

# Tradition & Discovery

## The Polanyi Society Periodical

Volume XXV

Number 2

1998-99

---

Preface.....	2
Call for Papers.....	3
Submissions for Publication.....	3
Minutes of Polanyi Society Meeting of November 21, 1998 .....	4
Michael Polanyi And The Liberal Philosophical Tradition In Hungary.....	5
Éva Gábor	
A Polyanian Approach To Conceiving And Teaching Introduction To Philosophy.....	11
Dale Cannon	
Notes on Contributors.....	19
“Beyond Logic and Beneath Will” – Teaching in a Polyanian Spirit.....	20
David W. Rutledge	
Reclaiming “Science as a Vocation”: Learning as Self-Destruction; Teaching as Self-Restraint.....	30
D. M. Yeager	
Information on WWW Polanyi Resources.....	41
Review.....	42
<i>Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society</i> by Edward I. Bailey Reviewed by Paul Lewis	
Membership Information.....	43
Information on Electronic Discussion Group.....	43

# The Polanyi Society

## Preface

### General Coordinator

Richard Gelwick  
RFD #5 Box 2440/Cundys Harbor  
Brunswick, ME 04011  
(207)725-7975

### General Editor-*Tradition & Discovery*

Phil Mullins  
Missouri Western State College  
St. Joseph, MO 64507

### Book Review Editor

Walter Gulick  
Montana State University--Billings  
Billings, MT 59101

### Art Studies

Doug Adams  
PSR/Grad. Theol. Union  
Berkeley, CA

### Communication/Rhetorical Studies

Sam Watson  
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

### Education Studies

Raymond Wilken  
Kent State University

### Medical and Psychiatric Studies

Allen R. Dyer  
Quillen College of Medicine  
East Tennessee State University

### Philosophical Studies

Martha Crunkelton  
Bates College

### Religious Studies

Martin X. Moleski  
Canisius College

### Member At Large

Harry Prosch  
Skidmore College

### UK Coordinator

John Puddefoot  
Benson House, Willowbrook  
Eton  
Windsor, Berks SL4 6HL

On the following two pages, you will find important information coming from the November, 1999, business meeting of the Polanyi Society in Orlando, Florida. Some changes are in the making and a few are worth mentioning: (1) Thanks are due to Richard Gelwick for many years of service as General Coordinator. Richard has retired from his university post and wants to shift his Polanyi Society role to that Treasurer rather than General Coordinator; Walter Gulick has agreed to become our new General Coordinator. (2) The Polanyi Society is on the way to becoming an official non-profit organization. That is, we are applying for a tax status which allows us to receive contributions and provide contributors with a tax letter. If you are curious about the financial status of the Polanyi Society, it is safe to say we are solvent, but not very much so. Each year, we collect dues about equal to our expenditures to publish and mail *TAD*; additionally, we have a few other expenses such as space rental for the annual meeting. We don't anticipate, after our change in tax status, any large fund drives, but we will accept contributions from those interested in Polanyi Society projects. We will begin publishing basic financial information on the Society. (3) Some reorganization of the *TAD* editorial board will occur in the next year. After many years of having area coordinators, we will shift to a more functional structure. (4) Finally, you will note the general concern to involve younger scholars in the Polanyi Society. This is an important issue for any professional society. I hope if you have ideas, you will forward them to Marty Moleski or Walter Gulick. On the next page, you will also find the Call for Papers for the Boston November, 1999, meeting. Please remember that it is imperative that proposals come in by the March 31, 1999, deadline. For many years, the Polanyi Society annual meeting has been held in conjunction with the much larger American Academy of Religion annual meeting. The AAR calls the shots in setting up deadlines for room reservations and publications; we simply must abide by their timetable.

The article in this issue by Éva Gábor, "Michael Polanyi And The Liberal Philosophical Tradition In Hungary" was originally a paper she did in August, 1998, as a part of the Polanyi Society session at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston. It is an interesting essay that helps to situate Polanyi's political ideas in their Hungarian context. The other three essays by Dale Cannon, David Rutledge and D.M. Yeager were the papers given in November, 1998, at the Orlando Polanyi Society meeting. The authors are all seasoned teachers who have been thoughtfully reflecting, for more than twenty years, on the bearing of Polanyi's thought on their practice. Those who attended the Orlando session found the set of papers to be sensitive reflections which produced a lively discussion; sharing the set with the larger *TAD* audience seemed an excellent idea.

Phil Mullins

*Tradition and Discovery* is indexed selectively in *The Philosopher's Index* and *Religion One: Periodicals*. Book reviews are indexed in *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*.

# Call for Papers

The next meeting of the Polanyi Society will be held in Boston, November 19-20, 1999. Presently, I anticipate we will host two sessions (Friday evening and Saturday morning) prior to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature.

We are interested in nominations for a presentation by an invited speaker for either the Friday night or Saturday morning session. We have not as yet narrowed the focus for our sessions. Some possible topics of interest suggested at our 1998 meeting in are listed in the Minutes of the Business Meeting for November 21, 1998 (p. 4). We are open to further suggestions or refinements in these topics or other topics.

The welfare of the Polanyi Society depends upon your tacit awareness of what matters most and your personal commitment to write something excellent for us to consider in Boston. By March 31, 1999, please send comments and proposals to:

Martin X. Moleski, SJ  
Department of Religious Studies  
Canisius College  
Buffalo, New York 14208

Tel: (716) 888-2383  
FAX: (716) 886-6506  
[moleski@canisius.edu](mailto:moleski@canisius.edu)

## Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide a hard copy and a disk or an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

Phil Mullins  
Missouri Western State College  
St. Joseph, Missouri 64507  
Fax (816) 271-5987  
Phone: (816)271-4386  
E-mail: [mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu](mailto:mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu)

Walter Gulick  
Montana State University, Billings  
Billings, Montana 59101  
Fax (406) 657-2187  
Phone: (406) 657-2904  
[phil\\_gulick@vixen.emcmt.edu](mailto:phil_gulick@vixen.emcmt.edu)

**Minutes of Polanyi Business Meeting**  
**Orlando, Florida**  
**November 21, 1998**

1. Richard Gelwick is retiring as coordinator of the Polanyi Society, since he is also retiring from his university position. He will continue to act as Treasurer for the group.
2. Charles McCoy and Phil Rolnick moved that Phil Mullins should be authorized to establish the Polanyi Society as a not-for-profit corporation. The motion was adopted unanimously. We will have to develop By-Laws for the group that will allow those who can attend the Annual Meeting to continue to act on behalf of the whole Society.
3. David Ruttledge and Charles McCoy moved that Walt Gulick be appointed Coordinator of the Polanyi Society and that Richard Gelwick continue to serve as Treasurer. The motion was adopted unanimously. The change will take place at the end of the current academic year.
4. Phil Mullins discussed the reorganization of the editorial board for Tradition and Discovery. Charles McCoy recommended that every effort be made to obtain international representation on the board.
5. The group discussed how to encourage younger scholars to become interested in Polanyi. We would like to identify the new people in the field, especially those with dissertations in progress, and encourage them to join us at our annual meetings. It might be wise to continue to have an invited paper from a prominent scholar (e.g., Parker Palmer, Mark Johnson, Nancy Murphey) and to find new methods of advertising the talks. We might also consider having the invited paper on Saturday morning instead of Friday night so as to accommodate those who travel long distances to the conference. The disadvantage of such a schedule would be the loss or dislocation of our tradition of a group discussion led by members of the Society. Charles McCoy agreed to contact Parker Palmer to find out whether he would be interested in doing a presentation for us.
6. We considered the possibility of setting up a schedule of topics several years in advance. We might consider a broad cycle for topics related to Polanyi's work: Philosophy and Religion, Psychology, Philosophy of Science Social and Economic Issues, Aesthetics and Ethics. Possible topics suggested for next and/or future meetings: "The Revolution that Never Happened"; "Problems with Polanyi"; "A [Post-?] Critical Assessment of Polanyi's Realism"; "Moral Inversion: Polanyi's Greatest Contribution to Social Analysis"; "Polanyi's View of Language"; "Polanyi's Fuzzy Logic."

Secretary *Pro Tem*

Martin X. Moleski, SJ

# Michael Polanyi And The Liberal Philosophical Tradition In Hungary

Éva Gábor

[Editor's Note: The following paper was presented by Professor Gabor (President of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association centered in Budapest, Hungary) at the Polanyi Society meeting held at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston in August of 1998. Thanks go to Walter Gulick for editorial work which allowed prompt publication of this essay.]

**ABSTRACT:** Key Words: Michael Polanyi, liberal philosophical tradition, Hungarian social and economic development, Hungarian history, liberal Hungarian statesmen

*This essay describes the Hungarian historical background out of which Michael Polanyi's lifelong commitment to a liberal, democratic form of government grew. Hungary's liberal thinkers blossomed in the nineteenth century, but their orientation was more political and practical than philosophical. Enlightenment ideas did not penetrate deeply into Hungarian society, which in recent centuries was hampered by its Eastern European and feudal ties. Thus Polanyi felt he had to move to more liberal countries.*

Michael Polanyi was a significant thinker whose fate was connected with three countries: Hungary (1891-1919), Germany (1920-1933) and Great Britain (1933-1976). The first of these countries exists within the orbit of Eastern/Central Europe, while the other two belong to the West. Regional differences between these areas made the historical, economic, political, and intellectual development of the countries essentially different. In this essay, I will describe the differences in their development with respect to their liberal philosophical traditions.

A free, liberal country was important to M. Polanyi, who went into self-imposed exile in 1919 and again in 1933. Indeed, he was searching for a better life and career as a citizen of a much more liberal and democratic country than either his homeland, Hungary, or his first chosen country, Germany, turned out to be.

In the first three decades of his life, Polanyi lived in his homeland, Hungary. His father, M. Pollacsek, a successful railway engineer and businessman in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, lived and worked in Vienna as well as Budapest. M. Polanyi soon learned what it meant to be a child of a successful businessman in the Monarchy. He experienced wealth in abundance, attended the best schools (including the MINTA gymnasium for high school), had excellent teachers, and came to an early knowledge of foreign languages while surrounded by the atmosphere of classical European culture. It also meant trips to foreign countries, and, last but not least, it meant meeting interesting people.

But too soon and unexpectedly he had to leave the sunny side of life and get accustomed to the shady side. The boy in his teens had to realize that a family like his also has to face the vicissitudes of laissez-faire

capitalism. M. Pollacsek could not prevail against an economic crisis, and at the end of the nineteenth century went into bankruptcy. Even if not fallen into poverty, the family had to live in a rather modest way. The children had to contribute to the income of the family. M. Polanyi was in his early teens when he made money by tutoring children of rich families. This way he came to Karlsruhe, Germany as a companion of a rich boy. This experience influenced his later determination to return to Germany in 1920 to learn chemistry and physics at the University of Karlsruhe.

However, his modest means and experience in Germany were only peripheral motivations for leaving Hungary for Karlsruhe. An essentially more definitive fact determining Polanyi's mentality and action was the lack of liberal philosophical traditions in Central Europe, including Hungary. Characteristic of this region was the belated development of economy, politics and political culture. This delay determined significantly the position and role of political liberalism in the development of Hungarian society.

If we compare the development of the two European regions, we find that two models can be distinguished. The core (Western Europe) model can be contrasted with the peripheral (Eastern Europe) model. Characteristic of the core model was that modernization extended to all areas — industry, agriculture, infrastructure, communication, everyday life — at the same time. Characteristic of the peripheral model was that old and new structures co-existed. The strong archaic feudal and weak capitalist systems existed simultaneously, with the former dominating. Development of industry was slow and uneven; the industrial revolution lagged behind. Lack of capital was a permanent condition, with the food industry and raw material production being chronically inefficient.

In the core model countries, the radical agrarian revolution ran its course. In the peripheral model countries, the heavy influence of the feudal estates meant the small farms were not able to exist and develop. At the end of the last century, Hungary was called “the country of three million beggars.”

In the core model the manifold competition of entrepreneurs contributed to the development of the ideology of liberalism: the ideas of liberty, humanism, enlightenment and individualism emerged. In contrast, in the peripheral model the old feudal system was conserved.

The Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs wrote in his famous book, *Drafts of the Three Historical Regions of Europe*, the following: “For 500 years after the foundation of the Hungarian state, Hungary belonged to Western Europe [core model] and really had the advantage of belonging to it. In the next 400 years she was forced to be absorbed into the East European region.” I have no time to mention all the historical causes. For Hungary, the hardest consequence of this situation was that the country was unable to develop and was motionless for a period of several centuries. This situation made it impossible for Hungary to keep pace with the general European development. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dissolution of the feudal economic structure occurred in Western Europe. During this period, industry, commerce and transportation were developing in a powerful way and the ideas which later were dominant in the classical European philosophical thinking rose to the top. In the meantime, in Eastern European countries time seemed to come to a standstill.

Now we have to review the history of Eastern European and especially Hungarian development in the last one hundred and fifty years. We have to run through its economic, political and cultural situation to be able to answer the question as to why Hungarian liberal philosophical ideas differed from the Western

European model.

I may be asked why I begin by speaking about the differences. Why do I put them in first place and why do I not draw parallels showing the similar or the same character of the liberal philosophical thinking and traditions of the two regions? My answer is short. It is because there are very few identical features, and the differences appear to be much more dominant.

Let us summarize the most important differences:

a) The traditional feudal institutions of agriculture and trade were maintained and continued in Hungary, and society was built on the relations of nobility and serfdom until the second part of the nineteenth century.

b) The level of agricultural and industrial production was rather low and its technical basis underdeveloped. This way was backward in comparison to western development.

c) The Hungarian nobility was not interested in supporting economic and technical progress.

d) The feudal constitution was retained for a long time, and this was a hindrance to the modernization of the civil law.

e) In Hungary, citizens had no wish to get emancipated, and they were not able to achieve the successes of citizens in more developed countries.

f) Hungarian philosophical liberalism was strongly linked to nationalism and conservatism. Linked with the former, it alienated the minorities who comprised 50% of the population of Hungary. In this way, it repelled these weak, developing strata of citizens.

g) Hungarian philosophical liberalism came to positive results only in three spheres. These are: education, literature and some spheres of science. As for education, especially the elementary schools and middle schools (called gymnasium in Hungary) maintained by the church and universities in some big Hungarian towns had the same level as in the Western European countries. This was due first of all to Hungarian reform politicians, e.g., Jozsef Eotvos, Istvan Szechenyi, Agoston Trefort.

In sum, Hungary as part of the Habsburg Monarchy was not independent. As you may know, from the seventeenth century until 1867, Hungary was part of the Austrian Empire and lived under oppression. In 1848-49, the Hungarians fought against the Habsburg in the so-called War for Freedom and Independence. Hungary lost the war. In 1867, Hungary and her Habsburg king came to a so-called Common Understanding which resulted in the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The empire was terribly fragile even at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this situation, Hungary was primarily an agrarian country.

As you may have noticed, among the outstanding Hungarians mentioned above there were no philosophers. Most of Hungary's statesmen considered the position of the country from the point of view of politics and literature. All this can be explained by the strong and significant feudal traditions and by the underdeveloped civil conditions.

Despite the absence of philosophers, what may be termed the Hungarian liberal philosophical tradition grew. This tradition was oriented about practical, political issues, but it was marked by an open, liberal search for new policies and programs. Outstanding representatives of this tradition include the following:

FERENC DEAK (1803-1870): jurist, politician, minister of justice. He was a representative of liberal ideas

on a moral basis and promoted spontaneous development. The abilities of Ferenc Deak are to be thanked for the rather favorable outcome of the Common Agreement of 1867.

JOZSEF EOTVOS (1813-1871): writer, politician, lawyer. When traveling abroad, he got acquainted with liberal ideas. A delegate to Parliament from 1832 to 1836, he was a liberal member of the opposition in the upper house. As minister of education in 1848, after the previously mentioned War of Freedom and Independence, he had to emigrate to Germany and could return only in 1853. He was a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and in 1867 minister of education for the second time. He was the greatest Hungarian liberal. He fought for modernization. Between 1849 and 1867, his central aim was to create a civil state. His chief oeuvre was *Influence of the Dominant Ideas of the 19th Century on the State*.

FERENC KAZINCZY (1759-1832): writer, politician. He was an outstanding student of the Hungarian language, a language innovator, and a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In 1794, he joined the Jacobin movement. He was arrested and condemned to death. After some years of prison, he was set free and after that time lived on his estate. His great work, *The Recollection of My Life*, has been a bible of the younger generations.

LAJOS KOSSUTH (1802-1894): lawyer, politician, and, between 1832 and 1840, editor of the periodical *Parliament News*. In 1847, he became a member of Parliament and, in 1848, minister of finance of the first independent Hungarian government and president of the Committee of Defense in the War for Freedom and Independence. After Hungary was defeated by the Habsburgs, he had to emigrate. In 1867, he did not accept the Common Understanding between Hungary and the Habsburg king. The plans and aims he wanted to realize during his emigration did not come true.

FERENC KOLCSEY (1790-1838): jurist, member of the Hungarian Parliament beginning in 1832. After his political career, he lived on his estate. There he wrote poems and political pamphlets in the spirit of ethical thinking. He was the outstanding representative of the Hungarian Reform Period. I cannot help but mention that he wrote the text of the Hungarian National Anthem.

ISTVAN SZECHENYI (1771-1860): military man, minister, developer of the Hungarian infrastructure. In the military, he traveled a lot in Western Europe, where he observed the development Hungary had not yet achieved. Returning home in 1825, he founded the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. On his inspiration and with financial support, the Danube was regulated, the first bridge over it was built, banks were established, and shipping on Lake Balaton and the Danube started. In 1848, he was minister of traffic and transport. Unfortunately, his mind was damaged, and he had to live in an asylum in Austria where he committed suicide. His liberalism did not remain pure.

AGOSTON TREFORT (1817-1888): jurist, pedagogue. He organized many educational innovations in the country and established schools and new towns on a western pattern. From 1867 to 1888, he was minister of agriculture, commerce and trade; in these positions, he followed European patterns in an extensive way.

I would like to emphasize again that these Hungarian writers and politicians surpassed in their activities most other Hungarian and East European statesmen. The cause of it was not only the way they applied their liberal mentality to the contemplation of Hungary's place in the wider world, but also the fact that they were open to the world, understood the challenge of their age and were not limited by conventions. That is

why M. Polanyi honored and esteemed them. As a matter of fact, he understood that they were the representatives of Hungary's future.

As an emigrant, Polanyi often emphasized his opinion that the activities of these individuals were very rare phenomena in Hungary. Never before in Hungarian history had so many outstanding positive individuals existed in the same period. If other circumstances had been more favorable, they could have definitively changed Hungarian society for the better.

The later history of Hungarian liberal philosophical history did not attract and inspire comparable magnificent individuals. Representatives of conservative ideas grew stronger and came to power. Liberal thinking, liberal politics and economic development came to a standstill. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of liberalism had acquired a rather pejorative connotation in Hungary and Eastern Europe. In the history of Hungarian governance, liberal politicians were scarce, the exceptions. There were some political parties that had nothing to do with classical liberalism.

Liberal thinkers conspicuously vanished from Hungarian public life after 1920. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that an important motive for the self-imposed emigration of Polanyi was that he could not make compromises with any illiberal regimes, not with the Hungarian regimes of Horthy, Rakosi or Kadar. All of them lacked the minimal civil liberties and democratic structures which existed in liberal Western European countries.

For Michael Polanyi, who lived in core model states after 1920, it was obvious that the contrast between the two models of European development could not be annihilated during one generation. A new generation would have to undertake the mission of completing the shift from the peripheral to the core model while at the same time retaining Hungarian national identity.

My opinion is that the above mentioned causes led M. Polanyi to the neo-liberalism of F. Hayek. He accepted Hayek's brand of liberalism almost without any criticism. Maybe this uncritical acceptance is to be understood in terms of his conviction that because liberal philosophical thinking never became rooted in Hungarian thought or society, it had adversely affected the politics and everyday life he experienced there.

From the forties through the sixties, Michael Polanyi wrote about 120 letters to his brother, Karl. These letters have yet to be studied; today they are owned by Kari Polanyi Levitt, the daughter of Karl Polanyi. Included in these letters is a discussion by the two brothers of the special meaning and character of liberalism. The letters reveal sharp differences between the two brothers, and that is why they later became estranged.

I have now completed my presentation of Hungarian liberal philosophical thinking and its heritage in relation to Eastern and Western Europe. It was a problematic heritage which Polanyi and his generation had to face as adults. After having provided some background information, I feel it to be my duty to discuss the liberal philosophical ideas of Michael Polanyi even if only in outline form. Naturally, his thought belongs to a later period: the middle decades of the twentieth century.

I have not mentioned the undertaking of this duty by chance. It is not only to pay my respect toward Michael Polanyi, but also to cherish the memory of Gabriella Ujlaki, late secretary of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association, who died unexpectedly and tragically in 1994. It was she who was deeply

interested in the approach of M. Polanyi to liberalism. Her summarizing study was published in the Hungarian periodical *Cafe Basbel* in 1991. There she wrote, "Few people know F. Hayek with whom M. Polanyi had an expanded correspondence and had friendly connections for years. [Polanyi created] the difference between the two expressions, 'made order' and 'grown order.'" F. Hayek explained under the influence of Polanyi that the order made by man can be directed through one center. On the contrary, a spontaneous order has multiple centers. One center demands dictatorship; more centers involve democracy.

This thought was expressed for the first time by Polanyi in 1939-40 in his unpublished manuscript, "The Struggle of Man." Gabriella Ujlaki could have mentioned some other works by Polanyi where he wrote about the same problem — for instance, "Order in Space and Time" (The Joseph Regenstein Library, Special Collection, Chicago, Box 26, Folder 6), "Structure of Liberalism" (Regenstein Collection, Box 30, Folder 1), and "The Republic of Science: Its Political and Economic Theory" (*Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene, 1969). In these essays, Polanyi denies every sort of totalitarianism because through it the state can exercise its power over all its citizens. So he gives the preference to modern liberalism. This is the final conclusion of the study written by Gabriella Ujlaki.

After considering the thoughts and events that the mature Michael Polanyi experienced, it is easy to understand why he wanted to find a way to get rid of the depressing experiences that his generation had to live through.

### **Relevant Works**

Kossellek, Reinhardt *Zur historischen, politischen Semantik asymmetrischen Gegenbegriffe*. Frankfurt. 1978.

Leach, Robert. *British Political Ideologies: Liberalism*. Hamstead. 1996.

Manent, Pierre. *Histoire Intellectuelle du Liberalisme*. Paris. 1987.

Nagy, Endre. "Civil Society in Michael Polanyi's Thought," *Polanyiana* 2:4/3:1 (1992-1993, double issue), 142-165.

Polanyi, Michael. "The Struggle of Man in Society." Papers of Michael Polanyi, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. Box 26, Folder 2.

Polanyi, Michael. "The Structure of Liberalism." Papers of Michael Polanyi, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. Box 30, Folder 1.

Szucs, Jenő. *Drafts of the Three Historical Regions of Europe*. Budapest. 1974.

Wallenstein, Immanuel. "The Rise and Future of the World Capitalist System--Concepts for Comparative Analysis." Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New Orleans. Louisiana. 1972.

# A Polanyian Approach To Conceiving And Teaching Introduction To Philosophy

Dale Cannon

ABSTRACT Key Words: introduction to philosophy, post-critical, methodological belief, allegory of the cave, teaching critical thinking, Michael Polanyi, William James

*This paper represents one attempt to implement a post-critical approach to teaching introduction to philosophy, in contrast with the usual approach which serves to re-establish the critical paradigm that Polanyi's "post-critical philosophy" is meant to challenge and displace. It aims to have students discover their own fiduciary access to reality and rely upon it while slowly building competence in critical analysis of the principal intellectual options in the history of philosophy.*

My comments assume that Polanyi's diagnosis and critique of the methodology of doubt that has characterized modern intellectual culture is substantially sound and that his case for the fiduciary grounding of, and personal participation in shaping, all rational judgment is cogent. I do not intend to argue for them here, or even to expound them to any significant extent.

The typical way undergraduate students are introduced to philosophy — especially in regard to epistemology but even more so in regard to *doing* philosophy (including writing critical papers, critically discussing philosophical theories in class, and critically reading philosophy) — involves entering an apprenticeship in critical reflection as that has been embodied in modern philosophy, with nuances of variation depending on the university setting, the teacher, and the graduate school that shaped the teacher's sensibility as a philosopher. [I wish to acknowledge that I am aware that there are many exceptions to this generalization. Please note that this generalization is already qualified.] While other disciplines than philosophy can and often do teach their students to think critically, more often than not it is the discipline of philosophy that is held to be the paradigm for critical reflection both for students and for instructors in post-secondary education. The typical introduction to philosophy course focuses on issues in epistemology and metaphysics, whether approached topically or historically, and more often than not has a major component devoted to the study of Descartes' *Meditations* — one of the first primary texts that philosophy students have opportunity to chew over at length. While it is highly unlikely that any student nowadays comes away from studying Descartes believing in Descartes' conclusions or the soundness of his major arguments, it is more than likely that the resulting paradigm which the student appropriates of what it is ideally to reflect and inquire critically is embodied in Descartes' own intellectual project: *to rebuild his understanding of things solely upon candidates for belief that can withstand his utmost efforts to doubt them*. This, I think, is so even when Descartes has not been the main focus of the course. In other words, Descartes' implicit motto — "Doubt, unless or until one has sufficient reason to believe." — is the paradigm principle of critical reflection and inquiry for the student of philosophy, the paradigm of critical reflection and inquiry not just in the study of philosophy but in any subject area, even when critical reflection in this sense is unlikely to be practiced seriously to any extent by the student in question. Insofar as these conditions hold true, the typical introductory course in philosophy serves to re-establish, or to be a major factor in re-establishing, for each new generation of college and university students the very paradigm of intellectual inquiry that Polanyi's

“*post-critical* philosophy” is meant to challenge and displace.

Consider for a moment what the Cartesian motto just cited means and implies. By itself the motto accredits an attitude of *doubt as such*, not doubt because there is some particular good reason to doubt, some serious counter-evidence to what one has heretofore believed or taken for granted. It advocates critical suspicion toward each and every candidate for belief capable of tempting you to believe it. Force it [the candidate for belief] to prove itself worthy of your belief first, before believing, before giving it your credence. Force it to prove itself worthy of belief on the ground whereon you stand, in the frame of reference you currently occupy, to the perspective you currently hold. In the process of introductory philosophical apprenticeship the motto — “Doubt unless or until one has sufficient reason to believe.” — is rarely paired with its inverse: “Believe unless or until one has sufficient reason to doubt.” No. It is presented pretty much on its own — implying that one needs no good reason to doubt, no sufficient reason to doubt, only good reasons to believe. There is, of course, a general, non-specific reason for the admonition to doubt, however: precisely to avoid being taken in by an unworthy candidate for belief, to avoid being wrong, to avoid being deceived. Above all, to avoid being self-deceived due to contributions (colorings, distortions, additions of secondary qualities) coming from one’s own subjectivity to the object of belief, making it seem more credible than it actually is.

As William James put it in his classic essay, “The Will to Believe,” the reason behind the admonition to doubt is *to avoid error* — a worthy goal to be sure. But the objective of avoiding error, James commonsensically points out, by itself will not suffice to bring you to any truth that you haven’t yet attained. By itself, doubt never ventures to seek out things not yet known in hope of discovery. James points out that the admonition to avoid error needs to be conjoined with the admonition to seek truth, to venture beyond the security of present certainties in the confidence (fallible to be sure) that things now uncertainly intimated will become known. Like Polanyi, James advocates the practical necessity of what Polanyi calls *acritical, methodological belief* in given circumstances (circumstances that James calls *genuine options*), where evidence on the surface doesn’t resolve what should be believed. Both principles — “avoid error” and “seek the truth” — need to operate in tandem, in an ongoing dialectical relationship, never one wholly without the other. One without the other is insufficient and liable to result in problems: either overbelief (credulity) or underbelief (skepticism), both of which disable serious intellectual inquiry.

Nevertheless, James’ argument and the essay from which it is taken, though occasionally presented in introductory philosophy anthologies, has for the most part gone unappreciated and unappropriated at the level of philosophical pedagogy, has generally been delegated to a topic in philosophy of religion, and is almost never considered worthy of consideration in basic epistemology. Even less Polanyi’s ideas and arguments in this respect. Where does this leave us? Precisely with the situation to which James alludes. Standard fare in introductory philosophy is learning how to detect and avoid error, how to expose fallacy, how to subject to impersonal critical analysis and skeptical ordeal any candidate for belief and any argument we may happen to encounter, period — not how to seek truth or gain confidence in its pursuit. (Indeed, not a little contemporary work in contemporary epistemology is devoted to attempts at jettisoning the concept of truth altogether.) As well it leaves the student with little if anything to counter the skeptical critiques of commonsense beliefs about ourselves and the world.

Anyone sensitized to Polanyi’s critique of the methodology of doubt, that continues dominantly to characterize intellectual culture in our time, and persuaded by Polanyi’s case for the fiduciary grounding of

rational judgment and our personal participation in shaping rational judgment, cannot in good conscience go on introducing students to philosophy as usual in this way. That, at least, is my conviction. Something has got to change. I have been puzzling for years on how to introduce students to philosophy *in a post-critical way* — not simply to “post-critical philosophy” as a body of philosophical content found in Polanyi and others (that they might happen to meet with in an upper division course, when the critical paradigm of intellectual inquiry for them will have already been well set). In other words, I seek to have my students’ introduction to philosophy be one where the paradigm of intellectual inquiry is *post-critical*. My comments here represent my current thinking about this topic and my experiences in attempting to implement a post-critical approach to teaching introduction to philosophy.

Alright, then, what does such an introductory course in philosophy look like? Or rather, what does my attempt at such an introductory course happen to look like? On the surface not a whole lot different than usual, for I have my students read from one or another anthology, including selections from Plato and Descartes, among others, and sometimes also a secondary overview of philosophy, have them write essays responding to assigned questions (recently I have experimented with team written essays), conduct classes in informal lecture and discussion style, broken up with small group discussion, etc. The difference lies more in how these materials, ideas, and arguments are handled, what questions are posed, what alternative possibilities are considered, and how students are invited to relate themselves in a fiduciary way to the things being explored.

Typically, I start off by introducing my students to two extended metaphors, both powerful and mutually reinforcing: (1) that “map is not territory” and (2) that the chief philosophical task in any philosophically problematic situation is “to find a way out of the cave.” Though these metaphors are introduced early on, they are used and repeatedly explored throughout the course.

Straightaway on the first day of the course, I pose for my students the thesis that the heart of philosophy involves a recognition that, whatever you may happen to be dealing with or thinking about, the mental map that you have of the subject matter in question — regardless of what map it happens to be and regardless of how good a map it happens to be — that that map is not the same as the territory it presumes to represent. It, the map, is a *representation*. If it is a good representation, it represents well and reliably (for certain limited purposes) the territory in question. But it may not be a good mental representation, or good in all respects, and it may be unreliable for certain purposes. In any case the map as representation is not the territory and that needs to be kept clear. *Philosophical thinking* is the effort to determine how good our mental map is (or maps, when we are considering more than one) in relation to the territory it presumes to represent, and not simply take for granted that the territory is wholly comprised by the map. It is to explore in wonder the extent to which the territory is more than, or other than, the map. The opposite of philosophical thinking, in this respect, is *philodoxy* (a term coined by Eric Voegelin): the love of opinion, or more strictly, the attitude which equates truth (the territory) with a given representation of it (a given map), and equates loyalty to the truth with loyalty to the map. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our mental maps.

The second metaphor is more complex and, if not properly qualified, more problematic. I introduce my students very early to the allegory of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*. But I immediately modify it to detach it from its connection with Plato’s metaphysics. Let me explain. Recall that the prisoners in the cave of Plato’s allegory take the shadows projected upon the wall (projected by images carried by other persons in front of

a fire) to be reality. They don't realize that the shadows are representations of images, which images are themselves putative representations of reality. Quite apart from Plato's rather contrived analogy of the situation of the prisoners with sense perception, the real genius of the story of the cave, as I see it, lies in its illumination of the predicament of persons who simply take the mental representations that peers, experts, or other persons in authority give them to be reality. Philosophical liberation and enlightenment comes in breaking free of that predicament and, first, examining critically the representations whose projected shadows one has heretofore been taking to be reality and, second, finding one's way out of the cave so as to have one's reflection draw upon one's direct acquaintance with the realities purportedly represented by these images. This interpretation of philosophical liberation works for objects we perceive with our senses no less than normative principles like justice – an important point that Plato appears to miss. I urge my students to consider philosophical thinking on their part to be the effort to escape the predicament of the prisoners in the cave, to examine critically the various mental maps of reality competing for their credence (including those of other philosophers – Plato's too, and those to which I introduce them — no less than the unphilosophical notions they bring to the course). Above all, I urge them to exercise and draw upon their own means of direct acquaintance with the realities in question – “to activate their own access to being,” in the words of Walker Percy — in the process of critically examining the mental maps they receive from others and in further developing their own mental maps (recognizing here too that territory is always other than map). I also call attention to the fact that the extended metaphor of escape from the cave (and further elaboration of it to be explained shortly) is itself an image projected on the wall of the cave to be critically examined along with the others.

To attempt to do philosophy utilizing the strategy of avoiding error (methodological doubt) without also seeking truth (methodological belief) is to escape the predicament of the prisoners in the cave but to fail to get beyond critically examining the images being paraded before the fire. It is to remain in the cave, to be stuck in the cave — and typically with the skeptical suspicion that there is no escape from the cave at all, no genuine knowledge of reality to be had. The skeptical suspicion that there is no external world, that it is radically other than we can know with our own powers of cognition, or that it cannot be known at all is a direct expression of this predicament. Note that such a suspicion is not merely theoretical; if taken seriously and not satisfactorily answered it has the immediate practical consequence of disabling our power of methodological belief, our power of pursuing truth. Yet this is the situation in which our students are too often left as a result of being introduced to philosophy.

Extending this line of thinking, in my course I introduce to my students the idea of *pitfalls on the way out of the cave* — pitfalls that may appear at first to promise a way out of the cave, only to turn out to be mental traps from which it is very difficult to extricate oneself. They are deemed pitfalls or mental traps precisely because they disable serious philosophical inquiry; they undercut the very capacity we have of getting anywhere by means of our own powers of reasoning, whether by ourselves or jointly with others. I introduce five specific pitfalls as we proceed through the course — relativism, ideological thinking, skepticism, nihilism, and scientism — what they are, what makes them plausible, and some reasoned ways out of them, reasoned ways of extricating oneself from them. Finding a way out of the cave involves becoming aware of the pitfalls and learning how to effectively counteract them with reason.

The two extended metaphors, map is not territory and escape from the cave, taken as reliable clues or guides in philosophy, have built into them certain presuppositions, which my students in various respects unpack and explore as the course proceeds. One is a distinction between knowledge by representation

(encompassing primarily propositional knowledge) and knowledge by personal acquaintance -- specifically knowledge by acquaintance of realities beyond the immediate contents of one's own mind, both tangible and intangible. This distinction we explore quite explicitly in relation to the major theories of perception, knowledge, and the mind in Western philosophy. Note that if knowledge by acquaintance of realities beyond the mind is possible, the knowing mind, is not *a closed container* cut off from the external world (except and insofar as it takes itself to be so), but is (in principle at least) *opened out upon a world extending beyond itself*, a world transcending in various respects any mental map the mind may have of it. So also, perceptual experience is not *representational* or not primarily representational (a depthless stream of sense data internal to the mind), but rather is *relational*, the multifaceted way we relate mindbodily to our environment, acquainting ourselves with it. (As well, I think it fair to say, in this respect, that the two metaphors assume a form of critical realism.) Knowledge by acquaintance is thus given a relative priority in relation to knowledge by representation — not, for the most part, by itself but as undergirding and giving personal realization and backing to whatever knowledge by representation we come to accredit and also as a fulcrum for calling into question the presumption to complete adequacy of any representation.

Another presupposition (implied in the foregoing) is the inherent capacity of each person to come to know the world in its transcendence beyond existing representations for herself, to come to know it by acquaintance, by personal relationship. It is only in light of that kind of knowing that knowledge by representation can rightly be assessed and appreciated. The exercise of this capacity involves *methodological faith* — indeed, a gradually maturing methodological faith that learns by apprenticeship. Importantly, where it is lacking, its exercise will require a confidence to be placed in the student's capacity by a mentor or teacher. The presupposition of methodological faith is explored explicitly in the course to some extent, but its most important role is realized at the level of solicited student participation and specific kinds of participation sought. Thus a primary objective is to engage, activate, and nurture my students' capacity to seek truth about things that matter.

The first serious philosophical reading we do in the course is from Plato and specifically from the early dialogues in order to get a clear grasp of Socrates as paradigm philosopher. We spend a good bit of time working at making sense of Socrates' irony, and how that irony can serve to sensitize a hearer or reader to different levels of meaning in the dialogues and analogous levels of meaning in anyone's own pretensions to knowledge and wisdom, including my students' own — i.e., how something said, taken in context, can have multiple levels of meaning discernible only as there is a corresponding inward development that has taken place in the person discerning them. [Interestingly, I have just begun to discover some interesting correlations between these levels and some theories of intellectual development among college students that have recently emerged from the work of William Perry, Mary Belenky and associates, and Joanne Kurfiss.] Let me briefly explain: Think of stages on the way between being a prisoner in the cave and finally coming to the cave's mouth. At the first level, a kind of pre-critical level, knowledge is supposed to be an answer provided by an expert and ignorance is thought to be lack of such an answer. At a second, apparently critical but still unphilosophical level, knowledge is supposed to be simply an answer one has come to for oneself (regardless of how) and ignorance is thought to be (a) not realizing this and/or (b) not yet having come to an answer for oneself. This would be the level of relativistic sophism. At a third, fully critical and conventionally philosophical level, knowledge would be having an answer with justification that withstands repeated critical examination, and ignorance would be lacking such an answer.

There is a fourth Socratic level, often overlooked, partly because it has an air of paradox about it. I

would like to call it a *post-critical* level. It is where knowledge ceases to be identified with having an answer and only emerges when the existing available answers have been examined and have been found wanting in one respect or another. Some answers are clearly better than others, but none can be taken as absolute, as having complete adequacy. This level is what Nicholas of Cusa, having Socrates in mind, was later to term “learned ignorance” – which, though sounding negative to ironically undeveloped ears, is actually profoundly positive. It is a recognition that true knowledge, knowledge at this fourth level, is a developed consciousness of the present partiality, fallibility, uncertainty, and incompleteness of one’s explicit grasp of the reality in question *vis-à-vis* one’s recognition (a knowledge by acquaintance) of the presence of the reality objectively there, transcending one’s fully adequate grasp. Note that being at this level is to be at the mouth of the cave, to be profoundly open to the reality in question that transcends one’s current grasp; indeed, there is an eagerness of “learned ignorance” to come to know it more. On the other hand, the ignorance that Socrates termed most culpable, which is fully appreciated only at this fourth level, is the pretension to know more of the reality, to grasp or possess in representation more of the reality, than one actually does. It is an ignorance of one’s true ignorance. To truly come to know and own up to one’s ignorance (to come to have “learned ignorance”) is simultaneously to come fully into possession of the little knowledge, but most precious knowledge, of what one truly does know. At this fourth level, explicit, propositional knowledge (held, be it noted, philosophically, not philodoxically, i.e., held in learned ignorance) is recognized not to be the truth itself but our own best present grasp of the truth, yet to be revised and modified as we proceed. Indeed, the primary meaning of truth shifts from correct representation of reality to personal fidelity to reality.

[Plato’s so-called theory of the forms is the inherently paradoxical attempt to develop a positive (explicit) metaphysics of the transcendental (trans-explicit) realities into which Socrates inquired. It (the explicit theory) is secondary, derivative, and — according to Plato himself — highly problematic *vis-à-vis* the tacit recognition for oneself of those realities. It is not to be equated with those realities themselves or even with a fully adequate representation of them. Plato clearly recognized it was not, despite the dominant interpretation that has been given his work in contemporary philosophy.]

I need to say that some students are relatively quick to catch on to what the fourth level I have just explained is about, others catch on to it with more difficulty, and still others have difficulty making sense of it at all, even by the end of the course. I have no magic tricks up my sleeve. Some of my students, I have come to believe, are simply not ready for the shift to thinking at the fourth level. Often many are unready to make the shift to the third. Which brings me to a minor digression: A good deal of what I am trying to do with my students in this course involves helping them come to see things from a different perspective, from a different frame of reference, and with a different paradigm than they are accustomed to. Helping them make this transition certainly is an art and not a science, and certainly no technology. Indeed, in important respects it is a matter of spirit. And sometimes I feel wholly inadequate to the task. Nevertheless, most of my students do make it, I believe.

In any case, as I have already indicated, in the course we go on to explore a variety of issues and arguments in subsequent Western philosophy, including a close reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*, among other classic texts. But now we are in a position to read them and the *Meditations* in a different light than usual, with some independent sense of the territory they seek to map. Moreover, we explore philosophical views not as historically displacing each other in a one-directional, progressive succession, but as explorations of much of the same territory but from different angles, with different concerns and agendas. This involves

methodological empathy: a specific kind of methodological belief where (as Coleridge put it) you suspend your disbelief in order to see what it is like to explore a subject by means of assumptions different from your own. In the class we juxtapose one philosophical view and associate arguments alongside others and see how they respond to each other. Thus Aristotle is not seen as displacing Plato, and Plato is given, in our imagination at least, an opportunity to respond critically to Aristotle's critique. I encourage my students to place the great philosophers in dialogue with each other so no significant voice gets lost just because it is earlier than another. So also with the conflict between Rationalism and Empiricism, where Rationalism is usually given short shrift, especially in relation to the development of modern science. In Medieval Philosophy we listen to the Christian Platonists as well as the Christian Aristotleans, the Monastic philosopher-theologians as well as the Scholastic philosopher-theologians, the classical realists as well as the nominalists. We pay attention to the spokespersons for change and contingency, the Heracliteans, as well as the spokespersons for stasis and rational necessity, the Parmenideans. In Twentieth Century Philosophy we consider both Analytic approaches as well as Phenomenological approaches. Overall, we are primarily interested in becoming acquainted with those aspects of the territory these philosophers are seeking to bring to light (certain crucial aspects of the human condition) above and beyond the "territory" consisting of their maps.

All of this would amount to historicism, another form of relativism, without the active participation of my students in sorting the issues out for themselves and their confidence that in so doing they were deepening their acquaintance and familiarity with the realities in question. That is to say, requisite to the process is their own methodological faith in reaching out to encounter reality and be faithful to what they find thus disclosed. To seek the truth is to draw near to reality in its transcendence beyond our expectations and to be drawn into a relationship of deepening fidelity to it.

At the climax of Polanyi's chapter in *Personal Knowledge* entitled "The Logic of Affirmation," Polanyi explains Augustine's maxim, *nisi credideritis non intelligitis*:

It says, as I [Polanyi] understand it, that the process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis. Our fundamental beliefs are continuously reconsidered in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premises (PK 267).

This is the task to which I summon my students: critical exploration of certain intellectual maps in dialectical relation with an exegesis of their own developing methodological faith-convictions which constitute their own present access to reality, their means of acquaintance with it. Primary fidelity is owed to the reality to which these faith-convictions give access, not to those convictions themselves. Reliance upon them needs to be philosophical not philodoxical. Thus I do not directly challenge their faith. To the contrary, I invite them methodologically to rely upon their present convictions *in a philosophical way, as distinct from a philodoxical way*. Post-critical reason (post-critical critical investigation and scrutiny) in this sense requires faith. Students need to realize this truth not only in theory, but even more so in practice.

In sum, my aim in introducing my students to philosophy is to have them discover their own fiduciary access to reality and rely upon it while slowly building their competence in critical analysis of the principal existing intellectual options that have been worked out in the history of philosophy.

## Bibliographical Notes

William James' classic essay, "The Will to Believe," is widely anthologized, but its original publication is in *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1896).

The reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein is to his statement in *Philosophical Investigations*, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."

The concept of *philodoxy* in relation to *philosophy* is discussed in various places within Eric Voegelin's work. See his *Amnesis*, trans. and ed. by Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame and London: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1978); Eugene Webb, *Erich Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle and London: U. of Washington Press, 1981); and Eugene Webb, "Faith, Truth, and Persuasion in the Thought of Erich Voegelin," in *Voegelin and the Theologian*, ed. by John Kirby and William M. Thompson (Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 10; New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), pp. 356-369.

Polanyi's fullest discussion of acritical, methodological belief is in Part Three of *Personal Knowledge*, but there is a good, brief introduction to the idea in Lecture One of *The Study of Man*. Aside from Polanyi's discussion of the fiduciary coefficient of our judgment and the role of acritical belief in all of our knowing, very useful discussions of methodological belief may be found in Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Teaching and Learning* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1986), esp. "Methodological Doubting and Believing: Contraries in Inquiry," pp. 254-300; Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1974); and James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1992).

Walker Percy's idea of our "access to being" may be found in his essay, "The Loss of the Creature," in the collection, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 46-63.

The references to theories of intellectual development in college students include William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Hold, Rinehart, 1970); Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); and Joanne G. Kurfiss, *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice and Possibilities* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2; Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1988).

My discussion of levels of meaning to which Socrates' irony sensitizes us has been shaped by Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. by Lee M. Capel (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); and Robert Paul Wolff, *About Philosophy* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 7.

Nicholas of Cusa's concept of "learned ignorance" may be found in almost any good book on later Medieval philosophy. For Nicholas' own account, see Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Banning Press, 1990).

## Notes on Contributors

**Dale Cannon** is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, OR 97361. He has long been interested in Polanyi, having written his 1969 Duke dissertation under William H. Poteat on “Mastered Irony: The Point of Entry Into a Post-Critical Epistemology.” Cannon has, on several occasions, been a presenter or respondent at Polanyi Society annual meetings; he has written a number of articles for *TAD*. He is interested in corresponding with teachers of philosophy who are interested in rethinking the teaching of philosophy from a perspective opened up by Polanyi and post-critical philosophy (email: [cannodw@wou.edu](mailto:cannodw@wou.edu)).

**Éva Gábor** is Professor Emeritus in philosophy at Technical University of Budapest. Her area of specialization is social philosophy; she has interest in figures like Karl Mannheim as well as Michael Polanyi. She is one of the editors-in-chief of *Polanyiana* and is President of Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association, 1111 Budapest, Műegyetem rkp. 3. K. I. 59, Hungary; (e-mail: [GABORE@TTTK2.TTTK.BME.HU](mailto:GABORE@TTTK2.TTTK.BME.HU)).

**David Rutledge** is Professor of Religion and Coordinator of Humanities at Furman University, where he teaches courses in religion and science, and religion and ecology. He began his study of Polanyi with William H. Poteat, and it has remained background to most of his later work. This is clear to the discerning reader of his *Humans and the Earth: Toward a Personal Ecology* (Peter Lang, 1993). Rutledge has won awards for his teaching, and specifically for his religion and ecology course at Furman (email: [David.Rutledge@furman.edu](mailto:David.Rutledge@furman.edu)).

**D. M. Yeager** is the person to whom William H. Poteat said, on different occasions: “You are a perfect fool for Christ” and “What worries me about you is that every time I say something philosophically outrageous, you perk up and expect me to take it further.” Nonetheless, on the principle that nothing out of nothing comes, she now teaches bankrupt traditions in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University (e-mail: [YEAGERD@gunet.georgetown.edu](mailto:YEAGERD@gunet.georgetown.edu)).

# “Beyond Logic and Beneath Will” – Teaching in a Polanyian Spirit<sup>1</sup>

David W. Rutledge

**ABSTRACT Key Words:** post-modernism; warfare model; critical ideal; doubt; disincarnate; ambiguity; *Science, Faith and Society*; apprenticeship; fiduciary; unity of knowledge; dialectical, communal, and personal pedagogy.

*Crucial to teaching Polanyi is an appreciation of his post-critical position outside of usual philosophy of science debates. He is especially useful in introducing students to religion & science debates (esp. Science, Faith and Society), because he struggled out of a critical dilemma similar to theirs. Polanyi’s work has unusual moral and historical dimensions; Science, Faith and Society anticipates, in accessible form, many of his later arguments. A class mirroring Polanyian concerns will be communal, dialectical, and personal, in a combination which helps students find their own voice.*

How does one go about teaching students to read Michael Polanyi, and what does the study of Michael Polanyi’s work contribute to our teaching generally? Let me begin addressing these questions by noting that middle age is said to be the time of confession, and I confess that I am a treasonous clerk who, after reading Michael Polanyi devotedly for years, has assigned his writings to my students infrequently, and who has never taught *Personal Knowledge*.

I mention this because I think my ambivalence about teaching Polanyi may be significant, and may be shared by others. My reluctance springs from the hard-won knowledge that Polanyi is not simple and straightforward like most textbook authors; he was writing to his intellectual peers, who are not, for the most part, my students. I am like a traveler who once struggled mightily to pick his way through difficult terrain, and now, having won through to the other side, is loath to go back and encourage others to enter the same dangerous pages. It is much easier to sit on the near side of Polanyi’s work, drawing simplified maps for my students, than to try to lead them safely through *Personal Knowledge*. And so I confess I have not taught a great deal of Polanyi, *per se*.

What I have found, however, is that my own difficult journey through *Personal Knowledge* marked me for life, giving me not so much new knowledge, as new vision, eyes which seemed newly opened so that everything was fresh and startling. I was like those people in Marius von Senden’s *Space and Sight*, who happened to reach adulthood just as surgeons learned how to safely remove cataracts.<sup>2</sup> Blind from birth, they suddenly were enabled to see, and their lives were transformed by light and space they had never known before. No one so changed could hide it, or repress it, or forget it completely, and thus I have been, willy-nilly, a Polanyian who has tried to tell others what it is like to undergo such a metamorphosis of thought. Even when not teaching Polanyi, I have remained a Polanyian teacher.

The two sides of our theme are thus related in a particular way: one may not be able to teach Polanyi in straightforward fashion as one does many subjects for the very reason that what he offers is not a new theory, so much as a new grasp on reality. Or, to use Jerry Gill’s imagery, Polanyi does not offer a new foundation, but in prototypical post-modern form, he gives us a new axis or center around which to organize our understanding, and only subsequently do we acquire a new theoretical understanding.<sup>3</sup> That *Personal*

*Knowledge* may be difficult for undergraduates is no reason not to teach it, of course, but one should always be mindful of what it is that you are trying to do in teaching Polanyi, and how radical that is.

## A Moral and Historical Approach

Polanyi was a polymath, and his work therefore connects to numerous disciplines. For me, his relevance to religion and science discussions has been primary, and others share that preference: three of the most widely used surveys of religion and science all refer to Polanyi's work, and one of those authors, Ian Barbour, has attended several meetings of the Polanyi Society.<sup>4</sup> This "field" of study began to appear and organize itself just a few years after *Personal Knowledge* was published, and he has been widely cited, if sometimes superficially read, by scholars attempting to construct a dialogue between these areas. To place Polanyi within religion-science debates is not to ignore the philosophy of science or epistemology to which he specifically addresses himself, nor is it to suggest that Polanyi presents trenchant comments on contemporary theological debates, but it is rather to relate *to* these issues from a concrete, practical problem in our culture with which students are struggling. Part of the story I tell in these courses is how an appealing and powerfully productive scientific tradition took shape in a peculiar context that set it in opposition to traditional religious perspectives. (Note that it was the context – philosophical, social, religious – that caused the opposition.) This tension reached its height in nineteenth century accounts of the warfare of science and religion (Draper and White), and we normally begin the class with a discussion of this warfare model.<sup>5</sup> Michael Polanyi's critical analysis of this objectivist, "scientism" trajectory in the philosophy of science helps to identify the reasons for misunderstanding and confusion between religion and science (though this was not his purpose), and provides a starting point for fruitful dialogue. This, I have found, is always relevant to my students; they are indifferent, at least initially, to Polanyi's relation to Popper, Feyerabend, Kuhn, Lakatos, or Hanson; they are keenly interested in knowing whether it is possible to be religious any more in this thoroughly scientific age.

Let me try to spell out some of what this means. The students who walk into my classes are remarkably diverse, but they typically fall into two epistemological camps — those who are determined to defend traditional beliefs against all comers by proving the absolute truth of those beliefs (this is a small group), and those who assume that traditional beliefs are not things we can know at all, and are thus wary of any attempt to ground morals, politics, or faith intellectually. Neither group would describe themselves in these words, but they are either absolutists or relativists on matters of knowledge, and it is the strength of Michael Polanyi's work that he explains how both groups, unbeknownst to them, are reacting to the program of critical philosophy, which was implicated in the warfare model just referred to. Naive and unreflective though my students might be, their response to critical culture is absolutely normal, I would argue, and simply the most recent version of the unease that initiated Polanyi's philosophy sixty years ago. Polanyi's own entrance into the problems which would occupy his philosophical life came when he encountered the wave of enthusiasm for planned science in the thirties, and realized with a shock that it was at odds with his most deeply held convictions about the nature of knowledge. He instinctively knew that this conflict was not merely epistemological, but that it was somehow related to values, to bedrock commitments. His early writings and such later pieces as "Beyond Nihilism" (1960) remind us of the thoroughly *moral* protest that Polanyi launched with his inquiry into the grounds of scientific knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

His concern was that western patterns of thought were leading to cultural madness, to a nihilism that would destroy not only the hypocrisies of an unjust social system, but the very foundations of rational thought. Having seen the cultures of central Europe destroyed by such a neurosis, Polanyi wrote with a seriousness and purpose that gives weight to his ideas. He opens up for us, therefore, the possibility of infusing our teaching with a similar moral weight. This “pathological perversion” of moral values took concrete form in Polanyi’s life in fascist and Soviet regimes, but he also saw its appeal to intellectuals in the western democracies. Though the cultural context has changed, we are not immune to the threat of intellectual nihilism in schools of thought guided by scientism or certain forms of post-modernism, or in a society so addicted to technological affluence that it will not question the implications of this addiction.<sup>7</sup> Polanyi was led to re-think the foundations of knowledge not as the conclusion of a long series of philosophical arguments, but as the result of surprise and dismay at the inability of western philosophy and science to answer the political threat of state planning of science. I take it to be a warrant of the genuineness, the trustworthiness of Polanyi’s work that it began in shocked reaction to the intellectual disarray of the west, and I suggest this makes him particularly helpful in teaching students who sense this same problem.

Where my students accept the critical ideal unquestioningly, or reject its implications out of hand, Polanyi entered a forty-year effort to understand the sources of our madness, and to prescribe a cure. He begins *Personal Knowledge*, for example, with a statement of the “objective” ideal, and then asserts that “it goes without saying that no-one – scientists included – looks at the universe this way, whatever lip-service is given to objectivity.”<sup>8</sup> Polanyi then traces (in the second section, “The Growth of Mechanism”) the history of this idea of objectivity, which he notes, “in its massive modern absurdity has almost entirely dominated twentieth-century thinking on science,” and proceeds to reveal its internal contradictions and logical lacunae. He has moved, in the twenty years between his first shock and *Personal Knowledge*, to a clear and confident assessment of the problem and a firm outline of the solution, and my unoriginal suggestion is that he has pioneered a path on which our students will also have to travel, though their route will have to be tailored to their degree of awareness. Reading back over Polanyi’s writings, I think it is appropriate to describe the process he underwent as a conversion, and his texts provide a first-order report on that momentous event. It is not too much to say that as a teacher I am in the business of encouraging my students to undergo a similar conversion.

Now you are perhaps nervous with my language of “converting students,” academic secularists that you are, so let me quickly insist on the appositeness of the metaphor. (Indeed, the antipathy of the academy to the language of conversion is a palpable sign of the malady I am about to describe.) Our students feel uneasy for the same reason that Polanyi’s work is important: our culture is deeply conflicted because it has been led to see its present home as at war with its deepest longings, and nothing short of a “turning around” or “transformation” (root meanings of “conversion”) will enable it to overcome this conflict, and be whole. We are members of a thoroughly scientific culture which makes us comfortable by its attentive ministrations to our physical needs — from Novocain at the dentist’s, to transcontinental air travel, to kiwi fruit in the middle of winter – and by granting us an equally comfortable and predictable mental world, where everything is set out, described and explained with finality. And yet we are also members of a human community whose greatest passions flow from those values which scientific culture ignores: our conviction that we and our loved ones, as individuals, are infinitely, eternally precious; our undeniable encounter with beauty and wonder, when we least expect it; the sure sense that our bodily selves are not mere costumes or spacesuits for our minds, but integrally involved in who we are; the certain grasp we have on our intending, hoping, and believing, as well as our knowing. These two parts of human being, to which we give the twinned names of fact and value, knowing

and being, reason and faith, science and religion, seem to both belong, and yet we cannot understand how to put them together, how to live at peace with each, and the failure produces both sadness and pain.<sup>9</sup>

Polanyi's attempt to overcome this condition is stated in terms of the overcoming of critical by post-critical thought, and early in religion and science classes I elicit from students the ways in which their education and culture are critical, and the ways in which they sense problems therein. Briefly, this critical perspective insists that knowledge is impersonal, skeptical, disincarnate, and explicit. (1) Students have been told to avoid the first person singular in scholarly writing; they learn that *all their personal claims to know something must reference someone else*, "experts" who can be trusted precisely because they do not know them at all (so they can remain "objective" sources), etc. (2) They accept *doubt as the "royal road" to knowledge*, for they have been taught that it is only by ruthlessly discarding all the views handed down to them "by tradition," views which have not survived the acids of critical doubt, that a residue of pure fact may be found. Descartes' *Discourse on Method* established this advice as philosophical dogma, protected by hedges of mathematical, quantitative clarity and distinctness.<sup>10</sup> They learn, therefore, not to trust themselves or those things on which they have always relied, for these occupy a somewhat hazy pre-articulate realm that is maddeningly difficult to get out into the light – the realm of "beliefs," "values," "commitments," "prejudices," and "assumptions." One consequence is an epistemological minimalism, in which the number of things they are prepared to affirm as knowledge becomes drastically reduced to a few atomistic facts about the public world. When knowledge is understood in this way, according to the rule of skepticism, then the more bits of information students can hold clearly and distinctly in consciousness, the smarter they are, the better students they are. So the learning of microeconomics, or art history, or Latin, is largely a matter of "mastering the data," as we say – giving each doubtless item in the study a specific place in a system from which we can retrieve it on demand. (3) Students also learn that knowledge is a *mental thing, which has little or nothing to do with their bodies*, despite the fact that their bodies are of extraordinary interest to them at this point in life. The dominant model for their mental life is the computer, and the disanalogies of computer equipment to their own bodies only accentuate the disincarnate character of ideas. A corollary is their inability to sense how the natural world, with whom they feel great affinity, has any relation to their feats of knowing, except insofar as it provides objects for mental processing. (4) And finally, my students *assume that knowledge and ambiguity are contradictory terms*, that anything which is worth knowing must be absolutely clear and distinct, able to be explicitly and publicly stated, defined, and analyzed. This becomes their unconscious warrant for derogating the humanities to the status of "arts," meaning entertainments, and elevating the natural and social sciences with their perceived exactitude. The realization that much of life's pleasure comes from its humanistic side creates exquisite dilemmas, for they must assume that the serious world of work or career should be dedicated to the more effective, predictable – and boring — activities of technocracy.

This view of knowledge survives such dilemmas because it is so reassuring, even comforting in its admirable clarity and simplicity. Everyone knows what it is to have all the elements of mental exercise directly before you, completely present and clear, totally accessible to the bright light which is our mind. A simple algebraic equation or a regular verb conjugation present us with mental tasks that we find comfortably familiar, entirely 'natural.' The ambiguities and ambivalences of humanistic disciplines may be fascinating, but students take them as evidence of the inherent instability and uncertainty of these fields. This, with suitable embroidery, describes the attitude which my students seem to have to learning in most of their classes.

Many people instinctively feel the inadequacy of this picture, but Michael Polanyi has helped us to see *why* it is inadequate, and to believe that it can be overcome. Anyone who has studied Polanyi both

recognizes the dilemma under which such students labor, and also recalls his rich resources available for addressing the dilemma. What we gain by reading *Personal Knowledge* and his other works is not primarily a new theory but a new place to stand, from which the history of western thought – even those episodes untouched by Polanyi – sounds different, and so reveals the deficiencies and self-contradictions of the dominant model of knowing.

[Let me remark here in an aside that one of the curious things about the reception of Michael Polanyi among scholars – the prominent role played by theologians and scholars in religious studies – is partially explainable by their location in the culture.<sup>11</sup> Few areas of intellectual life have been marginalized as deliberately by critical thought as the area of religious reflection. The scientific revolution and the modern philosophical project, with their peculiar embodiments in movements such as the Enlightenment, Marxism, and Freudian psychology, assumed that one of the earliest, most visible signs of the success of their work would be the atrophy and eventual disappearance of organized religion. The critical thought opposed by Polanyi, therefore, was understood deep down as a sweeping threat to an approach to the world that western culture not only had endorsed for most of its history, but out of which critical thought itself had arisen. Theologians, or those infected by theology, had been expelled from intellectual conversation, and had been wandering in the wilderness for several generations when our St. John appeared, in the disguise of a Michael, calling out to the culture, “Repent!” (Stay with me, now) This is not to say that other areas of culture had not also felt the pinch, but only that the immediate response of religious reflection to Polanyi makes perfect sense. This helps us to see as well why philosophers have had a much more ambivalent response to his work – they were *not* targeted for extinction by critical thought; indeed, they were usually “riding the wave.”]

A careful reading of Polanyian texts also reveals the *sources* of this critical model of knowing in the certain images of Greek philosophy; in late medieval nominalism and its Reformation heirs as they split off faith from reason; in the catastrophic impact that the medium of printed texts had on our sense of *meaning*; in the separation of phenomena into primary and secondary qualities in the seventeenth century;<sup>12</sup> in the mathematical model of knowledge that Galileo and Descartes enshrined; in the positivism that developed in the philosophy of science in the late nineteenth century, and so on. These books, especially *Personal Knowledge*, open up a new perspective on western intellectual history, allowing an archaeology of modern theories of knowledge which both informs us of the assumptions which our students bring to our classes, and gives us an alternative story of a *post*-critical world.<sup>13</sup> Thus Polanyi encourages teaching that is **historical**, rooted in the concrete details of the western philosophical and scientific tradition, rich in its appreciation of our role in an ongoing intellectual adventure.

### Some Particular Classroom Examples

The Polanyian text I have used most often with undergraduates is *Science, Faith, and Society* (1946), whose first two sections, “Science and Reality” and “Authority and Conscience,” present many of the post-positivist perspectives that define Polanyi’s major contribution to the philosophy of science. These perspectives are presented concretely in discussions of the process of discovery, the unspoken premisses upon which science rests, the apprenticeship to which science students must submit, the master-pupil relationship through which personal skills and judgements are shared, and the institutional structures of science which embody these personal values. In most respects the general vision of *Personal Knowledge* is already implied in *Science, Faith, and Society*, allowing one to raise larger epistemological and ontological

issues, while the text's shortness and simplicity permit a straightforward discussion of each part of his argument.<sup>14</sup> I don't feel constrained to teach the whole book, usually giving a light touch to the third and final part, and not even assigning the appendices.

Let me describe a couple of ways I use this text to work on my students' critical assumptions. *Science, Faith and Society* begins with a charming yet somewhat elusive discussion of the paradox that orthodoxy and dissent are always wedded in science, that part of the business of scientific authority is to encourage freedom, that there is a "perpetual *tension between discipline and originality*."<sup>15</sup> This directly counters the naïve assumption that scientists are slavishly obedient to facts, following docilely wherever the Scientific Method may lead them. But it also denies the absolutist and relativist assumptions that knowledge must be complete, absolute, perfect, if it is to deserve the name "knowledge." Polanyi shows how science has made remarkable progress by what we might call "deep guessing," intuitive leaps whose truth is demonstrated only much later through a multitude of unanticipated confirmations. In that calm way of his that is initially infuriating, Polanyi affirms: "Though I deny that truth is demonstrable, I assert that it is knowable, and I have said how."<sup>16</sup> After a good bit of discussion, students usually begin to sense the implications of this new way of talking. If scientific knowledge at any given moment fulfilled the critical requirements of being totally explicit, present before the investigator in its totality, then scientific discovery would be an oxymoron, and scientific progress an illusion. If "absolutism or relativism" were a real, a true dichotomy, then science would lose the internal dynamic which drives it. In such small ways, students can be led to *look at* their assumptions, to query them, to taste an alternative flavor of knowing.

A second lesson from this text that relates to our theme of pedagogy is Polanyi's discussion of *apprenticeship*, by which the premisses of science are acquired by each new generation of scientists. "[A] full initiation into the premisses of science," he writes, "can be gained only by the few who possess the gifts for becoming independent scientists, and they usually achieve it only through close personal association with the intimate views and practice of a distinguished master."<sup>17</sup> It is through this close personal contact between teacher and student that the intuitions, apprehensions, integrations, and choices of the teacher reveal her art of knowing so that the student acquires "a reflection at least" of her "essential visions." Later in *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi will repeat these comments in his discussion of tradition and authority in science. If knowledge is irreducibly personal, then we gain it from persons in the multiplicity of interactions through which one human being communicates himself or herself to another. Such relationships are crucial to higher levels of learning because it is only through participation in the dynamics of knowing as it happens, in all its temporal, bodily, emotional complexity, that we acquire a sense of the subtleties of perception and judgement that make genuine knowledge possible. We normally do not, of course, conceive of these things as I have described them, but as they appear in the words, gestures, actions, and life of one whom we respect, of whom we want to some degree to emulate. In a day when "distance learning" has become fashionable, so that money and energy is being poured into computer programs and technology that will allow one to "learn" without direct human contact, Polanyi's discussion of the teacher-student *relationship* in knowing is profoundly important.

It is also in *Science, Faith and Society* that Polanyi introduces what he will later call "the *fiduciary element*" in knowing, and through a patient working out of the sources and implications of this assertion, students can be helped to overcome the fact/value dichotomy that critical culture has instilled in them. There are two aspects to this element of reliance, of "trusting in": the first is a reliance on clues for the solution of a problem, as when we construct a theory of a burglar from various night sounds in a house – what Polanyi will later call "the structure of tacit knowing";<sup>18</sup> the second is the intentional act of commitment by which a

scientist submits to the authority of his peers and of the institution of science, what Polanyi will later call “the structure of commitment.”<sup>19</sup> If all acts of knowing, from the most abstract to the most deeply personal, contain at their core this element of faith, of relying on, of trusting, of depending upon that which cannot be exhaustively specified, then the fact/value distinction loses its epistemological and ontological force, and becomes *merely* a distinction, as it properly should be.

Implicit in this last lesson which I draw from *Science, Faith and Society* is a larger one that I find more clearly presented in Polanyi’s later writings, and that is *the unity of knowledge*. I alluded to the *atomistic* character of critical thought earlier, in which students see no overall unity or center to their studies, no wholism that will lead them to good intellectual and spiritual health. Polanyi was positively brazen in defying the wrath of academic critics who insist that knowledge be specialized, and knowers specialists. Coming from a central European humanist tradition which sought wisdom and understanding rather than knowledge, Polanyi moved quite naturally from science into the humanities in order to test and apply his views more widely. If his insight concerning the tacit structure of knowledge was correct, then all human knowing springs from the same ground, and follows the same logic of meaningfulness.<sup>20</sup> This overcoming of critical dualism is the most powerful message of *Personal Knowledge*, and makes real his claim to be moving not toward some new theory, but toward a new way of living and thinking, a post-critical *philosophy*.

But when you have the real thing to read, there is little point in your reading Rutledge on the themes of Polanyi’s thought. What I can do, however, is conclude this paper with even more specific comments about pedagogy that might stimulate thinking and discussion, and I want to thank Jerry Gill, in particular, for suggesting some of these things.<sup>21</sup> From a Polanyian perspective, we can say at a minimum that learning must be dialectical, communal, and personal.

By “*dialectical*,” we simply mean learning that moves as a conversation between people, back and forth, question and answer, giving rise to new questions and answers. Socrates provides the enduring model for such education, and his approach is so well known that we forget its richness, its subtlety, and its difficulty. (We do well to remember that two of the most complex and disturbing of modernity’s critics, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both take Socrates as their model.)

For Socrates, the process of searching for truth was at least as important as the answers one found, and this echoes Polanyi’s insistence that knowledge begins in searching out the intimations of reality that we sense subsidiarily, but never have completely: ‘we know more than we can tell.’ It is not difficult then to see the difference between a Polanyian class and the traditional pattern of teaching, such as that so wonderfully described by Charles Dickens in the opening pages of *Hard Times*.<sup>22</sup> There knowledge is a set of facts which an expert --one who possesses great stores of facts-- pours into the empty minds of passive students like water being poured into pitchers. This traditional lecture model has so abstracted knowing from its dynamic, convivial, bodily roots that it seems like ghostly, disembodied ideas are somehow floating from one mind to another. A classroom that got the student involved in his or her search for understanding by a dialectical process of question and answer between professor and student would appear much less orderly, and would seem to move much more haphazardly, even chaotically, yet it would better represent the ways we come to know things.

Beyond simply the fact of dialectical, conversational interchange between professor and student, a successful classroom must also allow for a *communal*, convivial setting in which students feel comfortable

practicing problem-solving, making tentative integrations, venturing judgements before the answer is clear. Such a classroom requires that the professor step down from his or her omniscient perch and allow students room for their imaginations to flourish, and to fail. This is perhaps the most difficult step for most of us, because our training teaches us to *assume* more knowledge, more mastery, than we actually possess – one does not survive graduate seminars by confessing ignorance. By the time we begin teaching, the unspoken rule, “if you don’t know, fake it” is deeply ingrained in our psyches. Students quickly pick up subliminal messages telling them how open we are, how genuine is our request for their comments, how honest we are being about our own perplexities. A communal classroom gives everyone in the class responsibility for bringing joint efforts to a successful conclusion, and allows everyone to participate.

Note that I am not suggesting that a convivial classroom dissolves all differences between professor and student, only that a classroom should strive to imitate community as much as possible, and in such a body, all parts are important; every member has his or her important role to play, such that the professor becomes less a gatekeeper than a midwife, encouraging students to contribute to the joint effort. Classes that occasionally incorporate meals, or that meet in more “liveable” surroundings, such as a student lounge or parlour or the professor’s home, can further this communal, convivial setting even more.

And finally, learning obviously must be *personal* to be Polanyian --that is, we must find ways to bring students to *own* their acts of knowing, to accept responsibility for their judgements, to become confident in their assertions. At the simplest level, writing and speaking assignments can help students to get their thoughts out into the open, on paper or into sound, with their signature or name attached, particularly when these assignments require students not to collect and exposit the views of others, but to think for themselves, even on difficult issues. Encouraging the use of the first person singular *along with* the evidence and reasons they deduce for a particular idea is a simple and yet profoundly important task. I vividly remember my first exposure to Michael Polanyi was in a graduate seminar in which a different student led the discussion each week. I was a divinity student in the midst of doctoral candidates, and my week came to lead the class’s discussion of “Intellectual Passions,” Chapter 6 of *Personal Knowledge*. Though I had thought I was “hot stuff” coming in to the seminar, by the time we got to Chapter 6 I had *no* idea what was going on. But because I was to lead the class, I worked my head off reading and re-reading and trying to interpret that section, and felt, when it was over, that I belonged in some partial sense to this particular community. (Even though Poteat seemed to ignore my ideas, he did not ignore *me*.) In this case, apprenticeship and ownership were united, and genuine learning took place.

In addition to encouraging students to use their personal voice, one can search for reading that subverts the critical model of knowledge. I have found myself drawn in recent years--due, I would argue, to the maturing of my Polanyian instincts – to assigning texts like Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac*, Wendell Berry’s *Home Economics* or *What are People For?*, James Watson’s *Double Helix*, Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and the poems of Pattiann Rogers, rather than simply the dry academic surveys of topics in religion and science. These are books written with a personal grain, with passion, and they therefore show students what it means to look at the world from *somewhere*, rather than nowhere.

Now, how is the dialectical, communal, personal classroom I’m describing different from a typical senior or graduate seminar? In outward form they might appear similar, but my ideal classroom is thoroughly grounded in an approach to knowledge that sees it residing in the members of the class, at least as much as it

resides in books or in the professor. Whether we attempt to convey this approach by way of teaching the ideas and texts of Michael Polanyi himself, or by applying the Polanyian principles I have mentioned to every pedagogical opportunity, we will find ourselves better equipped and directed by his reflections. Our aim is conversion out of critical madness, a healing of insanity, and toward this end we bend the usual elements of education into new configurations, making them subsidiary features of a new awareness within our students. The therapy we attempt is not some kind of emotional rescue as much as it is an intellectual re-orientation, leading students, on our good days, out of the cave of shadows to a fuller confrontation with reality. And on our bad days, we take courage from Michael Polanyi himself and his inspiring words for all teachers, and all learners:

The technique of our redemption is to lose ourselves in the performance of an obligation which we accept, in spite of its appearing on reflection impossible of achievement.<sup>23</sup>

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The phrase in my title is from a poem by ee cummings, no. 157 in his *Collected Poems* (1973): “voices to voices, lip to lip.”

<sup>2</sup> See Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (NY: Harper & Row Perennial Library, 1985), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Gill describes Polanyi this way in Ch. 5 (p. 148ff.) of an unpublished manuscript, *The Tacit Mode: Polanyi's Post Modern Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking of Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science* (1997) and its earlier versions; Holmes Rolston, *Science and Religion* (1987) and now out of print; and John F. Haught, *Science and Religion* (1995).

<sup>5</sup> I am referring, of course, to the well-known volumes by John William Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), and Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). The tale of the rise of the warfare model is told admirably in James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* (Cambridge, 1979), Part I.

<sup>6</sup> “Beyond Nihilism” is included in *Knowing and Being*, ed. M. Grene (1969). Polanyi discusses the origin of his perplexities in *The Tacit Dimension* (Doubleday Anchor, 1967), pp. 3-4, 56-57, and in the “Background and Prospect” which precedes the text of the 1964 University of Chicago edition of *Science, Faith and Society* (pp. 7-10).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of this kind of scientism, a current mutation of critical philosophy, I usually have students read Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, etc., Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, etc., or Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*.

<sup>8</sup> *Personal Knowledge*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> In the history of western thought, of course, all of these paired terms are not precisely equivalent. I do think each points, however, to one important dimension of the split in consciousness that Polanyi is trying to overcome with his paradoxical affirmation of *personal knowledge*.

<sup>10</sup> It is in the fourth section of the *Discourse* that we get the most concise statement of the isolated self, doubting all received arguments, arriving finally at “I think, therefore I am” as the ground of knowledge. See Arthur Wollaston’s Penguin edition (1960), pp. 60-61. Polanyi refers specifically to Descartes’ role in *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 269ff.

<sup>11</sup> As well as, of course, the particular role played by people like Thomas Torrance, Bill Poteat, Charles McCoy, Richard Gelwick, Bob Osborn, and Tom Langford in using his work.

<sup>12</sup> The distinction actually goes back to Democritus, but was popularized by Galileo and Descartes, and especially by Boyle, Locke, and Newton. See *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6.

<sup>13</sup> This story has often been told; see e.g. Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery* (1977), Harry Prosch, *Michael Polanyi* (1986), Part One; essays by Grene, Pols, and Kuhn in Poteat & Langford, eds., *Intellect and Hope* (1968); Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (1966), etc.

<sup>14</sup> In the “Introduction” to *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), Polanyi says “my ideas were first given a systematic form in *Science, Faith and Society* in 1946....In my Gifford Lectures (Aberdeen, 1951-52) I greatly expanded these themes....The result was *Personal Knowledge* (1958).”

<sup>15</sup> *Science, Faith and Society*, p. 16 (italics added).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> *The Tacit Dimension* (1966).

<sup>19</sup> *Personal Knowledge* (1958), pp. 308-315.

<sup>20</sup> It is this particular thread of Polanyi that William Poteat has followed so tenaciously, particularly emphasizing that knowing is an act of the whole mindbody. You should read *Polanyian Meditations* (1985), *A Philosophical Daybook* (1990), and *Recovering the Ground* (1994).

<sup>21</sup> I had the opportunity this summer to read Gill’s manuscript “The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi’s Post-Modern Philosophy,” which has been submitted to a publisher. See note 3.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854] (Oxford University Press, 1989); see ch. 1 and ch. 2, “Murdering the Innocents.”

<sup>23</sup> *Personal Knowledge*, p. 324.

# Reclaiming “Science as a Vocation”: Learning as Self-Destruction; Teaching as Self-Restraint

**D. M. Yeager**

**ABSTRACT** Key Words: assessment, education, identity, Polanyi, Weber, vocation, whole person  
*Working from an integration of Michael Polanyi's image of learning as self-destruction and Max Weber's analysis of the ethics of scholarship, the author explores the implications of Polanyi's argument concerning “the depth to which the . . . person is involved even in . . . an elementary heuristic effort” (367). In the process, the author raises questions about current expectations concerning faculty “performance” and current methods of assessing faculty success in the classroom.*

This essay begins in three places: in two casual conversations with colleagues about teaching and in one section of *Personal Knowledge* in which Michael Polanyi meditates on “articulate systems as mental dwelling places” (202), a meditation launched from one of his characteristic triple distinctions: “Between the practice of hackneyed exercises on the one hand and the heuristic visions of the lonely discoverer on the other, lies the major domain of established mathematics on which the mathematician consciously dwells by losing himself in the contemplation of its greatness” (195).<sup>1</sup> I hope that the strands of argument thus diversely rising will converge.

## **1. O Brave New World**

It begins first in a conversation I had last spring with Lee Yearley, then chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford, in which he referred to teaching as a performance art.<sup>2</sup> That reminded me of an article I had recently read (whether in the *Chronicle*, *Academe*, the *New York Times*, or some other publication I cannot now say) about the changes in education that are being introduced by the growth of distance learning. Among the changes predicted was that actors will soon be used in video transmissions to deliver scripts written by academics working with scriptwriters—since the professors themselves generally seem, in the judgment of marketers and educational professionals concerned with audience response, to do a poor job of “delivering” their “material.” This, it seems to me, would offer ample food for thought, did it not so remarkably stick in the craw.

I would not, of course, want to set myself against PBS or the BBC. We all learn in many ways, and one can learn quite a bit in a general way about the Civil War from watching an artfully done collage of photographs and music and genial well-crafted pre-written opinions by noted scholars shown in intimate close-ups in warm colors against the comfortable backgrounds of what at least appear to be their private studies. Just as one can learn quite a bit in a somewhat more specific way about the Civil War by reading a published narrative history of it. I think a significant (if not necessarily large) sector of the post-secondary public is, in fact, eager to know and will benefit immensely from undemanding, appealing, entertaining, multimedia “deliveries” of information about the world we inhabit and about our history.<sup>3</sup> I am even so naive as to think that a significant sector of the public is actually starving for informed and helpful discussion of the

policy issues that confront us as a body politic, and I would be as delighted as I would be surprised to hear that fellow scholars are trying to field some equivalent of *The Civil War* that would deal with the regulation of the economy, with sustainable health-care commitments, with the population explosion, with the evolution of the family, with the plight of the developing world, and so on. If we have to have handsome celebrity “faces” reading off teleprompters in order to attract an audience to serious reflection on serious issues, more power to the highly paid “face.”<sup>4</sup>

This line of thought raises, however, a fairly serious question: If all education were construed on the model of entertainment and the people who were encouraged to take it up were those sufficiently beautiful and vivacious to succeed in performance art and if education were to be considered a competitor with other leisure activities with audience satisfaction becoming the measure of educational success and if, indeed, we increasingly undertook to replace the scholar who is perceived to be clumsy, dry, and tedious with the “face” who has no knowledge but only the skills (or perhaps only the celebrity) to excite and engage the audience, will we any longer have people who can write reliable scripts for the “face” to deliver? Information clearly is a commodity; knowledge, too, can be, and increasingly is, a commodity in the marketplace. I have actually come to hope that it will prove to be a profitable one, because I think it would be nice to have Madison Avenue crying up calculus and Latin with something like the financial resources and artistic imagination it expends creating consuming desire for particular beers and deodorants. Much would certainly be gained if we were able, through aggressive image management, to make having a high school diploma seem at least as attractive to adolescents—at least as central to their self-definition—as having a sports car or a light truck.

While knowledge can be made a commodity, education cannot. It seems to me that every effort to turn education into a commodity reduces it to the sale of commodified knowledge, a procedure in which education, as I understand it, disappears altogether.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. To Possess by Dispossession

How is it, then, that I understand education? This question brings me to the paper’s second point of beginning: *Personal Knowledge*, page 196. This is the passage:<sup>6</sup>

The task of inducing an intelligent contemplation of music and dramatic art aims likewise at enabling a person to surrender himself to works of art. This is neither to observe nor to handle them, but to live in them. Thus the satisfaction of gaining intellectual control over the external world is linked to a satisfaction of gaining control over ourselves.

The urge towards this dual satisfaction is persistent; yet it operates by phases of self-destruction. The construction of a framework which will handle experience on our behalf begins in the infant and culminates in the scientist. This endeavour must occasionally operate by demolishing a hitherto accepted structure, or parts of it, in order to establish an even more rigorous and comprehensive one in its place. Scientific discovery, which leads from one such framework to its successor, bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision. And while it is thus breaking out, the mind is for the moment directly experiencing its content rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation: it is overwhelmed by its own passionate activity.

The distinction between observing/handling the objects of study and living in the objects of study is itself an interesting one to which I will return, but it is this notion of self-destruction on which I want to focus for the time being. Sense-makers all, we construct (often simply though receptive appropriation) “frameworks for handling experience.” These frameworks of meaning are, in the deepest sense, our identity as particular selves in a particular known world. To a large extent this framework of interpretation grows by accretion: compatible bits are brought in from outside, furniture is stripped and refinished, some partitions are knocked down and others are added, the gable is extended, a foundation is added under the back porch and the porch turned into a sunroom. But occasionally the whole structure, or some significant wing of it, is just demolished “in order to establish an even more rigorous and comprehensive one in its place.” And this is not the dismantling of some set of ideas; it is the dismantling of the self. Polanyi passes immediately on to the mature scientist at the pinnacle of her powers as she “breaks out” of the current consensus in a moment of “heuristic vision” that is the moment of discovery. In that example, the passage is wholly voluntary and therefore, in Polanyi’s view at least, downright ecstatic, but suppose we apply this notion of phases of self-destruction to the mundane work of educating the young. Now there can be no doubt that much of what we do through reading assignments and classroom lectures and discussions amounts to nothing more than the enrichment of the student’s existing interpretive frame.<sup>7</sup> I think it must also be admitted that frameworks of interpretation can undergo fairly radical changes more slowly and incrementally than Polanyi’s dramatic description suggests or allows. Yet what he has said here about phases of self-destruction provides a powerful image of what is required of us all in true learning: a willingness to let go of our very selves, a dedication and self-discipline so great as to subordinate considerations of security to the sometimes utterly disorienting rewards of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

To the extent that learning requires (not constantly, but more often than we probably think) self-destruction, learning ought to be approached as a terrible thing. Obviously, I am not using “terrible” here in the sense of “bad, appalling,” but rather in the sense of “severe, extreme” and, possibly, “fear-inspiring.” The soporific, incremental routine of the daily educational regimen conceals this extremity, this fearfulness. But it is only to the extent that we can bring ourselves to be aware of this severity, this extremity, this fearfulness that we can begin to reflect in any sort of systematic and reliable way on the responsibilities of the teacher. Self-destruction is not inviting and it is not fun, and when it is imposed upon you in situations that you do not in the least control by people whom you don’t really know, let alone trust, it can seem like a threat to your very being. The tearful demoralized student and the uncooperative resistant student too often know and express what the faculty have forgotten or refuse to know: we are not talking about enrichment here.

What, then, are the responsibilities of the teacher? Well, if I understand the passage in *Personal Knowledge* correctly, we have the responsibility of calling into question, of placing in jeopardy, the system of understanding that is the axis of the student’s sense that she is in control of herself and her world. This deconstructive activity is not the point and focus of our work, but it is the necessary tool of our work. We are also, of course, to serve as masters to our student-apprentices, conveying to them the platform of a hard-won consensus within which they can take up the task on their own. But they are not blank slates; they have a platform of their own in place. To the extent that it is our role to “induce an intelligent contemplation” of articulate systems they do not yet apprehend, to the extent that it is our role to ensure for them in some future they do not yet know “the satisfaction of gaining intellectual control over the external world” and the “satisfaction of gaining control over [them]selves,” it is also our role to undertake the destruction and replacement of their accepted structures of understanding.

The most dramatic example of learning as self-destruction in my own history occurred my sophomore year in college at the hands of an English professor whom I hated and feared more than I had ever hated and feared anyone on earth. Looking back, the course seems innocuous enough. We read the works of Franz Kafka, Alan Robbe-Grillet, Robert Musil, Honoré Balzac, Albert Camus, and Thomas Mann. Partly because of the content of the books, partly because of the way they were taught, it was a course that threatened the dearest values of a sheltered, piously Lutheran, lower middle-class girl from a Republican village in the Ohio heartland. And I reacted like a cornered rat. He had asked us to keep a journal in addition to writing some papers, and I had understood when I was keeping it that we had to do it but he wasn't going to read it, so I poured into that journal (when I wasn't obstinately refusing to write anything at all) all my resistance to the texts as well as my vicious and personal hatred of the professor whom I regarded as a thoroughly vicious and immoral man. Then, at the end, to my horror, he collected the journals and read them. The first final grade I got in the course was a C—also an experience of self-destruction since my “framework for handling experience” did not, at that time, include any way of accounting for a failure of that magnitude. Some months later, he saw me on campus and mentioned that he had thought further about my work and was going to put through a grade-change form raising the mark because, he said, “You are, if nothing else, honest.”

It took me a long time to recover from the course—indeed, we might truly say I never recovered from it because I had to put together a new Diane Yeager in order to go on from it, and that was the work of years. When I graduated from college, I still thought he was the worst professor I had ever had (though I think I was already beginning to respect, in some unacknowledged corner of my mind, what he had accomplished with me); only after many years did he begin to appear in memory as one of my most influential teachers. Backyard bomb shelters notwithstanding, I had been raised in the nineteenth century, and none of my previous courses had compelled me to reconfigure any of my convictions nor had they sent the least tremor through the subsoil of my assumptions. This professor was an earthquake from the first day of class, but he was an earthquake that had already happened. It is not as if I could have refused the twentieth century.

Whether this transition could have happened in any other way is a question to which I will return in the next section. The point I want to make here is that reflecting on Polanyi's notion of learning as phased self-destruction has enabled me, for the first time, to make interpretive sense of this experience, to see it not in isolation but as part of a pattern, and to allow the experience its own integrity as a costly and individually unsupported rite of passage: intellectually, a person died there and knew she was dying and fought the way any creature fights death. Polanyi has also given me the language to see the experience not as pathological (that is, not as the accident of a fragile psyche too immature to cope with rough truth) and not as blameworthy (that is, not as a failure of intellectual discipline or curiosity) but as emblematic of the very nature of serious and sustained inquiry. This, in turn, has given me a new patience with my students, as well as a deepening respect for their bravery.

Still, one might worry about this notion of learning as self-destruction, which has as its corollary, after all, the notion of the teacher as destroyer. This is not how we typically think of ourselves, and the initial counter-response to this argument has been that it distorts the teacher's role, which is actually that of inviting the student out of a limited world into one that is richer, more comprehensive, more truthful, and, indeed, more beautiful. I do not dispute the truth of this positive and constructive portrait of our task; Polanyi himself, in the very passage in question, puts this progressive process of integration in terms of an “urge” toward “satisfaction” concerning both self and world. Destruction, as I said earlier, is *not* the objective. Yet Polanyi has, with the same uncompromising honesty and clarity of vision that caused him to dismiss regnant paradigms

of objectivity, insisted that we notice and not conceal (especially from ourselves) the fact that what seems from our point of view like an act of liberation is from the point of view of the other an often intolerable threat. All education is “education of the whole person” in the sense that the personality is an achievement of interpretive integration; any challenge to that achievement of integration is a challenge to the integrity and worth of the personality. Accordingly, far more is at stake in any act of authentic learning than the neutral processing of some new bit of information.

There is still a deeper worry here, though, and that is that this model of learning as self-destruction, if taken seriously, will become a license for bullies, that it will be gladly seized upon by those for whom the classroom is a seat for the exercise of power and whose experience of power is never so complete as when they are able to attack and deprive and demolish under the cover of instruction. This is a worry that Polanyi, understood in this way, could be invoked to legitimate the likes of Wackford Squeers! So deplorable a possible outcome makes us doubtful of the proposal itself: we wonder whether his couching his insight in the language of destruction might have been a slip, an exaggeration, a misleading and even unfortunate way of describing the welcome and benign process of metamorphosis.

I think we should resist the temptation to slip out through this handy exit. Rather than denying the analysis, let us ask instead how we can conduct ourselves responsibly in an occupation which, when it is taken seriously, has such potential to destroy, which must, if it is not to be disengaged and superficial, trivial and self-indulgent, induce and perhaps even require the collapse of meaning and the loss of valuational assurances. In this matter Polanyi gives us some help, but I think that he does not give us as much help as we need. This is partly because his model of learning is so completely defined by the personal, supportive, and sustained master/apprentice relationship, a relationship that almost none of us enjoy at any level below that of doctoral programs.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Imperative Impartiality**

It is at this point that I would like to reclaim elements of the argument Max Weber made in “Science as a Vocation.” Specifically, I want to reclaim Weber’s normative demand for impartiality in the classroom and Weber’s portrait of scholarship as a vocation.<sup>10</sup>

Weber’s conviction that scholars who stand up as teachers have a moral responsibility to teach as if they had no convictions of their own flies in the face of a great weight of contemporary arguments to the contrary. “Politics,” Weber says, “is out of place in the classroom” (145). Neither the students nor the docents should introduce it, not even in those courses in which politics is the subject of study. It is tempting, when we read these words, to think that Weber is just naive about the value-laden character of all facts and all speaking, but to dismiss his argument on such grounds is simply silly. Weber was one of the first to compel us to see the degree to which all of our judgments are made within some set of commitments that both define and reflect our “world” of meaning and value. Nor can he legitimately be accused of being inconsistent: as though he pointed to the inescapable matrix of commitment in some texts and denied it in others. It is the very inescapability of bias that, in his view, requires the individual who teaches to struggle to neutralize bias in (and only in) that distinctive performative act that is teaching. When we speak out of our interests and values with the intent to convert others to our views or to influence the pattern of their action, we use our words as swords, weapons, and “it would be an outrage . . . to use words in this fashion in a lecture or in the lecture-room” (145).

The words of the teacher should be, instead, “plowshares to loosen the soil of contemplative thought” (145). But this is not all; “the true teacher will beware of imposing from the platform any political position upon the student, whether it is expressed or suggested . . . .” (146). Why “abstain” from this, particularly since many “highly esteemed colleagues are of the opinion that it is not possible to carry through this self-restraint” (146)? Because it is an abuse of power.

To the prophet and the demagogue, it is said: “Go your ways out into the streets and speak openly to the world,” that is, speak where criticism is possible. In the lecture-room we stand opposite our audience, and it has to remain silent. I deem it irresponsible to exploit the circumstance that for the sake of their career the students have to attend a teacher’s course while there is nobody present to oppose him with criticism. The task of the teacher is to serve the students with his knowledge and scientific experience and not to imprint upon them his personal political views. It is certainly possible that the individual teacher will not entirely succeed in eliminating his personal sympathies. He is then exposed to the sharpest criticism in the forum of his own conscience. And this deficiency does not prove anything; other errors are also possible, for instance, erroneous statements of fact, and yet they prove nothing against the duty of searching for the truth. I also reject this in the very interest of science. I am ready to prove from the works of our historians that whenever the man of science introduces his personal value judgment, a full understanding of the facts *ceases* [146].

Now, to be sure, our students are more prone to talk back than Weber’s were, and there is more give and take in most of our classrooms, but the fundamental structure is unchanged. Our students have to satisfy us, and they know that. Moreover, they are in no sense our equals; there are students who may ask questions and raise objections in my classroom, but “there is nobody present to oppose [me] with criticism” because there is nobody present who is remotely my equal in either expertise or experience (keep in mind that all my classes are undergraduate classes, mostly lower-level undergraduate classes).

Understanding learning as phased self-destruction only serves to emphasize the extraordinary importance of its complementary coordinate: teaching as self-restraint. It would be positively immoral, in my judgment, for us to be hacking away at our students’ conceptual frameworks—carrying as they do political and social views gained from formation and experiences in family, church, previous schooling, passive image access like television, and active independent projects of reading and reflection—with the explicit purpose of thrusting upon them our own somehow privileged political and social commitments.

The ultimate paradox of learning as self-destruction is that although “breaking out” always requires an external impetus, it ought, nevertheless, always to be voluntary. With this in mind, let us return to my autobiographical example, for it seems to me that the *trauma* of the experience was directly proportional to its involuntariness. It is plain to me that that particular professor lacked self-restraint. He was a European intellectual hired in to be a “star” in the English Department of a fourth-rate state school in an economically and culturally impoverished region of a country that he considered to be an intellectual wasteland. He did not try to conceal his contempt for the school, the town, or the intellectual level of the student body. He was an atheist, a critic of sexual conventions, and an unmasker of moral platitudes; he used nihilism as a sword against hypocrisy. He despised bourgeois values. He made it clear that intellectual excellence was a function of these views and that right-thinking students would adopt them. That, I think, is what gave the experience its peculiar character of violence and made the subsequent necessary “[re]construction of a framework for handling

experience” so slow, so disorganized, and so difficult. I did not have a whole lot left when that course ended (because he *was* so very effective, and because, even in my passionate resistance, I could see that he was right about so much), but whatever there was that was left was damned if it was going to become like him!

Although it is our responsibility as educators to be catalysts of self-destruction, we must strive, to whatever extent it is possible, to leave it to the student to carry out the deed. We ought not to take unfair advantage of the vulnerability of the student, whose world has been thrown into disarray, to form the precipitating self in our own image. That is why teaching requires restraint. That is why the classroom should not be politicized. That is why the possibilities should be laid out but not advocated.

This suggestion that the teacher refrain from undertaking to convert her students to her own views is not, it seems to me, in compatible with Polanyi’s insistence on the situatedness of all our knowing and doing. Polanyi certainly does hold that no one can ever speak or know from nowhere, and he is quite explicit in saying “all truth is but the external pole of belief” (286). His reference point for these sorts of comments, however, is always a transpersonal articulate system or framework or edifice of meaning and knowledge built up over generations—a system that has not only its own internal valid structure but also its own internal history of conflict, supersession, anomalies, and imagined futures. There can be no proper learning without authority because each generation must convey to its successor the comparatively stable but still fluid consensus without which nothing can be thought at all in the domain in question. So, while we cannot escape our convictions and our social location in our teaching (or anywhere else), when we teach with universal intent, we teach as dispassionately and as fully as possible the complexity of structures and tensions arrayed in the full framework of the articulate system that we sustain by our teaching. The only truly inescapable convictions which must be passionately professed (or more properly, *shown*) rather than dispassionately examined are the convictions that are constitutive of the system or community into which we seek to introduce our students.

This is why it is important to recover and preserve an understanding of scholarship as a vocation. It is certainly part of our responsibility as teachers to have a clear position that we can state, if asked, on the issues that we profess to be important, and it is likewise our responsibility to know the full range of plausible alternatives and to have clear reasons for rejecting those that we reject. However, having and advocating a position is not having a vocation, not, at least, in the older deeper sense. To have a vocation is to be prepared to subordinate one’s own personal beliefs and will and interests to the requirements of professional relationships that are unique in involving complex dimensions of power and trust. We neither forget nor deny our particularity, but we place all the passions of our particularity at the service of something that, in turn, places them in question. For the attorney, it is the principle that there is always truth on all sides and that no one can ever do anything so bad that it will destroy their right to a fair defense. For the physician, it is the placement of the well-being of the patient above her own. For the minister, it is self-dedication to a transcendent ultimacy that relativizes our temporal absolutes. For the politician it is, according to Weber, that “firm taming of the soul” (115) that involves two things: (1) a sense of proportion or “a habituation to detachment” (116) that prevents the politician’s necessary pursuit of power from being fouled by “self-intoxication” at the same time that it prepares him not to “crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer” (128) and (2) responsibility toward the future, by which Weber means subordinating one’s own desire to act blamelessly in the present to one’s vision of how one’s actions will play out in consequences for others and for the community as a whole over the coming years. For the “scientist,” again according to Weber, it is the discipline to place one’s knowledge and one’s method at the *service* of students who do not share one’s commitments as well as those who do. The politicization of

the classroom, then, is undesirable not simply because it represents an abuse of power but also because it is a betrayal of vocation—and ultimately, in Weber’s view, a falsification of the truth of things. No teacher ever knows the final truth of things. Bedrock commitments are not susceptible to proof. Weber puts it this way:

. . . so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice [152].

All human beings make these choices—explicitly, inadvertently, or by default. We cannot do it for our students and should not try.

Thus, if we are competent in our pursuit (which must be presupposed here) we can force the individual, or at least we can help him, to give himself an *account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct*. This appears to me as not so trifling a thing to do, even for one’s own personal life. . . . a teacher who succeeds in this . . . stands in the service of “moral” forces; he fulfils the duty of bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility. And I believe he will be the more able to do this, the more conscientiously he avoids the desire personally to impose upon or suggest to his audience his own stand [152].

This, then, is what I mean by teaching as self-restraint.

#### **4. The Contemplation of Its Greatness**

Does it make any sense for us to continue, eighty years later, to speak of “science” (teaching) as a vocation? In our institutions we are made to feel more and more like employees of corporations selling knowledge as a commodity to buyers who (Heaven help us!) will “vote with their feet.” In the discussion of our “performance” in the classroom, we are made to feel more and more as if the criteria of success are the criteria applied to actors and “faces,” meticulous introverts and ponderous thinkers being hardly welcome. I believe there is a vocation for teaching, and I don’t believe that it has much to do with performance art. I am not sure that the vocation for teaching is going to survive into the twenty-first century any more than the vocation of healing will. Instead, we will have knowledge delivery and health-care delivery by licensed practitioners, and I will not insist that the polity will be the worse for it—we might well end up with, on average, a more knowledgeable public and a healthier populace. However, the value of vocations cannot, I think, be measured in terms of statistical outcomes; indeed, to put them in the same sentence is to commit a category mistake.

Let us come back to that other relevant line in the passage from “Dwelling In and Breaking Out” in *Personal Knowledge*: “This is neither to observe nor to handle them, but to live in them.” In our schools, from kindergarten through graduate seminars, we are introducing the rising generation to the “valid articulate framework[s]” that are the infrastructure of the distinctively human world and the platform of human thinking and identity. The wherewithal of any articulate framework can be, and, indeed, must be, “used in a routine manner” (195). It can be “observed” and “handled.” There may be a sense of power in that; it may be entertaining for a time; and it may make the user a good and useful worker or citizen. But as Polanyi underlines,

there is little joy in that—and even less meaning. It is a different thing, he suggests, to “live in” the articulate framework; when one truly lives in the articulate system, even the routine tasks are transformed. “A true understanding of science and mathematics includes the capacity for a contemplative experience of them, and the teaching of these sciences must aim at imparting this capacity to the pupil” (195-96); such teaching “aims” at “enabling a person to surrender himself” to the framework of interpretation. The language Polanyi uses in this section goes all squishy and mystical (which is the reason that this is the first time I, not being disposed in the least to the mystical, have ever tried really hard to understand what is going on here), but I wonder whether his point doesn’t rely less on religious visions, contemplation, and ecstasy than on a more simply moral apprehension: There are, on the one hand, constricted, self-serving, use-governed ways of doing things; there are, on the other hand, ways of doing things that are oriented always toward the other and the whole. Short-term success cannot redeem the former from the meaninglessness that always attends unintegrated fragments; neither tedium nor failure can defeat the experience of worth that attends the latter.

This brings me to the paper’s third point of departure: a conversation, now a year or so past, with one of my Georgetown colleagues for whom I have the greatest respect and against whom I harbor considerable envy which is directed not least at her extraordinary rapport with students. She had been drafted to teach a course required of many of our theology majors, a course that had been notably undersubscribed and that other faculty had had difficulty teaching. It became evident that she was actually enjoying the early weeks of the class, and I expressed surprise. Her response, touched with irony, was: “‘It’s all about you!’ I tell them. All you have to do is find ways to let them see that ‘It’s all about you!’” I suddenly understood, in the time it took her to say those words, what I had not understood in ten years of reading (mostly but not exclusively) unfriendly teaching evaluations and struggling to decide whether I was as bad as some of my students said. My message has been, through all these years of teaching, relentlessly and unambiguously, “This is *not* about you.”<sup>11</sup>

It’s not, of course, about me either. It involves a kind of ascetic transparency that allows us to see what transcends us (locally or largely) as truly other than ourselves. It is a discipline, ultimately, of self-forgetfulness, as Polanyi intimates when he writes (further along in “Dwelling In and Breaking Out”), “And as we lose ourselves in contemplation, we take on an impersonal life in the objects of our contemplation” (197). Science (teaching) as a vocation, then, seems to me to be the effort to impart to the student that capacity for seeing, for being in some deep sense devoted to, the articulate system as a whole. This is, in most cases, an invitation to self-destruction of two sorts: the dismantling of previously constructed, less adequate systems of interpretation *and* a subordination of one’s own projects and needs and, indeed, interests to an impersonal system which, if properly indwelt, becomes a source of meaning and a liberation of self. It is this quality of living authentically in a way of organizing the world that cannot be commodified and cannot be conveyed, nor even simulated, by any hired “face.” And though one finds it, to be sure, in some wonderfully charismatic and lively scholars, it is sometimes most pronounced in boring, dry, tedious teachers for whom what others would regard as boring, dry, tedious work is honest love’s selfless labor, suffused for them with an intellectual passion that almost no beginning students (including me, back in the mists of prehistory), and perhaps few advanced ones (including me, when I laid waste most of my opportunities at Duke), can gladly honor, or even fairly understand.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the work of Polanyi are taken from: Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> I should hasten to add that Lee was not saying that teaching necessarily is or should be a performance art. His formulation was: “If teaching is a performance art, as increasing numbers of people consider it to be, . . .”

<sup>3</sup> I therefore read with great interest and considerable sympathy Simon Schama’s article “So, You Care about History? Get out of the Classroom and onto TV” in the “Think Tank” column in the October 10, 1998, *New York Times*. Schama, who is a humanities professor at Columbia and has been named Scholar of the Year by the New York Council for the Humanities, has been, for the past two years, writing and directing a sixteen-part series on British history for the BBC. In the article (which consists of excerpts from his address “Visualizing History,” prepared for the Council for the Humanities), he argues that it is a grave mistake for scholars to “flinch” from journalism and popularization, that “we need to go beyond the book—to the humming bazaar of contemporary culture; to the modern museum; to the rapidly accumulating infinite world of the cyberarchive, of interactive electronic history; to the movies; to the imminent world of digital television; and we need to do so not holding our noses or looking down them, but steadily right into the lens of the camera.” Schama does not want more historians to serve as consultants and “low-rent fact checkers”; he wants more historians to become “full partners or producers in these enterprises.”

<sup>4</sup> “They gave me the list. I asked the questions. The producers took the tape and I was gone. I was the face.” You may remember these words of Peter Arnett last summer after CNN was obliged to retract the explosive, and apparently wrong, exposé of Operation Tailwind, in which CNN reporters alleged that United States Special Forces had used chemical weapons (nerve gas) against United States defectors in Laos (I have quoted Arnett’s words as recorded in “Career of a CNN Star Hangs in the Balance over a Repudiated Report,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1998). Writing for the *Washington Post*, Howard Kurtz told the story this way:

The familiar face that viewers saw describing CNN’s nerve gas story belonged to Peter Arnett, the Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent who has reported in war zones from Vietnam to Iraq.

But Arnett did not interview most of the sources for the broadcast or write the words that would stir a nationwide controversy. As is common on many network magazine shows, he was the front man for conclusions compiled by unseen minions.

“He almost wasn’t involved in the reporting and the research,” said a CNN executive who asked not to be named. “It was mainly a case of him being flown in to read a script. He basically did what he was told to do” [“Behind-the-Scenes Faces Shaped CNN’s Reporting,” *Washington Post*, July 3, 1998].

<sup>5</sup> Commodification is not the only force transforming the educational enterprise. The multiplying needs of an essentially bureaucratic society for the certification of office holders should also be noted. The October 13, 1998, *Washington Post* carried a front page story on Intelligent Essay Assessor, a software program (now publicly available) that grades students’ essays. While the developers insist that their “goal is not to replace teachers” but to “have students do more writing” and to help students improve their writing, they have formed a company “through which they hope to market their product to both institutions and individual teachers”; moreover, when questioned about the cost of the software, one of them responded, “it’s less than going through the essays by hand.” The story reports that Phylis Floyd at Michigan State plans to use the software “for training teaching assistants how to grade” and Florida State University plans, pending its own testing of the software, to use it “to score the 200 finals in one of its introductory courses” in library science. The article further

reports that the Education Testing Service is developing its own (allegedly more sophisticated) software for use evaluating the business school entrance exam, the Graduate Record Exam, and eventually, the Scholastic Assessment Test. (Linda Perlstein, “Software’s Essay Test: Should It Be Grading?” *Washington Post*, October 13, 1998, A1, A8.) On the one hand and from the point of view of the staggering requirements associated with repeatedly assessing the performance of millions of children and young adults, the logic of all this is unassailable. On the other hand, what, precisely, is going on when we build into our education process the repeated activity of composing written arguments whose only fate is never to be considered by any human being? What shall we make of a speech act directed solely to a machine?

<sup>6</sup> I should admit straight off that it comes from that controversial and, in some ways, disconcerting consideration of “Dwelling In and Breaking Out” that forms the last section of “Intellectual Passions.”

<sup>7</sup> “Enrichment” is a word that is increasingly prevalent in language about education. I doubt that this is simple linguistic trendiness; I think marketers and administrators and teachers like “enrichment” because “enrichment” is safe. Who could be against enrichment? Who could argue or find fault? The whole point of enrichment is that it leaves everything the same but more of it. Enrichment can’t possibly be anything but appealing and enjoyable. What a selling point for a culture soaked in comfort!

<sup>8</sup> I want to underline here, because this is perhaps not a conviction widely shared, that (along with Emil Brunner and the Niebuhr brothers) I believe that the desire to be secure is one of the very deepest desires of the finite heart. I am therefore saying something very serious when I say that authentic inquiry requires the subordination of this desire.

<sup>9</sup> If we are thinking about “Polanyian teaching,” about trying to implement his insights about learning in our ordinary classrooms, I think we do need to pay attention to potential problems to which he does not give much attention. This inattention is not solely the result of his familiarity with the more individualized apprentice model of the lab sciences; it also reflects the degree to which his interest is focused on people of extraordinary ability. In his treatment of discovery as problem solving, for example, we find a report on the fate of less adept problem solvers that is notable for its pathos. It occurs in the subsection “Learning” in chapter 12, “Knowing Life.” Having outlined the four possible “outcomes” of attempts at learning, he passes on to “the emotional upheaval which accompanies the mental reorganization necessary for crossing the logical gap that separates a problem from its solution” (367), and this leads him to a consideration of “the tension of this choosing power” (that is, between “the force of personal judgment” that is at stake and the paucity of clues on which this judgment must be exercised) and “the limits within which this tension is bearable.” That the tension can, in fact, be unbearable has been demonstrated in experimental studies. These have been studies of animals, of course—because it would violate ethical protocols to do experiments of this sort on persons (the reader may, indeed, conclude that it should be considered unethical to do this sort of experiment on animals as well). In order to find the point at which the tension becomes unbearable, one has to go past it, and when one goes past it, the creature suffers a mental breakdown. One passes this point by gradually making the problems too difficult for the creature to solve. This produces a crisis of self-confidence that altogether disorganizes the personality of the animal and leaves it neurotic, if not altogether dysfunctional. This is an extremely sobering section for the teacher, for it draws attention to the hazards inherent in a process whereby the responsible act of setting problems adequate to move our best students to the threshold of discovery may produce an acknowledged or unacknowledged crisis for less capable students. Polanyi gives us no help dealing with the

implications of such experiments for our understanding of education. Rather, as he moves on to the section on “Human Knowledge,” he takes from these experiments only their disclosure of the tremendous level of “personal” engagement in the learning endeavor—its remoteness from the sort of model of detached, mechanical, logical progression that is so frequently assumed to be a reliable representation about how learning occurs. His subsequent discussion of the self-modifying effects of discovery in humans is a discussion of success. The models given are superior thinkers. The exchange of problems is among equals. Nowhere in the discussion of self-set standards do we find an acknowledgment of what the animal experiments make so clear: it is the tragedy of sentience that these self-set standards can exceed the capacity of the organism to fulfill them—with disastrous results for the personality of the agent. So here again, though Polanyi penetrates to the psychological truth of the pain of education—its threat to the learner’s sense of worth and meaning—he seems to simply note it and move on to the ranks of the elite who dispatch the threat by sheer achievement.

<sup>10</sup> “Science as a Vocation” is the companion to “Politics as a Vocation”; both were given as lectures in 1918 and published in 1919 (dates my colleagues are quick to point out whenever I undertake to appeal to Weber to justify myself). The essays divide between them the domains of education and active public involvement. Weber, viewing himself and his audience as scientists, used the term “science” where I believe we are justified in using the broader term “scholarship.” Quotations are from the essays as translated and reprinted in: H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>11</sup> Since I am telling this anecdote in this particular context and since you do not know my colleague, I want to emphasize that she was in no way advocating an appeal to self-serving interests—hence the irony in her tone. It is, however, her consistent practice to look for the point at which the authors are thinking about issues or problems or questions that the students recognize as familiar and important, so that the texts can be read as texts directed in some significant way to the students and their lives. Framed this way, it is easy to see that her classroom approach and mine are not incompatible, although her comment crystallized for me how we must appear to our students. Indeed, I could undoubtedly succeed much better at “bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility” if I could ever get the hang of doing what she does so naturally.

## WWW Polanyi Resources

**The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the “Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi” which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi.**

---

---

## REVIEW

---

---

Edward I. Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Theologie & Empirie, No. 28. Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House and Weinheim, Germany: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1997. Pp. ix + 302. ISBN: 3-89271-694-3.

In this sometimes ponderous and sometimes illuminating work, Bailey chronicles his investigation into implicit religion conducted some thirty years ago in England. Bailey defines implicit religion as the commitments or foci which integrate life (8-9), commitments which may or may not intersect with or reflect the commitments of organized or institutionalized religions. He begins by developing his definition of implicit religion in conversation with a variety of perspectives drawn from the social sciences and religious studies (Chapter One) and defends his project (Chapter Two).

Chapters Three, Four and Five contain the heart of the book, detailed accounts of three studies. The first consists of a set of interviews with over a hundred persons asked to reflect on what they think and feel about life. In analyzing the results of the conversations, the author tries to see things from the speaker's perspective and then compares that perspective with others (77). Bailey constructs a three-plank creed to summarize the implicit religion he discovers from his conversation partners. The first plank deals with the self, the second with the outer world and the third with religion and morality. The creed reads: "I believe in my self, in the all-pervading influence of time and in other selves as in mine (90). As the world is in me, and I am in those I know, so I distinguish, but I decline to divide (102). Conscience commands, Christianity helps, and the world is kind; but ageing [sic] is fearful, and God is distant" (120).

For his second and third investigations,

Bailey takes the roll of participant observer, first in a public house, or pub (Chapter Four) and secondly in a residential parish he serves as rector (Chapter Five). He finds common to those who frequent the pub a relatively modest and widely shared commitment to Christianity, understood mainly as a set of rules which help people to get along with one another (188-189). More importantly, Bailey finds life in the pub to be integrated around the "idea, ideal, and ritual possibility of 'being a man,'" which requires "being able to hold your own" and to allow others to pursue the same goal with one's self (191-2). He summarizes the tacit commitments of the parish as, "I believe in Christianity; I insist on the right of everyone to make up their own mind; and I affirm the value of values" (261).

In the concluding chapter, Bailey reflects on the results of his investigations, finding in them a major commitment to the self. Bailey observes that this implicit religion involves "the sacredness of the self as its highest common factor, the sacredness of other Selves as its lowest common multiple; and the sacredness of relationships with other Selves, as its infinite extrapolation" (271). In short, the implicit religion he finds is a universalizing religion that values and seeks human well-being, thus counterbalancing more traditional religious perspectives.

While Bailey makes no explicit reference to Polanyi, members of the Society will find affinities between Bailey's arguments and Polanyi's work. For example, Bailey argues that something can be subjective, without being arbitrary or judgmental (3). He recognizes that his category of implicit religion is evaluative, not neutral, in the sense that it requires an empathy born of commitment (35). Polanyian echoes can also be heard in Bailey's discussion of the personal commitment that are part of religious belief

(83) and his rejection of subject/object thinking (263). Thus it would seem that Bailey wants to work in a post-critical framework, and this is indeed a strength of the book, along with the engaging narratives of his studies.

Nonetheless the book does not completely satisfy, for two reasons. Bailey largely works with a theoretical structure drawn from sources that are at least 40 years old. In making this point, I do not mean to suggest that Eliade, Lippman, Tillich, Weber and a host of others are intellectual fossils who have no contemporary relevance. Instead, I mean to suggest that the author owes us a more detailed and up-to-date defense of a conceptual structure that has taken a number of serious hits over the past 10-15 years. To be sure, Bailey does tip his hat to recent developments in Religious Studies and Postmodern thought in both the first and last chapters, but he only offers a list of references to these works; he does not engage them critically. Secondly, the book begs for more critical engagement with the content of this implicit religion. (Perhaps this is simply the cranky complaint of a theologian, not a social scientist; perhaps Bailey intends to offer such an evaluation in the future). Nevertheless, I am left wondering what to make of this implicit religion. Is this religion of humaneness something to be celebrated (as Bailey seems to do)? Is it a cause of concern? Is it both reason for celebration and concern? Some would see in it a significant and seemingly widespread departure from central themes of the Christian tradition—even among its own adherents. For example, the celebration of the self runs counter to longstanding strands of mainstream Christianity that maintain life is not about self-fulfillment, but about serving God, for whom the fulfillment of individual selves is not an ultimate concern. Others would see in Bailey's description of implicit religion a disturbing trend toward individualized religion. My point is that it is not obvious that the implicit commitments of these people are completely laudatory and the book would benefit from such critical reflection.

Paul Lewis  
High Point, NC

## Polanyi Society Membership

*Tradition and Discovery* is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally three issues of *TAD* each year.

Annual membership in the Polanyi Society is \$20 (\$10 for students). The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Humanities, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (fax: 816-271-5987, e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu) Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the card holder's name as it appears on the card, the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be sent to Mullins. New members should provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), e-mail address and/or fax number. Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing. The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and/or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.

### Electronic Discussion Group

**The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 E-MAIL: [apczynski@sbu.edu](mailto:apczynski@sbu.edu) PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.**

