

# **Ethics For The Post-Critical Era: Perspectives from the Thought of Michael Polanyi**

**Charles S. McCoy**

ABSTRACT Key Words: ethics, post-critical thought, Michael Polanyi

*This essay treats Michael Polanyi's post-critical philosophy and the contributions of post-critical thought to ethics. It discusses the from/to structure of human knowing and heurism and ethics. It argues that virtue, viewed post-critically, is an achievement in community; post-critical thought calls for movement beyond specialization.*

## **1. Introduction**

The twentieth century was not always kind to practitioners of religious, philosophical, and ethical thought. This is especially so for Christian thinkers who let themselves become caught between the rational empiricism of the Enlightenment turned into dogmatic scientism and the onslaught of historical relativism as Western thought wrestled with the diversity of cultures and religions. Scholars in the physical and biological sciences fared better as long as they avoided quasi-metaphysical claims and shallow theological excursions. In the humanities, however, academics have often tried to become “scientific” and, as a result, have wandered either into wastelands of rationalism, thus becoming isolated from the wholeness of being human, or into post-modernism, with its confusing array of meanings and individual fideisms.<sup>1</sup>

In this era in which final certainties have been undermined, we can hope that there will be more cautious and modest claims from persons of all persuasions, more adequate measures of clarity as to meaning, and wider acceptance of the particularity of human location and perspective. As for theology and ethics, it is probable that a new era is emerging, with a turn comparable to the abrupt one brought on by the biblical fundamentalism based upon modern rationalism and the neo-orthodox challenge to Christian theology shaped by the Enlightenment. There is the possibility of recovery from dogmatic rationalism, from the erratic tendency to veer from one fad to another, and from the insular theologies of Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth.

This essay makes no attempt to deal with the entire spectrum of issues emerging from the impact of Enlightenment thought or the challenges to it. Instead, we shall explore contributions that the post-critical philosophy of Michael Polanyi<sup>2</sup> provides for a new era of faith and ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, based on his creative redefining of the problems of the post-Enlightenment era.

Before launching into the major focus of the essay, a brief account of how the present problems came about may provide helpful background for the discussion. This sketch will be given from my own somewhat jaundiced angle of vision.

## **2. Enlightenment Thought and Its Developing Problems**

The triumph among 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century academics of Enlightenment rationalism and scientism has never been complete or without strong alternatives. Nagging doubts emerging over the entire period caused the

reigning confidence to recede sharply during the 20th century. It is instructive to note the intellectual movements and academic fads that have been put forward to replace the Enlightenment and to examine briefly their significance for Christian thought

The Enlightenment can best be understood as the culmination and triumph, at least among European intellectuals, of the critical movement in philosophy initiated by Descartes, the view of the natural world formulated by Newton, and the articulation of these views in the philosophy of Kant. The critical period of Western thought coincided with the rise of modern science. Both the critical movement and modern science were made possible by the hard-won increases in religious, political, and economic freedom initiated during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Major sectors of Western society, previously restricted in thought and action, could read the Bible, become educated, and engage in research with far fewer restraints. In turn, increasing knowledge and diverse perspectives strengthened the political economies and educational systems emerging from the growing liberation. The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment liked to regard themselves as solely responsible for the freedom they had inherited as well as for the critical philosophy and scientific method they nurtured. They also believed that critical rationalism could now discover “objective truth.” Truth as it emerged would become, they thought, a sufficient basis for rejecting the pre-critical past of traditional cultures. As Carl Becker suggests, however, they resembled thinkers of the past more than they realized, even while believing that history was a success story because it had culminated in them. In their own eyes, Becker writes:

They are citizens of the world, the emancipated ones, looking out upon a universe seemingly brand new because so freshly flooded with light, a universe in which everything worth attending to is visible, and everything visible is seen to be unblurred and wonderfully simple after all, and evidently intelligible to the human mind—the mind of Philosophers.<sup>3</sup>

The claims of Enlightenment rationalism did not, however, receive universal agreement, even among the intelligentsia. David Hume, for example, showed the problematic character of rational empiricism if taken as a final understanding of the world as experienced, and suggested that we still must come out of laboratories and scholarly studies to live in a world of tradition and belief. Immanuel Kant carefully left room for faith in his philosophy and, while rejecting the traditional proofs for the existence of God, confesses that, if he must choose between equally undemonstrable alternatives, would opt for belief in an *ens realissimum* as a necessary basis for rational thought, an endorsement in his way of the ontological argument for deity.

Nevertheless, the critical perspective carried the day generally in intellectual circles, and its embodiment in the academic programs of the Humboldt University (founded in Berlin in 1810) became the model for graduate education in the universities of Europe and America. The undoubted achievements of the critical method, in its brilliant discoveries about nature and its technological achievements, obscured for its devotees its deficiencies as a total view of the world. In spite of its contributions to modern society, the Enlightenment had also produced, it gradually became clear, a dogmatic “scientism” that, following the triumphalist pattern found in much Western religion, sought to discredit other perspectives, in particular pre-critical views of the world held by communities of religious belief, and to convert people to this Enlightenment way to Truth.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of the critical premises of the Enlightenment, religion was expected to fade away, a prediction on which such different disciples of scientific objectivism as Auguste Comte and Karl Marx could agree. Religion, however, both in its organized forms and in spontaneous movements, did not disappear during the time when critical thought and modern science were emerging, nor did it diminish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century except

perhaps in strongholds of established Christianity. Instead, from the time of the Renaissance and Reformation, religious groups have become a major force for freedom and have kept on growing during the zenith of Enlightenment influence, much to the dismay of many of the intelligentsia. Indeed, religious communities—leaders and members—have often played significant roles in science and critical scholarship, in political and economic democratization, and in social reforms such as the abolition of slavery and increasing rights for laborers, women, and children, changing the complexion of western society and laying the groundwork for continuing reform. Quite clearly, religious belief and communities of faith, far from disappearing, have remained alive and well, to the consternation of those for whom the scientific method had become a total view of reality, i.e. *their religion*.

At the same time, problems developed within the critical rationalism of the Enlightenment throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and multiplied sharply in the 20<sup>th</sup>. A series of events and movements undermined critical thought as the ultimate arbiter of Truth. Existentialism convinced many that rationality is inadequate for the anxiety of living without a leap of faith. Phenomenology retreated from the task of dealing with noumenal reality and contented itself with analysis of phenomena, except for Heidegger, who, in a brilliant reversal of Kant, declared the phenomenology of human existence as the way back into being. Nietzschean thought sneered at the weak mediocrity of Western Christian culture and proclaimed the possibility of transcendence into a superior level of existence. The emergence of cross-cultural awareness and historical relativity undermined confidence in Western rationality for the humanities. The idea of relativity, however, produced a quantum leap forward in the physical sciences with Einstein's theories. In philosophy, the attempt of logical positivism to bolster confidence in rational empiricism collapsed from internal contradictions, while the withdrawal into linguistic analysis provided for many attracted to this Oxford/ Cambridge movement an interesting evasion of the challenges to critical rationalism.<sup>5</sup> The frontal assaults of "deconstructionism" sent critical thought into retreat, except where dogmatic scientism and variations of pre-critical religious faith had become firmly entrenched.

Along with philosophy, Christian thought shaped by critical thought has faced all these challenges, as well as the powerful reactions of neo-orthodoxy and the rise of fundamentalism, the latter a modern byproduct of the critical method. As a result, theology, especially Protestant Christian varieties, has endured a series of errant fads such as "demythologizing," "honest to God," "secularization" and the death of God." Ethics has moved through what has been called a "wasteland of utilitarianism" into a "wasteland of rationalism," as well as an amazing ploy by Western ethicists to deny the existence of ethics in other religions and cultures, in an attempt, it would seem, to shape and control the emerging field of comparative ethics. A recent fad in theology and ethics, as well as in virtually every other discipline and cultural activity, has been the shift into the ambiguous language of "post-modernism." Its central thread of meaning, amid its confusing variety, is the rejection of "modernism." It has spread out into a "vague, oblong blur" across a wide swath of those who might be called the intellectual masses of Western society. Though this reaction to modernism has undoubtedly produced creative work, it has failed to achieve cohesiveness, clarity, or strength as a response to the critical period of Western thought.

There is an alternative to post-modern *pandemonium*. That alternative is *the post-critical philosophy of Michael Polanyi*. In the midst of his achievements in physical chemistry, Polanyi perceived early in his career problems of the critical method that the post-modernists discovered much later and attributed to "modernism." Further, in the view of many, he provided more cogent resolutions of these problems than did the post-modernists, and did so without post-modernism's rejection of the achievements of the Enlightenment. Polanyi combines appreciation of both critical method and pre-critical faith as he develops his post-critical philosophy.

While not directly dependent upon them, his thought exhibits kinship with the work of Plato, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Josiah Royce in philosophy, and of H. Richard Niebuhr in theology and ethics. In what follows, after a sketch of Polanyi's post-critical thought, the focus will be on its implications for ethics, adding insights from H. Richard Niebuhr and federal/covenantal theology.

### 3. A Sketch of the Post-Critical Philosophy of Michael Polanyi<sup>6</sup>

The philosopher Marjorie Grene declares that Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowing is "grounds for a revolution in philosophy" and involves "the thesis that all knowledge necessarily includes a tacit component on which it relies in order to focus on its goal, whether of theoretical discovery and formulation or practical activity."<sup>7</sup> I agree with her but propose a more inclusive hypothesis: Polanyi's post-critical thought, based especially on his notion of tacit knowing, *opens the way to a new era in human thought*, a revolution as significant as the earlier turn from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican perspective. Scholars in disciplines across the entire spectrum of learning have been slow to recognize that this revolution is taking place. The insights of Polanyi, nevertheless, are gradually seeping into and modifying the methods and tenor of human thought today. The critical period of Western thought, opened by Descartes and brought to its zenith in the Enlightenment, is ending, and the post-critical era is emerging. This new perspective, as we shall see, has important meaning for ethics. Here are the major points of post-critical thought:

A. Combination of Critical and Pre-Critical Reason. Polanyi's post-critical philosophy does not reject the achievements of critical thought, as is generally the case with post-modernists, but instead combines critical reasoning with the fiduciary dimension of pre-critical thought in a way that affirms both. He exposes the pretensions of those who suppose they have found the sure path to universal truth either through rationality or by means of scientific method. Polanyi holds that thinkers of the critical era have pursued a "mistaken ideal of objectivity."<sup>8</sup> He points out that the critical method has not escaped human location and personal commitment. "Thus, when we claim greater objectivity for the Copernican theory, we do imply that its excellence is, not a matter of personal taste on our part, but an inherent quality deserving universal acceptance by rational creatures. We abandon the cruder anthropocentrism of our senses--but only in favor of a more ambitious anthropocentrism of our reason."<sup>9</sup>

With this insight, Polanyi proposes an advance in human thought as significant as that initiated by Copernicus four centuries earlier. The Copernican Revolution shows that humanity is not the center of the universe. The Polanyian Revolution unfolding around us shows that we still occupy the particularity of human location in our knowing and action. Polanyi provides a method that combines critical rigor and impetus for discovery with the pre-critical respect for tradition, culture, community, and faith into post-critical thought. In post-critical perspective, uncritical adherence to critical method leads toward an objectivism in knowing that does not take account of the tacit coefficient upon which it depends, and is as inadequate as the post-modern rejection of the modern that leaves itself adrift without connection to a context of tradition, community, and commitment. Post-critical thought discloses the pre-critical passion and faith underlying critical rigor and the potential of pre-critical traditionalism as a springboard for discovery, thus providing fiduciary roots in tradition and community for post-modern creativity.

B. The From/To Structure of Knowing. In Western thought, Polanyi points out, attention has been given to the focal dimension of knowing, the "to" of knowing, and has neglected the "from" component of knowing that makes the "to" of knowing possible. With the "from," Polanyi offers an inclusive account of that

upon which the knower relies in order to focus on the “to.” Knowing, he argues persuasively, has an inescapable “from/to” pattern, the “from” including the embodied, physical basis of observation, the existence of consciousness and the ability to think and interpret, and the context of presuppositions, faith, tradition, and culture shaping the interpreted “to.” In this from/to structure, knowing consists 1) in that part that we focus upon, of which we have *focal awareness*, and 2) in that part that we rely upon in order to focus, of which we have *subsidiary awareness*. Knowing cannot be reduced to the *explicit dimension* of knowing but must include also the *tacit dimension*, without which the explicit dimension could not exist. Thus, the process of human knowing moves from a *proximal context*, of which we are subsidiarily aware to a *distal context*, of which we are focally aware. By dealing only with the focal aspect of knowing and ignoring the tacit dimension, Western epistemology has been individualistic and insufficiently aware of the bodily and communal context of knowing. By uncovering the tacit dimension, the Polanyian Revolution reminds us that knowing is personal, occurring within and relying upon human location, understood so as to include both the *from* and the *to* dimensions of human understanding and action. Polanyi succeeds in delineating with precision the central problem of the critical method and showing the need to re-appropriate the pre-critical perspective, thus opening the way toward a post-critical philosophy.

From Aristotle onward, the major lines of Western philosophy have given primary attention to the focal elements in knowing and little attention to the subsidiary elements upon which the focal relies. This is certainly the case with Descartes, who initiates the critical era of Western thought, and with Whitehead, the greatest metaphysician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who expresses directly his reliance on Descartes: “The positive doctrine of these lectures [*Process and Reality*] is concerned with the becoming, the being, and the relatedness of ‘actual entities.’ An ‘actual entity’ is a *res vera* in the Cartesian sense of that term.”<sup>10</sup> In no way does this aspect of Whitehead’s thought negate the greatness of his organic, processive system, but it does place it decisively within the bounds of critical philosophy. Though Whitehead acknowledges his debt to Plato, he does not give attention to Plato’s suggestions of a tacit dimension in human thought in the *Meno* and in the dialogical method that makes clear the human location of philosophical exploration.

At one point, Polanyi offers a succinct summary of the discovery that takes him beyond the critical into the post-critical without rejecting the importance of critical thought:

We have seen *tacit knowledge* to comprise two kinds of awareness, *subsidiary awareness* and *focal awareness*. Now we see *tacit knowledge* opposed to *explicit knowledge*; but these two are not sharply divided. While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied. Hence all knowledge is *either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge*. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable.<sup>11</sup>

The recognition of the tacit dimension, the background in subsidiary awareness for human knowing, appears to be a resounding defeat to all those gripped by the critical desire to attain absolute, objective knowledge of Reality or Truth and for whom the particularity of human location is a scandal to be overcome. Polanyi regards the post-critical perspective as an important discovery, opening up the ignored tacit dimension of human knowing, an achievement rather than a defeat. He writes: “I suggest we transform this retreat into a triumph, by the simple device of changing camp. Let us recognize that tacit knowing is the fundamental power of the mind, which creates explicit knowing, lends meaning to it and controls its uses.”<sup>12</sup>

What does this mean for the critical claim that it can arrive at objective Truth and uncover final Reality? The from/to structure of knowing makes it impossible to accept the detached objectivism of critical thought as

the path to Truth. A new understanding of Reality emerges:

To hold a natural law to be true is to believe that its presence will manifest itself in an indeterminate range of yet unknown and perhaps unthinkable consequences . . . We meet here with a new definition of reality. Real is that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminately in the future. Hence an explicit statement can bear on reality only by virtue of the tacit coefficient associated with it. This conception of reality and of the tacit knowing of reality underlies all my writing.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, Polanyi dissolves the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity in knowing. He writes:

I think we may distinguish between the personal in us, which actively enters into our commitments, and our subjective states, in which we merely endure our feelings. This distinction establishes the conception of the *personal*, which is neither subjective nor objective. In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.<sup>14</sup>

In no way does Polanyi reject the importance of the critical method, he only deprives it of what I call the “Imperial Mood” of discourse and the assumption that it describes Reality “objectively” from an “ontological peak” outside historical, social location.

C. The Heuristic Shape of Post-Critical Thought. Polanyi’s recognition of the importance of tradition, culture, and community, i.e. the inclusion of the pre-critical, fiduciary rootage of knowing, does not lead to views of knowledge as static and chained to the past. *We dwell in* a past inherited from our community of interpretation, not in order to repeat it, but in order to *break out* into the newness of the future hidden within it. This *dwelling in* and *breaking out* arises from “the essential restlessness of the human mind, which calls ever again in question any satisfaction that it may have previously achieved.”<sup>15</sup>

For Polanyi, fiduciary knowing regards faith not as an unchanging platform but rather as a heuristic springboard that places us in a restless tension between the known and the unknown. Reality becomes a process under way, a problem not yet completely solved, that engages our entire being and draws us further into the mystery of being. What we believe we know leads us to focus on what we do not yet know. Referring to the mathematician Polya’s advice for solving problems, Polanyi writes: “How can we concentrate our attention on something we don’t know? . . . ‘Look at the unknown—says Polya—’Look at the end’ . . . *Look at the unknown. Look at the conclusion.*” Polanyi continues:

The seeming paradox is resolved by the fact that even though we have never met the solution, we have a conception of it in the same sense as we have a conception of a forgotten name. By directing our attention on a focus in which we are subsidiarily aware of all the particulars that remind us of the forgotten name, we form a conception of it; and likewise, by fixing our attention on a focus in which we are subsidiarily aware of the data by which the solution of a problem is determined, we form a conception of this solution. The admonition to look at the unknown really means that we should *look at the known data, but not in themselves, rather as clues to the unknown; as pointers to it and parts of it.*<sup>16</sup>

Far beyond mathematics, the post-critical philosophy of Polanyi has meaning for the entire spectrum of knowing and action. This is the case no less for ethics than other academic disciplines. Polanyi enables us to accept and use critical thought without either absolutizing it into scientism or rejecting it as do the post-modernists. His post-critical thought reaffirms the meaning of the pre-critical, with its emphasis on tradition, community, commitment, and the reaches of human spirituality and faith. In Polanyi's brilliant reformulation of the meaning of reality, there is a partial affirmation of the critical method with its precise probing of human experience and also of the indeterminate nature of the future. There is stability in human thought and action based upon commitment and faith as the human location in which we dwell in order to break out toward a not-yet-known, unthinkable consummation. The heuristic tension relates the dwelling in and breaking out. Thus, we believe, know, and act, not with the rigidity of *absolute, universal assertion*, but with the confidence of *universal intent* that believes in order to understand but also anticipates, indeed *longs for*, a future of unfolding insight, knowledge, and faith.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Contributions of Polanyi's Post-Critical Thought to Ethics

With this overview of post-critical philosophy in mind, we can examine the perspectives on ethical reflection and action in the contemporary world that the Polyanian Revolution provides. These insights will be illuminating for ethics within the Christian community, for ethics within other communities of interpretation, and also for the emerging context of global ethics in which diverse communities are meeting, at times with violent results and at times with creative interchange that may prove beneficial to the world. Some of Polanyi's contributions come from the overall pattern of post-critical thought, and others are particular insights of his about ethics. In both ways, Polanyi helps move us beyond contemporary forms of ethics toward ethics for the post-critical age of human history.

A. Implications for Ethics of Combining Critical Reason with Pre-critical Faith. As noted above, the post-critical thought of Polanyi continues rather than rejecting critical reasoning but places it within the pre-critical context of presuppositions, commitments, and faith. In this way, Polanyi affirms the achievements of the critical period but overcomes its pretense of objectivism that threatens human values and vision.

1. A basic contribution of post-critical thought to ethics is to affirm its importance for the entire spectrum of human thought and action. Faith, commitment, and valuing are present in the physical and biological sciences no less than in the humanities and social sciences, no less in the building of bridges than in home and family. Pre-critical elements of human life can be subjected to critical thought and modified but not eliminated.

2. Post-critical thought must be distinguished carefully from post-modernism and the problems it raises for ethics. A theme present amid the bewildering diversity of post-modernism is its decisive rejection of what it calls the "modern," meaning by this the objectivist rationality of the critical period of Western thought. In rejecting the narrow, limiting certainties of modernism, post-modernism also eliminates any firm grounding for human thought and action, ethics included. Deconstruction takes the matter further and rejects the possibility of grounding for any view of reality and value.

The post-critical view is more discriminating and, I believe, more accurate. While it does not accept the overconfident claims of critical rationalism as doorway to reality, the post-critical perspective through its discovery of the tacit coefficient discloses pre-critical *roots* (rather than ground) of human thinking in particular

communities and traditions. After all, the critique of epistemology and ethics by deconstructionists relies for its force on their tacit dimension, with its commitments and presuppositions. Further, the affirmation of *absolute relativism* involves a major contradiction.

The tacit dimension provides firm roots for human commitment and action but not absolute grounding. Polanyi rejects the claim of critical thought to make *universal* statements about what is real, but affirms the possibility for humans informed by their communities and traditions to take responsibility for committing themselves to statements about reality and value with *universal intent*. In this way, Polanyi's post-critical philosophy combines the critical and the pre-critical, thus providing roots for ethical reflection and action, rather than setting humans adrift in a post-modern, deconstructed world.

3. Post-critical thought discloses the weakness of rationalism as the basis for ethics. Reason is useful in the process of ethical reflection but inadequate as its frame and focus, as, for example, when rationalism reduces ethics to ethical theory.

Most obviously, in post-critical perspective, the questions must be posed: "Whose reason? In what tradition and community of interpretation is the reasoning rooted?" One example that illustrates the inadequacy of reason as the ground of ethics is what can be called the postulation method of rational individualism in ethics found in the widely acclaimed work of John Rawls, whose major work is *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>18</sup> Rawl's ethical theory is based on individual definition and sequential postulation, with the unexamined presupposition that the author's reason is congruent with a rationality present in all rational individuals. Thus Rawls can make such assertions as: "I have distinguished the concept of justice," "The concept of justice I take to be defined by" (p. 10), "the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant," "each person must decide by rational reflection" (p. 11), "The choice which rational persons would make" (p. 12), "It seems reasonable to suppose" (p. 19), "Let us assume that each person beyond a certain age and possessed of the requisite intellectual capacity develops a sense of justice" (p. 46), and so on. The structure Rawls builds has its interesting aspects as a theoretical, individual performance. From a post-critical perspective, however, his work has a basis no stronger than Rawls' individual assumptions and stipulations and will appeal only to those who share his view or merely enjoy the performance.

In speaking of the rational ethics of English academics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mary Warnock offers a succinct comment: "One of the consequences of treating ethics as the analysis of ethical language is . . . that it leads to the increasing triviality of the subject . . . We do need to categorize and to describe, even in the sphere of morals, but we should still exist as moral agents even if we seldom did so, and therefore the subject matter of ethics would still exist."<sup>19</sup>

Rationalism as practiced by Rawls and as observed by Warnock reduces and trivializes ethics as the result of ignoring the tacit coefficient of persons engaging in ethical reflection. The embodied traditions, communities of interpretation, commitments, and passions must also be included. Polanyi observes, "To speak of moral passions is something new. Writers on ethics, both ancient and modern, have defined morality as a composed state of mind . . . There is, admittedly one ancient record of moral admonitions which were outbreaks of moral passion: the sermons of the Hebrew prophets."<sup>20</sup>

The post-critical perspective widens ethics beyond rationality by making us aware of the tacit coefficient of human thought shaping moral reflection. The importance of critical reason is affirmed within pre-

critical context. The rational premise is questioned that reason operates the same way in all humans and is independent of culture and tradition. Further, post-critical method goes beyond the notion of ethics as coolly detached and includes the elements of commitment and passion that characterize the moral life of humanity. As Polanyi puts it, “for the sake of precision declaratory sentences should be formulated in the fiduciary mode, with the words ‘I believe’ prefixed to them” thus eliminating “any formal distinction between statements of belief and statements of fact.” This admission that statements, when understood carefully, are “intentionally circular” expressing one’s “intellectual responsibilities” and “personal beliefs” makes it clear that faith and commitment are crucial elements in the tacit dimension of knowing and action; “the fiduciary mode will have to be merged in the wider framework of commitment.”<sup>21</sup> Such an understanding is as important for ethics as for epistemology.

B. Implications for Ethics of the From/To Structure of Human Knowing. Polanyi reminds us that “thinking is not only necessarily intentional, as Brentano taught; it is also necessarily fraught with the roots that it embodies.”<sup>22</sup> This is just as true for ethics as for the physical sciences, epistemology, or learning to ride a bicycle, though specialists in religious, philosophical, and theological ethics are as prone as scholars in other specialties to overlook this basic insight and concentrate focally on the analysis of ethical language and/or ethical concepts.

1. Ethical reflection has its focus on moral judgment and action, individual and communal. That focal awareness emerges within a tacit dimension, a “from,” upon which the “to” relies. Ethics provides guidance for the moral agency of humans and is rooted in the traditions and commitments shaping the subsidiary awareness of individuals and communities. Ethical reflection is neither objective reasoning about moral issues nor is it subjective preferences. Instead ethical judgment and action arise from what humans believe to be real, meaningful, and of value, what are right principles and rules, and what is responsible and appropriate in human relations. Ethical reflection and action are seen in their wholeness only when the tacit coefficient is included.

2. The tacit coefficient in ethics has sometimes been dealt with under the heading of *character*. Polanyi’s perspective helps enlarge the understanding of character by including the embodiment of humans and their immersion in tradition and community, so that character directs attention to much more than “virtues” inhering in individuals. The communal rootage of character is given more adequate attention in post-critical perspective, and the character of communities as well as persons in community becomes clearer. Parallel to Plato’s view of justice, we may say that personal character becomes more virtuous as communal character embodies virtue, and communal character becomes more virtuous as the character of the persons in the community embodies virtue.

3. The from/to pattern helps show the inadequacy of “situation ethics,” and may clear up some of its problems. As presented by John A. T. Robinson and Joseph Fletcher,<sup>23</sup> “situation ethics” focuses too exclusively on response to the immediate context and too little on the larger context opened up in the tacit coefficient shaping human interpretations of the situations and what is regarded as appropriate response in a particular context. In this situation ethics, the criterion of action becomes too simply the “principle of love,” overlooking the tacit coefficient understood through the Christian community of interpretation, the tradition of Christian love, and faith in a God of love, which provide the basic context of Christian commitment.

4. Another view elides ethics into “obedience” in the moment of existential decision and ignores the tacit dimension that includes the roots of obedience in tradition, community, and meaningful relationships, thus giving attention to faith and commitment.<sup>24</sup> Without subsidiary awareness, obedience remains a concept that

is, at worst, vague and, at best, remains highly ambiguous. The reliance on a context of tradition and community for interpreting the meaning of obedience is obscured if no attention is given to the tacit coefficient of human thought and action.

5. The from/to structure of post-critical thought provides the tacit dimension necessary for understanding the ethics of one's own faith community as well as the ethics of other communities. In this way, Polanyi contributes more inclusive awareness to Christian ethics, liberates it from a shallow bondage to the ethicist's own culture that is a present threat to the development of comparative ethics, and may prove midwife to the birth of global ethics as diverse cultures meet and interact.

Attempts at formulating a global ethic have shown tendencies to emerge from lowest-common-denominator reduction rather than from the height of commitment present in diverse faith communities around the world. The result is a list of principles that produce weak agreement but not the basis of strong common action. A genuine global ethic must begin by understanding divergent tacit coefficients in which communal commitments are rooted and work at discovering areas of strong agreement providing grounds for common commitments and effective action.

6. Most obvious and direct of all, Polanyi's from/to pattern discloses what could be called the dilemma of "Dilemma Ethics" and renders this kind of ethical thought a primary casualty of post-critical thought. The focus of dilemma ethics is the notion that the need for ethics arises when a moral problem confronts us with a dilemma requiring moral judgment and decisions about alternative courses of action. Overlooked is the tacit coefficient in human agents within which a dilemma arises and makes it possible to recognize the existence of a dilemma. The from/to structure of post-critical thought both undermines the basis of "dilemma ethics" itself and also illumines the subsidiary element of focal ethical awareness and action. Without the "from," there is no "to," without a background of moral commitments, there is no dilemma. In this perspective, dilemma ethics is truncated and incomplete, existing in a vacuum of non-explanation, unless the crucial dimension of believed-in meaning and value is included. Not only does the tacit coefficient explain the appearance of an ethical dilemma, but also makes it clear that the resources for dealing with ethical issues once recognized will be shaped by the fiduciary character of the tacit coefficient.

C. Post-Critical Heurism and Ethics. At no point is Polanyi's thought more important for ethics in a post-critical era than in its heuristic core. Humans  *dwell in* the traditions of the community in which they are born and to which they are apprenticed from birth. But there is the strong heuristic impulse to  *break out* into new insights that extend the past. The teleological, goal-oriented, character of ethics must wrestle constantly with the burgeoning of meaning of such ends as love and justice. As one level of meaning is attained, new levels emerge. In deontological ethics, focused upon principles, rules, and laws to be followed, the same heuristic phenomenon of development and change can be observed. As Chief Justice Earl Warren observed, "Law floats in a sea of morality," and changes as moral insight unfolds. And morality exists in a context of ethical convictions and faith that have heuristic impulses taking humanity forward into a future of newness. Weber sees charisma emerging and subsiding into routinization, institutionalization, and stasis, but Polanyi views the dynamic force of charisma still present, dwelt in and waiting to break out anew. The heuristic core of post-critical thought appears especially in the Polanyi's notions of  *moral inversion, virtue as achievement, and liberation.*

1. Moral Inversion.. Among the most interesting and original contributions of Polanyi to ethics is the notion of "moral inversion." When we understand that ethics is not based on inner peace or the absence of passion

but rather on commitment and moral passion, the ambiguous character of morality emerges. Ethical aspiration may open the way to coercion or violence to achieve the goal to which it is committed. This commitment to violence as a means may be transformed into a goal. Polanyi calls this “transformation a process of *moral inversion*.”<sup>25</sup> One aspect of moral inversion arises from excessive intensity of moral expectations, which can be destructive of ethical thought and action. A second aspect of moral inversion is what Polanyi calls “dynamo-objective coupling.”

a. The Peril of Perfectionism. In the opinion of many observers of the moral scene today, the language of moral discourse is chaotic; that human ethical thought, concern, and action are disappearing; and that moral standards and behavior are in sharp decline. Evidence for all these opinions, in the view of those holding them, can be found in abundance. Polanyi has a different perspective.

First, the view that ethics and morality have fallen into chaos and decline can be seen as evidence that the standards for judging have been raised. As some observers have noted about the rising tide of complaint about the ethics of business corporation, the situation when viewed carefully does not reveal that the behavior of corporations and business leaders is worse than was the case fifty or one hundred years ago; indeed the actual behavior has improved—in many areas quite markedly; the real change is that society (through government, through the activity of the increasing number of protest groups; and the development of ethics codes in business and trade associations and in all varieties of corporation) has dramatically elevated the ethical standards by which business corporations are judged. The intensity of ethical concern has become deeper, and the areas of ethical interest in society has widened immensely throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Second, the more serious problem today is the intensification and increasing breadth of moral concern, as it moves toward standard of judgment approaching perfectionism. The public is beginning to demand ethical perfection in all areas of moral concern and to want complete fulfillment of moral expectations immediately. This raises the possibility of “moral inversion,” a reaction to failure to attain these ultimate expectations resulting in widespread cynicism, despair, nihilism, and an openness to immoral actions resulting from excessive moral passion. Not declining moral concern, but rather the reverse—the intensity of moral expectations—may lead to an endemic collapse of ethics.

Those “chicken-little” ethicists, who are declaring that the ethical sky is falling, may be victims of historical amnesia and social myopia.<sup>26</sup> In their focal awareness on contemporary moral outcry, they have missed the heightened standards and the increasing number of areas of concern in ethics and contributed to the looming peril of moral inversion via ethical perfectionism.

b. Dynamo-Objective Coupling. Polanyi finds illustrations of this kind of “moral inversion” in Marxism and Freudianism. The dynamo-objective coupling occurs when “Moral passions are . . . cast in the form of a scientific affirmation.” For example, “both branches of Marxism operate by denying to morality any intrinsic moral force of its own . . . yet both appeal in this very act to moral passions . . . Any criticism of the scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings.”<sup>27</sup>

Polanyi suggests that Freud carries out a similar bit of moral inversion. Morality as viewed by Freud in others has Oedipal roots, yet Freud’s own “scientific” views are justified by the moral passions underlying them for curing patients of neuroses. Polanyi writes, “A society affiliated to such a network [Marxist or

Freudian] may be said to maintain a certain standard of ‘factuality’—provided that one accepts its methods of fact-finding.”<sup>28</sup>

2. Virtue as Human Achievement in Community. When ethics is understood in the heuristic perspective of Polanyi’s post-critical thought, it becomes apparent that virtue as it should be understood in ethics is not a static form of goodness or a power for doing the good that resides in individuals or an aspect of character that inheres in habitual behavior. Whatever virtue humanity is capable of exhibiting is rooted in tradition, human community, and emerges in the heuristic context of dwelling in and breaking out. Virtue is an ongoing social achievement.

Polanyi does not have a doctrine of original sin but rather a conviction that humanity has a dimension of incompleteness with reference to moral aspiration as well as knowing. Reality has morality interwoven within it. Virtue, we may say, is also rooted in reality. The passion for fulfillment results in a restlessness of humanity that participates in a process toward an unknown consummation.

Just as in the community of science, there is a check on what individuals may regard as real and valid, so also in political and economic community that are checks and balances on power that contribute to moral development. Both the restlessness, the aspiration, and the importance of virtue as dependent upon community for pervasive ways of checking and limiting power and self-aggrandizement show the kinship of Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy with the federal or covenantal tradition in theology and political thought as found, for example, in *The Federalist Papers*, especially those written by James Madison, who studied federal theology and political philosophy with John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey.<sup>29</sup> There is also similarity with the ethics of Plato as found in *The Republic*, in his notion of the Good as the goal of human and divine striving and also in his treatment of virtue as reflected in “The Ring of Gyges,”<sup>30</sup> as resting on the visibility in society of humans.

3. Liberation. Polanyi’s view of reality in process of unfolding knowledge and moral development is related to notions of evolution, but not in sense of chance natural selection but rather as a *heuristic field* luring all forms of living toward commitment and achievement. More than process, there is, for Polanyi, an eschatological element present in reality, not in the sense of “doctrine of last things,” but in the sense that Jürgen Moltmann means that there is a hopeful teleology built into human, historical existence, as well as natural reality:

For the emergent noosphere is wholly determined as that which we believe to be true and right; it is the external pole of our commitments, the service of which is our freedom. It defines a free society as a fellowship fostering truth and respecting the right. It comprises everything in which we may be totally mistaken.<sup>31</sup>

As we review the entire past embodied in our universe, Polanyi suggests, we realize that there has been purposive power shaping it, a power we identify with what we ultimately believe, a power bearing the world toward liberation. The ethics of Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy emerges not with a view of values and morality rooted merely in human preferences but rather in tradition, culture, community, commitment, and believed-in reality. The final paragraph of *Personal Knowledge* displays this incredible vision:

So far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in humanity are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been

so far the ultimate stage in the wakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the striving of a myriad of centres that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us up to this point. They are all akin to us. For all these centres—those which led up to our own existence and the far more numerous others which produced different lines of which many are extinct—may be seen engaged in the same endeavor toward ultimate liberation. We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own towards an unthinkable consummation. And that is also, I believe, how a Christian is placed when worshipping God.<sup>32</sup>

D. Beyond Specialization. Most philosophers have been wary of Polanyi, the majority reluctant even to grapple with his thought. Not a member of any particular faith community, he felt a deep kinship with the Christian community. His thought erases the sharp lines of specialization between fields of study. Humans become participants in a world already underway. Reality, as he believes in it with universal intent to be inexhaustible, has ethical meaning at its core. This cosmic process is characterized by an eschatological drive toward ultimate liberation. And the empowering factor is the heuristic lure of dissatisfaction:

The indwelling of the Christian worshipper is therefore a continued attempt at breaking out, at casting off the condition of man, even while humbly acknowledging its inescapability. Such indwelling is fulfilled most . . . in the heuristic upsurge which strives to break through the accepted frameworks of thought, guided by intimations of discoveries still beyond our horizon. Christian worship sustains, as it were, an eternal, never to be consummated hunch: a heuristic vision . . . [and] command: 'Look at the unknown!' Christianity sedulously fosters, and in a sense permanently satisfies, man's craving for mental dissatisfaction by offering him the comfort of a crucified God.<sup>33</sup>

In this context of commitment and acceptance of responsibility lies the human sense of calling, with an understanding including the whole being of humanness. Polanyi affirms the roots of faith and ethics in tradition and community, not bound to past dogmas or an impossible ideal of objectivity, but directing humanity toward an unfolding future filled with creativity and anticipation of newness leading toward ultimate liberation and unthinkable consummation.

The most important contribution to ethics of post-critical thought may well be restoring attention to the wholeness of human action and responsibility, rather than having the primary focus on one part or another. Specialization shatters the comprehensiveness of human living, so that, for example, the separated disciplines of the university as based on the rationalism of the Enlightenment are ill-equipped to deal with any human problem. In a sentence that might have been used at the beginning of this essay, Polanyi affirms that "the study of man must start with an appreciation of man in the act of making responsible decisions."<sup>34</sup> He sees ethics, not as an isolated specialty of philosophy or theology, but rather as central to the wholeness of human action in achieving knowledge and seeking to act responsibly in every sphere of life. The morality of personal knowing and the commitments involved are not peripheral but pervade the historical, communal nature of human existence.

## 5. Conclusion

Polanyi's revolution in thought touches every discipline and aspect of human life, and opens up a new, comprehensive understanding of ethics. The tacit coefficient makes it clear that ethics pervades all human

activity and involves commitment and passion as well as reason. Ethics represents a comprehensive level of reality as humans experience it, not a narrow specialty giving rational ordering to categories of “goodness” or analyzing “moral language.” Post-critical thought provides a method for understanding diverse patterns of ethics in Western society and around the globe, respecting them without agreeing completely with them, and making it possible for them to relate to and learn from one another. Polanyi points out the dangers of excessive moral passion, and, of central importance, the heuristic lure that leads us to dwell in tradition in order to break out into the unfolding, satisfyingly indeterminate, inexhaustible, faithful reality of God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For helpful views of the relation of Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy to post-modernism, see Richard Gelwick, “Michael Polanyi and Postmodernism,” a paper prepared for the Polanyi Society; Andy Sanders, “Tacit Knowing—Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 18:2 (1991-1992): 15-21; and Jerry H. Gill, *The Tacit Mode, Michael Polanyi’s Postmodern Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Polanyi was born in Hungary in 1891 and died in England in 1976. Brought up in a family that prized learning and culture, he earned doctorates in both medicine and physical chemistry. A brother, Karl Polanyi, became a distinguished economist and author of *The Great Transformation*. Michael taught at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin until in 1933 his Jewish antecedents forced him to emigrate to England, where he became professor of physical chemistry at the University of Manchester and later was a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. After very distinguished work in physical chemistry, he shifted into a chair in social philosophy, gradually developing his post-critical thought.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> For one analysis of the tunnel vision imposed by scientism and its missionary fervor, see Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 2000. Given Smith’s perspective, however, this is hardly an “age of disbelief,” as he depicts the fervent belief in scientism sweeping across the world with the power exhibited by Islam in the seventh century.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the preoccupation among philosophers at Oxford and Cambridge with the analysis of language, three of England’s most important philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—Alfred North Whitehead, R. G. Collingwood, and Michael Polanyi—have been given far more attention in other countries than in British universities. As we were having a discussion one day over tea in the senior common room of Magdalen College, Gilbert Ryle remarked to me, “The major problem of Oxford philosophers is that they are convinced that ‘ordinary’ language is the English spoken in the senior common room of Oxford colleges.”

<sup>6</sup> In other articles in recent years encouraging a deeper appreciation of Polanyi’s thought, I have presented material similar to that found in what follows. For example, see “The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives for Ethics” in *Tradition and Discovery*, Volume XVIII, Number 2, 1991-1992, based on an address I gave at the Polanyi Centennial Conference in 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 8, No. 3, October 1977: 164.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 7. Referred to hereinafter as *PK*.

<sup>9</sup> *PK*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected Edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978, p. xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Grene (ed.), *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*. London: Oxford University Press, 1946. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946, p. 10. See also *PK*, p. 311.

<sup>14</sup> *PK*, p. 300.

<sup>15</sup> *PK*, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> *PK*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>17</sup> *PK*, p. 311. See also the discussion on commitment and the circularity of knowing leading up to this affirmation, *PK*, 299ff.

<sup>18</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 144; Third edition, 1978, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> *Knowing and Being*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *PK*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966, p. x.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*. London: SCM Press, 1963, in which he writes (p. 115), “love alone . . . has a built-in moral compass, enabling it to ‘home’ intuitively upon the deepest need of the other, can allow itself to be directed completely by the situation.” See also Robinson, *Christian Morals Today*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964; Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966, and “Love is the Only Measure,” *Commonweal*, Vol. 83 (1966).

<sup>24</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann. *Jesus and the Word*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934. For criticisms of Bultmann’s ethics of obedience, see Amos N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Revised edition, 1950, pp. 138ff., and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1951, pp. 22ff.

<sup>25</sup> See the entire essay, “Beyond Nihilism,” in *Knowing and Being*, pp. 3-23.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, who puts forward the thesis that we face “moral calamity” today (vi.) because “the nature of moral community and moral judgment in distinctively modern societies” makes it impossible “to appeal to moral criteria in a way that had been possible in other times and places . . . There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture” (6). The choice left for the modern world is either the moral disorder of emotivism epitomized in Nietzsche of the firmly rational basis for virtue found in Aristotle (211).

<sup>27</sup> *PK*, p. 230 and ff.

<sup>28</sup> *PK*, p. 240. Polanyi attributes his meaning of “factuality” to Hannah Arendt.

<sup>29</sup> See Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, esp. Pp. 95-98.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 359d-368d.

<sup>31</sup> *PK*, p. 404.

<sup>32</sup> *PK*, p. 405.

<sup>33</sup> *PK*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959, p. 71.

## 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. MLA or APA style are preferred; because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody's “standard English.” 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. Consistency and clear writing are expected.

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. 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) 271-5680  
Phone: (816)271-4386  
E-mail: mullins@mwsc.edu

Walter Gulick  
Montana State University, Billings  
Billings, Montana 59101  
Fax (406) 657-2187  
Phone: (406) 657-2904  
E-mail: WGulick@msubillings.edu