

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH POLANYI'S REALISM: AN EXAMINATION OF ESTHER MEEK'S CONTACT WITH REALITY



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ABSTRACT

This essay provides a general overview of Meek's central arguments in Contact with Reality, focusing on her interpretation of Polanyi's notion of "contact with reality" as it pertains to the viability of a distinctly Polanyian brand of realism. Special attention is given to Meek's treatment of "indeterminate future manifestations" as the core of Polanyi's epistemic realism and the implications of this for a theory of truth.

A Brief Introduction to Contact with Reality

At its heart, Esther Meek's *Contact with Reality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017) is a close reading of Polanyi's philosophical thought. I use the word "heart" intentionally here, for while her main focus is on the perennial question of realism, her project also has an undeniable *personal* quality, apropos of a central feature of Polanyi's postcritical epistemology. As she zeroes in on the unique form(s) of realism hidden in plain sight in Polanyi's writings, one cannot help but notice Meek is an evangelist not only of Polanyi, but also of the liberative and healing potential of his proposals. The conviction that a rigorous examination of a concept like "reality" can in fact have such potential is rare, especially in monographs comfortably situated in the contemporary

analytic tradition. For my money, then, regardless of how one evaluates Meek's defense of Polanyi's realism or the unstated implications of her argument, *Contact with Reality* (henceforth *CWR*) is a solid example of what academic philosophy can be in its best moments: suffused with heart without being preachy, personal without being parochial, and duly technical without being disconnected from the realities of the human experience.

The personal character of Meek's project is exemplified by its form as well as its content. The bulk of *CWR* comprises a slightly revised version of her 1985 doctoral dissertation. By her own admission, Meek intentionally preserved the integrity of the original manuscript—an interesting decision, to be discussed later. Because of this, the first part of the book (the original dissertation), "Early Consideration of Contact with Reality" (chapters 1-11), has the feel of a journey of personal discovery. Here, the reader has the sense of reading Polanyi alongside Meek. The second part, "Re-Calling Contact with Reality" (chapters 12-14), has instead the feel of a retrospective reflection on her earlier work in light of her subsequent intellectual development.

Meek's central thesis is that an analysis of Polanyi's notion of "contact with reality" (see *PK*, 104; 147; 313), in conjunction with a host of related concepts, shows that he is an "epistemic realist" (*CWR*, 6; 58). In this mode of realism, although reality is independent of the knower, it's nevertheless "substantially accessible" to them (*CWR*, 12). In Meek's view, Polanyi concurs with what Joseph Margolis refers to as the "original realist thesis," viz., that reality exists external to the knower and independent of any conception of it (*CWR*, 55-56). Although Polanyi emphasizes the personal character of knowledge (i.e., that the agent plays a necessary, active role in the discovery and dissemination of knowledge and truth), Meek is adamant this has little in common with those types of constructivism or Kantian idealism wherein there's an unbridgeable chasm between reality-in-itself and reality-for-us. Polanyi, she claims, believes we can access the "in-itself" of reality, and this despite the intrinsically subjective, personal character of all human knowing (*CWR*, 57).

Evidence of this can be found in Polanyi's comments about the "powerful" impulse characteristic of critical thought (i.e., post-Kantian thought) "to eliminate any quest for an understanding that carries with it the metaphysical implications of a groping for reality behind a screen of appearances" (*SM*, 20). Rather than seeing this as a cop-out, as a way of bypassing the transcendental turn without having to deal with it, Polanyi pushes back against the belief that the results of science are merely descriptions of experiences, that is, of phenomena. When the Enlightenment ideals of rational inquiry and healthy skepticism are pushed to the extreme, defending truth claims about the in-itself of reality becomes impossible insofar as everything is basically reduced to a matter of epistemology. Even though Polanyi considered the assumption the natural sciences are indicative of "complete objectivity" to be delusional (*PK*, 18), he nevertheless maintained they can lead to objective knowledge about empirical reality. It thus

makes sense that for Polanyi, as for any realist, ontology precedes epistemology (*CWR*, 74). In this framework, the knower, by right of being an embodied, physical entity, is already rooted in and part of the world prior to having made any conclusions about it, let alone conceptual distinctions between knower/known, subject/object, etc. (*CWR*, 12-13). For Meek, it's precisely the subject's rootedness in the already-existing external world that makes realism a live option.

On this foundation Meek builds her case for a distinctly Polanyian brand of realism. She provides helpful overviews of tacit knowledge, the subsidiary/focal dialectic, the logics of discovery and indwelling, the notion that we know more than we can tell, and the claim that grasping an aspect of reality leads to an "indefinite range of yet unforeseen consequences" (*PK*, 147), which Meek refers to as "indeterminate future manifestations" (or the "IFM effect"); familiar ideas to those who've read any of Polanyi's major works. The basic shape of her argument is that Polanyi regards the universe as inherently rational, that all knowledge is either subsidiary or rooted in the subsidiary, and that the real is that which manifests itself in unforeseen ways as a knower discovers new, meaningful ways of indwelling a network of unspecifiable subsidiaries. Polanyi's realism is thus a synthesis of the notions that a knower makes contact with reality through the skillful act of an "integrative discovery" (*CWR*, 81) and that "truth lies in the achievement of a contact with reality" (*PK*, 147; *CWR*, 83).

It's no accident the truth question pops up here. It would be difficult to offer a thoroughgoing defense of a realist metaphysic without directly addressing it. Meek recognizes this, and spends a significant amount of time working through the issue. But the conclusions she draws about the theory of truth implied by Polanyi's realism are as unexpected as they are intriguing. It seems inarguable that, like most versions of metaphysical/ontological realism (though by no means all), epistemic realism is closely connected to the correspondence theory of truth. The paradigmatic example here is the view advanced by Russell and Moore at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The idea that truth is about the 1:1 correspondence between a statement about the world and the world as it really is (i.e., a fact about the world) is a virtual cornerstone of Russell's metaphysical realism. At first blush, the theory of truth implied by Meek's definition of epistemic realism seems to have much in common with this correspondence theory. Following G. H. Merrill, Meek explains epistemic realism comes down to the idea that to accept a theory is to believe it's true, to believe its terms denote existing entities (*CWR*, 58). The parallels are obvious: "existing entities" corresponds to the world "as it really is" in Russell's scheme, and believing a theory to be true corresponds to making a statement about the world, presumably a statement one believes to be true. At this point Meek makes two noteworthy claims. First, that, at least according to Merrill's definition, epistemic realism ought to be distinguished from metaphysical realism (*CWR*, 58). Second, that while a "great portion" of Polanyi's statements about reality fall under the rubric of epistemic realism, this shouldn't be taken to mean he isn't

also a metaphysical and semantic realist in certain ways (*CWR*, 58 n. 11). The kicker is that Meek rejects the notion Polanyi's realism is indicative of the correspondence theory of truth (*CWR*, 84).

Ultimately, Meek's position is that in a systematic account of Polanyi's thought, when it comes to the question of truth, the notion of "contact" replaces that of "correspondence" (*CWR*, 166). She goes so far as to suggest that the constellation of concepts related to "contact with reality" can be read as a "creative response to the thin correspondence realism that mainline philosophers ambivalently supported" (*CWR*, 150). Rather than truth being a matter of 1:1 correspondence with reality, as far as Meek is concerned, Polanyi's realism points to a "*one-to-infinity correspondence*" between thought and reality (*CWR*, 247; her emphasis). The operative principle here is that reality always manifests itself in unforeseeable ways, because reality is fundamentally inexhaustible. This is the IFM effect in a nutshell, and it's at the heart of Polanyi's notion of discovery. Accordingly, a statement about reality is true insofar as it reveals an aspect of reality and truth is the achievement of having made contact with reality (*CWR*, 163). Because truth is akin to a responsible commitment made with universal intent, it could be said Polanyi's conception of truth is performative. We can't step outside of the framework we indwell, the framework to which we're necessarily *committed* (*CWR*, 178). While there's a sense in which this sounds like circular reasoning, a more generous interpretation would be to say Meek is here engaged in the difficult task of explicating the dialectic of truth and belief in Polanyi's assertion that "truth is but the external pole of belief, and to destroy all belief would be to deny all truth" (*PK*, 286).

Meek wants to demonstrate Polanyi himself espoused a form a realism, not just that core Polanyian concepts might come in handy to certain types of realists. This means *CWR* is descriptive rather than constructive. It's the difference between the questions of what Polanyi said or believed and what it could mean to be a Polanyian today; between exegesis of Polanyi and indwelling Polanyian ideals. This bears mention because Meek acknowledges Polanyi doesn't address the question of realism in a precise, systematic manner. Reality, sort of; but *realism* as an 'ism,' no. Perhaps his realism is obscured by his fiduciary account of knowledge (*CWR*, 11): an interesting possibility. Either way, to her credit, she concedes "contact with reality" might only be a manner of speaking for him (*CWR*, 75). And yet she never backs down from the bold claim that *Polanyi's* realism is "the best realism to hold," that his is the most justifiable kind (*CWR*, 6). She takes this one step further in saying that Polanyi reinvented epistemology, essentially "recast[ing] rationality in a new key" (*CWR*, 135).

Contrast this with her claims that Polanyi's insights on the topic are little remembered today (*CWR*, 2) and that his position hasn't been given its due because of the way it "challenges the fundamental parameters of the philosophical debate, then and now, regarding realism and anti-realism in philosophy of science and in epistemology" (*CWR*, 6). One might read this with a raised eyebrow: how can Polanyi have

reinvented epistemology, changed the parameters of the conversation, all while being more or less ignored by the majority of his peers and contemporary thinkers? But Meek hasn't made such a facile oversight. No, for her, Polanyi's realism obviates the problem altogether (e.g., *CWR*, 5; 252; 253). "*Reality* solves the problem of realism," she says (*CWR*, 7; her emphasis), by which she means realism can't be given external justification. Trying to prove realism—or any other metaphysics, for that matter—is evidence of having capitulated to the myriad faulty assumptions deeply woven into "modernist" epistemology, the red thread of which Meek identifies as "anti-realism" (*CWR*, 259). Setting aside the suspect "anti-" rhetoric, the basic idea here is a fundamental Polanyian one: there's no stepping outside the frame to prove in some unfalsifiable fashion the validity of one's interpretation of the frame; you can't use your spectacles to scrutinize your spectacles (*M*, 37). In this light, maintaining a realist posture is no different than making a claim about the truth-status of a Copernican vision of the solar system: both entail that a knower indwelling the from-to structure of reality has focally integrated the relevant subsidiary elements such that they can justifiably claim to have made a responsible commitment to the unpredictable manifestations of the real. The linchpin of Meek's argument is that, for Polanyi, the from-to structure of reality is ultimately unformalizable, which is to say the focal integration (i.e., the *meaning*) resulting from the skillful act of indwelling a particular complex of subsidiaries cannot be exhaustively delineated. Nor can subsidiaries be known *qua* subsidiaries. To focus on them would be to achieve a new focal integration, which would of course be predicated upon another network of unspecifiable subsidiaries, ad infinitum. Meek's case for Polanyi's realism takes these intimations of indeterminacy and unknowability and goes all-in with them: "It is precisely the unformalizable—to speak oxymoronically—that testifies to the real. It is in the unformalizable that the real shows itself to be independent of the knower" (*CWR*, 233).

Some Initial Impressions

As noted above, the lion's share of *CWR* is Meek's original doctoral dissertation, "deliberately preserved...with only minor revisions" (*CWR*, 5). She says she did this "out of respect for [her] colleagues in the Polanyi Society," because it was the dissertation that led to her involvement in the Society in the first place (*ibid*). This strikes me as odd. Given that the dissertation was written over thirty years ago, why not present an updated account of the argument? Why not update the writing so it doesn't read so much like a dissertation? The first part of *CWR* is rife with serpentine prose, there are too many quotes, and it's often repetitive, both in terms of the content of different sections as well as specific words: all of this could've been ameliorated without much effort. As it is, the reader is left to guess which parts of the book she still agrees with and which parts are vestiges of her former skeptical worldview.

Another problem arises as a result of leaving the dissertation as-is: by not revising the text in light of the relevant literature produced over the past three decades, the book already feels dated, reading more like a time capsule than a contribution to an ongoing scholarly conversation.

More specifically, I would have expected Meek to account for some of the contributions made to the study of Polanyi's realism. There are, for example, eight articles in an issue of *Tradition & Discovery* (26, no. 3: 1999-2000) dedicated to this question, but Meek mentions none but her own. Similarly, there are other important articles in this same vein she passes over as well.¹ I don't quite know what to make of this.

Regardless, while Meek makes a number of interesting and insightful observations about some of the broadly realist assumptions underlying Polanyi's thought, I'm not convinced this is the final word on whether his postcritical epistemology is indicative of the type of realism she thinks it is. More to the point, I'm not sure it matters. Don't get me wrong, the big metaphysical questions are as important as ever, especially given what researchers in theoretical physics and neuroscience are discovering about the world and the human person. But Meek doesn't actually address them head-on. She's written a book about whether or not Polanyi is a realist, not a book on realism, per se. So it's hard to take seriously her conviction that *CWR* will somehow make "philosophers and realists of us all" (*CWR*, 8). Setting aside the fact this type of project will likely appeal most to those already in the Polanyi camp, it seems to me Meek gets to the *real* issue too late in the game. It isn't until the penultimate chapter—"The Current Conversation: The Difference Polanyi Would Make"—that she finally begins to address the question of what Polanyi's epistemology and notion of "contact with reality" have to teach us about the nature of *reality itself*. I'm an avowed, card-carrying Polanyian, but the question of whether or not Polanyi was a realist pales in import to the questions of whether realism is itself viable and how it stacks up against different forms of idealism. One is a question about a philosopher, the others are questions of philosophy itself. To be fair, there is of course value in the first question. But with that being said, even after reading *Contact with Reality* with a spirit of excitement and anticipation, if someone asked me why Polanyi's realism matters, my answer would be, "I don't know."

ENDNOTE

¹To name just a few: Dale Cannon, "Sanders' Analytic Rebuttal to Polanyi's Critics, With Some Musings On Polanyi's Idea of Truth," in *Tradition and Discovery* 23/3 (1996-7): 17-23; Andy Sanders, "Criticism, Contact With Reality and Truth," in *Tradition and Discovery* 23/3 (1996-7): 24-36; Phil Mullins, "Polanyi's Participatory Realism," in *Polanyiana* 6/2 (1997), <http://chemonet.hu/polanyi/9702/mullins.html> (accessed February 28, 2018); Walter B. Gulick, "The Meaningful and the Real in Polanyian Perspective," in *Polanyiana* 8/1-2 (1999), <http://chemonet.hu/polanyi/9912/gulick.html> (accessed February 28, 2018).