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CREATED TO KNOW: A COMPARISON OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF
MICHAEL POLANYI AND FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

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CREATED TO KNOW: A COMPARISON OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF MICHAEL POLANYI AND FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

During the mid to latter part of the twentieth century, thinkers from various disciplines spoke out against the epistemological conclusions of Modernism. Some of them thought that the modern view of human knowledge had been a major impetus behind the carnage of World War I, World War II, fascism, and communism. One such thinker, Michael Polanyi (1891-1976), a world-renowned physical chemist, recognized that this incomplete understanding of knowledge had become especially prevalent in the scientific community. He turned to the study of philosophy in order to explore how these ideas came about and to propose a much needed course correction. In his major work he wrote that “This is primarily an enquiry into the nature and justification of scientific knowledge. But my reconsideration of scientific knowledge leads on to a wide range of questions outside science.”¹

Likewise, Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), an influential Presbyterian pastor and missionary, recognized that many of the moral issues he was fighting—drug use, amorality, disregard for human life, governmental oppression, and loss of personal freedom in society—were the result of this confused epistemology. He wrote in 1972 that “Those who have been raised in the last couple of decades stand right here in the area of epistemology. The really great problem is not, for example, drugs or amorality. The problem is knowing.”² He claimed that

¹ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), vii.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 318.

“epistemology was the central problem of our generation.”³ In this paper I will demonstrate that Schaeffer appreciated Polanyi’s epistemological insight and was influenced by Polanyi in this area to some degree. However, I will argue that Schaeffer thought Polanyi’s epistemology was ultimately insufficient because it did not have a strong enough ontological foundation. This issue is worth serious consideration if we are to avoid repeating the carnage of our recent past.

Similarities in Diagnosing the Problem

Both Polanyi and Schaeffer traced a similar path through western intellectual history as they sought to explain where this distorted view of epistemology came from. Polanyi argued that the root of the problem extended all the way back to William of Ockham (1287-1347). He wrote that “Ockham brought scholasticism to a close by declaring that faith and reason were incompatible and should be kept strictly separate. Thus he ushered in the period of modern rationalism, which, too, accepts this separation, but with the new proviso that reason alone can establish true knowledge.”⁴ Schaeffer pointed to the same era as the origin of modern epistemology but instead laid most of the blame on Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).⁵

Both men recognized the importance of René Descartes’ (1596-1650) attempt to exclude faith all together and achieve certain objective knowledge by beginning, not with faith, but with doubt.⁶ Descartes did not reject the certainty of divine revelation; he merely attempted to build an alternative path to certain knowledge by using only human reason. This approach, though, inevitably led to a devaluation of divine revelation. Polanyi pointed out that “If divine revelation

³ Ibid., 305.

⁴ Michael Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” *The Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 238.

⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 2 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 209–212. The author of this paper believes that Schaeffer misunderstood Aquinas.

⁶ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 269.

continues to be venerated, its functions—like those of the Kings and Lords in England—are gradually reduced to that of being honoured on ceremonial occasions. All real power goes to the nominally Lower House of objectively demonstrable assertions.”⁷ Schaeffer referred to this process as the upper story, grace, being overwhelmed, and eventually eaten up by, the lower story, nature.⁸

Over time this skeptical approach eroded confidence in our ability to know anything except that which could be known through human reason, and specifically, science. If something could not be tested via experience, then it was automatically suspect, and most likely meaningless. Schaeffer explained that:

Descartes' concept was that the mathematical model could settle everything and from this flowed (with variations, of course) the whole thought of a mathematical grid being forced upon all things and what was kept was only what is mathematical. As I see it, positivism and empiricism are a natural on-flow. The tragedy is the reduction of all truth and knowledge to merely impersonal mathematical formulas rather than the fullness of knowledge.⁹

Limiting knowledge in this way eventually cut people off from knowing about, or believing in, such things as justice, beauty, morality, love, and meaning.¹⁰ Polanyi wrote that “You can destroy meaning wholesale by reducing everything to its uninterpreted particulars, we can eliminate all subsidiary awareness of things in terms of others, and create an atomised, totally depersonalised universe.”¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 63.

⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer to Al Amezaga, Jr., January 17, 1978, Francis A. Schaeffer Collection, Box 48, File 9, The Library, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C.

¹⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 4 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 495.

¹¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 199.

Restricting knowledge to only what could be studied scientifically led to an ontological conception of the universe as a vast impersonal machine. Polanyi explained that “Eventually it was to appear that the primary qualities of such a universe could be brought under intellectual control by applying Newtonian mechanics to the motions of matter, while its secondary qualities could be derived from this underlying primary reality. Thus emerged the mechanistic conception of the world...”¹² Later, even human beings were viewed as merely cogs in this vast cosmic machine, themselves produced by an impersonal mechanical process. As Schaeffer pointed out, when human beings are reduced to the mechanics of physics and chemistry, the person, as well as all personal significance, disappears.¹³

This confusing dehumanization left people with no reasonable explanation for meaning and values, but yet, inconsistently, they still tried to hold onto their moral notions. “Wherever the current scientific outlook bears directly on man and society and affects our world view, it denatures its subject. Only the blessed inconsistency of its expositors prevents them from rendering man, and all the sufferings and works of man, quite meaningless.”¹⁴ This inconsistency played a major role in Schaeffer’s method of helping people see the world correctly again. He argued that the more people were consistent with their naturalistic presuppositions, the farther they were from the real world of love, morality, and personal significance.¹⁵ People desperately wanted to hold onto these things, but they could do so only by being inconsistent with their naturalistic presuppositions. By gently pointing out this inconsistency, he was able to help them

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 167.

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?” *Philosophy Today* 7 (Spring 1963): 11.

¹⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 369.

see that it was their naturalistic presuppositions which were mistaken. As will be explained later in this paper, this was precisely Schaeffer's response to Polanyi's epistemology.

When it came to morality, Polanyi described this inconsistency as a 'moral inversion' and explained how it formed the cement between the optimistic utopian ideals and the crushing totalitarian control of both fascism and communism.¹⁶ He wrote:

The moment, however, a community ceases to be dedicated, through its members, to transcendent ideals, it can continue to exist undisrupted only by submission to a single centre of unlimited secular power. Nor can citizens who have radically abandoned belief in spiritual realities – on the obligations to which their conscience would have been entitled and in duty bound to take a stand – raise any valid objection to being totally directed by the state. In fact their love of truth and justice turn then automatically. . . into love of state power.¹⁷

Schaeffer argued that when people are seen as machines—unable to make responsible free choices because they are determined by nature or their social and economic environment—authoritarian states capitalize on this to justify their use of manipulation and control.¹⁸ Polanyi agreed; he wrote that “This is the cause of our corruption of the conception of man, reducing him either to an insentient automaton or to a bundle of appetites. This is why science denies us the possibility of acknowledging personal responsibility. This is why science can be invoked so easily in support of totalitarian violence, why science has become the greatest source of dangerous fallacies today.”¹⁹ The problem is not science itself, the problem is thinking that the only type of knowledge that can be trusted is scientific knowledge.

Similarities in Epistemology

¹⁶ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 231–235.

¹⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946), 78.

¹⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of the *Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 231–232.

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 25.

Polanyi and Schaeffer shared many similar ideas about how human knowledge actually works. First, they both thought that total objectivity was impossible. Polanyi stated this clearly in the thesis of his major work: “The purpose of this book is to show that complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal.”²⁰ Having worked as a scientist for decades, he knew from experience that scientists are not completely objective, passively following a strict method of rules in order to make new discoveries. Instead, scientists are personally and passionately involved in their work and often rely on intuition, imagination, and simple hunches. This set Polanyi at odds with most scientists and philosophers of his day, many of whom had embraced logical positivism. He wrote that “It is true that science professes to be based on detached observation. But actually, no knowledge of the external world can be discovered, or held to be true, in accordance with the ideal of strict detachment. I have proposed, therefore, a new theory of knowledge, which recognizes the participation of the knower as an indispensable coefficient of all knowledge.”²¹ Schaeffer agreed with Polanyi; he wrote:

Polanyi argues that positivism is inadequate because it does not consider the knower of what is known. It acts as though the knower may be overlooked—as though the knower knew without actually being there. . . . positivism assumes that the knower approaches everything without any presuppositions, without any grid through which he feeds his knowledge. But here is the dilemma, as Polanyi shows, because this simply is not true. There is no scientist who holds to the positivistic position who does not feed knowledge through a grid—a theory or world-view through which he sees and finds. The concept of the totally innocent, objective observer is utterly naive. And science cannot exist without an observer.²²

Second, as seen in this quote, both Polanyi and Schaeffer emphasized the importance of antecedent beliefs, or presuppositions. It should be noted that Schaeffer did not think of

²⁰ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 18.

²¹ Polanyi, “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?” 4.

²² Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 314.

presuppositions as beliefs that people held but were unaware of, thus forever stuck with their particular perspective. He explained that by presuppositions, he meant those beliefs, possibly unprovable at first, that a person starts out with in their attempt to understand the world. People often inherit these beliefs from their culture but Schaeffer thought that presuppositions can, and should be, evaluated, tested, and discarded if they did not correspond with reality. In other words, presuppositions can be chosen, and a person should choose the ones that best make sense of reality.²³

Third, though Polanyi and Schaeffer placed more emphasis on the subjective aspect of knowing, they did not mean by this that truth was relative. They rejected the extreme objectivity of logical positivism but they also rejected the opposite extreme of subjectivism which concludes that, because we all see through a grid, we cannot know reality as it truly is. Polanyi explicitly stated that he believed in an “external reality with which we can make contact.”²⁴ He explained the title for his major work as follows:

Such is the personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding. But this does not make our understanding subjective. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; a contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge.²⁵

Everyone sees reality a bit differently because there is a subjective element in knowing, but this does not mean we are unable to know reality truly. Schaeffer compared this situation to how language works in order to make his point; no two people mean exactly the same thing when they use the same word because we all have different backgrounds, but, as can be seen from our

²³ Ibid., 326–327.

²⁴ Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 133.

experiences, there is enough overlap in our meanings that real communication is still possible.²⁶ This does not mean that communication is always easy, or that we are always successful in our attempts, but yet true communication can still be achieved in spite of these difficulties.

Fourth, both Polanyi and Schaeffer argued that, although we cannot know truth exhaustively, this does not mean we cannot know truth correctly. Schaeffer lamented over modern man in that when he failed in his attempt to know truth exhaustively using only reason, he then gave up all hope and erred too far the other direction, concluding that he could know nothing at all.²⁷ Since we are finite, we should not expect to be able to know things exhaustively. But, as Schaeffer pointed out, we do not have to choose between knowing the external world totally or not knowing it at all.²⁸ Polanyi expressed the same sentiment when he, while discussing how scientists learn in the laboratory, wrote “Wherever this happens, some knowledge of the comprehensive aspect of things is being transmitted: a kind of knowledge which we must acquire by becoming aware of a multitude of clues that cannot be exhaustively identified.”²⁹

Fifth, both men argued that the way we go about learning scientific knowledge was not altogether different from how we come to have other types of knowledge. When Polanyi tried to show the personal aspects involved in scientific knowledge, he was not trying to degrade scientific knowledge, but to show that scientific knowledge was not unique from other types of knowledge. In this sense then, he redeemed other types of knowledge—intuition, aesthetics,

²⁵ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, viii.

²⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, “Epistemology and the Early Wittgenstein” (lecture, <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/Epistemology%20and%20the%20Early%20Wittgenstein%20-%20Francis%20Schaeffer.mp3>).

²⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of the *Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 186.

²⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 333.

imagination, morality, even religious knowledge—which some had disparaged because they were viewed as mere subjective beliefs.

Conversely, Polanyi also thought that while religious knowledge may be somewhat more personal than scientific knowledge, it too should be validated by evidence. Though he agreed with much of Paul Tillich's (1886-1965) theology, he rejected the notion that science and religion describe completely separate domains.³⁰ He hoped his way of viewing knowledge would “lead us back to the conception of religious worship as a heuristic vision and align religion in turn also with the great intellectual systems, such as mathematics, fiction and the fine arts, which are validated by becoming happy dwelling places of the human mind. We shall see then that in spite of its a-critical character, the force of religious conviction does depend on factual evidence and can be affected by doubt concerning certain facts.”³¹ Schaeffer also thought that science, philosophy, and religion should follow the same rules when it comes to evidence and proof.³² He strenuously fought against the common notion that “religious” knowledge was a mystical leap of faith, different from other types of knowledge because it was somehow immune from verification (or refutation as the case may be). He wrote that “There is a remarkable parallel between the way scientists go about checking to see if what they think about reality does in fact correspond to it and the way the biblical world-view can be checked to see if it is true.”³³

Sixth, Polanyi and Schaeffer both thought that there was an element of faith, or trust, in every type of knowledge, including both religious and scientific knowledge. Polanyi described

²⁹ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 240.

³⁰ Polanyi, “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?” 4.

³¹ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 280.

³² Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 121.

³³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 357–358.

all knowledge claims as fiduciary in the sense that they involve commitment and risk. Although we believe in truth and should strive to achieve it, we must also admit that sometimes we just flat out get it wrong. He wrote that “We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.”³⁴ In this regard, Polanyi had great respect for Augustine’s (354-430) balance between faith and reason, specifically his view of “faith seeking understanding.” He even described Augustine’s work as the first post-critical philosophy which ended the era of Greek rationalism, much the same way he hoped his own work would help curtail the extremes of modern rationalism.³⁵

Schaeffer often used the example of marriage to show how faith and knowledge worked together. He explained how a person should not trust someone as their marriage partner until they have at least some basic knowledge about the person. On the other hand, someone cannot expect to learn everything about their potential spouse before they commit to marriage; hence there will always be an element of faith and risk in our commitments.³⁶ In response to someone who was struggling to understand how faith and knowledge worked together in our understanding of God, Schaeffer wrote the following:

I would not be willing to say that there would be a qualitative difference between the way we know that God is there and the way we know your VW is there. We are all finite and eventually therefore there must be some element of a step in our certainty of the knowledge of the existence of anything. I would in no way use the

³⁴ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 266.

³⁵ Ibid. See also Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 238–239.

³⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, “Five Problems for Those Who Deny the Bible’s Evaluation Concerning Itself 1” (lecture, 1965, <http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/Five%20Problems%20for%20Those%20who%20Deny%20the%20Bible’s%20Evaluation%20Concerning%20Itself%20Part%201%20-%20Francis%20Schaeffer.mp3>).

term 'leap of faith' here for that would tie it into the Kierkegaardian concept of a dichotomy between our reason and the 'religious knowing.' What I would say is because we are finite there is a step in knowing anything, including your VW, and in reality there is no qualitative difference between that and my knowing God.³⁷

Polanyi's Influence On Schaeffer

Although Polanyi did not specifically pursue theological conclusions in his work, he realized that it had implications for theology. Many theologians have found his description of knowing helpful in legitimizing religious beliefs, rescuing them from positivism's scrapheap of meaningless statements. It is no surprise then that many theologians have been influenced by Polanyi, some even adopting parts of his epistemological model.³⁸ As shown above, Polanyi and Schaeffer had many similarities in their respective epistemologies, but this does not necessarily mean Schaeffer was influenced by Polanyi. Certainly he was not one of the major influences behind Schaeffer's thought; most agree his theological roots can be traced back primarily to Princeton theologians Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, B.B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, and that his emphasis on presuppositions came from Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til.³⁹ There are a few clues, however, which have led some to conclude that Schaeffer was influenced by Polanyi to some degree. For instance, Bryan A. Follis wrote that "The groundbreaking work

³⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer to Steven Anderson, September 6, 1972, Francis A. Schaeffer Collection, Box 95, File 10, The Library, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C. This is remarkably similar to Esther Meek, who in seeking to describe Polanyi's model of knowing, argued that knowing God is like knowing your auto mechanic. See Esther L. Meek, *Longing to Know* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), 9, 41.

³⁸ For a list of such theologians see Avery Dulles, "Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 537. See also William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 289.

³⁹ Forrest Baird, *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruegsegger (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academic Books, 1986), 48–58. See also Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 106–108.

of secular scholars such as Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn also helped him understand how all individuals interpret ‘facts’ from a subjective basis.”⁴⁰

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that Schaeffer’s epistemology was influenced by Polanyi can be seen in how Schaeffer described Polanyi and his ideas. Schaeffer referred to Polanyi as “one of the most brilliant men alive today”⁴¹ and discussed his contributions to philosophy in five of his books.⁴² In his book that dealt most specifically with epistemology, Schaeffer wrote:

Gradually positivism has died. For a careful study as to why this has happened, I would recommend Michael Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge*... Polanyi is a name that hardly ever appears in the popular press and he is unknown by many, but he was one of the dominant thinkers in the intellectual world. His book shows why positivism is not a sufficient epistemology, and why the hope of modern science to have any certain knowledge is doomed to failure.⁴³

Schaeffer was also impressed with Polanyi’s response to James Watson and Francis Crick’s discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule.⁴⁴ Contrary to Watson and Crick, Polanyi argued that their discovery did not prove human beings were determined by their physical and chemical properties. The discovery of DNA would lead to the conclusion that

⁴⁰ Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 64.

⁴¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, “Optimistic Humanism” (lecture, <http://moodyaudio.com/products/53897/optimistic-humanism>).

⁴² Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 20. Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985) 313–314, 318, 332. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, in *A Christian View of the Church*, vol. 4, bk. 4 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 271. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 10. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 205.

⁴³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 313–314.

⁴⁴ Michael Polanyi, “Life Transcending Physics and Chemistry,” *Chemical and Engineering News* 45, no. 35 (August 21, 1967): 54–66.

human beings are programmed machines only if we limit our knowledge to the materialistic aspects of life. But Polanyi pointed out that even machines cannot be fully explained on the basis of their physical and chemical properties. He argued that while both life and machines are constrained by their physical and chemical properties, they are not fully explained or determined by these properties. In an hour and a half lecture about Polanyi, Schaeffer said he felt Polanyi's argument on this subject was "one of the great propositions of the second half of the twentieth century" and noted that he had "never met a scholar in any of these related areas that didn't know Polanyi... [he] is a tremendous force in the current intellectual world."⁴⁵

Schaeffer's Critique of Polanyi's Epistemological Foundation

Schaeffer appreciated Polanyi's epistemology because it championed truth and, compared with logical positivism, more accurately described how human knowledge actually works.⁴⁶ However, Schaeffer believed that his model ultimately ended in cynicism concerning knowledge because it did not have a sufficient ontological explanation. In other words, Schaeffer was glad Polanyi argued for our ability to know reality but did not think he provided an explanation, or warrant, for why we should think we could. He wrote that "Polanyi, for example, who was so magnificent in destroying logical positivism, ends up with pure cynicism in the area of epistemology and knowing. So, as we have seen, does Karl Popper. Modern man is stuck right here. Positivism is dead and what is left is cynicism as to knowing. That is where modern man is,

⁴⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, "Chance and Evolution - Part 2 - Arthur Koestler and Michael Polyani" (lecture, 1968, [http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/12.2a%20&%2012.1b%20Chance%20&%20Evolution%20\(Part%202%20-%20Arthur%20Koestler%20&%20Michael%20Polyani\)%20-%20Francis%20Schaeffer.mp3](http://www.labri-ideas-library.org/store/12.2a%20&%2012.1b%20Chance%20&%20Evolution%20(Part%202%20-%20Arthur%20Koestler%20&%20Michael%20Polyani)%20-%20Francis%20Schaeffer.mp3)).

⁴⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 318.

whether the individual man knows it or not.”⁴⁷ Schaeffer did not mean that Polanyi himself ended in cynicism, but that his epistemological model would if it was carried out consistently. To better explain what he meant, Schaeffer expanded this section as part of a later revision:

Polanyi was so magnificent in destroying logical positivism, *and also in insisting that the subject-object relationship is real and that the subject can know the object. He is also known for championing truth; yet he developed no adequate base as to why these things are true. . . We truly can be thankful for his coming out for "truth," but he failed to give us a base and method as to how "the truth" can epistemologically be known to be truth.* Positivism is dead, and *what is left is cynicism or some mystical leap as to knowing.* That is where modern man is, whether the individual man knows it or not.⁴⁸

Polanyi argued against Modernism’s epistemology but he did not provide an ontological explanation which would justify his epistemological conclusions. Schaeffer believed that the critical error which led to Modernism’s epistemological problem was an incorrect ontology.⁴⁹ He argued that a new ontology was needed in order to avoid Modernism’s epistemological dilemma, that is, to provide warrant for *why* we should think there is a correlation between the subject (the knower’s inner beliefs) and the object (the external world). Our level of confidence in our ability to know reality is inexorably connected with what we, as human beings, think we are and where we think we came from.

This leads to one of the most fundamental of all questions: do we come from a personal or an impersonal source? Either we were created by a personal being or we came about as the product of an impersonal universe through time and chance. Schaeffer argued that modern epistemology resulted in confusion because it had adopted an ontological view of the uniformity

⁴⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), 54.

⁴⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 318. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

of natural causes in a closed system.⁵⁰ Joan Crewdson, a friend of Polanyi and student of his work, explained the concept of a closed system as follows:

To work with scientific presuppositions, as generally understood at present, requires that everything be explained by reference to causes that lie within the space-time system. This rules out belief in any transcendent power (coming from beyond the universe viewed as a closed causal nexus), including the idea of divine intervention. But if we believe that reality as a whole consists of God and the universe in interaction, we need a view of reality, in which God is neither identical with the universe, which would be pantheism, nor wholly outside the universe, which would be deism, but is both immanent in and transcendent of it.⁵¹

If the universe is a closed system, then human beings themselves are stuck in the inevitable sequence of cause and effect determination.⁵² If one believes this, it is difficult for them to escape the conclusion that human beings, having been produced by the cosmic machine, are also determined to act and think the way they do. As a case in point, Richard Dawkins concluded that “We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.”⁵³ Hence, if human beings came about accidentally through a chance materialistic process, there would be no reason to think that ‘how things seem to us’ accurately reflects what is really there.⁵⁴ Thomas Nagel, Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University, wrote that “[if] we came to believe that our capacity for objective theory were the product of natural selection, that would warrant serious skepticism about its results. . .

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Joan Crewdson, *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Personal Knowledge: A Personalist Theology* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 283–284. On page x she explains that “The aim of this book is to show that the basic unit of reality is not either matter, or mind, but both-and, and that we live in an irreducibly personal universe, with personal being as its highest product.” On page ix she claims that Polanyi was interested in her project and hoped she would write a book applying his ideas to theological issues.

⁵² Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of the *Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 164.

⁵³ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxi.

⁵⁴ For a thorough argument which explains why, if naturalism and evolution are true, we should not think our cognitive faculties are reliable, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307–351.

An evolutionary explanation of our theorizing faculty would provide absolutely no confirmation of its capacity to get at the truth.”⁵⁵

This dilemma has been most recognized in the area of moral knowledge. If we live in a closed, completely material universe, why think that love and morality are anything more than accidental human constructs selected by nature because they led to greater chances of survival and reproduction? Many have come to this very conclusion; for instance, Michael Ruse wrote that “. . . Darwinian theory shows that in fact morality is a function of (subjective) feelings, but it shows also that we have (and must have) the illusion of objectivity. . . In a sense, therefore, morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes.”⁵⁶ Schaeffer did not argue that those who rejected belief in God are unable to have moral knowledge, but only that within their system they cannot justify why they should believe such knowledge points to, or is connected with, any objective truth that exists beyond their subjective preferences. In making the connection between moral knowledge and overall epistemology, he wrote that “I am not saying that they do not have moral motions, but they have no basis for them. . . [likewise] I am not saying that . . . [they do] not know that the object exists—the problem is that they have no system to explain the subject-object correlation.”⁵⁷ It was Modernism’s view of ontology, that we live in a closed materialistic universe, which led to the horror of modern man not being able to know if what he thought in his head corresponded to how things really are, of not being able to distinguish reality from fantasy or illusion.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 79.

⁵⁶ Michael Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously: A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy* (New York: Blackwell, 1986), 253.

⁵⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 1 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 180.

⁵⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 329.

Schaeffer's Ontological Basis for Epistemology

Schaeffer argued that only if we believed we were created by an infinite-personal God would we be justified in thinking that there was a correlation between our inner faculty of knowing and the objective world. He wrote that “It is not surprising that if a reasonable God created the universe and put me in it, he should also correlate the *categories of my mind* to fit that universe, simply because I have to live in it.”⁵⁹ There would be no epistemological problem if our “internal faculty of knowing was made by God to correspond to the world and its form which He made.”⁶⁰ Schaeffer explained that there is a sense in which every person, in building their system of epistemology, must begin from the same place; they have to start from themselves. There is no other way to begin because everyone looks at the world through their own eyes. The point he emphasized was that theism is the only system which explains why that works.⁶¹ In other words, it is not necessary to start with God in building an epistemology to *describe how* human knowledge works but it is necessary to have God first ontologically in order to *explain why* we should think human knowledge works.

Schaeffer was not alone in recognizing the connection between believing that we were created by God and believing that we can truly understand reality. Many have attributed the rise of science in Western Europe to the fact that those in that culture believed nature was created by a rational God. For instance, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), when explaining why the scientific movement arose in Europe as opposed to other cultures, wrote that “there seems but

⁵⁹ Ibid., 335.

⁶⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, in *A Christian View of the West*, vol. 5, bk. 3 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 366.

⁶¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, in *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, vol. 1, bk. 2 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985), 265.

one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God.”⁶² Early scientists had confidence that they could understand nature through reason because they believed both they and nature had been created by the same reasonable God. Even Nietzsche, a most unlikely ally, wrote that “It is unfair to Descartes to call his appeal to God's credibility frivolous. Indeed, only if we assume a God who is morally our like can ‘truth’ and the search for truth be at all something meaningful and promising of success. This God left aside, the question is permitted whether being deceived is not one of the conditions of life.”⁶³

Schaeffer believed that Polanyi could not justify his epistemology without appealing to God. But the question must be asked: Did Polanyi himself believe that God exists? There are some indications that he did; for example, he wrote that “Such I believe is the true transition from the science to the humanities and also from our knowing the laws of nature to our knowing the person of God.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, he also wrote that “God cannot be observed, any more than truth or beauty can be observed. He exists in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise; not as a fact—any more than truth, beauty or justice exist as facts. All these, like God, are things which can be apprehended only in serving them.”⁶⁵ This passage is ambiguous but some have interpreted it to mean Polanyi believed that, in the process of worship, nothing exists externally beyond the worshipper.⁶⁶ Even those who knew him well were not sure where he stood on this issue: “[M]any of his friends and admirers tried to find out precisely what he himself believed. Some were frustrated by the ambiguities in his writing and wanted

⁶² Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures, 1925* (New York: New American Library, 1948), 13.

⁶³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26.

⁶⁴ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 245.

⁶⁵ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 279–280.

⁶⁶ Martin X. Moleski, *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 148.

reassurance that he believed in the reality of the existence of God.”⁶⁷ Regardless of whether he personally believed in God or not, he did not make God an explicit part of his epistemology and that is why Schaeffer felt it was insufficient.

Conclusion

In his attempt to help people, Schaeffer’s primary strategy was to show them the logical implications of their presuppositions, especially when it led to conclusions inconsistent with what they themselves believed about reality. For example, he would explain to a naturalist who fell in love that, if they followed their naturalistic presuppositions out consistently, they would conclude that love was meaningless. This was not an attempt to get them to reject love, but to re-think their presuppositions in light of what they experienced in the real world. Similarly, Schaeffer argued that Polanyi’s epistemological conclusion was indeed correct, but it was inconsistent with naturalistic presuppositions. While Schaeffer appreciated Polanyi’s epistemology, and may have even been influenced by it to some degree, he did not think it could be justified without believing in a God who created us to know. If God does not exist, there is no good reason to think that what comes to us through our senses corresponds to what is really there. In other words, theism provides a better ontological explanation for Polanyi’s epistemology than naturalism.

It should be noted though that Polanyi’s epistemological insight could be helpful in restoring western civilization’s belief in a theistic ontology. After all, as discussed in the beginning of this paper, it was Descartes’ epistemological misstep of trying to exclude faith which led to the ontological view of a non-theistic mechanical universe. When knowledge is

⁶⁷ Scott and Moleski, *Michael Polanyi*, 287. See also Drusilla Scott, *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 181 and Thomas F.

limited to only what can be known scientifically, people inevitably conclude that nothing exists beyond nature. By showing that faith is essential to all knowledge, Polanyi opened the door for once again legitimizing belief in a theistic universe, which in turn would provide the ontological foundation necessary to justify the belief that our knowledge truly corresponds with reality. This may just be exactly what Polanyi was trying to do: “I have mentioned divinity and the possibility of knowing God. These subjects lie outside my argument. But my conception of knowing opens the way to them.”⁶⁸

Torrance, “Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith—A Personal Report,” *Tradition and Discovery* 27 (2000-2001): 29–30.

⁶⁸ Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 247. See also Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, 69–70 and Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 324, 405.

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