

A POLANYIAN EPISTEMOLOGY MANQUÉ: REFLECTIONS ON RETRIEVING REALISM



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ABSTRACT

These reflections attempt to clarify and strengthen Dreyfus and Taylor's defense of a realist understanding of knowing by comparing it to features of Michael Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge. I believe this overcomes some ambiguities such as their use of "mediation" and strengthens their case in discussing science without recourse to the notion of a "view from nowhere." These in turn provide a more robust understanding of their understanding of realism within a pluralist framework. For students of Polanyi's thought, this comparative effort provides an opportunity to place Polanyi's theory within the wider world of contemporary philosophical thinking that they bring to their exposition of a "contact" theory of knowing. This might provide a basis for developing Polanyi's thought through these contemporary channels.

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor have proposed in *Retrieving Realism* a theory of human knowing that overcomes the obstacles derived from the modern presuppositions of detached, impersonal objectivity.¹ They affirm that when knowledge is understood to be an activity of knowers directly involved in making their way in their environments, the "problem" of trying to explain how something "external" is correctly present to our "inner states" dissolves. A student of Polanyi who reflects momentarily

on this can immediately discern that this was the sort of project that motivated Polanyi to produce *Personal Knowledge*.² In fact, I contend that most of the major themes of Dreyfus and Taylor had already been proposed by Polanyi sixty years earlier. I say this in spite of the fact that there is no explicit acknowledgment of any relationship of their work to Polanyi's.³ What I propose to do here, then, is to survey salient features of Dreyfus and Taylor's arguments in light of Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge in the hope of clarifying this unacknowledged relationship. My expectation is that this will contribute to strengthening their position as well as encourage students of Polanyi to engage with this important work.

Dreyfus and Taylor begin by exploring Wittgenstein's observation that an impoverished picture of knowing dominating our modern culture and its implicit parameters held us captive, so much so that even attempts to break free were not entirely successful (*RR*, 1-5). They call this a "mediational" picture of reality, but it would be more helpful, I believe, if we followed Polanyi here and understood it as an "impersonal" and "totally explicit" understanding of knowledge with a goal of being able to control our environment. These goals of complete objectivity coupled with a striving for perfectionism implicitly fed a "moral inversion" according to Polanyi.⁴ Dreyfus and Taylor intend for their analysis to apply to our activities as embodied, social, and cultural agents (*RR*, 15) as well, but this requires a leap from their more technical analysis of the dominant philosophical picture of knowing. They recognize, for example, that their basic conceptualization for the modern distortion, "mediational," has to be modified by the qualification of "only through" (*RR*, 10).

The ambiguities of Dreyfus and Taylor's analysis become clearer when we consider their formulation of an alternative to their understanding of the mediational picture. They call this alternative a "contact theory," which they claim provides "an account of knowledge as our attaining unmediated contact with the reality known" (*RR*, 17). Their intention is clear: they are attempting to develop some understanding of knowing in which the knower experiences a direct (not, as they are required to say here because of their preceding analysis, "unmediated") contact with the reality known. This contact, they carefully point out,

is not achieved on the level of Ideas, but is rather something primordial, something we never escape.... These [living, active] beings are at grips with a world and each other; this original contact provides the sense-making context for all their knowledge constructions, which, however much they are based on mediating depictions, rely for their meaning on this primordial and indissoluble involvement in the surrounding reality (*RR*, 18-19).

Here we have an excellent summary statement of what Polanyi calls tacit awareness, something he painstakingly elaborated from inarticulate sensory experience—even in lower life forms—up through articulation and expression of our highest ideals (*PK*, 69-131). Knowing is accordingly something we perform, an activity through which we orient ourselves to our surroundings, not a detached state of awareness.⁵ Dreyfus and Taylor acknowledge several twentieth century philosophers who attempted to express some variations of this insight, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, but tellingly omit Polanyi.

Because our interactions with our surroundings are dependent on our tacit awareness of subsidiary clues directly experienced by us and integrated into a focal whole, justification, they rightly point out, has a quality of self-authentication (*RR*, 19). A claim to know something requires, as Polanyi would put it, a personal affirmation that grounds our belief to know the reality adequately. There is no explicit, independent criterion to which we may impersonally appeal. A second characteristic of the way we deal with the world is that it is path dependent (*RR*, 22). Consequently, our experience of our world is always an achievement, never an isolated unit capable of discrete analysis. In Polanyian terms this directedness is a feature of the “from-to” structure of our knowing. From our simple awareness of our environment all the way up to our dwelling in our cultural ideals, knowing is temporal. The modern penchant for dissecting knowing into isolatable, particular elements fails to recognize this holistic character of knowing, which Dreyfus and Taylor’s presentation of their “contact theory” discloses.

Based on this preliminary understanding of a holistic understanding of knowing, they turn their attention to exploring how thinkers attempt to escape the flawed picture with its “primacy of the monological” (*RR*, 28). One step is to “deconstruct” the foundationalist implications of the disengaged picture. Dreyfus and Taylor show how Kant and Hegel begin the process by explicitly pointing out the background processes implied by the disengaged view, which undermine its assumptions (*RR*, 31-34). Interestingly, Marjorie Grene made a similar argument in her Polanyian epistemological study when she claimed that our “synthetic a prioris” are subject to historical development even though Kant himself did not quite recognize it at the time.⁶ The major challenge to the foundationalist picture arose in the twentieth century when many thinkers attempted to escape from attempts to build certain knowledge on undeniable building blocks. At this point new problems emerge when various thinkers try to clarify what this entails. For example, Charles Taylor has argued that John Searle, who clearly attempts to develop an antifoundationalist position, nonetheless remains trapped within Cartesian assumptions, because he insists that background capacities have to be mental in order to rise to the level of intentionality.⁷ Dreyfus and Taylor, to the contrary, hold that our ability to make our way in our world involves not only explicit forms of understanding, but implicit bodily ones as well (*RR*, 45). They point

to Merleau-Ponty's use of the term *motor intentionality* to highlight an "unmediated" body-based intentionality (*RR*, 48).⁸ For them motor intentionality precedes mental capacities and formulations and makes them possible. Similarly, Polanyi had pointed to forms of inarticulate intelligence in animals (*PK*, 71-74) and in humans as the bodily basis of our own knowledge: "the inarticulate mental capacities developed in our body by the process of evolution become then the tacit coefficients of articulate thought" (*PK*, 389). Our everyday coping thus grounds and sustains our background understanding, which provides the context for our reflective thought.

Next, Dreyfus and Taylor turn to assessing our explicit knowledge claims. They call the dominant philosophical tradition today "representationalist" in that we are somehow constrained within our own representations or language-games and cannot get beyond them to compare our claims to an elusive "reality" (*RR*, 57-58). Dreyfus and Taylor argue that philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson rely on the assumptions of representationalism in order to show that their non-realist position is obvious. Paradoxically, their argument is meant to repudiate representationalism. "This is what it means to be held captive," they wryly observe (*RR*, 58). Their response to this dilemma is fundamentally Polanyian: they point to the bodily basis of all knowing, even relying on Gestalt experiments to support their position (*RR*, 60). Rorty's and Davidson's unacknowledged reliance on such assumptions allow them to "know" much more than they acknowledge that they know. We all draw on "the as-yet-unarticulated sense we have of things" to think about our world (*RR*, 65). Dreyfus and Taylor conclude that we must allow for a kind of preconceptual understanding on the basis of which we predicate our concepts to things (*RR*, 69). Such an engaged relationship to the world is the basis for our efforts to make sense of striving for meaning and is both spontaneous and passive, imposed by the realities we encounter. Even the language that they use here almost appears derivative from Polanyi's writings.

This leads them to take up a more detailed assessment of the place of the preconceptual in our knowing. For this they consider the case made by John McDowell in *Mind and World*, which is also a critique of a dualist epistemology (*RR*, 71). To affirm that a brute given impinges on our perceptions by causing us to form perceptual beliefs opens us to skepticism since the causal impact simply leads to a particular belief without any clear understanding of how it emerges (*RR*, 73). To affirm a belief requires rule-governed activity (reasoning) with the creative spontaneity allowing us to recognize its larger context. When placed in the framework of an ongoing activity negotiating our environment, whether this be riding a bicycle, pursuing a scientific experiment, or facing a moral dilemma, we are attempting to "get it right" by relying on host of preconceptual clues.⁹ Why, then, does McDowell resist acknowledging a preconceptual contact with reality guiding our reasoning? Dreyfus and Taylor suggest that McDowell is emphasizing the role of reasoning in checking our perceptions that prevents him

from accepting the notion of the preconceptual dimension in our knowledge (*RR*, 77). They offer what they consider an explicit (eleven-step) account of our skillful perception and interaction with the world leading to the establishment of beliefs that are validly justified (*RR*, 88-90) with the expectation that this may contribute to narrowing the gap between their account and McDowell's.

In the succeeding chapter, Dreyfus and Taylor consolidate their understanding of the contact theory by examining features of what it means to be an embodied agent which is embedded in a society and at grips with the world (*RR*, 91). One obvious feature is that our understanding of the world is partial and limited, even though in another sense it is unshakeable and incorrigible (*RR*, 93-94).¹⁰ This embodiment requires that we avoid a "subject" vs. "object" dualism which implies an isolatable subject who is capable of an impersonal account of knowledge. A knowing person always is engaged within a world, which includes the physical environment as well as the social and cultural features shaping the knower's relationship to the world. One objection to such a depiction is that this portrayal is "phenomenological" in that it fails to account for the "necessity" required by the neural picture of the brain. Dreyfus and Taylor counter that neuroscience provides only the necessary causal conditions, not the sufficient conditions, for the agent's ability to cope with the situation.¹¹ Such challenges seem plausible only from within the remnants of the Cartesian representationalism which overlooks our tacit, direct contact with the world (*RR*, 98-101).

In the latter chapters they take up a second line of refutation of the critical turn that ontologized the method of critical thought.¹² This challenges the monological focus of modern theory by highlighting the primacy of conversation in human life (*RR*, 106). This concerns our human world that opens us to the meanings on the moral and ideal level. Here they rely on Gadamer's notions of fusion of horizons and conversation to explore how we can inquire and appreciate alternative views of the world.¹³ They consider this a second kind of "contact" which we must acknowledge: "The 'contact' in one case [normal growing in a given society and culture] consists of actual dealings with the world, and enables us to get behind our representations (formulated beliefs); in the other case [of encountering humans in an alien culture], it consists of a capacity to respond, resonate with, make sense of human meanings; and it enables us to get beyond and beneath, not so much representations—they are involved here—but a kind of imprinting, whereby a certain range of meanings have become for us the human meanings. And these two abilities are intertwined at the root in our most basic bodily comportments" (*RR*, 128). They acknowledge, as Polanyi did when describing scientific discovery, that such transformed understandings of the other entail a change of self-understanding (*RR*, 125).¹⁴ Polanyi began to address the knotty issues involved in what we today identify as the phenomenon of cultural pluralism when he reflected on the stability of cultural beliefs through the anthropological example of studies on

the Azande (*PK*, 287-94). He proposed his notion of the “personal”—as distinct from the subjective or the objective—by which he meant a committed decision to accept a belief, acknowledging all the while its reliance a host of subsidiary clues ranging from perceptual contact with our surroundings and encompassing our dwelling in our highest cultural ideals (*PK*, 300-303). Our acceptance of our particular cultural circumstances, coupled with universal aspirations aiming toward transcendent ideals, constitutes our calling (*PK*, 320-24). Dreyfus and Taylor are making a similar case when they claim that in encountering other people from different cultures with alien ideals, we have a capacity to appreciate them because our language does not exhaust our contact with the realities embodied in these meanings (*RR*, 128-29). Our capacity to learn, transcend our assumptions in unexpected ways, is grounded in a contact with the realities (at least presumed to be) disclosed. This allows us to acknowledge the incommensurabilities and gaps between cultures as we attempt to straddle them, even if we cannot always “fuse” them (*RR*, 130).

Once we grant that our understanding of the world is dependent on our bodily awareness of our everyday world, they raise the difficulty of accounting for our capacity of doing science. Recall that once Polanyi called attention to the personal co-efficient sustaining scientific inquiry this became one of the central issues confronting Polanyi’s challenge to scientific positivism and empiricism. Dreyfus and Taylor are required to confront this issue again because the mainstream analytic philosophical tradition requires that knowledge—especially scientific knowledge—be explicit and impersonal. Even though they do not intend to do so, they implicitly slip into this picture of science when they regularly refer to it as “a view from nowhere,” repeating this mantra¹⁵ as though they were scientific literalists holding on to a sacred text, but not when they describe the actual practice of scientists, which is quite Polanyian.¹⁶ Our normal converse with the world considers realities in light of their relationship to ourselves and our cultural values. The community of scientists, however, has created a tradition informed by theories and practices which allow us to grasp elements of our world in light of their relationship to each other as disclosed by relevant theories. Presuming the universe has an intrinsic intelligibility, we can understand that science affords us with one contingent access to our world which provides us with the best explanation available for how objects that surround us work *in relationship to each other*. Granted that this happens, science then may be understood to be a continually self-correcting tradition that surpasses previously held theories. This appears to be closer to understanding the actual *practice* of scientists. While this is not a definitive, impersonal argument, it supports the claim that science is not strictly speaking a view from nowhere, but dependent upon the assumptions and practices of the scientific community. Moreover, since these theories are dependent on scientists’ subsidiary awareness of world, the claims of

deflationary realists, like Rorty, are simply assuming we are captives of our representations (*RR*, 140-47).

Given their robust defense of scientific realism, Dreyfus and Taylor turn next to an unsettling implication of Saul Kripke's contention that if a scientific description of nature is true, then alternative descriptions of nature must be false (*RR*, 149-52). Such a conclusion appears to challenge their earlier discussion of the value of entering into alien horizons of meaning in order to discover the possibility of aspects of reality revealed there. They point out, however, that such a conclusion would be justified only if other cultural traditions were intending to describe the natural world as it exists in terms of its inner relations. But such a perspective was developed only in the modern West. What we must recognize is that there are different accounts of reality, one describing those aspects of nature as it is in itself disclosed by appropriate theories and another as it is revealed to involved human beings (*RR*, 153). There may, accordingly, be many different languages describing different aspects of reality. "Our position could then be characterized as *pluralistic robust realism*" (*RR*, 154). They present this as a third way of understanding our knowing reality in contrast with the more dominant philosophical views of modern scientism and various forms of subjectivism and relativism (*RR*, 154). Their aim is to commend a position that is open to varying, and perhaps initially incompatible, perspectives. Once we overcome the restrictions of the dominant perspectives, "our everyday experience of our direct embodied contact with an independent reality opens a space for a whole range of accounts of our essential nature and of the nature of the universe, thus freeing us for an empirical investigation to determine which, if any, of these accounts correspond to aspects of reality, and how, if at all, these various aspects fit together" (*RR*, 160). At this level of their position, Dreyfus and Taylor clearly evoke some of the most well-known elements of Polanyi's thought, including the capacity of an object to reveal unexpected aspects of its reality in the future¹⁷ or the way in which truth may be understood to be manifested in myths.¹⁸

Beyond all this they raise the question about progress in our knowing at this profound level. They clearly hold to the possibility of a "rational supersession" at the cultural level (*RR*, 163). We can see that, at least retrospectively, we have taken steps in this direction through the examples of the suppression of slavery and the promotion of women's civic rights. Additionally, we have seen convergence on certain points even if disagreement about deepest values remain. Perhaps something like John Rawls's "overlapping consensus" may contribute to understanding such progress (*RR*, 164). Even if our deepest underlying reasons for meaning resist convergence, there is no reason not to continue to attempt it; and a robust plural realism, they submit, provides the greatest basis for hoping for such a unification or convergence.

In these reflections I have attempted to indicate how the main features of the argument presented in *Retrieving Realism* is congruent with the position first developed by

Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. Indeed, I tried to indicate how acknowledging explicitly the structure of tacit knowing would improve some of the formulations presented by Dreyfus and Taylor. So the first concluding point I make is that students of Polanyi's thought ought to study carefully this work to complement and inform their own understanding of Polanyi's theory of knowledge.

Secondly, along the way, Dreyfus and Taylor address most of the major issues confronting any realistic epistemology from within the dominant analytic and hermeneutical philosophical traditions found in the academic world of today. This provides the student of Polanyi with an entree into the wider academic debates regarding realism and is suggestive of how a Polanyian approach might address them.

Finally, if I am correct in my first contention, that Polanyi's thought anticipated in a more adequate fashion the basic position defended by Dreyfus and Taylor, then the obvious question arises as to why they do not explicitly acknowledge, if not reliance, then at least similarity with, the thought of Polanyi. To affirm that they are not familiar with the thought of Polanyi clearly is wrong. At least in the case of Taylor, he refers to the influence and importance of Polanyi in several of his previous writings. While I cannot offer any definitive response, I have a strong suspicion that what motivated them to this stance is their desire to address the mainstream philosophical community in the academy. In this task, Polanyi would be an outlier and not at all helpful. Even though the publication of *Personal Knowledge* was widely discussed at the time and was considered a groundbreaking study of science, the theory of personal knowledge that Polanyi believed sustained it never gained wide traction among the philosophical professionals at Oxford or Cambridge—and consequently in the wider analytic or hermeneutical philosophical traditions.¹⁹ An anecdotal account concerning this phenomenon was relayed to me by Rom Harré. He said that when it first came out “everybody” at Oxbridge was discussing *Personal Knowledge*—but not in print. Polanyi was not a member of the guild. For Dreyfus and Taylor to present their position as a development of Polanyi's, in other words, would not carry much support among their intended audience. This is, I admit, merely a surmise. But I hope that these reflections on Dreyfus and Taylor's effort to bring a “contact theory” of knowing into dialogue with the wider academic world would prove to be a sufficient stimulus for students of Polanyi to build on their efforts to do likewise with “personal knowledge.”

ENDNOTES

¹Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as *RR*, followed by the page number.

²Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Reprinted with a new preface as a Harper Torchbook (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964). Subsequent references to this work will be indicated in the text as *PK*, followed by the page number.

³There is, to be sure, one reference to *Personal Knowledge* (*RR*, 76), but it is used merely illustratively to support their argument that even in science the spontaneous creativity leading to a new insight is guided by the rigor of “getting it right” and is in no way capricious. Tellingly, the editor at Harvard Press mistakenly identified this reference as Polanyi’s brother, Karl (*RR*, 171), probably because his name came up before Michael’s in the indexing software he was using. That no one caught this gaff suggests how peripheral the reference is to their epistemological argument.

⁴This was such a significant theme in Polanyi’s corpus that Harry Prosch used it as the organizing motif of his presentation of Polanyi’s thought. See his *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). The first three parts are called “diagnosis,” “prescription,” and “treatment.”

⁵The best introduction of this facet of Polanyi’s position of which I am aware is that of Richard Gelwick. See his *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁶Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 145.

⁷Charles Taylor, “Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition,” in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 257-275.

⁸Again, I contend that their meaning is better served by “direct” rather than “unmediated.”

⁹This is the context within which Dreyfus and Taylor appeal to Polanyi’s appraisal of creativity in science. It is a generic reference to support their view that both rational necessity and spontaneity are involved in affirming a discovery.

¹⁰On this matter, John Searle is in agreement. See his *Philosophy in a New Century: Selected Essays*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7-8.

¹¹A point frequently made by Polanyi. See, for example, “The Structure of Consciousness,” and “Life’s Irreducible Structure” in *Knowing and Being*. Ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 211-239.

¹²This is reminiscent of the way Taylor structured his analysis in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). The first part focused on the tacitly assumed epistemological underpinnings of the modern sense of the self, while the subsequent parts uncovered the normally unnoticed cultural underpinnings of modern identity and its impact on our moral sensibility.

¹³Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004). Original German edition 1975.

¹⁴*The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 80-81.

¹⁵Enshrined in the analytic tradition by Thomas Nagel. See his *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Nagel assumes that science is explicit and impersonal and here raises the profound question of how we can understand it in relation to our subjective, cultural ideals. Granted these assumptions, he provides many insightful observations on how we may lead moral, meaningful lives, but ultimately must confess—humbly and modestly—that we cannot bring the objective viewpoint to bear on our cultural meanings: “Our problem has in this sense no solution, but to recognize that is to come as near as we can to living in light of the truth” (231).

¹⁶I have found numerous uses of this phrase in their work: see pages 69-70, 132-33, 139, 149-53.

¹⁷*The Tacit Dimension*, “This capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future I attribute to the fact that the thing observed is an aspect of reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it” (p. 32). “Perception has this inexhaustible profundity, because what we perceive is an aspect of reality, and aspects of reality are clues to boundless undisclosed, and perhaps yet unthinkable, experiences” (p. 68).

¹⁸Some of Polanyi’s later reflections on this were published, with the collaboration of Harry Prosch, as *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975). His observation on the famous anthropological study of the Bororos and their self-identification as red parrots is illustrative: “What the Borroros mean by identifying themselves with red parrots may be difficult to fathom, but there is no necessary reason to say that it is any more absurd than the view of many scientists and philosophers that they are machines” (pp. 139-40).

¹⁹See Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).