BEING REAL AND *CONTACT WITH REALITY*

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Keywords: evolution, ultrabiology, naturalized epistemology, realism, person, Esther Meek, Michael Polanyi

ABSTRACT

In the first part of Contact with Reality*, Meek provides a justification for Polanyi's realism, a justification she suggests Polanyi himself did not fully articulate. In the second part of* Contact with Reality*, Meek explores her own shift in thinking about realism, one that relieves Polanyi of the burden of justification. I argue Polanyi's account of the reality of persons and their evolutionary history—what he calls "ultrabiology"—provides the foundation of his epistemology and thus his realism.*

Introduction

What makes it challenging to reflect on Esther Lightcap Meek's *Contact with Reality* (2017; hereafter, *CR*) is that it actually comprises two books, partially in conflict with each other. It offers a verdict on various philosophical stances on realism by reconstructing Polanyi's thought and demonstrating its relative superiority, but also does not miss the opportunity to advance its own position on realism. Those familiar with Polanyi will find much in common between Meek and Polanyi: *CR* very much resembles *PK* in its heterogeneous goals and modalities. In the first half of part one of *CR*, Meek summarizes Polanyi's views on realism. In the second half of part one, she evaluates the significance of Polanyi's realism relative to other approaches to realism and (in particular) the philosophy of science.

An overall goal of the entire book is to highlight what Meek herself first stresses in the introduction, namely, the tremendous insights to be gained from adopting Polanyi's framework. I hope I will be forgiven for commenting on this first introductory chapter:

an introduction provides space for an author to share the background and motivations of the work and should generally be off-limits to criticism. Yet I can't help pointing out two things here, both related to a rather romantic perception I would call "Michael Polanyi as the unappreciated treasure."

My first point has to do with the jubilant language about the "liberating" and "healing" effects Polanyi's philosophy had on Meek. Mired as she had been in a miserable skepticism, her study of Polanyi provided her with a glimmer of hope about the viability of realism. I mention this only because this starting point seems to have consequences for the whole project. Meek basically attempts to develop a missing justification for Polanyi's efforts that he himself appears to have thought unnecessary, namely, a defense of his realism. From reading *CR*, one could have the impression Polanyi's realism was chiefly supported by his natural attitude as a premier scientist (i.e., a tacit commitment to realism is necessary to practice science) and possibly by his faith in his own fiduciary program. So he appeared not to give much thought to justifying his realism and thus this job now falls to the professional philosopher.

I suggest Polanyi might have thought his critique of objectivism successfully put the burden of proof on those wanting to make *anti*-realist arguments and therefore there was no need for him to justify his commitment to realism. This very same issue about the burden of proof surfaces in the second part of *CR*, where Meek appears to lift this burden, but possibly not with the right justification.

The other thing worth mentioning about the introduction has to do with Meek's perception that Polanyi's work is generally not recognized or respected to the degree it deserves (a recurring theme throughout *CR*). However, taken together *PK* and *TD* easily have fifty thousand citations; this does not include other works by Polanyi. While many of those citations might be only about a mention of tacit knowledge and may not entail real understanding of Polanyi's broader project, I do not think he is neglected to the degree we sometimes portray him to be. There is no question that in current philosophical debates about realism and some other philosophical issues Polanyi is not often cited; amongst non-philosophers, however, his works are much more visible than are those of many more prominent analytical philosophers.

I turn now to comments about the first part of *CR*. One thing worth pointing out is that Meek's ambitious efforts are apparently based on all of Polanyi's relevant works. While this exhaustive search for every possible reference to Polanyi's realism provides tremendous insight, it can also be a problem. First, although this exhaustive approach can provide revealing background information, it sometimes does not add much to the overall project; I felt this to be the case in the section titled, "Ontological Aspect of Tacit Knowing." Second, one has the impression while reading Polanyi's works that, although he generally retained the same family of ideas throughout his career as a philosopher, he carved them up in alternative conceptual ways in successive books. The

result is that while the concepts do not really contradict each other, they sometimes cannot be seen as entirely complementary either.

I have a similar concern having to do with the amount of attention given to the concept of indwelling: it is extensively discussed in chapter two but mostly missing from the rest of part one, but then re-emerges in part two. I suggest highlighting the concept of indwelling without attending to the related concept of the "active centre" is symptomatic of a skew in the representation of Polanyi's work.

Some concepts important to Polanyi's thought are missing altogether. One of these is evolution, which can serve as an account of the history of reality, especially of a multi-layered ontology. Meek repeatedly describes Polanyi as a premier scientist and a game-changer in our understanding of the philosophy of science, but she also insists (in part two) that the source of his novel epistemological insights and reality are basically unexplained. I argue that his having been a scientist and a medical doctor would have made him sympathetic to the naturalization of epistemology (a goal sought by others, as well) and enabled him to develop a research program that yielded groundbreaking results.

Just as Polanyi's works both partially supersede one another even as they partially complement one other, the two parts of *CR*, written three decades apart, exhibit a similar tension. I will not be able to comment very much on part two: this second, newer part of *CR* argues the main points of part one are still valid today, so much so that Meek no longer believes it's necessary to justify a realist standpoint (although she offers no real explanation on how this change has come about).

As for the other arguments of part two—especially covenant epistemology and the idea reality itself might be personal—Meek heads in directions I cannot follow and therefore I cannot judge her arguments. But I do want to share my interpretation of what Polanyi proposes in chapter nine of *PK* about religious faith and Christianity. There he classifies religious vision with other heuristic systems like mathematics. On this basis, he argues that, since true or false statements are not possible in such heuristic systems, neither are true or false statements possible about the existence of God. On the contrary, if the statement "God exists" were thought to be true (and thereby expected to yield indeterminate future manifestations) it would make the object of that statement comparable to natural objects, and thereby destroy it as a proper object of religious worship.

Objectivity and Reality

In chapter one of *PK*, "Objectivity," Polanyi presents the core idea of contact with reality: "We accept [a given theory] in the hope of making contact with reality; so that, being really true, our theory may yet show forth its truth through future centuries in ways undreamed of by its authors…In this wholly indeterminate scope of its

true implications lies the deepest sense in which objectivity is attributed to a scientific theory" (*PK*, 5).

Meek explores one aspect of this account very thoroughly in part one of *CR*, namely, the indeterminate future manifestations (or what she calls the "IFM Effect") we expect from a true theory. The "IFM Effect" is a telltale sign of truth, and according to Meek, the discovery of truth is based on tacit "foreknowledge" facilitated by the aesthetic quality of a theory and its capability to spark our intellectual passions.

But I think there is more to this idea that needs to be noticed. Polanyi's treatment of objectivity in chapter one of *PK* can be seen as his argument for realism. For instance, when he writes he wants to "recall how scientific theory came to be reduced in the modern mind to the rank of a convenient contrivance, a device for recording events and computing their future course" (*PK*, 6), we read therein an implicit charge against instrumentalist descriptions of science.

This reduction of theory begins with the reduction of the reality of the person. That line of thought culminates in chapter six of *PK*, "Intellectual Passions," which describes the contradictory nature of the Laplacean ideal of knowledge. Polanyi argues the ethereal Laplacean mind would not have any real understanding or knowledge about anything, precisely because of its ethereal nature. I believe there is here an implied argument about the reality of the person, an argument that is additional to the possibility of true theories (i.e., realism). When we forget about the reality of the person and move immediately to analysis of our knowledge of the external world, we end up relying *only* on the claim that the structure of our knowledge reflects the structure of the objects of our knowledge; in other words, we are supposed to infer *from the structure of knowing to the structure of being*. However, this inference alone—without another independent argument (i.e., about the reality of the person)—is not enough of a foundation for ontological statements about the world (cf. Margitay 2010; Paksi 2019).

Evolution and the Emergence of Man

If we are able to accept the reality of the person, it is entirely justified to ask about the origins of that person. Polanyi took seriously the continuity between animals and humans, extensively studied animal learning, and concluded explicit knowledge is just the latest evolutionary development after a long era during which knowledge was held only tacitly. This continuity between humans and animals—or, to put it another way, this continuity within nature—underpins the claim that the structure of our mental representation of other biological beings resembles the structure of those beings themselves. This correspondence is due to the "anthropogenesis" manifest in the shared "ancestral system" of biological species. Polanyi notes, "We have reached the point at which we must confront the unspecifiability of higher levels in terms of particulars belonging to lower levels, with the fact that the higher levels have in fact come into

existence spontaneously from elements of these lower levels. How can the emergent have arisen from particulars that cannot constitute it?" (*PK*, 393).

This also means that trust in knowing is in part justified by evolution. A later passage in *PK* illustrates the evolution of contact with reality very clearly:

> In my description of anthropogenesis I have surveyed the gradual rise of field centres to the rank of full personhood, and I have again spoken of this rise when illustrating some aspects of emergence by the logical maturation of the mind from infancy to adulthood. At all levels of life it is these centres which take the risks of living and believing. And it is still such centres which, at the highest stage of development, actuate those men who seek the truth and declare it to all comers—at all costs (*PK*, 404).

The reality of the person, together with the evolutionary heritage of the human species, make a good argument why anti-realism appears contradictory. It also explains why contact with reality can generally be achieved (thanks to our evolved skill set), but is also fallible. Polanyi referred to this form of reasoning in terms of "ultrabiology" and suggested evolutionary progress "can be extended by continuous stages into epistemology, and more generally, into the justification of [our] own fundamental commitments." Ultimately, this evolutionary series "should present itself as a series of successive existential achievements" (PK, 387).

I do think the "ultrabiology" argument, as the foundation of Polanyi's epistemology, also includes a foundation for Polanyi's realism. The argument, as Polanyi admits, is still circular. However, he also shows that no other kind of conceptual system is possible, and therefore an admittedly circular system should be seen as more viable than one claiming to be un-circular and grounded solely in objective evidence.

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