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Submission Guidelines

Submissions: All manuscripts should be submitted as a Microsoft Word file attached to an email message. **Articles** should be no more than 6000 words in length (inclusive of keywords, abstract, notes, and references) and sent to Paul Lewis at lewis_pa@mercer.edu. All submissions will be sent out for blind peer review. **Book reviews** should be no more than 1000 words in length and sent to Andrew Grosso at atgrosso@icloud.com.

Spelling: We recognize that the journal serves English-speaking writers around the world and so do not require anyone's "standard" English spelling. We do, however, require all writers to be consistent in whatever convention they follow.

Citations:

- Our preference is for Chicago's parenthetical/reference style in which citations are given in the text as (last name of author year, page number), combined with full bibliographical information at the end of the article. One exception is that Polanyi's major works may be cited parenthetically using the following abbreviations (with abbreviations italicized):

<i>CF</i>	<i>Contempt of Freedom</i>
<i>KB</i>	<i>Knowing and Being</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>Logic of Liberty</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<i>PK</i>	<i>Personal Knowledge</i>
<i>SEP</i>	<i>Society, Economics, and Philosophy</i>
<i>SFS</i>	<i>Science, Faith, and Society</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Study of Man</i>
<i>STSR</i>	<i>Scientific Thought and Social Reality</i>
<i>TD</i>	<i>Tacit Dimension</i>

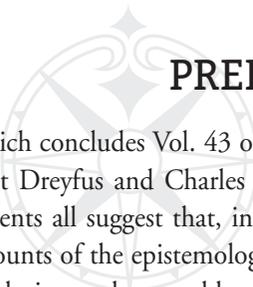
For example: Polanyi argues that (*TD*, 56). Full bibliographical information should still be supplied in the references section since many of us may work with different editions of his works.

- Endnotes should be used sparingly and be placed before the reference section.
- We do recognize that Polanyi's work connects with scholars who work in diverse disciplines that use different style guides. To the extent that our software allows, we will accept other styles (e.g., APA or MLA) so long as the author is consistent and careful in following it. The main point, of course, is to give the reader enough information to locate and engage your sources. Manuscripts that are not careful and consistent in style will be returned so that the author can make corrections, which may delay publication.

The Polanyi Society gratefully acknowledges the support of Mercer University, Macon, GA, for the mailing of *Tradition & Discovery*.

Tradition & Discovery is prepared for printing by Faithlab in Macon, GA.

Tradition & Discovery is indexed selectively in *The Philosopher's Index* and *Religious and Theological Abstracts* and is included in the EBSCO online database of academic and research journals. *Tradition & Discovery* is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals and is also available online at www.polanyisociety.org.



PREFACE

This issue, which concludes Vol. 43 of *TAD*, features a symposium on *Retrieving Realism* by Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor. While deeply sympathetic to their work, our respondents all suggest that, in one way or another, Polanyi's work offers more nuanced accounts of the epistemological problems generated by modernity and therefore a better solution to those problems. This issue also includes two book reviews: Andrew Grosso reviews Charles Taylor's *Language Animal* and Dale Cannon reviews Christian Smith's *To Flourish or Destruct*.

Inserted as well is our annual reminder to renew your individual memberships or library subscriptions. You may renew by following the instructions on the flyer. Remember that the deadline is December 31, 2017 in order to keep receiving print copies of *TAD*.

Finally, a couple of reminders: News and Notes, information about November's Annual Meeting in Boston, and other Society information is now online at www.polanyisociety.org.

Paul Lewis

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A POLANYIAN EPISTEMOLOGY MANQUÉ: REFLECTIONS ON RETRIEVING REALISM



John V. Apczynski

Keywords: Hubert Dreyfus, Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi, tacit knowing, preconceptual knowledge, bodily basis of knowing, realism, scientific knowledge, cultural pluralism, progress in knowing, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, John McDowell, Richard Rorty, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, John Searle, Saul Kripke

ABSTRACT

These reflections attempt to clarify and strengthen Dreyfus and Taylor's defense of a realist understanding of knowing by comparing it to features of Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge. I believe this overcomes some ambiguities such as their use of "mediation" and strengthens their case in discussing science without recourse to the notion of a "view from nowhere." These in turn provide a more robust understanding of their understanding of realism within a pluralist framework. For students of Polanyi's thought, this comparative effort provides an opportunity to place Polanyi's theory within the wider world of contemporary philosophical thinking that they bring to their exposition of a "contact" theory of knowing. This might provide a basis for developing Polanyi's thought through these contemporary channels.

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor have proposed in *Retrieving Realism* a theory of human knowing that overcomes the obstacles derived from the modern presuppositions of detached, impersonal objectivity.¹ They affirm that when knowledge is understood to be an activity of knowers directly involved in making their way in their environments, the "problem" of trying to explain how something "external" is correctly present to our "inner states" dissolves. A student of Polanyi who reflects momentarily

on this can immediately discern that this was the sort of project that motivated Polanyi to produce *Personal Knowledge*.² In fact, I contend that most of the major themes of Dreyfus and Taylor had already been proposed by Polanyi sixty years earlier. I say this in spite of the fact that there is no explicit acknowledgment of any relationship of their work to Polanyi's.³ What I propose to do here, then, is to survey salient features of Dreyfus and Taylor's arguments in light of Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge in the hope of clarifying this unacknowledged relationship. My expectation is that this will contribute to strengthening their position as well as encourage students of Polanyi to engage with this important work.

Dreyfus and Taylor begin by exploring Wittgenstein's observation that an impoverished picture of knowing dominating our modern culture and its implicit parameters held us captive, so much so that even attempts to break free were not entirely successful (*RR*, 1-5). They call this a "mediational" picture of reality, but it would be more helpful, I believe, if we followed Polanyi here and understood it as an "impersonal" and "totally explicit" understanding of knowledge with a goal of being able to control our environment. These goals of complete objectivity coupled with a striving for perfectionism implicitly fed a "moral inversion" according to Polanyi.⁴ Dreyfus and Taylor intend for their analysis to apply to our activities as embodied, social, and cultural agents (*RR*, 15) as well, but this requires a leap from their more technical analysis of the dominant philosophical picture of knowing. They recognize, for example, that their basic conceptualization for the modern distortion, "mediational," has to be modified by the qualification of "only through" (*RR*, 10).

The ambiguities of Dreyfus and Taylor's analysis become clearer when we consider their formulation of an alternative to their understanding of the mediational picture. They call this alternative a "contact theory," which they claim provides "an account of knowledge as our attaining unmediated contact with the reality known" (*RR*, 17). Their intention is clear: they are attempting to develop some understanding of knowing in which the knower experiences a direct (not, as they are required to say here because of their preceding analysis, "unmediated") contact with the reality known. This contact, they carefully point out,

is not achieved on the level of Ideas, but is rather something primordial, something we never escape.... These [living, active] beings are at grips with a world and each other; this original contact provides the sense-making context for all their knowledge constructions, which, however much they are based on mediating depictions, rely for their meaning on this primordial and indissoluble involvement in the surrounding reality (*RR*, 18-19).

Here we have an excellent summary statement of what Polanyi calls tacit awareness, something he painstakingly elaborated from inarticulate sensory experience—even in lower life forms—up through articulation and expression of our highest ideals (*PK*, 69-131). Knowing is accordingly something we perform, an activity through which we orient ourselves to our surroundings, not a detached state of awareness.⁵ Dreyfus and Taylor acknowledge several twentieth century philosophers who attempted to express some variations of this insight, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, but tellingly omit Polanyi.

Because our interactions with our surroundings are dependent on our tacit awareness of subsidiary clues directly experienced by us and integrated into a focal whole, justification, they rightly point out, has a quality of self-authentication (*RR*, 19). A claim to know something requires, as Polanyi would put it, a personal affirmation that grounds our belief to know the reality adequately. There is no explicit, independent criterion to which we may impersonally appeal. A second characteristic of the way we deal with the world is that it is path dependent (*RR*, 22). Consequently, our experience of our world is always an achievement, never an isolated unit capable of discrete analysis. In Polyanian terms this directedness is a feature of the “from-to” structure of our knowing. From our simple awareness of our environment all the way up to our dwelling in our cultural ideals, knowing is temporal. The modern penchant for dissecting knowing into isolatable, particular elements fails to recognize this holistic character of knowing, which Dreyfus and Taylor’s presentation of their “contact theory” discloses.

Based on this preliminary understanding of a holistic understanding of knowing, they turn their attention to exploring how thinkers attempt to escape the flawed picture with its “primacy of the monological” (*RR*, 28). One step is to “deconstruct” the foundationalist implications of the disengaged picture. Dreyfus and Taylor show how Kant and Hegel begin the process by explicitly pointing out the background processes implied by the disengaged view, which undermine its assumptions (*RR*, 31-34). Interestingly, Marjorie Grene made a similar argument in her Polyanian epistemological study when she claimed that our “synthetic a prioris” are subject to historical development even though Kant himself did not quite recognize it at the time.⁶ The major challenge to the foundationalist picture arose in the twentieth century when many thinkers attempted to escape from attempts to build certain knowledge on undeniable building blocks. At this point new problems emerge when various thinkers try to clarify what this entails. For example, Charles Taylor has argued that John Searle, who clearly attempts to develop an antifoundationalist position, nonetheless remains trapped within Cartesian assumptions, because he insists that background capacities have to be mental in order to rise to the level of intentionality.⁷ Dreyfus and Taylor, to the contrary, hold that our ability to make our way in our world involves not only explicit forms of understanding, but implicit bodily ones as well (*RR*, 45). They point

to Merleau-Ponty's use of the term *motor intentionality* to highlight an "unmediated" body-based intentionality (*RR*, 48).⁸ For them motor intentionality precedes mental capacities and formulations and makes them possible. Similarly, Polanyi had pointed to forms of inarticulate intelligence in animals (*PK*, 71-74) and in humans as the bodily basis of our own knowledge: "the inarticulate mental capacities developed in our body by the process of evolution become then the tacit coefficients of articulate thought" (*PK*, 389). Our everyday coping thus grounds and sustains our background understanding, which provides the context for our reflective thought.

Next, Dreyfus and Taylor turn to assessing our explicit knowledge claims. They call the dominant philosophical tradition today "representationalist" in that we are somehow constrained within our own representations or language-games and cannot get beyond them to compare our claims to an elusive "reality" (*RR*, 57-58). Dreyfus and Taylor argue that philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson rely on the assumptions of representationalism in order to show that their non-realist position is obvious. Paradoxically, their argument is meant to repudiate representationalism. "This is what it means to be held captive," they wryly observe (*RR*, 58). Their response to this dilemma is fundamentally Polanyian: they point to the bodily basis of all knowing, even relying on Gestalt experiments to support their position (*RR*, 60). Rorty's and Davidson's unacknowledged reliance on such assumptions allow them to "know" much more than they acknowledge that they know. We all draw on "the as-yet-unarticulated sense we have of things" to think about our world (*RR*, 65). Dreyfus and Taylor conclude that we must allow for a kind of preconceptual understanding on the basis of which we predicate our concepts to things (*RR*, 69). Such an engaged relationship to the world is the basis for our efforts to make sense of striving for meaning and is both spontaneous and passive, imposed by the realities we encounter. Even the language that they use here almost appears derivative from Polanyi's writings.

This leads them to take up a more detailed assessment of the place of the preconceptual in our knowing. For this they consider the case made by John McDowell in *Mind and World*, which is also a critique of a dualist epistemology (*RR*, 71). To affirm that a brute given impinges on our perceptions by causing us to form perceptual beliefs opens us to skepticism since the causal impact simply leads to a particular belief without any clear understanding of how it emerges (*RR*, 73). To affirm a belief requires rule-governed activity (reasoning) with the creative spontaneity allowing us to recognize its larger context. When placed in the framework of an ongoing activity negotiating our environment, whether this be riding a bicycle, pursuing a scientific experiment, or facing a moral dilemma, we are attempting to "get it right" by relying on host of preconceptual clues.⁹ Why, then, does McDowell resist acknowledging a preconceptual contact with reality guiding our reasoning? Dreyfus and Taylor suggest that McDowell is emphasizing the role of reasoning in checking our perceptions that prevents him

from accepting the notion of the preconceptual dimension in our knowledge (*RR*, 77). They offer what they consider an explicit (eleven-step) account of our skillful perception and interaction with the world leading to the establishment of beliefs that are validly justified (*RR*, 88-90) with the expectation that this may contribute to narrowing the gap between their account and McDowell's.

In the succeeding chapter, Dreyfus and Taylor consolidate their understanding of the contact theory by examining features of what it means to be an embodied agent which is embedded in a society and at grips with the world (*RR*, 91). One obvious feature is that our understanding of the world is partial and limited, even though in another sense it is unshakeable and incorrigible (*RR*, 93-94).¹⁰ This embodiment requires that we avoid a "subject" vs. "object" dualism which implies an isolatable subject who is capable of an impersonal account of knowledge. A knowing person always is engaged within a world, which includes the physical environment as well as the social and cultural features shaping the knower's relationship to the world. One objection to such a depiction is that this portrayal is "phenomenological" in that it fails to account for the "necessity" required by the neural picture of the brain. Dreyfus and Taylor counter that neuroscience provides only the necessary causal conditions, not the sufficient conditions, for the agent's ability to cope with the situation.¹¹ Such challenges seem plausible only from within the remnants of the Cartesian representationalism which overlooks our tacit, direct contact with the world (*RR*, 98-101).

In the latter chapters they take up a second line of refutation of the critical turn that ontologized the method of critical thought.¹² This challenges the monological focus of modern theory by highlighting the primacy of conversation in human life (*RR*, 106). This concerns our human world that opens us to the meanings on the moral and ideal level. Here they rely on Gadamer's notions of fusion of horizons and conversation to explore how we can inquire and appreciate alternative views of the world.¹³ They consider this a second kind of "contact" which we must acknowledge: "The 'contact' in one case [normal growing in a given society and culture] consists of actual dealings with the world, and enables us to get behind our representations (formulated beliefs); in the other case [of encountering humans in an alien culture], it consists of a capacity to respond, resonate with, make sense of human meanings; and it enables us to get beyond and beneath, not so much representations—they are involved here—but a kind of imprinting, whereby a certain range of meanings have become for us the human meanings. And these two abilities are intertwined at the root in our most basic bodily comportments" (*RR*, 128). They acknowledge, as Polanyi did when describing scientific discovery, that such transformed understandings of the other entail a change of self-understanding (*RR*, 125).¹⁴ Polanyi began to address the knotty issues involved in what we today identify as the phenomenon of cultural pluralism when he reflected on the stability of cultural beliefs through the anthropological example of studies on

the Azande (*PK*, 287-94). He proposed his notion of the “personal”—as distinct from the subjective or the objective—by which he meant a committed decision to accept a belief, acknowledging all the while its reliance a host of subsidiary clues ranging from perceptual contact with our surroundings and encompassing our dwelling in our highest cultural ideals (*PK*, 300-303). Our acceptance of our particular cultural circumstances, coupled with universal aspirations aiming toward transcendent ideals, constitutes our calling (*PK*, 320-24). Dreyfus and Taylor are making a similar case when they claim that in encountering other people from different cultures with alien ideals, we have a capacity to appreciate them because our language does not exhaust our contact with the realities embodied in these meanings (*RR*, 128-29). Our capacity to learn, transcend our assumptions in unexpected ways, is grounded in a contact with the realities (at least presumed to be) disclosed. This allows us to acknowledge the incommensurabilities and gaps between cultures as we attempt to straddle them, even if we cannot always “fuse” them (*RR*, 130).

Once we grant that our understanding of the world is dependent on our bodily awareness of our everyday world, they raise the difficulty of accounting for our capacity of doing science. Recall that once Polanyi called attention to the personal co-efficient sustaining scientific inquiry this became one of the central issues confronting Polanyi’s challenge to scientific positivism and empiricism. Dreyfus and Taylor are required to confront this issue again because the mainstream analytic philosophical tradition requires that knowledge—especially scientific knowledge—be explicit and impersonal. Even though they do not intend to do so, they implicitly slip into this picture of science when they regularly refer to it as “a view from nowhere,” repeating this mantra¹⁵ as though they were scientific literalists holding on to a sacred text, but not when they describe the actual practice of scientists, which is quite Polanyian.¹⁶ Our normal converse with the world considers realities in light of their relationship to ourselves and our cultural values. The community of scientists, however, has created a tradition informed by theories and practices which allow us to grasp elements of our world in light of their relationship to each other as disclosed by relevant theories. Presuming the universe has an intrinsic intelligibility, we can understand that science affords us with one contingent access to our world which provides us with the best explanation available for how objects that surround us work *in relationship to each other*. Granted that this happens, science then may be understood to be a continually self-correcting tradition that surpasses previously held theories. This appears to be closer to understanding the actual *practice* of scientists. While this is not a definitive, impersonal argument, it supports the claim that science is not strictly speaking a view from nowhere, but dependent upon the assumptions and practices of the scientific community. Moreover, since these theories are dependent on scientists’ subsidiary awareness of world, the claims of

deflationary realists, like Rorty, are simply assuming we are captives of our representations (*RR*, 140-47).

Given their robust defense of scientific realism, Dreyfus and Taylor turn next to an unsettling implication of Saul Kripke's contention that if a scientific description of nature is true, then alternative descriptions of nature must be false (*RR*, 149-52). Such a conclusion appears to challenge their earlier discussion of the value of entering into alien horizons of meaning in order to discover the possibility of aspects of reality revealed there. They point out, however, that such a conclusion would be justified only if other cultural traditions were intending to describe the natural world as it exists in terms of its inner relations. But such a perspective was developed only in the modern West. What we must recognize is that there are different accounts of reality, one describing those aspects of nature as it is in itself disclosed by appropriate theories and another as it is revealed to involved human beings (*RR*, 153). There may, accordingly, be many different languages describing different aspects of reality. "Our position could then be characterized as *pluralistic robust realism*" (*RR*, 154). They present this as a third way of understanding our knowing reality in contrast with the more dominant philosophical views of modern scientism and various forms of subjectivism and relativism (*RR*, 154). Their aim is to commend a position that is open to varying, and perhaps initially incompatible, perspectives. Once we overcome the restrictions of the dominant perspectives, "our everyday experience of our direct embodied contact with an independent reality opens a space for a whole range of accounts of our essential nature and of the nature of the universe, thus freeing us for an empirical investigation to determine which, if any, of these accounts correspond to aspects of reality, and how, if at all, these various aspects fit together" (*RR*, 160). At this level of their position, Dreyfus and Taylor clearly evoke some of the most well-known elements of Polanyi's thought, including the capacity of an object to reveal unexpected aspects of its reality in the future¹⁷ or the way in which truth may be understood to be manifested in myths.¹⁸

Beyond all this they raise the question about progress in our knowing at this profound level. They clearly hold to the possibility of a "rational supersession" at the cultural level (*RR*, 163). We can see that, at least retrospectively, we have taken steps in this direction through the examples of the suppression of slavery and the promotion of women's civic rights. Additionally, we have seen convergence on certain points even if disagreement about deepest values remain. Perhaps something like John Rawls's "overlapping consensus" may contribute to understanding such progress (*RR*, 164). Even if our deepest underlying reasons for meaning resist convergence, there is no reason not to continue to attempt it; and a robust plural realism, they submit, provides the greatest basis for hoping for such a unification or convergence.

In these reflections I have attempted to indicate how the main features of the argument presented in *Retrieving Realism* is congruent with the position first developed by

Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. Indeed, I tried to indicate how acknowledging explicitly the structure of tacit knowing would improve some of the formulations presented by Dreyfus and Taylor. So the first concluding point I make is that students of Polanyi's thought ought to study carefully this work to complement and inform their own understanding of Polanyi's theory of knowledge.

Secondly, along the way, Dreyfus and Taylor address most of the major issues confronting any realistic epistemology from within the dominant analytic and hermeneutical philosophical traditions found in the academic world of today. This provides the student of Polanyi with an entree into the wider academic debates regarding realism and is suggestive of how a Polanyian approach might address them.

Finally, if I am correct in my first contention, that Polanyi's thought anticipated in a more adequate fashion the basic position defended by Dreyfus and Taylor, then the obvious question arises as to why they do not explicitly acknowledge, if not reliance, then at least similarity with, the thought of Polanyi. To affirm that they are not familiar with the thought of Polanyi clearly is wrong. At least in the case of Taylor, he refers to the influence and importance of Polanyi in several of his previous writings. While I cannot offer any definitive response, I have a strong suspicion that what motivated them to this stance is their desire to address the mainstream philosophical community in the academy. In this task, Polanyi would be an outlier and not at all helpful. Even though the publication of *Personal Knowledge* was widely discussed at the time and was considered a groundbreaking study of science, the theory of personal knowledge that Polanyi believed sustained it never gained wide traction among the philosophical professionals at Oxford or Cambridge—and consequently in the wider analytic or hermeneutical philosophical traditions.¹⁹ An anecdotal account concerning this phenomenon was relayed to me by Rom Harré. He said that when it first came out “everybody” at Oxbridge was discussing *Personal Knowledge*—but not in print. Polanyi was not a member of the guild. For Dreyfus and Taylor to present their position as a development of Polanyi's, in other words, would not carry much support among their intended audience. This is, I admit, merely a surmise. But I hope that these reflections on Dreyfus and Taylor's effort to bring a “contact theory” of knowing into dialogue with the wider academic world would prove to be a sufficient stimulus for students of Polanyi to build on their efforts to do likewise with “personal knowledge.”

ENDNOTES

¹Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as *RR*, followed by the page number.

²Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Reprinted with a new preface as a Harper Torchbook (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964). Subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as *PK*, followed by the page number.

³There is, to be sure, one reference to *Personal Knowledge* (*RR*, 76), but it is used merely illustratively to support their argument that even in science the spontaneous creativity leading to a new insight is guided by the rigor of “getting it right” and is in no way capricious. Tellingly, the editor at Harvard Press mistakenly identified this reference as Polanyi’s brother, Karl (*RR*, 171), probably because his name came up before Michael’s in the indexing software he was using. That no one caught this gaff suggests how peripheral the reference is to their epistemological argument.

⁴This was such a significant theme in Polanyi’s corpus that Harry Prosch used it as the organizing motif of his presentation of Polanyi’s thought. See his *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). The first three parts are called “diagnosis,” “prescription,” and “treatment.”

⁵The best introduction of this facet of Polanyi’s position of which I am aware is that of Richard Gelwick. See his *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁶Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 145.

⁷Charles Taylor, “Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition,” in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 257-275.

⁸Again, I contend that their meaning is better served by “direct” rather than “unmediated.”

⁹This is the context within which Dreyfus and Taylor appeal to Polanyi’s appraisal of creativity in science. It is a generic reference to support their view that both rational necessity and spontaneity are involved in affirming a discovery.

¹⁰On this matter, John Searle is in agreement. See his *Philosophy in a New Century: Selected Essays*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7-8.

¹¹A point frequently made by Polanyi. See, for example, “The Structure of Consciousness,” and “Life’s Irreducible Structure” in *Knowing and Being*. Ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 211-239.

¹²This is reminiscent of the way Taylor structured his analysis in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). The first part focused on the tacitly assumed epistemological underpinnings of the modern sense of the self, while the subsequent parts uncovered the normally unnoticed cultural underpinnings of modern identity and its impact on our moral sensibility.

¹³Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004). Original German edition 1975.

¹⁴*The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 80-81.

¹⁵Enshrined in the analytic tradition by Thomas Nagel. See his *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Nagel assumes that science is explicit and impersonal and here raises the profound question of how we can understand it in relation to our subjective, cultural ideals. Granted these assumptions, he provides many insightful observations on how we may lead moral, meaningful lives, but ultimately must confess—humbly and modestly—that we cannot bring the objective viewpoint to bear on our cultural meanings: “Our problem has in this sense no solution, but to recognize that is to come as near as we can to living in light of the truth” (231).

¹⁶I have found numerous uses of this phrase in their work: see pages 69-70, 132-33, 139, 149-53.

¹⁷*The Tacit Dimension*, “This capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future I attribute 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” (p. 32). “Perception has this inexhaustible profundity, because what we perceive is an aspect of reality, and aspects of reality are clues to boundless undisclosed, and perhaps yet unthinkable, experiences” (p. 68).

¹⁸Some of Polanyi’s later reflections on this were published, with the collaboration of Harry Prosch, as *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975). His observation on the famous anthropological study of the Bororos and their self-identification as red parrots is illustrative: “What the Borroros mean by identifying themselves with red parrots may be difficult to fathom, but there is no necessary reason to say that it is any more absurd than the view of many scientists and philosophers that they are machines” (pp. 139-40).

¹⁹See Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

CONTACT WITH REALITY: COMPARING MICHAEL POLANYI AND DREYFUS AND TAYLOR, *RETRIEVING REALISM*



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Keywords: realism, contact with reality, *Retrieving Realism*, “the picture that held us captive,” Cartesian, discovery, phenomenology, subsidiary-focal integration, representationalism, mediated vs. direct contact, preconceptual layer, prethetic, prereflexive, epistemology

ABSTRACT

*This essay contrasts Michael Polanyi’s insight regarding contact with reality to the idea of direct contact theory that Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor develop in their recent effort to “retrieve” realism. Whereas the latter locates a “direct” contact “beneath” articulation in a preconceptual layer “accessible only by phenomenology,” Polanyi locates contact in discovery—not beneath, but rather beyond, our efforts to know. It is also apparent that the authors of *Retrieving Realism* presume an epistemology less sophisticated than Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal integration, as well as omitting the critical epistemic component of commitment. The essay concludes that Polanyi offers the superior challenge to “the picture that held us captive”—Cartesian epistemology with its resultant anti-realism, one which additionally unleashes a lively, surprising real to its proper primacy.*

Anyone who has undergone formal philosophical study in recent decades will have no trouble appreciating the work of Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor in their recent *Retrieving Realism*. This is because it speaks within and to the prevailing conversation in and around realism, against the backdrop of modernity. It speaks accessibly and

effectively—also unusual in analytic philosophy. As its title suggests, the coauthors labor to retrieve realism by challenging the by now commonly panned “picture that held us captive”—Ludwig Wittgenstein’s apt characterization of the Cartesian world picture (*RR*, 1).¹ Dreyfus and Taylor identify four key features that define this defective picture: first, the presumption that the “outer” world is mediated to the “inner” self “only through” representations; second, a rejection of anything but explicit belief; third, a commitment to justification only by appealing to explicit beliefs, preferably immediate givens; and finally, a mind-body dualist “sorting” (*RR*, 10-12). One of the book’s assets is the authors’ effective presentation of the defective picture, both in its damage and in its appeal (*RR*, 24-26).

The authors claim that the great philosophers of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, along with Wittgenstein, have carried out a most effective challenge to this defective picture (*RR*, 18). They themselves espouse Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology which they draw into the analytic milieu in their endeavor to retrieve realism. Dreyfus and Taylor name the defective picture, “the mediational view.” Correspondingly, they term their own proposal a “direct contact theory” (*RR*, 17-26 *et passim*). Contact with reality, they pose, is direct, rather than mediated: rather than the defective picture of our accessing the world only via representations, knowers are always already embedded bodily in the world, thus contacting it directly. This direct contact supports the retrieval of realism. Their primary interlocutor they take to be Richard Rorty, as a representative of the most challenging anti-realism that must be satisfied in their argument (*RR*, 7 *et passim*).

In June 2016 the Polanyi Society met for a special conference in celebration of the anniversary of the publication of Michael Polanyi’s *Tacit Dimension*.² A major portion of the program was devoted to examination of *Retrieving Realism*. What follows here reflects my assigned contribution to the panel convened on the book, namely, to explore its notion of contact with reality in comparison with that of Polanyi’s.³ Records show that Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor participated in most of the Polanyi study groups, gatherings of scholars orchestrated over the decades for Polanyi by Marjorie Grene (Breyspraak and Mullins 2016; see also Grene 1971). Given that their work in *Retrieving Realism* so profoundly overlaps Polanyi’s, it is beyond mystifying that in this book no use or even mention of Polanyi’s insights is ever made. Polanyi garners only a solitary footnote, an aside to the Polanyian scientist being like the ordinary football player in incorporating active and receptive into his work. The footnote was evidently added as an afterthought; the succeeding “*ibid*” was never corrected (*RR*, 76). It is difficult to imagine that such august philosophers would have felt it necessary to avoid what others have perceived as an embarrassing association. Surely they could have at least spoken in a manner similar to Grene: throughout her excellent work she regularly comments that “this is something like what Polanyi was doing when he...” (Grene 1995, 17).

“Contact with reality” is a prominent notion in Michael Polanyi’s work also. Polanyi repeats that designation frequently throughout his work. For example, from the preface of *Personal Knowledge*: “Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications” (*PK*, viii). For me as a philosopher, this idea of contact has for decades delighted and intrigued me as the very sort of phenomenon I need to be assured of: a reality independent of my knowing it. This contact with reality testifies to the independent real and thus constitutes the position of realism and its justification (Meek, 2015).

My purpose in this essay, then, is to compare and contrast the claims of *Retrieving Realism* with those of Polanyi with respect to the notion of contact with reality. If, in comparing Polanyi’s proposals, in general, to the general argument of Dreyfus and Taylor in *Retrieving Realism*, the reference point for the comparison is their challenge to Cartesian modernist epistemology, the two proposals display much in common. Both make that a high priority and offer an effective challenge that dispels the picture that held us captive. I would say, however, that while this is the sole agenda of Dreyfus and Taylor in this book, Polanyi perhaps never saw himself (focally) as doing this. Rather, he saw himself as innovating within the modern intellectual tradition.⁴

However, if we change the reference point so as to compare the two proposals directly to each other, telltale contrasts emerge. As per my natural attention to the matter of contact with reality, the contrasts specifically involve a divergent understanding of the matter of contact with reality, along with what I feel to be a defective understanding, on the part of the authors of *Retrieving Realism*, of their own “preconceptual layer.” My comparison in this essay is not merely for the sake of comparison. While Taylor and Dreyfus contribute a well-reasoned work valuable in the arena of analytic philosophy, these are key dimensions of knowing and of realism that Polanyi’s work elucidates uniquely, to which knowers of any stripe would do well to pay attention. What follows here, then, is a list of these contrasts. I trust that also by the end of the essay, the difference these contrasts make will be evident.

To begin with, let us note the obvious: Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus are premier philosophers.⁵ Polanyi was a premier scientist, aided significantly by a premier (though refreshingly maverick) philosopher in Marjorie Grene. Grene states, as she argues that Polanyi’s work offers “grounds for a revolution in philosophy,” that what was distinctive of Polanyi was that he raised these philosophical matters from within science (Grene 1977, 166-67). It is only to be expected that the two approaches would lay the accents divergently on what might be seen to be a common agenda. But Polanyi the scientist also targeted philosophical anti-realist opponents: the positivists (1967). However, these thwarted the work of good science; so his was not a “purely” philosophical agenda.

Related to this divergence of focus is a critical contrast. The arguments differ with respect to whether or not discovery is taken to be paradigmatic for knowing, and of foremost importance in epistemology. For Polanyi the paradigm of all knowing is “knowledge of an approaching discovery” (*TD*, 20). While it may not be accurate to say that the Dreyfus/Taylor argument remains in the “context of explanation” by contrast, it clearly displays an absence of attention to discovery. Following Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenologists, they attend to perception. They look to the known (cubes and such), not to the not-yet known. By contrast, Polanyi also attends continuously to perception; but his emphasis on the not-yet known leads him to attend to exploratory perception. He finds in even the most primitive perception the intrinsically integrative subsidiary-focal structure (*TD*, 7). For Polanyi, it will be subsidiary-focal integration that dispels representationalism. It does not take an argument or proof; it simply takes display—*this* is what we do when we are knowing. There is a real sense in which in this respect Polanyi is more intentional about intentionality than are the phenomenologists. Intentionality should be seen not as aboutness of mental content, but as aboutness, from-to, about the world beyond me, the yet-to-be-known. We will return to the emphasis on discovery when we consider their divergent notions of contact with reality.

Another key contrast between the arguments concerns the specific flaw of the picture that holds us captive that the two arguments identify as critically problematic. Consideration of this difference displays the comparative inferiority of the coauthors’ proposals with respect to Polanyi’s subsidiary focal integration. For Dreyfus and Taylor, the problem with the picture is mediation, or representationalism. I do not believe that Polanyi actually ever addresses representationalism as a problem—apart from challenging positivist efforts to limit knowledge to claims about appearances. But by contrast, for Polanyi, the problem with modernist epistemology is “focalness.”

I say it this way, rather than identifying it as explicit knowledge, for a reason or two. First, I follow Grene in believing that the heart of what Polanyi was saying is that no knowledge can be wholly focal, but rather is always rooted in and outrun by the subsidiary—and in saying that it is that two-level, subsidiary-focal integrative structure which is unique and key (Grene 1977, 175). To speak of the focal is to imply the intrinsically, integratively, related subsidiary. It is true that Polanyi challenges extensively the closely related concepts of explicit knowledge and articulation, along with the false ideal of certainty (*PK*, Pt. III). This emphasis does correspond with the defective picture as Dreyfus and Taylor delineate it (the second feature concerning explicit knowledge only); actually, Polanyi engages this matter far more than they do.⁶

But to continue: why is it important to identify focalness as Polanyi’s concern? It is important in this way: if subsidiary-focal integration is true—and it is difficult to miss observing it once someone points it out—focusing on something that you are trying to comprehend can be just what blinds you to it. (*TD*, 19) For example: focusing on the letters I key and you read in this sentence can blind me and you to the meaning of the

sentence. Blindness obviously would not be helpful for someone wanting to apprehend the real. The more effective strategy for an aspiring discoverer—not to mention aspiring reader or tennis player—is to try to relate to the clues in a creatively indwelling way, in hope of inviting inbreaking insight. Now it is true that “destructive analysis,” according to Polanyi, though risky, can serve to deepen our insight upon reintegration (*TD*, 19). But certainly destructive analysis was never meant to offer the paradigm of knowledge, as it does in modernity.

I believe that a common misunderstanding of Polanyi’s claims, following Grene’s insight here, is to designate explicit knowledge and tacit (or implicit) knowledge—as if they are two unrelated kinds of knowledge (Grene 1977, 175). Not only does this obviate the all-important from-to of the subsidiary-focal, it also presumes that you could have explicit knowledge without the subsidiary—and that you can have explicit knowledge at all. Also, it is common to identify “explicit” with “focal” and “tacit” with “subsidiary.” But the focal and explicit knowledge are not exactly the same thing; this is because it is possible to have focal knowledge that is not itself explicit either. For example, you can be driving a car (subsidiary-focal integration—and thus focused on the performance) without that being explicit knowledge. Also, you can be driving a car and be focused on a philosophical discussion you are carrying on with others in the car. The focal can be—must be, to the extent that our knowing layers up—tacit. Finally, there is a real sense, I believe, in which no meaningful knowledge is explicit knowledge. For it takes subsidiarily indwelling even the most articulate statement for it to be meaningful. Destructive analysis destroys meaning (*TD*, 19). There is a sense in which “explicit knowledge” is performatively incoherent. This is an astounding thought, and it provides a glimpse of the sophistication that Polanyi, the scientist insider, philosophy outsider, built naturally into his description of how we know.

By contrast, Dreyfus and Taylor, in following Merleau-Ponty, seek contact in a “layer beneath” the reflexive or thetic—beneath reflective articulation, or articulate reflection (*RR*, ch. 4). They desire that implicit knowledge be acknowledged; they have in mind especially bodily awareness. But their proposals lack the sophistication of Polanyi’s subsidiary focal integration. If the focal is not identical to the explicit, the subsidiary is not identical to the implicit. The layers they distinguish appear to fall apart, rather than hang integrally together as in subsidiary focal integration. On this view, effectively both layers in a way are focal, and it is implied that reflective articulation is a stand-alone production. This is just what Polanyi wrote to challenge. Also, Dreyfus and Taylor, as a result, do not see that what is needed need not be something exclusively prethetic. After we are language users, we are as subsidiarily rooted in our language in the world as we were before we had learned to speak.⁷ We don’t need the prethetic, “only to be accessed by phenomenology,” to dispel the picture that held us captive. My overarching assessment here is that Dreyfus and Taylor’s own argument

would have been immensely helped had they understood and embraced Polanyi's sophisticated epistemology. Polanyi's account of both "layers" and their relation is what heals us of the picture that holds modernity captive, and does so while contributing to the support, not rejection, of articulation.

Turning to the comparison with respect to contact with reality, let me offer a transitional, prefatory remark. There is something strange about Taylor and Dreyfus condemning "mediated" in favor of "direct" contact. Of course we are rooted bodily in the world; that point is an important one on which both proposals insist (*TD*, 15; *KB*, 147).⁸ As Grene says, "Why can't we check our beliefs against reality? We can't—because we are already in it" (Grene 1995, 17). Nor do we need to exalt representations, or even to say that we have them some of the time, in our epistemic account (*RR*, 27). But the richness that we bring to our understanding must be acknowledged—richness that invites rather than hinders contact with the real—embodiment, language, apprenticeship, tradition, conviviality, expertise, culture. Polanyi shows how it is actually mediation via these critical epistemic features, along with others—mediation *as subsidiarily connected and logically unspecifiable*—that roots us in and with the world. What renders mediation effective is indwelling it subsidiarily. This is what Polanyi is commending in the "changing camp" passage—that we turn the recent "retreat" of acknowledging "limitations" to knowledge into an advance by changing camp (*KB*, 156). We may add to this defense of mediation Grene's argument regarding humans as essentially mediational creatures (Grene, 1995, esp. ch. 8). All this raises a question regarding the aptness of the Dreyfus/Taylor argument characterizing the critical concern as one of mediation.

But now let us turn to contrast the two notions of contact. What Dreyfus and Taylor have in mind by "contact" is the co-production of knowing by the knower embedded in and in touch with her surroundings—"engaged coping" (*RR*, 93, and ch. 4). They consider this to be something prethetic or prereflexive—"beneath" and other than (as I noted) explicit articulation. Polanyi agrees in presuming "the bodily rootedness of all thought"; indeed, Merleau-Ponty's work may be profitably read as an astoundingly rich corroboration and development of the bodied subsidiary. Polanyi can be seen to concur with this rooted contact—as subsidiary. Polanyi avers that it is subsidiary indwelling that makes us feel our bodies to be our own, and that roots us belongingly in the world (*TD*, 16). Proficiency at bike-riding opens a world of biking possibilities to us. So Polanyi espouses and confirms this primordial contact—although, with the conditions which we have noted, that it be seen as subsidiary, and that it not need to be seen as exclusively prethetic.

But the location of the contact that intrigues Polanyi—which makes the difference in one's epistemology, which most significantly connects us to the real, and which even transforms the knower's bodily rootedness—is contact with the yet-to-be-known.

It is contact with reality, not exclusively beneath us or even as subsidiary, but contact primarily beyond us, which as humans we pursue, for which as humans we hope.

Consider just one of Polanyi's expressions of this: "The pursuit of discovery is conducted from the start in these terms; all the time we are guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing; and the discovery which terminates and satisfies this pursuit is still sustained by the same vision. It claims to have made contact with reality; a reality which, being real may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations" (*TD*, 23-24). Here we can hear his emphasis on discovery, and his preoccupation with a present but hidden reality. We read that for Polanyi, "contact with reality" lies in discovery. And we see that such contact is attested to by our attending sense of an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations.

When I was young, I thought nothing of venturing out onto a log fallen across a deep ravine. It was a delightful expertise. Once I got older, I could no longer do that. Now I find that even far simpler ambulatory feats, such as descending a set of stairs, involve my continual suspecting and attending to my balance, to the end of "justification." I devise this analogy, because Dreyfus and Taylor, in the highpoint of their argument, cite the work of Samuel Todes to offer verticality as an undeniable instance of embedded coproduction that requires an independent real (*RR*, 136-39, esp. n. 8). I do not mean at all to discount the importance of balance for anchoring us in the world. I do mean to suggest that making it primary epistemically, as Dreyfus and Taylor do, in contrast to Polanyi's exuberant reaching out for contact beyond and future possibilities, is not where the accent, for humans, should lie primarily. If we may speak of a "back-door" and a "front-door" contact, the back-door contact is not the locus of contact which, considered in itself (focally), anchors us best in the world.

Thus, it is not the better contact for the purpose of retrieving realism. Locating contact *beneath* involves checking and justifying beliefs; locating contact *beyond* involves joyous surrender.⁹ If the former is a retrieved, robust realism, the latter is an exuberant realism—a plunging into reality in which reality itself overwhelms us. Contact with reality, in its signature "IFM Effect,"¹⁰ proves to be reality contacting us, often more a matter of exploding our questions than answering them, and changing us (and our balance) in the process. Polyanian contact makes even better sense of Merleau-Ponty's powerful claim than does the engaged coping contact of Dreyfus and Taylor: "To ask whether the world is real is not to understand what we are saying" (*RR*, 93). Indeed, if anti-realism is a category mistake, it is also, as per Polanyi, a pseudosubstitution—an illicit denial of one's very own experience of the primacy of the real (Grene 1995, Ch. 6).

This connects with another contrast between the two approaches. It appears that that of *Retrieving Realism* attributes to the prethetic layer the entire provision

of meaning. The prethetic layer, following in the Kantian tradition, alone provides sense-making conditions (*RR*, 31). This understanding is a critical piece of the authors' representation of the contemporary challenge to the Myth of the Given. And following Merleau-Ponty, they also argue further that the prethetic is not the intellectualist's mental structure, but a coproduction connected to the world. Although this would need more careful scrutiny to be sure, it seems that Polanyi directly challenges the sufficiency of the prethetic to meaning. Yes, the subsidiary-focal structure is utterly essential to meaning, though in something other than a strictly necessary nor sufficient sense (Meek 2008, 4-6). But it would be, primarily, the focally integrated pattern that gives meaning to the clues. True, the pattern is "necessarily fraught with the clues on which it relies" (*TD*, xviii); but the semantic "freight" on the "trainline" of integration is at the very least two-way.

What is more, Polanyi sees the knower as pursuing meaning in the cosmos, rationality in nature. In this he is truer to Isaac Newton's own outlook than was Kant. Polanyi's commitment to rationality in nature is what can induce people in modernity to view Polanyi as an "out-dated Platonist" (*PK*, 6). Taylor and Dreyfus do identify Platonism as a contact theory, but quickly and without justification dismiss it as impossible in modernity (*RR*, 17-18). So again in this contrast between the two arguments we see that Polanyi's notion is of a contact with reality, intrinsically meaningful, beyond.

Modern thinkers, in the absence of a working understanding of subsidiary-focal integration, indeed cannot see their way to affirming an independent reality. Merleau-Ponty actually sees himself as an anti-realist; he condemns empiricist sensationalism for holding to that nonsensical belief (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxiv *et passim*). "There is no view from nowhere," as it has become common to say (*RR*, 133). But for Polanyi, this claim is actually wrongheaded. One need not be capable of something logically impossible—of "knowing reality independent of our knowing it"—to know that reality exists independent of our knowing it. Nor should it be taken as a confession of failure to say that there is no view from nowhere; because we are here, not nowhere, we do view—we may be graced with eyes to see—the world. Our view-from-which is not what keeps us from reality but that which launches us out into it. But what testifies to independent reality (not in spite of, but because of, our rootedness) is that it is actually reality that initiates and *surprises*.¹¹ It showers us with a sense of indeterminate future prospects. Then, it transforms our very rootedness and our very being.

Attention to these features of contacting the real make good sense to the one who would be excellent in science and in understanding in general. This is why what intrigued Polanyi about Kant was the "mother wit" that Kant himself dismissed (*KB*, 106).¹² If the telltale proof of realism for Dreyfus and Taylor lies in the phenomenon of verticality, the telltale clue to epistemology and realism for Polanyi lies in the inherent unformalizability of our efforts, leading to deeply profound discoveries.

Mother wit is itself reality—human reality—issuing indeterminately in surprising unformalizable tacit powers and inexhaustible depths. This critical dimension of knowing is what Polanyi was trying to reveal and have us accredit as the personal. Since this is the genius in science that must be protected for science to move forward, restricting knowledge to “unbridled lucidity” and doubt-proof certainty would hobble science (*TD*, 18). We may note the contrast in what the two arguments find problematic in Descartes: the authors of *Retrieving Realism* focus on representationalism; Polanyi focuses on the incoherence of doubting everything to the end of certainty. In fact, it might be argued that in Descartes’ work the matter that Polanyi fingers, certainty, is critically prior to the one that Dreyfus and Taylor engage, representation.

Another contrast between the two arguments has to do with the role of commitment in knowing. For Polanyi it is essential—and essential to realism. It appears to be absent from the argument of Taylor and Dreyfus. Polanyi has been known by outsiders exclusively for his explicitly embracing belief and commitment in knowing. We can see that this stance is his response to the faulty and damaging Cartesian picture. It is true that in later years he places more emphasis on subsidiary-focal integration, as he notes (*TD*, xviii). But I would argue that it is impossible for an epistemology ever (even unconsciously) to overlook or replace the normative dimension. Knowing requires the highly personed acts of consent, commitment, submission, accreditation, indwelling, reliance on clues, and responsible risk. The normative, commitment dimension is nothing to be embarrassed of as some sort of inadequacy. It is not to be dismissed as no longer tenable in modernity. As Marjorie Grene moves to the conclusion of her argument about humanness, she too quotes St. Augustine: “This is my freedom, that I am subject to this truth” (Grene 1995, 179).

How does this all tie in to this study of the contrasting features of our two arguments for realism? First, let us note that for Polanyi, commitment is intrinsically bodied. He defines commitment as “our manner of disposing ourselves toward” reality (*PK*, 61). This is bodied intentionality. Intentionality, we may say, is commitment, and it is bodied. Thus, no proponent of phenomenology should discount Polanyi’s explicit avowal of belief as somehow out of step with embodiment. Polanyi goes beyond the phenomenologist to say that we indwell our most theoretical frameworks—we interiorize and body them, too.

The realist argument needs this dimension of commitment. What is significant about the subsidiary layer—prethetic or thetic—is that we responsibly give ourselves to indwell it. We rely on it, entrust ourselves to it. And it is as we do, and only as we do, that we see the world. It is as we indwell subsidiaries that we apprehend the surprising real beyond us. We do not verify verticality so much as give ourselves to it. But then we also reach beyond ourselves to commit ourselves to the yet to be known. The “argument” for contact in both the subsidiary and the anticipative is not focal but rather subsidiary, as the proverbial proof is in the pudding.

It is ironic that outsiders to Polanyi's work mistake it to be anti-realist—thinking that his rooting knowledge in belief could only be so. We can lay the blame for this blindness at Descartes' door, along with everything else we blame him for. But normative or commitment dimensions are absent from the Dreyfus/Taylor argument for realism. This is typical of a modern argument—one which does not comprehend subsidiary-focal integration, nor the role of responsibility in knowing. In fact, commitment opens the real to us; trust alone opens the real to us. This doesn't make reality less real or realism more qualified. Realism just is indwelling trust in the real.

Indeed, Polanyi himself never struggled with the problem of realism that most of us in modern epistemology have had and continue to have. This situation is similar to “the problem of certainty” that Augustine had, contrasted to Descartes in his appropriation of Augustine's argument. Descartes' concern was to find certainty; Augustine's was actually the opposite: to account for why we have certainty so undeniably—and also to make the most of it, and to delight in it.¹³ By comparison, I believe, Polanyi's is the more natural and exuberant realism.

It has been my personal experience over the years as a Polanyian, that Polanyi's epistemology actually frees reality to be more dynamically real. I would say from experience that his is a realism that heals one's metaphysics, along with one's humanness. My experience has been to cease questioning realism and to begin to enjoy it.

There is a very real sense in which Dreyfus and Taylor, in their argument for realism, display that they, in contrast, remain captive to the picture that held us captive. I apologize for any banality in recurring to finger pointing. I do not deprecate, so much as describe. For any who would directly take on the problem of the picture that held us captive in an arena still in its thrall, must of necessity, for the sake of its agenda, be conformed somewhat to that picture. This is the way it is within analytic philosophy. Polanyi stood on no such ceremony—neither in philosophy nor in his science. He stood free to witness to the real.¹⁴

In conclusion: While the immense richness of what phenomenology uncovers must be admitted and appreciated for its important implications, certainly it must be said that phenomenology is not “the only way” to dispel the modernist, Cartesian, “picture that held us captive” (*RR*, 137). It is more than appropriate to acknowledge Polanyi's distinctive contribution to the challenge mounted widely in the 20th century. But comparing Polanyi's vast contribution to this cause to the recent effort of Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus in their 2015 *Retrieving Realism*, something that those authors failed inexplicably to do, telltale differences emerge and suggest the superiority of Polanyian epistemology and realism. Taylor and Dreyfus address mediation and propound “direct” contact. Polanyi addressed focalness and identified subsidiary-focal integration. Taylor and Dreyfus emphasized “back-door” contact—prethetic, “beneath” the thetic. Polanyi identified “front-door” contact—contact beyond where we are, toward which we grope, by which we are transformed in discovery. The former

is an effort at proof, perhaps at justification; the latter is a venture toward surrender to the real. And finally, we have considered here, Polanyi's steady acknowledgement on the *sine qua non* of commitment, absent from the argument of *Retrieving Realism*, offers a critical piece of the argument for realism. In all of these respects, I find Polanyi's approach superior—truer to our knowing practice, better for the outcomes of our ventures, healing for our humanness, both in its embodiment and in its defining intentionality—its desire for the real, and restorative for our intellectual heritage—because better at dispelling the picture that has held us captive. And perhaps most wonderfully: in addition to healing and advantaging the knower, it restores reality itself to the dynamically inexhaustive primacy it deserves.

ENDNOTES

¹As they will show, simply being able to identify that it is a picture that holds us captive goes a significant way to challenging that picture. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, ch. 2. Hereafter in-text citations as *RR*.

²Polanyi Studies: Past, Present, and Future, 2016 Polanyi Society Conference, June 8–11, 2016.

³Additionally, I presented a stand-alone paper (“Contact with Reality: Retrospect and Prospect”), which engaged *Retrieving Realism* and was intended for what it has become: a chapter in my recently released *Contact with Reality: Michael Polanyi's Realism and Why It Matters* (2017). For my purposes in this book, the appearance of the work by Dreyfus and Taylor was timely and strategic.

⁴Consider, for example, on the one hand, that Polanyi's “Critique of Doubt,” in *PK*, Ch. 9, directly contradicts Descartes' famous thought experiment regarding the *Cogito*. Consider, on the other hand, that according to Grene, Polanyi saw his own work, mistakenly, as supporting a Cartesian view of the mind (Grene 1977, 169).

⁵Hubert Dreyfus passed away just this spring. But I will retain the present-tense to honor his work which continues to live on.

⁶Neither “implicit” nor “explicit” is included in the admittedly selective Index of *Retrieving Realism*.

⁷Consider Grene's superb treatment of this matter (1995, Ch. 8).

⁸They share this, although understanding embodiment as subsidiary represents a significant and qualitative advance. Reading Merleau-Ponty through Polanyian eyes improves its sense, even as it martial it.

⁹Consider the wise comment of Hans Urs von Balthasar, which I insert into the Introduction to *Contact With Reality* (7); as well as his wider work, *Theological Trilogy*.

¹⁰I coined this term in my 1985 PhD dissertation, now freshly reframed and published as *Contact With Reality* (Meek 2017, 77).

¹¹Consider the work of D. C. Schindler (2013) to underscore this critical point, in his “Surprised by Truth,” Ch. 2.

¹²Polanyi rightly understood that attending to it would undermine the work of Kant and his followers—but nevertheless makes for better knowing. That is why he himself is fascinated with “the unaccountable element in science”—this is the title of the essay which this claim prefaces (*KB*, 106).

¹³Augustine. *On Free Choice II*, 33-34, excerpted in Vernon J. Burke, ed., *The Essential Augustine*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 123-24.

¹⁴It should be noted that Polanyi’s vision may not have been more widely accepted within science than it was in philosophy. Consider standard treatments of the philosophy of science such as that by Peter Godfrey-Smith (2003).

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DREYFUS, TAYLOR, AND POLANYI'S PRESCIENCE



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Keywords: Cartesianism, mediational view, contact theory, Richard Rorty, John McDowell, Michael Polanyi, epistemology, realism, background, pluralistic robust realism

ABSTRACT

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor argue explicit conceptual knowledge has an essential pre-conceptual “background” fully embedding the knower in the world. This refutes the Cartesian view that knowledge of the outside world is mediated through the mind of the observer. This “mediational” view is undermined by Kant, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Todes, and the “contact theory” they make possible. I add Polanyi to the list, as tacit knowing accomplishes similar things in better fashion.

The appearance of *Retrieving Realism*, jointly written by prominent philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, has naturally occasioned much commentary, including in *Tradition and Discovery* (XLIII, 1, 2017).¹ The book continues a long-running discussion of realism that has included Richard Rorty, John McDowell, and others, offering both a summary of the debate thus far and some new arguments by Dreyfus and Taylor.² So this review drops into the middle of a protracted discussion, one that has touched on a wide range of issues and philosophers of the past forty years; needless to say, the present book and its review are a truncated version of this wider exchange. I concentrate on two important features, the authors' explication of the “background” to knowing and their efforts to describe “the real.” I then discuss broader implications of these issues, particularly those of interest to readers of this journal.

In Chapter One of *Retrieving Realism*, Dreyfus & Taylor identify four strands of “the picture that held us captive,” the “mediational” epistemology that begins with Descartes. The first is the insistence that knowledge of the world can only come to us if mediated through representations (depictions, ideas, beliefs, sentences) in the mind. A second strand is the “normal implication of this meditational picture that the content of our knowledge can be analyzed into clearly defined, explicit elements” (11). The third strand claims that “we can never go beyond/below these explicit, formulated elements” in justifying our beliefs (11). The fourth is the distinction between body and mind, or “the dualist sorting” Dreyfus and Taylor later add to this list by noting other implications of these strands, such as skepticism, the ideals of freedom, autonomous reason, and self-government. Although they elsewhere use different terms for some of these elements (for example, “the atomism of the inputs” when referring to explicit representations), the four strands form a robust list of prominent features of the “objectification of the world,” and the “disenchantment” resulting from modern epistemology. The authors claim that two results of this traditional epistemology are skepticism and relativism (46, 55-56), which conflict with their conviction that philosophy can contribute to a “healing” of our troubled times, allowing us “to flourish in healthier ways than was possible in the critical tradition” (Taylor 1995, xii).

The reactions to this “disengaged stance” have been forceful and varied, all agreeing that the meditational view has made us “divided beings, needing to be healed” (*RR*, 10-11).

Beginning with Kant, a number of thinkers objected to the reduction of knowledge to a simple mental content, with no connection to any others, and began to insist that if there were no relations between our ideas, they would have no meaning for us, and we would lose the unity of the world which perception makes manifest.

[These arguments] can be seen as a turning point in modern philosophy. With hindsight, we can see them as the first attempt to articulate the background that the modern disengaged picture itself requires... and to use this articulation to undermine the picture. Once one goes through this transition, the whole philosophical landscape changes, because the issue of background understanding is out in the open (33).

According to Dreyfus and Taylor, it is Heidegger who helps us to see that not only the atomism of impressions must be rejected in favor of a more holistic view of perception, but also the assumption that we acquire knowledge through a neutral, “disengaged” stance. Such a stance is seen to be possible only against the background of an already engaged being-in-the-world. To grasp things in perception is to be involved with them, to display intention at the most basic level of awareness (11).

Without following out all the details of their exposition of the contact theory with which they would replace the meditational picture, I want to turn to the “already engaged being-in-the-world” that Dreyfus and Taylor refer to as the *background* of knowledge.

On Background

What does “background” actually mean? We understand the basic idea, but why does such a simple, seemingly trivial idea, designated by human speech perhaps for thousands of years, have epistemological significance now? By observing their uses of the term we can gain some insight into the meaning they assign it. Dreyfus and Taylor refer to “background” as a “framework,” a “setting,” and a “context.” In addition, they describe it in terms of our “gripping” or “grasping” reality, of “coping,” or “aligning ourselves.” It is both an “understanding” and a pre-conceptual, implicit, tacit “preunderstanding.” The background is “the whole form of life,” “an overall grasp,” and “holistic.”⁴ While this may seem at first a lamentable looseness on the authors’ part, careful attention to these terms yields a remarkably rich picture of the phenomenon of a background to knowledge, roughly corresponding to the “themes” of the background that Taylor and Dreyfus discuss in the book. Grouping this long list under five headings will allow us to see more clearly the content of their “contact theory.”

(1) The background to our knowing is *primordial*; it is precisely that part of our conceptualizing which cannot be made explicit, which it is impossible to “foreground.” It is the refusal of the human organism to “dilute the...intentional thickness of perception” by flattening and homogenizing our encounter with the world.⁴ The various dimensions of this incorrigible “thickness” of perception—logical, temporal, cognitive—are what Dreyfus and Taylor try to signal by calling the background a “primordial framework,” and the many other cognates and correlates they use.

(2) The background is *active*. There is a subtle move in the critical tradition from describing the process of knowing to describing what is known, and how it can be justified. One can only make this move by converting the process of knowing into a purely passive reception of sense impressions (for empiricists like Hume and Locke) or of ideas (for rationalists like Descartes), and it results in conceiving of knowledge as an isolated artifact—a fact, a theory, an idea or concept—which can then be subjected to exhaustive analysis and verification. So one feature of the background that Dreyfus and Taylor want to recover is its active nature. The background is not a blank curtain or screen hanging at the back of the mind; it is rather a grasping, a seeking for sense in what is in front of us (18, 21). The background of our understanding is a “steady flow” of intention through which we “align ourselves” with experience (47, 62). We do not passively receive beliefs about the world—not even through the categories of understanding that Kant believed were part of our mental architecture—but we “engage with” the world,

“grouping” and “generating” our beliefs in a “continuing transaction” with the world (36, 48, 64). This emphasis on the process of knowing—particularly of discovery—has often been dismissed by the philosophical guild as mere “psychologizing” and not actually doing philosophy; this was a criticism of Michael Polanyi’s work, for example.

Dreyfus and Taylor illustrate action by emphasizing coping, by which the knower deals with the world by making sense of the “conditions of experience” (51ff.). Both in physiological coping (walking up a path, driving a car) and conceptual coping (having a conversation, thinking discursively, doing mathematics) we exercise skills we have learned, usually unconsciously, in reading and making sense of experience. Most important, “theoretical knowledge has to be situated in relation to everyday coping to be the knowledge that it is” (54). “Background” and “foreground” simply mark different aspects of the same experience, of the same act of perception by which we make sense of things. Though Dreyfus and Taylor use examples primarily from Merleau-Ponty (the footballer, etc.) in illustrating this point, a similar point can be made through the acquisition of skills, as Polanyi shows.

(3) The background is *meaningful*. It is an original move in which we engage the world and this engagement is marked throughout by its significance for us. Human knowing is not just like a plant turning to the sun, though it includes basic physical abilities; it is rather a stretching out toward richer significance in reality, toward meaning that is relevant to us: “[W]e need to see this understanding as that of an engaged agent, determining the significances...of things from out of its aims, needs, purposes, desires” (69). The mediational perspective’s alliance with a claim of radical objectivity has distorted human knowing by insisting that it must be completely impersonal. What was important for Descartes—overcoming the uncertainty, disagreements, and stagnation of traditional knowledge claims while providing a firm basis for the new sciences—led inexorably to the impossible ideal of achieving *all* knowledge without a knower, of reaching a perspective on the world completely abstracted from the messiness of human life. Dreyfus and Taylor’s careers have been largely spent critiquing the aspirations of social science (including computing) to be more objective, more quantitative, more like the natural sciences, and that critique is supported here.⁵

(4) The background is *holistic*. Returning to Kant, Dreyfus and Taylor see another necessary constituent of “overcoming epistemology” as the awareness that knowledge must be integral, encompassing “the whole form of life,” “an already operative overall grasp of things,” because “every bit of my understanding draws on the whole” (38, 39, 46). Though it is the phenomenologists Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and the later Wittgenstein who have made this point most emphatically, it began with Kant’s rejection of the “atomism of inputs” that undergirded Hume and Locke’s empiricism. “The mediational approach seems to want to take each belief as though it was there on its own, standing alone, frameworkless” (20). Sense impressions enter the mind as discrete,

particular bits of information that are then assembled into the ideas that constitute our concepts and theories. The more amenable such impressions are to quantification, the more certain knowledge becomes.

Beginning in the early 20th century, philosophers became restless with this assumption of atomism, and a new kind of theory emerges. “A basic move,” Dreyfus and Taylor write, “which gives rise to this [contact] theory is a re-embedding of thought and knowledge in the bodily and social-cultural contexts in which it takes place” (18). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues “that things are disclosed first as part of a world,” and they are disclosed as “ready-to-hand,” that is, as part of our ordinary involvement with the world. The scientific stance of neutrality toward the world, seeing things as instrumentally present, can only exist derivatively from a primordial involvement with that world (34-35). Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is a compelling revelation of how our existence in the world is bodily through and through, such that no Cartesian dualism can get a purchase in this new way of thinking: “It seems clear from the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that the ‘engaged’ mode, in which things show up in their meanings for us, has to precede the disengaged one” (36).

A third member of this rebel group that undermines mediational epistemology is Wittgenstein, who targets an atomistic view of language and meaning,

which consisted in the view that a word was given meaning by being linked to an object in a relation of ‘naming’ or ‘signifying.’...Naming something seems like a primitive, self-sufficient operation, but when one takes it as such, ‘one forgets that a great deal of stage setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense...’ (37, 38).

Wittgenstein substitutes for the atomism of this “ostensive definition” approach to language the various language games in which humans participate, and “eventually the whole form of life in which these games have sense” (38). Both in the *Investigations* and in *On Certainty*, he makes clear that “there is no such thing as an absolutely isolated bit of information, unlinked by inferences, fore and aft” (39).

(5) The background is *embodied*. Finally, though my list is not exhaustive, Dreyfus and Taylor claim that the contact theory assumes that all knowing is embodied: “the original, inescapable locus of this constrained, preconceptual sense-making is our bodily commerce with our world” (69). Though I suspect anyone who has read the *Phenomenology of Perception* finds it impossible to appreciate the rendering of knowing in mediational epistemology solely in terms of mental acts, nevertheless, this has been the tradition inherited by modernity. The mind was said to receive sense impressions, translate them somewhat magically into ideas, and then assemble them according to logical rules into concepts and theories representing the world outside the mind.

Again, in its atomistic, abstract rendering of mental life, the critical tradition gave science an epistemological foundation that swept away traditional views of reason and understanding in an effort to bend every human activity to science's needs. Though often told, this story still needs repeating, for contrary to what might seem to be a lot of Enlightenment-bashing in post-modernity, our authors argue that "there is a big mistake operating in our culture, a kind of operative (mis)understanding of what it is to know, which has had dire effects on both theory and practice in a host of domains" (2).

Such a move of abstracting ourselves from the ordinary world in which we live, a world shot through with bodiliness, cannot help but increase our sense of alienation, of lostness. William Poteat expresses this point powerfully:

...the commonsense view of spatiality that has come down to us from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, and which has tacitly become for us the ontologically *primordial* view, is radically incoherent. What is worse, its incoherence is humanly intolerable. Persons have *places*. The conception of space under review systematically preempts the notion of *place* (1993, 33).

Our basic orientation in the world is bodily; as Dreyfus and Taylor put it, using the work of Samuel Todes, "the most primordial and unavoidable significances of things are...: that our field is shaped in terms of up or down, near or far, easily accessible or out of reach, graspable, avoidable, and so on" (69). Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Our body is...a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves toward its equilibrium" (quoted on 48). So reconceiving knowledge in terms of incarnation, of "enfleshment" in the human body, provides a more accurate understanding of knowing, and so returns philosophy to sanity.

Thus a tour through the many ways that Dreyfus and Taylor have described the "background" of knowing outlines their "contact theory," which asserts that this background is *primordial*, arises in *action*, reveals what is *meaningful* to the knower, is *holistic*, and *embodied*. Each of these features clarifies through contrast why mediational epistemology is inadequate, and points to a different approach to knowing. If we step outside this fairly standard philosophical discussion, however, to consider the views of an outsider, we find what I believe to be helpful additions to the arguments of *Retrieving Realism*, for Michael Polanyi's work deepens, augments, and extends our understanding of the background of knowing. This is not to suggest that his views oppose the views of Dreyfus and Taylor—the opposite is actually the case. It does suggest, however, that important features of the background and its implications have been overlooked.

Most striking to me is that so much of the treatment of knowing in *Retrieving Realism*, particularly its discussion of the "background," has only the most tenuous sense of a knower, an agent, as the locus of this activity. The background is referred to as

“the context” (30), as “correlates of concerned involvement” (34), as “a kind of framework or context” (20), as “conditions of intelligibility” (38), “the never-questioned overall shape of things” (45), “motor intentionality” (50), “a kind of protoknowledge” (52), and many others, none of which suggests a human being behind them. Certainly Dreyfus and Taylor assume a person is involved with all of these dimensions of the background; some of their locutions suggest this: “acting in and on a world which also acts on them” (18), or “our grasp on reality” (22), or “my ability to cope” (44), or “our bodily commerce with our world” (69). But this is the problem: there are only *suggestions* of a person who is creating or engaging the background, when Polanyi would insist that each of these background features is an aspect of a human striving to make sense of his world, and that this personal agency should never be lost in our attempts to describe knowing: “I have shown that into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge” (*PK*, xiv).

The extensive critique in *PK* of the claims of positivistic science from *within* science means that use of scientific knowing as the standard of a mediational view is severely curtailed. It can no longer simply be assumed that scientific knowledge as traditionally understood can be unproblematically accepted as the norm for human knowing generally. Though he first looks at knowing as it actually happens in scientific practice, Polanyi extends his perspective through all acts of knowing, in the arts, history, language, and everyday life, considerably broadening the scope of epistemology.

Dreyfus and Taylor strive mightily to avoid a Cartesian dual placing of the “background” both within the knower—in her mind, or in her body—and within the world she lives in, as this reduces to the “dualist sorting” that has worked so much mischief in philosophy (*RR*, 11-14). The structure of tacit knowing derived from Gestalt psychology, however, provides a ready solution in the polarity of tacit and explicit awareness; as Marjorie Grene puts it: “Polanyi’s solution...rests on the distinction...between two kinds of awareness: focal and subsidiary...Our explicit awareness, the focal core of consciousness, is always founded in and carried by the tacit acceptance of something not explicit, which binds, heavily and concretely, ourselves to and within our world” (*KB*, ix-x).

When we are absorbed in trying to figure out a scene before us (an unknown face, a problem, a path in the woods), there are a host of features of the scene which we do not notice, even though they may be clues to figuring out what we want to know. These clues can be either *subliminal*, unavailable for direct inspection because they are inaccessible within our bodies—our eye muscles, respiration, circulation of our blood, the firing of neurons in our brains—or *marginal*, where we could observe these clues if we chose to, such as our distance from the perceived object, the level of light in the scene, etc. Yet both kinds of clues are subsidiary to my attending to the object in front of me.

I do not observe them directly, and yet they enable me to perceive the object. Polanyi summarizes: “*We may say that my awareness of both kinds of clues is subsidiary to my focal awareness of that object*” (KB, 140, italics original).

The background to my knowledge, then, is the world of things within which I live, some of which become subsidiary clues in my seeking understanding of what is around me. Going back and forth between subsidiary and focal awareness (the active part of my background) yields the integration which is knowing. This polar process solves the mystery of how knowledge can be both background and foreground, both tacit and explicit: “I am envisaging a continuous range in degrees of indwelling, not two aspects, one from inside, the other from outside” (KB, 180, n.3). Tacit knowing therefore gives a fuller account of the role of the background than we saw with Dreyfus and Taylor:

When I move my hand before my eyes, it would keep changing its colour, its shape and its size, but for the fact that I take into account a host of rapidly changing clues, some in the field of vision, some in my eye muscles and some deeper still in my body, as in the labyrinth of the inner ear. My powers of perceiving coherence make me see these *thousand varied and changing clues* jointly as one single unchanging object... (KB, 139; italics added).

How straightforward! When we recognize something, we see its parts in a different way than when we see them in isolation, and this has been firmly established by science itself. A scientific discovery, or any intellectual insight, is established by observing particular clues focally and then making them subsidiary by shifting our attention from them to their “theoretical coherence.” Thus, Polanyi states, “this act of integration, which we can identify both in the visual perception of objects and in the discovery of scientific theories is the tacit power we have been looking for. I shall call it *tacit knowing*” (KB, 140; Polanyi will go on in *The Tacit Dimension* to elaborate the tacit in terms of proximal/distal dimensions, and functional, phenomenal, semantic and ontological aspects). But it is his examples of what Dreyfus and Taylor call “skilled coping” that are especially helpful in seeing the simple profundity of his theory. In riding a bicycle, swimming, giving a speech, or recognizing a face, we are integrating subsidiary clues to a focal meaning, and the fact that the clues that give the activity or object its meaning are subsidiary means that we cannot tell, in any complete, explicit way, how it is that we do these things. An additional advantage of the polar structure of tacit knowing is that it enables us to account for the persistence of the mediational view, for the subsidiary pole of awareness, because tacit and unseen, could easily be assimilated to a vague “mind” and so ignored, while the focal pole of awareness provided the explicit features that Cartesianism desired. In short, properly understood, “background” is shorthand for “a knower engaged in the world.”

An additional feature of Polanyi's treatment of these themes that I find absent in Dreyfus and Taylor is the notion of *indwelling*, which links up the simple act of perception (including its background) with the deeper comprehension of complex entities that we commonly call "knowledge." In ordinary perception, I integrate tacit clues (the movement of muscles in my eyes, the position of my head, the light that falls on the scene, etc.) into a comprehensive whole that makes sense, that I can identify ("There's John over there"). This integration is tantamount to dwelling in those clues, participating in their relations to one another to such a degree that we interiorize them, extending our bodies through them in a sense, in much the same way that we extend ourselves with tools or instruments, as when one is playing the piano, or reading an absorbing novel; we forget about the piano or the book as we focus entirely on the meaning of the music or the story. This indwelling is particularly important when we are engaging with other people or with complex entities or ideas, for it allows us to participate in that which we are trying to know. So my relation to a symphony's performance of a Mozart concerto goes beyond "hearing the notes;" I indwell those sounds to a degree that may allow me to know it at a deeper level than purely passive listening would, even to being "carried away" by the music. Such indwelling, to give one example of its relevance, could offer plentiful resources to the desire of Dreyfus and Taylor to "fuse horizons" between different cultures, so that alternative modernities can live together peacefully (Chapter Six).

On Realism

Thus far my comments on *Retrieving Realism* have focused on the central theme of "background." A second element of human knowledge tackled by our authors is its connection to a "real" world, and it is their treatment of realism that I now examine. The first thing we notice in *RR* is the use of a plethora of terms and phrases to describe "the real": "physical objects around us" (6), "the components of the universe as they are in themselves, absolutely independent of any relation to our embodiment" (133), "the universe as it is in itself" (131), "nature as it is in itself" (149), and many others. Such a variety is true to our normal speech, as far as it goes, as well as our normal experience, and reminds us that careful reflection on an idea does not require that we achieve an explicit definition of that idea. In fact, such a requirement may only short-circuit our reflection. Tracking such usage, however, can indicate patterns of thought which are never actually stated—thus the usefulness of etymology—and in *RR* I detect a *spatial* dimension: "reality" is that which is separate from "us" The real is "...as it is in itself," which, when we are talking of "the world" (65, etc.) or "the cosmos" (137), or "the universe" (146), can only mean separate from the human knower, something standing over there, not connected to the person.

Such spatiality seems harmless, perhaps, but it does seem to allow back in a shadow of the “mind inside, world outside” dualism Dreyfus and Taylor have been so determined to escape (11-12). It also complicates their later attempts to argue that science actually discovers a “reality” that is independent of our language, for they have already defined “the real” as that which is “totally independent of us” (138). Rorty can simply point to such descriptions as “self-fulfilling prophecies”—the claim that science shows reality is actually independent of us merely repeats our definition, without ever getting outside the circle of language.

Here Polanyi presents another possibility, that of referring to reality in terms that emphasize *temporal*, as well as simply spatial features of the real: “it [reality] is capable of yet manifesting itself indefinitely in the future” (*KB*, 170). There is a certain mystery in our encounters with the world, since some features of that world are always hidden from us. “My definition of reality, as that which may yet inexhaustibly manifest itself, implies the presence of an indeterminate range of anticipations in any knowledge bearing on reality” (*KB*, 141). In integrating various clues that are available to us, we anticipate what is there, we envision possibilities that will only prove right or wrong over time. Marjorie Grene notes that this is one of the (few) insights of Heidegger: “Being-ahead-of-oneself”: human being is always in advance of itself; we project ourselves as what we mean to make of ourselves. For human being(s), the primary tense is future” (1995, 72). Such a future orientation also better allows for changes that will occur in science itself (e.g., from classical physics to quantum mechanics), changes that occur in our grasp of reality, and for the inevitable surprises and contradictions of human expectations that science continually presents. This way of speaking of reality—that which “may yet reveal itself to our deepened understanding in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations” (*KB*, 133)—shifts the emphasis of “reality” from an independently existing thing out there, “totally independent of us” (138), to that which is constituted *both* by what is there “outside our skins,” and by the human knower who is making sense of what is encountered by indwelling the various clues that she has picked up in her search for the meaning of the experience. In contrast to both Rorty and Dreyfus and Taylor, this understanding encompasses a world with a significant degree of independence, *and* a human being striving to comprehend that world and express it in language. I do not find this degree of holism in Dreyfus and Taylor.

To be clear, Polanyi is not suggesting that “reality” is made up only of our anticipations of the future. He illustrates and confirms the observation of *Retrieving Realism* that most scientists are “robust realists” (135). His work is full of descriptions of the actual practice of science in which the belief in an external reality drives the effort to discover more about that reality: “Why do we entrust the life and guidance of our thoughts to our conceptions? Because we believe that their manifest rationality is due to their being in contact with domains of reality, of which they have grasped one aspect” (*PK*, 104).

Polanyi's understanding of reality, arising from his view of the panorama of tacit knowing which he has developed in great detail, bridges the gap between person and world that so bedevils traditional views of epistemology. Humans are embedded in a world which they can gradually know, and scientific discovery is one piece of evidence that the world they know is actually there, and not just "in their heads."

Dreyfus and Taylor emphasize in their use of Merleau-Ponty and Samuel Todes that perception offers the most accessible clues to our embeddedness in the world. Polanyi's approach connects perception to his understanding of reality, for just as we cannot specify the clues we indwell to achieve knowledge, there is an indeterminate range of non-specifiable clues, of anticipations, whose meaning will only become clear when they are integrated in a whole vision. The very vagueness of the human mind, when compared to the exactitude of physics, is a sign of the vast resources humans command in making sense of the world, particularly through the use of language; it is also a sign of the tacit character of these powers, rooted as they are in bodily perception. Polanyi asserts that "by my definition, this [vagueness or] indeterminacy makes mind the more real, the more substantial" (*KB*, 151). than the tangible objects which have been elevated to center stage in modern discussions of knowing. People are more real than cobblestones, so that a humane realism, a critical realism somewhat similar, perhaps, to Dreyfus and Taylor's "pluralist robust realism," is certainly on firmer ground than are most current ontologies.

Conclusion

The many ways that Dreyfus and Taylor have explicated the meaning of "background" provides extensive support for their argument that "our explicit thinking about the world is contextualized and given its sense by an implicit, largely unarticulated background sense of our being in the world" (67). It is also important that their explication of the background has been woven from insights of a number of major philosophers, chiefly Kant, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and the later Wittgenstein—hardly minority voices.⁶

Nevertheless, there is room for at least one more voice. The various features of the background to our knowledge—preconceptual, active, embodied and the rest—have been expressed in *RR* in a philosophical idiom appropriate to the academic venues in which the discussions have occurred. It is science, however, which has provided one of the main bulwarks defending the mediational perspective, and it is in philosophy of science that many of the conflicts have been fought, particularly over the question of realism. Do our scientific claims express real knowledge of an independently existing natural world? Or, as Davidson and Rorty have argued, is science only a particular corner of the linguistic world, where "knowledge consists only in beliefs being justified by other beliefs," rather than by contact with reality? (Dreyfus in Abbey, 2004,

60, 68-75). Given the status and power of science in our society, the stakes in our answers to these questions could not be higher. This being the case, would you not think that philosophers would pay attention to a distinguished scientist—none of those mentioned are—who has written extensively on these very issues? The irony is that Polanyi's ventures in philosophy were dismissed by telling him that “cobblers should stick to their lasts,” while philosophers with no experience as practicing scientists made abundant judgments about science (Langford and Poteat 1968, 4)!

His absence is the mystery surrounding Michael Polanyi in modern discussions of realism—he is a ghost in the room, ignored by almost everyone. To read Polanyi essays like “The Logic of Tacit Inference” and “Tacit Knowing: Its Bearing on Some Problems of Philosophy,” published fifty years ago, reminds one of his prescience, and also confirms his assertion that the measure of how well one has described reality is the degree to which that description is confirmed in unexpected ways in the future. (*KB*, 138-180). Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor are doing battle, of course, on the field of contemporary philosophy, and so use weapons and strategies appropriate to that arena. Perhaps it is still possible, however, contrary to all the expectations of the academy, that an Extra-Territorial may provide unanticipated contributions to this important effort.

ENDNOTES

¹Hereafter, page numbers to *Retrieving Realism* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²Dreyfus and Taylor (2015), Schear (2013), and Dreyfus' article in Abbey, 2004. I want to thank Phil Mullins and Esther Meek for indirect help with my reading of *Retrieving Realism* through their earlier comments on the book, in connection with their own work. Since *Retrieving Realism* has been or is being discussed by others in *Tradition and Discovery*, my comments will not be synoptic, but selective.

³There are well over 100 different terms, by my count. This abundance of terms may not be surprising to phenomenologists, but it is most annoying to analytic philosophers (see Bernard Williams' comments on Heidegger and Rorty in Williams 2004).

⁴See W.H. Poteat's statement of this point in “George Steiner: the Extra-Territorial Critic,” in Nickell and Stines 1993, 261-62.

⁵These earlier efforts can be seen in books like Dreyfus (1992) and Taylor (1985).

⁶This is laid out more fully in Taylor's well-known article, “Overcoming Epistemology” (1995, 1-19).

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ROBUST MORAL REALISM: PLURALIST OR EMERGENT?¹



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Keywords: Charles Taylor, Hubert Dreyfus, Michael Polanyi, Wittgenstein, Rorty, pluralism, emergentism, tacit knowing, ethics, emergentist ethics, relativism, realism, deflationary realism

ABSTRACT

In Retrieving Realism, Taylor and Dreyfus aim to correct mistaken modern assumptions and their post-modern reactions in order to affirm a robust realism about a world for scientific and moral exploration. Their critiques and solutions have much in common with Polanyi's approach; they all emphasize tacit body-knowing, background frameworks, and our ability to develop epistemological structures that better and better grasp the world considered independent from us. Dreyfus-Taylor and Polanyi diverge, however, when it comes to choosing a framework from which to understand a robust moral realism. The former endorse a Heideggerian "reveal but conceal" pluralist approach, while a Polanyian view advocates a "progress but with risk" emergentist approach. I argue that the emergentist approach provides a better defense against deflationary realism and better reconciles apparent contradictions, such as physical causality and free will, engaged contact and progress in knowing reality in-itself, and cultural relativism and objective morality. While a pluralist account may have the strength of endorsing tolerance, it is more vulnerable to an ethical relativism; and while an emergentist view is more clearly at risk of illicit dogmatism, it has the strength of endorsing the search for moral truth that we all can share.

In *Retrieving Realism*, Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus look at deeply-seated modern assumptions that can distort our relation to the world and encourage us to experience it as meaningless and distant. Much like Michael Polanyi, they see modern epistemology as at least partly responsible for undermining our belief in the reality of human values and free will. They unravel to the roots these distorting assumptions that can “colonize common sense” and, by standing on the shoulders of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Samuel Todes and Hans-Georg Gadamer, they magnificently show us how we actually do connect with the world and each other in a meaningful way. But they are after much more than this. Once contact is established, a realism can be deflationary or robust. They want a “robust realism” that affirms science’s ability to progress in discovering reality. They also want a robust realism that affirms our ability to discover and weigh true values.

To bolster their robust view against Richard Rorty’s deflationary realism, they move towards ideas we find in Michael Polanyi and C.S. Peirce, such as the building of tacit epistemological structures that can accurately capture an independent reality in the long run. However, in the last chapter they advocate a pluralistic conception of reality that is in tension with their notion of a “fusion of horizons” and a progressive supersession to more and more adequate views. Advocating pluralism can defuse some dangers surrounding too strong a conception of progress, but pluralism applied too soon can also re-introduce a realist’s version of the relativism that they worry about in Rorty’s account (65).²

I argue that explicitly framing their insights in Polanyi’s emergentist “progress but with risk” picture rather than Heidegger’s pluralistic “reveal but conceal” picture would strengthen Taylor and Dreyfus’ argument against deflationary realists like Rorty and better legitimize their conception of progress in moral knowledge. A stratified emergentist account is also a more thoroughgoing application of gestalt holism than a flat pluralism and better reconciles apparent contradictions in a unified framework, such as the co-existence of (1) causal determination and rational freedom, (2) engaged contact and progress in knowing reality in-itself, and (3) cultural relativism and objective morality. While there are dangers and benefits to each approach, viewing ethical truths as emergent achievements allows for a plurality, but also presents a stronger hope for a new, shared moral reality.

Realism Lost: Distorting Assumptions and Their Dangers

Taylor and Dreyfus identify the assumptions that can distort our understanding of the world: (1) the “dualist sortings” of inside from outside (mind-matter, mind-world, brain-body, but also form-content, original-copy and mold-filling [46]), (2) a mediational view of how the two are then bridged (representations or ideas in the mind depicting the world), (3) a foundationalist approach (a reduction to atoms of

experience and rebuilding knowledge from them), and (4) a “monological” (as in an individualistic monologue) understanding of how we come to know the world and establish meaningfulness. This last assumption divides us not only from the world, but from each other, making the project of knowing the world seem a more individual matter than it actually is.

The root problem here is the way an inside-outside distinction is conceived; we start to posit and problematize a widening gulf between our minds and the world beyond it. This distance breeds both skeptical and anti-realist views that encourage us to doubt that we can ever know reality as it is, if there is such a thing. The dualist sorting of a mind or brain *in here* and the world *out there* even makes the notion that we are living in constant illusion—like a brain in a vat or Neo hooked up to the Matrix—seem like a real possibility when it is merely a fanciful possibility (95-97).

This separation between mind and reality also leads to seeing the world outside as comprised solely of physical configurations that are completely separate from human values, which then come to seem inner and mental and thus appear to be merely projected upon the outer world. Conceived as two entirely distinct and contradictory notions, the realm of determinate physical causes (expressed as value-free facts) seems to negate any reality for a realm of human meanings and freedom. Hence the skepticism about the reality of the world, or our ability to know it, is surpassed only by an even stronger skepticism about the possibility of finding truth in any assessment of human values. If only the “outer” physical facts count as real, the values of Hitler and Mother Theresa are equally good or evil, and both are illusory fabrications, to be judged, perhaps, only by their usefulness to those who adhere to them. This last caveat reflects the sort of non-realist relativism about values that Dreyfus and Taylor worry about with Rorty’s approach.

Answering Rorty’s Challenge: Building Epistemological Structure

Taylor and Dreyfus overcome any continued skepticism about the existence of reality and meanings by providing a “contact” picture that displaces traditional mediational or representational pictures. Their contact picture, complemented by Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games and Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons, also takes away the primacy that Descartes and Locke put on the abilities of an isolated individual. They see how we develop, learn and grow together as we, together, engage and even “coproduce” (93) reality—but how this contact is conceived is crucial. Rorty also allows that our linguistic categories come from pragmatic engagement, but he cannot imagine stepping outside of language for it to be fitted against a world that is apart from us (58). Rorty thus advocates a “deflationary” realism: for him, the philosophical question of a correspondence of true sentences to a world does not arise, precisely because we cannot separate language from the world enough for a correspondence to make sense.³

Re-describing the world can change our “truths,” but we cannot get an independent stance from which to judge when one description is a better than another. Connecting scientific and moral “truths” with how our community agrees to talk makes Rorty’s view look nonrealist and relativist (65), but Taylor and Dreyfus can run into a similar sort of trouble if they cannot adequately address “Rorty’s Challenge” (132).

To get their robust realism, Taylor and Dreyfus must be able to tell us how we can get to reality *in itself* when we start from an engaged perspective that describes reality as it is to us. Too great a conceptual distance from reality and we succumb to skepticism; but too close and we succumb to “deflationary” realism. Their arguments against Rorty here rely heavily on their ability to substantiate the notion of progress in science (and morality) towards better and better accounts of the structure of reality as it is apart from us (142).

Here Taylor and Dreyfus import notions of “essences” and “natural kinds,” along with “rigid designation” that allows language the ability to correspond to instances of such kinds (141, 142).⁴ In attempting to reformulate philosophical distinctions rather than escape from their spell, Taylor and Dreyfus are moving away from Wittgenstein’s own deflationary account. Taylor and Dreyfus effectively use Wittgenstein’s notion of language-games to exposes flaws in a “monological” approach, but for Wittgenstein, we are also supposed to resist the pull of language that makes us build up philosophical categories such as “truth” and notions such as the idea that language “corresponds” to “reality in itself.” Rorty, following Wittgenstein, wants us to “walk away” from such talk (132); Wittgenstein and Rorty would both see new efforts to make realism robust as a backsliding to representationalist notions.

Here Polanyi remains a more steadfast ally than Merleau-Ponty and even Heidegger. Engaged coping and contact is consistent with tacit knowing and indwelling, and both give us a participatory understanding of reality. But the structure of tacit knowing helps us see how we can develop better and better structures for knowing reality as it is (conceived) independently from us. To extract us sufficiently from engagement, Taylor and Dreyfus describe our movement from protoconceptual agents, to engaged agents, to the (responsible) agency of decentered knowers (69). Framing this as the emergence of tacit structure for grasping an independent (and emerging) reality, as Polanyi does, helps strengthen Taylor and Dreyfus’ argument, for then we can better see the advancement of science in the post-Galilean “decentered” theories/conceptions as a continuation of the preconceptual task of “getting it right” (76) rather than a backsliding. This is indeed part of their strategy (as they indicate on page 138) but it tacitly imports a developmental and even emergentist approach that Polanyi helps make more explicit.

Polanyi provides a general *from-to* structure common to both motor and linguistic skills that allows us to see how one epistemic stage can build on another. The *from-to* structure of tacit knowing is a gestalt in which the focal understanding (the *to*)

is irreducible to the individual clues that comprise it (the *from*). Also, the focal can become a tacit clue in a further integration. Tacit knowing structures can develop, that we effortlessly see through, and so representational intentionality can be built upon motor intentionality.

Taylor and Dreyfus recognize (with Merleau-Ponty) that “motor intentionality makes representational intentionality possible” (50) and that the meaningful proto-conceptual makes the conceptual and the theoretic possible.⁵ The *from-to* structure gives an indication of how we can move *from* the sub-symbolic experience *to* concepts, and *from* concepts *to* conceptions, and *from* conceptions *to* theories, and how these (at each stage) can shape/inform the world and our experience of the world, but also can act as better and better tools for reaching out to discover and understand an independent reality.⁶ We dwell in, or tacitly move through, these structures when we reach out to an experience of the world, just as we can move through our nerves, muscles, and the stick in our hand to feel focally the dimensions of a dark room. We are integrally entwined with reality, but our concepts can bring reality to light. This reality, for Polanyi and Peirce, includes natural kinds. Since “universals” (Polanyi, *KB* 149) or “generals” (Peirce) can have real effects and “manifest themselves on an indeterminate range of future occasions” (*KB* 168) they count as real and would divide into kinds based on properties that are “essential” to them.

Taylor and Dreyfus outline in eleven steps the development of “skillful perception and action” that can produce justified true beliefs about the world (summarized on pp. 88-89). They note how these epistemological skills build one upon the other and how all work together tacitly and so any individual stage is typically only noticed when it breaks down (88). Taylor and Dreyfus in effect show how we develop enough tacit knowing structure to become capable of *speaking* about our “coproduced” (93) reality in a meaningful correspondence of words and things, and how we can test, so as to *know* when we get it right. This development shows how we start with an entwined contact with reality as a participatory co-production, but also shows the way we develop structures for knowing, concepts, conceptions and theories that have the requisite distance to either match the structure of the world, or not.⁷

As Taylor and Dreyfus move from “engaged” or “absorbed coping” to the view that we can know a world as it is in itself apart from us, they recognize that they begin to lose the support of Merleau-Ponty (135), but they also seem to lose Heidegger.⁸ This is not just because Heidegger would be unhappy to see us pursue the “de-worlding” approach of science as the proper and paradigmatic way to unveil Being, but because for Heidegger with any revealing there is also a concealing, and this does not reflect well the robust notion of scientific progress that Taylor and Dreyfus express. Their effort to keep Heidegger close strains at the notion of progress and draws them towards the pluralistic conception that manifests explicitly in Chapter Eight.

Reconciling Incompatibility: Emergent “Progress but with Risk” vs. Plural “Reveal but Conceal”

In Chapters One through Seven, we see Taylor and Dreyfus advocating something that fits well the framework of Polanyi’s development of the tacit structure for *knowing*, but we also see them tacitly embrace some version of an emergentist picture of *being* as well. We see this in the evolutionary progress from the sort of things that are in the causal domain of physical determination to those that can use reason and be free. They provide a picture in which some animals do not yet have the type of freedom that reason gives us, but still have protoconceptual awareness that sets the groundwork for our concepts and beliefs. We can see that the type of beings that we are is dependent upon but not reducible to features that some animals display (77). Here Polanyi’s epistemic gestalt holism of a *from-to* structure is echoed in his ontic gestalt holism of a *subsidiary-emergent* structure. With Polanyi we see (and Taylor and Dreyfus would likely acknowledge) that the ontogenesis of the knowing structures that they describe in human beings reflects the phylogenesis of the emergence of one sort of being from another sort. The development towards becoming “decentered” responsible knowers reflects the emergence of the sort of being that is rational and free from a sort of being that is causally determined.⁹

According to Polanyi, each such stage of development in knowing or being is an achievement that also bears new risks (PK 387-389). At “every step” of advance there is “an additional liability to miscarry” (TD 50). With the emergence of animal life (with degrees of freedom) from non-life, and with the emergence of “higher” forms of life (with more degrees of freedom) there is a greater possibility for growth and movement, but there is also the possibility of deformity and death that did not exist before. Similarly, with the emergence of structures for knowing, we have more chances for getting it right, but we also have more opportunities to go wrong. So while there is no room for skepticism or solipsism at lower levels of animal engagement, at higher levels we can have true beliefs, but we can be mistaken, and we can even become deluded. Humans also gain a freedom from nature that allows us not only to think about it in concepts but allows us to become accountable for our actions. Morality can be seen as a further emergent achievement bearing risks. So while there is no notion of evil at lower levels, at higher levels we have opportunities to do good, or to commit evil acts.

Whereas an emergentist picture sees progress, but with risk of distortion or error, Heidegger tends to see every revealing as simultaneously a concealing; so advancing one line of questioning reality (e.g., pursuing science) detracts from other possible manifestations of reality (e.g., seeing gold as sacred—if the ancient Egyptians were right) and the different manifestations need not be reconcilable. While emergentism is a stratified form of pluralism that shows a way to reconcile contradictory notions together in relation to each other, a flat pluralism lacks this developmental structure. So, while Taylor

and Dreyfus present something like an emergentist account of how freedom builds up from a world dominated by physical causality earlier in the book, in Chapter Eight, where they develop a pluralistic account, they emphasize that causality and freedom may be forever irreconcilable (158), and a natural kind might even have two incompatible essences, e.g., gold may essentially be *both* atomic #79 and sacred (151,152,156).

A flat pluralism opens up the possibility of a natural kind having several essences, but also seems to see these as belonging to it from the very beginning, awaiting discovery, albeit from different approaches (152). Emergentism, in contrast, proposes an ontic gestalt holism that properly remedies the foundationalist picture by supplementing its good method (23) of analysis to parts (and their essential properties) with both (1) the emergence of irreducible wholes/beings (with novel properties) and (2) the notion that emergent wholes/relations can act on their subsidiary conditions (perhaps, at times, unlocking novel properties in the parts). In this picture, even gold (if the Egyptians were right) could take on a new property that is essential to it at different level of engagement, but it would likely not be a feature that was always actually essentially there at the start.

Just as the atomic bits are meaningless without the holistic context of their relations, so atomic parts of a system can get some of their properties from the emergent whole. It is therefore possible that in some cases emergence can change the subsidiaries by bringing out possibilities in them that weren't there before via a new configuration of complex relations.¹⁰ This, in a way, is analogous to how the past can change when we supersede to a new background framework for understanding: the meanings of past events and actions transform in the new context.

Middle Ways between a Reductionist's Monism and a Flat Pluralist's Relativism

Taylor and Dreyfus recognize that the notion we have of scientific *progress* presupposes "one shared reality" as well as notions like "correspondence" and "truth" (147,155). Scientific progress also presupposes, at least as a regulative notion, that we can work towards one unified picture of our one shared reality. If flat-worlders are willing to live with a different set of anomalies than we do, we want to say they are mistaken about our one shared reality. We do not move to a plural conception of reality in which their understanding reveals something concealed to us but is equally valid.

Similarly, if we want a robust realism about values, we want to be able to say that some actions are right and some are wrong. We want progress towards a common fusion from which we can judge together when one set of values is better than another. We do not say that cannibalism reveals something important that is lost to us, but is just as good a practice as any other. We want to say it is a distorted or degenerate practice.

Dreyfus and Taylor's argument against Rorty relies on our ability to "get it right" in a unified story about natural kinds in one shared reality ("science as *world picturing*," 144). In both science and morality, applying the notion of a plural reality *too soon* not only detracts from Dreyfus and Taylor's argument, but also from the hope they provide for supersession to higher values in the moral domain. Without the ruling presumption that I am attempting to discover something that is universally true for everyone via a third-person or transcending view in science *or* morality (Polanyi's "universal intent" [PK 37] and Taylor and Dreyfus's "view from nowhere" [69]), pluralism may kick in too early and lead to the stalemate of a realist's relativism in which my world and its values are just as real and just as true as yours. If a pluralist reality, rather than a unified shared reality, becomes our ruling presumption and regulative default, then relativism follows prematurely.

There are indeed good reasons for introducing pluralism at some point: rocks are different than humans and have different properties; we can act freely they cannot. But there are different ways of understanding pluralism and some are more consistent with a robust view of progress than others. Emergentism endorses a developmental and functionally layered picture that resists a reduction to a pure ontological monism, but also resist the relativism of a premature or unconstrained pluralism.

Taylor and Dreyfus see their pluralism as a third alternative between relativism and scientism (154). Emergentism has been described as a third alternative between pluralism and monism.¹¹ If we see pluralism without any notion of fusion of horizons or supersession into a unitary picture as the relativism (at the far left of the scale), and if we see reduction of everything to the most general science, i.e. physics, as the monism (at the far right of the scale), then we see that Polanyi's emergentism and Taylor and Dreyfus's pluralism are both middle alternatives. Taylor and Dreyfus's pluralistic view is closer to a relativism, but resists the notion of irreconcilably conflicting yet equally true conceptual schemes via the unity that comes with the possibility for a "calibration" of diverse languages and the supersession of distorting frameworks.

Polanyi's view is closer to monism but resists pure identity of all beings to the physical via the plurality that comes with the notion of emergence. The move from left (a relativist's pluralism) to right (a reductionist's monism) comes with the degree to which a successful fusion of horizons, or supersession of conflicting frameworks, can unify diverse conceptions of reality in a common explanatory matrix. The more we do that, the more we tend to see the unification of the plurality of objects in a common sort of being. When it comes to science, as Taylor and Dreyfus point out (155), how much diversity can be brought into unity is largely a matter of empirical investigation, but when unifying moral reality in a common matrix, how much progress we can achieve also depends on what we decide to do. Here is where adopting a "progress but risk" or a "reveal but conceal" approach can make an important difference, since,

among other things, the former can provide a stronger motivation for seeking mutual understanding.

Toward a Robust Emergentist Ethics¹²

Taylor and Dreyfus affirm that “earlier peoples...neither simply *discovered* universal truths about nature and the gods nor *invented* their descriptions of them, but drew on their form of life to *reveal* reality from their own perspectives” (151). The word “reveal” here packs in both discovery and “co-production.” While some assessments are merely discoveries of what already is, and some are projective fabrications, some discoveries can manifest co-productions. If this might happen with metals, how much more so with morals? Moral truths reveal possibilities for our interacting with each other and the world in better or worse ways, but the co-produced realities of our human meanings can diverge.

The divergence of moral realities, like the evolution of creatures with freedom, points us towards emergentist conceptions of reality in which divergent cultural “human meanings” build on, but are not reducible to, the “life meanings” common to all human ways of living (108). Although the creation of life meanings is itself a holistic endeavor, to try to understand divergent human meanings on the basis of these would be a “bottom up” approach. To assure us of contact with each other—and to understand each other’s communally coproduced world—Taylor and Dreyfus introduce and develop Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons that can link us to each other. This fusion of background horizons presents the possibility of coming to at least partially “calibrate” (129) our language/conceptual scheme and background with that of others in a holistic manner. This allows us to understand each other in the realm of *human meanings* even when one’s culture and language is radically different and an approach via our common *life meanings* is insufficient.

But the fusion of horizons and dialogue might do more than calibrate schemes: it can bring us to an understanding that supersedes each interlocutor’s conceptual scheme. Through dialogue and investigation, we can achieve less distorted understandings of nature itself and what is really good. This notion of supersession brings Taylor and Dreyfus to the idea that both our knowledge of reality and of values can progress (143, 162). In science, we can come to see that Einstein’s theories better display the structure of the universe than Newton’s, and, in morality, we can come to see abolishing slavery better reflects moral reality than condoning it.

When we encounter a foreign culture with very different moral values, Taylor and Dreyfus present the hope that we can fuse horizons and perhaps even supersede both our perspectives in a new common conception about what there is. But, if reality is considered irreconcilably pluralistic, there is less theoretical motivation to attempt supersession, and if reality is not emergent, supersession to a common framework would

only be possible if a better way actually already happened to *pre-exist* our discovery (just as gold already has two essences in a flat pluralistic picture, if the Egyptians were right). In an emergentist picture, where moral realities diverge, divergences can also converge in a new emergent way of being. The discovery of a mutually better way of being can be a *co*-coproduction of reality that arises from people together in a community engaging the affordances reality presents. Again, Taylor and Dreyfus already tacitly accept some form of an emergentist picture and would not deny this possibility, but it comes across as a robust possibility in the “achievement but risk” view and can come across as an unlikely hope in the “reveal but conceal” picture. In Heidegger’s conception, *Dasein* is the sort of being that “takes a stand on itself” (161). We have “disclosed” different ways of understanding human nature, and each brings a different conception of the good (162). This also raises the possibility that we can disclose ways of becoming that are different and better together, but Taylor and Dreyfus seem to look for these possibilities in some pre-existing fixed nature that is there for us to discover (162), and our gain in one direction might be a loss in another.

I have suggested that the emergentist picture reconciles apparent contradictions with regard to causality vs. freedom and intractable engagement vs. truth better than a flat pluralism can; it also better reconciles the notion of an objective morality together with a cultural multiplicity. It does not force us to claim that past or different cultures with practices we find abhorrent were simply wrong, but also it does not force us to say they were just as right as we are, which would generate a relativism. It is possible that for the sort of creatures we were, in the sort of conditions in which we lived, one way of living was better than another, e.g., one that focused on survival and reproductive pleasure. But as we advanced to the kind of creatures that we can be, we discovered that values that work towards our flourishing together as a community really do enrich us more, and these values manifest as moral truths. And so we can begin to put values in a rough hierarchy: typically, those that deal primarily with survival are lower than those that deal primarily with community. Accordingly, we find that cannibalism, or Hitler’s xenophobic impetus to exterminate others, can be seen as appealing primarily to the lower values of mere survival, rather than the higher values involved in building relationships that Mother Theresa displayed.

Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy in psychology might be the sort of general ordering that displays one parsing of the emergence of values in history; psychology may replicate moral history in the way ontogenesis can display features of phylogenesis.¹³ In this stratification, we would move from (1) physiological needs (2) to safety, (3) to loving and belonging, (4) to self-esteem, and on (5) to self-actualization (in the context of a community).¹⁴ Each higher level is dependent on the lower level for the possibility of its manifestation, but the higher provides more human fulfillment than the lower can on its own. The higher level also transforms our understanding of the role of the lower

levels; it alters both our essential nature and our understanding of the past. Once the higher value is discovered, the lower value becomes defeasible. Acting from the lower value in disregard of the higher would be a temptation to reversion that might arise in circumstances where the lower value seems to take (and formerly took) precedence.

There can be progress, however, since values come in holistic systems, it is very difficult to judge baldly when one value or action is better than another. Emergent moral developments in our way of being are easier to recognize large-scale across cultures over the course of history. Thus Taylor and Dreyfus can see such shifts in the changes that came with the onset of the Axial age (166). They can also be easier to see within the development of our own culture (human meanings), where we believe we have a good enough grip on the language [“broadly construed” so as to reflect a shared way of life (127)] to recognize real progress, such as in the abolition of slavery or in the institution of voting rights for women (163).

But when we reach deep into history to examine a particular culture’s belief (e.g., to see if gold has a sacred essence), or when we look at a very different current culture (e.g., to understand values that seem to subjugate women), we do not—and cannot—have the same confidence, since we don’t “speak their language”—even though we do share some common forms of life and can translate much.

Pluralism is thus indeed the safe default position. But theoretically we can and should espouse the same confidence in our ability to share a superior and common view of moral reality with divergent others if we could take on *their* language and fuse our horizons. This would be a first step toward being able to rationally discuss and weigh values with them, and between them and us. And in the attempt to fuse, we might supersede with them to a new common view in which our individual differences may come to have a different role or significance.

Explicitly acknowledging emergentism can give Taylor and Dreyfus more encouragement in the possibility for convergence where some overlap begins to show, but where the basal reasons for the overlap are very different. Emergentists have the notion of “multiple realizability” by which different lines of evolution can develop common properties in different ways. Squirrels, fish and birds developed the ability to soar; bees, butterflies, and birds make use of different principles to fly. So the reality of soaring or flying can be realized in multiple ways. The lesson here is that all the background information, ideas and even values do not need to line up and calibrate in order for important superseding agreements and realities to develop.¹⁵ Where we come from is important, but from an emergentist perspective where we want to go together is even more important. The notion that a fusion and supersession can be an emergent co-coproduction gives more hope for co-discovering even better ways to be—but it can happen only if we are willing to put our current identity at risk. As Taylor and Dreyfus note, truly understanding each other “always has an identity cost” (125). If the

new way of being truly supersedes, however, we would look back and see that we were smaller and wrong to understand some of our practices in the way that we did, and would be glad for who we are now.

Pluralism can risk relativism, but it also does a good job of recognizing that each culture can produce valid notions of what is good and true, even if we can't recognize them from our perspective. In contrast, the danger of an emergentist view is ethnocentrism. The optimism that science provides may move too quickly into the moral domain. We can then be faced with the Spencerian notions of progress that proved to be historically destructive in less cautious hands. Visions of the overmen and eugenics are called to mind. Wars, revolutions and genocides have been fought in the name of stamping out the purportedly morally or genetically inferior.

This real danger is what makes us tread so carefully when we come to discuss progress in moral realities. In a way, the divide between fact and value was a safeguard against the dangers of claims to moral progress. Science can safely advance so long as it was thought to make no moral claims. In *Retrieving Realism*, Taylor and Dreyfus break down the barrier between consciousness and world and between fact and value. Pluralism provides a good safeguard to a multiplicity of real values. The safeguards that emergentism has against ethnocentrism are the very values that developed through our history and efforts at progress. The guiding values of autonomy and freedom—and with them the right of people to choose even what we might consider a less satisfying life—are more important than forcing our values on people. This value of tolerance, though generally advocated by pluralists, may actually have a better ground in an emergentist framework; in a pluralist framework, tolerance might more properly seem like a local cultural value rather than the revealing of a universal value that we should all respect. We also see in progress itself the guiding value of being open to changing ourselves. In an emergentist view, we must risk our own identity to gain a perspective on the other from the inside. Only then can we actually know whether or not we have understood them well enough to be able to weigh the better and worse. And only if we are open to that sort of risk would we be open to seeing what we might achieve together.

Conclusion: Framing a Robust Realism for Science and Morality

Taylor and Dreyfus and Polanyi overlap in explicating how engaged coping (tacit knowing) can overturn atomism and foundationalism (reductionism) and put us inextricably back in reality (indwelling). They show how we can restore the validity of human meanings (personal knowledge), and they bring us to a conception of natural and moral reality that scientists and communities of inquirers can successfully and progressively investigate (dialogue, fusion, discovery, supersession). It is in this last claim for a robust realism where Taylor and Dreyfus most conspicuously slide off

Wittgenstein's shoulders, but they also distance themselves from Merleau-Ponty and even Heidegger in their efforts to reform rather than abandon some key philosophical issues and distinctions—not least of which is the modern optimism in the possibility of scientific and moral progress.

Throughout their first seven chapters, Taylor and Dreyfus' ideas closely associate with the ideas of Polanyi. They, in effect, affirm the emergence of tacit structures of knowing and the emergence of different sorts of entities. But in the end they frame their insights in a Heideggerian pluralist “reveal but conceal” view. While emphasizing pluralism allows them the latitude they want for different meaningful valuations of reality, it can detract from the optimistic notion of progress in knowing the real that they deploy against Rorty's “deflationary” realism, and also detract from the cautious progress they advocate in the moral realm.

A Polanyian emergentist “achievement but with risk” view more naturally gives direction to discovery. It can also reconcile contradictory notions in a way that is more satisfying than a flat pluralism. It can reconcile causality and freedom, engaged contact and robust knowledge, natural kinds and multiple essences, and moral progress and relativism. Taylor and Dreyfus tacitly endorse something like a developmental/emergentism view, but explicitly endorsing it would give more force to their argument against Rorty and reduce their exposure to a realist's version of relativism. There are dangers and benefits in taking either an emergentist or pluralist perspective, but an emergentist picture gives Taylor and Dreyfus more of what they want for a robustly real world with robustly real values.

A “reveal but conceal” pluralism accounts for our sense that there is gain but there is also loss in modern culture (167). But “gain and loss” is, in some sense, inevitable in an emergentist account as well, since a superseding picture is the outcome of a gestalt. With a new holistic organization, some benefits of former (incomplete) discoveries are indeed lost, but they are given up because we find a better or more adequate (complete) overall way of understanding or being—at least in the long run. Often these feelings of loss come at a stage when we are in the throes of dissolution; when anomalies arise that call for a new integration to a new understanding. At times such as these, emergentism provides more motivation and more hope for a supersession to a shared moral reality that can, as Taylor and Dreyfus say, “[realize] the highest and the best of human potential” (162).

ENDNOTES

¹This essay is a greatly abridged version of a chapter in the forthcoming book, *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions*, Charles W. Lowney II (ed.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

²Page numbers standing alone will refer to Dreyfus and Taylor's *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³In seeing that Rorty and Davidson are still trapped in a "mediational" picture that makes any escape from language seem like nonsense, Taylor and Dreyfus are in good company. Hintikka sees Wittgenstein and Rorty both as trapped in "language as the universal medium" assumptions. See Jaakko Hintikka, *Lingua Universalis vs. Calculus Ratiocinator, Selected Papers*, Volume 2 (Dordrech: Kluwer Academic, 1997). I included Davidson in this group in my dissertation, "The Tacit and the Ineffable: Frege and Wittgenstein on the Distinction between Language as a Calculus and Language as the Universal Medium" (Boston: Boston University Library, 2005). In an extreme version of the "universalist" position, it no longer makes to talk about one language connecting up with one world, and this is where deflationary accounts are born.

⁴I prefer Frege's notion of *Bedeutung* over Kripke's notion of rigid designation, but the main point stands. See my "From Epistemology to Ontology to *Epistemontology*," *Tradition and Discovery* 40:1 (2013-2014):16-29. See my "The Tacit in Frege" in *Polanyiana* 17:1-2 (2008):19-37 for more on how Frege's distinctions between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* and concept and object can relate to Polanyi's epistemology.

⁵On the protoconceptual as meaningful, see Taylor and Dreyfus's differences with John McDowell on page 80.

⁶In "Frege" (2008), I show how the *from-to* structure can provide a model for understanding concept formation, and the "unsaturated" (tacit) role of concepts in presenting objects.

⁷In "*Epistemontology*" (2014), I attempt to provide a Polanyian picture of where knowing and being go together inextricably—at the level of protoconcepts—and where they break apart to allow for the correspondence between knowing and being that Polanyi emphasized.

⁸They surmise that Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl, leaned too strongly toward a constructivist or idealist understanding of reality (135). They lose Merleau-Ponty for other reasons as well, because in his more mature view he wished to move beyond the inside-outside, intellectualist-empiricist, idealist-realist metaphysical distinctions, and he regretted that he had not done so as successfully as he would like because he started from the "consciousness-object" distinction. See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 200.

⁹Another indication of ontic emergence, discussed later, comes with the development of "human meanings." If we have a robust realism of values, then these can reveal an emergent reality as well.

¹⁰See Crosby, "Emergentism, Perspectivism, and Divine Pathos," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 31:3 (September 2010):196-206.

¹¹See Olivier Sartenaer, "Neither Metaphysical Dichotomy nor Pure Identity: Clarifying the Emergentist Creed," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 44 (2013):365.

¹²For more on Emergentist ethics see my, “Morality: Emergentist Ethics and Virtue *for Itself*,” *Tradition and Discovery* 36:3 (2010):52-65 and “From Morality to Spirituality: Society, Religion and Transformation,” *Tradition and Discovery* 37:1 (2010):19-38.

¹³Another way of seeing a history of moral progress in psychological development is Lawrence Kohlberg’s. He sees egoist concerns and internalization of parental command developing towards utilitarian ethics, which then develop towards Kantian and contract based theories. In contrast, Carol Gilligan can see *care* as a further development in this dialectic rather than a reversion to earlier moral stages. See her *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁴This caveat brings out the concerns of Charles Taylor, who places authenticity in the context of a “horizon of significance” and those of Gilligan (1993), who emphasizes relationship and care. See Taylor’s *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁵Taylor and Dreyfus start to see this sort of a convergence between very different cultures in how women in the Republic of Iran have the right to vote for reasons different than in Western democratic states (163,164). Republics are institutions that might be an emergent development that reflects a higher-order “overlapping consensus” that is multiply realizable in different cultures. Seeing the more or less successful republics in cultures that are very foreign to us (Turkey and Iran), in which women have the right to vote, may be an important overlap and promising development.



BOOK REVIEWS

Taylor, Charles. *The Language Animal: the Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-674-66020-5. 352 + xii. \$35.

The “basic thesis” of Charles Taylor’s *Language Animal* is that understanding language requires accounting for “its constitutive role in human life” (261). Taylor contrasts his use of the term “constitutive” to another way of understanding language he describes as “designative-instrumental.” This latter account defines language chiefly in terms of encoding and representation; the former, however, describes language as the means whereby we are able to avail ourselves of forms of awareness and experience we would otherwise not have. Language, in other words, does not merely represent reality: rather, the use of language contributes to the unfolding or development of reality.

Taylor identifies two philosophical traditions with each of these views of language: the “designative” he associates with Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Étienne Condillac (i.e., the “HLC” tradition), and the “constitutive” he associates with Johann Hamann, Johann Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (i.e., the “HHH” tradition). The HLC tradition developed in the shadow of

the “representational epistemology” of Descartes (4-5); in modern times, the HLC tradition is represented by theories that suggest our use of language can be “easily transposed into the stimulus-response connections of classical behaviorism” (14). The HHH tradition, on the other hand, arises out German Romanticism, and is more recently represented by Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although Taylor often refers to both traditions throughout *Language Animal*, they are not the focus of this work; he plans to develop a more fulsome account of both traditions in a forthcoming companion study on “writers of the Romantic period” and ways some of them rehabilitated premodern accounts of the world as a “locus of signs” (326; cf. 343-345).

The first chapter is dedicated to identifying the principal differences between “designative” (HLC) and “constitutive” (HHH) accounts of language. The former takes a much narrower view of what counts as language, whereas the latter adopts a more expansive or “holistic” perspective (17-18). The former tends to focus on discrete, punctual instances of articulation, whereas the latter affirms the inherent “temporality” of all language (21-22). The former is concerned chiefly with identifying how language maps

an *a priori*, independent reality, but the latter suggests language opens up new horizons of meaning and awareness that involve us in new existential concerns (28-35) and “lay out new topographies” (41). The former depends on more or less “monological” accounts of thought and articulation, whereas the latter assumes a more “dialogical” account of both (48-50).

Having thus established the parameters of his investigation, Taylor next turns to an examination of the “ontogenesis” of language; he recognizes the need to provide an account of the emergence of language in individuals, in cultures, and in the evolutionary history of the species, but is also clear any such account will be more than a little speculative (51-52). Relative to individuals, Taylor follows Michael Tomasello’s suggestion language emerges from “protoconversations” that involve shared attention or “referential triangles” between children and parents (53-57). Relative to cultures, he suggests languages emerge alongside expectations about behaviors, social roles, forms of propriety, and standards of reasonableness in given communities (63-65). Relative to the evolutionary history of the species, he borrows from Merlin Donald’s analysis of the relationship between mimesis, ritual, myth, and theory (68-75; cf. 274-269, 337), and also explores the cultural transformations that resulted from the destabilization of premodern accounts of cosmic order and the accession of (modern) standards of meaning and value that seek no justification outside themselves (79-81).

The next two chapters are dedicated to critical analysis of the HLC tradition and its assumptions. Taylor distinguishes between biological or “life meanings” and “metabiological” or “human meanings,” examples of which include aesthetic values, moral and ethical standards, and acts of altruism (88-91). He notes the reductionistic tendency of some in the HLC tradition to collapse the latter into the former, but concludes such efforts are misguided: strictly designative accounts of language may help explain “life meanings,” but are less useful for making sense of “human meanings.” Much of the attraction of the reductionistic, “resolutive-compositive” logic of the HLC tradition follows from its perceived alignment with both modern natural science as well as modern notions of authority, freedom, and political order (108-109). The work of Gottlob Frege rendered many of the conclusions of the HLC tradition “quaint and unsophisticated to an almost unbelievable degree” (111), but the HLC tradition continues to exert no small influence on analytic philosophy (112-117, 122-124).

Taylor’s efforts are not merely critical and so he devotes most of the rest of the book to unpacking his various constructive proposals. The three themes he highlights are “disclosive metaphor, the lived body, and the ineliminability of (human) meanings” (161), none of which the HLC can fully accommodate. The first of these refers to ways we deploy language to open up hitherto unavailable forms of attention, awareness, and understanding (134-137); the metaphorical character

of language necessarily involves a degree of indeterminacy and flexibility when it comes to meaning (140-141, 147-148). Taylor draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty as well as more recent efforts by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to demonstrate how different “sensorimotor schemata” disclose different horizons of meaning (149-160). Ultimately, Taylor says, attempts to delimit the range of language to terms the HLC tradition is willing to accredit “must founder” because we simply cannot express everything “we want to say about ethics, aesthetics, human character, history, politics, and so on,” in such narrow terms (172).

One question Taylor engages repeatedly in the latter half of the book has to do with how we ought to think about the relationship between continuity and change in linguistic traditions (187-193). Both life meanings and human meanings are subject to modification, but the question is especially pressing relative to the latter: how do we know we’re “getting it righter” (197), especially when it comes to forms of articulation that seek “internal,” self-authenticating justification as opposed to “external,” referential justification (197-198)? Taylor examines the way moral reasoning and ethical standards undergo change as a paradigmatic case study of this challenge (200-230). Such changes come about through reconfigurations of the “dimensions of constitutive enactment” that support traditions of human meaning (237).

Another issue he considers has to do with the necessarily multimodal character of language. Some forms of articulation

(e.g., visual arts, music, etc.) cannot be transposed or translated to other media, and thus portray meanings that resist articulation in any terms other than those in which they’re originally expressed (238-249). Once we grasp the hermeneutic character of constitutive forms of articulation, there can be no question either of delimiting our understanding of language to a single mode or form or recognizing the interdependence of various modes or forms (260).

The last few chapters are dedicated to exploring the relational character of language. Over and against the more individualistic, “monological” account of language advanced by the HLC tradition, Taylor advances the more social, “dialogical” approach favored by the HHH tradition (264-268). Drawing on his earlier work in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, he outlines ways forms of articulation enact the histories, traditions, values, and goals of particular cultures (273-285). The relational character of language is further manifest in the influence narrative and context play in determining the meaning of terms and phrases, and vice versa (291-298): this leads to an examination of the correspondence between narrative and identity and the way enacting stories enable us to “become a self” (318).

Finally, Taylor turns to a brief consideration of linguistic relativity (i.e., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Relative to life meanings and certain aspects of articulation (e.g., tense, some forms of perception, etc.), he suggests hypotheses regarding the incommensurability of worldviews signified by different languages can be

overstated. Relative, however, to human meanings and the kinds of “metaphysical” realities that require articulation in order to be actualized, he is more willing to give credence to linguistic relativity. In other words, “designative” articulations are not subject to such relativity, but “constitutive” ones may well be (327-328). This kind of variance need not result in “moral uncertainty and ‘relativity,’” but rather directs us towards the hard but unavoidable work of careful listening and dialogue (328). Taylor concludes with a brief chapter that draws together the major themes of the book and outlines how these themes will inform the forthcoming companion study of Romantic accounts of language.

There are many points of contact between Taylor’s analysis and Polanyi’s account of language and meaning: both repeatedly emphasize the continuity and the distinction between life meanings and human meanings, the overlap between embodiment (action), cognition, and articulation, and the way forms of articulation subject to self-authenticating rules of rightness open up new horizons of awareness and meaning. It seems, too, Polanyi would agree with Taylor about the reality and the challenge of linguistic relativity (as well as the extent to which linguistic relativity need not lead to metaphysical or moral relativity). Here as elsewhere, Taylor provides more solid and philosophically sophisticated versions of ideas and arguments Polanyi advanced but was not able to elaborate to the same degree.

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Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. 342. ISBN-13:978-0-226-23195-2. \$44.72 hb.

Building on his book, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (U of Chicago Press, 2010), Christian Smith in *To Flourish or Destruct* carries forward and fleshes out an ambitious, comprehensive project of reforming contemporary sociology and related disciplines in the social sciences. His target audience is professionals within these fields, though he also seeks to engage professionals outside these disciplinary boundaries. Smith writes as a seasoned, classically grounded philosopher and sociologist, remarkably free of ideological bias, forthrightly acknowledging the fallibility of his own thinking, and commanding an impressive grasp of the vast body of recognized scholarship in sociology as well as the history of reflection on human nature. He seeks to restore to the center of the social sciences a humanistically robust, critical realist conception of what it means to be a human being—specifically, a *person*. This entails displacing five dominant, but in Smith’s account seriously problematic, models of human being that are to be found in sociological literature. The view Smith represents he identifies with the intellectual tradition of personalism, though he seeks to re-establish personalism on a firmer foundation

conversant with insights from the natural and social sciences, and refashion it so as to incorporate a coherent, normative account of human interest, motivation and action that is grounded in the nature of reality and teleologically oriented toward realizing what is good for humans as such (an account self-consciously akin to that of Aristotle).

Smith's project leads him to take up and challenge a host of problematic legacies of the Modern European Enlightenment that have distorted and disabled sociological attempts to understand, explain, and significantly ameliorate the human condition of persons in modern society: ontological anti-realism (including constructivism), epistemological foundationalism, judgmental relativism, positivist empiricism, hermeneutical interpretivism, post-modern deconstructionism, objectivism (along with the idea that being objective requires moral neutrality), the fact-value dichotomy, reductionisms of various sorts, causal determinism, and the sociological antinomy between the individual and society (manifest among other places in liberalism/individualism versus collectivism/holism). In each case Smith carefully explains how the problematic conceptions in question fail to grasp and take into account the complex nature of human persons and how a personalist understanding can resolve or dissolve the problem. Key ideas here are Smith's understanding of ontological hierarchy, his carefully crafted conception of emergence (applied both to the person and to society,

but asymmetrically), and the distinction he draws between ontological dependence (of the person on its biological constituents) on the one hand and developmental and contextual dependence (of the person on its social and cultural conditions) on the other.

After theoretical groundwork is laid in the Introduction and Chapter 1, the remainder of the book is principally focused on developing a theory of human goods, human motivations, human failures, and human evil (which, as Smith explains, is a necessary complement of a realist account of human motivation and of what is by nature good for human beings). The care and thoughtfulness with which Smith crafts his comprehensive theory (in opposition to widespread competing conceptions) gave me much to ponder, appreciate, and absorb. The book is dense and carefully argued, with a minimum of theoretical jargon, and fairly easy to follow. Smith writes clearly and well.

Polanyi appears not to be a major source or direct influence upon Smith's work, at least not in this book, though Smith does acknowledge *Personal Knowledge* among 17 other books in one endnote listing important sources of the understanding of the person that he espouses. In my judgment, Polanyi's thinking is complementary and at times convergent with Smith's work, especially with respect to their hierarchical ontologies and understandings of causation. However, distinctive elements of Polanyi's epistemology and their implications—such as the tacit, subsidiary dimensions of

explicit knowing, the concept of indwelling, and the fiduciary foundations of all cognitive enterprises—are not to be found. I fail to detect any serious conflict between the two philosophers, though there are no doubt points of tension and disagreement.

Interestingly, from a perspective opened up by the work of William H. Poteat, there is very little account taken by Smith of the role of language, reflexive self-reference, or becoming present and owning oneself before others as essential to the constituting of personhood and personal agency as they are to Poteat. If asked, Smith would no doubt speak of these things as important to the realization or actualization of a person's inherent potential, but not as constitutive of the *being* of a person, which for him must be there from the beginning (i.e., from conception, guiding the *emergence* of personal being).

Some quotations from the book that are well worth pondering:

1. "By 'person' I mean the particular kind of being that under proper conditions is capable of developing into (or has developed into) a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who—as the efficient cause of his or her responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other

personal selves and with the nonpersonal world" (35).

2. "Although they are not ontologically created by society, persons are innately social in their ontological being, in the existential realization of their being, and in the proper teleological ends of their personhood. Social existence is not something alien to persons, added onto personal life as some kind of subsequent experience or obligation placed on humans emerging from an innocent atomistic state of nature. To be a person is to be social" (57f).

3. "...all social structures and institutions are *emergently* dependent upon the ongoing activity of human persons, whereas human persons are only *contextually* and *developmentally* dependent upon the social structures and institutions that nurture and sustain (or perhaps exclude, exploit, and destroy) them" (30).

4. "Personalism begins with a set of assumptions about reality that is both commonsensical and intellectually defensible. Most generally, it assumes that independently of human consciousness, a reality exists that is differentiated, ordered, complex, and stratified" (32).

5. "As to the situating of my argument in the larger field of general theories, readers will soon realize that my personalism is positioned within the broad natural law tradition" (24f).

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