

# RESTORING FAITH IN REASON: THOMAS PFAU'S DEFENSE OF HUMANISTIC INQUIRY



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## ABSTRACT

*This article provides an appreciative but critical analysis of the account of humanistic inquiry Thomas Pfau develops in *Minding the Modern*. Moleski examines various complementary accounts of tacit knowing, and highlights the importance of assent, conscience, and tradition. He critiques Pfau's account of objectivity, and argues perspectivalism and pluralism are not barriers to reliable knowledge of reality. He concludes with a cursory comparison of the efforts of Pfau, Newman, Polanyi, and Lonergan.*

## Introduction

I am honored and delighted to have this opportunity to discuss Thomas Pfau's study of the concepts of "person" and "will," both of which are central to "Western humanistic inquiry and its ongoing, albeit enormously diverse, attempts to develop a satisfactory account of human agency" (Pfau 2013, 9; unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references are to this work).<sup>1</sup> I am in deep sympathy with his project to critically retrieve the meaning of these key concepts as they have developed in Western thought since the time of Plato and Aristotle (13). With Pfau, I affirm "the viability, indeed the necessity, of narrative continuities in the domain of intellectual history and philosophical theology" (163). The view that gives humanistic inquiry coherence is the

product of many minds over many centuries, one that must be received and explored through “a sustained, comprehensive, and evolving critical engagement...[in order] not to expire in its struggle with competing notions or succumb to inner contradictions or corruptions” (63).

I am very sympathetic to Pfau’s reading of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, John Henry Newman, and Michael Polanyi, and I am also glad to see him in dialogue with my first metaphysics teacher, W. Norris Clarke, SJ (506, 524), as well as with Phil Rolnick (528, 534-537), a fellow devotee of Clarke and Polanyi. I feel very much at home in Pfau’s worldview and with the company that he keeps. However (and mindful of Pfau’s repeated warning against indulging in what Freud calls the “narcissism of minor differences,” 65, 380), I would like to offer some modest variations to some of the themes he explores.

### Illative Sense and Tacit Knowing

John Henry Newman is a major dialogue partner of Pfau’s. Throughout *Minding the Modern*, he repeatedly employs the “quasi-phenomenological orientation” (47, footnote 17) Newman described in both *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845) and *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). My 1991 doctoral dissertation, “Illative Sense and Tacit Knowledge: a Comparison of the Theological Implications of the Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi” (subsequently published as Moleski 2000), was a study of the intersection between the epistemologies of Newman and Polanyi, so it is a joy to see how highly they rank in Pfau’s estimation.<sup>2</sup> I will herein explore some of the ground Newman and Polanyi have in common in the interests of making Newman more accessible to a Polyanian audience as well as highlighting some of the contributions Polanyi can make to Pfau’s project.

The *Grammar of Assent* begins with a distinction Pfau finds useful. Just as Coleridge talks about “the natural differences of *things* and *thoughts*” (587), so Newman draws a distinction between notions and realities: “Sometimes [the terms of a proposition] stand for certain ideas existing in our own minds, and for nothing outside of them; sometimes for things simply external to us, brought home to us through the experiences and informations [*sic*] we have of them” (Newman 1979, 29). To grasp the meaning of an abstract proposition is “notional apprehension,” while grasping the meaning of a proposition about a particular reality is “real apprehension.”

Each form of apprehension is associated with a particular form of assent: acts of *real* assent involve decisions about real apprehension, whereas acts of *notional* assent involve judgment about notional apprehension. These can, however, be confused; we may attempt an act of real assent relative to a notional apprehension, or an act of notional assent relative to a real apprehension. Real assent to propositions about ideas

“tend to be mere assertions without any personal hold on them on the part of those who make them.” Similarly, notional assent to propositions that bear on reality “tend to be conjectures or presentiments, without any logical force.” In light of this, Newman suggests, it seems “that when Inference is clearest, Assent may be least forcible, and, when Assent is most intense, Inference may be least distinct” (Newman 1979, 52).

Pfau understands “real assent” as “an agent’s assent (in itself inaccessible to rational discipline) to the reality and apparent significance of phenomena before they can be scrutinized by means of inferential and propositional reasoning” (404; we will return to this passage below when discussing Polanyi’s insights into tacit knowing). Pfau suggests “this uniquely human capacity...acts as a crucial constraint on the utopian aspirations of Enlightenment rationalism and liberalism.” This is a recurring theme in the book as Pfau appeals to Newman’s standpoint against thinkers who take a much narrower view of the knower and the known (cf. 46-47, 105, 179-180, et al.).

Polanyi does not have a distinctive vocabulary for notional apprehension, notional assent, real apprehension, or real assent. He is more concerned with the fact that “we know more than we can tell” (*TD*, 4). This is true with regard to both those aspects of reality with which we are already familiar and those aspects that intimate a new, and hitherto unrecognized, dimension or depth to reality. “The implications of new knowledge,” writes Polanyi, “can never be known at its birth. For it speaks of something real, and to attribute reality of something is to express the belief that its presence will yet show up in an indefinite number of unpredictable ways” (*PK*, 311).

I find this an immensely rich insight, one that reminds me of the first line of the first poem of the *Tao Te Ching*: “The Tao that can be put into words is not the real Tao.” Pfau explores great realities throughout *Minding the Modern*—self, other, will, intellect, love—none of which can be exhaustively defined and all of which are profoundly “enmeshed” with each other (29). The self I can put into words is not the real self; even the thought I can put into words is not the real thought. In all cases, our goal is “to think the noumenon through the phenomenon” (601).

We have to be careful, however, not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Precise observations, repeatable experiments, formal definitions, strict logic, and definite conclusions are remarkable accomplishments, and are not to be devalued. The error of the Enlightenment lies in over-valuing these great achievements and taking them as an exclusive model of how we know what we know. The philosophies of science inspired by the magnificent growth of science in the last three centuries tend to eliminate, in Newman’s terms, “the personal action of our own minds” (615), as if there could be observations without observers, thoughts without thinkers, knowledge without knowers, judgments without judges, information without understanding—or science without scientists.

For both Newman and Polanyi, knowing is a responsible personal action that falls, as all actions do, under the reign of conscience; this is also a recurring theme in *Minding*

*the Modern*. The title of Newman's great work suggests there may be a "grammar of assent" that would provide the paradigms and regulations for the formation and evaluation of assent, just as grammars provide the norms for correct speech and writing, but it turns out that Newman is actually opposed to the formalization or mechanization of our judgments. Newman argues there is no set of rules and regulations that can take the place of personal judgment—hence, his essay on assent concludes there is no grammar of assent. Pfau concurs, and highlights Newman's insistence "that the foundation for all cognition is to be found not in the 'paper logic' of some syllogistic template, but in the realm of personal judgment of 'Illative Sense' roughly analogous to Aristotelian *phronēsis*" (432-433).

"Illative sense" is arguably one of the least elegant expressions in Newman's writings. "Illative" is formed from *illatus*, the third principle part of the deponent verb, *infero*, which, of course, is the root of "inference." "Illative sense" thus signifies "the self-awareness by which we make inferences." This self-reflexive aspect of our minds acts as the conscience of the intellect, telling us when to grant or withhold assent to various propositions. As Pfau says so well, our grasp of the fundamental obligation to do good and avoid evil "is the condition of possibility for any moral (self-)awareness whatsoever" (289-290). The illative sense is not a formal component of any syllogism, but it is the ever-present subsidiary imperative to seek truth and avoid every form of falsehood. "Illative sense" is Newman's name for what Augustine described as "an inner sense [by which] I watched over the integrity of my senses" (112).

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi describes the conscience of the intellect as "the capacity for appraising our own articulation" (*PK*, 91). We are, in every instance, called upon to "accept commitment as the framework within which we may believe something to be true." Such commitment establishes "the conception of competence which authorizes a fiduciary choice made and timed, to the best of the acting person's ability, as a deliberate and yet necessary choice" (*PK*, 314-315). Pfau also picks up on the language of appraisal: "Simply put, all conscious states are subject to some form of appraisal, be it reflexive and explicit or more tentative and, perhaps, even subliminal" (587). We judge our own performance as knowers subliminally, in the background, while we focus on that which we know and desire to communicate or on that which we hope to discover in the foreground.

Polanyi and Pfau also both employ the language of conscience when describing the act of knowing. In *Science, Faith and Society*, Polanyi suggested conscience is the guardian of the commitments we make: our conscience assents to those acts of knowing whereby we sense we have made contact with reality. Scientists commit themselves "on the strength of evidence which can, admittedly, never be complete." They do so trusting that such a "gamble," when consistent with the "dictates of...scientific conscience," is itself nothing other than their "competent function" as scientists, and is thus the only

way they can make any kind of contribution to science (*SFS*, 40). The title of the final chapter of *Minding the Modern* (591–618) is taken from Coleridge: “Faith is fidelity... to the conscience.” Knowing is essentially an action that depends on using our personal judgment in good conscience—all certitude is essentially moral certitude.

In Pfau’s reading, Aristotle sees “action as the consummation of practical reason” (3). To know is to act wisely with respect to the data and inferences available in any particular question. Therefore, theoretical reason—notional apprehension and assent for Newman, the realm of scientific theory for Polanyi—is the fruit of practical reason. What Newman calls illative sense is the voice of reason at work in all of our reasoning, a reflexive self-awareness that shows us how to reason rightly. This necessary self-appraisal of the operations of the mind is neither innate nor self-evident, but is learned in childhood and appreciated by the kind of introspective phenomenology employed by Newman, Polanyi, and Pfau.

One of the great contributions to this conversation is Polanyi’s assertion that “all knowledge is tacit or rooted in tacit knowing” (*M*, 61). In his 1963 introduction to the second edition of *Science, Faith and Society*, Polanyi describes the central role tacit knowing plays in his philosophy of science: “*Scientific knowing consists in discerning Gestalten that are aspects of reality*. I have here called this ‘intuition’; in later writings I have described it as the tacit coefficient of a scientific theory, by which it bears on experience, as a token of reality. Thus it foresees yet indeterminate manifestations of the experience on which it bears” (*SFS*, 10).

Pfau does not use Polanyi’s language of “tacit knowing” or “the tacit dimension,” but he is very sensitive to the reality, as when he observed that “an agent’s assent” is “in itself inaccessible to rational discipline” and pre-exists any kind of scrutiny “by means of inferential and propositional reasoning” (Pfau 2013, 404). As with Descartes, the philosophies of the Enlightenment take mathematics, geometry, or pure logic as the norm for all knowing; there can be no knowledge unless there are clear and distinct ideas that possess their own self-evidence or that are rigidly linked to self-evident ideas by means of rigorous logical argument. The Enlightenment “grammar of assent” was characterized by “*not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built on will warrant*. Whoever goes beyond this measure of assent, it is plain, receives not truth in the love of it, loves not truth for truth-sake, but for some other by-end” (Newman 1979, 138). It is the rejection of the more primitive, but fundamental form of tacit knowing and “informal reasoning” (Newman) that leads to modernity’s exaltation of “explicitness, transparency, certainty, verifiability” as the grounds of autonomous human knowledge (160). Pfau affirms the reality and value of tacit knowing, without using that particular label for it, in all of his efforts at “rehabilitating reason as something more than mere calculation—indeed, as substantially *free*” (215).

What Polanyi describes as “tacit knowing” appears in Newman’s work as “implicit reason,” and Pfau picks up on the distinction Newman made in his *Oxford University*

*Sermons* between explicit (or conscious) and implicit (or unconscious) reason (301-302). In his discussion of the development of ideas in a living, humanistic tradition, Pfau underscores the fact that relying on tacit, personal powers of reasoning demands an act of faith on the part of those engaged in reasoning: the hidden reality glimpsed by one generation is gradually revealed by those who come after, “provided the idea in question had sufficient weight and significance not to expire in its struggle with competing notions or succumb to inner contradictions or corruptions” (63).

By its very nature, then, there can be no strict proof of the reality of tacit knowing. Those who have noticed this aspect of reasoning can only ask others to engage in the same kind of introspection so as to gain an intuitive appreciation of their intuitive powers of reasoning. “All knowledge is tacit or rooted in tacit knowing” (*M*, 61; cf. *KB*, 195; *SFS*, 10). Children know no words at birth. Their awareness is fully tacit and inchoate. To learn how to speak, and therefore to gain what is necessary to be educated in how to think in a linear and coherent fashion, is to solve the puzzle of meaning wordlessly. All children have their own “Helen Keller moment” when they pass from not understanding the words, gestures, facial expressions, and body language of their parents to “seeing what they mean.” Only when the children have gained the fundamental skill of interpreting meanings can they then enter into the great domain of articulate knowledge discovered, preserved, and transmitted by a culture.

The tacit powers of reasoning that enabled the child to begin to reason articulately do not disappear when the child begins to use speech. Those spontaneous powers of the mind remain operative at all times: “Already in the tenth of his *Oxford University Sermons*, Newman had emphasized how all inquiry hangs on anticipations of meaning—Gadamer’s ‘pre-understanding’ (*Forverständnis*)—since in the absence of such *praepjudicata opinioni* it would be logically impossible to correlate the evidence that is to either confirm or disprove them at all” (65). Using a Polanyian observation about “unspecifiable knowledge,” Pfau portrays knowing as an art: “‘To the extent to which our intelligence falls short of the idea of precise formalization...we act and see by the light of unspecifiable knowledge and must acknowledge that we accept the verdict of our personal appraisal.’ In other words, the authority of a specific method of knowing inevitably rests on, and is circumscribed by, the art of judgment” (29).

## Standpoints, Perspectives, Frameworks: Taking a View of Views

Pfau’s narrative of the conceptual history of “human agency, intellectual traditions, and responsible knowledge” (the sub-title of *Minding the Modern*) might be summarized as a clash between two worldviews: “the Platonic-Christian-humanist model of will, person, action, judgment, and responsibility” (71) as opposed to the “naturalist...and reductionist outlook” of modernity (73). Scientists, mathematicians, or logicians do not need to grasp the nature of their own worldview in order to function

competently. Their “vision of a reality” (*PK*, 86) operates tacitly in the background as they focus on the questions that concern them. They do not need an adequate account of their own human agency as they *use* their human powers skillfully to ask and answer questions appropriate to their field of inquiry. Good scientists may advocate bad philosophies of science because the skills necessary for scientific investigation are different from the skills needed for philosophical reflection. In a sense, the objects of the formal sciences are right before our eyes; the mind that perceives through the eyes and that reasons from what is seen is hidden from view. The one who sees something directly cannot directly see oneself seeing. Just as the eye is transparent to itself and functions in a subsidiary fashion to what the eye is focused on, so the mind operates in the background of consciousness as we focus on particular aspects of reality in the foreground.

In Pfau’s understanding of humanistic inquiry, our vision of reality affects every aspect of how we explore the realm of meaning. Drawing on Augustine, Newman, and Gadamer, he insists “the proper point of departure for hermeneutic inquiry is not some instance of objective certainty or ‘first principle’ to be syllogistically proven and conveyed in propositional form” (71). Rather, it lies in what Newman described as a “moment of certitude” that commits us to “view” the implications of which we then explore and gradually discover. When we “peremptorily exclude all questions of value, commitment, and final causes,” we are left with a perspective that is “by and large incapable of correlating thought and existence, life and action” (72).

Pfau often invokes Newman’s understanding of views by placing the word in quotation marks as a reminder that the view in question is not an ordinary standpoint or perspective, but a deep and complex presentiment about what really matters: “Far from originating in some incidental and passive apprehension of brute facts, all understanding begins with a ‘view,’ a commitment to a hypothesis or idea whose hold on the intellect is as palpable as it is destined to undergo continual reevaluation and revision” (66). “All understanding begins with a ‘view’” is a fairly sweeping generalization—it is at least implicitly a view on all possible points of view—and one with which I think I concur, but it is here that I find some slight discrepancies between Pfau’s view of reason and my own.

It seems to me Pfau stops short of understanding the full implications of the view that he investigates and upholds. At one point, Pfau’s recognition of “performative inconsistency” in Hume leads him to the brink of making the claim that the Western philosophical tradition, like the physical sciences that grew from “*philosophia naturalis*,” has discovered truths unknown to any other philosophical tradition, truths that enable us to be critical of all cultures, including our own. Pfau, however, seems unwilling to embrace that implication of his own vision of reality. We may be committed to a particular view of things, but this involves neither “a nostalgic outlook on the past”

nor a “triumphalist view of intellectual history... *We simply do not have at our disposal an independent point of view from which objectively to judge whether the recurrent confrontation between naturalist and Platonic legacies has truly advanced our thinking or, perhaps, left it impoverished*” (69-70, emphasis added).

I do not think it is triumphalistic to claim no other culture in history has elaborated the kind of principles that enable its adherents to strive for and achieve objectivity. Rather, that is simply a description of what sets Aristotelian realism apart from all other kinds of philosophy. While I have come to this view via a very peculiar and idiosyncratic path, the whole point of cultivating the skill of abstract thinking is to set aside my roots as a Polish-Irish-English mixed breed born of two Canadian parents at the end of the baby boom in the United States. I am a bald, overweight, and irascible old man, but these aspects of the mystery that are part of me are negligible when I am defending the Western view of right reason. My foibles certainly can and do pose difficulties in my family and my friendships, but I am not exalting myself; rather, I praise the tradition of the perennial philosophy developed by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and their heirs, when I claim this tradition provides what Polanyi called an “interpretative framework” (*PK*, 59) that allows us to act *as if* we possessed “an independent point of view from which to objectively judge” (69-70) competing intellectual traditions.

In some passages, Pfauf portrays the effort to achieve objectivity as part of the essential flaw in modernity instead of part of its genius. “Ancient philosophy,” he says, “has no concept equivalent to the modern idea of ‘information’ as neutral and instrumental knowledge; in fact, the proposition that there might be a type of knowledge that can be agonistically or indifferently appraised by means of some ‘view from nowhere’ would have struck thinkers of that era as bizarre” (91; see also 608). However, I think that to assert that the ideal of objectivity requires “some ‘view from nowhere’” is to create a straw man. All of our judgments require a view, and all of our views have a developmental history, but it does not follow that our power to think abstractly is defeated by these necessary conditions of human inquiry. It is not just Hume who must offer “an equally comprehensive, alternative account,” but Pfauf, Gadamer, and MacIntyre. To declare apodictically “there is no ‘view from nowhere,’” one must possess some kind of transcendent perspective to ground that judgment on all possible judgments. MacIntyre’s claim “there is no such thing as justification as such... no such thing as justification independent of the context of any tradition,” and no independent justification of “first principles” apart from “the theory as a whole” (232) either is just a mystical edict asserted through his own gnostic illumination or a counter-example to the point that he is trying to make. If no one can take a standpoint outside of the culture that educated them, then MacIntyre, unless he happens to be God or an angel masquerading as a human being, cannot make universal negative claims about the limits of reason.

“There are no timeless truths” is either a timeless truth of the very sort that it negates or else it is a truism of virtually no import about the chronology of the development of ideas. Once upon a time, we did not know that water molecules are composed of one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms; some chemist discovered this truth at some particular time in history, and now we know something about the whole history of the cosmos that was not known beforehand, namely that wherever and whenever there is water, its chemical identity is H<sub>2</sub>O.

It may well be that there are no presuppositionless standpoints. If so, the declaration that “there are no presuppositionless standpoints” is based on presuppositions. If the declaration is true, then it follows that relying on presuppositions does not necessarily keep us from knowing truth—that there are no presuppositionless standpoints is irrelevant to the question of finding out what presuppositions are involved in the questions that interest us. The historical rootedness of presuppositions does not mean that we are in bondage to our idiosyncrasies. We cannot think without making assumptions; our assumptions are essentially prejudices that provide us with “antecedent probabilities” (Newman 1979, 328-329; cf. Pfau 2013, 27-28, 63-64, et al.). For God and the angels, perhaps, there may be direct knowledge without the need to draw inferences, but for all rational agents in this cosmos who have an embodied intellect like ours, such that “all knowledge begins in the senses” (Aristotle), to judge is to rely on pre-judgments. From the fact that we need prejudices in order to reason rightly, it does not follow that all of our judgments are necessarily biased. If that were the case, then we could never know that all reasoning depends on presumptions and that therefore “there are no presuppositionless standpoints” in any culture at any time in any place in the world.

Polanyi recognized this quandary, and saw that there was no way out except through accepting that all of our judgments are hazardous commitments. We are the ones who hold and accredit our intellectual passions and beliefs, but we hold them with universal intent. Even when we allow ourselves to be guided by the passions and heuristic instincts of others, we are the ones who allow ourselves to be so led, acknowledging even as we do so we may be mistaken (*PK*, 145). To advance the Western tradition, we must act in faith that our reasoning either is reliable or that it is corrigible. We do not have the freedom to change our nature into that of God or the angels. We must work with what nature has given us.

Pfau’s exposition of Coleridge points toward a relatively satisfying “comprehensive account” of our power to “break out” (*PK*, 195-202) of the frameworks in which we first find our intellectual bearings. Pfau highlights Coleridge’s rejection of the “modern perspectivalist and pluralist argument that rationality is itself contingent on, and determined by, inherently non-rational (material) factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, material circumstances, and so forth” (558). Every contingent act of knowing intuitively something of the necessary, and this intuition reassures us of the veracity of our intellectual efforts, however halting or groping they may be. In every judgment something

is finite, I implicitly rely on an awareness of the infinite; in every recognition something is time-bound, I manifest an awareness of a timeless viewpoint; whenever I see I am not God, I silently appeal to “the sense of his holy presence” (611).

In calling this vision of reality a “comprehensive account,” I am not suggesting it has been or can be spelled out with mathematical or logical precision. The transcendental realities of truth, beauty, and goodness in the classical Platonic triad, or “the good, the beautiful, the just, reason” in Pfau’s exposition of Strauss (51), are not clear and distinct ideas that can be expressed in notional propositions fit for notional apprehension and notional assent. The Tao I can bring into focus is not the real Tao. The transcendental realities that can be designated by notional propositions are not the real transcendentals. Polanyi holds they operate on our minds in a tacit manner: “They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being; as they are themselves our ultimate framework, they are essentially inarticulable” (*PK*, 60).

Pfau argues it is not our ability to articulate our understanding of the good “in propositional form” that matters, but rather “the very effort to achieve moral articulacy” (253). Our tacit awareness of incommunicable transcendentals bears on every aspect of reality that we bring into focal awareness. Similarly, Polanyi argues our use of tools, signs, and symbols “can be conceived as such only in the eyes of a person who relies on them to achieve or to signify something. *This reliance is a personal commitment which is involved in all acts of intelligence by which we integrate some things subsidiarily to the center of our focal attention.*” Every such act involves an ineradicable personal commitment and is thus “a manner of disposing of ourselves” (*PK*, 61).

The aspect of the self we call “intellect” is always oriented toward the truth—the hermeneutic model “conceives of ideas and concepts as continuously evolving realizations of a truth...Concepts are grasped as conduits for the successive distillation of a *truth*” (41). The aspect of the self we call “will” is always oriented toward the good (*synderesis*, cf. 231, 273, 289-290, 320). The aspect of self some call the heart, as in Newman’s motto, “*cor ad cor loquitur*,” is drawn to beauty: “[I]t is not epistemology but ethics—for Shaftesbury intimately entwined with aesthetics—that should be the principal focus of philosophy” (239; cf. 242, 271, 283).<sup>3</sup> The self is not a prison for itself. We can, paradoxically, adopt a viewpoint above ourselves and call our own commitments into question: “For to engage life and human consciousness *as a philosophical problem* is to stand necessarily at some remove from it and to have achieved a certain measure of transcendence” (474). In such an act, the self goes beyond the self. To a machine intelligence, this is a contradiction in terms; to a phenomenologist, this is an observation.

## Conclusion

When I was studying philosophy at Fordham University as a young Jesuit, I fell under the spell of Bernard Lonergan's *Insight* (1972). I do not know how many times I have read it since 1975—probably six or eight, at least. Lonergan had a similar fascination with Newman during his early studies: “My fundamental mentor and guide has been John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent*... [I] found Newman's presentation to be something that fitted in with the way I knew things. It was from that kernel that I went on to different authors” (in Gallagher 2004, 735). In the section on “The Notion of a Universal Viewpoint,” Lonergan anticipates precisely the kind of work Pfau has done in *Minding the Modern*:

The universal viewpoint is concerned with the interpreter's capacity to grasp meanings; it would open his mind to ideas that do not lie on the surface and to views that diverge enormously from his own; it would enable him to find clues where otherwise he might look but would fail to see; it would equip him with a capacity to transport his thinking to the level and texture of another culture in another epoch. There are the external sources of historical interpretation and, in the main, they consist in spatially ordered marks on paper or parchment, papyrus or stone. But there are also sources of interpretation immanent in the historiographer himself, in his ability to distinguish and recombine elements in his own experience, in his ability to work backwards from contemporary to earlier accomplishments of insights in human development, in his ability to envisage the protean possibilities of the notion of being, the core of all meaning, which varies in content with the experience, the insights, the judgments, and the habitual orientation of each individual (Lonergan 1972, 565).

From Lonergan's standpoint, Pfau is operating from the universal viewpoint advocated by the *philosophia perennis*. Pfau prescinds from his day, age, place, and time in order to enter into the worldview of the authors whom he reads. He considers their works in the light of invariant principles of reason and places authors in dialogue with each other and with the concerns of the present day by translating from one cultural context to another and by mapping their contributions on a grid oriented to the transcendental ideals of the true, the beautiful, and the good.

Lonergan goes beyond Polanyi in his assertion that there is an objective universal viewpoint that provides us, in principle, with a view of all possible views. As so many do, Polanyi took the history of scientific revisions as a model for all thinking about thinking, a paradigmatic example of a tradition intended to provide its followers with

progressive “intimations of hidden truths” that lead them to a greater understanding of and participation in reality. “Such are the metaphysical grounds of intellectual life in a free, dynamic society: the principles which safeguard intellectual life in such a society. I call this a society of explorers” (*TD*, 82-83).

Loneragan, by contrast, distinguished between the lower frameworks of scientific inquiry and the higher frameworks of humanistic inquiry:

Popular relativism is prone to argue that empirical science is the most reliable form of human knowledge; but empirical science is subject to indefinite revision; therefore, all human knowledge is equally subject to indefinite revision. Now such argument is necessarily fallacious. One must definitively know invariant features of human knowledge before one can assert that empirical science is subject to indefinite revision; and if one definitively knows invariant features of human knowledge, then one knows what is not subject to revision. Moreover, as is obvious, such knowledge surpasses empirical science at least in the respect that it is not subject to revision (Loneragan 1972, 336).

The presuppositions that make Pfau’s position tenable are the invariant principles of abstract reasoning: “Theories can be revised if there is a reviser. But to talk about revising the revisers is to enter a field of empty speculation in which the name ‘revision’ loses its determinate meaning” (Loneragan 1972, 304). Lonergan is diametrically opposed to Polanyi’s view that a correct account of the metaphysical foundation of human knowing must envision the possibility of being overturned by revolutionary discoveries:

Such a metaphysics, once it had surmounted its initial difficulties, would be stable. It would admit incidental modifications and improvements, but it could not undergo the revolutionary changes to which the empirical sciences are subject. For a science is open to revolutionary change inasmuch as it is possible to reach a higher viewpoint and consequently to alter the content of its primitive terms and relations. But it is possible to reach a higher viewpoint only within the framework of inquiring and critical intelligence; there is not, in human knowledge, any possible higher viewpoint that goes beyond that framework itself and replaces intelligent inquiry and critical reflection by some surrogate; and the viewpoint of metaphysics is constituted by nothing less than inquiring intelligence and critical reflection...Accordingly, since metaphysics is the integral heuristic structure of proportionate being, since it is a structure

that is coincident with inquiring intelligence and critical reflection, metaphysics is not open to revolutionary change (Lonergan 1972, 393-394).

Far-ranging statements about what humans can and cannot know all depend on an appraisal of our common human nature, which is a metaphysical question. Lonergan defends his view that we are capable of operating from a universal standpoint by noting the self-referential inconsistency of anyone who would challenge his basic account of knowing:

The only manner in which this basic theorem could be modified would be to modify its factual supposition that knowing consists in experiencing, understanding, and judging; and it has been argued that that fact is not open to revision in any concrete meaning of the term 'revision.' For any human reviser would appeal to experience, understanding, and judgment; and there is no use arguing that men might be other than they are, because it is equally true that the universe might be other than it is, and the issue lies, not in the possibility of a different metaphysics in a different universe, but in the possibility of a different metaphysics in this universe (Lonergan 1972, 735).

The reading, exposition, interpretation, and critique that Pfau has done seems to me to be consistent with Lonergan's understanding of metaphysics, although Pfau's appeal to the universal viewpoint of the western tradition is tacit rather than explicit. I have seen more than I can say and learned more than I can tell from Pfau's breathtaking exploration of the "abiding framework" of the Western intellectual tradition (162) and look forward to his next volume on the rehabilitation of the image in the nineteenth century. I am convinced that speculative thinking is not a luxury but a necessity. We must see what we believe, not by sight but by insight, and I am sure that Pfau's work on aesthetics will be eye-opening.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The phrase "humanistic inquiry" does not appear in the index of *Minding the Modern*, but it is a favorite expression of Pfau's (e.g., 40, 46-47, 52, 53, 71-73, 75, 509). I take it as a convenient name for the tradition with which Pfau identifies and which he wishes to renew, defend, and refresh in this work.

<sup>2</sup>Through my work with Bill Scott on *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), I discovered Polanyi had read the *Grammar of Assent* twice; after

mulling this over for a decade or so, I finally came to grips with that fact in “Polanyi and Newman: a Reconsideration,” in *Tradition and Discovery* 41/2 (2014-2015), 45-55.

<sup>3</sup>In his next book, Pfau will almost certainly expand on the importance of aesthetics in human inquiry, and intimates as much in the last passage of *Minding the Modern*: “The strong emphasis on the visual and the image that characterizes Ruskin’s aesthetics and that is also observable in its most profound extension, Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetics, reflects attempts to develop a phenomenology of the human person by other means. It will be the matter of another book to show how... [Coleridge’s] heirs proceeded to rethink the human in emphatically objective terms, viz., by embarking on a rehabilitation of the image” (617-618).

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