

Meditations On The Shared Life

Bruce Haddox

ABSTRACT: Key words: presence, deconstruction, mindbodily inherence, coinherence.

This paper examines the dominant Western image of Being as presence. It then explores William Poteat's alternative picture of our mindbodily inherence in a world and its relevance for a more adequate understanding of our lived existence.

Two summers ago, my father died. One Sunday afternoon, his heart erupted, then shut down. It was all too sudden. I remember the hurried, but failed attempt to arrive at his hospital bed before it was too late, the zombie-like activities of the days that followed, the immense sadness that permeated the duties of the ensuing weeks and months. Even now, as I remember those times, the clouds reassemble.

During these two years following my father's death, I have become aware of something that is at once mysterious and obvious—mysterious because I do not know exactly what to make of it, obvious because there is no doubt about it—namely, that my father is with me even more profoundly than he was before he died.

Now, of course, much has been made of this phenomenon in both psychological and religious circles, and I do not wish to either agree or argue here with those projects. They are serious and important projects, but they are not central to my point. The point I want to make is that this recognition of my father's presence to me (perhaps in me, certainly with me), has profound philosophical importance for my thinking about anything at all and especially when thinking about subjects like “thinking” or “knowing” or “being.”

I should say at the start that I look like my father. I mean here something at once straightforward and equivocal, namely that my father and I not only share certain physical characteristics noticeable to anyone, but also that I look at things the way my father did. It is this phenomenon that I have begun to notice more acutely during the last two years. Here, the issue is not similarity of perception, but a kind of embodiment in a particular presence or, perhaps, a particular practice. The life of my father, his gestures, his intonations, his way with the world, his venturing out and withdrawal from, all of these and more, are mine, in a real, yet unclear, sense. It is as though I carry on, not just for him, but with him.¹

As I just said, this is both obvious to me as I sit here writing/thinking/knowning/being, and mysterious to me as I flounder about trying to comprehend what I sense to be true. All of this, of course, needs a great deal of elaboration and I am mindful of that fact. This essay is at least an attempt, an exercise in that direction.

II

Write an essay on the implications of Bill Poteat's thought. That is what the voice of the caller from North Carolina said. And I, at once surprised, flattered and frightened, said uncomprehendingly All right, I will. And now here I am, in my office late at night, thinking about my father's death two years ago. Is this diversion? Inspiration? Desperation? Yes, it is.

I remember vividly my first classroom encounter with Bill Poteat, as a first-year grad student at Duke. We were in the midst of some mystifying discussion of Either/Or and he walked up to me, pointed me out, and asked me to identify myself as clearly as I could. With what I thought was a good amount of philosophical sophistication, I gave a fairly extensive Strawson-like answer, making sure that whatever behavioral, physico-chemical and personal predicates involved were applied to the one subject occupying this and only this spatio-temporal location. Poteat listened patiently, dropped his arm, stared at me for a long moment, and said: Haddox, is that really who you are? It was a question that did not seem to ask for an answer, but only for a hearing. It was a profound moment in my education and I have never forgotten it. It was the beginning of my learning from Bill Poteat the radical nature of thinking about ourselves, of trying to recapture our ability to think and act as beings in the world, rather than as isolated minds in objectified bodies with explicitly knowable pasts, presents and futures. In other words, I began, that day, under the tutelage of Bill Poteat and with my fellow students, to explore the nature of our modern orientation which made my abstract and totally theoretical answer to his question seem appropriate at the time.

I remember all this, twenty-seven years later, rocking in my office, with my father's ironic smile on my face.

III

“What is, is,” wrote Parmenides, and “What is not, is not.” Western philosophical thought resonates to the sound of those words. Indeed, the dominant discussion of Being is a discussion of this is-ness, this determinate, timeless, totally present state of being. Such a rendering of is-ness became the model for the metaphysics of the self in classical Western thought early on, Heidegger argued, when the distinction between Being and beings was forgotten and the Being (is-ness) of beings became the issue of Being.² Certainly this abstract notion of what it means to be is taken to be paradigmatic in both Plato and Aristotle and is given a privileged status within the context of describing the nature of things. The issue of change, important as it might be, is discussed in the light of Being as what it is, and the conception of Being as pure presence, essence, logos, becomes the dominant and determining lens through which many later Christian philosophers theoretically interpret theological claims.

This metaphysical picture of a-temporal and unambiguous presence was wholeheartedly embraced in modern thought also. Descartes presents himself as one who is present to himself in the state of pure intuition. In so doing, he took that notion into isolation. All philosophers who followed him, no matter what kind of spin they put on the attendant issues, took up that basic metaphysical picture of the be-ing of everything.³ And even though Kant no longer renders the Being of self as substance, but subject, substance having become a category of the understanding, he nevertheless accepts self (whether the knowing self of the first Critique or the doing self of the second) as that which is. None of these philosophers, however, can hold a candle to Hegel, who manages to produce a philosophy of change including everything actual and possible, within the picture of presence. It is his logocentrism that Heidegger primarily attacks.

Thus, in the West it seems not an oversimplification to say that we think about ourselves such that to be is to be what one is. Change, wherever it occurs, is to be explained in terms of or in the light of an unchanging, rock-bottom base, whether that base be substance, subject, person, mind, speaker or object. Of course, this is not only problematic for whatever historical or philosophical study I might be engaged with, it essentially distills me from my actual life, it casts me into the realm of being as presence, which means I am no longer incarnate in a body-world.⁴ All pasts, insofar

as they are real, are present and all futures, insofar as they are possibilities, are potential presents. Indeed, the dominance of presence as the framework for our thinking about our world, is undeniable.

It is this privileged picture for thinking about being, that Jacques Derrida addresses and attempts to deconstruct. Of course, Derrida's writings are relevant for a number of enterprises and they have been the source of much controversy partly because of their challenge to the metaphysical picture discussed above. In his famous essay "Differance,"⁵ Derrida presents an alternative entry into our discussion. Instead of privileging presence or identity or sameness, Derrida makes the observation that every notation of what is, is not dependent on a recognition of what is not, as would be the case in the classical tradition. Rather, such notation is dependent on noting its difference from something else. Difference seems to be the hermeneutical principle here, not identity nor an "in-itself presence." Derrida introduces this procedure with the word "differance," a word that contains in its different spelling the very meaning conveyed. We note the is-ness of "differance" by its difference from "difference," and that exactly is the point of differance as a way of proceeding to analyze the meaning of texts or issues. Just as the meaning of a playing card in a deck is determined by its differentiation from the other cards, so is the meaning of everything. Differance, not identity, not being-what-it-is, is the key. And differance is never what it is; it cannot be in that sense. Indeed, differance deconstructs the metaphysics of Being, displaying the falsity of privileging the presence of Being. This is because every time anything is posited as it is (whether it be myself, God or the world), differance sets it within a context where the recognition that it is, is itself a recognition of its difference from something to which it is connected. The interplay of identity and difference, driven by differance, subverts is-ness, then, as the primitive, rock-bottom characteristic of Being.

It is important to note here that in this essay, Derrida does not posit differance as something that is. Neither is it an action done by somebody who is. Differance, rather, is a play of differences.⁶ As Derrida writes:

... differance is not. It is not a present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of differance, but differance instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach differance with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter.⁷

This passage is troubling for several reasons, not the least among them being that the critic of Derrida wishes so badly to accuse him of deconstructing privileged positions from a privileged position of his own. But such a critique will not do, at least not for the purpose of mere dismissal. The subversion of every kingdom, the renunciation of capital letters, may present a significant challenge for us, but no easy dismissal of Derrida, which suggests he is just like everyone else, is possible. Surely Derrida is correct in suggesting that differance offers us a different way of handling the issues than did the being-as-presence approach. The question is whether differance is de-throner only or whether by its peculiar non-stance stance, it demands an alternative way to build a different kind of kingdom. Clearly, if the only way to think about be-ing is in terms of the Greek picture of presence, then Derrida has a point in his deconstruction. The privileging of being-as-it-is has no metaphysical significance. It is a chosen option which has no grounding except in choice. On this perspective, Derrida and company seem to many to be the end of a long historical project, the Western metaphysical project beginning with the Greeks and ending with modernity. We have, as they say, moved into post-modernity.

IV

There is, of course, another way to think of ourselves. It is an ancient way, presented narratively within the Hebrew scriptures where humans are displayed as beings called into existence and embedded in a divine-human history. As such, they are never what they are, but always both less and more. More precisely, they are something else altogether.

The classic story of God's revelation of divine being is the story of Moses and the burning bush. A voice speaks to Moses out of the fire and tells him of his mission to Egypt. He is to bring Israel to the land of promise. Before accepting the mission, however, Moses asks for the voice's name. Instead of giving a name, the voice replies I am who I am or I will be who I will be or, to be precise, both of these as inseparable, since what is given is first-person form of presentation. In place of a name, God gives Moses the first-person pronoun, something only God can use to present divine being. Moses certainly cannot use it and neither can any of us, unless we radically alter it and pretend that it is the name of something to which we are referring. But if we are true to the narrative, we can never legitimately do that, for the story introduces God as Yahweh, the one who can never be fully spoken about and certainly not fully thought about. Yahweh is both present to Moses and transcendent of him. As such, Yahweh is not the One in terms of which the many is to be understood, as in Greek metaphysics. Yahweh is the other, the different (differ-ing one), who is present in the midst of an historical encounter. As such, Yahweh is addressed in response, not thought about in theories. Yahweh is re-collected in story, not thought about in theory, for in story Yahweh's encounter is re-presented and re-enacted whereas theoretical representation necessarily re-casts all this into third-person, object language. The centrality of this Biblical narrative, displaying Yahweh and the people of covenant, to the philosophical task becomes apparent when we notice that in the narrative there is a requirement for participants to be hearers and speakers. Moses cannot think Yahweh, nor can he put Yahweh into words. Yahweh's reality is displayed in the confrontation with his word, by hearing, and in responding to that word, by speaking. And Moses reality is what it is in the ongoing conversation with Yahweh and the people. Here, there is no self apart from or abstracted out of the lived concrete experience of the story.

This same truth is deepened in the prophetic tradition later on. The prophets know that no talk of the presence of God or the identity of God's people is licit apart from the concrete reality being lived out in terms of the covenant. The noise of solemn assemblies means nothing without justice being practiced, and pious words about God do not have weight. What is real are our actions before God, for humans exist only before God, and the truth of our existence is always embodied in the story of our many ways of hearing/speaking within the lived experience of God's world.

This is part of what I take Bill Poteat to mean when he writes of a major difference between himself and Heidegger: “. . . even though Heidegger and I both have have aspired to undermine the western philosophic tradition by excavating through its layers to a radical bedrock, he and I find that bedrock to be something profoundly different: for him, so I've heard, being disclosed through Dasein; for me a speaker before Yahweh.”⁸

It is clear here that Poteat, in his work, takes the Hebrew rendition of reality to have utmost philosophical significance, not for ideological or apologetic reasons, but because it provides an alternative to the dualism of modern thought and because it allows for a radical philosophical analysis of our embodied, lived experience. As he writes:

We share, I think, our mutual, thoroughly anti-romantic, anti-gnostic, discovery, won in our convivially agonistic way from the Enlightenment that is in our very bones, that we are rooted in the world, that all our thought is generated out of and continually refers back to our mindbodily inherence here and that the power of thought to rise to the challenge of reality is authorized and grounded in this best of all places—and nowhere else.⁹

Mindbodily inherence takes its meaning within an altogether different way of thinking about ourselves than Greek metaphysics or Enlightenment dualism does. Thought is never merely thought about something, with the act of my thinking bracketed out, but thought is an emergent act from an embodiment in a world, a history, a body. Thus all talk of presence, absence, identity and difference are really abstractions from the concrete reality I am living. The radical nature of the philosophic task is to explore the meaning of our concreteness without slipping into abstractions that become reified into objects and taken to be the real contents of our knowledge.

V

The enduring contribution of Bill Poteat's work, both as teacher and author, is his passionate and uncompromising development of post-critical thought so that the meaning of concrete existence can be better understood and accredited in our thinking. Poteat always insisted that Michael Polanyi's work was much more than most academic circles gave it credit for being. For them, Polanyi presented an interesting point about scientific achievement, namely, that it was the result of the passionate pursuit of scientists. Poteat always saw much more. Indeed, in his introduction to *Intellect and Hope*, entitled “Upon First Sitting down to read *Personal Knowledge*,” he notices that the task of reading *Personal Knowledge* is, itself, of philosophical interest because the task Polanyi sets before himself and us is nothing less than a reconsideration of ourselves in the world. No mere straight-forward reading of the text is possible, then. Indeed Poteat argues, a Polanyian achievement by the reader is the necessary condition for the text to convey its meaning.¹⁰

In that initial warning, Poteat alerted his readers and students to the fact that something radical was afoot here, that this is no mere addition to the philosophical corpus. If Michael Polanyi was correct in his analysis of knowing as a personal act and if his analysis of the from-to structure of that action was accurate, then the whole philosophical enterprise from Descartes on had to be re-considered carefully and systematically.

Polanyi argued that all knowing, from the simplest achievement of tool-using to the most abstract intellectual enterprise, was the result of an indwelling by a person. Indeed the analysis of the range of this indwelling is part of the genius of *Personal Knowledge*. For example, as I write this sentence and you, the reader, attend to my words, we both do so by dwelling in, quite specifically, a particular body, history, culture, language, and present and future orientations. I do not have these things, as Gabriel Marcel pointed out so well,¹¹ I am them. Yet, Polanyi shows us, I am them in a certain way, within a certain structure. I dwell in them, not for the purpose of being who I am, but for the purpose of attending to the world. I attend from my body, history, language, etc., by dwelling in them, in order to pursue meaning, achieve knowledge, perform skills, or think. As anyone at all familiar with Polanyi knows, his work is a careful and ingenious analysis and description of the nature of our embodiment in all the different aspects of our world.

Now, of course, it is obvious that Polanyi's claim about us is diametrically opposed to the picture we have inherited from the modern philosophical tradition. Indwelling there was the source of our ignorance, not the necessary condition of our knowing. As such, it is to be downplayed and if possible, avoided. The genius of Cartesian method was that it constructed a way for us to imagine the knowing situation where absolutely certain, explicit knowledge would be achieved and the ambiguity of indwelling would not be a factor. Furthermore, this method was consistent with the western philosophical tradition's dominant metaphysic of Being. *Cogito* replaced Form or Substance as the image of Being, but the nature of being, the is-ness of Parmenides, remained ever-present. Thus, the explicit character of knowledge in modern thought remains consistent with the explicit rendition of the metaphysics of the self. The major difficulties with this enterprise, as every student of philosophy knows, is that such a rendition cannot itself stand up to the critical analysis demanded by Descartes himself. In spite of his effort to achieve strict objectivity, defined as the opposite of indwelling, Descartes and his successors were caught with their assumptions showing and the metaphysical House of Cards fell. But the rationale for and the blueprint of that building remains.

Certainly such is the case with Jacques Derrida. As I wrote earlier, Derrida's deconstruction of being as presence is understandable from a certain point of view. He argues that presence cannot be absolutely privileged, since difference is a function of any achievement of meaning. But difference as such cannot be pinned down. It builds no kingdom, as Derrida noted, and so one can never settle on a primary meaning or an intention of the author. There is only a play of meanings, an interaction, an esthetic moment.

This argument (or is it playful encounter?) carries him into his discussion with John Searle over speech-act theory, where he suggests that it is impossible to speak of an author of anything. There is always a company or collective author.¹² As one reads his description, there can be no doubt that much of what he says is true, but why does he draw conclusions which are so counter-intuitive to any of us every time we sit down to read, to attend to, the meaning of a text?

I think the answer lies somewhere in that image used above about the blueprint for the fallen House of Cards. Derrida rightly deconstructs the Greek metaphysics of Being as presence, but his picture of knowing is such that he cannot deal with presence in any other way than Parmenides did.

Bill Poteat writes in his Philosophical Daybook about Derrida: "For me to remark difference, that is the complementary simultaneous absence and presence of meaning in any given sign, it is necessary for both the absence and presence to be in some sense unequivocally simultaneously present —to me here and now, rooted in my lively mindbody in the world, actually remarking this difference."¹³

Poteat's point is obviously correct, so why does Derrida not see it? Perhaps the answer is to be found in Poteat's phrase about meaning being present in some sense. Both the absence and presence, the is-ness and the difference, is present to me in some sense. But in what sense? Clearly, not in the sense of what it means to be present to me within the metaphysics of Being, for then difference would be a trivial issue, a mere preliminary to the real event. Surely, meaning is present to me, in Poteat's sense, in a different manner. Here Polanyi must be recognized as informing Poteat's and my understanding. Meaning is present to me in the manner of achievement or discovery by indwelling, rather than in the manner of intuition. The presence of difference is itself achieved by indwelling. Here, as Poteat argues, a different image is necessary to enable our imagination to work constructively. Because Derrida's epistemology or picture of knowledge is the traditional, Cartesian visual one, he has no way of imagining presence in any other sense than in the

Greek tradition and he ends in a jazzed-up, contemporary version of Humean skepticism.

I mention this because Michael Polanyi's re-thinking of ourselves as actual knowers in the world, his reconstruction of epistemology, helps us take Derrida's critique of traditional metaphysics seriously without committing us to a total rejection of all metaphysical thinking. Yet Polanyi's reconstruction is a wrenching experience. It catches us unawares and at every hand. Taking it seriously, we notice how easily we fall into the objectivist outlook. As Bill Poteat says, the Enlightenment is in our bones.

I am very much aware of all this as I sit here writing. As I follow the elusive meaning of a Polanyian or Poteatian clue and attempt to rely upon it for further discovery, I recognize the real possibility of casting the entire enterprise into what Bill Poteat has called "The Theatre of Solitude,"¹⁴ that location of self within itself located in the visual space of the modern project, and thereby losing it all in mere thought. To have been taught by Bill Poteat and to have been schooled by his writings in some manner every year since graduate school, is to be reminded that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against something much more difficult. This is part of the reason for the great adulation Poteat enjoys (or endures) from his students. His is no small vision, his battle no skirmish.

On the other hand, Bill Poteat does more than awaken us from dogmatic slumbers and interpret to us the significance of Michael Polanyi. In his own careful, sometimes difficult, always brilliant way, he describes and analyzes the manner of our embodiment in the world, our incarnation. His discourses on our mindbodily existence brings me to myself in ways resonant to my actual life. As I read his *Polanyian Meditations* or *Philosophical Daybook*, I do so with the resonance of that question still there, seeking a hearing: "Haddox, is that who you really are?"

VI

Two years ago my father died, and yet I know he is with me all the time—most times quietly, sometimes in the bark of a laugh or a gesture of the arms, always a bit tense and impatient. Is this just Freudian rhetoric or, worse, a sign of weakened sensibility? I do not think so. I simply know that I am not who I am by myself, alone, sharing only accidentally a life with others while preserving them through my ideas or memories. I am in others, with them, and they in and with me. We are bound together, inextricably conjoined, so that "I" and "you" are but achievements from a more fundamental "we."

If I understand embodiment and indwelling at all, they at least mean that I am in the world, in my body, in the history of the connectedness with my father, mother, grandparents. I emerged from my shared life with them, as Polanyi would say, by assimilating the particulars of that shared world to myself and attending from them to my own particular tasks. Without the ability to do this I would not be I at all.

I must remember that any thought of myself separated from my dwelling in the shared life with my father (and many others) throws me back into Bill Poteat's theatre of solitude, the Cartesian picture of the *Cogito*, where all shared indwelling becomes ideas of the mind or experiences of the psyche. But such thoughts are not about me, the one addressed by Poteat years ago and called upon to speak, but are of a mere shadow, a spectre, a discarnate one. For such a "one," my father becomes either a memory, an aspect of my existence, or a part of a world separate from me, a fact. Haddox, is that who you really are? I think not.

Here, now, as I sit in my office considering all these things (including Bill Poteat), there is no dualism of self and world, no mind thinking of the other as idea. There is coinherence of myself and the world I dwell in and attend from. It includes far more than I can say, but certainly central to its shape is my father and crucial to it is Bill Poteat, who both coinheres with his students and stirs within them the hunger for further exploration of what this all means.

Endnotes

¹I am reminded of Gabriel Marcel's profound discussion of the mystery of Being in which he notes that *Esse est co-esse*.

²Martin Heidegger, The Anaximander Fragment in *Early Greek Thinking*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 50.

³Hume is the most interesting of these moderns because in the Appendix to the *Treatise on Human Nature*, he seems to be aware of the problematic nature of this picture, the unassimilability of self to being as presence. He at once accepts the picture as the only game in town and rejects it with a philosophical shrug of the shoulders.

⁴This point will be elaborated later on in the paper.

⁵Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 1-27.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 15

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 21-2

⁸Letter to James Stines, April 2, 1987, pp. 1-2

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

¹⁰Poteat, Wm H. and Langford, Thomas A. *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. Durham, N.C.: Duke U. Press, p. 18

¹¹Marcel, Gabriel. *Being and Having*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965

¹²Derrida, Jacques, *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 36

¹³Poteat, William H. *A Philosophical Daybook*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, p. 60

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.11