

The Postcritical and Fiduciary Dimension in Polanyi and Tillich

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Paul Tillich and Michael Polanyi had their only face-to-face meeting in Berkeley, in February, 1963. The author reports the circumstances of this conversation, which he arranged and in which he participated, and, on the basis of his participation, offers reflections on the postcritical and fiduciary dimensions in the work of Polanyi and Tillich as a means of identifying similarities and differences in the thought of each.

When we consider comparing Michael Polanyi and Paul Tillich, our first impression may easily be: one can scarcely imagine two people from more different backgrounds or with more divergent perspectives. Tillich comes from the austere background of a Lutheran pastor's family in the heartland of the German Empire of the Kaisers and Otto von Bismarck. With a Jewish background, Polanyi grew up in fun-loving Budapest in an artistic, intellectual family that had been wealthy during Polanyi's childhood but had become relatively impoverished during his youth. Tillich was trained in Protestant theology for the pastorate and served as a chaplain in the German army during World War I. Polanyi's education was in the sciences, first in medicine and then in physical chemistry; he served briefly and reluctantly as a medical officer in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I.

Yet both emerged into adulthood in *fin de siecle* Europe, and both were possessed by a depth of perception and breadth of vision that took them beyond their differences in origin and beyond the straitjacket of academic specialization toward a fascinating convergence of concerns and perspectives. This movement toward proximity along different paths resulted in similarities in their thought that deserve careful attention and that emerged in one face-to-face meeting at the Claremont Hotel, Berkeley, February 21, 1963, during the Earl Lectures at Pacific School of Religion.

The Conversation

Tillich had been scheduled for several years to give the Earl Lectures for 1963. By rotation on the PSR faculty, I was chair that year of the conference at which the Earl Lectures would be delivered and was responsible for the schedules of the speakers.

During my doctoral study at Yale, Tillich had come to New Haven to deliver his Terry Lectures, *The Courage to Be*, and to give a seminar for graduate students. I was a member of that seminar for the entire year, became acquainted with Tillich then, and kept in sporadic touch with him afterward.

My contact with Polanyi began while I was teaching at the University of Florida. A colleague in economics introduced me to the thought of Karl Polanyi, Michael's older brother, and then, as an afterthought, mentioned that

I might also be interested in the younger brother. He was correct. I became *very* interested. After I went to Berkeley, Michael Polanyi came to lecture there and I was able to meet him, invite him into my seminars and for guest lectures at Pacific School of Religion, and supervise the first theological dissertation on his thought by Richard Gelwick.

Polanyi spent the year 1962-63 at the Center for Advanced Study, Palo Alto, where I visited him several times. On one visit in the fall, Polanyi, Eric Ericson, Richard Gelwick, and I were having lunch. I mentioned that Tillich would be in Berkeley in February. Ericson became very excited and wanted to know if he might meet Tillich, whose work he greatly admired. I subsequently arranged that for him. Polanyi said nothing at the time but later in his office asked what I thought of his references to Tillich in *Personal Knowledge*. Out of that discussion came the idea for a conversation between them. After Tillich arrived, I asked him if such a meeting would interest him. Though he seemed to know more about Karl Polanyi than Michael, he agreed willingly to a conversation. Tillich enjoyed sitting with friends in the evening, drinking Schnapps, and talking. Gelwick brought Polanyi from Palo Alto to Berkeley for what was a historic occasion.

With hindsight, I regret not taping it. At the time, I thought that the presence of a microphone would be an intrusion into an informal, social setting. Now I am less certain that my decision was the right one. From the standpoint of my role as host, however, the evening could not have gone better. The two stars sparkled and thoroughly enjoyed the exchange of views--a happy, brilliant meeting of great minds.

The Polyanian Revolution--Toward Postcritical Thought

As I turn from the conversation to the “postcritical” and “fiduciary” dimensions in Polanyi and Tillich, it will be important to understand what Polanyi means by these terms and his own place in relation to the emerging postcritical era of human thought.

Marjorie Grene has called Polanyi’s tacit knowing “grounds for a revolution in philosophy.”¹ Even more, I suggest, Polanyi marks a revolution in human thought as significant as the turn from the Ptolemaic perspective in the Copernican revolution. The Polyanian revolution moves us into the postcritical era and the recovery of the fiduciary dimension of human thought through his meticulous delineation of the from/to structure of knowing.

The critical period of Western philosophy opened with Descartes’ program of doubt seeking clarity, was brought to its zenith in the Enlightenment, and has been dissolving in the twentieth century under the weight of its own pretensions.² While retaining certain strengths of the critical period, Polanyi points out that its thinkers pursued a “mistaken ideal of objectivity” (*Personal Knowledge*, hereafter *PK*, 7):

When we claim greater objectivity for the Copernican theory, we 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 sense--but only in favour of a more ambitious anthropocentrism of our reason (*PK*, 4-5).

The Polyanian revolution provides a method that includes use of the rigor of the critical period and appreciation of its achievements. After all, Polanyi was a physical chemist of world renown. He inaugurated the postcritical era of human thought by relating critical thought to the precritical location within religion, tradition, culture, and community,

all of which critical thought had depreciated or discarded as unnecessary. Though philosophers preoccupied with the analysis of language or the collapse of the critical method have scarcely noticed his work, Polanyi's perspective is increasingly accepted, and he is winning, as Richard Gelwick aptly calls it, a belated "tacit victory."

The From/To Structure of Knowing

Polanyi integrates the critical and precritical into the postcritical perspective with the reminder that knowing takes place within human, social locations, and he then explores with delicacy and precision the epistemological/ontological meaning of location with its implications for the entire spectrum of believing, knowing, and action.

The ground for the Polanyian Revolution and his "unique contribution to philosophy," writes Grene, "is the theory of tacit knowing, the thesis that all knowledge necessarily includes a tacit component on which it relies in order to focus on its goal, whether of theoretical discovery and formulation or practical activity."³

Tacit knowing as the core of the postcritical perspective is based on Polanyi's insight that knowing has a *from/to* structure. Knowing consists in part of that which we focus upon, of which we have *focal* awareness. Knowing also consists in that which we rely upon in order to focus, of which Polanyi says we have *subsidiary* awareness. All too often knowledge has been reduced to *explicit* 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. As Polanyi summarizes it:

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, hereafter *KB*).

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 (*KB*, 156).

There are many implications of Polanyi's from/to structure of knowing. We shall explore several of these briefly.

First, the fiduciary dimension of knowing has been recovered by Polanyi. Humans rely upon elements from their social location, tradition, and community of interpretation in order to affirm what they believe to be knowledge. With this recovery, the precritical notions of "faith seeking understanding" and "believing in order to know" take on new meaning as Polanyi delineates the tacit component in critical knowing.

Second, knowers in postcritical perspective are not individualistic knowers but rather are shaped by and rely for validation upon their community and its culture, which knowers embody. Critical hermeneutics is dyadic in structure—the knower and the known. Postcritical hermeneutics is triadic, involving (a) a knower rooted in culture and community; (b) what is interpreted within its context; and (c) those for whom the interpretation is intended, who are also rooted in culture and community.⁴

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

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. The social sciences have moved gradually away from methods based on an illusory objectivism borrowed from physical science toward methods recognizing the human location of investigators and the tacit dimension of knowing. Old disciplines like history and newer ones like computer science have gradually undergone the Polanyian Revolution.

Fourth, recognizing the importance of tradition, culture, and community need not lead to conservative, static views of knowledge. By emphasizing the from/to structure, Polanyi clarifies the potential for change and innovation in human knowing. We dwell in our tacit dimension not to repeat the past but to break out toward the newness hidden within the future. “Scientific discovery,” he writes, “which leads from one such framework to its successor, bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision” (*PK*, 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” (*PK*, 196).

Polanyi and Tillich

It seems clear that both Tillich and Polanyi are moving toward a postcritical perspective and that, for both, the fiduciary dimension is central. However, they approach the postcritical and the fiduciary from different directions. There are similarities between them, but the differences are also pronounced.

In his life and thought, Tillich had a grounding in Christian commitment shaped by his Lutheran pastor’s family and by the Lutheran community of faith and worship. This commitment was not secondhand or an inherited residuum for him but became internalized into the depth of his being, though not without critical revision and a profound sense of the risk and doubt present within faith. God as revealed in Jesus Christ remained central for him, filling his life and guiding his thought.

At the same time, as he pursued the path of Christian faith in *Gymnasium* and university, Tillich was attracted strongly to the wider reaches of German culture. His path of intellectual development took him, first, into German idealism and then, through the late Schelling, beyond idealism into existential philosophy and a phenomenological method informed by Martin Heidegger with whom Tillich was a colleague briefly at Marburg. Yet this absorption of German culture did not displace his Christian faith but rather extended, shaped, and armed it, so that he could speak persuasively to his contemporaries within, outside, and on the edges of the Christian community. In many ways, Tillich became a twentieth-century Schleiermacher, commending Christian faith to its cultured despisers and to those ambivalently attracted and repelled by it.

As with Polanyi and in part with Heidegger, Tillich moved beyond the pretensions and dichotomies that brought critical thought to an impasse and sought a way to combine the wholeness of human experiencing in the precritical era with the rigor and openness to liberation and innovation characterizing the critical era. In Tillich's case, this meant combining Christian commitment with the best and most profound to be encountered in human culture. This seeking toward a postcritical perspective can be seen most clearly in his emphasis on the fiduciary element in human perceiving, knowing, and affirming.

The fiduciary, for example, plays a crucial role in *The Religious Situation*, an early work written in German and appearing in 1931 in an English translation by H. Richard Niebuhr. Here Tillich takes an epistemological position that can be called "beliefful realism." In this view, perceiving what is "real" and shaping that reality conceptually take place within a context of believing that enables us to affirm our knowing as pertaining to reality. Tillich's realism is thus a belief-ful realism, in which Christian faith provides ground and context for knowing. It is not clear, however, that he remains true to this position (see below).

The fiduciary dimension of Tillich's thought is exemplified also in his notion of "ultimate concern," which appears early in *Systematic Theology I*, underlies the argument in all three volumes, and is elaborated in *Dynamics of Faith*. "Faith," Tillich writes, "is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern"⁵

Tillich, however, appears at times to view the ultimacy of *his* ultimate concern as normative. As Ernst Troeltsch at one time regarded Christianity as the ultimate religion, the "culmination-point" toward which all religion moves, and as Radhakrishnan takes Indian mysticism as the true ultimate, so Tillich seems in *Systematic Theology I* (pp. 11-15) and in *Dynamics of Faith* (passim) to affirm that only when concern has reached what Tillich regards as ultimate is it truly ultimate. Is this a covert triumphalism? In his late writing, however, he seems to modify this position.

By contrast, the formulation of the postcritical and the fiduciary in Polanyi carefully includes both ontological affirmation and limitation. He describes "Christian faith as a passionate heuristic impulse which has no prospect of consummation" (*PK*, 280) and quotes Tillich from *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*: "Faith embraces itself and the doubt about itself" (p. 61). But Tillich means the doubt that exists within faith, and Polanyi is referring to the problem of making *universal* statements that fulfill Bertrand Russell's criterion of truth "as a coincidence between one's subjective belief and actual facts" when only committed, personal affirmations with *universal intent* are possible (*PK*, 304; see also *PK*, 64-65, 301-303, and elsewhere).

Or again, there is an important difference between them in regard to theology and science. Tillich writes in

Systematic Theology I: “Revelation is the manifestation of the depth of reason and the ground of being. It points to the mystery of existence and to our ultimate concern. It is independent of what science and history say about the conditions in which it appears; and it cannot make science and history (which are rooted in detached, objective knowing) dependent on itself. No conflict between different dimensions of reality is possible” (p. 130). This view differs from that in *The Religious Situation* and is similar to the position attributed, erroneously in my opinion, to Polanyi by Harry Prosch.⁶

Polanyi proposes a perspectival, internal/external understanding of the relation between religion and science. His view is more akin to H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation* than to Tillich’s (see *PK*, 282-283 and elsewhere).

Exploration of this latter issue was central to the discussion between Tillich and Polanyi on February 21, 1963. Tillich said he had moved in the direction of Polanyi’s view earlier and referred to an article of his in the *Horkheimer Festschrift*. He might also have mentioned *The Religious Situation*. Polanyi insisted there was a difference between his own understanding and that presented by Tillich in his recent writing and lectures. Though I have learned much from Tillich and continue to be indebted to him as one of my most important teachers, I agree with Polanyi on this point and continue to find Polanyi more precise and persuasive in articulating a postcritical, fiduciary perspective helpful today in Christian theology and ethics.

Endnotes

1. Marjorie Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 8,3 (October 1977): 164-171.

2. See Huston Smith, “Two Traditions - and Philosophy,” in *Religion of the Heart*. Seyyed H. Nasr & William Stoddart (eds.). Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991: 278-296. Smith describes how philosophy as conceived since Descartes “seems to have played out its destiny and reached a dead end” (279) and delineates incisively the self-destruction of philosophy in the twentieth century. He then proposes a reappropriation of tradition with striking similarities to the postcritical program that Polanyi elaborates with precision and comprehensiveness. In a footnote (287) Smith gives an example about Japanese chicken sexers learning, not by specified rules but through apprenticeship, that resembles examples used by Polanyi and would probably have been included by him had he known of it.

3. Grene: 164.

4. Cf. Charles Sanders Peirce and Josiah Royce.

5. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper, 1957): 1.

6. Harry Prosch, *Michael Potanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).