



NOTES ON POLANYI'S INTEREST IN HEIDEGGER

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ABSTRACT

*This essay makes use of a variety of archival materials in the Michael Polanyi Papers to show that Polanyi’s comment linking his account of “indwelling” and Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world” (in his 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge*) was a carefully considered, thoughtful philosophical claim. Materials from both before and after the writing of this Torchbook Preface make clear that Polanyi was seriously exploring connections between his emerging epistemic account and ideas developed by Heidegger as well as other modern thinkers who in the sixties often were dubbed “existentialists.”*



Prosch, Polanyi, and Heidegger

Harry Prosch wrote that “Polanyi noted, several times, that he had learned some things from Heidegger, although, as far as I know, he never said what those things were” (1991–1992, 21). Perhaps this is not quite on the mark. In unpublished manuscripts from the sixties, there are repeated references to Heidegger that suggest that Polanyi was more deeply involved with Heidegger’s writings and ideas than is usually recognized. Although Prosch certainly read many Polanyi texts, he dealt chiefly with the 1969, 1970, and 1971 Meaning Lectures, primary sources for the core chapters of *Meaning* (hereafter *M*; see *M*, ix–xi and 227–228). Indeed, in the manuscripts of these lectures there are no references to Heidegger’s thought. But in archival manuscripts particularly from the first half of the sixties, Heidegger (as well as Husserl and Sartre) are frequently referenced. In his Terry Lectures and somewhat later lectures and manuscripts, this is clearly the case, as the discussion below makes clear.

Polanyi’s best-known reference to Heidegger is in his 1964 “Preface to the Torchbook Edition” of *Personal Knowledge* (hereafter cited as *PK* using the 1964 Torchbook edition pagination). Here Polanyi connects “indwelling” with “being-in-the-world,” which is an important paradigm of Heideggerian existential phenomenology:

Things which we can tell, we know by observing them; those that we cannot tell, we know by dwelling in them. All understanding is based on our dwelling in the particulars of that which we comprehend. Such indwelling is a participation of ours in the existence of that which we comprehend; it is Heidegger's *being-in-the-world*. Indwelling is also the instrument by which comprehensive entities are known throughout the world. It is from the logic of indwelling that I have derived in Part IV of this book the conception of a stratified universe and the evolutionary panorama, leading to the rise of man equipped with the logic of comprehension.

...

Indwelling is being-in-the-world. Every act of tacit knowing shifts our existence, re-directing, contracting our participation in the world. Existentialism and phenomenology have studied such processes under other names. We must re-interpret such observations now in terms of the more concrete structure of tacit knowing. (*PK*, x–xi).

This preface, dated June 22, 1964, was written about two years after delivery of the Terry Lectures, but the Terry archival manuscripts contain similar passages (see discussion below). Some of the material from the Terry Lectures was later published by Polanyi in *The Tacit Dimension* (1966, hereafter *TD* using Anchor Books pagination; see *TD*, v, ix–xi). However, in this book the name of Heidegger never appears, nor is there any direct reference to a relationship with his ideas. There is, however, in his introduction a final intriguing comment that suggests that Polanyi's account of subsidiaries as bodily elements implies that all "novel thought" should be "seen to be an existential commitment." He then goes on to say this is a "handy model" reflecting "major existential actions" independent of a treatment of "the great issues of man's fate." Polanyi concludes by pointing out that "originality breeds new values" but it does so tacitly, and human beings do not thus choose new values but "submit to them by the very act of creating or adopting them" (*TD*, xi). This very concise epistemic account of "major existential actions" is in fact Polanyi's carefully digested reflection on Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, and perhaps other contemporary philosophers. These were all figures that Polanyi (and others in this period) might have dubbed generically "existentialist" thinkers. Polanyi recognized the bearing of the insights of "existential" thinkers on the problem of discovery (i.e., the problem articulated most clearly in Plato's *Meno*) and the problems of knowledge, and *The Tacit Dimension* is his effort to make this clear.

The connection Polanyi made between his ideas and those of Heidegger in his 1964 *PK* Torchbook preface was likely not expected by many Polanyi scholars; it continues to puzzle some. Some perhaps consider this brief reference only a provocative gesture toward a then most influential European philosopher. Some perhaps have surmised that this reference reflected Marjorie Grene's influence, but, as discussion below makes clear, this seems unlikely. The general case outlined in this essay suggests that this 1964 Heidegger reference indicates what was at the center, in the first half of the sixties, of Polanyi's philosophical concerns about the mechanisms and consequences of tacit inference.

Marjorie Grene, Heidegger, and Polanyi

In the acknowledgements to the 1958 edition of *Personal Knowledge* (included in the Torchbook edition), Michael Polanyi clearly highlighted Marjorie Grene's contribution to his book: "This work owes

much to Marjorie Grene.” And he added, “Our discussions have catalyzed its progress of this work at every stage and there is hardly a page that has not benefited from her criticism” (*PK*, xv).

Marjorie Glicksman Grene (1910–2009) met Polanyi in 1950 (when he first lectured at the University of Chicago), and from 1951 she collaborated with him, most intensively during 1957 and 1958, on the final stages of *PK* (Grene 1986, 356; 1995, 5; and 2002, 13). But the relationship of friendship and collaboration remained quite close also in the following years, even after Grene returned to the United States in 1965 to join the Philosophy Department at the University of California, Davis (Mullins 2022). From the mid-sixties until 1972, Grene was the primary figure organizing two experimental Ford Foundation-sponsored projects, the Study Group on the Foundations of Cultural Unity and the Study Group for the Unity of Knowledge; these projects organized a series of interdisciplinary conferences and produced an interesting set of interdisciplinary publications. Polanyi worked closely with Grene on the initial 1965 and 1966 conferences, participated in several later conferences, and was instrumental in securing funding for the two projects (see discussion in Breyspraak and Mullins, 2017 and 2020).

At the age of twenty-one, Grene, a new graduate in zoology, went to study philosophy in Germany, where she attended Heidegger’s classes: “in 1931 I was sent as a German American exchange student to Freiberg, where—with hundreds of others—I sat at the feet of Martin Heidegger, and heard his lectures on the ‘essence of truth’ and on the ‘beginning of Western philosophy’” (Grene 2002, 4–5). Grene then returned to the United States and completed her doctorate in 1935² at Radcliffe College, which was “the nearest a woman could get to Harvard in those days” (2002, 7). She later won a fellowship to study in Denmark and worked on Kierkegaard (2002, 8). In 1937, she went to the University of Chicago and became a teaching assistant in order to participate in Carnap’s research seminar (2002, 9). The following year, Grene (under her maiden name, Glicksman) published, in an American philosophy journal, a scathing article that deconstructs Heidegger’s method (Glickman 1938). This article she later republished in 1976 in a collection of her essays (Grene 1976a, 38–49), along with another 1958 essay, “Heidegger: Philosopher and Prophet,” in which she criticizes Heidegger’s word play (Grene 1976b, 61–70).³

Ten years after her 1938 American journal article, she published one of two books that marked the introduction of Heidegger and existentialism in the United States. *Dreadful Freedom* she classifies in the preface as “an introductory essay,” and here she treats existentialism as a new attempt at a “reevaluation of values” that promotes an interpretation of the individual as for himself in relation to others (Grene 1948, vii). The third and fourth of the seven chapters of this work are dedicated to Sartre and Heidegger together.

Almost a decade later, Grene published *Martin Heidegger* (Grene 1957), which was one of the first books on Heidegger published in the United States; its influence was significant at a time when there was still no English translation of *Being and Time*. As Martin Woessner notes in *Heidegger in America*, young American students of Heidegger who returned to the US were the first to introduce Heidegger’s philosophical perspective to large American audiences.⁴ They were also the first to seriously criticize Heidegger’s approach (Woessner 2011, 8–9), and in this Grene was one who most distinguished herself.

Given her record as a knowledgeable even if sharply critical Heidegger scholar, it is therefore plausible that Grene could have influenced Polanyi on Heidegger as well as other authors regarded as European existentialists. However, it was not easy intellectually to influence an independent and persistent personality like Polanyi, even under his cover of permanent affability, sympathy, and even some shyness, as the correspondence between Grene and Polanyi itself also attests (Mullins 2022).

It seems, in fact, unlikely that it was Grene's influence that suggested Polanyi's words in his 1964 preface linking his ideas and those of Heidegger. The evidence discussed below hints at other sources. Moreover, Grene later contends, in more than one place, that Polanyi's "indwelling" was not equivalent to Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" but rather is akin to Merleau-Ponty's "being-in-the-world," and this is very different than Heidegger's "being-in-the-world." Grene's account is thus strikingly at odds with what was written by Polanyi in his 1964 Torchbook preface.

Grene discovered Merleau-Ponty around 1960, as she recalled in her *A Philosophical Testament*:

In 1960-61, belatedly, I somehow stumbled on the English version of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, originally published in 1945. I had been working through most of the fifties with Michael Polanyi on what was to be *Personal Knowledge* and Merleau-Ponty's book seemed to me to convey the same message, but in the opposite order, and in a language that I could both understand and use (or so it seemed at the time). The basic concept in which Merleau's description of human existence is grounded is that of being-in-the-world. The expression owes its origin to Heidegger, but both in Heidegger's exposition and in Sartre's it seemed, and still seems to me, defective. Merleau-Ponty took what was right in it and placed it in a more appropriate context. As he uses it, it appears to me by far the best concept available for the rethinking of philosophical questions about human beings as responsible agents and in particular as knowers. (Grene 1995, 69)

In an earlier 1986 essay, Grene, in fact, had already made a similar brief comment:

What Polanyi called "indwelling" or Merleau-Ponty "being-in-the-world" (I know the phrase comes from Heidegger, but Heideggerian ontology is still too one-sided and, as Dorothea Frede's argument clearly shows, too ambiguous in its import, to serve for the *arche* I am trying to suggest) is, as I see it, the necessary ground, at this juncture in our intellectual history, for any fruitful reflection on any such theme as this. (Grene 1986, 365)

In a word, Grene clearly distinguishes Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's account of being-in-the-world, and she does not regard Heidegger's account as sound. Although these comments date from after the writing of the 1964 preface, they suggest that if Grene (after she discovers Merleau-Ponty in 1960) had influenced Polanyi to link indwelling and "being-in-the-world," she likely would have done so by emphasizing Merleau-Ponty's "being-in-the-world" rather than Heidegger's account⁵ (see Mullins 2022 for a discussion of Grene's push to get Polanyi to study Merleau-Ponty).

Grene's criticism of Heidegger's being-in-the-world is also confirmed by a note in her contribution to *Intellect and Hope*, the 1968 Polanyi festschrift (Langford and Poteat 1968). Grene's essay, "Tacit Knowing and the Pre-Reflective Cogito," was intended to discuss Sartre's projection of the "impasse of modern philosophy" and "to demonstrate how the whole no-exit panorama of the Sartrean world is transformed by the substitution of tacit for explicit knowing, and of bodily indwelling for the *pour-soi/en-soi* dichotomy of Sartrean thought" (Grene 1968, 20). Discussing the mechanism of Polanyi's knowing (from subsidiary clues to a focus), she writes, "the proximal pole, the subsidiaries, are mine, while the distal pole, the focus of my effort, is that aspect of the world toward which I am straining, to which I am giving my attention. This is the most evident direction of our everyday indwelling, of being-in-the-world" (1968, 44). In a footnote to her discussion, she directly questions Polanyi's effort to link indwelling and Heidegger's account:

Polanyi holds that his concept of indwelling is identical with Heidegger's being-in-the-world; see Torchbook edition of P.K., p. viii. I am not sure about this, since in *Sein und Zeit* there is no conception of authentic community and no ground on which to establish a relation of Dasein to nature; but there is certainly a kinship. (Grene 1968, 44, note 46)

The First Half of the Sixties: Polanyi's Lectures

Polanyi's three Terry Lectures at Yale were given October 31–November 3, 1962. However, the Polanyi archival manuscripts of the Terry materials are a rich and somewhat confusing larger set of materials. What Polanyi actually delivered in his 1962 Yale lectures was likely closely akin to the briefer texts that he gave to Richard Gelwick soon after the lectures (see [Gelwick microfilm](#), files for Glwk110). But the more extensive archival Terry material (cited in References as Box 35, Folders 6–12, MPP [Michael Polanyi Papers], according to the University of Chicago Regenstien Library [Cash] [Guide to MPP](#)) includes lengthy drafts. Also, some of the archival Terry manuscripts seem to be revised texts dated after the actual Terry Lectures. Scott and Moleski note that in Polanyi's stay as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Science in Palo Alto in 1962–1963, he continued to develop the texts he had used in his Terry Lectures (Scott and Moleski 2005, 250). Parts of these Terry materials (see, for example, Box 35, Folder 9, 0291-0293), without question, clearly indicate that Polanyi was making connections between his account of knowing and the existential and phenomenological views of Husserl, Sartre, and Heidegger. In one version of the first Terry Lecture, Polanyi summarizes his perspective this way:

The process of growing into our cultural heritage is part of this way of coming into existence by assimilating things outside us. Thus, the simple structure of tacit knowing accounts for a wide range of phenomena uncovered by modern philosophic movements. (Box 35, Folder 8, 0292 [ms. p. 18]).

In 1963 and 1964, Polanyi further explored the relationship between his epistemic perspective and other modern philosophical ideas. He again treated the topic of links between his account of tacit knowing and existential and phenomenological views in his third Duke Lectures, titled "Commitments to Science," delivered February 24, 1964. The Duke Lectures were never published but are online. In "Commitment to Science," Polanyi added additional discussion to what he had earlier developed in the Terry material. That is, parts of his earlier written texts "grew" as he added ideas. One paragraph of importance was on Husserl, and another linked the problems of existentialism with the intriguing question about what is a problem (see especially pp. 9–13). In one section in particular in this third Duke Lecture, Polanyi directly connects tacit knowing, based on indwelling, and Heidegger's ideas about "being-in-the-world":

From the theory of tacit knowing we can derive the being-in-the-world, the Dasein of man, as defined by Heidegger. For every meaningful thought and action of ours interiorises particulars for the purpose of attending to their joint significance, and thus we populate the known world with comprehensive entities the elements of which function logically as parts of ourselves. Our being extends then over the range of our understanding. We have here Heidegger's Field of Being (as William Barrett has called it) and we discover its logical theory: which is that every act of comprehension shapes jointly our existence and our knowledge. (p. 11)⁶

It seems but a short step from this statement in Polanyi's late February 1964 Duke Lecture to the statement in his "Preface to the Torchbook Edition" of *Personal Knowledge* dated June 22, 1964:

Indwelling is being-in-the-world. Every act of tacit knowing shifts our existence, re-directing, contracting our participation in the world. Existentialism and phenomenology have studied such processes under other names. We must re-interpret such observations now in terms of the more concrete structure of tacit knowing. (*PK*, xi)

All of the earlier passages treating the links between Polanyi's developing ideas and existential and phenomenological views apparently were later reproduced in a 1965 Polanyi manuscript that was to be a chapter in a never published book, *Man in Search of Meaning*. Within what is apparently the book chapter "The Logic of Innovation" (Box 38, Folder 6 0424-0452, but 0434-0439 has been inserted), Polanyi consolidates his previous texts. What follows is a lengthy quotation (and parts of it may be familiar since Polanyi used parts in other publications), but it most clearly reflects the several elements (tacit knowing and indwelling; views of Dilthey, Lipps, Husserl, Heidegger and "Existentialism and Phenomenology"; and an account of Plato's *Meno*) that Polanyi was working to pull together in the mid-sixties:

For centuries past the systematic thinking of modern man has been based almost invariably on the assumption that a process of inference must be explicit. But since the last eighty years or so there have been important thinkers, mainly German, who have postulated that indwelling is the proper means of knowing man and the humanities. Dilthey taught that the mind of a person can be understood only by reliving its workings and Lipps represented aesthetic appreciation as an entering into a work of art and thus dwelling in the mind of its creator. Dilthey and Lipps were right in saying that such knowledge can be achieved only by indwelling. But my analysis of tacit knowing shows that Dilthey was mistaken in affirming that this fact sharply distinguishes the humanities from the natural sciences. There is a continuous transition from indwelling in science, to the fuller participation of the knower in the study of art, literature and history.

My conception of indwelling is more deeply affiliated to existentialism and to Husserl's phenomenology. I am ultimately aiming, as Husserl did, at rescuing the reality of an essentially hierarchic universe from being flattened out by a Laplacean analysis of it. But I shall not try to unfold the true structure of phenomena, as Husserl tried, by excluding the question of their reality.

Husserl followed Brentano in describing thought as being intrinsically directed at its own object, whether this existed or not. He believed that such intentionality of thought makes it possible to contemplate lived experience, irrespective of its claims to reality. The analysis of such lived structures should, therefore, be unerring, transcendental. But when, as he confessed, towards the end of his life, "this dream dissolved" (3) such structural analysis was reduced to subjectivity. My theory of knowledge will try, on the contrary, to discipline intentionality by its bearing on reality.

Husserl has proved so far the most influential thinker of the twentieth century. As it became clear that knowledge of lived experience, which he was seeking, was knowledge

possessed by indwelling, it transpired that it was a knowledge of being, and this led on to Heidegger and French existentialism.

From my theory of tacit knowing we can derive the being-in-the-world, the Dasein of man, as defined by Heidegger. As every meaningful thought and action of ours interiorises particulars for the purpose of attending to their joint significance, we populate the known world with comprehensive entities, the elements of which function logically as part of ourselves. Our being extends in this sense over the range of our understanding. We have here Heidegger's Field of Being (as William Barrett has called it) and are given it[s] logical theory[:] every act of comprehension shapes jointly both our existence and our knowledge.⁷

Once interiorisation is accepted as intrinsic to knowing, an analysis of knowledge will keep bringing up aspects of existence, and such observations will confirm the results of existentialist philosophy. But they will go beyond existentialism by revealing the logical structure of the observed existential commitments.

The existential elements of human knowledge have admittedly a different quality from the existential elements of human destiny. Man's life and fate have a more immediate and more moving interest than has man's knowledge of things. This may partly account for the difference of the perspectives into which being is placed by the two enquiries. Heidegger brings out man's being-in-the-world by confronting him with death which cancels his projects. To me, man's striving for truer being and knowing appears justified within the cosmic course of organic evolution, leading up to responsible manhood within a Society of Explorers.

Yet a fundamental problem of existentialism, of which I have spoken, will be with us. On what grounds can we possibly justify a choice of new grounds in place of those on which we stand when making the choice? The question arises sharply when scientific discovery changes our interpretive framework, but it is foreshadowed already before discovery in our choice of a major problem pointing to discovery. So let me ask once more, What is a problem?

A problem is the sight of something hidden. This description conjures up a self contradiction, stated in Plato's Meno, from which he concluded that an effort to solve a problem was logically absurd. He said that to search for the solution of a problem was impossible; for either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem, or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you are not looking for anything and cannot expect to find anything.

The solution which Plato offered for this paradox was that all discovery is a remembering of past lives. This explanation has hardly ever been accepted, but neither has any other solution been offered for avoiding the contradiction. So we are faced with the fact that for two thousand years and more, humanity has progressed by the efforts of people solving difficult problems, while all the time it could be shown that to do this was either meaningless or impossible. For the Meno is essentially right. It points to the fact that so long as we think of knowledge as having a determinate content, the conception of a problem is self contradictory and the achievement of discovery is incomprehensible.

The fact that for two millennia this fundamental difficulty was passed by, shows how the identification of reason with explicit processes of inference has caused philosophy to overlook, or to notice only marginally, the tacit powers in which all explicit thought originates and remains embedded up to the highest levels of its formalization. Existentialism and Phenomenology have sought to remedy this deficiency, but have done so only at the cost of severing the connection of knowledge with science and indeed with reason itself. But once a belief in reality is seen to be a belief in that which may yet inexhaustibly manifest itself in the future, the claims of science and reason are reconciled with the tacit powers of thought. The paradox of the Meno is resolved in principle by acknowledging the kind of anticipatory powers, which bring our knowledge of the external world to bear on a hidden reality. For a problem is but such an anticipation, intensified and narrowed down to aim sharply at a particular direction. And it can be described without self-contradiction, therefore, as pointing the way to unknown things. (Box 38, Folder 6, 0433 [ms. p. 10], 0440-0442 [ms. pp. 11 and 12] of the chapter “Logic of Innovation,” 0424-0452)

Discussion in the following section elaborates a series of Polanyi’s encounters with existential and phenomenological ideas that are mentioned in archival Polanyi materials. These encounters go back to 1962 and perhaps should be viewed as part of the tacit background of the above 1965 text, which includes passages apparently originally written as early as 1962.

Polanyi’s Early Comments on Phenomenology, Husserl, and Heidegger

An account of knowing that addresses the paradox of new knowledge, a paradox originally posed in Plato’s *Meno*, is discussed in the above quotation from Polanyi’s 1965 chapter “The Logic of Innovation.” But questions about discovery interested Polanyi from at least the time of the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, and such questions seem nascent even earlier, perhaps as early as Polanyi’s Riddell Lectures published in 1946 as *Science, Faith and Society*. In a 1960 letter, Polanyi challenged Marjorie Grene to help him understand matters historical concerning his account of two kinds of knowing: “I am getting increasingly clear about the question to which I should like to find an answer with your help. If there are two kinds of knowing (“by reliance on” and “by attending to”) where have they been hidden for 2500 years?” (Polanyi to Grene, 4 September 1960, Box 16, Folder 1, 0011, MPP). Later in his letter, Polanyi identified six types of knowledge recognized by other thinkers, and one of these is “phenomenology which developed a high sensibility to states of affairs not accessible to specification, and a brilliant technique, see e.g. Hannah Arendt for handling them (without acknowledging their distinctive relation to the speaker).” This somewhat confusing 1960 Polanyi reference to phenomenology suggests at least that Polanyi was beginning, after the publication of *PK*, to attempt concretely to link his developing ideas with other philosophical accounts and particularly the modern account of phenomenology.

Two years later, in mid-1962, Polanyi announced to Marjorie Grene:

I have always felt uneasy about the way my work is related to phenomenology, so I bought a copy of the *Cartesian Meditations* by Husserl. One thing is clear that he assumed the existence of ‘simple evidence’, to be “kept free from all interpretations that read into them more than is genuinely seen”. This is monstrously bad as an epistemology of perception, but

highly suggestive towards recognition of complex entities perceived. (Polanyi to Grene, 15 July 1962, Box 16, Folder 1, 0027, MPP)

There follows a long and elaborate commentary on phenomenology and psychology, consciousness and Descartes. This letter commenting on a carefully studied Husserl text shows Polanyi's personal initiative in exploring possible relationships between his ideas and Husserl's phenomenology.

After the Terry Lectures (October 31–November 3, 1962), Polanyi traveled to Guatemala at the end of 1962, where he spent the turn of the year from 1962 to 1963. In the archival notes about this trip (Notes Made on the Journey December 27, 1962 to January 10, 1963 to Guatemala, Box 21, Folder 7, 0273-02799, MPP), which seem to be notes about what Polanyi was thinking or his reading, there are several interesting discussions. Polanyi identifies one section of his notes as concerning “a major new theme: to trace back my philosophy to the corresponding ideas of the existentialist movement” (Box 21, Folder 7, 0273 [p. 1]). There follow several pages with comments on Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Sartre with some references to contemporary books treating these figures. Apparently as part of the discussion of Sartre, there is a section of “notes on relation of existentialism to indwelling.” Here there are a variety of comments about the nature of consciousness, and at the end of these notes is a separate reference to Heidegger:

Heidegger's distinction between representative and reminiscent (evocative) language refers to the variable degree of imaginative effort required to understand a proposition. (Box 21, Folder 7, 0279)

Polanyi apparently was interested in some of Heidegger's ideas about language and imagination and in linking these ideas to his own account of the process for discovering meaning. Two years later, in his opening address for the 1965 Bowdoin conference, Polanyi further discussed the important role of imagination in tacit knowing in “The Creative Imagination,” and this essay was one of the gateways into his Meaning Lectures beginning in the late sixties (Breyspraak and Mullins 2017, 55–58).

In mid-July 1963, Polanyi was in Switzerland, staying at the classic Hotel Waldhaus in Sils-Maria, a village near Moritz. He there wrote Grene a letter in which he commented on the relationships he was discovering between Husserl and Heidegger and his own ideas, and, according to his model of discovery, he admits that this may open up a path, as yet undetermined, to new future understandings:

I have been busily thinking of you here for a few days, while reading “Panorama des idées contemporaines”, by Caitan Picon, a huge volume of well arranged extracts presented by an ardent Husserl-Heidegger follower. The date 1956. I am at last convinced and clear that Husserl's vision and its existential extension by Heidegger, Merleau Ponty and Sartre become comprehensible in terms of tacit knowing. Most of what they say is an account of my own panorama as it would appear to a mind coming across its paradoxes without having recognised its mechanism. In certain respects this experience of a scene, familiar to me by light, in terms of how it feels in the dark, is revealing. It certainly stimulates me towards trying to explore some ultimate implications of its structure, which an understanding of this structure tends to cover up, or at least distract from. What pleased me most, was to find that so much of Husserl's struggle, as well as that of his successors, was conducted in trying to break the monopoly of “conceptual” thought. They meant, of course, explicit thought. This explains, at long last, the famous “reduction” obscurely demanded by Husserl. It means

the kind of vision that the “giant blackboard” has illustrated back in my Virginia lectures. I can see now that the close concurrence, up to a point only, of Ryle’s writing with my own views is due to the fact that he demonstrates the absurdity of explicit descriptions in places where I conclude that only tacit knowing is possible—while he, of course, goes off at a tangent and comes down with some lame behaviorism or artificial and false trivialisation of the problem (as in his critique of phenomenism). All this is most exciting—for it is a small fraction of the things that are becoming clear to me at last. It will be wonderful to talk to you about all of it. (Polanyi to Grene, 22 July 1963, Box 16, Folder 1, 0049-0050, MPP)

About two weeks later, in early August 1963, Polanyi wrote two typewritten pages of dense notes on tacit knowledge, consciousness, and the role of imagination in problem solving. The first note clearly relates interiorization (indwelling) with being, understood in Heidegger’s existential phenomenological sense, which later is made even more explicit in the preface to the 1964 Torchbook edition of *PK*:

Husserl, struggling against reductivism, realised that we know much that cannot be conceptually grasped. Accused all previous philosophy of having consciously or less consc.[iously] assumed that knowledge must be conceptual. Here he attacked Kant, in particular. He realised that this non-conceptual knowledge extended into the world as a participation. He saw the interesting structure processed by man’s mental and cultural domain and proposed that it should be analysed but only described, while setting aside the question whether it was real or not ... He thought that, having set this aside, experience and its description would have the absolute certainty that an illusion has qua illusion. Thus came about his transcendent ego with an ubiquitous intentionality, but never an effort or commitment. He tries to develop this view in a metaphysical sense, but this excursion into ultimate depth is unsupported by any substantial image of the secondary strata to which it underly [sic]. There is no structure of conceptual knowledge, let alone tacit inference and no ideas about the structure of the universe which sustains man, his knowledge and the works of human thought. Heidegger, Sarte [sic], Jaspers realise that the knowledge which cannot be cast in conceptual form is that of being, our own being in particular. Since they have no substantial theory of non-conceptual thought, they regard being as either given or decreed. Our personal freedom is exercised by deciding to be i.e. by overcoming our given being. Being, thus decreed, is authentic.

Our main existential knowledge (known by being lived) is our knowledge of being in our body. Many instances of interiorisation and re-exteriorisation are given, but without exploring the wider field to which they belong. Hence no theory of knowledge emerges in this connection. Hence also, no evolutionary perspective is visible. The universe may as well not exist. Once more, the depth of metaphysical analysis seems insufficiently guided by an understanding of that to which it should underlie. (In my own work, it is, on the contrary, the superstructure which predominates on an insufficiently developed metaphysical basis.) (Notes, Sils-Maria, 5 August 1963, Box 23, Folder 16, 0770 to 0771, MPP)

After returning to England following the Duke lectures, Polanyi wrote, in the fall, to Hadley Cantril, a psychologist with broad interests that Polanyi appreciated: “I have lately tried to make contact with parallel

view points, such as yours.” He noted, “I feel that there is a chance of finding support by others coming from very different starting points, such as Husserl’s phenomenology. Merleau Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* seems to show that this movement can make rich contributions to our enquiries.” Polanyi also added Erwin Straus, Carl Rogers, and Arthur Koestler to this list and commented that “as a result of this sense of companionship I am feeling my way towards establishing a more permanent contact between these various similar endeavours” (Polanyi to Cantril, 6 October 1964, Box 6, Folder 6, 0357, MPP).

Some Later Comments Indicating Polanyi’s Continuing Interest in Heidegger and “Existentialism”

In the MPP, there are several interesting archival documents suggesting that, in the middle sixties, Polanyi continued to be interested in connecting his ideas with those of Heidegger and other contemporary thinkers.

In the manuscript of the comments Polanyi delivered at the October 1966 Reinhold Niebuhr celebrations in New York (i.e., events marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the journal *Christianity and Crisis*), Polanyi reflects on the origins of the “crisis that permeates our current culture,” which underlay the division of the world and which, Polanyi contended, can be traced to the nineteenth century. But Polanyi candidly noted, in contemporary culture, the more recent undermining negative contributions of Sartre and Heidegger as philosophers with only contempt for contemporary standards operating in society:

Submission to accepted standards is, according to Sartre, an act of bad faith because man must exercise self-determination and be the author of his own values. Heidegger teaches the same contempt for standards that have been established by universal acceptance. (Opening Address, dated 25 February 1966 for 6 October 1966 Niebuhr Celebration, New York, Box 38, Folder 8, 0510, MPP)

In 1966 and 1967, Raymond Wilken conducted two sets of interviews with Michael Polanyi when Wilken was a graduate student at the University of Illinois.⁸ Polanyi was in residence at Wesleyan University in part of 1966 and also later was interviewed again in 1967 in Chicago. In the 1966 and 1967 interviews (see the online introduction to the 1966 and [1967](#) interviews written by Mullins, n.d.), “existentialism” is a recurrent topic in the discussion. There are ten different instances in which “existentialism” is mentioned in connection with Polanyi’s ideas in the 1966 conversations with Wilken!⁹ Polanyi comments on topics such as self-set standards and the authenticity of beliefs, knowledge as indwelling, meaning in Polanyi’s view versus the “existentialism way,” the “existentialism postulate,” and the “existentialism dilemma.” Heidegger (identified as “the beginning of the modern existentialism”) as well as Hegel (but, Polanyi notes, “I am not sufficiently familiar with this Hegelianism”), Sartre, Nietzsche, and Merleau-Ponty are all mentioned. Clearly, Polanyi seemed very interested in and committed to discussing “existentialism” and sorting out the relationship between his ideas and “existentialism.” He contended that “now I am just as much concerned with the failures of existentialism” as previously with positivism and later added this: “At the moment I am only concerned with...finding a way in which one can avoid the existentialist’s postulate that we must be able to, well that existence comes before essence, that is that we create ourselves, and must create ourselves if we should be authentic. Well, that is complete nonsense” ([Wesleyan Interview, April 6, 1966, Transcript 3 File](#), see pp. 12 and 13).

Polanyi also noted his interest in the relationships between the “structural elements actually in my tacit knowledge” and things “that have been described by the existentialists,” but he suggested that this is an open issue: “what the end product of this relationship is I don’t know” (part 3, p. 12). In sum, these Polanyi comments in his interview with Ray Wilken show how during the second half of sixties Polanyi was looking for connections with “existentialism” but was also trying to discover alternatives to the “existentialism way” based on his theory of tacit knowledge.

In Polanyi’s 1968 correspondence, there is a text that is apparently a letter of recommendation for a possible stay of D. W. Millholland in Oxford.¹⁰ In this recommendation, Polanyi says,

I met D.W. Millholland for a few days in 1964 at Duke University and learned from him about Husserl and Heidegger in their bearing on my own ideas. Recently I have read his dissertation, which I found most interesting, both in his account of Camus’s works and in its critique of my writings. (10 October 1968, Box 7, Folder 5, 0261)

Polanyi was interested in collaborating with Millholland if he came to Oxford; he indicates in his letter that he knew Millholland’s plan to work “in a direction that I personally feel to be essential for the recovery of our balance after the disasters of the 20th century.”

David William Millholland (1932–2000) received his PhD from Duke University in 1965 after graduating from Duke University and Union Theological Seminary. He was working on his dissertation (as a student of William Poteat) when Polanyi was in residence in 1964 at Duke and gave the Duke Lectures. Polanyi met with Millholland, whose 1966 Duke dissertation (582 pages) was *Beyond Nihilism: A Study of the Thought of Albert Camus and Michael Polanyi*. Millholland was later professor of religious studies at several American universities.

Orus Barker was another Poteat graduate student whose dissertation was on Rilke; like Millholland, he met Polanyi in his 1964 Duke residence and later corresponded with Polanyi. Barker’s letter to Polanyi of 17 March 1966 (Box 6, Folder 8, 0600-0601) recommended some Heidegger texts for Polanyi and commented on some other Heidegger texts; he also commented on Heidegger’s turn away from Nazi affiliation. Barker noted that he found no “moral inversion” (an important Polanyi theme in the sixties) in Heidegger but that Heidegger’s account of Nietzsche was one that noted moral inversion.

In an undated letter apparently written at some point soon after the publication of the 1964 Torchbook Edition of *PK*, Gyula Hollo, a lifelong correspondent and friend from Polanyi’s days in medical school in Hungary, commented on the new *PK* preface: “I wish I could talk to you in person about your new preface to P.K.” (Hollo to Polanyi, Box 14, Folder 4, 0228). He noted, however, that “I think you do yourself an injustice by putting yourself quasi into the shadow of Heidegger.” About Polanyi, Hollo says, “You are more than an existentialist, and you have to show it.” Hollo apparently meant that Polanyi’s basic distinction between focal and subsidiary awareness was a fundamental insight regrounding knowledge. Polanyi perhaps responded to these comments from his friend, although no response has yet been located in archival materials.

In his 1966 essay “The Logic of Tacit Inference,” Polanyi suggests that his tacit knowledge theory may be called “a phenomenology of science and knowledge, by reference to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This would correctly relate my enterprise both to analytic philosophy and to phenomenology and existentialism.” And he adds, “Admittedly, my view that true knowledge bears on an essentially indeterminate reality and my theory of a stratified universe are foreign to these schools of thought. And again, while knowledge by

indwelling is clearly related to Dilthey and existentialism, its extension to the natural sciences is contrary to these philosophies” (Polanyi 1966, 17).

Conclusion

Heidegger (and sometimes Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and “existentialism”) is persistently alluded to in unpublished Polanyi materials, including correspondence, lectures, and other archival texts written in the sixties by Polanyi. There are also a few brief references to Heidegger and some of these other figures in Polanyi publications. Perhaps the comment on Heidegger included in his 1964 Torchbook preface is the most prominent. Clearly, the larger body of unpublished materials outlines the background for understanding Polanyi’s broader interest in building bridges between his epistemological account and contemporary philosophical ideas at the time often generically dubbed “existentialism” (although this seems to have included some “phenomenologists,” who rejected the label “existentialist”). Recognizing Polanyi’s interest in links with Continental philosophers, which has been largely unrecognized, should perhaps inspire further study of these connections.

ENDNOTES

¹Many thanks to Phil Mullins, who shares my interest in the topic treated here and who has helped me organize the final version of this essay with many threads.

²She wrote “a hasty and atrocious dissertation on the concept of *Existenz* in contemporary German Philosophy,” she notes in Grene 2002, 7, and in comments in Grene 1995, 5.

³In the preface to her 1976 collection *Philosophy In and Out of Europe*, she comments, “Participation in Carnap’s research seminar in Chicago in 1937-38 had sufficed to show me the impotence of logical positivism (or logical empiricism) as a foundation for philosophy; the decades wasted by so many in ‘logical reconstruction’. I am happy not to have shared” (Grene 1976, ix).

⁴In addition to Grene, this first wave includes Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Sidney Hook. Later figures, such as Hannah Arendt, Glenn Gray, Richard Rorty, Daniel Libeskind, and Herbert Marcuse, Woessner also mentions (Woessner 2011, 9). Although influential, they had less influence on the dissemination of Heidegger’s thoughts in America. Woessner discusses Grene’s role and the early connections of Heidegger’s students in Freiburg in detail in his first chapter.

⁵For a discussion of Grene’s push to get Polanyi to study Merleau-Ponty, see Mullins 2022. Polanyi remained critical of aspects of Merleau-Ponty. But perhaps because Grene insisted that he study carefully some Merleau-Ponty texts, Polanyi does seem to find more common ground with Merleau-Ponty than other figures he generically dubs “existentialists.” In mid-sixties publications, he comments on Merleau-Ponty. See Mullins 2022 for a discussion of comments in the essay “The Structure of Consciousness” (Polanyi 1965). Polanyi notes, in his 1968 “Logic and Psychology,” that Merleau-Ponty anticipated the existential commitment present in tacit knowledge, but did so without recognizing the triadic structure which determines the functions of this commitment—the way it establishes our knowledge of a valid coherence. The contrast between explicit inference and an existential experience imbued with intentionality is not sufficient for defining the structure and workings of tacit knowing. We are offered an abundance of brilliant flashes without a constructive system. (Polanyi 1968, 34)

⁶In some Polanyi manuscripts, there is a superscript (footnote) to Barrett, though Polanyi did not complete his reference. But the reference is almost certainly to William Barrett’s *Irrational Man: A Study of Existential Philosophy*, a 1958 publication that introduced contemporary “existentialist” thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre (as well as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard) to English speakers.

⁷See note 6 about the superscript 1 in the quotation. The “s” and the colon in brackets have been added here since the sentence seems to be garbled.

⁸Thanks to Phil Mullins for calling my attention to these Wilken recorded interviews [available online here](#) on the Polanyi Society website. Most of the audio has been transcribed and the text files are cited hereafter. Wilken used the contents of the

interviews in his PhD dissertation under the direction of Harry Broudy at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Wilken later taught at and retired from Kent State University in 1996. He sponsored two important conferences on the thought of Michael Polanyi during his tenure at Kent State University.

⁹See the [Wesleyan Interviews of April 5 and 6, 1966](#), in the following sections: [Transcript File 1](#), pp. 15–16; [Transcript File 2](#), pp. 29, 34, and 39; [Transcript File 3](#), pp. 8, 12; and File 4, p. 1 (around 1:20) and 5 (after 16:54). Transcripts of files 1, 2, and 3 are by R. Wilken. I have made a rough transcript of the final twenty-four minutes of these interviews that was File 4 (a file for which Wilken provided no transcript), and the page numbers are my pages for the typescript. Quotations and summaries of comments in the next sentence are from these interview materials.

¹⁰Thanks to Dale Cannon and Gus Breyspraak for helping identify Poteat graduate students Millholland and Orus Barker, whose correspondence is discussed below.

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