

PANNENBERG'S POLANYIANISM: A RESPONSE TO JOHN V. APCZYNSKI

by *Durwood Foster*

Abstract. John V. Apczynski, while presenting a helpful analysis of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Michael Polanyi, does not succeed in showing that Pannenberg's theology is incoherent. Contrary to Apczynski, I hold that Pannenberg's concern for theoretic assertions is not extrinsic but intrinsic and central to his program. Moreover, this concern does not rest directly upon the cultural dominance of impersonal knowing but is a countering of the theological overreaction against it. Polanyi has pioneered the critique of impersonal knowledge, but in Pannenberg's judgment much theology tends to espouse too cheaply the Polanyian elevation of faith as ground of knowing. Pannenberg, while appreciating the relative justification of Polanyi's work, is attempting to thematize afresh—in interesting contrast to Polanyi and, for instance, Paul Tillich—the public, rational structure of faith.

Professor John V. Apczynski, while recognizing much in Wolfhart Pannenberg's thought that commends itself to a Polanyian way of thinking, holds that nevertheless Pannenberg's proposal for understanding knowledge appears to be weakened by an incoherence. The alleged incoherence is that Pannenberg requires "impersonal, theoretical" assertions and at the same time recognizes their "incompleteness and their anticipation of the still undisclosed totality of reality." In other words, "Pannenberg admits that truth is known in a presupposed context of the totality of meaning" (this being the Polanyian affinity); yet Pannenberg, according to Apczynski, "dismisses this from the realm of knowledge as such, and this is what constitutes the conceptual inadequacy of his system."¹

"The reasons Pannenberg wants to formulate knowledge in impersonal terms," Apczynski believes, "are extrinsic to his system." For

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"Pannenberg is very much concerned with the apologetic task of demonstrating the truth of Christianity and intends to avoid any special role for 'faith' as a subjective . . . factor in this demonstration." This, in turn, continues Apczynski, "is clearly dependent upon the current cultural dominance of the impersonal ideal of knowing."²

I do not understand Apczynski's judgment that Pannenberg's concern for "theoretic assertions"—or let us say, more broadly, for the theoretic verifiability of theology—is extrinsic to his system. This concern, rather, seems to me to be clearly central to Pannenberg's program. I would have expected Apczynski to recognize this, even though he finds Pannenberg's program misguided. But in any event I disagree with Apczynski's statement that Pannenberg's concern (which, by the way, should not, I think, be called "apologetic," since Pannenberg himself eschews this word as too narrow) is "dependent on the current cultural dominance of the impersonal ideal of knowing."³

Michael Polanyi's concern was indeed orientated to the cultural dominance of the impersonal ideal of knowing. That is, Polanyi set out to *expose and overcome a false ideal of objectivity*—culturally presumed to be exemplified in the exact sciences—which idea was (and still is) having devastating consequences for the humane integrity of our culture. Others, like Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, were similarly engaged. But Pannenberg, a generation younger, cutting (or grinding) his teeth on the theology of Karl Barth, entered the scene with a precisely opposite spin. Of course, the whole modern situation *is* fatefully conditioned by the technical objectification of knowledge. But Pannenberg's specific program was motivated by the overreaction, as he saw it, in neo-orthodox and existentialist theology, to the cultural prevalence of objectifying knowledge. Pannenberg rebelled against what W. W. Bartley, at about the same time, was calling the "retreat to commitment." Thus Polanyi and Pannenberg, while their courses run significantly parallel, embark upon them from opposite directions. They have common opponents in logical and linguistic positivism, in neo-orthodoxy and some forms of existentialism—wherever, in fact, the cognitive continuum is bifurcated into an antithesis of faith and reason. But whereas Polanyi has wanted to qualify reason to make room for faith, Pannenberg's intention is to qualify faith to make room for reason. His program, therefore, I should say, is dependent only dialectically—at one remove—on the cultural dominance of the impersonal ideal of knowing. It is *directly* dependent on the intervening dominance, in theology and the church, of an excess fideism, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called Barth's "positivism of revelation." A situation has ensued in which inquirers are repelled by Christian witness

because it requires accepting faith prior to and apart from cognitive accountability. It is *this* situation Pannenberg sets out to rectify.

This brings us back to the main indictment brought by Apczynski against Pannenberg's theology—which he (Apczynski) in many respects also admires—the charge, namely, that Pannenberg's proposal is weakened by incoherence and therefore is inadequate, specifically at the point of wanting to *separate a theoretic component from the personal matrix of knowing* and indeed (inconsistently with his own overarching insights) to construe this impersonal component as the requisite element in cognition, compared with which the fiduciary horizon is disregarded. Is Pannenberg guilty as charged? I personally do not believe so, even though he does exaggerate the independence of reason from revelation and faith.

Let me say, by the way, that in the prosecution of this case, it seems important to differentiate carefully the development of Pannenberg's views and to use, as definitive, his most mature statement on the subject—that is, his major work, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*. Apczynski has not always done this, and I would suggest that some of what has seemed to him to be incoherence may be thus explained.

Let us review, quickly, some of the principal evidence.

In his inquiry into natural science (where Apczynski himself allows the alleged separation of a theoretical component would have a “certain plausibility”), Pannenberg seems to me consistently to be aware of what Karl Popper, for example, emphasized from the 1950s onward: that “all observation involves interpretation,” and that interpretation implies a framework or horizon of meaning that never can be explicated exhaustively—both because of the infinitude of present facts and the unfinishedness of history.⁴ It has become a truism in current discussion that, as phrased by Norwood R. Hanson, “all data are theory laden.”⁵ The new physics particularly has driven this home. Pannenberg seems to me to be fully aware of it; and he stresses, as few do, the Hegelian maxim that “the truth is in the whole”—a whole that is never given to us wholly, in our finitude, as long as history lasts. Thus our knowledge, even in natural science, remains provisional and subject to revision, even to the paradigm shifts that Thomas Kuhn describes.

Nevertheless, Pannenberg does endorse in a carefully nuanced discussion Popper's notion of falsifiability and his program of open-ended testing of cognitive hypotheses in the natural sciences as well as in the *Geisteswissenschaften* and in philosophy. Theology too, Pannenberg proposes, is a science in the sense that it proposes cognitive hypotheses (preeminently the God hypothesis—the hypothesis of an all-determining ground of the world) and holds these hypotheses to be (provisionally and within limits) subject to falsification and verification.

In discussing the *Geisteswissenschaften*, Pannenberg is at pains to defend theoretic statements against their devaluation in contemporary hermeneutical philosophy and theology—as exemplified in certain statements of (the middle) Heidegger and Hans G. Gadamer. Heidegger says, for example in *Being and Time*, that the statement, as a semantic structure, is cutoff from the reference relations of significance which are its matrix of “concernful understanding” in “a totality of (existential) involvements.”⁶

Over against this construction, and the way it has been used by Gadamer and others, Pannenberg defends the function of propositional objectivity as a “characteristic feature of the specifically human relation to the world.”⁷ Human communication, he argues, “presupposes a separability of the content of the communication from the subjective characteristics of both speaker and hearer; in other words, a degree of objectification sufficient to allow the content to be communicated unchanged.”⁸ This is specifically, I take it, the point at which Apczynski is at odds with Pannenberg. Let us therefore attend to it with particular care.

Be it noted, first, that Pannenberg immediately goes on to state that Heidegger is indeed right that “every proposition is part of the referential frame of a ‘totality of involvements’ and that its meaning is rooted in this totality.”⁹ This is, of course, deeply in agreement with Polanyi. Gadamer’s even more Polanyian formulation is also affirmed here by Pannenberg, namely, that every proposition includes within itself “an unexpressed horizon of meaning.”¹⁰ This, Pannenberg says, “is a convincing view, with far-reaching consequences, but not necessarily in conflict with the factor of objectification. Rather, one of the peculiarities of language is that in the process of speaking the expressed and the unexpressed, the defined and the undefined, are all held together.”¹¹ The issue raised by Apczynski is whether this constitutes incoherence.

Let me lift up for inspection three pivotal terms involved in this issue: the words “separable,” “personal,” and “subjective.” My suggestion is that Pannenberg does not mean these words as Apczynski hears them.

First, “separable.” For Apczynski the “separability” of the theoretic component in language appears to mean that it becomes—in Pannenberg’s view—totally sundered from its tacit matrix. Apczynski believes that to take this back Pannenberg has to contradict himself. I would submit, however, that “separable” does not ever mean in the first place, for Pannenberg, that words are totally disjoined from their matrix of signification. Pannenberg introduces the term to make a point about communication. Perhaps it isn’t the optimal word for his purpose; but let us be governed by that purpose, which seems clear

enough. Words do have the power to carry over concepts from one person to others, without bringing with them the whole emotive individuality of the speaker or writer. I was able, for example, to learn theology from Paul Tillich without knowing about the idiosyncracies later reported by Mrs. Tillich in her book.¹² But this does not mean, as Pannenberg emphasizes, that the signification of words is independent of the wider matrix of shared meaning that constitutes a culture or tradition.

The same pertains to the words “personal” and “subjective.” Both are inherently ambiguous and in a parallel way. They can mean personal subjectivity in a structural sense, that is, as contrasted with a computer’s manipulation of information; or they can mean the idiosyncratic individuality of someone. When Pannenberg says theoretic statements do not involve subjective/personal factors, I suggest he means the latter, but that Apczynski hears the former of the two meanings. That is, Pannenberg means that cognitive theory is “impersonal” in the sense that I can relevantly state the ontological argument without telling the audience about my private fears and lusts. In other words, I can successfully abstract from much, if not all, of my personal eccentricity. But objectivity in this sense is still interpersonal in the humanly structural sense. It presupposes the shared matrix of traditional symbols and values without which reasoned argument would indeed be impossible. Ian Barbour generalizes that, in the light of the epistemology of science, objectivity today means at most—but also at least—“intersubjective testability” and “universal intentionality.”¹³ Without using precisely these phrases Pannenberg seems to me to be in substantive accord. In fact from his earliest publications he has stressed the rootage of rationality in shared tradition and in a prolepsis of the meaning and end of history.

Thus I do not agree with Apczynski that Pannenberg needs rescuing from a grievous incoherence in his epistemology. To me he already seems privy, in large measure, to Polanyian insights.

I would agree, however, that Pannenberg might have done well to recognize and make more explicit use of Polanyi’s work. In *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, as Apczynski notes, there is only one very brief and unsatisfactory reference to Polanyi, acknowledging that Gadamer’s “unexpressed horizon of meaning” is related to Polanyi’s “tacit coefficient of speech.”¹⁴ Polanyi, however, says Pannenberg, “does not distinguish between the inexpressibility of rational structures of meaning and emotional components such as attention, passions, and commitments.”¹⁵ This observation is based only upon *Personal Knowledge*. Clumsy and inaccurate as it is, it does reflect the need, which Polanyi himself felt, to supplement the account given in *Personal Knowledge* with a more precise differentiation of types of tacit and explicit meaning.

However, there is already in *Personal Knowledge* an endorsement of the service critical reason may render faith and theology. Here Polanyi associates himself, as many have recognized, closely with Tillich. He cites from Tillich the principle that "science, psychology and history are allies of theology in the fight against supranaturalistic distortion of genuine revelation."¹⁶ He goes on to expound Tillich's view that "knowledge of revelation does not imply factual assertion."¹⁷ One wonders if it may have been this kind of statement that has led some to believe Polanyi did not construe—or did not continue to construe—religious symbols as having an ontological referent. Apczynski seems somewhat unresolved about this, though I believe he comes down in the end clearly on the side of ontological reference. I hasten to add that any other view would, in my opinion, be drastically contrary to the intention of Tillich which Polanyi so clearly espoused. Tillich's meaning, explicitly affirmed by Polanyi, is that religious symbols point beyond themselves to the depth of reason and the ground of being. Their referent is, so to speak, as "ontological" as you can get, though the ground of being or God cannot, indeed, be conceived as an ascertainable fact in time and space.

In passing let me register the fact that on this issue Pannenberg, Tillich, and Polanyi are in complete agreement. I am the more minded to celebrate this because of the tide of relativistic positivism one encounters nowadays in religious epistemology.

Pannenberg differs from Tillich and Polanyi in emphasizing that reason has the role not only of critically purging faith of false props and thus exposing the religious question but also of constructing positive argumentation for faith. This consists in showing that the cognitive hypotheses of faith are both coherent and more comprehensively adequate than any known alternatives in giving a comprehensive account of experience. Comparison between the three thinkers is skewed because Tillich thematizes the issue within a *triadic* frame of reference: one that involves technical reason, ontological reason, and faith as the ecstasy or self-transcendence of reason; whereas Pannenberg generally operates with a *dyadic* frame of reference, stressing theoretic components as well as the unexpressed horizon of meaning.¹⁸ Polanyi is *prima facie* in this regard more like Pannenberg, with the two poles of reason and fiduciary matrix. Yet Polanyi's specific discussion of religious knowledge often seems to me to introduce unannounced a third category that is like Tillich's ecstatic faith, differing both from localizing cognition and from the fiduciary matrix of ordinary knowledge.

Tillich and Polanyi agree that genuine or valid religious symbols cannot be tested for their truth or falsity, whereas Pannenberg maintains they can. Apczynski seems to waver somewhat on this matter,

holding on one page that religious symbols can, but on another page that they cannot be so tested.¹⁹ I should like to invite him to clarify this further in discussion.

In any event, however, the contrast in this respect is not absolute, even between Tillich and Pannenberg. They both try to exhibit the superior adequacy of their theological symbol systems for the widest possible interpretation of human experience. Both recognize this cannot, in history, ever yield complete verification. Yet, for both, the lower-level testing of science—natural and social—can critically remove (by falsifying them, as Popper suggests) the superstitions that proliferate within traditions. In all of this, broadly speaking, Polanyi agrees not only with Tillich but also with Pannenberg. Professor Apczynski, through his vigorous analysis, has helped us to see all of this more sharply.

NOTES

1. John V. Apczynski, "Truth in Religion: A Polanyian Appraisal of Wolfhart Pannenberg's Theological Program," in this issue, p. 60.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 370, *passim*.
4. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 21-22; cited by Pannenberg, p. 37.
5. Norwood R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 18.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 200-1; cited by Pannenberg, p. 177.
7. Pannenberg, p. 178.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973).
13. Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 183.
14. Pannenberg, p. 217n.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 283n.
17. *Ibid.*
18. This and the following comparative generalizations are based on the major works of Pannenberg and Polanyi already cited and on Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Part 1.
19. Apczynski, in this issue, pp. 71, 69.