

Polanyi's Integrative Philosophy and My New Interpretation: A Response to Pflug's Review.

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ABSTRACT Key Words: from-to awareness, from-at awareness, scientific truth, philosophic roots, intellectual biography.

In this response to Jeff Pflug's review of my dissertation Michael Polanyi's Integrative Philosophy, I note that Pflug focused on my discussion of possible extension of Polanyi's epistemology; he has also taken my statements on scientific truth out of context. In addition, he ignored the four major elements of the dissertation, thereby not giving the reader a "map" to the meaning and the rationale of the work – an intellectual biography of Polanyi.

I am glad J.S. Pflug found the dissertation to be a good introduction to the study of Polanyi. I am also gratified that he found my exploration of Polanyi's speculations on *from-at* knowing interesting, though he disagrees with me.

He is in good company. Marjorie Grene, who kindly commented on this dissertation some years ago also disagrees with me on this point, as well as on my label "doctrine" applied to her comment in her famous 1977 essay "Tacit Knowing, Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy" in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* (8, October, 1977). In this essay and in her comments to me she held that Polanyi committed an error and obscured his revolutionary idea of *from-to* structure of all knowing by introducing a distinction between *from-to* and *from-at* awareness. All knowing has a *from-to* structure. In the dissertation (pp. 49-51) I explored the implications of a late development in Polanyi's thought, i.e., that he wanted to make the distinction between *from-to* and *from-at* awareness for the purpose of pointing out the difference between the way of knowing another mind and the way of knowing another body. This move was not for the purpose of reviving Cartesian dualism, as Grene feared, although Polanyi's use of the term "dualism" is fluid and somewhat misleading. The context of his speculation offers some clarification. Polanyi speculated that the mind and the body are known by differently directed attention. (see his Logic and Psychology and The Tacit Dimension). This is the crux of the claim and the point I explored. Grene objected to Polanyi's *from-to from-at* distinction, "For the theory of mind mediated by the doctrine of tacit knowing is a theory of mind as fundamentally and irrevocably incarnate." (Grene, p. 169) My label "doctrine" referred to this statement, in which I interpreted "doctrine" in the strong sense as an unchangeable rule. Grene apparently intended "doctrine" in the sense of "theme", the weaker sense of the term. This was not clear to me.

My point in exploring Polanyi's speculation on *from-at* knowing was to see how a "loose end" could be extended and elaborated. If Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing is partially open, analogously to good scientific theories, then it should have "intimations of fruitfulness" in the future. That is, his theory also should have a scope still left indeterminate. My exploration of *from-at* knowing was an exploration of the implications of Polanyi's epistemology to test its fruitfulness. Although the dead cannot defend themselves, I think that Polanyi who was trained in the sciences would agree with me. About the somewhat strong label "doctrine," I belatedly

apologize to Marjorie Grene; it should be mentioned, that the discussion of these implications of *from-at* is but a few pages in the dissertation.

Pflug's descriptions of some traditional points of Polanyian philosophy in the dissertation are correct. However, I have not "recognized that Polanyi's theory of explanation leaves an unsatisfactory account of scientific truth, because data are not independent of our conceptions"(20) nor did I "admit that (I) find this is very problematic, for Polanyi" (as Pflug quotes from my dissertation) "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" (20).

These "admissions" are taken out of context. The first point, that data are theory laden, is a commonplace now, though it may have been an "unsatisfactory account" in the eyes of the opponents of Polanyi and Hanson at the time of the Polanyi-Grunbaum debate. This point is clear in the dissertation, as the long chapter devoted to Polanyi's epistemology shows. The dissertation quotation in the second point, needs to be put in context of my discussion and broader evaluation of Polanyi's philosophy, where I show Polanyi's notion of the two poles of knowing: the personal pole (claim of contact with reality, claim of truth) and the external pole (contact with reality, truth itself--Jha, p.167). Pflug has not paid attention to my gradual development of the argument. The opinions presented in the quotations from sources and ideas referred to in the process of building of the argument have been attributed to me as my assessment of Polanyi's whole philosophy. This is unfortunate.

It is also unfortunate, that the four obvious elements of this intellectual biography-- the roots and development of his thought--have not been pointed out to guide the potential reader. They are these:

- (1) The detailed discussion of Polanyi's philosophical roots in Kant and in Kant's "children"-- from Gestalt psychology through phenomenology and Dilthey's existentialism, to Peirce's logic.
- (2) The laying out of the conceptual model to show how these roots are transmuted into Polanyi's *from-to* schema of tacit knowing. I published this model in "A New Interpretation of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Tacit Knowing: Integrative Philosophy with 'Intellectual Passions'" in *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, (28:4 [1997]: 611-631).
- (3) The analysis and demonstration of the structure of Polanyi's epistemology as can be seen in mathematics, physics and biology. This analysis is the groundwork for the argument for the nature and justification of personal knowledge culminating in the Polanyi - Grunbaum debate, that is the debate between the "personal knowledge view of science" and the "standard view of science." It provides the intellectual backbone for Polanyi's innovation.
- (4) The biography, which uses untapped archival materials in Hungarian between Polanyi and his colleagues of his formative years as a chemist, and correspondence with family members, as well as early essays unpublished at the time of dissertation writing. These archival materials enrich the background, enhance the nuances and point to the origin of Polanyi's concerns with civic freedom grounded in moral obligation, and with freedom of thought. These newly introduced materials provide a balance to those interpretations, which remake Polanyi in an image approximating a conservative British Episcopalian.

I believe, all four of these aspects are “new treasures,” especially as elements of a portrait of “man in thought,” even though Pflug did not find them so.

It is true that W.T. Scott has written of Polanyi’s philosophy as a Gestalt Philosophy (Polanyi did not agree with this assessment (Jha, p. 33)) and Marjorie Grene’s assessment of Polanyi has a distinctly phenomenological flavor. However, most commentaries did not (at the time of writing) go beyond these two layers; neither Dilthey’s existentialism nor Peirce’s logic has been explored in connection with Polanyi in the manner the dissertation has analyzed these sources, showing the layering and development of Polanyi’s epistemology. My documented roots of Polanyi’s philosophy in Kant especially with respect to the crucial dynamic of Intellectual Passions, the fulcrum of “personal” in personal knowledge, has not been previously analyzed thoroughly, to the best of my knowledge.

That there is an aesthetic element in Polanyi’s conception of scientific creativity is obvious, but the philosophical roots of this element have not been so. The same can be said of the notion of “universal intent.”

Overall, the review of the dissertation is of its highly selected parts, missing (and not indicating) the organic structure of the work. This has the effect of missing the meaning and rationale of the work. The meaning is that Polanyi owes more to Kant than he tells, and the rationale is an accessible conceptual model of Polanyi’s epistemology. In spite of this, I appreciate Pflug’s recommendation of the work as a good introduction to Polanyi.