

Poteat on Modern Culture and Critical Philosophy

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ABSTRACT Key words: mindbodily experience, lived experience, cultural derangement, Enlightenment, critical philosophy, cartesian rationality, bourgeois form of life, materialistic values, humanistic values, naturalistic worldview, scientific descriptive/explanatory conceptual system, humanistic framework of thought, unreflected worldview, humanistic worldview.

While agreeing with Poteat that the modern Western culture has gone awry in a humanly destructive way, the paper contends that the culprit was not, as Poteat claims, Enlightenment critical philosophy, but the materialistic values of the bourgeois form of life and the puritanical view of knowledge and the naturalistic worldview that they generated. Accordingly, the solution proposed is not Poteat's unreflected experience and commonsense worldview but a shift to a humanistic culture-generating stance and a critical humanistic philosophy.

William H. Poteat's major work, *Polanyian Meditations* (1985), is a learned book that dares to challenge the foundations of modern Western civilization and to chart a new course by excavating and calling us back to what he takes to be the foundations of all civilization, namely, "the 'hanging togetherness' and 'sense-making' of our integral mindbodily rootedness in the as yet unreflected world and in our unreflected 'thinkings' and doings in that world" (*PM*, p. 9).

Like many others, Poteat has felt keenly the problems of the human self in the disenchanting world defined by our modern cultural perspective. He speaks of the Enlightenment (sometimes he includes the Renaissance and the Reformation, but his emphasis is on the Enlightenment) as having drawn a veil between us and ourselves (*PM*, p. 2). "[W]hat I had taken for 'real life' was crusted over and skewed," he says, "by acritically held images and values deriving from uncriticized Enlightenment criticism" (*Philosophical Daybook* [1990], p. 3). He contends that our culture has discredited **real** life, that is, "life that is potent with the unacknowledged configurations of meaning, coherence, order, and value," because "its articulation was never the outcome of a skeptically induced inquiry--mandatory since the *Discourse* of Descartes--and therefore could not command the authority and epistemological weight--or even interest--of the repertoire of the philosophical tradition" (*PD*, p. 3).

In his long disquiet with our modern culture and his search for an alternative way of understanding the human condition, Poteat has found himself resonating with Pascal, Kierkegaard, Hanna Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and especially the later Wittgenstein and Polanyi. Nourished by insights from these and other like-minded rebels against the modern mind, Poteat has developed his own way of uncovering and liberating himself and recovering the culture in which he can dwell with the full richness and wholeness of life that human selfhood demands. Basically he attempts to return us with confidence to the unreflected configurations of meaning, value, and order in our "mindbodily" commerce and negotiations with the world in our ordinary pursuits in living our lives.

In speaking of the imaginary/real, fiction/history, figurative/direct, metaphorical/literal, mythos/logos distinctions, Poteat rejects the view that we dwell in only the second of these pairs. He asks, "Is not having and being in a world precisely to dwell alternately and often richly simultaneously, but never less than fully, in both terms of each of these pairs?"

Indeed, is not the tension among these pairs in which we simultaneously dwell the very source of our existential tonus, our mindbodily oriented presence?" (*PD*, pp. 7-8). "Even so," he goes on to say, "our ingenuous and acritical confidence in the integrity of the world so appropriated. . . is in jeopardy to the supposition that only that is really real which is the *terminus ad quem*, quite narrowly construed, of a name-relation theory of meaning" (*PD*, pp. 7-8).

The central thesis of his philosophy is succinctly stated: "All our acts of indication, including our mathematical ones, possess a semantic and 'ontological' thrust, since they are grounded in and are archaically warranted by our existent, intentional mindbodies" (*PM*, p. 225); and the world we live in is "the progeny of all of the world-forming powers of our intentional mindbodily beings--from our breathing in and breathing out, to the styles of our gaits, to the rhythm and timbre of our speech, to our song and dance, to all of our ordinary knowings and doings, to our practice of mathematical heuristics, etc., with no **in principle** assignment of special privilege and authority, where world-formation is concerned, to any one of these powers" (*PD*, p. 16).

I applaud much of Poteat's criticism of our cultural situation and his support for the configurations inherent in lived experience. For many years I have contended that the modern Western mind is deranged: that our restricted, puritanical epistemological views have undermined the humanistic culture in terms of which we live our lives and run our institutions, and that they have given rise to an intellectual vision of humankind and the world that will not sustain the human spirit or a great civilization. Indeed, I have argued that our reigning epistemological views have eroded the foundations of society and generated such an impoverished worldview that we have mutilated and dehumanized ourselves by the intellectual reprocessing required to place ourselves in the world in a way that would make our existence intelligible. In all of this, I am on common ground with Poteat. He is one of the most literate philosophers of our time and a man who has thought deeply about the profoundest problems of the modern age. *Polanyian Meditations*, as I said in a prepublication appraisal that is quoted on the jacket of the book, is "a work of inspiration with marks of genius."

Nevertheless, there are some things about Poteat's position that bother me and this would not be an honest appraisal without airing them. I have trouble with his etiology of our cultural derangement and our differences here have a bearing on the appropriate therapy.

The Derangement of the Modern Western Mind

Like Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981), Alan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), James O. Wilson in *The Moral Sense* (1993), and some other recent critics of our cultural situation, Poteat thinks that certain intellectuals have led the culture astray with a false image of how we make sense of things. The chief culprits according to MacIntyre and Bloom were Nietzsche and the intellectuals who were influenced by him; for Wilson, the culprits were the Logical Positivists. For Poteat, the trouble began in the seventeenth century with Descartes whom he thinks captured the modern mind with a perverting image of rationality.

Poteat seems to accept Wittgenstein's view that philosophers often pervert the culture by misunderstanding ordinary discourse and forms of life and that the only legitimate task for them is to undo the mischief philosophers have already done by correct descriptions of our ordinary ways of experience and thought that leave our unreflected thinkings and doings as they were. "When we do philosophy," Wittgenstein said, "we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions" (*Philosophical Investigations*, para. 194). Philosophy, Wittgenstein contends, "is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by

means of language. . . . [It] may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe” (*Ibid.*, paras. 109, 124).

Poteat seems to think that the Enlightenment philosophers (especially Descartes) and the philosophical tradition emanating from them are the chief culprits in our modern cultural derangement. For more than three hundred years, Westerners, he thinks, have been captives of the Cartesian Enlightenment mathematical/logical image of rationality and the idea that nothing is acceptable unless it passes muster under reflective criticism. The cultural results, he thinks, have been humanly devastating, for we have a culture in which human beings cannot thrive and a worldview which provides no place for human beings with their freedom and dignity.

It was, Poteat thinks, the identification of the self with the subject of theoretical thinking of the Cartesian sort that generated Descartes’ view of the discarnate mind. In order to recover the full human self involved in all the rich overlapping layers of experience, thought, and action involved in the full spectrum of human concerns and in ordinary living, Poteat emphasizes our indivisible mindbodily existence in the multidimensional world present to us in all our intentional modalities.

I have several misgivings about this account. I do not find the Cartesian view of rationality prevalent even among the intellectuals of the modern age. Of course Descartes did foster a school of rationalism in the seventeenth century, but the empiricists have been more at home in and recognized by the culture in subsequent centuries. Descartes, of course, made a major contribution to mathematics and helped prepare the way for Newtonian physics. And Poteat is certainly right in holding that Descartes is the father of modern Critical philosophy. He made an important philosophical contribution to the Enlightenment by holding that all beliefs should be held accountable to rational scrutiny. But that, I suggest, was an inevitable response to the contradictions already developing in the culture.

Poteat is particularly concerned to discredit Descartes’ theory of a discarnate mind. But certainly Descartes had no copyright on the theory. It was an ancient Greek idea that has come down to us through some strands of Christianity. Origin, in the third century, said, for instance, that “mind, for its movements or operations needs no physical space, nor sensible magnitude, nor bodily shape, nor color, nor any other . . . properties of bodies or matter.” This, he says, “is certain from observation of our own mind.” But what is more important, the discarnate-mind theory has not fared well in our modern culture. Ever since Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Descartes, the movement has been more toward some form of physicalism, except for the nineteenth-century idealism of the Romantic revolt against the Enlightenment and its twentieth-century successors, phenomenology and existentialism.

A deeper worry that I have is whether philosophers ever have the kind of cultural influence Poteat and other recent cultural critics have attributed to them. Hegel was nearer right, I think, when he said that the Owl of Minerva takes her flight at dusk. The job of philosophy, according to my view, is to articulate trouble-causing assumptions and presuppositions already operative in the culture and to work for coherence in the foundations of the culture and a valid unified worldview. Philosophers do, of course, influence the culture. In stable times, the ones who usually get a hearing are those who provide intellectual support for the prevailing culture and its worldview. Philosophical critics of the established order do not get much of a hearing unless they give form and voice to an already existing discontent. Philosophers have their greatest influence in revolutionary times by helping to discredit and to exorcise the views and assumptions of the passing era or those of a decaying power structure, and by bringing clarification to, and providing intellectual support for, the views and assumptions that underwrite a revolutionary movement or an emerging culture. Philosophers, for example, played a major role in the late Medieval and the early modern period in the unraveling of Christian feudalism and the rise of modern Western

Civilization. But the philosophers were not the initiators of this revolution. New philosophical ideas take root only in a culture that is already groping toward them or is at least in an unstable condition that makes it vulnerable to them.

The great revolution in Western civilization that gave rise to our modern culture was caused, according to my understanding, by a shift in the governing values of the society. In most classical cultures, although they were often power-driven and barbaric, the dominant culture was shaped largely by a concern for humanistic values--values grounded in the needs of selfhood and society: the need for a stable social order, shared values, group loyalty, justice, security, and a normative place in which one feels "at home" and needed; the need for a worthy identity, a normative self-concept that defines for one a life with normative requirements and limits; the need for a sense of self-worth, self-respect, and the respect of others; the need to love and to be loved; the need for beauty, understanding, meaningful experiences and activities; the need for meaningful work, self-expression, and self-fulfillment; the need for family, community and cooperation; the need for a historical and metaphysical context in which one's life is meaningful; and so forth. In these classical cultures, the modes of thought and expression in religion, history, morality, art, and politics dominated the intellectual life and shaped the culture's vision of humankind and the world.

Modern Western culture was generated not so much by the work of philosophers as by the development of a new form of life, what we may call bourgeois life, focused on materialistic values--values grounded in our materialistic needs, that is, needs that lend themselves to satisfaction by manipulation, exploitation, and control of the conditions of our existence. Our culture-generating priorities shifted from concern with who we are and what reality requires of us to concern with getting what we want and imposing our will on the world; and, with this shift in our conception of the human enterprise, there was a corresponding shift in our way of understanding the world, a shift from a humanistic to a naturalistic worldview.

Under the priorities of the rising bourgeois class and the nation-state, Knowledge came to be conceived as the key to how to make, to remake, and to control things; it became identified with Promethean power. Intellectual inspiration came not from religion, art, morality, history, and politics as in the past, but from the crafts. With intellectual enlightenment, the crafts were elevated to technology; and with the marriage of science and the practical arts, science itself underwent a radical transformation. The basis of knowledge shifted to sensory observation; the ultimate test of knowledge became its application in making and remaking things and in intervening in and controlling natural processes. The descriptive/explanatory language of science was purified of all humanistic concepts, especially the central concepts of value and meaning; and the idea of ends, structures of meaning, and normative laws in nature were dismissed as superstitions, leaving nature a purely physical system open to our exploitation without any normative limits on our will. With the success of science in our technological/industrial, bourgeois civilization, it has come to be the ideal of knowledge and we seek to bring all subject matter, including ourselves and social and cultural phenomena, under its descriptive/explanatory conceptual system. So the humanistically purified worldview presupposed by modern empirical science has become our culture's dominant worldview. It dominates our intellectual life and our practical endeavors, and it is pervasive in our educational system.

Yet we cannot be human beings, live our lives, or run our institutions without thinking of ourselves, our activities, our culture, and institutions in humanistic terms. Even the doing of science presupposes the humanistic framework of thought. Although he puts the matter somewhat differently, I take this to be the most significant point that Poteat makes. And he is certainly right and he makes the point most forcefully.

But I submit that the derangement of our modern Western culture that threatens our humanity and the social order was generated, not by false images or theories of philosophers, but by the presuppositions of two forms of life, one inherently

and inescapably human and the other historically generated. Descartes is rightly called the father of modern philosophy, not so much because his ideas were implanted in the culture, but because he is one of the first great thinkers to be sensitive to and to wrestle with the contradictions and antinomies deep in the emerging culture. He did not, I suggest, derive the idea of a discarnate mind as the subject of abstract theoretical thinking, but rather seized upon the old idea of a discarnate mind as the subject matter of humanistic thought, leaving a dehumanized physical realm, including the human body, the subject matter of the new dehumanized scientific way of thought. In other words, he sought to resolve the tension in the culture between the humanistic and the new scientific ways of thought by dividing the world, including human beings, into mental and physical substances. Although his theory is not satisfactory and it has rightly been criticized, Descartes should not be blamed for the problems he was trying to solve. It was not his ideas that have beset the modern mind, but his problems. They are still with us and philosophers are still wrestling with them, not with Descartes.

Critical Philosophy

In his search for a post-Critical philosophy, Poteat thinks, if I understand him correctly, that the way experience and life are formed and the world is appropriated in our unreflected mindbodily being and living are unproblematic. This is similar to Wittgenstein's view that the culture is alright as long as it is grounded in a form of life that has not been messed up by reflective misunderstandings and philosophical theories. In other words, there are no genuine philosophical problems; there is no legitimate theoretical job for philosophy; its real function is to save the culture from the mischief reflection and philosophical theories do by exposing the reflective misunderstandings that generated the alleged philosophical problems the theories were constructed to solve. But unlike Wittgenstein, Poteat seems to focus on only Enlightenment philosophy and its progeny. He seems to think that if we could rid our culture of the perversions caused by modern Critical philosophy (which he dates from Descartes), we would have a philosophically unproblematic culture.

But surely the pre-Enlightenment culture of the West had its philosophical problems and was crusted over or even permeated with philosophical theories, mostly springing from the ancient Greek Enlightenment. The development of mathematics in ancient Greece generated philosophical problems that engaged the classical Greek philosophers, especially the Pythagoreans, Parmenides, and Plato, much as the development of modern empirical science gave rise to the Critical philosophy of the modern Enlightenment. The introduction of Judaism and Christianity into Hellenistic culture gave rise to the philosophical theology of Philo, Clement, Origin, St. Augustine, and others. There is some point to Nietzsche's charge that Christianity is "vulgar Platonism." Cultural pluralism inevitably raises philosophical questions about morality as it did with the Sophists in ancient Greece. Even differences in kind among beliefs and judgments, the simple facts of grammar, arouse philosophical reflection that spawn philosophical theories. No culture is immune to philosophical perplexities. Indeed, rational beings with critical reflective powers are always vulnerable to philosophical perplexity in any culture.

If our culture were purged of the modern Enlightenment-based philosophical misunderstandings and theories, it would be still a reflected culture; and if, I am right, it would embody not only the scars of earlier philosophical controversies and the marks of classical philosophical theories, but it would harbor its own philosophical perplexities, especially the contradictions that hold between the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of lived experience (the configurations of experience and the world in our mindbodily being, living, and thinking) on one hand and the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of modern empirical science, technology, and our science-based practical endeavors.

Of course Wittgenstein is partly right. Many philosophical perplexities can be solved or resolved without any

reconstruction of the culture. But this is not true of those philosophical perplexities grounded in contradictions among the presuppositions of the culture, especially those grounded in different forms of life. This is the case, I submit, with the typical problems that have engaged the Critical philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors even unto this day. These problems have been intractable because they are grounded in our ways of life. They do not admit of a purely intellectual solution. Nothing would suffice short of a radical transformation of the culture by a shift in our culture-generating stance--a shift in our governing priorities from materialistic to humanistic values. Only with such a shift would our ways of thought change. Philosophers may help us make the change by exposing the problems and locating their source and their solution, but the society may have to confront painfully the absurdities of the culture and the human consequences of its conflicting ways of life before it will take the problems in the foundations of the culture seriously.

Poteat is right, in my judgment, in calling our attention to the priority of our inescapable mindbodily engagement with the world in lived experience and the way in which the self and the world are categorially configured in this orientation. And he is right also in his claim that the tacit epistemological and metaphysical categories in this approach cannot be consistently denied, for they are presupposed in all of our thinking and doing. But, given the power and the standing our materialistic values give to the categorial configurations inherent in the scientific/technological/practical stance of modern culture, it is not enough to point these things out, not even so elegantly and persuasively as Poteat does.

We need detailed arguments against the widespread modern claim that, although lived experience involves the full structure of "subjectivity" reported in folk psychology, only sensory experience and manipulatory action and thought grounded in and validated by them provide us with an objective account of reality. We also need refutation of the further claim that the contradiction Poteat points out in the rejection of the categories of lived experience is only apparent. Such a task would involve articulation and detailed argument for the objective validity of the tacit configurations in our full mindbodily living. Furthermore, this task would require either a reconstruction of the categorial framework and methodology of science or a way of accommodating and explaining science in the larger humanistic framework of thought.

Enlightenment Critical philosophy arose as an intellectual response to the felt contradictions in the foundations of the emerging bourgeois culture. It has, for the most part, tried to achieve coherence in the foundations of the culture in a way that would not alter the direction of modern civilization. What we need, in my judgment, is not the abandonment of Critical philosophy but Critical philosophy rightly done and in a way that would be effective in bringing critical intelligence into the reconstruction of the culture. This is a big order indeed. It requires, as already indicated, detailed philosophical validation of the implicit categorial configurations in lived experience over against the rival presuppositions of our scientific/technological/practical stance; but even this would not be enough.

Whatever results philosophers achieve are likely to remain their secret. For philosophy to be effectual, it must join with other forces in the culture and become part of public discourse. Among its natural allies, the humanities, education, religion, and political thought are the most likely to be helpful. Historically science would have been a natural ally, but given its form and status in our culture, it offers mostly resistance to the kind of cultural transformation that is needed. Science will not change course unless it fails or reaches its limits in its culturally defined task or the cultural values that shape its framework of thought undergo a radical change. Philosophers must come out of the closet and engage other intellectual disciplines in the critical examination of their foundations; and they must come out of the ivory tower and engage the society at large in cultural criticism, with emphasis on the organizing and governing values of modern Western civilization and their cultural and human consequences, and with special emphasis on the validity and priority of humanistic values and ways of thought in human affairs.

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