

William Poteat's Anthropology: "Mindbody in the World"

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ABSTRACT: Key words: mindbody, pretension, retrotension, epistemological radix, prereflection, ontological hierarchy, coherence, meaning.

Using the metaphor of a circle with its center, periphery, and radius, this essay explores William Poteat's understanding of the self, or "mindbody," in its dynamic and creative relation to the larger world, or cosmos, identifying the mindbody's prereflective radix with the "center," its boundary or point of interface with the larger world with the "periphery," and its dialectical evolution and articulation of a sense of coherence and meaning in terms of a pretensive and retrotensive "radius."

I: The Indeterminate Anthropological Center

If you place mystery at the center of existence, the rest will fall into place. However, if you place reason at the center, all will be chaotic (paraphrase of G.K. Chesterton by an unknown).

In his "Prologue" to *Polanyian Meditations* (1985), William Poteat notes that it was his discovery in 1952 of some of Michael Polanyi's early philosophical writings that "accredited and greatly enriched the context within which initially to obey my own intimations" (6). This same year marked the beginning for Professor Poteat of now more than four decades, innumerable lectures, more than thirty articles or chapters, and three books in obedience to those intimations.¹ Polanyi's influence throughout is obvious, but it served primarily as a catalyst. Poteat's intimations were his own. From the beginning Professor Poteat articulates a conceptual framework and addresses issues that extend his post-critical reflections well beyond the Polanyian corpus. Still, even his most original insights, he himself acknowledges, consistently retrotend (to use one of Poteat's seminal concepts) "deeply interiorized Polanyian motifs" (*PM*, 8).

Although the general thrust of Poteat's works, like Polanyi's philosophical writings, is epistemological, one of his major contributions is his articulation of an anthropology consistent with his post-critical epistemology. Having started with, and explored through his own conceptual categories, the Polanyian realization that all knowing is tacitly grounded, that is, radically tacit, he then asks what is the nature of this tacit radix? His underlying assumption, like Polanyi's, is that "the structure of our way of *knowing* in the world reduplicates our way of *being* in the world--at least in the sense that an integral analysis of neither can be abstracted from time" (*PM*, 25). Therefore, "a theory of knowing must be inextricably implicated with a theory of being." (*PP*, 80). It is significant that Stines and Nickell chose to entitle their edited collection representing the vast range of Poteat's scholarship *The Primacy of Persons* . . . Michael Polanyi insists, in *Personal Knowledge*, that "by contrast to a field of forces operating in an inanimate system, a field of *biological* striving stands defined by the fact that we attribute its operations to *an active center*" (404, emphasis added). And all the more do these tensile forces become consolidated and cocentered as they become conscious, deliberative, deliberate, and committal--that is, as Polanyi puts it in *The Tacit Dimension*, "the center of the individual [organism]."

.. rises to the level of personhood in man” (50).

It is upon this insight that Polanyi proceeds to develop his dynamic understanding of developmental hierarchy--not only phylogenetic (evolutionary) but ontogenetic, and not only *developmental* hierarchy but also a functional and ontological hierarchy, all of these hierarchies contained within the Polanyian concept of emergence. Poteat’s insights are clearly beneficiary to these and other related rich Polanyian conceptual resources--for example, the concepts of boundary conditions and marginal control, the tacit and the explicit, interiorizing and indwelling, the subsidiary and the focal, attending from and attending to, the proximal and the distal, intimation, and the fiducial aspect of knowing. Poteat does not, indeed, literally employ all of these same terms, but he incorporates them to various degrees in his own, often richer, terminology and vision. For example, Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal, from-to dynamic of knowing becomes Poteat’s pretensive-retrotensive dynamic, grounded in memory but impelled and directed by imagination. Even though he extends his reflections considerably beyond areas of concern represented by Polanyi, at only one point in all of his writings (which I shall comment on in Part II) does his thinking contradict what appears to be implicate in Polanyi’s own thinking; and even there Poteat suggests that his thesis is not inconsistent with Polanyi’s obvious intentions. This is not to overlook some significant differences in emphasis between the two thinkers.

After interiorizing the concepts of both Polanyi and Poteat, it is easy to forget precisely where the former has left off and the latter takes off, so great is the continuity between them. However, in going back to the Polanyian works, it becomes clear that, however richly suggestive Polanyi’s treatment is of the anthropological question, he does not go very far with it. Poteat takes it much farther. Adding his own interpretive categories to Polanyi’s--I am referring especially to Poteat’s focus upon both temporality and corporeality as he conceptualizes both knowing and being--he provides his own valuable insights. It is probably, in large part, Poteat’s sophistication in linguistics, especially etymology, that gives him particular sensitivity to the temporal dimension of being and meaning and to the gradual loss of appreciation for this dimension with the ascendance of alphabetic literacy. (Assured that the ambiguous association of this properized noun with the Latin *lexis*, as well as *lex*, could not escape Poteat’s attention, one is tempted to ask, to whom else would it occur to name his English Mastiff, not “Rex,” but “Lex”!) He does to philosophical anthropology what Einstein did to physics. Taking “time”--actually, mindbodily tonicity--as his radical “constant,” he interprets all else, even space (“It takes ‘time’ to see” [*PM*, 61]), in terms of it. His refinement specifically of the corporeal dimension of self, similarly by temporalizing it (i.e., by defining it in terms of tonicity), we shall treat shortly.

G.K. Chesterton observed that “one may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star.”² Poteat appears to agree with Chesterton when he (Poteat) acknowledges the seeming incongruity of his attempt “to grasp in reflection that which is itself the radix and provenance of reflexion” (*RG*, ms). “The gestalt . . . laid down in the most primitive intentionalities of my mindbody [is] far beyond the reach of reflection” (*RG*, ms). In a more linguistic analysis of the elusiveness of the self, Poteat observes that “‘I’ . . . for me . . . is elusive . . . for when I use ‘I’ in order to say something about myself at one logical level, there is the fact of my activity of saying this about myself at another logical level yet to be reported” (*PP*, 174-75). And: “‘Mindbody’ is not an ordinary concept . . . since it always makes reference to the antecedent of *all* concepts, that which devises and interprets the use and application of all concepts” (*RG*, ms). As a thinking, reflecting being attempting to articulate his insights to other thinking, reflecting beings, Poteat must rely on concepts. Yet, the ground to which he would point us is *preconceptual*. Therefore, “the user of language can . . . never be objectified in language He is only found ‘behind’ the language *just now being used*” (*PP*, 73). Therefore, actually, this mindbodily “‘ground’ . . . is *not* a ground, but rather the systematically elusive

background that is our primordial dwelling in time and space”(RG, ms). However, changing his perspectival imagery further, from “background,” to “ground,” and then “foreground,” Poteat suggests that “as the ground of the meaning and the intentionality of my asseverations, my mindbody is in the foreground, too close at hand readily to be perceived” (RG, ms). Therefore, it is, in a very real sense, *not* more distant than any star. Indeed, he suggests paradoxically, with a twist on the Augustinian phrase, that our mindbodies are “closer to us than we are to ourselves” (RG, ms). Finally: “So far as reflection from out of our mindbodies seeks itself as an object among objects, it will fail to find itself” (RG, ms).

Fully aware of the obstacles and dangers in the path of self-reflexion, Poteat sets for himself this highly introspective task--one that justifies, indeed recommends, his “daybook” style of reflection. The objectifying and abstracting culture and traditions of alphabetic and linear literacy that constantly intrude upon such incursive reflexion, require the temporal-spatial orientation, concreteness, and repeated beginnings of this style. And, despite the inherently static, atemporal, and abstracting proclivities of his medium, the printed word, ironically, it at least offers, better than oral/aural discourse, even if it does not incorporate it as well, the *time* the reader requires if the interiorization and assimilation (indwelling) needed for real reflexion are to occur.

Despite the inherent elusiveness of our task, Poteat advises us that, if we indwell our mindbodies, we can “know” them as “at [our] backs” just as “dualism is healed by being shown to be derivative of the bedrock pretensions and retentions of our convivial mindbodily being” (RG, ms). Sometimes, by indwelling that which we can directly experience--such as our heartbeats, our remembering, and our imagining--we get a sense of the primitive, prereflective intentionalities that constitute our mindbodies. It is the *reconciling* of the two “parts” of the dualisms rather than the elimination of either “part” that brings us closer to truth, to reality, and to ourselves. The healing, or reconciling, of the dualisms, like the “knowing” of our primal selves, or mindbodies, is simple, we are told, because it merely requires us to do what we always--and quite naturally--do: indwell. But to *say* what we thereby come to “know” is quite a different and more difficult matter. We must struggle, through a process that Poteat alludes to as “reflexive phenomenology” (PD, 82), to bring the unreflected and tacit to the level of focal and explicit reflection. But much of the unreflected is unreflectable, unexplicitable. And even that which profitably lends itself to differentiated reflection risks being torn from its meaning--and life-giving prereflective and undifferentiated roots. Therefore, Poteat warns that while “the radical truth about our being in the world is . . . simple . . . it is not simply said; since it can be said at all only by means of a feat of estrangement from that [truthful] simplicity” (PM, 22).

Professor Poteat tries to assure us that our world-creations that are reflections, therefore relative abstractions, are no less real than the prereflective concretions from which they derive--only *derivative* realities. Even the static, “dead slice,” second-order representations of space and time that Poteat spends so much time warning that we not take as exhaustive of our understanding of temporality--or, better, tonicity--appear to have their proper place in our “world creating.” Although “derivative” and “not as radical as that from which they derive . . . the primordial [mindbodily place and time] whence all times and places are pretended, that every time and place retentends,” these reflected, abstracted times and places are no less real (PD, 68). The crucial condition that gives these derived concepts reality, or authenticity, is our *awareness* of their derivative, therefore “second-order,” nature. Within this perspective they can serve us well in our “quotidian doings and sayings.”

Similarly, in his effort to avoid the shoals of philosophical idealism, Poteat stresses the primal homogeneity of an undifferentiated “mindbody.” Still, the “mind” of the *differentiated*, abstracted self, while derivative--both

etiologically (that is, in terms of ontogenetic and phylogenetic evolution) and ontologically (that is, in terms of its abstraction and differentiation from a more concrete and undifferentiated mindbody)--is also claimed to be fully real. *Can* one, without contradiction, simultaneously assign something an ontologically derivative status and still claim for it equal, therefore implicitly commensurable, reality with that from which it is derived? Further, can one maintain ontological hierarchy--as clearly Poteat intends to do--while assuaging dualisms by assigning *full reality* to both terms of the dualism, as well as to the archaic, undifferentiated mindbody? Does this conflict with Polanyi's understanding of either "reality" (an entity's "independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the future") or ontological hierarchy, according to which "minds and problems possess a deeper reality than cobblestones"? (*TD*, 32).

Perhaps it is a sign of Professor Poteat's attempt to struggle with this problem that we can detect some significant evolution of terminology over the forty year course of his writing, particularly in regard to anthropological definition. There seems to be a gradual movement from an almost exclusively "carnal" depiction of self to--beginning about halfway through that period--the more balanced image of "mindbody." Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Poteat's analysis of the dynamically conceived primal self was largely in terms of the existential-linguistic implications of the personal pronoun "I", referring to the "logically extended concept I" and the "private self," but he also made frequent reference to the self as "body," "body-in-the-world," "being-in-our-own- bodies-in-the-world," and "carnal being"; in the late 1960s the less explicitly visceral "ground-meaning" and "ground being"; then, in the early 1970s, "concrete knower" and "human heart." We can find some precedence for Poteat's profoundly carnal challenge to discarnate Cartesianism in Polanyi's frequent references to brain physiology; for example, Polanyi's statement in *The Tacit Dimension*: "We may venture . . . to extend the scope of tacit knowing to include neural traces in the cortex of the nervous system" (15). (In similar fashion, Poteat later tells us that, for him "knowing [is] not one but many sorts of things"[*PP*, 80]). However suggestive Polanyi's extension of "knowing" to include observable, physiological, electro-chemical "traces" for a carnal depiction of self, he seems to have resisted translating his epistemological leap ("venture") into a corresponding anthropological leap. Poteat, most explicitly in the early period, makes this leap--at least terminologically: he quite readily refers to not just one dimension of the differentiated self, but to the undifferentiated self, the primal core or ground of selfhood, simply as "carnal being" or "body."

In so far as I can determine from surveying Professor Poteat's writings, it was not until 1973 ("Moustakas Within His Ambience," *PP*, 275) that he uses the term "mindbody" (also "psycho-somata") to refer to the primal self. This term, together with "mindbody in the world," and, perhaps the most frequently reiterated of all his phrases, the "sentient, motile, and oriented mindbody," sometimes including among these adjectives "tonic" and often completed by ". . . in the world," promptly permeates his writings, including all three of his books, from thereon. Where the more exclusively carnal imagery reappears, it tends to come with a caveat. For example, in 1974 he reminds the reader that "body," as he uses the term, has no extension: "Even my 'body' as *my* 'body' is not in space" (*PP*, 33). "Body," rather, is the paradigmatic, primordial *place*, the *whence* from which all orientation derives. Writing in 1992, when he presses to our most primal experience of the tensionality of our mindbodies, he points to the experiencing of our heartbeat (and even before that, our mother's "beating heart rhythmically [pumping] the blood of life through [our] foetal bodies"[*PP*, 275]). Even to apprehend our heartbeat as a *beat*, he reminds us, means attributing to our "flesh" a preconscious "imagining" and "remembering" in the form of its autonomic pretensions and retentions.

At this remove from ordinary awareness it is my *flesh* that imagines; my *flesh* that remembers--not

“flesh” as this is mediated through the categories of gross anatomy, physiology, molecular biology, but flesh as this appears unmediated in the tonality of my living mindbody (*RG*, ms).

And, of course, he has made it clear that this “carnal” “imagining” and “remembering” is not in the commonsense but derived (mediated) understanding that we have of these latter two terms.

It finally becomes evident to the reader that Poteat has loaded his terminology, from both ends (“mental” as well as “physical”), to its metaphorical limits; and that the earlier, less refined, more carnal terminology, “loaded” perhaps to excess, carried the same intent. In 1974, he offered another of his all-important (although, in a footnote) caveats: “It should go without saying that . . . ‘body’ as the ground of the primordial sense of space has, as well, a primordial sense not to be assimilated to any derived sense” (*PP*, 30). Poteat’s “It should go without saying . . .” certainly underscores the fact that he has held this assumption all along. Further, his existentially probing treatment of the pronoun “I” and of “person” makes this assumption, indeed, obvious. But now more comfortably subsumed under the dominating metaphor of “mindbody,” the same words--“body,” “carnal being,” etc.--are less jarring and less groping because of their more explicit reference, as we noted in his treatment of temporality, to a reconciled dualism.

By the time of publication of his first book, in 1985 (*Polanyian Meditations*), the concept of “body,” in its assumed, underived, primordial sense, had virtually yielded to the concept of “mindbody,” in its only, but identical--that is, underived, primordial--sense. Perhaps feeling that by now he has laid to rest in the minds of his readers any tendency to perceive “mind” in terms of abstracted, Cartesian--or other--idealism, he suggests functional considerations, perhaps not totally dissimilar from those that motivated his earlier retention of both “body” and “mindbody,” that would seem to justify his currently retaining both “mindbody” and “mind,” although his use of quotation marks around only the latter term indicates that “mind,” while rooted in the primordial mindbody, is nevertheless derived.

“Beliefs”, “valuations”, “assumptions”, “premises” are “held” not merely by the “mind”, whether reflected or reflectable, but also by the mindbody; . . . an assumption in the mindbody . . . is neither explicit nor, strictly, explicitable, and one in the “mind” . . . may be explicit but is certainly explicitable . . . (*PM*, 32).

In final analysis, it must be said that Professor Poteat has struggled admirably and with exceptional eloquence and success in applying our largely post-Cartesian--and only--articulate vocabulary to uncover and recover its pre-Cartesian roots in the pre-articulate sinews of our mindbodies.

Still, the problem of assigning full and commensurable reality to the ontologically derivative, and the related problem of ontological hierarchy, it seems to me, remains. Poteat has effectively challenged the discarnate rationalistic and alphabetic assumptions of both Cartesian idealism and Platonic logocentrism (to borrow from Derrida), and he has successfully addressed a number of other epistemological and anthropological problems. But more needs to be done in addressing some problems that arise, or remain, amidst his new and ground-breaking--better, ground-restoring--insights.

II: The Protensive “Radius”

Consciousness . . . requires . . . a center and periphery that are dialectically . . . in pretensive and

retrotransitive communion with each other (*PD*, 79).

Professor Poteat, like Polanyi, begins with the observation that all sentient life evidences, in various degrees of sophistication and evolution, an irresistible effort to detect and embody some kind of ordering principle, *arché*, or meaning in its being in the world. In all sentient life there appears to be a primal prejudice toward coherence, the “hanging togetherness of things.” In this sense, Poteat suggests, sentient life at its radix is “axiologically determined—that is, through and through ingenuously disposed toward value” (*PD*, 113). However, this is manifested not only in meaning-seeking but also in a prior meaning-discernment. There is a prereflectively *given* sense of value. At the level of human sentience, this primal orientation or sense of value is “in principle” beyond all doubt—unless, of course, one’s consciousness has been estranged, by abstraction, from its primal roots. Even at the lowest level of life, the vegetative, we can detect in its most archaic form such a “given” orienting or ordering of life in its “commitment” to function and growth. At the sentient level we observe the emergence of an “active-perceptive center” capable of appraisal, or meaning. For example, Polanyi tells us that

a floating amoeba will emit pseudopods in all directions until . . . when one of the pseudopods touches solid ground, all the others are drawn in and the whole mass of protoplasm is sent floating toward the new point of anchorage.³

At the level of intelligence, appraisal—or commitment—is made by a “consciously deliberative” center, which—in its highest, or human, expression—can be assigned responsibility. In other words, the prereflective givenness of a sense of value, at the human level of sentience, does not constitute commitment. Nor does it preclude the ongoing task of meaning-discernment and meaning-giving. Indeed, commitment is meaningless apart from my reflective explicitation or, to use Poteat’s terms, my “bodying forth” “asseverations” and my subsequent “standing behind,” these asseverations before others in the context of a specific time and specific place and specific circumstances. Both Polanyi and Poteat insist that it is only at this point of world-transcending willful commitment at this level, or mode, of moral existence, that I become “I”, that is, a person. But this takes us beyond the intended scope of this paper.

The point to be made in terms of these phylogenetic levels of existence—from the vegetative to the (merely) sentient (as in the case of the amoeba), to the intelligent, and the moral (in the human person)—is that at the highest level, that of human existence, *all* the levels are inextricably co-present, not only ontogenetically but at every given moment. As Polanyi states it, all explicit thought, even in its most formal expression, is tacitly grounded. Poteat, building upon Polanyi’s seminal concept of “boundary conditions,” represents the integration of these diverse levels in the human mind/body in dynamic terms:

I cannot explicitly say what it is to be a self (person) because it is always an integration of the particulars of my body-in-the-world with (from the natural standpoint) its many different levels of reality and the principles governing the integration of each level through the determination of the boundary conditions left open by the principles . . . at the next lower level. Also, it is an integration of all my skills And finally, it is the integration of all these to anticipatory, heuristic powers . . . (*PP*, 47, n. 4).

In as much as human *being* is inseparable from human *knowing* (this distinction itself an abstract, alphabetic dualism), the self is epistemologically and ontologically (again, an abstracted distinction) hierarchical. Therefore, “my language

is continuous with gesture, as gesture is continuous with [prereflective] sentience and orientation” (*PD*, 111). And our gestures, our elaborate musical or graphic art forms, our language, and even our most intricate mathematical theories not only have their primal origins but derive their present meanings from “the sinews of our bodies which had them first” (*RG*, ms).

At least by the time that life reaches the stage of animal existence and sentience, the vital meaning-discerning center of life, that is, mindbody, has--better: is--in addition to orientation, what Poteat characterizes as “tonicity” and “motility.” All three of these characterizations require a conceptualizing of mindbody as *distended in time*. However, as we have become aware of by now in reading Poteat, these last two (italicized) terms--like virtually all of his key terms--although inevitably the product of alphabetic literacy and loaded with discarnate post-Cartesian colorations, must not be interpreted in their conventional, second-order, alphabetically-abstracted meanings. Distention does not mean extension, and time does not mean duration. In other words, Poteat’s conception of mindbody involves neither spatial nor temporal extension.

Mindbodily distention--like temporality, a precondition of tonicity, according to Poteat--turns out to be characterized, as we have seen in the case of mindbodily temporality, precisely *in terms of* tonicity. We have apparently reached semantic bedrock in our depiction of the mindbody as “tonic,” “tensional.” The distended mindbody, we are told to think of as “infinitely dense,” with no extension, like a cosmic black hole. And the temporality of mindbody is similarly “infinitely compacted” by Poteat to include the past and the future contemporaneously “within” the present. The mindbody, although explicitable only in dimensional terms--that is, metaphorically--at its infinitely compacted, existential primal core, loses all dimensionality, becomes a point without extension. Its tonicity--again, not a characteristic that the mindbody *has*, but what it *is*--is best described in the dynamic concepts of latency, potency, energy, intentionality, protension. Indeed, our senses of “intending,” “stretching forth,” “reaching out,” we are told, are paradigmatically “given” in our prereflective mindbodies. Further: “Because of [its] *pretensions* there is a *not-yet* that is nevertheless contemporaneous with *now*; and because of [its] *retrotensions* there is a *no-longer* that is similarly contemporaneous with *now*” (*PD*, 106).⁴ By derivative (because temporally extended, not distended) analogy, we gain a sense of this in the experiencing of a melody through the co-presence, or contemporaneity, of the individual notes that comprise the melody by pretending and retrotending each other in our remembering and imagining, as the note G pretends C, as it retrotends E, and E pretends G as it retrotends what precedes it, etc.

But, having denied that our mindbodies can be characterized in terms of spatial or temporal extension, Poteat now insists that mindbody “does not exist in an instant,” just as the notes in a melody, in their co-presence, are not simultaneously sounded or heard; and, further, that mindbody is the paradigmatic case of “place.” To speak in terms of distention requires that we rely, although self-consciously--that is, with caution and metaphorically--upon second-order concepts of time and space. Again, it seems we have approached the inevitable point of semantic overload. (Poteat refers to this as the “surplus of meaning” that characterizes language, as acknowledged in metaphor, especially as we engage in reflexive contemplation). Poteat’s intention is clear: In as much as the self, the mindbody, is tensional, that is, meaning-discerning and meaning-giving, its reflective explicitation--to the limited extent that it *is* explicitable--can only be in terms of narrative, that is, in the context of a living history, both my own and the world’s. And, again because of the mindbody’s axiological, meaning-discerning and meaning-giving nature, it can be understood only in reference to “where” it is “at home”--that is, in the context of that part of the world, those places, objects, and events upon which it has (I have) left its (my) imprint and which most closely comport with, reflect, embody, its prereflective, archaic sense of meaning.

Just as the effort to articulate the meaning of self, or mindbody, inevitably involves us in concepts of temporal and spatial dimensionality, those that seem to be the most elucidating are those concepts or images that can accommodate the dynamics of pretension and retension, that is, the lively mindbodily activity of dwelling in its prereflective center and the outward projection of meaning thus derived. The image of a circle, or sphere, with its center and circumference, or periphery, immediately suggests itself. "Consciousness," Poteat suggests, "requires at any given moment a center and periphery that are dialectically . . . in pretensive and retentive communion with each other" (*PD*, 79). We indicated earlier that the primal, axiologically radical mindbody cannot be objectified. Ultimately this prereflective "radix of all meaning and meaning-discernment" can only be experienced directly in the act of indwelling and referred to, indirectly, through those "objects" or events in the world that the self distinguishes in terms of its previously inexplicit, sometimes inexplicable, mindbodily motifs. We are reminded of the Polanyian insight that the meanings we indwell subsidiarily tend to be "displaced away from ourselves" (*TD*, 13), as the sensations in the palm of my hand are experienced in terms of the world that presents itself at the end of my probe. Or Polanyi's suggestion that we can know the particulars in which we dwell with tacit awareness only through the joint meaning that is achieved by their convergence as we direct our attention from, or through, them to the more comprehensive object on which we focus. At our primal core, Poteat reminds us, there is no separation between fact and value. The articulation, or "bodying forth" of our mindbodily meanings confers facticity--in a sense, involves us in "creating" a world--"outside" our prereflective, undifferentiated mindbodily centers. Conscious reflection, in other words, presents us with a sense of "other," a world over against the self.

There is nothing "illicit," Poteat assures us, about this conceptual dualism, even though it is an abstraction from the more immediate, prereflectively "given" and therefore less differentiated (from the reflective perspective, *undifferentiated*) protensions of the archaic mindbody. "Licit" in the sense that even a conscious reflective "knowing" of the mindbody as it situates itself in a larger "world" need not estrange itself from its prereflective center. Consciousness, whether "licit" or "illicit," requires at each moment a continuing shifting between retro- and pre-tensive awarenesses; between, respectively, the mindbodily grounding center and that which it focally apprehends on the protensive periphery. But as the distance increases between center and periphery, and the protensive "radius" becomes stretched to the extent that the "world" at the periphery loses contact with its primal meaning-seeking and meaning-conferring logos (we might say that, at this point, it has become qualitatively, or axiologically, "decontextualized") and thus deprived of its vitality, the world thus abstracted becomes static, dead, merely quantified and extended space and time.

My parenthetical comment in the previous paragraph suggests that there are indications in Poteat's thought that when he refers to the tacit, or prereflective, level of awareness as "undifferentiated," he intends a *relative* distinction; and that the protensive dynamic he finds in *all* levels of life, even in the orienting and growth-directing functions of vegetative life, precludes the stasis that would accompany an absolutely undifferentiated state of existence. Both he and Polanyi have clearly stated that life is inherently ontologically hierarchical. Even the single-celled protozoan exists as a life form because of a complex juxtaposition of molecular, chemical, and organic principles in dynamic and supportive relation to each other through a hierarchy of boundary conditions. And where there is hierarchy, there is differentiation. All the more so in the case of the human mindbody, even at its prereflective radix. "My being," Poteat suggests, is marked by a pretensive/retentive cadence "far below the level of ordinary awareness" (*RG*, ms). And he describes our tacit "knowing" in terms of "archaic and usually unreflected hierarchies" (*PM*, 193). He vividly reflects upon his own process of bringing words into existence: there is a sense of incipient, tacit

differentiation just prior to their emergence into articulated differentiation. Even though the mindbody is generally depicted as the “whence” of the protensive dialectic--not its explicit focus--that is, the “arena” of prereflective indwelling, Poteat curiously alludes to the mindbody’s “prereflective apprehending of itself” by “attending to” itself (*PM*, 221). What this seems to suggest is that even our act of indwelling is experienced as a prereflective but nevertheless protensive dialectic and therefore involves the degree of differentiation required for a tacit, prearticulate orientation or “focusing,” that is both primal and paradigmatic relative to what we experience in our abstracted reflection.

It is always the concrete “undifferentiated,” prereflective and retrotended pole of our pretensive dialectic that is paradigmatic, in Poteat’s thinking, for our abstracted, “differentiated,” pretensive reflections. “Formalized rationality . . . derives from and remains parasitical upon [our] ‘sense making’,” . . . our prereflective intimations of a “‘hanging togetherness’,” (*PM*, 9) of “‘rules of procedure’ and ‘substantial beliefs about the nature of things’,” (*PM*, 12) of which we can be certain (*PP*, 46-47), but “which we cannot or at least do not [reflectively, explicitly] know and, in any case, may not, cannot, need not know prior to the beginning of an inquiry” (*PM*, 12). Interestingly, this latter observation, that we cannot know our primal beliefs *prior to* the course of our reflection, leaves open the question of what effect the reflective process may have upon the character and quality of our prereflective intimations.

There is no question that at our most inner core, at that dimensionless point of “infinite density” of our being and knowing, our awareness can only be in its fullest state of prereflective, undifferentiated concretion. But even the dichotomy suggested by “prereflective” versus “reflective” belies the underlying continuity of sentience. Poteat acknowledges this by occasionally substituting for “prereflection” and “reflection” the common term “knowing” and placing that word within quotation marks only when alluding to prereflection. The distinction between, or among, the mindbody’s levels of awareness is better represented in terms of a gradient than in terms of boundaries.

However, as we indicated earlier in addressing the problem of dualisms, in reflective thought we inevitably find that we cannot avoid thinking and speaking in conceptual differentiations, dualistic or other. To recognize the temporal dynamic of mindbody, we find that conceptualizing this dynamic in terms of a dialectic, in the terminology of “pretension” and “retrotension,” is helpful. And these latter terms invariably point us to that which we pretend, or imagine (the “object” of our focus), and that which we retrotend, or indwell. Therefore the terminology of “boundaries” can also be useful, as long as we remind ourselves of its abstraction from the more fundamental continuum of all awareness.

To think *is* to abstract. And, at the human level of our mindbodily existence, it is merely an extension of the mindbody’s innate attempt to find coherence and meaning, to seek a reality commensurate with the “given” order that *is* its most inner, archaic being. Professor Poteat tells us that “only when our usual devices do not issue in that coherence demanded by our intentional mindbodies in the world . . . do we adopt a more reflective mode” (*RG*, ms). In strictly vegetative forms of life the protensive energies--limited as they are to anticipating and reacting to the needs of growth and the functions of self-maintenance--are easily confined within the closely drawn “boundaries” of a prereflective organism. In low-level sentient animal systems, the added demands of motility are similarly easily met by the prereflective mode of knowing and being.

But at the human level of existence, the universal quest for coherence is not so easily met. It appears that the task of bringing coherence and meaning to a “world” greatly enlarged and complicated by man’s expanded prereflective awareness requires the extension of his/her protensive energies beyond their prereflective radius. Evolving

consciousness, with its increasing reflexive sense of its own protensive activity, becomes increasingly aware, in its prereflective dialectic, of what we have come to know through Gödel regarding our most abstracted reflections: namely, that neither the coherence of our thought nor the meaning/rationale for its fundamental orienting principles can be grasped (even when sensed primordially) without advancing to a higher and more encompassing mode of thought. But long before we arrived at the highly abstracted mode represented by mathematics, the human quest for meaning had reached the limits--run up against the boundary conditions--of the prereflective mode. To the human intellect it is apparent that the "given" prereflective sense (what Poteat, in the previous quotation, refers to as "our usual devices") of "hanging togetherness" does not suffice, and reflection must complement it.

Reflection does not *supplant* the tacit, prereflective process, but carries it further. Both the recognition and the resolution of incoherence remain rooted in the prereflective mindbody. Underscoring this, Poteat reclaims from our post-Cartesian, alphabetic culture its constrained use of the word "criticism" (a usage both he and Polanyi had employed, without challenging, in their books' subtitles, until Poteat's *RG*) and expands it (arguably, even *beyond* its etymological roots in the Greek *kritikos*) to include the tacit and prereflective: "Criticism is the tacit, mindbodily recognition of incoherence in the course of my quest for coherence. This criticism is incessantly being carried out instantaneously in my mindbody" (*RG*, ms). In the light of this "criticism," the mindbody prereflectively engages in the task of discerning and creating greater coherence by grasping and forming gestalts: "Seeking coherence is the feat of grasping gestalts [and] dissolving them for the sake of a more inclusive coherence" (*RG*, ms).

However, as we have noted, this process must be carried into reflection. At this level, Poteat speaks of the task of theory construction. "Theories" include not only what is usually assumed by that term, but also works of art and architecture, musical compositions, maps, metaphors, language, even gesture--for all of these, like gestalts at the prereflective level, serve to provide us with a sense of meaning and coherence. "Theoretical" reflection, in any of these forms, facilitates the task of bringing coherence to the world of man's expanded awareness because theory, by systematically and selectively contracting the *scale* of the particulars of our experience, is able simultaneously to enlarge the *scope* of our experience, our vision, in the same way that a map, by reducing the number of geographical entities to be represented and the distances between these entities (cities, rivers, etc.), can give us a comprehensive view of a country that would be unattainable if we had to look at it "full scale," standing in the middle of it. Similarly language, in addition to the creative potential represented by the richness of its grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and etymology, by introducing abstract, general terms that vastly reduce the number of "tokens" we would otherwise have to commit to memory, enhances our control over our prelingual experience.

Reflection, therefore--in answer to our earlier query--clearly enriches our prereflective intimations. And to the extent that the reflected and the prereflected are dialectically related in pre- and retro-tension, does it not make sense to suggest that certain prereflective awarenesses are thereby raised to a higher (less undifferentiated) prereflective level, and that some are actually brought to the level of reflection? It is in this sense, it seems to me, that one can make sense of Poteat's assignment of full reality to that which is derivative, that is, abstracted in reflection. For our abstractions--as long as they have not stretched their bonds of retrotension so far that they break from that archaic center which both initiates and continues to give primal direction and sustenance to our quest for coherence--substantively contribute to that quest. They have no less, and no less legitimate, claim--as an integral part of the pretensive and retrotensive "activity" that *I am* in the world, and as an integral part of the prereflective and reflective continuum that I similarly represent--in determining who we are, mindbodily in the world. However, because our reflections are always

derivative, they cannot be paradigmatic in the *ultimate* sense in which Poteat appears to employ that term.

Yet, from a *penultimate* perspective, it would not seem--from what we have just said--inappropriate to refer to our pretending/retrotending reflection as paradigmatic. To the extent that our reflective efforts succeed in achieving a greater degree of integration and coherence, as, for example, in our "theory" building (what we might call the "formalizing of gestalts"), and this, in turn, enforms or enriches our prereflective awareness (in the sense that Polanyi suggests that our focal awareness gives meaning to our subsidiary, tacit awareness; or that the higher ontological level of being--for example, the biological--provides the organizing principles for the next lower, the chemical-molecular, through the boundary conditions left open by the lower), reflection reflexively impacts upon our prereflective process "of grasping gestalts [and] dissolving them for the sake of a more inclusive coherence" (*RG*, ms).

But this recognition of the dialectical relationship between the reflective and the prereflective processes does not support Polanyi's assertion that

logical antecedents derived from the prior acceptance of their consequents are necessarily less certain than the consequents. It is clearly unreasonable, therefore, to regard these antecedents as the grounds on which we accept their consequents (*PK*, 192).

Ultimately, it is our prereflective, tacit awareness that is paradigmatic. Poteat's, to my knowledge, *only* rebuttal of Polanyi is warranted--that, contrary to his own articulated epistemological assumptions and intentions, he has unwittingly slipped back into the Enlightenment perspective which equates certainty with clarity, and logic with explicit formalism (*PM*, 229). What I am suggesting must be amended to this critique, however--and is suggested by Poteat in other contexts--is Polanyi's recognition, in the above quotation, that the dialectic of our prereflective and reflective processes *is* a dialectic, that is, a relationship of mutual influence.⁵ Not only do our prereflections give form and meaning to our reflections, but our reflections, *having thus been derived and influenced*, in turn influence our tacit, prereflective awareness. Is this not a reasonable interpretation of Poteat (if we read "silence" to mean the prereflected and "speech" to refer to the reflected) when he says, "It is silence which gives to speech its depth; it is speech which gives to silence its weight" (*PP*, 262). I do not think that I am retreating to Enlightenment captivity when I venture to suggest that the nature of the influence of our reflections upon their prereflective ground might, guardedly, be described as the evolving of our tacit gestalts in the direction of less *undifferentiation* (in *this prereflective* sense, more clarity). This does not increase the *certainty* with which we hold our tacit "beliefs." Whatever certainty we have always remains radically fiducial. But it enhances our ability to "know" that which we hold as certain; and, indeed, to know (without quotation marks) *explicitly* to the extent that our tacit gestalts are moved by our reflective retrotension across the threshold of the tacit into reflection, that is, the articulable. This latter development Poteat clearly acknowledges:

I now accept a reflected formulation of my hitherto *tacit* believings, *after the fact of my having relied upon them* as the (logical/ontological) grounds of my coming to achieve my presently *explicit* beliefs, because now I have come to see *these* believings to be implied in my presently achieved explicit beliefs (*RG*, ms).

Endnotes

¹ Most of these articles are included in J. Stines and J. Nickell (eds.), *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993), hereafter referred to as *PP*. Poteat's chapter, "Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology and Action: Some Polanyian Meditations" in T. Langford and W. Poteat (eds.), *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1968), is included in *The Primacy of Persons*. Poteat's three books are: *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985), hereafter referred to as *PM*; *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1990), hereafter referred to as *PD*; and *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Anamnesis* (hereafter referred to as *RG*, ms), due for publication by the State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, in 1994. Because at the time of writing I had available to me only the manuscript copy of *Recovering the Ground*, my citing of this work lacks page references.

² *Orthodoxy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 96-97.

³ "The Nature of Scientific Convictions," *Psychological Issues*, v.8, no.4, monograph 32 (1974), 62.

⁴ "Pretension" and "retrotension," key terms for elucidating Poteat's concept of mindbodily tonicity, or temporal distension, do not appear in his works until 1985, in *PM*.

⁵ Professor Poteat wrote in 1992: "I am first and last--and all the time in between--an intentional mindbody in the world dialectically moving back and forth between the pre-reflective and reflection" (*RG*, ms).

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.