

COVERING THE RECOVERING



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Keywords: Michael Polanyi, tacit skills, baseball hitting, personal knowing, cultural crisis, animal cognition, inarticulate learning, epistemic hierarchies

ABSTRACT

In this brief essay, I respond to three generous reviews of my annotated anthology of Michael Polanyi's comprehensive thought. Where my meaning or Polanyi's thought seems unclear or controversial, I offer my rationale for my usage or interpretations.

I am grateful to the three persons who thoughtfully reviewed *Recovering Truths: A Comprehensive Anthology of Michael Polanyi's Writings*, more commonly called the Polanyi Reader. As particularly Ellen Bernal noted, the book was in its conception a community effort, and the reviewers have effectively joined that community, each offering a distinctive perspective on the volume. My most basic aim in pulling together and interpreting diverse selections from the corpus of Polanyi's writings was to provide a comprehensive introduction to the range of his thought in his own words, providing explanation and clarification insofar as that seemed helpful. It is gratifying to find out that in general each reviewer found *Recovering Truths* to have fulfilled that goal successfully.

Tex Sample approaches the Polanyi Reader as a resource, not as a critic. His article augments Polanyi's example of tacit, skillful accomplishment. Polanyi's conceptual framework illuminating such examples as using a probe, playing the piano, and tool use in general, is applied by Sample to that most American sport, baseball. Sample especially makes use of terminology defined in the Glossary to offer a Polyanian interpretation of the difference between Ted Williams and Mickey Mantle as great hitters. His analysis of the skill employed in batting touches home for me in two senses. My boyhood hero

was Ted Williams, not too surprising for a kid raised in the Boston suburbs who still remembers the 1947 Red Sox lineup. However, my idolizing of Williams was in part a compensatory commitment, for I was a terrible hitter, perhaps to be expected for a kid handicapped by rather severe asthma. I lacked Sample's appreciation for great skill wherever it was manifest, for I could only hope that Mantle, a member of those hated Yankees, would flounder and fail.

Sample provides an exemplary Polanyian analysis of how the two players approached the skillful practice of hitting a baseball. Williams augmented his embodied skill with an indwelt explicit understanding of the various facets of batting successfully. For Mantle, in contrast, hitting well was a matter of uncritical second nature, of relying on unspecifiable muscle memory. I find Sample's explanation convincing regarding the cause for Mantle batting zero for twenty-eight after hearing what Williams had to say about hitting. Mantle began to attend to the various subsidiaries Williams discussed that contribute to excellence in hitting, and Mantle thereby lost his total focus on the flight of the baseball that is so crucial to hitting it. Just as surely as the concert pianist loses control of the overall meaning of his or her performance by thinking about finger placement, so attention to batting stance or batting grip will impede success in hitting the ball. Sample's description of how the indwelt, embodied personal pole of batting is related to the universal pole of team-wide success in baseball usefully extends Polanyi's more typical explication of the personal-universal relation in intellectual terms, as for instance in solving a problem and scientific discovery.

I thank Ellen Bernal for her summary of the Polanyi Reader, a summary that is both accurate and concise. She correctly notes that for the most part I offer a sympathetic portrayal of Polanyi's thought. This is no arbitrary stance, for in fact I am deeply influenced by Polanyi and believe others would benefit as I do from his insights if they are made accessible.

Bernal suggests that one aspect of Polanyi's thought I did not make sufficiently clear is his reference to the "cultural crisis" of modern thought. She correctly intuits that moral inversion (referred to without being explicitly named in the quotation she uses from *Tacit Dimension*), inappropriate usage of Cartesian doubt and objectivity as intellectual standards in many disciplines, and totalitarianism are implicated in the "cultural crisis," but she wonders how these facets are linked together.

I take it that the background concern motivating Polanyi's philosophy is seeking an explanation for and then a solution to the tragic disasters of the twentieth century: the world wars, the depression, the rise of totalitarian governments. He sees a misunderstanding and misapplication of science as a fundamental causal agent producing these tragic events that incidentally led to the loss of many of his family members in the holocaust. The Cartesian idealization of objectivity and certainty influenced positivism, scientism, and social thought in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. It also led to abandonment of religious, moral, and traditional

restraints on governance and behavior. Their values were seen as merely subjective. Consequently, totalitarianism in politics was unleashed and nihilism in personal belief flourished. In *The Contempt of Freedom* and other early non-scientific writings, Polanyi claims the resulting totalitarian and objectivist idealism created a “cultural crisis” that permitted or even encouraged the century’s disasters. In place of tyranny in governance, he argues for a reconstituted liberalism in which what he terms public liberty attuned to transcendent values works toward the common good. Social arrangements making for public welfare are sustained only if backed by philosophically inspired commitment that acknowledges personal responsibility. Describing how all knowing is personal is Polanyi’s key solution for ensuring that the century’s disasters not be repeated. He shows how *personal knowing* is both epistemically true and socially beneficial, in contrast to objective determinism (Marx and Engels) or emotional extremism unconstrained by ethics (Stalin, Hitler).

Several questions raised by Kriszta Sajber in her gracious review deserve a response with explanation. She is concerned that *Recovering Truths* relies so much on the material from *Personal Knowledge* that later developments in Polanyi’s thought are given insufficient attention. I see *PK* as a brilliant but dense work that needs exposition and explanation more than any other of Polanyi’s writings. It contains in at least nascent form most of the core concepts he develops further in later writings plus summaries of many of his earlier insights. No other book he wrote is as comprehensive, systematic, and daring as *PK* (and Sajber seems to grant this). I think it important to focus attention on this central work, believing my selections afford readers access to his most carefully considered and sometimes truly inspired phrasings.

Sajber directs her particular concern to Polanyi’s seemingly triumphalist hierarchical epistemology in which human knowing is superior to the cognition of any other animal. Insofar as occasionally Polanyi seems to suggest that evolution almost purposefully leads to human sovereignty, she is surely right to complain. She is also correct in objecting to a literal reading of Polanyi’s claim that “animals only learn when impelled by desire or fear” (see *Varieties of Human Knowing*, 12). A more liberal interpretation of “desire,” though, might connect “desire” with Polanyi’s claim that “we meet a general alertness of animals, not directed toward any specific satisfaction, but merely exploring what is there” (*PK* 132)—a desire to learn and know.

The reference to learning and knowing leads to subject matter where Sajber and I may have genuinely different understandings. She objects to Polanyi’s view that “animals are incapable of language use” and states that in the past two decades animal scientists have offered “convincing evidence to disprove” this. Setting aside the notion of being “incapable,” which I don’t think comes up in Polanyi’s discussion, he does claim that no other animal makes use of language. While it is certainly true that some species of non-human animals have rich means of communication and may have cognitive and perceptual abilities surpassing human capabilities, I don’t know of any

animal scientist who would claim any other species make use of language. Frans de Waal, to whom Sajber refers as supporting animals' linguistic capability, writes that "I consider us the only linguistic species" (De Waal 2017, 106). Languages have such characteristics as vocabularies that can be used in many ways, grammars that allow words to be combined into more complex meanings than individual words allow, and displacement, that is, reference to ideas and objects not immediately in front of one. Some species have some aspects of language like displacement, but no non-human species have all the qualities of language that have permitted humans to visit the moon, write Shakespearean dramas, or understand evolution.

I share Sajber's appreciation of animal intelligence and implied concern over mistreatment of animals. But I also think Polanyi's discussion of animals' capacity for trick, sign, and latent learning—the section in the Polanyi Reader that Sajber found so surprising—is quite brilliant and stands up well to current research. Trick learning allows for tool use, intention, and cleverness among animals. Ravens' competence in contriving solutions to problems, as mentioned by Bernal, is an example of trick learning. Sign learning is the basis for animals understanding their environment and being at home in their niche—and also the basis for animal communication. Latent learning is about the ability of animals to remember their experience and reorganize key insights for future use. We humans depend on these gifts of evolution; jointly they provide for understanding reality. De Waal denies that language adequately captures a person's intentions, feelings, fears, yearnings, etc. He notes that "even though language assists human thinking by providing categories and concepts, it is not the stuff of thought. We don't actually need language in order to think" (De Waal 2017, 102). Polanyi shares this view. The three types of inarticulate learning he posits provide us with tacit knowing, that is, the irreplaceable cognitive skills and understanding that underlie all linguistic thought. We know more than we can say.

Sajber is uneasy with the hierarchical nature of cognition and ontology in Polanyi's thought. It should be remembered, however, that Polanyi sets his thought within an evolutionary framework in Part IV of PK. This necessarily implies continuity with other animals in his theories of knowing and reality. Within the spectrum of types of cognition, however, new developments *emerge*. Each new level is not reducible to the parts from which it arises. The symbolic nature of linguistic meaning operates according to different rules than sign meaning. Hierarchy exists within overall continuity.

I wish again to thank the three generous reviewers of *Uncovering Truths*, and I hope the work will continue to be useful to those seeking a grasp of Polanyi's important philosophical thought.

REFERENCES

deWaal, Frans. 2017. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* New York: W.W. Norton, Co..