



## Further Thoughts on *Guide to Personal Knowledge*: Response to our Reviewers

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### ABSTRACT

*The two Hungarian authors of Guide to Personal Knowledge are in general agreement with the assessments of their work offered by David Alker and Alessio Tartaro. However, they contend that Jon Fennell's criticism of their writing style, while sometimes accurate, nevertheless derives from an expected level of precision from non-native speakers of English that is unnecessary when the language is used as a lingua franca. Moreover, they suggest that underlying Fennell's complaints about language are differences in the interpretation of Polanyi's philosophy.*

We are grateful for the time and effort expended by our reviewers, who help us emphasize the importance of understanding Michel Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (*PK*). These reviews show that the task we attempt in our *Guide to Personal Knowledge* (*GPK*) is far from complete. Perhaps the most important goal of philosophy is to reveal people's hidden tacit convictions through a convivial contest of arguments. The three reviews certainly helped us in this task.

Two of the three reviews are positive, and one of them is rather negative. Thus, after some general remarks, we will focus our answer on the latter. We will argue in detail why we think that Jon Fennell's critique is not well established. Of course, it has several good points, but we think that there may be a deeper or broader problem than he acknowledges that made reading our *GPK* so frustrating for him.

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Let us start with some general remarks. David W. Agler highlights well how new readers can experience an immediate fascination and then a much slower but surer frustration with *PK*. As he puts it, "many of the core theses of *PK* are easy to state in a punchy way" (Agler, 11). Alessio Tartaro quotes one of these well-known "punchy" phrases: "we can know more than we can tell" (Tartaro, 19). Then, he immediately adds, "Tacit knowledge describes a form of knowing akin to skill, which has an evolutionary origin, a fiduciary foundation and broad socio-cultural consequences. Highlighting these dimensions of the concept is crucial to avoid misunderstanding and simplification" (19).

Agler argues that the readers' frustrations with *GPK* arise for two main reasons: first, the numerous and seemingly divergent topics Polanyi discusses, and second, his strange and equivocal terminology. He says that "Polanyi didn't limit himself to a single topic for doing so would ignore how pervasive the disease of

detached objectivity had become” (Agler, 11), which is an apt observation. Indeed, there is a positive or constructive side to this broad approach that we will revisit shortly.

After Agler emphasizes the paradigmatic differences between Polanyi and a couple of other scholars, he states that we have “hacked” a straight path through *PK* and Polanyi’s strange and equivocal terminology: “[Paksi and Héder] don’t muddle clear waters themselves by trying to do too much: they don’t try to solve interpretive debates, they don’t engage with scholarship, and they don’t critically engage Polanyi’s book” (Agler, 12). However, this is only true on the surface. Yes, we explicitly do not do these things, but motivating our omissions and angles of approach are some tacit convictions that we describe in this article—for the expression of which we are grateful to *Tradition and Discovery*.

Take, for example, the meaning of “an evolutionary origin”; to a great extent, we avoided the interpretive debate about this concept in *GPK*. There are many differing interpretations of evolution. Evolutionary origin, according to neo-Darwinism, is in its updated form the mainstream objectivist scientific theory. Is this equivalent to evolutionary origins according to the commonsense view? What of evolutionary origins according to the old vitalist view or evolutionary origins according to Pope John Paul II and other theist believers in God? These are all fundamentally different from Polanyi’s view. However, we don’t express *PK*’s truly unique position if we align ourselves with mainstream science or theist faith, which people attempt to do when yielding to pressures external and internal. Similarly, we articulate Polanyi’s understanding of the concepts of fiduciary foundation, sociocultural consequences, and moral inversion without attending to the diversity of understandings to which they may be subject.

Agler correctly detects important reasons for Polanyi’s fascinating uniqueness and strange vocabulary, but, as Tartaro articulates well (Tartaro, 19), the deepest reason is that Polanyi is a visionary. He dreams of a post-critical philosophy and takes the first unsteady steps towards it. He deals with many different topics using a vocabulary that is strange to philosophers because he wants to depict a new view of the universe and show the place and aim of humans and their philosophies in it. Our *GPK* does not dare to take any steps beyond what Polanyi explicitly states but rather tries to eliminate unsteady interpretations of Polanyi’s first steps.

Both Agler and Tartaro suggest that we should have used more bibliographical references to highlight and explain Polanyi’s personal struggles, the circumstances during the writing of *PK*, and the controversial reception of his work (Agler, 14; Tartaro, 21). In a sense, they are absolutely right. An explanation of important background issues would help readers of *PK*. However, this would have caused distracting detours for the readers, yielding historical information rather than the philosophical insights we wished to explain. So as a conscious but not articulated choice, we instead used the approach of “the death of the author” (i.e., focus on the text alone) for better immersion into Polanyi’s written explication. We are adamant in our view that understanding *PK* does not have to depend on understanding context. We believe that deemphasizing the circumstances influencing the writing and reception of Polanyi’s work and focusing on the message of the fiduciary programme itself is a viable and worthy approach. As the Polanyi archives reveal, he was in intensive correspondence with several prominent scientists and intellectuals for decades, and yet he always attempted to write self-inspired works with little dependence on other frameworks. Perhaps in a similar way, with our guiding map in their hands, we hope readers will more easily make their own unsteady steps towards Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy without having to familiarize themselves with his assigned place in the philosophy of science after the historical turn, with the unavoidable but superficial parallels with Kuhn and others.

Also, both Agler and Tartaro emphasize the value of text boxes in our *GPK* (Agler, 13; Tartaro, 21) and suggest the advantages of having even more. The reasoning behind using the text boxes is that they provide the necessary information at certain points without breaking the flow of the main text.

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Jon Fennell expresses serious doubts concerning the success of our efforts. He divides his criticism into two halves: one is about language or, as he puts it, our shaky skills at writing in a foreign tongue; the other is about matters of greater substance. However, it seems to us that the real, profound problem is similar in both cases: how to understand Polanyi. This is not to say that Fennell's critique is without merit, but we suspect that even behind the complaints regarding the correctness of language, deeper interpretative differences are lurking.

According to Fennell, the language of our *GPK* creates a great barrier to the readers' understanding of Polanyi's message. He states that he is "reluctant to write even a letter" in a foreign language (Fennell, 4) and that "*Guide to Personal Knowledge*, in its use of English, is troubled indeed" (4). He even claims that "it is more often the case that Polanyi serves as a guide to this text than that the text serves effectively as a guide to him," referring to the frequent and lengthy quotations from Polanyi in our *GPK* (Fennell, 6).

Clearly, the latter statement expresses well his frustrations with our text. We acknowledge the existence of several errors left in the text even after it was reviewed by two native English editors. Yet we still think that Fennell's main problem is not with precise usage of English but with tacit convictions underlying our explicit text. Accordingly, we do not think that Fennell was able to argue his points convincingly with his examples. Before turning to detailed analysis to show this, however, we offer a few general points about writing in a foreign language.

Fennell's statement about not routinely using second languages genuinely shocks us as international scholars. Contrary to Fennell, for us it is obligatory to write in a second language, even if we write with imperfections, if we wish to participate in cosmopolitan dialogue. Fennell will be delighted to learn that we first wrote *GPK* in Hungarian. It was published in 2020. It did not generate much feedback, which is not a surprise: the relevant audience able to read that text is as much as five hundred times smaller than for the English version. Our situation is not ideal. It requires a lot of effort and money to write in a second language, and as Fennell emphasizes, we sometimes have inadequate editorial support (even if we did have several good editors for *GPK*).

Obviously, English is not just a regional native language but rather is the *lingua franca* of international science. Polanyi was a native Hungarian speaker, and he wrote *Personal Knowledge* in English. According to Fennell's logic, he never should have written it in English.

English speakers naturally tend to forget that they are in a minority within the English-speaking academic world, and they are not truly able to see the scientific *lingua franca* as such. We can appreciate beautiful literary English—and we will never be able to write it ourselves—but for scientific understanding, it is not necessary to achieve the literary excellence of a gifted writer. On the contrary, for non-native speakers of English, it is usually frustrating to attempt to read or write complexly formulated English full of allusions, metaphors, and cultural nuances. To put it simply, it is often much easier to understand the scientific writings of non-native speakers of English who necessarily use it as science's fact-oriented international *lingua franca*.

However, to do justice to English, it is not merely hard and frustrating because it includes components like gender pronouns but is also at times very useful. From our Hungarian point of view, there is no basic degree of difference between English and French. These seem to be almost the same language, but Hungarian is indeed a fundamentally different language (as are Chinese and Arabic and such). The tacit roots of Hungarian understanding and Western culture are the same, but still there are trains of thoughts, perspectives, connections of ideas, etc., that can be expressed in English better than in Hungarian. This is why it is not unfair that in Europe, generally, no post-graduate degrees are awarded without awardees demonstrating reliable second-language skills.

Articulated systems create their own tacit fundamentals of understanding by relying on the common tacit roots that they share with other such systems. English is a good *lingua franca* (at least for Europeans and Americans), probably because it evolved from German, Celt, Latin, and French influences as a quasi *lingua franca*. Contrary to this, Hungarian would be a terrible *lingua franca*, making everybody upset because in contrast to English it is an ancient, unique, and non-straightforward language.

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Fennell uses five examples to support his argument criticizing our English. First, he quotes our *GPK*: “Polanyi states that morality and science are not inseparable because, in both domains, we are led by personal tacit passions...” (*GPK*, 72; Fennell, 5). Then, he asks, “Do not the authors here mean to say that morality and science ‘are inseparable’ or ‘are not separable’? But maybe they do mean what they say. The statement is explicit, after all. Is this an error, or not? Who can tell?” (Fennell, 5).

Everybody can tell that this is an obvious error on our part, which is clearly revealed by the context of our discussion. Despite Fennell’s clever questions, we believe that in general we demonstrated the ability to use negation in English.

Second, Fennell again quotes the *GPK*: “Consequently, owing to the fact that collective tacit foundations were present even in the early forms of evolution, scientific and moral truths are in accordance with each other thus, [sic] proper scientific ideas do not contradict proper moral commitments” (*GPK*, 72; Fennell, 5). Fennell then asks several questions to express his doubts concerning the adequacy of the conveyed message in this text. At the surface, it seems that the problem is with the language; however, his footnote to the meaning of “the early forms of evolution” is quite telling: “Peculiar unexpected references to evolution are common in the book.” Fennell follows by asking how is it that our evolutionary roots “are responsible for scientific and moral truths now being in accord” (Fennell, 5).

Fennell’s review is probably most valuable for us because it prods us to emphasize a few points. For a new reader of *PK* and *GPK*, these questions about the origins of tacit and personal knowledge would be great because they reveal that Polanyi’s view of humans is unique. From a Polanyi scholar’s point of view, they show a profoundly different interpretation of *PK* on these issues. More broadly, Fennell’s questions display a different interpretation of whether (or why) our personal commitments towards moral and scientific truth have the same origin and structure.

In our view, the basis of tacit and personal knowledge is our evolutionary origin. We believe Polanyi is clear (especially in chapter 13 of *PK*) that tacit and personal knowledge is present throughout the evolution of animals. Consequently, a high number of references to evolution should not be unexpected, as this is a central theme of *PK*.

However, we are aware that many scholars of Polanyi's thought do not see evolution as a prominent feature of *PK*. A more critical view of Polanyi's account of evolutionary emergence allows the ruling scientific consensus of neo-Darwinism to be reconciled with Polanyi's view. Furthermore, by ignoring Polanyi's account, the traditional theist faith in God can be reconciled with Polanyi's view. But we believe a faithful interpretation of *PK* is at odds with these approaches. Maybe Fennell's questions concerning the concordance of scientific and moral origins in early forms of evolution are not actually about language at all. Nevertheless, his comments are still helpful in pointing out comma-related and structural challenges.

*GPK* is not just a guide for new readers of *PK*. We believe that the proper, literal reading of *PK* challenges some of the established interpretations of Polanyi and scientific evidence. *GPK* tries to shift the views of Polanyi scholars and therefore could be seen as part of an interpretation debate.

Fennell's third quotation from *GPK* states that "[t]he development of knowledge in different sciences is granted by the tacit foundations, which sustain the operation of articulated systems of knowledge" (*GPK*, 88; Fennell, 5). According to him, "the reader is puzzled" (Fennell, 5) because the meaning of "granted by" is ambiguous. His proposed substitutions of "is made possible by" or "is enabled by" are adequate, or at least they could be suitable if his understanding of these explicit words corresponded to our meaning. It seems that this is also not a genuine case of misusing language. However, our understanding assumes that the tacit foundations *act* rather than provide something more *passive* as suggested by Fennell's terminology.

This suspicion of difference in understanding is strengthened by how Fennell responds to a fourth quotation from *GPK*: "Articulated communication is made possible by commonly possessed tacit knowledge, which motivates and fills the acts of explicit communication with meaning..." (*GPK*, 88; Fennell, 6). Fennell asks what is the meaning of "motivates" here, and he opens a dictionary, according to which the word means "to provide with an incentive" or "to impel." But his question about the agency of the tacit is revealed by his response: "Is tacit knowledge even the sort of thing that *can* provide an incentive?" (Fennell, 6).

The answer to this question is *yes*, it can. This is not a slip of the tongue or a grammatical error. For Polanyi, knowledge is not just a passive belief or skill evoked on request by a self that is somehow a different thing. If one accepts that the basis of tacit knowledge is to be found in our evolutionary origin, then this agency is not a surprise. On the contrary, all *motivations*, *incentives*, and *instinctual actions* of non-human animals are examples of tacit knowing (see also Héder and Paksi 2018). According to Polanyi, evolution started "when ultramicroscopic, virus-like specks of living matter gained standard shapes and sizes, presumably with a correspondingly integrated internal organization. The bacillus which thus emerged carried the stamp of individuality. Its self-controlled shape and structure, and the physiological functions serving its survival, set up a centre of self-interest against the world-wide drift of meaningless happenings" (*PK*, 387).

Fennell quotes this sentence from *GPK*: "This shared tacit knowledge, which we rely on when evaluating explicit manifestations, is the same in everyone." Then, he claims that "the reader is here plagued by an ambiguity" and asks, "Does 'is the same in everyone' mean a) that tacit knowledge is present in everyone, or b) the particular tacit contents are the same in everyone?" (Fennell, 6).

For a), the answer is obviously yes, since every living being possesses tacit knowledge.

However, for b), the answer is that we can share particular tacit elements of knowledge, but there are no two individuals with the same inventory of tacitly known items. For understanding each other, some common, shared, or identical tacit elements are needed, which is what we mean by *same* (and some ambiguity indeed lingers).

Fennell is right in that it is indeed difficult to understand what we mean to say in the former quotation, given our imperfect English. However, he is wrong to think our linguistic ambiguity is the important issue at stake. We believe some deeper disagreements are cloaked as frustrating linguistic issues.

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Now we will focus on Fennell's criticisms that are of greater substance. The general direction of his criticism is the same. He claims that there are "at least a dozen" such substantive issues, but he highlights only four (Fennell, 7). We will briefly discuss them.

First, he quotes us as follows: "The most deeply rooted convictions of human nature are called implicit beliefs by Polanyi. These convictions are explained and determined by the conceptual frameworks of natural languages by which experiences are tacitly interpreted" (*GPK*, 128; Fennell, 7). His problem concerns the interpretation of experiences. He suggests that "constituted" would be more accurate terminology than "interpreted." He then adds, "To say that an experience is interpreted entails that it in some fashion exists in advance of the interpretation. But what is an experience that is not interpreted (i.e., that is not itself an instance of interpretation or judgment)?" (Fennell, 7).

It is our turn now to open the Merriam-Webster dictionary, in which we find "experience: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge." Here experience is noted as the basis for the subsequent interpretation that forms knowledge. It is exactly this knowledge formation process that is discussed here. Some experiences, which are not yet interpreted, may only be incoming impressions. However, the whole quoted text is about the relationship between the explicit linguistic framework and the tacit process of interpretation, which is unique in Polanyi. Perhaps a paradigmatic difference in understanding *PK* has created a wide abyss.

Second, concerning ordering and operational principles, Fennell observes that in the preface, although we rightly state that "operational principles can only work in the right physical-chemical conditions," they are "rules of rightness that have emerged in the course of evolution," and we still erroneously claim that such principles "kick-started life" (*GPK*, xxii; Fennell, 7). Then, he argues that "the kick-starting is instead provided by Polanyi's 'ordering principles' which are themselves 'released by random fluctuations' in the universe (*PK*, 384; Polanyi's emphasis). If this interpretation of Polanyi is correct, then it would seem that the authors have confounded the two sorts of principles and have attributed to operational principles that which belongs only to the even more fundamental ordering principles" (Fennell, 7–8).

Fennell is right about this particular passage. However, this is only a short preface, and these matters are all discussed in detail in subsequent chapters in ways that fit Fennell's interpretation and expectations. In the preface, the emphasis is on the fact that, according to Polanyi and in contrast to mainstream neo-Darwinian views, there exist such principles. Later we argue, along with Fennell, that for the first primitive prokaryote, a prior operational principle was needed, that is, that ordering principles initiated the operational principle, which then kick-started life. This would be a much more nuanced formulation than our brief statement in the preface because, in contrast to operational principles, the ordering principles of life and evolution are not real in the material sense, and only real operational principles can directly generate material kick-starts.

Whether the passage in the preface should include such details is a matter of stylistic taste. However, in general, we are in agreement with Fennell about the importance of the origins of emergence, the status of the ordering principles of life, and evolution.

Third, he claims that performative consistency “deserves a more prominent role in this guide” (Fennell, 8). Perhaps he is right. We hope that we practiced it through the whole book.

Finally, Fennell mentions the moral problems made clear by contemporary recognition of cultural pluralism. He writes, “Polanyi, of course, is a fallibilist: he understands that it is always possible that he may be wrong. It is presumably due to this feature of Polanyi’s position that our authors assert that, in the face of the fact of multiple rival conceptual systems, Polanyi believes that we are obliged to be tolerant (143). This is probably saying too much. (After all, Polanyi passionately condemned Marxist debunking of principle, Soviet restrictions on freedom, Nazi mockery of the ideal, etc.). Can we imagine, for example, Polanyi tolerantly standing by in the presence of enforced suttee or of capital punishment on the basis of reading a dead fowl’s intestines?” (Fennell, 10).

This is an unfortunate and completely misguided argument. The confounding of the tolerance of views and opinions with the tolerance of harmful actions is a dangerous mistake. What usually follows is that by pointing to terrible acts, some sort of reason is manufactured for controlling the expressions of opinion. But, according to the principle of performative consistency, Polanyi definitely contends that we should tolerate every opinion and belief in truth. Even the opinion of Marxists, National Socialists, and believers in magic should be publicly accessible as long as they are fiduciary acts. Otherwise, following Fennell’s proposed logic, the opinions of such classical liberals as Polanyi or the opinions of the believers in God, or anybody else, could be controlled. This, in turn, would weaken the arguments against Marxists and National Socialists, who 1) are serious about not tolerating opinions that diverge from their views and 2) thus prepare the way for taking overt political action in support of totalitarian rule. Tolerance of expression of opinions is the only way we can seek out and defend the truth, and it is not the same as tolerance of harmful actions.

We are grateful to all three reviewers for spending time evaluating *GPK*, and we hope that we have made some points clearer in our response. We certainly plan to improve the text in an upcoming revision that, we hope, will also be openly accessible.

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