

The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives for Ethics

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1. From Ptolemy to Copernicus to Polanyi

Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) marks a turn in human perspective parallel to and as significant as the turn from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican angle of vision. The Ptolemaic way of viewing the world is named after Claudius Ptolemy, one of the great geographers and astronomers of the Graeco-Roman period, who was active in Alexandria, Egypt, in the Second Century of the Christian Era. In Ptolemy's world, humanity and earth were regarded as the center of the universe, with the earth motionless and the moon, sun, and planets circling around it; the stars were spots of light on the dome arching over the whole. This view was generally accepted through the Middle Ages and Renaissance in Western Europe. It began to be displaced by the view of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473- 1543), a Polish astronomer, set forth in *Concerning the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* in 1543, that the earth was not the center of the world but was itself one of the planets circling the sun. Copernicus sparked what has become known as the Copernican Revolution. This momentous change of perspective requires humans to reject the notion that they live as the center of the physical universe and to accept the view that the center is displaced away from earth. Since the time of Copernicus, there have been a series of events heralded as "Copernican Revolutions" in many areas of human life articulating the implications of the insight that our world can no longer be regarded from what has been called an anthropocentric perspective.

Looking back from the twentieth century, it is possible to affirm that many of these Copernican revolutions have proved helpful in breaking the grip of narrow world views based upon the ethnocentric angles of vision of one or another tribal enclave of the human community. The development of modern science and technology and pressures for social reform and liberation have been attributed in considerable measure to the widened vision emerging in a post-Copernican perspective.

It has also often happened, however, that the criticism of one limited perspective has been carried on from a point of view that itself appeared to be limited and limiting but regarded itself as having achieved a universal perspective exempt from the critique of anthropocentrism.

The sociology of knowledge as formulated by Karl Mannheim, for example, was able to point out the distortions of view arising from the interests associated with human social location. Yet Mannheim appears to hold that the intelligentsia occupies a location with a clear vision of reality undistorted by interest and location. Extending the insights of Mannheim, the critical theorists of the Frankfurter Schule thought their critique applied to all social groups except themselves.

Christian theologians also have leveled criticisms at the anthropocentric tendencies of others while exempting themselves. Of the philosopher Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann writes: “It seems to me that Jaspers claims to have attained a stand-point as a philosopher outside history.” And a few pages later adds: “In faith, the Christian has the stand-point above history which Jaspers like many others has endeavored to find” (*History and Eschatology*, pp. 129, 154).

While Bultmann thought his Christian faith exempted him from the Copernican insight, we must not forget that he is correct in accusing Jaspers of making a parallel assumption. Enlightenment perspectives, of which Jaspers is heir, have frequently jumped from the pre-Copernican frying pan of uncritical anthropocentrism into post-Copernican fires with more sophisticated versions of the same problem. As Enlightenment assumptions have come to permeate the academic work of nineteenth and twentieth century universities, it has been taken for granted that the objectivity of scientific method can displace all previous perspectives at last with the Archimedean point of universal truth.

With this angle of vision, on the one hand, religious and cultural traditions from the past are, for the most part, rejected or at least rendered suspect. On the other hand, scientific objectivism is proclaimed as the perspective that eliminates the Copernican disability of viewing the world from a human angle subject to the distortions of social location. As Carl Becker suggests in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, the Enlightenment *philosophes* were convinced that history is a success story because it had culminated in them.

Without rejecting the achievements of all the sciences and the importance of academic research, it is still possible to question “scientism” and the dogmatism that often characterizes its devotees. In their objectivist faith, they have replaced the pretensions of older tribal enclaves with the arrogance of yet another. Just as pre-critical world views brought value and order to traditional groups, so too has scientific objectivism brought new insights and helpful reordering and made valuable contributions to human welfare that few want to relinquish. Yet the problems of post-Copernican thought have continued to mount.

The critical period of Western philosophy, opened by Descartes and brought to its zenith in the Enlightenment, is coming to an end, and the post-critical era is emerging. Michael Polanyi, it appears to me, is the most important philosophic figure opening up this new direction and delineating its basic elements. Of the critical pretensions to have found a way, either through philosophic rationality or by means of scientific method, to a universal perspective, Polanyi points out that thinkers of the critical period have pursued “a mistaken ideal of objectivity” (*Personal Knowledge*, 7). “Thus, when we claim greater objectivity for the Copernican theory, we do imply that its excellence is, not a matter of personal taste on our part, but an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures. We abandon the cruder anthropocentrism of our senses--but only in favour of a more ambitious anthropocentrism of our reason” (*Personal Knowledge*, 4-5).

Though forerunners of post-critical thought may be discerned, for example, in the political philosophy of *The Federalist Papers* and in the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce, George Herbert Mead, H. Richard Niebuhr, and others, Polanyi has brought the tendencies produced by problems of the critical perspective into systematic focus and pioneered a new epistemological method with imagination and comprehensiveness. It is this method that marks him as inaugurating the post-critical era of Western thought.

In so doing Polanyi carries out a revolution as significant as the one Copernicus began four centuries earlier. We are justified, I am convinced, in speaking now of the Polanyian Revolution, the meaning of which will unfold, is

unfolding, more rapidly even than the Copernican Revolution. In this new revolution, Polanyi provides a method that involves continuing appreciation of the rigor and achievements of the critical perspective, yet inaugurates the post-critical era by relating critical thought to the pre-critical appreciation of tradition, culture, and community.

2. Post-Critical Epistemology: The From/To Structure of Knowing

The Polanyian Revolution consists, first of all, in reminding us that knowing occurs within human locations and from perspectives shaped by those locations. Second, the Polanyian Revolution explores with delicacy and precision the epistemological meaning of human location that has implications for the entire spectrum of human knowing and action.

In a sense, Polanyi has developed what was implicit but neglected in the Copernican Revolution: while it has become clear that humanity and earth are not the center of the world and the pretensions to absolutism in pre-critical communities must be abandoned, the critical methods that have emerged in the wake of the Copernican Revolution cannot, despite their claims, be said to have attained an ontological peak of objectivity by means of which they escape the limits of human social location and epistemological anthropocentrism.

Even more, however, Polanyi has gone beyond affirming this fairly obvious problem of critical thought and delineated what knowing means in post-critical perspective. It is in this achievement that Polanyi makes his most important contributions to human thought.

If human knowing takes place within human locations, then this context is not merely related to knowing but is a constitutive part of knowing. Polanyi points out that all knowing has a *from/to* structure. Knowing consists in that part that we focus upon, of which Polanyi says we have focal awareness. Knowing also consists in that part which we rely upon in order to focus, of which Polanyi says we have *subsidiary* awareness. All too often knowledge is reduced to the explicit result of knowing, and the *tacit dimension* or component, with its movement from a proximal pole, of which we are subsidiarily aware, to a distal pole, of which we are focally aware, is ignored. Or, as Polanyi summarizes it at one point:

We have seen *tacit knowledge* to comprise two kinds of awareness, *subsidiary awareness* and *focal awareness*. Now we see *tacit knowledge* opposed to *explicit knowledge*; but these two are not sharply divided. While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied. Hence all knowledge is *either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge*. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable (*Knowing and Being*, 144).

To those gripped by the critical desire to attain absolutely objective knowledge that can be explicitly stated, the recognition of the background in human location upon which knowing relies seems to be a resounding defeat. Polanyi regards it as opening up the tacit dimension of knowing, an achievement rather than a defeat:

I suggest that we transform this retreat into a triumph, by the simple device of changing camp. Let us recognize that tacit knowing is the fundamental power of the mind, which creates explicit knowing, lends meaning to it and controls its uses (*Knowing and Being*, 156).

The implications of Polanyi's from/to structure of knowing are many. I shall mention a few very briefly.

First, the fiduciary dimension of knowing is recovered. Humans rely upon elements from their social location, tradition, and community in order to affirm what they believe is knowledge. The pre-critical notions of "faith seeking understanding" and "believing in order to understand" take on new meaning as Polanyi sets forth the tacit component involved in critical knowing.

Second, the knower in post-critical perspective is not an individualistic knower but rather is shaped by and relies for validation upon the community and its culture, which the knower embodies. Critical hermeneutics is dyadic in structure --the knower and the known. Post-critical hermeneutics is triadic in structure, involving a knower rooted in culture and community, what is being interpreted within its context, and those for whom the interpretation is intended, who are also rooted in culture and community.

Third, the from/to structure makes it impossible to accept the detached objectivism of critical epistemology as a certain path to final Truth. Indeed, the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity in knowing is dissolved, and a quite different conception of what is true and real emerges. As Polanyi puts it:

To hold a natural law to be true is to believe that its presence will manifest itself in an indeterminate range of yet unknown and perhaps unthinkable consequences We meet here with a new definition of reality. Real is that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminately in the future. Hence an explicit statement can bear on reality only by virtue of the tacit coefficient associated with it. This conception of reality and of the tacit knowing of reality underlies all my writing (*Science Faith and Society*, 1964 edition, 10).

The from/to structure of knowing has implications across the entire spectrum of human endeavor, not only for the natural sciences. The social sciences have been moving gradually to displace the method borrowed from the illusory objectivism of physical science with methods recognizing the human location of investigators and the tacit dimension of knowing. Old disciplines like history have gradually entered upon the Polanyian Revolution as also have newer ones like computer science. The implications for the field of ethics are, I find, especially interesting. Fourth, the recognition of the importance of tradition, culture, and community does not lead to conservative or static views of knowledge. The from/to structure emphasizes the neglected tacit dimension upon which explicit knowledge rests. Polanyi also clarifies the continuing change and innovative potentials of human knowing; that is to say, he also contributes to better understanding of the "to" in the structure of knowing. We dwell in the past of our community of interpretation, not in order to repeat the past, but rather to break out into the newness hidden within the future. Polanyi writes:

Scientific discovery, which leads from one such framework to its successor, bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision. And while it is thus breaking out, the mind is for the moment directly experiencing its content rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation: it is overwhelmed by its own passionate activity (*Personal Knowledge*, 196).

This *dwelling in* and *breaking out* arises from "the essential restlessness of the human mind, which calls ever again in question any satisfaction that it may have previously achieved" (*Idem*). To emphasize the newness, Polanyi quotes

the mathematician Polya: “*Look at the unknown. Look at the conclusion*” (*Ibid.*, p 127). When one reads such passages, it becomes clear the extent to which Thomas Kuhn, in his notion of scientific revolutions and changing paradigms, is relying on Polanyi.

3. The Meaning of Post-Critical Thought for Ethics

The Polanyi Revolution provides perspectives on ethical reflection and morality in the contemporary world that are profoundly illuminating. His views help us move toward a post-critical understanding of ethics. Some implications of this understanding follow.

a. *Perils of Perfectionism.* The opinion prevails among many observers of the moral scene that human conduct, judged according to ethical standards, is today in sharp decline. Evidence for the erosion of morals, for persons holding this view, can be found in abundance by reading in the newspapers the increasing reports of moral transgressions and ethical deficiencies. The divorce rate and juvenile delinquency in relation to the home; bribery and political chicanery in government; dishonesty, fraud, and exploitation in business; theft of ideas, misrepresentation of research, and sleazy practices relating to sports and outside contracts in higher education; and, of course, the scams and immorality of persons in televangelism and in the churches--the rising number of incidents in these categories and more are a telling indictment of the moral level of our time. It is easy to agree with those who see a downward slide.

Polanyi takes a different view of contemporary moral conditions, a view that is profoundly illuminating. He holds that moral fervor today, rather than diminished, has grown so intense that it shatters the social channels built up slowly and painfully in the past to curb human wrongdoing and develop higher levels of justice. Idealism and perfectionism threaten to undo the hard-won achievements represented by tradition and impel adherents toward nihilism.

Polanyi does not approve the immorality reported or take a lax view of standards. He suggests, however, that the from/to structure of knowing reveals a rampant moral excess rather than deficiency in many quarters today. “The idea that morality consists in imposing on ourselves the curb of moral commands is so ingrained in us,” he writes, “that we simply cannot see that the moral need of our time is, on the contrary, to curb our inordinate moral demands” (*Knowing and Being*, 4).

Put another way, we can speak of the perils of unbridled perfectionism. In one sense, heightened moral expectations make society more aware of transgressions. If the standards become too high, however, it may appear that conduct is getting worse and worse and the situation is hopeless. In another sense, moral excess may lead us to demand that all problems be solved totally and immediately, and, when this expectation is not met, to reject moral possibility and fall into nihilism. In still a third sense, perfectionism may reach such intensity that no intermediate standards are acceptable; the entire enterprise of ethics comes to be regarded as meaningless. Polanyi calls this “moral inversion: a condition in which high moral purpose operates only as the hidden force of an openly declared inhumanity” (*Knowing and Being*, 16).

b. *The Dilemma of Dilemma Ethics.* The from/to structure of knowing offers a helpful perspective on the type of ethical reflection known as dilemma ethics. This type sees ethics as arising when dilemmas arise; once tension is perceived between alternative courses of action, ethics is required to resolve the dilemma and provide a basis for choice. A dilemma, however, does not emerge except within the context of a tacit coefficient internalized in community. There

can be no ethical problem or dilemma apart from a moral background that already exists tacitly. Further, ethical reflection subsequent to perceiving a dilemma will draw on the tacit dimension for criteria to use in choosing a course of action.

What this means is that ethics, no less than other kinds of reflection, relies upon a subsidiary awareness in order to have a focal awareness. Ethics must include the tacit coefficient in its scope no less than its explicit results in principles and codes.

c. *Morality versus Moralism.* The from/to structure of knowing, as it illumines ethics, enables persons and communities to take moral responsibility within their human location without absolutizing one's own moral norms, rejecting the moral norms of other communities, or falling into moral relativism.

Dean Acheson, Secretary of State in the Truman Administration, distinguishes between "Morality and Moralism in Foreign Policy" (*Yale Review*, Summer, 1958), and indicates the way toward post-critical ethics. Morality, he suggests, means conducting foreign policy out of the culture and standards of a nation's own heritage and traditions. But, inevitably, he notes, it is necessary to relate to nations with different culture and norms, some very similar to those of one's own nation, some very different. Moralism, he says, consists in being unaware of the background out of which the policies of other nations emerges and attempting to impose the standards of conduct dictated by the standards on one's own nation. He regards moralism not only as inadequate but also a dangerous basis for foreign policy in the contemporary world.

d. *The Weakness of Ethical Rationalism.* In her book, *Ethics Since 1900*, Mary Warnock comes up with the following conclusion: "One of the consequences of treating ethics as the analysis of ethical language is . . . that it leads to the increasing triviality of the subject. . . . We do need to categorize and to describe, even in the sphere of morals, but we should still exist as moral agents even if we seldom did so; and therefore the subject matter of ethics would still exist" (*Ethics Since 1900*, 144).

In Polanyian perspective, rationalism not only trivializes ethics but also provides a very weak foundation for reflection on the moral significance of action. Ethical rationalism seeks to formulate principles that are universal. It assumes, however, that what one philosopher takes to be rational is what all persons should recognize as true. For someone who understands the from/to structure of knowing, it is very frustrating to read a treatise like John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Repeatedly, to validate the explicit argument he is unfolding, the author appeals to "what all rational persons can agree upon" or "as rational men know," etc. An unexamined assumption of a tacit dimension of universal reason in humans is used to validate the universal truth of the ethical theory. The philosopher can operate on an individualistic, dyadic pattern of knowing because it is assumed that reason is the same in all humans and is not shaped by the traditions and culture of the social enclave in which the philosopher dwells.

The Polanyian Revolution exposes the weakness of ethical rationalism. On the one hand, there is the highly questionable presupposition of universal reason. On the other hand, there is the illusion of objectivism in ethical theory achieved by ignoring the tacit coefficient of its structure.

e. *Virtue as Human Achievement in Community.* When ethics is understood in the from/to perspective Polanyi provides, it becomes clear that virtue is not something that inheres in individual character and habits. Instead, virtue is grounded in and relies upon tradition, culture, community, and social interaction and, therefore, is a hard-won social achievement, more "a torch race than a fierce competition among heirs," as Thornton Wilder reminds us is the

case with reference to literature. The understanding of virtue suggested by Polanyi is closer to Plato's treatment of virtue in his story, "The Ring of Gyges" (*Republic*, 359d-368d), than to Aristotle's in the *Ethics*, closer to the view of James Madison in *The Federalist Papers* than to contemporary ethical rationalists.

In Polanyian perspective, the restlessness of humanity can be found in ethics no less than in scientific discovery. Humans dwell in the morality shaped by tradition and culture in order to break out toward greater justice, toward hitherto unknown conceptions of virtue, and toward a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of love. As with scientific discovery, humans as moral beings are involved in "permanent revolution," to use H. Richard Niebuhr's key phrase in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Post-critical ethics, therefore, is an ethics of liberation.

f. The Polanyian Revolution and Liberation. The final paragraph of *Personal Knowledge* reads as follows:

So far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in humanity are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the strivings of a myriad centres that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us up to this point. They are all akin to us. For all these centres--those which led up to our own existence and the far more numerous others which produced different lines of which many are extinct--may be seen engaged in the same endeavor towards ultimate liberation. We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own towards an unthinkable consummation. And that is also, I believe, how a Christian is placed when worshipping God (p. 405).

From this passage, one can see why philosophers have been wary of Polanyi, reluctant even to grapple with his thought, much less to espouse his perspective. It is also clear why he has attracted the attention of people in theology and ethics. His understanding of the human enterprise, growing out of his work in physical chemistry, medicine, and epistemology, resonates powerfully with the biblical Christian tradition. Nowhere is this more apparent than in ethics understood in the perspective of liberation.

Humans are brought into a world already underway. The direction is toward an unknown consummation, and the key signpost is liberation. Humans are created with a restlessness in their minds and hearts. They dwell in their past in order to break out into new discoveries of knowledge and action, and the key to that newness is liberation.

Further, the from/to structure of knowing affirms the striving of the oppressed and the validity of their perspective and insight. The ethics of black liberation, of feminist liberation, of third world liberation, rely on the strong impetus toward liberation in the biblical Christian tradition and dwell in that past within diverse contexts of oppression, and break out toward new insights into the way toward "ultimate liberation" and toward "an unthinkable consummation."

The new era that Polanyi has inaugurated emerges with more comprehensive clarity. The Polanyi Revolution invites us not only into a new period of human thought, it lures us also toward faith and action unafraid to dwell in the past and equally determined to break out toward liberation in a world filled with the unfolding, indeterminate, yet faithful, reality of God.