

THE POLANYI SOCIETY

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REPORT ON NOVEMBER 9 POLANYI CONSULTATION

Although our program was scheduled late in the program, the Nov. 9 Polanyi Consultation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Dallas was a lively, well attended (approximately 25) gathering. The papers by John Apczynski, Richard Gelwick, and Ronald Hall and responses by Durwood Foster, Harry Prosch, and Bruce Haddox elicited vigorous discussion; many interesting issues were opened but none, in our short session, could be thoroughly pursued. Papers, responses and discussion are being considered as a symposium on "Polanyi and the Interpretation of Religion" in a future issue of Zygon, probably Dec. 1981 or Mar. 1982.

Phil Mullins
Convener and PS
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POLANYI SOCIETY AND AAR IN DECEMBER, 1981

Below are several announcements of interest to Polanyi students who attend the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and affiliated professional societies:

- (1) The Polanyi Consultation voted to seek a renewal of its status as an official program unit of the annual meeting of the AAR. If this is approved there will be a three hour session allocated to the Consultation at the 1981 annual meeting (Dec. 19-22) in San Francisco. Two papers on the theme "Polanyian Perspectives on Imagination, Story and the Psycho-Social Dimensions of Religion" will be delivered in the 1981 session. A formal call for papers will be issued in an upcoming issue of the Council for the Scientific Study of Religion Bulletin which regularly publicizes information on AAR annual meetings. If you do not receive the Bulletin but would like to present a paper on the chosen theme at the San Francisco meeting please send a 500 word proposal to me at the address listed below by March 15.
- (2) Some members of the Polanyi Consultation are seeking to organize a session of the Philosophy of Religion section (of the AAR annual meeting program) on Polanyi and Whitehead. This effort will not be ready for the San Francisco meeting, but if you have special interest

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in this area and wish to be kept abreast of developments, please notify me at the address below.

(3) The AAR annual meeting program includes a relatively new component called the Breakfast Session. In essence a breakfast session is an opportunity to deliver or respond to a presentation with a small group of interested persons over breakfast. The sessions are advertised and interested persons sign up, receive materials, etc., all for a slightly inflated breakfast fee. Some members of the Polanyi Consultation have inquired about planning a session or sessions to expand the discussion of themes related to Polanyi. If you are interested in convening such a session, a formal call for proposals for the Breakfast Sessions Program will be in an upcoming CSR Bulletin. Please let me know if you are doing a Breakfast Session presentation. If you are interested in participating in a program organized by someone else, the session topics will be published in the program for the 1981 annual meeting which is distributed to AAR members in the late Fall.

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REPORT FROM BILL SCOTT
ON POLANYI BIOGRAPHY

The effort to construct a biography of Michael Polanyi is at times overwhelming, at times fascinating, and at times filled with a high sense of calling. My basic aim is to account for the development of the thought of this charming, profound and brilliant man. I have been engaged in the work since the fall of 1977, and will take at least another three years to get a manuscript completed.

Fortunately I have the services of an excellent biographical assistant, Monika Tobin, an Austrian scholar of the German language, who has built up for me a file of cards tape transcripts, photographs and correspondence without which I could not hope to complete the project. A grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a sabbatical leave have enabled me to make several short trips to England and the Continent, to interview 100 people (including a dozen of his relatives) and correspond with 20 or 30 more, to spend six weeks at the Michael Polanyi Archives in Chicago, and to get a good start on analyzing his roughly 400 pieces of writing. There are a few more oldsters whose memories go far back that I must be in touch with, and much more correspondence from Michael to others to track down. So far I have written a tentative chapter on the Hungarian background--a handy way of finding out what I still need to learn--and a paper on how Polanyi went from social theory to philosophy. A trip to Budapest has allowed me to search out the old home addresses and try to get a "feeling for place" of the locus of Michael's early life. Many people have given me stories, memories, insights and above all perspective on his character and his work. While I cannot hide my own sympathies for Polanyi as a man and as a thinker, I have an obligation to provide some balance in telling the reader of at least some of his human limitations and of some of the major criticisms of his work.

The work goes slowly during my period of teaching at the University of Nevada, but as of May 15, 1981, I retire, and will be able to devote nearly all of my time to the biography.

Anyone who has letters from Michael Polanyi would assist me considerably by sending photocopies. Memories of personal contacts, anecdotes, and considered judgments on the value of his work would also be much appreciated.

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IDEALISM IN MEDICAL ETHICS:
THE PROBLEM OF MORAL INVERSION

Allen Ralph Dyer, M.D., completed his doctor of philosophy dissertation and degree this October, at Duke University, supervised by Prof. William Poteat, and writing on the above title. The following excerpts are from the abstract of his dissertation.

This dissertation examines conflicting ideals in contemporary society regarding modern medicine by focusing on the efforts of biomedical ethics to call medicine back to its humanistic roots. These efforts often fail, it is argued, because they rely on the same epistemological assumptions which have led medicine to focus too much on the physical aspects of disease and not enough on the patient's experience of illness. For ethics an account of knowing which holds complete explicitness as its goal lends itself more to matters of public policy than to reflection on the ambiguities of personal responsibility. It is the thesis of this dissertation that our culture has come to hold its ideals as moral imperatives, which no person in reality can live up to, rather than recognizing them as standards toward which one should strive, and furthermore that ruthless adherence to the demand for such moral perfectionism may inadvertently result in immorality justified on moral grounds.

A number of issues in medical ethics are examined in light of the interplay between the values which may be in conflict in our society and the facts which are used to explain these conflicts. In each of several issues--physician advertising, use of placebos, opposition to involuntary psychiatric commitment to protect the civil liberties of patients, abortion argued as a definition of the origin of life, definitions of death, and informed consent--noble ideals held as imperatives may become immoral if the needs of individual persons are subsumed in the interest of maintaining abstract principles. In each of the examples so discussed, it is held that a problem arises in medical practice from the Cartesian mind-body dualism, which either identifies the body as a machine or views the mind in a disembodied way.

In order to better appreciate the responsibilities of physicians in light of these difficulties the concept of self is reviewed in philosophical and psychoanalytic perspectives. The self is identified as a moral agent by the values one holds, whether regulated by the superego and a sense of guilt, by the ego ideal and a sense of shame, or by a mature interaction with another person, unique by virtue of unique historical experiences. For the physician, it is concluded, medicine cannot be responsibly practiced without an assessment of the unique needs and desires of each individual patient.

Convivium, Newsletter No. 11, October 1980, Excerpts

(By agreement with Joan Crewdson, Coordinator of the Convivium Newsletter in Great Britain, the Polanyi Society Newsletter will exchange news items to keep our members informed of developments on the other side of the Atlantic.)

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Personal Knowledge and Early Childhood Education.

by Drusilla Scott

Since Polanyi was so deeply concerned with learning and discovery, it would be surprising if his work had no relevance to the ways in which children should be educated. I have found that his ideas reinforce some modern ideas in education while they cast doubt on others. Here is one point where they seem relevant to the very earliest beginnings of children's learning.

Learning begins at birth, and we now recognise, as never before, the immense importance of the learning that takes place in the first few years of life. This is a stage where teaching is hardly possible, but learning is amazingly active, given normal conditions, and its achievements truly astounding. If for any reason the learning that should take place in these years is prevented, the child's whole future development is warped or stunted. So although formal teaching is not yet opportune, it must be of the greatest importance for education that the right conditions for this learning should be provided.

There is significant agreement among widely different writers about the conditions necessary for this infant learning which all now agree is so vital. The basic condition is emotional. Look first at an anticipation of some modern views in the insight of a poet who thought and felt deeply about children. Wordsworth, tracing the growth of imaginative power, wrote in 'The Prelude' (1805 text)

Blest the Babe
Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the Babe who sleeps
Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul
Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul
Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!
Such feelings pass into his torpid life
Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind
Even in the first trial of its powers
Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
In one appearance, all the elements
And parts of the same object; else detach'd
And loth to coalesce."

Another student of children who noticed this emotional basis for understanding and perceiving was Margaret Macmillan, pioneer of nursery education. "The little child," she wrote, (Education through the Imagination) "learns to know his mother's or nurse's

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face well, to recognise her quickly, and in this recognition emotion plays so great a part that the familiar face becomes a kind of starting point of all the widening sympathy and interest of life. If early life gives a little opportunity for the experience of preserving and stimulating emotions, a remarkable apathy is the result!" She then describes a large school she knew where teaching and discipline were good, but where the pupils came from backgrounds mostly lacking in personal nurture. The teachers were puzzled at the mental apathy of the children, who did not notice their surroundings nor have clear images of things. They would say that a sparrow had four legs; they would mix up plant and animal forms in their drawings, they were unresponsive to colour ... "In every school," she wrote, "emotional life has to be more or less assumed. The classroom is the place where what has been lived through can be put in order." But when there has been no emotional 'living through', there is nothing to order. "There is no clear antithesis of single things to prevent this confusion and pave the way for true association. But above all the deep emotional stimulus is lacking, which wherever it exists moves like a living thing through even the faultiest, clumsiest work... The school lesson always presupposes a vast silent preparation on the part of every child... by experience and freedom in experiment and play."

The agreement of this passage with Wordsworth's perception is remarkable. Both writers believed that without early emotional stimulus and nurture a child may not develop the imaginative synthesising power of seeing things as real things, animals, people with their own coherence and meaning. The testimony of the poet and the educational pioneer from their own experience and understanding is born out by more recent study. John Bowlby's book 'Child Care and the Growth of Love' was a landmark in changing the general understanding of the importance of the earliest emotional relationship of mother and child, and he quotes reports that fit in with these insights. For instance in children who were brought up in an institution without close steady interaction with one loved person ... "in spite of good intelligence, all conception of space, time and person was lacking." Many other current writers could be quoted.

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This power of imaginative integration by which children learn to read the clues of their senses as real objects in a real world, is the very power that Polanyi, drawing on the findings of Gestalt psychology, saw as the power of tacit knowing, the basis of all discovery and all knowledge. And the evidence shows that the growth of this power depends vitally on the child's early nurture in a loving responding environment, which the child imbibes by this same tacit power. Ian Suttie in "The Origins of Love and Hate" thus describes the baby enjoying expressive interchanges with its mother; "All the elements of expression, meaningless in themselves like single letters, are intuitively apprehended together as one meaningful word. That word is 'love'... "How is the comforting conviction of being loved arrived at? Words will not produce it, though pitch and timbre of voice are important. Quickness of response, even laughter, posture, eye movements, facial colour and expression - signs which individually are meaningless, are intuitively apprehended as a harmonious whole."

Ian Suttie is here using almost the exact language of tacit awareness. "A deliberate attempt to reproduce the signs of love is always ineffective... The whole mechanism of love and responsiveness is put out of action by attention or deliberation of any kind... Conscious attention is unable to read the complex signs of emotion, of liking and interest. They have to resonate by organic sympathy to get across."

Polanyi speaks of the destruction of meaning by attention to instead of attention from the particulars of what we see, and of the unspecifiable nature of the particular clues which convey a meaning. In an article about 'the feelings of machines' he quoted Raltray Taylor, who said 'Tell us what sign would convince you that machines can feel, and we can produce the sign.' But, says Polanyi, there is no specific sign, so this is not possible. Polanyi wrote of the child learning to speak - "Guided by its love and trust of its guardians it perceives the light of reason in their eyes, voice and bearing, and feels instinctively attracted towards the source of this light. It is impelled to imitate - and to understand better as it imitates further - these expressive actions of its adult guides." (Science, Faith & Society, 1964, p.44)

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According to the writers quoted and many others, the young child reads 'love' in the clues given by its mother's behaviour and this feeds its reliance on the world and thus its ability to read other clues as revealing objects in a real world. But the pseudo-scientific outlook that Polanyi challenged so widely has produced another view. Paul Halmos gave a good account of it in his book 'The Faith of the Counsellors'. In the field of counselling and social work, the work depends on love, sympathy, tenderness and personal relations, but the false cult of science makes workers in these fields uneasy if they cannot find scientific terms for what they do, and science cannot recognise love. Halmos quotes H.F. Harlow, who wrote a well-known study of Love in Infant Monkeys, and concluded that 'there appears to be no reason why we cannot at some future time investigate the fundamental neuro-physical and biochemical variables underlying affection and love'. If love is nothing more than the sum of sensory stimuli, it could be applied mechanically without the personal participation of anyone. Accordingly Harlow argues that in the foreseeable future women will no longer be needed for the early rearing of children, which could be done by mechanical devices.

Polanyi's analysis of tacit knowing would show this to be a mis-reading of the situation; the baby is not attending to the particular details of his mother's handling of him, he is reading their joint meaning. The handling could not be faked because the particular items of it are only specifiable in terms of their joint meaning, because it is a revelation of something real which can manifest itself in unforeseeable ways. Maybe with a mechanical set-up you could fool some of the babies some of the time - after all the scientist can be fooled by false clues - but you could not fool all the babies all the time, and the cost would be the total destruction of their trust.

It is by tacit understanding fired by emotion that the child develops the trust which will allow him to grow into an adventurous, curious, interested person. This is the beginning of the faith in the rationality of the universe, and the 'intellectual love', the intense desire to make sense of things, which runs all through life from worms to Einstein. It is what the philosopher Whitehead called 'concern'. "I contend", he wrote, "that the notion of mere

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knowledge is a high abstraction. The basis of experience is emotional ... Thus the Quaker word 'concern' divested of any suggestion of knowledge, is more fitted to express this fundamental structure."

John Holt in his book 'How Children Fail' described how the eager curiosity, confidence and active exploration of the baby who has had good mothering can later be destroyed by the very system of education which is meant to develop it. The difference between the bright child and the dull child in school, he found, is largely a difference of attitude. The bright child has confidence in the universe as a reasonable and trustworthy place; he wants to explore it and see how it works, he can tolerate uncertainty and take risks, in the confidence that the universe does not play dirty tricks. But the dull child has no such confidence, he sees the world as unpredictable, senseless and treacherous. He does not want to try for fear of failing. To him an unanswered question is not a challenge or an opportunity, but a threat. An answer, for these children, is a thing in itself, unconnected with reality. In fact he found children and teachers often caught up in the 'answer syndrome'; children preoccupied with finding the right answer, the one the teacher wants; teachers so concentrated on the 'right answer' that they lose the sense of reality and could not see when the child's answer was valid though not the one they expected; or on the other hand not valid though it was the one they expected.

Reality, as Polanyi said, always has depths, unforeseen aspects, and it is by having the confidence to wander around that discoveries are often made - like the sixteen year old Einstein imagining what it would be like, if he could pursue a beam of light at the speed of light. It is this confidence that enables a person to indwell in his knowledge, and we should study the conditions that favour the growth of this confidence from the earliest stages.

A Note from David Holbrook

David Holbrook invokes Michael Polanyi's work, in his recent book English for Meaning. This is Holbrook's eighth book on the teaching of English and on education. His own approach, as set out in English for Maturity (1961) and English for the Rejected (1964) is based on imaginative disciplines, and the central discipline is poetry. If the English teacher knows how to teach poetry, and how to respond to the poetry written by children, then everything else follows.

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This approach, however, was supplanted in a recent government report, the Bullock Report, A Language for Life, by an approach largely based on linguistics. This tried to be 'scientific', in order to satisfy demands from the universities for 'proper disciplines' in Education Department. The Report, for example, urges theoretical courses in linguistics for student teachers and implies that they cannot teach English until they understand the workings of language, in an abstract way.

David Holbrook rejects this tendency in English, and believes it to be a disaster, as 'official' backing is given to Bullock. He tries to show that the whole development is based on fallacy. Teaching, he declares, is an art, and it is based on what Polanyi calls 'tacit' processes. The child uses language naturally, and puts together sentences which linguists would find it extremely hard to analyse-- yet the child knows no linguistics. Dogberry was right-- reading and writing come by nature. Moreover, meaning points 'beyond the words', so that explicit attention to the words in an analytical way may have as much of an inhibiting effect as the old kind of analytical grammar teaching. There are disciplines in using language, but they are those of the literary critic and the creative artist, who can collaborate with the mysterious powers of our capacities for symbolism, and examine meaning in a phenomenological way, that is, as a manifestation of consciousness and 'being-in-the-world'.

Holbrook tries to suggest a philosophical backing for this approach, in the work of those who find man to be the animal symbolicum, like Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer; in the work of the post-critical philosophers Marjorie Grene and Michael Polanyi, in Martin Buber's theories of the development of being in the context of relationship, and in recent developments in psychoanalysis, notably the work of D.W. Winnicott and Rollo May. In a section at the end he reports on his own work as a teacher of English, with young children and with adolescents.

The book has been well received, not least by many who were themselves puzzled by the direction in which Bullock went. Holbrook himself reports giving a talk on the creative writing of less able children to a group of teachers of 'backward' children, only to find them saddled with a reading list of 120 books on linguistics, some of which he had tried to read himself, but failed-- a list it would anyway take any intelligent adult five years to get through. The effect of this kind of thing, he believes, as with the abstract courses proposed in A Language for Life, is to inhibit the teacher, and to make life dull in the classroom. The Bullock Report, he alleges, was illiterate. It was badly written and dull, confused and inadequate---for example, it gave only a few pages on poetry, and fails altogether either to give a flavour of children's voices, or any sense of the vast resources which reside on the shelves of English Literature. Yet Bullock cost some £90,000. Holbrook's own book has sold so far 903 copies, a reward for the author, after five years' work, of some £550, so far.

David Holbrook also invokes Polanyi and his interpreter, Marjorie Grene, in a number of recent articles. In Collaborations, a new quarterly from Vanbrugh College, the University of York, on 'Am I a Chemical Accident?' In New Universities Quarterly, from

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Blackwell's, Oxford, on 'Are we only DNA's way of making more DNA?' (Winter 1978-9) and in a forthcoming article on 'Standards in the Arts' in the same quarterly. In an article in the New Humanist, he suggests that we do not have to accept a metaphysic of being, unable to believe in anything based on 'what science says', using to refute this Polanyi and Prosch's Meaning. He also refers to Polanyi in a long review of Mary Midgeley's Beast and Man, also coming out in Collaborations.

The sad state of the book trade is inhibiting the growth and developments of debate and the spread of ideas, seriously. David Holbrook has attempted a survey of the new existentialism and phenomenology, with much reference to Polanyi's work entitled Back to the Things Themselves! This was accepted by Compton Press, on a recommendation by Iris Murdoch, but, alas, as the offer was being negotiated, Compton Press went out of business. Commercial publishers now complain that such a book would cost £10, there is no 'slot' for it, and so who would buy it?

English for Meaning is published by the National Foundation for Educational Research, at £6.25.

End of Convivium excerpts

PUBLICATIONS RECENTLY REPORTED RELEVANT TO POLANYI

- John B. Bennett, "The Tacit Experience: Polanyi and Whitehead," THE THOMIST, Vol. 42, January, 1978, No. 1, pp. 28-49
- Avery Dulles, "Revelation and Discovery", THEOLOGY AND DISCOVERY: ESSAYS IN HONOR OF KARL RAHNER, S.J., (ed.) William J. Kelly, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Marquette University Press, 1980, pp. 1-29.
- Jerry Gill, "Of Split-Brain and Tacit Knowing," INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY, March, 1980.
- James A. Hall, (chapter on Polanyi in book) CLINICAL USES OF DREAMS, New York, Grune and Stratton, 1977.
- Terrence Kennedy, THE MORALITY OF KNOWLEDGE: TRANSCENDENCE AND THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE IN THE THOUGHT OF MICHAEL POLANYI, a doctoral thesis, obtainable for about 8000 lira from Bro. Gaudenzio, Collegio Saint'Alfonso, Via Merulana 31, Rome.
- Joseph Kroger, "Polanyi and Lonergan on Scientific Method," PHILOSOPHY TODAY, Vol. 21, 1977, pp. 2-20.
- Joseph Kroger, "Theology and Notions of Reason - A Note On A Point of Comparison in Lonergan and Polanyi," JOURNAL OF RELIGION, 1976, pp. 157-161.
- Harry Prosch, "Michael Polanyi," THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE BIOGRAPHICAL SUPPLEMENT, Vol. 18, 1979, New York, The Free Press. pp. 640-42.
- William T. Scott, "The Personal Character of the Discovery of Mechanisms in Cloud Physics," (ed.) T. Nickles, SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY: CASE STUDIES, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980, pp. 273-289

Sir Geoffrey Vickers, "The Future of Morality," 12 pp., available on request from the author: The Grange, Manor Road, Goring, Reading RG3 9EA.

CONTRIBUTION FROM MAGDA POLANYI

The Polanyi Society has received a contribution of one hundred dollars from Dr. Magda Polanyi, widow of Michael Polanyi. She sent the gift to assist in covering expenses and to convey "her warmest good wishes and appreciation for the splendid work" of the Society. She is still living in the Polanyi home in Oxford and enjoying life with the help of many wonderful friends and neighbors.

Thanks for the items for the Newsletter. Keep it up.

Richard Gelwick, PS Coordinator and Editor
