

“History” and Michael Polanyi

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Michael Polanyi’s interests were so many and varied that it is not surprising he gave some attention to history, but that attention was relatively brief. The third Lindsay Memorial Lecture, printed in *The Study of Man*, addresses the topic directly, but it asks only a specific question about history — namely, ‘are the methods of study used by historians different from, or only a variant of, the methods used by natural scientists?’¹ We should be grateful for any attempt by Polanyi to extend the import of his thought into areas beyond science, even when those efforts are only partially successful. This paper will comment briefly on the setting of *The Study of Man*, note ways that his theory of personal knowledge offers alternatives to critical historiographies, and conclude with questions about the book’s basic conclusion.

Polanyi notes in the Preface that Lectures One and Two recapitulate “the relevant parts” of the argument of “my recently published volume,” and that “The whole series [of lectures] can accordingly be read as an introduction to *Personal Knowledge*” (9). The lectures, according to the biography, were given in March of 1958, a few months before the publication of *PK* on June 20th. Scott and Moleski tell us that after completing the *PK* manuscript, “the pressure was off,” and Polanyi “relaxed by reading some philosophy of history....”² This suggests that his third Lindsay lecture, “Understanding History,” may have been written without the extensive research and revisions of most of his other books and essays, but rather out of the fullness of his memory and excitement over having just completed “nine years” of intense effort on *PK*.³ I suggest below that the effort was successful, but not without its problems.

Polanyi begins *SM* with the cliché that the “most outstanding attribute” of human beings is their ability to think and acquire knowledge, but explicates this cliché with his radical, or at least unconventional, theory of tacit knowing. This audience does not need me to go through all of the first two lectures, which recapitulate much of the argument of *PK*, though I can note that where Lecture One focuses on the structure of *tacit knowing*, Lecture Two focuses more on the structure of *commitment*. In place of a recapitulation, let me discuss the context in which Polanyi writes, and then the main features of the

essay's contribution to understanding history.

All of Polanyi's philosophizing occurs against the background of a militant critical tradition whose ideal of scientific detachment has exercised "a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science."⁴ This turn to history was the first attempt to extend his epistemology "beyond the domain of science," showing that this former chemist was far more revolutionary than most philosophers of science. The lectures at the relatively new Keele University gave Polanyi a stage on which he could present his new theory of personal knowledge, and hopefully weaken the hold of objectivism on western society. One of the reasons for this topic was Polanyi's conviction that scholars in many humanistic and social science fields were attempting to define their disciplines in terms of the canons of positivistic science, which he felt would be fatal to their work. We will mention below the historical 'secessionists' he opposed, and we should note here that their aim in trying to separate their discipline from science was precisely Polanyi's — namely, to protect humanistic studies from a totalitarian positivism. They were unaware, however, that this particular approach to science — an 'objectivist' approach — was actually a distortion of science, and in truth they had nothing to fear, Polanyi believed, from "science done right."⁵

Thus *SM* should be seen as a first, somewhat exploratory attempt to tackle the large issue of warning intellectuals of all stripes of the dangers of the popular, 'normal' understanding of science. The use of *history* as the vehicle for the revisionist grasp of knowing was appropriate, but no more so than it would have been to discuss the disciplines of literature or philosophy. Let me step back now from the text of *SM* to summarize the most important ways in which his philosophy provides a secure ground for the doing of history.

(1) The first way in which Polanyi contributes to a revival of humanistic learning is simply by developing from *within science* a formidable critique of the positivist model which claims that science is impersonal, follows an ideal of totally explicit knowledge, and aims to reduce all phenomena to explanation by physics and chemistry.⁶ This was the task of *Personal Knowledge* (1958). In *SM*, his articulation of *understanding* as a term covering all the various forms of tacit knowing is, I think, particularly helpful in including history within the framework of "knowledge." "Understanding" refers to 'making sense of experience,' 'comprehending experience,' "a grasping of disjointed parts into a comprehending whole" (20-28). He goes further: "I have now expanded the

function of understanding into that of knowing what we *intend*, what we *mean*, or what we *do*....All these semantic functions are the tacit operations of a person” (22), which is what the historian studies.

(2) A move that is particularly helpful to a strengthening of historical work is Polanyi’s emphasis on the importance of *tradition* and *authority* within science itself. An Enlightenment shibboleth, of course, was the conviction that the past was an obstacle to knowledge, and authority was always oppressive and destructive of human freedom. Yu Zhenhua has examined Polanyi’s discussion of tradition and its crucial importance in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another.⁷ While *articulated* tradition (such as scientific theories in books) can be distributed globally by impersonal means, *unarticulated* traditions cannot be, for they are the tacit dimensions of scientific skill and judgment developed by generations of scientists, passed down in one-on-one contact from master to apprentice. Science only thrives in those locales which have preserved such traditions of personal contact and the tacit knowledge those scientists possess, and the same would be true for history. Authority is rather obvious in the funding sources and editorial review boards that control money and publishing in science, but its chief role, Zhenhua Yu suggests by reference to H.G. Gadamer, is inculcating not submission to power, but acknowledgment by scientists of the superiority of more experienced, creative scientists.⁸ To stress the independence and critical freedom of science too much, therefore, is to undermine the unified tradition that provides a background, a foundation even, for future discoveries that may alter the tradition.

(3) As the title *PK* indicates, Polanyi’s philosophy always foregrounded the human, personal agent as the actor in gaining knowledge. This was a fundamental challenge to the paradigm of impersonal, objective knowledge that had become a hallmark of critical thinking since Descartes. If we had to designate one feature of writing history that distinguishes it from natural science, it would be its focus on human beings as the vehicle of meaning in the story of the past. This sounds simple-minded, even trite, but it is highly significant in an era in which impersonal forces often are claimed to be the cause of most cultural change.

(4) In describing the way in which tools become, in effect, part of the body of the person using them, Polanyi introduces in *PK* the term *indwelling*, which will become an important part of his philosophy.⁹ It is hard to think of a term which would overcome the impersonalism of critical philosophy more neatly than this one, and it proves particularly apropos of the historian’s effort to see the past through the eyes of the people who lived

it.¹⁰ In *SM* Polanyi will argue that “no knowledge of nature lacks some measure of indwelling of the observer in his subject-matter...” (80), so he believes this to be a fundamental part of all tacit knowing (I will return to this topic later.)

(5) This terminology will prove fruitful as Polanyi’s thought matures, for in the Preface to the Torchbook edition of *PK* (1964), he repeats the idea of indwelling (“All understanding is based on our dwelling in the particulars of that which we comprehend”), and then states “it is Heidegger’s *being-in-the-world*” (x). Thus he affirms that a knower is always rooted in a local context, which provides a “background” to her knowledge, and repudiates the “view from nowhere” adopted by the impersonalism of critical philosophy.¹¹

(6) Polanyi’s effort to understand the depth or “reach” of personal knowledge leads him to assert that reality comprises a hierarchy of stratified levels of existence, and this view of stratified levels becomes quite important in his philosophy (*SM*, 52-59). The conception is not his, of course — it probably goes back to Greek philosophy, is put into iconic form in the “Great Chain of Being” of the middle ages, and is the backbone of Linnaeus’ taxonomy in *The System of Nature* (1735, 1758). But Polanyi sees its epistemological importance, for each level is subject to dual control by the constraints of the laws that govern that level, as well as by those that govern the level above.

Polanyi illustrates this with examples of language (from the level of basic sounds up to that of great works of literature) and building trades (from bricks to architectural masterpieces), but it can also be demonstrated in history. The historian may study, for example, a situation governed by principles of economics; this level of activity, however, is not completely determined by economics, particularly when the actors — the bankers and traders — are free agents. After all, different economic systems can function using the same basic elements. The potential left undetermined by the laws of economics Polanyi terms the *boundary conditions* of that level. When the elements of that lower level are arranged into a specific configuration according to the principles operating at a higher level — in this case, the principles of sound history-writing, then those elements are said to be under the *marginal control* of the higher level. They have been harnessed to a particular pattern which the historian sees in the data — say, government decisions which have turned a free market economy into a mixed or socialist economy. This is similar to the way in which an engineer might observe data at a lower level, governed perhaps by the laws of physics and chemistry, and harness the boundary conditions of

that level to a conception of a machine to do a particular task. Thus Polanyi is convinced that history shares a basic pattern or methodology with the sciences (*SM*, 74-79).

(7) Yu Zhenhua adds several features to these reforms of Polanyi, among which two seem to me especially significant for a discussion of history: his critique of doubt as a requirement for thought; and his fiduciary program generally.¹² The Cartesian insistence that the way to knowledge is to doubt any claim that is not “clear and distinct” was the initial form of a skepticism that has been elaborated and extended into many areas of modern thought, including history.¹³ The uncovering of the personal element in all knowing removes a primary source of this skepticism, namely the variability of historical interpretation, which can never be eliminated to establish *one* definitive account of any human act. The danger of subjectivism is met by Polanyi’s account of the nature of commitment in knowing: “‘I believe, in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.’ This sentence, summarizing my fiduciary programme, conveys an ultimate belief which I find myself holding...;” the working out of this understanding provides “a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs” (*PK*, 299). This is Polanyi’s answer to objectivism: establishing personal knowledge between the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism, by incorporating *personal* commitment, to *universal* standards: “No one can know universal intellectual standards except by acknowledging their jurisdiction over himself as part of the terms on which he holds himself responsible for the pursuit of his mental efforts.” (303)

Having surveyed the salient ways in which tacit knowing offers resources for the study of human beings, I now want to raise some questions about the way in which Polanyi articulates his argument in *SM*, particularly in Lecture Three. This lecture, “Understanding History,” is Polanyi’s fullest statement of his views on this crucial part of humanistic knowledge, and it is germane, I think, to ask why a former physical chemist should attempt to explain the nature of history.¹⁴ Let me suggest that this is part of his ambitious effort to show that the theory of tacit knowing is a structure so fundamental to the human mind that grasping it will throw light on virtually all of human intellectual life. I believe this effort is a central impulse of his philosophy, and it gathered strength as he worked. I sometimes have the feeling that Polanyi never completely left his scientific training behind, even though there were over twenty-five years between his last scientific paper (1949) and his last philosophical writing (1975). I say this simply because of the

style of his thought, which seems distinctly different from the humanities in which I was trained. He seems to consider his theory of tacit knowing to be a discovery quite similar to scientific discoveries he made; that is, it is a structure or process within reality that is universal in human beings, and underlies all of their higher level thinking, much as the circulation of the blood was discovered by Harvey to be common to all persons. This helps explain Polanyi's insistence that there is a "smooth continuum" between scientific knowing and historical knowing, and why he spends more time explicating this structure rather than exploring the *interpretation* of experience which seems to be a central feature of the humanities, and perhaps even of the social sciences.¹⁵

(1) Perhaps an appropriate place to begin is with Polanyi's declaration at the very beginning of the lecture that "the study of man must start with an appreciation of man in the act of making responsible decisions. The most striking examples of human decisions are recorded by history. They are the acts of the men Hegel called 'world historical personalities,' men like Alexander, Augustus, Charlemagne, Luther, Cromwell, Napoleon, Bismarck, Hitler, Lenin" (71-72). There is no scientist in Polanyi's list, and while he acknowledges that scientists or religious martyrs "may have been, in the long run, more influential," he claims that "it is political actions profoundly affecting the framework of existing power, that form the most striking human choices. It is these which make up the drama of history..." (72; see also pp. 78, 87, 93). Since Polanyi has said before that mental life, as exemplified in scientific discovery, is the highest form of human achievement, it is curious that he focuses here on *political* actors. He never attempts to explain a connection between *discovery* and *political actions*, though it does not seem impossible.

When we consider the various schools of history that have appeared in western thought, especially over the last 200 years, Polanyi's unargued support for Hegel's model is hard to credit, especially as it departs so clearly from his own epistemological views.¹⁶ Perhaps my point will be clearer if we note that Polanyi himself "does history," for example in two of his essays about his own time in science, "The Potential Theory of Adsorption," and "My Time with X-rays and Crystals" (both included in *KB*), and yet his history does not meet his own standard for what makes up "the drama of history," that is, it is not about "political actions profoundly affecting the framework of existing power," actions carried out by 'world historical personalities.' Clearly he is assuming two types of history, one consisting of "the most striking examples" of human decision-making, and the other consisting of the activities of normal intelligent people. More attention is

needed to this difference, I suggest, and it doesn't appear that Polanyi has acknowledged the degree to which his views of history have been shaped by a particular stream of culture, somewhat vitiating his arguments about how history works.

(2) A second claim in Lecture Three to which I have already alluded on p. 2 is Polanyi's criticism of those historians like Hegel, Herder, Vico, and Collingwood who have tried to separate history from the natural sciences, leading him to deny "any discontinuity between the study of nature and the study of man" (72). Admittedly, Polanyi's argument for continuity is not the simple-minded sort which simply insists that *all* forms of knowledge must meet the standards and copy the methods of science, for at his best, he acknowledges that particular disciplines like history have their own "special kind of understanding" (73) with its own "distinctive characteristics."¹⁷ But he leans to the side of "lumping" these distinctives together into the pattern given us by natural science, and gives little attention to those 'special kinds' or 'distinctives.'¹⁸ Polanyi seems to be claiming that there are no methodologies for establishing knowledge outside of the natural sciences that are significantly different, and also legitimate. I will return to this below.

The reference to "lumping" is meant to bring to your mind the review of *Intellect and Hope* by Paul Holmer, in which he declares Polanyi to be a 'lumper' rather than a 'splitter.'¹⁹ I do not think Holmer had a very deep grasp of what Polanyi was all about, and he certainly had mixed feelings about *Intellect and Hope*. He was an acute philosopher, however, and his reading of "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading" as the work of a "lumper" was, I think, right on target. A "lumper" is a thinker who attempts to relate all ideas to one or a few overarching concepts that can unite them, at least in theory, into some kind of whole. A "splitter," on the other hand, was someone like Holmer's hero Wittgenstein, who insisted on allowing free reign to the multifarious uses of language, rather than forcing them into some artificial unity in a philosophical theory (such as Ayer's "Verifiability Criterion of Meaning").

This characterization of "lumper" is not merely clever — it points to a distinguishing feature of Polanyi's thought, one that was singled out in the recent review of Charlie Lowney's edited volume on Polanyi and Taylor, where the reviewer laments lack of attention to "likely the most far-reaching difference between the two: whether there's a fundamental methodological distinction between the human and the natural sciences."²⁰ The reviewer states that "Taylor has famously endorsed the idea [of a

“fundamental methodological distinction”]....But Polanyi...sees only a difference in degrees of ‘indwelling’” (p. 3).

In *Retrieving Realism* by Dreyfus and Taylor, this issue is connected to questions of cultural pluralism, which is certainly a pressing issue in the western world these days.²¹ The Scientific Revolution, particularly as understood by the Enlightenment, developed a view of nature that was believed to be universal, that is, that described the physical world accurately, so that any person anywhere in the world — given a modicum of education in the terms of western science — would understand that view, and would see things as the West sees them. “Likewise,” Dreyfus and Taylor write, “thinkers in the West have repeatedly claimed to find behind the plethora of cultural arrangements all over the world an invariant structure, an independent human nature, that could, in principle, be understood by anyone anywhere” (*Retrieving*, 148).

The question, then, is whether Polanyi’s insistence that “knowledge is of the same kind at all levels of existence” (*SM*, 73) leads necessarily to the kind of holism that would deny any essential difference between human cultures. Does tacit knowing describe the way all human beings perceive the world, regardless of their social or geographic location? (After all, his book is titled simply *The Study of Man!*) If so, then the question is asked, ‘does this not impose inadvertently a western, scientific worldview on non-western cultures that do not share the scientific history and outlook of the West?’ The shrinking of the globe by modern communications, as well as the unequal power relations between the West and other parts of the world, make this more than just an ‘academic’ question.

You may feel that I have wandered far away from my announced topic, and it is true that these issues are complex enough that I have not done full justice to their subtleties, or to how Polanyi’s views in *The Study of Man* relate to them. But I do want you to see the importance of the implications of his views.

(3) One of the statements of Polanyi’s ‘holistic’ view of methods of understanding raises an interesting question. He says on p. 73 of *SM* that “The characteristic features of historiography will thus be shown to emerge by the continuation of a development broadly prefigured already within the natural sciences.” But isn’t it the case that traditional humanistic forms of knowing *precede* the scientific historically, in that science as we know it today did not exist when western thought began with Greeks and Hebrews? The reasonable assumption would seem to be that ‘the distinctive characteristics of the *scientist’s* method emerge by continuous stages from the progressive modifications of the

methods used within the *humanities*.’ Even if Galileo & Newton saw their science and their more humanistic endeavors — both men wrote on the subject of biblical interpretation — as parallel in importance, would they claim that their biblical interpretation emerged from their science? It has been argued that modern western science has been shaped significantly by its origin in the Christian West, and modern historiography (!) has shown clearly in recent decades that ‘hostility’ between religion and science is more fable than fact.²² One might argue that the derivation of history from science is *logical*, rather than historical, but one would still have to explain the grounds of one’s choice. The usual reason given is the success of science, but then we are dealing not with general standards, but those peculiar to one discipline.

(4) In his effort to draw science and history together, Polanyi states that “the contrast between actions recorded by history and events studied by natural science vanishes altogether if we recall that animal psychology...lies within the domain of natural science. It is true that only human actions are subject to moral judgment. But... every branch of natural science makes value judgments of some kind” (79-80). A first reading is that Polanyi is confusing a judgment by the historian of *the morality of human actions*, with the *value judgments of scientists* who study animal behavior. In one case we are speaking of judging the object of one’s study; in the other we are speaking of the values of the one doing the study. Another reading of course suggests he is claiming that *moral judgments* and *value judgments* are essentially the same in history and in science, but I question this. Can a historian’s judgment about fidelity to the Geneva Conventions be equated with a biologist’s judgment that a mammal has been “successful” in its quest for food, or in its mating strategy? Note that I am not questioning the fact that Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge eliminates the traditional fact/value dichotomy, but I am suggesting that the way in which this elimination is described in relation to history needs further clarification.

On pp. 37-39 of *SM*, Polanyi describes *beauty* as the source of the joy that humans feel in the satisfaction of intellectual passions, and then makes clear that he intends with this term to bring together the facts of science with the values of the arts: “I have moved deliberately from facts to values and from science to the arts, in order to surprise you with the result; namely, that our powers of understanding control equally both these domains” (37). He continues: “The moment the ideal of detached knowledge was abandoned, it was inevitable that the ideal of dispassionateness should eventually follow, and that with it the supposed cleavage between dispassionate knowledge of fact and

impassioned valuation of beauty should vanish” (38). Now Polanyi can speak of the sense of intellectual beauty in physics and mathematics, “and from here there is but a short step to the abstract arts to music” (39). And finally, he concludes the chapter: “And so, we could go on extending our perspective....For the whole universe of human sensibility...is evoked...by dwelling within the framework of our cultural heritage” (39). Given the sweep of this view of fact and value, perhaps my question should be rephrased: are “value” and “morality” synonyms for Polanyi?

A related question arises a bit later in the lecture when Polanyi is comparing the rationality of history and of science. He declares that “the historian can understand what men of the past have done, in the same sense in which we can understand a mathematical proof or the judicial decisions of a court of law” (90). The crucial phrase, of course, is “*in the same sense*”: can an evaluation of whether British generals acted wisely in World War I be “in the same sense” that a mathematician understands a proof?

Here Polanyi sees *similarities* in the two forms of rationality, history and science. But then he suggests a *difference*: “Though the pathological behaviour of a Tiberius or a Hitler may be a matter of historical record, it lies outside the historian’s distinctive task which is to understand the responsible decisions of historic personages” (91). So Polanyi removes the historian from the task of explaining Hitler because Hitler was ‘mad,’ and madness is a “diseased behaviour” which can only be understood in terms of its *causes*, which scientists study, not in terms of *reasons* which historians study. Surely it is legitimate to argue that the standard by which we judge the sickness (“pathology,” “madness”) of an historical figure is a cultural standard which may *include* scientific or medical analysis, but which cannot be *limited* to that sphere. In the case of a Tiberius or a Hitler, moral judgments are also relevant, which would seem to be outside the purview of science. These sentences are especially odd in that on p. 72, Polanyi included Hitler as a ‘world historical personality,’ as studied by history.

(5) Since I have abandoned all restraint (!), let me also suggest there is a lack of clarity in some of the ways in which Polanyi discusses *indwelling*, which is rightly of central importance in discussing historical knowledge. Earlier (above, p. 3, no. 4) I pointed out that Polanyi sees *indwelling* as a feature of all acts of tacit knowing: “no knowledge of nature lacks some measure of *indwelling* of the observer in his subject-matter...” (80). This will enable him to declare that the differences between the *indwelling* of an historian, and that of a scientist, are only a matter of *degree*, and this is where questions arise for me. What sense can we make of the claim that a cosmologist

“indwells” the galaxies she studies, the scale of which is almost unimaginable to human beings (current estimates put the diameter of the universe at roughly 93 billion light years)? At what point do we have to conclude that the concept is no longer meaningful, simply because of the *scale* of the object being studied? (The same issue would arise for very small entities, such as subatomic particles.) Apart from being simply an anthropomorphic metaphor, what could “indwelling” mean in such cases?

In describing the changes in the nature of the scientist’s indwelling, from lower levels of nature to higher levels, Polanyi speaks of the greater “intensity,” greater “intimacy,” or greater “penetration” of the indwelling as we move to higher levels of complexity, but he never explains what he means by these terms (73, 74, 80). Since this is actually his description of the historian’s comprehension of past events, it matters what he means. When we are describing an historian’s indwelling the life of an historical figure, then a term like “intimacy” might make sense as a reference to the greater detail studied, and the similarity of those particular, subsidiary details to those *within the life of the historian*. But at what point do we draw a line between this kind of indwelling of a fellow species member, and what most scientists are doing when they study a phenomenon of nature? It seems that Polanyi’s desire to make history and science parallel does damage here to the straightforward meaning of terms.

Another version of this same question concerns the difference between the historian’s indwelling of the life of a human being, who is an “active agent” displaying free will, and the scientist indwelling an inanimate object, an organism, or an animal, bird, or fish that operates primarily by what we term ‘instinct.’ There are many issues here, of course, concerning how to draw or not draw distinctions between human beings and non-human organisms. But should those issues prevent us from describing essential features of human culture — like the writing of history? The tide of science since the time of Darwin has moved steadily toward merging the human with non-human descriptions of life, and much of this is unobjectionable, and makes good sense. A theory of *personal knowledge*, however, would seem to depend on maintaining a sense of what “personhood” includes. The nature of indwelling in cultural knowing seems an appropriate place to seek greater clarity on this issue.

(6) In his admirable effort to elevate the status of human intellectual achievements, Polanyi makes the startling claim, “...man is the only creature in the world to whom we owe respect” (86). This is startling because in the forty-two years since his death, the environmental movement has sensitized us to the kinship of all of life, to the fact that

‘everything is connected to everything else,’ and to the incipient morality that some scientists claim to have found in higher primates.²³ Polanyi is assuming that we respect “things that are purely of the mind,” because we think they are “excellent in themselves” (86). We might suggest today that broadening our sense of intelligence or mental activity might be in order, not to mention broadening our ethics. This is the other side of the question of defining “personhood.”

The laudatory first part of this paper, and the questions I have raised in the second part, simply illustrate issues in *SM* to keep in mind if we are to develop a sound grasp of the bearing of personal knowledge on the ‘sciences of man.’ To summarize my reading of these lectures, I do think Michael Polanyi has provided in tacit knowing a way to appreciate the irreducibly personal character of all human knowledge, thus unifying the intellectual landscape, including both science and history, in a revolutionary way. I also would argue that this drive for unification has led him to downplay distinctive differences in the way human beings interpret their knowledge. The task of exploring these distinctive forms of interpretation still lies ahead, beckoning us to exciting new discoveries.

Endnotes

¹ Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (University of Chicago, 1959), 72-73 [hereafter *SM*] Note that a major shortcoming of *SM* is that it does not have an Index.

² William Taussig Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J. *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 230. [hereafter *MPSP*]

³ In the “Acknowledgments,” Polanyi mentions spending nine years “almost exclusively on the preparation of this book” (xv). Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago, 1958).[hereafter *PK*]

Concerning his preparation of these lectures, a recent communication from Phil Mullins throws light on the process:

“...it is interesting that MP went to Shils [Edward Shils of Chicago] for inspiration to pull *SM* together about a year before the lectures. This is from a recent essay I wrote on Shils and MP and I think the letters were in the Shils Papers:

“From the earliest years of their friendship, Polanyi made serious efforts to be near Shils and clearly wished to coordinate some of their scholarly writing. In some ways, Shils seems to have been something like a muse for Polanyi. Shils’ writings and perhaps conversations with Shils apparently were a catalyst stimulating Polanyi’s own writing projects. Shils’ muse role is clearest in Polanyi’s 15 July 1957 letter; he reports to Shils that he has almost finished his revisions of *PK* and that he plans soon to put a revised copy in Shils’ hands, but he also notes his next pressing scholarly project:

‘I have now to turn my mind to the preparation of my Lindsay Lectures for next February. Unfortunately I have given them the absurd title *The Study of Man* which includes everything I know nothing about. It would help me to focus on some problems if you would let me have a sample of your recent writings. Our thoughts have a way of supplementing each other which could be made more effective by closer cooperation.’ (15 July 1957, ESP, MPF, B4)

In a follow-up letter of 28 August 1957 (ESP, MPF, B4), Polanyi repeats his request that Shils send him recent writing. Shils’ 23 October 1957 letter (MPP, B5, F10) belatedly offers an alternative plan to Polanyi: ‘Re Mss on *Study of Man*, may I suggest that we devote a few hours to this in Paris and that before that, you send me a few of the headings under which you will treat the subject. That will enable me to give you some assistance—though I expect I will learn more than teach.’ “

⁴ *PK*, Preface to the first edition, p. xiii.

⁵ On this point, see the excellent article by Yu Zhenhua, “Two Cultures Revisited: Michael Polanyi on the Continuity Between the Natural Sciences and the Study of Man,” *Tradition and Discovery*, 28:3, pp. 6-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷ See “Tradition, Authority and Originality in a Post-Critical Perspective,” *Tradition & Discovery*, 32:3, pp. 40-56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ *PK*, p. 59.

¹⁰ The term parallels the various terms used by Wilhelm Dilthey to describe the historian’s understanding of the past: “empathy,” “recreating,” “reliving,” “transposition,” “re-experiencing,” etc. See *Philosophies of History: From Enlightenment to Postmodernity*, ed. Robert M. Burns and Hugh Rayment-Pickard (Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 174-175.

¹¹ The term “background” is familiar from the writings of Charles Taylor; see “Overcoming Epistemology” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1995) pp. 1-19. The phrase “the view from nowhere” is Thomas Nagel’s, *The View from Nowhere* (New York, 1983). Yu’s “Two Cultures Revisited” brought the later Preface of *PK* to my attention.

¹² Yu mentions these briefly on p. 16 of “Two Cultures Revisited.”

¹³ See, for example, the discussion of Theodor Adorno's 'history of decay' in *Philosophies of History*, pp. 250-255.

¹⁴ No less germane is the question, why does Polanyi believe he can explain the nature of human knowing in literature, art, myth, and politics, as he does in *Meaning?* See Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (University of Chicago, 1975).

¹⁵ Charles Taylor will focus on interpretation in the humanities. See his "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 15-57.

¹⁶ It is interesting that in a letter of 1962 Polanyi confesses "I have suspected myself for a long time of actually being a Hegelian...." *MPSP*, p. 249.

¹⁷ A famous example of such a simple-minded view would be the logical positivism of A.J. Ayer in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Penguin, [1936] 1990).

¹⁸ Unlike Charles Taylor, who tries to carefully examine the distinctive features of scholarship about human beings. See *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, in note 11 above.

¹⁹ Paul L. Holmer, Review of *Intellect and Hope* in *Soundings*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Spring, 1970), pp. 95-109. See Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat, eds., *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Duke University Press, 1968).

²⁰ Charles Blattberg, Review of Charles W. Lowney II (ed.), *Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi and the Critique of Modernity: Pluralist and Emergentist Directions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, 2018.11.03.

²¹ Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard University Press, 2015). See especially Ch. 8, "Plural Realism," pp. 148-168.

²² See David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds. *God & Nature. Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (University of California Press, 1986). On religious influence in the rise of science, see R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1972).

²³ Most notably the work of Frans de Waal, such as *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton, 2006).