



MICKEY MANTLE AND TED WILLIAMS HITTING A BASEBALL: USING THE MICHAEL POLANYI READER TO ANALYZE PRACTICES¹



Tex Sample

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ABSTRACT

This paper interprets the batting styles of Mickey Mantle and Ted Williams utilizing key concepts of the Michael Polanyi Reader. In doing so it demonstrates the thoughtful organization of Polanyi's work in the Reader, on the one hand, and the explanatory and descriptive power of Polanyi's thought about practices on the other. Key Polanyi concepts utilized in this paper include: indwelling, the specifiable and the unspecifiable, connoisseurship, a-critical and critical judgment, knowledge and knowing as action, understanding, and commitment with its personal and universal poles.

A story runs through the baseball world about the time that Mickey Mantle and Ted Williams sat down together and talked about hitting a baseball. For over an hour these two masterful batting champions discussed what is arguably the most difficult thing to do in sport, putting a round bat on a round ball when that sphere is coming at the batter at high speeds or different speeds and with a variety of moves. To hit a baseball is typically an exercise in failure. One is considered a fine hitter if one gets three hits out of 10 official times at bat. Mantle, however, after his conversation with Williams did not get a single hit in his next 28 times at bat.

The reasons for this extraordinary failure on Mantle's part will never be known, of course, Nevertheless, I think that the broader Mantle-Williams story offers a rich

interpretive opportunity to do two things: first to demonstrate the utility of the new Polanyi Reader by means of the thoughtful organization of Polanyi's work contained therein, and, secondly to demonstrate the explanatory and descriptive power of Polanyi's thought about practices as developed and made available in this same Reader.

When I wanted to organize my interpretation of the Mantle and Williams story, I turned to the excellent Polanyi Reader and used it to gather up key Polanyi concepts which were relevant to the interpretive task I have been pondering for some years. Not only did I find more concepts than I could possibly engage in the space available here, but I found references in the Reader that provided not only a definition of each of those concepts, but in turn located the rich resources for pursuing Polanyi's thought in material in the Reader but also in its references to Polanyi's wider corpus.

In the Glossary I turned to those key notions of Polanyi about indwelling, attending, the distal and proximal, the focal and subsidiary and, of course, the tacit. Among the many things in this world that require indwelling, surely hitting a baseball does. I think of the concentration, keeping one's body balanced in the batter's box while waiting on the pitch, keeping one's eye on the ball, gripping the bat firmly but not so tightly that one locks up the wrists, lining up the Vs between the thumb and fore-finger on both hands while gripping the bat in order to keep wrists flexible, shifting one's body weight as the pitch approaches, keeping one's head down and the front shoulder in so as not to pull away on the pitch, picking a good pitch to hit and learning to wait on the ball, and, of course, follow through, etc. Added to all of these things one must practice, practice, practice. And, then, one must focus on hitting the ball as all of these subsidiary skills tacitly flow together. Polanyi often attacked the Cartesian ego with its separation of the mind and body. Indeed, a very good philosophical case could be made that the separation of mind and body in Descartes' thought could never provide one with the skills required to hit a 90-mile-an-hour baseball.

According to the Glossary, indwelling is "a process of interiorizing objects or ideas so they can function as subsidiaries bearing upon the focal target or action" (p. 8). The guidelines of hitting a baseball suggested in the paragraph above must not be simply a list of ideas one thinks through while getting ready and then swinging at a ball. That may be the worst thing one can do, as Polanyi has warned readers in a good many lectures and papers. Or, as coaches will often say to a batter, "you are thinking too much." Indwelling requires instead the interiorizing of such guidelines, their embodiment, if you will. At best, these guidelines become tacitly understood but are "automatic" or second nature in their incarnate expression so that the batter is more conscious *from* them than *of* them. Focal awareness attends to seeing and hitting the ball and must be at the center of one's concentration. Thus, the guidelines are that necessary range of subsidiaries that constitute the *from* in Polanyi's from-to structure but are synthesized in the structure of the whole.

So my first gambit in interpreting what happened to Mantle after his conversation with Williams is that he began to think too much, to focus on the subsidiaries of hitting a ball, and thereby lost focal awareness: that participation, that indwelling so necessary to high performance, the skills of a craft, and the creation of art. Mantle's focal target and action became consumed with guidelines—subsidiaries—and Mantle lost his capacity, at least for a time, to hit the ball.

Further, my interpretation of Mantle's zero for twenty-eight hitting drought must take into account the differences between him and Williams. Both were great hitters. Williams had a lifetime batting average of .344, with 2654 hits, 521 home runs, and an on-base percentage of .482. All of this while missing three full seasons in his prime years while serving in the military in World War II and then missing the far greater part of two seasons while engaged in the Korean conflict.

Meanwhile, Mantle's batting average was .298 with 2415 hits, 536 home runs, and 1509 RBIs, while playing seventeen years in pain from an early injury in the 1951 World Series. With numbers like these Williams is clearly the superior pure hitter, especially when one considers what his records would've been had he been able to play the full five seasons he missed. At the same time, to baseball purists, winning is the measure of great performance, and Mantle played in 12 World Series in an 18-year career and led the Yankees to seven wins in those Series. Further, Mantle had 18 home runs, 40 RBIs, 26 extra base hits, 42 runs, 43 walks, and 123 total bases in World Series play, all Series records. Williams played in one World Series, which his team the Boston Red Sox lost, and he batted .200.

From a Polyanian perspective, they were radically different from each other in the way they approached hitting. In Jane Leavy's substantive biography of Mantle, she reports that "Mantle was not a baseball scholar." Big leaguer Mike Epstein once asked Mantle about how he felt his body "moving in a certain direction or doing something you can talk to me about [while hitting a ball]?" Mantle answered "honestly, I don't know nothing about hitting...I just watch the other hitters." Leavy concludes that "Mantle had no idea of what he did right or wrong or differently batting right-handed and left-handed" (Leavy 2010, 156-57). Leavy goes on to make the case for "muscle memory" as the description for understanding Mantle's batting performance, by which she means "the ability to recall and replicate a perfected motion, such as a baseball swing, in the freedom of infinite space." It is the ability to recruit "the family of muscles that have to be moved to accomplish a task." Leavy goes on to suggest that "muscle memory is a form of implicit memory" in contrast to explicit memory. She claims that "Mantle was an Einstein of implicit intelligence" (Ibid., 158-59).

In these pages, Leavy is working with neurobiology and other sciences, but her discussion of "muscle memory" and "implicit intelligence" is illumined by and is quite reminiscent of Polanyi's distinction between the specifiable and the unspecifiable. In his work on this distinction Polanyi describes "What can or cannot be made explicit."

Polanyi is clear that “subsidiary awareness and focal awareness are mutually exclusive” so that in the case of a baseball batter one cannot be at the same time focally aware of hitting the ball and paying attention to the host of micro, subsidiary practices performed time and time again in the batting cage or at the hitting machine. Polanyi points out that “some deeply embodied tacit skills”—as in the case of those of Mickey Mantle—may never be, at least in principle, specifiable (Glossary, 14; *PK*, 56).

But Ted Williams was quite different from Mantle. He was a serious student of hitting the ball. He also published a book, *The Science of Hitting* (note the title).² Williams observes that “if there is such a thing as a science in sport, hitting a baseball is it.” He does go on to say that it is “not an exact science” (Williams and Underwood 1986, 12). So, when Williams gives attention to hitting as a science I regard him as a connoisseur in Polanyi’s terms. While Polanyi indicates that connoisseurship in the main is “a tacit form of knowing,” it nevertheless “involves evaluative judgment and perhaps artistic sensibility in all sorts of endeavors....” (Glossary, 3; *SM*, 23; Reader, Chapter II E 1).

At this point I find Polanyi’s distinction between a-critical and critical judgment to be descriptively helpful. By a-critical, Polanyi means “tacit acts not based upon critical reflection about alternatives.” Any action dependent upon “unspecifiable clues is an a-critical act.” Such a-critical acts are inarticulate, whereas critical judgment attends to “the assertion of an articulate form” (Glossary, 1; *PK*, 264). My point here is not that Williams used articulated critical judgment in hitting the ball and that Mantle was a-critical. A claim like that would miss the profoundly tacit dimensions of Williams’s connoisseurship—he cultivated the refined judgment of a good hitter even though he linked his book with science. Polanyi certainly thought that connoisseurship was a part of science, although he also recognized that science appreciated articulated critical judgments. Williams was more interested than Mantle in articulating critical judgments about hitting. But Williams understood that concentration and capacity to focus on the ball in spite of the ways a wide array of now-again-subsidiary-but-formerly-critical-assessments undergirds the practice of hitting.

Also, in Mantle’s case a kind of critical judgment was certainly not absent when he paid attention to the characteristics of different pitchers, or his anticipation of the pitcher’s next pitch (a fastball, curve, or slider, etc.), or the location of defensive players on the opposing team when he came to bat (such as the Boudreau shift, which moved infielders to one side of the field in order to take advantage of Mantle’s batting from the left or right side). Both Williams and Mantle made use of critical and a-critical judgment. It would be impossible to be a great hitter otherwise, certainly on Polanyi’s reckoning. As Polanyi says, “We should not apply, therefore, the terms ‘critical’ or ‘uncritical’ to any process of tacit thought *by itself*; anymore than we would speak of the critical or uncritical performance of a high jump or a dance” [or hitting a baseball]. (Ibid. Italics are Polanyi’s, brackets are mine). Still, a good case can be made that

Mantle was far more a-critical in his approach but that Williams' approach made more use of articulated critical judgment.

Thus, going back to our initial story of the conversation between Williams and Mantle, it is certainly not far-fetched to suggest that that conversation pushed Mantle in the direction of articulated critical judgment that moved him away from his strength and led him into specific judgments that perhaps disrupted his concentration (focal awareness) and distracted him from the brilliantly normal a-critical stance that, in part, made him the hitter he was. Mantle's strength was his inarticulate learning, his "feats of a-critical achievement" (Glossary, 1; Reader, II B). As we reported Leavy's comment above, "Mantle was an Einstein of implicit intelligence" (Leavy 2010, 159). For reasons of space I will not here provide a discussion of Polanyi's concepts of unspecifiable and specifiable knowledge because they are closely related to his concepts of critical and a-critical judgments (See Glossary, 15-16).

This distinction between critical and a-critical judgment raises a fundamental question about knowledge in Polanyi. He seems to emphasize the importance of knowing as action. For him the action of knowing is as important as the knowledge focally understood as the product of such action. Hence "knowing by acquaintance," which emerges from "inarticulate learning," is as important as representative knowledge, as in a linguistic, more exact description of the subject under review. To emphasize knowing as a process (an ongoing one of reliance on tacit elements) over knowledge is to focus on "the personal participation of the knower in and [in] relationship to what is known...." (Glossary, 9).

Clearly, Mickey Mantle's approach to hitting was one of knowing as a process. As he said in an expression mirroring his inarticulate learning, he watched the other players in order to learn how to hit. Mantle was naturally a right-handed hitter and hit far better from that side of the plate. From the left side, it was certainly "learned behavior," a panoply of integrated second nature skills drilled into him by thousands of balls thrown by his father and grandfather in an Oklahoma backyard as he grew up. And nobody hit the ball farther than Mantle; He "swung with ferocious intent." His power is described with words like: "a thing of raw beauty," "naturally aggressive," "violent," "sheer athleticism," and "pure, blue-collar, farm-boy aggressiveness" (Leavy 2010, 161, 407). Leavy uses current scientific methods including video and mapping of Mantle's swing. She displays the work of his legs and feet, his stance at the plate, the power-generating torque of his hips and body, the placement of his hands, the slight upswing of his batting stroke, and the way he kept his head and body otherwise still through his swing. "He had a quiet body and a quiet head" (Ibid., 412). Such power did not come after his arrival in the big leagues. While he was still a teenager in Oklahoma, reports came to scouts about a kid who was hitting 500-foot home runs.

That Mantle can be aptly characterized in terms of knowing as action can be attributed, in great part, to his somatic makeup. Arguably, he was physically the most gifted player ever to play the game. His blazing speed, a strong arm, his eye-hand coordination that enabled him to swing with such force and still maintain a high batting average, and his capacity to deliver in the clutch as witnessed in his performance in World Series games. One can only wonder what he might've done had he not played with an injury throughout his career and not been afflicted with alcoholism not many years after coming into the big leagues (Ibid). To live in a body of such enormous capacity, and, then, to indwell in the action of hitting a baseball for all of those years constitutes a knowing-as-action not finally articulable in more common notions of knowledge as that which is or can become explicit.

With these comments about Mantle, I do not mean to suggest that Ted Williams' hitting a baseball did not include knowing-as-action. His hitting clearly did include this characteristic. Yet, he also possessed more explicit knowledge about putting the bat on a ball. In fact, it may well be that no one possessed knowing-as-action and knowledge about hitting (Polanyi's terms) on the scale that Williams did. The attention he gives in his book to things made explicit like concentration, the length and weight of one's bat, studying and sizing-up pitchers, knowing oneself and one's style, rules for hitting a ball, characteristics of the batting box and the strike zone, weight balance, hip action, the position and use of the hands, corrections and adjustments in hitting, dealing with slumps, and a host of others. All of these are normally subsidiaries in Polanyi's terms. Williams was thoroughly committed to the practice of hitting the ball. He reports practicing in the batting cage until his hands bled and then developing calluses over these wounds. Indeed, the question is how William attended to all these contributors to hitting as things in themselves and then come to the plate with such comprehensive, focal awareness that he was able to hit a baseball so successfully. At this point, I would argue that he was far more the connoisseur—again in Polanyi's terms—than Mantle.

In this connection Polanyi's concept of understanding seems to characterize Williams more than Mantle. For Polanyi, understanding is "the most comprehensive form of knowing. It certainly involves active participation and it includes both tacit integrations and subsidiaries at work in inarticulate knowing, but it also involves "[t]he explicit products of integrations...." To be sure, it is "largely unspecified" knowledge because it encompasses a wide range of experience with different situations that cannot be consciously brought to an action. Nevertheless, there is a tacit anticipation of a wide range of circumstances with the capacity to respond to them (Glossary, 9).

The marvel of Ted Williams is that his understanding, like an iceberg, contained a greater unspecified knowing that was beneath his explicit teaching, and yet few can match his understanding about hitting a ball in terms of both its explicit and inexplicit knowing. It is doubtful that Mantle could ever have put together his "implicit

intelligence” with the matchless combination of explicit and inexplicit knowledge in the understanding of Ted Williams. Moreover, Williams was able to teach others how to hit as evidenced by the jump in batting averages by the Washington Senators players in the year when Williams first became their manager and instructed them. It is a compelling testimony to the explicit powers in Polanyi’s notion of understanding, in spite of its largely unspecifiable nature. (I suspect that Williams as coach did tell players about things they should attend to explicitly; he probably made them practice these, but then they had to become subsidiary again and be integrated with the many other subsidiaries that flow together as the batter focuses on hitting the pitch from a particular pitcher at a particular time. Maybe Williams also had players “read his book” but if so they still had to practice the different elements discussed and, finally, make these practiced elements subsidiaries that flow with other subsidiaries into attending to the *kairos*, that moment in the fullness of time before the pitch!)

Finally, in a short list, Polanyi’s concept of commitment offers an important opening into the hitting approaches of both Williams and Mantle. For Polanyi commitment is “a manner of disposing of ourselves through submission to values...” (Glossary, 3; *PK*, 363; Reader, Chapter VI D). In the Glossary the description of commitment focuses primarily on the value of truth seeking, which, of course, is appropriate. Here, however, I use the concept to focus on the value of playing the game of baseball. It is a game for which one is personally responsible. Someone has said that no sport isolates a player with the ball like baseball. In action after action it is the player handling the ball: to throw it, catch it, hit it, and chase it down, etc. Clearly it involves a personal pole, as Polanyi suggests. To play baseball is to make a public commitment. To make a play is to make a public, embodied commitment. One’s action on the field bears witness to the sincerity of one’s assertions; yes, often to one’s ultimate commitments.

Baseball also has a universal pole, at least within the game itself: to play the game well, to be a team player, and to win. In fact, many of the best players say that the best aim is to have fun, which also seems to have positive results in how well one plays and promotes the intrinsic values of the game itself. This commitment may be both tacit and explicit, and the more one plays, the more the game generates an expanding consciousness about how it’s played and how to play it right. While commitment has intrinsic value; extrinsic values come into play as well. Outfielder Hank Bauer, who played many years for the Yankees when they were winning all those World Series, used to warn rookie players with the comment: “Don’t mess with our money,” suggesting that lax play could cause them to miss the World Series and the pay ballplayers received by participating in that championship contest (Glossary, 3; *PK*, 363; Reader, Chapter VI D).

My purpose here, however, is again to return to the conversation between Williams and Mantle, with which we began. And at this point I will make a claim that lacks

as much substantiation as those I make above, but it has, nevertheless considerable explanatory power in relating my Polanyian interpretation to the baseball play of Mantle and Williams.

It is well attested that in public Mantle could be a first-class jerk, to put it in common parlance. What stands in such sharp contrast was his conduct in the Yankee locker room and the sustained awe with which he was held by so many of the players. They appreciated his desire to avoid the limelight, to be with the team, his generosity in reaching out to young players, his behind-the-scenes visits to children in hospitals, his loans and gifts of money, and his financial care for his family. In the clubhouse, he took on heroic proportions. It was not just “the respect the other players had for the way he played the game—not just his ability but the intensity he played it with” (Leavy 2010, 241).

His commitment to the team and to the game were at the center of his life. It was further displayed in the fact that he played most games in pain, that his knee required a tight wrapping in order for him to be able to run at all. Players who were with him through spring training, a 154 Game schedule, plus typically a World Series, saw him up close, day by day, and they were the ones who admired him the most.

Williams was different. The most important thing in the world to him was hitting a baseball. Fielding never gripped him the way that hitting did. Later he would regret that he had not given attention to his defense as he should. Not disposed to the excessive drinking, carousing, and the womanizing of Mantle, he led a disciplined life, getting a good night’s sleep, eating right, taking a nap before a ballgame, and getting himself ready to play. He even took a rubber ball with him to movies to squeeze in order to strengthen his hands, wrists, and forearms. After a game he did a hundred rigorously-designed push-ups with his feet on the seat of a chair while supporting his upper body with the fingers of his hands rather than his palms. He constantly checked the weight of his bats so they would be light enough to accommodate a quick swing. Williams came to the park, excited, with the expectation that something wonderful would happen. With other players, he was a constant teacher and loved to talk hitting most of all. He never stopped thinking and analyzing the game (Halberstam 1989, 180-189). He got along well with his teammates. Generous and considerate, especially with younger teammates, the Red Sox players held him with “an unusual affection” long after his playing days were over, and he maintained decades-long friendships with Bobby Doerr, Dom DiMaggio, and Johnny Pesky (Ibid., 184). But he was not a leader because in his passion to be the best hitter in the game he did not seek those kinds of responsibilities. It was more than enough to meet the expectations of the fans and teammates, and himself (Ibid., 138).

In my reading of Williams and Mantle the former was highly and affectionately admired by his teammates and certainly respected for his prodigious talent of hitting

the ball. Not a leader, but a teacher, not the driving force of his team, but rather the one man who wanted to be more than anything else the greatest living hitter of his time. With Mantle, in spite of and perhaps sometimes because of his riotous living, his capacity to play through pain, and his sacrificial giving up of himself for the team bespoke a devotion to the ball club, a readiness to do whatever it took to win, and an intrinsic commitment to the game. If Williams was a consummate student of the game, a teacher of rare competence, a batter almost unmatched in the history of baseball, Mickey Mantle, broken as he was with his compulsions, but, playing with such incredible intensity and with a profound love of the game, took on virtually a martyr-like quality with his Yankee teammates.

Mantle brought those qualities to his conversation with Williams on that day. It was perhaps this most of all that lead him to put into play the teaching he got from the one who is perhaps, at least, the best teacher of hitting a baseball in his time. It was that commitment that rendered Mantle lost in the subsidiaries of Williams's teaching. It took him away from the genius of his own implicit intelligence until he could move away from that kind of explicit knowledge to that special knowing in action that made him the great player he was. Needless to say, I have found the Polanyi Reader to be an excellent guide for the exploration of these issues and the interpretation provided herein.

Endnotes

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²A video of him giving instruction, "Batting with Ted Williams from 16mm film by R&M Video," is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpMIVptg2Ls> (accessed 26 April, 2019).

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