

Reply to Comments of Grosby, Mullins, and Turner on Polanyi, Shils, and Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief response to selected points made by the commentators on my essay.

“The child is father to the man.” This famous line from Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up,” perhaps modified for contemporary readers to “The child is parent to the adult,” points to one dimension of the valuable complexity Steven Grosby discusses. Stephen Turner also alludes to this aspect of complexity when he points out that events in the life of the young Shils are useful in “obscure ways” in helping us to understand the life and thought of the older man. And when Phil Mullins warns against overplaying the religion card, he is correctly pointing to the obscurity of the connection between the young Polanyi’s five-year period of being a “completely converted Christian” and his mature thinking.

Polanyi was acutely aware of the complexity and obscurity of the relations between his earlier life and his later thought. In “The Personal Mode of Meaning,” he admitted that he was unable to make *all* of his tacit assumptions explicit. He knew, in a general way, that the residues of his earlier experiences were “the matrix”—the metaphorical mother—of all his later intellectual activities, and that this matrix was subject to continual modifications. “All my amendments to these original terms,” he wrote, “will remain embedded in the system of my previous beliefs. Worse still, I cannot precisely say what these beliefs are” (PK 252). He was probably more aware than most people of the parental relationships between his earlier experiences and his later thinking, but even for him the precise nature of those relations were obscure. If they were hidden from him, how much more deeply are they hidden from us.

But there is a dialectical tension here. It is indeed a mistake to overplay the religion card in trying to understand Polanyi’s mature mind, and equally a mistake to overplay the “orphan card” in trying understand the later life and thought of Shils. But it is also a mistake to fail to recognize that these are cards that we must play. They are among the subsidiaries *from* which an interpreter attends *to* the meanings of their texts. Each sentence and paragraph they wrote was the result of thinking that had a *from-to* structure, and we who seek to understand the things they wrote are less able than they were to make the tacit dimensions of their thinking fully explicit. The obscurity of the ways that the child is father to the man is a necessary consequence of the tacit character of the subsidiaries *from* which a writer attends *to* a focal object.

The obscurity is not total. If it were, all attempts to understand the thinking of Polanyi, Shils, Tönnies or Augustine would be futile. Nye’s metaphor is useful: there are sharks in these waters. Grosby is probably right to say that the memory of Mannheim was not really a “haunting presence” in Shils’ later life, but I have to think that Shils’ memory of his early enthusiasm for Mannheim was one of the sharks that was

cruising beneath the surface of his thinking. Similarly, I have to think that Polanyi's period of enthusiasm for Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy was some kind of fish, if not necessarily a shark, swimming beneath the surface of his later thinking. Not every creature swimming beneath the surface of a person's thinking is a shark. The sharks are the ones the thinker tries to keep at a distance.

It is not just the child who is father to the man, or the young woman who is mother to the old woman. "Father," "mother," "grandfather," and "grandmother" are words that point to the intergenerational dimension of cognitive parenthood. Texts are not simply "handed down" from generation to generation. Reading them results in new conceptions in the fertile minds of the readers. Each reader attributes meaning to these texts, partly on the basis of the constraints imposed by membership in a speech community, and partly on the basis of the matrix of tacit beliefs that reside in his or her unique personal background. Arguing about what the writers of these texts meant to say is not an exercise in futility. These conversations are what keep traditions alive.