

Filip Jaroš and Jiří Klouda (eds.). *Adolf Portmann: A Thinker of Self-Expressive Life*. Springer: Biosemiotics Volume 23. ISBN 978-3-030-67809-8. Hardcover \$169.99. ISBN 978-3-030-67810-4. E-book \$129. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67810-4>.

This collection on Adolf Portmann's contributions to biology and the philosophy of biology is a volume in the Springer Biosemiotics book series. Its fourteen essays are organized under four rubrics: (1) Paving a Path to the New Biology; (2) Biology, Biosemiotics, Anthropology; (3) Philosophical Aspects of Portmann's Work; and (4) Historical Context and Later Reception. Here I will comment primarily on a few essays of special interest to readers who are familiar with Michael Polanyi's thought. Independent of links to Polanyi, however, I emphasize the importance of Adolph Portmann to philosophical biology; the essays in this book provide analysis and an overview that make his contributions clear.

Adolph Portmann (1897–1982) was a Swiss zoologist particularly interested in morphology and animal behavior. Marjorie Grene wrote about Portmann's approach to biology and aligned him with the post-critical philosophical ideas of Michael Polanyi. Grene's letters to Polanyi in the sixties encouraged him to read Portmann and several other European scientists-philosophers. She consulted Portmann (a leader in the Eranos intellectual discussion group) about how to set up the Study Groups' programs funded by the Ford Foundation. These groups originally aimed to bring together independent thinkers like Portmann who resisted much that was dominant in several areas of science and philosophy of science. The plan was to use Polanyi's epistemological innovations as a galvanizing element that might initiate a broader reform movement in the still largely positivist-influenced cultural mainstream (see discussion in Breytspraak and Mullins, [2017](#)).

Following Jaroš and Klouda's helpful introduction (1–9) is a lucid English translation of a short 1965 Portmann essay, "New Fronts of Biological Work" (13–21), that originally was a contribution to a festschrift. This brief Portmann reflection concisely articulates his view that a new and significant perspective in philosophical biology was emerging—one quite different from the immensely fruitful recent approach to biology Portmann called the "physico-chemical technique" (13). Portmann saw the new approach, growing out of the German tradition of biological research, as focusing on the fact that "living beings appear in the world as subjects, and that they settle into, and intervene in, environments as relatively autonomous centres of action" (14). Organisms are perceiving beings embedded in a changing environment, and they "integrate their experience into their mode of existence and process their experience independently of conscious processes" (14). This approach to living beings brought what Portmann called a "fresh perspective to peculiarities of appearance" (19). That is, "self-presentation" (20) of living beings becomes "the instrument of a special manifestation of life" that expresses "special and species-specific features of an organism in the language of the senses" (20).

Perhaps most interesting for Polanyians is a Marjorie Grene essay that turned up in the Portmann archive in Basel, Switzerland (apparently Grene gave a copy to Portmann at some point when she consulted him). Titled "The Language of Nature Re-Read" (23–42), this hitherto unpublished piece was the third lecture in a series on "man in nature" (41) that Grene gave in the sixties at Queens University, Belfast. At the time, she was keenly interested in Portmann and used Polanyi to clarify some of Portmann's themes. Interestingly, the Grene lecture references Polanyi's Duke Lectures (1964), and parts of this lecture are also in sections of Grene's *The Knower and the Known* (1966), a book dedicated to Polanyi that Grene says was mostly

written from 1961–1963 at Queens University (see her Preface to the 1974 paper-bound edition).

Greene was one of the first interpreters of Portmann for an English-speaking academic audience; a chapter on Portmann in her *Approaches to Philosophical Biology* (1965) was also later included in *The Understanding of Nature* (1974). As the editors of this new collection put matters, Greene's Belfast lecture attempts to "work out an 'ontology of the living' which lies at the foundation of Portmann's new biology" (4). Put somewhat differently, Greene saw that Portmann, several other European scientist-philosophers, and Polanyi all recognized "the limitations of a mathematizing approach to organic phenomena." They instead emphasized "the rich reality of color, sound, smell and taste that makes up the sensory plenum of living nature as experiencing and experienced." Greene emphasizes—and saw that Portmann and Polanyi emphasized—"that there is no one language in which nature's truth is eternally and unambiguously written" (25). She argues that narrow modern naturalism arose from epistemic ideas, and only a renewed philosophy of knowledge provides release from the consequences of this naturalism such that humans are "not dis-inherited, but at home in the living world." Portmann seems, more or less, to have recognized all this, but Greene argues that it is Polanyi who provided the "missing philosophical keystone" in his account of tacit knowing and "by the ontology it entails" (23).

In a volume of material focusing on Portmann's ideas and research, this Greene essay unpacks Polanyi's thought in a way that draws Portmann into the discussion and shows how his biology complements and amplifies some of Polanyi's own ideas about life. Greene provides an articulate account of Polanyi's approach to biology, making clear what she was putting together in the mid-sixties as a philosopher of biology. Portmann seems to be a philosophical biologist whose work is now being picked up by some working in the interdisciplinary field of "biosemiotics." Perhaps the publication

of Greene's "The Language of Nature Re-Read" will encourage those interested in "biosemiotics" to take a closer look at Polanyi's philosophical ideas. Greene makes a solid case that Polanyi provides helpful underpinning for Portmann.

Other essays in this collection include the following (and here I omit some entirely): Roger Stamm (affiliated with the Portmann archive) provides a broad-based essay and supplementary material nicely summarizing Portmann's research and teaching (45–69). Riin Magnus compares von Uexküll's and Portmann's approaches to cognitive and perceptual schemes in living beings (71–87). Essays by Andres Kurismaa (89–118) and Filip Jaroš (119–142) outline Portmann's influence on anthropology, which perhaps exceeded his influence on biological research. Markus Wild's essay (145–158) shows how Portmann's approach to biology is a "reluctant relative" (145) of Goethe's approach. Jiří Klouda links Portmann's new morphology and hermeneutics (199–218). Ivana Ryška Vajdová's essay lays out the connection between Carl Gustav Jung and Portmann and shows how Portmann worked to broaden the conversation in the Eranos group to include science (241–256).

This rich collection of essays illumines what Adolph Portmann spent his life working on as a scientist-philosopher. Some of these essays helpfully amplify and enrich the account of Portmann that Marjorie Greene provides using some Polyanian ideas.

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