



MY INTEREST IN POLANYI, HIS LINKS WITH OTHER THINKERS,
AND HIS PROBLEMS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD T. ALLEN



C. P. Goodman and Richard T. Allen

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, C. P. Goodman invites British Polanyi scholar Richard T. Allen to reflect on his interest in Polanyi's philosophical ideas and share what he believes is valuable in his thought.

Goodman: If you look at most philosophy of science textbooks, you will generally not find the name Michael Polanyi, and, if you do, it will often be in the form of a footnote. I believe I know why this is the case. It is not because his reflections on the practice of science are lacking in quality, or that he was not read, or indeed that he was not influential. It is that, for all their differences, the names mentioned in these textbooks, such as Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Lakatos, attack the concept of truth, leading some to claim that what we call truth is the result of a power struggle. David Stove (*Scientific Irrationalism: Origins of a Postmodern Cult*) calls this approach irrationalism. Polanyi, unlike Stove, does not ground science in inductive logic; he asserts that scientists pursue ideals such as truth and beauty. Where did you first come across the name Michael Polanyi, and what first attracted you to his writings? Once you started reading him, what made you want to read more of his work?

Allen: I think by stressing the activity of the scientist in science Polanyi suffered from being taken to be a subjectivist, even though in his writings he refutes pseudo-substitutes for truth. But few people bothered to read him. I first came across Michael Polanyi when I saw the green covers of *Personal Knowledge* in the University of Nottingham's Library (sometime between 1960–1963), but I did not borrow it. When I had given up an academic career—big mistake!—I borrowed it (c. 1965) from the county library and wasn't very taken by it. When I was engaged in a part-time M.Ed. at Leicester University (which elsewhere would have been an M.Lit.) with a thesis on Emotion and Education (1969–1973, first part philosophy and second part

D. H. Lawrence), my supervisor, Professor Geoffrey Bantock, suggested that for the first part there might be something in Michael Polanyi, and there was! I haven't looked back since. I also discovered Macmurray and Scheler, via J. N. Findlay in the library at Leicester and Collingwood, whose book *The Idea of History* (1946) I think I had read previously. In 1971 I went to the first Polanyi conference, which was held at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park, and in 1978 I became a member of the committee of the British Polanyi group, suggesting "Convivium" for its name because Robin Hodgkin thought that naming a society after a person might encourage a cult [most copies of *Convivium* are available on the Polanyi Society website [here](#)]. These days I do not bother with publications about Michael Polanyi or anyone else—only with extensions and applications of their work. Much later, I worked out that Bantock knew of Michael Polanyi via F. R. Leavis's essay on him, which I have never read. Bantock had studied under Leavis.

Goodman: Popper got one of his post-graduates, Alan Musgrave, to write a thesis claiming that Polanyi was a subjectivist. Musgrave edited the papers from a 1965 conference in London which became known for its debate between Popper and Kuhn. Lakatos had invited Polanyi to the conference, but Popper told Lakatos to disinvite him; otherwise, Popper would refuse to attend. The joke at the London School of Economics was that Popper's most famous book should be called "The Open Society by one of its Enemies." Lakatos however continued to correspond with Polanyi in secret. In 1962 in a debate about the relative importance of the sciences and the humanities, F. R. Leavis famously attacked C. P. Snow. In 1959, Polanyi had already published his own contribution to this debate in an article titled "The Two Cultures." Leavis was introduced to Polanyi when he came across Marjorie Grene's book *The Knower and the Known* (1966) in a secondhand bookshop in Cambridge. He approved of its critique of scientism. David Holbrook (*English in a University Education*) and George Watson (*Never Ones for Theory: England and the War of Ideas*), who like Leavis taught English literature at Cambridge University, were both influenced by Polanyi. It was because Polanyi was thought to be advocating subjectivism that Kuhn and Feyerabend were drawn to his writings. From a Polanyian point of view, however, both the Logical Positivist and the Sociological approach are misguided. Indeed, they are two sides of the same false dichotomy between facts and values. Knowing without a subject is impossible. All knowing is personal. But it does not follow that because it is personal knowing is subjective. Polanyi, and many of those who have been influenced by him, are Christians. Saint Paul rejected the claim that doing good is simply a matter of knowing what is right and wrong. You may know what is the right thing to do and still do the opposite. Polanyi suggested his Post-Critical philosophy was foreshadowed by Saint Augustine. To what extent is the idea of a person connected with a defence of free will?

Allen: I've never understood why Hayek liked Popper. Yes, I should have remembered Polanyi's "The Two Cultures" as a likely link. David Holbrook came to our first Convivium Conference in 1976 and joined for a while. At that time, he was in the Education Department at Cambridge University. He was a prolific author. I have his *Education, Nihilism, and Survival* (1977), which has many references to Polanyi. I haven't heard of George Watson. Polanyi liked Kuhn at first, but not after his book was published. I would say that Kuhn merely "observed" scientists from the outside and did not "rethink" their thinking, as Collingwood would have said, or, as Polanyi would say, he did not "indwell" it. Hence, he treated science as mere facts and events and not as an earnest endeavour to discover truths about the natural world. Contrary to what Wikipedia says, not only is Kuhn a relativist; he is also a behaviourist. Free will (I prefer "freedom of the person" to avoid making will into a thing rather than what a person decides to do and follow through on) is essential to personhood. It is the power of choice and self-determination. Every animal has some degree

of decision and judgement, but ours is more or less explicit. By *sophia*, Plato meant more than knowing; he meant knowing which changes the person and results in us acting in accordance with it.

Goodman: Another person influenced by Michael Polanyi was the historian John Lukacs. He attended the 1966 Ford Foundation-funded conference of the Study Group on the Foundations of Cultural Unity (chaired by Polanyi) in the USA at Bowdoin College and described it in his autobiography *Confessions of an Original Sinner* as one of the most disillusioning experiences in his life! According to Lukacs, instead of being about intellectual curiosity academia has become almost exclusively about careerism. I recently read through various books about Polanyi. I found William Poteat (who was also involved in this 1966 conference) to be one of three authors who reflect in an original way upon Polanyi's ideas rather than simply repeating his words. Many American supporters of Polanyi were pupils of Poteat. I am sure there will be others who will discuss his influence upon them. The other more recent writer on Polanyi who caught my attention is Esther Meek, who takes seriously the Polanyian claim that tacit knowing puts us into contact with reality, and then there is Marjorie Grene, who of course was Polanyi's assistant when he wrote *Personal Knowledge*. She attended and helped organize the 1966 conference, editing the books that resulted from both the 1965 and 1966 conferences. They were attended by philosophers who subsequently became well known, such as Hubert Dreyfus, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Grene comes across as a very forceful person who, although wonderfully sharp, can be quite blinkered, but on epistemology she is a delight. She describes herself as a dogmatic fallibilist. She relates Polanyi to other thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty and J. J. Gibson. Another person who attended the 1966 Bowdoin College was Stanley Jaki, who later became one of Polanyi's sharpest critics. He reports that he found the conference repellant since Polanyi was treated by some like a guru (see "Knowledge, Personal and Impersonal: Reflections on Polanyi's Thought," in Jaki's collection *Uncodified Conspiracy and Other Essays*, 129–40). Jaki claims that Polanyi had good intentions but had no talent for mathematics and so sought to dilute the precision of the sciences. He notes that Polanyi countered materialism and mechanism by deriving science from the personal and the tacit. But, according to Jaki, it is only the quantitative which makes something amenable to scientific investigation and gives it its predictive power:

His readings do not show familiarity with Eddington's books. There Polanyi could have found the felicitous phrase that the principle line of separation lies not between the immanent and the transcendental, but between the metric and the non-metric, that is between the quantitative and non-quantitative data in our cognition.... Polanyi did not seem to know of a most seminal remark by Hertz... "Maxwell's theory is Maxwell's system of equation." (136)

Polanyi, according to Jaki, grew up in intellectual circles in Budapest, where parroting flashy phrases passed as familiarity with the subject. All knowledge is personal insofar as it is conscious, but tacit knowledge can only exist within the context of explicit knowledge. Quantities are not impersonal, but they are the least subjective form of knowledge. It is therefore a mistake to talk about the beauty of mathematics. Is this a fair criticism?

Allen: I think I've read something in *Tradition and Discovery* about William Poteat, but I can't remember anything of it if I did. As for Jaki, I really like his books and often refer to them. But I totally disagree with his claim that the tacit only exists because of the explicit. It can be only the reverse. The knowledge

of animals and human infants is inevitably tacit. Only with language does anything become explicit, and then only because it relies on what is tacit, as Polanyi proved with many examples. As for the quantitative making something scientific, natural science is primarily concerned with structures, before any measurement of them is made. Finding subatomic particles and discovering what they do is prior to measuring them and their interactions. Indeed, measuring atomic weights proved to be a dead end for further investigation. Polanyi does not dilute the importance of mathematics; he shows that there is more to science than the quantitative. As Polanyi points out in relation to Laplace, all measurements wouldn't tell us about that of which they are the measurements. Daniel Paksi, in one of his *Appraisal* articles, makes a good point that mathematics can be substituted for reality, which he claimed Einstein did at one point. I have heard Analytic Philosophers say that equations can always be reversed. Yes, but not the processes that they quantify. No, beauty in mathematics is not irrelevant: an elegant proof is mathematically as well as aesthetically better. Also, how else can one get out of mechanism if not by showing that knowledge of it is not another mechanism but is the product of something that is not mechanical, a living, thinking, and truth-seeking person? I agree with you on Grene's book. It is very good, but not her resolute secularism.

Goodman: When Polanyi emigrated to England in 1933, central planning was popular—at least it was popular with the sort of people for whom the answer to every problem is giving the government more power, by which of course they mean themselves. Polanyi, together with John Baker, founded the Society for Freedom in Science, which opposed those who claimed that scientific research should be directed by the State. He also attended the first Mount Pelerin Society meeting in 1947, which Hayek set up in order to promote the claim that free markets are better at giving people what they want. Polanyi argued that a complex society cannot function without free markets. But he did not see free markets as the only answer. Keynesianism was a disaster because the above-mentioned advocates of State planning used it to justify government interventions in the market. Polanyi however justified efforts to moderate booms and busts by decreasing or increasing the money supply. Paul Craig Roberts argued that his Keynesian-Monetarism was thirty years ahead of its time. But Polanyi failed to take account of the fact that politicians in democracies obtain power by offering jam today. While they are happy to create short-term booms, they are less keen on implementing the discipline required to limit the long-term damage caused by inflation. Polanyi argues that a utilitarian justification for a free society is as inadequate as a utilitarian justification for science. Both are practices which rely upon value commitments. These commitments are passed on in the form of traditions. Does this accord with your understanding of Polanyi?

Allen: I agree with this account for the most part, but one other consideration needs to be added: Polanyi's distinction between private and public freedom. By that he did not mean submission of the individual to the collective but the use of freedom for the pursuit and cultivation of those activities which are inherently good, such as the human and natural sciences, justice, religion, and being a good neighbour, together with the institutions and traditions which support them, i.e., a set of "positive liberties" with the ideals and standards to the achieved and observed needing no other "justification," with private freedoms being more a matter of individual inclination and therefore largely "negative liberties." Both should be protected, but the former should take priority. (See his *The Logic of Liberty*.) On reflection, I would now qualify this, because hobbies, games, and sports also have their standards, though there is truth in Chesterton's remark that "If something is worth doing it is worth doing badly." It is better for example to be a bad painter than to spend all of your free time passively watching television irrespective of what's on. This leads to the problem of modern lists of

human, universal, or natural rights: they are merely assertive and individualist demands to do as one likes, with the implicit obligation of others not to interfere with the individual's exercise of them. Natural Law was a doctrine of universal obligations, with the implicit duty not to be obstructed in obeying them. Polanyi is a Natural Law thinker and certainly not a modern human rights advocate.

Goodman: Polanyi claims that scepticism about the objectivity of values in the modern period, far from deflating moral passions, created a hyper-moralism that, unconstrained by any reality, seeks to destroy the existing society and replace it with a utopia. Voegelin characterized this quest in religious terms. The Gnostics believed that the world was created by an evil demiurge. We are not responsible for this evil, and via their knowledge of the goodness of a transcendent God, the enlightened will liberate us from this world. Voegelin embarked upon a history of ideas. He noted that over time our understanding of the order of the universe becomes increasingly differentiated. But when he reached Christianity he gave up on the project. He declared that we create symbols to articulate our experience, and if we focus on the symbols, we ignore the experience which gives them their meaning. It seems to me that another reason Voegelin stopped writing his history of ideas was because he was reluctant to explore the connection between Gnosticism, which he disliked, and the Christian, and ultimately Jewish, quest to live in accordance with the will of a transcendent God. Polanyi views moral passion as Jewish in origin. When it is combined with a materialist account of reality, this passion is inverted into an attack upon all existing values. A Pantheist derives this error from comprehending values as transcendent. Moral inversion simply takes the next step and replaces God with ourselves as the source of value. Polanyi describes transcendent ideals as self-set ends of inquiry. But he does not take them to be subjective. Is he supplying an immanent theology in which the divine spirit comes to self-knowledge via persons engaged in a quest for understanding?

Allen: These are very complicated matters. I'll start with Voegelin. I have lost my copy of *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (1968), but so far as I can recall he focuses on the claims of Marxism and other systems to know the future, rather than the evil that is the present, though it is implied. In his book on Gnosticism, Hans Jonas ends it by discussing modern versions such as Heidegger. It seems to me that in his study of the search for order Voegelin balks at Christianity and life everlasting in the presence of God as being the logical conclusion of life in the metaxy, and he substitutes for it a merely nominal construction of symbols. Hence the metaxy is between the solid reality of the universe and something that is not substantial at all, let alone far more real than this world. Polanyi appears to do the same in *Personal Knowledge and Meaning*. Years ago in *Convivium*, I reviewed the three principal interpretations of Polanyi on Christianity in an issue of *Zygon*: the minimalist by Prosch, the maximalist as fully Christian by Gelwick, and the intermediate by Apczynski, with which I agreed. See also chapter 2 of my book *Transcendence and Immanence in the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and Christian Theism* (1992). This brings me to what Polanyi meant by "Transcendent Ideals." He certainly does not state or imply any theological or other metaphysical foundation. So what do they transcend? I suggest it is anything less than that which requires devotion, raising oneself to a higher level, and acting accordingly. In *Science, Faith, and Society*, he lists truth, justice, and charity and belief in their reality as ideals (p. 81). At the end of the book, he does suggest that God is the source and end of these ideals, but that is as far as he goes, and in *Personal Knowledge and Meaning*, he affirms even less than this. There is, however, a path to God which starts with the "fundamental beliefs" used in any attempt to prove or disprove them. For example, the general reliability of our perceptions and mental powers, especially induction, which Polanyi mentions in *Personal Knowledge*, results in a correspondence of our beliefs with

reality (that is the only definition of truth, the others being ways of testing them), and this is what I call a “Global Absolute Presupposition,” together with the “Regional” ones in the human and natural sciences, with which Collingwood deals. You mentioned “moral inversion.” This is identical with Scheler’s refutation of Nietzsche. The difference is that Polanyi applies it to the claim that lack of scruples is being “honest” about one’s immorality, whereas Scheler counters the Nietzschean “overturning of values” by comprehending it as motivated by resentment.

Goodman: Humans are symbol-using animals. We enrich our awareness by indwelling within articulations. Marjorie Grene points out that Polanyi is often described as claiming that articulation sometimes has a tacit residue, but what Polanyi is saying is that all articulation always relies upon our tacit awareness. Consciousness has a focal and a subsidiary component, and its from-to structure derives from the fact that we are situated. This is not a flaw; it is the ground from which all understanding arises. He rejects the claim that we can generate meanings simply by manipulating symbols in accordance with rules. This is a Rationalist myth. Graham Dunstan Martin (*Shadows in the Cave: Mapping the Conscious Universe*) claims that poets deliberately impede the everyday transparency of prose in order to evoke our tacit awareness. You have just finished writing a book called *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Tacit Dimensions of Language, Truth, and Logic*. Do you discuss poetry? Grene said that Polanyi was going senile when he tried to reflect upon the nature of metaphor in his late writings and therefore advises us to ignore them. She also said that when he wrote *Personal Knowledge* (whose subtitle is “Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy”) it took him a year to write his Articulation chapter. To what extent do his claims about the structure, power, and limitations of articulation go to the heart of what he is trying to do in his Post-Critical philosophy?

Allen: Yes, Marjorie Grene was right about that. In my book, I discuss “heightened” language, which includes poetry, in which the words themselves are focal. There is also a chapter on real metaphors, whereas Michael Polanyi considers them to be only figures of speech, i.e., as using the terms of one known thing to express another known thing. The Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga calls these “manufactory metaphors,” as opposed to “revelatory metaphors” which extend the use of existing terms for what is already known to refer to something radically new, and for which there are no words. The audience has to tacitly grasp what the speaker is trying to say and convey. I published a paper on this and with permission I reproduced it in the book.

Goodman: In her summary of his philosophy, Esther Meek claims that Polanyi highlights the importance of responsible fiduciary commitment, the integration of two levels of awareness, and contact with reality as the discovery of indeterminate future manifestations. Instead of viewing knowing only in propositional terms, he returns us to the context of discovery. Articulation renders higher levels of meaning possible. But one of the hazards of description is the temptation to reduce A to nothing but B. Relativism is the negative version of the same misguided obsession with exhaustive description. Nor do we only seek to describe reality. We also create it. In the final chapters of *Personal Knowledge*, and in various subsequent writings, Polanyi outlines an emergent cosmology in which higher levels direct lower levels and are rendered possible by them. Although our embodied consciousness is fallible, our existence is not meaningless. In his heuristic phenomenology, we observe, explore, and create, enriching our meanings by building upon the achievements of others. What do you find most valuable in his writings?

Allen: The central element of his thinking is tacit integration: in one way or another, most of his previous work leads up to chapter 4 (“Skills”) in *Personal Knowledge*, which he then applies and extends. Two items I think are incorrect. First, in *The Tacit Dimension*, he says that tacit integration no longer needs commitment, but it is clear that tacit integration tacitly requires it, and so the very important chapter 10 in *Personal Knowledge* about commitment (and titled “Commitment”) is still highly relevant. Second, his last few chapters in *Personal Knowledge* about emergence, like all his writings on this topic, give a merely verbal pseudo account which entails that life, sentience, intelligence, and personhood are already latent in mere matter and that the principles of operation of higher levels bring these new levels into existence, as if the addition of more levels is somehow able to bring about that which is radically different. The implication is that no extra-mundane explanation is required. Marjorie Grene was right to reject those chapters, but for the wrong reasons.