

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION OF REALITY: A RESPONSE TO MY INTERLOCUTORS



Esther Lightcap Meek

Keywords: Michael Polanyi, contact with reality, realism, reality, subsidiary/focal integration

ABSTRACT

In this essay I respond to the assessments of my Contact with Reality provided by Stewart, Héder, Takaki, and Grosso. I clarify the book's agenda as posing what I call the fundamental question of realism, i.e., whether reality is there. I distinguish this question from various realisms that describe specifics about what reality is like and how we through our knowing interact with it. This fundamental question exercises logical priority, has existential importance, and is timely in response to modernist epistemology. In addition to this question, my book also is motivated by what I call the "lodestar" of Polanyi's epistemology: subsidiary/focal integration, issuing in contact with reality, with concomitant indeterminate future manifestations. Various decisions I made in Contact with Reality and my engagement of Polanyi's work have generally been motivated by these two concerns. I conclude by responding selectively to specific matters raised by each interlocutor.

I appreciate the opportunity to devote this issue of *TAD* to my recent *Contact with Reality* (Meek 2017a; hereafter, *CWR*). I have found much value in pondering the contributions of my colleagues. I know from experience that I begin to know a book of my own only once it is published and I start to talk it over with others. Convivial conversation advances understanding, in the spirit of Polanyi himself; it is the hallmark of the Polanyi Society. Together we hope this conversation continues.

The Fundamental Question of Realism

The submissions from each of my interlocutors prompt me to ask afresh: in *CWR*, what was my central question about Polanyi and realism? What realism, and whose? Thus I begin with some comments that bear on all the responses taken together.

My central question, which *CWR* addresses, is *whether reality is there*. In any discussion of realism—or of anything—this question is fundamental. Let's call this the fundamental question of reality (hereafter, FQR). However, the ever-burgeoning plethora of “realisms” seems to overshadow it. Marjorie Grene wrestles with this matter and settles on the beautiful phrase, “the primacy of the real” (Grene 1995, chap. 6). It aptly expresses what I have been after all along.

I distinguish this “existential” (in more than one sense) question from specified positions of many theses of “realism”—positions that designate, rather, what reality is like or how our knowing engages it. The former might be categorized as metaphysical realism (or just metaphysics); the latter might be called epistemic realism. As per the title of my 1985 dissertation, I considered the FQR a matter of epistemic realism (*CWR*, 11). However, it seems that many discussions espousing realisms of any sort actually bypass the FQR.

CWR makes it clear that the FQR has been the urgent question for me. It may be a “lowly” question, but I resist David Stewart's concluding assessment that it does not matter. It is lowly in the way that all fundamental philosophical questions are lowly. As one moves beyond skepticism, the FQR becomes a question of profoundest wonder: why is there something rather than nothing? How is it that I would be so blessed as to be apprehended by reality and to understand it? That's a posture worthy of a lifetime. The wonder grows with deepening understanding, as David Schindler argues in direct challenge to modernist epistemology and its bias against metaphysics (see Schindler 2013, esp. ch. 7). The FQR is the embarrassing question our modernist era characteristically bypasses. Raising it, as Polanyi does, and addressing it, as *CWR* does, matters strategically in our time.

To be sure, Polanyi himself never doubted reality is there. In this respect *CWR*'s agenda is not solely to represent his stance, but rather, as if by a magnifying lens, to focus its beams on the FQR. Polanyi at least raised the FQR, displaying throughout his work that it matters. For him it matters in science, in opposition to the socialization of science, in opposition to positivism, and in epistemology quite generally. This is what drew me to his work.

The FQR ought to be addressed before one offers specific accounts of realism or claims about the nature of reality. As with all fundamental questions, it would be effectively impossible to accord consideration of the question before taking up *life*. However, in life (in fact, *contra* Polanyi's claim, which Stewart notes) we must and can in some way use our spectacles to examine our spectacles, as Polanyi's own epistemology

demonstrates. What is more, Polanyi's sophisticated epistemology demonstrates I don't have to do this in order to be addressed by reality. In fact, my indwelt spectacles, even if impoverished or skewed, can still have positioned me in a manner soon to be overtaken by integrative insight, thanks to reality's generous overtures. So the FQR has logical, if not chronological, priority with respect to additional realist stances.

In Polanyi's thought, it is evident the answer to the FQR is *yes*, and that *one thing* shows this: *contact with reality*. It is not Polanyi's doctrine of levels, or his consideration of the growth of thought in society. It is not his conviction that people are more profoundly real than cobblestones; even a cobblestone will do it. These topics of course are germane to realisms of this or that sort and deeply intriguing. But this shows why in foregrounding the FQR I downplay these other important dimensions of Polanyi's thought. I remain taken with the wonder and witness of contact with reality and its unfolding implications.

How do we know that reality is there? We know reality is there because of the phenomenon, the event, of contact with reality. In our pursuit of the yet to be known, this is our common experience: an insight "breaks in" which irreducibly supersedes and transforms even my beginning stance, the parameters of my question, and even me along with it. Reality "is what obtrudes, fascinates, concerns me from the start and, so far, to the end, and it is also what has made and continues to make me who I am," says Grene (1995, 115). Reality, in its primacy, it turns out, contacts back—or, better, *first*. Reality itself, breaking in and apprehending me in the phenomenon of contact, directly addresses the fundamental question of realism (*CWR*, part two).

As a youthful Cartesian skeptic in the milieu of modernity, in my doubt of the real, I dismissed even my own bodily senses. So of course I did not trust or even see my common experience of insight. That is why Polanyi's authoritative witness to this phenomenon mattered deeply to me: he was a premier scientist speaking about his *expert* experience in scientific discovery. Discovery, of course, foregrounds the FQR in a way that the still dominating epistemic preoccupation with explicit explanation and justification precisely does not: the discoverer just is asking, "Is anything *there*?" Polanyi challenged a deadening approach to science itself that was actually marginalizing discovery as non-epistemic. Discovery is essentially fraught with the unformalizable. What discovery apprehends is "messy as you like, but real," as Grene says (1995, 114). To be an expert discoverer, Polanyi represents, is to love endlessly the feel of this question. It is to surrender to it, to trust it, to follow where it leads. But Polanyi's account shows that everyone lives this question in ordinary life; by nature humans long to know and understand. We experience the phenomenon of contact in every act of insight, from the simplest perception to the most sophisticated thesis.

To give oneself to the "yes" of Polyanian contact with reality is to be made over as a realist, released from what now appears a ludicrous skepticism. Recovering reality, as

per Polanyi, resolves the question of realism (*CWR*, chs. 12 and 14). I followed the lead of Hans Urs von Balthasar in saying life should make philosophers and realists of us all (*CWR*, 8). *CWR* contends it does so, with the therapeutic aid of Polanyi's epistemology.

Does the word "contact" imply distance, as Andrew Grosso contends? Granted, the word can sound distant and diminutive. However, when one considers Polanyi's distinctive use of it, one cannot miss its richness. Polanyi does not mean his phrase to describe a realist account so much as the event, an epiphanic encounter the knower undergoes, in which she is participatively present. I have suggested elsewhere that "engaging" and "unlocking" may be more apt to describe the phenomenon (Meek 2003; cf. Schindler 2015, ch. 4).

The Polanyian Lodestar

Polanyi's notion of contact with reality is embedded integrally in his insightful and innovative account of knowing as subsidiary/focal integration. Each anchors the other reciprocally—as knowing and being always do. He offers his epistemology to defend and accredit the unformalizability of the process, which he deems precious and critical to science and humanness. Polanyi's approach to both the FQR and knowing is to foreground what is happening in the act of insight. What happens when we know—when we discover? Knowing roots deeply in the unspecifiable; it launches toward the unspecifiable; it is deeply abetted and satisfied in the unspecifiable.

Over the decades-long interim that *CWR* bookends, I have focused on Polanyi's epistemology, teaching any number of people to identify, accredit, and implement subsidiary/focal integration in all their knowing ventures. For me, the lodestar of Polanyi just is subsidiary/focal integration (SFI), leading to contact with reality (*CWR*) with its telltale indeterminate range of future manifestations (IFM) and unspecifiable sense of the possibility: thus, SFI → *CWR* → IFM. This lodestar has been my launch-point for considering what reality is like—as over against Polanyi's doctrine of levels.¹

This sheds light on the authorial choices that shape *CWR*, and now my anticipated work. I acceded to the stipulations of my philosophy department, the prevailing winds of contemporary philosophy, as well as the ongoing concern of my Polanyi Society colleagues, to connect and commend Polanyi's work to the analytic tradition's epistemic and realist stances. *CWR* devotes multiple conversations to it, engaging major players in Polanyi's own time and currently, including, quite strategically, the influential and widely considered work of Charles Taylor. But by presumption the dominating analytic approach rejects the very challenge and reform Polanyi's lodestar brings to light: knowledge, to be knowledge, must be rooted integrally in and from the inarticulate. So my efforts have been received less than enthusiastically, just because of the unaccepted superiority of Polanyian epistemology. This was Polanyi's experience; and I cast chapter 13 of *CWR* as the difference Polanyi *would* make.

Continually drawn as I am to this lodestar of SFI → CWR → IFM, I intend to ask in *CWR*, “What is it about those IFMs?” What does the phenomenon of discovery say about the nature of the real? This avenue of inquiry is what led directly to my developing my own proposals about knowing and being: the claim that reality is person-like, and knowing is best construed as an interpersonal encounter (see Meek 2011). My direction moving forward, inspired by Grene’s ringing primacy of the real, thus inclines toward Schindler’s work on knowing and being. *CWR*’s final chapter is a fledgling’s first flight.

It’s evident throughout my work that I profess Christianity in its classic, historic expression. That means that I believe that God is real and most real. This is to say something definitive as an opening stance; definitively not a last word. I sense a deep resonance between his work and my religious profession, as do many other Polanyians. But this in itself is not to impose my version of Christianity onto his own (or that of others). It is not to bend his proposals to prove God is real. Polanyi’s own work doesn’t exactly narrow down the options. But neither does it reject such options preemptively. And it refuses to ensconce a relativistic claim that all comers are equally valid.

In order to hold truthfully to Polanyi’s innovative, modernism-dispelling epistemology, its implication must be embraced: we may not rule against certain dimensions of quest for reality as inaccessible or illegitimate. Nor should we stipulate a relativism that effectively disrespects those who disagree with us. Both of these actually commit the inconsistent (anti)metaphysical reification of modernism. The modernist claim that knowing is in principle not appropriate for theological inquiry is itself a theological claim. Polanyi’s epistemology directly challenges this modernist holdover, as does, I believe, his doctrine of levels. In fact, subsidiary/focal integration opens reality to the indeterminate—the farthest thing from subjectivity—unless of course one sees it as the subjectivity of an “other.” To seek understanding requires that we be continually open to the real beyond us.

Not ruling out God’s reality, then, is not to commit metaphysical reification (cf. Schindler 2013, ch. 4). In fact, it resonates with what Polanyi portrayed about subsidiary/focal integration, that it opens to the real in a way that is more honestly religious than modernist epistemology. He felt that his epistemology might be better for religion than any effort that religion might be able to carry out (*CWR*, 241). In this matter also I move out from this lodestar of Polanyi’s thought.

The Realisms

Before offering specific responses to my co-contributors, let me locate *CWR* with respect to various theses termed realisms. The FQR may be said to be *Polanyi’s realism* fundamentally, if not exclusively. This stance regarding the FQR may be deemed a *phenomenological realism*: it concerns the phenomenon of contact with reality. I have

called my own stance an *exuberant realism* to call attention to the FQR, to contact with reality's joyous IFM-fraught in-breaking, and to the abundant generosity of reality's contacting back (or first). I believe Takaki employs the term "*consequential realism*" to denote the phenomenon of IFMs; I would concur. The FQR itself might be considered an *epistemic realism*: in our knowing, we find reality to be there. It may be considered a *metaphysical realism*: reality is there independently of our knowing it. This of course should not be identified with the absurd claim that we can know it is there independently of our knowing it, nor with the denial that our knowing and reality mutually interact with and shape each other (Takaki's "semi-independence"). We can tell it is independently there, not because we step out of our skin or because we do not engage it, but because it answers back. Undeniably, it has a life of its own, not lessened by but rather showcased in our responsible involvement. Thus, the FQR is consistent with an *enactive realism* (Takaki) or a *participative realism* (Grosso); these are appropriate designations for Polanyi's realism and mine. It is entirely appropriate to designate Polanyi's an *emergent realism*; I do not at least currently designate my own that way. My realism could be called *personalist*; for developing realism out from the Polyanian lodestar has suggested to me that reality is person-like (see Meek 2011).

David James Stewart

David Stewart's fine synopsis of *CWR* dominates his contribution, which I appreciate as an approach. His overall assessment of the work is dismissive, however. This appears due in part to a few apparent misreadings of the text.² It is also evident my philosophical proclivities diverge from his own—one reason I have tried in this rejoinder to specify mine more starkly. It is to be expected that as a result Stewart judges *CWR*'s merits differently.

Stewart questions whether *CWR* in this form honors the ethos of the Polanyi Society, since it omits taking up discussions and proposals around realism evident in the more contemporary literature. This does indeed identify an editorial decision that remains uncomfortable, as well as an ongoing desire now that *CWR* has been published. There have, however, been a number of face-to-face conversations about related issues within the Society since 2000; I'm not sure Stewart has been involved in many of these discussions.

Stewart avers the main task of *CWR* should have been to show how Polanyi's realism stacks up against different forms of idealism. I appreciate his enthusiasm for chapter 13. However, his assessment of the book makes no mention of *CWR*'s exploration of Merleau-Ponty, Taylor and Dreyfus, Grene, or Schindler. It mystifies me that at least the engagement with Dreyfus and Taylor, enthusiastically continued by other respondents, does not count toward this agenda—not to mention the ponderous

chapters in the first part of *CWR* which Stewart wishes had been revised. Nevertheless, I look forward to Stewart's own contributions in this area.

Mihály Héder

I'm especially enlightened to read Mihály Héder's perceptions of my work. I note he finds my perception of Polanyi's value "romantic," jubilant about its liberating and healing effects: I plead guilty, as many students and conversation partners of mine will attest. Additionally, he notes the apparent mismatch between my own existential question about reality and Polanyi's utter confidence about reality, which I have addressed above.

Héder observes that *CWR* postures itself as offering a philosophical justification which Polanyi himself had not provided, one that now falls to the professional philosopher to supply. To be sure, I regret this remark, a sophomoric claim I overlooked in editing. But the savvy reader acquainted with the analytic philosophy of that time will rightly surmise this misconstrual tellingly reflects that milieu, my situation as a dissertation candidate in it, and the posture in which I was being groomed that I have long since revoked. However, in *CWR*, what I meant was that Polanyi offers no justification, not for realism, but rather for the reality statement—that contact with reality is characterized by indeterminate future manifestations. Héder proceeds to identify major discussions, such as Polanyi's critique of objectivism, his refutations of positivism and of reductivism, and his positive account of ontological levels, which constitute Polanyi's own justification of realism, or shifting of the burden of proof to anti-realism. I am indeed happy to accept this characterization, as *CWR*'s discussion implies.

I have spoken already to the concern about reified metaphysics. I do believe discovery uncovers *things* that are there, and avoids concocting *reifications* of things that are not. That's what discovery is about. To be a thing, as Aristotle argued long ago, is the wonder-full heart of metaphysics. Add to this that for Polanyi things include ones with active centers, as Héder notes, and you have a convivially personal metaphysics.

Finally, I am glad for Héder's claim that Polanyi is not the niche thinker we make him out to be. But nothing has changed my perception throughout the last forty years of always checking first a book's index for Polanyi's name and more often not finding it, and of talking mostly to people in ordinary walks of life. Speaking to an array of audiences as I do, I can reliably expect most present will have never heard of Polanyi or will not know his epistemology; thus, the great value of sharing it.

Kyle Takaki

Both Takaki and Grosso begin by attending not to *CWR* but to Charles Taylor, I note with humility. But I like that Takaki sees *CWR* as moving beyond Dreyfus and Taylor's *Retrieving Realism* by demonstrating the comparative superiority of Polanyi's

realism. I have much to learn as I continue to listen to Takaki's work. I appreciate that it probes how knowing works in science, including its intrinsic logical leap of levels (his "pluralistic heterarchical hierarchies") and how it intrinsically involves a knower rooted in reality engaging reality in a mutually reciprocal enactive realism.

Takaki's engagement of Polanyi's levels actually confirms my early uneasiness with the doctrine; it corroborates that Polanyi's "ontological equation," as a one-to-one correspondence, may not be valid. It is preferable to see that every act of coming to know involves a jump of levels. From this it may be inferred, not necessarily that there is a single hierarchy of them, but rather that reality itself self-discloses epiphanically. This is also a specific example of moving directly from Polanyian contact with reality to implications regarding what reality itself is like.

I will give further thought to Takaki's proposed spectrum of stances on realism—Taylor's, Takaki's, and Charles Lowney's emergence with risk. Takaki suggests mine is a middle position, offering this analysis to widen the conversation about realism.

I do not, however, care for the thought of reality as a working hypothesis, as Takaki names it. That doesn't seem something that Polanyi himself would say; it doesn't square with the passionate commitment to the as yet unrealized discovery that he is concerned to represent. I also note Takaki's use of the term "worldview." But I will need to understand what he is saying more deeply before I can respond properly. I do say more below about my beginning thinking regarding levels, which also bears on my response to Takaki's well-packed presentation.

Andrew Grosso

Andrew Grosso's approach perhaps most affirms and resonates with the actual arc of *CWR*'s unfolding. I have suggested above Grosso's critique of "contact as distance" can be met in a way that reveals Polanyi's and mine to be a participative realism. Grosso deals in the new work of Charles Taylor regarding language, *The Language Animal*. Judging from Grosso's description, Taylor's thesis displays philosophical commitments of a piece with those in *Retrieving Realism*, which *CWR* engages and challenges. The distinction between life meanings and human meanings reflect tacit commitments that continue to prevail in modernity.³ According to Polanyi, it is not *ever* the case that life meanings do not depend on hermeneutic forms of reasoning and articulation. Taylor's claims overlook Polanyi's distinctive and critical description of their status as *subsidiary*. From the standpoint of an impending discovery, just about everything is subsidiary, consenting to and standing readied for their own incipient transformation in the anticipated *Gestalt*. All that is subsidiary is bodily indwelt by me and my collaborators, along with all we have hitherto come to understand or misunderstand—our vision of reality, all language and meaning, and all hermeneutical, philosophical, and psychological commitments involved.⁴ Subsidiaries meld anticipatively which, when

they were focused on previously or in destructive analysis, are even contradictory. It is my endeavor in *CWR*, along with the opening reflections of this essay, to suggest Polanyi's unique account of knowing and contact with reality actually helpfully redraws such discussions.

Polanyi's Doctrine of Levels

I turn finally to the matter of Polanyian levels. Now as I discharge my existential quest and begin a wider philosophical life, I believe something like the doctrine of levels is both undeniable and fruitful. I do believe that the dynamic of discovery and insight itself just is an existential experience of the in-breaking of a higher level (see Meek 2017b). The apprehension of a *Gestalt* transforms the clues. To employ Schindler's language, the "higher" level is the other that generously self-discloses, gifting the one seeking the very conditions of possibility required for apprehension (Schindler 2013, ch. 2). As a concrete example, the birds in my yard must reveal to me how best to care for them as I attend to them; as another, a prospective friend or long-loved daughter must clue me in on how to care for her. All that Polanyi says about boundary conditions and principles of marginal control, the irreducibility of the higher to the lower, offers insight into the act of discovery. The act of discovery suggests the doctrine of levels—another launching out into reality from the notion of contact.

To my admittedly thus-far shallow understanding of Polanyian levels, I add that four things seem to have been especially important about them to Polanyi. One is the irreducibility of relative levels and their characteristic workings. A second is that the higher up you go, the more interpersonal the knowing becomes. I would say this suggests that there are no higher levels than are interpersonal; everything less personal would be a step back. It seems to me that Polanyi's epistemology displays knowing as just the work of the nexus of conditions that typify the personal/interpersonal level.

Third, for Polanyi the "beyond"—the next higher level—is somehow the most important and definitive thing about the lower levels—even when it has not yet been discovered. If, in knowing, the knower is on or in a lower level, by definition she'll need the gracious initiative of the higher even to sense its presence; and she can well anticipate that comprehending that level in principle exceeds her capacity. We must see knowing as "from-to and beyond"—integrally open to the other. Transcendence, by which I mean the necessary irreducibility and inscrutability of the next higher level from the one below, is utterly essential to Polanyi's account of knowing and of levels. The higher level can be seen to make the lower what it most characteristically is, even when it cannot yet (or ever can) be identified. The next level beyond is necessary. This also supports the claim that the act of discovery is actually the definitive window into epistemology.

Fourth, even as the level beyond is necessary to the lower, it is so in a manner that brings it to a freer, fuller flourishing as itself. This involvement is not dominating so much as evocative. Higher levels function less like a control and more as a personal other. This shows again how appropriate it is to view the higher levels as interpersonal.⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, I once again express my thanks for this symposium on *CWR*, and for the substantial contributions of my interlocutors. I am grateful for the further thought and articulation they have already engendered, and I anticipate more to come as we all consider these issues further.

ENDNOTES

¹Additionally, *CWR* bears ample witness to the fact Grene deemed Polanyi's doctrine of levels a suspect part of Polanyi's work and strongly encouraged me away from it.

²With reference to the title of the second part of *CWR*, Stewart construes "re-calling" as a mere reference to the past, missing the richer meaning the hyphen introduces. Also, Stewart equivocates the word "epistemology" in the context of his claim *CWR* contradicts itself regarding Polanyi's contribution: he cites my claim Polanyi reinvented epistemology alongside my claim Polanyi's contributions have been more or less ignored in prevailing discussions (cf. *CWR*, 6, 135). The word refers in the one to an account of knowing, in the other to the general philosophical discussion.

³Schindler's thorough metaphysical work in his *Catholicity of Reason* uncovers the metaphysical commitments that predominate in modern thought and culture, including Taylor's distinction. Schindler also documents the massive change in the notion of causality that comes about at the hands of Galileo, a metaphysical move that delegitimizes metaphysics itself. See Schindler 2013, chs. 5 and 6.

⁴In fact, the undergirding subsidiary layer the *Gestalt* constitutes generously overlooks or supersedes certain mistakes we have made, the way "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4.8 NRSV).

⁵Schindler (2013, 258) follows Balthasar and argues we must see the analogy of being (akin in some respect to Polanyian levels) as *katalogical*—not based "out of itself" but "gifted from another." This is in direct challenge to modernist epistemology.

REFERENCES

- Grene, Marjorie. 1995. *A Philosophical Testament*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Meek, Esther Lightcap. 2003. *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos.
- _____. 2011. *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.
- _____. 2017a. *Contact With Reality: Michael Polanyi's Realism and Why It Matters*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.

- _____. 2017b. "Recovering Reality." Paper for the Polanyi Society Annual Meeting. Boston, MA: November, 2017.
- Schindler, D.C. 2013. *The Catholicity of Reason*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- _____. 2018. *Love and the Postmodern Predicament*. Eugene, OR: Cascade.