

Connections between Michael Polanyi and Virtue Epistemology

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In his introduction to the philosophy of Michael Polanyi, Richard Gelwick writes that Polanyi's philosophy is a "new paradigm." Whereas the old paradigm "tried to understand the nature of inference and reasoning without including the central role of the person," Polanyi's new paradigm makes "all knowledge revolve around the responsible person."¹ This fact comes as no surprise to readers of Polanyi. The role of the person in knowing is the central theme of Polanyi's philosophy. His major work is entitled *Personal Knowledge*. In titling his book this, Polanyi realized that many people would consider the title a contradiction. According to the popular understanding of knowledge, the word 'personal' connotes subjective and subjective means biased. 'Knowledge', in the truest sense of the word is not subjective, but objective and independent of the person who claims it. Polanyi rejected this understanding of knowledge. He argued that knowledge cannot be divorced from the person who knows it. And this "personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding" is not subjective. Instead it is a "responsible act claiming universal validity" and is an "intellectual commitment."² The words Polanyi uses here—'responsible' and commitment—remind us that there is a moral undercurrent to Polanyi's thought. Polanyi's philosophical project is not an attempt at theory construction. Instead it is an attempt to rescue us from a deformed understanding of knowledge, an understanding of knowledge that Polanyi believed had disastrous consequences. And so I think it is clear, that for Polanyi, one cannot divorce the epistemological from the ethical. In this brief paper, I would like to explore the connection between Polanyi's epistemological and ethical thinking. I believe (as many others do)

¹ Richard Gelwick, *Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, 55-56.

² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, vii-viii.

that Polanyi's ethical thinking has much in common with what has become known as virtue ethics. In the first part of this paper, I would like to place Polanyi's thinking within the context of contemporary virtue ethics. In the second part, I discuss the current literature of what has come to be known as virtue epistemology. As far as I can tell, no one has explored the similarities between Polanyi and virtue epistemology or the possible contributions Polanyi might make to virtue epistemology. I would like to sketch some possibilities.

I. Virtue Ethics

Many scholars and commentators have noticed an affinity between Polanyi's thought and the development of virtue ethics. There are several reasons for this. 1) It makes sense that a philosopher who emphasized the person would also be interested in virtue. For virtues are character traits and only persons can have such traits. It is hard to see how knowledge could be responsible if knowledge must be detached, objective, and impersonal. But if knowledge is fundamentally tied to persons, then the notion of responsible knowledge makes sense. The character of the knower will affect how the knower knows and pursues knowledge. 2) Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, is often credited as a key component in the revival of virtue ethics. And in reading MacIntyre's discussion of tradition and practices, we notice a parallel with Polanyi's discussion of authority, apprenticeship, and the free society. For MacIntyre, the virtues can only be pursued within a tradition. Likewise for Polanyi, knowledge (or any human activity), can only be pursued within the context of a community. Thus science is only possible because there is a scientific community, and the individual scientist must submit to the values of this community (He can do this even if he argues for views that are opposed to the majority consensus of the scientific community). 3) Polanyi, like many virtue ethicists, is skeptical of moral theory and rejects many of the assumptions that modern moral theories make. Nagy writes that Polanyi "came to the conclusion that the ethical theories developed in modern critical philosophy were responsible for

the moral perfectionism which was one of the causes of the excessive moral fanaticisms and moral inversions of our time.”³ Modern ethical theories make the assumption that some basic concept or principle—e.g. the concept of duty in deontology, or the principle of utility in utilitarianism, can be made primary, and an ethical system can be derived from them. It is concerned with making explicit the necessary and sufficient conditions of right action. The virtue ethics advocated by such thinkers as G.E.M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre are, what David Solomon calls, radical virtue ethics in that they reject these assumptions. Not all virtue ethics is radical. Many virtue ethicists continue the modern project. Instead of rejecting moral theory as such, they pose a different theory—one that makes virtue primary. Solomon terms this routine virtue ethics.

Polanyi is clearly on the side of radical virtue ethics. Modern moral theory assumes that right action can be determined by following the right reasons. If we can adequately define the basic principles and concepts, we can deduce what actions are proper. Radical virtue ethics questions the adequacy of rules and principles just as Polanyi questions and ultimately rejects the idea that the scientific method can be completely formulizable. To assume that the scientific method or the moral life can be decided by an explicit statement of rules is to ignore the role of tacit knowledge in all knowing.

II. Virtue Epistemology

With the rise of virtue ethics, a new form of epistemology arose—one that focused on epistemological virtue—virtue epistemology. Like contemporary virtue ethics, the field of contemporary virtue epistemology can be divided in several different ways.⁴ The first contemporary philosopher to make use of virtue in epistemology is Ernest Sosa. Sosa did not

³ Paul Nagy, “Philosophy in a Different Voice: Michael Polanyi on Liberty and Liberalism,” in *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*. Vol. XXII, No. 3: 1995-1996, 22-23.

⁴ The history and taxonomy that I give in this section follows that given in the first chapter of Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues & Virtue Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

understand intellectual virtues to be character traits instead he understood them to be reliable faculties. Thus Sosa's virtue epistemology is a type of reliabilism and is concerned with the traditional epistemological problems of justification and the problem of skepticism. But there is also a growing body of literature of what Jason Baehr describes as "character based virtue epistemology" and it is this character based virtue epistemology that I want to concentrate on.⁵ Baehr divides character based epistemology between conservative and autonomous virtue epistemology.⁶ Conservative virtue epistemologists believe that intellectual virtue can play an important role in solving many of the traditional problems in epistemology (offering a solution to the Gettier problem for example). Autonomous virtue epistemologists argue that the study of the intellectual virtues is separate from the problems of traditional epistemology.

Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood offer an example of autonomous virtue epistemology. Their 2007 book, *Intellectual Virtues* is subtitled "An Essay in Regulative Epistemology." By "regulative epistemology" Roberts and Wood means an epistemology that "tries to generate guidance for epistemic practice...[It] is a response to perceived deficiencies in people's epistemic conduct and thus strongly practical and social. This kind of epistemology aims to change the (social) world."⁷ To this end, Roberts and Wood eschew what they call "theory building" which they consider the attempt to define and give necessary and sufficient conditions to such key terms as "knowledge, rationality, warrant, [and] justification" and also to sort out a hierarchical and often reductive system of these concepts.⁸ Instead, their book consists of conceptual analyses of various intellectual virtues—love knowledge, firmness, courage, humility, among others. In their introduction they note that:

⁵ Baehr 9.

⁶ For the remainder of this paper, virtue epistemology will be synonymous with character based virtue epistemology.

⁷ Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood. *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 21.

⁸ Roberts and Wood 21, 23.

These analyses will constitute something like “definitions”; at any rate we aim by way of our discussions to make the concepts more definite in our minds. If *such* definition and conceptual clarification is theory, then we are doing theory; but our “definitions” will not be formulas that aspire to specify the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for anything’s falling under whatever concept is in question; nor will we have any qualms about multi-directional “derivations” of concepts. It seems to us that in fact this messy non-hierarchical logic is actually the logic of the concepts that governs the intellectual life, and that attempts to regiment them into hierarchical orderings satisfying the strictures of typical philosophical theorizing result only in confusing and pedantic analyses that are ill fit to regulate anybody’s epistemic life.⁹

Roberts and Wood hope that exploring these concepts will not only help us better understand these virtues, but also help us cultivate them in ourselves. I would like to suggest that Polanyi’s thought and the virtue ethics of Roberts and Wood have many interesting parallels and that it would be fruitful to explore them. Like Polanyi, Roberts and Wood are skeptical of a decision procedure for obtaining knowledge. Polanyi tells us that the rules of science are the rules of an art. They are helpful in that they offer us guidelines in how we should go about our intellectual activities. They do not guarantee us success. Discovery is messy and we should not seek to sanitize this messiness. Still formulating rules and doing conceptual analysis of intellectual virtues is helpful. And this should be done as rigorously as possible. Such formulations should increase our understanding rather than fulfill the demands of a certain type of theory that do not fully capture the phenomena.

Furthermore, when we read Polanyi, we often see hints of virtue language. Many of the virtues that Roberts and Wood discuss have parallels in Polanyi’s own writings. The love of knowledge, for example, is the first virtue that Roberts and Wood explore. This virtue is central to Polanyi’s project. In the beginning of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi rejects the idea that knowledge is pursued impersonally and detached from our interests and passions. If we were truly pursuing knowledge in this sense, we would spend our lives studying interstellar dust. Objectivity, as

⁹Roberts and Wood 26.

Polanyi understands it “inspires us, on the contrary, with the hope of overcoming the appalling disabilities of our bodily existence, even to the point of conceiving a rational idea of the universe which can authoritatively speak for itself. It is not a counsel of self-effacement, but the very reverse—a call to the Pygmalion in the mind of man.”¹⁰ For Polanyi, passion for knowledge and discovery is central to being a good scientist. In his earlier book, *Science, Faith and Society*, Polanyi makes the claim that science is only possible in a free society and a free society is dedicated to the “fourfold proposition (1) that there is such a thing as truth; (2) that all members love it; (3) that they feel obliged and (4) are in fact capable of pursuing it.”¹¹ The free society, as Polanyi conceives it, depends upon cultivating the virtue of love of knowledge in all its citizens.

The love of knowledge leads to another related virtue—the virtue of intellectual responsibility. Polanyi sees the scientist as having a calling, a calling to pursue the truth as he or she understands it. The community of science is bound together by a submission to the values of science and each scientist is responsible for holding to those values. There are times when a given scientist will be called to put forward an unpopular scientific conclusion. He must only do so when he believes that this conclusion faithfully embodies the scientific ideals that he shares with others. But to do so also requires that he has intellectual courage—the courage to put forward his unpopular conclusions for all to examine and judge. One possible area of exploration between Polanyi and virtue epistemology is thinking through these intellectual virtues. What are the intellectual virtues that are central to Polanyi’s thought? Why are they so central? Does Polanyi’s analysis and writings offer us any additional insight into these virtues?

In addition to expanding Polanyi’s project, I also think that Polanyi’s thought might aid virtue epistemologists. In particular I am thinking that virtue epistemologists might be able to

¹⁰ *Personal Knowledge* 5.

¹¹ Michael Polanyi. *Science, Faith, and Society*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1946, 71.

make use of Polanyi's tacit knowledge. In a recent paper by Robert C. Roberts and Ryan West engage with the thought of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman.¹² Kahneman has documented a number of situations where we are prone to make wrong judgments. Our thinking, according to Kahneman is divided between two systems: System 1 is effortless and automatic and includes being able to solve simple math problems, recognizing a face, and sensing danger. System 2 is where we do our more intensive thinking—concentrating on a problem, doing difficult math. These two systems are constantly interacting and their interactions are largely efficient in our day to day activities. But there are certain instances when their interaction is systematically defective. Roberts and West, making use of Kahneman recommend the cultivation of two virtues to help correct these deficiencies—self vigilance and intellectual vitality. Essentially these our virtues in which we learn to recognize those situations when systematic deficiencies are most likely. In reading their discussion in this topic, I'm inclined to think that Polanyi's understanding of tacit knowledge could further aid our discussion on this matter. And many virtues (both ethic and moral) might helpfully be thought of in terms of the subsidiary and focal. I have not yet worked out this thought, but it seems to me to be a fruitful line of reasoning.

I think that virtue epistemology should be seen as a welcome development in contemporary epistemology by Polanyi scholars, and that that both Polanyians and virtue epistemologists have much to gain by engaging each others thought.

¹² Roberts, Robert C., and Ryan West. "Natural Epistemic Defects and Corrective Virtues." *Synthese* 192.8 (2015): 2557-76. Web.