

## Excerpts from Poteat on Being Post-Critical

For a serviceable overview of William H. Poteat's life, thought, and teaching, see the Wikipedia article, "William H. Poteat." Helpful recent overviews of the history of Poteat's relationship to Polanyi and the relationship between his own thinking and that of Polanyi may be found in *Tradition and Discovery* 42:1 (2015-2016), 8-44, and 40:2 (2013-2014), 36-45. Also helpful is the website, <whpoteat.org>.

Poteat doesn't often make use of the phrase or word "post-critical," but when he does it clearly refers to what he otherwise repeatedly explains as a radical shift beyond modern critical thought to something else: another framework of thought, another paradigm, another cultural sensibility—a *post-critical* sensibility.

In *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, Poteat is digging deep, deeper than surface appearances, into things Polanyi has said or written that have caught his attention and caused him to ponder. He is searching above all to discover how it is that Polanyi tacitly has carried forward the inquiry that led to, and is manifest in, *Personal Knowledge*: what is the "logic" that Polanyi follows to come up with his novel "post-critical" understandings. Poteat's "epiphany" in 1968 upon experiencing the sculpture of *Moustakas*, recounted in the Prologue of *Polanyian Meditations*, gave him keener eyes to see with, and more sensitive ears to hear with, to find things in Polanyi that he hadn't noticed well before. Polanyi's innovations, Poteat came to understand, were much more subtle, complex, and profound than he had first taken them to be: Polanyi's shift from a critical to a post-critical perspective is more radical than he (Poteat) had earlier supposed, illuminating "a way out of the old modern age," to use a phrase of Walker Percy. Curiously, Polanyi himself hadn't fully recognized them either, as Poteat points out.

Bibliographic abbreviations in the following are as follows: *PP: The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat*, edited by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993). *IH: Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, edited by Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968). *PM: Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985). *PD: A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990). *RG: Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

1. *IH* 16f (From Poteat's "Upon First Sitting Down to Read *Personal Knowledge*: An Introduction," in which the rhetoric of *Personal Knowledge* is identified as "confessional," published in 1968):

"It only remains for us to ask why it is that a confessional form should be used with such diffidence by its author and greeted by such indifference or suspicion by the unsympathetic reader; and why it results in so much confusion even for the sympathetic reader.

"As I have already suggested, an answer may well lie in the difference between the confessions of Augustine and Rousseau.

"Let us go back for a moment to Descartes, on whose head so many errors have been laid. His program of methodological doubt developed an ethos in which mathematical rigor

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became paradigmatic for all thought. Thus our intellect was uprooted from its grounding in the past of our bodies. (An exception may be the *cogito* itself, but from the significance of this self-directed moment our sensibility has on the whole turned away.) The consequence of Cartesian method, therefore, was the notorious ‘bifurcation of nature,’ a dichotomy which carried with it the insistence on the utterly detached character of rational thinking. Such an insistence, however, entailed a rhetoric that eschewed the first-person in favor of a third-person form for transacting our serious business with one another about what is the case. This has meant, therefore, that the first-person form has become either a mere means to reveal the idiosyncratic uniqueness of the ‘interesting’ individual (singular) or alternatively the form in which a historically conditioned (pejorative sense) community, somewhat nervously, declared its corporate faith (plural).

“But if one returns to or recovers an ancient, pre-Cartesian model [of confession]—Augustine’s *Confessions*—then one begins to realize that as a rhetorical device the confession—whether in the first person singular or plural—has a very different force. For it then ceases to be a soliloquy by an individual through which is revealed his merely personal and idiosyncratic uniqueness. Instead, it can be seen as a disclosure to oneself of one’s basic beliefs, grounded first, in one’s own personal history, with its roots in a pre-personal somatic appearance in the world, bearing its genetic inheritance; and secondly, in a native language upon the insinuations of a larger coherence of which one has trustingly and acritically relied as the *conditio sine qua non* of one’s coming ever more fully to possess one’s human being.

“Now, far from being a mere disclosure of one’s unique idiosyncrasy, *this* form of confession is precisely the medium for seeking to appreciate how and who one is in order that one may more fully be so. Therefore it is a confession having a fully convivial setting in the double sense that, on the one hand, one, in subscribing to one’s own ever more fully self-disclosed and disclosing reality, is *discovering* and *affirming* that convivial setting as one’s own; and on the other, one is ratifying this setting as something at once both *given* and *shared*. This recovery of the prepersonal and personal historical roots of one’s own knowledge leads, not as for the Cartesian, to subjectivism or relativism, but to the recognition of the inescapable, because necessary, universal intent of all our affirmation.”

2. *PP 27* [from an article by Poteat, “Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication,” published in 1974]: “Indeed, it is a general characteristic of modern theories of knowledge, Kant’s first *Critique* being a suitable example here, to take knowing as an accomplished fact and then undertake a ‘transcendental analysis’ of its necessary conditions, rather than to observe particular feats of the acquisition of knowledge to determine the processes that in fact enter into them. . . . But it is only necessary for present purposes to say that a preoccupation with knowledge as an accomplished fact instead of concern with the processes of its skillful achievement, however useful and just the preoccupation may be in itself, disposes the imagination toward a static rather than a dynamic picture of the noetic situation and therefore toward a passive rather than an active image of the “subject” of knowledge, the knower. And it is just this disposition that in due time makes us able not merely to tolerate but even to take as quite natural, because we take it quite unreflectively, the absurdity of the ‘visual experiences’ of a disembodied eye.

“I am not at all suggesting that in our epistemology and ontology we have consciously decided to operate with these absurdities. The fact, on the contrary, is that they inhabit our imaginations at so primitive a level and in such an equivocal fashion that, even when the presuppositions of these inquiries are quite explicitly under review, such factors are almost never

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even vaguely sensed, and even when sensed are not recognized as being significant.

“If, across a conceptual landscape dominated by models drawn from visual experiences—visual experiences, in effect, imputed to the disembodied eye—we find ourselves in due course arriving at the paradigm of a knower that is a god, this should in no way surprise us. On the contrary, it is any alternative issue that would be surprising.”

3. *PP* 36f [also from the article “Persons and Places,” published in 1974]: “Surely it is obvious then that, the inalienable relation between persons and places being what I have claimed, the Cartesian image of extended things, which has come increasingly to dominate even our view of everyday spatiality, is profoundly inimical to personalism. For it is evident that place as the where of my body, as status and as room, is very far from being congenial with the abstract notion of infinite and homogeneous spaces that has so dominated the modern imagination—whose eternal silence Pascal found a weight hardly to be borne.

”Let us here make the important concession. It may be appropriate and heuristically productive—who, observing the theoretical and technological prodigies of the sciences of the past three centuries could, short of being mad, deny this—to abstract ourselves from the heterogeneous aural, tactile, proprioceptive spatiality of the concrete world by means of the feats of spectation already described—whether this be the contemplation of the orbital paths of the planets as from the sun rather than from the earth, as with Copernicus, or the contemplation of the nature of finite substances as if from the skeptically induced discarnate asceticism, as with Descartes. That is to say, it is appropriate to do so when we recognize what we are doing, that it cannot be both strictly and coherently done and, therefore, that it cannot be allowed to become the ground for the subversion of our unsophisticated confidence that the world is just as we know it to be. In such terms it is safe enough to concern ourselves with mere *things* that occupy space.

“But a person has to be able to feel that the nature of things confers on him a place, a room to become what he is, a “whereon” to stand that is commensurable with his imagination and with the power of his moral will. To be deprived of a place is to become disincarnated, to be driven mad, to become an alien—to have no home or not to be at home. To think of oneself as a thing in space is to take oneself to be a *mere* thing—an observation that will seem not worth making only to those unacquainted with the scholarly literature in which there bound feats of intellectual ingenuity devoted to reducing man to an animal and animals to mere biochemical and physical integrations of varying complexity, all in the service of these ‘Cartesian’ absurdities. To be deprived of a place is to become depersonalized, As Kafka represents it to us with both poignancy and terror in his story of Gregor Samsa . . . .”

4. *PP* 261 n2 [from an article by Poteat, “George Steiner: The Extraterritorial Critic,” published in 1972]: “A post-critical account of human cognition would abandon the Enlightenment model of an atemporal, abstract, godlike knower whose knowledge is taken to be an accomplished fact, and would attend instead to the contingent feats of perceptual and conceptual integration in time that enter into the cognitive acts of a concrete knower achieving knowledge. Such a model resituates thought in an actual thinker, embodied in his prepersonal natural history; and it explicitly acknowledges—and reiterates—that all judgments, however routine, are acts of irreducibly personal appraisal.”
5. *PP* 261f [from the article on George Steiner, published in 1972]: “If it is the perennial temptation of critical thought to demand total explicitness in all things, to bring all

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background into foreground, to dissolve the tension between the focal and the subsidiary by making everything focal, to dilute the temporal and intentional thickness of perception, to dehistoricize thought—as Descartes undertakes to do as he moves through the introduction to his *Discourse* on his way to his sole initial certainty, namely, that he exists at least in the moment in which he is thinking—to lighten every shadowy place, to dig up and aerate the roots of our being, to make all interiors exterior, to unsituate all reflection from time and space, to disincarnate mind, to define knowledge as that which can be grasped by thought in an absolutely lucid “moment” without temporal extension, to flatten out all epistemic hierarchy, to homogenize all logical heterogeneity, if, in short, the temptation of enlightenment is to doubt all our previous certainties and to ground our knowledge strictly upon clarity and distinctness in the present, then Steiner, as we have said, lives instinctively in a noncritical ambience. The root metaphor out of which is generated his curiosity about language and man’s nature, and to which it always seems to return, is the irreducible juxtaposition and opposition of speech and silence. It is this that lies behind such phrases as ‘the image one has of man’s relations to the *logos*,’ ‘the condition of maximal concentration, when, as Heidegger says, language is total being,’ and most of all when he speaks of ‘the ‘mystery’ of language, its median state between spirituality and physical articulation’ and goes on, ‘it is in that median quality . . . that may be sought primarily clues to the linguistic core of human identity.’”

6. PP 270 [from the article on George Steiner, published in 1972]: Following a discussion of Noam Chomsky’s transformational linguistics, Poteat writes: “Therefore, be our formalisms ever so abstract [as with Chomsky’s], they can never be entirely abstracted from the participation of personal recognizers, endorsers, and appraisers of the formalism—even if the ‘persons’ have become, and usefully so, abstract and cruelly truncated. A *personal act* of integrating the particulars, even in the case of the computer code, to their joint meaning, however routine this may be, is *always* involved. The suppression of this fact about human meaning–discernment is the scandal of critical thought.”
7. PP 273f [from the article, “Moustakas within his Ambience,” published in 1973]: “Our history begins with Enlightenment, with the Renaissance, with Reformation. For good and for ill, we are creature of modernity, of criticism, of revolution. Not only have we turned our backs upon the past, tradition, inherited ways, the harmonious balance between man and nature, but we have been tempted, as we have dedivinized nature, following our biblical inheritance, to divinize ourselves, and there has ensued a ripening flirtation with godhood, with infinity, restlessness, tumult, and madness.  
“Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* consolidated the emerging hopes of his predecessors and drafted a program for our consciousness, saying:  
By them [Descartes’ new principles of method] I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life . . . and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature. And this is a result to be desired, not only in order to the invention of an infinity of Arts, by which we might be enabled to enjoy without trouble the fruits of the earth, and all its comforts, but also, and especially for the preservation of health.  
Under the impetus of these hopes, which have become at times a ‘sweet dream’ of the heaven on earth, we have subjugated nature. And for three centuries we have found

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ourselves thrown back and forth in despair between the image of ourselves as a ‘useless freedom’ in no way commensurate with the great, inane nature that is merely our subject and the image of a mere animal whose greater complexity only renders its existence within the bosom of a nature without grandeur the more meaningless. Our “humanism” is very often the diseased offspring of this impiety. Our discarnate freedom has no place in the universe, our visible form recapitulates no cosmos, no breath of God shines in our faces. We are alternately bewildered and ashamed of our own image.

“The humanism that is a child of the dark side of modernity—of Pascal, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevski—is tinged with bitterness. There is a strain of self-hatred in our Western protests against dehumanization, a bad faith that shows itself more, the more mordant and shrill the protest, as if we have to still with the sound of our own voices the deeper doubt that there is anything genuinely and intrinsically human to be defended. Who can contemplate Picasso’s enraged cry of pain over the fate of innocent sufferers in Guernica without feeling, nevertheless, the hint of the human self-contempt that is also undeniably there. Our humanism keeps a mistress whose name is Nihilism.

“Albert Camus explored this, our madness, in the myth of Sisyphus and sought wholeness in the Greek ideal of limits. ‘Greek thought,’ he says, always took refuge behind the conception of limits. It never carried anything to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it negated nothing, neither the sacred nor reason. It took everything into consideration, balancing shadow with light. Our Europe, on the other hand, off in the pursuit of totality, is the child of disproportion. She negates beauty, as she negates whatever she does not glorify. And, through all her diverse ways, she glorifies one thing, which is the future rule of reason. In her madness she extends the eternal limits, and at that very moment dark Erinyes fall upon her and tear her to pieces.

This is the ambience of the sculpture of Evangelos Moustakas. To discipline our imaginations to behold it aright will tell us something about our Cartesianism and what of both good and ill it has done to us. Greece and Byzantium have no Renaissance past, no Enlightenment past. Hence, perhaps, both the tragic sense of life and the affirmation that is given in face of it, are experienced in more muted ways, expressed without either the presumption or the despair that the Cartesianism of the Europe of the West has so frantically, self-consciously, and egocentrically produced.”

8. *PM 9f*: “What then are the central motifs that form the armature of these ever circling reflections [that go to make up Poteat’s *Polanyian Meditations*]? It is my view that rationality, that is, the ‘hanging togetherness’ of things for us, and logic, that is, the articulated *form* of the ‘making sense’ of things for us, is more deeply and ubiquitously, though inexplicitly, embedded in our ordinary thinking and doing than we are likely to notice. We fail to notice this because when called upon to *reflect* upon these facts we are likely to do so in the light of models—‘a picture held us captive’ [here quoting Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*]—formed by critical philosophy, beginning with Descartes, which increasingly took mathematics and formal logic to be the preeminent (and usually the only) paradigms of the ‘hanging togetherness’ of things and the ‘making sense’ of things. I argue therefore that contrary to the subtly pervasive ‘picture’ in the regnant Cartesianism of this culture that conceptually estranges thought about our minds

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from thought about our bodies, formalized rationality—mathematics and formal logic—derives from and remains parasitical upon the ‘hanging togetherness’ and ‘sense making’ of our integral mindbodily rootedness in the as yet unreflected world and in our unreflected ‘thinkings’ and doings in that world. This of course means that the mix among our uses of such concepts as ‘reason,’ ‘logic,’ ‘body,’ and ‘mind,’ to mention only some, will come to be drastically revised. For I claim that language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first; that the grammar, the syntax, the ingenuous choreography of our rhetorical engagement with the world, the meaning, the semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world, which is their condition of possibility. Mathematics is the ultimate achievement of our powers of abstraction and the medium of our ultimate access to the physical universe. It is therefore in it that our formalizing powers are conceptually most alienated from their somatic roots. Thus, when mathematics becomes our dominant even if not sole paradigm of reason, the ‘picture’ into which we easily fall to be held captive is that of a discarnate, i.e., the opposite of a mindbodily, being insofar as and when we are being rational. I contend therefore that when we speak of our world as an object or of our bodies as mere objects in the world, we use and can only use language generated out of a ‘reality’ more archaic to our history than and very different from ‘mere objects in the world,’ namely our *lived* rootedness in this prelingual setting. The only thing I find surprising about this claim is that it somehow seems at once outrageous and self-evident. But then there is much in what follows of which this can also be said.”

9. *PD* 82f: “5/26/88 [Poteat’s entries in this volume are dated] It is our commonsensical experience of knowing what we know in our most quotidian doings that has first evoked our interest in cognition, it is this that continues to sustain it, and it is these ubiquitous cognitive acts that at once inescapably accompany and systematically elude all our investigations of them. It is these unreduced acts of knowing and judging that we know in the setting of our ordinary doings that are the *ultimate* subject of a ‘science’ of cognition. The method for their study therefore will have to be a reflexive phenomenology—that is, a systematic description, in ordinary rather than in an artificially contrived language, of our feats of coming to know, reflexively grasped from within as they unfold in time. Not an easy task, since in the intellectual environment where to understand is in principle to reduce and to explain is to devise a causal theory—both of which alienate us from our own actual feats of knowing—a mere description such as this will compete among us most unevenly for serious attention.” (For more on “reflexive phenomenology” as Poteat’s own characterization of a central and crucial aspect of his philosophical method, see *PM* 189-190 & 192. Also *RG* 98-99.)
10. *PD* 5, from the Introduction: “Cartesianism as an explicit philosophical doctrine is virtually without effect in this culture. It functions however at a tacit level like a repetition compulsion; it is ubiquitous and pervades the atmosphere of our life like chronic depression. For it is in its impact upon philosophical anthropology, not only, not even primarily, as explicit doctrines, but as that which is implicated in *all* our thought and action, that it is most malign. Cartesianism, tacit and explicit, invites us to embrace a view of ourselves in the universe which seduces us with the promise of Godlike power, and thereby separates us from our true ground and humanity. Nowhere is this malignity so much in evidence as in

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those forms of humanistic endeavor and scholarship—the very phrase, ‘*humanistic endeavor*,’ is itself a cry of despair—where the putative import of scientism is taken with utter uncritical seriousness; whereas it is paid little mind in science. Nihilism, though lethal, is embraced as a form of honesty that will save us.”

11. *PD 5*, from the Introduction: “What I aspire to for you [my reader] is the same thing I have sought for myself: growing consolidation in a post-critical mode of mindbodily being through the step-by-step and painstaking examination of some old philosophical puzzles, reimagined and rearticulated, until they are transformed into the commonplaces of a new form of *real life*—so that, for example, we will be able under the vault of heaven, to say with no tinge of self-consciousness what we are, in any case, ingenuously *inclined* to say: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.’

“In our culture the time for relocating the axis of our existence [in reference to the shift from a critical to a post-critical frame of reference] is very late; perhaps it has already passed. It is still possible, nonetheless, for us to remain steadfast at our posts.”

12. *RG 9-11*, dated 6/4/90: “Cartesianism is the fulfillment of this historical movement from orality to literacy, bringing with it the ultimate form of human self-estrangement: a universe embodied in mathematical discourse in the formal elements of which there are no egocentric particulars for making explicit references to specific times and places in the actual world, no tenses for expressing the temporal distension and deployment in time of such a world no demonstrative or personal pronouns.

“At the very moment of this denouement, Pascal, the first and greatest of postmodern men asks: “What is a man in the infinite?”

[Immediately following the above, but dated 6/5/90,] “In the 325 years or so since this question was first posed there has hardly been an answer that has not suffered from an inherent instability wrought by the contradictions between, on one hand, the epistemological, ontological, and rhetorical values introjected from our literacy and borne by our formal and casual, our explicit and tacit philosophical accounts of ourselves, and those, of orality, on the other hand, that, though in theory subordinate to the former, have of course persisted in the daily practice of our quotidian life of speaking and hearing speech.

“This contradiction cuts deep and can be overcome only by going deeper, by producing a new Copernican revolution [in reference to the shift from a critical to a post-critical perspective, in this book referred to as “recovering the ground”], making good on the aborted Kantian one, that is, by going all the way past the dualism of epistemological subject and noetic object to the roots and arché of *all* sense reading, all meaning and meaning discernment that is given in the unreflected intentionalities of our convivial mindbodily sentience, motility and orientation.

“The context in which this outrageous claim can be seen to achieve some plausibility is in the extended colloquy—it is no ‘argument’ in any sense familiar to the philosophical tradition—that is to be found in *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* and *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical investigations*, which are herewith incorporated by reference into these reflections.”

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- 13.** *RG* 220f (in the Appendix to this book): “In the bifurcation of nature, the compatibility with the theater of solitude is even more obvious and striking: on the one hand, inane nature ‘hurrying endlessly, meaninglessly’; on the other, our thought, insofar as it can bear at all upon the real objects—“by our senses we know nothing of external objects beyond their figure [or situation], magnitude, and motion” [Descartes]—as spare and bleak as its objects, save only for the whole universe of supervenient secondary qualities.
- “I have said that all we need do is to break the spell of this picture of ourselves in the world is to look away for an instant. Yet, how are we to do this? By, I suggest occupying the radical epistemological and ontological ground that I have undertaken to articulate here, by acknowledging and claiming the ground on which we all stand: our immediate unreflected sentient, oriented, motile and convivially intentional mindbodies in their world; from which arise all our pretensions to meaning, order, coherence and the real, that never ceases being retortended by this meaning, order and reality. Since being alive is to be, throughout the whole hierarchy of our existential modes, oriented toward values concerning which there can be no *in principle* doubt, and since, as I have claimed, even what we call facts are the outcome of our exigent mindbodily pursuit of meaning, order, coherence and the real, the real existence of values cannot then be thought to be problematic *in principle*.”
- 14.** *RG* xiii (from the Introduction): “If however the views have merit that I have set forth in *Polanyian Meditations* and *A Philosophical Daybook*, and advance still further in what follows, then each one of us—and as many of us as chose to come together on it—is rooted in an archaic and infrangible ground that is closer to us than we are to ourselves and that the hypertrophication of the values of literacy and discarnate spiritualism can obscure but cannot efface: Our sentient, motile and oriented mindbodies in the world that are the ground of all meaning and meaning discernment, whence all reflection derives—even the literature of gnostic dreams. It is a scandal that the most commonplace of all facts—that we are inextricably rooted in our bodies in the world, and that we begin and end with this—should require such dialectical prodigies to establish. Yet so it is. In this book then I am making yet another payment on my project to recover the ground.”
- 15.** *PP* 42 [from the article, “Persons and Places,” published in 1974]: “[T]his self-liberation [from the critical to the post-critical] will require a disciplined, arduous, relentless, painful, and patient process of seeking a post-Cartesian intellectual equilibrium, working at every point against the grain of our entire culture, denying ourselves the respite—and the sweet pleasures—of rushing into the street every fortnight with some new messianic word.”