
Reviews

Sheldon Richmond, *Aesthetic Criteria: Gombrich and Philosophies of Science of Popper and Polanyi*. Atlanta, GA: Rodolphi, 1994. pp. 152. \$29.70. ISBN: 90-5183-618-X.

Art historian Sir Ernst Gombrich was an ardent follower of the thought of Sir Karl Popper. Or was he? Richmond's thesis is that in matters of aesthetics, Gombrich breaks away from Popper and instead adopts ideas from Michael Polanyi.

Richmond describes Polanyi's criticism of methodology and Gombrich's criticism of aesthetics to demonstrate the analogies of their critiques. He applies a Popperian reply to both Polanyi and Gombrich to show the disanalogous thought between Popper and Gombrich and to refute Gombrich: a Popperian aesthetics is not only possible but worthwhile.

Richmond's thesis rests in Polanyi's rejection of methodology and Gombrich's implicitly devaluing of aesthetics. Since Gombrich does not explicitly critique aesthetics, Richmond generates his critique by first stating Polanyi's critique of methodology and then substituting terms such as "aesthetics," and "work of art," for "methodology," and "scientific theory." The problem is that Richmond does not understand Polanyi.

Richmond takes a wrongful leap from Polanyi's stating that no explicit rules can exist to guarantee discovery to stating that no rules exist to aid in discovery. Richmond misses the crucial feature of tacit knowing: many parts are involved in the discovery of a whole. Polanyi does not dismiss rules and methodologies; he clearly states that more is involved than rules in the discovery process. Rules are important. But they are guides that contribute jointly with other guides to discov-

ery, such as tradition, perception, facts, intuition and imagination. Because Richmond bases his thesis on Polanyi's rejection of methodologies, his whole argument collapses.

Richmond crowns his argument with Polanyi's call for an unconditional adherence to an idea with the result that Polanyi does not allow error to act as an instrument for learning. This is analogous to Gombrich who says "it is impossible to learn from our mistakes in aesthetics" (54).

What I find refreshing in Polanyi's epistemology is that we can make mistakes and learn from them. Our adherence to an idea is not unconditional, but always open to correction and enlargement. Polanyi does stress that we need to be impassioned by an idea; we trust in it, or we could not progress. But our passions and beliefs are not closed. A fundamentalist approach also hinders growth in knowledge. We proceed to learn, backed by a belief in something which may be incorrect. Polanyi frequently reminds us that as knowers we are fallible. Our fallibility is not a hindrance but an opportunity to break out into something new.

Richmond's thesis is an interesting idea. However his belief that Polanyi's theories are inconsistent and irrational is wrong. I encourage this author to re-read Polanyi with an open mind. He has tried to ally Gombrich with Popper in regards to the history of art and Polanyi in regards to aesthetics. To join in one thinker (Gombrich) two disparate thinkers (Popper and Polanyi) is a fascinating and creative undertaking. Perhaps another attempt would bear some fruit.

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The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat. Edited with an Introduction by James M. Nickell and James W. Stines. Columbia: University of MO Press, 1993. pp. 343. \$49.95.

I was a graduate student at Duke University when I first read “Persons and Places.” It was circulated by Bill Poteat to his students before publication and the occasion is memorable because it was a particularly existential one for me. Earlier, I had read Poteat’s “Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology, and Action” in a seminar and had appreciated its insight, particularly its elucidation of the logic of narrative, but “Persons and Places” was special to me. I was overwhelmed by it, or in Tillichian terms, I was “grasped.” The essay was “about” the concept of “person” and how it was inextricably connected to “place.” Furthermore, it showed that modern sensibility, replacing “place” with “space,” denatured “persons” into objective “selves,” abstracting us from any fundamental placement in the world or before God. It was a powerful essay, well-written and argued with unique insight, in that sense, an ordinary Bill Poteat product. But it was more than that to me. As I read the essay, I sensed (tacitly?) in my person what Poteat was writing “about.” The essay performed a change in my perceiving, not just my perception. It was the first time I “caught on,” in some intellectual/existential way, to what Bill Poteat was trying to “do” with me. After that experience, I began to seek out and read all his essays, published in a number of journals and covering a variety of topics.

I relate that experience because after I read *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture*, I have had trouble knowing exactly how to respond to it. This collection of essays by William H. Poteat, written over a period of three decades is, by any academic standard, an impressive work. The essays are organized in four categories to permit a variety of readings other than merely a chronological one. The introductory essay by James W. Stines and James M. Nickell is, in itself, a wonderful entree into the life’s work of Bill Poteat and deserves careful reading. This collection of essays is an important contribution to anyone who is interested in exploring the dynam-

ics of our modern conceptual framework. It seems to me to be a required resource for any student of Western culture, philosophy of religion or philosophical anthropology. Even theologians, properly situated, would do well to deal with these essays, especially the explicitly theological ones.

But what to make of them as a whole, a corpus, a volume, is another matter. Stines and Nickell take up this very issue in the opening paragraph of their introduction by stating that the collection “should be understood as in some sense a kind of prolegomenon for anyone wishing to study his (Poteat’s) more recent work” (1). They are referring specifically here to three books by Poteat – *Polanyian Meditations*; *A Philosophical Daybook*; and *Recovering the Ground*, all lengthy pieces of philosophical reflection written since 1985. It is interesting, however, that they are guarded in this suggestion, for they see that clearly these essays are not an ordinary introduction to Poteat’s work, nor essential to reading his later work. Rather, they go on to add their belief that “this collection, part of which is previously unpublished, is valuable in its own right” (1)

It is valuable, they go on to argue, because, “the malady of the modern world is a Cartesian malady” (9) and “What is needed...is the exposure of Cartesianism in its tacit as well as its explicit dimensions in such a way that it can be recognized for what it is. It is one of the great merits of these essays that they undertake this task, revealing in an unavoidable and comprehensible fashion the hidden Cartesian commitments and their implications which lie buried in some of the most seemingly innocuous positions” (10).

Here it seems to me, the editors have put their finger on the importance of these essays and why, upon re-reading “Persons and Places” I was transported back to Duke graduate studies. For these essays reveal a great deal of what is required to critique the Cartesianism of modern thought (or post-modern thought, for that matter). Our involvement in objective thought forms, abstractions from our lived experiences, and impersonal claims which

systematically erode our ability to accredit our own involvement in the world so constituted by our life, is so persuasive, so unnoticed, that no merely straightforward “argument” about these issues will do. The remarkable thing about these essays, and why they are so valuable as a corpus, is that they display a person *in the act of recovering himself* from an involvement in a Cartesian world which pervades and distorts our thought about ourselves, our culture, our language and (especially?) God.

In short, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* is important precisely because it is, at one level, uneven and tentative. In that regard, it is not an introduction to Bill Poteat’s thought. But, at least for me, it is an introduction to an intellectual vocation, in part by example (Poteat’s life work), in part by the thoughtful, hard-nosed reflection found in the essays themselves. A chronological presentation of these essays would not do both, as Stines and Nickell sensed. But neither was systematic handling possible. That is why “Persons and Places” was exactly the “correct” or “fitting” essay to open this work. It does for the book what it did for me some twenty-eight years ago. It re-focuses reflection by inviting the reader to re-imagine oneself in the act of reflection. It places one as the tacit prerequisite for thinking. For only then can one begin to reflect adequately on the work required to appreciate one’s relation to world, persons, God, culture, language. The task, as Poteat knew, is a life’s work; it is also the work of and in community. Anyone reading these essays, especially if proper attention is paid to what “Persons and Places” does to the reader, will be initiated into some sort of citizenship in that community.

James Stines and James Nickell have made a unique contribution to intellectual life with this book.. I recommend it strongly, not for historical purposes, but for active use.

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Joan Crewdson, *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polanyi’s Theory of Personal Knowledge (A Personalist Theology)*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994. pp. xi +445. \$109.95/£59.95. ISBN0-7734-9150-3.

Joan Crewdson has been working on her major study of Polanyi’s relevance to Christian doctrine for at least fifteen years. The result is a thorough investigation of the fundamentals of trinitarian and incarnational Christianity from a perspective steeped in Polanyi’s work. Her analysis is powerful, her own faith very clear, and the centrality of Polanyi’s thinking for her interpretation of Christianity inescapable. Any reader concerned to explore the intricacies of the trinitarian faith will find much here to become engrossed in, and there are places where the depth of scholarship will reward careful and repeated study.

What others less prepared to take a very orthodox trinitarian and Christological line will make of it will depend very much on what one looks for and expects. It is not a *critical* study: it has little to say of Polanyi that is not respectful, and much to say that is devotional; there is no sustained attempt to address the kinds of questions that will be raised by those doubtful of trinitarian and incarnational issues, and to some extent the book needs the variety that such discussions would have provided. At times I felt overly bound up with a description of a certain highly orthodox position when something more radical and challenging might have brought new perspectives and freshness to a text that in its four hundred pages makes heavy demands on the reader’s willingness to explore every nook and cranny of an idea. If it has a serious fault, it is that it tends to state and restate what the orthodox position is while scarcely seeming to acknowledge that there are alternatives. For Crewdson, there is a Christian view, a trinitarian analysis, a Christological perspective, where for others each of these may prove more multi-faceted and problematic.

The difficulty for the reviewer is knowing whether to address it as scholarship or as meditation (even mysticism). It is certainly both, but it has some serious deficiencies (not least its apparent inability to view Polanyi as a

human being with faults, whose philosophy, far-ranging and profound as it was, did not anticipate everything that came after it other than by dint of a pregnant vagueness and openness -- Polanyi can be to philosophy what Nostradamus is to fortune-telling). It always worries me that Polanyi seems to incite this one-sided adulation in his admirers. Until he is deemed worthy of and able to withstand a far more critical appraisal, it is difficult to see how he can enter the ranks of the genuinely epoch-making philosophers of our time.

As homage and meditation, Joan Crewdson's book scores much more strongly. There is a reverential quality about it, a *personal* quality, that stretches beyond anything general and merely scholarly and must be understood in terms of specific human devotion. Polanyi, for Crewdson, was undoubtedly the greatest of all thinkers. It is not for any reviewer to deny such a discipleship; only to point it out. I would have failed in my duty if someone were to part with \$100 expecting this to be more than a spiritual homily or as open-ended as Polanyi's own thought. Joan Crewdson knows where she is going, knows with whom she is prepared to make the journey, and explores every step of the way with selfless thoroughness. There is a little too much "I believe +" and "I am arguing that +", but there are also some wonderful poetic phrases and some passages of extended meditation which invite reverence and awe, not criticism.

On the other hand, there are few open valences here, few unopened doors, few hanging or pregnant possibilities. At times the exploration is as exhausting as it is exhaustive, simply because there is such a concern to make things clear, to communicate the depth of the love and power of God that Joan Crewdson perceives in her own life, that we are left with almost no room to be ourselves and other. At times -- too many times -- I felt almost churlishly rebellious, wanting to say "yes, but +" far too often, but checking myself because that is not why we are here. This is less a study than an adulation; less and analysis than an assertion; less a question than an answer. As spiritual homily it is little short of profound: few prepared to explore these many pages will fail to be moved;

some, like me, will wonder whether they ought in all propriety to have been invited to enter these inner sanctums of the human mind at all. The place whereon thou standest (and wherein thou readeest) is holy ground. Walk (and read) respectfully.

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Notes on Contributors

Stephen Turner is a philosopher who teaches at the University of South Florida; he was both a student of Edward Shils' work and a friend during the last fourteen years of Shills' life. Turner's recent book, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions*, will soon be reviewed in *TAD*.

Edward Shils was a friend and colleague of Michael Polanyi. He was Professor of Sociology and Social Thought at the University of Chicago and fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge. Shils was a special speaker at the April 1991 Kent State centennial conference on the life and work of Polanyi; the article in this issue, based upon his Kent State address, was one of Shils' last essays before his death in January 1995.

Andy Sanders is a member of the Theology Faculty at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. He is author of *Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology*.

Sheldon Richmond is author of *Aesthetic Criteria: Gombrich and Philosophies of Science of Popper and Polanyi*.

Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.

Polanyi Society Membership

Tradition and Discovery is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally two or three issues of *TAD* each year.

The regular annual membership rate for the Polanyi Society is \$20; the student rate is \$12. The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Humanities, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507,. Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the following information: subscriber's name as it appears on the card, the card name, and the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be mailed, faxed or e-mailed to Mullins (e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu ; fax: USA 816-271-4574).

New members must provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), institutional relationship, and e-mail address and/or fax number (if available). Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing.

The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and /or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be doublespaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

Manuscripts should include the author's name on a separate page since submissions normally will be sent out for blind review. In addition to the typescript of a manuscript to be reviewed, authors are expected to provide an electronic copy (on either a 5.25" or 3.5" disk) of accepted articles; it is helpful if original submissions are accompanied by a disk. ASCII text as well as most popular IBM word processors are acceptable; MAC text can usually be translated to ASCII. Be sure that disks include all relevant information which may help converting files to Word Perfect or ASCII. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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