



REVIEW ESSAYS ON

Guide to Personal Knowledge: The Philosophy of Michael Polanyi
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ABSTRACT

These articles identify some of the difficulties in reading philosophical texts, the ways in which Paksi and Héder attempt to do so with regard to Polanyi's Personal Knowledge, and shortcomings in the attempt to make the principal themes and arguments of Polanyi's book clear to new readers.



Comments on *Guide to Personal Knowledge*

Jon Fennell

Introduction: On Writing in a Foreign Tongue

I can express myself in only one language other than my native English. I am reluctant to write even a letter in that language (French) and would not realistically consider employing it to compose a professional paper, not to mention a book. And yet the authors of this ambitious new volume have done precisely that: native speakers of the Hungarian language, they offer us a book written in English whose purpose is to serve as a “guide” to Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, which is, of course, also written in English. One marvels at this courageous undertaking. But there is good reason for my reluctance *écrire en français*. *Guide to Personal Knowledge*, in its use of English, is troubled indeed.

This volume is certainly the fruit of noble intentions, and because I respect the authors, I have no wish to disparage the enterprise. But since I assert that the book suffers considerably for having been written in

the authors' second language, it is necessary to provide evidence for the claim. I will begin by doing so. In the closing section I turn to more substantive matters.

Faulty Diction, Incorrect Grammar, and Insufficient Editorial Support

Guide to Personal Knowledge, due to the authors' lack of deep intimacy with English, suffers from persistent faulty diction. The result is that they routinely do not say what they mean and the reader encounters frequent solecism. Inevitably, this lack of precision produces ambiguity. These factors yield, for the reader, constant discomfort rooted in the fear of having misunderstood what has been written. As a consequence, especially if he or she is new to Polanyi, the reader remains uncertain that the book correctly interprets *Personal Knowledge*. Moreover, and especially problematic for an intended "guide" to a text, it is often impossible to distinguish between 1) a genuine issue in Polanyi's account (i.e., the authors' interpretation of it) and 2) a difficulty arising out of the labored and imprecise prose.

I will illustrate these problems, as briefly as possible, with several examples.

1. After quoting Polanyi to the effect that science is not morally neutral, the authors attempt to explain Polanyi's meaning, asserting that "Polanyi states that morality and science are not inseparable because, in both domains, we are led by personal tacit passions..." (72). Perhaps they mean to say that morality and science "are inseparable" or "are not separable." But maybe they do mean what they say. The statement is explicit, after all. Is this an error or not? Who can tell?
2. Later in the same paragraph is the following: "Consequently, owing to the fact that collective tacit foundations were present even in the early forms of evolution, scientific and moral truths are in accordance with each other thus, [sic] proper scientific ideas do not contradict proper moral commitments." I will assume, perhaps ill advisedly, that the authors have earlier made clear what they mean by the statement "collective tacit foundations were present even in the early forms of evolution."¹ But, even if this is true, what are readers to make of the implicit gap-filling logic here? It would seem that "early forms of evolution" (by which the authors must mean "earlier, less-evolved instances of life," or the like) are responsible for scientific and moral truths now being in accord. How is this the case? And, whatever that case may be, why and how does this lead to "proper scientific ideas" not being in contradiction with "proper moral commitments"? What are "proper" ideas and moral commitments? (That is, what do the authors really mean by use of this term?) What does "in accordance" mean? The phrase, which presumably goes to the heart of Polanyi's point, is vague. Complicating these issues, and making the authors' meaning even more difficult to discern, is the grammatical error in the sentence. The cogitation and confusion occasioned by this paragraph is, unfortunately, typical (see the problematic paragraphs that immediately follow), and that is why it takes a long time to read and make sense of a single page in this book.
3. The opening sentence of a new section in chapter 7 states that "[t]he development of knowledge in different sciences is granted by the tacit foundations, which sustain the operation of articulated systems of knowledge" (88). What does "granted by" mean here? Perhaps it is equivalent to "made possible by." But even this substitute is vague and imprecise. It is also possible that "granted by" was meant to say something like "provided authority by" or, very simply, "enabled." The reader is puzzled. Then, after a lengthy quotation from page 203 of *Personal Knowledge* (one in which a

small unintended dot of ink on that page is rendered by our authors as a hyphen or dash—an error that should have been caught through proofreading by a capable English-speaking editor), the text reads: “Articulated communication is made possible by commonly possessed tacit knowledge, which motivates and fills the acts of explicit communication with meaning. . . .” What is the purpose of the term “motivates” here? A dictionary defines the word as “to provide with an incentive” or “to impel.” What incentive is provided by tacit knowledge? (Is tacit knowledge even the sort of thing that *can* provide an incentive?) Where is the impulsion and what is its nature? Then, in the sentence that follows, the authors state, “This shared tacit knowledge, which we rely on when evaluating explicit manifestations, is the same in everyone.” What “evaluating explicit manifestations” means is unclear, but, more significantly, the reader is here plagued by an ambiguity: Does “is the same in everyone” mean a) that tacit knowledge is present in everyone or b) that the particular tacit contents are the same in everyone? Do note that the authors’ interpretation of Polanyi is not the immediate issue; I am simply pointing out how difficult it is to understand what they mean to say.

While I might cite many additional ambiguous and fundamentally confusing passages, it is also true that, on occasion, the reader of *Guide to Personal Knowledge* encounters clear paraphrases or summaries of Polanyi’s position. This short paragraph from chapter 7 is such a case: “Thus, a precondition of communication is the kind of conviviality in which authority and trust tacitly connect the participants in communication” (89). So too is this phrase from chapter 11: “*The essence of a person is that he follows his ideal to which he committed himself*” (154). (The authors should be saluted for italicizing this statement—one that captures an aspect of Polanyi that brings him into concert with C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*.) Moreover, as noted below, the authors in this same chapter clearly distinguish Polanyi’s position from the misunderstandings of both objectivism and relativism.

Considering the book as a whole, chapter 11, corresponding to Polanyi’s chapter 11 (“The Logic of Achievement”), is the one least plagued by English writing problems such as I have briefly surveyed above. I must confess, however, that the clearest language in *Guide to Personal Knowledge* appears in the numerous quotations from Polanyi himself. Ironically, it is more often the case that Polanyi serves as a guide to this text than that the text serves effectively as a guide to his work. Such Polanyian rescue of the commentary is apparent throughout.²

As has already been suggested, this book lacks proper proofreading. Unfortunately, this is evident from the outset. Examples include a reference in the preface to “a list of quotations” that does not exist in the published product, inaccurate citations (see pages 113 and 135), and inconsistent use of personal pronouns and grammatically problematic antecedent-pronoun agreement, including the use of “they” and “their” to refer to a singular antecedent (see page 22 and throughout).

All writers make errors. The question I wish to raise is this: Why were such problems not detected before publication? Proofreading by the publisher’s agent is indispensable for any publication. It is, of course, imperative when the authors are writing in a foreign tongue.

Organization of the Book

We have no other choice but to work with the book that we have. Accordingly, in the section that follows I will examine, despite the abundant ambiguities and distractions, some important matters raised by *Guide to Personal Knowledge*. As a prelude, let us note how the book is organized. Following a foreword by

C. P. Goodman (rife with problems of its own), there is the preface, and after this the book mirrors the parts and chapters of *Personal Knowledge*. Both Polanyi's book and this guide to it therefore have thirteen chapters. Each of the chapters opens with "Goals of the chapter," the authors' heading for a summary of points that they will address in the pages ahead. Each chapter closes with a "Conclusion." Within the various chapters are intermissions consisting of subsidiary discussions of topics raised by the analysis of Polanyi but somewhat tangential to it. Each of these subsidiary discussions (with one erroneous exception) is enclosed within a numbered "box." As noted above, *Guide* contains abundant quotations, many of substantial length, from *Personal Knowledge*. There is at the end of the book a serviceable bibliography and a useful index.

Matters of Greater Substance

There are at least a dozen substantive matters raised by this book that deserve closer inspection, but I can here examine only a small number of these. The first topic in our truncated list is somewhat technical. In chapter 9 ("The Critique of Doubt"), the authors state the following: "The most deeply rooted convictions of human nature are called implicit beliefs by Polanyi. These convictions are explained and determined by the conceptual frameworks of natural languages by which experiences are tacitly interpreted" (128). The question that arises here is whether, for Polanyi, experiences are "interpreted" by conceptual frameworks. Might it instead be the case that they are *constituted* by such frameworks? To say that an experience is interpreted entails that it in some fashion exists in advance of the interpretation. But what is an experience that is not interpreted (i.e., that is not itself an instance of interpretation or judgment)? It is true that in the section of *Personal Knowledge* titled "Dwelling In and Breaking Out," Polanyi speaks of "the mind...directly experiencing its content rather than controlling it by the use of any pre-established modes of interpretation" (*PK*, 196). For myself as reviewer, the notion of "direct experience" is incoherent. This assessment, moreover, is rooted in the persuasiveness of Polanyi's grand project of establishing the ubiquitous authoritative influence of the personal. In light of the role of conceptual frameworks, and considering the character of human epistemological formation, what sense can we make of experience independent of interpretation or judgment? What, after all, *is* experience? One response is that experience is an instance of thought, *marked by recognition* (of reality), consisting of a concrete whole that we are apt misleadingly to divide into "what is experienced" and "experiencing." If this is an accurate portrayal of the matter, rather than speak of direct experience, would it not be more consistent for Polanyi to speak, under the heading of "breaking out," of *alternative* experience—experience that is markedly in contrast to what is more commonly the case and that is attributable to the impact of a quite different, perhaps spontaneously occurring, alternative framework? Discussion of this matter would be most appropriate for a guide to *Personal Knowledge*. It would be interesting to know whether our authors agree that Polanyi is inconsistent and, if not, how they reconcile the apparent discrepancy.

The second topic warranting our attention is Polanyi's concepts of "ordering principles" and "operational principles," and the connection between them. In the preface to *Guide to Personal Knowledge*, after accurately observing that, on Polanyi's account, "operational principles can only work in the right physical-chemical conditions," the authors state that such principles "kick-started life" (xxii). This latter claim strikes me as odd. It is true, as the authors aver, that operational principles are "features of nature." But as a reader of *Personal Knowledge*, I have always understood operational principles (which characterize the proper functioning of living beings as well as machines) to be rules of rightness that have emerged in the course of evolution. In this sense, it is the operational principles that are "kick-started," and they themselves do not

kick-start anything. The kick-starting is instead provided by Polanyi's "ordering principles," which are themselves "released by random fluctuations" in the universe (*PK*, 384; Polanyi's emphasis). If this interpretation of Polanyi is correct, then it would seem that the authors have confounded the two sorts of principles and have attributed to operational principles that which belongs only to the even more fundamental ordering principles.³ Further, while it thus is accurate to say that for Polanyi ordering principles "kick-start" processes (including life itself), this is true in a somewhat peculiar sense: ordering principles possess untold potential, but such potential produces a real effect only as the consequence of a random, and hence contingent (or, to use Polanyi's term, "accidental"), event. An additional consequence of this interpretation of Polanyi, if indeed it proves true, is that, as the authors state on the subsequent page, all that exists has roots in the material. But ordering principles must on this account also exist *in some non-material sense* from the beginning (in the form of potentiality). It is only because they already in this sense exist that they can, after all, be released by the "random fluctuations." Our authors, it appears, concur, for on page 186 they state that "the potential ordering principle of life," before the emergence of life, is "a possibility-condition [which later] initiated the emergence of life." But this initial semblance of clarity is compromised by something said just prior, namely, that "the potential ordering principle of life is nothing more in space-time than a *favorable order of material conditions*" (the authors' emphasis). The authors in this discussion introduce the distinction between the epistemological and the ontological, and they provide a sidebar labelled "Epistemological and ontological emergence." The distinction between the epistemological and the ontological appears important to the authors' account of ordering principles. But the associated discussion raises more issues than it resolves. We are thus left with the problems and questions noted above.

A third topic calling for our attention is Polanyi's commitment in *Personal Knowledge* to performative consistency (i.e., his successful avoidance of performative contradiction, a fatal flaw in reasoning in which the expression or affirmation of a position is inconsistent with its content). In *Guide to Personal Knowledge*, this matter, while never explicitly mentioned, is to a degree addressed under "the fiduciary program" (pages 116–118). While the authors are sensitive to what is arguably Polanyi's central contribution to the Western intellectual tradition, they do not fully appreciate its significance and, as a result, fail to assign it suitable emphasis.

Our hopes for a fuller development are stimulated when the authors in chapter 10 ("Commitment") insightfully declare that 1) Polanyi is opposed to relativism as well as objectivism, 2) he argues that any comprehensive position is necessarily circular, and 3) he is committed to honesty and consistency, and endeavors to proceed accordingly (pages 134–135). At this point the authors cite (without acknowledgement of the italics and quotation marks employed by Polanyi) one of the several explicit confessional statements that constitute the heart of *Personal Knowledge*: "I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings" (*PK*, 299).⁴ Polanyi in this confessional statement is referring to his "calling," a matter that is discussed by him in some detail but that, peculiarly, is not listed in the index to the guide. The authors do, however, discuss "calling" at the close of chapter 10, and to their credit they understand the importance of what Polanyi articulates under this heading. In his view, every individual is the product of a contingent tradition by and through which one is called into being ("into our particular form of existence" [*PK*, 321]). Polanyi observes that

we are creatures of circumstance. Every mental process by which man surpasses the animals is rooted in the early apprenticeship by which the child acquires the idiom of its native

community and eventually absorbs the whole cultural heritage to which it succeeds. Great pioneers may modify this idiom by their own efforts, but even their outlook will remain predominantly determined by the time and place of their origin. Our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging. And this reliance on the cultural machinery of our society continues through life. (*PK*, 322)

Now, where an epistemological relativist would at this point declare “Aha! All ‘values’ are therefore ‘relative’ and knowing can consist of nothing other than a multiplicity of equally authoritative perspectives,” Polanyi rejects that conclusion and instead passionately asserts that our contingent and intrinsically personal cultural circumstances are an opportunity (the sole opportunity) for seeking and arriving at the truth. Through the confessional statements that permeate *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi is affirming his faith in these circumstances and the possibilities contained therein. And, as our authors appropriately note (page xviii), while Polanyi believes that in our claim to know it is always possible that we are wrong, in order to arrive at the truth, we must trust that we are not.

In allegiance to honesty and consistency (moral aspects of the cultural heritage to which he openly professes a commitment), Polanyi insists that the authority he claims for his account of the human condition and its possibilities is no greater than what that account itself allows. Not quoted on page 134 of *Guide to Personal Knowledge* is this essential remark by Polanyi: “Any inquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its conclusions. It must be intentionally circular” (*PK*, 299). Polanyi then goes on to say,

The last statement is itself an instance of the kind of act which it licenses. For it stakes out the ground of my discourse by relying essentially on the very grounds thus staked out; my confident admission of circularity being justified only by my conviction, that in so far as I express my utmost understanding of my intellectual responsibilities as my own personal belief, I may rest assured of having fulfilled the ultimate requirements of self-criticism; that indeed I am obliged to form such personal beliefs and can hold them in a responsible manner, even though I recognize that such a claim can have no other justification than such as it derives from being declared in the very terms which it endorses. Logically, the whole of my argument is but an elaboration of this circle; it is a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs. (*PK*, 299)

As he states in the preface to *Personal Knowledge* (and serving as the context within which the book as a whole is to be read), “All affirmations published in this book are my own personal commitments; they claim this, and no more than this, for themselves.” In short, Polanyi is committed to limiting the scope and claimed authority of his utterances to what is possible should those utterances in fact prove to be true. That is, he is *performatively consistent*. What this means, as Polanyi indicates throughout *Personal Knowledge*, is that what are traditionally known as “foundations” for claims to truth are an illusion, and there are instead only *grounds* for such claims—grounds that, while admittedly local and contingent (and necessarily mediated by the personal), are capable of illuminating truths that are universal and therefore binding on all persons at all times and in all places. No dimension of *Personal Knowledge* is more significant than this confession of, and response to, the necessarily self-reflexive character of justification. It deserves a more prominent role in Paksi and Héder’s guide.

The fourth and final topic is closely related to the third. If “[o]ur believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging” (*PK*, 322), and as a result any comprehensive position is necessarily circular, how are we to assess ways of thinking in conflict with our own? In what sense, and on what grounds, can we legitimately judge them to be erroneous? Our authors understand that there is a problem. They state, “A question arises: if [as explicitly maintained by Polanyi at *PK*, 316] there is only one truth, then what does a person have to think about the ‘truth’ of other conceptual systems, which is different than the truth in which the person believes according to his conceptual system and convictions?” Answering their own question, they go on to say that “Polanyi’s answer is simple: he has to reject it as false a belief [sic]” (142). Now, while the authors are certainly correct in stating that Polanyi is prepared to judge rival views as mistaken (consider, for example, his assessment in *Personal Knowledge* of the supernatural worldview of the Azande), there is nothing “simple” about the underlying reasoning. Rather, we encounter here what may be the most profound element of Polanyi’s thought.

The authors correctly note that for Polanyi a rival conceptual system may, while erroneous, still be “rational and competent” (143). (That of the Azande qualifies on this score.) The authors perceptively add that, in judging the rival to be flawed, Polanyi is necessarily drawing upon the authority afforded by his own personal background (i.e., by the particular contingent cultural heritage and related character formation that provides the occasion for his “calling” and whose exploration, qua a search for the truth, constitutes the work of that “calling”). What the authors thereby lead us to understand, but are seemingly reluctant to state explicitly, is that the grounds on which Polanyi rejects a rival view as incompetent are ultimately the same as those that permit him to regard his own as competent, and we already know that these are essentially circular. For Polanyi, the justification for the claim to know is, in the final analysis, belief in and commitment to the principles and ideals invoked and honored in thus coming to know. Polanyi, of course, is a fallibilist: he understands that it is always possible that he may be wrong. It is presumably due to this feature of Polanyi’s position that our authors assert that, in the face of the fact of multiple rival conceptual systems, Polanyi believes that we are obliged to be tolerant (143). This is probably saying too much. (After all, Polanyi passionately condemned Marxist debunking of principle, Soviet restrictions on freedom, Nazi mockery of the ideal, etc.) Can we imagine, for example, Polanyi tolerantly standing by in the presence of enforced suttee or of capital punishment on the basis of reading a dead fowl’s intestines? The larger and more significant point, however, is this: the grounds for the incumbency of fallibilism (as well as for whatever tolerance we feel obliged to exercise) are the same as for the honesty and consistency noted above. The appeal, in justification, to foundations is for Polanyi no longer viable. In *Personal Knowledge*, he is describing (and thereby, in the only way truly possible, arguing for) the sort of belief-based, faith-centered humanity he would have everyone embrace. He endeavors to expand the realization of that vision by persuading the reader, precisely through the beauty and nobility of such a life, to join him in it. In what will we believe? To what will we commit? Above all, in what will we have faith? The manner in which one responds to these questions constitutes the master game, and in that game, whose central purpose is preservation of that to which, through good fortune, we are heir, everything we cherish is at stake. This is the ultimate meaning of “grounds without foundations.” And even if in honoring our calling we pray for grace, Polanyi teaches that this possibility, too, depends on the readiness of the recipient.

ENDNOTES

¹Peculiar unexpected references to evolution are common in the book.

²Interested readers with access to the guide might, for example, consult pages 58, 96–97, 130–131, and 188–189.

³See, too, page 195 of the guide. In an attempted paraphrase of what Polanyi has to say about the creation of a “center of self-interest,” the authors state, “Through using its operational principles, this will maintain its own integrity. In the case of living beings, this means ordering principles that are not determined by material conditions but by the logic of achievement.”

⁴*Guide to Personal Knowledge* italicizes and places within quotation marks all passages from Polanyi. Therefore, to capture Polanyi’s use of italics and quotation marks, the authors need to use non-italicized characters and a second set of quotation marks.

REFERENCE

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Reflections on *Guide to Personal Knowledge*

David W. Agler

Paksi and Héder’s *Guide to Personal Knowledge* (hereafter *GPK* and *Guide*) is, as the title suggests, a guide of the most important and original ideas of Michael Polanyi’s book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958, hereafter *PK*). Is a guide to *Personal Knowledge* needed? I think the answer is a resounding “yes” for many new readers. To see why, let’s briefly review two common complaints about *PK*.

First, consider that many of the core theses of *PK* are easy to state in a punchy way that makes readers initially enthusiastic about Polanyi’s *magnum opus*. But this enthusiasm is quickly extinguished by the text itself. Part of the difficulty of *PK* is due to the manifold topics Polanyi discusses. As Gulick puts it,

He [Polanyi] writes at one time or another about savings and investment, the anthropology of preliterate people, the role of authority in society, visionary poetry, science in contrast to technology, learning theory, patents, mythology, nihilism, evolutionary theory, the Hungarian revolution, metaphor, causal explanation, illusion in painting, totalitarianism, probability, the role of faith and passion in intellectual life, creativity and discovery—and the list could be extended on and on. (Gulick 2012, 4)

On the one hand, this diversity can be interpreted in terms of the richness, suggestibility, and scope of the work. On the other hand, it can cause some to lose their grip on the central theme(s) of *PK*.¹ For example, consider the complaint expressed by Oakeshott (1958, 77), who wrote that *PK* is a “jungle,” viz., “full of side-glances into other matters; it is disordered, repetitive, digressive.”² So why did Polanyi feel the need to elaborate on so many diverse subjects? For Paksi and Héder, it is because the faulty understanding of scientific practice and knowledge as a detached, purely objective, mechanistic procedure extends beyond the scientific community into everyday life (*GPK*, xvi). At its worst, this impersonal ideal of knowledge manifests itself as a type of moral skepticism, which gets coupled with an excessive moral sensitivity and then is codified in some form of totalitarianism. In short, Polanyi didn’t limit himself to a single topic, for doing so would ignore how pervasive the disease of detached objectivity had become.