

Schizophrenic Notes On William Poteat's Polanyian Meditations: Praise and
Possibly Cartesian Misgivings

I. Poteat's Project

William Poteat's Polanyian Meditations is likely to be a book that only the already converted will read. It seems probable that the book is in fact chiefly written for the already converted. By "the converted" I mean those folk already deeply interested in and influenced by the philosophical thought of Michael Polanyi. These are likely to be the only folk with the tenacity to stick with Poteat to the end of his often insightful but always convoluted, dense and verbose meditations. There is nothing in itself wrong with selecting an audience but it strikes me that this book aims to speak to such a narrow coterie that its author became a bit self-indulgent. He gave up the discipline of creating an idiom which could be relatively accessible to generally educated folk.

Perhaps I should not start on this critical note but should be more charitable and say Poteat's book is very carefully crafted, crafted in a way designed to allow the reading experience to reinforce the philosophical insights of the book. Let me begin anew in another voice since I must confess to be a schizophrenic respondent to this book. Poteat's project is after all announced as a meditation. By intention this is not a straightforward bit of philosophizing. Poteat is quite self-conscious about the difficulties of his text (see pp. 8-9). He knows it is, by ordinary standards, reflexive, disputatious, and obscurely organized. Polanyi's thought and its perplexities internalized have become in Polanyian Meditations the occasion for further deep thinking. Poteat aims at nothing less ambitious than revising his readers' orientation to logic and commonsense. He makes his case not by traditional argument--this would be an irony that undermined his mission--but by creating a web of language that traps.

But my apologetic voice is now once more overcome: The problem with much of Poteat's reflection is that many of his points are just not clear. Clarity is only one intellectual virtue, but certainly it is an important one. It may be Cartesian, as Poteat argues, but I want to claim it is Polanyian and necessary also. It is not acceptable (a least for non-Germans) to articulate ideas in a woolly abundance of words that piles qualifier upon qualifier. Readers--even those who want desperately to follow--lose the point. In the diffusion of endless linkages, Poteat's word soup, I drown. Thought, like music, (a metaphor Poteat deftly uses) cannot sound all notes simultaneously.

But, on the other hand, Polanyian Meditations is an intriguing and sometimes extraordinarily tasty word soup. When I get beyond my frustrations with the parts, I see that this book as a whole does move consistently in a direction. There is a melody here, not mere cacophany. The book hangs together, just as Poteat argues human meaning does, although this coherence is not really locatable at the level of argument. It is necessary to be patient with this text in a way uncharacteristic even for readers of philosophy.

Perhaps the best thing which Poteat (and Duke University Press, if it decides to reprint) could do for this difficult text is insert as a preface David Rutledge's fine twenty page essay ("Intuitions of the Inexpressible"--William Poteat's Polanyian Meditations) which was originally prepared for a 1986 AAR annual meeting book roundtable. Rutledge recognizes that readers need help with the book; while he sees and approves Poteat's intention to work on his readers, dismembering them in reading in order to rethink logic, Rutledge dispenses a little balm to ease the resurrection. Rutledge's mapping of Poteat's vexing text seems to me accurate:

Straightforwardly described, Polanyian Meditations is a sustained reflection on "logic" and related concepts, divided rather arbitrarily into a Prologue and seventeen sections. The book has a minimalist form: there is no "Contents" page, and the sections are not titled or

divided, with the exception of one four-page passage at the end of section 3 labelled "Divertissement"(pp. 4-5)

According to Rutledge (see note 9, pp.23-24), Poteat's account focuses in four areas which are each treated in a section of the book although all remain continually before the author: Poteat opens by discussing the "oddness of Polanyi's locutions on logical themes" (p. 23) and the way in which the picture of knowledge in the critical tradition is at odds with Polanyi. Next he analyzes seeing and hearing, tracing paradigmatic cases back to Greek and Hebrew backgrounds, and shows how alternative pictures of "hanging together" emerge from these sense experiences. Poteat then contrasts visions of language found in the critical and Polanyian (termed by Poteat "mindbodily") perspectives. Finally, in the last several chapters of the book, Poteat discusses how positivism undermines our "common sense acknowledgments of meaning" (p. 24); he attempts to unravel ways in which a series of thinkers (Copernicus, Perlman, Chomsky, Ong and others) have subtly interiorized and reflected based upon a picture in which a Cartesian, non-temporal picture of knowing and knowledge dominates.

II. Ruminations on Poteat's Themes

I won't pretend that I can be anything like comprehensive in my response to Poteat's work. Already I have admitted that many sections I endured but did not understand; even those sections which I flatter myself in believing I partially follow are so complex that I could not adequately represent Poteat's insights in brief compass. What follows I candidly admit is impressionistic portraiture--still solidly schizophrenic--about matters I sense miss or make the mark.

Let me begin with Poteat's own account of "Cartesianism" as that ultimate plague which like Camus' la pest has broken out among us and ravaged even, and most importantly, our imaginations:

But first a word about "Cartesianism" as I am using it. It is first and fundamentally not a set of articulated philosophical doctrines, but rather a picture, lodged with growing authority in the imagination of the West from the end of the Middle Ages on, that is the presupposition of such doctrines. This picture is comprised of a coherent system of mutually implicative images, metaphors, and analogies that represent man's relation to nature, to his own body, to the world of material objects, to time and history, to his acts of reflection, to his decisions, to his intellect, even to his own ego; and these relations are analogous to the relation that God is conceived to have to the world that he has made out of nothing. Man is here depicted, in other words, as essentially disembrangled from, because transcendent over, and thus autonomous in relation to all of these (pp. 252-253).

Potter knows, of course, that many philosophers have now turned against Cartesianism with a vengeance but he contends that its power is pervasive because our subscription to it is largely tacit. It is the appeal of the largely vision dominated, non-temporal picture of the "hanging togetherness" of things which Potter sees as undermining even common sense. I believe, on this point, Potter's insight is keen. It does seem to me that it is the images which inhabit us that are the principle determinants of our thought. Such images are, of course, chiefly tacit; they are the terms through which all else takes shape--they are our tools for apprehending the world, in Polanyi's terms. Potter is right too in emphasizing that the tacit picture is something we both have and are in the midst of always.

Perhaps the most interesting and important dimension of Potter's discussion is the claim that the picture of Cartesianism does not properly reckon with temporality. It is a picture in which knowledge is construed to be a contemporaneous presence of parts composing a whole. Potter's contrast between

musical and visual metaphors is illuminating. He seems to me correct (although he never puts it this way since he probably objects to the visual Platonic part-whole language) that there can be a temporally sensitive image of wholeness which is suggested by the way notes in a melody unfold in sequence. Notes "protend" those later in the sequence and "retrotend" those earlier (p.80). This "hanging togetherness" is a motival wholeness or logic.

Poteat's exploration of temporality leads him back to Polanyi and a renewed appreciation of Polanyi's claims for the bodiliness of all knowledge. As implied above, Poteat suggests that there is a kind of logic, found buried and ambiguous in Polanyi's thought, which is deeply mindful of time. This is the rhythmic logic of our bodily presence. There is a constant refrain in Poteat's book which affirms that this alternative logic points inevitably to the "integrity in time of the intentional mindbody" (p.70). It is the foundational priority of the person as bodily being immersed in an unfolding world which impresses Poteat: "The temporality of our being appears and is 'known as the from-to structure of the tonicity of our living mindbodies and of their motility"(p. 73). In my judgment, Poteat's emphasis upon the mindbody, however obscurely articulated, impressively and insightfully draws out some of the most important matters implicit in Polanyi's work. Poteat's clarification of the priority and temporal/intentional structure of mindbodily human being makes much more understandable and convincing Polanyi's claim that the form of being reduplicates the form of knowing. I would like Poteat's "mindbodiliness" even better if he emphasized more strongly, in his portrait of the human person, the relational, social sense of self which I find in Polanyi. This criticism, however, is a mild one intended only to clarify that human mindbodiliness should not be construed exclusively in terms of biological metaphors.

As Rutledge points out (p. 15), Poteat's analysis of temporality not only treats mindbodily intentionality in terms of involvement in the world but also in terms of involvement in the human world of language in speech and writing.

Poteat seems to me very on target in seeing humans as meaning makers whose dependence upon their mindbodiliness is inestimable: "our lively mindbodies are the omnipresent, radically inalienable, and logically necessary matrix within which all our acts of meaning-discernment are conceived and brought to term, no matter how abstracted from this matrix are the vectors by which these acts are borne (pp. 203-204). Although there are some Poteat claims about human language which are to me quite unfathomable, I applaud the thrust of Poteat's treatment which intimately links human language use and our basic bodiliness:

. . . that language, our first formal system, has the sinews of our mindbodies which had them first; that the grammar, syntax, meaning, semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world; therefore, that formalized rationality--mathematics and formal logic--derives from and remains parasitical upon the hanging togetherness and sense-making of our integral rootedness in the as yet unreflected world" (p. 220).

The point at which I become uncomfortable with Poteat's ruminations on temporality comes as he expands his basic contrast between Cartesianism, with its eternal, vision-dominated picture, and a temporally sensitive image of wholeness. He tries to root his contrast in the Greek and Hebrew past. I accept his claim that it is not necessary to take his framework as an attempt to be historically accurate. But if this is the case, I wonder, in turn, if the liabilities of his two valued approach (perhaps yet another heritage of traditional logic) do not outweigh its positive heuristic potentialities. There seems an inevitable one-upmanship involved in dwelling upon the divergence between the ways in which the primary metaphor "word" is construed in Greek and Hebrew culture. I am perplexed by what can be construed from one of Poteat's final conclusions in the chapter which attempts to link his phenomenological analysis of hearing and seeing, Hebrew and Greek paradigms, and Polanyi's apparent innovations in logic:

The second conclusion is that these innovations appear to surface and

gain ascendancy in Polanyi's imagination because the alternate ways of picturing reality instituted by the dynamic model of Yahweh's spoken dabhar--in contrast to the static model of an eternal logos--are a part of his intellectual inheritance from the beginning.

Although I hope Poteat doesn't intend this reading, one might interpret this conclusion as contending Polanyi's thought deserves respect because it somehow reaches back and makes contact with a purer, more original strand of the Western cultural heritage. In sum, interpreting Polanyi through some foundational images of early Judaism has for me limited appeal. This may be to say no more than that I see Polanyi's thought as a resource for attuning Western philosophy and religious thought to global horizons; it is not clear to me from reading Polanyian Meditations that this is consistent with Poteat's agenda.

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