A Polanyian Metaphysics?
Milton Scarborough's Nondualistic Philosophical Vision

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Milton Scarborough, Michael Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Poteat, metaphysics, nondualism, Buddhist thought, Hebrew worldview, knowing as learning.

This article offers an appreciative review of Milton Scarborough's book, Comparative Theories of Nonduality: The Search for a Middle Way. *The nondualistic metaphysics and epistemology Scarborough argues for integrating three major influences: the Buddhist notions of emptiness and nothingness, ancient Hebrew covenantal theology, and the minority perspectives within Western philosophy of Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty. What results is a vision of a protean reality that is not captured adequately by fixed essences—especially dualistic alternatives— or by a drive toward some unreachable certainty in knowledge. The article raises some questions about the implications of Scarborough's thought and how he formulates it, but as a whole praises the work as a fine example of cross-cultural philosophy.*

Scarborough's stimulating book offers an extended argument for what he terms a middle way that would have a far-reaching, even revolutionary impact on Western ways of thinking and acting. Polanyi's thought plays an important explanatory role in this constructive project. Scarborough's achievement has significant ethical, religious, epistemological, and ontological dimensions, but it is the metaphysical dimension that Scarborough suggests crucially underlies and unifies the various other expressions of the middle way (see page 15). Before describing his notion of the metaphysical middle way, though, several preliminary questions beg to be answered. For instance, why should we want to search for a middle way in the first place? What exactly does Scarborough have in mind when speaking of a middle way?

Dualisms are the negativities needing to be exorcised in Scarborough's vision of insightful human cognition. They are ideally to be replaced by a nondualist perspective, as alluded to in the book's title. The middle way to be uncovered and indwelt is nondualistic in nature. And what is wrong with dualisms? They are a type of survival mechanism that are used to carve out spaces of security and protection in a world of change that is perceived to be unreliable and threatening. Dualisms are hardened oppositions inconsistent with the indeterminate flux actually characteristic of reality. The human purposes served by dualisms do not "necessarily facilitate the quest for dispassionate, objective truth or harmony or even cooperation" (10-11). Presumably, then, we should search for a nondualist middle way because it will attune us to reality in a way that produces personal harmony, interpersonal accord, and humble but exhilarating participation in the cosmic whole, qualities that are too frequently missing in contemporary life.

At this point I can imagine some readers might feel reservations about reading further: "What? Yet another work that begins by bashing Cartesian dualism and postulates a mediating or nondual alternative? Why read an account that trods upon contemplative ground already explored by thinkers as diverse as Hegel,

39

Nietzsche, Dewey, and Heidegger, to name just a few among the thousands who have traveled this route?"

Here I think a strong plea on Scarborough's behalf is fitting. *Comparative Theories of Nonduality* creatively explores territory not even visible from the well trodden paths of most philosophical discourse. Scarborough interprets and integrates three distinctly different metaphysical perspectives in constructing his middle way: the ancient Hebrew worldview, Buddhist nondualism, and Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty as representatives of a minority perspective within Western philosophy. Moreover, he offers a careful discussion of the various sorts of distinctions – some useful, some problematic – that can be labeled "dualistic" or "nondualistic." The result is a distillation of a lifetime of thinking and teaching that I find both unique and largely persuasive. It is a book that deserves serious attention.

In his first chapter, Scarborough lists four types of verbal distinctions that have legitimate uses because they have not yet hardened into the opposition that he calls a dualism. 1. Some distinctions merely point out quite legitimate phenomenal differences (for instance, "cold" and "hard" in describing ice). 2. Some apparent opposites are not mutually exclusive like dualisms; two apparently opposed terms could both be true because there is overlap in the meaning of the terms. 3. Yet other apparent opposites may be but the extremes on a sliding scale of possible positions; such polar opposites are not yet dualistic in the negative sense ("liberals," " conservatives"). 4. The sharpest contrast between binary terms is contradiction, as between "black" and "non-black." Yet such a dichotomy exhibits an acceptable logical division that becomes problematic only if the terms are misapplied to reality.

What then constitutes a dualism, the *bête noire* of Scarborough's analysis? "[D]ualism consists of a dichotomy in which the paired terms, concepts, or things have a static substance or fixed essence" (6). As is well known with respect to Descartes' two substances – for the purposes of this discussion, mind and matter – their substantial quality creates an insuperable difficulty in understanding how intangible mind might have a causal impact in a material world. In their rigid opposition, dualistic terms, like mind and matter, but also self and other, faith versus reason, cognition versus emotion, monism versus dualism, good versus reason, and so on, are out of kilter with the ambiguous and complex nature of the real and our lived experience of it. Such binaries distort the truth through their over-precision, numerical simplification, implicit denial of change, and legitimation of invidious hierarchical distinctions (7-9). The problems of conceptualization created by dualisms are exacerbated by the ease with which dualistic terms can facilitate clean-cut conclusions in Aristotelian logic and its Western successors. The precision of logic when manipulating clearly delimited dualistic terms helps create the illusion that modern Western philosophy has achieved a rigor and certainty characteristic of the disciplines this approach to knowledge is modeled after: physics and mathematics. Alas, recalcitrant reality refuses to be confined in the straightjacket of modernist thought, and postmodernist proposals are better at critiquing modernism than they are in formulating alternative visions of the real. There continues to be a need for a middle way in ontology between modernist *rigor mortis* and postmodernist explanatory looseness. To what extent is Scarborough's nondualist project successful in charting an attractive and useful middle way?

Asia is resident to a number of systems of thought and practice that are nondualist in nature. Scarborough relies heavily for his metaphysical middle way on the Buddhist tradition, particularly as articulated by Nagarjuna in his concept of emptiness (*sunyata)* and expressed in the Zen Buddhist concept of nothingness (Chinese *wu*, Japanese *mu*). Each points to a dimension of depth in reality, appreciated in experience at a pre-reflective level. The Buddhist doctrines of no-self, impermanence, and dependent co-arising are particularly significant as descriptors of the metaphysical vision Scarborough promulgates (15). His summary of the middle way based on Mahayana Buddhism includes the following claims:

First, Mahayana denies the existence of fixed essences, inherent existence, or substances such as *Atman* or *svabhava*. All things are empty of such essences. Second, it affirms that all things are causally conditioned. Nothing is independent; rather, all things are interdependent. Third, it affirms that words are relationally defined. . . . Fourth, the source of the conceptualized, objectified world is nonbeing. *Sunyata* places all things into a wider, interdependent context, often characterized as a net or web. . . . What nonbeing as a source does is to add a third dimension, the dimension of depth. . . . Given such tools in its toolbox, Asia is far better equipped than the West to deal with all varieties of dualisms and other binary oppositions. (23-24)

Several serious questions can be directed to Scarborough concerning the very notion of a metaphysical middle way. It is easy to understand why Buddha's prescriptions about how to live came to be called a middle way as a morally tinged approach to daily living: his path follows a course between two extremes: the self-indulgent luxury of his youth and his extreme devotion to asceticism once he left his family compound. But is the *metaphysical* vision to which Scarborough calls us best described as a middle way? Here is his justification for using this term: "In the sixth century BCE, only two possibilities were available for speaking philosophically about existence – permanent existence (*astitta*) and no existence (*nastitta*). These two options constitute a metaphysical dualism" (15). It is difficult to imagine on what grounds anyone would follow a metaphysics of no existence; certainly it would not seem to be an option today. Buddha's metaphysics seems basically to be constructed in opposition to the Hindu notions of *Atman* and *Brahman*, permanent and unchanging entities. It seems more like an oppositional alternative than a middle way. It's not even a middle way between permanence and change, as Plato's metaphysics can be seen as a middle way between Parmenides and Heraclitus (71). The Mahayana way is much closer to Heraclitus than Parmenides. Neither of Scarborough's further elaborations of the metaphysical middle way – the relative naivety of ancient Hebrew thought and the philosophy of Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty – seems to be usefully construed as a middle way. Consequently, wouldn't the thrust of Scarborough's ontological argument be more accurately described in other terms, such as a metaphysics of depth, a non-thetic phenomenology, a metaphysics privileging the tacit, or perhaps even a Buddhist metaphysics? "The middle way" does not reveal clearly what Scarborough is up to in metaphysics. His project calls the reader to something more radical than a metaphysics of mediation or compromise.

On the other hand, "the middle way" is a suggestive term for Scarborough's *epistemology*. He argues, with Polanyi, for an understanding of knowledge as both personal and manifesting universal intent. The objectivist ideal of certain and absolute knowledge is rejected as incompatible with the nondualist metaphysics that grounds his thought (see, for instance, 92-93). But while we have no absolute knowledge of reality, we experience much that we can rely upon. So in epistemology Scarborough does indeed chart a middle way between absolutism and extreme skepticism. This middle way breaks asunder one of the perennial dualisms he claims operates in Western culture: that between absolute knowledge and ignorance (74).

Here, though, is another question for Scarborough. He begins his first chapter with a quote from Yuanwu: "If you are in opposition to anything, this creates duality. Then you are stuck with self and others and gain and loss, and you are unable to walk upon the open ground of reality" (1). Scarborough is in opposition to dualism. Dualism and nondualism are defined in ways that suggest each has certain essential characteristics. Does this imply that Scarborough self contradictorily creates a dualism to attack dualism? Does his binary approach result in his inability to walk upon the open ground of reality?

The alleged inconsistency, he might assert, occurs at the level of language only. There is a deeper, tacit level of reality that language can point to, and the distinction between this pre-reflective level and the articulate level of language names a legitimate difference. But the difference is not absolute. In Polanyian terms, sometimes the tacit can be made explicit, the subsidiary made focal. Thus Scarborough's opposition to dualism is best understood not as eventuating in a new dualism of delimited terms that occludes our understanding of reality, but as an expansion of our understanding and appreciation of the depth and breadth of reality. His approach does not founder upon self-contradiction.

How does Hebrew pre-philosophical thought, the second of the three metaphysical perspectives Scarborough relies upon, contribute meaningfully to his metaphysical middle way? He devotes the second and third chapters of his book to making a case for the insightfulness of the archaic Hebrew worldview, which he believes is nondualistic in a naïve way. He admits that his interpretation of Hebrew culture and thought is a highly selective account (27, 61). The description of the creation in the first chapter of Genesis plays an important role in his interpretation: Elohim is not portrayed as a transcendent being to be seen in contrast to the created world. The reference in Genesis 1:2 to an "abyss," "waters," "earth," and "wind" suggests Elohim is an immanent force bringing order and purpose to pre-existing building blocks of the universe (162-163). In Hebrew thought, there is not the duality one finds in Greek thought between time and eternity (time in Hebrew conception "is dynamic and moves toward an open future" [36]); heaven and earth (Elohim created both); essence and existence (Elohim is not immutable, but changes his mind); or body and soul (the soul "is merely the life of the body" [34]). Rather than a transcendent being, then, Elohim is seen as involved in history and related uniquely to the Hebrew people in a covenant involving mutual obligations between Elohim and a whole community. "Relatedness to others, then, is a central feature of both God and humans" (65). Scarborough goes on, rather surprisingly, to compare and contrast what Elohim/Yahweh means to the Hebrew community with what *sunyata* means to Nagarjuna and the Buddhist community. He concludes that "there is a parallel between the inherent human potential for being in covenant relationship and the inherent human potential for enlightenment: the Elohim-nature is analogous to the Buddha-nature" (65).

Those who are familiar with Scarborough's earlier *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994 – reviewed in *TAD* 21:2) will not be surprised at the contrast he draws between Hebrew and Greek thought. In that work he privileges the first creation myth of Genesis as opposed to Plato's creation myth of Timaeus. Both myths, he claims, are tacitly at work in Western thought. The work of the demiurge of the Timaeus myth, who creates according to the plans provided by Platonic ideas, supports the modernist dualism of form and matter and contributes to objectivism and a mechanistic view of the cosmos. The biblical myth, on the other hand, portrays the divinity as willfully shaping chaotic material in a free, contingent manner that culminates in delight: the creation was seen as good. In like manner, the Hebrew people are invited to participate with God in the ambiguous yet meaning-laden shaping of historical possibility toward a better world. In both of his books, Scarborough offers Abraham as the model human being, one who in faithfulness to God's promise journeys toward an unknown destination. In *Comparative Theories of Nonduality* the story of Abraham is linked up with Buddhist thought and Polanyian philosophy in the following instructive selection:

> The epistemological nondualism of the Abraham passage becomes apparent if his 'not knowing where he was going' is interpreted as 'non-knowing' (a rhetorical formula indebted to Buddhism) for expressing the middle way between the extremes of knowing absolutely and not knowing at all (ignorance). Such nondualism is more likely to be appreciated in the West, however, if it is put into positive rather than negative terms. Hence, I propose that in a genuinely

postmodern era knowing be understood as learning, a concept that is descriptive of Abraham's journeying, I believe, and of what Polanyi calls 'personal knowledge' or 'post-critical knowledge.' (130; see also 224)

Again, several questions arise for this reviewer. In embracing the concreteness of Hebrew culture and its view of Elohim/Yahweh, can Scarborough avoid committing himself to the creative activity of a personal god, which seems so much at odds with the impersonal *sunyata* of Buddhism which he seems to take as the foundational reality? Moreover, is the worldview of ancient Israel really all that different from the worldviews, broadly conceived, of other cultures? For instance, the cult of ancient Sumer is polytheistic rather than henotheistic or even monotheistic, as is the case for ancient Hebrew culture. But if one takes Abraham or Jacob as models, there are biblical links to the religions of Sumer and Babylon, perhaps most clearly visible in the household gods that Rachel took from Laban (Genesis 31:19 ff). Many other cultures, often preliterate, view god or gods as active in the world in ways not terribly distinct from how Elohim is conceived as involved with the people of Israel. So in endorsing the Hebrew vision of the world is Scarborough in effect not advocating a nostalgic retrieval of an archaic worldview in serious conflict with the scientific understanding of the world that is characteristic of the Western worldview, as well as being at odds with Buddhist thought? Even in the Greek world, is there not the existence of mystery religions and other archaic elements that have much in common with the Hebrew worldview? Nietzsche partially captures this perspective in his notion of the Dionysian. Need Scarborough set Hebrew versus Greek to make his point; does this scheme not set up the sort of dualism he seeks to avoid?

The contrast made between Hebrew oral tradition and Greek visual culture has a long history involving such thinkers as Adolf Harnack, but here the influence of William Poteat on Scarborough is most evident. Indeed, Scarborough's project as a whole can be seen as an extension of Poteat's critique of the logical, visual bias that dominates Western philosophy. Poteat is one of the persons to whom Scarborough dedicates *Comparative Theories of Nonduality*. However, Scarborough writes about complex issues with admirable clarity; unlike Poteat he does not think neologisms have to be coined or vocabulary has continually to be altered (as is characteristic of Heidegger and Derrida) in order to avoid linguistic sclerosis (although occasionally Poteatian terms like "embrangled," "retrotends" and "mindbody" sneak into his text).

In his fourth chapter, "From Omniscience to Ignorance," Scarborough lays out a somewhat schematized history of Western dualism. The Platonic contrast between the changing world of the senses and the unchanging intelligible world of reason and the Forms sets the table for subsequent thinkers. Scarborough's basic theme is that Western philosophy has increasingly become skeptical about the possibility of comprehending reality. One of the reasons for this is that it has been assumed that knowing is a state of certainty based upon proof and rigorous verification. British empiricism culminated in the skepticism of Hume; German idealists recaptured the certainty of reason at the cost of losing contact with reality; and analytic philosophy eventuated in an examination of how language is used, which again has no necessary correlation with the way things really are.

Especially interesting to this reviewer is Scarborough's take on Derrida's style of postmodernism. Beginning from the flawed view of language promulgated by Saussure, which simplistically opposes a signifier and a signified, Derrida shows that on this basis language is arbitrarily conventional and incapable of grasping and revealing what is real. "Both Derrida and Nagarjuna oppose fixity [of linguistic terms], definability, and the sufficiency of logic and reason" (83). Poteat also believes Western logic and objectivist language are inadequate means for grasping reality, but he turns to the speech act rooted in and embracing the fullness of our tacit

sensitivities as establishing a standpoint in reality. So what steps does Derrida propose to counter the logocentrism of logically defined terms?

> In the course of deconstructing such terms, [Derrida] emphasizes their opposites. For example, he moves from identity to difference, from presence to absence, from center to margin, from logic to rhetoric, and from realism to a linguistic form of idealism. Language is not determined by reality but by its own internal and arbitrary rules and practices. But he sees that since 'difference' and the other opposites to which he gravitates, are also logocentric, they, too, are problematic. Hence, if they are to be used and if logocentrism is to be avoided . . ., then the opposite terms must be placed 'under erasure' or 'crossed out,' that is, used merely provisionally. Even so, they must be changed frequently so that they don't harden and become fixed (87).

As can be seen in the foregoing passage, Derrida does not really escape the ruling web of language through his recommended solution. The fullness of experience beyond language is never more than hinted at and never relied upon as a basis for seeking to understand reality. It is at this point that Scarborough turns to Polanyi and Merleau-Ponty as offering a more satisfying theory of how we relate to the real.

Polanyi's thought, which Scarborough sees as a middle way between absolute knowledge and extreme skepticism, is featured in Chapter 5, "A Western, Nondual Epistemology." Polanyi, as a scientist, is able to incorporate nature as well as language into his philosophy. "For Polanyi, the point of view from within the process of discovery, rather than the point of view acquired after a discovery is already made, becomes the proper paradigm of all knowing" (106). The active knower is motivated by a passion to understand reality, as guided by tacit intimations of coherence. "If the search for knowledge is driven by intellectual desire and conducted largely by inarticulate powers, then the solution or discovery 'carries conviction from the start'" (107). Thus Polanyian epistemology undercuts pervasive skepticism, but it does not thereby accede to the assumption that knowledge must be absolute and certain to count as knowledge. For knowing is a personal act based on biologically endowed and learned skills that are often indeterminate and fallible.

Scarborough asserts that Polanyian tacit knowing has strong affinities with *sunyata* and *mu* because it

> functions to undercut dualistic thinking. Dualistic conceptions are the product of reflection and lie at the 'to' pole of reflective acts. The absolute character of these dualities, however, is relativized or dissolved by the 'from' pole, which is the inarticulate, shadowy, background that is the tacit dimension. In other words, the ultimately unspecifiable and inexhaustible tacit dimension is a kind of Western version of emptiness and nothingness, both in description and function (109).

Moreover, Scarborough claims that "Polanyi's universal intent, along with his 'personally grounded objectivity' is his attempt to articulate for the West the nonduality of objectivity vs. subjectivity, universal vs. particular, identity vs. difference. There is a greater reality from which all these binary oppositions are abstracted aspects" (119).

Scarborough's interpretation of Polanyi is sure-footed and perceptive. He stresses the importance of Polanyi's notion of embodiment as supportive of tacit skills and as the ultimate expression of our finitude. "The body is the tacit dimension made flesh" (120). Because in a spiritual sense each person is a fluctuating but expanding system of tacit acceptances, the contrast between faith or belief and reason dissolves.

> It should be clear enough that belief, as understood here, is not the assent of a separate and utterly disinterested intellect to the truth of approved doctrinal formulations lacking sufficient evidence. It is a confident reliance on tacit acceptances, a courageous indwelling of clues, and the passionate pursuit of intimations in the hope of a discovery or of fresh confirmations. It is the structure of all knowing-as-learning (125).

The notion of knowing-as-learning connects with Polanyi's inarticulate skills of trick, sign and latent learning as well as his heuristic vision of articulate discovery. Scarborough has provided us with a helpful alternative to thinking of knowledge as absolute and certain.

The last three chapters of Scarborough's book treat, roughly speaking, the notions of self, God, and world, all as understood from a nondual standpoint. This tripartite division corresponds with Kant's three transcendental ideas, although I don't believe Scarborough ever is explicit about such a correlation. As regards the self, he suggests that the American duality of self versus the other is fostered by forms of individualism that are "antithetical to a sense of togetherness, solidarity, and common ground" (135). These latter convivial qualities are supported by the interrelatedness found in *sunyata* and the Hebrew worldview. To bolster understanding of the ineluctable social nature of humans, Scarborough makes use of Erikson's psycho-historical theory, the account of the "wild-boy" of Averyron, and the story of a son of blind parents who as a child required communal coaching so that he could learn to see.

Chapter 7, "Nondual Immanence and Transcendence," is a fascinating exploration of the notion of divinity. Scarborough brings into the discussion a diverse group of thinkers including Gordon Kaufman, Tom Kasulis, Masao Abe, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, John Macmurray, Keiji Nishitani, Charles Hartshorne, and Harvey Cox. As already noted, Scarborough favors understanding the divine as an immanent force in history. Yet finally he opts for the notion of reality as the ultimate horizon of being and becoming understood nondually. "I am inclined to say that God and the world, like the transcendent and the immanent, are parts of something more comprehensive and nondual, which I call 'Reality'" (181). In contrast to Polanyi's suggestion that worship is the ultimate relationship to be directed toward God, Scarborough supports "partnership with God in repairing Reality" (181). He acknowledges that in speaking of the divine, some degree of anthropomorphism is inescapable. He articulates his most considered view about the divine as follows:

> To say 'God' is to speak humbly and haltingly of our experience of those more elusive, less determinate, less definable, and sublime dimensions of Reality, especially those that summon us to compassion, justice, courage, and creativity; that motivate, empower, comfort, and sustain us along life's journey; and that prompt surprising upsurges of gratitude and joy. (187).

It should be noted in passing that Scarborough's nondual theology does not seem to offer any resources for coping with some of the negative experiences of living that motivate many persons to look toward religions for insight or consolation. What of sin and guilt? Are there promptings of forgiveness in a nondual perspective? What of seemingly unmerited experiences of suffering? Can a theodicy be extracted from his ideas? What of the

fact of death; how should its apparent finality be understood? Are there resources for morality to be garnered from *sunyata* ? Scarborough states he does not intend to present a full-blown doctrine of God (157), and these apparently unanswered questions suggest how distant his thought is from traditional theology.

The last chapter contains some practical suggestions about how to engage the world in a nondual manner. Scarborough first catalogues some horizontal, vertical and habitual obstacles to nondual engagement in and with the world. The vertical problem of privileging some planes of existence over others (sometimes powerful higher planes over lower planes; sometimes, as in reductionism, lower over higher planes) can be countered by utilizing Polanyi's notion of emergence, which he interprets as viewing levels as interdependent (196). He then lists several practices which can sustain a nondual perspective. We can learn to see rather than merely look. We see when we tame our active intentionality and patiently open ourselves to the wonder of pre-reflective experience as it wells up into reflective awareness. We can develop the habit of noticing and disempowering, in thought or action, the commanding presence of binary oppositions. Meditation and phenomenological intuiting can aid our sensitivity to our cognitive patterns and their role in our life. Above all, we are encouraged to develop habits of compassionate action, wisdom in discernment, and celebration as a counter to despair or resignation (220).

Milton Scarborough never pretends he has all the answers, and he assures us that his prescriptions are not to be taken in some monolithic way. He expresses the modesty that is also characteristic of Polanyi at his best. But modesty is not the same as timidity. *Comparative Theories of Nonduality* is a brave, ground-breaking work. I am not convinced that its insights are best described as a metaphysical *middle way*, but I would affirm that the book's nondualistic vision, however labeled, sketches out an attractive way of thinking and doing that bypasses many of the problems associated with the dominant metaphysical assumptions in the West. The deplorable cost of the 237 page book is unfortunate but not all that unusual these days. The good news is that it will soon be published in a less expensive paperback form. That Polanyi's insights are so central to the book's vision of a nondual manner of living is but one of many reasons that we may celebrate the publication of a version more accessible to all.

WWW   Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi . In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) digital archives containing all issues of *Tradition and Discovery* and its predecessor publications of the Polanyi Society going back to 1972; (2) indices listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) the history of Polanyi Society publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Michael Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi," which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL 60637; (6) photographs of Polanyi; (7) links to a number of essays (available on the Polanyi Society web site and other sites) by Polanyi as well as audio files for Polanyi's McEnerney Lectures (1962) and Polanyi's conversation with Carl Rogers (1966).