Understanding, not Knowing, as the Core of Polanyi's Philosophy

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It has been suggested that, although the title of Michael Polanyi's *magnum opus* is *Personal Knowledge*, it would be more consistent with the dynamic thrust of his philosophical vision if the work were entitled *Personal Knowing*.[1] In this essay, I will argue that an even more apt title to describe his philosophy than *Personal Knowing* would be *A Philosophy of Understanding*. I will further suggest that the process of understanding involves personal acts of discerning, creating, and evaluating meanings of various sorts.

Note first and primarily that the term "knowledge" is often used in society to designate either what has been demonstrated scientifically or, more colloquially, what is commonly taken for granted. It manifests an aura of objectivity. "Understanding," on the other hand, is grounded in an embodied capacity of an individual to learn from experience.[2] Understanding can accommodate reasoning about a person's world orientation and values, topics about which knowledge cannot legitimately make claims. Understanding encompasses elusive psychological factors like motivation, desire, and strategy, factors that seem outside the realm of knowing. Polanyi codifies his insight into how understanding encapsulates one's personal experience and the shaping influence of environment by speaking of a person's calling. Polanyi came to see his own calling to be developing a rich, meaning-laden theory of understanding designed to heal the twentieth century's massive problems[3] and offer individuals hope that their lives matter.

Additionally, understanding includes an interpersonal, appreciative aspect largely missing in knowing. While this interpersonal aspect of understanding is not emphasized by Polanyi, it supports his notions of conviviality and progress in the republic of science. Understanding, like knowing, can refer to comprehension of material at a given epistemic level, but more than knowledge, it is nimble and able to comprehend the relationships between materials at different epistemic levels. Similarly, it can assess and comprehend with sensitivity the diverse views of different people. Understanding is the launching site for synoptic interpretation. From an understanding of diverse factors, an imaginative integration can produce comprehensive vision.

In short, understanding is both more sensitive to diversity and more comprehensive than knowing. It draws strength and direction from tacit processes in a way that nurtures significant explicit thought and action. It functions at the very core of Polanyi's philosophical venture.

Well, if understanding is so importantly involved in living, then its nature and functioning ought to be examined closely. That is my aim in this essay.

I. The Inarticulate Roots of Understanding

In suggesting the importance of "understanding" for comprehending Polanyian thought, I am of course not imposing some concept that is foreign to his philosophical vision. Indeed, in *The Study of Man*, Polanyi's summary statement of what he thinks he achieved in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi states that the one word to identify properly all the processes by which humans gain intellectual control over their experience is "understanding" (SM 20; see also PK 132). Control is achieved through tacitly reorganizing experiences into intelligible and manipulable schemas and categories. Understanding includes all the tacit processes and powers through which persons come to recognize what they *believe*, and such examined belief comes to serve as the ultimate basis for justifying what they think and how they act. Understanding thus anchors Polanyi's fiduciary philosophy. It is the basis of competence and claims of knowledge. On this basis, Polanyi states, "I have now expanded the function of understanding into that of knowing what we *intend*, what we *mean*, or what we *do*" (SM 22). Now if understanding is about personal control of thought and action and is therefore even more firmly grounded in the personal than knowing, perhaps Polanyi should have phrased the sentence just quoted so as to eliminate the *knowing* of what we intend, etc. It might better be stated as follows: "I have now expanded the function of understanding into that of *being consciously in control of* what we intend, what we mean, and what we do." This way of phrasing things aptly demonstrates that the core of personal responsibility lies in judgments expressive of our understanding and its galaxy of beliefs.[4]

The foregoing discussion indicates that Polanyi intends the term "understanding" to cover processes he also calls "tacit knowing." That is, he roots "understanding" in innate and learned *inarticulate skills* and the nonlinguistic lessons we learn from our skillful perceptual interactions with our environments. "We may say in general that by acquiring a skill, whether muscular or intellectual, we achieve an understanding which we cannot put into words and which is continuous with the inarticulate faculties of animals" (PK 90). Then, in an intriguing footnote, he further elaborates on what he means by "understanding":

> Our widened use of the word 'understanding' makes it comprise the domain of 'conception' as well as that of 'schema', the term used by Claparede and Piaget for designating a complex motoric faculty. I shall use these words interchangeably, to stand for a kind of latent knowledge, or aspects of such knowledge, as distinct from any overt performances based on this kind of knowledge. Later on 'intuition' or 'insight' will be introduced to describe the act of understanding, particularly in mathematics. (PK 91)

Polanyi's act of embedding inarticulate understanding in both the schemas of sensorimotor skills and sensory conception makes sense in terms of recent understanding of brain architecture. These skills are closely linked in the cerebral cortex. In addition, linguistic ability seems to have evolved as an elaboration of motoric skills in the same region of the brain. This makes sense in that talking involves skillfully moving lips, tongue, and vocal chords. Perhaps this tight connection indicates why we often cannot resist accompanying our speech with hand and body gestures.

Polanyi identifies three types of inarticulate intelligence employed by nonhuman animals: trick, sign and latent learning (PK 71-76). These involve respectively a skill in contriving things for certain purposes, observing signals that inform animals of environmental events of interest

and potential response, and the reorganization of what is experienced into meaningfully connected memories, mental maps that can be utilized in purposeful behavior. Polanyi states that latent learning, the crucial third type of inarticulate intelligence, occurs "when the process of reorganization is achieved not by a particular act of contriving or observing, but by achieving a *true understanding of a situation which had been open to inspection almost entirely from the start*" (PK 74). Thus, latent learning stores the lessons of experience and functions as the ground of understanding.

Polanyi describes the realm of inarticulate understanding as constituting an ineffable domain, by which he means that while one can refer to its inarticulate contents, one cannot speak of them adequately (PK 91). "This ineffable domain of skillful knowing is continuous in its inarticulateness with the knowledge possessed by animals and infants, who, as we have seen, also possess the capacity for reorganizing their inarticulate knowledge and using it as an interpretive framework" (PK 90).[5]

If understanding is so important to Polanyi's philosophical position, why does he not make that importance clearer in how he labels his thought? The certainty associated with knowledge links it with the aim of Cartesian philosophy. Descartes sought to establish a methodology that would transcend the subjective uncertainty he discerned in his Jesuit education. Polanyi experienced the problematic legacy of Descartes's methodology in the positivism and objectivism that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century. Polanyi labels his effective discrediting of those philosophical positions with the terms "personal knowledge" and "post-critical philosophy." He uses these two terms to demonstrate that he offers an epistemological alternative. Unfortunately, each term also bears connotations that are at odds with his broad intent. "Personal philosophy" sounds to the uninitiated to advocate a strictly subjective approach to philosophy, even though Polanyi goes to great lengths to disavow any such interpretation. "Post-critical philosophy" has the problem that the term "post-critical" suggests criticism no longer has a place in philosophy, which again is not what Polanyi believes.

Does the term "personal understanding" more adequately capture the essence of Polanyi's unique vision? Unfortunately, I don't think so. Understanding is generally thought to have a personal element, so the term does not hint at the wholesale shift from modernist presuppositions that Polanyi's comprehensive thought requires. Rather "personal understanding" tends to sound like a retreat into flaccid subjectivism. "Personal knowledge" more paradoxically and evocatively integrates a term that sounds subjective with a term that sounds objective, and this invites inquiry into the nature of this integration. "Post-critical philosophy" also lures one into seeking out what Polanyi's intended position might be. Since I believe understanding is at the very center of that intention, my candidate to describe most accurately Polanyi's epistemic prioritizing of understanding would simply be "philosophy of understanding." I am not advocating "philosophy of understanding" replace "post-critical philosophy" or "personal knowledge;" I only suggest it is the phrase that most adequately describes his philosophical stance.

To summarize: Understanding connotes an ability to discern relationships that help one see the big picture and feel in control. One is able to find one's way about. The inarticulate

aspect of understanding refers to mental processes in which any of the three types of inarticulate intelligence humans share with other animals are utilized in accordance with some purpose. I view latent learning as a particularly significant aspect of inarticulate understanding, because embedding learning in a map-like structure allows one to be aware of how one's experiences fit together coherently. Inarticulate understanding as a process refers to the active use of imagination and intuition to gain control of the experience through mapping experience into appropriate, useful domains.

II. The Articulation of Understanding through Language

Our normal usage of the term "understanding" includes much more than the felt, inarticulate sensibility we experience in common with animals and infants. We tend to see understanding as a state of comprehension we can describe in language. So, if the suggested description of Polanyi's thought as philosophy of understanding is not to be a misleading designation, the role language plays in transforming understanding from a felt to an articulate state needs to be accounted for.

Note, however, that to speak of understanding as articulate can be misleading. For the experienced state of understanding remains felt and therefore inarticulate even as its content is made explicit through language. Polanyi never clearly addresses the distinction between articulate and inarticulate understanding. In delineating this distinction, therefore, I will expand and supplement his ideas, but do so in ways that I believe are consistent with his overall philosophy.

Included in the inarticulate dimension of understanding are many of the skillful competences humans share with other animals, particularly primates. The apes exhibit an ability to cope with what life brings; they can plan and play, meet and mate. It is not necessary to relegate such traits of consciousness as intention and meaning to linguistic ability alone. Included within the tacit dimension are the embodied skills Polanyi mentions, such as reading the information provided by a probe, or operating a machine. Indeed, many of the operations humans learn become second nature and do not require language-loaded thought in order to function properly.

Language is, of course, the primary factor that produces the uniquely human form of articulate understanding. Polanyi suggests that the three tacit powers of the mind described earlier are combined in humans, unlike other animals, to enable us to speak. "To speak is to *contrive* signs, to *observe* their fitness, and to *interpret* their alternative relations; though the animal possesses each of these three faculties, he cannot combine them" (PK 82). While Polanyi theoretically emphasizes the importance of language in human experience, the way he treats language as but one of many tacit factors in knowing does not in practice adequately accent its uniqueness and centrality. "We may say that when we learn to use language, or a probe, or a tool, and thus make ourselves aware of these things as we are of our body, we *interiorize* these things and *make ourselves dwell in them*" (KB 148). Language is thus for Polanyi just one of many functionally tacit subsidiaries to focal knowledge in what he terms the triadic structure of consciousness.

Here it is important to note that virtually all transactions within and between living organisms are mediated and therefore triadic in nature. Biosemiotics describes the various sorts of triadic processes in the biological realm. But the focus of this essay is upon human understanding and role of language in elevating consciousness to become an emergent phenomenon facilitating the rise of human culture. Because human language so significantly separates human consciousness from other forms of consciousness, and its impact upon the world is so pronounced, I feel its importance ought not be minimized by regarding it as simply one more type of subsidiary in the zoo of subsidiaries.

Polanyi anchors his discussion of the emergence of human consciousness by speaking of the from-to character of consciousness. In adding a "from" dimension to the "to" aspect of consciousness emphasized by Brentano, Polanyi made an important step. Brentano stated that all consciousness is of some object or content, the "to." Polanyi's "from" indicates the complex background that gives the object or content of the "to" specific meaning. Sometimes Polanyi simplifies the complexity of the background and concentrates on how a few subsidiaries of which we are aware contribute to focal meaning. However, passages such as the following indicate Polanyi fully recognizes the complex background features included in the functioning of the "from." Our acts of knowing, he says, rely on "stimuli coming from outside, from all parts of our body and from tools or instruments assimilated to our body, and . . . on a wide range of linguistic pointers which bring to bear our pre-conceptions—based on past experiences—on the interpretation of our subject matter" (KB 134).

To highlight the way the inarticulate and articulate levels of consciousness are connected in *human* experience, for some years I have advocated expanding Polanyi's from-to model of consciousness into a triadic *from-via-to* model. This model is consistent with Polanyi's triadic formulation of consciousness (see KB 181-182); his from-to model suggests duality. I have stipulated that the "via" which transforms the tacit "from" into the articulate "to" be restricted to discursive symbolism—to language in particular, as the unique contributor to human consciousness. It is important to recognize that language is not simply restricted to mental processing in speech and thought, but that it may also be applied to sensation to create perception that accommodates question raising and thoughtful inquiry. That is, perception becomes distinctively human when language is added to the schematized recognition of sensation we experience in common with other animals so that a person can reflect upon and discuss what is perceived. More basically, I see the framework assembling, language evoking, and judging carried out at the "via" level to be the very center of personhood, constituting the responsible individual.

Polanyi seeks to interpret how humans negotiate the several types of consciousness to which we are privy by telling of how a traveler writes to a reader what that person experienced so that the reader may imaginatively enter into the experience. He says it involves a sequence of three integrations.

> The *first* is an intelligent understanding of sights and events, the *second* the composing of a verbal account of this experience, and the *third* the interpretation of this verbal account with a view to reproducing this experience which is reported. . .The *first* triad is more a

> sense-*reading*, the *second* more a sense-*giving* and the *third*, once more, a sense-*reading*. ((KB 186)

He calls the basic schematizing of sensory experience "sense-reading." When that schematized sensory experience is translated into language, he terms this act "sense-giving." If another person reads what the perceiver writes, this again requires sense-reading. But note that Polanyi uses the same term, "sense-reading," to refer to activity at two different levels: one at the level of understanding what one sees and the other at the level of comprehending human language. This can be confusing, for different processes of understanding occur at the inarticulate and articulate levels of consciousness.

I list below some of the interrelated characteristics of language—the "via"—that jointly contribute to a state of human consciousness not found in other animals. Inasmuch as articulate understanding relies so heavily on language, increased understanding of the nature and processes of language increases our understanding of understanding itself.

1. Human language, unlike other forms of communication, has a vocabulary. Words, the elements of language, are arbitrarily rather than iconically related to what they *denote*. Their relatively fixed meanings are established by convention. As conventional, language is socially constituted and forms the basis for intersubjective communication, yet as schematically grounded in personal experience, words (and combinational flexibility) allow for personal creativity. Words singly and in combination also exhibit *connotations* reflective of the speaker's/writer's intention and the context in which they are used. There are often alternative ways to arrive at the same or similar meanings, some more precise or pleasing than others.
2. Words can be arranged according to syntactical and grammatical rules into propositions or other types of higher level semantic meaning. "Language as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When we hear our native language we do not hear grammar or particular sounds or meanings, we hear and instantly understand what is being said as a whole, individually and together in a conversation or story."[6] That is, when we speak or write, we create an emergent level of consciousness that is more than a mere aggregation of words. Individual words name items or events and can then function as signals. Words in proper syntactic combination, however, make possible claims of truth or falsity and help establish the whole edifice of human culture.
3. Some words or phrases are intelligibly equivalent to the meaning of other groups of words so that dictionaries can be constructed. Languages then are domesticated and allow for precision in communication.
4. Words tend to be linked to particular schemas which in turn capture commonly available objects or events. Many of these same intellectual schemas (concepts) are referred to in different languages. Lakoff and Johnson persuasively argue that this is because all languages are grounded in bodily accessible basic-level categories that are neither too abstract nor too refined.[7] Thus, one can equally call a horse a caballo, a pferd, or a cheval. That humans throughout the world share many of the same or very similar concepts provides a basis upon which translations from one language to another can be established.

5. As social animals, young humans are predisposed to learn languages (and other aspects of our cultural heritage) as part of their initiation into social reality. Parents shape the baby's babbling into language and new levels of intimacy and competence result. The young child's world can expand beyond immediate perceptual experience though the imaginative reach of language (sometimes called displacement).
6. Language has great plasticity. It can be shaped into different *frameworks* of understanding so that the natural, cultural, and interpersonal worlds can be engaged from different perspectives. The most general sorts of frameworks mold specific cultural understandings of what makes sense (for instance, the Azande versus the scientific worldview). Collingwood calls such basic beliefs "absolute presuppositions" and suggests many inhabitants of a culture are not even aware of these beliefs and their influence. The various academic disciplines all tend to have specific frameworks that may separate them to some degree from other disciplines, although usually not with the incommensurability that Kuhn is often interpreted as suggesting. Then there are the very personal frameworks individuals develop. The different roles people play and the different personalities they engage each tend to induce the use of specific vocabularies that function as frameworks. Frameworks tend to be labile, changing as culture evolves.
7. Jerome Bruner distinguishes two basic modes of linguistic organization that dominate the human urge for explanation: analysis (breaking a whole into its parts to understand better how it works) and narrative exposition (story telling within which causal explanation is frequently embedded).[8] Charles Taylor offers a related distinction: those in the empiricist tradition like Locke view language as a tool for description and the communication of information, while those in the romantic tradition like Goethe employ the constitutive function of narratives to build novel "landscapes of meaning."[9]
8. Language, when married with a predisposition to contrive, has produced technological achievements that vastly expand human perception and empirical understanding into macro, micro, and ancient worlds that are unimaginable to other animals. The flexibility of language grants access to different levels and perspectives upon reality, thereby dramatically expanding the reach of understanding.
9. The most important technological achievement, writing, now augmented by the internet, has allowed for unprecedented shared communication across ethnic and generational divisions. This expanded intelligible world becomes part of the cultural legacy into which humans are socialized and which thereby shapes human experience. A kind of global orthodoxy supported by the media and involving science, history, and the various facets of globalization has thereby largely replaced the authority of local traditions. Shared understanding has consequently become potentially more widespread, although in practice electronic media have also spawned new forms of tribalism.

III. Meaning

The distinction I have drawn between inarticulate and articulate understanding suggests there exists within human consciousness a fundamental dichotomy. However, rarely is extreme disjunction justified when one takes, as Polanyi does, an evolutionary view regarding biological

development and relationship. No doubt there have been in evolutionary history many small incremental steps between the inarticulate understanding of primates and human articulate understanding that reveal underlying continuities as well as emergent discontinuities. From a phenomenological standpoint, understanding seems a felt condition happily including both inarticulate and articulate factors. At this point, I find it instructive to focus on the felt continuities by asking what the function of understanding at any of its levels might be. Here is an introductory answer: *understanding identifies, classifies, and assesses the significance of the challenges and opportunities afforded by one's personal, cultural, and physical environments*.

The currency in terms of which understanding identifies, classifies, and assesses is *meaning*. Clearly, if what we thought about or how we acted had no meaning, we would also have no understanding. Understanding and meaning are woven together in diverse ways. The inarticulate reading of environmental signs signaling danger or opportunity may be regarded as the primal origin of meaningfulness within evolutionary history. "As far down the scale of life as the worms and even perhaps the amoeba, we meet a general alertness of animals, not directed toward any specific satisfaction, but merely exploring what is there; an urge to achieve intellectual control over the situations confronting it" (PK 132). Latent learning secures for future usage in understanding the lessons derived from purposeful engagement with environmental features and forces.

Polanyi claims that there are two kinds of elements in all meaningful matters. "There are things in it that *have* a meaning and these things bear on something else, namely on that which *is* their meaning."[10] This claim makes sense with respect to ordinary discourse. Words have conventional meanings and are deployed in a sentence to bear on what is their joint meaning. But should such a relationship be generalized to illuminate the structure of perception? This is what Polanyi attempts. "[I]n a gestalt the parts *have* a meaning and the whole which they form *is* their meaning."[11] I do not believe the parts making up a gestalt typically have meaning in the same sense that words have a meaning in a sentence. Imagine a picture of a mountain. What is it that creates our understanding that we are viewing a mountain? Is it an integration of the individual streaks of grey presumably indicating rocks with the blobs of green that must be trees? No. It is the upward jutting or rounded form that signifies the shape of a mountain. Identifiable mountains have a certain schematized pattern that enables us to identify them as such. I see no experiential evidence that we must integrate the various shades of color, each claimed to have their own meaning, to form the image of a mountain as a comprehensive entity. Using the from-via-to structure, I would describe the perception of the mountain along these lines: with the tacit intent to comprehend what I am viewing, I would recognize in the visual sensations I receive a familiar schematized pattern of upheaval (the "from") to which the word "mountain" is conventionally attached (the "via") and understand I am viewing a mountain (the "to") as the explicit meaning of my viewing process. Pattern and language, rather than parts and whole, seem best suited for *understanding* what we *perceive*.

IV. Referential Meaning

In the rise of understanding through perception and reflection, we humans identify empirical and mental phenomena as certain intelligible types. In that process, we classify them in relation to how they fit into our pre-existing networks of comprehension. This activity can occur

tacitly as, for example, in latent learning. It can also occur at a largely explicit, rational level. I will term the various meaning-creating activities at different epistemic levels "referential meaning." Three types of referential meaning stand out as especially important in understanding's processes of identification and classification: (1) schematized recognition, (2) imagistic meaning, and (3) discursive meaning. The mediating entities for these three epistemic levels are, respectively, schemas, images, and words. These function as mediators in triadic relationships, although the terminology of "via" is only applied to language. The results of the meaning-creating process (the "to") are purposeful actions, denoted objects, and apprehended connotations (which may also denote).

The patterns we use and respond to are often cultural artifacts having agreed upon meanings. Conventional meanings (4) cut across the three types of referential meaning. A bell in high school can signal the end of a class; a smiley face emoji can communicate a mood; the word "waterfall" denotes a certain feature of a landscape. Conventional signals and symbols, then, also function referentially.

Each of the four types of meaning involved in recognizing, interpreting, and organizing internally the phenomena of experience contributes in some way to the purposeful behavior of living beings. Even the most primitive living beings must distinguish between those environmental factors that lead to flourishing versus those that lead to diminution or even extinction. At the simplest level, they accomplish this by schematizing physical and causal patterns bearing on survival. The meaning created by (1) schematized recognition (and habitual response) is generally autonomic in nature. Signal and response, whether innate or learned, afford a kind of primitive understanding to living creatures. They respond unreflectively but intelligently to environmental information at the level of schematized information.

Schematized recognition (1) is simply sensation registered and responded to when learned or innate habits are triggered, but what we ordinarily take to be perception involves conception infused with (2) imagistic meaning. The patterns identified in schematic recognition apparently become loosened from a specific sort of response to create (2) imagistic meaning. When meaningful patterns become unshackled in "higher" forms of life, they can be combined and become creative. Imagistic meaning facilitates mental creativity not tied to environmental immediacy. Imagination bubbles up and flies beyond the limits imposed by the information provided by our receptors. The images created may represent features previously encountered in the world, and thus be shaped by memory, or they may be novel concoctions. They may flit away as fantasies, they may inspire artistic expression, or they may help orchestrate technological innovations. Just as a word properly placed in a proposition contributes to a higher level of meaning, so images of all sorts—aural as well as visual—can contribute to expanded meaning when placed in broader intelligible contexts.

Imagistic meaning is particularly sensitive to aesthetic standards like harmony, beauty, balance, and coherence. Polanyi claims that at heart science is a form of augmented perception ("Creative Imagination" in SEP, 252). Scientific discovery in his recounting follows felt anticipations of increasing imagistic coherence and beauty to the intuitive climax of coherent solution. Thus discovery ranks as a culminating form of imagistic meaning—of understanding. It is a form of meaning accompanied by feelings of satisfaction to which we shall return shortly.

The third and fourth forms of referential meaning, (3) discursive meaning and (4) conventional meaning, have already been extensively covered in the discussion of articulate understanding and language. Language gains its power from its reliance upon the conventional meaning of words. Words connected in proper grammatical form can express, describe, reflect, and so on. However, three interconnected aspects of language not previously emphasized deserve attention in relation to understanding.

First, inarticulate understanding, as pre-linguistic, is clearly tacit in its functioning. But so is articulate understanding. In expressing ourselves linguistically, our focal attention is neither directed at the words we use nor at the understanding that arises, but rather at the meanings the words express, the explicit meaning "to" which we attend. Language is translucent. Understanding is felt. As such, each is tacitly, not focally, experienced.

Second, I believe much discussion of language is snared in a kind of objectivism that can be just as pernicious as objectivism in science. Words are often treated as reducible to dictionary definitions, and sentences are treated as if their meaning is factually evident to everyone. But in practice, language is a tool used to communicate a speaker's intention, which resting on the various subsidiaries and feelings of individualized experience, is often not clearly related to words. The words used by a speaker may have intended *connotations* slightly different than the meanings expressed in a dictionary definition. Understanding, more than knowing, is attuned to motivation, intention, and the slipperiness of language. Knowledge desires clarity and certainty in all situations, even those where none may be possible. Understanding can accommodate some degree of ambiguity. In their commitment to clarity of discourse, thinkers in the analytic tradition cannot deal effectively with the messiness of much human interchange. Understanding is not chained to fact or linguistic precision the way knowledge is usually taken to be.

Third, another characteristic of language not stressed in the nine points above is that the human need to impose language on experience is virtually irrepressible. It takes trained sensitivity to penetrate in introspection beyond the incessant babble of language to become aware of the variety of feelings that constitute important inarticulate processes. Inarticulate understanding is the term I have used to describe both the process and result of the harmonious encoding and situating of sensed material within long-term memory and embodied skills. Articulate understanding often starts with "the unreasoned conclusions of our senses" (SM 17), but in reflection and imagination, thought soars beyond the limits inherent to the information received from receptors. Some language is far distanced from perceived reality or entirely separate from it. In poetry and fiction, for instance, as Charles Taylor has stressed, language can create new, often artistic, meanings that have no direct relation to the empirical realm. Polanyi and Prosch in *Meaning* explore ways in which linguistic meanings can both extend understanding beyond knowledge but also transcend understanding in imaginative vision.

V. Intended and Existential Meaning

One aspect that makes the notion of understanding so powerful is that the term implies more than just awareness of content. We have seen that it also refers to a process of gaining control over content. It is an ordering, intending, and evaluating process. When we are

misunderstood, we may explain that the hearer did not understand what we mean. Meaning is grounded in speaker's intention. Moreover, when we say something is meaning*ful* to us, we may mean it is significant. I believe it is not an accident that these varied meanings are designated by the same term, meaning. I think that understanding can be seen as the basic epistemic process in which all these connoted meanings have a systemic function. Polanyi notes this interdependence when he claims that the function of understanding includes intending, meaning, and doing (citing SM 22 again).

Intended meaning (5) and existential meaning (6) are dynamic epistemic forces that contribute to understanding. Intended meaning (5) underlies but is distinguishable from the explicit meaning expressed in imagistic and discursive meaning. Humans indwell a variety of purposes during their lives. Some are connected to specific roles that are inhabited; some are more vague personal and social goals. Usually, however, our language usage is tied to mundane immediate goals: I need to call my friend about an upcoming meeting; I want to find the best reasonably priced repair service for the washing machine; I want to share my evaluation of a movie. These fleeting examples of (5) *intended meaning* arise out of a rich background understanding of the society and culture in which one dwells. Satisfactions of our purposes often extend or alter our reservoir of background understanding and thereby contribute to new intentions.

We have seen that within rational human experience, language (the "via") expresses a person's largely tacit intentions at the "from" level by formulating explicit meanings at the "to" level. The specific words and phrases required to express the meaning of a rational intention are evoked according to felt associative relationships from memorized vocabulary and inarticulate understanding. Our speech is judged for adequacy by aesthetic criteria: does the meaning expressed harmonize with and appropriately represent the intention and its base in latent learning? Does commonly understood explicit meaning adequately match intended tacit meaning? Understanding is not complete unless there is an adequate match.

The successful achievement of our goals results in a feeling of satisfaction. Failure of achievement results in feelings of frustration or defeat. The little victories and defeats of everyday life do not add up to much, but the more basic goals of living, such as having faithful companions, being recognized as successful in one's job, or creatively expressing oneself in a valued hobby—these do make a difference in how we view life. They relate to whether or not we experience meaning in life. Meaning in this sense has to do with personal significance. We are speaking here of (6) *existential meaning*, the felt assessment of the degree to which we are satisfying our goals, especially those goals we feel to be of greatest significance.

Let us develop our understanding of *existential meaning* by returning to Polanyi's notion that understanding is rooted in embodied skills.

> "What I *understand* in this manner has a meaning for me, and it has this meaning in itself, and not as a sign has a meaning when denoting an object. I have called this earlier on an existential meaning. Since animals have no language which could denote anything, we may describe all meaning of the kind that is understood by animals as existential" (PK 90).

Yes, a skill does not have denotative meaning. But does it have a meaning *in itself*? I believe Polanyi's notion of existential meaning is flawed. As examples of things having existential meaning, he lists a physiognomy, a tune, and a pattern, and he states that "they mean something only in themselves" (PK 58). He goes on to "describe the kind of meaning which a context possesses in itself as *existential*, to distinguish it especially from *denotative* or, more generally, *representative* meaning. . . All kinds of order, whether contrived or natural, have existential meaning; but contrived order usually also conveys a message" (PK 90).

I believe there is a gem of insight in Polanyi's notion of existential meaning, but that it is obscured by an overlay of several problematic notions. First, does *all order* have existential meaning? No, I would strongly urge. Order manifests the *potential for meaning* that is realized only when that order is recognized and employed in relation to some purpose(s) or insights of a living entity. Polanyi speaks of the actualization of that potential for meaning as an achievement. However, he generally does not consider the world of physics and chemistry alone as meaningful, even though aspects of that world are clearly ordered. The process of anthropogenesis he describes in Part IV of *Personal Knowing* describes life as bringing meaning to an otherwise meaningless universe. "While the first rise of living individuals overcame the meaninglessness of the universe by establishing in it centres of subjective interests, the rise of human thought in its turn overcame these subjective interests by its universal intent" (PK 389). In Polanyi's comprehensive vision, order in contrast to randomness can serve as a clue for new discovery, but it is not itself meaningful apart from its telic appropriation by living beings.

A similar sort of argument can be used to critique the notion of existential meaning as meaningful only in itself. Does a person's facial expression, or a tune, or a pattern have the sort of independent contextual meaning Polanyi ascribes to them? No. A person's expression becomes meaningful only when it is observed by another person interested in ascertaining the first person's state of mind. A tune without a listener would just be noise. To be sure, there is an ineliminable contextual aspect to a tune; a single sound is not a tune. At the very least, a potential listener is needed to make a sequence of notes meaningful. Likewise, a pattern takes on meaning only when it is regarded or employed by a person for some purpose. For the world is so replete with relationships that can be seen as patterns that it is otiose to regard all patterns, all order, as meaningful.

What then is the gem associated with Polanyi's notion of existential meaning? It is the notion that a skill has a "meaning for me." It deals with something I care about. More primal than linguistic meaning, which has assumed dominance in analytic thought, is inarticulate, embodied purposefulness—felt sorts of meaning that give birth to intentions. Existential meaning, as properly conceived, is a *felt characteristic* of actions related to the success or failure of personal goals, purposes, or interests. It is embedded within our passions. In his language of passions, Polanyi most clearly articulates what I am here calling existential meaning. Heuristic passion, persuasive passion, the passion for justice—these represent impulses seeking existential satisfactions.

The intellectual satisfaction associated with securing understanding is an important motive driving human thought and action. This claim is central to the thesis of this essay. Polanyi

speaks of the *passion to understand* as "an urge to achieve intellectual control over the situations confronting" a living being (PK 132). The satisfaction of desires is another motivating force. Polanyi argues for the greater significance of intellectual satisfaction rather than desire satisfaction. He states that "while appetites are guided by standards of private satisfaction, a passion for mental excellence believes itself to be fulfilling universal obligations" (PK 174).

In addition, when Polanyi in *Meaning* describes the importance of *interest* and being carried away during the construction of different sorts of meaning, he expresses key aspects of what I mean by existential meaning.[12] Satisfaction or frustration are felt expressions of existential meaning, "meaning for me." The search for positive existential meaning is the primary motivational force underlying human cultural activity.

For Polanyi, the act of discovery is an exemplary instance of experiencing existential meaning, as Richard Gelwick made clear in his pioneering treatment of Polanyi's philosophy.[13] The discovery of a significant coherence produces understanding accompanied by a feeling of satisfaction. Understanding as a state of being is but a term to describe the accumulation of interrelated lessons of experience bearing differing degrees of existential meaning. Understanding thus stands for an interested mind poised to interpret and respond fruitfully to unfolding experience in pursuit of further satisfactory existential meaning.

What is the relationship between existential meaning, language, and understanding in human experience? Well, anxieties and fears are facilitated by language's unprecedented capacity to envision the future. But language also functions as the major tool that humans use to alleviate those anxieties and secure existential meaning. The great cultural constructions of language—religions, for instance—offer practices or formulas to counter the anxieties and dilemmas blocking people's experiences of positive existential meaning. Rhetoric is another way language is deployed in search of existential meaning. As Polanyi notes, "language is primarily and always impersonal and in some degree impassioned; exclusively so in emotional expression (passionate communication) and imperative speech (action by speech), while even in declaratory statements of fact there is some purpose (to communicate) and passion (to express belief)" (PK 77).

VI. Conclusion

Polanyi's prioritizing of understanding leads the way to a new chapter of epistemology.[14] To be sure, much consciousness is a fumbling stream of bits and pieces that leads to no coherent outcome. Then understanding plays little or no role in consciousness. Yet I have sought to demonstrate, in agreement with Polanyi, that understanding is more basic for comprehending human behavior than knowledge and reason. Understanding is grounded in human purposefulness. It organizes and expresses drives and interests in largely tacit intentionality. Intended meaning evokes the imagination and language to make that intention explicit, available for assessment and further development. Referential meaning is evaluated as to its significance, felt as existential meaning. And that felt significance functions as feedback influencing the nature and scope of our understood interests. It thereby shapes further intentionality. Identified meaning, intended meaning, expressed meaning, significant meaning—such are stages in the systemic loop fueling the advance of understanding. Understanding is both source and goal.

The way I have recast Polanyi's notion of existential meaning helps illuminate Polanyi's two most deeply felt philosophical purposes. The first is to rectify the thinking that led to the twentieth century's great disasters. The second is to move beyond nihilism by describing and supporting the various ways humans can create and enjoy meaningful lives. The latter is the goal of the final book to which Polanyi contributed, *Meaning* (see M 44-45, 107, 216). With respect to each of Polanyi's purposes, erroneous use of thought and language created problems that he sought to overcome. Distorted, antisocial ways of experiencing existential meaning share responsibility for the nihilism, moral inversion, and disrespect of tradition that contributed to massive individual and social suffering. The enflamed rhetoric of Aryan superiority unleashed savage sorts of satisfaction within Nazism. The Marxist suspicion of ethical restraint as serving bourgeois interests helped legitimate Communist duplicity, tyranny, and terror. Within the Western world, the glorification of scientific objectivity devalued religion, ethics, and other humanistic views as merely subjective and arbitrary, thus encouraging nihilism while undermining the various humanistic ways of living rich, meaningful lives.

The lesson of all this begins with the recognition that language can be shaped into frameworks that promote terrible, immoral outcomes. When ideas assume power within society that undermine religious and other traditions that validate ultimate values like truth and justice, existential meaning can be misdirected, and disaster can ensue. Within such demonic frameworks, people can still experience existential meaning, although they are supportive of catastrophic ends. The Nazi can experience satisfaction at killing those considered to be inferior. To support good world order, existential meaning must be situated within cultures constrained by what Polanyi calls the firmament of values. Hence the basic aim of Polanyi's philosophy can be seen as ethical in the broad sense. He seeks to rectify language and properly align existential meaning with positive social goals. This requires both understanding of the dangers of wrong thought and recognition of the possibility of experiencing lives charged with positive existential meaning. It is the nature of human interpretation that knowledge of such ultimate issues cannot be demonstrated and secured. However, *understanding* of how social disasters can be avoided and how lives can flourish can be achieved and secured through committed belief. This is why I find it profitable to term his overarching vision a philosophy of understanding.

Endnotes

[1] Polanyi himself recognizes this point. "Knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing" (KB 132).

[2] During his April 25, 1967 interview with Ray Wilken, Polanyi suggests understanding is a tacit ability to make sense of the world. He indicates that this capacity has allowed him to lessen his earlier emphasis on justifying our ultimate commitments and instead attend to the tacit processes shaping human consciousness (see also his comments at PK, xi). I thank Phil Mullins for suggesting the Wilken comments and for his thoughtful comments on this essay.

[3] The claim that Polanyi's thought is designed to heal the sick modern mind and its associated social problems is convincingly argued by Harry Prosch in his book, *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986).

[4] In a perceptive article describing Polanyi's theory of judgment, Diane Yeager notes that for Polanyi the "act (and art) of personal judgment is, in fact, the core of his distinctive conception

of the nature of knowing. . .” (Yeager, “The Deliberate Holding of Unproven Beliefs,” *The Political Science Reviewer* XXXVII [2008], 101). She further observes that Polanyi considers “judgment to be an indelible power constitutive of personhood” (106). Judgment for Polanyi occurs at different levels, but perhaps it is most strikingly manifest in transforming tacit sensitivity into articulate expression. This act is most conducive to truth when it emerges under the guidance of understanding.

[5] Polanyi’s emphasis on the inarticulate abilities we share with other animals is not an anomalous vision in conflict with contemporary understanding. Michael Tomasello, the influential co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, writes (in harmony with Polanyi’s view) that “great apes, as the closest living relatives of humans, already understand in human-like ways many aspects of their physical and social worlds, including the causal and intentional relations that structure those worlds. This means that many important aspects of human understanding derive not from humans’ unique forms of sociality, culture, and language but rather, from something like the individual problem-solving abilities of great apes in general” (*A Natural History of Human Thinking* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014], 2).

[6] Daniel L. Everett, *How Language Began: The Story of Humanity’s Greatest Invention* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 105.

[7] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 26-30. Elizabeth Spelke’s findings over two decades suggests that infants prior to six months old are able to single out objects “that are internally cohesive and separately movable: cups but not . . . doorknobs, sand piles, or block towers” (in Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009], 158). She states (156-157) that there is evidence for at least five systems of core knowledge prior to the learning of language. A baby’s ability to recognize and reason about such things as material objects, intentional agents, and situated places offers support for the significance of Polanyi’s notion of latent learning.

[8] Jerome Bruner’s *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) provides a sustained argument for the primacy of these two modes.

[9] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 332. Taylor distinguishes between “designative-instrumental” and “constitutive expressive” modes of language usage (4). Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac tend to take an atomistic and instrumental approach to what language accomplishes, while Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt emphasize the creative potential inherent in narrative and poetry—a clash between empirical and romantic tendencies.

[10] Michael Polanyi, “The Lecture Series: Meaning, Lost and Regained, *Polanyiana* 15:1-2 (2006), 74.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Polanyi views the arts and religion as especially powerful cultural vehicles for eliciting experiences of existential meaning. For instance, with respect to poetry, he writes that “a metaphor, like a symbol, carries us away, embodies us in itself, and moves us deeply as we surrender ourselves to it” (*M* 79).

[13] Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[14] Catherine Elgin is a contemporary philosopher who, like Polanyi, persuasively argues for the priority of understanding over knowledge. See her *True Enough* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).