

# Does Polanyi's Thought Affirm A "Correspondence Thesis"?

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**ABSTRACT Key Words:** comprehensive entity, hierarchical structure of knowing and being, arguing across cultural frameworks, heuristic strategy.

*These remarks are comments on Tihamér Margitay's criticisms of Polanyi's so-called "correspondence thesis" in his recent essay "From Epistemology to Ontology."*

One of the most satisfying aspects of studying the thought of Michael Polanyi for me lies in its profundity. Time and again I have been surprised to discover implications in his writings that I had not noticed previously, but which emerged only as I approached his corpus with new questions. Implied in this phenomenon is the acknowledgement that an inquirer's assumptions contribute significantly towards the understanding of his thought. My upbringing in the Catholic intellectual tradition, for example, made the initial foray into Polanyi's thought more manageable, particularly in the context of the prominence of the then regnant forms of positivism and empiricism in the Anglo-American philosophy of my graduate school studies. Likewise this intellectual tradition allowed me to appreciate Polanyi's later reflections on deeper meanings sustaining culture and their process of transmission as continuous with his earlier reflections on the progress sustained by scientific communities, when some of Polanyi's students viewed this as discontinuous.

As I worked my way through the essays collected in *Knowing and Being*, several such capacious moments arose. One of the more stimulating, and for me troubling, features of Polanyi's thought brought forth here was Tihamér Margitay's claim that Polanyi proposed a "Correspondence Thesis" according to which the hierarchical structure of tacit knowing constitutes the basis for the hierarchical structure of comprehensive entities (130-31). That Polanyi proposed a structural similarity between the pattern of comprehension and the elements of a reality thus comprehended is a fundamental feature of Polanyi's thought well-known to all who study his work. In his essay, however, Margitay explicates this in a way that I find problematic—at least if I am understanding him correctly.

Let me first explore what I believe Margitay is proposing on this point. In the third section of his essay, "Reality Is Hierarchical Because the Way We Know It Is Hierarchical," he declares that "Polanyi wishes to model the structure of reality on the structure of knowing" (130). This curious way of phrasing Polanyi's intention gave me pause, particularly once he asks how the structure of knowing and the hierarchical ontology are related exactly—something I never thought Polanyi attempted. With this question in mind, Margitay then shows how Polanyi used the example of a skillful human performance as an example of a comprehensive entity with a structural similarity to an act of comprehension as the basis for a generalization for the ontological structure of all comprehensive entities. Margitay's focus is on the similarity of the structural patterns which he interprets in the strongest possible way: "the structure of the entity is *the same as* the epistemic structure of the knowing concerning that entity" (131). I take this to mean that the structure is identical. If so, he then

asks quite appropriately, why we should assume with Polanyi that this is generalizable to all entities. (In the original passage, Polanyi says “real comprehensive entities” [TD 34], not simply “entities.”)

Here is where Margitay makes another claim about Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge that I had never entertained: it is the structure of tacit knowing that makes an object hierarchically structured. He bases this on a summary observation Polanyi made in the *Tacit Dimension*: “the structure of tacit knowing determines the structure of comprehensive entities” (55). Again, as I understand his focus, Margitay is pushing this in the strong sense of the knower’s activity “shaping” or “constituting” the object known insofar as it is hierarchically structured. There are obvious problems with Polanyi’s theory, if this is what he intended.

But do these strong claims accurately reflect Polanyi’s position on the structure of tacit knowing and the hierarchical structure of comprehensive entities? If they do, I must acknowledge that in my years of studying and relying on Polanyi’s insights I had not been aware of them. My own understanding is that Polanyi does not propose a “correspondence thesis” as Margitay presents it. How should we then understand Polanyi’s proposal for a structural similarity? Here I wish to recall my initial observations about the way in which readers’ assumptions affect their understanding of Polanyi’s position. Polanyi was writing in a cultural context of an empiricist understanding of scientific practice with an attendant reductive materialism. Within such an intellectual framework, Polanyi had to persuade his audience to adopt—at least temporarily and provisionally—an alternative set of tacit assumptions to appreciate the thrust of his insights; he could not appeal to shared assumptions to prove an argument. In his introductory reflections in *The Study of Man*, for example, he attempts to portray the implications of an ideal of totally objective knowledge as logically impossible in the hopes that his readers might shift their awareness so that they indwell his understanding that all knowledge requires the personal participation of a knower for it to be genuine. There is no “argument” as such to prove or demonstrate his point since there is no common frame of reference. His reader makes the personal judgment to attempt to shift awareness or simply fails to understand Polanyi’s point from the dominant framework with its more restrictive presuppositions. In this context, then, Polanyi is not arguing that the structure of tacit knowing demonstrates the reality of dual control manifested in comprehensive entities; he is using it as a clue to point a way out of a reductive materialism for understanding human reality and values.

Interestingly, Margitay seems to acknowledge this when he suggests that we may take the Correspondence Thesis as something like a heuristic device (133-34). Even though, as he points out, there are many textual instances from Polanyi’s work that would support such an approach, he finally rejects it because it would not support the positing of a Correspondence Thesis in the strong sense that Margitay affirms. I believe he is correct in emphasizing Polanyi’s heuristic interests, not in holding firm to strong correspondence.

Why, then, does Margitay continue to affirm this strong sense? My surmise is that he is working out of a set of technical philosophical assumptions that requires “proof” in a fairly strong sense to defend a claim—something rather different from Polanyi’s originating context. If this is correct, he then works to salvage a portion of Polanyi’s insight by claiming to demonstrate that his argument for the function of tacit knowing does support the claim of a hierarchically ordered ontology for knowledge-like entities. These are, he claims, emergent realities in the strong sense, with far-reaching consequences for human values of truth, community, and tradition (139). In this way his reflections merge once again with Polanyi’s.