

What About “Beliefs”?

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As a thoughtful 20th century intellectual, Michael Polanyi was seriously interested in changing prevailing notions about “beliefs” in science, philosophy and culture. His short article “Science: Observation and Belief,” in the February 1947 issue of *Humanitas*, is a statement summarizing ideas about “beliefs” that Polanyi seems to have held prior to his Gifford Lectures. I wrote a [1.5-page comment](#) (bottom of p. 45 to the top of p. 47) on this Polanyi essay in a recent TAD essay. This essay, divided into four sections, seems concisely to repackage much that was in Polanyi’s 1946 Riddell Lectures (SFS). The opening section attacks many of the then popular accounts of science. It moves on to affirm the centrality of scientists’ personal convictions but also sketches a brief history of changing convictions in the history of modern science. Polanyi contends that throughout the history of science scientists have relied heavily on beliefs embedded in the scientific tradition (which evolves) but also scientific ideas and practices are themselves embedded more broadly in tacitly held naturalistic beliefs that came to be re-rooted (and have become pervasive) in Western tradition after the Renaissance. After warning that beguiling popular misrepresentations of science are dangerous for science and society, Polanyi calls on scientists and others to “profess their adherence to these beliefs [underlying science and culture] by an explicit declaration of faith” (15). Turning to broader generalizations, he suggests that modern philosophy and scientism has ended the era of self-evident common beliefs which promoted a stable but changing liberal social order. He notes that modern fanaticism exceeds that in an era of professed creeds.

It is a little unclear how straightforwardly to take the medicine Polanyi seems to recommend. Descartes is tagged as the patron saint of an arid modern rationalism which implicitly promotes hidden “old instinctive and unconscious beliefs” (15) in preference to professed beliefs. But then Polanyi cleverly transforms Descartes to suggest that “beliefs” are the ground of thinking and discerning people should recognize this. Polanyi’s effort in this short essay (and some other writing in this period) seems aimed at emphasizing how important “beliefs” are in science and society and encouraging people to “profess” (make explicit?) their beliefs. Polanyi criticizes both the prevailing ethos emphasizing doubt as the road to truth (skepticism) and also certain broader philosophical suppositions that perhaps should be called objectivism. His later writing develops some of these threads in his cultural criticism and also articulates a richer constructive philosophical alternative stance. In his Gifford Lectures, he begins to work out his ideas about “two kinds of awareness” and he develops this germ more robustly in PK; in the sixties, he reworks and recasts these constructive ideas as the theory of tacit knowing. His later thought suggests that even when a person openly “professes” his/her “beliefs” that profession is shaped and supported by tacit elements and this is the key also to appreciating meaning in the artifacts of art, ritual and religion.

The questions that I want to raise concern contemporary post-Covid culture’s disposition toward “beliefs.” Does this disposition fit with Polanyi’s account at the end of World War II as he began to argue for a re-evaluation of “beliefs” in the face of a narrow objectivism and certain popular misrepresentation of science? Does Polanyi offer any suggestions that are helpful for understanding and addressing contemporary culture in which there seems to be a hyperpoliticization of all matters concerned with “knowledge” and “beliefs”? Linking “beliefs” and “knowledge” is an old and difficult philosophical problem. Many ordinary people seem today to recognize the plurality of “beliefs” and are simply flabbergasted by the diversity. Many seem sometimes to lack Polanyi’s confidence that the

perspectives that scientific inquiry generates are “true” and reveal something of the nature of “reality,” and that science offers a rich vision of the cosmos (where modern people can find a home). Polanyi seems to have believed science fits into a democratic social order and that science might be a beacon that, when combined with respect for law and a “public” understanding of liberty, furthers the prospect for gradual change toward a more just and sensible society. I suspect many contemporary people think such a vision is merely “pie in the sky.”