

# Artistic Expression And Contemplation: Some Reflections Based On The Epistemology Of Michael Polanyi

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**ABSTRACT** Key words: subsidiary/focal, dwelling in/breaking out, intuition/imagination, visual perception, observation/communion, present/future.

*An exploration of the relationship between imagination and intuition and the workings of visual perception, in light of Polanyi's epistemology, helps us to understand aesthetic seeing. The artist and contemplative learn to see anew and accordingly grasp extraordinary coherences of meaning.*

## Preface

These reflections descend from personal experience in both artistic expression and contemplation. In the interest of clarity and brevity, I have limited my discussion to acts which focus on objects of natural reality. I do not intend to limit art or contemplation to concentration upon objects outside of ourselves. Both artistic expression and contemplation can and do involve interior and exterior reality in a variety of ways. The sections on intuition and imagination, and on visual perception derive from my book, *Visual Art as Theology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994), 56-66.

## Introduction

Michael Polanyi's epistemology details two kinds of awareness inherent in all knowing: the subsidiary parts, details, or particulars from which we attend; and the focal whole or meaning to which we attend. This is the characteristic structure of tacit knowing and is the fundamental basis of Michael Polanyi's post-critical epistemology. The first type of awareness, the subsidiary, is that of which we have knowledge but are unable to tell. We know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second type of awareness, the focal (*TD*, 10). We rely on our eyes subsidiarily, to which we pay no focal attention, in order to see the person focally for whom we are looking in the crowd. We use our own body, without being focally aware of it, in order to attend to things beyond ourselves. Important to note is that our subsidiary awareness is not the same thing as unconscious, pre-conscious or subliminal awareness, nor is it fringe awareness. "What makes an awareness subsidiary is the function it fulfills; it can have any degree of consciousness, so long as it functions as a clue to the object of our focal attention" (*TD*, 95-6).

When we attend from the particulars of an entity to the whole they constitute, we may be unable to specify the constitutive particulars while recognizing the whole. We may be unable to specify facial features while recognizing a face. This achievement of a coherent understanding is integration not deduction. One cannot formally explain how one knows the face. And the achievement is irreversible, we can only retrace our steps when we disintegrate the comprehension attained.

Knowing, in Polanyi's schema, is a combination of two tendencies, "dwelling in and breaking out". We build

up frameworks into which new experience is assimilated, and we adapt these frameworks to accommodate new experience. The ability to hold these tendencies together establishes our reality as a person and our relation to truth.

Indwelling is our extending ourselves into something known so that it becomes an extension of the self and a tool for further exploration of reality. When a painter first picks up a paint brush s/he focuses on the brush as an object; but once the painter acquires the skill of using the brush, the brush becomes an extension of the painter's body so that the painter may attend from the brush to the painting. The painter dwells in the brush, reaching out from this known entity in order to discover an as yet unknown, a new reality, the painting. The particulars in which we dwell are clues for extending ourselves into the discovery of external reality; and by doing so we find meaning not in the particulars, but in their integration. We dwell in our perceptions, former encounters with paintings, iconographic and formal features, and such to form a progressively more meaningful relationship with works of art.

To sort out how this basic structure of tacit knowing helps us understand contemplation and artistic expression, further nuances of Polanyi's thought need to be considered. One is the relationship between intuition and imagination, the other is the workings of visual perception.

## **Intuition and Imagination**

The relationship between intuition and imagination is one of empowerment and infusion. The imagination implements our intentions. It is "the nucleus of all discovery, invention and artistic creativity" (*M:P*, "From Metaphor to Perception," 5). The integrative powers are largely spontaneous; thus, Polanyi names them "intuition." However, rather than an alternation between imagination and intuition, the thrusts of the imagination propel and supply intuition with suitable material that leads towards discovery. Imaginative effort and intuitive observation are merged to account for all apprehensions of meaning. In the process of inquiry

we have always the same story. An idea appears, given by intuition to be pondered by the imagination. Second, the imagination is let loose to hammer out a path of possible clues, guided by intuitive feelings. And thirdly, an idea offers itself intuitively as a proposed conclusion to be pondered in its true light of the imagination (*M:P*, "Works of Art," 18).

Our intuitive faculties are empowered by the imagination. The imagination, in turn, is infused with intuition. The imagination is guided by the intuition in its future-oriented quest to implement performance, be it movement, perception or discovery. The imagination thrusts forward with a deliberate focal intention and intuition integrates the subsidiary clues imagination lights upon. Intuition works on a subsidiary level, sensing and integrating clues that are largely unspecifiable while the deliberate focal acts of the imagination seek reality and its meaning.

Thus, intuition sparks the imagination which implements our intentions; imagination imbued with intuition informs and enriches our tacit mindbodily being. This process of knowing is not primarily a dialectic between imagination and intuition but a unique and entwined aspect of the act of extending ourselves mindbodily into tacit integrations that achieve an aim and appreciate a comprehensive whole. I would call this procedure "open empowerment."

While all meaning is achieved through the same implementation of the imagination and intuition, the thrusts

of the imagination required to perceive a simple scene, to make a painting, or to contemplate are not the same. The imaginative performance required to create a painting or to focus on awareness is much greater than is required to scan a scene. Likewise, the complexity of an intuitive integration bears directly on the measure of imaginative effort. The more complex an integration, the more imaginative-intuitive effort will be required for its achievement. The integrations required to scan a scene are much less complex than are those needed to create a painting or to concentrate contemplatively.

We attend from our tacit knowledge of the subsidiary parts to our focal knowledge of the whole. It is through the integration of particulars which we have embodied intuitively that the reality these particulars comprise is endowed with the meaning imagination lights upon. This meaning is grounded in our reliance on the framework or location in which we dwell. One's unique epoch, race, geography, social history, ideology, training and so forth affect one's view of the whole. Knowledge is grounded in bodily indwelling so as to make sense of the outside world. We live mindbodily in the world, open to change and discovery.

## Visual Perception

Visual perception consists in the integration of clues evoked in our body by the impact of light to produce the sight of their joint meaning. Visual clues include the retinal image, the feeling of our eye muscles, the feeling of our bodily muscles supporting the position of our head, the sensations from our inner ear, the hidden memories which shape our interpretation of objects, as well as the neural traces evoked by the light reaching our eyes. Perception is grounded in these feats of bodily indwelling which jointly make sense of the objects presented to our vision. We rely on the clues of visual perception subsidiarily to integrate them into their joint meaning, the sight of the object.

Perception is not instantaneous, nor is it effortless. The simplest scanning of a scene requires time and a remarkable feat of integration. Our eyes intuitively see the objects before them in a series of imaginative snapshots taken from consecutive positions at the rate of about three to four shots per second. Thus, in a period of ten seconds spent looking at an object, we collect thirty to forty different snapshots. This collection of snapshots is then integrated into a single view of the object looked upon. It is a curious feat of integration that enables us to merge into a single sight the whole collection of consecutive pictures we have built up. The collection of images is not random. Vision selects the details that are of the most interest (*M:P*, "From Perception to Metaphor," 6).

The effort of the eye to present an image of clarity is the result of self-set perceptual standards in which we dwell. The muscles of the eye adjust the thickness of its lens and the collection of images are selected and integrated in accordance with a learned interpretive framework. When a baby moves a rattle towards its eyes and away again, the baby's perception must choose between seeing the rattle swell up and shrink alternately, or see it change its distance while retaining its size. The baby chooses the latter alternative. This choice guides our perception into a universal interpretive framework which sees objects as retaining their size and shape when seen at different distances and angles, and their color and brightness when seen under different types of light (*PK*, 96-97). Even when retinal evidence is to the contrary, we make perceptual adjustments to maintain the standards of correct seeing. The subsidiary clues of visual perception work toward a coherence of the world we see about us. The process of uniting visual clues into their joint meaning is a lifelong course of application and reliance on established sensory clues. We dwell in sensory clues subsidiarily in order to attend to integrated, and thus meaningful sightings.

Making art compels the artist to acquire a new way of seeing things that re-integrates their established perceptual interpretive framework. Contemplation dissolves integrative seeing, not to reverse perception, but to deepen it. The art of learning “to see” aesthetically and contemplatively is a breaking out from the perceptual standards in which we dwell. The artist and contemplative, rather than relying on what they have learned to see in the past, learn to see in a new way. For example, an artist learns, when setting out to draw a person lying horizontally with feet close to the artist and the head at a distance, to see the body differently than it is ordinarily seen. The artist learns to see the feet swelled and the head shrunk rather than the seeing the feet closer and the head at a distance. The opposite choice of the baby rattle experience is made. The feet are drawn proportionately larger than the whole of the rest of the body; the body is drawn progressively smaller as it moves toward the head. In art this is called foreshortening. What is closer is drawn larger, what is at a distance is drawn smaller. Objects, in the artist’s eye, do not retain their size, but change when seen at different angles and distances. The same is true for color. The artist learns to see variances in color rather than consistency due to illumination changes. This ability to break out from existing perceptual frameworks demonstrates our ability intentionally to prompt our perception to explore and assess perceptual clues in new ways in the quest of artistic expression.

The contemplative, rather than aiming to incarnate a new way of seeing things, wholly dissolves the screen of perceptual knowledge and “sees” patches of color for its own sake. Intellectual control is relaxed as the contemplative becomes absorbed in the quality of experience. The contemplative gaze ceases to scan the scene before the eyes with an aim towards recognition or representation. Contemplative seeing is intensely focal, subsidiary and participative in an experience that is ineffable and inexpressible. It unifies focal and subsidiary awareness into a divine whole by sinking self-set standards of seeing into abeyance. Or, following Polanyi’s use of the *via negativa*, contemplatives “see things. . . not focally, but as part of a cosmos, as features of God” (*PK*, 198). The contemplative then, like the artist, breaks out from conceptual frameworks of perception, but unlike the artist, the contemplative does not aim toward novel integrations of expression.

## **Artistic Expression and Contemplation**

Polanyi states that the most radical manifestation of the urge to dwell in and break out is the ecstatic vision of contemplation. We dissolve the screen of our conceptual framework, we cease to move through experience and instead pour ourselves into experience; “we cease to handle things and become immersed in them” (*PK*, 197). The experience is vivid yet dream-like, timeless and without definite spacial location.

It is not an objective reality; for it is not the focus of an intelligent perception anticipating future confirmation by tangible things, but resides merely in the colored patches of various shapes which the things present to the eye (*PK*, 197).

The person participates, indwells completely in what is contemplated. In contemplation the knower resides imaginatively in natural reality in order to experience an imageless and nameless reality. Time, space and discursive thought are transcended into an awareness of a intuitive coherence which bears meaning in an extraordinary way. Reality is fused into an ecstatic experience as all is “merged with the unfathomable intuition of the universe” (*PK*, 197). The contemplative immerses oneself into natural reality so that rather than being aware of the objects of nature, s/he experiences a deeper now. Contemplative detachment is highly imaginative due to its concentrated effort, but is also

an unimaginative suffusion into reality that does not attend towards the future. This paradox enables the contemplative to reside in the parts, rather than the whole, without dismembering meaning but deepening it in an extraordinary way. Contemplation is a skillful seeing into the natural world that reveals profound meaning.

In an aim to embody extraordinary meaning, the artist, like the contemplative, ceases to handle things and instead becomes immersed in them. When an artist is questioned about the process of making art, the artist most often states that it is a timeless yet vivid experience. It is for the artist a spiritual moment of vision. Like the contemplative, the artist does not focus on an observation of nature but pours oneself into a communion with nature. But unlike the contemplative who indwells the present, the artist anticipates a future manifestation of embodied meaning. The artist resides in the colored patches of various shapes which are present to the eye, not as a means of communion with nature (though this may occur) but in order to make extraordinary meaning visible, and thus tangible to the eye. The artist makes imaginative tacit integrations which are wholly non-specifiable, visible. What art creates is not illusion but intuitive embodiments of the creative imagination. The achievement of artistic integrations are an heuristic leap that incarnate what cannot be communicated otherwise. Art does not communicate facts of ordinary experienced reality that can be observed, but novel, tacit integrations or facts of the imagination that can only be indwelled.

The contemplative, like the artist does not focus on nature but pours oneself into a communion with nature. But unlike the contemplative who indwells without an incarnational aim, the artist anticipates the tangible. This is not to suggest that embodiment does not occur in contemplation. It must because meaning is grounded in embodiment. Contemplation is an intense act of union which is embodied into the contemplative's mindbodily being in the world. The experience of contemplation is assimilated into the self while the self is integrated into the object of contemplation. This dual movement lends contemplation its ecstatic character.

Art embodies clues from the self and natural reality that when imaginatively integrated outside of the self into form present a uniquely meaningful coherence. The contemplative pours the self into natural coherences imaginatively and experiences the depths of intuition which are re-embodied into the self. The contemplative resides in the present; the artist thrusts toward future manifestations of embodied meaning. Both grasp deeper coherences of reality than are ordinarily experienced. The contemplative immerses the self into a reality that exists in nature to comprehend a deeper level than can be communicated. When the contemplative does strive to share the experience, artistic expression arises. The artist surrenders the self into natural reality and re-integrates it imaginatively through form. The artifact's reality relies on nature but does not in itself find its full meaning in nature. Natural reality holds the potentiality for extraordinary meaning to be experienced and embodied by the contemplative or incarnated into works of art.

## **Abbreviations of Michael Polanyi's Works Cited**

*M:P* "Meaning: a Project," unpublished lectures forming background of *Meaning*. (University of Chicago; University of Texas, Austin; February, March, 1969).

*PK* *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

*TD* *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1983).