

**"Should We be Pluralists or Emergentists?"**

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Abstract/Proposal

For my presentation at the November 2017 Polanyi Society meeting, I will be reformulating and condensing my paper, "Robust Moral Realism: Pluralist or Emergent?" (TAD 43:3, 2017) in order to bring about a discussion surrounding the positive and negative aspects of choosing to frame post-critical/post-Modern insights in an emergentist framework rather than a pluralist framework.

Drawing mainly from Taylor and Dreyfus's *Retrieving Realism* (2015), we see Charles Taylor as a philosopher who endorses a particular brand of pluralism about reality. Michael Polanyi, of course, endorses emergentism about reality, but also a political pluralism. Taylor and Polanyi both affirm that post-Modern insights allow for both scientific and moral realism: both Taylor's Pluralism and Polanyi's Emergentism move against subjective relativism, at one end of the continuum, and an amoral scientific reductionism, at the other end. But pluralism can totter dangerously toward moral relativism and emergentism can risk becoming too dogmatic or absolutist.

I will argue that a stratified emergentist account is a more thoroughgoing application of gestalt holism than a flat pluralism and better reconciles apparent contradictions in a unified framework, such as engaged contact and robust knowledge about reality, natural kinds and multiple essences, causality and freedom, and moral progress and relativism. I hope to show that a Polanyian "progress but with risk" emergentist framework is preferable to Taylor's Heideggerian "reveal but conceal" pluralist framework. While there are dangers and benefits to each approach, viewing ethical truths as emergent achievements allows for a plurality, but also presents a stronger hope for a new shared moral reality. It also better grounds political liberalism and a pluralism of engagement with different views.

Taylor and Dreyfus's *Retrieving Realism* (2015):

"Our position could then be characterized as *pluralistic robust realism*. That is, there may be (1) multiple ways of interrogating reality (that's the "plural" part), which nevertheless (2) reveal truths independent of us, that is, truths that require us to revise and adjust our thinking to grasp them (and that's the robust realist part), and where (3) all attempts fail to bring the different ways of interrogating reality into a single mode of questioning that yields a unified picture or theory (so they stay plural)." (154).

Taylor and Dreyfus contrast their position with subjectivism and relativism on one side, and scientism, on the other. But there is friendly but distinct position to consider: Polanyi's Post-critical Emergentism, which, as I see it, can better argue against both the sides that Taylor and Dreyfus find themselves struggling against.

So here is the outline for my presentation...

## **"Should We be Pluralists or Emergentists?"**

*I. A choice of frameworks: Understanding Pluralism and Emergentism*

*II. Progress in knowing and being seems Emergentist rather than Pluralist: 12 points to compare:*

*In nature and knowing the world*

- 1. Evolution to types of beings with greater capacity for knowledge*
- 2. Progress from engaged contact to conceptual distance*
- 3. Progress in scientific knowledge and paradigm succession*

*In the evolution & knowledge of real values*

- 4. Existence of sorts of value in nature (breaking fact-value distinction)*
- 5. Common life meanings/values but diverse human meanings/values (co-coproduced)*
- 6. Progress in moral understanding and (for an emergentist) in morality itself*

*Fusion of Horizons, Supersession, Discovery/Creation*

*III. But in the last chapter of Retrieving Realism Taylor & Dreyfus endorses a pluralistic view, when it seems an emergentist approach provides better resources for understanding, e.g.,*

- 7. Compatibility of different "essential" properties*
- 8. Compatibility of physical causality and freedom*
- 9. Compatibility of cultural relativism and an objective morality that rank-orders values*

*Taylor & Dreyfus's choice for a flatter pluralism here is based on a Heideggerian "reveal-conceal" notion of understanding & being. Different approaches/systems both reveal yet conceal features of Being.*

*IV. Benefits and Dangers*

*There are benefits and dangers to this pluralistic approach: may encourage respect for others and their values and encourage tolerance and communication. But it also undermines the notion of progress, can encourage a relativism, and does not ground tolerance as a universal value.*

*There are dangers and benefits to emergentism as well. Emergentism can encourage ethnocentrism, and dismiss or diminish other voices. But it also allows for "progress but with risk," which can give the value of tolerance ground. Due to emergent value, fallibilism and a notion of progress, we must respect the emergence of real and possibly diverse human values, and we are motivated toward communication and engagement. Due to multiple realization and supersession, we can hope to discover/co-coproduce better ways to be by learning more about each other. Advocacy/commitment is the ground for progress, but from a post-critical emergentist perspective tolerance, freedom of speech, and political pluralism are built into the way knowledge progresses and being evolves in both science and the moral domain.*

*V. And so when comparing Emergentist or Pluralist approaches there are a few more issues to consider:*

- 10. Grounding tolerance, pluralism, and political freedom in political liberalism*
- 11. Incentive for communication and engagement; hope for mutual agreement*

*VI. SO we should be emergentists in our science, and moral commitments, but we should be political pluralists, and our emergentism should color our pluralism. Which brings up a nagging question:*

- 12. Does emergentism justify putting a stronger net under liberal democracy?*

*...to prevent intolerant factions from becoming dominant and undermining an open society from within?*