

Three Explorers: Polanyi, Jung, And Rhine

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This brief essay reflects on my encounters with Polanyi, June and Rhine and tries to link some elements of their thought.

Three men from vastly different fields have greatly influenced my thinking: Carl Jung, Michael Polanyi, and J. B. Rhine. Jung died in 1961, the same year that I graduated from medical school, two years after I met Rhine, and four years before I met Polanyi during the second year of my psychiatry residency at Duke. I met J. B. Rhine through a mutual friend while I was in medical school. Rhine's parapsychology lab was just across the street from the east campus at Duke. Its proximity to the hospital was one reason I chose Duke for my residency.

I first met Polanyi at a conference sponsored by the Department of Religion. Polanyi was the James B. Duke Distinguished Professor, having been nominated by Bill Poteat in the Religion Department. My first impression of Polanyi was that of a kindly gentleman patiently trying to explain his ideas to a pack of intellectual wolves more interested in demonstrating their ability to sniff out questionable chinks in his thinking than in understanding it. A few years later I had the same impression at a conference sponsored by Perkins School of Theology, SMU, for the process theologian Charles Hartshorne.

Almost instantly, I saw the relevance of Polanyi's central concept of focal/tacit knowing as supplementary to psychiatry's central concept of conscious/unconscious and to parapsychology's inability to find a mechanism for the transmission of telepathy. I accordingly arranged for Polanyi to present at a weekly Grand Rounds meeting of the psychiatry department, expecting that it would provoke a lively debate. I was to be disappointed. Not only was there no lively debate, there was not a single question or comment. It was as if the silence were saying, "Yes, but so what? What do your ideas have to do with *me*?" The theologian Huston Smith encountered a similar lack of response when he brought Polanyi to MIT.¹

Shortly after the Grand Rounds meeting, J. B. Rhine invited me to accompany him to one of Polanyi's public lectures. I expected that J. B. would sense the possibility that intrigued me – that in telepathy there might be no "transmission" of information whatsoever (for that would be a process requiring energy). Telepathy might, alternatively, be conceived as a shift in focal/tacit boundaries that allowed information ordinarily known only tacitly to appear focally in consciousness, though perhaps in symbolic form. Could a shift in focal/tacit boundaries require no energy consumption? But instead of the appreciation I expected, Dr. Rhine had an immediate antipathy to Polanyi's thought for reasons that I still do not understand.

Rhine and Jung met once and carried on a correspondence from 1935 until 1951. Rhine's work was important to Jung, and may have given him courage to publish his thoughts on synchronicity.² Recently, physicist Victor Mansfield and others have advocated a clearer separation

of synchronicity and psi phenomena (psi phenomena are telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition—i.e., ESP--plus psychokinesis).³

Polanyi suggests three criteria that make a problem worthy of scientific interest: intrinsic interest, measurability, and systematic relevance.⁴ Deficiency in one of these factors can be compensated for by richness in another. Parapsychology, for instance, if based only on laboratory tests, which must be winnowed by elaborate statistics, would not evoke the intrinsic human interest it does were it not for impressive anecdotal reports. Likewise psi events (if one takes them into account) rank high in systematic relevance. It seems to me that, if psi is considered “real,” then any theory that fails to allow for psi is fatally flawed. In the thirties, J. B. Rhine evolved the largely laboratory and statistically-based science of parapsychology out of the older field of psychical research. Psychical research began in 1882 with the founding in England of the Society for Psychic Research, soon followed by a sister society in America, the American Society for Psychic Research founded by William James and others. These societies were founded in order to use accepted scientific tools in investigating phenomena that were left out in formulating the reigning causal-materialistic paradigm of most scientists. This paradigm ignores as “anomalies” data that challenge the basic assumptions of the paradigm, an attitude that causes most scientists to ignore Rhine’s work.⁵ This attitude should most properly be referred to as “scientism.”

The field of parapsychology, though using accepted scientific methods, is generally ignored by other branches of science because its findings do not fit within the reigning causal-materialistic paradigm. The conviviality of scientists usually stops at the borders of parapsychology. Yet, put bluntly, either the phenomena studied by parapsychology are real or the usual statistical tools of scientific research are flawed. Although they can be influenced by various factors – such as “degree of consciousness” – psi effects appear resistant to ever being brought under conscious control. Psi, therefore, is unlikely to ever have any “practical” value. As I read him, Polanyi was open to parapsychology and felt that mainstream science is denying it a fair hearing because it raises fundamental doubt about mainstream science’s basic assumptions.⁶ Polanyi clearly does not consider parapsychology a pseudoscience as he does, for example, Azande thinking.⁷ In discussing Azande beliefs, Polanyi points out that their paradigm cannot be challenged within the Azande system of thought. An outside critic is eventually reduced to asserting that the Azande paradigm is untrue. Similarly, observations that cannot be explained away as fraud, error, or poor technique must be fitted into the dominant paradigm, perhaps modifying it, or rejected as “pseudoscience.”

As Polanyi amply demonstrated, “meaning” arises when observations (usually called “facts”) are seen in reference to a particular framework. The framework itself is chosen by the observer, but is usually chosen unconsciously. Before Polanyi noted the hopeless task of the “Laplacian mind” to make all knowledge explicit, Gödel demonstrated that it is impossible to construct a system of thought that explains, within the system itself, the necessary existence of the system.⁸ At the start of any system, some a-rational assumptions must be made. This means that all knowledge is personal knowledge and what we call “objective” knowledge is simply personal knowledge held with “universal intent.” It might be mistaken, particularly if the framework to which observations are referred is mistaken. Thus all knowledge, even “objective” knowledge, is held at the knowledge holder’s risk. It might prove to be mistaken if the “world” to which it is referred is not the ultimate world accessible to human intelligence.

These three men, all explorers, were contemporaries for much of their lives, as shown by their birth and death dates: Polanyi (1891-1976), Jung (1875-1961), Rhine (1895-1980). Polanyi knew of Rhine's work (see references in note 6 above) and certainly knew of Jung, though he had virtually no interest in psychoanalysis (except Freudian psychoanalysis as an example of dynamo-objective coupling, moral inversion⁹). I know of no evidence that Jung knew of Polanyi's work; but Jung was appreciative of Rhine's work and carried on a long correspondence with him, largely of Rhine's initiative. Rhine met both Jung and Polanyi but seems not to have been significantly influenced by either. Rhine's significance lies primarily in establishing parapsychology as a science, though a poorly accepted one. I shall deal no further with Rhine but will deal with comparing Polanyi and Jung, particularly in their attitude toward psi phenomena.

Polanyi wrote nothing focused on psi, but he was open to it, as some of his writings show (see references in note 6 above). By 1963, Polanyi had further developed his central concept of focal-tacit knowing and was less sure that scientists' ability to perceive as-yet-unrecognized Gestalten in nature was mediated by ESP.¹⁰ Jung was very interested in psi both theoretically and personally.¹¹ I will now compare Jung and Polanyi along other dimensions.

Polanyi and Jung have long been dominants in my thinking. I have often found Polanyi's thought illuminating of Jung's,¹² but this is my first attempt to compare the work of the two thinkers. The central terms for Polanyi are "focal" and "tacit" (or "subsidiary") awareness, Polanyi's nearest approximation to "unconscious.." When it can easily be made focal, tacit awareness may approximate the psychoanalytic "preconscious." Jung's "complex" centers about the terms "conscious" and "unconscious," divided by Jung into personal unconscious and collective unconscious (in his later work, "objective psyche"). I find it useful to compare these central terms in a 2x2 table: conscious (Cs) unconscious (Ucs) top to bottom and tacit (T), focal (F) left to right, this produces four cells:

Cs-T (I)	Cs-F (II)
Ucs-T (IV)	Ucs-F (III)

Quadrant II is our ordinary waking consciousness. Quadrant I contains elements in consciousness of which we ordinarily have only subsidiary awareness (eyeglasses, microscopes, and telescopes are examples.) Quadrant III represents such things as dream "consciousness," which is unconscious only in comparison to the consciousness of Quadrants I and II. Quadrant IV, both tacit and unconscious, is the absolute unconscious, known only by inference from its derivatives, which are always symbols pointing to a reality unknowable in itself.

Polanyi's chief concern, in my opinion, is to demonstrate that all knowledge is held by personal commitment. What is called "objective" is simply personal knowledge held with "universal intent," the belief (possibly erroneous) that anyone considering the same "facts" from the same viewpoint will see them the same way. Jung's chief concern is the transformation of the ego under pressure from the unconscious, the center of which is the Self (a term also used to mean the totality of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious.) Jung calls this process *individuation*.

Both Polanyi and Jung affirm the importance of maintaining a firm grounding in consciousness, although Jung emphasizes the need to shift the center of consciousness toward (but not to) the archetypal Self. In terms of the diagram, this would be an asymptotic approach to the midpoint where all four cells meet. For both, meaning may be seen as the relation between what is consciously (focally) perceived and the (largely unconscious/tacit, subsidiary) framework to which it is referred. The choice of this framework or context is only in part volitional. Polanyi speaks of finding clues to more coherent entities than those presently perceived. Jung speaks of archetypal patterns that, as long as they are unconscious, influence one unawares.

Both Polanyi and Jung were focused on paradigm shifts, but Polanyi concentrated more on shifts in the ruling scientific paradigm, Jung more on the personal sense of “I”, though in his post-1944 work he dealt more with cultural and transpersonal factors.

Polanyi’s chief contributions to understanding the human mind are:

1. His demonstration that all thinking, even scientific thinking, involves an irreducible element of personal commitment and passion.
2. Anything that is in focal conscious awareness can potentially be unpacked into its tacit components, which may be conscious, unconscious, or both.
3. The concept of dynamo-objective couplings, developed around repression of innate religious strivings, is a model of neurosis applicable when any important feelings are denied. Of the two major examples that Polanyi used, Communism and Freudian psychoanalysis, the former is discredited and the latter, in my opinion, is waning. This suggests that dynamo-objective couplings, though extremely enduring,¹³ are less enduring than more open systems.
4. The analysis of machines (*PK*, 328-331) can be applied to the structure of the mind. The over activity of complexes can cause the breakdown of higher-level ego functions but cannot explain the emergence of those functions.

Jung’s chief contributions toward understanding the human mind are:

1. The ego, to which all known things are referred, is itself a specialized organ of a more comprehensive personality which Jung calls the archetypal Self.
2. There is an innate dynamism toward centroverson of the personality. There are lesser forces pressing for deintegration but integration > deintegration.
3. Archetypes are universal patterns underlying consciousness. They are a competing hypothesis (along with cultural diffusion and ESP) for explaining the occurrence of similar patterns in cultures widely separated in time and space (and in dreams.) The building blocks of the mind are complexes, some of which are pathological. Complexes consist of personal material arranged about an archetypal core.
4. Jung’s theory of synchronicity concerns evidence that interior/subjective is ultimately the same as exterior/“objective” connected by meaning into one world, a *unus mundus*.

Though seeming impossible to harness for “practical” purposes, psi’s ultimate utility may be its ability to discriminate between theories according to whether they allow for it. Of the three men who have most influenced my own thinking, two, Jung and Rhine, explicitly found psi phenomena important. The third theoretician, Michael Polanyi, was open to psi, but he did not write on that

subject.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between these three thinkers is in the area of religion and spirituality. Polanyi focused on how a worshipper must “indwell” the forms and rituals of an already-established religion like Christianity in order to appreciate it.¹⁴ Rhine considered parapsychology to be “the basic science of religion.”¹⁵ Religious thinkers generally have ignored parapsychology. Jung was interested in numinous experiences, which he conceptualized as experiences of the archetypal Self, the origin and core of the ego. From Jung’s perspective, religions are priestly and theological elaborations of the numinous experiences of individuals like Jesus, Paul, Buddha, Mohammed, etc., but he repeatedly acknowledges that he is working with the actual phenomenology of the psyche and is not making metaphysical statements.¹⁶

I pose the question, “Does the universe point beyond itself? It is an interesting question. I do not know the answer. Certainly the causal-materialist universe that most scientists call “the universe” clearly does point beyond itself. But their “universe” is constructed by leaving out certain observable and well-studied phenomena. Whether the universe as it is potentially knowable is another question entirely. Let us *try* to find the answer.

We shall doubtless fail. Polanyi’s focal-tacit knowing and Alfred North Whitehead’s distinction between the primordial and consequent natures of God and Jung’s view of the ego as a specialized organ of the archetypal Self and Rhine’s failure to harness ESP to conscious ego control suggest that we shall never unpack all the inexhaustible mysteries of the universe of which we ourselves are an infinitesimal part.

One thing is clear, however: in any “Society of Explorers,” Polanyi, Jung, and Rhine qualify as charter members.

Notes

¹ Huston Smith, personal communication 11/23/99.

² Jung’s basic discussion of synchronicity (a term he coined) is (1978) “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” in his *Collected Works*, Volume 8. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ Victor Mansfield, Sally Rhine Feather, and James Hall. “The Rhine-Jung Letters: Differentiating Parapsychological from Synchronistic Events.” *Journal of Parapsychology* 62: 1 (March 1998): 5-25,. See also Victor Mansfield,. “Distinguishing Synchronicity from Parapsychological Phenomena: An Essay in Honor of Marie-Louise von Franz,” (part 2 of a two-part article), *Quadrant*, XXIX: 1 (Winter, 1999).

⁴ *PK*, 135-136 .

⁵ Against great resistance, the Parapsychological Association was accepted as an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

⁶ *PK*, p. 166. *SFS*, pp. 35-38 and 60. These are all concerned with ESP.

⁸ Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman. *Gödel's Proof* (New York: New York University Press, 1986)

⁹ James A. Hall, "Polanyi and Psychoanalysis." *Tradition and Discovery* 18:2: 5-9.

¹⁰*Science, Faith and Society* was originally published in 1946. In 1964, it was reprinted by the University of Chicago Press. The reprint include a new introduction by Polanyi titled "Background and Prospect" which was written in Dec. 1963 (pp. 1-17). This new introduction reflects on the 1946 text in terms of all the other things that Polanyi has published. Here he notes that early he was interested in how one can tell what things not yet understood by science are capable of being understood. This is a good problem that after working out the dynamics of tacit knowing he is less willing to discuss in terms of ESP:

The testing hand, the straining eye, the ransacked brain, may all be thought to be labouring under the common spell of a potential discovery trying to emerge into actuality. I feel doubtful today about the role of extra-sensory perception in guiding this actualization. But my speculations on this possibility illustrate well the depth that I ascribe to this problem (14).

¹¹Jung saw parapsychology as confirming his notion of synchronicity. He found important the loud reports from the bookcase on his first meeting with Freud, which lasted thirteen hours Jung found significance in the splitting dining room table and bread knife. Dr. Rhine kept a picture of the fractured breadknife on the wall of his Parapsychology Lab while it was housed on the Duke campus. These events are discussed by Jung in his autobiographical *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston. Revised edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).

¹²James A. Hall, "Polanyi and Jungian Psychology: Dream Ego and Waking Ego," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 27 (1982): 239-254. James A. Hall, "Pseudo-Objectivity as a Defense Mechanism: Polanyi's Concept of Dynamo-Objective Coupling," *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 12:2 (April 1984): 199-209. James A. Hall, "Polanyi and Psychoanalysis." *Tradition and Discovery* 18:2 (1991-92): 5-9.

¹³James A. Hall, "Collective Shadows: Why They Endure" *The Archetype of Shadow in a Split World*, ed. M. A. Mattoon (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1987): 113-133.

¹⁴ Harry Prosch, *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) summarizes as follows:

The convert, he [Polanyi] said, surrenders 'to the religious ecstasy' that the 'articulate framework of worship and doctrine' evokes and 'accredits thereby its validity.' This, he added, is 'analogous to the process of validation' in art. It therefore seemed to him to be the 'religious ecstasy' evoked by the whole framework of our religion which 'validates' our religious thought, rather than our ability to 'verify' our thought by reference to some intuitive contact with some reality pre-existing independently of our discover of it. God 'exists,' he held, 'in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise; not as a fact — any more than truth, beauty or justice exist as facts. All these, like God, are things which can be appreciated only in serving them.

This language is in sharp contrast to the way in which he had already written in that book about the referent of science. He had said scientific theories claim 'to represent empirical reality.' (250).

¹⁵J. B. Rhine, "Parapsychology and Religion," *Journal of the Texas Society for Psychical Research*, (1976-77): 9-22.

¹⁶"Psychology can only approach the subject [faith] from the phenomenological angle, for the realities of faith lie outside the realm of psychology." C. G. Jung, 1940/54, "Psychology and Religion: West and East," *Collected Works*: 11: par. 296.