

LEARNING TO BE POST-CRITICAL: AN INTERVIEW WITH DALE CANNON

Martin Turkis and Dale Cannon

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ABSTRACT

Interviewer Martin Turkis focuses on Dale Cannon's intellectual career in relation to Polanyi studies, how he was introduced to the thought of Michael Polanyi through the guidance of William H. Poteat and his publications, what led to Cannon's focus on the meaning and importance of the shift from the critical to the post-critical, and what that shift means.



Turkis: How did you come to study philosophy?

Cannon: I moved into philosophy in a curious kind of way. When I started at Seattle Pacific University in 1960, I was already on a trajectory of pursuing a degree in physics, spurred on by a great teacher in high school. But by the end of my first undergraduate year (1960–1961) I had taken a philosophy class with Jerry Gill, and by the end of my second year I had decided to change my career focus to philosophy, though I double-majored in physics to have a better acquaintance with what goes on in the practice of science itself. Even in those early days, I was struck by the fact that many philosophers of science seemed disconnected from actual scientific practice. Their idea of science wasn't the science that I experienced in my physics classes and in the lab while assisting in the research of my physics professor. So at that stage, I was becoming aware that there was a serious disconnect between the theory and practice of science that needed clearing up philosophically. This disconnect was key to my later appreciation of Polanyi's idea of a post-critical philosophy. It initiated in me a lifelong project of thinking through these things, though I was far from being able to articulate it in this way at the time.

I was later accepted into Duke University's graduate program in Philosophy with a full-ride National Defense Education Act Fellowship because of my dual major in philosophy and physics. Duke's program was dominated by analytic approaches. I found I was able to do what they taught reasonably well, but nobody was interested in exploring the big philosophical issues I most wanted to pursue. In some ways, Duke's Philosophy Department in those years was an epitome of what I later recognized as the modern critical tradition.

Turkis: What led you to change your focus to religious studies?

Cannon: My first year there, I looked up William H. Poteat¹ on the recommendation of Jerry Gill. Poteat was a genuine philosopher in my judgment, but his professorship at Duke was in Religion. I had to take

some courses outside the Department of Philosophy, so I decided to take his. And my, oh my! Intellectually I was in heaven. He seemed to be precisely the sort of teacher and mentor I had been looking for, so I decided to transfer to the Department of Religion to work with him, though this meant I wasn't going to end up with a standard PhD. It was a fateful decision in many ways, but I believe it turned out to be the right one.

My first encounter with Michael Polanyi's ideas came in a small seminar with Poteat in 1967. I was one of only two students in the course. We met in Poteat's home and worked through *Personal Knowledge*. Poteat's influence was key in guiding me toward Polanyi and other thinkers who deeply informed my approach to the post-critical shift.

Turkis: We will come back to Poteat, Polanyi, and the post-critical shift later. What came next for you?

Cannon: On the recommendation of Bill Poteat, I was hired at Skidmore College by Harry Prosch in 1968 while still working on my dissertation. I jumped at the opportunity. Doing this got me into some pretty deep water! In retrospect, I would say I was hired before I was really ready for teaching. The whole thing was very frightening to me, just jumping in to teach without any experience whatsoever.

Turkis: Prosch is a significant figure in Polanyi Studies. How well did you get to know him?

Cannon: Prosch was working with Polanyi in England most of the time during my first year of teaching at Skidmore College. And when he came back to Skidmore my second year there, we had relatively few conversations, so I did not get to know him well. He is a very good philosopher in his own right. I think he expected me to be more of a serious, traditional philosopher, fully versed in the history of thought. And I was very unseasoned. Prosch didn't take to a Poteatian orientation at all. Not that he was an avowed enemy of Poteat's or anything; he just couldn't understand Poteat's way of coming at things and was not disposed to take the time and effort to learn what it was about.

In 1970, I was offered a position in the relatively new Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Accepting it turned out to be more fateful than I realized at the time. Until that point, I would say I was naïve when it came to the academic politics of tenure, which were quite rough there. Having a few brilliant students excited with my teaching did little to outweigh the relatively poor draw I was making with new students fresh to Religious Studies, and I had no training and little natural talent as to how to do the latter.

Turkis: Did you ever have the opportunity to interact personally with Polanyi?

Cannon: In 1972, I went to the Dayton Polanyi Conference, where I met Polanyi. Harry Prosch and Marjorie Grene were there, playing major roles. I didn't have any one-on-one conversations with Polanyi, though I would have liked to. He wasn't mixing a lot with people, as I recall, and when he did speak he did so from prepared notes, which was just as well, because when he spoke off the cuff you could tell he wasn't quite able to extemporize anymore. He was far from top form. He still had four more years to go before he died, but it was pretty much downhill from there, and there were clear traces of dementia even in those days.

Turkis: How did you end up finishing your academic career at Western Oregon University?

Cannon: After three years in Virginia, my wife and I and our two oldest girls moved to the Pacific Northwest. Thus began a four-year interim in which I taught part-time, worked as a handyman, did some academic writing, and searched for an opening in philosophy. This is when it became clear that my PhD in Religion did not make me particularly attractive to institutions seeking to fill a tenure-track position in philosophy.

In 1977, I took a half-time position at Western Oregon State College (later renamed Western Oregon University) teaching philosophy and religious studies. That fall my wife and I and our two daughters moved to Monmouth, Oregon, where we have lived ever since. In 1980, I became a full-time, tenure-track Assistant Professor. Academic politics at Western, though challenging at times, were thankfully never hostile to the values I brought to bear on my teaching, my collegial relationships, or my research. It was and has been a good place to teach.

Turkis: You have written that your approach to philosophy and your understanding of Polanyi's thought was much influenced by William Poteat. Say more about the nature of this influence.

Cannon: I studied with Poteat when he was at his height, dialectically and Socratically. I was learning how to read Polanyi in the way that Poteat read him, and that very much has stayed with me. Partly this involved working with the text in an actively empathetic manner—trying to grasp what Polanyi was seeking to articulate and not taking for granted that what he wrote was the last and final word on the subject—and Socratically drawing out my own responses to what we were reading. Just as important was Poteat's personal presence, encouraging me and placing confidence in what I had to say.

Poteat would often bring other major thinkers into a convivial virtual conversation and use one to comment on the other. This was, among other things, a Poteatian counter to the abstract uniformization and virtual solipsism characteristic of the modern academy's mode of "critical thinking" that resulted in *other* points of view dropping out of the arena of discussion. That kind of interplay became for me a model for a post-critical, intellectual ethos: a kind of post-critical commonsense-making and a kind of post-critical public sphere (what Hannah Arendt called a "space of appearance" and what Polanyi speaks of as the convivial order of the scientific community). I was drawn to this model as well as to the kind of convivial conversations that were characteristic of Poteat's graduate seminars. My own contention is that this conviviality (involving mutual accreditation and mutual confidence in what each member of the community has to contribute) is essential to a post-critical intellectual ethos, more than many persons have realized.

This conviviality, a central and crucial aspect of the post-critical intellectual ethos among Poteat's students, came to characterize their interaction both in and out of classes. There were quite a few of us, and in order to continue and sustain the kinds of convivial intellectual conversations to which we had been introduced in Poteat's classes, Jim Stines and I helped arrange summer gatherings in North and South Carolina for several years. One of the topics we discussed was posed by the novelist Walker Percy: "How to find the way out of the confusions of the Modern Age." In addition, a recurrent question and puzzlement that we kept coming back to was, "What is this peculiar sort of reflection and intellectual inquiry (and teaching) that we are doing to which Poteat has introduced us?" Was it philosophy? What relationship did it have to religion? Was it "philosophical studies in religion and culture"? It was all of these and more. There was no simple answer we came to that summed it up, but nevertheless it seemed to have a kind of coherence and we seemed to be making a kind of progress in relation to it.

Poteat did not directly provide us with words for what it was. In some ways, I think, even he at times was not able fully to articulate it and at times seemed reluctant to talk about it since he feared that doing so might make it dissipate and disappear. Poteat attended a couple of these summer gatherings and seemed to enjoy them. Through them, he became one of us, as it were. Apparently, they provided an opportunity for convivial discussion that he did not have much of in his own life. It may be important to note that Poteat's use of "post-critical" in the titles of his books, starting with *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (1985), did not occur until after these summer gatherings had ended.

Turkis: So the convivial philosophical discussions fostered by Poteat and centering on Polanyi's work gave you something to work on throughout your intellectual journey.

Cannon: Yes. During my time with Poteat at Duke, the post-critical shift was becoming for me a kind of symbol of the academic quest I had undertaken. What is it, precisely? What is it all about? Nobody else under Poteat, before or since, was focused on explaining that, at least not as I was. I would say that for various reasons, perhaps, some have never really appropriated this centrally important aspect of Polanyi's work. And it bears noting that early on in my studies, I did not even have the words that I now have to articulate the quest I was on. That came later when I was well into writing my dissertation.

Turkis: What was the topic of your dissertation?

Cannon: It took me a while to come up with a dissertation topic. The eventual title of my dissertation, "Mastered Irony: The Point of Entry into a Post-Critical Epistemology," reflects a convergence of three lines of thought: (1) wrestling with what Polanyi was accomplishing (both intellectually and existentially) in writing what became *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Epistemology*, viewed and considered in light of (2) the impact of encountering Kierkegaard's writings (stemming from my first-semester course on Existentialism with Poteat in 1965) and reading Kierkegaard's own academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, and (3) the evocative intentional irony that pervaded Poteat's Socratic teaching, which sensitized his students (and myself in particular) to the presence of irony in modern intellectual life and above all in the existential self-alienation constituting the critical mindset of modernity itself. Kierkegaard introduces the idea of "mastered irony" in the last chapter of his dissertation. Overcoming the existential self-alienation that characterized modern intellectual life—and thus a shift from the critical mindset to a post-critical mindset—required a mastery (and overcoming) of its irony, and Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* pointed the way. My dissertation (defended in June 1969) was my initial articulation of what it was all about, and I have never stopped working on it since. Near the time of my defense, I recall that Poteat told me it would take me a lifetime to unpack my dissertation and unfold its full meaning. Although the dissertation title focuses on epistemology, the dissertation is my first attempt to articulate what I take to be the root problem of modernity and how to move beyond it.

Turkis: Explain a bit more what you mean by what Polanyi was “wrestling with” in *Personal Knowledge*.

Cannon: Polanyi was a philosopher who was a scientist in the fullest sense of the word—one who is a *practitioner* of science from the ground up. His understanding of science was not that of an outsider, as was the case for many of those who developed Logical Positivism and related philosophical theories of science. Nor can Polanyi’s understanding be said to represent the critical mindset, which is an abstracted conceptualization of one’s life and practice. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi is not just writing for his reader. He is writing for himself, and he is working through the shift from the critical mindset to the post-critical amid that writing. He makes a number of personal declarations, and they indicate an existential transformation that is taking place. It’s a transformation through which he remains the scientist he has been along with the rest of the scientific community in its largely tacit practice. Polanyi is explicitly owning up to himself as a scientist and a member of the scientific community and laying claim to the personal backing and intellectual passion he has given, and still gives [through his writing], to all of that—all in opposition to the predominant objectivist understandings that misrepresent what science is supposed to be about.

Because Polanyi himself was not focused on what is involved in such an existential transformation in general (as Poteat was), he seems at times almost oblivious to the full range of implications of the shift to the post-critical mindset or what would be involved in persons other than himself. There are a few confusions like this manifest in *Personal Knowledge* at times, and that’s part of the whole package. To undergo the shift, you work with where you are, coming to realize what you are as an embodied being in the world alongside other people and reaccrediting your trust in the particular history of practical learning, in the tacit skills, mentorship, and intellectual passions that have led you to that place. I think much of this is often missed by people reading and writing about Polanyi. What got you into intellectual life in the first place, and how has the modern mindset distanced and alienated you from it? Passion (the motivating force behind your personal participation in knowing) is a central part of it. That’s one of the things, by the way, that Kierkegaard has helped remind me of; his understanding of truth has passion at the heart of it, as does Polanyi’s. The need to return and own up to yourself reflects the depth of alienation from oneself that the critical mindset brings about and what the shift to the post-critical has to overcome.

The fact that Polanyi was not generally focused on the existential side of this transformation is one of the reasons why he doesn’t recognize other post-critical thinkers who aren’t Polanyians as well as Poteat was able to. Polanyi also seemed to have taken for granted Jean-Paul Sartre’s distorted conception of existentialism as a whole as something he had to distance himself from and reject. In consequence, Polanyi concludes that he has nothing in common with existentialists. In his first published reference to “post-critical” (*LL*, 109), Polanyi speaks of the shift to the post-critical as a significant intellectual movement in Europe to which he is calling his readers’ attention, not as a conceptual framework that he has constructed and is himself introducing. This is a broad reference to other people, other intellectuals, who have undergone or are undergoing the same existential transformation that he was undergoing. Poteat follows Polanyi in regarding post-critical thinking as a broad movement in intellectual culture, though Poteat’s work as a teacher and a writer, as we already discussed, was more consistent and explicit in acknowledging and bringing together, at least virtually, intellectuals (including many existentialists but not all) who think and write in a post-critical manner.

It is also important to recognize that Polanyi wasn’t entirely or consistently post-critical and wasn’t always able to notice his lapses when they happened.

Turkis: What is the end goal of navigating the post-critical shift?

Cannon: It's a very powerful, life-changing experience to recover from the madness and disorientation of taking on the critical mindset as a result of coming to possess a modern mind. In important respects, it's as if, in the modern mindset, you lose track of who you are as a person, and recovering from this loss is a matter of existentially recovering yourself. Poteat understood his own task as that of curing this insanity and returning us to ourselves, to who we are as a concrete, embodied person before God. This is not to suppose that it can be done straightforwardly or easily, least of all as a social program (see Cannon, 2008–2009). Poteat understood as well that helping a person undergo the shift and securing her place in the post-critical involves more than simply a change in that person's thinking; it involves how that person relates herself to herself and to the world (personal and extra-personal) in which she lives. For many, it requires a space, a time, and a supporting community (and ethos) to make and sustain the shift.

In a series of published articles, I have sought to clarify and expound the shift from the critical paradigm in modern Western culture to the post-critical paradigm and to acknowledge its importance to Polanyi's thought and its significance to intellectual culture at large. This shift was central to all that Poteat had to teach and write about Polanyi and to Poteat's interpretation of other twentieth-century critics of modern Western culture (including here pre-twentieth-century figures such as Pascal and Kierkegaard). It has seemed to me that the shift has not been fully recognized or articulated among other Polanyi students/scholars. Being aware of this has motivated me to write about and expound upon it repeatedly (see Cannon 1981, 1992–1993, 1994–1995, 2008–2009, 2016, and 2021).

Turkis: Discuss how you came to apply “post-critical thought” to Religious Studies.

Cannon: When I made the transition in graduate school from a department of philosophy to a department of religion under Poteat, I had to take courses and study for preliminary exams in other areas such as comparative religion, philosophical theology, and systematic theology. Getting involved in all those areas, especially the first, changed the trajectory of my teaching career in important respects. For instance, in my first job, half of my teaching load was comparative study of religion, and I have taught comparative study of religion virtually every subsequent year of my teaching career. Every position I have had since then involved teaching religious studies. Until that first job assignment, religious studies had never been a part of my career vision. But it eventually led me to write my book, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion* (now available for free using the link in the References section of the article). That book is the result of my philosophically inquiring into the nature of religious studies and developing what I believe is a sound theory about it. I did not realize until much later how much it, and the methodology as I employed, taught, and advocated it, reflected a distinctly Polanyian and post-critical orientation. What most led me to that realization was an exchange that took place in the Polanyi Society Meetings in 2011 and 2012.

I invited Jacob Sherman of the Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco to make a presentation to the Polanyi Society. Jacob Sherman is going to make quite a name for himself. He was one of the co-authors of a collection called *The Participatory Turn* that reflected the way a number of people in religious studies are shifting toward an approach with much more involvement on the part of the investigator in the religious tradition under examination, a self-conscious personal participation very close to the way Polanyi talks

about the personal participation of the knower in all forms of inquiry. I talked with Sherman initially to see if he agreed with my initial impression and if he would be interested in coming to a Society Meeting and talking about the relationship of this participatory turn to Polanyi's ideas. He thought the proposal intriguing. He presented a paper on the subject and I responded. These have yet to be published in *Tradition and Discovery*, mainly hanging on my tackling the job of editing them.

And then the following year, on Sherman's encouragement and in further response to his presentation, I wrote a paper on what would be a Polyanian approach to a comparative study of religion. This occasion led me to realize that my book, *Six Ways of Being Religious*, was itself an answer to that question, much more than I realized at the time of writing the book. It also led me to realize that the pedagogy I had developed in teaching comparative study of religion—namely, teaching my students how to explore (in a highly disciplined yet empathetic way) alternative systems of symbols and to describe what they thereby discovered—was an implementation of what Polanyi meant by tacit indwelling. In turn, Sherman composed and gave a positive response to my paper. So between Sherman and myself, we've got four papers that are yet to be published on a Polyanian approach to religious studies, and it is likely that they will be published at some point in *TAD* in the near future.

My work in comparative religion is one way in which my trajectory has built upon yet also moved beyond the legacies of Polanyi and Poteat. Few of Poteat's students, for instance, went in that direction, with the important exception of Milton Scarborough (2009).

Turkis: Describe your interest in Philosophy for Children.

Cannon: Another movement I became interested in late in my career was a program called Philosophy for Children, developed by Matthew Lipman in New Jersey. He was formerly a professor at Columbia University. Lipman's approach is now only one among several others around the world, all using the general rubric of "philosophy with children." I got involved around 1990 and went to two seminars where I was able to work with Lipman as well as with children learning philosophy. It has affected my understanding of what it is to do philosophy by giving me a sense that anybody can be involved in philosophical thinking in a way that can be of value to them. In turn, I think it has made me able to communicate much more effectively about philosophical matters with ordinary people. I believe that this has to do with what I have called Polanyi's recovery of "commonsense" and "a commonsense perspective" in intellectual life (1992–1993). I came to realize this with the help of Hannah Arendt's account of "the loss of commonsense" in the modern world. I was introduced to her writings (especially *The Human Condition*) in one of Poteat's seminars.

Turkis: What place has the post-critical shift had in your teaching?

Cannon: There are lots of ways in which the shift from a critical to a post-critical mindset has manifested in my teaching and publishing, and I have at times deliberately sought to have it be manifest, even in unforeseen places. It never was for me a program unto itself such as, let's say, the title of a course or a program of studies. Yet it became an integral part of what I sought overall to accomplish in my teaching in whatever subject area I happened to be working.

Sometimes I took it as a deliberate focus to be clearly understood by my students, and it was rewarding when I did. Yet for the most part it was something tacitly at work in whatever area I worked in. Part of that was

also because the need for content coverage in a small department required that I teach all sorts of courses that I otherwise wouldn't teach. One example was the logic courses I taught every so often. I skewed that a bit so it became a course in development and refinement of reasoning skills rather than logic understood as only formal logic. As I came to characterize the taxonomy involved, I taught that there are formal reasoning skills (which we know in formal logic and mathematics and computer coding), and there are also informal reasoning skills, and what that includes, I discovered, is a large area, particularly if you've been influenced as I have by Steven Toulmin et al. (1979). As soon as you're talking about the concrete context of reasoning, you're going to bring into play other things besides formal aspects—other people reasoning together with you with significantly different points of view, and how special warrants governing informal inferences become involved as contexts are shifted. I summarized this in a little essay that calls for reasoning in four dimensions. The four dimensions in my taxonomy are *formal reasoning*, *informal reasoning*, *interpersonal reasoning*—where we get multiple points of view interacting simultaneously—and *philosophical reasoning*—wherein we reason about the presuppositions underlying our thought and the conceptual tools with which we reason more generally. I tried to integrate that type of approach in important respects when I taught logic, so it was never just formal logic, and it helped my students understand where formal logic fits into the whole complex of human reasoning.

Turkis: What have you sought to do in working within the Polanyi Society and in your publishing in *TAD*?

Cannon: I joined the Polanyi Society in the mid-1970s and have played a part (by presenting papers, responding to papers, doing editorial work with papers submitted to *TAD*, planning annual meetings and conferences, and sitting on the governing board), at least when I could afford to participate in meetings. My travel budget at a smaller state university way out west in Oregon often limited the conferences in which I was able to participate. My purpose was manifold. First, I wanted to help cultivate a community of philosophical colleagues who could and would serve as a receptive and convivial space of appearance (to use Hannah Arendt's phrase), which I did not really have in the conventional circles of philosophical scholarship (such as the American Philosophical Association). Second, I already had a strong disposition to develop my thinking and publish papers and articles on topics to which Poteat had introduced me, and the Polanyi Society was more receptive than any other academic group I was familiar with. Third, I came to have a strong interest in helping extend and develop existing and new lines of scholarship in Polanyi studies—less out of a historical interest than out of a heuristic interest in carrying forward Polanyi's (and Poteat's) insights (see three quite different but important examples in Cannon 1972, 1975, and 2002–2003). The last of these remains in my estimation one of the more significant constructive philosophical works I have done in Polanyi studies.

In some of my articles (1996–1997, 1999, 1999–2000, and 2002–2003), I have sought to render explicit the conception or theory of truth that I find implied in Polanyi's work. I have to say, however, that I have not found other Polanyi scholars as receptive to my theory as I had hoped. Apart from these works, I also published, earlier and elsewhere, "An Existential Theory of Truth" (1996).

I have sought within the Polanyi Society to make William Poteat's contributions better known and understood and to show their relevance beyond the relatively small group of his students. This has been inseparable for me from expounding upon and elucidating aspects of Polanyi's thought, precisely because that sort of

exposition and elucidation was a central part of Poteat’s own work. Both of these projects were called for, as I understood them, because Poteat’s work comes at topics from a radically different angle than is usual and because it is often a challenge to decipher. It needs persons who know it well to interpret and make it accessible for others who do not. I should mention in this connection my participation with Wally Mead and James Clement van Pelt in organizing and putting together the June 2014 conference at Yale University—“The Primacy of Persons: The Intellectual Legacy of William H. Poteat”—and the subsequent publication of *Recovering the Personal: The Philosophical Anthropology of William H. Poteat*, which I co-edited with Ron Hall (Lexington, 2016). This book is made up of selected papers from that conference. Most of the other papers from the conference have been published in several issues of *Tradition and Discovery* (XLII:1, XLII:4, and IXIV:1).

I have sought too to bring other thinkers whose work converged in many ways with Polanyi’s thought into Polanyi Society meetings and into the intellectual forum provided by *TAD*. One example among others was my invitation to Blythe Clinchy, one of the co-authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, to make a presentation to the society’s Annual Meeting. I have also sought to bring in figures involved in the establishment of “critical realism” in contemporary sociology and philosophers working on what has been called the “extended mind” thesis. There are many other resonant figures and movements that I could name. Both Polanyi and Poteat have much to contribute to the larger intellectual public; we have hardly begun to plumb the connections.

Throughout my involvement with the Polanyi Society, I have sought to encourage younger scholars new to Polanyi by participating in workshops designed to help them understand his ideas, and I have helped to promote the idea of a Polanyi Reader that, thankfully, Walt Gulick was able to put together. I have participated in other less formal brainstorming sessions on enhancing the Polanyi Society website, discussing future ideas for the Annual Society Meetings and the occasional Polanyi Conference. Where possible, I intend to continue to do so. [Editor’s Note: Cannon has contributed to several Zoom meetings; see the Polanyi Society website for information.]

ENDNOTE

¹For a good overview of William H. Poteat’s thought and its relation to Polanyi, see the *Wikipedia* article, “William H. Poteat,” to which Cannon has contributed most of the content: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_H._Poteat.

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