MADNESS AS METAPHOR: THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS OF POST-CRITICAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Poteat often spoke of our modern predicament as "madness." His use of this term was not strictly technical, but he meant it most emphatically. Modern thought created an alienation of self from lived-through experience, which had to be recovered through careful examination of the assumptions of the regnant culture. Polanyi and the post critical enterprise offered a perspective and certain tools for this recovery of self, which may properly be understood to be "therapeutic" both in the metaphorical sense and with the understandings that might be offered by the psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

William H. Poteat, in his PhD dissertation, "Pascal's Concept of Man and Modern Sensibility," identifies the crisis of modernity with a bifurcation of thought that brought about an "external" as well as an experienced view of reality. This bifurcation has profoundly undermined any sense of self. Man in this understanding, once the holder of a unique dignity in the universe, became a mere object, a three dimensional thing (*res extensa*, as Descartes put it, with a detached mind, *res cogitans*).[1] Poteat has shown the consequences of this view. It

> caused a feeling of ambivalence; in it there was something supremely satisfying, something flattering to human vanity and the desire to

> become as gods, not only knowing good and evil, but having power over the very earth itself. Yet this self-flattery had to be purchased at the awful price of something terrifying to human vanity, at the price, namely, of losing any assurance that human life has any unique status in a world the last reality of which is the 'hurrying of matter endlessly, meaninglessly'. For this reason, modern thought has been vacillating between pride and despair—the pride bred of man's power to control nature, the despair bred of his fear that it is really nature that has the last word (Poteat 1950, 121).

The anxiety stems from this presumption that the new "objective" view of reality foisted upon us by modern critical thought must somehow trump the world of lived-through experience, the primary world of the senses (Merleau-Ponty), the comfortable certitudes of a close relationship with God, an ordered known universe.

Polanyi's post-critical epistemology (personal knowledge) becomes therapeutic in dealing with this malaise. Polanyi, with the authority of a scientist who sees through the ruse, points out what should be obvious to anyone not willing to pretend (recall "The Emperor has No Clothes") that all knowledge is based on an antecedent tacit experience of reality, which becomes a commitment to a held belief.

Poteat, not occasionally and not incidentally, referred to this cultural alienation as a form of "madness" and even "insanity." I think he used these terms quite deliberately and quite emphatically, born out of feelings of frustration, exasperation, at dealing with people, his/our contemporaries, who accepted such duplicity unselfconsciously, or worse, presumed a moral superiority. He did not suggest lightly that this bifurcation was a psychiatric (or mental) disorder. Psychiatric nomenclature itself is subject to mind/body bifurcation, which insurance companies try to exploit by reimbursing at lower rates than true physical disorders. Schizophrenia is more than a split-mind. Depression is more than unhappiness. Anxiety is more than angst. And PTSD is more than the aftermath of a post-traumatic event. All have biological components, which may be modified by medications, herbs, substances, or "mind-altering" chemicals, but cannot be completely reduced to physical-chemical understandings of transmitters at synapses. They also have psycho-social, economic, and spiritual determinants, which are part of the more complex reality of human understanding that Poteat sought to elucidate. They have an aspect of lived-through experience (history, narrative) that may with difficulty be communicated to others though the medium of language (talking therapy) or use of other symbols, such as art or ritual.

Poteat is diagnosing a very real form of cultural neurosis, a conflict based on fear, anxiety or dread. Poteat's understanding of dis-ease is a metaphor. It takes something familiar and makes us look at it in an unfamiliar way, thus taking something we

thought we understood, madness, and showing us that we did not really understand it at all. Poteat's quest for understanding has a therapeutic dimension that is as much psychological as it is philosophical or theological.

Madness as metaphor opens the possibility of understanding the relationship between thoughts and feelings. As such it can be a bridge between mind and body ("mindbody" to use Poteat's neologism), as a way of overcoming the mind/body split, the legacy of Cartesian dualism. Madness as diagnosis has its detractors, further stigmatizing those already marginalized. Anti-psychiatry objects to the medicalization of distress. Scientology promotes its own brand of religion, which many would not recognize as either religious or therapeutic. Thomas Szasz suggests that mental illness is a myth, by which he means "myth" as a non-reality (rather than "myth" as an explanatory system) because, in his view—only biological illnesses are real illnesses.

R.D. Laing, a popular counter-culture psychiatrist in the 1960s and 1970s, further suggested that sane society, and psychiatry as its instrument, actually perpetuate rather than alleviate certain kinds of mental illness. Laing's first book *The Divided Self* (1960) attempted to make schizophrenia and the process of going mad intelligible in existential terms. In his *Politics of Experience* (1967), schizophrenia has become a sane reaction to an insane society so that normality becomes madness, the development of a false-self system. Without quite mastering the metaphor, Laing in an objectivist way, confuses the experience of alienation and the cause of alienation (see Dyer 1973).

Robert Pirsig is more perceptive in his exploration of madness. His widely read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is not only an odyssey through life, an extended motorcycle journey, reflections on facing life's challenges honestly, it is also a useful review of ways in which the Western philosophical canon, as taught at the University of Chicago, could literally—*literally*—drive one mad.[2]

Pirsig's second book, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, though less popular, is no less insightful. It details another odyssey. An anthropologist, an observer of culture, takes a sailboat from the Great Lakes down the Hudson River. As he travels, he reflects on how people form their sense of self—how for example, American culture can be seen as a blend of Native American and European cultures. Native Americans appear to Europeans as wild and unrefined, while European Americans appear to Native Americans as forked-tongue and duplicitous—we might even say "Cartesian." In this journey the anthropologist meets a woman named Lila, who becomes progressively unhinged, grieving a drowned baby doll as her own lost child. By the time we reach New York, we are prepared to empathize with Lila as someone who lives in a culture of her own making, which no one else shares or understands.

Richard Gelwick, perhaps sensitized by years teaching in a medical school, sees Polanyi's task as a physician of culture or a cultural diagnostician. Polanyi uses this

metaphor himself with great effect in an early paper, "The Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Cure:"

> In the days when an idea could be silenced by showing that it was contrary to religion, theology was the greatest single source of fallacies. Today, when any human thought can be discredited by branding it as unscientific, the power exercised previously by theology has passed over to science; hence, science has become in its turn the greatest single source of error (Polanyi 1957, 480).

In his paper, Gelwick notes that Polanyi documents the dangers posed to our moral ideals by false epistemological beliefs. I will explore those themes below, but I would like to call attention here to Polanyi's formulation of the power of ideas. He is talking about an implicit power of cultural conformity, which at one point in history (pre-Enlightenment, pre-critical) was possessed by religion and which subsequently passed to science.

Susan Sontag suggests that we travel with two passports, that of the well and that of the sick. Having a diagnosis like cancer, tuberculosis, or HIV is doubly difficult because of the social burden added to the affliction: the way people react to the person with illness (1978, 3). Getting well is more than getting over a biological affliction; it also means recovering our sense of self, our sense of wellbeing. Madness by extension is like traveling with two passports, metaphorically speaking. Objectivist thought requires us to see ourselves as (we imagine) others see us and at the same time as we experience ourselves.

Polanyi's critique of modern epistemology was generated by an ethical problem: the damage he thought objectivist epistemology was doing to our moral ideals. Although Polanyi was implicitly concerned with moral problems, he does not explicitly take on ethics as a philosophical undertaking.[3]

In a sense the word "ethics" and all it connotes covers two different terrains, the attempt to discern right from wrong and at the same time the attempt to know the right thing to do. We might say one is the domain of ethics as a discipline and the other of morality in terms of cultural or even individual norms. But even that distinction is fraught with ambiguity. Post-critically we appreciate a from-to vector in ethical undertaking, but the undertaking of "doing ethics" skates dangerously close to the thin ice of Cartesian thought, especially as it is often done, laying out rules for conformity or for judging the behavior of others from a purportedly solid objectivist vantage point.

Polanyi saw a danger to our cultural ideals, which he once described to me as no less than "the dissolution of European culture" (Personal communication, Oxford, 1969). Most poignantly for him was the Soviet oppression of his native Hungary (1966, 24-39). His most direct comments about ethics come in his description of

moral inversion, where utopian moral perfectionism results in immorality. I don't think enough has been made of these insights when everyday news accounts provide new examples of seemingly impenetrable dynamo-objective couplings, where moral passions depart from all reason and short circuit any possibility of a convivial order, even a civil order.[4]

Polanyi gives two examples of the dynamo-objective coupling: first, Soviet Marxism, in which disguised moral passions lead to oppressive immorality:

> Alleged scientific assertions, which are accepted as fact because they satisfy moral passions, will excite the passions further. Any criticism of the scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings. Each of the two components, the dynamic and the objective, takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when it is under attack (*PK*, 230).[5]

The other example Polanyi offers as a "spurious" form of moral inversion, is Freud's interpretation of culture in light of his psychology. Polanyi sees this as an example of the way "men may go on talking the language of positivism, pragmatism, and naturalism for many years, yet continue to respect the principles of truth and morality, which their vocabulary anxiously ignores" (*PK*, 233). Freud here may be seen as speaking in the language of the regnant culture, even while creating a new vocabulary. He might be said to be travelling with two passports, epistemologically as well as when the Nazis entered Vienna and he was forced to emigrate to London. The loss of his son in World War I left Freud deeply pessimistic. Polanyi is in no way dismissive of Freud or his insights or hypotheses, but recognizes in Freud's yearning for acceptance by his scientific colleagues and a reliance on their objectivist metaphors, at least in his theoretical formulations.[6]

I have found it useful to distinguish "Freudianism" as the theoretical extrapolation of Freud's insights from "psychoanalysis," the clinical application of his method to helping individual persons understand their own motives and choices. Ultimately psychoanalysis is a form of transformative personal knowing, a moral undertaking in unraveling the unconscious dynamisms that shape feelings and drive behavior, aligning the impulses of childhood (id) with the ideals of society (superego) through insight and understanding (ego).

I find Murray Jardine's 2013 article, "Michael Polanyi's Response to the Crisis of Modernity," a helpful reminder of Poteat's understanding of "modernity as mixed metaphor." Modern man lives in the tension between two incoherent worldviews, the primarily visual worldview that the efficient Greek alphabet fostered and the primarily oral/aural narrative experience of Hebraic culture. The self-knowledge of psychoanalysis,

like the Socratic admonition to "know thyself," like the personal knowledge of Polanyi, recovers an antecedent experience analogous to the figure-ground of Gestalt psychology, where the recovery of the self (figure) stands out against the background of the culture in which it exists. We feel whole only when connected to both parts of our experience, the inner and the outer, the private and the public. Otherwise we may feel "alienated, anxious, a divided self" (Dyer 1974, 257).[7]

This is what I take to be Freud's contribution to the therapeutic enterprise as recognized by Poteat: the recovery of the first-person narrative of the history that lies behind the public persona. In this sense, Freud is relying on the Hebraic tradition in creating a space away from the agora ("public sphere"), where one can gradually become comfortable speaking one's innermost thoughts and feelings. This narrative I take to be essential to the healing enterprise of medicine more broadly, the communication of the patient/sufferer with the doctor/healer: the medical history, the chief concerns, the history of the present illness, the past medical history, the family history, the social history, the developmental history; in short, the patient's story.

Even Freud's placement of the analysts' chair outside the line of vision of the patient/analysand must be understood as Hebraic in this oral/aural tradition. It is sometimes said disparagingly that Freud did not want to be stared at by his patients all day. That might or might not be part of his motive, but more importantly, psychoanalysis is conceived as something that occurs by means of verbal communication, not "acted out" in a public space. Following that were Freud's strict requirements for minimal interaction outside the sessions and no physical (certainly no sexual) contact between doctor and patient, proscriptions that we understand as the ethical boundaries, or frame, which are requisite for the development of trust (faithfulness or fidelity) required for healing.

The Dreams of Descartes

The crisis of modernity, or the modern predicament—indeed the scientific method itself—is often identified with René Descartes. Descartes claimed that this method was "revealed" to him in a series of dreams, which he had on the night of November 10, 1619.[8] The dreams are instructive, for they reveal the workings of Descartes' mind and his anxieties behind the Cartesian veil. The first two dreams were frightening to Descartes, which he took to be warnings about the dangers he faced in developing a new philosophy challenging ecclesiastical authority, but the third dream was soothing in that he felt it revealed the blessing of God for his scientific undertaking. In the third dream, he sees two books on a table, one a dictionary, which he takes to be all the sciences joined together, and the second an anthology of poems, *Corpus Poetarum*, which he took to be Philosophy and Wisdom joined together. He felt some disdain for the [scholastic] philosophy of his time. He felt that poets, indeed all men, had maxims

and insights which were deeper and more sensible than the writings of the philosophers. One of the poems was called *Quod vitae sectabor iter?* (Which way shall I choose?) The pleasantness of the dream he took to be divine blessing for his new vocation.

The great turning point in dream interpretation came with Freud's classic book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he suggested that dreams offer clues to a person's past, a somewhat radical departure from the usual understanding that dreams were portents of the future. Recall Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream about Seven Fat Cows/Seven Lean Cows, which Joseph interpreted as a prediction of seven fat years, and seven years famine. Descartes took his dreams as a blessing for his future, but looking at his life developmentally, we see that there were problems the dreams did not solve.

Notable in Descartes' life was the death of his mother when he was fourteen months old. His father, a prosperous lawyer, provided for the sickly child, but never developed an emotionally close relationship with him, and when he was ten placed him in a Jesuit school.

Descartes' life, his philosophy, and his dreams all reveal conflicts between a desire for certainty and security and a desire for independence and solitude, between a submission to authority and defiance of that authority (his father, his school, the church and its traditions), and between a fascination with his emotions and a rationality devoid of emotional content.[9]

Descartes' seventeenth-century solution is our contemporary problem. What appears to have been a revolution of liberation from a most oppressive dogmatism, we now recognize as a compromise solution at best. Intellectual freedom was accomplished at the expense of loss of personal and moral wholeness. At the heart of the Cartesian method of abstraction lies a fundamental deception, the outward appearance of conformity and subjugation to authority, while maintaining an inward mental life (Dyer 1986, 172).

The liberation of the pursuit of knowledge from the authority of the church was a truly astonishing accomplishment. Yet our appreciation of Descartes' genius is ambivalent, for the price of that liberation was a split of the material and spiritual worlds with the result that Man (as a person) was to be impersonally studied by the methods of understanding physical objects in space and time. Descartes was no Cartesian. He learned to navigate perilous territory by travelling in disguise. He professed always to be a devout Catholic. Yet he claimed to doubt everything—everything, that is, except his own existence, which he claimed to be proof of a sovereign God.

Religion as Moral Inversion?

Descartes taught moderns to hold two worldviews simultaneously, the exterior world of extended things (*res extensa*) and the inner world of thinking things (*res cogitans*). For him they were separate realms, separate frames of reference, and for Descartes, this dualism protected him from the strictures of ecclesiastical authority and provided a space for his thinking method. Thanks in part to Descartes, contemporary persons are less likely to feel the constraints of ecclesiastical authority and have gotten out of the habit of being told what to believe. Personal knowledge becomes instructive here particularly in Polanyi's equivalence of doubt and belief. No less important, I believe, is his caution about the dangers of ideology when personal commitments and moral passions go unrecognized and unacknowledged.

For many if not most moderns (or are we ready to claim ourselves as post-moderns?), post-critical epistemology makes it impossible for us to go back to modern habits the way that it is hard (but not impossible) in a post-Freudian era to imagine pure thoughts without embodied feelings, stored in unconscious memories and over-determined motives. Is not the cat irreversibly out of the bag? Is not the post-critical enterprise an inoculation, protective against the "madness" Poteat altered us to, therapeutic in the sense that once we realize that we are *neither* interior *nor* exterior beings, we can live comfortably, both as we experience ourselves and as others see us, from the inside and the outside simultaneously in our mindbodies?

And now back to my question about the place of religion in post-modern experience. It seems that for many contemporary persons, the articulated certitudes of organized religion, presented as unassailable facts, do not ring true. The evils sanctioned in the name of God and the rationalizations for political misbehavior undermine for many the credibility of stories and traditions which might offer guidance and comfort. Having been alerted to the workings of the dynamo-objective coupling, it is hard not to see moral inversions, the coupling of moral certitude with an objective view of reality, at operation in many religious institutions. Do the possibilities for faith require us to turn a blind eye to the more mundane aspects of religion?

Of course these are problems of "Western" modernist thought. Our Asian friends remind us that "Eastern" thought never underwent the mind/body split. Spirituality has always been casually and sometimes usefully part of life. Descartes and his contemporaries needed a cover to protect them from the life-or-death coercion of the ecclesiastical authorities. This kind of alienation and madness is primarily a problem created by the excess of power the medieval church accrued to itself, an historical aberration that has created anxieties that persist to this day.

Finally, we come back to the question of the therapeutic implications of post-critical philosophy. Can philosophy ultimately ever really be therapeutic, i.e. psychotherapeutic? Can it move us from dis-ease to at-ease? In a metaphorical sense, we may feel less

discomfited by trying to adhere to external expectations, which we may experience as false, but dare not say so. These are the false-self systems Laing identified. But only in psychosis can we truly live a solipsistic existence. Post-critical philosophy thus clears the deck for self-understanding. But the task remains to narrate one's own experience (through language) to other human beings and to move from thought to the actions of lived-through experience.

Ethics thus emerges from epistemology, the knowledge of our selves in the world we inhabit, the knowledge of being-in-the-world or, to put it post-critically, personal knowledge. Awareness of self comes from acting in ways that are congruent with beliefs, actions that feel right as well as think-right. Our sense of who we are is an ethical identity. Poteat explicitly (both philosophically and personally) saw psychotherapy as a means towards achieving this congruence.

> There is a sense in which we may say that the neurotic is the creator of a world of his own 'imagination' to which he then becomes subject—incarcerated as a prisoner. The job of the therapist is, as an outsider, to invade that world and to enhance his patient's wish to be free. The invasion is a kind of incarnation, for the therapist enters the neurotic world from the outside and remains, while in it, an outsider, lest he, like [the] patient, becomes the subject of that world, powerless against it (1993, 283).[10]

I would add to this observation that the patient does not at first see that all his assumptions about reality are just that, assumptions, which must be reconsidered and reassessed. The neurotic person in therapy—as in life—struggles to maintain this familiar view of the world as real, even as the evidence for it begins to crumble.

The passport metaphor is limited by the fact that these two worlds do not have distinct boundaries, but the inner world and the outer world are linked by an invisible umbilicus. We can never really forget who we are, even in our existential confusion and ambivalence. Poteat emphasized this by eliminating the hyphen from mindbody. Polanyi's tacit/explicit tension is explicated with corporeal analogies: proximal/distal, from/to, focal/subsidiary. And Freud's famous "discovery" of the "unconscious," brings into focal awareness that which had previously been only subsidiary.

These two world-views "oscillate between pride and despair" as Poteat so trenchantly observed. They are existential concerns, "ultimate concerns" (Tillich) and may properly be considered spiritual questions. Post-critical philosophy teaches us to "systematically recognize and hold our own beliefs" (Polanyi). It thus clears the deck for speaking in the first person, active voice (Poteat's Private-I). The remaining task is to identify a personal sense of meaning and value and to translate that understanding into actions in the real world. That is the therapeutic task.

ENDNOTES

[1]"Man," as philosophical anthropology formerly identified humankind.

[2]Richard Gelwick recognized similarities between Pirsig's insights and Polanyi's post-critical approach and invited him to a conference on post-critical thinking he organized at Harvard in 1992. Pirsig suggested at one of the breaks, that society needed psychiatrists to help people deal with the sorts of problems he experienced by taking philosophy too seriously in the wrong way.

[3]We should also note that Poteat never explicitly addresses ethics beyond the implication of our actions that derive from our indwelled knowledge. He hints at this in the Appendix to *Recovering the Ground*, reflecting on the fact-value distinction that has so plagued modern philosophy. Again, he too finds metaphors of illness useful in suggesting, "A wasting disease has afflicted the human spirit, perhaps mortally, for now more than 300 years" (1994, 187). He goes on to suggest that it has become "a form of madness" (1994, 221).

[4]For a thoughtful discussion of the moral inversion, see Yeager (2002).

[5]Dynamo-objective coupling might be understood to operate analogously to the way psychological defense mechanisms keep unpleasant feelings from conscious (focal) awareness.

[6]Poteat has expounded on this observation sympathetically to Freud's attempt to explain his discovery to his positivist colleagues. Poteat reflects on Freud's 1895 "Project for a Scientific Psychology" as a misguided attempt to explain the "cause" of neurotic symptoms on a neurological basis, which ironically has greater credibility in the 21st century in light of the understandings of modern neuroscience (Poteat, 1993b, 228). More ambiguous is the idea that neurotic symptoms are "caused" by childhood experiences particularly, early feelings and fantasies about sexuality. Freud was not unaware of the possibility of reductionist pitfalls when he suggested that such symptoms were "overdetermined," meaning that there could be multiple "determinants." Indeed this observation is prescient in the 21st century as we recognize social and economic determinants of health as well as psychological and biological determinants.

[7]It is probably a mischaracterization to suggest that Poteat's style of teaching was "Socratic" at least in the later years of his career. While both were interrogatory, it was Plato's intent through his character, Socrates, to show his students that they did not know what they thought they knew from long-established wisdom. Poteat, on the other hand, was more intent on showing his students that they *did* know what they might heretofore have been shy about articulating.

[8]Descartes recorded his dreams in a manuscript called *Olympia*, which is no longer available, but which was used by his biographer, Baillet (*Vie de Monsieur Descartes*, 1946) and which are reproduced in their entirety in Dyer 1986.

[9]Psychoanalysts characterize the first phase of development as dyadic object relations in that the infant distinguishes self and other, a more primitive view which is later supplanted by triadic object relations when the child realizes a parent of the same sex and a parent of the opposite sex and different, more complex relationships. This theme is beyond the scope of this paper but is one I develop in Dyer 1986. It is worth noting that this psychoanalytic formulation, based on developmental considerations, mirrors the philosophical concern with a dualistic world-view as inadequate to the more complex realties of lived-through experience.

[10]Poteat saw the story of Oedipus, who knows enough to answer the riddle of the Sphinx and is a being who walks, as "compactly" told in his name, which means swollen foot. In the Oedipal

story, both as Sophocles told it and as Freud understands it, man is swollen with knowledge, but yet a mystery to himself. Politely, neither Poteat nor even Freud suggested the swollen foot as a tumescent appendage, yet the story is always fraught with urgently sexualized anxieties, which are hard to speak out loud even obliquely.

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