

# Polanyi and Narvaez's "Moral Rationality"

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Narvaez, objectivism, indigenous knowing, childrearing, right and left brain, reductionism, brain and higher cognitive phenomena.

Before raising five points for further discussion I attempt to outline the back story or meta-narrative behind *Narvaez and/or her sources and question whether it fits well with Polanyi. I then address her views of appropriate childrearing, how she conceptualizes the relationship of brain studies to higher level cognitive phenomena, her positive assessment of the indigenous mind, the widespread acceptance of tacit knowing in psychology, and whether her attacks on objectivism allow the positive role for scientific knowing that Polanyi advocated.*

I want to begin by thanking Darcia Narvaez, not just for this stimulating paper, but for her voluminous output in so many important areas of the psychology of moral development, moral education, ethics, and philosophical reflection as related to these areas. And I thank Paul Lewis who seems to have been the one who "discovered" her for this tribe that gathers annually, because of our interests in Polanyi's thought, to discuss papers.<sup>1</sup>

There are many interesting points to explore, so Paul and I agreed to chase different rabbits. Paul knows much more about virtue ethics, not to mention about virtue itself, than I do, so I am leaving those topics for him. Also those who have read Narvaez's paper may have other questions such as questions about the compatibility and relationship of Polanyi with MacMurray that I am ignoring.

Before raising five points, I summarize what I see as a possible back story or meta-narrative underlying Narvaez's paper, though not in exactly the order she wrote it. I don't think this is the only way she would tell the story, but I do suspect that some of her sources tend in this direction.

## I. Two Ways of Knowing and Being

Almost all of the italicized words, phrases, and sentences in the following eight paragraphs are taken directly from Dr. Narvaez's paper:

Once upon a time, or more accurately for a very long time (*for over 95% of human existence*), *human beings were parented appropriately in the ways of our ancestors. We developed naturally into virtuous, emotionally healthy (expressive rather than contained?), fully sensory, emotionally intelligent, and body-accepting members of communal groups. We survived and thrived by relating to the rich individual particularities of the world holistically by primarily using our right brained, largely tacit, ways of knowing. The world we came to know was infused with meaning, morality, and spirituality. We found subjectivity in all things through involvement and indwelling.*

*This indigenous way of knowing and being is largely lost in the modern West's individualistic, detached, left brained objectivity of egocentric intellectual awareness. This alternative way of knowing and being is found in complex societies and results from harsh child rearing (violence toward children), suppression of*

*emotions, and detachment from nature. It gives us knowledge about things rather than knowledge of them.*

*The primary cause seems to be faulty child rearing: whether raised by nannies, boarding schools, or hierarchical, emotionally and physically distanced parents, children's spirits are squelched, punished, and traumatized. They arrive at adolescence with an internal emptiness that is then filled by the adult's prescriptions, rules, and beliefs of adopted virtue rather than the natural virtue of ancestral ways and indigenous cultures.*

The pursuit of "objective" science as a cultural ideal far beyond science also has a contributing role in causing our fall; thus Polanyi's ideas get involved.

*The increasing practice of third person detached, left brain objectivity had led to a Western way of knowing and being that "has increasingly detached itself from relationships, from nature, from emotion, to emphasize reasoning, individual autonomy and control."*

*This modern Western objective form of knowing and being categorizes, standardizes, dissects, separates, prefers lifeless and static things, seeks replicas rather than true knowledge of individual reality. It so distorts our thinking that we no longer trust our received wisdom: many don't even believe that breast milk evolved over millions of years with thousands of ingredients is better than scientifically derived formulas with a few dozen. Objective knowing is environmentally and socially destructive and leads to extreme individualism, a plethora of psychopathologies, and degradation of the natural world.*

*When children don't get what they need to build all brain and body systems, they develop self-centered brains that move between threat sensitivity and emotional detachment, thus undermining natural virtue and making them ripe for what Polanyi has described as "moral inversion."*

*Furthermore, science as currently configured will be unable to recognize or analyze the natural virtue we must recover: "As long as science emphasizes "left-brain thinking" with its decontextualization of features, separation of components from the whole, ignoring data that does not fit the model, virtue will remain a mystery. Left-brained scientific thinking can neither know nor learn to live virtue." Instead we need to support the development of right-brain objectivity to regain emotion, subjectivity, tacit knowledge, indigenous wisdom, and natural virtue.*

## **II. Does Polanyi Fit the Logic of the Back Story?**

My summary has re-arranged the order but I think not the logic underlying some sections of the paper. Her paper contains important divergences from this story to which I will return later, but I find something like this in the background—whether from some of her sources or in her own thinking. Her references reveal important works in progress that will explain and build her case in greater depth and I look forward to reading them. She employs Polanyi in several interesting ways as she tells this sad tale and probes its implications. He might well be pleased to find a major psychologist using his ideas. I find important contributions in her work.

But, perhaps because my left brain is overactive, I am not convinced Polanyi fits this particular story at some major junctures. And I have some significant reservations if this is the background story or meta-narrative informing her thinking.

### III. Five Points For Consideration

Let me address five points briefly:

1) I am intrigued with her attention to “appropriate childrearing,” as the grandfather of two toddlers among other reasons, and I think this may go beyond Polanyi in helpful ways. Polanyi did not seem much interested in this type of psychological reflection about such matters, as far as I remember. He uses Gestalt, Kohler, cites much experimental data and draws from Piaget a good bit, but almost seems to assume that people develop normally. He is fascinated by how that happens. He doesn’t dig around in “relationships” or what can go wrong in our thinking when relationships get fouled up as much as he focuses on how we are built, wired, raised for discovery and meaning seeking. I wish he had been more tuned into psycho-dynamics and the psychology of interpersonal relationships in the same way that I wish he had been more “sociological.”

He is not totally unaware of detours, maladaptation you might say, as when he discusses the chicken who “pecks wildly at its fellow chicks and runs around terror stricken” (PK 210 and 295) when put in their company after having been raised in isolation. There are more than 3 dozen references to children in the index of PK. But Narvaez’s exploration the impact of early nurturing including how we can get sidetracked into destructive detours is helpful and seems to me to be an addition that Polanyi can use. I would be interested in even more examination of how “objectivism” is impacting child rearing in negative ways, if it is. That seems to be among the projects in press or on which she is working.

2) Similarly, her knowledge of and attention to what I would call the neurological correlates of some of the phenomena Polanyi describes and analyzes can also be quite fascinating. As a fan of Eric Kandel, both his wonderful autobiography/history of 20th century brain research and his excellent work with Charley Rose on that series that you all should view online if you have missed it, I want to know about more about the brain in all of this (where this stuff is going on, what chemicals are involved, etc.) In this paper she takes us into right brain left brain dimensions and in other works engages other areas of emerging cognitive science.

There are, of course, dangers here, most notably a kind of reductionism that is quite opposed to Polanyi when it is assumed that descriptions of the “correlates” at what we might call lower levels explain away the higher level phenomena. Even the great John Searle recently responded to letter from a reader who does not see how it is possible that “a bunch of firing neurons in any kind of network produce consciousness.” Searle replied: “I entirely agree that, at present, the way neurons produce consciousness remains mysterious.”<sup>2</sup>

David Barash was recently asked what was the most difficult unsolved problem in science:

I answered without hesitation: How the brain generates awareness, thought, perceptions, emotions, and so forth, what philosophers call “the hard problem of consciousness.” It’s a hard one indeed, so hard that despite an immense amount of research attention devoted to neurobiology, and despite great advances in our knowledge, I don’t believe we are significantly closer to bridging the gap between that which is physical,

anatomical and electro-neurochemical, and what is subjectively experienced by all of us . . . or at least by me.<sup>3</sup>

So I am curious about Narvaez's understanding of the relationship of these neurobiological phenomena to "higher level" cognition and emotions. She seems to be treading on thin ice in reporting "at the neurobiological level the systems are indistinguishable" when speaking of emotions and cognitions, reasoning and passions. Searle and Barash both seem to think it is only a matter of time before the mystery will be solved, but I am wondering if Lewis from whom Narvaez is drawing, thinks it already has been solved and is saying that emotion and cognition are the same because the same neurons are firing?

With Polanyi's way of thinking, as I understand it, the "mystery" will remain because it is built into the very structure of our knowing and being. Polanyi taught us that an exhaustive physical-chemical analysis of a frog will not reveal that it is a frog and that exhaustive explication of the physical-chemical properties of a machine will not reveal the purposes of the machine or even its existence as a machine. Perhaps some attention to levels is needed here to "distinguish the systems."

Also, trying to locate explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge in different hemispheres may involve different understandings of explicit and tacit from some uses in Polanyi: think of his opening distinctions in *The Tacit Dimension* between the functional, phenomenal, and semantic, and ontological dimensions. Can each of these be assigned to different brain regions? How does this mapping address the "from-to" structure of all knowing?

I am reassured by Narvaez's concluding affirmation that "morality is a whole-brain phenomenon" and that we need "the full capacities of right-brain thinking coordinated by left brain thinking." I think Polanyi would agree with her earlier statement that "true rationality combines both intellect (detached thinking) and emotion" and "... a dichotomy between reason and intuition, reason and emotion are false dichotomies." But I feel some tension between such statements and the comments on indistinguishable systems and the tacit/explicit mapping by hemisphere and I am curious if she does.

3) I also find her appreciation of what is variously described as the indigenous and ancestral mind of interest because it takes me into one of the most fascinating areas of Polanyi's thought - his puzzlement over how the scientific account is better than that of the Azande witchcraft. I hope someone will work out more of the relationship of Polanyi to Evans- Pritchard. ( I can remember spending hours arguing about all of that with Ron Hall over coffee in the Great Hall at Duke when I should have been reading my assignments for theology courses.) There is much to be learned from that section of PK and from Polanyi's little essay on "The Stability of Beliefs," and I still haven't got it all sorted out.

I am concerned, though, that Narvaez, perhaps following her sources, so strongly rejects "objectivism" that she is embracing a Romanticized version of indigenous and ancestral thinking. Polanyi clearly prefers scientific accounts in many instances to indigenous thought's explanations. Does Jacobs (from whom she draws) prefer the indigenous mind's accounts over those of science? Doesn't Narvaez think that in most areas our modern Western account is not only better but true? Do we really want to go with poison oracles and being held responsible for what we do in someone else's dreams?

How do we want to sort all of that out in a way that does not fall into either trap of an objectivist scientific reductionism that misses other realities on the one hand or an overly naive romanticized view of the noble savage mind that rejects science on the other?

4) I am glad to hear that “the understanding that tacit knowledge is predominant is finally a widespread view in psychological science.” That may well be progress, depending on what psychological science understands tacit knowledge to be. Not everyone who uses the term is using it the way Polanyi developed it.

We have a long history in modernity of letting our deeply rooted objectivist assumptions slip in the back door when we open to front door with an attack on objectivism, and I would fear some of that may be happening in psychological science as it does in so many of the more popular treatments of tacit knowledge I read in newspapers and reviews. The recent flurry of discussion (on the Polanyi Society discussion list) of Collins’ book on tacit and explicit knowledge provides much discussion of questionable appropriation of Polanyi’s thought, and I would expect some similar misunderstandings can be found in psychology

This brings to mind a question for those who knew Polanyi or know of his reactions from biographical research: are there any examples of his reactions to persons who misunderstood his ideas and used them inappropriately? I have this image of him always welcoming those who wanted to apply his ideas - surely there were times he was concerned about misunderstandings?

5) And that brings me to my fifth and final point, one which I raise with some hesitation because I am speaking about sources she has used of which I am ignorant. To use a distinction Narvaez develops in earlier work, I don’t even have “recognition knowledge,” much less articulate explicable knowledge of the works from which she is drawing.

But it seems to me that a superficial reading of her essay might lead astray any one of a variety of subjectivists, as opposed to objectivists, who rightly sense something is wrong with objectivism. And I mean lead them astray into the wilderness of failing to appreciate scientific ways of knowing, in spite of the widespread misunderstanding of the nature of objectivity and how science has actually discovered what it has. I think Polanyi’s goal was to redefine, although that is too timid a term for what he attempted, the notion of objectivity - not to replace it with another form of subjectivity. He was moving toward a kind of redefinition of all of the terms, and I suspect some of those from whom Narvaez is drawing, may not have reached that level of understanding.

What appear in some of her sources to be attacks on science itself, as distinguished from a mistaken account of science that is leading us astray, seem to me to be very different from Polanyi’s project which was pro-science to the extent of having scientific knowing serve, once properly understood, as the model for much inquiry and even the basis of a free society.

Narvaez seems to recognize some of this at various points and there are several “objectivisms” in her essay which add nuance to the back story I have outlined. When she pulls all of this together in her Terry, Gifford or some other lectures, I hope she gets to that level of re-defining objectivism and all the associated terms with careful avoidance of embracing a subjectivism that is as bad as a left brained reductionist objectivism as she has described it.

In the meantime I look forward to reading her continued probing of these very important areas with the great resources, skills, and rich background she brings to the task.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Paul Lewis provides a summary of Narvaez's work in "The Emerging Comprehensive Moral Psychology of Darcia Narvaez," *TAD* 37:3 (2020-2011): 9-18.

<sup>2</sup>Letters to Editor, *The New York Review of Books*, September 29, 2011, p.101

<sup>3</sup>David Barash "The Hardest Problem in Science," *Chronicle of Higher Education Brainstorm* (online blog), Oct 28, 2011.

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