

# ENGAGING A WIDER AUDIENCE: REFLECTIONS ON WALTER GULICK'S *RECOVERING TRUTHS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANTHOLOGY OF MICHAEL POLANYI'S WRITINGS*



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## ABSTRACT

*Michael Polanyi's thought still has an "outsider" status, despite the efforts of The Polanyi Society and extensive publications by other scholars in various fields. Gulick attributes this limited familiarity to Polanyi's complexity and atypical philosophical insights, his re-introduction of the personal in feats of knowing, and his call for significant intellectual reform. Gulick sets out to remedy the situation with his well written, comprehensive, and accessible anthology. Polanyi's thought can be applied to many of today's concerns, including human research, animal intelligence, ecoliterature, and socio-political problems. Gulick's book is an excellent resource for introducing students and others to the relevance of Polanyi's thought for today's issues.*

"Why hasn't Polanyi's thought attracted more attention?" "What makes Polanyi's distinctive stance so significant now?" (*Recovering Truths* Chapter I, 1-2; hereafter *RT*). Most Polanyi scholars have undoubtedly asked themselves the same questions. At a 2005 gathering, Gulick, Dale Cannon, Wally Mead, Jere Moorman and Phil Mullins

concluded that a jointly created Polanyi Reader would be a good approach to reaching a wider audience. *RT* is the welcome result.

As Gulick points out, Polanyi remains an outsider in philosophical circles. This is so despite the sustained conversation among members of the Polanyi Society with its twice-yearly conferences and publication of *Tradition and Discovery* (hereafter *TAD*). Gulick's comprehensive bibliography documents many books and articles that appear in other journals. Still, for colleges and universities, courses on Polanyi's writings are relatively rare. (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is one of the exceptions).

Polanyi's thought often seems foreign to mainstream philosophers:

Professor Polanyi's ambition to let nothing go by default, to surround his argument with embroidery, not of qualification but of elaboration, and to follow his theme into every variation that suggests itself, makes the book like a jungle through which the reader must hack his way (Oakeshott 1958, 77-80).

From the standpoint of the analytic tradition, Polanyi's philosophy appears rooted in continental thought. Also, Polanyi's "intellectual reform" is even more radical than the interests of "applied philosophy" in pursuits such as bioethics, environmental ethics and gender studies (*RTI*, 4).

Polanyi's work is also atypical because it strives to recover traditional virtues and faith in human knowing, and at the same time affirms the insights and methods of the sciences. This characteristic might create the impression of a Polanyian link to political action groups or even religion, which unfortunately are often suspect.

Gulick's volume is an outstanding contribution to a further understanding of the complexities of Polanyi's thought. The tone is appealing, even welcoming. In many anthologies, the editor's practice is to offer only brief introductions and transitional remarks followed by selections from primary sources. Gulick orients the reader with a comprehensive Introduction, then guidance for each subsequent chapter. There are "warnings" to the reader when one of Polanyi's ideas might lead to mistaken assumptions. For example, the reader is guided to understand that "tacit" knowing is not equivalent to "the unconscious" (II, 6). In a later chapter, Gulick explains a controversy that comes about because of Polanyi's apparent shift from a primary concern with ontology, to a focus on epistemology (V, 9).

The book offers persuasion rather than critical analysis. Gulick welcomes the reader to the study of Polanyi: "you are cordially invited to join this survey of the riches to be mined from the broad spreading veins of his interests. There is much to learn from Michael Polanyi" (I, 3). The approachable style echoes the "vulnerable yet invitational and passionate quality" of Polanyi's own voice (I, 8). The excerpts and longer

quotations are drawn from *Personal Knowledge* (hereafter *PK*) and from a wide range of Polanyi's other works. *RT* concludes with a useful glossary of Polanyi's distinctive language and a bibliography of works by and about Polanyi.

The arrangement of chapters is generally consistent with the order of *PK*, but the content is presented to the reader in a more accessible fashion. Chapter I engages the reader's curiosity by posing wide-ranging questions and highlighting where they will be addressed later on. "How did ideas prevalent in the 'civilized' West lead to totalitarian governments and the unprecedented destruction of World Wars I and II" will be discussed in IV, Section B. Discussion of Polanyi's "coherent philosophical vision that acknowledges the insights of neuroscience and the biological importance of evolution and embodiment yet also affirms freedom, moral responsibility, and meaning" will be found in II A, C; III C; V, C. There is also a helpful distinction, first brought out by Dale Cannon, between Polanyi's *post-critical stance* and the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern styles of thought (*RTI*, 10-13).

*RT* creates linkages between Polanyi's personal experiences and his philosophy. Polanyi was born into a highly educated family in Budapest. He entered into a successful scientific career, but a 1935 conversation with Bukharin in Moscow led him to question the Soviet ideology which placed scientific discovery completely in the service of explicit Five-Year plans. Polanyi feared that the exclusive focus on technology and societal benefit would destroy the process of free inquiry by virtue of which he held that scientific advances occur; and this in turn led him to ponder implications for the humanities and social sciences (*RTI*, 7).

Gulick describes Polanyi's take on the advancement of science. The individual scientist perceives a problem worth studying and integrates clues to new insights, which are then confirmed, modified or rejected by the larger scientific community.

Polanyi's assertion that tacit knowing operates within all fields of human achievement is explored in Chapter II, "Varieties of Human Knowing: A Truer Understanding." "Knowledge, like perception, arises through personal acts of integration" from tacitly known clues to a newly appreciated comprehensive vision" (II, 3). Judgments are not infallible, nevertheless they are trustworthy when they are affirmed by responsible persons of good will in a free society. Social and professional traditions allow others to affirm, deny, or modify the individual knower's findings. Polanyi avoids the pitfalls of subjectivism and fideism: knowing is a responsible act with universal intent; it requires an act of personal judgment, and not a mere reliance on received truth (*RTII*, 4-5). Gulick points out that Polanyi uses such scientific models as equilibrium and spontaneous order as *analogies* to the "fabric and functions" of a healthy society (see *RTIV*).

Our curiosity and intellectual passions are inborn, evolving from animals' abilities: *Trick-Learning* and *Sign-Learning* are based in motility and sentience, while *Latent*

*Learning* is an implicit act of intelligence that prefigures articulate problem-solving (*RTI*, 11-13).

Chapters III, IV and V explore *truer understandings* of science, society, and personhood. Chapter VI, “Polanyi’s Prescription for Transcending our Cultural Crisis,” offers a comprehensive summary as well as commentary on morality, myth, and religion.

In Chapter VI, Gulick expands on “Polanyi’s Prescription for Transcending our Cultural Crisis.” Here I believe that a more specific definition of “cultural crisis” would be helpful. We know that Polanyi himself described his project as the reform of the entire critical framework and its false picture of knowing that has led to mistaken assumptions throughout the sciences, humanities and arts. Polanyi saw that:

Our society was pervaded by the dissonance of an extreme critical lucidity and an intense moral conscience, and that this combination had generated both our tight-lipped modern revolutions and the tormented self-doubt of modern man (Polanyi 2009, 3-4).

Polanyi’s ambitious program of cultural reform would seem to require a comprehensive upgrade of society’s pervasive beliefs in objectivity and extreme doubt. No wonder that Polanyi’s thought has not been completely accepted! Is this the meaning of the “cultural crisis” discussed in Chapter VI?

On the other hand, “cultural crisis” might refer to a host of more specialized problems within Western thought, such as totalitarianism. We live in a free democracy, but concerning elements of a totalitarian structure are evident, such as extremist movements, ideologies that are competing and entrenched, cults, and mistrust of common discourse. The mass suicides of 1978 in Jonestown were the end product of a closed system that deliberately suppressed independent thought and civic virtues. Pervasive surveillance and mandatory “Learning Crews” for perceived transgressions forced individual compliance. Clever strategies to brush aside any negative press about Jones himself stabilized the myth of moral superiority (Guinn, 2017, 299-300 and 355-362).

Certainly there are many other political issues that could be explored from a Polyanian perspective: the current emphasis on power and nationalism, growing suspicion of the press and attempts to limit its proper role, extreme skepticism about science and dismissal of research that confirms climate change are just a few. There has been a deterioration of trust in social discourse. How can we “pursue ideals such as justice, truth, equality, fraternity and beauty once we are aware that they may be masks behind which other, darker motives lurk?” (*RTI*, 22).

There is an endless supply of research on humans and animals that would benefit from Polyanian insight. In a recent neurological study, several monkeys’ brains were linked with implanted electrodes connected to computers. In this set-up the animals could “cooperate” to achieve complex tasks in the hope of being rewarded. A

commentator noted, “What’s different here is that [the scientist] is able to demonstrate that more than a pair of brains can be yoked together” (Rao, quoted in Zimmer 2015). When I contacted study personnel with concerns about the suffering of the animals and the insignificance of this research—we already know that animals can cooperate—the reply was a boilerplate assurance of the researchers’ commitment to animal care. Human research is now turning to the development of patient-controlled prosthetic devices intended to help those with amputations or paralysis (Khatchadourian 2018).

While the research outcomes may prove helpful, their interpretation could mistakenly reinforce mechanistic views of human action and lead to reductionistic ideas of the mind. Polanyi would surely argue that the brain-computer interfaces are a new form of tool embodied by the research subjects and that they demonstrate levels of machine-like functions, not the “real” workings of thought or mind in firing neurons.

Another contemporary field, “Ecoliterature,” seeks to replace objectivist descriptions of nature with a more phenomenological viewpoint. The literature typically brings forward the personal interpretations of nature that are usually overlooked in scientific accounts (See Quammen 2001 and Rumsy 2001). When one group misunderstands another group’s perception of nature, there may be significant or even disastrous results. In 1845, Sir John Franklin’s expedition set out for the Arctic aboard HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*. In 1846, the sea froze around his ships. Two years later, running out of food, the remaining crew set out on land but soon perished. The 1850’s saw the discovery of some of the crews’ remains. However, *Erebus* and *Terror* were not located until 2014 and 2016. The discoveries were made, of course, with the help of modern technology, but the Inuit stories gathered by Louis Kamookak were also essential. Since the Inuit tend to reckon position by wind direction instead of compass points, the search team had to relocate the search area (Watson 2017).

Recent naturalistic studies of ravens’ intelligence complement and extend Polanyi’s notions of animal learning. Evidence that the birds possess a “theory of mind” is supported by the ways they cache food. Individual ravens will make “false” caches or choose a more distant location if other ravens are nearby (Heinrich 1999, Chapter 22; hereafter *MR*). Ravens easily solve problems such as pulling up food suspended by a string (*MR*, 312). They also set for themselves increasingly difficult variations on hanging from branches and “fancy flying” (*MR*, 281-283, 289-291). Behaviorist frameworks do not support the investigation of an animal’s “world”: Heinrich’s initial attempts at publication met with great resistance (*MR*, 321-322). Polanyi might consider ravens’ play to be a precursor of artistic creation.

*RT* is a first-rate exploration of Polanyi’s thought that should be an excellent resource for Polanyi scholars and, one hopes, the wider community. Scholars and others who offer critiques of modernity will appreciate clarification of Polanyi’s complex vocabulary and argument (See the extensive list of publications in the Bibliography).

The anthology would also be useful in college and graduate level courses, perhaps as a companion to Polanyi's original works (See Cannon 1998 and Rutledge 1998).

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