# REVIEWS

Dennis Ford. *The Search for Meaning: A Short History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. Pp. xxii + 290. ISBN-13: 978-0-520-25300-1. $24.95 cloth.

Ford opens his Preface with this question: "Does life have meaning?" This is quite a different question than "Does life have *a* meaning?" Ford has written an introductory approach to the former question, but as an avowed postmodernist he eschews the latter question. In emphasizing the various approaches people have used to find meaning in life, he has written an account that relies on both psychology and philosophy but is distanced from religious approaches.

The book is labeled a short history, but that title is somewhat misleading. This is no chronological approach to the question of meaning, but rather more a categorical or typological approach. Each chapter concludes with pertinent answers to the same basic four questions about meaning. After Ford's introductory chapter, his next four chapters, forming Part I, deal respectively with myth, philosophy, science, and postmodernism. There is a certain overlapping sequential aspect to these topics, but that is as close to a historical account as Ford gets. He terms Part II of the book "Contemporary Sources of Meaning," and here he lists in order pragmatism, archetypal psychology, metaphysics, and naturalism. There is some obvious overlap here with the first part: why have a chapter on science and then later one on naturalism, or chapters on both philosophy and metaphysics, for instance?

Ford's exposition is based on two assumptions: "First, the meaning otherwise available in our culture—including that offered by historical and institutionalized religions—is no longer persuasive, and, second, living without meaning is unacceptable" (xix). The first assumption comes out of Ford's own experience and is certainly debatable as a general statement. The validity of the second assumption depends upon what Ford means by "meaning," and an implication of his subjective approach is that meaning is not pinned down to any strict definition. Unfortunately, this all too often leads to equivocation and murkiness in his text. But as a rough generalization, Ford seems to want to focus his discussion of meaning upon a felt sense of significance or purpose in one's thought and action. On such a basis, his second assumption seems warranted.

Another assumption Ford makes struck me at first as a bit self-congratulatory and presumptuous. He writes, "Talking openly about meaning and meaninglessness is one of the last taboos. The question of meaning makes us uncomfortable" (xv). To say the topic is taboo seems unjustified because, as Ford openly acknowledges, much of the more serious literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries deals with questions of meaning. However, when I used *The Search for Meaning* as the basis for two different discussion groups, I did find a certain number of the participants reacted negatively or even hostilely to the book. Part of this reaction can be attributed to some poor writing on Ford's part. The quality of the prose is uneven; some nice quotes or insights are compromised too often by turgid exposition or irritating inconsistencies. But the negative response is caused by more than hostility to uneven writing: Ford seems right in suggesting that for quite a few people discussion of meaning upsets their sense of stability and security in life. This further suggests that his assumption that talking about meaning is disturbing also has some validity. People are easily upset when their basic beliefs about significance in life are questioned. Ford gives a convincing illustration of this in his introductory chapter through his discussion of the crisis precipitated in Leo Tolstoy's life once he faced the question of "Why?" What Ford omits to describe is the answer Tolstoy eventually worked out, which is centered on a life of peace, love and service modeled on the life of Jesus.

Ford's chapter on myth begins by taking its cue from the way Homeric epics have commonly been treated by such commentators as Eric Havelock and John Finley. Myths are said to emphasize the surface of things, and narrative demands take precedence over conceptual structure. "No thematic or conceptual summary of a myth is possible, because its essence is in the bright particulars" (29). Such a claim is surely exaggerated: explanations in terms of the will of the gods or the breaking of taboos are examples of repeated conceptual features found in many myths. Ford then switches to reliance on Eliade. Ford calls the tension that is created between his earlier emphasis on particularity and Eliade's emphasis on universality "paradoxical" (46). "The world expressed by myth is unchanging and eternal; the myths do not change; the gods and actors always play out the narrative in the same way" (30). This view ignores the plasticity of myths through time; they are altered by the bard or shaman in a pragmatic way as they respond to audience interest. Ford does acknowledge that mythic themes after the classical period have been picked up and utilized in many different guises.

Of interest to Polanyians is this quotation from Ford: "Knowing mythically is not disinterested and objective but engaged and tacit, like the knowledge one has of riding a bike, hitting a tennis ball, or greeting a neighbor" (34). In even more Polanyian terms, one could say that the mythic worldview is indwelt almost like a perceptual skill, and the person so identifies with the mythic hero and the mythic lessons that they become dominant subsidiaries in the construction of that person's reality. "For those who live mythically, there is no myth or distance between the knower and the known; the world in which we live simply is, and we respond" (51). Ford contrasts such unself-conscious acceptance of a mythic framework with modern skepticism about any framework or any commitment, which raises the specter of meaninglessness, yet he is also leery of buying uncritically into any world view. Polanyi's combination of faith and fallibilism would be helpful to him here, but he never does cite Polanyi in the book.

If in Ford's account living mythically is overly naïve, living philosophically is seen as an ongoing attempt to overcome discontent. "The philosophical mind asserts that skepticism and doubt are more reliable avenues to truth than faith and engagement" (76). It may seem that the model for Ford's exposition of the philosophical mind is Descartes, but surprisingly it is Plato, or better, Platonism. In skepticism about the reality of the everyday world, the Platonic mind escapes to the transcendent world of the Forms. "The philosophic mind is thus world-denying, ascetic, and dualistic . . ." (73). Clearly such a formulation is hardly fair to philosophy as a general concept, although it applies to certain historical forms of philosophy.

Aristotle gets his due in the chapter on science. His explanation of causation and emphasis on Forms in nature is interpreted as that which sets science on its course. The science that gets described by Ford is not Polanyi's view of science, but rather a form of the objectivism that Polanyi attacks. One who sees science as the source of meaning, Ford claims, must learn to find some joy in the progress of knowledge and conform to the facts and laws of nature (100).

Kant, relativity and quantum theory, and finally Kuhn are interpreted by Ford as the precursors to postmodernism. "For the postmodernist, our ideas and symbols do not correspond to reality, they produce reality through an act of interpretation or construction, in which we select and reify one of many possible worlds according to our social and individual needs" (126). There is an aspect of Polanyi's thought, as when he discusses the Azande worldview, that correlates with this dimension of postmodernism. But postmodernism plunges much deeper into relativism than Polanyi would accept. Postmodernists reject the modernist idea of Truth and replace it with pragmatic functions.

It should be no big surprise that among relatively recent writers, William James is Ford's favorite. Ford emphasizes the pluralistic, voluntaristic, interpretive aspects of James' thought; James comes across as

a proto-postmodernist. Truth is not discovered. It must be made (154). It is biographical.

Given Ford's affirmation of pragmatism and relativism, it is noteworthy that he is also appreciative of James Hillman's archetypal psychology and the wisdom tradition today perhaps most associated with Huston Smith. Each affirms a sort of absolute in the world that grounds meaning – Hillman referring to autonomous archetypes that shape our deepest emotions, and Smith claiming that it is the unchanging highest levels of being that grant us meaning.

One of the virtues of Ford's book is that he is generally successful in offering genuinely different approaches to meaning without unfairly backing favorites and denigrating alternatives. The other side of the coin is that he does not argue consistently or present evidence for a specific understanding of meaning. Perhaps his basic stance might be termed empathetic postmodernism. Thus the book is descriptive and suggestive rather than constructive and systematic. In sum, Dennis Ford offers a reader a number of optional ways of viewing meaning, some of which will be congenial to those appreciative of Polanyi's insights.

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Leslie Paul Thiele. *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. x + 321. ISBN: 0-521-86444-5. $88.00. Hardback.

A professor of Political Science at the University of Florida, Thiele seeks to revisit the topic of practical reasoning, especially in light of recent work in neurobiology. The result is an understanding of practical judgment that draws from the work of philosophers, neuroscientists of various sorts, and narrative thinkers. The picture of practical reasoning that emerges from his account is that of a comprehensive human capacity, which the following statement nicely conveys: "Blending rational, perceptual, and affective capacities, operating at the conscious level and below the threshold of consciousness, the human judge manages to forge meaningful patterns from a blooming, buzzing world" (ix). This "blooming, buzzing world" is marked by its multi-dimensionality, such that "no one account, no single story can capture the full import of moral and political life, or settle, once and for all, the rightness or wrongness of its components" (12). Political and moral judgments, like those made in the worlds of medicine, business, and the military deal with what Thiele calls "deep complexity," i.e. "relationships that are so intricate and interdependent as to preclude deductive calculations of reactions and outcomes" (9). Given this complexity, Thiele argues that increased attention to practical judgment is precisely what is needed for healthy democracy "in a world burdened by claims that subjective preferences are the final word" (278).

As noted above, Thiele seeks to integrate philosophical, neurobiological, and narrative insights into his account of practical judgment. Thiele's appropriation of philosophers is most focused in the first chapter, "An Intellectual History of Judgment." There, Thiele offers a lucid, yet concise narrative of how twelve different thinkers or schools of thought, from Plato to contemporary decision theorists, have had to account for practical judgment. They may differ on how tightly practical reasoning is tied to morality (Aristotle v. Machiavelli) or whether it requires strong individuals or democratic practices to thrive (Nietzsche v. Dewey). They may emphasize its strengths or its limitations (virtually anyone v. the post-modernists), but all recognize that the power of judgment is central to human existence.

Thiele's appropriation of the neurosciences is more dispersed throughout the book, although it occurs in three main places. The first comes in his discussion of the role experience plays in developing skill in practical reasoning. Some of the experience that is relevant, Thiele contends, is ancestral experience that creates heritable brain maps that are then modified by personal experience (73-89). A second place where neuroscience plays a major role in Theile's account is that of what he calls the unconscious (although that is

perhaps a misnomer). Here, Thiele draws from theories of a modular brain to show how the tacit nature of practical reasoning is rooted in the development of perceptual skills and implicit memory (117-129). Neurobiology even shows up in the chapter devoted to narrative when he suggests that brain maps are a kind of narrative of lived experience (204-205).

In discussing narrative (chapter 5), he argues that evolutionary history makes it possible for humans to develop a reflexive identity, but that language is necessary for completing that process (217). He goes on to argue that morality is primarily narrative in nature (238-244) and then to explore the limits and possibilities of using novels in forming practical judgment (245-263). He concludes by reflecting on the plurality of narratives and suggesting that good judgment entails the capacities to enter various stories, see from many vantage points, and be open to transformation (273-276). In this respect, Thiele offers a more complex account of narratives than Alasdair MacIntyre or others who have established a reputation as narrative thinkers. Thiele readily recognizes that people live in many narratives that are often nested in complex ways (266-269).

All of these sources blend together as Thiele, throughout the book, develops a subtext on how to develop practical reasoning. Thiele agrees with Aristotle that such learning comes primarily through practice—a minimum of 10 years according to some studies that trace the development of expertise in chess, fine arts, and math (93)! Experience can be supplemented with formal instruction, but such instruction must include reflection on actions that provide a genuine possibility of making mistakes (see especially 104-114). Reading and critical reflection on novels can also provide a mechanism for gaining experience vicariously, as well as developing perceptual capacities (245-257).

This summation suggests many possible connections between Thiele's understanding of practical judgment and Polanyi's account of personal knowledge: the importance of perception, the task of recognizing patterns, the inclusion of passions in an account of human thought, the place of apprenticeship in developing skills, and the parallels with clinical judgment. In fact, Thiele make rather extensive use of Polanyi at two main points in his account (even if he does confuse Michael with Karl at one point [254]). The first of these comes in the third chapter, one devoted to "The Power of the Unconscious." There, Thiele draws on Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge as an acquired "knowing how" that can never be fully explicit (130-137). The second comes in the fifth chapter, "The Riches of Narrative." There, Thiele incorporates Polanyi's idea of indwelling into his argument that narratives, because of their rich textures, can be catalysts for internalizing the details that are the stuff of practical reasoning (254). His appropriations of Polanyi are both fair to Polanyi (although I wonder if Polanyi would argue that tacit knowledge should not be included in a discussion of the unconscious) and appropriate to his argument. Given Thiele's familiarity with Polanyi, it is surprising that he does not find Polanyi's discussion of the passions likewise useful.

*The Heart of Judgment* can be taken, alongside the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Bellah, and others, as another constructive response to the pluralism and resulting fragmentation of the contemporary western world. It does offer some advantages over these other approaches. Unlike MacIntyre, Thiele does not advocate as a solution a return to living in a monolithic narrative—his account of narrative pluralism is too thoroughgoing for that. Practical judgment, the ability to sort through competing claims, does indeed seem to be the skill most needed at this time. In this respect, *The Heart of Judgment* has much in common with Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin's *The Abuse of Casuistry*, a work that Thiele somewhat surprisingly ignores. Thiele is also more willing to let the sciences inform his work than at least the early MacIntyre (whose later *Dependant Rational Animals* suggests more openness to biological accounts of human nature).

Still, some questions remain. Although the account of practical judgment that Thiele develops

resonates with Aristotle's at many points, Thiele makes one subtle, but important switch. For Aristotle, practical reasoning requires a polis that is at least relatively good. For him people from deficient backgrounds will not be able to develop the crowning virtue of practical reasoning. For a good society, Thiele substitutes a richly-textured society. Is this the same thing? Put differently, are democratic practices and institutions vibrant enough to produce people of good practical judgment? Perhaps the work of Jeffrey Stout and others is needed to supplement Thiele's argument.

Nevertheless, one cannot do everything in one work. Thiele is to be commended for putting practical reasoning at the forefront of discussion in a way that integrates fields that all too often do not communicate with one another. The end result is a book that offers as fine an account of practical reasoning as is currently available, one that also offers many fruitful ideas for those interested in ways of fostering skill in practical judgment.

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Tony Clark. *Divine Revelation and Human Practice: Responsive and Imaginative Participation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008. Pp. 228 + xvi. ISBN 13: 978-1-55635-516-5. $16.20 paperback.

In preparing to read and review this book by Tony Clark, part of me hoped to be favorably impressed both because of its focus on Polanyi's theory of knowledge and its publication by a press with which I currently have a book contract, while another part of me expected to be unimpressed by its Barthianism in theology. And indeed my actual impressions did reflect an ambivalence precisely along those substantive lines.

This is a well-written book whose prose flows smoothly. With subtitles such as "Intellectual Passions," "Indwelling," "Faith and Doubt," "Commitment, Calling, and Universal Intent," and "The Ubiquity of the Tacit," Chapter 3 serves as a very good introduction to or refresher on Polanyi's epistemology. Drawing on all of Polanyi's books, it makes generous and effective use of quotations as it helpfully schematizes Polanyi's major themes.

With regard to religion and theology, Clark readily grants that Polanyi himself was hardly a positivist with respect to revelation. He notes that Polanyi did not elaborate much on religious epistemology, nor was he necessarily fully consistent in what he did write. He critiques a tendency in Polanyi's references to religion to suggest that, unlike with science and many other areas of human inquiry, religious commitments may not refer to any objective reality at all (138-39)—a legitimate complaint as I read Polanyi.

Like Clark I believe that Polanyi's epistemology holds great promise for religious traditions. He astutely critiques Gordon Kaufman for sharply distinguishing the natural and human sciences as objective from theology and metaphysics as imaginative construction—in the case of theology typically arbitrarily reifying tradition (204ff). Clark rightly chides Polanyi for his own failure to emphasize the crucial role of practicing religious communities for religious knowledge—instead focusing on the individual Christian—a failure all the more glaring because of Polanyi's recognition of the cruciality of the scientific community for advancing scientific knowledge (139).

The main focus of Clark's appropriation of Polanyi for theology is to develop the claim that Polanyi's general epistemology can legitimately and profitably be brought to bear in support of indwelling and imaginative participation in Christian revelation understood in Barthian exclusivist fashion. Here is where I have problems with Clark's argument. He takes umbrage at Kaufman's characterization of Barth's assumption of the truth of Christian revelation as "arbitrary" fideism, defending this revelation as a self-grounding disclosure (a move which can boast an initial plausibility in terms of the acritical aspects of Polanyi's epistemology) (211). Clark finds it very significant that Kaufman denies the possibility of a definitive divine disclosure on the grounds that God is not

a percept, like a book, dog, or human being (among other grounds) (209ff). Citing Alvin Plantinga, he concludes that Kaufman has given us no reasons to doubt the logical possibility of an omniscient and omnipotent God deciding to make Godself known (210).

Recalling a point in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, I grant that God could reveal Godself—indeed in an unambiguous way. We can imagine God declaring, across the earth in each human being's own language, God's reality and will. This use of imagination points to the real problem in Clark's Barthian position. We can devise a scenario in which the divine chooses to become an unambiguous percept to all of humankind. But Barthians and their ilk want to have their cake and eat it too. God chooses to reveal Godself in a more ambiguous way, in which the divine is veiled in its unveiling and which only certain humans truly "hear." At the same time any other religion's claim of a partially revealing, partially veiling manifestation of the divine is false. Obviously any religious tradition can in theory play this same exclusivist game. In practice many, probably most, Muslims accept the exclusive finality of God's self disclosure through Muhammad (even as perhaps most lay Christians still assume such finality about revelation in Christ, especially given the tremendous growth of Christianity in the developing world). Such exclusivity constitutes the elephant in the room which Clark seems not to notice. Such exclusivity I believe constitutes the fundamental arbitrariness which, to Clark's perplexity, troubles Kaufman.

Before concluding I do want to address an element of style also carrying substantive implications for tradition: Clark's use of exclusively masculine pronouns for God. While such exclusive language from "people in the pews" does not faze me, I must confess that I was somewhat put off by such apparent nonchalance by a contemporary Christian theologian. Such exclusivity has become problematic for most academic theologians, with telling critiques of such practice mounted from within Christian tradition. Here is a case where I expect at least some explanation, some appeal to critical reason, even if just in passing.

I will now address the issue of whether Clark's exclusivist model of revelation is problematic not only with respect to Polanyi's own religious convictions, but with respect to important elements of his epistemology. In virtually every area of human endeavor and inquiry, humans continue to attempt to discover, and often succeed in discovering, some of the indeterminate possible future implications Polanyi believed reality always holds. History represents an area which does not quite fit into the same mold, both because our access to the distant past falls under unique constraints and because the past in its own right is already determinate in a sense in which the just present and future are not. Yet the particular areas of history we study, like politics and art, continue to unfold. I personally find it incongruous, with the rise of human personhood from our convivial biological origins, as more of the components of our universe emerge into coherent patterns of meaning and more of the potentialities of that universe become actualized and known, to so limit what I believe to be the most holistic dimension of human life, namely religion. For me, to aver that the divine has chosen to limit its making known of itself to one definitive act through one person or event of the past—and granted the present and future ramifications of this past in the lives of believers through the divine spirit—unnecessarily and implausibly limits God.

In short, regarding the religious and theological ruminations of *Divine Revelation and Human Practice*, neo-orthodox of the Barthian wing, Lindbeckian postliberals, Milbankian Radical Orthodox, and Meekian evangelicals likely will regard Clark's appropriation of Polanyi's epistemology in the service of religious exclusivism as valid, while those more inclusively or pluralistically inclined, like myself, will demur from Clark's basic assumptions about Christian revelation.

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