

Those Missing “Objects”

Harry Prosch

I was quite puzzled when I read Maben W. Poirier’s “Harry Prosch’s Modernism” in *Tradition & Discovery*, XVI (1988-89) pp. 32-39. As Socrates said when he heard the charges brought against him at his trial, they almost made me forget who I was. I began to wonder if it was I he was talking about. I finally concluded that either I am not very good at writing or Poirier is not very good at reading--or we are both somewhat deficient. For he seems to think that I think that which I know I do not think.

1. I do *not* think that Polanyi attributed no reality to the “objects” of “the arts, religion, and the humanities.” Why Poirier did not also include the “objects” of mathematics in his list I do not know, since Polanyi did include them also with those of the arts and religion (as non-empirical realities) in his *Personal Knowledge*. However, I must admit that we might find it difficult to say just what the term “objects” means in these articulate frameworks of thought which Polanyi included among the many he found inhabiting our noosphere. But whatever we were to locate in these areas (say, for example, the Pythagorean theorem or God) I think Polanyi certainly would have claimed they were real, in accordance, of course, with what he expressly said he meant by “reality.”

2. I do *not* think that Polanyi developed his new epistemology primarily to handle the problem of induction. He did show, of course, that it can deal with this problem more ably than the others have been able to do--as it should be able to, if it is an adequate epistemology. However I must also add in this connection that his tacit inference *was* understood by him to be logical, not merely psychological. He wrote specifically about the “*logic* of tacit inference,” and I heard him once reject a compliment made by an admirer of this thought, a psychologist, to the effect that his work on the tacit dimension was a very good way to show the psychological components of our knowledge. Polanyi explicitly denied this on that occasion, insisting he was not explaining our acquisition of knowledge psychologically, but *logically*.

3. I do *not* think that Polanyi thought his personal knowledge was situated midway between subjectivity and objectivity. To say that it bridges the gap between the two is merely to say that it includes both of them in itself and gives them both more adequate meaning, not that it is a new separate thing “situated” in between them. His thought is dialectical, not serialistic.

I do indeed think that Polanyi held there is no *purely* objective knowledge (i.e., knowledge unconnected to a particular person, and thus wholly lacking any tacit dimensions whatever). But this is not to say I think he held that there is no such thing as objective knowledge. What he understands to be objective knowledge is the personal knowledge we obtain with universal intent--and so it must include our best works in ethics, art, religion, and mathematics.

4. Thus I do *not* simply equate explicit knowledge with objectivity. Polanyi thought he was battling those who did so. He thought it was a misunderstanding to think that objective knowledge would have to be purely explicit knowledge, i.e., knowledge not grounded in tacitly held clues--which is knowledge impossible to have. Thus he rejected the notion that objective knowledge would have to be that which existed "extra-personally." That to which we strive to make our personal knowledge adequate in empirical experience (and so in our empirical sciences) *does* exist extra-personally, i.e., it has its own existence aside from our thought of it. He claimed that this was a necessary metaphysical position in science. But our *knowledge* of it never could exist extra-personally, since he steadfastly maintained it must include the tacit knowledge in which we can only *dwell*, not know explicitly. Our knowledge, he thus held, *may* be wrong at some particular point, i.e., it may not be adequate to the being of the external reality which it strives to know. *Empirical* verification is therefore required of all our knowledge in science, although what counts for verification is also a personal judgement--with universal intent.

5. I do *not* think that Polanyi made the "humanities realities" contingent upon something else, say, a human mind. But for him to have supposed the "objects" of art, religion, ethics, and mathematics existed independently of us before we discovered them, in the same way the empirical realities did, he would have had to have supposed them all to be simply some other empirical things among empirical things, and then all of the various frameworks of thought would have had to collapse into those of the empirical sciences. His opposition to such a reductionism of all our articulate frameworks of thought is well known. A sort of reality different from the empirical would be required to bring off assigning these "objects" an existence prior to our discovery of them. He was obviously intellectually acute enough to see this when he wrote *Personal Knowledge*.

All of this leads me to think that perhaps everyone would be happier with my views about Polanyi's thought, if I said that I think something may be missing in Polanyi's thought that might possibly be supplied by Plato's philosophy--or perhaps Hegel's.

Michael Polanyi did admit once to being a Platonist "of a sort;" but one who rejected the Platonic Ideas. I think, however, he might actually *need* these Ideas--or Hegel's *Begriff*--as the "objects" able to serve as sort of control poles for our thought, *viz.*, as that to which the "humanities" are striving to be adequate, much as the empirical realities are those to which the sciences are striving to be adequate.

Maybe I should have included a recognition of such a need among my criticisms of his views. I was, however, rightly or wrongly, intent on trying to find a way of understanding all his statements, if possible without any additions or subtractions. But I must confess that I always found it hard to make sense of his notion of the "progress" he claimed had occurred historically in ethics, law, art, religion, and mathematics, if there were nothing (at least nothing even dimly seen, like Plato's Ideas) by which to assess whether the changes taking place in them were improvements or not. It seemed to me, perhaps from a few cryptic remarks he made, that he may have thought that, buried deeply within these activities, there was a sort of "core" which, so to speak, guided them in the minds of their most serious and responsible inquirers (or creative participants or servants) and which led these devotees to ever greater and richer creations, that seemed to appear to them mostly as "discoveries," much as in Plato we discover more and more the meaning of the Idea through our continual dialogue concerning it.

But, at any rate, it seems rather clear that he thought of these non-empirical "cores" (if indeed he thought of them as "cores" at all) as showing more and more of themselves *only* in the further developments of them which became

established in history by those who were participants in (or servants of) them (perhaps therefore he could also be called an Hegelian--without Hegel's *Begriff*). So he restrained himself from providing them with some "place" to be, prior to their concrete developments. Moreover he appeared to think that philosophy was not equal to the task of telling us what these "cores" were, before those who served them showed us more and more of their natures as time went on.

So I left the problem as open-ended as it seemed to me he had.

Polanyi did remark several times that he had learned some things from Heidegger, though, as far as I know, he never spelled out just what they were. Was he really prepared to accept as the true "objects" of the humanities (and mathematics) *whatever* established itself existentially in time (i.e., whatever disclosed being) by becoming more ascendant and powerful in the minds of the members of these various communities of "experts"? Somehow I doubted that he was wholly prepared to do so, for he had not done so in his own science, chemistry.

I was afraid, when it came to the "objects" of religion, that someone in the religious framework would accuse me of being among those who have "taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid Him." And of such I have been accused, in effect. But the truth is I don't know for sure just where *Polanyi* has laid Him--if indeed he could be said to have laid Him anywhere. So I did not try to say. I left it as he left it, as far as I could tell where he had left it.

But this surely does not mean that I think Polanyi thought God was not real. It is true in *Personal Knowledge* he said that God existed "in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise; not as a fact--any more than truth, beauty or justice exist as facts. All these, like God, are things which can be appreciated only in serving them" (279).

What did he mean by this? From the ways in which he had dealt with these kinds of "objects" throughout his works it seemed to me he could not have meant they were only projections of our subjective psychological needs, with their real roots only in our minds. But the words themselves clearly also could not mean that God is an empirical reality--a "fact." Besides, if he really meant to affirm He was a fact (somehow in spite of the clear words he used) he would have been making God out to be a mere thing among things, and he would have had to understand himself to be an idolator.

What is left is, it seems to me, the very Polanyian position that the reality of God is an item of personal knowledge (with universal intent and thus with objectivity) established by our creative imagination *in* the religious framework of thought--that is, *from* the wealth of subsidiary clues provided by the history, myths, worship, doctrine, rites, etc. of our religion, *in* which He exists "to be worshipped and obeyed." God is not established in the frameworks of science, art, ethics, or mathematics. They each have their own "core," or trajectory of meaning. And none of the frameworks of thought provide us with merely "second-rate" knowledge. Nor are any of their own realities second-rate. The reality of God, as founded uniquely in religion, could only be denigrated as a second-rate reality by those whose attitude of mind makes them regard *empirical* realities as the only "real" ones, the truly first-rate ones. Neither Polanyi nor I (nor Plato), I submit, ever thought such a thing. If we thought there *were* any "lower-place" realities, I'm sure the three of us would think that this "honor" belonged rather to the empirical sort. I invite Poirier to join us--and anyone else who accepts this open door which Polanyi has shown us swings in all the directions in which our thought with universal intent may lead.

Plato has suggested that all the eternal realities, among which would surely be included the non-empirical realities of ethics, religion, art and mathematics, are best called Ideas, which have a being of their own and which most resemble, but *are not* simply, the ideas we have in our heads. For were these Ideas only the ideas we have in our own minds, they could not be used as the touchstones of the truth or adequacy of the ideas which *are* in our own minds (see his *Parmenides* and his *Seventh Epistle*). He proposed they thus must have an extra-personal existence of a vital and real sort--as Hegel also provided for us in his *Begriff*--although even for these philosophers these “existences,” these realities, do *not* exist as things alongside other things. They, as universals, have *concrete* existence only as given in their supposed embodiment (or “imitations”) in concrete things and actions in our world.

Hegel obviously thought this. He specifically maintained that only the *concrete universal* existed, not the abstract universal (even though it was real); and the existing concrete universal, he held, always fell short of all that was “in” the universal *Begriff*. This position is not always recognized as also true for Plato. However, Plato explicitly rejected, in his *Sophist*, the notion that the Ideas or Forms could exist in awful, frozen inactivity, excluded from life and soul. Their necessary togetherness with the world of becoming and soul is also expressed mythically in his *Timaeus*.

So--if I suppose that Polanyi did not assign a separate thing-like existence to these “objects,” as simply things beside other things in our empirical world, our cosmos, I am supposing him to be in good philosophic company. Nor can I think he “changed his mind” about these matters later in life. In my book I have carefully shown this view to have been in his *Personal Knowledge*.

Thus, in espousing dialectical views similar to those of Plato and Hegel, in order to try to make sense of all of Polanyi’s statements, I think I have clearly exhibited how far my views are from anything that could be called “modernism.” No “modernist” would claim me, I’m sure.