

Stephania Jha's Integrative Interpretation of Polanyi

J. S. Pflug

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This review essay discusses Stephanian Jha's account of Polanyi's thought in her dissertation, Michael Polanyi's Integrative Philosophy (Harvard University, Gutman Education Library: Thesis J47, 1995); I criticize her understanding and use of Polanyi's notion of "from-at" integrations.

In her doctoral thesis, "Michael Polanyi's Integrative Philosophy" (Harvard University, Gutman Education Library: Thesis J47, 1995), Stefania Jha seeks to provide us with a more precise understanding of Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing. According to Jha, this theory grounds all explicit knowing in an active process of integration—the personal, tacit event of organizing clues into a meaningful whole in one's quest for truth, guided by an aesthetically sensitive vision of reality. She defends, expands and evaluates this interpretation while drawing extensively from Polanyi's entire corpus, including his personal letters, making her work an excellent introduction to Polanyi's thought. However, her understanding of Polanyi's work reveals no new treasures which previous interpretations have left veiled. Although Jha believes she is picking up "where Polanyi left off" (p.200) when she stresses Polanyi's distinction between *from-to* and *from-at* knowledge, her description of this distinction is quite ambiguous if not confused, as I shall detail.

Polanyi emphasized the role of belief in his earlier work, *Personal Knowledge*, but Jha notices that, in later works, he relied more upon the role of "integration" in personal action and thereby better depicted his concepts of knowing and truth. Jha characterizes Polanyi's theory of truth as an "open" version of coherence theory, "a blend of coherence-correspondence theories, with 'coherence theory' most strongly emphasized" (p.140). This accurately captures Polanyi's insistence that, although "truth lies in the achievement of contact with reality" (p.140), reality is known only through the selective and heuristic functions of personal knowledge; that is to say, it is only through a scientist's impassioned unity of purpose that he will discern "gestalten that indicate a true coherence in nature" (*KB*, 138). From this, Jha correctly concludes that the scientist's interaction with reality will always have an indeterminate character. As she says, "Integration is anchored in and evoked by the significance of the focus of attention . . . it opens meaning up to richer possibility" (p.152-153).

Jha's integrative interpretation reiterates what others have found to be most significant in Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge. First, he offered an account of scientific explanation (a form of "insight") that is grounded in tacit knowing. Because we can never specify the grounds on which we believe something to be true with complete certainty, scientific explanation "is a reinterpretation, a reconception, illuminated by previously unexplained connections and offering new principles" (p.158). Second, he hoped his work would overcome the prevailing deterministic, mechanistic worldview, and its insatiable appetite for reductionist explanations. In its place, he transformed his theory of stratified, hierarchical meaning into an ontological theory. As sounds are integrated into words and words into phrases, so too there are aspects of lower levels of reality which emerge to form more complex levels; furthermore, "each level is subject to dual control—its own laws and the laws of the level above it" (p.100).

Therefore, higher levels cannot be fully explained by lower levels, making reductionism impossible. Finally, with his emphasis on the inextricable personal element in all knowledge, he meant to bring scientific knowing closer to the humanities; more specifically, he aimed at “treating science as continuous with other areas of knowing in culture” (p.190).

From the perspective of the “standard view of science,” Jha recognizes that Polanyi’s theory of explanation leaves an unsatisfactory account of scientific truth, because Polanyi’s data are not independent of our conceptions. If facts can only be tacitly integrated into a theory as we strive to prove or confirm that theory, then all facts are theory-laden, depending on our conceptions and assertions. Jha admits that she finds this is very problematic, for Polanyi “seems to blur the distinction between a claim of contact with reality and actual contact with reality, and between the commitment to truth and truth itself” (p.108).

Ultimately, Jha contends that the only way for Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge to gain recognition within the scientific community is for someone to show how the “standard view” is untenable as a complete account of scientific knowledge. In Jha’s words, “if we can grant Polanyi that tacit knowing underpins explicit knowing, and both play a role in scientific knowing . . . [this] would allow Polanyi to claim that his theory of tacit knowing subsumes theories of explicit knowing, i.e., explicit knowing is a special case of tacit knowing” (pp.190-191). Therefore, Jha attempts to show the merits of Polanyi’s personal knowledge over that standard view of science by applying his epistemology and ontology to medicine as a way of uniting the humanist “soft” approach (which treats the patient as a person) and the scientific “hard” approach (which treats the patient as a mere bodily mechanism).

Ontologically, Polanyi’s philosophy offers, Jha suggests, an anti-mechanistic alternative which demands that the physician approach his patient with empathy, for his patient is not a mere mechanism, but a person. Using Polanyi’s notion of stratified, hierarchical (emergent) entities, Jha argues that a person (i.e., a mind) cannot be reduced to a mere collection of parts. Instead, a mind is a “closed causal loop,” an anticipatory system functionally dependent on an environment. The mind must be treated as a whole that operates in a non-linear fashion, and therefore “the ‘mind-brain problem’ falls irretrievably outside of science” (p.196). Hence, when a physician seeks to diagnose a patient, he or she will feel obligated to go beyond the mere instrumental advantages of asking the patient questions about her physical condition to an ontological attitude of treating the patient as a person.

Jha argues that Polanyi’s epistemology best describes the way physicians settle on diagnostic hypotheses as they talk with a patient about his or her condition. Because the mind is the meaning of the body, the physician could have no better place to begin in assessing the condition of the body. Jha identifies the *from-to* conception of knowing as this revelatory encounter between the physician and his patient; in fact, she says the physician needs to employ this way of knowing “as the foundation of the clinical relationship” (p.201).

While the tacit, personal *from-to* form of knowing is fundamental in giving global insight (i.e., a vision of coherence) to the physician, he still needs to treat the patient’s body as a mechanism in his effort to validate his diagnostic hypothesis. Therefore, according to Jha, “in the stage where the scientific problem-solving is predominant, the ‘from-at’ mode of knowing is in operation and the ‘from-to’ mode is latent, the perception of the patient as the phenomenological-existential body is in subsidiary awareness” (p.203). Thus it is the physician’s responsibility to learn how gracefully to “oscillate” between personal

integration (i.e., *from-to* knowing) and empirical analysis (i.e., *from-at* knowing), so that the effectiveness of his work is enhanced.

In conjunction with this rather curious notion of “oscillation,” Jha criticizes some of Marjorie Grene’s discussion of Polanyian points. Jha contends that Grene inappropriately discusses the *from-to* structure of knowing as a ubiquitous “doctrine” rather than a flexible principle; Grene does not regard the *from-to* structure as an optional working hypothesis. Jha is correct that, for Grene (and I would say Polanyi, too), all awareness moves from subsidiaries to the focal object of attention. As Grene puts it, there is no structure of knowing other than *from-to*: “No cognitive performance ever has any other structure” (“Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 8:3 (Oct. 1977), p.169). But this conviction, argues Jha, makes Grene unable to see how the difference between Polanyi’s *from-to* and *from-at* knowing may contribute to Polanyi’s epistemology.

Jha believes that Polanyi speaks of *from-at* knowing as having a fundamentally different structure of attention than *from-to* knowing; in *from-at* knowing, there is a “shifting [of] one’s attention from the direction on which the subsidiaries bear and focusing instead on the subsidiaries themselves” (“Logic and Psychology,” *American Psychologist* 23.1-6 (1968), p.39). Jha proposes a way of distinguishing these two forms of knowing: while *from-to* knowing deals with phenomenal awareness (i.e., wholes), *from-at* knowing deals with information (i.e., particulars). Using this distinction, Jha argues that *from-at* knowing is made manifest when a physician gives focal significance to a former subsidiary (e.g., the perception of the patient as a mechanical body) of an irreducible meaning (i.e., the perception of the patient as a mind) which was grasped by the physician’s *from-to* knowing. Yet she also states that the former meaning of *from-to* knowing (i.e., the mind) now becomes subsidiary. In this rather convoluted scheme, Jha does not convincingly show how *from-at* knowing does *not* move from subsidiaries to a focal object of attention. Far from being opposed to Grene, it seems that she, too, upholds the *from-to* structure of all knowing as a “doctrine.”

As far as I tell, it seems Jha’s chief motive for distinguishing these two forms of knowing is to provide a way in which we can give special significance, in the case of *from-at* knowing, to the subsidiary perception of an irreducible meaning (i.e., “the perception of the patient as the phenomenological-existential body”). If this is an accurate portrayal of Jha’s position, she must demonstrate how a knower could give focal significance to his or her object of attention (i.e., the patient’s body), while also giving another form of attention (focal?) to the latent, subsidiary meaning of the person. What exactly does it mean to say that *from-to* knowing, including its inherent focal awareness, can become consciously latent? Polanyi’s position is that we cannot give focal significance to two different objects at the same time. Jha seems to be proposing an expansion of Polanyi’s account.

We are left with the question of what Polanyi meant by distinguishing *from-at* and *from-to* knowing. Did he really intend to create a substantial difference between two forms of knowing, or merely to stress the contrast in the functions of the mind’s two forms of awareness (i.e., subsidiary and focal)? Although Polanyi can be easily misread on this issue, I believe the latter is the correct interpretation. As he says, “Tacit knowing is a *from-to* knowing. Sometimes it will also be called a *from-at* knowing, but this variation will be only a matter of convenience” (“Logic and Psychology”, p.29).

In “Life’s Irreducible Structure”(*KB*, 225-239), Polanyi emphasizes that there is a qualitative

difference between the reality of the brain and the reality of the mind by demonstrating how a subject viewing a cat and a neurologist viewing this subject's brain are related to the subject's brain in different ways. Both the subject viewing the cat and the neurologist viewing the subject's brain have *from-to* knowledge, but the neurologist cannot be said to fully participate in the focal meaning of his or her subject's object of attention (i.e., the cat); however, this is only because the neurologist's attention is focused on the subject's brain, and not the cat.

While the subject is subsidiarily relying on his brain to integrate (i.e., interiorize) the meaning of the sense data concerned with the cat and his body's responses, the neurologist does not—in fact, cannot—rely on the subject's brain in this same way; that is to say, the neurologist can neither participate in nor know of the subject's *from*-knowledge. Instead, the neurologist has a focal relation to the subject's brain and subsidiarily relies on his own brain (among other things) to interiorize the mechanics of how the subject's brain neurologically processes the information about the cat to help support, for example, his theory of how perception is the result of neural gestalts. From the perspective of the subject viewing the cat, the neurologist is temporarily “alienated” from integrating the perception of the cat, because his attention is focused on the subject's brain. Here, *from-at* knowing is the term Polanyi uses to refer to the neurologist's alienation, for he cannot participate in knowing the subject's mind; rather, he can only participate in his own understanding of the subject's neurological processes.

Jha could better achieve her hope of grounding all explicit knowing in tacit knowing by demonstrating how the humanist “soft” approach and the scientific “hard” approach do *not* have to be *united*, for these two approaches are always already united. Beyond this, she could cite case studies showing how those physicians who temporarily bracket their abundant technical skills and methodological assumptions in order to communicate authentically with patients actually give more accurate diagnoses. For example, when a friend of mine once complained of respiratory problems, no appetite, and abnormal fatigue, a physician followed these clues no farther than assigning them to a mere cold. However, a month later after an x-ray, another doctor discovered a tumor the size of a volley-ball in his (now collapsed) left lung.

I believe Jha was on the right track in stressing the revelatory encounter between the physician and his patient as the foundation of the clinical relationship, but her attempt to make the epistemological structure of this encounter utterly unique from the physician's investigation of the patient's body is unnecessary. Also, I would argue that Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing can best serve the physician by helping him understand the importance of subsidiarily relying on the art of communication, so he may learn to trust the authority of the patient's experience, and then integrate it into his diagnosis. Polanyi argued, “A true communication will take place if, and only if, . . . assumptions of [mutual] authority and trust are in fact justified” (*PK*, p.206). Rather than solely relying on the often cold, shallow and general techniques one learns in medical school, a physician must develop a virtue of personal concern as he strives to interiorize the patient's experience as a—or in some cases *the*—key subsidiary clue to interpreting the patient's sickness or injury. In other words, as opposed to the physician imposing his conceptual framework onto the patient's symptoms—and as a consequence, neither questioning his own assumptions nor entering into an interpretative relationship with his patient—the physician should “participate feelingly” (*KB*, p.149) by communicating authentically with his patient.

Notes on Contributors

Jeff Pflug is currently a graduate student at the University of Montana where he is completing a Master's degree in philosophy.

S.R. Jha is an Associate at the Philosophy of Education Research Center, Harvard University. Philosophic interests, in addition to Polanyi's work include – methods in philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, history of science and its relation to the philosophy of science.

Philip Mirowski is Carl Koch Professor of Economics and the History and Philosophy of Science, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556, USA. This paper was originally a talk delivered at the meetings of the European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy, Krakow, Poland, October 1995. Mirowski is author of *More Heat than Light* (1989) and the forthcoming book entitled *Machine Dreams*, as well as editor of *Natural Images in Economic Thought* (1994).

Stephen Turner is Graduate Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida, Tampa. He has written extensively on the philosophical aspects of social theory, and has dealt with specifically Polanyian issues in a variety of places, including his book with Regis Factor, *Max Weber and the Dispute Over Reason and Value* (Routledge, 1984), which has a chapter on the intellectual context of the revival of the concept of tradition in the wartime and postwar period, especially in Britain. He has also worked extensively on the problem of the governance of science, and is presently engaged in a major project on the constitution of science which is designed to update the analyses made by Polanyi in such texts as *The Logic of Liberty*.

Walter Gulick teaches at Montana State University-Billings where he also now serves as Director of International Education and Honors Programs following a stint as interim Provost. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the Technical University of Budapest in the Spring term of 1993 where he helped put together an early English issue of *Polanyiana*. Gulick serves as the *TAD* Book Review editor; he has written a number of reviews and articles which have been in *TAD* over the years.