

Polanyi and Tillich on History

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ABSTRACT Key Words: autonomy, heteronomy, theonomy, kairos, logos, epistemology, ontology, philosophy of history, Paul Tillich, Michael Polanyi, science and religion
Using a critical framework developed by W. H. Walsh, this essay assesses Polanyi's theory of historical passage. It then compares Polanyi's views about history with those of Paul Tillich. The comparison reveals similar approaches to understanding ontology and epistemology.

Although they met personally on only one occasion and exchanged but a few letters, Polanyi and Tillich shared more intellectually than one might suppose. The aim of this essay is to surface the striking similarities they share in their views of being/ontology and epistemology through the lens of their philosophies of history. Using a framework for assessing historical process proposed by W. H. Walsh, I will focally analyze Polanyi's theory of history as presented primarily in his essay "Understanding History" and then draw comparisons with Tillich's well-developed views of history. This "conversation" about their views of history reveals common approaches to ontology and epistemology. Their similarities invite further "conversations."

Polanyi on History

The word "history" may have two referents. It may refer to human actions of the past or it may refer to the account of those actions constructed in the present. These two ways of considering history have resulted in two kinds of philosophy of history — speculative or metaphysical philosophy of history and critical or analytic philosophy of history.¹ The following discussion will attempt to demonstrate that Polanyi's view of history entails both kinds of philosophy of history: Polanyi's philosophy of history is an ontological philosophy of history which attempts to take into account questions and issues raised in critical philosophy of history.

In a critical analysis of the work that historians do, at least three questions must be considered. They are (1) the question of the relationship between history and natural science, (2) the question of the objectivity of historical knowledge, and (3) the questions of the nature of historical explanation.² I shall at the same time show that Polanyi's treatment of history — its status vis á vis natural science, its objectivity, and the nature of historical explanation — is at every point rooted in his ontology and epistemology.

1. We shall begin with the question of the relationship of history to natural science, the question most extensively considered by Polanyi. He comes at the question from two fronts. On the one hand, in opposition to idealism (as he interprets idealism) he avers that historical knowledge and natural scientific knowledge are of one kind. On the other hand, he holds that natural scientific knowledge is the paradigm for understanding historical knowledge, and indeed for all knowledge. If we add to these two points the further underlying assumption of the fiduciary, communal element of all knowledge, we have the triad of interrelated elements that form the fundamental framework of Polanyi's epistemology. It may be helpful to us in clarifying the Polanyian answer to the question of the relationship of history to natural science to outline how he came to his constructive position which includes these three elements.

The shift in Michael Polanyi's career from pure science to social science and philosophy occurred when he became embroiled in a debate in the philosophy of science over the nature of scientific inquiry and scientific knowledge.

(In 1932 Polanyi came to the University of Manchester from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin as professor of physical chemistry. In 1948 he officially shifted his focus when he was named to a chair in social studies at Manchester.) The debate took place among reflective British scientists and philosophers in the 1930s over the rise of the influence of Marxist philosophy of science in England where science was understood as applied science; that is, where all scientific inquiry was subjugated to the service of societal ends established by a political/economic ideology.³ In contradistinction to this view, Polanyi asked, “What philosophy of science had we in the West to pit against this? How was its general acceptance among us to be accounted for? Was this acceptance justified? On what grounds?”⁴ His answer in part called for the autonomy of scientific disciplines from external political, economic, and social structures and controls. At the same time, he argued for an internal “principle of mutual control” in science whereby scientists themselves would exercise critical judgment upon one another. This view of science contained both societal and fiduciary elements. With regard to the societal element, Polanyi held that the scientific community, “a moral association of persons” acting on the basis of “a common belief,” established a tradition which was the ground of free inquiry and the advance of scientific knowledge.⁵ With regard to the fiduciary element, Polanyi held that the ultimate justification for his view of the nature of scientific inquiry was a personal, responsible commitment. “At some point I can only answer, ‘For I believe so’.”⁶ His answer to the question of the nature of natural science, then, consisted of a critique of Marxist philosophy of science and pointed toward a revision of positivistic philosophy of science toward a philosophy of science which included the communal and fiduciary elements of scientific inquiry, and indeed, all inquiry.

Beyond the question of the nature of science and scientific knowledge, the answer to which provided the base from which all his further work developed, Polanyi turned to inquire about the nature of a society in which science could prosper. This question was pressed upon Polanyi by a double-edged dilemma — the rise of totalitarian societies based on Marxist ideology and the growing disintegration of free Western societies in their movement toward nihilism. Polanyi’s answer to the double threat of totalitarian Marxism and anarchical nihilism, which he considered to be the logical outcomes of authoritarian “closed societies” and radical “open societies,” was a “free society” in which tradition and freedom were mutually related. He wrote that “a free society must exist within the context of a tradition that provides a framework within which members of the society may make free contributions to the tasks involved in the society.”⁷ In this way a free society “can be bound traditionally to certain standards and values and yet be free — both in the sense of being innovative and in the sense of being self-governing or autonomous.”⁸ This view of the intellectual foundations of science and all societies was enunciated early and late in his career, in *Science, Faith and Society* (1946) and *The Logic of Liberty* (1951), and in *Meaning* (1975). There are several points worth noting about Polanyi’s definition of a free society. First, he considered the scientific community of western nations the paradigm for all free associations of persons dedicated to ends that are worthy of respect.⁹ Second, Polanyi held that the traditional beliefs, values, and mores of a free, inquiring society were an indispensable, normative basis upon which that society was structured. Third, the structure of a free society in which tradition and freedom are dialectical poles in tension with one another is the same structure which we saw earlier in our study that operates in the organic world. The principle of boundary conditions has the same structure as the principle of mutual control. Tradition is to lower-level operations as freedom is to higher-level operations.

Finally, Polanyi’s shift from pure science to social science and then to epistemology was completed when he extended his pursuit of the nature of natural scientific knowledge to all knowledge. This final phase of his work is elaborated most clearly in *Personal Knowledge, The Tacit Dimension, Knowing and Being*, and *Meaning*. His theory of personal knowledge grew out of his inquiry into the nature of science and society and expresses a further development of that work. The theory of personal knowledge includes both critical and constructive aspects. First, Polanyi provided

a critique of the ideal of a wholly explicit, self-guaranteeing knowledge in the Cartesian tradition, a tradition he called positivistic skepticism, by showing that all knowledge includes irreducible personal elements. Then, he sought to answer the question of how one can justify the holding of dubitable, personal beliefs by positing his theory of personal knowledge in which all knowledge was considered to be rooted in an unspecifiable “fiduciary framework.”

The triad of fundamental elements in Polanyi’s thought — the nature of science, the nature of societies, and the nature of knowledge — are brought together in the following text: “We have now, in the instance of scientific inquiry . . . a kind of moral association of persons, through the exercise of mutual authority, [which] welds traditions and freedom together in a pursuit of the truth.”¹⁰ In every case of human inquiry into truth, traditional structures and beliefs must be given normative status in order for free research to be carried out. This structure of human inquiry, grounded in an epistemology in which societal traditions and free inquiry reciprocally support one another, is for Polanyi applicable both to natural science and to history as well as to all other pursuits of truth.

The preceding discussion has placed Polanyi’s view of knowledge into its broader context and sketched its development through Polanyi’s career. Hopefully, it has illumined why he deems both natural science and history as personal knowledge: (1) Both operate from fiduciary frameworks — assumptions, laws, theories, and practices — which are peculiar to the community of historians or the community of scientists. These frameworks are ultimately grounded on ontological assumptions of the sort, “I believe it to be so.” (2) Both historical and natural scientific knowledge entail a personal, tacit element which is the epistemological correlate of the above ontological assumption. For these reasons history and natural science cannot be considered as ultimately separate from one another, for both are aspects of personal knowledge.

2. From the question of the relationship of historical knowledge to natural scientific knowledge, we turn to Polanyi’s answer to the question of the objectivity of historical knowledge. Negatively, against positivism, he rejects the ideal of a self-guaranteeing knowledge as absurd; against idealism, he argues that history need not lose its objectivity and universal character because of its personal nature. He argues that positivism is not as objective as it alleges to be and that idealism, on the other hand, need not retreat into individualistic subjectivism which divorces history from natural science. Positively, Polanyi defines the objectivity of historical knowledge within the bounds of his theory of personal knowledge. Both the selection of historical subjects and historical data as well as the standards by which the subject and data are interpreted involve irreducibly personal elements. These elements are rooted in a myriad of cultural factors; some are explicit and some are implicit and hidden. Given this personal, subjective element in history, the historian must guard against sliding into mere subjectivism. This is controlled in two ways. One is by the self-critical application of possible fallacies of history to one’s own historical work. Polanyi does not believe the rationalist and relativist fallacies can be completely avoided but can be reduced by a careful, self-critical historical method. The second control against subjectivism is the self-critical acceptance of one’s own interpretive framework and standards. Polanyi holds that every historian has personal assumptions which guide the selection of historical subjects and the interpretation of them. The historian can never separate himself from these assumptions and ought not try. The historian can, however, exercise self-criticism by making them explicit and revising and rejecting them on the basis of that self-criticism. History for Polanyi, then, is never free of interpretive frameworks or possible fallacies.

What then, becomes of the question of the objectivity of historical knowledge? How can objectivity be claimed for so subjective an inquiry? If we confine objectivity to those disciplines which limit themselves only to conclusions based upon explicit theories tested within and established by inquiries of the discipline itself, then history

cannot be called objective. But, as we have seen, Polanyi argues against such an ideal of objectivity. Polanyi's definition of the ideal of objectivity is illuminated if we attend to his view of the ideal of truth in natural science. What the scientist claims as true does not mean "that he has thereby established universality, but only that he has exhibited a universal intent, for a scientist cannot know whether his claims will be accepted."¹¹ Scientific conclusions may prove to be false, or even if true, not convince enough scientists in order to be accredited. In any case, even if accredited their acceptance by the scientific community is not equivalent to their being true; that is, "acceptance" does not equal "truth." Scientific objectivity has therefore both an objective and subjective pole; the scientist with universal intent toward discovering truth seeks the objectively real, but what scientific claims can never be universally established. Truth is always tentative and subject to rejection. For Polanyi, the ultimate reason for this definition of scientific objectivity is that it corresponds to his ontological assumption about the nature of the reality into which the scientist inquires.

A scientist, having relied throughout his inquiry on the presence of something real, hidden out there, can rely only on that external presence also for claiming the validity of the result that satisfies his quest By his own command, which bound him to the quest of reality, he will claim that his results are universally valid. Such is the universal intent of a scientific discovery.¹²

This character of truth in natural science is the character of truth in all human inquiry. All inquiries have two poles: one pole is the objective reality toward which one inquires, the other pole is the personal knower. These two poles are always present. The inquirer's "acts are personal judgments exercised responsibly with a view to a reality with which he is seeking to establish contact."¹³ The structure of objectivity in natural science has therefore the same structure in history.

3. We come finally to the question of the nature of historical explanation, the question of whether or not here are laws of history like there are laws of science and if there are, what constitutes the nature of the laws. Polanyi does not specifically address this question but does respond to the related question about the uniqueness of historical events versus the repetitiveness of natural scientific occurrences. The answer to this question typically concludes that repetitiveness makes natural scientific laws possible while historical uniqueness precludes laws of history. Polanyi replies by recognizing a difference in the types of occurrences that history and natural science treat but he does not view the uniqueness-repetition difference as one of kind but only one of degree. He does not therefore pit repetitiveness/universality over against uniqueness/particularity but views them as opposite ends of one continuum. His conclusion is that history is "at the end of a row of sciences of increasing intimacy and delicate complexity, yet offset against all of them by an exceptionally vigorous and subtle participation in its subject matter."¹⁴ Thus, history has autonomy within the spectrum of knowing just as natural science has its peculiar place. This is to say that there are no laws of history but it is at the same time not to say that historical explanation is of a different kind than natural scientific explanation.

Although Polanyi does not accept a theory of historical explanation based upon the application of laws of history, he does recognize that historical events have a structure and that historical inquiry seeks to understand and interpret that structure. Historical events are events in reality and share the structures of reality. Thus, for him historical events occur between the poles of stability and openness, tradition and freedom, and acceptance and criticism. Historical explanation must take into account at least two factors: (1) the context or framework of the historical subject — given biological, psychological, religious, social, and political structures which condition the subject's actions — and (2) the historical subject's free decision to act in a certain manner within that framework.

In Polanyi's answers to the questions of critical philosophy of history — the question of the relationship of history to natural science, the question of objectivity in history, and the question of the nature of historical explanation — we have seen how each question is answered within the epistemological framework of his theory of personal knowledge and in consideration of the underlying ontological assumptions about reality that buttress his theory. The nature, structure, and character of historical knowledge is in Polanyi's view dependent upon the mutually reciprocal relationship between his epistemology and ontology.

Having given attention to Polanyi's answers to the questions of critical philosophy of history, we shall now ask about the speculative element in his view of history, recalling that we began this analysis with the statement that we judged Polanyi's view of history an ontological view which sought to account for the questions of critical philosophy of history.

Speculative philosophy of history is generally considered as an attempt "to discover the meaning and purpose of the whole historical process."¹⁵ Its objective is "to produce an interpretation of the actual course of events showing that a special kind of intelligibility could be found in it."¹⁶ It seeks to uncover the intelligible structure, the universal patterns of change, the most fundamental forms, and the goals of its object, history. Polanyi's philosophy of history is speculative in the sense that it is ontological; that is, it assumes that reality is of a certain knowable structure and that historical actions and occurrences evidence that same structure. But, while Polanyi maintains that historical events are limited and formed by the structures of reality, he does not seek to uncover the meaning of the entire historical process. For him reality and hence history is dynamic; there can be change and novelty, and therefore historical passage is possible. History's dynamism is actualized through human intent and decision and those intentions and decisions always are future oriented. But, while Polanyi affirms the teleological aspect of human activity and hence historical events, he does not assume or speculate about a final telos of the entire movement of history. For this reason we chose to call his philosophy of history ontological rather than speculative.

Further, Polanyi sees no radical disfunction between speculative philosophy of history and critical philosophy of history. Adequate interpretation of history must include a critical or analytic element; all criticism and analysis of historical interpretation are based on what are finally unspecifiable, ontological assumptions.

Polanyi holds that reality and the knowledge of what is real has a certain dialectical, dynamic structure, a structure that is present in both being and knowing. In an important essay, which we have until now not considered, the main point is clear. He claims that "knowing is an indwelling; that is, a utilization of a framework for unfolding our understanding in accordance with the indications and standards imposed by the framework." This ontological framework is the basis for all knowledge. "If an act of knowing affects our choice between alternative frameworks, or modifies the framework in which we dwell, it involves a change in our being."¹⁷ This is to say that the framework is not static but dynamic, as is our knowledge of the reality that the framework images.

I regard all true understanding as an intimation of such a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to our deepened understanding in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations. I accept the obligation to search for the truth through my own intimations of reality, knowing that there is, and can be, no strict rule by which my conclusions can be justified. My reference to reality legitimates my acts of unspecifiable knowing, even

while it duly keeps the exercise of such acts within the bounds of a rational objectivity. For a claim to have made contact with reality necessarily legislates both for myself and others with universal intent.¹⁸

Thus, while the reality one attends to in knowing is for Polanyi a mental construct, it is not a mere idea or the product of a purely subjective imagination. An irreducible assumption of Polanyi's thought is that there is "an external reality with which we can establish contact."¹⁹ In all knowing there is an external reality which is the object of the knower and that reality, as the objective pole of knowing, sets the limits and provides the structure of knowledge. Thus, the structure of reality has an analog in the structure of knowing. Herein lies the ontological aspect of historical knowledge for Polanyi — historical events provide the objective structures which the historian seeks to understand and interpret. In this sense historical knowledge is ontological.

POLANYI AND TILLICH ON HISTORY

We have summarized Polanyi's view of history and have shown his philosophy of history to be an ontological philosophy of history which addresses the issues of critical philosophy of history. Now we shall compare his philosophy of history with the philosophy of history of Paul Tillich. Polanyi's philosophy of history is similar to Tillich's philosophy of history in that both claim that historical events and historical knowledge have a certain ontological structure and that their descriptions of the structure of reality and events in reality are similar.

The ontological aspect of Tillich's philosophy of history is evident in his essay "Philosophy and Fate." The theme of this essay with regard to history is, the "unconditional truth" of history which "pulsates through all our thinking; there can be no act of thought without the secret presupposition of its unconditional truth." But, the logos or truth of history is not our possession; "it is the hidden criterion of every truth we believe we possess." Every statement about the logos of history is therefore contingent due to the limitation of the knower. Still, the interpreter of history claims an interpretation to be true. "We can take this risk in the certainty that this is the only way in which truth can reveal itself to finite and historical beings."²⁰ Man's finiteness and particularity constitute his fatedness. Fate is one of the given structures of existence as "the transcendent necessity in which freedom is entangled."²¹ This relationship of fate to freedom entails three things: (1) Fate is structurally related to freedom and without freedom fate is reduced to necessity; (2) "Fate signifies that freedom is subjected to necessity," that is, freedom is placed into an embracing frame of reference; and (3) "Fate signifies that freedom and necessity interpenetrate each other." Thus, fate and freedom "are conditioned by each other and are inextricably interwoven."²²

Polanyi's view bears striking similarities with Tillich on these structural aspects of historical knowledge. (1) Tillich's logos or unconditional truth of history is similar to Polanyi's objective or "real" pole of historical knowledge. (2) The logos of history is the criterion of history (Tillich) or it is the external reality with which we can establish contact (Polanyi). (3) What the historian knows about an historical event is considered true and yet remains subject to revision, rejection, and replacement. This is due to the risk involved in truth-claims and is a result of the dialectical relationship of knower to known. In "Philosophy and Fate," Tillich elaborates this relationship in terms of fate, freedom, and necessity where fate and freedom are structurally related and where fate without freedom is necessity. Polanyi talks about similar ontological realities as tradition and freedom with reference to societies. We saw this in Polanyi's view of a free society — "A free society must exist within the context of a tradition that provides a framework within which members of the society may make free contributions to the tasks involved in that society"²³ — and, more specifically, in his view that scientists "trust the traditions fostered by this system of mutual control without much experience of

it and at the same time claim an independent position from which they may interpret and possibly revolutionize this tradition.”²⁴ Clearly these texts reveal that structural character of Polanyi’s tradition and freedom is similar to Tillich’s fate and freedom.

This structural similarity allows us to interpret the three fallacies of history according to Polanyi using Tillich’s language about fate, freedom, and necessity. Each fallacy results from a mistaken, distorted, or incomplete understanding of the structures of history. The rationalist fallacy in which the historian absolutizes personal standards and norms is the result of ignoring the fact that the historian’s fate (or kairos) and the subject’s fate (or kairos) may not be the same fate (or kairos). Further, the historian’s fate is reduced to necessity when it is applied to the historical subject. Second, the relativist fallacy in which the historian ignores the cultural context is due to ignoring the historian’s fate and claiming a false freedom. Third, the determinist fallacy in history is the result of a fate which ignores freedom and thereby becomes necessity. The ability to translate or interpret Polanyi’s three fallacies of history into Tillich’s fate/freedom/necessity language is a clear indication of the similar ontology of these two thinkers.

Our point is strengthened when we turn to consider Tillich’s concept kairos. By “kairos” Tillich refers to that time in which the logos — the universal and unconditional truth — is manifest in the fate of existence. Kairos is not *a* time, it is rather a quality of time or a fullness of time, “a moment rich in content and significance.”²⁵ For Tillich, every finite existent has its capacity for kairos. “From physics on up to the normative cultural sciences there is a gradation, the logos standing at the one end and the kairos at the other. But there is no point at which either logos or kairos alone is to be found.”²⁶ Both must be included, both ontologically and epistemologically. “If it stood only in the kairos, it would be without validity and the assertion would be valid only for the one making it; if it stood only in the logos, it would be without fate and would therefore have no part in existence, for existence is involved in fate.”²⁷ With reference to the previous paragraph, one could say: with only logos and without kairos, the historian will suffer the rationalist fallacy; with only kairos and without logos, the historian will suffer from the relativist fallacy.

Tillich applies his ontology of kairos and logos to the actual course of history. He maintains that every period has its kairos; the more deeply the kairos is understood the more extensively is the logos known. In order to understand the kairos, one must understand the situation, hence his treatments of *The Religious Situation*²⁸ and *The World Situation*.²⁹ That is, one must have “a consciousness of history whose roots reach down into the depth of the unconditional . . . and whose ethos is an inescapable responsibility for the present moment in history.”³⁰

In “Kairos”, Tillich attempts to outline a philosophy of history which is in accord with logos/kairos structure of historical events. He holds that a two-fold demand is made upon a philosophy of history aware of kairos: “The tension characteristic of the absolute interpretation of history must be united with the universalism of the relative interpretation.” The paradox of this demand — that a kairotic event is both absolute and under the judgment of the absolute at the same time — is relieved “when the conditioned surrenders itself to become a vehicle for the unconditional. This is made possible when an individual or a group is open to the unconditional in a special moment of history, a kairos. At the same time, a person or group can miss or turn away from or not understand or misappropriate the unconditional due to the strictures of finite existence, leading to the dynamism of historical passage as the interrelation of theonomy, autonomy, and heteronomy.”³¹

Theonomy: A theonomous age or period in history is one which is open to the unconditional “in which the consciousness of the presence of the unconditional permeates and guides all cultural functions and forms.”³² For the

purposes of our study, the most relevant characteristic of a theonomous age is that “the knowledge of things has not the purpose of analyzing them in order to control them; it has the purpose of finding their inner meaning, their mystery, and their divine significance.”³³ “Theonomy unites the absolute and relative element in the interpretation of history, the demand that everything relative become the vehicle of the absolute and the insight that nothing relative can ever become absolute itself.”³⁴ A further characteristic of theonomy which we find similar to Polanyi’s view of the relationship of the individual to society is that the individual is never seen as isolated but always in relationship to the whole: “Merely individual religion, individual culture, individual emotional life, and individual economic interests are impossible in such a social and spiritual situation.”³⁵

The character of theonomy which unites absolute and relative, universal and particular, parts and wholes into an all-encompassing framework is very similar to the structure of what Polanyi calls a “free society.” First, Polanyi holds that a free society “rests upon a traditional framework” which provides norms and values which are accepted within the society. This framework is established by a religious vision and commitment of a world-view.³⁶ This function of religion in Polanyi, an important aspect of his thought which we have left untreated in this paper, is very much like Tillich’s understanding of the relation of religion to culture, namely, as that of sustaining a common mythical interpretation of the logos of reality.³⁷ Second, a free society (Polanyi) and a theonomous society (Tillich) both hold in tension tradition and freedom (Polanyi) and fate and freedom (Tillich). Third, both thinkers characterize reason in a free/theonomous society as reason seeking meaning rather than technical or analytic reason. Tillich puts this in terms of reason finding the meaning, purpose and ultimate significance of things. Polanyi similarly writes:

If we believe in the existence of a general movement toward the attainment of meaning in the universe. We will regard every achievement of any sort of meaning as the epitome of reality, for we will think it is the sort of thing that the world is organized to bring about.³⁸

For both thinkers analytic reason can tell us nothing meaningful because it is reason separated from its ontological ground. Finally, both locate the individual within a free/theonomous society as within the whole, that is, as one among many and not as isolated nor as absorbed into the mass; individuality is always in tension with community.

Autonomy: According to Tillich, autonomy appears both as the opposition to theonomy and as a necessity for theonomy.

As a correlate of theonomy autonomy replaces mystical nature with rational nature; it puts in the place of mythical events historical happenings, and in the place of the magical sense of communion it sets up technical control. It constitutes communities on the basis of purpose, and morality on the basis of individual perfection. It analyzes everything in order to put it together rationally. It makes religion a matter of personal decision and makes the inner life of the individual dependent upon itself. It releases also the forces of an autonomous political and economic activity.³⁹

As the opposition to theonomy, autonomy struggles to break the bonds of theonomy and as such is “the dynamic principle of history.” Theonomy, on the other hand, is the substance and meaning of history. Autonomy is not, however, necessarily a turning away from the unconditional. “It is the acceptance of the norms of truth and justice, or order and beauty, of personality and community. It is obedience to the principles that control the realms of individual and social culture. The real difference between autonomy and theonomy “is that in an autonomous culture the cultural

forms appear only in their finite relationship, while in a theonomous culture they appear in the relation to the unconditional.” For example, “autonomous science ... deals with the logical forms and the factual material of things; theonomous science deals, beyond this, with their ultimate meaning and their existential significance.”⁴⁰

The distinction Tillich makes between autonomous and theonomous science is similar to the distinction that Polanyi makes between the scientific knowledge sought in the Laplacean model and the scientific knowledge held in his theory of personal knowledge. Polanyi holds that positivistic science operates on the paradigm of Laplace: “to replace all human knowledge by a complete knowledge of atoms in motion.”⁴¹ The ideal of such a science is the embodiment of “all knowledge of the universe in an exact topography of all its atoms.” On this model, all things stand in isolated particularity divorced from their context. In Tillich’s terms, they are analyzed in their autonomy. Further, it appears that Tillich’s theonomous science which seeks the significance and existential relevance of scientific knowledge is close to Polanyi’s definition of an adequate science. Polanyi’s criticism of the Laplacean model is “that it would tell us absolutely nothing that we are interested in.” This is because it dissects wholes into parts and says nothing about the wholes. Yet, wholes are what concern us most and this is what science in the theory of personal knowledge includes that it does not in Laplacean/autonomous science. Polanyi writes:

The shortcomings of the Laplacean ideal of science must be remedied by acknowledging our personal knowing — our indwelling — as an integral part of all knowledge. This amendment . . . bridges the gap between the natural sciences and the study of man. Having recognized personal participation as the universal principle of knowing and having determined the structure of this knowing, we are now able to see that the personal participation through which we reach our evaluation of human actions as the actions of sentient, intelligent, and morally responsible beings is a legitimate instance of scientific knowing.⁴²

This view is similar to what Tillich calls theonomous science.

Heteronomy: Once autonomy breaks through theonomy the initial theonomy can never be reestablished. “The autonomous road must be traveled to its very end, namely, to the moment in which a new theonomy appears in a new kairos.” A new theonomy is not the negation of autonomy; attempts to suppress, destroy, or negate autonomy brings into existence a condition of heteronomy. “Heteronomy imposes an alien law, religious or secular, on man’s mind. It disregards the logos structure of mind and world. It destroys the honesty of truth and the dignity of the moral personality. It undermines creative freedom and the humanity of man. Its symbol is the “terror” exercised by absolute churches or absolute states.” Heteronomy arises when autonomy is completely separated from the religious substance of life and culture. Autonomy can subsist as long as it can feed upon traditions of the past, but eventually it will exhaust its spiritual substance. Then, “it becomes emptier, more formalistic, or more factual and is driven toward skepticism and cynicism, toward the loss of meaning and purpose.”⁴³ This description of the process of history which results in heteronomy is equivalent to a similar process interpreted by Polanyi which ends in what he calls “moral inversion.” Finally, we note that the resolution of the problem of heteronomy in history for Tillich is a breakthrough of a new kairos and the establishment of a new theonomy. For Polanyi, the breakthrough of “moral inversion” comes in the hope of a “free society.”⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

This brief and somewhat truncated comparison of Polanyi and Tillich on history uncovers similarities that have not been noticed in a focal way. Perhaps the reason for lack of “conversation” between the two was their perception of their views of the different places of natural science and religion in culture. In his essay, “Science and Religion,”⁴⁵ Polanyi distanced himself from Tillich. He claimed that Tillich wished to keep religion and science separate on the grounds that they are “two different dimensions which logically by-pass each other, the dimension of science being that of strictly detached knowledge, while the dimension of religion is one of unconditional commitment.”⁴⁶ In contradistinction to this view, Polanyi granted that science and religion deal with different levels of reality but that both kinds of knowledge have a common ground. Polanyi’s interpretation of Tillich on this issue is somewhat inaccurate, although Tillich does emphasize in *Dynamics of Faith* the differences between science and religion. In his most developed work, Tillich expressly sought a unified reality in knowing. Had Polanyi attended more to Tillich’s writings on the place of religion in culture where science resides, perhaps he would not have made this error. In fact, in a footnote in his essay, “Science and Religion,” Polanyi notes that Tillich makes a statement in his *Systematic Theology I*, “which comes nearer to my own position.” The statement from Tillich that he quotes is the following: “The element of union and the element of detachment appear in different proportions in the different realms of knowledge. But there is no knowledge without the presence of both elements.”⁴⁷ This statement of Tillich’s is a more adequate representation of his overall position with regard to epistemology. If Polanyi had taken it as such, he may not have sought to contrast his own position with Tillich’s vis á vis the relationship of science and religion, but rather, to compare his position with Tillich’s, and, as we have done in this study, conclude that their positions are very similar.

Endnotes

¹W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 16-7.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 17-26. I have reduced Walsh’s four questions in critical philosophy of history to three, conflating the question of truth and fact and the question of objectivity into one.

³Among the treatments of this debate are J. R. Baker, *Science and the Planned State* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1945) as well as Polanyi’s *Science, Faith and Society* (in part).

⁴M. Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 9.

⁵M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 196.

⁶Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, p. 9.

⁷Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 202.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 196-203.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹¹Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 195.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴Polanyi, “Understanding History,” p. 85.

¹⁵Walsh, p. 26.

- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ¹⁷M. Polanyi, "Knowing and Being", *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 134.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*
- ²⁰Paul Tillich, "Philosophy and Fate," *The Protestant Era*, trans. J. L. Adams, abridged ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 13-14.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ²²*Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.
- ²³Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 202.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ²⁵Tillich, "Philosophy and Fate," p. 14 and Tillich, "Kairos," *The Protestant Era*, trans. J. L. Adams, abridged ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 33.
- ²⁶Tillich, "Philosophy and Fate," p. 15.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*
- ²⁸P. Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956; orig. 1932).
- ²⁹P. Tillich, *The World Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965; orig. 1945).
- ³⁰Tillich, "Kairos," p. 32.
- ³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.
- ³²*Ibid.*, p. 43
- ³³*Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ³⁶Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, pp. 159-60, 184, 215-216.
- ³⁷Tillich, "Kairos," p. 44.
- ³⁸Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 182.
- ³⁹Tillich, "Kairos," p. 44.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁴¹Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, p. 25.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ⁴³Tillich, "Kairos," p. 46.
- ⁴⁴Polanyi, "Beyond Nihilism," in *Knowing and Being*.
- ⁴⁵Polanyi, "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?" *Philosophy Today* 7 (Spring, 1963): 4-14.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ⁴⁷P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1967), I, p. 97.