

A Response to Esther L. Meek’s paper “*Contact with Reality: Reflections Upon Completing a Good Beginning*” at The Polanyi Society meeting, November 17, 2017, Boston.
by David Rutledge

I.

I was delighted to hear that Esther Meek was going to publish a book that placed Michael Polanyi within the philosophy of science discussions that surrounded him in the middle of the 20th century. I had never read her dissertation — indeed I had forgotten that she had written on the topic of Polanyi’s realism — but I believed that more attention should be paid to situating Polanyi amid the constellation of Feyerabend, Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn and other contemporaries who were working on similar problems. My reason for believing this is that the subject is of immense importance, given the predominance of science in our culture, and the assumption by many that positivism was the natural form of science. To read a book like A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic* as an undergraduate left one with the view that science was necessarily pitted against humanistic concerns generally, especially religious belief. Thus it was crucial that science be accurately understood and explained, if a legitimate answer to the challenge of positivism was to be found, and Meek’s book promised to put Polanyi back into the middle of the debate over the nature of science.

Another reason for anticipation was that I was a fan of Esther’s previous work, even though I did not always understand or agree with what she was doing (!). She is a trustworthy guide to Polanyi; she usually reads him from an ultimately religious perspective, which I appreciate; and her writing was always refreshing, full of humor, concrete examples, provocative metaphors, and illustrations from the classroom. Now I must admit that *Contact with Reality* does not display all of the virtues of her *writing* that we have become accustomed to — it seems it is hard to explicate Karl Popper in a light and stimulating way! *Contact with Reality* is more an explication of the theme for academics, rather than a teaching instrument for neophytes; thus it is a bit drier and less personal than her earlier books, focused on carefully working out her argument. Nevertheless, I looked forward to this book, and I was not disappointed.

II.

I have few major criticisms of Meek’s book or paper, so let me get a minor one out of the way at the start. I was surprised that there was no mention of Mary Jo Nye’s book on Polanyi, since it discusses his relationship to many of the same figures Meek treats, though from an historical rather than philosophical perspective. I also expected some mention of the *TAD* issue on Polanyi’s realism *to which Meek herself contributed* (!); it seemed to me that at least Mullins’ and Cannon’s essays would have been relevant.

Mullins also has essays on Polanyi's realism in *Polanyiana*, and on his metaphysics in *TAD*, that are helpful.¹

Now let me turn to more substantive, positive comments, beginning with an appreciation for the careful way Meek clarifies elements of Polanyi's thought that were sometimes left a bit vague by Polanyi himself. One example is Meek's explanation of why Polanyi's statements about a parallel between the structure of tacit knowing and the structure of the real world needed to be, and were, discarded in his later writings (pp. 92-96)² To summarize: she presents three difficulties with this "parallel structures" idea, and then shows why it can be discarded on the basis of his own ideas: "The relationship between knowing and being is ultimately close for Polanyi, not because knowing parallels being, but because knowing in fact *is* being." (95)

A second example of Meek's careful reading is her insistence that Polanyi actually contributes to appreciating the *communal* nature of knowing by accrediting "the role of 'external' factors such as history, sociology, and community...as subsidiaries transformatively incorporated into the integrative pattern of our knowing." (273) "Polanyi believes that knowledge develops in the context of the community;" thus he does not ignore the role of one's community in shaping one's thought, but identifies it as a subsidiary — important but subsidiary — to the focal integration of the individual. (See p. 25, n. 28) Her treatment here is a helpful corrective to the often individualistic descriptions of personal knowledge.

And finally, another strength of *Contact with Reality* (esp. in chs. 8-10) is that Meek shows how misguided and unsuccessful are the criticisms of Polanyi by major philosophers of science and their acolytes, and she does this in a careful and detailed way. This is especially true for me in her discussion of the incommensurability of scientific theories from different paradigms, and on the rationality of Polanyi's views. (125ff.; 132ff.) Beyond these particular examples, Esther foregrounds the central elements of Polanyi's view of knowing: it takes *discovery* as its model, not explanation or justification; the concreteness and appositeness of his examples, drawn as they are from *actual scientific practice*, are far superior to the theoretical abstractions of most philosophers of science, who are not scientists; that Polanyi's understanding of reality allows for persons and their creations to be *more real* than cobblestones; that reality remains *mysterious* for Polanyi, in that we can never know it in its entirety — it remains, despite our knowledge, "boundless," "inexhaustible," "indeterminate," perhaps even "unthinkable;" and the real, finally, is not arcane or difficult to comprehend; it is simply *the world* as we live in it. (68)

In a sense, Meek is providing the engagement with the philosophers of science contemporary with

¹ Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and his Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); *TAD* 26:3 (1999-2000); *Polanyiana* 6:2 (1997) 5-21; *TAD* 33:3.

² Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Meek's book, *Contact with Reality* (Cascade Books, 2017).

Polanyi that he did not provide, which is most helpful. Though the initial aim of her dissertation thirty years ago was to *prove* or exhaustively justify Polanyi's realism, we can applaud her realization that attempting to do so was misguided, because it is contrary to the indeterminate, partially hidden nature of reality itself. (233; 235, n. 98; 259) I was also struck by how useful were the copious references Meeks gives in her notes to relevant passages in all of Polanyi's works, so that the evidence for her readings is abundant and clear. Having convinced you, hopefully, that *Contact with Reality* contains good lessons for experienced Polanyians, let me address some questions to Esther that deserve discussion.

III.

(1) In discussing Polanyi's understanding of the real as that which manifests itself in the future in unanticipated ways, Meek confronts the question of how the knower can expect the real to manifest itself in the future in ways that, while new and unanticipated, can be nevertheless recognized. How can the knower *expect the unexpected*? Meek's answer is to refer to Marjorie Grene's formulation, that unpredictability in Polanyi is not irrationality or chaos, but a "*systematic* unpredictability." (69) Can you say more about this?

(2) Polanyi makes *discovery* the model for all knowing, which honors the questing, restless, dynamic intentionality of human beings. This is significant, as Meek states: "the breakthrough that is discovery seems intrinsically to be a breakthrough to a higher emergent level." (6 of paper) But how do we understand other forms of knowing that are not so dramatic? Some examples:

We see a picture, which we identify as that of a unicorn.

We read, and come to understand, a description of an atom.

Explorers identify objects on the top of Mt. Ararat as part of Noah's ark.

We memorize the multiplication tables.

With Christmas coming, we hear read the scripture, "My soul magnifies the Lord..." (Lk. 1), and we understand what a soul is.

How do we comprehend these examples of knowing something with the process of discovery? Or are further distinctions perhaps necessary? [Note here Paul Holmer's criticism that Polanyi is a "lumper," not a "splitter" like Wittgenstein — that is, he tends to lump all forms of knowing into one or a few categories.]

(3) On p. 4, n. 8 of her paper, Meek tries to defend Polanyi's view of science as 'non-elitist,' as democratic. But while Polanyi certainly intended his structure of tacit knowing to apply to the knowing of all persons, everywhere, he does not suggest that science can be done by just anyone. Meek writes, "One need not be a scientist to practice every dimension of the personal participation in knowing that he helpfully identifies." (ibid.) Even if this is true, it does not mean that anyone can be a scientific genius, like Einstein. *Knowing* is not elitist; science is. Comment?

(4) I found the last chapter of Meek’s book extremely interesting, and want to devote the rest of this response to the issues presented there. As she makes clear in the Preface to Part II of *Contact*, Meek wants to extend Polanyi’s epistemological insights into ontology, and then into theology (240-243). She is aware that this is an “extra-territorial” use of Polanyi, and notes the ambiguity of doing this responsibly. On the one hand, it is not inappropriate “to pursue the matter of God in connection with Polanyi’s work.” (241) On the other hand, Polanyi “would have been uncomfortable with religion as a kind of add-on or explicit application of his work;” (241) For example, Meek notes that “Michael Polanyi was conceiving of the highest level of being to be the interchange of minds known as culture and thought,” — and not God. (11 in paper)

So a first question is, given Polanyi’s ambivalence about religion, why connect him explicitly to this theological effort? Why not simply say, “At this point I am not speaking for Polanyi, as we do not know how far he might have gone in this direction” ?

If, however, we grant that Polanyi was “intuitively metaphysical,” and further that in his work “ontology ultimately precedes epistemology,” as Meek asserts (74), can we say anything specific about what concept of God might result from these facts? Meek uses David Schindler (and indirectly von Balthasar) to describe such a God, and sketches Schindler’s claims:

(a) “knowing has two centers of agency — not the self alone, but rather the self and the other.” (8 in paper)

(b) being (reality) moves toward the soul of the knower, and actually makes the first overture. Being “gives itself to be known; it self-communicates.” (quoted on 8 in paper) and

(c) knowing is encounter, which “requires fundamentally that the structure of knowing be empathetic.”

“The soul’s contact with being is one of intimacy, feeling-with the other, consent and communion. In fact, since the soul is itself being, knowing is ‘genuine ontological communion with the other.’” (quoted on 9 of paper)

This seems to me a pretty extensive set of terms to import into Polanyi’s discussion of “the real.” Meek is saying that “the real” with which all knowing tries to make contact, according to Polanyi, is a personal God, and a Person of a particular character, which Schindler describes with the image of “the mother’s smile” as a kind of symbol of the love of God. This, Meek suggests, is what Polanyi really brings us to, and “Schindler specifically affirms that Polanyi is doing epistemology ‘from above.’” (10 in paper)

While I find this relating of Polanyi and Schindler fascinating and provocative in many ways, approaching the Divine is not merely a matter of moving terms around — I’m not sure all the necessary subtleties are being honored here. One example of the kind of issue that is raised when we move from philosophy to theology: I’ve been reading Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* recently, where Francis reminds us that Jewish and Christian thought “no longer saw nature as divine” — they introduced a

distinction between the two. He continues: “God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature....” (para. 78, 80) Though the earth is “a locus of God’s presence,” (88) “This is not to forget that there is an infinite distance between God and the things of this world, which do not possess his fullness.” (88)

The question that arises is, within “the real” with which knowing puts us in contact, how do we accommodate this standard Christian distinction between “nature”/“world” and God? Meek sees a movement from “the real” to “being” to “the person, interpersonhood, of God the Holy Trinity” (11 of the paper), but it seems to me this goes far beyond Michael Polanyi, and I’m a bit uncomfortable with these assertions (even if I agree with the theology!). Theologically, this is the question of how God is related to the world, of how transcendence and immanence are to be understood, and it behooves us to tread carefully here, as these are not simple matters.

To put the point differently: Polanyi’s “structure of tacit knowing” seems intended as a universal description of how knowing works in human beings generally. So how is it that “the real” to which it leads is actually the trinitarian God of Christianity? Perhaps these different ‘language games’ need to be sorted out a bit more. So is this caveat unfair, or unnecessary?

And now thanks to Esther for giving us a very worthwhile book!
