

William Poteat: The Primacy of the Person

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an overview of Poteat's thought, beginning with his basic problem of the eradication of the embodied person from accounts of human knowing in the critical tradition. Poteat's analysis of the move from "place" to "space" as the arena of living shows his procedure. I isolate six elements of the recovery of the person in his work: the necessity of his strange vocabulary, the need to embed knowing in time, the primacy of speech over writing, the centrality of the body to all knowing, the mindbodily unity of the person, and the mindbody as the ground of all meaning-making. I conclude with three questions: Is Descartes, or bourgeois culture, the real villain of modern thought? Isn't language, rather than the mindbody, a more appropriate place to locate the absolute center of the Real? Isn't there a need to flesh out Poteat's individualistic focus with the communal dimensions of personhood?

I propose to introduce you in this article to the thought of William Poteat, a provocative and fertile American thinker who has cleared a path to recovering the richness and solidity of the human person as the center of all knowing and meaning-making. An early admirer of Michael Polanyi, whose work decisively influenced his own, Poteat adapted and extended Polyanian insights in new, even revolutionary, ways. Despite having a relatively low profile in today's Academy, Poteat's work offers one of the twentieth century's most distinctive and important efforts to re-establish social and intellectual values within the person, thus helping us to escape our 'ripening flirtation with godhood, with infinity, restlessness, tumult, and madness' (Poteat 1985, 4). After a brief description of Poteat's context and the problem that gripped him, I will devote the bulk of the essay to some of his central ideas, before concluding with a brief evaluation of his work.

Poteat and His Problem

William H. Poteat (1919-2000) spent most of his career as Professor of Religion and Comparative Studies at Duke University, though he also taught philosophy at the University of North Carolina, taught at an Episcopal seminary, and held visiting professorships at Stanford and Texas (Nikell and Stines 1993, 3-5). Through his co-editing of a major collection of essays on Michael Polanyi's thought, and the supervision of numerous doctoral dissertations on Polanyi and others concerned with the issue of personal knowing, Poteat was prepared at the end of his career to publish three volumes of his reflections, and assist in the publication of a volume of essays published over a thirty-year period. What is distinctive about Poteat's intellectual life is the persistent, tenacious focus on the problem of finding a suitable home within the modern ethos for the human person, a home that would allow that person to claim his or her knowledge, belief, actions, and creations as real, as true, as full of meaning as they are prior to entering upon reflection about them. In his doctoral dissertation on 'Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility' (Duke, 1951), Poteat opposed Pascal's search for the *esprit de finesse* behind our rational powers to Descartes'

claim that the *esprit de géométrie* lay behind such powers. He later recalled that ‘Here was shaped for me the problem that has occupied me now for more than thirty years: the nature of rationality and logic in an intellectual climate in which Descartes’ legatees have prevailed and left us culturally insane’ (Poteat 1985, 6). What is this problem with Cartesian rationality and logic, whose effects would merit the charge of ‘insanity’?

Such a strong claim cannot be unpacked briefly without distortion, but at least a sketch, a short version of the story must be attempted if we are to appreciate the restorative task to which Poteat devoted his energies. Beginning perhaps with the late medieval period and continuing into the early modern, we find western thought gradually replacing communal solidarity with solitary individuality, replacing knowing as a harmonious union of faith and reason with a purely mental picture of reason guided by methodological doubt, and replacing a sense of the mystery of the world with an aim to render knowledge of the world fully explicit.¹ When the ‘disenchantment of nature’ began with the Copernican revolution, theology and philosophy had already begun to withdraw human beings from their rootedness in a world that accredited myths, stories, poetry, history, drama and art as sources of knowledge about that world, in order to sharpen the tool of critical rationality. That such a critical reason was still believed to be the gift of God did not prevent later thinkers from thoroughly secularizing it, which accelerated the transition from a society which unproblematically practiced a humanistic personalism to one which elevated scientific objectivity as the guarantor of all meaning and truth.

For Poteat, the chief figure in this transition was Rene Descartes, whose elevation of an isolated, individual cogito, his use of radical doubt as the primary instrument for investigating the world, and his severing of body and mind in a metaphysical dualism all contributed to the shaping of a new vision of what knowing was, and who human beings are. Coupled with the mathematization of physical theory effected by Galileo and Newton, Descartes’ philosophical anthropology, while rarely explicitly stated, nevertheless provided a powerful justification for the triumph of critical reason not only in science, but throughout wide areas of western scholarship. Poteat saw this triumph of ‘exteriorization’ as far from beneficent. As he states elsewhere:

... it is the perennial temptation of critical thought to demand total explicitness in all things, to bring all background into foreground, to dissolve the tension between the focal and the subsidiary by making everything focal, to dilute the temporal and intentional thickness of perception, to dehistoricize thought... to lighten every shadowy place, to dig up and aerate the roots of our being, to make all interiors exterior, to unsituate all reflection from time and space, to disincarnate mind, to define knowledge as that which can be grasped by thought in an absolutely lucid “moment” without temporal extension, to flatten out all epistemic hierarchy, to homogenize all logical heterogeneity... (Poteat 1993, 261-262).

Here the problem of western intellectual society is described as precisely and intriguingly as an Escher drawing, and the strength of Poteat’s work comes from his single-minded focus on ‘recovering the ground’ of meaning that we lost to the critical model of knowing. A massive displacement of the person had occurred, a chronic amnesia of the spirit in which what it actually meant to be a human being was forgotten. In a letter to a colleague, Poteat once wrote: ‘In *Polanyian Meditations* and *A Philosophical Day Book* I have labored mightily—not always with success—to arraign the whole philosophical tradition lock, stock, and barrel. I have said this repeatedly, but either people don’t listen or they refuse to believe what they hear.’²

Perhaps the best example of the way Poteat re-reads the history of the western intellectual tradition is his 1974 essay, ‘Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication,’ where he traces carefully the transformation of perspective that occurred in the Italian Renaissance in which science and art combined

their emerging visions of reality to elevate space as the fundamental arena within which human being must be understood, above the sense of place that had held this position prior to the Renaissance. This was a fateful moment in the displacement of persons from human culture:

...let me repeat, the commonsense view of spatiality that has come down to us from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, and which has tacitly become for us the ontologically primordial view, is radically incoherent. What is worse, its incoherence is humanly intolerable. Persons have places. The conception of space under review systematically preempts the notion of place (Poteat 1993, 33).

Using the work of Alexander Koyré and Sigfried Giedeon, philosophically applied to the Cartesian revolution through the insights opened up by Pascal, Poteat shows how fundamental to our sense of ourselves as persons is a notion of our place in the world, a “whence” from which all other ordinations—such as the geometrical quantifications of modern science—are grasped. Our relationship to our own bodies is not the same as our relationship to external objects in space, either logically or experientially. This fundamental truth was obscured by Descartes when he wrote that ‘...the nature of matter or of body in its universal aspect, does not consist in its being hard, or heavy or coloured...but solely in the fact that it is a substance extended in length, breadth and depth.’ (quoted, Poteat 1993, 31) Poteat comments on this ‘paralyzing incoherence’:

I have argued that “extensions” or the perception of “extended” things presupposes a prereflective oriented whence from which radiating vectors distinguish length, breadth, and depth, which is to say that “extended” things are derivative, while the prereflective oriented whence...is radical. All this then means that for me, existentially, as the concrete person I am, extension is not first of all space, but rather is place...(Poteat 1993, 33).

The replacement of place, so understood, by space in our thinking was a major step toward the ‘disenchantment of the world,’ the ‘dissolution of the cosmos’ which has been so often remarked by modernity, and which caused Auden to term our time ‘the Age of Anxiety.’ Poteat then shows the relevance of this moment by tracing signs of this dissolution in John Donne (‘The Sun is lost, and the earth, and no man’s wit/ Can well direct him where to looke for it.’); in Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, suddenly transformed in his bed one morning into a gigantic insect; in David Riesman’s outer-directed man in a ‘lonely crowd;’ in Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, afraid to cross a street in New York City, lest ‘I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again...’; and in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Flies*, where Orestes admits to Zeus’s charge that he is insubordinate: ‘Foreign to myself—I know it. Outside nature, against nature, without excuse, beyond remedy....Nature abhors man, and you too, God of Gods, abhor mankind’ (Poteat 1993, 37-41). The litany could be extended, of course, (think of Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov or Kirilov, or Camus’ *The Stranger*) showing the overwhelming sense of loss, of lostness, that characterizes persons in modernity: ‘In fact, as we can now begin to see, the whole of modern culture could be described as an assault upon place, status, and room for personal action by the abstracting intellect’ (Poteat 1993, 39). Ironically, this loss of his place in the universe made modern man desperately uneasy, seeking ‘a deliverance from every particular place, every particular status, and the ambiguity of every particular moral action’ (Poteat 1993, 40). Despair may issue in restless passion, as well as in passivity, as Michael Polanyi saw in his description of ‘moral inversion.’

However helpful such revisioning of the accepted history of philosophy is in understanding the problem Poteat found in our culture, he is emphatically not interested in simply correcting the record by undertaking a full-scale historical or archaeological project; there is a strong sense of mission in his effort to recover a sane place to stand. Let me now turn to some of the major motifs in Poteat’s effort at recovering the personal.

The Way Back to Firm Ground

Perhaps the most salient of Poteat's signposts on the path of recovery are the following (necessarily somewhat distorted by my stating them so simply and bluntly): (1) that the infection of western language by critical assumptions forces him to use a strange and awkward vocabulary to impeach those assumptions; (2) that we must demur not only to the dominance of the spatial arena in critical thought, but also to its emphasis on the timeless, eternal moment; (3) that speech—the oral-aural reciprocity of ordinary conversation—is the proper home of thought, rather than in the abstractions of the printed page; (4) that what place, temporality, and speech reveal to us is the prereflective omnipresence of the body in all our formal articulations—knowing can only be incarnate; (5) that the mind/body dualism of the critical tradition must be understood to be overcome in the unity of the two, for which mindbody is an appropriate term; (6) that grasping our mindbody as the ground of all orientation, sense, and meaning-making is the first, major step in recovering our personhood. Let me take up just a few of these elements, so that my reader can get some sense of how Poteat's thinking proceeds, and can hear him articulate that thinking.

One of the most irritating features of Poteat's work is that he refuses to write and think within the normal patterns laid down by the academic orthodoxy within which almost all his readers were trained, but he has reasons for this practice. Poteat works outside the professional philosophical guild because it is hopelessly in thrall to critical assumptions ('The more deeply I indwell the new place in the world that this book [*Polanyian Meditations*] provides, the less I find it possible to read books on philosophy. I feel like a man who believes the earth is round reading books by authors who think it's flat. I am utterly tongue-tied in philosophical colloquy.'³ Poteat's 'extra-territorial' posture toward the tradition gives him, however, a good ear for the dissonances in other thinkers, and he writes perceptively on the critical assumptions of authors who should know better (Karl Popper, George Steiner, and Walker Percy, among others; Poteat 1993, Part 3, 201-278). If the customary way of doing philosophy does not get us beyond critical thought, then we must find a new way to think and talk that will not betray our best instincts. This Poteat attempts to do in what may be one of the most controversial of his strategies, namely the adoption of a written style that he admits is an 'extraordinarily mixed bag' of rhetoric. He is therefore very attentive to matters of form and style, which leads him to write 'meditations,' a 'daybook,' a series of reflections in epistolary form. In speaking of the style of his last book, *Recovering the Ground*, he writes:

In its style—awkward syntax, nonlinear progression, reflexivity, dialectical reduplication, an unfamiliar and often deliberately "atonal" diction congested with what will appear to be pretentious or merely clever coinages that, together, allow my radical insight lucidly to oppose itself to the conceptual landscape from which it has been elicited and to impede yet another bemused lapse into our familiar dualisms—I have obeyed the demand upon me of this primitive reality to educe and then body forth the logos that endows my mindbody with sentience, motility, and orientation, both before I have yet spoken and after I do, as itself the condition of speech (Poteat 1994, xiv).

Is this really necessary, we might ask? Only if, Poteat would answer, you *really* want to escape the confines of a critical worldview, to experience yourself united once more, body and mind, as one whole person. He sees the acts of writing and reading not as reports about meaning we have conceptualized, and merely need to express—even if these are properly post-critical reports—but as themselves actual experiences of making or finding meaning. 'I aspire to place the reader in an agonistic relation to the text' (Poteat 1994, xv), meaning that the book must work on us, 'dismembering' our Cartesian cogito in order to allow new possibilities for knowledge to appear.

In language that intentionally attempts to force us away from conventional, comfortable ways of thinking, Poteat tries to show how Polanyi's placement of the person, in all his richness and complexity, at

the center of knowing leads to revolutionary perspectives that are at the same time the familiar and ordinary understandings that gave our world meaning before we were bewitched by critical assumptions. In his evocative words, 'It is my view that rationality, that is, the 'hanging togetherness' of things for us, and logic, that is, the articulated form of the 'making sense' of things for us, is more deeply and ubiquitously, though inexplicitly, embedded in our ordinary thinking and doing than we are likely to notice...' (Poteat 1985, 9). Conceptual innovation is reflected in misleadingly simple language: 'reason' equals 'things hanging together for us,' while 'logic' is the articulate expression of this 'hanging together,' or 'making sense' of things for the knower. This is a broad notion of rationality and of logic that would include most poems, songs, novels, jokes, sermons, and musical compositions as fully rational, an assertion that we only find odd in the setting of critical philosophy.

With some sense now of the reasons for the way he writes, we can turn to other of Poteat's motifs. He points in the essay mentioned above, 'Persons and Places,' to Kierkegaard's treatment of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, which discloses another of his major themes, the substitution in the history of critical thought of sight for sound, of the printed page for the act of speech on which it is based. In *Polanyian Meditations*, Poteat explores the way in which the critical tradition has construed knowing as an instantaneous, or better, timeless, phenomenon. With the mathematical image for knowledge on which Galileo and Descartes insisted, critical thought argued that clarity and distinctness must be hallmarks of real knowledge, as they are of number. The perceptual moment is ideally depicted as a timeless instant, excluding the possibility that objects of our cognizing could change while we investigate them. This assumption coheres naturally with a visualist sensibility, in which sight is elevated above the other senses as the paradigm of knowing: 'The static, visual model dominates the epistemological exposition of the (atemporally) logical structure of the conditions of knowledge, conceived as an established fact' (Poteat 1993, 40). What this leaves out of the account of knowing, of course, is the rich oral-aural world of actual speech, of language as it exists prior to its being fixed in printed form by reflection. The work of Walter Ong and Jack Goody on oral cultures, and the ways in which literacy obscures the spoken roots of language, led Poteat into a new appreciation of how experience cannot be made, logically, to yield an act of knowing completely divorced from temporality, because it is part of the very form of hearing, and so of language and thought. Analyzing J.S. Bach's "First Prelude in C" in the *Meditations*, Poteat concludes that music has a logic (a sense, a 'hanging together,' a 'connectedness'), and that this logic is inherently, unavoidably temporal. So the visual picture of rationality that has dominated western thought is not the only possibility; that we have restricted our reflections on logic ('form,' 'order,' 'whole,' 'integrity,' etc.) to a visual rather than an auditory model is a matter of history, not of eternal necessity.

To the recovery of the importance of place and time to the human person, Poteat adds a third crucial ingredient, the body that actually constitutes our place in the world. The stimulus and conversation partner in this effort is M. Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the irreducible coherency of body, mind, and perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Through his own phenomenological examination of his bodily being in thinking, writing, bike-riding, and playing tennis, Poteat reveals the insidious tendency of the critical tradition to make us think of our body as a thing like other things, when in fact it is, for us, radically unlike anything else in the universe. It is the center from which all our stretching forth toward the world commences, beginning:

in my mother's womb, within which her beating heart rhythmically pumps the blood of life through my foetal body, forming itself toward my primal initiation into the very foundation of my first and most primitive cosmos.... These forms are for me, even still for conscious, reflective, critical me, archetypically the forms of measured time: tempo, beat, strophe, pulse.... There is then an archaic prejudice far older than I in my prereflective and unreflecting mind/body to indwell all form, meaning, and order in the world as the kindred of the first order I have known, the order of my mother's beating heart (Poteat 1985, 22-23).

The ground of the human notions of order, measure, “connectedness,” of “hanging together” (that is, logic) lies in this prelingual level of awareness, which is inescapably ours, which never leaves us, and from which all the articulations of higher thought are educed. Where else would the human sense of pattern, order, rhythm have come from, if we were not, long before formal reflection, not already immersed in a world that gave us meaning?

...it is clear that if the tonic mindbody is the omnipresent and inalienable matrix within which all our acts of meaning-discernment are conceived and brought to term, if, that is to say, the new picture of ourselves as beings in the world actively engaged in asking, seeking, finding, and affirming clearly situates us in the moil and ruck of the world’s temporal thickness, marinating there in our own carnal juices, then our rationality can only appear here, inextricably consanguine with our most primitive sentience, motility, and orientation (Poteat 1985, 246-247).

In thinking about this radical suggestion, we are led necessarily to consider the role of language in our lives, particularly in our intellectual lives, and I will conclude this section with a description of Poteat’s re-instatement of speech at the heart of language.

Having already noted the tendency of the critical tradition to construe the arena of knowing in spatial, visual, timeless, purely mental terms, we should not be surprised to find Poteat gravitating to the ignored role of human speech, and the oral-aural arena within which it occurs. Against the abstracting linguistics of a Chomsky or Skinner, Poteat argues that knowing cannot be made intelligible without attention to the language in which such knowledge is expressed, and that language makes no sense if it does not always acknowledge, even tacitly, its prelinguistic rootage in our bodies. Though the term ‘mindbody’ and its cognates are awkward at first, Poteat coins these terms to insist upon the ‘prelingual performing’ of our minds in our bodies, as Polanyi described it in *PK* (pp. 70ff.). He is extending Polanyi’s cryptic assertions by constantly ‘leaning against’ the terms and patterns which are regnant in philosophical discourse so that space might be created for a new way of thinking. Our knowing is not just mental, it is not just bodily, it is always both together, as our mindbody, a ‘mindedbody,’ an ‘embodiedmind’ that is knowing. He writes further:

I claim that language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first; that the grammar, the syntax, the ingenuous choreography of our rhetorical engagement with the world, the meaning, the semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world, which is their condition of possibility (Poteat 1985, 9).

‘Language has the sinews of our bodies.’ In this synaesthetic commingling of human experience, Poteat tries to overcome the discarnate, disembodied mentalism of critical philosophy. Beginning his meditations by reflecting on Polanyi’s own dependence on his mindbody in writing *PK*, Poteat continues with numerous examples of experimental data from language acquisition studies (by Church, Lewin, Trevarthen, and Condon) to echo his points, and uses extended analogies of listening to music and playing tennis to drive home the ubiquitous mutual entanglement of mind and body:

The structure of this picture is expressed in “language”: in the style of our movement; in the bearing and mien, the timbre and mood of either our erect or of our recumbent bodies; in the pitch and the color of our voices; in the key, the tempo, and phrasing of our gaits; in the resonance and the hue of our glance; in the pace, the diction, weight, momentum, and metaphorical intentionalities of our speech (Poteat 1985, 14-15).

Here Wittgenstein's 'form of life' is fleshed out, incarnated, in language that itself attempts to perform, to create, a vivid experience and example of the power of words to make meaning: "A sentence uttered makes a world appear" (W.H. Auden, quoted by Poteat 1985, 116).

Beyond the helpful term 'mindbody,' (which seems both natural and necessary to those who have immersed themselves in his writings) Poteat attempts to re-think language as speech and hearing rather than as written grammar, and uncovers the insidious distortions of the model of visual perception which has been the standard vehicle for knowledge in the critical paradigm. By stressing speech – 'lively oral-aural reciprocity' (Poteat 1985, 113)—rather than sight as the faculty that makes us human, Poteat is able to re-direct knowing from the individual mind in contemplation of the world, to the dialogue between the knower and the one who calls him or her into personhood through address, through summons. While Poteat's radical re-statement of central terms in philosophy may not speak to everyone, he does make clear, I believe, how fundamentally revolutionary Polanyi's work was, and his own extension of that work is, preventing an easy domestication of personal knowledge into a trite truism.

In summary, William Poteat argues rationality as construed by the modern Academy has so truncated, refined, isolated, abstracted knowing from the people who do it that persons can no longer affirm what they know with the full sense of their being. People who know lots of things, and live quite unproblematically relying on such knowledge, are suddenly stricken mute and disoriented when the modern intellectual tradition demands an accounting of this knowledge, on its terms. What an absurd situation! The dynamic, temporally situated, oral-aural reality of our minded bodies/embodied minds, richly entangled in a place and a world of speech, memory, and hope, is ruled illegitimate to speak before the bar of critical reason, which demands an explicit, timeless report of fixed and certain objects, fully illuminated and thus exhaustively available to sight, delivered by a discarnate mind in a universal theater of reflection. To help us recover from this alienation from our ordinary selves, Poteat has overcome a wrongheaded notion of "logic" that is shaped by a static, visual, discarnate model of knowing, and rooted logic instead in the mindbody. In the setting of everyday life, then, we see people doing all kinds of things in organized, patterned ways that people around them find sensible, so full of meaning that these others engage quite naturally with them in conversations on all sorts of topics, and activities of all kinds. He is therefore able to say, at the end of his agnostic reflections:

In a sense nothing has changed: everything remains essentially the same. We may go on talking as we pretty much always have...The world remains pretty much what we have always commonsensically thought...What an effortful way to declare that we are incarnate beings, irreducibly carnal spirits, actually existent mindbodily persons! (Poteat 1985, 166)

Evaluating the Critic

This concluding section of the paper can be relatively brief, in part because there has not yet been a great deal of critical examination of Bill Poteat's work—the emphasis has been on understanding what he is trying to say. Three important questions have been raised by interlocutors.

First, E.M. Adams, a friend of Poteat and his colleague in philosophy at North Carolina, has argued that Descartes cannot, or should not, be made the villain of modern western thought as Poteat has done (Adams 1994-95, 45-50). Adams points out that Descartes was not the first to separate the mind and knowing from the body; that he does not find the influence of Cartesianism so prevalent today; and that the malign effects of modernity are more the effects of 'a shift in the governing values of the society,' than any epistemology stemming from the Enlightenment: '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...' (Adams,

1994-95, 48). While it is certainly true that social, political, and economic forces would have to be taken into consideration in any account of the rise of ‘modernity,’ Poteat’s brief, occasional comments on Marx suggest that he would find behind any such social change in values a philosophical anthropology whose very language about human beings and their actions would be formative influences on the individuals in that society (Poteat 1990, 30, 92; 1994, 140). One could suggest that the very reason sociology presumes to be a science is that it abstracts from actual human persons in a way that renders it helpless when trying to apply its ‘scientific findings’ to those persons, precisely because it ignores the issue of its own anthropology, and those of its subjects.

A second question about Poteat’s work is raised by Ronald Hall, one of his students, who worries that the late emphasis in Poteat on the ‘mindbody’ has occluded the importance he gave earlier to speech and language as the center of human being (Hall 2000-2001, 11-15). In a letter to Poteat, Hall once wrote:

I sometimes get the impression, Bill, that you think that the mindbody is our access to the Real. I think we might part company here, for I am inclined to think that words are our access to the Real.... There is a difference in saying that the mindbody is the center of the Real and saying that it is its ground. I quite agree with you that the pre-reflective mindbody is the ground, and that we need to recover it, but I remain convinced that it is in words that we find its absolute center (Hall, 2000-2001, 15).

Hall, who is well acquainted with all the subtleties of Poteat’s thought, senses an ambitious desire to give the *coup de grace* to modernity, and that the ‘mindbody’ became in Poteat’s mind the silver bullet to do that. But isn’t there an important distinction to be made between the prelingual biological realities of infants, and the spoken and written words of adults that form culture, that allow the extraordinarily complex reflections of the *Meditations* to occur? ‘Mindbody’ is certainly to be preferred to a mind/body dualism, but it is speech, after all, that unites mind and body. Is not the mindbody of a reflective adult sufficiently different from that of a pre-speech infant to justify Hall’s concern? I doubt that Poteat would want to elevate one aspect of our being-in-the-world, either speech or the mindbody, but would rather insist on the thorough, complete entanglement of both in everything a person does or says, so unified that ‘no relativizing skepticism can get a foothold’ (Poteat 1985, 162).

Finally, let me mention one further question that has been raised about Poteat’s work, concerning whether or not he gives sufficient attention to the sociality, the inter-personal relationships, that lie at the heart of human life.⁴ Poteat’s intellectual companions in his work—Pascal, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty—are not thinkers known for their attention to the social dimension of existence, though none of them avoid it completely. Only Michael Polanyi perhaps, in his study of the scientific community in *SFS*, in his chapter on ‘Conviviality’ in *PK*, and in parts of *Meaning*, gave adequate attention to the social. There are no references to ‘society’ or ‘community’ in the indices to Poteat’s books, and little attention to these topics in articles about Poteat. Yet his insistence on recovering life as it is lived prior to reflection would seem to require attention to the social, to people in relation, to the networks of mutuality that language and the nurture of infants entail. In *Polanyian Meditations*, in contrasting the Greek focus on sight with the Hebrew on sound, Poteat draws close to the relational aspects of human being, but the mention is brief, and never followed up: ‘[A speech-act, at]... its heart, as *speech-act*, is the absolutely novel and underivable act of owning one’s words *before another*. Indeed, ... to be a person is nothing other than to be able before another to own one’s words...’ (Poteat 1985, 95). Yet he gives this crucial social situation—I and another—none of the careful, detailed, exhaustive attention that he gave to the spatial, oral, and temporal features of the mindbody.

Poteat does, in *Philosophical Daybook*, briefly respond to this criticism, but only in one brief entry (that for 8/10/87) that somewhat querulously, to my mind, argues that the problem of sociality is a function

of the modernist, critical temper, with its emphasis on the isolated *cogito*, and thus social relations are not a problem for his post-critical perspective, in which all meaning derives from the same source, the mindbody:

For *Polanyian Meditations* ... it is our integral, sentient, oriented, motile mindbodies, bonded in their efferent intentions to a world prior to reflection, which are the *radical* given. . . . In other words self and other, I and you, solitude and society, individuation and socialization have at bedrock the same provenance for *Polanyian Meditations*.

This hardly seems adequate, however, as a display of how each of us begins and goes through life tied to others, implicated in their lives, taking our cues and making our plans with others ‘in mind.’ It would seem a natural extension of Poteat’s wonderfully insightful use of research on the speech and movement of infants to see what research says about the necessarily *social* character of early life, but this has not yet been ventured. Though his argument is not weakened by this omission, it would certainly be strengthened by further work in this area.

While other comparisons could be drawn between Poteat’s work and the work of those he studied—Heidegger, or Wittgenstein, or Polanyi; and though we could try to place him in the usual shorthand catalogues of the professoriat—is he a ‘hedgehog’ or a ‘fox’? an ‘edifying’ philosopher or a ‘systematic’ philosopher? a ‘splitter’ or a ‘lumper’? is he primarily concerned with epistemology or with ontology? etc.—I hope that the issues raised both in exposition and in criticism convince you of the richness, the distinctive originality, and the tantalizing promise of William H. Poteat. I encourage you to *Read his Books*.

ENDNOTES

¹See also the account of Poteat’s intellectual perspective given by Jim Nickell and Jim Stines in their excellent “Introduction” to *The Primacy of Persons*, pp. 6-10, which describes this period as replacing theonomy with autonomy, community with solitary individuality, and a sense of reality as an expression of God with a sense of reality as an object of thought and of sense perception. For brief accounts by Poteat himself on this history, see the essay, “Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication” in *Primacy of Persons; Polanyian Meditations*, pp. 6-9 and 252-254; and William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection*, “Appendix,” esp. pp. 202-203.

Other scholars have, of course, traced this same history. See, for example, Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*; Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, Part II, and *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, ch. 3; and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

²Poteat, unpublished letter to Houston Craighead, September 1, 1989, p. 1.

³Poteat, unpublished letter to David Rutledge, June 25, 1987, p. 1 (now in the Yale Divinity School Library Poteat Archives).

⁴The first person to raise this question about Poteat for me was Professor Martha Crunkleton, though I do not think she has published on this suggestion.

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