

# Some Aspects of Polanyi's Version of Realism

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**ABSTRACT:** Key Words: Michael Polanyi, realism, idealism, truth, reality, responsible commitment, autonomy of thought, intrinsic meaning, tacit knowing, knowing by acquaintance, knowing by representation, Kant.

*This essay attempts to clarify certain aspects of Polanyi's version of comprehensive realism: the irreducible role of responsible personal commitment as transcending human subjectivity in any meaningful reference to transcendent reality, and thus for any coherent realism; realism as a fundamental presupposition of intellectual responsibility in the humanities and in the sciences; a conception of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic, anthropocentrically projected) meaning characterizing real things, in greater and lesser degrees; a conception of embodied tacit knowing as a relational, acquaintance knowing that achieves contact with reality-in-itself, transcending our grasp – hence, transcending our representational or propositional knowing (which is always reality-as-constituted or construed-by-us).*

## I. Introduction

Among Polanyi interpreters, there is little controversy over whether Polanyi was a realist. But in what sense he was a realist and how extensive was the range of his realism is a matter of considerable ongoing controversy. This small paper is an attempt to address four aspects of the controversy, but not all of the aspects of those aspects unfortunately (for lack of time and space).

I have sought to articulate my remarks simply and in a relatively non-technical way. I am aware that my brief remarks may well seem fragmentary and incompletely developed, and certainly incompletely justified, to some readers. A full account and justification of my interpretation of Polanyi would take a small monograph, I am sure. Yet these features of Polanyi's realist position do cohere – so I believe. It is, however, important to try them on for size, to think with them, to see how well they handle traditional epistemological and metaphysical issues – methodologically to suspend one's disbelief concerning them — and not attempt to force fit them to sensibilities incompatible with them. Polanyi was up to some very radical conceptual innovations and, allowing for this, we should at least do our best to give him the benefit of our doubt and learn what good sense can be made of what he was up to, doing our best to interpret any given passage in his works in relation to what he was up to as a whole.

## II. The Paradox of Transcendent Reference

Traditional philosophical realism insists that reality as such is independent of the knower, independent of its being perceived and known – a reality in itself, objectively out there unto itself, external to human knowledge, external to conscious awareness of it, hence not in need of acknowledgement for it to be. Polanyi, however, has many things to say about reality and our knowledge of it which appear not to coincide with this conception of reality and have accordingly led those who identify with traditional philosophical realism to be uneasy with him, to distance themselves from certain of his philosophical views, or to regard these views as philosophically incoherent.

Consider for example the following passage:

I can speak of facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., within my commitment situation, for it is constituted by my search for facts, knowledge, proof, reality, etc., as binding on me. These are proper designations for commitment targets which apply so long as I am committed to them; but they cannot be referred to non-committally. You cannot speak without self-contradiction of knowledge you do not believe, or of a reality which [you are convinced] does not exist (*PK* 303).

Here Polanyi identifies reality as a “commitment target” and speaks of such targets as apparently in some sense relative to persons who are committed to them. This way of speaking would seem to make reality dependent upon the person committed to it, even while that person maintains that the reality to which she is committed exists independently from and prior to her acknowledgment and commitment. On a surface (and superficial) reading, this would seem to be not all that far removed from idealist George Berkeley’s “To be is to be perceived” – but in this case it would be “To be is to be the object of someone’s (specifically my) commitment.” Many readers might be willing to concede that meaning, purpose, beauty, normativeness, and the like, being abstract, are relative in an idealist sense to human acknowledgment, to human consciousness of them. But can reality, especially objective realities of the sort investigated by natural science, be so considered?

Regular readers of this journal are aware that some Polanyi interpreters – notably Harry Prosch and now Walter Gulick (in his contribution to this symposium) – resolve what appears to be an ambiguity in some of what Polanyi wrote in favor of distinguishing the objects of humanistic and artistic concern from the objects of natural science: the latter are alone real, whereas the former meanings are created and sustained by the comprehensive, indwelling integrations of human beings. Prosch and Gulick do point out that natural science and natural scientific understandings of the world are human cultural meanings as well, but these latter meanings point beyond themselves to, and allegedly correspond with, realities in themselves. They are verifiable whereas the latter are only validatable. Thus it would seem that Prosch and Gulick hold to an idealist interpretation of Polanyi’s account of cultural meanings but to a realist interpretation of Polanyi’s account of natural science. This position would then take the above passage from Polanyi as conceding, perhaps, that the concept of reality (as a “commitment target”), but not natural real things themselves, is itself a culturally constituted, humanly created meaning and that as such it is relative to (“validated by” but not “verified by”) those who are committed to its pursuit.

On my reading, however, Polanyi is saying something different. Earlier in *PK*, Polanyi wrote:

... both *verification* and *validation* are everywhere an acknowledgement of a commitment: they claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker. As distinct from both of these, *subjective* experiences can only be said to be *authentic*, and authenticity does not involve a commitment [i.e., commitment involving submission to an external, objective reality] in the sense in which both verification and validation do (*PK* 202; emphasis in original).

And on the page immediately prior, he wrote,

Artistic beauty is a token of artistic reality, in the same sense in which mathematical beauty is a token to mathematical reality. Its appreciation has universal intent, and bears witness

beyond that to the presence of an inexhaustible fund of meaning in it which future centuries may yet elicit. Such is our commitment to indwelling (*PK* 201).

In these passages at least, Polanyi seems to be disagreeing with both Prosch and Gulick. He does not hesitate to speak of validating realities here, and he clearly identifies art and mathematics as both concerned with reality. So what are we to make of it? Are we to conclude that Polanyi is simply inconsistent, or at least not careful enough with his categories? That he can't make up his mind between realism and idealism? A possibility that should be considered is that he is adumbrating a novel but coherent philosophical position that is neither realist nor idealist as traditionally conceived, a comprehensive (post-critical) realist position that concedes some truth to each – somewhat analogous to Kant's critical idealist position (as I will attempt to explain in part 5 below) but nevertheless quite distinct from Kant's position.

As Polanyi explicitly pointed out, "Epistemology has traditionally aimed at defining truth and falsity in impersonal terms, for these alone are accepted as truly universal. The framework of commitment *leaves no scope for such an endeavor*; for its acceptance necessarily invalidates any impersonal justification of knowledge" (*PK* 303, my emphasis). If we take what Polanyi is saying here seriously and appropriate it, we cannot do epistemology or metaphysics in the traditional, non-committal way. Polanyi claims that one cannot refer to, or make contact with reality itself (or any other of the commitment targets of which he speaks) – that which objectively transcends human subjectivity – except by way of passionate personal commitment. The question, then, is how is it possible to do this (and still be a realist)? How is it possible coherently to refer committally (by way of what is, on traditional reckoning, to be an expression of passionate subjectivity) to a reality that transcends subjective grasp? I shall call this the paradox of transcendent reference.

The idiom of traditional modern realism consistently refers to reality-in-itself, the reality to which our claims to knowledge are to correspond, in impersonal, non-committal terms (even though tacitly the philosophers in question may be very passionate in setting forth their views about it and disagreeing with contrary views). That is to say, that idiom does not explicitly acknowledge the irreducible role of personal commitment that Polanyi contends should be highlighted. Moreover, that idiom consistently refers to the person who perceives, knows, acknowledges, or is conscious of reality and to that person's cognitive relationship to reality in impersonal non-committal terms as well. But Polanyi shows that to consider the commitment situation thus non-committally is to fragment it, such that its mutually entailed parts – namely, personal passion, confident utterance, and accredited facts – fall apart – into subjective belief, declaratory sentence, and alleged facts (or simply facts accredited as such surreptitiously by the would-be non-committal observer) – and no longer require each other (see *PK* 303).

The paradox of transcendent reference is solvable only if we differentiate, as Polanyi proposes, the personal (as in responsible personal judgment, thus a normative concept, implicating our commitment to it) from the subjective (which is merely descriptive, non-normative, and non-committal).

*The fiduciary passions which induce a confident utterance about the facts are **personal**, because they submit to the facts as universally valid, but when we reflect on this act non-committally, its passion is reduced to **subjectivity**.* (*PK* 303, emphasis in original)

Personal fiduciary passion, in the sense here described, is essentially a transcendence of subjective human belief, of mere subjectivity – ultimately implicating our first person accreditation in identifying it as such,

whether in other persons or in ourselves. It cannot without distortion be characterized as human subjectivity traditionally understood, for as such it is no longer about the human subject in question; it is rather about some aspect of the reality with which the person in question is concerned. It is her participation in, her connection with, that which transcends her subjectivity – that which exists apart from her, independently of and pre-existing her subjectivity and capable of manifesting itself in yet indeterminate ways. It establishes her contact with, her acquaintance with, her relational rapport with reality. As such it cannot itself be referred to non-committally. Reference to it (her genuine knowledge, not merely to her alleged or claimed knowledge) entails (of we who are third person observers) our own first person accreditation of it as genuine transcendence, as genuine connection with the reality in question – as we have come to know it. Reference to it is thus a knowing of the person's knowing, an acknowledgement by us of its presence, its being, in the world before us or alongside of us.

Note too here that the fiduciary passion involved is directed (primarily) to the reality itself transcending whatever happens to be our aspectual grasp of it. (By “aspectual grasp” I mean that our grasp of reality is always of some aspect, some facet, and never definitive or exhaustive of that reality in its entirety, especially insofar as the reality is capable of manifesting itself inexhaustibly in new and surprising ways.) The fiduciary passion, if rightly oriented, is secondarily or derivatively directed to our representation of that reality (a fallible, partial, specific grasp of certain of its aspects), as our best present grasp of it. It is this differentiation between transcendent reality and our specific representation of it that enables us to be genuinely open to the reality, learning new and different aspects of it that may contradict, and lead us to revise, our current grasp. Again, the passionate commitment is, or should be, directed to the transcendent reality, not to our explicit account of it – which, without that differentiation, can easily become the focus of an idolatrous fixation.

So is Polanyi a realist? Yes, but a realist with a difference. Not a realist who presumes to speak of noumenal reality, reality in itself, non-committally. Considered apart from the framework of commitment that Polanyi sets out, to presume to speak of noumenal reality non-committally, as if it could be discussed from a non-committal standpoint – outside the human condition of being an embodied speaker-knower alongside other speaker-knowers – is to beg the question of what is reality and how it is to be determined. What Polanyi is implying, as I read him, is that an accounting of the condition of human knowledge *vis-à-vis* reality developed in a non-committal manner – especially an accounting that presumes to be realist – is incoherent. Conversely, only a position which gives account of the condition of human knowledge *vis-à-vis* reality in the committal manner outlined by Polanyi can hope to be coherent.<sup>1</sup>

Is Polanyi a crypto-idealist? Insofar as we regard human beings as unable to transcend their subjectivity in responsible personal judgment, it would appear that he is. That is what Gulick and Prosch take Polanyi to be in regard to humanistic and artistic concerns. But insofar as human beings within these fields are genuinely able to transcend their subjectivity in responsible personal judgment, then, as Polanyi himself maintains, a coherent, comprehensive realist position is possible, and makes the most sense, in regard to humanistic and artistic concerns as well as the natural and social sciences.

### **III. Polanyi's Primary Motivating Concern: To Justify Our Belief in the Power and Autonomy of Thought**

In making sense of Polanyi's realism, it seems to me essential that an interpreter of Polanyi needs to keep freshly in mind what was his primary motivating philosophical concern, or at least one of them, if there

can be said to be more than one. And that is his objective to establish grounds for justifying the power and autonomy of thought in responsible pursuit of the transcendental ideals of truth, justice, morality, etc. This objective was behind his efforts to counter the subjection of scientific research to social planning, which got him into philosophy (social philosophy) in the first place. It was behind his efforts to counteract the nihilistic tendencies of the modern mind. It was behind his identification with and praise for the freedom fighters in Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe in their struggle against Soviet totalitarianism. Truth and reality, for Polanyi, were sacred, impassioned ideals. This is not a thesis independent from his philosophical realism. To say it more appropriately: truth and reality, as Polanyi repeatedly brought to our attention, are sacred, impassioned ideals. It is easy, terribly easy in contemporary intellectual, “post-modern” culture, even among students of Polanyi, to forget this. To say that these ideals should not (he actually says “cannot”) — be treated non-committally is, as it were, an understatement. To presume to treat them non-committally or indifferently is a kind of sacrilege. The extent to which we find ourselves able to treat them non-committally or indifferently — or, as several contemporary philosophers have proposed, to jettison them altogether — is a measure of how far we have come from integrity and mental/moral well being. They are the ideals the pursuit of which makes our lives worthy of respect and reverence. Their pursuit is what makes human life, or at least human intellectual life, most worth living.

Human greatness which evokes our admiration and deep respect does exist. It is a real feature of our world. However, as Polanyi writes,

... human greatness can be recognized only by submission to it and thus belongs to the family of things which exist only for those committed to them. All manner of excellence that we accept for our guidance, and all obligations to which we grant jurisdiction over us, can be defined by our respect for human greatness. And from these objects of our respect we can pass on continuously to purely cognitive targets, such as facts, knowledge, proof, reality, science — all of which can likewise be said to exist only as binding on ourselves (*PK* 380).

Reading this passage non-committally — i.e., reading it critically — as is our disposition as possessors of modern minds, Polanyi seems to be saying that the ideals that constitute human greatness don't exist in the sense with which traditional philosophical realism is concerned — even cognitive targets such as facts and reality! What he means here, however, is not that our granting jurisdiction over us creates them or brings them into being. Rather is he saying that an attitude, a hermeneutic, of reverence and submission to them is what enables us to be cognizant of them. There is simply no other way to become cognizant of them, no other way to take them in. Without that attitude, we are at best left with a pretense or mere claim to human greatness. Cognizance of them requires a transcendence of human subjectivity from its passive, given state to a responsibly impassioned state of responsible personhood; we have to develop the capacity to apprehend them or allow that capacity to develop in us. When we do attain this cognizance, we discover their power and capacity to guide us: we thereby discover their reality, the peculiar sense of reality that they have. To be committed to them is to be committed to their independent power and authority over us, and thus to them as real.

The problem of the modern mind, that Polanyi sought to lay bare, is that in some respects at least we have gotten ourselves into an intellectual predicament where these ideals no longer appear credible — where they seem, in Nietzsche's words, no longer worthy of belief. They have no authority over us, no power to move us and guide us. It is as if we (or at least many in our contemporary intellectual culture) cannot but approach

them non-committally and with an attitude of critical suspicion. And with that frame of mind, with that hermeneutic, they appear completely unimpassioned and unworthy of belief – indeed, non-existent in any realist sense.

One manifestation of this predicament is the suspicion that the horrors of totalitarianism derive from just such passionate commitment to reality and truth (i.e., from uncritical and blind commitment to what people take to be reality and truth) — leading many in our post-modern world to be wary of passionate commitment to anything (see Puddefoot’s section 2 which makes this claim.) Polanyi’s understanding of the Logic of Affirmation, properly understood, clarifies and resolves this confusion. The problem is not passionate commitment but misdirected, idolatrous passion. A totalitarian frame of mind results from a comprehensive failure to differentiate map from territory, a failure to differentiate a specific representative, explicit version of a social ideal from the transcendental ideal itself (reality, truth, justice, and/or beauty) with which we are acquainted in acritical fiduciary passion for it. When we keep that differentiation clear (between the image and the reality) and maintain the focus of our commitment upon the transcendental ideal – again, not on this or that version of it but on that of which our version held with universal intent fallibly represents and that inexhaustibly transcends every presumption to complete and final grasp of it – we are open and vulnerable to having our specific representations appropriately called into question by the ideal, or at least called into question by others who are able to bring to light the inadequacy of our version of it.

It was Polanyi’s primary intention to restore to us the grounds for believing in our own most fundamental beliefs, for drinking deeply without qualm in the wellsprings of our intellectual passions, for believing in the reality – the authority and power over us – of this firmament of values.

We attribute absoluteness to our standards, because by using them as part of ourselves we rely on them in the ultimate resort, even while recognizing that they are actually neither part of our selves nor made by ourselves, but external to ourselves. Yet this reliance can take place only in some momentary circumstance, at some particular place and time, and our standards will be granted absoluteness within this historical context. So I could properly profess that the scientific values upheld by the tradition of modern science are eternal, even though I feared that they might soon be lost [to us] for ever. (*PK* 183f)

The question of what Polanyi’s realism consists in then is at the heart of this concern, and no account of Polanyi’s realism – of his conceptions of reality or truth or any other aspect of his epistemology – can begin to be adequate that does not fully take this concern centrally into account.

#### **IV. Natural Realities That Are Intrinsically Meaningful**

In his contribution to this issue, Walter Gulick questions what he takes to be Polanyi’s equation of the meaningful and the real. Gulick’s proposal is that meaning and reality must be kept distinct to avoid the dangers of conflating them. Polanyi’s innovation, it seems to me, is not to conflate them but to bring to light how they overlap in important and interesting ways: some things are meaningful but not real, some things are real and have little if any meaning, but some things are real and, in themselves, are of more or less great, or more or less profound, meaning. Gulick’s conception of meaning as “that mental process which produces the noosphere”, a concept borrowed from Teilhard, meaning “the lasting articulate framework of thought created by humans (*PK* 388)” [Gulick 1999, 9] or (in his present contribution, section 2) as “the product of integrations which create a dynamic unity out of subsidiary particulars”, is not what Polanyi has in mind when

he speaks, for example, of the significance of minds. Here Polanyi speaks, contrary to current common intellectual usage, of the intrinsic meaningfulness of certain things (e.g., living organisms and minds), as distinct from the extrinsic meaningfulness of things which have what meaning they have relative to the specific interests of a living organism. Andy Sanders (cf. his section 4) makes a similar point when he speaks of Polanyi's recognition of the "intrinsic value" of things – their potential or capacity to embody, sustain, and bring about tokens of ultimate values like truth, justice, beauty, and love. Gulick's definition of meaning makes it necessarily extrinsic. Polanyi doesn't deny the existence of extrinsic meanings. But the meaning in which he is primarily interested, in relation to pursuing and apprehending hidden or incompletely disclosed realities, is intrinsic or objective meaning (i.e., meaning pertaining to the object rather than to the subject). The intrinsic meaningfulness of such things (at one with, though I think not simply identical to, their capacity to manifest new aspects of themselves inexhaustibly) is not "constructed" or "produced." It is discovered, through the responsible exercise (with universal intent) of our cognitive capacities seeking contact with aspects of reality that transcend their immediate or surface appearances.

Until we can get clear that Polanyi's idea of the meaningfulness of real things is a matter of intrinsic meaning, as opposed to extrinsic or derived meaning, I suggest that his further conception that things can be accordingly more or less real will make no sense at all. Because Gulick appears not to have gotten that clear, he accordingly finds that the latter makes no good sense. Part of Gulick's problem appears to derive from his being perhaps misled into conflating Polanyi's way of speaking about our comprehension-of-a-comprehensive entity (itself a meaningful comprehensive entity constituted by ourselves) with the comprehensive entity being comprehended (itself meaningful in one or another respect but not constituted by ourselves) – which, on my reading, Polanyi keeps distinct. Some comprehensive entities (as in art, for instance) are themselves human creations and would, on the face of it, neither be valued and appreciated nor even exist apart from a living center for whose interests they are significant. In this respect, they are extrinsically meaningful.<sup>2</sup> But other comprehensive entities – e.g., healthy, functioning, living organisms – are not themselves human creations. They are natural, real, existent. And their meaning is intrinsic. The autonomous, steady-state functioning (and living Gestalten) of living organisms is an intrinsically meaningful, objective, normative achievement – involving, according to Polanyi's ontology, a successfully functioning hierarchy of levels within a comprehensive entity that need not have been and is liable to breaking down.

In any case, the things that are human creations, considered (from the point of view of a third party) not unto themselves but in relation to (and thus as part of a larger comprehensive entity including) the living human centers for whose interests they are significant, considered committally, are themselves really existent (i.e., real) comprehensive entities of intrinsic meaning. They are so in basically the same way that intrinsically meaningful, natural interactions of animals of a given species with, say, elaborate nests they have constructed, are real instances of intrinsic meaning.

Quite apart from more problematic and controversial things such as the meaningfulness of works of art or of religious experiences, there do exist intrinsically meaningful natural entities wherever there is a case of normative achievement – which, as Polanyi points out, is everywhere that we have living systems. Intrinsic meaning exists, is objectively real, at least wherever there is life. But it takes a capacity for critical appreciation to take it in.

Since all life is defined by its capacity for success and failure, all biology is necessarily critical ['critical' in the sense here of being normatively governed and normatively

assessed]. Observation, strictly free from valuation, is possible only in the sciences of inanimate nature. Traces of criticism [i.e., normative assessments] are present even in some of these sciences.... Each new branch of biology that was developed to cover the increasingly complex function of higher animals sets up additional standards, to which the observer expects the animal to measure up. And this intensification of criticism coincides with an increasing enrichment of relations between the critic and his object. We know an animal, as we know a person, by entering into its performance, and we appreciate it as an individual, in the interests of which these performances have their meaning. . . . All biology is, in this sense, convivial. But this conviviality rises to emotional concern as the animal approaches the human level. We then become aware of its sentience, of its intelligence, and above all its emotional relations to ourselves. . . . [A]t the highest level of personhood we meet man's moral sense, guided by the firmament of his standards (*TD* 50f, bracketed interpolation DC).

Intrinsic meaningfulness is a curious thing. It is capable, via the help of those with ears to hear, of calling our obliviousness and obtuseness into account. It resists our modern technocratic disposition to treat all things as means for the ends we self-servingly postulate. It calls for our honor, our respect, and perhaps our celebration. While our account of it may well be linguistically constituted (such that the account might be said to be extrinsically meaningful to the persons who find the account intelligible), the account refers beyond itself (fallibly to be sure) in order to honor and pay due respect to features of reality which it alleges to be meaningful in themselves. Recognition of the latter requires our responsive and responsible indwelling of its intimations, reaching out to it with universal intent, committed to making contact with whatever it is that is there, even though we may not at any given point be quite sure yet what it is, and even when it would call us and our enterprises into question. Intrinsic meaningfulness is not recognizable apart from an openness to and responsible pursuit of discovery of transcendent meaning, nor apart from one's developed/developing capacity to take it in.

“We need reverence to perceive greatness, even as we need a telescope to observe spiral nebulae” (*SM* 96). Does this claim locate such meaning merely in the eye of the beholder – i.e., merely correlative to the interests of some living center? I, and I believe Polanyi, would say no. But we would find it impossible to convince a skeptic who is not himself committed to the responsible pursuit of discovering intrinsic meaningfulness. That its recognition and acknowledgment is dependent upon that commitment doesn't make it not real, or reduce it to the realm of the merely meaningful-to-the-interests-of-a-living-center. Here too the issue relates to the question whether responsible personal judgment really does transcend mere human subjectivity.

## **V. Polanyi's Post-Critical Realist Epistemology: A Thumbnail Sketch**

In the second part of this essay, I introduced the paradox of transcendent reference: how is it possible to acknowledge as an object of our passionate commitment a transcendent reality-in-itself lying beyond our subjectivity, indeed beyond all of our representations of it? In phrasing the question in this way, I was already deliberately drawing on some of the vocabulary of Immanuel Kant in an attempt to make clear the issues with which Polanyi was struggling.

Kant called his position a form of critical idealism, not critical realism, despite his references to, and belief in, reality-in-itself, the noumenon. Why? Kant was convinced that for a philosophical position to qualify as realism, it had to establish how epistemological access to reality was possible. But because he

became convinced on the basis of his assumptions that epistemological access to noumena was impossible, he was forced to identify his position (the most coherent that he thought possible) as critical idealism. We can know only representations that the mind has produced from the raw data of sense, never the thing itself: first of all, the pre-articulate representations experientially ordered and presented to us by our sensibility and, secondly, the explicit representations by means of which the mind categorizes and gives an intelligible account of what we experience. We never encounter reality-in-itself, on Kant's account, but only reality as constituted and construed by us.

Kant characterized his philosophical position as a culmination of critical philosophy. I would like now to characterize in a fuller way Polanyi's post-critical realist philosophy, which solves the paradox of transcendent reference, using Kant's position as a foil. Presuming to do so in the simplified way that I do runs many risks, but I believe the sketch will be helpful in putting the pieces of Polanyi's position together as a whole. Please realize that I am not attempting to fit Polanyi into the Kantian scheme.

From the perspective of my understanding of Polanyi, Kant did get several things right. However, Kant also got many important things wrong or skewed because of his unquestioned acceptance of several problematic, unquestioned assumptions: (a) the Cartesian *cogito* as the starting point of philosophical reflection; (b) a conception of the mind as a closed container (cut off from any possibility of direct acquaintance with the external, noumenal world as well as from any convivial relation with other persons); (c) a representative theory of perception (with sense impressions conceived as representations, wholly immanent to the subjective mind, of what appear to be features of the external, transcendent world); and (d) the Cartesian critical method – namely, “Doubt (or at least be non-committal), unless you have sufficient reason to believe”, while rejecting by default the parallel maxim of methodical belief, “Believe, unless you have sufficient reason to doubt” – which, as William James pointed out, amounts to adoption of the maxim, “Avoid error”, in the absence of its essential dialectical complement “Seek the truth.” Polanyi, by way of contrast, begins with fundamentally different assumptions: (a) the person immersed in thought responsibly seeking truth; (b) the knowing person embodied and situated vis-à-vis the known, alongside and in convivial relation to other persons and other living organisms (down to the lowly planarium); (c) the person known and knowable in her knowing; and (d) perceptual knowing conceived as a from-to stretch of attention, achieving contact with reality itself in its capacity to manifest itself in indeterminate ways.

In consequence, for Polanyi, the indeterminate reality with which he claims we achieve contact in our knowing (note: knowing is here conceived as relational, not representational) is noumenal, the very thing that Kant thought impossible. Contact here is a relational knowing of reality in its transcendence beyond our determinate representative grasp. Reality, the reality we can and do know, is knowable qua independent of us – i.e., somehow knowable in its very transcendence. That is Polanyi's claim and it is why he defines reality as that which is capable of manifesting itself inexhaustibly. However, we can make reference to it as such only committally – otherwise it becomes a mere claim, a mere representation immanent to the mind, concerning a reality allegedly out there. Our representations of reality, on the other hand, developed by way of our cultural powers of articulation – constituting our explicit, critical knowledge of reality, our determinate propositional representations (which for them to be knowledge, according to Polanyi, must be regarded committally<sup>3</sup>) – have the status not of noumenal reality in itself but of reality as constituted or construed by us, reality somehow immanent to the mind, which is what Kant characterized as the phenomenal realm. Our representations of reality are our construal of reality (personally and culturally); they constitute our map of reality. They are reality made intelligible to us, the indeterminate rendered determinate, and are therefore in significant

measure a product of the articulate framework we bring to the reality known tacitly, by acquaintance. They are human constructions. Such truth as they have is a matter of correspondence. Correspondence with what? With reality, reality in itself, noumenal reality, verification of which, in natural science at least, may involve experimental testing. But how is that possible? To what do we compare our explicit representations to establish correspondence? We compare them not with noumenal reality itself (certainly not non-committally considered). Rather we compare them with what we are able to become acquainted with of noumenal reality. For scientists, this acquaintance knowing may involve the use of sophisticated instrumentation and theoretically informed sensibilities, which, as Polanyi describes, become extensions of the from-to stretch of their embodied tacit perceptual knowing. Transcendent noumenal reality is the territory of which our explicit knowledge is the map (Polanyi himself uses this metaphor--*SM*, 14f).

Contact with the territory, familiarity with the territory, is achieved not by explicit knowledge but by our acritical acquaintance knowing, a tacit knowing, a relational knowing – which is always embodied and first person, a from-to stretch of conscious, integrative attentiveness and indwelling. It is not just pre-reflective and pre-explicit, however. It is also post-reflective and post-explicit when we resume our tacit powers after critical reflection. Thus our tacit knowing stands in dialectical relationship with our efforts to render reality explicit. But it remains something distinct from our explicit representations. It is relational, an establishment of contact, of rapport, with reality, whereas our explicit mappings of reality involve a suspension or drawing back from the immediacy of that contact, seeking to give it voice, to say what we have become acquainted with. Moreover, our tacit knowing is also fallible, but fallible in a different way than explicit knowledge. To fail in acquaintance knowledge is to fail in one or another respect (e.g., through blindness, selective attention, mishandling) to establish rapport with, familiarity with, and due respect toward reality. Truth in acquaintance knowledge is not a matter of correspondence (between accurate representation and reality represented) but of fidelity or faithfulness of our person to noumenal reality as it continues to show more of itself to us through our deepening acquaintance with it. The trustworthiness of our acquaintance, the trustworthiness of our contact with reality, has to do with our adherence to reality in its transcendence beyond our explicit grasp of it, our being true to it as it progressively reveals itself, the respect we show toward its peculiar being or essence as that reveals itself in our ongoing acquaintance with it, our lived rapport and acknowledgement of it in all of its progressively disclosed aspects. All explicit, representational, determinate knowledge, as Polanyi has stressed, is rooted and grounded in tacit knowing of an indeterminate or never fully determinate reality – both in its grounding in an acquaintance with the territory it represents and in our practical acquaintance knowledge of the explicit map itself and the map's relation to other maps.

Thus, for Polanyi, the scientist in his tacit knowledge by acquaintance, regarded committally, does succeed in making contact with and in becoming familiar in a limited and partial way with certain aspects of the indeterminate noumenal world, and, on that basis, with the aid of the articulate framework of modern science, in rendering in determinate explicit form, though never exactly, what he has come to know by acquaintance. He knows, if he is honest, that the reality he thus articulates transcends his articulations. In his acquaintance with the very aspects of reality he is seeking to articulate, he always knows more than he can tell. But what he tells, being articulated within a pre-existing framework that is used to take in far more than this aspect of reality, will be freighted with manifold associations and connections beyond simply mapping what tacitly he has come to know. In that respect, our explicit knowledge is in large measure constructed by us, much as Kant maintained.

But because Polanyi is no scientismist, the scientific mapping of a given sector of reality doesn't

exhaust all that might be truthfully articulated about it. From other angles of approach, Polanyi allows for other, “non-scientific” but no less cognitive approaches to acquaintance with, and representation of, the noumenal world – humanistic, artistic, and religious – especially in regard to the more complex aspects of the biosphere and of human life in particular. Indeed, for Polanyi, our unscientific, commonsense, perceptual experience of the world connects with fundamental aspects of the noumenal world as it truly is, though certainly not all of its aspects (e.g., the very large and the very small). We need not wait solely upon the scientific expert to tell us how things really are. Science has no privileged access to noumenal reality. Genuine access it does have, but its access is aspectual no less than that of other approaches.

I am keenly conscious of many aspects of this brief sketch that cry out for fuller elaboration and the many questions readers will have that press to be answered. Yes, indeed, there are many unanswered questions. But I gave prior warning: this is only a sketch in which I had to work within a limited space under limited time. It is, however, how I see Polanyi’s realism.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some readers may wonder about the weight being placed here on the framework of commitment, on which Polanyi claims to “reduce” his reliance in the “Introduction” to *TD* (x) and which does not explicitly appear in his writing subsequent to *PK*. It is my conviction that the framework of commitment was never abandoned by Polanyi. It simply was not needed to be brought explicitly into account where he was not forced to discuss fundamental presuppositions as he was in *PK*. But for an outsider needing to learn what is involved in the transition from a critical to a post-critical perspective, it is essential that it be well understood and appropriated.

<sup>2</sup> Independently of the line of thinking that would classify works of art as having only extrinsic significance, I am inclined to think that authentic works of good art, and certainly of great art, also may be intrinsically meaningful – though in important respects different in their intrinsic meaningfulness from natural comprehensive entities. Artists don’t hesitate to insist that the art work must be allowed to “speak for itself.” Moreover, many artists and connoisseurs of art speak of art, at least sometimes, as apprehending and giving voice to meanings transcendent to the artworks and to the artists. One of my favorite poets, William Stafford, regularly spoke this way about his poems.

<sup>3</sup> Regarded non-committally, these explicit representations constitute mere alleged knowledge, mere representations that may or may not be true. As a matter of fact, according to Polanyi, we can regard something non-committally – that is, we can reflect on something critically – only insofar as we succeed in representing it to ourselves explicitly. See the first few pages of *SM*.

## Electronic Discussion List

**The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can subscribe; send a query to [owner-polanyi@lists.sbu.edu](mailto:owner-polanyi@lists.sbu.edu) 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: [apczynsk@sbu.edu](mailto:apczynsk@sbu.edu) PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.**