

kérdésekre kísérelnek meg választ adni.”¹⁶ Ezek voltak hát a tudományfilozófiai vállalkozását elindító kérdések, melyek szokatlan módon nem a tudományban vagy a filozófiatörténetben, hanem a politikában és a tudánypolitikában gyökereztek. És ezek a kérdések voltak azok a kiindulópontok, ahonnan Polányi elindult egy olyan filozófiai program megvalósítása felé, amely a legjobban megfelelt gondolkodói alkatának. Ezt megelőzően és jó ideig azonban még több különálló területen olyan kutatási feladatokat tűzött maga elé, mint a tervgazdaság és a szovjet tudánypolitika bírálata, melyekben nem bizonyult átütően sikeresnek. Az ötvenes években kialakuló új tudományfilozófiai programja viszont már sokkal jobban harmonizált alkatával és felkészültségével. Olyan tudományfilozófiát akart létrehozni, mely rögtön születése pillanatában polemikus jellegűnek is bizonyul. Ezért azután Polányi a vállalt tudományfilozófiai feladathoz nemcsak az érveket és a kutatási irányokat kereste meg, hanem részben a filozófiai ellenfeleket is. Jellemző módon az intuíció fogalmának tudományfilozófiai alkalmazása, de főleg a személyes és a hallgatólagos tudás koncepciójának kifejtése során mindinkább konfrontálódott a kanti kritikai filozófiával. A polemikus írásmód, habár végigkíséri a fő műnek számító *Személyes tudást*, valamelyest háttérbe szorult a pozitív kidolgozás javára. Mindazonáltal e mű még bővelkedően tárgyalja az új tudományfilozófiai eredményeknek az eredeti motívációhoz, a marxizmus kritikájához való visszacsatolását. A *Személyes tudás* társadalomfilozófiai fejezetei ennél fogva egészen világosan mutatják azt a politikai háttérrel, amelyből Polányi eredeti gondolkodói programja kiemelkedett.

Noha az ötvenes években az új tudományfilozófia kialakítása Polányi szellemi kapacitásának már egyre nagyobb részét kötötte le, filozófiai programjában újabb fordulatok csak a hatvanas években következtek be. Ekkor végezte el részben elméletének filozófiatörténeti legitimálását, amit a *Személyes tudás*ban vagy erősen elnagyolt vagy egészen elhanyagolt. A hatvanas évek második felében pedig már jel- és jelentéseméleti kérdések felé nyitott. De magas kora miatt ezeket az új kezdeményezéseit már nem tudta végigvinni.

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¹⁶ Háttér és távlat, i. m. I. 24.

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THE “POST-CRITICAL” SYMBOL AND THE “POST-CRITICAL” ELEMENTS OF POLANYI’S THOUGHT

Abstract

This paper discusses the “post critical” nature of Polanyi’s thought by looking at several components: (1) the history of Polanyi’s use of the term “post-critical”; (2) Polanyi’s active account of comprehension and its evolution; (3) the major elements of Polanyi’s criticism of modern thought and Polanyi’s constructive alternative vision.

1.0 Introduction

Everyone notices that the subtitle of Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*¹ is “Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy.” However there is surprisingly little direct discussion of the term “post-critical” in *Personal Knowledge* or in any other writings by Polanyi. This paper discusses Polanyi’s term and what he seems to mean by it. I begin with a bit of history about the term.

1.1 “Post-Critical” In The Gifford Lectures

The term “post-critical” dates back at least to the period in which Polanyi was preparing his 1951 (First Series) Gifford Lectures. The subject for the lectures identified on the cover page of the syllabus is “Commitment: In Quest of a Post-Critical Philosophy.”² Also Lecture 6 in the First Series (21st May, 1951) has the same title as that later used in the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge*, “Towards a

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards A Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbook Edition, 1958). All citations of *Personal Knowledge* (as well as citations of other Polanyi works, after the first citation) are by title abbreviation (*PK*) in parenthesis following the quotations or section references. Citation to *PK* are to the Torchbook Edition which includes prefatory material in the earlier University of Chicago and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. hardback publications.

² The syllabus is in The Papers of Michael Polanyi, Box 33, Folder 1. This and succeeding quotations from and references to the Polanyi Papers are used with permission of the University of Chicago Library’s Department of Special Collections. Citation of any archival material will hereafter be shortened to the particular document, box number and folder number noted in parentheses (e.g., 33-1). All of the quotations in the remainder of this section of this paper are from the syllabus in 33-1; they will not be noted in the text.

Post-Critical Philosophy.” The precis of this lecture gives a clear comment that identifies the domain into which “post-critical philosophy” fits:

Philosophy cannot perform its task within the restrictions of objectivism. These were breached in the first place in Lecture 4 by recasting for the purpose of accuracy all declaratory sentences in a fiduciary mode which links them to a speaker or writer. I shall now venture a step further towards a post-critical philosophy.

That further step is concerned with what Polanyi a little later identifies as the “rehabilitation of overt belief”: “I propose to break altogether with objectivism by making it my purpose to find and declare what I truly believe in.” Polanyi acknowledges that “a frankly fiduciary philosophy” has certain dangers, but also it “should enable us to envisage without self contradiction the social rootedness and social responsibility of our beliefs concerning men and society.” He notes that fiduciarism must guard against depriving itself of any claim to objective validity; it must learn to express belief in a way which will countenance beliefs as beliefs without reducing their content or the act of affirming them to the status of mere subjectivity.

In sum, Polanyi’s comments in the 1951 syllabus for his First Series Gifford Lectures make clear that “post-critical” is a term that is aligned with what he calls “fiduciary philosophy” or “fiduciarism” and aligned against what Polanyi dubs “objectivism.”³ “Fiduciary philosophy” is concerned with finding and declaring what one truly believes and Polanyi holds the project of rehabilitating overt belief is a worthy philosophical enterprise.

1.2 Personal Knowledge: The “Fiduciary Program”

Polanyi makes a number of the same points in the prefatory material of *Personal Knowledge* that he does in the 1951 syllabus, although he does not use the term “post-critical.” He sometimes comes close to the same language used in his 1951 syllabus, but he also seems to be reaching for new terms. In the August 1957

³ Polanyi uses “objectivism” rather broadly to point to philosophy of science and epistemological views that fail to respect the personal participation of the knower. Polanyi had a relatively clear sense of general sense of what “post-critical” philosophy opposed. “Objectivism” often seems to be used interchangeably with “positivism,” a term that Marjorie Grene points out covers much more than the thought of Carnap. Grene suggests that Polanyi often seems to have characterized many other contemporary philosophers—some of whom may have had ideas akin to his own—as “positivists.” See *A Philosophical Testament* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1995), 63 (hereafter cited in parenthesis as *PT*).

“Preface” (the original preface) to *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi comments on the personal participation of the knower in the known and on his view that “personal knowledge” is not merely subjective but is an act of comprehension described as a “responsible act claiming universal *validity*” (*PK*, xiv). In the June 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi identifies the objective of *Personal Knowledge* as “the task of justifying the holding of unproven traditional beliefs” (*PK*, ix). He points out that “more than forty declarations of belief” in the book are listed in the “Index” under “fiduciary program.” Marjorie Grene reports that when she and her children were preparing this “Index,” that Polanyi “had specially requested that I stress all passages that showed the book to be a *credo*.”⁴ She contends that this reflects how “Polanyi himself set great store by the fiduciary programme” (“*TKG*”, 167).

Grene describes the nature of the “fiduciary programme” by pointing out that Polanyi’s constructive argument in *Personal Knowledge* is based on an analogical foundation. She suggests that Polanyi’s method in his *magnum opus* “consisted essentially in broadening and stabilizing the interpretive circle through a series of analogies, by showing that human activities of many kinds are structures in the same hopeful yet hazardous fashion as those of science” (“*TKG*”, 167). That is, Polanyi links his account of commitment in science to a broader range of human committed endeavor: “. . . the account of commitment, expanded to a fiduciary programme, showed us science as one instance of the way in which responsible beings do their best to make sense of what is given them and yet what they, by their active powers, have also partly already enacted” (“*TKG*”, 167).

1.3 Comprehension as Active and the Evolution of the “Fiduciary Program”

As the quotation above about “personal knowledge” from the 1957 “Preface” implies, one of the primary ways Polanyi generically describes “post-critical philosophy” and the “fiduciary programme,” is to say that he sets forth an active account of comprehension based upon the revision of Gestalt ideas. He acknowledges this adaptation in the original “Preface” of *Personal Knowledge* and in almost every major publication after *Personal Knowledge*⁵:

⁴ Marjorie Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 8, no. 3, October 1977: 167 (hereafter abbreviated as “*TKG*” in parenthesis by page number).

⁵ See for example, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 28-28 (hereafter *SM* in parenthesis), *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1966), 6 (hereafter *TD* in parenthesis), and Polanyi’s 1963 introduction, “Background and Prospect” (11-12) to the Chicago reprint of *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964—hereafter *SFS* in parenthesis) for some additional comments on the transformation of Gestalt ideas.

I have used the findings of Gestalt psychology as my first clues to this conceptual reform. Scientists have run away from the philosophic implications of gestalt; I want to countenance them uncompromisingly. I regard knowing as an active comprehension of the things known, an action that requires skill. Skillful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skillful achievement, whether practical or theoretical (*PK*, xiii).

Polanyi's "post-critical philosophy" is an account that affirms knowing as a personal, skillful activity, a performance, in which particulars are indwelt and integrated around a focus. This active participation or shaping by a person is not an imperfection in human knowing but is the very condition of knowing⁶.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi's "conceptual reform," that is, his account of the active nature of comprehension, is an account that emphasizes commitment. Grene links the "fiduciary program" of *Personal Knowledge* especially with the emphasis upon overt commitment in this book ("*TKG*", 167-168). Certainly, in *Personal Knowledge* the holding of unproven traditional beliefs in science and other human endeavors is justified by Polanyi's discussion of the ways in which commitment is central to all knowing. It is in *Personal Knowledge* that there is a lengthy discussion of universal intent⁷. But eight years after the original publication of *Personal Knowledge*, in the 1964 "Preface to the Torchbook Edition" of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi himself recognized that his "fiduciary program" had become less reliant upon overt commitment as he worked out the structure of tacit knowing:

But there is a parallel line of argument in the book which goes deeper and has shown greater potentialities for further development. In surveying the places

⁶ Active shaping implies a centered subject and the creation and implementation of standards of value; Polanyi's account of comprehension in the "fiduciary program" thus might be viewed as leading to certain inferences about the person and agency: Comprehension is an unformalizable process striving towards an unspecifiable achievement, and is accordingly attributed to the agency of a centre seeking satisfaction in the light of its own standards. For it cannot be defined without accrediting the intellectual satisfaction of the comprehending centre. (*PK*, 398). Polanyi uses the same reasoning in his account of morphogenesis as involving active shaping and achievement. See *PK*, 398.

⁷ The "Index" of *Personal Knowledge* reflects that "universal intent" is another key idea. There are a host of citations throughout the book. It is worth noting that the final paragraph of the "Skills" chapter, which is the conclusion of Part One of *Personal Knowledge*, is a paragraph that binds together commitment and universal intent. It is also the case that there is a whole chapter on commitment (containing many comments on "universal intent") and that this is the concluding component of Part Three, which focuses upon "The Justification of Personal Knowledge."

where human knowledge rests on a belief, I have hit upon the fact that this fiduciary element is intrinsic to the tacit component of knowledge” (*PK*, 10).

What Polanyi is pointing to here⁸ is that he came better to understand what he calls the “fiduciary element” in knowledge as he continued to explore the importance of the inarticulate after *Personal Knowledge*. A bit later in his 1964 preface, Polanyi comments on the ways his writing after *Personal Knowledge*, and especially his forthcoming book, *The Tacit Dimension*, recasts his early emphasis upon commitment: “My later writings, including a new book on press, are less occupied with the justification of our ultimate commitments and concentrate instead on working out precisely the operations of tacit knowing” (*PK*, xi).⁹

In sum, several of the things Polanyi himself said, as well as Marjorie Grene’s account of Polanyi’s development, point to the way that “post-critical philosophy” understood as the “fiduciary program,” evolves. Polanyi seems to have gotten into philosophy, as he puts it in *The Tacit Dimension*, as an “afterthought” (*TD*, 3). The politics of the early twentieth century led him to seek a clear understanding of the organization of science and its relation to the larger political sphere. As Grene puts it, “the problem of the administration of science”(“TKG”, 165) led Polanyi toward articulation of “an epistemology of science: . . . a philosophical interpretation of the claims of scientists to know about nature, claims which are in principle susceptible of error, yet also, in circumstances that need to be elaborated, worthy of acceptance” (“TKG”, 166). This epistemology of science is developed expansively in *Personal Knowledge*. At least by the time of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi was comfortable describing the “fiduciary program” in terms of his development of an active account of comprehension. He acknowledged this active account adapted Gestalt ideas and emphasized overt commitment. But this commitment-centered account of “the fiduciary program” already had seeds in it that grew, in the sixties, into a richer account in Polanyi’s later theory of tacit knowing. As he explores and articulates in greater depth the structure of tacit knowing, Polanyi comes to hold that “this structure shows that all thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware in the focal content of our thinking, and that all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our body” (*TD*, x).

⁸ Grene also notes this development (“TKG”, 168).

⁹ See also Polanyi’s comment in the “Introduction” (April, 1966) to *The Tacit Dimension* where he points out that his “reliance on the necessity of commitment has been reduced by working out the structure of tacit knowing” (*TD*, x).

2.1 “Post-Critical” As A Symbol Representing Polanyi’s Critique of Modern Philosophy And His Alternative Constructive Vision

On November 30, 1958, just after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi gave a lecture in Austin, Texas, titled “The Outlook of Science: Its Sickness and Cure.” He makes, in this little known lecture, one of his very few direct comments on the subtitle of *Personal Knowledge*:¹⁰

I have given to the book called *Personal Knowledge*, on which this lecture is based, the subtitle “Towards a Post-critical Philosophy.” This was meant to say that in my view the great intellectual revolution which is marked by the names of Descartes, Hume, Kant, J. S. Mill, and Bertrand Russell, is nearing its final limits. This movement was guided by the principle that doubt is the solvent of error which leaves behind truth (33-11).

This comment suggests that the term “post-critical” served as a vehicle or symbol that gathered up both the major themes in Polanyi’s criticisms of modern thought and the major constructive philosophical alternatives in Polanyi’s vision. I believe this is the case. The previous discussions have outlined some elements of Polanyi’s alternative constructive vision; I will return to the constructive elements of Polanyi’s alternative vision at the end of this paper. Before this final turn, it is worth surveying the major critical themes and their reworking that the “post-critical” rubric seems to fold together.

There is no single approach that works perfectly to summarize Polanyi’s criticisms of modern thought and his effort to recast its contours. Andy Sanders put together, several years ago, in a *Tradition and Discovery* article, a very illuminating brief comparison of modern and postmodern elements in Polanyi’s thought¹¹. Jerry Gill, more recently, has tried to link Polanyi with “constructive” postmodernism¹². Below, I briefly outline a set of five Polanyian themes articulating criticisms and

¹⁰ Richard Charles Prust’s dissertation quotes this unpublished lecture (The Knowledge and Reality of God: The Theological Implications of Michael Polanyi’s Epistemology and Ontology, Duke University, 1970. pp.5-6) and I am indebted to him for calling my attention to it. Polanyi did publish an article with the same title in March of 1957 (“Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Its Cure” in *Science* CXXXV, Mar. 1957, pp. 480-504), but this article is not much akin to the lecture and does not contain the quotation. There is a copy of the lecture in archival material for 1958 identified as a “short manuscript” in Box 33, Folder 11.

¹¹ Andy Sanders, “Tacit Knowing—Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 18:2 (1991-1992): 15-21.

¹² Jerry H. Gill, *The Tacit Mode, Michael Polanyi’s Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

counters to important modernist ideas. These constitute in a substantial fashion the “post-critical” perspective¹³.

2.11 The Critique of Doubt

The 1958 lecture quoted above directly mentions Polanyi’s critique of doubt. There is an entire chapter on this topic in *Personal Knowledge*. Polanyi holds that doubt is not heuristic and modernity’s celebration of doubt as the path to truth has lent undeserved respect to skepticism and disguised the importance of tradition in communities of inquiry. Polanyi argues that doubt really is parasitical upon belief. It is belief that is the primary matter for human beings and the problem of justifying belief is a serious concern in Polanyi’s thought. Polanyi’s account of belief is one that is thoroughly fallibilistic. Belief may be and in fact often is wrong. How do we know? The cooperating interpretative community makes contact with reality and continues the work of exploring reality; we acquire more penetrating visions of reality in time and our errors become clear to us.¹⁴

2.12 The Critique of the Ideal of Impersonal Knowledge

Hand in hand with Polanyi’s critique of doubt is his critique of the ideal of a wholly impersonal knowledge. There are no negotiable unsigned checks, according

¹³ Although I cannot treat this topic here, there is no question that there are affinities between Polanyi’s “post-critical” perspective and perspectives of other philosophers. Sanders and Gill somewhat treat this as have others. The archival correspondence with Grene suggests she was often encouraging Polanyi to see connections between his own ideas and those of other thinkers who seemed generally to be interested in a “post-critical” transformation of philosophy. Polanyi seems often to have resisted Grene’s comparisons as Grene particularly notes in the case of Merleau-Ponty (“TKG”, 164 footnote). Nevertheless, Polanyi does often make generous references to similarities between his ideas and those of others in prefatory materials for some publications. See the 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge* (*PK*, x) and the 1963 new introduction, “Background and Prospect,” to the University of Chicago reprint of *Science, Faith and Society* (*SFS*, 12-13).

¹⁴ Polanyi’s realism is tightly bound up with his fallibilism, his ideas about truth and his claims for personal knowledge. What is involved in the post-critical turn in philosophy Marjorie Grene puts starkly in her recent book *A Philosophical Testament* (9-27) when she says it is time to recognize that knowledge is justified belief. The Platonic separation of knowledge and belief is transformed in post-critical thought. Polanyi sets forth knowledge as a subset of belief, namely that belief that is justified. The rub comes in specifying what is involved in justification. First, one can say that justification involves “universal intent” but, second, Polanyi injects into his account a great respect for the interpretative community and its dynamic tradition embodied in the practices of living members engaged in ongoing investigation.

to Polanyi, and there is no such thing as wholly impersonal knowledge. Polanyi makes the person central. He shifts the discussion of “knowledge” to include the skillful agent engaged in an activity of knowing. In the 1961 essay “Knowing and Being,” Polanyi forthrightly claims that “knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing” (*KB*, 132). In an earlier section, I have outlined Polanyi’s account of comprehension as active, showing how participation is the condition of knowledge rather than a fault. There are chapters in *Personal Knowledge* on skills and intellectual passions that make Polanyi’s strong case for personal knowledge by articulating the nature of participation. As I have noted above, personal knowledge does not imply that knowledge is merely subjective. Polanyi redefines objectivity and sets forth a strong case that personal knowledge can be justified.

2.13 The Critique of Reductionism

Polanyi’s “post-critical” perspective includes criticisms of reductionistic thinking, a pattern of thought sometimes aligned with objectivism. Reductionism, of course, is older than modernity, but reductionist views have been popular in modernity in many venues. Polanyi criticizes, for example, deterministic materialist views such as those of Laplace, historicist reductionism, behaviorist perspectives, and reductionistic readings of natural selection. Polanyi argues for a spectrum of inquiry running from physics to dramatic history. He understands inquiry in terms of a hierarchy of increasing complexity of subjects of investigation. Particularly in Part Four of *Personal Knowledge* and in his later writing, Polanyi attacks reductionism in biology. His “principle of marginal control” (*TD*, 40, sometime termed the “principle of marginality”) is an ontological implication or amplification of his epistemological claims for tacit knowing. The two level structure of comprehensive entities, Polanyi contends, has the logical implication that a higher level of organization can “come into existence only through a process not manifest in the lower level, a process which thus qualifies as an emergence.” (*TD*, 45).

2.14 The Critique of Centralized Control

As I have suggested above, Polanyi’s work in philosophy developed because he was searching for an account of science that would allow it to prosper in the twentieth century. Many of both the critical and constructive philosophical ideas that Polanyi later articulated grew out of his effort to make sense of and respond to political events and the emerging social and political philosophy after World War I. Polanyi was, of course, from the thirties forward an outspoken opponent of planned science, whether in Stalinist Russia or Great Britain. He was equally critical of