potential of Polanyi's work with complete success" (Grosso 2007, 114). Grosso is not suggesting that these efforts are necessarily misguided. It's simply the case that among those surveyed, those who selectively employed Polanyi in an illuminative manner, "often failed to represent the full scope of his thought, and have often been rather narrow in their application of his thought to the task of theology," while those who took the more ambitious foundational approach "often failed to account adequately for the dogmatic content of the theological tradition and the responsibilities that inhere with its reception and perpetuation" (Grosso 2007, 114). Thus, any theological appropriation of Polanyi's work must be mindful of the limitations typically encountered by exclusively pursuing one approach over the other. This is clearly one of Grosso's chief concerns in his monograph. By not limiting himself exclusively to either approach, he seeks to avoid the pitfalls typical of each. Instead, his intention is "to initiate a conversation between Polanyi and the theological tradition with the expectation that there is much to be gained on both sides from sustained, meaningful interaction" (Grosso 2007, 114). He further expects that "as we examine the correspondence between the theological tradition and Polanyi's thought, we will recognize new ways of approaching familiar theological questions while also seeing the extent to which it is only a theological mode of inquiry that can bring to fruition the ambitions of Polanyi's philosophy" (Grosso 2007, 114). I draw attention to these distinctions in hopes of contextualizing my own interaction with Polanyi in this paper, which shares Grosso's intention and expectations.

²There are few times however when Polanyi does explicitly engage in dialogue with a theologian. For example, he interacts with Teilhard de Chardin's understanding of the human person in "The Mind-Body Relation" (Polanyi 1968, 102). He also comments on Teilhard's notion of "noogenesis" in *Personal Knowledge*, 388. But the most consistent interaction he sustained with a theologian was with Paul Tillich. There is an (in)famous reference to Tillich in a footnote on page 283 of *Personal Knowledge* where he says that he finds many of his own theological intuitions confirmed in Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. He also takes Tillich to task on the relationship between science and faith, engaging him extensively in "Faith and Reason" and "Science and Religion."

³Colin Grant observes that the real epistemological issue Polanyi sought to address was not the divide between objectivism and subjectivism, but the alleged gulf between the knowing subject and the object known. Thus we should recognize that, "the real alternative is not between objectivism and subjectivism, but between the assumption of the subject-object dichotomy, which results in this oscillation between objectivism and subjectivism on the one hand, and a comprehensive approach, such as Polanyi advocates" (Grant 1987, 266). For Grant, Polanyi occasionally "compromises his holistic approach by appearing to be advocating subjectivism in reaction against the objectivism he opposes, and, in so doing, overlooks some of the most illuminating insights his comprehensive vision can afford," namely, diagnosing our "modern malaise as a form of acute-self consciousness" (Grant 1987, 267). This, Grant refers to as Polanyi's "near miss."

⁴Polanyi identifies two types of problem solving: "systematic" and "heuristic." The difference between them is that while a systematic operation is a "wholly deliberate act, a heuristic process is a combination of active and passive stages" (*PK*, 126). The active stage involves the deliberate process of "preparation" and is followed by a period of "incubation" where nothing is done and nothing happens on the level of consciousness. The fruit of the investigator's efforts, the advent of a "happy thought" is not the result of deliberate action, it simply "happens" (*PK*, 126). Elsewhere, in "The Creative Imagination" especially, Polanyi emphasizes the roles played by the intuition and imagination in this process. The important point is that a heuristic vision of reality prioritizes the roles played by both in the discovery of truth.

⁵This puts the "real" in Polanyi's critical realism. Despite his consistent opposition to an objectivist epistemology, this makes it clear he does not offer a subjectivist one in its place. He explains that scientists, throughout their inquiries, rely "on the presence of something real hidden out there," and thus they will "necessarily also rely on that external presence for claiming the validity of the result that satisfies the question" (Polanyi 1981, 106).

⁶This has immense consequences for theological epistemology—consequences which I can only here provide clues to. In a subsequent article I will flesh out these issues more fully by bringing Polanyi into conversation with a particular reading of Hegel.

⁷In the preface to the second edition, Polanyi says that while he spoke of tradition as a "spiritual reality" in the original publication, he later came to think of it as a belief in "the reality of emergent meaning and truth" (*SFS*, 17).

⁸"Heuristic circularity" is a wonderful little phrase borrowed from Aaron Milavec (Milavec 2006, 474).

⁹This is why positivism is self-defeating: the quest to capture reality in a knowledge "that is firm and final is a denial of life, a pursuit of death" (Grant, 1988, 415).

¹⁰There is an uncanny resemblance between Polanyi's idea here and George Steiner's "wager on transcendence" as the source of all meaning (Steiner 1989, 4).

¹¹Others have expressed similar appreciation. John Macquarrie described the first volume in the series as “the most impressive theological book I have read in quite a long time” (Macquarrie 2001, 471-3).

¹²Brown wonders if Jesus ever understood himself in this way. Brown further suggests that it is not inconceivable to think that Jesus might have understood himself in some sense as sinful—although this would in no way make him a sinner.

¹³For a more sustained treatment of kenosis in Brown’s theology, see *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology*.

¹⁴Mark C. Taylor argues this exact point in *After God*. His aim is to develop a definition of religion that is both sensitive to the stabilizing as well as its de-stabilizing movements (Taylor 2007, 12-3).

¹⁵The chief criticism raised against Brown on this point is the paucity of clear criteria for determining whether or not a development in the tradition is to be considered progressive (i.e., revelatory) or not. For as much as Macquarrie praises Brown’s work in his review of *Tradition*, he sees this as an important question left unanswered: “How does one discriminate among those efforts of the imagination? Can one decide whether its recreations of an event have a sound basis, or has imagination run away with the imaginer?” (Macquarrie 2002, 769). Brown himself acknowledges this weakness in *Tradition* (375) and specifically takes up the issue in *Discipleship* (389-405), suggesting nine specific criteria for how we can decide if a development should be considered consistent with revelation or not.

¹⁶This is a classic Anglican position (King, MacSwain, and Fout 2012, 328).

¹⁷E.g., the Gospel of John’s treatment of Pentecost (Brown 1999, 60ff.), the different treatments of Jesus’ birth story (Brown 1999, 76ff.), and the development of the Abraham narrative (Brown 1999, 227ff.).

¹⁸It is interesting that when making this point he cites Eliade, Jung, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss as examples of thinkers who recognized this—but not Polanyi (Brown 2000, 353 n. 32).

¹⁹This article was originally presented at the Polanyi Society Annual Meeting at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting on November 22, 2013. The comments offered by the three respondents—Jon Fennell, Andrew Grosso, and David Brown—genuinely helped me to clarify my argument and stimulated me to think about many of my central claims in new ways. Thanks for your careful reading of my original essay and your insightful reflections along the way.

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